

Visitations 1

Dancing Queen

Cyndi: The party was supposed to be this epic blowout. Marie called me to tell me about it three days before, saying we *had* to go. She said it was because it would give her a leg up with the kids at the fancy college she was going to in the fall. But I knew it was because she thought Roger Townsend was going to be there. She had drug me to what felt like a dozen parties already, hoping for a glimpse or a taste of Roger Townsend. I told her, “Marie,” I said, “if he won’t look at you at school why is he gonna look at you at some party where there’s a bunch of college girls?” But she was obsessed.

So I told her it sounded fun, though it didn’t, but that I didn’t feel comfortable going to a college party in some part of town I didn’t know. Actually, what I said was, “Marie, how do you know we’re not going to get murdered and thrown in a dumpster somewhere?”

I swear I could hear Marie roll her eyes over the phone. “Jesus, Cyndi, why do always have to be such a dork? Nancy said it was cool. You should be stoked to go to a party like this!”

Sometimes Marie talks like she’s in a disco movie.

“Is Nancy gonna be there? Why would she tell you about this party?” I asked. I knew that Nancy Givens hated Marie like the plague ever since Marie had tried to kiss Nancy’s crush at the homecoming dance. The whole thing sounded phony to me.

Marie did another invisible eye roll. “Nancy and I are cool. And who cares about Nancy Givens anyway? A whole lot of college boys are gonna be there, and plenty to drink and plenty to smoke, so take a chill pill and say you’ll go with me.”

So I told her I’d go, like we both knew I would. Marie said she’d meet me at a certain bus

stop and then it was like a three block walk. She had the address from Nancy, who had it from her brother's roommate at the college.

So I did it. I told my mom I was staying at Marie's, and she told her mom she was staying at my place, and I left the house. I was wearing flared jeans and a white shirt with a black vest, platform sandals and my biggest hoops. Cobalt eye-shadow. I don't mind saying I looked hot. I'm not a stone cold fox like Marie, but I know how to look good.

I got on the bus a block from my place and made it to the stop Marie had told me by eight o'clock. Marie was already there, dressed like Stevie Nicks in a swirl of shawls and feathered earrings. She had a new Farrah Fawcett hairdo that I could never pull off. She grinned when she saw me and grabbed my hand, pulling me into the sunset streets toward the party.

The streets in this neighborhood were a grid, which should have made it easier, but every corner looked like the last one. The house was supposedly on Dupin Street but we couldn't find Dupin Street, and all the cross streets had names we couldn't pronounce, or I couldn't quite see them, or something. Every time I tried to read one, I couldn't remember it right afterwards. Maybe I need glasses? But then I'd be even more of a dork. It took less than five minutes before I knew we were lost.

The sun had been setting when I got off the bus—everything was glowing orange and gold—but after half an hour of wandering the streets like a couple of spazzes darkness had fallen. There were pools of amber light under the streetlights, but between those it was pitch dark. Even worse, a fog had rolled in off the river, and that made it even harder to read the signs. I felt like we were drifting on clouds, further and further from any place that I recognized. I'll tell you, I was starting to get scared.

But not Marie. She was having a great time, dancing along the sidewalks, telling jokes

and talking about music, like we were in the halls at school and not lost in the fog in a strange part of town.

When I suggested that maybe we should give it up and just try to find the bus stop again, she called me a baby and said maybe she should have left me at home.

“Don’t say that, Marie. I’m happy to go with you. I just think we’re lost. And it’s no fun if we miss the party completely, right?”

“We’re not lost,” she said. “It’s right around here somewhere.” But for the first time I could tell she wasn’t so certain.

“Do you have a phone number?” I asked. “Maybe we could find a pay phone?” But to tell the truth that didn’t seem very likely. The part of town we were in was pretty residential. The streets were empty, and even the houses, I noticed now, were dark. For a long time now, the only sound had been our heels clicking on the sidewalk. It was like we were the only people there.

“I don’t have a phone number, I only have the address,” she said. “1842 Dupin Avenue.”

We were standing on a corner, like every other corner we had seen. I peered up at the street signs. We were on Roget, but I couldn’t read the cross street. When I looked at it, the letters swam and quivered. It made me queasy, and I looked quickly away.

“I don’t even think there is a Dupin Street,” I muttered.

“What was that, Cyn?” I had started to walk away, but Marie pulled me up short and spun me to face her. “What did you say?”

“I *said*. I don’t think there even *is* a Dupin Street. I think maybe somebody duped you. I think maybe Nancy sent us walking around this nothing-ass neighborhood for a laugh.”

Marie looked like her head was gonna explode. She stepped up to me and raised her hand, like, I don’t know, like she was gonna slap me.

