

HAPPY ENDINGS

By Tono Rondone

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“Okay, Angie, okay, I know mommy’s late honey.”

The petulant five year old blond haired, blue eyed sweetie buried her chin into her shirt and pouted like a pro.

Near the laundry room, Hank Phillips was carrying a plastic basket full of dirty clothes. Once in the diminutive room, he jammed the clothes into the washer and turned quickly towards the cry that was emanating from one of the bedrooms.

“Angie, go see what your brother is screaming about, will ya?”

In the bedroom, Josh, three years of age, had gotten one of his toy cars stuck under the bed and all you could see of him were his feet dangling out from under the bed frame. Angie dived down next to him.

“What’s up, Josh?”

“Help me get my Trans Am!”

Hank Phillips was frustrated as hell. He was a big black man, but not too tall and maybe too stocky; his ever present baseball cap was enjoying the ride on his smooth shaved head. He rarely cursed, even under his breath, but it was almost noon and Nona hadn’t shown up yet from work, so he was gnashing his jaws overtime, muttering expletives quiet enough so the kids couldn’t hear him.

The phone rang and he rushed to it from the laundry room after cranking up the machine and slamming the door to muffle the noise of the device. But it wasn’t her.

“No, I’m telling you, Chief, it’s just not like her to not show up and not call. I’m stuck here looking after her kids, but I called Roger, and he and Eddie will fill in for me today. Then I’ll take a night shift off of Lou Celery, ‘cause he’s got vacation time coming anyway, and things’ll be all square.”

“I don’t like floppin’ the shifts around, Hank, you know that. This isn’t the first time since you hooked up with that broad that you bucked shifts or been late, and I’m getting’ pretty fed up with it.”

The sourpuss captain of the fraud squad on the other end of the line was Hank’s boss downtown at the Las Vegas Detention Center.

Hank breathed through his teeth before he spoke his next sentence. He swabbed the back of his neck with a black and white bandana, and the pupils of his brown eyes narrowed to the size of the head of a pin.

“Listen, Stan . . . don’t talk that way about Nona. My personal life is none of your God damn business.”

Nona never knew why anybody would live in Las Vegas if they didn’t have to. It’s a dust pervaded, roach infested windy hellhole in the middle of the desert. Its water supply, Lake Mead, was drying up fast. Up to six thousand hopeful immigrants were showing up in this place *every month*, swelling the local population to the breaking point. Many were Spanish speaking illegal transplants, but these brown bodies work like blazes,

off the books for peanuts, live ten to a house, and send ninety percent of the money they make under the table back to their families in Mexico.

There were more real estate agents in Las Vegas per square foot than anyplace else in the country, Nona figured. Every other son of a bitch that she met at the club seemed to be in real estate, except the homies, of course.

“We just sold our house but we’re looking to buy a new one.”

“Pretty hard to find a new house these days, the demand’s staggering.”

“I made sixty G’s in only four years on mine! The value of property is going up, up, up, with all the Californians moving here, what with the cost of living on the coast.”

“Yeah, I can buy a mansion here for \$500,000, and get a decent brand new three bedroom place for as little as hundred and a half, but in Cali, Christ, it’s a million at least.”

Some of the most boring bullshit talk Nona ever heard, and she heard it every other night.

She was glad, though, that the summer was coming on fast now; once April 1st rounds the corner, it’ll be a hundred degrees or better for the next five months, she knew all too well. For one thing, Nona liked to wear practically no clothes when she wasn’t working, to show off her beautifully thin, tall, young tattooed body, her most valuable commodity – but she was feeling less and less young as the years rolled along. Funny she didn’t equate owning her body and being proud of it and owning a house and being proud of that. It amounted to the same foolish thing. In the end, in death, we would lose them all.

And the intense daytime temperatures during the summer made Nona glad she worked the night shift. By the time she got up during the afternoon, the sun was already on its way down, and when she got out of work, she’d see the cool dawn sunrise more often than not.

Nona lived in the Northwest corner of the sprawling metropolis, near a popular shopping center called The Best in the West. In Vegas, there’s The Strip, Las Vegas Boulevard, where Nona worked as a dancer at The Talk of the Town, an all nude strip joint, and there’s an endless array of suburban developments, all revolving around monotonously similar mini shopping centers.

