

SHE'S NOT SAFE

by Larry Caldwell

She went bowling for nostalgia and infidelity, simple as that. What other excuse was there for wanting to do what she was going to do? For justifying her presence in this cigarette lounge, gawking out at the bad dudes on Lane 5, their leader's muscles rippling as he fired strike after pin-spinning strike?

Stacy was twenty-seven, unhappy, the end of her marriage approaching like a kamikaze, all her dreamful notions of stardom shanghaied by her husband (not to mention the yawning indifference of the film industry). But it was spring now—whatever spring meant to the stagnant warmth of the San Fernando Valley—and the days were growing longer, and Marjorie, who Stacy had not spoken to in years before tonight, was at her elbow, teetering her generous ass on a wooden stool ready to tip.

If Hugh had known it was Marjorie his wife was going out with, had he bothered hearing Stacy suggest that very thing over breakfast this morning, he would have known it meant trouble. Because Marjorie Parkerstein was not as her name suggested—she wasn't an interior decorator or a secretary; she wasn't bookish, or soft-willed, or soft-spoken. "She's not safe," Hugh once said, and Stacy had laughed at the rarity of his candor.

He was right, of course. Marjorie had, among other things, been arrested on the 101 for copulating on a Harley Davidson. "We pulled the bike well on the shoulder," she'd explained to her arresting officer. Then, as the cuffs clamped tight around her collection of friendship

bracelets and smiley-face charms, “Pig!”—unable to help herself—“Goddamn swine! I’ll kill you!”

No amount of hyperbole encapsulated her. And since the fifth grade, Stacy had loved, and feared, her for just that reason. Marjorie was nobody’s angel, nobody’s fool—God help you if you called her *baby*. But she was loyal, despite herself. After all, who else could Stacy have called on for help after three years of snubbing? Who wouldn’t just hang right up on someone like that? But Marjorie, a self-described Queen of Mean, had been at Stacy’s door an hour later, toilet-papering Hugh’s favorite avocado tree, vowing to paint the town in her honor, and holding Stacy’s hand as they sped in her Trans Am through amber light after amber light.

A night with the Queen meant having a story to tell, secrets, regret. And Stacy wanted that more than anything. New regret to bury the old. And loitering in this bowling alley, eyeballing the sun-browned construction workers and buffed Latino men with Virgin Mother tattoos, Stacy was sure she’d find plenty. “They’re not much,” Marjorie was saying, of the hard-looking gang on Lane 5. “But they’re enough.”

Stacy frowned, longing then, for a fraction of a second, for the safety of home—Hugh’s heavy head on her shoulder, the spurious comfort of reality TV. How long had it been since she’d done anything like this? “They look young,” she offered.

“That’s the point.” Marjorie checked the purple of her eye shadow in a skull-shaped compact. “Too young to realize they’re only men. They still think they’re something more.”

Stacy gave Lane 5 another look. Teenagers, had to be. Untrustworthy. “The news says The Strangler is young,” she said, and she knew she had a point. The fact that, in the last year, a half-dozen women had been choked to death and left in dumpsters around L.A. County. These days,

how could you trust anyone, let alone a band of hoodlums flaunting bandannas and combat boots?

Marjorie rolled her eyes. “You’ve a better chance winning the lottery.” She fixed her bra straps so all the world could see them. “So what if he *is* one of them? Wouldn’t it be kind of fun to get strangled?”

“No.”

“Well, buy a jackpot ticket if you think you’re so special. They’re going to leave without us.” Marjorie paused halfway out of the lounge, realizing Stacy had yet to move from her stool. “We’ll just go out and have some menudo with them,” she said. “They won’t bite. And if they do, you owe me.”

Shamelessly, she’d announced this to the entire room, and now the smatter of other patrons abandoned their conversation—the two gnarled, intoxicated goons suspended their arm-wrestling match on the air hockey table, the large barmaid threw her head up and chuckled from the deepest recesses of her throat—all stares fell on Stacy. “Just, let’s have a few more drinks,” she heard herself say.