But right then, two people burst out of the fog behind us. I don't know how we didn't hear them coming, but suddenly they were there on the corner with us. A girl and a guy, both dressed crazy, like really freaky. The guy was wearing like full body tights, black and white checkered, with a huge Bela Lugosi collar rising up behind his head. He was wearing a mask, like a Lone Ranger mask but covered with sequins and feathers. He was carrying a silver-headed cane in one hand and had his other arm around the girl.

The girl was an explosion of scarves and feathers, a rainbow of colors. Underneath the cloud of fabric it looked like she was naked, but she must have been wearing some kind of bodysuit as well. Twinkles of light covered her body, like her skin was jeweled. She was also masked, but hers was cat-eyed and stretched out past the sides of her face, dripping with iridescent streamers and sprays of sequins. Both she and the guy had bright circles of rouge on their cheeks and bright red lipstick smeared across their mouths.

They were laughing and sort of floating along, and passed by almost without acknowledging us. But right as they turned onto the cross street, the girl looked over her shoulder at us.

“Are you coming to the party?” she said, and giggled.

At the same time, the guy smiled, and it was not a good smile at all. It looked like a wolf or something. Something hungry. I actually took a step back from it.

And then they disappeared into the fog.

“See?” said Marie.

“What the hell was that, Marie? Did you *see* that guy?”

“You mean his tights? I know, right? You could tell what religion he was.”

“No, I mean...” I started, but she interrupted me.

“Jesus, Cyn. Quit being such a wet blanket and let’s go!” And she followed after them into the fog. I had no choice but to follow her.

The fog wasn’t as thick on the cross street, though I still couldn’t read the street signs. Several blocks up we could see a house all lit up, and we could hear the sounds of music and people laughing.

The weird couple was a little ways ahead of us, and more were joining them, joining us, coming from cross streets and through the yards of darkened houses. They were all masked and wearing carnival costumes, moving in pairs and threesomes, dancing toward the lighted house.

“Is this a costume party?” I asked. I had started the evening thinking I looked pretty snazzy, but I was starting to feel underdressed.

“Hell if I know,” said Marie. She was excited now, and I could tell she felt a little smug about being right after all. I wanted to say something snarky back to her, but then we were in front of the house.

It was a two-story house with a wide porch, set back and above the street on a little hill. It was separated from the houses on either side by a huge yard lined with garden beds full of flowers. Foxglove and roses, and I don’t know what. Light spilled from every window of the house. In the darkness of the night-time streets, it was a blazing beacon. Music thumped through the walls.

A little set of stone steps led up from the street into the yard, and a huge oak tree spread out between the street and the house, higher than the roof. As we topped the steps and moved onto the grass, I saw that there was an old swing hanging from a branch of the oak—one rope had frayed and snapped, and the wooden seat hung askew from the one that remained. I looked back at it as we passed—it seemed so sad, but then we were on the porch, swept up in the tide of

partygoers entering the house.

A tall girl in a lacy white dress was meeting everyone at the door. She was smiling and seemed to know everybody, and I was worried she'd turn us away, but she didn't. She smiled wider and said, "Oh I'm glad you came! Here, you'll need these," and she handed us two masks.

My mask was black leather with pointed edges, like Julie Newmar's Catwoman. It matched my vest perfectly. I slid it over my head and pulled my hair over the elastic strap. I immediately felt sexy and anonymous.

Marie's mask was a full face clear plastic mask with pink lips. It obscured her face and turned her into a horror movie serial killer. I liked it because I felt like my mask made me look mysterious and sophisticated, and Marie's made her look stupid.

We were in a big foyer with a sweeping staircase and two big ornate doors on either side. Ahead of us, beyond the stairs, was an open doorway into what looked like a kitchen. The carnival people were moving through the foyer and spreading into the ground floor rooms.

"Whose house is this?" I asked, but Marie had already headed off toward the doorway on our right. I ran after her—no way was I going to be left alone here.

[Music louder, the sound of a crackling fire]

Through the door was a big room with couches along the wall and pillows covering the floor. It wasn't cold out, but there was a roaring fire in the fireplace, and music was pulsing from somewhere, even though I couldn't see any speakers or a stereo. Something was written on the stones above the mantle, scrawled like graffiti, but like the street signs I couldn't make it out. Maybe I imagined it. The only light came from the fire, which cast flickering shadows across the figures in the room. Couples were making out on the couches, and there were five or six people on the floor, sort of entwined and moving. At least one girl had her top off, and I think one of the

guys wasn't wearing pants. I looked away, and I hoped no one could see me blushing.

[We faintly hear the moans of the other partygoers]

This was such a long way from the high school parties we usually went to, where all the girls stood awkwardly against the wall and pretended the coke was more spiked than it was. Maybe towards the end of the night you might make out with a guy from Algebra class. But this room—it was like a picture in a book I'd be afraid to check out of the library. I had felt sexy and mysterious for a minute, but now I just felt really young.

