

Body Parts

Nora found the prosthetic leg in a puddle behind the university's medical school, not far from where she'd parked her car. There had been a brief, fierce storm while she was in her classes and she wondered if the leg had tumbled through the air from somewhere or been deliberately abandoned. Though dented and cracked, it might still be functional, and she felt something ought to be done with it. But when she attempted to give the leg to medical school staff, she was rebuffed.

She took it home, thinking to install it in her bedroom as found art. Its cartoonish pink plastic skin amused her. And yet it was mysterious. Who had discarded it and why?

Her parents were not amused.

"It's filthy," her mother said.

"I'll clean it up," Nora offered.

"Get it out of here now," her father said. "We don't need somebody else's garbage."

She couldn't explain why she'd felt compelled to rescue the leg from that puddle and was loath to consign it now to the trash. So she carried it out of the house and placed it gently in the trunk of her car.

And then, before too long, she forgot about it entirely. The leg migrated to the rear of the compartment and disappeared behind stacks of magazines, text books and camping gear.

Nora didn't think about the leg again until several months later, after she'd met Joey Fontana. By then, she was sling- ing cocktails in the Tiki lounge in North Miami Beach under the tutelage of Connie O'Leary, who was ten years older with freckled, sun-leathered skin and a cloud of dark teased hair, in which she pinned fresh jasmine blossoms every night.

She and Connie wore flowered sarongs slit up one side and bras covered in the same fabric, that plumped up their breasts, especially when they leaned over the bar. "Aloha," they chorused when customers entered the lounge.

Sometimes after work, Nora stopped for a nightcap at the nearby club where Joey Fontana sang and played piano. She felt comfortable in the Casablanca because other women came into the piano bar alone.

"You better stay away from the Caz," Connie warned.

"Why? I like it."

"Because, sweetpea, it's a hooker pickup joint."

"You're kidding, right?"

Connie raised both eyebrows, said nothing.

Nora clapped a hand to her forehead. "I'm an idiot."

Connie knew all about it, being in that line of work, herself. A single working mother, she couldn't earn enough at the Tiki to cover the rent and feed her kids. They only got three bucks a shift and had to split the measly tips.

"Joey watches out for me at the Caz," Nora said weakly.

"Joey's got a big thing for you."

She shrugged. "I guess."

"You're not interested?"

"No! He's like older than my father."

Connie laughed. "So why're you leading him on?"

"I'm not! He's nice to me, I'm nice to him."

"As if three kids weren't enough," Connie muttered.

Joey wore dark suits with a ruffled shirt and cummerbund, the costume for his gig. He was broad shouldered and barrel chested, and carried himself with dignity, Nora thought. He didn't slouch like a lot of old guys did. He walked with his head held high and a barely perceptible limp. His hair was shoe-polish black; heavy lidded eyes the color of strong coffee.

The other guys ogled her breasts and left quarter tips. Joey didn't ogle and he was a good tipper. He seemed to take a genuine interest in her, asked about her classes at the university, her family, her plans for the future.

"How'd you wind up working here, kiddo?" he asked.

She explained it was the only bar tending job she could get with no experience. She just had to be twenty-one and look good in a bikini.

"So I borrowed a bikini for the interview."

"You don't have a bikini?"

"I like to swim," she said. "Bikinis aren't practical."

A few days later he came into the lounge with a flat white box. Inside wrapped in tissue was a cream and blue striped bikini, exactly her size.

Nora hesitated. She looked over at Connie, who was buttering up someone else. Joey was watching her expectantly. "Thank you," she said. "I suppose every girl should have one."

"Especially this girl," he said.

Nora no longer stopped by the Caz after work. But Joey was often at the Tiki for cocktail hour. She told him she had to write papers and study for exams. It took a half-hour to drive home in the dead of night. All of this was true, though Nora never thought twice about staying up all night cramming for exams.

“Thatta girl,” Joey approved. “Nose to the grindstone.”

She went to the back bar to mix his drink and when she returned, he asked “So when can I take you to dinner?”

