

Fiction

# ANGINA

*By Helen Walker Jones*

AFTER MAGNUM, P.I., MYRNA KAUFUSI WALKED upstairs to her bedroom. Originally designed as a maid's room, it wasn't much bigger than a walk-in closet. She pulled open her dresser drawer, found her old orange bikini, and laid it on her new quilt with its puffy, three-dimensional blocks. Watching that old T.V. show had stirred her memories of Polynesia: surf, palm trees, plumeria, and dark-skinned men with perfectly white teeth.

The old, two-piece suit definitely covered the subject, Myrna thought, staring. No one who knew how to Tivo their favorite sitcom would ever have described that bathing suit as a bikini. It was, after all, forty years out of fashion, with a heavily-padded top in which the foam rubber had hardened, plus substantial shorts riding high at the waist, and cuffed at the bottom to avoid showing even the slightest shadow of buttocks.

She had bought it at Penn's insistence all those years ago. He had told her, "You've got a nice body. You should show it off."

She thought of the way her ex looked now, with his graying hair coaxed back into a pompadour.

When Myrna had first met Penn, a cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth and his biceps bulged with the weight of gleaming barbells. He had been "lifting" on his front lawn in full view of the neighbors. Myrna, passing by on her way to pick up a dozen eggs and a gallon of milk from the shoebox-sized mini-mart down at the corner, had fallen in love with him on the spot, watching him grunt and grimace, his powerful arms trembling as he struggled to hold the bar elevated before resting it gently in its cradle. It was a bonus that they only lived a block from each other.

But that had been forty years ago. Now she doubted Penn could lift more than a small child. According to her visiting teachers, he had a hard time catching his breath in

the pulpit as he preached about the wrath of God. Maybe his lungs were disabled, from back in his smoking years.

Myrna slipped out of her clothes.

During last month's visiting teaching message, Sister Green, seated next to Myrna on the couch, had leaned close and confided, "Did you know that Bishop Penn Kaufusi was released last Sunday? They turned him out to pasture." Sister Green's tinkling laughter made Myrna queasy. "He needs someone to check on his health. And who better than an ex-wife to bring him a bowl of chicken soup or a loaf of oven-fresh wheat bread?" She nudged Myrna's elbow. "A nice young fellow with his wife and six kids moved into the old Parker house, and they called him as a replacement."

"Thanks for the update," Myrna said half-heartedly. She had heard rumors about Penn's release but had poo-pooed them. This was confirmation.

Myrna's fingers tingled and the veins in her hand stood up in blue ridges as she touched the orange fabric. She feared her ancient bathing suit would serve more as a fortification than an enticement.

Still she slipped into the bra. Then, Myrna hesitantly ran her fingers over the curves of her foam-covered breasts. She assured herself that she looked good for her age, weighing only six pounds more than she had in her twenties. Her breasts were still full and nicely-shaped because, as her sister had reminded her, "You've never had a teething brat dangling from your nipple." Myrna hadn't responded, but she wanted to blurt, "I would have traded my youthful shape in a heartbeat for the privilege of becoming a mother."

Adjusting the bra of the bathing suit at her armpits, Myrna pictured drops of beer distilled on Penn's sparse moustache. He had been sober for decades and had been bishop for the past several years. When Myrna had been a teenager, there were no divorced or single bishops, but apparently times had changed. The scuttlebutt in the ward was that, even with his scandalous past, Penn was the only high priest in their economically-depressed ward who wasn't too elderly to function in that capacity. According to Sister Green, that was also why the powers-that-be had



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made an exception and let a widowed man stay in the position after his wife's death ten months ago.

Myrna tugged the shorts of the bathing suit into place. During the refurbishing of her room, she had installed one of those electric fireplaces with the eternal flames and logs that never burnt themselves up. When turned on, the coals looked authentic, glowing with remote, yet comforting heat. But the fireplace was shut off now, so she glanced at her rear view in its pane of glass. Gravity had taken its toll in those four decades, and admittedly, the curves of her bottom were long gone, but at least she was still slim.

