



*He was too big for the green folding chairs,
too severe for the town.*

SOME NIGHTS THE STARS DON'T SEEM THAT FAR

Once upon a Tuesday night, Che Guevara walked into my club around closing time. I'd given up on the last few assholes of the evening, and while I still wore my six-inch heels and more makeup than a nice girl, I'd put a gray sweatshirt on over my black bikini and was ordering a Diet Coke when I saw him to my right, in the mirror behind the bar. His face was clean-shaven. He wore a baseball hat, but his eyes were unprotected and unforgiving. Even when he smiled, it was confrontational, which I'd seen in Italy and France, but almost never in Los Angeles, let alone in a Los Angeles strip club. It could have been some biological blip, a freak extra step in his DNA ladder that made his eyes refract light a certain way. It could have been that he was one of the few men I'd seen who was unafraid of women.

When I noticed him, he was already sitting with a redhead, a dancer who called herself Scarlet, of course. She was one of the high-end girls who came in exclusively to meet with VIPs. The rest of us were subjected to the economic and political pressures of regular scheduling, slow nights, and hustling dances.

I considered the fact that not talking to Che Guevara would be one of the greatest failures of my life, not just as a stripper who occasionally has opportunity to chat and/or touch the penises of strange and/or powerful men, not just as a self-proclaimed socialist, and not just as an artist who should fling herself at everything new, but as all of those at once. His black hair stuck out in clumpy waves from the hat and he wore a sport coat over some dark jeans. I knew from approximately twenty seconds of observation that he did not appreciate fandom, sycophantic babbling, or even audacious interrupting hands that intended to be shaken. I would have to pay the DJ to put me on

stage and hope Che noticed me that way.

Then, the very nearly unimaginable occurred. Che's laser gaze pierced me from the mirror and he nodded his head once. In strip club sign language, this means, "come on over."

I wove around the red leather bar stools and approached him. Scarlet smiled prettily and seemed unruffled at my invasion of her work-space. She was still dressed — or rather, undressed, in expensive-looking black garters and a push-up bra. I envied her freckles and immediately was embarrassed by the two new pimples I'd acquired that day.

"Was that a 'come over here' nod?" I asked Che. In L.A., at night, a baseball hat makes someone more conspicuous, not less.

He waved the question away and leaned toward Scarlet. They talked cheek-to-cheek, into each other's ears. When she spoke, he stared at me. I stared back, but couldn't stop myself from smiling. His skin was darker than I'd imagined. His lips thicker.

"Where you from?" he asked. Everyone asked that. I never figured out what information they thought they gleaned from my answer.

"San Francisco."

He chuckled. San Francisco was some kind of joke to him. "I'm from Puerto Rico," he said.

Okay, I said.

Scarlet straightened to reach his ear. "You're going to love her," she said, this time loud enough for me to hear. "She's a writer." It was generous of her, and also, a way for her to find out if I could swim with the big fish. If she judged me worthy, she'd bring me along on other nights when high-profile customers came in a group and wanted some more girls. She'd get tipped if I became a favorite of any of her men. Like a finder's fee.

"What do you write?" he asked. In the background the music had changed to something very mellow, lounge-y. We were at the most dingy and precarious moments of the evening, when the girls didn't care anymore about smelling good and the managers weren't watching

the floor. The brass pole was smudged and our new carpet couldn't keep up with all the stilettos piercing its royal green nap.

"Mostly TV specs," I said. "But I just finished a screenplay."

"What's it called?"

"It's called *My Life in Babylon*," I said. "That's a line from a Leonard Cohen song."

He looked 20% surprised. "You like Leonard Cohen?"

"I love him." I tried to figure out how to ask Che for stories about Cuba. The lights behind the stage kept flashing through all the primary and secondary colors. It was only when the red hit him that he looked like himself.

"Okay," Che said to me, and winked at Scarlet. "Who are your top five musical artists, if you don't mind me putting you on the spot?"

"I don't mind," I said, kneeling on my stool so I'd be a little taller, "I like the spot." This time he smiled. And there was no other way to ingratiate but to be honest, since I didn't know anything about what he listened to. "Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, U2," I said. In the brief pause before I went on, Che had raised his hand to high five me. He was growing a small potbelly, which was sexy to me, because it made him look like he'd been happy recently.

"You get a drink for that!" he said. Then to Scarlet, "She picked heroes. Writers." Then to me, "You like Tom Waits?"

