

## *Last Dance*

“Last dance of the night, gentlemen,” the DJ announced. “Let’s give it up for Monroe!”

Five minutes till closing on Thursday night, and the only customers left in the topless bar were three men sitting up front near the stage. They clapped and whistled as Monroe took the stage. Her platinum curls hung down over one eye in a messy, sexy Marilyn Monroe-like fashion. She wrapped one leg around the pole and began writhing around it. One of the men signaled the waitress for another round.

Tina approached, carrying her tray and their check. She brushed her hair from her face as it slipped down from what had begun the evening as an elegant French twist. While the music blasted overhead, aggravating the pounding headache behind her eyes,

she leaned down and placed the check on the table. "I'm sorry sir, but last call was twenty minutes ago."

"But the show's still going on. Me and my friends need another beer." He nodded at his companions through the haze of cigarette smoke. He took off his John Deere cap and scratched his greasy hair. Tina checked her watch.

"Okay, but drink it fast. We close in four minutes."

"Atta girl," he said then turned and whistled at Monroe on stage. She unbuttoned her lingerie and slid it down off her shoulders.

Tina approached the bar and ordered three more beers. Simon, the bartender, gave her a hard time.

"Last call was a while ago," he protested.

"Just give me the damn beer, Simon."

He raised his hands in mock surrender, opened three Bud longnecks and set them down in front of her. She paid him from her till, placed them on her tray then hurried back up to the stage. The man in the John Deere cap stood beside the stage leaning over the edge, waving a five dollar bill.

She set the beers on the table saying, "Time to settle up, gentlemen." Both men pointed at the man in the John Deere cap.

Tina approached him just as he was motioning the dancer over towards him. When Monroe reached down to pick up the money he jerked his hand away and stuffed the bill into his pants pocket.

"Come down here and get it," he hollered.

Monroe's face dropped. She set her jaw, determined, then turned around - her rear end in the man's face - bent over and reached through her legs for the money. The men whistled and cheered. He of the John Deere cap reluctantly took a dollar from his pocket and gave it to Monroe. She looked at the single, rolled her eyes and stuffed it in the elastic band of her thigh-high stockings.

Tina tapped him on the shoulder, "Sir. We need to settle your bill."

The man joined his friends back at the table and they all took a swill of their beers. Foam settled on his bearded chin. He reeked of cheap Tequila. Tina laid their check on the table. "That'll be \$38," she said, smiling.

He gave her two twenty dollar bills and said, "Keep the change."

The music ended and the DJ came back on the mike. "Okay gentlemen. Drink up and we'll see you tomorrow, back here at Lipstick in beautiful downtown Bacliff, Texas."

Tina couldn't believe it. She'd served them three rounds, even served them after last call, and all they gave her was a measly two dollar tip. She stormed back up to the bar and counted up her till. Simon stood behind the counter watching her. It was a very slow night. She earned only \$43 and some change. After giving Simon a \$10 tip, she stuffed the rest into her pocket and began cleaning tables collecting glasses, bottles, and ashtrays. The rest of the dancers came in from the dressing room, tipped Simon and the DJ, then stood in line by the exit, waiting for the bouncer to walk them to their cars.

Tina took the broom and began sweeping the floor in back. Part of the job of the last waitress on duty was to clean the restrooms and dressing rooms after the dancers left for the night. She cleaned the restroom, swept the floor, and then opened the door into the

dressing room. Monroe was sitting on the floor crying while counting her money. The moment she saw Tina, she wiped her face and stuffed her money into her pocket.

“Are you okay?” Tina asked.

Monroe nodded. Another dancer, Charlene, came around the corner and grabbed her bag.

“What are you still doing here?” she said to Tina. “Make yourself useful.”

“I’m cleaning up after your messy ass,” Tina retorted. She started sweeping the floor.

Charlene laughed, a bit taken aback then said, “Well better you than me.” She put on fresh lipstick then left. Tina swept a pile of paper towels, hair balls and bobby pins into the middle of the dressing room floor then wiped the counter beneath the makeup mirror. Monroe pulled on her jeans and put on a dirty denim jacket.