Trying not to think of the way her thighs jiggled a bit, she pulled a cotton housedress over the bikini, then zipped her leather coat over the whole ensemble.

When Myrna stepped back into the hall, her knee-length coat pulled snugly around her, she could hear a high-pitched buzzing from Mama's room. "Turn down your hearing aid," Myrna called as she opened the old woman's bedroom door. The mauve organdy curtains were blowing across her mother's chest, beading her flesh with raindrops. Myrna swept the curtains out of the way and slammed the window.

"I've had a bad day, Honey." When Mama stretched her bare arm toward Myrna, the skin hung down like a decrepit rudder and smelled of barnacles. "My toenails need cutting." Mama stretched her leg sideways from beneath the blanket, trembling with the effort. "Has your sweetheart been by today? The one who brings bon bons?"

Earlier that week, a candy company had delivered free samples of their soft-centered milk chocolates as an advertising gimmick. "We're out of bon bons," Myrna said nonchalantly, taking the manicure set from the bedside table and sitting on the mattress. Her mother rolled toward her without trying to. Myrna grasped her mother's purple-veined foot and concentrated on making straight-across cuts with the clippers. "Beth and Cleo called again." Myrna

kept quiet about the suggested nursing home.

"Don't let that young man hug and kiss you till you're engaged." Mama thumped her fingers on the back of a cardboard heart. "That will mean the end of the chocolates." She flapped her hands as though swatting flies.

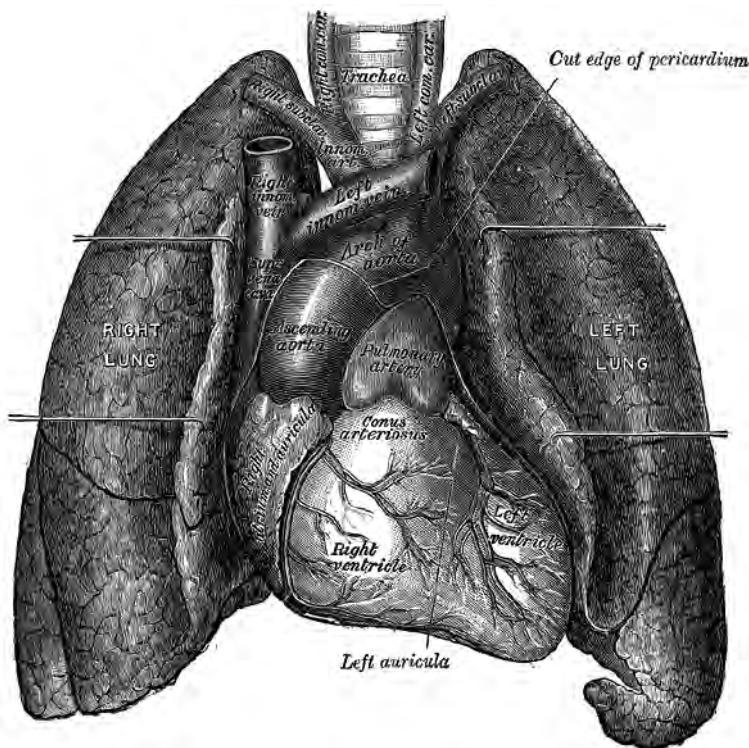
Sitting in the easy chair beside her mother's bed, Myrna reached into the pocket of her coat and touched her hand-knit mittens. They were folded into a clump, like Mama folded socks. Deep in the pocket beside them was a sheaf of letters from the mailbox on the porch. Myrna had forgotten to look at them earlier that day.

She slipped the rubber band off the bundle of mail and saw that her check was on top. Her Aunt Myrtle—the executrix of Papa's estate—sent what she called a "tidy sum" each month. Myrna had, in fact, been named for Aunt Myrtle but, by the second grade, she'd come to regard the name as dowdy and musty, like the smell of mothballs, so she'd started calling herself "Myrna" after Myrna Loy in those Nick & Nora movies.

