

## B l a c k   P e a r l s

I looked up at the rig dangling like a bracelet over the edge of the overpass. Rohn pulled our truck over, and he, my Auntie Annie, and I watched while above us police cars, fire trucks, tow trucks, and paramedics accumulated in the blackness. Out there in the cool black desert, beyond reach of Los Angeles, a man was trapped in the rig's cab, hanging above the road we were taking. Our road was blocked off, so there were a couple of dozen cars both before and behind us. I was surprised there were even that many. These days people didn't drive much for recreational purposes, so the highways were often empty. I climbed out of the

truck and wrote on a piece of paper, "The man is going to fall and die." And then I burned the paper. I was superstitious and thought I could prevent bad things from happening by writing them down and burning the paper.

Rohn leaned over my aunt and out the passenger window. "Francie, we don't mind if you believe in that stuff, but you put out that fire good." I stomped on the ashes, stood up to watch the rig. In a moment Rohn leaned out again. "Maybe you shouldn't stand on those ashes. It might be bad luck." I laughed. When I'd first moved in with my aunt and Rohn five years earlier, he hadn't believed in any of my superstitions, but now he'd developed some of his own.

He wrapped his arm around Auntie, and I waited outside to give them a romantic moment alone. The way it was today, with people dying or getting arrested or all the time leaving each other, you hated to love people, you really did. But I had to admit I enjoyed watching my aunt and her boyfriend together.

The crowd oohed as the firemen pulled the truck driver from the cab, and we down below applauded, our claps ringing out sharply into the emptiness. Then the firemen and the driver—who I saw now was actually a woman—waved to us, hugely and theatrically, and one person even bowed, as if the accident had been a planned entertainment.

"Off we go, wenches!" shouted Rohn, and I hopped in.

Before everything ran out of money, back at the beginning of the century, the government had started to build something in Southern California called the Sunshine System, an ambitious series of highways and freeways that would link the whole area and eliminate traffic jams. They never finished the Sunshine though, and the truncated roads arched over the landscape like half of concrete rainbows. You saw them all over, huge concrete forms throwing shadows over the concrete below them. Now,

because we were behind schedule anyway, Auntie Annie, Rohn, and I decided to do something we'd always talked about. We snuck up an abandoned rainbow and leaned over the edge where a road abruptly stopped. We felt as if we'd reached the end of the world.

Below us, a car whizzed by on the interstate. Rohn howled, barked, growled, and scratched and shook his butt. He loved making like an animal. He got quite into it sometimes. We waited for him to quiet down.

Auntie Annie looked at him lovingly. Though she was forty-three, only once before in her life had she had a boyfriend, a man she'd chased hard when she was eighteen, in the twenties. She'd followed him to seven states—living with him in three—and finally had fallen out of love as abruptly as she'd fallen in it. The next time she'd fallen in love was when she met Rohn, almost twenty years after her first affair.

Both Annie and Rohn were huge, corpulent, and surprisingly light on their feet. Either Annie's eyebrows had fallen out or she shaved them. Every morning before Rohn or I woke up, she drew long sloping black brows above her eyes, and she drew another long sloping black line on her eyelids, making their slant even more pronounced. She had jet-black hair that she wore to her shoulders—Rohn wore his dark hair to his waist.

"Hey! Look at this. A hair donut," said Rohn now. He lifted his shirt to expose his hairy stomach and squished the flesh around his belly button so that the belly button looked like the hole of a donut.

"Oh, now stop that!" said Auntie.

I laughed as he continued. I could see he was on a roll. "Do Igor!" I said. He leaned over, dragging his foot along the edge of the highway as a glob of saliva fell from his mouth. I was eighteen, another generation from my aunt. Girls of my

generation were hard to make sick. I dragged my foot along behind me and let drool fall onto my blouse. Auntie was the only person we acted this way around. It drove her mad.