She had a two bedroom apartment, pretty much devoid of interior decorations, unless you could call a four foot pile of clothes lying on the floor next to the bed fashionable furnishings. Her bathroom was filled with half open cosmetic bottles and lotions and oils and shampoos and KY jelly and lipsticks and full birth control pill containers she forgot to use all too often, and bras hanging off the aluminum frame with a torn shower curtain dangling from it. There was a stack of toilet paper rolls in the corner near the crapper and a couple of dirty diapers in the waste basket that were riper than brown bananas and stinking like a filthy beer bar’s spittoon in Kansas City on a humid summer Saturday night. Sometimes she’d put those on Josh even though he didn’t need them anymore, because she was so busy and tired. Plastic razors, weeks old, littered the floor of the shower stall. Mold was making a good fight at eating up the tile, but Nona missed the point of it.

She knew she was lucky to have that apartment all right. She had known plenty of girls who’d taken a nose dive in the self esteem department because of poverty; they’d turned into drug addicts or whores, and often both. She knew there was no public

housing out there in Vegas if you were a down and out girl, and once you got that poor, how could you sleep, bathe, dress up and go looking for a job? And then, even if you rose up against the struggle and tried to fucking win, even if you got a job offer, it'd usually be two weeks or more before you'd get your first paycheck, and by then you'd be half starved and sleeping in gutters. So you might be persuaded to turn a trick, to smoke some crack with a grifter in the hope of green, to forget the job search, hating yourself more and more and lost to the greater world by your pathetic fate of self perpetuating, society fueled non being.

Nona'd been dancing at that strip joint now for years; it was located above Sahara, in that no man's land between The Strip proper and Old Las Vegas, Fremont Street. It got darker down there than either of those other places, and that was all right with her.

The Talk of the Town was in a plain white building with a red and white painted sign in front of it which said: "Totally Nude Dancing Until 4 AM! The Best in Town!" But what it really was was a seedy dirty bookstore with a cheap dance hall in the back, thinly disguised by a roped off area with a black man standing in front of it checking the ID's of the patrons and collecting the fifteen dollar cover charge.

In that dance hall, scarcely lit and grotto like, loud music thumped away incongruently from eight in the evening until four in the morning, and there would be during that time a seemingly never ending array of girls coming out on stage and in two acts taking off their clothes and writhing around with their genitals hanging out, coming on to the gawkers for sawbucks or better, they hoped.

For forty bucks you could get yourself a semi private lap dance in one of the corners of the crummy hall, permeated with the stench of coca cola and the sex anxiety odor of both genders, and for a hundred you could get yourself sequestered in a private VIP room with one of the dancers for twenty minutes. Once you got in there, it was anybody's guess what a little more money might buy. The sweat off the dancing girls' bodies tainted the air with a thousand wisps of cheap perfumes mixed with that semi sweet skunk and pungent sour smell of sex, desire, amphetamines, cum and futile disgust.

Some nights the pickings would be pretty slim; customers could be few and far between, and a girl could strip nude and prance around for practically nothing at all. You had to do it. You had to work eight hours and dance your dances in rotation with all the other girls, or you'd get no money at all. It was worse than that, actually. You had to pay for the right to dance every night; like gates and gas for a hack driver. You wouldn't make anything until you first got enough tips from customers to pay back the initial nightly dancing fee. Sometimes it was six hours before that happened, and by then it'd be two o'clock in the morning.

An old colored guy named William ran the door. He was about fifty five, of medium height and not very imposing, with short graying hair and bad breath. His face was always shiny; adorning his worn visage was silver and black stubble, and his hands were sweaty but steady. On his belt hung a two foot long blackjack laughingly called a "Fish Billy," which he had used on rowdy drunks causing a ruckus in the club on more

than one occasion. He was deft and precise in yielding that weapon, which got him his nickname.

“Hey, Fish Billy, what’s up tonight?” Nona said to him arriving at work.

“Slow. There’s was some guy here asking me if you were dancing tonight.”

“What guy?”

“I don’t know, some white dude said he met you at Texas Station and you told him to come down and check your act out.”

“Cool, where’s he now?”

“Dunno. I told him you were on your way to work and to stick around.”

William stood on his tiptoes and stared off at the racks of porn DVDs across the shop.