Myrna set the mail at the foot of her mother's bed. The only other letter addressed to her in the batch was an invitation to a party at the church. "Live Music!" it said. "Special Luau to Follow! Authentic Polynesian

Food! Come and honor outgoing Bishop Penn Kaufusi." The exclamation points alone inspired Myrna to toss the invitation into the trash. It reminded her of the Sunday-dress church dances when she was a teenager, or—most embarrassing of all—when her parents (the stake dance directors) had hired a square-dance caller, offered do-si-do lessons, and made Myrna and her peers line up for the Virginia Reel. Her mother had worn yards and yards of net petticoats and a skirt that showed her thick knees.

As a teenager, Myrna had hated those dances until Penn Kaufusi moved into the ward. He rarely attended church but never missed a party. Even after they were engaged, she anticipated every dance, knowing he would be there. And



***"He needs someone to check on his health. And who better than an ex-wife to bring him a bowl of chicken soup or a loaf of oven-fresh wheat bread?" She nudged Myrna's elbow.***

one night, Myrna's mother had talked him into putting on a real Polynesian floor show.

After the opening prayer, the audience had been instructed to take a seat on the folding chairs lining the walls. The lights dimmed and, just as she'd anticipated, Penn entered, blazing torches illuminating the wide bones of his forehead and cheeks, the outline of his Afro like a back-lit halo. He was naked above the waist, the low throb of drums accompanying the sound of his bare feet stomping on the hardwood basketball court: It was the Fire Dance, accompanied by tongue-thrusting and blood-curdling screams, historically intended to ward off enemies. He twirled torches fearlessly—like a drum major in front of a marching band. He tossed them high in the air, capturing them as they fell, never missing a beat. Myrna thrilled every time she saw him do it. She actually felt a shiver in her pelvic area (a part of the anatomy Myrna absolutely refused to refer to by its Latin name).

Remembering the heat Penn had given off, and the way the crowd had cheered as he exited the Rec Hall, Myrna poured her mother some hot chocolate from the insulated pitcher on the nightstand. She even drank a cup herself, though she preferred coffee.

In those days, with so many Polynesians in their stake, the members had been accustomed to provocative native dancing, accompanied by ukuleles and bongos. Swivel-hipped women in grass skirts, strapless flower-print bras and orchid leis swaying between their breasts were a fixture in every roadshow, so Penn's half-naked performance hadn't raised eyebrows, but it certainly had elevated her blood pressure. She recalled the first time he had kissed her, when he warned, "Baby, you're playing with fire."

**M**YRNA CAREFULLY BRAIDED a single plait over the old woman's shoulder.

"Where are my babies?" Mama whimpered, "My little girls? I've got to find them." Most days, her mother thought Myrna was still seventeen, with plenty of boyfriends wearing flat-top haircuts and white buck shoes, but evidently today she had regressed even farther.

"I'm your baby girl," Myrna said, smoothing her hair, "and Beth and Cleo are grandmothers now. In fact, Cleo's going on Medicare soon. Jerry's selling his practice to a young doctor just out of his residency. I'll be fifty-nine next birthday." Then, under her breath she muttered, "Hardly the bikini-wearing teenager anymore."

But her mother heard, pressed her face into the pillow and shook her head until her hair stood up like a Mohawk. "Oh, that bathing suit," she said. "I wish you'd burn that darn thing. It's nothing but trouble. Flaunting your figure—so much bare skin. I won't have it. Beth and Cleo are always so modest. They only wear the once-piece kind, with the little skirts."

Myrna felt her cheeks flushing at the thought of the forbidden swimsuit beneath her coat.

She glanced at the calendar above Mama's nightstand; "October" it said, above a field of dead corn and pumpkins. She had lost two months somewhere. She flipped the sheets to December, where Santa held a Coca-Cola and said, "Zing! What a taste!" The exclamation marks made her wonder if a Mormon had written the advertising copy.

Suddenly, the phone on Mama's nightstand gave one short ring, and Myrna grabbed it before her mother could launch into some nonsensical tirade at the caller. It was Sister Green, doing her duty, checking on their welfare.

