

True Romance '66

by Ginnah Howard

First thing each morning, Miss Murgy, a tall witch of a woman, cornered both of us like she did every day. "Girls..." with that she clinked a tea spoon on a shot glass, "do I have your attention?"

"Yes, m'am," Vicky said.

6 a.m., six days a week, Miss Murgy, the spoon on the shot glass, clink, clink. I am not making that up. If it weren't for Vicky's willingness to m'am her—all her yes-sister years at parochial school—we would've lost that job cleaning the Monterey á la Go-Go our first day and let me assure you— á la anything it was not.

"I expect you to have all the cleaning done and done right before the painters get here: lysol both bathrooms, scrub the ashtrays, disinfect the top of the bar..."

Same list every morning, only difference was that this time at 10 o'clock we were to help painters cover everything up before they got started. Then halleluiah, because the bar would be closed, we had two days off in a row for the first time since we arrived. I planned to crawl into bed and not get up again.

Witch-woman switched on the lights in the go-go cage. When they did not blink, she said to Vicky, "Find the defective bulb and don't wear those shoes when you do it. Break your neck and think you can sue me."

Murgy never looked my way. She knew if she saw my face, she'd have to fire my ass and where else was she going to get such cheap labor. We figured she paid us about fifty cents an hour—just enough for us to chip in on Vicky's cousin Theresa's rent and to stock up on Winstons, peanut butter and Kotex . Believe me, lysoling the john after an evening's use by the á la Go-Go clientele was the least of it. Vicky and I spent some time at first trying to figure out how someone like Miss Murgy could be the owner of a place like the Go-Go. Vicky was sure she was a lapsed nun.

Just before Murgy went off to her job in some government office, she issued her final order, "While you assist the painters, I expect you to conduct yourselves as young ladies."

Young, yes; but ladies was definitely a stretch. Since the painters were probably a couple of winos Murgy commandeered off the street corner, I figured we'd have no trouble on that one. Even with a new paint job, no matter how much Windex and Lysol, how much of last night's attempt to drown the misery we hauled out to the alley, there was no disguising á la Go-Go's true nature: a biker bar where both the customers and the furnishings were dented and chipped and beyond hope.

We finished cleaning by 9:15, except for Vicky up in the cage testing bulbs, enough time for me to curl up for some solitary shut-eye in the biggest booth. There was only a twin bed in the spare room at Theresa's, so Vicky and I had to lie head to feet. The first thing I saw at the crack of dawn every morning were Vic's chipped toenails. One good thing at least: Vicky did not kick in her sleep.

I had just crawled into the booth when the go-go lights started blinking. Vicky had found the bad bulb. I knew this meant she was going to do what she did every morning when we finished early: Practice. But maybe not, if I appeared to be sleeping. Then I might not have to listen to the Supremes blasting "Stop in the Name of Love" for the hundredth time. One reason Vicky didn't hate this job as much as I did was that she saw it as a step toward her dream of becoming a Go-Go Girl.

"Carla," Vicky called. Too late once again. "Here are two quarters. Press B8 twice when I tell you I'm ready?"

"B8? I thought it was B7."

"No, I'm starting on a new song." She tied her shirt up midriff-style, pulled her jeans down a little, and stuck out her hip. She centered herself in the cage and glanced over her shoulder into the big mirror that covered the wall behind the bar, pyramids of bottles and big jars of pickles and sausage blinking in and out below her. "Ready," she said.

"Vic," I finally had to ask, "why would you want to be up there getting oogled by a bunch of drunks?"

"Oh Carla, stop being so grouchy. Don't you have any dreams?"

My dreams at sixteen? Hard to say, but being in a cage wearing a leather miniskirt and knee high boots and wiggling around was not one of my fantasies. But she was right about the constant bad mood. Three months ago, when we first arrived, after our big runaway escape from Jersey, I actually believed a new life was about to open up. That's what I told my mother when I called to reassure her I was safe. Her less than enthusiastic response might have clued me in.

"Yeah, dreams," Vicky said again, "I think we're lucky to be working here at the á la Go-Go. Better than the Five and Dime. Now hurry up and press B8, please."

Just as I was about to hit the button, there was a loud banging at the service entrance. While Vicky quick made her way down the steps from the cage, I went to the back door. "Who is it?"

