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RICHARD LANGE

Blind-Made Products

Dee Dee's moving again, for the third time this year. She doesn't feel safe anymore, not since she asked the Mexican guy down the hall if he would fix her leaky faucet and his wife called her a puta and threatened to kill her. She says her life has taken a dangerous turn, and she's always on the run from one assassin or another. That's just the speed talking. Her green hair bugs me, too, and the haughty tone she adopts with waitresses and 7-Eleven clerks. But Grady's god-knows-why sweet on her, and he's my only friend, so here I am, watching her have a nervous breakdown and wishing I was somewhere else.

Grady promised she'd be packed and ready to roll by the time we arrived with the truck, but it's been an hour already, and the boxes are still empty, and now Dee Dee has collapsed on the livingroom floor, crying because she can't decide where to stick what. My advice would be to drag it all out to the sidewalk and burn it. The dirty stuffed animals, the torn paperbacks. The thrift-store ball gowns and ancient punk-rock records. All of it. Because there's something morbid about hauling around so many mementos of your worthless past. Something morbid and something resigned.

"Why won't you help?" Dee Dee wails, and Grady leaves me sitting alone on the couch to kneel beside her. He lights her cigarette, cracks a few jokes, and pretty soon she's laughing. I could join in when they begin filling boxes, I guess, but I don't. I don't feel like it. The hot wind that's been blowing off the desert for days rattles the screen in the window frame and snatches up a blackened match from the coffee table. I stick my finger into the hole in my beer can and wonder how hard I would have to twist it to cut myself to the bone.

Don't get me wrong. I used to do pretty well with the ladies. I don't know what it was, but for a while there I had it. The way some retarded people can play piano or memorize baseball stats, I could pick up girls. Black, white, brown. Twins once, at the same time; a mother and daughter separately. A veterinarian with too many dogs, a welfare queen who used her government check to buy me

Quaaludes, a former Sea World mermaid, a blind girl. A beautiful blind girl.

I spent years jumping from woman to woman. It was fun and all, but you get caught up in a grind like that, and you fall behind in other areas. That's why I was glad when it ended, when the magic finally faded. Suddenly everyone saw right through me, and I couldn't have been happier. Really.

Being alone took some getting used to, of course. I had my booze and pills and whatnot, but some nights I just wanted to die. I kept telling myself there had to be more to life than breaking hearts. I pressed on. I let the years pass. And now I'm doing fine.

More people were supposed to be here to help Dee Dee move. Grady said it was going to be like a party. We'd have a couple beers, everyone would carry down a box or a piece of furniture, we'd follow the truck to the new place, unload, and have a few more beers. It didn't work out that way though. Grady and I are the only suckers who showed, and Dee Dee's idea of a festive spread is a bag of stale Doritos and a warm six-pack of Bud.

Grady does his best to keep me entertained as he and I wrangle the futon and kitchen table down the narrow stairway. He just got back from Vegas, where he hit a royal on video poker. A thousand and change. He goes through every hand the machine dealt him leading up to the jackpot, and I don't have the heart to tell him that other people's gambling stories bore the shit out of me. He's going to use the money to get Dee Dee some new head shots—she's taking acting lessons again—and he wants to buy another gun.

We break for cigarettes after carrying down what seems like a hundred milk crates full of junk. Grady stretches out on the U-Haul's ramp, I sit on the curb. There's a hot spot on my left foot from my new steel-toes. I unlace the boot and pull it off and roll down my sock to see how close I am to blistering.

"Think she's got any Band-Aids?" I ask.

"Somewhere, man, I'm sure," Grady replies. He reaches into one of the boxes and pulls out a grinning ceramic monkey on a surfboard. "This won't help?"

The battered ice-cream truck parked down the street is playing "It's a Small World." A bunch of Mexican kids have gathered at its door. They hop up and down and spin in circles and kung fu their

buddies. One little girl stands apart from the rest, waving a dollar bill over her head. I don't have any children. Nobody I know has any children. And nobody wants any. I squash an ant with my thumb. Then another. Then another.

Grady flicks away his half-smoked cigarette. "As of now, I'm quitting these," he announces.

The wind picks up. It's like a sick old man breathing in my face. I lie back and watch the shaggy crowns of the palm trees toss back and forth high overhead. The dry fronds crack and rustle and hiss.

"She wants me to torch her car," Grady says. He's running his hands over his crewcut, a nervous habit he's picked up lately.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Like for the insurance. You take it out somewhere and set it on fire, so she can collect."

"I know you're not that stupid."

He shoots me a fuck-you look. "I said she wants me to, that's all."