“Goodnight,” she said.

Tina glanced up from wiping the lipstick off the mirrors. “Good night.”

Twenty minutes later, after she’d finished cleaning the dressing room, she put on her jacket and grabbed her purse and keys. She walked into the bar. Simon waved to her as she headed for the exit. The bouncer stood at the front door, muscular arms folded across his chest, talking to Monroe.

“Hey, Tina,” he said, “can you give Monroe a lift home? Her ride isn’t coming and I’ve gotta go.”

Tina checked her watch: ten after three. She sighed. “I suppose so.”

Monroe slung her bag over her shoulder. “Thanks,” she murmured.

The bouncer walked them out to Tina's Ford Explorer and waved as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"Where do you live?" asked Tina.

"La Porte," said Monroe.

"That's pretty far." Tina's head was throbbing. All she wanted to do was drive the five minutes across the Kemah Bridge to her apartment in Seabrook, and crawl in bed next to her husband. Every night when she got home, their bed was all warmed up and waiting for her. Her husband would rub her feet and tell her it was only temporary, until she could find something better.

She'd lost her job as a Direct Support Professional the year before, after suffering an anxiety attack at work. Her employer told her they couldn't risk letting her work as a DSP, taking care of developmentally disabled clients, if she was emotionally unstable. Tina's anxiety stemmed from depression which had consumed her since her mother's diagnosis with inoperable cancer. Her mother's health deteriorated and she withered away, dying a slow, painful death.

Tina checked the gas gauge; the needle rested just this side of E. They stopped at the corner Quick Mart and put in three dollars' worth of gas.

"I'll pay you back tomorrow," said Monroe.

"Sure. No sweat."

'I'm 36 years old,' Tina thought, 'That's almost twice the age of most of the girls who worked at the club. *I have a college degree.*' She knew she was capable of earning a decent living, and as soon as she could find a better job, she'd leave the seedy world of Lipstick behind. But what chance did most of those girls have to better themselves? The

one thing they had going for them was youth and looks, but when that was gone, what would they do for money?

Tina felt somehow removed from the politics of despair surrounding life at Lipstick. She constantly reminded herself she was just passing through. Then again, how many of those girls told themselves that very same thing each night as they downed their shots just before stepping onstage. It was so incredibly degrading.

“So, did you grow up in La Porte?” Tina asked.

Nodding, Monroe rolled down the window halfway, leaning her head out into the cool night air. Tina turned on the heater then turned up the radio, realizing that a conversation with this girl was out of the question. What could they possibly find to talk about?

Tina drove up Highway 146, lost in thought about her mother, until they reached the industrial part of town. Approaching the Houston ship channel, refinery lights glistened through the early morning fog, altering the world around them so that all the intertwining towers, smokestacks, and miles of piping looked like alien space ships. The air smelled of sulfur. Her eyes began to water. She wondered how anyone could stand to live here.

As they veered off Highway 146 towards the Bayport North Industrial Park, Monroe said, “Turn here.” She directed Tina down a narrow dirt road to a small trailer park wedged in between two giant oil storage tanks. The air was thick with sulfuric smoke from the waste burn-off: the foul taste of rotten eggs settled on Tina’s tongue. The flame from the smoke stack rose high into the night sky, like a pillar of fire marking the entrance to the underworld, where Hades ruled with an iron fist.

“Turn left up here,” said Monroe.

They were nearing the bay and the fog was getting thicker, so Tina inched her car along cautiously, gravel crunching under the tires.

Tina thought about the hospice worker who’d come to help with the transition of her mother’s passing. He suggested they set up a hospital bed in the living room downstairs so her mother’s friends could visit and say goodbye without having to crowd into her bedroom upstairs.

On the day she died, her mother had been lying in bed with her family gathered around, and she was having difficulty breathing. She’d slipped into a coma three days earlier and hadn’t spoken a word since. But as she lay there gasping for breath, she scrunched up her face and cried out, “I’m falling!” as if she were sinking back into the pain of her cancer racked body instead of floating up to the heavens.

