

PINK FLAMINGOS

I visited Arlene at the three-bedroom ranch-style house that she and her husband, Frenchy, had just bought on Osborn Road near the old Holiday Inn in Phoenix. Sitting on a black Naugahyde barstool at the kitchen counter, I looked through the Venetian blinds at the front yard while Arlene, wearing a reddish-brown Afro wig, made margaritas in a blender. Water from the sprinklers made half-circle arcs over the yard, which was bare and smelled of manure. Arlene said Frenchy had just put the grass in.

I hadn't talked to her in five years.

"I heard you were in town," she said on the phone. "Please come over. I want you to see my baby. I've missed you."

I'd missed her, too, and her family. But I'd stayed away since the abortion. Rarely did I feel as deeply crushed as I had then. She never thanked me for helping her through it. She left me alone in the motel room where it happened and drove away with her boyfriend, who'd done nothing but get her pregnant. Now, here she was again; and I couldn't stop the churning in my stomach. I'd hoped that seeing her would help me get over it. Maybe motherhood had changed her.

"Where's the baby?" I asked.

"In the bedroom. We can look at him later. I need a break. We named him Oliver, Ollie for short," she said.

"Wasn't that the name of the singer at the Red Dog, the club where we used to dance? The guy you had a crush on? I remember doing a painting of him."

“Yeah.”

“Are you nursing him?”

“No way.”

“I’ve never seen it done before. I was hoping I could watch,” I said.

“Well, it hurt like hell and I got an infection.”

Arlene turned the margarita glasses upside down in a dish of salt, then poured the frothy pale yellow liquid from the blender. Holding it by its stem, she handed me a glass. I took a sip. Salt and cactus juice burned my throat. I stared at the diamond ring on her finger.

“Cubic Zirconium,” she said. “I bought it for myself. No one knows we’re not really married. You’re the only one I would tell.” Arlene sat down on the bar stool next to me and lit a cigarette. She smoked it out of the side of her mouth. “I was just looking for a good time. I dug shocking people. You should have seen the looks we got.”

“I’ll bet. I’ve never even seen a white woman with a black man in this town.”

“I liked making them uncomfortable, but now with Ollie, it’s a different story. People come up and call me a nigger lover, right to my face. Frenchy’s sister Leona accused me of getting pregnant on purpose just so I could have a brother for myself. So I hit her. I never expected to have a baby with Frenchy, but I couldn’t go through another border town abortion.”

Yeah, neither could I, I thought.

Arlene sucked smoke deep into her body. Her skin was lined like leather from too much sun. In high school we were always perfectly tanned. During our sitting out sessions, our bodies shining with baby oil, we held the backs of our hands toward the sun to make sure they matched the rest of us.

“Anyway, Leona hit me back and we really got into it. Frenchy’s two aunts had to break us up. All those women are on welfare. Well, I won. Leona’s nose bled and I ripped her blouse. She didn’t know who she was messing with.” Arlene poured herself another margarita. “She thought I was just some wimpy white woman.”

A warm breeze carried the smell of wet manure through the front window.

“How do you and Frenchy get along?”

“Oh, he turned into a pretty good guy once we got past the slavery thing.”

“The what?”

“One night he drank too much and hit me pretty hard. I couldn’t figure out what I’d done. The next day he apologized. He said it had to do with 200 years of slavery. I understand it I guess, the anger and all.”

“Aren’t you afraid he’ll do it again?”

“Oh, no. It was just the one time. See all those orange trees out there in the backyard? He planted every one of them. And he’s going to dig a hole for a swimming pool too.”

“Are you sure about all this?” I gulped down the rest of my drink.

“I know it’s a little freaky, and some days I don’t know how to handle it. Thank God for weed. I’ve made my bed, as they say. Besides, black men are better in that area.”

“Bigger than white men?”

“And better kissers too. There’s more cushion to their lips.” Arlene pursed hers and made in and out motions like a fish.

Maybe I should try it, I thought. I didn’t know if I could stand to be called a nigger lover. I thought that was a southern expression from another era. I’d have to live in a big city or

someplace in Europe. But maybe if I loved the guy I could live anywhere, including backward conservative Phoenix. “Are you in love with him?”

“I wish I’d had the chance to find out for sure before I got pregnant. If you want to try it out, I could introduce you to Frenchy’s cousin. He’s cute. You look good though. This guy Ray must be treating you right.”

“I guess. He’s a lot older. Can I try on your Afro?”

“It’s cool, huh?” Arlene pulled off the wig. Her hair was bleached platinum underneath. In her short, African print tunic, almond-shaped brown beads around her neck, she looked heavier without the big hair to give her more height.

I went down the hall to the bathroom to look in the mirror. Arlene turned up the sound on the television. Soap opera music played. In the darkness of the hallway I could barely see the wall photos of Arlene’s parents, her brother and the portrait I’d painted of her in high school: thin, tan, blonde, smiling and in love with Jerry, the guy she wanted to marry.