“There he is.”

Nona liked to party as much as the next girl, but she was lucky that they didn’t allow liquor in the club. Some nights she’d slip in a flask of cognac or JB, but she had to be careful, because the club had strict rules about that. Sometimes she felt like she just had to get tipsy in order to take off her clothes in public and incite men to lust after her. Juiced, she’d have fun being a faux fuck queen, but it took its toll. So sometimes she took speed too. Crystal meth was a baneful but inevitable part of many dancers’ lives, and Nona was no exception. It made her even thinner than her breakneck lifestyle would have anyway. Especially because of her horrendous schedule and ponderous responsibilities.

She had sole custody of both her children, Angie, five, and Josh, three, and it’d been like that for awhile now. So she had to keep it together enough to *remain* in custody of them, and maybe that saved her life, but a girl in her position was always looking over her shoulder at the do-gooders who would welcome the opportunity to steal her kids away from her, her an unfit mom, a sex industry worker, and make them wards of the court.

Between dances she’d occasionally snatch a smoke out back and talk with one or another of her fellow dancers. There weren’t too many of the girls she was friends with however, and it had been that way pretty much all along. The competition and jealousy among the girls of The Talk of the Town were often fierce and ugly.

“Hey, Phyllis,” Nona groaned exhaling cigarette smoke through her nostrils as she complained, “tonight’s murder.”

“Been this way all week. I know.”

“I’m so tired! Shit. Josh’s teeth are coming in hard, so I stayed up with him for hours today when I shoulda been sleeping. And the babysitter’s quitting in a week so I gotta find somebody else who can take them at night.”

Phyllis was Latino with very dark skin and long silver and bronze dyed hair drawn back into a long pony tail above her finely shaped head. She had a severe makeup job on her face tonight, thick brown paste, black lipstick ringed in white eyebrow pencil, fake eye lashes, the works. She wore new high go go boots on her slender but muscular legs and fish net stockings. Her breasts were curt and firm, but she had no man and no joy when she danced. Thus, she got little or no tips. She hated them, those pigs, those

perverts, and refused to suck up to the ugly masculinity that taunted her with their filthy paper money. Fuck you, assholes! You'll never get a pussy like mine!

“What about a daycare center?”

“Naw, there's just not many that are open all night. Only three, two of which are across town, in Henderson and Summerlin. They cost beaucoup bucks and have rotten screening processes, too. They just won't take everybody, the fuckers. I'd have to lie about what I do, and then they'd check up on me and I'd be dissed. There's a waiting list a mile long for those places around here. I don't understand how all the third shift casino workers do it.”

“What are drugs, what is a party, and what's the nature of my work?”

“I came from a small town in Northern California, I mean small. I think that's why I grew up an exhibitionist. In my town, by the time I was thirteen, you think it was tough to get a boy? I was already taller than most of 'em, and rarin' to go on the track field. I could high jump with the bunch of 'em! My mom liked boozers, gamblers and thieves, I guess, and I never knew my dad – and never cared to. I had one boyfriend in high school, but he cheated on me with my best friend, I found out later. And he'd always cut me down, ya know? My best friend and other high school associates got it from him, giggling at me while boasting of his manliness. That asshole! What diseases might I have gotten off that slob? I dropped him like a dirty shirt. Not only that, he was doing speed, and I didn't know it.

“I was living in with my fifty year old mom in Santa Rosa. Then she met some guy on the Internet, and actually moved down to Vegas to be with him. She visited a couple of times first, then she didn't come back.

“I said to her on the phone, ‘Well, if you're gonna stay down there, take me with you.’” Which she did, but it wasn't any picnic.

“The guy was a drunk, and he'd tell me during the course of his nightly excursions into hoochdom, ‘You know, you don't have no right to be har,’ and stinking shit like that.

“I had a nice guy named Aaron that I just started seeing, met him here in LV. He was a race car driver, doing the circuit, but he lived in Lake Havasu, Arizona. We never slept together and he said things about respecting me. He'd come way out of his way to Vegas to see me, but he was twenty nine and I was nineteen, so no one knew what to do.