And of course I did, or the story couldn't have gone this far. We began to discuss Tom Waits. Our drinks came. We all said, "Salud," and looked each other in the eyes as we toasted. Again, he tested me. "Favorite Waits album?"

"The 3-disc set, *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, and Bastards*," I said.

"I like you," he said. "We need to hang out. You will write me a story, and I will give you hell."

I imagined what that "hell" would look like: him yelling, throwing pages around, grinding them into the floor with his big black boots. I glanced at his feet. Sneakers.

Scarlet started telling him about a French movie she just saw and

he listened for one minute as if he would devote ten, before abruptly asking me, "Have you read any Dostoevsky?"

I told him I'd read *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground*.

"He's a prerequisite if you want to be a depressed college kid," I said.

He drank his vodka soda, looking at me sidelong. I relaxed my face.

Then a cocktail waitress came up to us with stars in her eyes. "I just wanted to tell you I love your work," she said, her hands pressed into her black apron.

"Thanks," I said.

Her breasts were pushing perfectly against her black corset. "I'm a big fan," she said, ignoring me.

Che nodded and thanked her. He did not invite her to join us. He did not say anything to encourage her, nor to discourage her. She scurried away and he turned back to me. Scarlet was called on stage.

Che and I were as alone as is possible at a strip club bar. "What's this?" he said, fingering my sweatshirt.

"Pajamas," I said.

"You smoke?"

"Weed and cigars," I said, "but not cigarettes."

He shook his head. "You don't smoke cigars."

"I'll go smoke a cigar on the patio with you right now."

He bought us two enormous Montecristos, and while he chopped their heads off he said, "I know a little bit about these things."

Scarlet returned, looking bored and checking her phone. She came outside with us. I walked in front. I kept my back straight. I hoped he noticed my calves.

The smoking patio at the club felt appropriately tropical, its banana leaf plants sprawling along the walls and white lights twinkling from the brown beams of the roof. A long table full of fat men made it difficult for us to find a private place to sit. We eventually squeezed in, and Che sat closest to the wall, with Scarlet and I perched cross-legged

facing him. He lit the cigars. He stared at me, puffing amusedly while I blew smoke away from Scarlet.

"You're a sexy fucker, aren't you," he said to me, without a question this time.

"Thank you," I said.

"Hey man," the fattest of the fat men called to him, "heads up!" and he tossed at Che a small rectangle wrapped in black plastic.

"What is this? Weed?"

"No man, it ain't weed. Open it." The fat man was wedged into the largest brown throne-chair in the club, which usually was not out on the patio.

Inside the plastic was a leather wallet, but it wasn't a wallet, it was the cover for an L.A. Sheriff's badge. "Is this real?" Che asked the fat man.

"Better believe it," the fat man said. "I know you already got some friends in the LAPD, but you can't ever have enough back-up, know what I mean?"

Scarlet and I looked at each other, hoping, maybe, to see an explanation in the other's face, and we didn't, and so we laughed. She said quietly, "That guy's a psychic. Stars pay him \$5,000 an hour for advice."

And Che pretended he was talking to a cop, drunk, slurring, saying "Lissen, ossifer, I'm a goddamn sherrif," while he fumbled with the badge, and we laughed harder. He had deep dimples. I wanted to sit in his lap and kiss him, then felt like a stupid teenager, knowing everyone else did too. "A psychic," he said. He shook his head.

I invented Che's friend in the LAPD. He was black, the son of a Panther, a detective. He busted white-collar criminals.

The fat men slowly stopped talking to us.

"What are you reading right now?" I asked Che. For the first time, I pictured touching his penis. I imagined it one of those large, reluctant types. (I was wrong.)

"Some novel by some guy that isn't very good," he said. "You send

me a story. Write me one.”

“What do you want it to be about?”

He opened his arms, indicating, *here*. “There’s this place,” he said. “There’s L.A. Come on,” and wagged a finger at me accusingly, as if to say, a writer should always have something to write about. I looked at Scarlet. She smiled reassuringly.

Another cocktail waitress came up to us. “I just wanted to say hi,” she said. “I’m a really big fan. I love your work. My boyfriend and I just think you’re like brilliant, we’ve seen all your movies. I loved you in *Traffic*. I’m sorry you guys. I just wanted to say hi.”

She was gone before Che could nod.

“How do I get a story to you?” I said.

“I’ll give you my email,” he said. “But I don’t have a pen.”

