

When She Was Good

by H. W. Moss

Madison met Anna early in the morning at the North Beach Photo Fair in Washington Square Park. Lance did not know what to do with either of them, but they were customers of the camera shop and both stepped forward and volunteered to help, so he told them to pull pins from last year's exhibit boards.

“How come there are pins in these in the first place?” Anna asked.

“Because we didn't have any volunteers to remove them last year, that's why,” Lance shouted over the din of his ghetto blaster. However, today there were plenty of volunteers and while two other people hammered the old display frames together, Lance stapled jesso-white pieces of pre-cut canvas covered boards inside each frame. The finished product was a series of exhibit racks stuck full of pins. The pins had to go.

“Madison, I need you to clean these up too, okay?” Lance demanded and asked in the same breath. Obviously, he was under considerable strain to complete his display before the crowds arrived. But he took just enough time to introduce his new helpers to each other.

“This is Anna. Anna, Madison; Madison, Anna. I forget everyone's last name. That's John and that's Warren over there,” he pointed at a large Asian man and a skinny white guy who barely looked up from their tasks, nodded, went back to work. “Help each other, willya?”

Lance placed another white-washed wall in a frame, bent a wire tab in each corner to hold it in place, shot it in all corners with a stapler where the material overlapped, then stepped back to survey his work.

“Cept for the pins and a little white touch up, we oughta be able to use that one.”

The Photo Fair was an annual event sponsored by Lance's camera store. Madison had been buying film there for several years, but this was the first time he offered to help with the exhibits. Although not obsessed with the prospect of being one of thousands of amateur photographers whose images would be on display, he annually entered some of his work. Unfortunately, all of Madison's pictures had been rejected by the judges over the years. The judging was done by Lance and his brother, Boots, who shared the decision making. Somehow their photos always seemed to meet with one another's approval and each had several shots hanging in the white exhibit booths.

Lance thought Madison had a good eye and the best intentions, just so long as he kept out of the darkroom. Timing. That was his problem. Madison couldn't develop a moustache. He lost too much emulsion in the soup before he used the stop bath. This after four years of lecture and demonstration. When Madison asked if the Fair -- meaning Lance -- needed any help, the best Lance could come up with was pin-pulling. How could Madison fuck up pins?

Anna was an unknown quantity. Not bad looking. A nice smile beamed at you with two dark pieces of coal for eyes, thick eyebrows. Good figure too; nice tits, looked like a tight ass under those jeans. No ring on her finger, so Lance purposely paired her with Madison. Lance was much more concerned with the logistics of the Fair than chasing a piece of tail. And he definitely did not want to raise his wife's ire at a time when he needed to focus all his attention on business. No telling what might happen, but best not to tempt fate.

"We have about 200 photos to get up in," Lance glanced at his watch. "Jesus Christ! It's already 8:30! The Fair opens at ten. Keep pulling those pins!"

Anna was probably better suited as subject of the camera than as user. She had been a customer about a month so Lance was still forming his impressions of her. He had never seen any

of her work although she talked as if she knew lenses, bodies and f-stops. No one claimed to have been in her pants or even to have had her remove so much as a jacket for a shoot.

Madison lost no time picking up Lance's cue. Turning toward Anna, he asked politely, "You exhibiting?" It was his best opening double-entendre of the year. He wondered if she would find it amusing or rude.

"Haven't unpacked any of my work. Nothing new, either. So, no," she said and leaned forward to clean the exhibit of a few more colored pin heads. He pretended to be absorbed in doing the same. Actually, he was trying to get a view of her breasts between the buttons of her shirt. Was she wearing a bra or not?

"How about you?" She inquired. "We going to see what your focal plane looks like today?"

That was good. More than mildly amused, Madison had to ask himself if she was better at innuendo than he. She abruptly turned toward him, her palm open flat in front of her. It was full of pins.

"What do we do with these goddam things now?" Then, without waiting for an answer, she tossed them over her shoulder onto the new mown lawn of the Square. "Maybe they'll grow up to be nails."

Now that was funny.

