

Aimee DeLong

Copperhead

His eyes kept rolling up, but he wasn't rolling his eyes. Some invisible Corona puppet master was simply keeping them from popping out. They were the darkest brown I had ever seen. I wanted to sleep inside of them.

"You are a real girl," he told me, "I like that."

"I know," I agreed. I was a real girl. Sometimes I wished I wasn't. It's not like The Cherry Blossom Club was the most suitable place for real girls, or even fake girls with real parts.

"Just dance for me right here. I'll pay you."

I stood between his knees as he sat on his barstool, feeling like a wide-eyed Christina Ricci in *Fear And Loathing*, held captive like a muse to a thinner Benicio del Toro and his non-linear requests, and his subtle cosmic gestures and his random thoughts. How was I to lap dance for a man sitting on a barstool? I swayed my hips back and forth, letting them ricochet between his denim. As physical inventiveness set in I hiked one thigh over his leg, undulating it in a wide circle as I allowed my hair to splay itself like ruby cobweb around his ear.

The song changed, and I plunked back down on my stool as he pulled his wallet out and discreetly handed me a fifth twenty-dollar bill since he had beckoned me.

"Do you want another drink?" he asked.

"I'm already drunk, and I have to dance again later."

"Order some food."

"No, that's OK."

Even as a stripper my first instinct was to say no when someone asked me if I wanted something. I once turned down fifty dollars because the

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man tried to give it to me as if he were urging me to accept food stamps. *Take the money*, he had said. *No, that's OK*, I replied. It seemed that my minister's daughter Iowa roots had followed me to California...their useless sense of practicality and pride. Juan stared at me, his midnight Mississippi eyes and their earthen ware, telling me, *come on, who are you kidding, you know you're starving*.

"OK. I'll order something."

"Jackie, we need a menu," Juan told the bartender.

I had heard the other girls crooning over the paella the last few days.

"I'll take the paella."

"It's sooo good," Jackie assured me.

I fondled the copper link bracelet that complimented Juan's gorgeous Mexican skin, a coral hued brown, as if he had electric jellyfish swimming through his veins, creating a peach glow all over his forearms. Although he was much darker than me, we had the same cream-sickle complexion.

"You know, copper is a soft metal," he informed me.

"Huh." I uttered without meaning.

"But," he continued with a vague sense of melancholy, "It's important to remember that it's still a metal."

I tumbled the links around on his wrist. They felt somehow soft at the core, as if they would collapse in on themselves if I just squeezed hard enough, but of course they didn't.

"Hey dere!" said Porsche, a clever yet hopelessly obvious Russian girl. The kind of girl that never had to be anything but obvious. Obvious in that way men love about strippers. Something that even when I wanted, I didn't have the ability to be.

Porsche put her arm around me, the blond of her hair and the gloss of her lips playing off each other in a diamond bounce around her head. She was pretty, but the accent made her beautiful.

"I LAV dis geeur! Don't you LAV her?" she asked Juan.

"Yes, I do." He stated as a matter of fact. He wasn't in the mood to play Porsche's games.

"Isn't Juan kuul?" she asked me, doing that stripper thing where the girls try to play off each other. I didn't mind it, because Porsche was my

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friend. Tag-teaming for extra money from douchbags was fine by me, but Juan was nice.

“Yeah, he’s a lot of fun.”

Actually, he was a lot of fun. But, he and I barely talked. We sat in each other’s presence as if we were floating in a swimming pool in the middle of the desert. At certain moments I would glance at him, and he would mouth the words to the songs. At other times he would pull me close to him and kiss my cheek or the side of my head.

“You should marry Sandy, yeah?” teased Porsche, “She is looking for a good husband.”

“I’m going to.”

The three of us stared at each other with pained smiles until it became clear to Porsche that Juan was only interested in spending money on me that night.

“Ciao, lavers!”

“Voila!” announced Jackie as she placed the paella in front of me.

It was never unappetizing to eat at The Cherry Blossom, because the main stage, the lap dance booths, and the bar were all in completely separate areas. Also, thank god it was only topless. Another difference about The Cherry Blossom was that the food was surprisingly good, because the owners had it delivered from a place across the street. Jackie pulled off the tin foil and there sat a steaming pile of shrimp and sausage-covered loveliness. My usual night of scant chilled skin and vodka washed thoughts was warming up into something human. I usually didn’t let the men buy me food, because it meant that they were trapping me in their company, often buying my dinner yet not paying for my time. But Juan had been handing me a twenty roughly every twenty minutes. He kissed my head again, and asked Jackie to get me some water.

One of the flat screens above the bar showed the girls on the main stage in a red hazy security camera sex-industry type of cinematography. The other screen played the nightly news. We gazed at a story on mute about a man who released his wild animals right before killing himself.

Juan scoffed at footage of a sign on the side of the road blinking with the words, EXOTIC ANIMALS RUNNING LOOSE. He shook his beer soaked brain. “What does that even mean? Exotic animals? Who decides if they are exotic or not?”

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I smiled, closed-lipped, my mouth full of paella. Juan rustled my hair.

“Is it good, sexy Sandy?”

“Yes, thank you so much.”