“Marie,” I whispered. “What kind of party is this?”

But Marie didn't answer me. She was looking across the room, where a door led deeper into the house. The guy who had passed us on the street was leaning against the doorframe. His checkered body suit, which had seemed silly outside, looked sinister in the firelight. The flames glinted off the head of his cane. He was looking at us and smiling that hungry smile. I didn't see the girl he had come with.

“I'll be back,” said Marie, and she crossed the room to him, stepping over the writhing bodies on the floor. I called out to her, but she ignored me. The harlequin dude held out his hand to her, and they disappeared through the door, leaving me alone.

[The sounds of the living room continue for a moment, then drop as Cyndi moves out of the room]

I didn't want to stand around watching a bunch of strangers get off by the fireplace, so I went back through the foyer to the other doorway, desperately hoping the whole thing wasn't some swinger sex party. I couldn't believe Marie had just left me there.

[Quieter music up]

The room across the hall was as different as I could want, but it was weird in its own

way. This room was like my grandmother's living room—overstuffed sofas and easy chairs. There were doilies on the end tables, even. Only two people were in this room, a guy who was asleep or passed out on one of the sofas, and a girl about my age on the other in a really cute flapper dress like she was from the 1920s or something.

I was so relieved no one was naked or moaning that I sat down next to the girl on the couch. There were pitchers and glasses on the coffee table, and the girl poured me a glass of something green and thick and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said. “Groovy outfit!”

She smiled. It was a little weird she hadn't said anything yet, but I liked her. She seemed calm and safe. This was totally a better room.

“I'm Cyndi,” I said, and stuck out my hand like a dork.

She took it in both of hers. She was wearing these really cool gloves that went up to her elbows, green like her dress. “I'm Lenore,” she said, and her voice was like chocolate.

“Some party, huh?” I said. She just sipped her drink, the same stuff as mine, looked like. It's hard when you're doing all the work in a conversation.

I took a sip from the glass. The drink was sharp and tasted a little like licorice. I liked it.

“Whose house is this?” I asked Lenore.

She thought this was a funny question, I guess, because she laughed a quiet little laugh. Her hair was cut short to frame her face, and there was a peacock feather fastened on the left side of her head, green to match her dress. Her eyes were rimmed with kohl, dark and heavy. She sipped more of her drink, and said “Tonight it's my house, I suppose.”

“Oh, is it like a rental?”

She laughed and shook her head. I felt really young again, like there was a joke everyone

but me was in on, and it pissed me off a little.

She said, “Where’s your friend?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She went off with some guy in a harlequin outfit.”

“Oh, that’s Tristan,” she said. “She’ll have a...unique time.”

I had no idea what that meant. I drank some more, and Lenore refilled my glass.

“So this is your party?” I was feeling a little light headed. The drink was strong and had some odd taste underneath. Undertaste? Anyway, Lenore was really pretty, and I wanted her to like me.

“The party sort of belongs to itself,” she said. “But I’m the hostess, if you like.”

The guy on the other sofa moaned and shifted a little.

“What’s up with him?” I asked.

Lenore glanced over at the guy and then back at me. “You go have fun,” she said. “Let me know if you need anything.”

I looked at the glass in my hand, which was full again. Lenore smiled and looked away. I got up and went back into the foyer, where six people were dancing in a circle to the music coming from the sex room. The floor looked like someone had spilled wine or something all over it, and the dancers were smearing it as they moved. It was thicker than wine. I watched the dance for a minute but I couldn’t understand it. They were all holding hands but also turning in ways that seemed like their arms shouldn’t be able to reach. I squeezed past them and went up the stairs.

There was a little man sitting on the steps halfway up, wearing a bowler hat and a dirty suit jacket. He grinned and wagged his long fingers at me. I pressed against the bannister to get past him and he giggled like a monkey, clutching at my ankle as I jumped away.

But it was much quieter at the top of the stairs, where there was a landing between two more doors. The back wall was covered by a tapestry with like little fairies on it. Some Lord of the Rings shit, I don't know. I was weirdly dizzy, and I stopped to lean against the railing to catch my breath. The dancers had wandered away from the foyer below me, leaving trails of red footprints winding crazily to various doors. There was a brief moment when no one was there but me—even the little man on the stairs was gone. I could hardly hear the music from the sex room. It was like the whole house was holding its breath.

The front door opened and I heard the woman who had handed us our masks say something to whoever was coming in. She sounded like, I don't know. Like she was relieved and afraid at the same time. I couldn't hear what she said.

And then she stepped back and held the door and a man came into the house. He was tall and thin, like so tall I first thought he might be on stilts, but that's silly. I could see his shoes on the floor, and his knees bent where they were supposed to. He was older than everybody else at the party, and dressed in an old fashioned black suit. He had a black bag in his hand, like an old-timey doctor.