* * *

Madison followed her around with his camera all day, but not like a puppy dog. He acted alternately interested and disinterested in what, he hoped, was a display of confident masculinity. Around noon he brought her a Polish sausage and a cup of coffee, then ran to find cream after she said she never drank it black.

Whenever she turned around he was there with his eye to the range finder, adjusting the lens or just snapping the shot, sometimes of her, often not. He ran through one roll and quickly loaded another. Meanwhile, he engaged her in the sort of conversation that would tell him about her and give as little away about himself as possible without being mysterious. He was a good listener. Most people talk more than they listen. He had learned to listen. And he knew from years of womanizing that the best listeners got laid the most.

The fair was crowded and as hot as San Francisco can get in mid-July. Even the breeze from the Bay blowing down Columbus Avenue onto the square where 2,000 people were milling around drinking beer, eating fair food and passing judgment on the life works of 300 photographers was not enough to cool Madison. He was panting after Anna like a randy goat but she kept him at a distance. She never said no, but she never said yes to his suggestion they leave and go to his place to relax.

“Or your place. Let’s go back to your apartment and I can help you hang those unpacked pictures you were telling me about.”

“My house is a mess,” she responded with what he took to be a typical evasion of the issue. He had heard that so many times he had a standard response.

“I don’t mind. My place is a mess too. My cat refuses to wash the dishes. Won’t even clean his own bowl!”

That got her to talking about her cat. He learned its entire life history right up to the time it got run over and buried in the back yard. The story took most of an hour. As she talked, they wandered the show they had helped create.

The more time he spent with her, the more he liked her company. She had a spunky approach to life, a candidness that was appealing. While exhibitors were unmercifully criticized or admired

by every camera-toting tourist, she was clearly looking for the soul of each picture she paused to admire. She quacked like a duck when she disapproved, applauded when she saw quality. Her remarks were limited to asides and sotto-voices meant to make him a partner in their adventure, not allowing him to remain distant.

Though the fair held his attention, he wanted the conversation to take a different direction. Besides, he could look at only so many photos by other unknown artists. What he really wanted was to get her away from the crowds of people. He was too intimidated to start necking in public. He mentioned that he liked to swim and pointed out the Muni Pier.

“Right next to the pier, over to the left between here and the bridge is the nude beach.” This in order to test her response to such things. “Very private.”

This prompted her to tell about her failed career in gymnastics and the problems she’d had with a dyke gym instructor. That story lasted until mid-afternoon.

“I’d love to set up a shoot for you,” he prompted when he found space for an opening. “Maybe in Golden Gate Park. Or on top of Bernal Heights. I know some secluded areas.” He clicked his camera without taking aim. He was out of film.

Which lead her to talk about a doll house in the backyard where she grew up. Her secluded place, she called it. Where she was lonely but never alone because she shared it with her secret friends. Dusk was glowing in the air by the time her family moved her away leaving the house and all her friends behind.

The Polish had worn off so he suggested dinner. She said she knew this Hunan restaurant near where she lived that had great kung-pow chicken.

The fair was closing and exhibitors packing their prints. He hailed a cab and the two of them plopped into the back seat. Getting comfortable, he put his arm around her shoulder and she

squirmed a little before she allowed him to rest it lightly. The driver knew the restaurant she described on Battery Street.

He ordered wine which she drank as fast as he. That was a good sign, he thought. They quickly went through one liter. They consumed a second liter while dining and when the waiter stood near their table to ask how the meal was, Madison looked knowingly in her direction, then ordered another bottle.

Before the third was served he learned she was having trouble at work. She was on a first name basis with everyone in her office and knew why each of them was trying to get her fired. She told him which ones didn't really do any work and who was sleeping with the boss. He found out all he ever wanted to know about claims adjusting and got a quick synopsis on why the insurance industry was headed for strict government control.

When he suggested they retire to her place and he would pick up another bottle of wine on the way, she told him her place was a mess and she'd have him over after it was clean.

"I told you, that doesn't bother me. You gotta live where you gotta live. The way you gotta live."

She said she wanted to go for a walk. He thought she meant the ladies' room, but when she made a bee-line for the door, he quickly grabbed the check and fumbled out two twenties to cover it.