Tina eased her Explorer along the single lane shell road down to the tiny trailer park where four dilapidated mobile homes sat dwarfed by Shell Oil refinery storage tanks on either side.

“Which trailer is yours?”

Monroe didn’t answer.

Tina stopped the car and said, “Monroe. Which trailer is yours?”

Monroe licked her chapped lips and said, “My name is Nancy Jean. And I live in the second trailer on the left.”

Tina pulled into the driveway and parked her car. “Can you make it in okay?” she asked.

Nancy Jean rubbed her forehead, “I don’t feel so good. I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Tina hurried around to the passenger side and opened the door. She helped Nancy Jean out of the car and up the steps to the trailer. Nancy Jean dropped her keys trying to unlock the door. Tina picked them up, unlocked the door, and helped her inside.

Once inside, the stale odor of bacon and cigarettes permeated the room, clinging to every surface like super glue. Nancy Jean turned on the light. A baby started crying.

“You left a baby here...alone?”

“My boyfriend was here when I left. He stays with our baby while I’m at work.”

The baby’s crying crescendoed into a full scale scream.

“She’s hungry,” said Nancy Jean, lifting the baby from the crib. “I don’t have money to buy milk. I only made three dollars tonight. She needs diapers and cereal. What the hell am I going to do?” She started crying.

Tina pulled a twenty dollar bill from her pocket and said, “Here. Buy some groceries. Pay me back tomorrow night.”

Nancy Jean looked up at Tina, mascara streaking down her cheeks. She took the money and said, “Thanks. You saved my life tonight. I mean it.”

“How old are you?”

Nancy Jean wiped her eyes. “I’ll be nineteen in three weeks.”

“You’re so young,” Tina said, disgusted by the filth and squalor all around her. “Things will get easier,” she said, stepping over the dirty clothes on the floor as she made her way to the door. “Get some sleep. See you tomorrow night.”

Tina shut the trailer door behind her and headed back to her car, but was suddenly caught like a deer in the headlights of a large pickup truck as it rattled up the driveway. It



pulled into the grass beside her car. She hesitated, watching. A man of medium height and build got out of the truck, slammed the door, and staggered up the steps to the trailer.

She got in her car and was just about to start the engine when she heard Nancy Jean scream. She froze. Should she call the police? She didn't know the address. Nancy Jean and her baby could be dead by the time the police showed up. Tina started to get out of her car then recalled her husband's voice, clear as a shrill steamship whistle saying, "Don't get involved." She sat there for a moment then stuck her key in the ignition.

A sudden crash of breaking glass and the baby screaming startled her back to reality. She got out of her car and ran up to the trailer. The door was standing wide open. Nancy Jean was lying on the floor, sobbing, her hands covering her face. Tina knocked on the open door.

"What the hell do you want?" yelled the man.

"Is everything okay here?" Tina asked, stepping inside. When she saw the baby on the floor crying, she felt her face flush and her heart race.

"Help me!" cried Nancy Jean, lowering her hands from her face so that Tina could see the blood on her mouth where she'd been hit.

The man walked over and kicked her in the stomach. "That's all the help you need, telling me you had a slow night. I'll show you a slow night, you lyin' whore!"

"Now just a minute," said Tina.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"A friend."

"Is that so? Well I'll tell you what, maybe your friendly little ass can help this miserable sack of shit here get off her lazy ass and clean up this dump."

He bent down and stuck his hands into Nancy Jean's pockets. She cowered away from him, once again covering her face. He pulled out the twenty dollar bill Tina had given her and shoved it into his shirt pocket.

"I knew you were lying!"

"Jimmy, that money is for groceries. Jenny needs milk and diapers."

"Shut the hell up, bitch!" He kicked her in the groin then grabbed his keys and staggered out of the trailer. Tina knelt beside Nancy Jean and touched her shoulder.

"He's gone. Let's get out of here before he comes back."

