

Diana

by A. E. Ivey

Dreams were all she ever had, all that ever comforted her. *Diana*.

But then there was Rachel. And Diana forgot about her dreams, because there was nothing but Rachel. At first it was nothing but innocent phone calls, plans to meet up for coffee that never happened. Rachel was everything that Diana wanted to be in the dreams that she always lived in as a child and into her adulthood. She was 27 now, and had never been in love before. She didn't know what that felt like. She knew what the city felt like, she knew what a studio apartment with an outside fire escape cat as a companion felt like. When it finally happened it all moved so quickly that Diana wasn't sure where it even became clear what they were doing. She remembers the first time they made love, she remembers telling Rachel, "*Baby, why don't you just move in with me?*" and she remembers the intensity of their fights. For some reason she remembers how the smell of the kitchen was those nights, the yellowing wallpaper, stale oil...

She wanted Rachel to stop dancing, Rachel of course wasn't going to. But the sex after their fights was so addictive that Diana stopped being able to discern whether the dancing even bothered her or if she just wanted the sex that she knew would follow. Rachel was always so abusive during sex after their fights, and Diana found herself craving the rope burns and the pain from Rachel smacking her face. Rachel progressively grew more and more distant though. It was all Diana felt she could do to keep Rachel close. But Diana felt like she was losing every piece of herself, and the depression became crippling to the point that she no longer acted like the Diana that she had been before Rachel came along. Rachel intoxicated every pore in Diana's body and she couldn't escape.

But one night that all changed. They fought the same way they always had, it had been going on like that for so long that Diana couldn't remember a time when they didn't fight - maybe even from day 1 of Rachel stepping foot in Diana's studio apartment. Outside

the city was wet with a day of overcast and misting clouds. It happened so fast Diana knew the situation was spiraling out of her control, but she wasn't sure how to stop it, she didn't know how to derail from the habit she had developed of fighting the same way she always had with Rachel - thinking she would always and forever get the same results from the situation.

But then Rachel was grabbing a bag from the closet and throwing clothes in it, and she was yelling the same things she always would when they fought, but instead of standing on the opposite side of the kitchen from Diana she was yelling from the closet, from the bathroom, from the chair by the tv that a pile of unfolded clean clothes was sitting on. And then she was walking out the door slamming it so hard pictures fell off the walls as the apartment rattled. Diana stood speechless, trying to wrap herself around what had just happened and how it had gone so differently from all the other fights before.

For weeks Diana was in shock, she hadn't cried, even when she got the phone call, even when Rachel's mom sobbing told Diana what had happened, even when Diana went down to the mortuary, even when they told her what did it...even at the funeral. Diana drew a fake veil on her face, and Rachel's family pointed and whispered about Diana. Everyone in Rachel's family knew but they never approved, and Rachel had never been interested in Diana or her sharing their relatives with each other. Diana didn't care, she didn't have any family. She had the city.

She felt numb, and took over Rachel's passion for dancing. She painted her face and body and performed in the street, in the club, and she swallowed different color pills that promised happiness and an alternate reality. And in that reality Rachel was smiling, with Diana. She imagined she saw her everywhere she went. Rachel liked Diana's face paint, but Diana wished Rachel would talk like she used to. She never talked anymore, she would just follow Diana around and watch her and shake her head and smile, her short brown hair tucked behind her ear. Rachel never wore makeup, but she didn't need it. She had those thick dark eyebrows and lashes, and

everywhere she went she never needed style it all came to her naturally. Diana could swear she smelled Rachel everywhere, and she would look and there she was. Citrus. Oranges.

How long had it been since Rachel died? Diana wasn't sure. Weeks, maybe months. Had it been years? How long had it been? Diana didn't know, she didn't care, she danced, and she swallowed the pretty pills, and she never knew what was real anymore.

But then the nights of dancing stopped, and there were no more pills. There was no more Rachel following Diana everywhere, there was no more of the smell of oranges hanging in the air. There was old urine, sweat, and trash from the city dumpster below Diana's apartment window. Rotting fruit. Homeless people. Wet dogs. And Diana, hot from summer nights without a/c in her dinky flat on the 3rd floor 5 blocks from Central Park, she was sober and Rachel was gone.