“Sure, I had hickies on my neck from Friday, when Steve got too wild after we French'd and groped in the basement at that party, but what'd you expect? Anyway, he took one look at my naval piercing and said to me that only sluts have naval piercings. So I wouldn't let him touch me and I told him later when we curled up in his bed upstairs in his parents' house that if he laid a finger on me I'd kill him. We had too much to drink, it was dark and quiet then and he began to snore, thank you very much.

“My work, what I do? I'm an exotic dancer. But I'm no whore. Drugs? Now I do, occasionally. You can't imagine the physical demands my life puts on me. I'm running like a crazy woman night and day. Sometimes I need a little pick me up.”

He didn't just have a pencil neck; his whole emaciated body resembled a stick figure more than it did a man. He wore a dull brown, ridiculously oversized two piece suit, a white shirt closed at the collar and no tie, above which his Adam's Apple protruded from the pencil like a bump on the log. Black cordovans were laced onto his long flat feet, and about eight inches of washed out grey cotton athletic sock showed between his pant cuffs and his shoes. Dark spoon like shades wrapped around his knobby head, cheating a view of his beady eyes. If he had any feelings or thoughts, he hid them well. Cupping his ears were foam stereo headphones, and he was holding a Walkman in his hands, fiddling with it absentmindedly and looking down, not around. There was no cognition of music entering his brain on his bland, expressionless, ugly face.

The kid, he couldn't have been more than twenty, was tall though he sat in a hunched over kind of posture that in twenty more years would have him on the operating table, if he lived that long. He sat in that chair with a hideous yellow backpack on the floor next to him looking blankly off into the casino without a care in the world. Taking him in, you'd think maybe he was a Mormon. Wrong. He was a check forger, and a pretty good one at that.

But his luck was ready to change, and Hank was ready to change it.

Inside upstairs in front of the monitor, Hank and the head of security at the Palace Station talked out their moves.

"Look at that punk, sitting there like a dork from Mars. Would you think he'd have the balls to pull a stunt like this?"

"Sure I would, Herbie. In fraud, you don't judge a book by its cover," Hank assured him. "You got that call from that credit union in Fargo?"

"Yup. Check's a phony all right. Pretty clever scam, huh? He forges a check from an out of town credit union, faxes a copy of it to the casino before he arrives . . ."

"When he gets here, he checks in and tells the head cashier that he forgot his five grand check back in Fargo, but he's got a fax of it coming from his bank and will you take that? Then he has the phony check Fed Ex'd to him here the next day by an accomplice, passes it on to you, and you don't check it like usual because . . ."

"We think we already got authorization from the credit union, that's the fax, so we just cash it for him and take it to the bank, where it will clear in about three days . . ."

"Of course, it bounces, but by that time, this cat's splitsville."

"The fucker didn't even have the courtesy of losing that dough back to the house either . . ."

"Which is what put you on to him in the first place."

"Hank, you know all too well that we write off ten grand a month in bad paper around here, just like every other major casino on the strip. We expect to take a beating, but the amount of good checks we get and the portion of 'em lost to the house makes that slippage within acceptable limits. It's just that I hate to see these grifters get away with murder! Makes me look stupid. So I figured, let's give the snoop to whoever cashes a big check to make sure they lose that money back to where it belongs. But this guy, he don't play at all."

In the black and white surveillance camera, the forger was taking off his headphones and packing the Walkman into the backpack.

“Get your guys on him now, Herbie.”

Into his walkie talkie Herbie gave the order and the kid was cuffed in thirty seconds.

Later in the office, the poor punk kid slung his bony cranium down to his chest and examined the carpet for flaws. His hands cuffed behind his back didn't help his posture any, but he wouldn't know it or care.

“Thanks, Hank, for coming down so fast and rapping this clam.”

“No problem, Herbie – that's what I do. Let's take out the garbage, Louie,” was the last word Hank spoke, as the uniformed cop with him yanked the criminal up out his chair and dragged him through the doors of the casino, headed downtown and the fingerprinting guy who makes \$65,000 a year plus bennies.

“What? Me, Josh and Angie all move in with you in your little apartment?”

He had committed himself at last. He didn't have the look of a young man proposing marriage; there was no hopeful idiocy in his eyes and beads of sweat hovering above his upper lip. Hank had been around the block once too many times for any optimistic naivety to be left in him. Still, he had fallen in love with her, and now she knew it for sure.