The walls of the bathroom were painted forest green. The color of the shag rug and toilet seat cover matched. The light was low. I almost didn’t see the baby lizard making its way across the windowsill.

I looked at myself in the mirror and then made my way back to the kitchen. “It looks good with my skin color. Exotic, don’t you think? Like I’m part Brazilian, black and Irish or something.”

Arlene twirled around on her barstool to face me. “Far out,” she said. “It looks great. Frenchy’ll dig it.”

“Where’d you meet him?”

“That place we used to go for burgers when we ditched school. The Ranch House, with those old ladies who did the cooking with nets over their hair. He was on a job nearby and stopped to eat his lunch out back at those picnic tables. He had on really tight bellbottoms.”

Arlene wiggled her hips on the bar stool and smacked her lips. “He knows how to give that good lovin’ every night. Anyway, he politely asked if he could join me. Frenchy makes good money too as long as the construction jobs keep coming in. In the summer he has to eat salt tablets it gets so hot. One hundred-twenty degrees some days. He never complains. He’s used to hard times. When he was a kid in Greensboro, Mississippi, he and his brother used to walk to school through the snow in their mother’s high heels. Isn’t that a trip? They didn’t have shoes of their own.”

“Your mother must be thrilled about all this.”

“You can imagine. She did loan me the money to buy the ring.”

We watched silently as the soap opera ended.

“Are you still painting?” Arlene asked.

“Yeah. Ray said I could turn his garage into a studio.”

“That’s great. Listen, I’m going to have Ollie baptized and I wanted to know if you’d be his godmother. If I die, you need to make sure he gets Catholic teachings.”

“Why me? I haven’t seen you in years. And I’m not Catholic.”

“I know we drifted apart, probably my fault, but we go back a long way.”

She hadn’t said that before. Maybe she had changed.

“I told Father Michael you were brought up Episcopalian. He said that was close enough for a godmother. You just have to promise you’d make sure he got Catholic teachings.”

Arlene went to the kitchen to warm a bottle. “Do you want to see him now? I have to warn you, he’s pretty dark.”

We went to the baby’s room. It was the same color as the bathroom except one wall was covered with bamboo print wallpaper, ripped at the seams. Sunlight seeped in from the edges of an ill-fitting window shade pulled down below the windowsill. One stuffed teddy bear sat on a shelf above Ollie’s crib.

“See what I mean?”

She hadn’t exaggerated his darkness. It was hard to believe he’d come out of her.

“Well, he’s a pretty color,” I said. “Shiny burnt umber.”

“What’s that?”

“A dark reddish-brown.”

He was a skinny baby. He lay in the middle of a small mattress covered with an animal print sheet. His body looked like a wooden board. Arlene didn’t pick him up. She put the bottle in a plastic holder next to him. Ollie turned his tiny head. His eyes stared up at me as he sucked at the fake nipple.

We heard Frenchy come through the garage door singing.

“Maybe you’ll want to give me kisses sweet. Hey, Arlene, you here?”

We went to the kitchen to meet him. His hair was cut short against his head. His jeans hung low on his hips. When he pulled off his white t-shirt and tossed it on the counter, he exposed his flat muscled belly. His navel was encircled with an oval of black curly hair. He opened the refrigerator and bent down to get a beer.

“Where have you been?” asked Arlene.

“Hey, Baby.” Frenchy put his arm around her. “Out to the Junkanoo Club talking with Marvin. We came up with a dynamite idea. We’re going into business together.”

Arlene looked at me and rolled her eyes.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Linda.”

“Oh, the artist. Nice to meet you.” Frenchy extended his pink-palmed hand toward me.

“We’re gonna manufacture Marvin’s Deep Pit Barbecue Sauce.”

He had a thick southern accent. I had to listen closely to understand what he said.

“White people in this town aren’t going to buy barbecue sauce from a couple of brothers,” Arlene said.

“Sure they will. We’ll be like Famous Amos, advertise our own thing. Start on local TV. We’ll film Marvin digging a pit, then slapping sauce all over a pig and lowering it down into the ground. You girls can eat the finished product on camera.”

“Nobody roasts pigs in pits anymore, except in Hawaii.”

“Baby, it’s just advertising.”

“What do you think of my idea?” he said to me.

I paused to make sure I understood him. “Sounds good. Everyone should go for what they believe in.”

“I am wore out. That is the bad part about all this. You get a house and you got to work harder. I’m too young for this.” Frenchy laughed.

“Did you bring the diapers?”

“Aw, shit.” Frenchy shrugged his shoulders and slid his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. “Sorry, Babe. I’ll go now.”

“Never mind. Give me the keys? Come on, Linda.”

“Let her stay. I can show her the wall out back where you thought she could paint pink flamingos.”

