

Anna Lee

by Jann Burner

He first saw her stepping off a water taxi by the *Long Docks* in the rain at night, her right arm atrophied from some early childhood disease, dangling like an apology, her other holding a cigarette. Her wet black hair hung past her shoulders and her eyes blazed forth like some Goya painting suddenly sprung to life. He came to refer to her as the Angel with the broken wing. She said her name was Anna Lee and she was not someone to feel sorry for. As it turned out she was a Death Defier, a sort of blue collar immortal, as she termed it. According to her story she was over two thousand years old although her body was only twenty six in earth years. She was, what she referred to with a laugh as, a chronic walk-in.

Anna Lee owned a string of six very small whisky bars, like tea houses out on the Long Docks. *Ichi, Ni, San, Shi, Go* and *Roku*, the numbers one through six in Japanese. The bars served up designer whisky. Small huts actually, decorated with fish tanks and colored kerosene lights. Very Wabi/Sabi, with room for perhaps ten customers or clients, because Anna Lee was really more a therapist than a shop keeper. These were wonderfully intimate little places where the most amazing individuals hung out. And the most amazing of all was Anna Lee. But like a shell game, one could never tell which hut she might appear in. Some nights should would manage to hit them all, other nights she would hang out at one for the entire evening and then, other times, she would be absent for days and days.

This was Nolan's lucky night. It was a slow night at the *ICHI* whisky bar out on the Long Docks. When he walked in the place was empty except for Anna Lee standing behind the small bar dealing cards onto the flat surface. But these weren't any normal playing cards...

"Sit down Mr. Nolan and let me tell you a little about yourself..."

Nolan sat on a bar stool in front of her, watching her lay down the cards. On the side facing upward there was a very simple geometric design in black against a white background and in the center of the design was a numeral. She motioned to him and he turned a card over. On the reverse side was a color photograph. Nolan looked at her and she looked back grinning. There was a picture of her on the reverse side and as she moved her head ever so slightly it matched exactly his view of her standing behind the bar.

She began to drop cards slowly at first and then faster and faster, some one on top of the other and some in patterns across the surface of the polished wood bar. Nolan saw himself flying over an ocean in a strange machine. He saw himself as a stone cutter sitting in the shade of the ancient Sphinx waiting with the others for night to fall so that they might put the finishing touches to the newly constructed pyramid. He was also a fisherman watching Jesus approaching over the water, an English King: a French poet.

Anna Lee looked at Nolan and grinned because up until the actual moment of turning the card, she had no idea exactly who he had been in those other times and other places. Nolan was shaken. For some reason he didn't want to know. He felt fear.

"Enough for now", she finally said with a grin. Then she looked at him with a serious expression.

"Nolan, fear is just the dark suitcase carried in the hand of mind. Don't combat it or argue with it or even fear it. Just...take off your mind! The mind will creep back again and again. Don't fight it, just watch it do its '*mind dance*'.

"But notice that each time it returns with its seductive 'drama', the black bag it carries will become smaller and smaller until it is hardly a wallet. And then...merely a dark calling card and then, one day, just...an ironic smile."

Anna Lee carried a leather and jewel encrusted pager sized computer on a wide silver Concho belt. It was a thought/voice activated model. Instead of a screen, the visuals were presented in 3-d through her dual Eye-Tap, full retinal display. The basic functions of the computer could be accessed through mere "*intention*". Her

computer couldn't exactly read her mind, yet, but could recognize focused pressure (intention) put upon certain icons being projected upon the retinas of her eyes. For full function ability she would, of course, have to speak to it, via her Cyber Companion whom she referred to simply as, "*The Cat*". The Cat was a new generation Cyber Companion. It had virtual unlimited memory, it never forgot anything said and it could actually read her mood by the changes in her pupil. For all intents and purposes it seemed to be a very wise therapist/friend. Things had certainly come a long way since the early days of *Cyber Pet* and *Shrink in A Box*.

The Eye Tap technology was very popular although not everyone could handle dual retinal displays. Most people were happier, and safer, with just one retina being bombarded with holographic visual data. With Anna's dual display she was literally moving around in a world within a world. But then she had had lots of practice. Nolan still found it an odd and disconcerting sight watching her jerk her head for no apparent reason while making impromptu hand gestures all the while talking to herself aloud. Sort of a Cyber-Tourettes thing. But then Nolan was retro enough to actually prefer one of the old fashioned laptops with an actual screen and keyboard.

She borrowed bodies the way another might shop for used, but serviceable clothing at the neighborhood *Good Will Store*.

"Why bother with the hassle of choosing parents, a blood birth, the pain of a dysfunctional childhood and adolescence?"

"Good question." Nolan hadn't realized it was an option.

"Yeah, sure", she said, "It's an option. Although there aren't as many around as you might think. Still..." she said with a shy smile, "more than you might imagine. Certainly more than a few," she said with a wink.

"How does it work," asked Nolan.