"Painters," a voice called.

I unlocked and swung the heavy door back. The man held one end of a long ladder. Straight ahead dark eyes. Maybe a head taller than me. A nice mouth. But it wasn't just that he was good looking. "Morning," he said. I must have said something. Definitely I stepped aside because next thing I remember he and another guy were bringing that ladder into the bar. But here's what I do know: some current of heat hit me. I am telling you this without any romantic touchup. Zap...Zap. I'm sure he felt it too.

They set down the ladder. "Steve. Steve Morletti," he said, "and this is Richie Rollins."

"Carla DeLuca. And this is Vicky. Vicky O'Mara." Vicky dropped a little curtsy. My first time actually introducing somebody else.

Then the four of us got busy. With Steve Morletti directing us. Vicky and I upended the stools onto the bar. We shoved all the tables into the middle and stacked the chairs on top. Steve and Richie brought in scaffolding to do the ceiling first. Richie dropped

a lot of quarters in the jukebox and he played many times a kind of music I'd never heard. 'Kind of Blue' by Miles Davis, he told us.

Steve overheard Vicky telling Richie about our Million Dollar Cash Prize entry, the thousand tickets we'd had Teresa send in for us. Very quietly, he told me, "You know, kiddo, those contests are pretty much all con. One chance in a zillion anything coming your way on that." In a way I already knew this, but now I knew it for sure. Maybe I'd tell Vicky what he said, but probably not.

Finally around 11, we began to help them cover everything. Steve Morletti on one end of the big cloths, me on the other, a sort of reverse of my brother and me folding the sheets. Just as we were putting the last cloth over the Go-Go cage, Steve Morletti said to me, standing only a few feet away up on that platform. "How old are you, Carla?"

"Going on nineteen," I said, without a flicker. I am a practiced liar. All those lies necessary to protect myself and my brothers all those years. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," he said, "and in the middle of a divorce." With that he gave me a hand down. "That's about it. Nothing to do now but paint. So what are you going to do with your two days off?"

Vicky had told them how excited we were to be getting that much time all at once. "I'm going to sleep. This getting up at 5:30 every morning is nasty."

Well, in a way I hated to go, but really there was nothing more for us to do. Steve was already climbing up to the second level of the scaffolding, one of those men who's quick and sure. One of those bodies you can't help but watch. Each part a pleasure to see.

We waved goodbye. "Nice to meet you," Vicky called and we headed for the back. Just as I was about to close the door, Steve Morlett stepped to the edge of the platform and cupped his hand to the side of his mouth, "Waxing crescent tonight. Get yourself down to the beach. Step into the sea. It'll wake you up."

I didn't know what to say to that, so we stepped out and I shut the door on all that energy. Waxing crescent? Uh-oh, I thought. It was pouring rain.

Vicky covered her bouffant with her jacket. "Hunky guys," she said.

"Hummm." I didn't say anything to Vicky about that zap...zap between Steve Morletti and me—something I'd never felt before. Telling her would have made it ordinary. Instead I turned my face up to the raining sky and ran.

Wet through by the time we got back to Theresa's, we put on dry T-shirts and crawled under the covers. We often did this on rainy days when we got back from work. "Cover my feet up," Vicky commanded.

I tucked her toes in and listened to the rain on the tin roof. Twenty-five. In a way that was only six years older than me because I was really a lot more nineteen than sixteen. Out on my own in the world while other girls my age were sitting in school, taking notes about things that meant nothing to them and never would.

When I woke up. Vicky was propped at the other end of the bed with a big stack of romance magazines piled beside her. She'd found a box of them under the bed when we first arrived. "Want half a PB and J?" she said, extending the sandwich toward me.

What I wanted was the cold half of a grapefruit, already neatly cut away from the rind, each triangle pried loose from its little divider. Pink grapefruit. My mother's morning gift to me when times were good. But I knew that Theresa's refrigerator most likely contained nothing beyond a near-empty carton of milk about to go and maybe an ancient box of Velveta cheese, dried to hard orange along all its edges. I sat up and took the sandwich. "Thanks," I said, "but tomorrow we've got to buy some fruit. Prevent scurvy."

"Scurvy?"

"Our Four Food Groups Prize Ticket. Your gums ever bleed?"

"Carla, doesn't it seem to you we would have heard something about our prize money by now?"