“We could get a bigger place,” he suggested, plopping down on the sofa in resignation and . . . perhaps slightly relieved.

Nona dropped down to her knees on the floor next to him and grabbed his legs affectionately. She looked up into his warm face and wished he was a little younger and a little taller, but she understood compromise too and didn't she have two kids with no dads and a dubious profession?

Nona's sharp and intelligent silver blue eyes twinkled, but there was a indifferent grimace slashed across her mouth, turning it down so you could see her lower teeth. She trembled and said, “Hank, you're sweet, and thanks for asking, but I'd just as well take this slow. How about you start spending the night, or morning, whenever you want, coming over to my apartment, and we'll see how the kids adjust to you. You start staying over here right away.”

“You remember when we were first introduced and you told me, ‘I'm the woman your mother warned you about?’”

She got up and sat next to him on the couch. The twinkle was out of her eyes now; she stuck her narrow shapely chin out with seriousness and stared down her nose at him.

“I just don't want the kids to get to know you and then have us break up. Angie's experienced that before and it's very confusing for her.”

“Okay, baby, I understand. We'll take it slow, but we'll still take it, right?”

He held her in his arms and kissed her in a way he hadn't kissed a woman in years. Nona liked it very much.

Then it was three o'clock in the morning and Hank was wide awake. It was Nona's night off. She was in bed now, as were the kids. Hank came into the dimly lit living room and grabbed the TV remote control. Channel surfing began as he poured himself a stiff drink of whiskey. He stopped surfing at what looked like a piece of

vintage drama, a stage play made for TV, in black and white. There was a lone character on the edge of the stage facing a wall, muttering to himself and trying out hand gestures in time to his words, which you could hear plainly enough:

“They said to me, That’s love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how easy it is. They said to me, That’s friendship, yes, yes, no question, you’ve found it. They said to me, Here’s the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you’re a brute beast, think upon these things and you’ll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds.”

Hank pulled the empty jigger from his lips, breathed deeply, switched off the TV and lamp, and padded to bed to sleep with his brand new lover.

“I first used to see Nona when she came into the Starbucks next to Borders at Best in the West. I would be just ending my shift and she would be going to work, usually, but I didn’t know that at the time. She’d be dressed in baggy hooded sweat clothes, you know, the Nike or Adidas variety, and then you couldn’t tell much of anything about her except that maybe she was trailer trash. Then one day there she was getting her Frappuccino™ with practically no clothes on at all and that was an entirely different matter. You didn’t know whether to stare at her lustily or to turn away in embarrassment . . . for her. I couldn’t do either. A girl with an ass that small and tight maybe shouldn’t paint itsy bitsy royal blue shorts on herself unless she’s staying home with her boyfriend so he can lick them off. And the orange tube top she had wrapped around her upper chest was no wider than a sheet of toilet paper and just as thin. It pushed her small breasts up into reasonable mounds of desire. Down about five feet, it looked like, from her hips to her toes that is, were clean white tennis shoes, the latest hip hop craze jobs. White socks barely peeked out over the top of her sneakers. Her legs were as shapely as a pair of perfectly formed, well manicured cypress trees. Her waist crashed in from her chest and hips a bit too abruptly, making her look at little undernourished and trapezoidal shaped. Around her back and pierced belly button were tattoos; likewise tats graced her ankle and upper right arm. She had long bleached blond hair, but not too bright and more yellow like fresh ripe corn silk, which she always kept up in a swirl or a bun. I liked her smile and the tired, dreamy look in her eyes, and I noticed she got along well with the crew at Starbucks; they all seemed to know her, with lots of “Hi, Nona!” And, “Nona, already got your drink done, kid.”

“Why ain’t you asleep, Nona?”

“It’s that bird again, Hank. I noticed it last year about this time, spring time.”

“A bird?”

“Yeah, you know, a mockingbird. It makes all kinds of different calls, drives me crazy. It’s up all night I tell ya. Come – Listen!”

Nona jumped out of bed in the nude and threw open the bedroom window. Hank came close to the open window and listened for the call of a bird. Meanwhile, he also

stroked Nona's slim, long body from behind. It wasn't instinctive, nor did he want her just then. But to be close to her, physically, grounded him so and he needed that now.

"There, you hear?"

Off in the pine trees next to the apartment building, he heard in the predawn darkness a warble, a cackle, a whistle and a toot.