She was lightly dismissive. "Simply find someone who wants to leave this earthly frame but is against suicide. Any unhappy soul will do. Someone in a really bad mood. Someone grieving for a loved one. Someone heavily in debt. Someone newly divorced."

She said there were many, many people like that out there. And she merely facilitated their departure. She provided a service, as she saw it. She made it clear that she wasn't one of those Dark spirits that simply attached to a human soul without permission. No, she never came in without being asked.

"I mean," she would say. "We're all driving rent-a-cars. It's just that I go out into the field and pick them up. Saves some people the trouble of returning them to the lot." She laughed. She laughed a lot for a woman over two thousand years old.

Her previous body had been a wealthy Colombian Cocaine dealer. It was educational as well as sensational! For awhile. But she was always looking for the...deeper connection, I mean after all, life is an art class and she saw herself as a world class artist! So she arranged the death of Mr. Cocaine's body and slid into the States in the body of a coke mule who had a condom break on the plane ride up from Columbia. Whew, what a rush! Any normal person would have died instantly, but Anna Lee, had her special gifts and her talents, as she described them. But she did have to leave that body rather quickly and so she next slid into a depressed heroin dealer in El Paso contemplating an overdose. It was a "*theme thing*", she said. They met in a bar. Over the eons she had met a lot of her clients in drinking establishments and opium dens. She dropped the drug habit but the body was wasted, certainly a quick turnaround. Almost a one night stand.

And then she met *Anna Lee*, one of the dealer's customers. This Anna Lee came from a strange family. Her father had been a lapsed reclusive Spanish monk and her mother had been a nun and she picked up the polio germ as a young child when she first arrived in the United States. "*Welcome Home*", the disease seemed to say to the newly incarnated spirit.

Everything that could go wrong in one life had seemingly gone wrong in hers and yet she was supremely *ALIVE!* It was intense! She had designed it that way. She was growing very fast. Certainly too fast for her body and the earth plane. The Death Defier really liked her a lot and looked forward to running into the spirit of Anna Lee

again, if not on Earth then surely on the other side. She too, was an artist of a very high level, she just didn't know it yet.

"But don't you become attached to any of these bodies? Do you ever see them all the way through to the end?"

She said she saw them as canvases and herself as a painter. She merely worked on paintings started by other, less talented artists and then let them go when they wore out. Some faster than others. She was an artist, as she saw it. She didn't get all sentimental about it. She had been around a long, long time and she was immortal. We all were. It was just that most people were like computers with a virus that keeps erasing their hard disk and clicking their re-start button.

This was just her way of...passing time. Some artists used oil paint. Some used drugs as a vehicle to explore consciousness. She used time, life and human experience. But yeah, once she did see a body through old age and then, when she was on her deathbed with her "*family and friends*" gathered around, one of her younger daughters became so grievously distraught that she simply slid out of her old body and into her daughters and let the dear child depart the gross earthly frame and go with her mother.

"I have to ask you, if you are an artist, then who is your audience?"

Anna Lee answered, "You don't know yet, do you?" Nolan looked dumbfounded. She simply smiled, nodded her head and wagged her index finger at him.

"Soon...soon."

She hadn't always been an artist. This was no capricious hobby! She had finally come to realize she was a Godling in training. For hundreds of years she had been--stuck. She had once been a religious zealot! A Priest. Boy, was that a hard one to kick loose from. A heroin habit is nothing! Child's play!"

Heroin over-dose as a transitional agent was her favorite method. Never raised too many questions and seemed natural enough in any urban setting. She always carried a syringe with an fatal dose of pure heroin.

"It's like moving into a new house," she said. "I love it!"

"Do you prefer being a man or a woman?"

"As the saying goes," she said with a sly smile. "All men are stupid and all women are crazy. Take your pick. Feel like being stupid or just stone crazy this time. Ha. I am partial to being crazy!" She said with a mad grin that broke into a hacking laugh that degenerated into a tubercular cough. "Men are stupid", she continued growing more serious. "But some are very clever and bear watching."

"But", Nolan said, "Don't you get tired of being human? I mean two thousand years..."

She laughed. "But I am more than human Nolan. Much more." She laughed again. "Nolan, it's like a large satellite antenna array. Being human is simply one channel on one satellite. I am the entire array! If you are watching TV on one channel, it doesn't mean that the other channels are all off. They are still broadcasting, still being received."

She laughed again and Nolan couldn't help but think that she sounded more like an 18 year old girl who was perhaps a bit full of herself, than a 2,000 year old....whatever she was.

"It is a conundrum wrapped in a riddle and meant to be sipped through a dribble glass Nolan. Ha. You men take everything so seriously..."

She lived in an old mansion in a once wealthy, now tumble down neighborhood. She gave Nolan her card. On it was her physical address, her Web Zone address and the greeting.

"Welcome to the "Villa Obscura"

Nolan had to ask. "What's your web zone like?"

"You tell me," she said with a sly smile.