Diana pulled herself from bed, unsure of how long she had been detoxing, unsure of the day of the week. She didn't care. She had coffee still, stale, in the cupboard. Her chest ached when she thought of Rachel, and she sat at her desk in front of the mirror and stared at the picture of the two of them that hung at the top of the vanity. Almost out of habit she began to transform her face into someone else, because it was easier to be another person or thing than to be Diana. She had never cried for Rachel, and she wasn't going to now, though she thought this was the first time since Rachel's death that she had been sober. She looked down at the zip lock bag on the floor beside her bed. The residue of the drugs coating the inside white. She smoked a cigarette while she sipped her coffee and wondered how long she could go without going back to the alternate reality where Rachel was. The apartment filled with smoke, and the little fan by the open window did little to relieve the heat from the New York summer.

Diana found she was being paid as a street performer with a local talent agency. She discovered a colorful calendar hanging by the front door with directions for every day. Each day written in a different neon color. Doodles covered every blank space on the

calendar. She tried to recall if she had been the one to draw them. But her memories were hazy, and all she could think about was Rachel. Some days she performed in Central Park, other days she was an "attraction" at a club, used to bring in business. People paid to come see her dance, to scream, to cut herself, to *perform* on a stage. There were pictures of Diana everywhere in the apartment. All over the kitchen floor and the counters. She forced herself not to look at them, covered in white face paint, her eyebrows painted on black in a filigree style, and bright red lips - she grabbed her leather jacket that had absorbed the smell of every sleazy New York night club bathroom and left.

Diana walked around the city for a few hours before exhaustion set in and she headed home. She dreaded the thought of passing through the front door and seeing the pictures of alternate Diana scattered everywhere. The sun was setting as she came into her tiny apartment, she collapsed on the bed and immediately fell asleep.

And she dreamt.

She dreamed like she hadn't since before Rachel. In her dreams she watched herself dreaming, and on the nightstand a little box cutter blade sat on a tiny mirror. She reached for it in her mind, sharp and slippery but she cupped it in her hands and looked down at her sleeping body. She ached for Rachel. And she suddenly knew that in the bathroom cabinet a bottle of sleeping pills that belonged to Rachel still took up space. She found herself staring at them.

Diana awoke, coughing. She was drenched in sweat. Beside her on the bed the bottle of sleeping pills was spilled out. She grabbed a handful and went to the kitchen for a glass. It was dark outside, and rain beat against the windows, the fan sprayed a mist into the room through the open window. She couldn't remember falling back to sleep, just the warmth of the sheets against her skin, uncomfortable and sticky from the hot summer night. But her dreams washed over her and carried her back to where she had been before, watching herself sleep. This time she only watched herself, she didn't move around the room. She was sitting up in bed against the wall, smoking a cigarette. The blade sitting beside her hand that lay open

on the bed, limp. The sheets were quickly soaking up the blood that pumped furiously from her artery. And Diana just watched herself. The cigarette sat on her dry lips, her face slowly grew pale and her eyes dark. She would take a drag every once in awhile, and the ash continued to grow on the end of the cigarette till it finally dropped and scattered on her chest.

The dream changed to a sharp vision of the wall the bed was pushed against, Diana watched herself sobbing angrily as she took the box cutter and carved "Rachel" over and over and over again into the sheet rock. White powder was spilling out of a ziplock bag on the bed, and covered a mirror on the nightstand. Tiny cuts left from the blade tore her hand and blood smears appeared on the wall and sheets.

Diana could hear someone calling her name, almost as if from underwater. She wasn't sure. The room spun around her but she couldn't see anyone, couldn't focus. It grew dark, and cold, and the last voicemail Rachel ever left her echoing on repeat.

"I can't do this anymore. You're miserable. I hate you, I hate us. You need help Diana. I can't do this anymore. I can't do this anymore..."

I can't do this anymore."