"That's it, you hear it!"

"Poor deluded dude!" said Hank. "Imagine, he's out there all night, no action, nobody to tell the poor bird brain that's it the middle of the night and nobody's out there . . ."

"There! There he is again!"

A coo coo, a whine, three chirps and a beep.

By this time Hank had found Nona's tits small like a young girl's though she wasn't exactly that and gently cupped them in his hands. She was leaning over the dresser towards the open window, so Hank had a clear shot. But a woman always had to be wanting it, otherwise there was nothing. They always choose. All a man can do is be willing. At best they might suggest. But only a coward and a villain takes a women by force or intimidation and he is not worthy of being called a man.

Nona grabbed at his crotch through his trousers and kissed him passionately on the mouth.

"Well, as long as I'm still up, stud, you might as well service me," was whispered into his left ear.

Hank trotted off to the John. He stripped down in the closet and grabbed a wash cloth, ran it under cold water, and swabbed his dick clean.

"Don't forget the KY Jelly, baby, okay? I'm close to my period and a little dry."

"Be my pleasure, mam'."

Angie was precociously polite for the age of five. When Josh came along, she first got affectionate, than jealous of him, but finally protectiveness came upon her and she loved her little brother very much. Angie's blond hair had never been cut, and went nicely into a long French braid. Her intense friendly blue eyes had no blemish in them. Her laugh, given ever so often, was honest and sincere.

She was truly without sin this little angel -- Angie.

Josh wanted to be good, but he just couldn't.

One day on the way from day care, Nona and Angie dropped into Starbucks and Hank was there, writing an assignment for his creative writing graduate school class at UNLV on his lap top.

Angie sat to the side of her mother and away from Hank (after she had looked at him and seen him looking back at her, smiling), but he had seen her little white cotton dress with small pink roses on them, tied at the waist with a white ribbon; he saw the white tights she wore (she turned and smiled at Hank again), he saw the tiny earrings in her ears, he saw the long hay colored rivulets of hair on Angie's head which ended in ringed curls falling well below her shoulders. On her feet were pretty white sandals.

All children made Hank glad to be alive; often he found himself, mostly while writing in cafes, turning quickly to come face to face with a small child looking up at him

from the next table, he'd catch the light of a sweet happy smile from the child's eyes, and joy would burst spontaneously from within his soul.

Josh was half black but his skin was light and his hair more red than dark brown. He had large, expressive, golden green eyes and would probably do well in school later, but he had come upon the terrible two's a bit late and now in his third year was making up for lost time.

There was no mistaking that Josh and Angie had different dads, but Josh had a lot of Nona in him too. Sometimes the mixture of breeds yields finer results than intense inbreeding.

"Josh, why did you take magic marker and scribble all over the bunk bed frame?"

"I was playing cowboys and Indians and the bunk beds were my teepees."

"Josh, why did you hide the Jell-O in your closet?"

"I wanted to save it for later."

"But you forgot it for a week and it got all moldy."

"Yeah! Did you see the funky stuff that was growing on it!"

"Josh, will you please get your tennis shoes out of the sink!"

"All you ever want to eat are hot dogs and potato chips! You can't grow up strong like that. Eat your spinach."

"Josh, why did you cut the head off one of your sister's Barbies?"

"Josh, put that bottle of bleach down this minute!"

Nona began the nightly packing of her gym bag with her costumes for work. But she did it discreetly now, because Hank and she had started getting serious and she was afraid that he wasn't going to take it too well, her dancing. But what could she do? He sat in the kitchen with Angie having hot chocolate. Josh had fallen out early -- for a three year old., that is.

Nona had outfits she wore for stripping which she removed as she danced, and outfits she wore to look incredibly seductive in the dim light of the club, when she sat next to customers while the other girls danced. Then she worked them in another way. She'd work them for money flat out, she'd admit it, but usually it was to encourage the guys to tip each dancer something. The girls were supposed to help each other out so everybody'd make out better, and they did, mostly, but Nona just as certainly wanted to solicit as many lap dances as she could obtain by seducing the male patrons.

She figured. "Well, I'm here already, and I'm taking off my clothes on stage for small change, so why shouldn't I take my clothes off for more money if I get the chance?" And sometimes she did.