“What kind of writer would I be without a pen?” I said, and pulled a black ballpoint from my tiny purse. He tried to untwist the cap, like it was a fountain pen. Che suddenly seemed very drunk. He would not accept help from us. He held the pen very close to his face, finally pulled the cap off, and brandished it triumphantly. He seemed amused by himself. He wrote his email address on a napkin. I folded it into a triangle and slipped it in a side zipper pocket of the tiny purse, the pocket where I keep my big bills, on nights when I get one.

Scarlet wanted to get back into the conversation. “So, of all the places it was released, where did *Che* do the best?” she asked him.

“Japan,” he answered.

“Weren’t they basically fascists, like, fifty years ago?” Scarlet blinked in confusion.

“Yes,” he said, “But there are elements of the story that appeal to them.”

“Maybe fighting to the death for a principle,” I said, “for an honorable idea.”

He nodded at me. My body felt stripped of skin, raw to the air, nerves firing. “Let’s hang out,” he said. “I’m serious.” Men never looked at me like that without touching me, but he wasn’t.

"I'd love to," I said. I leaned back in the chair, sucked in my stomach, re-crossed my legs.

Our mowhawked DJ walked onto the patio, looking for us. All the other girls had gone home. "Sorry guys," he said to Che and the fat men, "the girls gotta come inside."

Scarlet and I stood, and kissed Che on the cheek, one after another. He smelled like smoke and drycleaning. "It was great to meet you," I said, then wished I'd been more creative.

"Write me," he said. "Fast."

"Lickety-split," I said.

He took my cigar and tapped out the end. "Take this with you."

"Bye honey," Scarlet said to him, and he patted her waist.

I wrote Che Guevara an email at 3:44AM, worried that he was too drunk to remember our meeting. He wrote back at 8:12PM and said he remembered my legs, my pajamas, and talking about Tom Waits.

And then he asked me out to dinner.

I spent five days in a horrified excitement, reading *The Motorcycle Diaries* and brushing up on my Spanish. He canceled on Tuesday, citing various important meetings that could not be changed.

"What are you so sad about it for?" Scarlet asked me, the following week. We leaned side-by-side into the grossly bright dressing room mirror. I realized we were both applying mascara in time with the strains of "Don't Stop Believin'" that were getting piped in from the main stage. She said, "You can't count on a guy like that."

"A lot of people have counted on him, for a long time," I said.

"That's different."

"I suppose it is."

"He did really like you." She turned to inspect her backside. She adjusted some straps. "He'll probably call you in a month and want to come in here to see you. I've known him a long time."

"I don't want to see him as a customer," I said. "I wanted to talk to him about Cuba."

"Oh honey," Scarlet said, and put a hand on my arm. "He has to

do that all the time. He comes in here to relax." She wore expensive perfume, not the candy-scent spray most girls did.

"I don't want him to relax," I said.

Scarlet shrugged, and after her final look-over, strode to the door of the dressing room. "Who knows?" she said. "Maybe you're the first woman in lingerie he'll take seriously."

I adjusted my right eyelashes. "I think he understands that lingerie is very serious. It's a uniform for a subset of the working class."

Scarlet snorted and left.

When Che Guevara did finally call, he wanted hot dogs. "Italian sausage," he said, "and not the kind you're thinking of."

We went to the 3rd and Fairfax Farmer's Market and he let the sausage grease stay on his face until he was finished. He seemed older in the daylight. He was too big for the green folding chairs, too severe for the town. People looked at him, at us, with pangs of confused recognition.

"I wore a short skirt for you," I said, and raised one leg. "Now it disgusts me that I did that."

"You've got great legs," he said. "I appreciate the skirt."

"Tell me about Cuba," I said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Go there. Read your history. You tell me about Cuba, next time we talk."

"So what am I doing here?"

"Eating lunch."

"What are you doing here?"

"The same." He wiped his mouth, finally. "And, enjoying you."

"That's charming."

He nodded.

"It's disarming, actually."

He felt no need to respond.

"Okay," I said. "Do you want to be lovers?"

"Yes."

"Then, let's be lovers."

"You are disappointed," he said.

I didn't want to lie.

"That feeling is your fault," he said.

He reached for my hand, the first time he'd initiated any touch. His was warm, dry, enveloping. A hand without fear. I wanted to fuck immediately.

We stayed in the sunshine, not talking.

We looked at each other.

It was an act of both violence and affection between two polarized bodies of memory. ■