Grady loans me money. He steals CDs for me from the record store where he works. When I got my DUI, he bitched at the cops until they cuffed him and put him in the back seat of the cruiser, too, because he didn't want me to go to jail by myself. I think you can see why I worry about him.

While he and Dee Dee are carrying down more boxes, I'm left alone in her bedroom. I pick up one of her pillows and press it to my nose, then move to the dresser, where I finger her hairbrush, her makeup sponges, her lipstick.

The top drawer of the dresser is full of panties arrayed like the lustrous black and blue and red pelts of small exotic creatures. I slide my hand across them, then wriggle my fist deep into their silky depths and stand there buried to the forearm, listening to the wind slam a tree against the side of the building. Can you feel cancer cells multiplying inside you? Come on! It's funny if you're bent that way: A mother lode of G-strings, and this is where my mind goes. Ah, well, I tell myself as Grady and Dee Dee come tromping up the stairs and I grab a box of comic books to take to the truck. Ah, well.

The blind girl's name was Mercedes, a Filipina who attended the Braille Institute, which was down the street from where I lived at the time. It was a funny neighborhood. The traffic signals chirped

like birds to alert the students when to cross, and there was a small factory a few blocks away, Blind-Made Products, where many of them worked. In the morning they gathered in the doughnut shop, some in dark glasses, the bolder ones with their dead eyes bared. I loved to watch them prepare their coffee. Their hands seemed to have an intelligence all their own as they tore open sugar packets and tapped about in search of cream.

I met Mercedes at the liquor store. She'd asked for gummi bears, but the Korean clerk kept leading her to the chewing gum display.

"No," she said after running her fingers over the racks for the third time. "Gummi *bears*."

I stepped in and took her arm, steering her to what she wanted, and we ended up spending the rest of the day together. She lived with her parents out in Palms somewhere and rode the bus east every morning to the Institute. At first we rendezvoused in the doughnut shop when her classes were over and walked together to my place, but after two weeks she'd memorized the route, so I'd wait in the apartment, listening for the zipping sound her cane made against the sidewalk as she felt her way up the block.

She was one of those who preferred to wear dark glasses, and even when she took them off, she kept her eyes closed. We'd smoke dope and listen to music, and when we fucked, those incredible hands of hers would roam my body like soft, warm spiders. She liked to talk about religion—silly shit. Once she told me that she believed God was blind.

She was the most beautiful girl I'd ever been with, but since she couldn't see me, I wasn't sure if it counted.

Grady's going to drive the U-Haul to Dee Dee's new place, and he asks me to ride over with her in her Malibu. It's been sputtering at stoplights lately—the fuel pump, he suspects—and he'd feel better if she had someone with her in case it conks out. When I seem a bit hesitant, he gives me \$20 to pick up a 12-pack on the way and tells me I can keep the change.

Dee Dee's a complete idiot behind the wheel, nosing right up to slower cars in front of us and laying on the horn, a cigarette in one hand, an open beer between her legs. I roll down my window and try to relax. Most of the signs are in Korean on this stretch of Western. We pass a building I remember seeing on TV during the

riots. They interviewed the owner as he stood in front with a rifle, holding off looters. About all he could say in English was "Why?"

We get stuck behind a bus, and the exhaust makes me lightheaded. I watch the eightball air fresheners hanging over the rearview mirror swing back and forth and pretend I'm being hypnotized. A Jeep full of vatos pulls up beside us, and one of the guys points at Dee Dee's hair and laughs.

"Fuck you!" she yells, flipping him off. The gob he spits lands on the hood, and the next thing I know she's halfway out the door. I yank her back inside, but the vatos are in a fighting mood. They spill into the street waving baseball bats and tire irons, and I realize I've died this way before, in dreams.

The first of them reaches the car just as the light changes and traffic begins to move. A passing police cruiser slows for a look, and the driver of the Jeep whistles a warning. The vatos break off their attack and return to the Jeep, which speeds away while the black-and-white screeches through a U-turn to follow, one of the cops already calling in the plates.

My voice is shaking as bad as my hands when I shout at Dee Dee, "If you ever do that again, I swear I'll leave you to the fucking lions."

"I spilled my beer," she sobs. Big, black mascara tears crawl down her cheeks.

I screwed her once, eight or ten years ago, back in my heyday. A quickie car date in the parking lot of some death-rock club off Melrose. She went by Trixie then, something like that, and what attracted me to her were her blue eyes, maybe, or the rings she wore on every finger, little screaming skulls. Anyway, I never saw her again until Grady brought her around a couple of months ago, and if she remembers me, she hasn't let on.

She cleans her face with a fast-food napkin from under the seat and goes right back to swearing and swerving.