“I told you how busy I am.”

“When you’re not so busy. After your exams, as a reward. Someplace classy, like the Fontainebleau.”

“Joey, I’m always busy.”

“I see.” His face tightened. “No time for a pal?”

“My boyfriend’s the jealous type,” she said desperately.

In fact, her boyfriend was too cool and too stoned to care what she did.

Joey smiled suddenly. He had perfectly straight white teeth.

Dentures, Nora thought.

“Can’t say I blame the lucky fellow,” Joey said.

Nora’s boyfriend Arnie never invited her to dinner or asked about her plans for the future. Arnie wore dark sunglasses day and night, even in bed. He lived with three other hipsters in a long wood-frame cottage in Coconut Grove, whose rooms were smoky from cigarettes and pot and candles guttering in Chianti bottles. She was not in love with Arnie. She was fascinated by his long and graceful back.

“Would your boyfriend object if you came to my place for a swim before work?” Joey wasn’t a quitter. “You could bring your books and study.”

“Could I bring a girlfriend?”

Joey sighed. “Bring all your friends. Bring the boyfriend. I just want to see what the bikini looks like on you. Humor the old man, will you sport?”

She couldn't persuade any friend to drive twenty miles to Bay Harbor Island for a swim. Connie also declined, being truly busy herself, what with three kids and two plus jobs. There were dark circles under her eyes that makeup couldn't disguise.

"You don't have to worry about Joey. He's a gentleman," Connie assured her. "He's always been decent to me."

"Is he... did you?" Nora faltered.

"Oh no. No. Nothing like that. He knows my situation and he treats me with respect is all I'm saying."

Nora was still uneasy. "It's like I'd be doing him this weird favor. Which I don't want to do."

"You can always hot foot it out of there," Connie said dryly. "He'd never catch you."

"How d'you know that? He could be in training for the senior Olympics."

Connie stared at her in disbelief.

"You really don't know? He's only got one leg. The other one isn't real. I mean it's real, but it's man made."

Nora was shocked. "I didn't know. How would I know?"

"You got to admire the man," Connie went on. "He never complains."

Nora wiped the bar though it was clean. She knew Connie was watching her. Connie lowered her voice.

"He told me the girls really like his stump," she said with a sly grin, and then thought better of it. "Forget I said that."

"I didn't hear it," Nora said.

She drove past rows of shiny, late model cars looking for the condo's guest parking. Her battered Plymouth, needing a wash among other services, shuddered as she turned off the ignition.

Joey waved from a second floor landing. “Up here, sweetheart,” he called and, poolside, heads turned to stare. She went up the stairs and into his apartment.

He was wearing white linen pants and a Hawaiian silk shirt, and he must have just shaved, because the after-shave lotion was so strong she wanted to sneeze. Nora had thrown on the denim shift she wore over her costume to and from work. She’d not bothered with makeup, since she was planning to swim. He examined her eagerly.

“You’re lovely without makeup,” he said.

“I look too young without it,” she demurred, and turned from his gaze.

There was an upright piano in one corner of the room and a well stocked bar in another. Stacks of LPs, no books. A large burgundy velvet sofa with matching armchairs and on the walls, framed velvet paintings. She hated velvet paintings.

“What can I get you to drink?” he asked.

“Gin and tonic, please. Can I take it to the pool?”

“Absolutely. You can change in the bedroom.” He pointed.

“I won’t need to.” She began to unzip the shift, then stopped, aware of him watching. “I’ll take it off at the pool. I could use a towel, though.”

Joey mixed the drinks and brought out one towel.

“Aren’t you swimming?”

“I don’t swim,” he said curtly.

“I’m sorry.” She flushed. How stupid, what was she thinking? She had not been thinking. But now she was thinking *stump*. What does it look like? What does it feel like?

“Why don’t you swim?” She plunged on recklessly. “I’m sure you could. You do everything else so well.”

“I don’t like to expose myself. In public, that is.”