She was outside leaning against the restaurant wall near the door when he caught up to her. He became alarmed. It was not his intention to get her drunk. That was not his style. He wanted to feel comfortable with the woman, and controlled drinking was acceptable behavior. Maybe she could not hold her wine. He hadn't thought of that. He was glad his car was not close. They would have to walk a ways which ought to sober her up some.

He realized she was marching up the hill. It was a typical steep North Beach climb, more like a hike, to the next intersection, but she was halfway there by the time he caught up with her.

“Where you going?” he asked as he panted by her side. It was no longer lust that made his breath come quickly.

“Top,” she said in sensible response. They breasted the hill and he asked if her apartment was close.

“‘Bout a block or two. But the place’s a mess. Can’t let you come in.” Like a zombie, she turned toward an even steeper hill which she began to trudge. He worked hard to keep up with her.

On the one hand, he felt like abandoning his quest. It no longer looked like fun. Even if she finally broke down and allowed him to see her wreck of an apartment, she was certainly in no condition to appreciate having sex.

On the other hand, he felt responsible for getting her drunk and she probably needed chaperoning if she was to get home safely. So he plodded along next to her, following her lead, perhaps walking in circles for all he knew.

At last she stopped on the top of a hill at a cross roads with three choices left since they had climbed one of them. She seemed confused. He offered to call a cab and drop her off, but she shook her head and waved a forearm in front of her face. He was not certain how to interpret the gesture. Perhaps she was saying no. Just as easily, she could have been clearing the cobwebs in her brain. She drifted down one of the narrow streets and began fumbling in her coat pocket. She walked with a tilt, angled like a bowling pin teetering but not quite ready to fall.

He had become resigned to following her until she either found her way home or asked him to take the lead.

She turned toward a building and took three steps up to the front door. He realized she had a key in the lock of the main entrance to an older apartment complex. He counted six mailboxes.

“You okay now?” he asked with genuine concern. “Can I just say goodnight and maybe call you tomorrow?”

“Don’t leave me,” she replied with a ferocious exhale of breath up close to his face. This startled him. He allowed the security door to close behind them and followed her up the stairs.

They climbed two flights, to the topmost pair of units where she produced another key. He did not really want to go any further. He was operating under false pretenses. She was too far gone for him to feel she was willingly involved, but she tugged at his sleeve, dragged him into the unlighted hallway of her apartment and closed the door behind him. She snapped the deadbolt in place.

“Place is a mess,” she said as she flipped a switch and turned on a low green hallway light. He turned to see her shrug off her coat and drop it casually on the floor. Her shoes followed. “Don’t say anything about how the place looks,” she said as she wobbled toward the first room on the right. It was a bedroom. She disappeared into its darkness.

Nothing she had said, none of her warnings, not a word of her protestations had penetrated deep enough to prepare him for the shocking truth. He walked open mouthed, trance like down the hall where he waded through an incredible chaos. The apartment was not a mess, it was a disaster. Every imaginable article of clothing lay strewn about him. Coats, shoes, dresses, a rain slick and three pairs of pantyhose tripped him before he reached the end of the hall where he found another light switch and flipped it. At that end he could see into two rooms: the bathroom and the kitchen.

It was a one-bedroom apartment but it looked as if ten people occupied it. The kitchen floor was an impasse of pots and pans, dishes, canned goods and spoiled, rotting food. A table in the center of this ocean of litter sprouted fungus like a bog. In addition to a thick paste comprised of

what appeared to be mashed potatoes and beans, its top was piled to overflowing with boxes and magazines, dirty bowls and filthy cups, mixing bowls and eating utensils. Against the wall, a mound of books, at first glance they looked to be cookbooks, slid without bookends to hold them upright off the corner and overflowed onto the floor.

A sticky substance drooled lavender stalactites to meet the unwashed linoleum below.

One area of the table remained arguably clean in the face of this onslaught of trash and garbage. This spot was next to a chair, itself not fit for use because wet fingernail polish -- he tested it with his forefinger -- blazed red from its seat. This relatively clean area of the table was encumbered only by one wine bottle and glass. The bottle was empty.