"I can't look," she said, turning away. She immediately turned back with an annoyed expression. But Rohn grabbed and hugged her, and she smiled reluctantly, wiping saliva from his face with a lace handkerchief. I limped down the road a bit and sat with my legs hanging through a railing. Auntie and Rohn ignored me a lot, treating me at times with a sort of distracted warmth. But I knew that Rohn and I had her wrapped around our fingers. She was kind, a sucker, really. Annie had taken care of me since my parents died of lung cancer in the same year, when I was thirteen. They'd probably both been exposed to a chemical or something awful that caused their sickness. But I was lucky. A lot of kids these days were on their own by the time they turned sixteen or seventeen. I'd always made myself useful, riding my bicycle to help Annie and Rohn out in their delivery business. I still rode the same bicycle as when I started working for them as a child.

As a child, I'd had vivid dreams, and still did, sometimes. When I was younger, I'd heard things and seen things and felt quite haunted. I heard FBI agents knocking at our door and heard music in my ears, and I saw heads floating in the air. I saw not only my parents but also my Uncle Robin die even before they got sick, and at school I always knew who'd picked me when we played Seven-Up. Some of the other kids were the same way. Later, I read in *Popular Psychology* that such children weren't psychic, they just noticed without realizing it infinitesimal changes in people's expressions, voices, or carriages. It was a survival skill they'd developed. Sometimes I was hopelessly ignorant, but other times I *knew* things. For instance, I knew when Annie and Rohn looked at each other with eyes full of devotion and swore they would always be together that this

was not true. I don't know how I knew. Certainly they seemed to be in love. Maybe something outside would separate them. I wasn't sure.

"Okay, enough time wasted!" shouted Rohn. We walked down the road and back toward the highway where we'd parked our car. We were on the way to make a delivery of cigarettes, food, black-market Japanese electronics, and clothes out in the desert. Not many people lived in the desert—water was so hard to get—but there were a few. They loved it, I guess, the loneliness and everything. I always came along for long rides when I could, to relieve my boredom. All my deliveries followed the same route—downtown Los Angeles to richtown. Richtown was what everybody who didn't live there called the Beverly Hills and Brentwood area. Every city had a richtown. Six days a week, I rode up and down Wilshire Boulevard, carrying mostly letters and small packages.

When we reached our truck alongside the highway, two highway patrolmen were shining flashlights into the glove compartment.

"Where've you been? Got a problem?" said one of them. "Was that you guys up there?"

"We were just curious," said my aunt.

They shined bright lights on us and didn't say or do anything. I squinted. Rohn reached for his wallet. I knew it pained him to have to give them anything. But we did have the black-market electronics in back. He handed each of them a ten-gallon gas cred, and they took the creds as nonchalantly as Rohn had pretended to be as he handed them over. The men hopped on their bikes and were gone. I'd been on a bike as fast as theirs once and felt as if the air around me was trying to pull the skin off my face.

The truck was open and a gun missing from the glove compartment, but all the boxes seemed to be there. It was our best

gun, but we had another, older one. Auntie Annie didn't want me to own a gun till next year, but I always carried a disposable Mace gun.

The hills sloping up from the highway were littered, and—except for the fake plants mixed in with the real—dry and pale. I was always scheming for and lusting after water creds for the plants I kept at home. Every time I saw the parched grasses of the city or countryside, I thought of my plants. I kept a lot of aglaonema, because I'd read they cleared the air even better than most plants. I didn't want to die the way my parents had.

The truck shook every time a car passed. Rohn pushed in our card and we took off. He turned to Auntie. "We gotta see a movie one of these days. We haven't seen a movie in a long time." She raised her arm and indicated the road and he turned to watch where he was steering. Then he turned all the way around and looked at me. "Want to see a movie with us?"

"Rohn!" I yelled, pointing to the road. He turned forward. Rohn always needed to look at who he was talking to, even when he was driving. All of his friends had stories about how they were driving with him once and he almost ran into something because he was looking at them as he talked. The climax of these stories was when the friend took on an expression of mock terror and yelled out, "Rooohn!"