I looked at Arlene, then at Frenchy. He scared me a little but I was curious about him. Other than the fact that he was black, he seemed different than other men I’d met.

Arlene shot Frenchy a look of warning, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. I wondered if he’d cheated on her.

“Oh, alright. I’ll be back in a few,” she said.

Frenchy angled the blinds until the bands of light on the faded linoleum floor disappeared. “Have to keep the heat out,” he said smiling. “So, Linda. What’s happening?”

“Nothing much.” Maybe I should have gone with Arlene, I thought.

“Let me get you another margarita.” He went to the kitchen, pulled his shirt over his torso and pulsed the blender. “Did you see my main man in there?”

“He’s real cute. Looks just like you.”

“Cigarette? There on the table. They’re made for black folk.”

I noticed the brand. Parliaments.

“You smoke it, you might turn.”

I laughed nervously. “No, thanks.”

“That Afro looks good on you.”

“Oh, I forgot all about it.” I felt my face flush. I should have taken it off, but now my own hair would be a matted down mess underneath. I smoothed the fake hair with my hand like it was my own.

“Let’s sit down.” He put my drink and his beer on the coffee table and patted the couch cushion. I sat in the chair across from him. “You did that painting of John Coltrane Arlene’s got hanging in the bedroom. I like it. We’ll go out back in a minute. Flamingos look good with a pool. Don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I said. A picture he must have seen in a magazine, I thought.

“I don’t expect you to paint them for free or nothing. I used to draw as a kid. I drew things I wanted, like people going out to dinner. I got good at drawing cheeseburgers, tomatoes, onions, cheese and secret sauce dripping over the side of a bun.” Frenchy guzzled down half his beer. “My folks never took me anywhere. I mean nowhere. I’ve never even been on an airplane. I made paper ones all the time. My old man said, ‘You doing something girls do.’ He thought I was cutting out paper dolls. Can you believe it?” Frenchy leaned toward me with big eyes. “I tried to tell him, No. They fly. But he wouldn’t listen. Arlene said you used to write poetry.”

“Yeah. Real depressing, suicidal stuff.”

“Can I read you one of mine? You’ll dig it. Wait here.”

He went down the hall and came back carrying a red notebook. He flipped through a pile of records and put one on the turntable. “Background music. This poem is from a dream. Really two dreams put together. Ready?” He turned some pages, stopping somewhere in the middle of the notebook. “I call this one ‘The Nagi Man.’ His body began to sway to the reggae music.

The Nagi man takes you down

Behind the shadow wall

Hey, baby, come with me

It’s time for ecstasy

Oya sings below the tracks

Magnolia in her hair

Black arms wait to hold you

No more twists of fear

Before I could say anything he explained that in African mythology Oya was a black goddess with nine heads, the queen of the winds of change. “When she opens her mouth, flicks out her tongue,” he said, imitating Oya, “lightning strikes.”

As he talked I pictured myself in Arlene’s shoes. I couldn’t raise a black child in Phoenix any better than she. I couldn’t handle the gawking and whispering, but I saw why she’d been attracted to Frenchy. He was real, sensual and spontaneous.

The margaritas began to make my head buzz. The edges of my body felt doughy and thick.

“You got a man, Linda?”

“I live with him in Hollywood. People keep asking me when I’m going to settle down.”

“If this guy’s not the one, don’t settle. You look good. You got style and you got talent too.”

He turned up the music, took my hand and pulled me up from the couch. I hesitated but then followed his lead to the rhythm of reggae. I wanted to taste the salt on his skin. Dancing with Frenchy to the music of Bob Marley was a far cry from sitting around with Ray listening to Patti Page sing “The Folks on the Hill.” Sometimes with Ray I felt sucked into childhood, remembering the music my mother listened to through all her marriages and divorces.

Ollie began to cry.

“I’ll get him,” I said.

Still moving to the music, I came back to the den holding Ollie’s stiff body in my arms. His skin was moist. He smiled. “He knows I’m going to be his godmother,” I said.

“That’s my man.” Frenchy moved closer to me. His bare arm touched mine. He stroked the baby’s face. Ollie laughed and for a moment we stuck together.

I looked out the back window as the afternoon sun shot streaks of yellow light into the leaves of the orange trees. I heard the cranking cogwheel sound of the garage door opening.

Frenchy moved away from me. Arlene came in with a box of diapers. “Hey,” she said, sizing us up. “I ran into Marcus at the store. He’s having a barbeque, right now. He invited us over for a burger.”

“How about it Linda, we can all go?” Frenchy said.

“I don’t want to take Ollie. Linda can stay here with him, get to know her godson. We won’t be gone long.”

I’m not doing this again, I thought.

I handed the baby to Arlene.

“What?”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Why?”

“What about the flamingos?” said Frenchy.

“Paint them yourself.”

“What’s with you?” Arlene said.

On my way out, I held my breath as I walked by the freshly manured front lawn.