Marjorie sighed—clearly killer instinct wasn’t an issue with other girlfriends. She came around to the partition that overlooked the bowling lanes, tapping its frail pane with the heaviest of her nine rings (a gigantic chunk of turquoise some smitten geologist had bestowed). And in that smoky, scratched glass Stacy glimpsed the true divide between them—the seven years of her marriage separating their lives like an ever-rising electric fence. She had grown older than her years, while Marjorie remained the same, exactly the same. And so the possibility of this evening, the flirtatious bowling and random animal sex with a perfect stranger, suddenly

amounted to something as implausible as climbing the fabricated rock wall at Ballys Total Fitness. “This is why you never landed a good role,” Marjorie crowed, and there was no spite in this verbal torpedo, just pure, stated fact. The other patrons seemed to nod in agreement. “No guts. Just pretend guts.”

Stacy dropped her eyes and kept where she was. Marjorie let another moment draw out before making a beeline for Lane 5. She wandered into their mist without the slightest anxiety, interrupting them as they unlaced their two-tone bowling shoes in favor of polished nine-eyes, daring them to react. The bad dudes only looked at each other, wondering perhaps if her exhibition of deep cleavage were a mirage.

Then, suddenly, the truth was there on Marjorie’s face: The reluctance for her role as huntress, a lingering intimation of sadness. She was just running through the motions now, wasn’t she?

It left Stacy more perplexed than ever. Because if Marjorie wasn’t satisfied chasing men, and if Stacy herself couldn’t stay with one—and certainly no one was ever happy alone—then where was happiness? Where the hell was it?

Nonetheless Marjorie had Lane 5 won over in under a minute. She led them like children up the steps and past the ball racks, and for a moment, Stacy thought she’d bring them right into the lounge. But Marjorie only threw her the briefest glance and continued out to the parking lot, with five men she didn’t know—or much want.



Stacy couldn't guess how much time passed before the sandy-haired, bright-eyed dude in the leather jacket sat beside her. Marjorie's mercy offering, no doubt. The guy was short, pale, thin—good-looking at certain angles, but easily Lane 5's throwaway. And her ride home now too. “Buy me a drink?” he asked.

“Whatever.”

He unfolded a nest of one-dollar bills and it took a moment, but Stacy understood—he was too young to order. She bought them German lager and he grinned his thanks, teeth flashing between his lips. Stacy recognized the familiar near-perfection in it. “You're an actor, aren't you?”

Still grinning. “You too?”

“Once.”

“Not anymore, huh?”

“Nope.”

The guy extended his hand. “I'm Jonathan.”

Stacy shook it as lightly as possible. “I'm married. I know Marjorie sent you. And thanks and all—”

“Who's Marjorie?”

His chaotic spiked hair. The rain-ruined leather of his jacket. Hadn't he been with the bad dudes? Of course. “You think you're a pretty good actor too,” she quipped.

Jonathan shrugged. “Maybe I do. Is there something wrong with being proud?”

He handed her another nest of bills and she bought them another round. “Why’d you give it up?” he pushed. “I mean, you still look young. I might know an agent for you.”

“Let’s talk about something else.”

They listened instead to the rattling intonations of balls striking pins, the timeworn bleep of the Miss Pacman machine, and the deep guffaw of the barmaid’s blue-collar humor. After a while, Jonathan opened his mouth again, but Stacy beat him to it. “You want to get going?” she asked.

The kid looked disheartened. “Do I have to? I mean I only just got here.”

“I mean together, genius.”

“Yeah, okay. I’m ready.”

“I’m not,” Stacy said, and ordered another round. She drank hers down and wasn’t satisfied with the way Jonathan nursed his. “Lightweight,” she told him, and finished the bottom half of his bottle.

He watched her with curious untrained eyes. Stacy stood from her stool, hid the wobble in her knees, and weighed the kid’s sidelong stare. This was perhaps her one skill as an actress: the ability to emulate Marjorie while intoxicated. It had brought her one big role, in a TV movie called *Cell-block Brawlers*. And she’d played it to perfection, kicking, spitting, knocking the teeth from the smart mouths of supporting character inmates. But the performance hadn’t been well-received, and it was the more observant of her critics who got it right: No guts. Just pretend guts.

Tonight, though, tonight was different.

“Let’s get lost,” she told Jonathan, and she wandered out of the lounge, hiking her belt up, making sure not to glance back to see if he was buying it.

Though any advantage Stacy had garnered over him with her rendition of Marjorie was gone the moment they climbed into his pickup. *He* was behind the wheel. They were going where *he* wanted. And it was no mystery what would happen when they got there.

