

Troubled Loca's final journey — rest in peace

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

promiscuously penetrate souls rather than bodies. I wasn't interested in pursuing a relationship with anybody. I had no long-term patience with weak women anymore. All I cared about was myself, and Loca, on a deep level, knew it.

Deep in conversation with Loca, I saw Randolph stalk out the door, upset. He felt left out and frustrated, so he pretended to get a breath of fresh air on one of the most dangerous street corners in San Francisco. I understood him precisely and felt empathy, having once been a victim of the virus of jealousy myself.

"I better not talk to you anymore," said Loca.

I agreed. When Randolph came back, I ordered another drink and caused myself to disappear. Perhaps Randolph could give this woman what she needed. They conversed, about what I don't know, since the goddamned turned-up juke boxes in bars keep information a secret whispered between confederates and prevent fights among disagreeing

tribes. I love music, but sometimes I hate it.

Then Randolph left, leaving Loca behind. I think they had their first fight that night. I bought Loca a drink.

"Are you with anybody?" she asked.

"I'm still married," I replied.

I'd been separated from my second wife for two years, no chance of us ever living together again, though we still loved each other. But loving a woman doesn't mean you can live with her. Love is a cat taking a bird as a mate so she can teach him how to fly while she eats him because he is growing feathers. Gratefully, I understood this now.

I was alone and married to myself, and nothing could come between me and me, not even a woman like Loca, who, if I was still 30 years old, would no doubt have mickey finned me between her legs while I dedicated myself to saving her life, a project that would have been as futile as attempting to prop up a half-dead cow.

HARD-WON HONESTY

But now I had only myself to prop up and was free to be honest with those I encountered in this sad world. I was free to inform Loca of the facts of life, in spite of special interests involving sex or domination.

"My wife and I had to separate because we were fated to go in separate directions. But we still love each other," I told her.

"Give me a hug, Eddy," she asked, holding out her arms.

I hugged her, depressed because I knew I couldn't save her. Inside her eyes I saw a place I didn't want to go because I'd been there before.

During our hug she whispered, "There's no love anymore, Eddy. There's no love."

She told me this as though sharing a secret with her child that Santa Claus didn't exist and that Christmas was canceled because Daddy died.

I sat back on my barstool, feeling I'd just escaped the arms of a woman desperate to mine my life from me. Her own mother lode had been panned out, otherwise she wouldn't be sitting at the end of the road in this bar. There were rocks in her eyes and impenetrable forests: to enter them was to die in the High Sierra alone with her. Her path was suicide.

But I like women and hate to see them kill themselves, so I tried a form of artificial spiritual respiration I learned from an old drunk Indian tantric worshiper of Shiva I'd studied with in the early '80s before his alcoholism and lechery got the best of him and he retired to an American ashram.

"Do you know how much power you have inside yourself?" I said. "You are Shakti, Mother of the Universe!" I hugged her, put my hand on the top of her head and said, "This is where God lives. You have all the power in yourself. Don't give it up to others unless you can help them. You are sacred. You are all you need."

Then I ordered myself another drink. Unless I wanted to leave, there was nothing else to do.

Loca looked dazed after I'd informed her of her true nature. Sadly, she'd been attempting, with the encouragement of addicts who needed her body and money, to tame and sabotage that sacred autonomous side of herself, and had surrendered to death long ago.

Too late to change now. She looked me in the eyes and said, "Good-bye."

Loca moved in briefly with Randolph but it didn't work out. They were opposites, both addicted in their own ways to alcohol and drugs. One was a bear who wanted the impossible — a simple domestic life — and his name was Randolph. The other, Loca, was a spider woman with eight-legged multiple personalities and depressions, running in all directions at once, spinning her wheels, going nowhere.

They did not live happily ever after. They fought. I received many phone calls from Randolph about this, but having nothing to do with it, I could do nothing about it.

I have never been able to stop a war.

One afternoon Randolph phoned me and asked me to meet him at a bar around the corner. He was having a fight with Loca. This was nothing new, only a state of nature, a war between the sexes that has metastasized from the myth of Adam and Eve into global war.