"Hmmm." I didn't have the heart to tell her what Steve Morletti said.

By now Vicky's nose was buried back in the magazine. The bright yellow banner with the words TRUE ROMANCE was the only

sunshine in this room I'll say that: picture of a girl with dimples and perfect teeth smiling out. Story titles printed inches from her glowing face: *"Our Shameful Baby," "The Day Before Our Wedding He Married My Best Friend."*

"Vicky, how can you read that junk?"

She didn't answer me. I leaned over the edge of the bed and felt around in the box for the only real book it contained. Instead of crap like *"He Seduced Me With His Soul,"* this book grabbed you with these words on the cover: *A tender and bawdy fable of some gaily disreputable avoiders of work, drunks, fancy ladies, benign bums, and social-outcast philosophers.*

Benign bums. Social outcast philosophers. Sounded like a lot of the patrons of á la Go-Go. Whoever came up with these words, a good talker for sure. I opened to the first page. *"Cannery Row in Monterey" ...shit, this story takes place here... "is a poem, a stink...chipped pavement and weedy lots...honkey tonks."* I don't know about the poem part, but the stink, the glare...sounded a lot like Theresa's neighborhood. I read on. Kind of like the guy who told about Ethan, but more packed in, well...like sardines. The opposite of Mike Hammer. I read the first page again. No question I'd have to haul out the dictionary if I wanted to get every word, but it sounded good even without that. Yeah, a poem.

Vicky took hold of my foot and shook it. "Listen to this, Carla, these stories are not all mushy romance. This is from a complete suspense novelette, 'I Invited Danger'."

"Please," I said. "I'm reading something real."

"No, listen. I've got an idea how we can make some money." Then she glared at me over the top of the perfect girl on the cover, a girl whose eyes said she'd never even had a nightmare, much less a father who came into her bedroom and stared at her in the dark.

"I'm listening." Sometimes it's best to humor Vicky.

"Okay, here's how the person writing this builds up the suspense. In shaky red letters before the story even starts, kind of like an ad..." Vicky turned the magazine and pointed to the red column,

then she read from the side like kindergarten teachers do, her finger bouncing over the words: "*I'm in trouble,' the man said. 'I need help.' I opened the door a little wider to ask him to enter, then I froze. What would happen if my husband came home and found us together?"*"

"See, Carla, the writer hooks you. You'd have to go on and read the story. You know you would."

"Not me. I'd say what kind of dumb bunny would marry a guy who'd be jealous because you let a man in to use the phone."

"Oh Carla, you're just giving me a hard time—you know by the title "I Invited Danger" that the man is not coming in to use the phone."

"Well then, she shouldn't have opened the door in the first place."

"All right. Forget all that. Here's my idea, first read this, the part I've got underlined." She handed me the magazine.

True Romance is a women's magazine written by the readers.

We look for true stories that involve real people and real emotions. Stories can range from 2,000 to 10,000 words. Currently we pay ten cents a word.

"Two cents times 10,000. The two of us working on it together—we could probably knock off a story a week."

"And what fabulous true story from your life might you begin with," I said.

"I've got a title already: We Hitched a Ride With Danger. How a trucker tried to rape us and how we fought him off. We've got all the details we need to make it real. Mr. Uncongenial. What a semi looks like inside, the sounds. We could even use Rosalee as a model for the waitress who warns the girls not to hitch with that man, but they don't listen."

"And what about the rape part?"

"Oh we can make up all that stuff. Plus you can throw in a few real things from your experiences with Babylove Stewert."

"That was just playing around. Me, taking advantage of him. Vicky, I want to read *you* something. Something different from anything you'll ever read in one of those magazines. You think we could ever knock off something like this?" I got out of bed and held the book to the fading light. I felt like I ought to sing it:

"The inhabitants of Cannery Row are as the man once said, "whores,

pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant Everybody. Had the

man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels

and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing."

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It was dark. The rain had stopped. No wind. There was no one on this stretch of beach—only some green lights in the distance. The ocean—the sea—was quiet. We pulled off our shoes. Vicky took my hand and we walked into the waves. It pulled at the sand beneath our feet. Above us, a slice of moon high in the blue-black night.

"Waxing crescent," I said.

"What's waxing mean?"

"Coming or going. I mean to find out."