"You know what that motherfucker said to me?" she asks out of nowhere as we're passing over the Hollywood freeway.

"Who?" I ask.

"Grady. He said, 'I can rebuild you, baby. I have the technology.'"

I see the sheet of black plastic coming from a hundred yards away. It flaps and billows in the wind like an angry ghost. Pursing my lips, I empty my lungs in a quick puff, as if to ward it off, but this wayward shred of night has its heart set upon devouring us. It swoops

low over the road and skips across two lanes before whipping up to flatten itself against the windshield with a loud slap. We can't see anything ahead of us, yet Dee Dee doesn't ease up on the accelerator one bit. I sit back and grit my teeth and wait for her to lose her nerve.

She finally screams, "Do something!" and I stick my arm out the window, but the plastic slithers from my touch and launches itself again into the air, where it shoots straight up into the sky, up and up and up, to join the satellites and space junk. Dee Dee and I laugh and fiddle with the radio and keep on driving, any righteous wonder the moment warrants swept away by the cheap high of shared relief.

Dee Dee's new apartment is a block north of Hollywood Boulevard, in a scabby, has-been building that's supposedly haunted by Sal Mineo. Luckily a few of her friends are waiting, because the elevator is out of order, and everything will have to be carried up to the fourth floor. After Dee Dee jump-starts the late arrivals with a line or two of her stash, they're raring to go. "Beep beep," they shout as they squeeze past me, competing among themselves to see who can haul the biggest loads. I take up a position in the back of the truck and spend the next hour sliding boxes and furniture down the ramp to Dee Dee's buddies. They make a couple of remarks about me not doing my share, but fuck it, I've got nothing to prove to these boneheads.

More and more people straggle in, and it actually begins to resemble a party. The unloading goes quickly, and when it's done, Dee Dee takes everyone up to the roof of the building to cool off. It's just an expanse of gravel with a few potted palms scattered about and some rusty patio furniture, but the wind has lost its burn now that the sun is setting, and the Hollywood sign glows a pretty pink. Soon reggae is snaking out of a boom box, and a girl with a pierced eyebrow hands me another beer before I've finished the one I'm drinking. Someone discovers a barbecue grill, and a contingent is dispatched to buy hot dogs and veggie burgers.

I drag a lawn chair to the edge of the roof. The sky out this way is a map of hell—blood and fire and gristly bruised clouds. I stare at it until I think I have it memorized, then lower my eyes to an open window in the next building, through which I can see a fat man lying on his couch, watching television. There is an empty birdcage

in the apartment, a treadmill. He scratches his belly and coughs. These lives, these lives.

The girl with the eyebrow ring approaches tentatively. She's playing with a yo-yo. She stands with her back to me for a few seconds, taking in the sunset, but I can tell she has something prepared.

"You went out with my sister," she says when she finally turns to face me.

"What was her name?"

"Christina. About five years ago."

The aromatherapist, with all her little vials and potions. She thought she could help me, but my sense of smell was shot. Too many cigarettes. Her sister walks the dog, then jerks the yo-yo out of its stall into a cat's cradle. She's hot, in a black nail polish kind of way.

"How is Christina?" I ask.

"Married. Pregnant."

"Good for her."

"Like you give a shit," she says. "Guys like you, I swear..."

The yo-yo zips out and stops about an inch from my face before racing back up the string to the girl's hand. She wraps it in her fist like she's going to clock me with it.

"Are you mad at me?" I ask.

"Yeah, I am. I am fucking pissed."

I get up from my chair and walk back to where everybody's hanging out. A couple of guys I know are there now, Charlie and Nick. We talk about their band for a while, drink a few more beers.

Mercedes' blindness brought out the best in most people. Strangers were always grabbing her arm, trying to help her along. We'd be eating breakfast at Denny's, and old women would come up to our table and say, "God bless you, dear," and shove a few dollars into her hand. The neighborhood where the Braille Institute was located was a little rough—I heard gunshots almost every night—but Mercedes never had a problem. In fact, the only time she was robbed, the thief apologized. "I'm a drug addict," he confessed before snatching her purse, which she later told her parents she'd left on the bus, because that would have been just the excuse they needed.

She planned to go to college someday. She wanted to work with children. She also wanted to visit France. "Why?" I asked. It was a

legitimate question. I mean, she was blind. That was the only time I saw her cry. She had a cat named Lilly and a brother named José. Once when we were high in my apartment, she got confused and walked into the kitchen, thinking it was the bathroom. “It’s okay to laugh,” she said, so I did.