War brings people together as nothing else does, except love.

"I just woke up," I told Randolph.

"Get over here!" he said. "I'm at the Happy Daze." He was in pain. I could hear it in his strained voice.

WHAT'S A FRIEND FOR?

I got dressed and walked over to the bar. What else was I to do? Write a poem about a friend I wouldn't greet because I was too asleep or too tired to respond? That would be weak, and there is no mercy for weakness in the Tenderloin.

On the way to the bar, I passed dozens of minds on the corner of Market and Seventh that could have been geniuses if they had enough money and true love to pay for it. Most were involved in dope deals and death, disguised in dreams. I could do nothing to help them. We were equal. Whether whore, junkie, transvestite, wino, bartender or store owner, all of us were where no one wants to go, surviving inside The Land of the Dead.

In the bar, I saw that Randolph was fuming because Loca was sitting there and talking with another white guy, a handsome, dark-haired white guy. Randolph bought me a vodka cranberry, and I drank it fast to wake up. I was so depressed that only depressants could get me up, but I noticed that Randolph

was beyond medication.

Pretty soon I felt good. On one level, I'm a cold, dead silent man, a stranger even to himself. Chemically altered, I can listen to the problems of others without thinking about myself.

As Randolph glared at her, Loca got up and left the bar with the handsome white boy, who probably only gave her enough money to purchase a hit of crack or the opiate derivatives she loved to down with vodka and whiskey. There'd be no relationship for the white boy. No sex. Only sadness and defeat, and a resumption of his life.

Randolph went to the door of the bar and screamed at Loca as she staggered implacably down the street. There was murder in the air, and the patrons of the bar shrank into their drinks.

A few weeks later, Randolph forgot the incident and let Loca move in with him. But of all things possible in this world, living in harmony with another is one of the greatest challenges. To Randolph's credit, he bravely attempted the almost impossible, though it came to nothing but frustration and arguments that resolved nothing.

He finally accepted the fact that Loca had a complicated and ruined mind, and he made the sad, difficult decision to tell her to leave.

She had needs, but he couldn't afford them. If he let her stay, her life would take him down. He wanted to live, so he cut her loose. He loved beauty, but wasn't willing to pay for it with his life.

DREAMS CRUELLY DASHED

When Randolph found out the other day that Loca was dead of liver failure, his shock and sorrow were that of a soft human being, standing upright, wishing to penetrate the sky, but afraid of space and its infinite emptiness. He'd been bravely hot-rodding into this infinite Universe in search of beauty and love, but his journey ended in the death of a lover he loved but couldn't control.

"I really wanted a relationship with her," he told me. "Maybe it was only a dream, but I tried," he said, sounding as depressed as Loca had been all her life.

When you're depressed, you're a canary in mine shaft and a portent of the future. I quote from *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* by Andrew Solomon:

"Twenty years ago, about 1.5 percent of the population had depression that required treatment; now it's 5 percent; and as many as 10 percent of all Americans now living can expect to have a

major depressive episode during their life. About 50 percent experience some symptoms of depression. Clinical problems have increased; treatments have increased vastly more. Diagnosis is on the up, but that does not explain the scale of this problem. . . . Things are getting worse."

Meanwhile, Loca is beyond Earth, while Randolph and I still walk the planet.

It is easy to sit in a bar and drink and talk about sports until the day you die, forgotten, never to return to order another round. But I chose to come up from the underground to the top where I wasn't wanted in order to scrawl messages and omens on the sand that no one wants to read. I do it because it's my pleasure to remember those who are forgotten.

Being no one, I have nowhere to go but up. I watch the pigeons soar into the sky as Randolph and I stand on a shore kissed by a vast ocean, each of us lighting a torch to Loca. I light a cigarette. He prays to a hope that dies last. Randolph and I call to her, but I sense she knows better than to return to the surface with us.

Stay away, Loca.

Don't float to the top of the tank again.

Swim away.

Go to the other shore.

Rest in peace. ■



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