Stacy stayed in character. Van Nuys, North Hollywood, and Studio City blurred by their windows. Then they were up in the mountains, swerving along Mulholland Drive as it snaked between rock faces and steep dropoffs. They passed a scenic overlook, and another, and Stacy began to think Jonathan wasn’t actually bringing her to lover’s lane, but to a place more interesting—an abandoned house, maybe, or an old antenna station. Until Mulholland turned swiftly to the left, and his pickup kept going straight.

A grassy road with tire ruts led them to the edge of a sudden bluff. Their headlights illuminated the dented silver of a guardrail a moment, then Jonathan shut the engine off. Without the radio, the silence so high above the city was pure. No one else making out in this particular lane; no line of headlights flying along Mulholland; no parties at the movie-star estates on the mountaintops above. Beyond the guardrail lay a dotted carpet of white and yellow lights. Even the 101 looked serene and pretty from afar. *Scary*, Stacy thought. How the landscape could isolate you so easily in a city of ten million.

Jonathan shifted toward her in his seat, the vinyl loud under him. “I’m kind of feeling drunk,” he confessed. “I’m not sure if I can drive any more—”

Stacy leaned over and put her mouth on his.

His lips were chapped, thicker and more ovular than Hugh's—and Jonathan obviously didn't know how to use them. When Stacy let him up for air, her regret was immediate: "So, what, is your husband not putting out?" he asked. "I mean, this is sort of sudden."

Stacy made a point of laughing in his face—she'd never quite gotten the tone of Marjorie's snicker, but her own variation was equally jarring. "Not for a slutbag like me."

"So you've done this before?"

"Yeah, lots."

"Why don't you like your husband?"

Stacy shook her head. Somewhere among the dotted valley lights, Marjorie Parkerstein was scarfing menudo with four strange men and laughing her ass off. "We're not talking about this."

Jonathan's lips drew away from his teeth, as if to take offense.

"Don't start crying on me," Stacy said.

"Well, tell me why you stopped acting."

"No. Nice try though."

"God. Then at least would you tell me who Marjorie is?"

"She's the girl who sent you over, dumbass. The one with the big tits and eyebrow ring."

"What girl? I came over on my own."

Stacy paused—disbelieving, but not ready to refute him either. "Weren't you with those guys on Lane 5?"

"Nope."

"Then who the hell are you?"

Jonathan's reply was simple enough, coupled with his Oscar-wanting grin: "You've been hearing about me on the news."

Something inside Stacy clenched. She summoned more of Marjorie, her only defense at the feeling swelling inside her. "You're good," she said. "Really."

"I've strangled women all over L.A.," he went on. "Left them in dumpsters and bushes. One in the freezer section at Ralph's."

Stacy grinned, but her heart was picking up its stride. The skewed oval of his mouth. His wandering eyes. He was more convincing than her novice impression of Marjorie, she had to admit. Still, Stacy wasn't going to be outdone, not tonight, not by anyone. "Make sure they don't find me," she whispered. "Then go strangle someone else, so everyone forgets me right away."

Jonathan winked, brought his hands to her throat—and Stacy jerked him forward and ran her tongue across the inside of his upper lip. She could feel his pulse hammering in the narrow of his wrists as she held them away from her body.

"I'm real," she said, after a moment. "That's why I gave acting up. I went on auditions. I looked the parts. Real people don't ever make it in this town. The big stars are all manufactured by the studios. They're gears and wire."

"What, like robots? I don't think so," Jonathan said.

"I've met a lot of flesh-and-blood actors," Stacy retorted. "None of them made it."

"My father did," he shot back, stubborn all of a sudden. "An actor was all he ever wanted to be, so he kept at it. He landed this recurring role on the first season of *Jake and the Fatman*. But..."

Stacy waited awhile before taking his bait. "But, what?"

“He had a booze problem. Came up here slobbered one night and crashed”—Jonathan pointed through the windshield—“right over this cliff.”

Stacy glanced at the guardrail before them, which unless his father had hit with a Mac truck, looked impenetrable. “You’re just filled with stories, aren’t you?”

He avoided her eyes, but she felt the chill in his periphery. “Everything I’m saying is true.”

“Come on, why would you bring me here to mess around if that happened?”

“I didn’t bring you, you invited yourself. And I’m not messing around, you are.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter how fast he was going, the guardrail would have—”

“This was sixteen years ago. There wasn’t a railing.”

Stacy shook her head. “You’re blinking.”

“Am I?” he asked. He reached into his jeans and brought out a knife and unfolded the blade. Stacy wondered about the indiscernible length of it in the dark of his cab.