Ralph, poor Ralph; always with the same long raincoat and droopy hat. He was just a kid, twenty five maybe, not bad looking; just plain and maybe a little simple. Whenever Nona saw him come into the place and move to the darkened rear corner of the hall, she knew what he wanted and went over to him as fast as she could.

"Hi, Ralph, glad to see you baby? How you been?"

"Hi, Nona, I'm okay, real good. Oh, baby, you gonna dance for me again tonight?"

"Sure, honey, you got the dough?"

Questions, it was always that. She wanted to know if I had some dough, or a 'Nice car.' As though to touch me would have been a sin, and that she never did. Later, I got to know her, and she was grand, but she didn't love me physically and never called me. I don't think she liked men all that much. And who could blame her?

"One thing I got is real good legs," Nona said to her car racing boyfriend.

Ralph reached out with two sweaty twenties and put them into Nona's hand, which she then pinched beneath a garter hugging her slim thigh. The music was blaring rock loud and the light show was blazing electric and surreal for another dancer on stage. Nona grabbed her thin chiffon slip and raised her arms high above her head, completely removing the garment from her body and tossing it to the floor. Then she straddled Ralph with her long legs, reached behind her back and slipped off her bra.

After a few waves of her luscious form above the poor dumb bastard Ralph, Nona stepped off him again, turned her ass to him, bent down to the floor and slowly slid her G-string off her crotch so that Ralph could clearly see her slit and asshole. She backed into him and straddled him again, then flipped around once more and came onto him full frontally nude.

Then the dance was over, she grabbed her garments from the floor and swiftly took her leave by the stage door nearby. It had cost Ralph sixty five bucks and it was over in less than five minutes. And for five minutes there, Nona was making almost six C notes an hour.

But that wasn't tonight, that was last time, and this time, when she was going to work, Hank would be babysitting the kids. He had nights off anyway and seemed to be getting along great with the kids, so she had consented to his offer to save her some money.

When Nona came into the kitchen after getting prepared for work, Hank and Angie were pouring over a book together, her elbows on the table and her head propped up on her closed fists. It was a book of poetry, and Hank had it open to one of his favorite English poets, Tennyson. Hank was reading a poem to Angie, who seemed delighted to be read to and was listening intently; reading to the kids was something Nona had little time nor the natural inclination to do. Nona looked at her watch, seven thirty, better get going, but she wanted to listen as Hank read, too:

"There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
 To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
 The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
 Winding down to Camelot:

There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village-churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
 Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
 The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
'I am half-sick of shadows,' said
 The Lady of Shalott."

"Wow, nice poem, Hank," Nona commented. "What'd you think of it, Angie?"

"I liked it. It's about a lady locked up in a castle?"

"It's a lady who's been cursed, honey."

"Cursed? What's that?"

"You know, like when a witch puts a spell on you," Nona informed Angie.

"The Lady of Shalott was cursed because she lived in a tower in view of the beautiful ancient city of Camelot, with its grand buildings and gorgeous people and magnificent pageantry and abundant glory but she couldn't look at any of it, except through a mirror."

"Oh, my God Hank, that's kinda sad, don't you think?"

"So what she does is sit in her tower chamber, gaze into a mirror which looks out through a window at Camelot, and weaves a tapestry of what she sees. But she's alone and without a mate; she sees life and death in that mirror, and tries and tries again to capture it all in her weavings, but sometimes she gets tired of just recording cold dry images. What she would really like is to see and feel things first hand, to be in Camelot, instead of just depicting it, but she can't, because she's cursed. As a writer, Nona, sometimes I feel just like the Lady of Shalott."

Angie by this time had squirmed out of her chair and bounded into the living room to turn on the TV.

"Angie, only an hour and a half of TV at the most tonight, and then it's bedtime. Don't give Hank any trouble now, ya hear?"

"Hey, baby, come here."

They hugged and kissed around the corner out of sight of Angie.

Hank was reluctant, nervous and unsure of himself. Mostly he had seen Nona only in brief snatches so far, between shifts and on Sunday, their only mutual day off. He knew what she did, sure, but his nose hadn't been rubbed in it yet. Now she was going off to work right in front of him, with her bag of costumes under her arm, and he knew she wouldn't be back home until five or six in the morning.

The End