The nearest corner of the room was piled high with similar empty bottles. For one stark second he marveled at how high such a pile could be made without spilling out into the rest of the room. Then he realized that all the other trash was keeping it in place. It was as if he had walked in on a preserve, an empty wine bottle reservation, where the taking of game was forbidden.

He glanced up at the kitchen shelves. They were practically bare. It occurred to him that everything that ought to be on them was spread about at his feet.

The sink was mounded with dirty dishes. There was not a clean washed pot or fork. The drain board was full to capacity with yesterday's used tableware, some of which was left half full of water to soak, some of it simply abandoned as it had been when last utilized, sides and bottoms caked with the residue of long ago breakfasts and dinners.

He backed into the hall and turned toward the bathroom flipping on the light. The scene was so revolting he almost vomited. It was not human waste, for which he was thankful, but the stench was overpowering. He realized the odor came from the bathtub. The white porcelain tub was filled with clothing and water so murky it seemed alive. A bright green mold clung to every damp pore

and crack in the tile surrounding the tub. Most of the grout had fallen out between the tiles and water had run beneath and lifted many of them off their foundation which left a lumpy, uneven wall surface.

The outer perimeter of the shower enclosure had been painted many times. Steam from the shower rather than direct contact with water lifted the paint which fell away from near the ceiling in great long enamel strips that, in some places, remained attached to the wall at their lower extremities. These strips bowed to touch the bathroom floor like New Years streamers.

All the towel racks were bare because the hand and bath towels they should have held were strewn on the floor.

His initial step into the room crushed an empty tampon box and he had to take care to avoid stepping on the numerous hair curlers which littered the floor like so many miniature porcupines.

He turned off the light and began a retreat back along the hallway, conscious of the obstacle course he would have to traverse as he retraced his steps. He picked his way carefully toward the front door and had his hand on the handle when he heard Anna's voice calling from the bedroom.

“Madison, where are you? I need you, Madison, I want you.”

He fumbled his hand inside the door frame until he found the light switch on the bedroom wall. A naked bulb burst to life from beside the bed and illuminated the surface of the moon. Mounds of clothing prevented all but the most careful tiptoeing to reach the queen size bed which was as untidy and unkempt as the rest of the apartment. Although there were sheets, they appeared never to have been tucked in and all corners of the mattress were clearly visible.

He held his hand up to his face to block the light. There were no curtains on the windows, no paintings, mirrors or other room adornments, only dirty white walls. Lighter squares of paint

indicated where the previous tenant had hung posters or framed pictures. Obviously, the landlord had re-rented without re-painting but, then, neither had the new tenant done any work on the place.

At first he could not find her in the glaring white light. Shadows of rumpled sheets and blankets hid her form. At last she moved which gave away her position.

With the exception of the dangerously bright light, the box springs and mattress were an island floating in the white-capped, choppy seas of the bedroom and all the room held in the way of furnishings. Mounded in every corner, piled in heaps like the bottles in the kitchen, were mountains of clothing. Nothing was folded or hung in the empty closet and coat hangers projected from the pile like skeletal arms.

There was no furniture to speak of, no dresser drawers or overstuffed chair or even a night stand. The upright unshaded light fixture, which was large enough to have adorned a living room table, was plugged into a wall socket near where it rested vase-like, full and round, on the bare wood floor.

Anna suddenly sat upright on her bed. Her upper torso blocked the light as she loomed spectrally, partially clothed, beckoning with a drunken gesture of discordant sexual invitation. Her legs were covered by pillows and blankets, but both breasts with large silver dollar sized pink nipples were exposed.

“My Prince. My Prince has come,” she crooned to him as he stood over her. He was both attracted and repelled by the scene. “Won’t you come be my Prince for the night?”

He backed away and leaned against the door frame. His hand sought the handle, but he hesitated without pulling the door fully open. He was close to freedom, he could still escape, he did not have to go through with this. Yet part of him was unwilling to give up the invitation.

Then the combined stench of bathroom and kitchen wafted down the hallway and he instantly made up his mind. The thought of waking in such a disgusting environment was overwhelming enough to send him packing.

Afterward, in the chill quiet walk down the hill roughly in the direction of his car, he marveled at the Siren's song. It had almost worked. She had very nearly seduced him.

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