Nancy Jean sat up slowly. The sound of Jimmy's truck tearing down the driveway carried in through the open door. The baby's cries grew louder. Nancy Jean crawled over to her daughter lying in the middle of the floor and picked her up. She wiped the blood from her lip onto her jacket sleeve.

"Come on," said Tina. "I'm taking you home with me."

"I can't just leave him like that."

"Get up, get your purse and let's get the hell out of here. Do you want to end up dead?"

Nancy Jean held her child to her chest and kissed its downy head. "He wouldn't kill me."

"He's high out of his mind. No telling what he'll do if you're here when he gets back. He might even hurt your baby!"

Nancy Jean looked up, finally realizing how much danger she'd put her child in. She grabbed her keys, purse, and the baby's diaper bag then followed Tina back to her car.

“You can sleep on my couch tonight,” Tina said as Nancy Jean buckled herself in. “And tomorrow I’m taking you to the Lighthouse Shelter in San Leon.”

Nancy Jean wrapped the soiled baby blanket around her daughter then wiped the blood off her face on the corner of the blanket.

“I don’t have any money. He took it all.”

“You don’t need money at a shelter. They have food. And clothes. And child care. They even have job placement services, I know, because my mother’s prayer circle used to volunteer there.”

Nancy Jean stared at Tina, not really comprehending that her life was about to change drastically. She then leaned her head back on the head rest. “God my face hurts. He threw a beer bottle at me.”

Tina shifted gears as she pulled onto the highway. “You could press charges, you know. Lock him up so he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“I never want to see him again.”

“Good for you!”

“Tina?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Tina glanced over at Nancy Jean. She looked dazed. Tears welled up in her eyes. She looked away, clutching her baby closer to her chest.

“You’re welcome. Do you think you need stitches?”

“I doubt it,” said Nancy Jean, closing her eyes. “It’s already stopped bleeding. I just want to sleep.”

“We should stop at Wal-Mart and get a baby bottle and some milk and diapers.”

Nancy Jean nodded.

Fog drifted across the beam of the headlights, casting shadowy forms on the road in front of them. The place looked haunted, as if ghosts or evil spirits were flooding the road, and at any moment would wrestle them off to the underworld.

Tina recalled her mother, dying in the living room, struggling for her last breath until the hospice worker suggested that she and her family leave the room. “She’s trying to pass, but she feels your presence and it’s holding her back.”

Her father was reluctant at first, but Tina persuaded him to go with her into the kitchen and let her mother pass on in peace. A few minutes later the hospice worker came into the kitchen and told them she was gone. Her father rushed back into the family room and knelt beside her mother’s bed. He took her hand and sobbed.

That image seared itself into her mind. She sometimes thought of her parents like that, late at night when she couldn’t sleep, trapped in separate worlds yet still holding hands, clinging to the chasm between the living and the dead.

“He’ll come to Lipstick tomorrow looking for you,” said Tina.

“What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Stay at the shelter, let them find you a real job. You can live there until you save enough money to move out.”

“I’m never going back to Lipstick,” said Nancy Jean. “As far as I’m concerned, that place can rot in hell.”

“You know what?” said Tina, as if for the first time realizing she had a choice in the matter. “I’m never going back there either. We can find better jobs, I *know* we can.”

“Do you really think so?” asked Nancy Jean.

“Absolutely. We can type up our resumes in the morning, then I’ll drive us over to the Lighthouse Shelter and we can see what their job placement service can come up with.”

Nancy Jean smiled and rocked her baby.

“This is a blessing in disguise,” said Tina. “Your life is changing for the better, starting right now.”

She turned on the wipers, trying to clear the windshield, remembering how helpless she’d felt as she watched her father cry. She recalled her mother’s last spoken words: “I’m falling,” and hoped she was now soaring up to heaven, free of pain and suffering, free at last to dance with the angels.

Tina now felt like dancing herself, so relieved to not be going back to that tomb of a topless bar where everyone, whether customers or co-workers, emulated the waking dead. Being around such a negative environment made Tina feel as if she was walking around dead. Now that she’d decided to quit, she felt ecstatic to be free of it.