He walked into the center of the foyer (smearing more of that thick red mess), and I suddenly got very cold. Goosebumps and foggy breath cold. I stepped back from the railing and dropped my empty glass. It shattered on the wooden floor, and the sound echoed across the room. The man in the black suit looked up, directly at me. He didn't have any eyes.

I screamed. I couldn't help it, even though I realized pretty quick it was a mask—a really realistic-looking plastic skull mask that fit right up under his hat. He kept looking up at me, and people came out of the doors on all sides, drawn by my scream. I ducked past two men dressed like goblins through the door on my left.

This room was lit in red and had these weird little couches lining the walls, like daybeds. In the center of the room was a huge hookah, bubbling with gray smoke. Long tubes like tentacles snaked out from it in all directions, and partygoers were lounging on the daybeds smoking them. A neon sign hung on the back wall, that's where the red light came from. It said "La Grippe."

I searched the partygoers, hoping to see Marie, or Nancy, or anybody who looked familiar. All I wanted was to find Marie and go. Surely she was done hooking up with Tristan by now. All the people on the daybeds were semi-conscious, hookah-hooked and useless. I headed for the door at the back of the room, leading deeper in, but somebody called my name.

"Cyndi?"

It was an old woman. She had a deck of cards in her hand, and looked like she belonged in an Agatha Christie book.

"Do I know you," I asked.

"You can't find your friend," she said. She had a British accent. "You should draw a card." She held the cards out to me, fanning them like a magician.

"Do you know where she is?" I said, but the woman just smiled and pushed the cards toward me. To humor her, I drew a card and turned it over.

It was the picture of a huge man with goat legs and a big shaggy horned head. A naked woman was tied to a table in front of him, and he held a long knife raised above his head. I stared at it in horror.

"What the hell is that?" I said.

The old woman shook her head and clicked her tongue. "Oh dear," she said. "That doesn't bode well, does it?"

I wanted to ask her what she meant. But then something happened. It must have been whatever drink Lenore had given me—I must have been drunker than I thought. Because as I stared at the card, the beast on it turned its head and looked at me. I screamed, again, and one of the people on the daybeds said “damn, chill.”

“That doesn’t bode well at all,” the woman said, her smile growing wider as she spoke. “Oh dear. Oh dear.” She walked away, still muttering “oh dear” and smiling over her shoulder.

I went into the next room. It was small, little bigger than a closet, really. Two people were against the wall opposite me, and they were...well they were being intimate. The girl had her back to me, but the man was clearly the Harlequin boy we had first seen on the street. Tristan. And the girl on her knees in front of him was Marie, her plastic mask pushed up on the back of her head.

“Marie,” I said, “we’ve got to go. Jesus, get up.”

But the woman who turned around, wiping her mouth, was not Marie. I don’t know why I had thought she was. She had long red hair and was dressed in motley like the man. She was much older than I had thought. She laughed at me.

Tristan said, “Marie is across the hall. But I doubt she’ll go with you. She’s with the doctor now.”

The woman turned back around, and I got out. I went back through the hookah room and crossed the landing (there were dancers in the foyer below me, and the red stuff was smeared everywhere, across the floor, up the walls). I opened the last door and went in. I still felt light-headed, but I was beginning to snap out of it. I had to find Marie, and then figure out how to get home.

But she wasn’t in the room. Five people sat at a table, playing cards. They all wore plastic

masks like babies' faces, and they all turned to look at me as I came in.

"I'm looking for my friend," I said. Probably too loud. "She's wearing a clear plastic mask. Her name's Marie. She's about this tall and has black hair."

They looked blankly at me, cards in their hands. There was a pile of white objects in the center of the table, like knucklebones, they were using as betting chips. The silence got awkward, so I said, "Okay, then do you know somebody called The Doctor?"

All but one of them turned back to the card game. The other one pointed to a curtained archway across the room from me. I went to it and pushed through the curtains. From behind me I heard a high, singsongy voice say "Good luck!"

The new room, the last room, was dark. The walls were draped in black silk, and the only light came from black candles that sat at various points around the edges of the room. There was no furniture except a high table.

Marie was on the table. She wasn't wearing anything except her mask. She wasn't tied down or anything, she just lay there like she was asleep.

But we weren't alone. The tall man in the black suit stood behind the table, still wearing the skull mask. He didn't acknowledge me. As I came in the room, he opened his black bag and pulled out a long knife, like the one the beast held on the old woman's card.

I said, "Marie!"

Marie stretched like she was waking up. "Cyn?" she said.

I felt people pushing into the room behind me. The music from the sex room pulsed under our feet. The man in the black suit raised the knife. When he brought it down, all the candles went out.