"Watch the road, Rohnny," I said.

He turned all the way around again. "What? I didn't catch that." He laughed and turned back.

The farther you got from the city, the more blank white or outdated billboards you saw. So few people lived in the desert it didn't make much sense to advertise out there. We passed a board for Everest cigarettes, but Everest cigarettes didn't even exist anymore. That's what I loved about the desert. It was on a different schedule than we in the city were on. Sometimes as we drove down the interstate, I tried to imagine that it really

was years earlier. They were just starting the Sunshine System, and my parents hadn't been born yet.

As usual, Annie and Rohn were ignoring me as we drove. When I was younger I used to lean out and expose my breasts to truck drivers, so they would honk at us and surprise my aunt and Rohn.

There was something thrilling about the desert, something violent. The desert's rare but violent rainstorms, and especially the ferocious daytime heat, made me feel thrillingly vulnerable. That's what I thought about on that safe, peaceful evening as we drove through the Mojave.

Because we made deliveries at no cost to a motel owner, we always got a room free. The town was nearly empty—a pharmacist/herbalist/chicken farmer; a grocer/palm reader/mechanic; a motel owner/cook/cowboy/mayor; and maybe a hundred others.

When we got to our room, nothing happened when we switched on the lights. There were brownouts all the time no matter where you lived, so we just unpacked in the darkness and sat on the beds to talk.

"I don't know about that left tire," said Rohn quietly. "I don't know how much longer it'll last." The treads were worn unevenly—something wrong with the struts.

I stood at the open window, saw trucks moving down a highway beyond a long field. It was surreally quiet out. All I could hear was the sound of an endless line of trucks on the highway. Or maybe that low, low rumble was just the wind over the fields.

"There's always my savings," said Annie. She kept half her savings with her, and the other half stashed in secret places. A light began to blink in the room. It was the clock blinking off and on to alert us that we should reset it and the brownout was over. "We'll get new struts tomorrow."

Everything was too serious. It seemed like a good time to go snort-wild. I mumbled, "Honk, honk," and snorted softly. Auntie gave me a now-don't-you-start look. I raised my eyebrows at Rohn and he mumbled, "Honk, honk." I started yelling, "Honk," and snorting until my nostrils were killing me.

"You are an animal!" Rohn shouted gleefully. "An animal!" He began to sing his favorite song. He was way off key but Annie loved his singing and hopped up to dance with him. Despite their light feet, the floor shook. I left them alone for a while, as I did every night when we were away from home like this.

There was a light on in the pharmacy so I went down to buy an herb drink. The guy who owned the pharmacy used to live in richtown but had come here to retire after he'd lost much of his money. Hardly anybody was as rich as they'd once been, and if they were, they probably wouldn't be for long. Today a lot of things you needed for everyday life could be made by people you knew. If you bought from them, you could avoid the twelve and a half percent sales tax. For instance, I never bought packaged shampoo anymore. I bought shampoo from a lady down the street from our home in Hollywood. Every time I had none left, I just brought her my empty bottle and she filled it up.

Nobody was in the herb store, but I let myself in. All the herb jars had prices on them. I set some money down, got a cup, and drank gotu kola until my head spun; and then I went back out.

In the field, under the stars faded by pollution even this far from the city, I felt trust. I trusted the desert. It didn't lie to you. The shapes of the cholla cacti and Joshua trees were clear and harsh against the sky. I sat on a rock. A lot of people over the years had sat on the rocks out there. In the dirt lay cans so rusted you couldn't tell what they'd once held, and shards of glistening glass with edges as smooth as Rohn's voice when he



was conning someone. I watched the endless trail of trucks, an enormous lighted power plant towering beyond them in the town across the highway and field.

"Tie up my hands!"