“We deserve better,” she said as she pulled into the Wal-Mart parking lot. Nancy Jean’s baby opened her eyes wide and looked at Tina. She smiled at the baby and said, “You’ll see. Tomorrow will be a better day.”

After buying groceries, they drove back to Tina’s apartment where Nancy Jean fed and bathed her baby.

Tina put them to bed on the couch then crawled into bed next to her husband. He'd waited up for her, and when she was late coming home from work, he worried that she'd run out of gas or had car trouble.

"You could've called and let me know you'd be late getting home," he said. Tina turned off the lamp next to her bed. She rolled onto her side, facing her husband.

"If you saw where she lived, and how violent her boyfriend was, you would've done the same thing."

He sighed. "Maybe so. Just call me and let me know what you're doing. Okay?"

"I'm sorry. I'll be more considerate in the future."

He reached for her and kissed her good night.

The sound of a baby crying woke them up a few hours later, as the morning's first light streamed into their bedroom. Tina got up and went into the living room to check on Nancy Jean.

"Sorry to wake you," said Nancy Jean from the kitchen. She stood at the stove, holding her baby on her hip, while heating some milk in a saucepan.

"No problem. Did you sleep okay?"

Nancy Jean yawned. "Yes. She's already hungry *again*. But I could've slept another six hours. I'm really tired."

"We can sleep later. Let's get to work on your resume." Tina sat down at her desk in the living room and turned on her laptop. She opened a new file and started typing.

“What’s your last name, Nancy Jean?”

“Olsen.”

“Do you have a cell number and email address?”

“Yes. I’ll write it all down for you.”

Tina got a pen and paper for Nancy Jean then sat back down at her desk.

“Do you have any office skills? Can you type?”

Nancy Jean looked up from her writing and said, “I took keyboarding in high school and got my speed up to about 60 words a minute.”

“Great!” said Tina. “Have you used Word, PowerPoint, Excel or Outlook?”

Nancy Jean hesitated. “I don’t own a computer right now. But in school we used Word and Excel in the Mac Lab. Does that count?”

“Absolutely,” said Tina. “Have you ever worked in an office before?”

Nancy Jean shook her head then said, “Wait a minute. I was an aide in the attendance office in high school. I answered phones, did filing and checked email for the attendance secretary. That’s kind of like office experience, isn’t it?”

“Yes it is. Have you had any other jobs?”

Nancy Jean gave Tina the paper where she’d scribbled her contact info. She shrugged and said, “Not really. I used to babysit a lot when I was younger. But I’ve never really had a job other than as a dancer. I can’t put that on my resume.”

“No. But child care is a skill, and you have several years of experience...”

“Hard at work already?” said Tina’s husband as he breezed into the living room, dressed for work.

“Yes. We’re going to find new jobs today. Wish us luck.”

“Good luck,” he said, bending down to kiss his wife on the forehead. “I’ll see you tonight.”

When he left the apartment, Nancy Jean returned to the kitchen and poured some warm milk into the bottle then fed her baby. She watched as Tina typed on her laptop.

“Were you in any clubs or organizations in school?”

“No. But I ran track as a Freshman. Does that count?”

Tina thought for a moment. “Do you have any hobbies?”

Nancy Jean shook her head. She went up to Tina and looked over her shoulder at the monitor. The page was practically empty.

“This is hopeless. Who am I kidding? I can’t get a real job with resume as blank as that.”

“Don’t get discouraged,” said Tina. “What year did you graduate?”

“2012.”

“And what was your GPA?”

“C+”

“Hmm,” said Tina. “Maybe the career placement counselor at the shelter will have some ideas about how to beef this up a little.”

Tina changed the font to a larger point size so the page wouldn’t have so much white space on it. She then printed it, and gave it to Nancy Jean to read.

“I like this,” she said, glancing up at Tina. “Flexible, fast learner, and detail oriented. That sounds great.”

“Well, you have to be flexible and learn fast to survive at Lipstick for as long as you did. And I assume you learned to pay attention to details as an office aide. Right?”



