

The Princess of Fillmore Street

by Randall Stickrod

“Hey,” the voice on the phone said, as if it had been just the other day instead of three years since the last time we had talked. Just ‘hey.’ She knew I’d recognize her voice.

“Hey,” I said, and I wanted to kick myself for not having something appropriate and in just the right tone of voice for the occasion. She always thought she could push my buttons and she was mostly right. Mostly.

“So,” she said, in that lower register her voice could drop into when she was trying to be persuasive and adding the merest hint of seduction to the mix, “You want to hear about my new job?”

I was glad she couldn’t see my eye-roll or my bemused expression. “Yeah? A new job?” I honestly couldn’t remember what her previous one was.

Sarah had worked for me for two and a half years until the business fell apart in the wake of a quick tech market “correction” a few years before. In fact she had been responsible for my being there to head the business, but that’s another story.

“Yeah. Totally different. Listen, I’ve got someone else’s car and I’m not far from your place. Why don’t you come have a drink with me and I’ll tell you all about it. I just got off work. Besides, I want to know what you’ve been up to.”

I sort of know better, but Sarah is one of those people I’ve never been able to just say no to. Which is why she was my VP of Sales just a few years before as a precocious 26 year old. I agree to let her cruise by and pick me up in ten minutes. So I find myself on a street corner in the Marina district a few minutes later, realizing I don’t even know what she’s driving. Then a honk, and a ratty looking Nissan pickup pulls over. It is the same old Sarah, smiling and

cheerful but with a glint in her eye, always a suggestion of the mischievous. She looks like she's been on a building site or something, a clipboard on the seat, rough jeans, a loose shirt rolled up at the sleeves, no makeup or lipstick, hair tousled. And that same smooth throaty voice, maybe her most appealing quality.

Sarah was never a great driver. She always drove as if everything outside the car was a distraction to be ignored, and she simply created her own pace and her own space, often driving through stop signs, never signaling her turns, letting traffic pile up behind her, like now, when she was engaged in conversation with a passenger. She holds up the clipboard to show me. It's got a property appraiser's worksheet, carefully filled out. "Yeah, I'm an appraiser now. I'm loving it. The money's pretty good too"

I raise my eyebrows reflexively. "You laugh," she says, "but it's easy, I'm good at it, and I'm making better money doing this than when I was dressing in Chanel and pitching deals for you."

We cruise up to Fillmore Street and at the corner of Union and Fillmore a prime parking space miraculously opens in front of us and she dives into it nose first. "So, where are we going?" I ask warily.

"Balboa Café. Come on, let's have a glass of wine and get caught up." I grimace to myself, picturing us there together in her disheveled state. She looks like she needs a shower, fresh clothes and a makeover. She is literally dusty. As I'm contemplating all this we are making our way down Fillmore and she grabs my arm and tugs me into a store. It's an Aveda store, a large one, with only one other patron in the store and a small cluster of employees gabbing in the back. Nonchalantly, Sarah moves through the product sections like she owns the place. Every section has samplers. First stop, cleansers. She checks the various products, picks a bottle, takes a little square cotton applicator, and gives her face a once-over, and then her hands. I glance toward the back, and one of the employees has started watching us. Before tossing it, she uses the applicator to give a quick swipe to her toenails and then her sandals to take the dust off.

She moves to hair next. Squeezes some foamy stuff out onto her hand and works it through her hair. Voila! Instant chic. Then the makeup section. A touch of eye shadow, liner, blush. I glance nervously toward the back again and all three of them are now watching us warily. Sarah remains detached and totally unselfconscious, the Princess of Fillmore Street. Finally, lip gloss. Then she stuffs her shirttails into her pants, and turns up the collar. She turns to me, beaming. I am speechless. She looks terrific. I sort of mumble something but she can see the effect in my eyes. She knows she has just pulled off a neat bit of theatrics and she's loving it.

We sit at the bar in the Balboa Café, in an ebb and flow of late-afternoon swells, the charming mix of old San Francisco aristocracy and young movers and shakers, with a handful of hardcore barflies to balance things out. She sips a golden Chardonnay, that enigmatic smile constantly suggesting a tease. "So, when was the last time we saw each other?" she says.

"Ummm, we had coffee in Mill Valley, outside, at The Depot, I think,"

"Yeah, just before I sold the house and moved to New York." She pauses and stares into the bar mirror reflectively. Her voice has softened, and I steal a long look at her profile.

She laughs lightly under her breath. "Yeah, I thought something was going to happen between us then. You know? Did you?"

Well, I remember it all too well. It was late morning on a gorgeous spring day. We sat outside, in the plaza. She was wearing shorts and a tank top, all leggy and lithe, draped over the bench with her latte, the sun spackling down through the eucalyptus trees, setting her short blonde hair aglow, making her look the California surfer girl she truly was.

Her long time boyfriend was a recent casualty, and she was talking about the decision she had to make — to stay and work on her house, just up the hill, or take a job offer in New York and radically change everything in her life. She had squinted at me through the brilliant light, and added, "What I really want to do is

have a baby." She leaned toward me, glowing, "My hormones are just bursting out all over me right now," she gushed, "God, I think I'm so fertile I could get pregnant if you just touched my nipples!" Her voice is practically a purr. Just saying "nipples" is totally provocative, and she knows it. At that moment I felt like if I looked her in the eye I would lose all control and find myself walking up the hill with her and in bed with her, pumping her full of that sperm she is so eager for. Her need and her desire are just clutching at me. How did I manage to not give in that morning?