"Your sister Cleo called me," Sister Green said, proud of being in the Inner Circle. "She said big changes are coming. She's investigated Verdant Meadows and a few of those other assisted-living spots, huh? I'll bet you're relieved."

Myrna's mother waved both hands as though swatting flies and cried out, "Who is it, honey? Let me talk to them. I know it's for me."

Myrna ignored her. "Well, actually . . ." she started to say, but Sister Green interrupted her. "It will be so nice for your mom, and for you, dear. I'm so happy for you that it's happening right away."

Not only had Penn been released as bishop, but now her sisters were campaigning to put Mama into a home, fast. Myrna felt a rush of adrenalin. She had no options left.

She hung up the phone, fluffed her mother's pillows, turned the TV onto a *Matlock* re-run, and closed the door silently behind her, listening to her mother's thick snores.

**O**UTSIDE, IN THE cool, blank night, elongated shadows swaddled her on both sides as she walked down the driveway. She imagined evil men lurking in the brambles, waiting to grab her. Penn's house was just over a block away. She whistled "Catch the Sunshine" for courage and concentrated on the street light in front of his house. Though unseasonably warm for December, it was still chilly.

Although she now considered herself a Mormon in name only, she wondered why Penn hadn't at least dropped by a few times during his term as bishop to see if she or Mama needed anything. He and his second wife had been childless, too. And in the Polynesian culture, that was considered one of life's greatest tragedies, but it also meant he'd had plenty of time to care for his little flock of ward members.

Myrna felt certain Penn couldn't remember their honeymoon, their dingy apartment in his parents' basement, or even kissing her in a quiet corner of a State Street bar, the smell of beer reeking from him. Did he remember their married life at all, she wondered, having lived most of it in a boozy haze?

Lately—since his wife's death—Myrna had taken to spying on Penn. After sunset, she'd loiter on the sidewalk across from his house, wearing her shapeless raincoat with the collar turned up and a battered fedora from the hall closet. She called it her Columbo disguise, and she always carried an umbrella in case she needed to obscure her face

from view. She stuck close to the shrubbery and took cover when necessary.

Sometimes she had followed him at a discreet distance—either on foot or in Mama's old Buick. He had his hair cut at the six-dollar shop on the corner, bought copies of *Field and Stream* from the news vendor down on Main, and after supper he liked to sit out front on his concrete stairs, reading the newspaper. He apparently had traded in his mini-van for a mustard-colored pickup.

On each of her surveillance nights she wound up back across the street from his house. Blue and red triangular banners stretched from the roof of his house to the vine-covered tree on the boulevard. A sign, hung on wires from the eaves, said "Hair Removed" in letters burned into the wood. A plaque over the door read, "Boarders Welcome." She saw the men going in and out. The word on the street was that, following his second wife's death ten months earlier, Penn had turned his residence into a half-way house for recovering drunks. They said he ran meetings at least three times weekly, announcing "My name is Penn Kaufusi, and I'm an alcoholic."

Thinking of him alone in his shadowed bedroom, Myrna slid through the night like a ship through dark waters, with poor circulation to her feet, her hands cold and numb—but heated-up by her mental image of Penn, breathlessly admiring her still-trim body in the ancient bikini.

Tonight, wearing her bathing suit, she spotted him from fifty yards away, sitting on his front stairs, reading the paper by a dim light on the porch, a thermal blanket draped over his shoulders. She approached him and her voice turned wooden. "Good evening," she said, fingering her leather lapel.

"Hi there," he said. His voice held no trace of an accent except when he pronounced Polynesian names. Then it became rich and liquid.

Up on the porch, one of the boarders laughed and launched into rapid Spanish. Myrna shifted her weight to the other foot. "It's such a brisk evening, I couldn't stand being in that stuffy house."

"Yeah, it's kinda cold." He held a rolled-up sports page in his left hand. Myrna stared at his tan trousers, then down at his thongs. During their marriage, he'd worn them year-round and on all occasions, except in church. He called them "slippers," and the kids these days called them "flip-flops." They associated the word "thong" with those crazy panties that were nothing more than an eye patch attached to a T-shaped cord. Myrna didn't even like to think how those skimpy things must feel while you were wearing them. And now, just looking at his thonged feet made her shiver. The stiff fabric of her bikini bra chafed at her armpits.

