

Swim to Salvation

Jocelyn Corbett

Lornalee spoke of herself in the third person: "Lornalee is confused," she might say, or "that makes Lornalee angry." For years, her family teased her about it. But as Lornalee passed through adolescence and retained this idiosyncrasy, her family stopped mentioning it altogether. They looked at one other through a veil of eyelashes, but said nothing. Nobody knew why, but "I" was not in Lornalee's vocabulary.

When Lornalee began her freshman year at college, her mother went to work with the homeless children in Brazil. She'd seen their plight on "60 Minutes" and decided she had to help. She left it to her ex-husband to keep an eye on Lornalee.

But Lornalee's father was an actor and an ass, and he accepted a small role with a Dubuque repertory company with a dubious reputation, and left Lornalee in Los Angeles alone.

Not that Lornalee minded. She was busy at school, learning new things. She learned what to wear to class and who to hang out with in the quad. She learned how to get free birth control pills at Planned Parenthood by wearing her rattiest jeans and talking like an Okie. She learned how to drink and bow to shut one eye to keep the room from spinning her off her stool after one drink too many.

"I should have come down here years ago, her mother's first postcard began. There are 8 million children living the in the streets. I won't be able to help even a handful. I cry myself to sleep each night, when I can sleep. They're abused in ways I'd never imagined. They are used as dispensable go-betweens by drug dealers. They are murdered by policemen moonlighting in death squads, hired by merchants who don't want the children sleeping in front of their stores."

Lornalee flipped the postcard on the ground and flopped on her back across the mattress. Her head fell over one side of the bed, hair streaming below her. She took a long drag of her cigarette and exhaled slowly, aiming up towards the spider web in the corner of the room. The smoke insinuated itself through the individual strands and beyond, bouncing off the wall, back into the web.

Lornalee thought that Fay's father must have left by now. Fay, her roommate, hadn't had many belongings; it wouldn't take long to pack them up. Fay had been killed two days before in a coke deal gone bad. Lornalee tried to imagine strong hands at her own throat. Would the thumbs be in the front? Would you feel the insistent pressure of each finger individually or as one entity, a scarf of human flesh, wrapped tighter and tighter around your neck? Would your eyes meet your murderer's in a grotesque parody of longing lovers' gazes?

"There are so many young ones, 10 years old, 11 years old, prostitutes, using the money to support their families. We found one of my girls this morning, lying face up in the gutter with her throat slit. People stepped over her body to reach the curb."

By the time the second postcard arrived, Lornalee had been working for three months in the brothel set up in one of the larger tunnels under the campus. The head resident of her dorm had first shown her the tunnels, had in fact taken all the dorm

freshmen on the tunnel tour, complete with candles and a Black & Decker portable blender to hold the margaritas.

Lornalee didn't mind the work, although she wasn't particularly fond of sex. She made good money and had short hours. She met lots of interesting and well educated people, something that her mother once would have considered important for her.

"I try to teach them to use condoms. But they aren't concerned about AIDS. Ricardo says God protects him from AIDS. Ricardo is twelve. I think he doesn't really believe there is such a thing as AIDS. Of course, he also doesn't really believe there's such a thing as God."

When Lornalee's religious studies professor asked to sodomize her while she read aloud from The Scarlet Letter, she knew it was time to leave.

She closed out her savings account and bought a 1976 Mercury Capri to use as her getaway car. It was canary yellow, too bright for her taste really. But she saw the fluorescent decal of the Virgin de Guadalupe on the rear window and the chrome silhouettes of a naked woman on the back bumper, and took them as a sign that this car was meant for her.

She drove up Pacific Coast Highway. As she passed Pepperdine University, she saw a small billboard advertising new multi-million dollar homes. The development was called "Les Maisons de la Mer," the Sea Houses. Someone had added a "de" to the end of the name, changing it to "Les Maisons de la Merde," the Shit Houses. Lornalee thought it was inevitable that Malibu graffiti would be in French.

"Glue sniffing is epidemic here. Most of the children begin each day with it. It kills the appetite so they don't care that they have no food, and it sends their minds to another place, so they don't care about the degradations they must endure that day. Sometimes I wonder what I have to offer them as a substitute. We never have enough food for them; education has such a distant payoff. It's getting hard to see a positive outcome here."

Lornalee walked across the sand towards the ocean. Off to her left were three teenaged girls on the swings. They wore baggy clothes and bandanas and high-teased hair, and her first reaction was a mild fear that they might be in a gang. Then the blondgirl began singing: "Once I was a junkie, but Jesus set me free." The other girls shouted an impromptu chorus of Amens and Praise the Lords. Different kind of gang, Lornalee decided.

Lornalee spread her jacket across the sand and lay on her back. She felt the heat of the sun above her and of the sand below. Overhead she heard seagulls go by, shrieking to one another.

"I've lost three of my boys to train surfing. It's becoming more prevalent here. They stand on the top of trains and try to duck when they come to a bridge. Of course many don't duck in time. Why would they do anything so obviously dangerous? Why not, is the answer I'm given most frequently. "

Lornalee looked out at the ocean. She hadn't seen it like this since she was a child. It was a red tide, ugly now in daylight, the water a murky muddy mess. Tonight, though, it would be beautiful; the water would roll and break in phosphorescent turquoise waves.

She watched the surfers, like bipedal sea lions in their shiny black wetsuits,

clustered in pods, waiting for the right wave to carry them to shore.

Lomalee began humming the tune the blond girl had been singing, under her breath, absentmindedly. She pushed her toes and fingers into the hot sand, felt burning little grains dig under her nails. She decided to sit here until dark, until the sand cooled and the ocean was transformed into the shimmering glowing mass she remembered from her childhood. She would watch the luminous waves all night, and let their magic wash her clean.



Tom Moran