I jumped up and pulled out my Mace gun, but it was only Max the Magician. He was a beggar who lived out there and performed marvelous magic tricks for money. My aunt didn't like him, but I thought he was harmless. Max threw a rope at me and held out his hands. I tied him up as best I could. Since I'd never been in the Child Corps or anything, I didn't know much about knots, but I still think I tied him firmly. He spun around once and when he spun back toward me his hands were untied.

"You can do better than that," he said. His light eyes were always sly and wary. I tied him up again. This time he stayed turned around for a fraction of a second before he spun back. "That was better." He pulled a paper daisy from behind my head and waited expectantly after he'd placed it in my lap.

Having just paid for the gotu kola, all I had left were a few coins and some water credits. There'd been rationing for as long as I could remember. The government sent you gas and drinking-water creds every month and debited your bank account for them. I handed him the coins and he thanked me heartily. He sat on another rock and we listened to the sound of trucks rumbling.

"Where do you think they're always going?" I said.

He looked at me slyly, but it might have meant anything. Those trucks scared me. I felt as if everything in the world was falling apart and yet the trucks kept driving. Every time we came out to the desert, there they were.

"I noticed you had some water creds in there."

I thought I'd hidden them from him. I felt the weight of my Mace in my pocket. I clutched the Mace and shrugged to Max.

“Would you like some water?” he said.

“What do you mean? Do you have any?”

“I might.” He pulled a deck of cards out and held it toward me. I chose one. “Jack of clubs,” he said.

I stuck the card back in the deck. “You know you’re right.”

“Is your family on the market for some water?”

“Everybody’s on the market.” I wondered what lay behind his sly eyes.

“Not everybody can afford it.”

“I’ll ask them,” I said casually. “We might have some money.”

“Maybe I’ll talk to them tomorrow.” His hands were folded primly in his lap, and I stared at one of them. The moonlight and light from the power plant caught a small black bump under his skin. He saw me looking and smiled sadly, then leaned over and bit the bump. “Ptooeey,” he said, dramatically, and spit something into his hand. The bump was bleeding now and he was holding a shiny black object. It looked like a pearl, lovely, black, shining. This was not one of his magic tricks. It was some sort of skin disease. Both my parents had had it. Those little pearls—so pretty, so grotesque. Max was staring at the ground, seeming almost ashamed.

I still didn’t know whether that was the sound of the wind or of the trucks. The wind blew against my ears. It was strange to see shame in a face that usually showed little emotion. I started to tell him about my parents, but he jumped up and commanded me to close my eyes. I obeyed, knowing that when I opened them he would be gone. A scratch. A rustle. Another scratch. I opened my eyes to an empty field. Behind me, the light was still off at the motel. I stretched out my legs in front of me and admired the muscles from all the riding I did. Ever since mail delivery had been privatized, business had been thriving. Some deliverers were on God’s time—an hour to them

was a month to everybody else. The summer my parents first got sick, I'd been working in Chicago in an umbrella factory and living with a friend's family. I'd sent my parents a package, a beautiful stained-glass mobile an older friend of mine had made. I thought Mom and Dad could hang it up in their hospital room. I was back out in California when they died, and the mobile still hadn't arrived. A year later, the delivery service returned it to me, saying the addressee had moved and left my home as a forwarding address.

White clouds like ribs hung in the sky near the moon. I jumped at a noise, but it was just two lizards scampering over the dirt. I liked lizards. I thought they had tender hearts. I used to own two lizards for pets and one of them, the smaller one, always slept on top of the larger, even though there was a lot of space and he could have slept anywhere. I looked back toward the motel. The lights were still off. Maybe there was another brownout, though usually they occurred in the afternoon or early evening. Maybe Auntie and Rohn were in there having great gushy sex. He adored her as much as she adored him, but what he adored wasn't her so much as the way that she adored him. Well, maybe he also adored her skin. She made everybody touch it at least once. She had the softest skin in the world. It was her glory.