They were standing in the middle of the room holding their drinks. She glanced at his legs, then looked him in the eye.

“I’d never have known if Connie didn’t tell me. I don’t even know which one is real and which isn’t.”

“I’ll show you.” He leaned over to roll up the cuff of the left trouser leg above the top of the white sock, revealing an unnaturally flesh colored calf. He rapped it with a knuckle. It sounded hollow. Then he straightened up and the cuff fell down.

Without pausing to think, Nora unzipped her shift and stepped out of it. She hoped he wouldn’t stare.

“Thank you,” he said simply. His eyes flickered lazily up, down, then away. He looked at his watch. “We’d better get down to the pool, sport. Don’t want you late to work.”

He turned and walked to the door with a peculiar rolling gait she’d not noticed before.

Nora climbed out of the pool and sank into the deck chair beside Joey’s. She’d put her hair up in a knot and now it tumbled loose.

“You’re a regular mermaid,” he said.

“I could live in the water.” She squinted at him, shading her eyes with one hand. “Would you swim if the pool were private?”

“Sure,” he said. “I get in the pool in the wee smalls.”

“Alone?”

“Sometimes.” He looked at her closely. “Or with a special friend.”

She fidgeted. *Stump?* she thought. *No.*

She opened the textbook she’d brought to study, read a few lines, closed it. The sun beat fiercely down, penetrating

the umbrella. Joey kept wiping his face with a white handkerchief, monogrammed JF.

"I'm sorry," she said after a while. "I really don't like sunbathing."

"I don't like it either," he admitted.

They went back to his apartment. The cool air revived her.

"Another drink?" he asked.

"No, thanks. I should get ready for work."

"Wait," he said. "First, I got to say something."

She waited.

"I know I don't stand a chance with you," he began.

"Joey, please don't."

"Listen." He held up a hand. "I'm head over heels, but never mind. I'll survive. There's just one thing."

"One thing?"

"Yeah. It'll sound crazy."

"What is it?"

"I want to feel your breasts for like half a minute." He cupped his hands. "Your perfect breasts."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know if it's crazy, but it's not going to happen."

"Okay," he said, dejected.

When she came out of the bathroom with her sarong under the shift and her face made up, Joey was seated at the piano playing "Stardust," which he knew she liked.

"Forgive me?" he smiled.

"Of course," she said. "You're my pal."

He escorted her to her car. It was tilting oddly.

"That rear tire is flat," he observed.

"Oh shit."

"You got a spare and a jack?"

“I think so.”

She hesitated, key in hand, remembering only then what else was in the trunk of her car. But it was too late, she had to open it. Joey found the jack and then removed some boxes to get at the spare tire. And there was the leg lying with its pink shiny knee slightly arched on a bed of mildewed paper.

“Oh shit,” she said again.

“Why is that in your trunk?”

“I forgot it was there. I really did.”

He regarded her sternly. “How can you forget there’s a prosthetic leg in the trunk of your car?”

She frowned at the leg. If only she’d left it in the damn puddle.

“I’m too busy to remember every little thing,” she said at last.

“Nora, is this your idea of a joke?”

“No,” she protested. “I found it and tried to give it away, but no one wanted it.”

“You couldn’t have tried very hard.”

She was deeply embarrassed and didn’t know what else to say.

“I’m still crazy about you,” he said quietly. “But I can’t respect you now.”

“Maybe you could do something with it?” she blurted out.

He turned away from her without answering and pulled the tire out of the trunk.

She only told Connie about the flat tire, that Joey had taken it off and put on the spare. How he wouldn’t let her help, except that after he’d folded himself with difficulty to a seated position, he had to lean on her shoulder to get

up again. Afterward, he never came into the Tiki again on her shift.

Years later Nora couldn't remember what she did with the leg. For a while, it was an ashtray holder in an apartment she shared with two friends. Then she lost track of it.

What she would not forget: The warm hand gripping her shoulder, the man's entire weight bearing down. And thinking, he might bruise her and how could she blame him.