Saturdays we’d go places together—Griffith Park, the rose garden down by USC. She’d ask me to describe the flowers, the trees, the carousel, but this was beyond me. I couldn’t find the words. She said I was lazy, that if I cared about her I’d try. So I practiced. The moon looks like a drop of milk, I’d say to myself in the mirror, like a pearl, like a peephole into heaven. I never worked up the nerve to repeat any of it to her though. She bought me a shirt for my birthday, the ugliest shirt I’d ever seen.

The party moves back down to Dee Dee’s new apartment, and Grady pulls me into the bathroom and offers me one of the lines of speed he’s laid out on the plastic case of a Motorhead CD. I’ve been trying to stay away from that shit, but I’m drunk already, and I want to drink more. It’s not something I’m proud of. The speed sears the inside of my nose and drives tears into my eyes.

“Katy got busted,” Grady says.

I nod like I know who he’s talking about. The bathroom is painted light green, hospital-gown green, and there’s wall-to-wall shag carpeting on the floor. I don’t want to think about that carpet. I just don’t.

Back in the living room they’re playing a Greatest Disco Hits record, and a few people are dancing to it in that exaggerated way that lets everyone know they’re only kidding. We’re all on something or other now. A forest of beer bottles has sprouted on the coffee table. Everywhere I look, I see a guy chewing the inside of his cheek or a girl bouncing her knee and laughing too loud. Great secrets are revealed to strangers who will forget them by morning, and the smoke of a thousand cigarettes rises like scum off boiling meat and tries to find a way out through the earthquake cracks in the ceiling.

A space opens up on the couch, and I take it, settling into the thick of things. The speed is tickling the back of my neck, where my skull joins my spine, and my earlier drunkenness fades, replaced by the blessed chemical clarity that’s all I know of grace. I open myself up

as wide as I can, so wide that all of the goodness inside me sparkles like diamonds there for the taking, and sure enough, the guy to my left, the white boy with dreads, asks my name.

My tongue can hardly move fast enough to push out the words my brain drops onto it. I've got so much to say to my new acquaintance, a whole life to explain. Twenty minutes or so into it, he excuses himself to fetch another beer, but that's okay, someone else takes his place. And so on, and so on, for what seems like hours. One by one people get their fill of me and slip away. I don't even try to keep track of the changing faces, because I've got this idea that if I stop talking before I'm all talked out, I'll seize up and die.

I reminisce about Christmas when I was a kid and reel off the names of every dog I've ever owned. I discuss the themes of *Moby Dick* and explain how to make perfect scrambled eggs. I tell them about Mercedes and what finally happened between us and toss out every other miserable and degrading memory that comes to mind. Dee Dee finally jumps on me, pinning me to the couch. She's laughing so hard, she's crying as she puts her hand over my mouth and squeezes my lips together.

"Shut up," she gasps. "Shut up, shut up, shut up."

I get a grip on the reins after another beer or two, jerk myself back into a trot. Everything's sort of whirling around me, slightly distorted, like I'm watching from inside a fishbowl, which is fine, I enjoy the distance.

Some joker comes prancing down the hallway wearing one of Dee Dee's dresses and sends the party into hysterics. I'm swept up by the unruly stampede to the bedroom, where all of the men are soon tearing through the boxes of clothes and pulling on whatever fits. Mine's a frilly blue thing that reminds me of the toilet-paper covers in my grandmother's bathroom. A seam rips when I bend over to roll my jeans above my knees. Dee Dee's makeup case is unearthed, and we go to work on each other with lipstick and eye shadow.

"This is pretty fucking gay," I say as I draw a bright red whore's smile on Grady's face.

He takes a hit off a joint that's going around the room, then passes it to me, and it looks like it's been dipped in blood. I realize that I'm sweating, have been for hours. I stink.

There's some kind of contest. One by one we're to exit the bedroom and let the girls judge us. I stomp out and do a couple of pirouettes and some half-assed pop-locking. A flash goes off in my face and a Polaroid whirs. My performance draws a few claps and hoots, but nothing like what the next guy gets when he raises his skirt to reveal that he's not wearing underwear and shakes his gear in time to the music. The winner, instantly, and his prize is that he can kiss whichever of the girls he wants. He chooses a guy, though, and everybody loses it when they tongue each other right there in the middle of the living room.

"Cheater," I keep yelling, "no fair," until someone tells me to grow up.

When nobody's looking, I sneak over and steal my picture out of the stack of photos on the couch.

I should have told Mercedes when I began to date Pam the barfly nurse. Instead, I kept my mouth shut and pulled double duty, waiting for an easy way out. One day Mercedes showed up with all her hair cut off. She started to talk about getting a tattoo, a small one on her butt. The Institute called her parents and let them know she'd been missing classes, and her mother sent her to a priest who made her swear on the Bible that she was still a virgin. Mercedes could smell Pam on my sheets. "That's another girl, I know it is," she said.