Auntie Annie and my father had been close, at least as close as people got these days. Besides Auntie, I had not got truly close to anyone, even Rohn. There was no percentage in it. For all I knew, everyone I knew was dying. When my parents had died, Annie wanted to bury them in one of those expensive cemeteries like where Uncle Robin was. The grounds were always well guarded, but I didn't like the thought of my parents lying there while security guards with rifles marched around. I wanted my parents to be at peace. So we'd cremated them and had them buried in vases in a cremation burial ground. Even that had

been robbed, the vases stolen. I thought the earth where dead people lay was different from other earth in some spiritual and not at all imaginary way, and I couldn't believe that graves were dug up as frequently as they were.

I always carried a pouch containing a couple of rocks from a rock garden my parents had made for me once. Now I reached into my pocket—the one opposite my gun—and took out my rocks. In my mind, Mom was the round one, and Dad, the triangular one. When I was feeling severely troubled, I took out my parents and talked to them as if they were still alive, but for now I put them back in their pouch.

"Hey, Francie!" Rohn was bellowing. "Fancy-Francie!" I jumped up and turned around. "We're going to feast."

I ran as fast as I could back toward the motel, realizing as I ran how hungry I was. When I caught up with Rohn and Auntie, we walked quickly toward the diner.

"I was talking to Max, and he said he might have some water we can buy."

"Guaranteed clean?" said my aunt.

"I guess so. He didn't say. . . . I have forty water creds but I don't have any money with me."

"I told you not to talk to Max," my aunt said, as if suddenly remembering she didn't like him.

"He's okay. I feel bad for him. He has derma-what-do-you-call-it. I saw the thing in his hand."

Annie raised her own hand and looked at it. I recoiled, but her skin was clear. The disease wasn't fatal or really even harmful, but there was something profoundly disturbing about it.

"I'll talk to him tomorrow," Rohn said.

The café was empty now, except for the cook and a couple of his kids. He had a daughter around my age, but she was a chirp. Everything was fine and wonderful and terrific with her. There was a riot every day in one city or another, but everything

was fine. When I went to school a few years earlier, we used to play practical jokes on the chirps. It was mean-spirited of us, but I thought they were mean in their own way too.

Annie had her arm around Rohn and she was leaning into him on their side of our booth. She looked as happy as she always did when he was around.

When the cook came to our table, Rohn asked about Max's water.

The cook lowered his voice. "He's really got some, I heard. I don't know where he got it."

"Did you buy any?" I said.

"No, I wouldn't touch his water. That guy makes me nervous. You never know if he's behind you or where. You can't be too careful."

Just about everybody broke laws all the time—the Consumption Law, the black-market laws, the licensing laws. There was probably nobody in the entire country, except a few chirps, who couldn't be arrested for *something*. Occasionally, the police arrested a randomly chosen person, and if you went searching for him or her, they might arrest you, too.

We ate like pigs, gorging ourselves on tacos. There was nothing fresh in our dinners at all. Everything canned or synthetic. I can't honestly say the bad food dampened our appetites. We scorched the table in a celebration of bad food.

Later, back in my room, I couldn't sleep, and then when I did sleep I had vivid dreams about all of us. I also dreamed my rocks had escaped, so when I woke in the middle of the night I took them into the bathroom to talk to them. Outside, I could hear the sound of trucks, or wind, and when I peeked out I saw the line of trucks, moving at a steady speed.

The bathroom floor was the nicest thing about our room. The floor was high-grade foamite, very soft and warm. I took out my parents and asked them if they still loved each other. I made

them have satisfying rock sex together, and then I put them away and went back to bed.

Max came over early, even before Rohn had a chance to deliver any packages, and we went to look at the water. Max kept the water in a ghost ghost-town. About fifty years in the past, the town had been a tourist attraction, but these days, many tourist attractions had gone under. The ghost ghost-town was just a few wooden buildings with a main street. Inside a shack called Town Hall, Max poured us a couple of ounces each of water. It tasted sweet and pure.

"How much do you have?" I said, feeling desire rising in me.

"Enough for all your needs."