"The days are so short now," she said. "I'm rather frightened of the dark." One of the guys on the porch had a lit cigarette between his lips, and she gazed at the swirling smoke as it drifted in her direction. "Do you think you could see me home, Penn?" She felt the color

rise in her cheeks.

"I could do that," he said, "for a member of my ward."

"For a former wife," Myrna reminded him, but there was no response except a casual intake of breath. She was stung by his indifference, yet she said nothing. Her only consolation was that she still had his name. It was a badge of honor, a sign that she had once been desirable enough to cause a man to sacrifice his independence, if only for a short time; and even though the marriage had ended in violence and shame, being called "Mrs. Kaufusi" certified to the whole world that she was *not* an old maid.

Penn stood and shuffled along beside her. It felt odd, yet sweet, walking next to him again, his scent reminding her of a bedroom with the door shut. In the days when she had folded his bright cotton clothing at the laundromat, she was always amazed that he never wore socks or underwear. The laundry was a breeze. The underwear part certainly had to have changed when he became a bona fide, church-going Mormon.

They walked under the banners, past the caragana hedge. When they reached her walkway, Myrna said, "Would you like to come in for pie and coffee—I mean, hot chocolate?" She touched his elbow with her fingertips.

"Sounds good." The second wife had been a notoriously bad cook—rare in that culture. She was skinny, too, and refused to even taste crispy pig skin after it was roasted in a pit.

**M**YRNA UNLOCKED THE door and went in ahead of him. In the white-walled kitchen with its ballerina-stenciled wallpaper borders, they ate apple pie with little wedges of cheddar cheese on top. Out of deference to him, she drank hot chocolate, too. He stared at the kitchen table but didn't seem bothered by anything, unaware that Myrna had meticulously ironed the linen cloth, scrubbed the floor and polished the brass door-knobs, in preparation for his visit. Feeling a bit self-conscious, Myrna kept her coat on, and even left it zipped as she sat across the table from Penn, sipping her drink.

Myrna regarded his graying hair, slick and well-oiled, with an off-center part. He glanced around the room nonchalantly. "Myrna," he said. "I never apologized to you for the way I acted when I was drinking. Striking a woman—it's just disgusting. I can't believe I hit you. I'm a changed man."

Myrna smiled and toyed with a tiny mole at the base of her throat. "I know you are," she said. "I forgive you."

Quickly, he changed the subject. "Did you hear I was released as bishop?"

"Sister Green told me. What will you do with your free time?"

"Oh, I have my hobbies—watching sports on television, doing genealogy. You know." They sat in awkward silence for a moment till Penn said, "I like these old houses."

"Me, too. We have a dumb waiter, remember? And a balcony. A wonderful balcony." Myrna glanced over his head at the girls toe-dancing across the wallpaper. "My room's

been re-done. It's really lovely. You should see it."

"I wouldn't want to disturb your mother," he said, crossing his legs at the knee and flapping one thong against the ball of his foot. She looked at the way the pigment faded to pink on the side of his big toe. "It must be terrible to be bedridden," he said.

Myrna pictured an elderly woman with a mattress on her back. "She's perfectly healthy, but she eats eggshells and fights me for her bedpan and cries for her baby girls."

"You poor kid," he said and Myrna flushed. "Sister Green tells me how hard you work, taking care of your mom. I should have checked on the old gal—I mean on Sister Nish—more often. And you never get a day off. Nobody to relieve you. I really neglected this family while I was bishop. I didn't want to embarrass you. Or myself. I was ashamed."

"You could see her now," Myrna suggested eagerly. "She may be going into a nursing home soon. I don't know. It's not my choice, apparently."

"But you're her caretaker."

"My opinion doesn't count," she said, then regretted the tone of self-pity. "Maybe it's for the best. Who knows?"