“Why does The Strangler need a knife?” she asked, quietly.

Jonathan shrugged, put the knife back in his pocket. In the next moment, he was out of the truck, his lithe body scaling the guardrail with one hand and a hop. Stacy watched him step up to the edge of the dropoff, and then he wasn’t there. And she was left listening to her breath, which was ragged, like the beat of her heart.

There was a trail, half a trail, leading down the bluff. Stacy followed the scissoring ghost of Jonathan’s acid-wash Levis as he picked his way along the steep and narrow decline. Jutting bedrock lay in wait among the mountain scrub, and Stacy caught her foot—and Marjorie’s insistence that she wear cowgirl boots tonight was all that saved her from discovering a faster,

less pleasant way down the mountain. “You’re going to break our necks,” she yelled, though Jonathan neither acknowledged her nor slowed his pace.

Finally, the path leveled and they arrived at the bluff’s bottom. A hundred yards off and at the same elevation, Stacy saw lights from houses in the foothills. Lower property values, but homes still fought over by The Industry’s affluent—producers or studio execs (and others who kissed Hugh’s ass on a daily basis).

Jonathan was moving in a crouch among the spiny brush, looking for something, a sense of urgency in his hands as he patted the earth.

At last, he found what he wanted, yanking it from under a heap of crushed tumbleweed. Stacy needed a moment to decipher the object in the dark: It was a rust-flaked muffler, obscenely bent into some bizarre wind instrument. “Don’t believe me?” Jonathan demanded, holding it out to her as if it were a corpse he’d unburied.

Stacy didn’t touch the muffler, and Jonathan pitched it back into the bushes. He sifted through a thicket of chaparral and withdrew a badly dented hubcap. “How about now?”

Dropping the hubcap, he reached into the grainy dirt right at Stacy’s feet. A brake light reflector came away magically in his fingers. He turned it over in his palm, ensuring its reality. “What do you need to believe me? I’ll put the whole car back together. My father died down here, Sarah.”

“Alright,” Stacy said. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“You can see the marks on those rocks behind you. Where his Trans Am hit.”

Stacy pointed at a rolled length of canvas tucked into a crevice in the bluff. “There’s a sleeping bag too,” she said. “Was that his?”

In the waning moonlight, Jonathan looked boyish, crestfallen. "I sleep here once in awhile." He glanced up at the guardrail a hundred feet above. "I have this dream he comes speeding off the mountain. I can hear his engine rev just before he lands on me."

Stacy picked the discarded hubcap up. "I had a dream like that once," she admitted. "It was my husband's funeral." She tried to bend the metal, but it was firm, obstinate. "I couldn't stop smiling. I wanted to. But I couldn't. His family kept looking at me, but I couldn't stop."

"That's sick."

"I don't know where it came from. I don't hate Hugh. I just... who knows?"

Jonathan put his hand in her hair and kissed the corner of her mouth. "If I were The Strangler, I'd be afraid to take you on, having dreams like that."

Stacy pulled away. "But you *are* The Strangler."

"I know," he said.

"So strangle me."

They held each other a moment, the wind whistling up from the valley, whispering between their clothes. Jonathan reached out and wrapped his hands around her neck. Stacy closed her eyes, waited.

Though his fingers were more massage than menace. Was he trying to choke her or seduce her? His eyes seemed to hope for both.

"You're an amateur," she said, shrugging off his grip. "This is your first time strangling anyone."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because I'm still breathing. You were pressing the wrong places."

Stacy reached up and clamped down on his Adam's apple. "See?" she said. "Close off the windpipe. You can't speak. Can't scream. Nothing."

He looked at her honestly for the first time then. And for a second—but it was literally one second—Stacy mistook the pleasure in his eyes for fear.

She released him, and he staggered away, coughing. "My God," he gasped, his lungs working beneath his jacket, eyes bugged like something science fiction. When he lifted his head, she saw the tears in them. "What if you did it again?"

The post-dawn sky hung steely gray and low over the mountains—so low it seemed you could skew the dirty marshmallow clouds on a stick—not a California sky at all, but something that had crept down from the northwest. Stacy awoke, upright in the front seat. They hadn't left the bluff from the night before, and by some miracle the MRCA police had never been the wiser.