Nancy Jean nodded then burped her baby.

Tina printed a copy of her own resume then shut down her laptop.

“I’ll watch the baby if you want to take a shower. Towels are in the cabinet.”

“Thank you so much. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Two hours later, after checking Nancy Jean into the shelter, and getting her assigned to a room, they went next door to the career placement center. Upon entering the room, the pungent smell of boiled onions assailed them. Lunch was being served next door in the soup kitchen. They sat in the crowded waiting room with their resumes in hand watching wide eyed as other applicants passed through the office. Several small children sat on the floor playing with match box cars. A young Hispanic woman sat off to the side of the room, breast feeding her baby. When it was finally their turn to see the counselor, they approached the woman’s desk.

After explaining their situation and answering several questions about Lipstick and the working conditions there, Nancy Jean asked the woman point blank if she thought she could find her a job.

The woman said, “I think I’ve got the perfect job for you.”

She grinned. “What is it?”

“The First Baptist Church here in town is hiring day care workers for their Mothers’ Day Out program. It’s a full time job. 7:30 to 5:30 Monday through Friday and

it pays \$9 an hour. It's only six blocks away, which is perfect since you don't have a car. And you can even keep your daughter with you all day. Would you like for me to set up an interview?"

"Gee I don't know," said Nancy Jean, disappointed. "I was kind of hoping for an office job."

"My dear I'll be honest with you, without any previous office experience, you're not likely to find anyone willing to hire you."

"Set up the appointment," said Tina. "I can drive her over there for the interview."

"Good," said the counselor. "I'll call them right now."

"Are they hiring for any other positions?" asked Tina. "Maybe a receptionist or administrative assistant?"

"I don't think they are right now, but I'll check and see." She picked up her phone.

Tina held up her hand and crossed her fingers. Nancy Jean offered a half smile.

"Great," said the woman. "I'll send them over in a few minutes. Her name is Nancy Jean Olsen. Thank you. Oh and Janice, are you hiring for receptionist or anything else right now? Okay thank you."

She hung up her phone and said, "They're expecting you Nancy Jean. Ask for Janice Hopkins."

"Wonderful," said Tina. "What about the receptionist job?"

"Just like I thought. They're not hiring right now."

"Oh well," said Tina. "Maybe you know of some other places who are hiring."

She offered her resume to the woman.

“I’m sorry, but we only provide job placement services for women living in our shelter. Have you tried a temp agency?”

Tina shook her head.

“There are several in the Clear Lake area. Here’s a list.” She opened her desk drawer and took out a brochure.

“Thanks.” Tina took the brochure.

“Don’t mention it.” She stood and shook their hands. “I wish you both the best.”

“How’d it go?” asked Tina’s husband that evening when he came home from work.

“Nancy Jean found a job right away.”

“Doing what?”

“Day care. First Baptist Church in San Leon. She can walk there from the shelter.”

“My little Miracle Worker,” he said, hugging her. “I’m sorry for being angry at you last night. You have a big heart.”

She smiled at him, took his hand and kissed his wedding band.

“I have a job interview tomorrow,” she announced. “The temp agency I went to this afternoon set it up.”

“Really? What’s the job?”

“Education Counselor at Space Center Houston. It’s for an educational program, leading school kids through a planned curriculum after school and on weekends.”

“Wow. That’s great. You love working with kids.”

“And all my years as a substitute teacher will finally come in handy.”

He went to the kitchen and poured them each a glass of wine. He gave her the wine, sat down beside her, then held up his glass for a toast.

“To better days ahead.”

“To Nancy Jean, for making me see how badly I needed to change my life.”

He looked at her for a moment then said, “You’ll get that job. It’s your karma for rescuing her from hell.”

Tina smiled and sipped her wine. “We’ll see.”

“Let me take you out to dinner to celebrate,” he said.

“Let’s stay home and celebrate.”

He smiled and raised one eyebrow seductively.

She laughed, feeling as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, replaced by a new freedom borne of taking the time to help someone less fortunate than herself, just like her mother would have done.