When they opened the door to the old woman's room, though, she was sound asleep, her wool cap awry, her television rumbling through the weather report, the remote control lying on her stomach.

Penn shut the door quietly. "Don't wake her," he insisted.

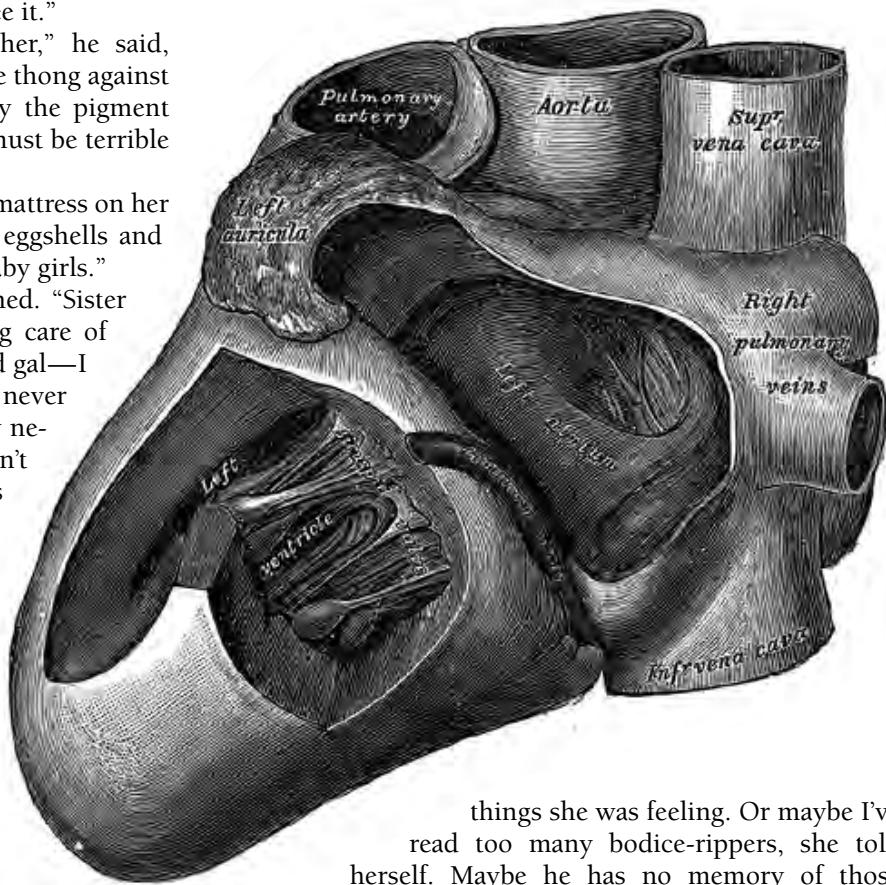
In the dark hallway, Myrna raised her hands to his shoulders, stood on tiptoes, and swiftly kissed him. Penn cleared his throat and wiped his lips with the back of his index finger, but the kiss had changed him somehow. His breathing was not just rapid but on the verge of panic. Yet Myrna was confident he would do whatever she asked him, so she touched his arm and felt a flash of static electricity from the rug.

"Oh my," Penn said. Myrna couldn't judge whether he was upset or simply excited. When he laughed nervously, she was positive he was warming up to the idea.

She slipped her fingers around his wrist and tried to steer him toward her room.

He resisted, hanging back, dragging his feet in the rubber slippers.