I grin sheepishly, almost blushing. "Yes, I thought so too. Life might be very different right now if we had let it happen then. Probably just as well ..."

She gazes off at some point above the liquor bottles above the bar then, and blurts out, "I got pregnant. Couple months ago."

I'm visibly shocked. "And?" I say.

"I lost it. Second time that's happened. Both times with Rick. Must be some chemistry thing between us that just wasn't meant to happen. I left him two weeks ago. For good this time. Long overdue."

She is making a long face now and I'm trying to metabolize this information and she pops out, "You and I would make a great baby, don't you think? Great gene combinations."

I shrug and shake my head non-committally. Anything I say could be wrong. She turns to look at me and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Anyway" she says.

"Anyway," I reply and clink glasses with her, trying to appear comradely but encouraging the conversation to shift gears.

"Anyway," she goes on after a long sip of her wine, "Everything is different now. And I'm involved with a woman."

What? Did I hear that right? I think so. I try not to react openly.

"Really? What's that all about?" I realize I'm twirling the stem of my glass on the counter nervously and I've spilled a little of my wine.

"So, yeah, I met somebody, and it's nice. It's different." Long pause and a shrug. "Just, you know, different."

"I guess so," I say, acknowledging the obvious.

"It's the real thing," she says. There is a solemn note in her voice I've never heard before. Well.

Then she pipes up, suddenly cheery again, "Remember when we went to New York on that last business trip?"

Do I! The flashback comes on vividly. It was during an August heat wave, and it was her first time in New York. As we were walking around midtown she told me to tell her and show her everything, to treat her as the unabashedly eager tourist she was. When we walked by St Patrick's iconic cathedral on Fifth Avenue, she insisted on going inside. Once in, she whispered that she wanted to sit down for awhile and would I mind waiting for her for a bit? So I sat on the steps outside for fifteen minutes until she came out and sat beside me and just started rattling off this story.

She told me of living in Hawaii for a long time when she was in grade school. When she was 11 she became a terrible alcoholic. She used to take a little flask of vodka to school every day. Nobody ever knew. Somewhere around 13 she knew her life was going to be really messed up if she didn't beat it. Where she lived nobody ever locked their doors. So she started getting up in the middle of the night and sneaking into people's houses. All she'd do is go sit in the kitchen for an hour or so, and just sit there and feel the peace. Never took anything or got into anything. Just sat there silently. There was something about that, something about the stillness and the odd feeling of being safe there, that got her over whatever it was that was making her an alcoholic.

I replay this conversation in my head in a flash flood of image clips as I look at her in profile, poised over her glass of wine, that strong chin and pronounced underbite. Sarah always had a way of looking better to me the longer I looked at her.

She takes another sip of wine and continues. "That New York trip. We had adjoining rooms. Remember?"

I nod. Of course I do. I remember spending two nights wondering if she was going to knock and try to change things forever between us. She didn't.

"Well," she goes on, with a sly nod, "I wanted to open that door between our rooms in the worst way. I was fertile then. I can feel it just bubbling up inside me when I am."

"But you didn't."

"No. I was actually hoping *you* would."

I give her a sort of stupid grin. "Guess it just wasn't meant to be?" I say lamely.

She ignores my statement. "I think it would have worked. We'd have a baby now. I'm sure of it."

"But you wouldn't have your new love, though."

"I guess not."

She looks away and her cheek has a little more color suddenly than it did just a minute ago. She looks like she might cry. I put a hand on her arm. She lays her other hand on mine and turns to me. Her eyes glisten but she's smiling brightly.

"I still want a baby," she says. "So does Jeannie."

I have no idea how to respond. It's been easy so far, feeling myself at sufficient emotional remove that I didn't have a stake in anything that might be said. But this one

"You could be the one," she says. "After all this time." She skewers me with blazing eyes. "Besides," she adds, giving me a little finger poke, "it would be fun to try. Wouldn't it?"

It suddenly occurs to me that the top two buttons of her blouse have come undone. How did I not notice that earlier? She was always proud of her boobs, and rightfully so. And now I am glancing down at the upswell of tanned bosom beckoning to me with shameless absence of subtlety.

There is an abrupt jingling, a melody that seems vaguely familiar. Her phone. It's apparently Jeannie, her paramour. Suddenly I am invisible. There is some kind of drama going on and Sarah is completely given over to it. A lover's quarrel and though I can only partly overhear half of it, I feel I could script it out in full. An all too familiar clash of two lovers' yearnings out of sync.

I sit and empty my glass, reading the wine specials off the big blackboard over the bar. A few minutes go by. Traffic into the bar is

picking up and the noise level is up a few notches. I slowly back my way off the bar stool, fish a twenty out of my wallet and lay it on the bar. I put a hand gently on her back and brush the back of her neck with my lips. She flashes me a quick sideways glance. I respond with a little wistful smile and a token wave, then turn and walk out the door. I know she won't try to stop me.