In the midst of all this, I got a little strung out. My dealer, a fat pig named Alberto, had seen me around the neighborhood with Mercedes and was fascinated by our relationship. When I wound up in over my head to him, he suggested I could clear my debt by letting him fuck her. I told him he was crazy. "Let me watch then," he said. "She'll never know." He stood in the kitchen, and I turned up the music and got it over with quickly. He was right—she never suspected a thing.

Eventually I stopped answering the buzzer when Mercedes showed up. The tapping of her cane as she walked away made me want to puke. I felt creepy and weak and my blood burned like poison. I'd see her sometimes, headed for the bus stop or doughnut shop, and pass within feet of her without saying a word. "You are such a fucker," Pam would tell me—Pam, who lasted less than a

month. I wound up getting loaded on Percodan and driving my car into a Taco Bell. That was as close as I came to asking for help.

I break the surface somewhere between dead and alive in the back seat of a car speeding through the desert. It's still night, and Dee Dee's driving, and I've got my hand down Christina's sister's pants. She shoves a stick of gum into my mouth and pulls my face to hers. My lips are raw and slimy. We've been kissing for hours. I touch the ring in her brow, think about yanking it out to see if she'll explode like a grenade, but she slaps my hand away.

Grady's Cadillac is behind us. His headlights flash, and Dee Dee pulls over. I leap from the Malibu and cross the dirt road to piss against a Joshua tree, which resembles, in the darkness, a crucified thief. I'm still wearing the dress. I have to pull it up around my hips to get at the buttons of my jeans. The massive sand dune swelling on the horizon glows like a pile of lost, old bones, and the wind howls in my ears. It's a lonely and truthful place, and it scares me. Grady and Dee Dee and Christina's sister are standing around the Caddy, washing down little white doughnuts with beer. I see that Grady is still wearing his dress, too, so it must be something we agreed upon.

He tosses me a Bud, and we walk to the Malibu. He has me hold a flashlight on him while he uses a screwdriver to pry the CD player from the dash.

Who are these people, I wonder, and what happened to my cigarettes? I can't stop looking at the stars swarming overhead, preparing to attack. Christina's sister comes up behind me and wraps her arms around my waist. Her breath against my spine makes me want to scream.

When Grady's done, he tosses the stereo into the Caddy, then hops in and backs the car further away from the Malibu.

"Let me pour," I say, just to say something, just to get away from Christina's sister.

Grady hands me the gas can. Following his shouted instructions, I douse the interior of the Malibu, the tires, the engine. The fumes sting my eyes, my swollen lips. I want to be the one to put the spark to it, too, but Grady won't allow that. He tells the girls to move across the road, to the Joshua tree. I stay where I am, beside him.

He strikes a road flare. It sputters and catches, giving off a rosy glow. With a smooth underhand toss, he sends it through the open window of the Malibu. There's a loud roar, and the sun rises inside the car, finds itself trapped by the roof, and so forces itself out wherever it can. A fiery arm reaches for us. Grady runs, but I don't see the point. The air begins to crackle around me, and hot fingers caress my cheeks, my nose, plunge into my eyes. My tongue crumbles into ash when I laugh, my teeth are nubbins of coal.

Grady yanks me backward by my collar. He rolls me in the sand to put out the fire. I sit next to the Joshua tree in the mud my piss made and stroke the remnants of the dress that still cling to me. The clothes I'm wearing beneath it are untouched. Across the road, the Malibu pops and whistles, a musical inferno. Birds chirp in the false dawn, jackrabbits awaken confused. Black smoke billows up to obscure the marauding stars.

"You okay?" Grady asks. The girls await my answer, hands over their mouths.

"I'm fine," I say.

We use the rest of the beer to wash the soot off of my face. And I *am* fine, except that when I close my eyes there are flames dancing on the backs of the lids.

We'll stop in Barstow for booze and cigarettes. Back in L.A., Christina's sister will crash at my apartment for a few days, and it will be fun and all, but we'll finally come to our senses. I'll tell her to leave, and she'll try to stab me with a broken tequila bottle. After that, I'll be lonely for a good long while, but then things will get better. I'll find a job, lose it, find another. A few years from now I'll come into enough money to take a trip to Hawaii. I will not enjoy it. There will be birds there, flowers red as candy, and waves just like in the brochure, but they'll all remind me of Mercedes. I'll stand on the shore and scream descriptions of everything into the night, descriptions that will tremble and falter and fall, and be gobbled up by a black, buzzing sea.