Jonathan wasn't in the cab with her. She searched out the windshield, but the lover's lane was lifeless, a depressing lot of dirt, scrub, and broken bottles. And Stacy began anticipating another climb over the guardrail—this time she would only shout down and hope it got him out of his sleeping bag, because there was no way in hell she was hiking down there again—when Jonathan rolled over behind her. In a stupor, he lifted himself from his sprawl in the pickup's bed and told her to take him home.

"I have no idea where you live."

Jonathan muttered directions and Stacy repeated them, the street names, left turn, right turn, 134 to the 5, just wanting it to be over, just wanting to get out of here. A fine mist wet the windshield as she navigated the S-turns and hairpins of Mulholland through this lethargic

morning, while Jonathan's body slid to and fro against the gunwales. Stacy retained his directions perfectly. Every street. Right turn, left turn. The freeway exits, side streets, not even needing to think about it.

It wasn't until she turned down the last street that she understood why: She hadn't driven Jonathan home at all. She'd driven herself home.

The pickup eased to a stop across the street from the three-story Tudor she'd lived in too long to be impressed with. Hugh's Mercedes was still in the driveway, under his beloved avocado tree—which was still covered with Marjorie's pink and yellow toilet paper. By now, he'd awoken to find her bed empty, and had assumed she left early for one of the substitute teacher assignments he never asked about. He'd showered, dressed, slicked his hair, and was probably even now emptying his daily bowl of Count Chocula. And what sort of man got fanatical about a cartoon vampire? He'd thrown a fit the one time Stacy had tried replacing it with something organic. How dare she pass judgment on his hebetic tastes—in Hollywood, his genius was unquestioned.

Jonathan stirred at last, knocking on the window with the toe of his sneaker. “The hell are we?”

“My house.”

His eyebrows drew up. “What, this mansion?”

“It's not a mansion.”

“Shit, yeah, it is.”

“Fine, but it's not mine. It's my husband's.”

Jonathan rose in the bed, shirtless, stretching his back, grimacing as he pinwheeled his arms, shoulder blades working beneath his freckled skin. "What are you going to do now?"

"Go inside? Sleep?"

"About him, I mean."

Stacy tried to turn in her seat, but her body was too sore. She'd have to resort to a conversation with the rearview. "I have no idea."

Jonathan pointed out the Mercedes. "What does he do? He a doctor or something?"

Stacy shook her head. "A director."

"Oh." And so came the inevitable question, predictable as thunder after lightning: "He do anything I'd know?"

Stacy shrugged. "Did you ever hear of *The Pallbearer's Secret? Mud becomes Dirt? These Last Days of Desperation?*"

The reflection of Jonathan's jaw went slack, as she feared it would. "Hugh Pallideno? *That's* your husband?"

"Yup."

"He's like the best director that ever lived."

"Yup."

"And you still can't make it as an actress in this town...?" But at this point even Jonathan knew how to shut up.

They heard the front door open and looked as Hugh stepped out on the front porch, squinting at the pickup across the street. And Stacy realized that she'd been all wrong—he was still in his bathrobe, his hair in tatters, no cereal in sight. He hadn't even shaved yet. Hesitantly,

he raised his hand at the truck. Stacy turned enough to see Jonathan waving with both arms, like some crazed castaway spotting a plane.

Then Hugh noticed the toilet paper laced around his tree and gave Jonathan the impatient gaze he often offered lesser beings—production assistants, for instance, and budding actresses. His eyes shifted to the windshield, seeing the other person behind the wheel—surely just the hint of a shape, which he would assume was another young tough, or perhaps the young tough's bitch. Hugh pointed at Marjorie's prank and summoned his directorial license of indisputable authority. "Is this funny?"

"No," Jonathan replied immediately. The truck bounced as he hopped off the bed and jogged across the street, hand outstretched, practiced headshot grin locked on his lips. Hugh shook his hand, reluctantly, then gestured from the tree to the pickup and back again.

Jonathan shook his head a few times, nodded a few others. Another nod and he was shimmying up the thick avocado trunk, willing to do anything to win the favor of this cinematic god, this once in a lifetime opportunity. He made it halfway before his strength waned, his hangover visible in his effort, and he began to slide slowly down again.

Hugh put his hands on Jonathan's ass to boost him. Somehow it worked. Jonathan made it the rest of the way up and batted at the streams of toilet paper like an invalid monkey.

Hugh directed him from one branch to the next until every last bit of it was off. Then he retreated to the porch, grabbed his morning paper, and with a last, long look at the pickup, stole back inside.