"What are you charging?" said my aunt.

"Five dollars cash and five gas creds for each gallon."

"That's ridiculous." She sneezed daintily. She did everything daintily despite her size. But she was a good bargainer. "Two dollars cash and two gas credits for each one."

"Four and two."

"One and three."

"Three and two."

"Sold." She started to count out her savings.

"Aw, wait," said Rohn. "I'll pay half. Francie needs the water."

"Don't you want to see the water first?" said Max, looking at Rohn.

"All right, let's go." Annie handed Rohn her money and the two men walked away.

"You guys wait in the truck," said Max as they were leaving.

Back in the truck, I stared out at the desert. It seemed at once monotonous and full of nuance. I could think that I was seeing nothing at all but dirt, and suddenly the "dirt" would

move as an animal changed position. After about fifteen minutes, Auntie and I looked at each other at the same time, saying nothing. "I'll go find him," I finally said.

The building we'd been in was empty, except for a bottle of water. I picked it up and put on the cap and went to search for Rohn and Max. But they were nowhere. I searched in each of the small buildings, then returned to the first. On a table, right in the middle, lay our money. I didn't know whether I hadn't noticed it before, or whether someone had put it there within the past few minutes. But I knew what it meant. It was a warning, to tell me that Rohn had been arrested, not robbed. I put the money in my pocket, and, clutching the water, hurried back to the truck.

"Hurry, we have to go," I said. "He's been arrested." I stuffed the money in her pocketbook. "Maybe they'll come for us." I stunned even myself by how cold-hearted I was, by how my only thought now was of Annie and me. But it wouldn't do any good for all three of us to get arrested. "Be calm," I said, even though Annie was perfectly calm.

She drove grimly back to the motel. We hurried to our room, as if that would protect us somehow. After a few minutes, Annie said, "I have to get you out of here," though I'd just been thinking I had to get *her* out. There was much that Rohn—and all of us—could have been arrested for. But I suppose that whoever had arrested Rohn had figured he was the head of the delivery business. In fact, Auntie was half owner.

It seemed to me that the trip back to Los Angeles was unnaturally short, not unnaturally long as I would have expected. When we reached our home, I felt dazed. In the distance a couple of different sirens were going off. I could hear a mechanical voice: "You are trespassing on private property. The police will arrive soon." Another mechanical voice spoke in a

loud monotone: “Help me. Help me.” Someone must have walked by still another alarm, because I heard a mechanical burp as the person passed but didn’t stop.

I lay in bed with my eyes opened, and when morning came, I went about my routine. I was nothing if not adaptable. That was me, Queen of the Adapts. I felt that morning as if many people and things—from my parents to Rohn to the constant noise of alarms and traffic—were like that music I used to hear, but I wanted to forget it, wanted it to go away, at least for a little while. I watered a couple of plants, some giant birds of paradise, and a canna lily with huge red flowers. I always inserted polymers into the soil to make the dirt retain more water. I knew just how much water to give my plants. Plants and I had an understanding. I loved them and they needed me. I like how I could exert control over whether they lived or died.

When I’d gone back inside, something thumped on our glass back door, and when I looked up, a cat I’d fed once was throwing itself against the glass. It was weird, the way that skinny thing kept hitting the door. When I let him in, he rubbed against my leg. I poured him some water and he drank a full cup, more water than I’d ever seen a cat drink at once, and he ate a small can of mixed fish. I always bought myself mixed fish now; tuna had become too expensive. Afterward, I reached down to pet him but he hissed and ran outside. I went to sit on the back porch and watched the cat watching me. The porch was painted dusty red. Rohn and I had painted it together. The light from the yellow-tinged sky shone on my smooth skin, and I noticed a bump on my forearm. I took a safety pin from off my bra and pricked my skin, watched the small black pearl fall to the ground and settle in the dirt. The sight of that made me feel tired, too tired to reach down to pick up the pearl or examine my skin further. The disease was harmless, like acne, but I felt so tired