Turning to face him, she said, "What's the problem?" She looked for a tinge of fear in his eyes, but saw none. So it must be intense passion and physical desire—the same



## *Penn entered, blazing torches illuminating the wide bones of his forehead and cheeks, the outline of his Afro like a back-lit halo.*

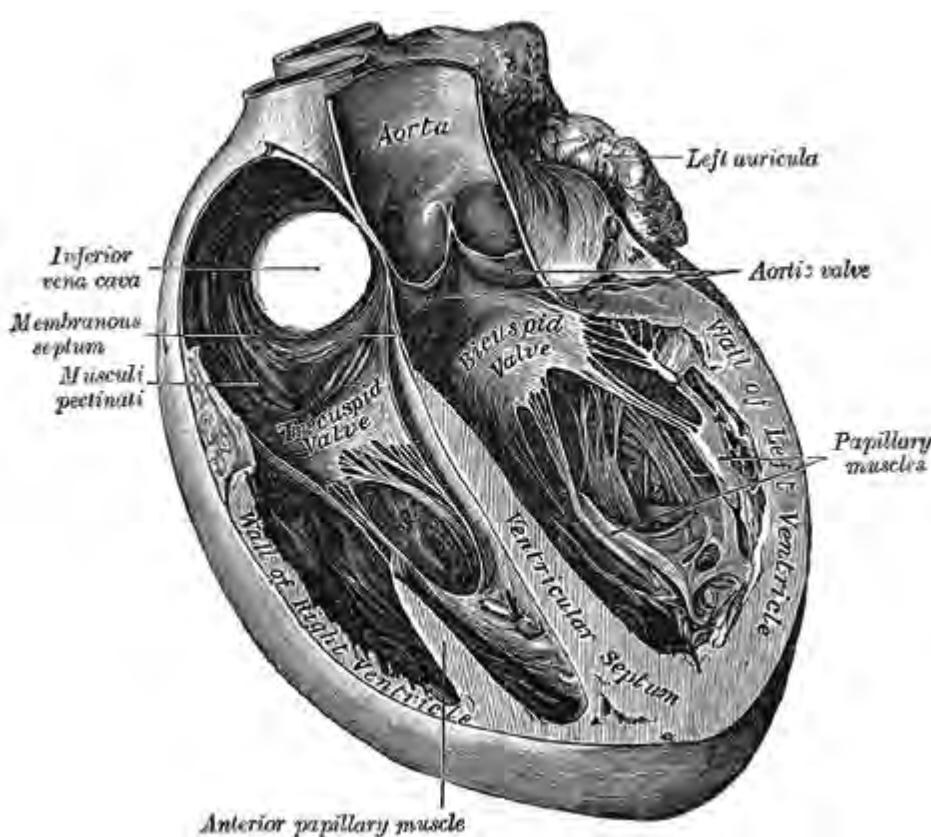
things she was feeling. Or maybe I've read too many bodice-rippers, she told herself. Maybe he has no memory of those flaming torches or the feel of his bare soles against the hardwood floor, or the way we made love in the front seat of his Fury, parked beside the road on the way home from the Valentine's party, with the engine still running, because we couldn't restrain ourselves until we were married.

"This thing with my chest happens a lot," he said, tapping near his breastbone. "Nothing to worry about."

Myrna caught her breath, encouraged by his answer. "I could call my brother," she offered. "He's a heart doctor." Penn shook his head, but his beefy hand enclosed hers now, and their thighs brushed together, accidentally, in the hallway. Her lips were inches from his still-powerful chest as she turned the doorknob of her bedroom. He was still exactly one foot taller than she was: 6'3" to her 5'3". The room swirled with memories of late-night kissing, touching, hurried fumbling, and blessed nakedness. She felt she was seeing her bedroom for the first time in decades—it was so different, like walking into their honeymoon hotel room and setting her suitcase on the bed and opening it and taking out her toothbrush and a nightie and her diaphragm.

Sweat had turned Penn's shirt collar dark. He breathed with his mouth open. Myrna wondered if she should grab a paper bag for him to blow into.

"Nice handwork," he said, dropping heavily onto the



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"For a former wife," Myrna reminded him**

quilt, his back against the headboard. "I like the hibiscus. And those pineapples on the bedposts—where'd you come up with that idea? Is this your island fantasy?"

Myrna cupped her hand around one of the pineapples, which fit into her palm like a tiny treasure. There was a long silence as she debated how to answer that question.

Finally Penn said, struggling to breathe, "You're a pretty woman, Myrna. You always were."

She knew it was a flat-out lie. Beth had been the beauty of the family, with Cleo as runner-up. And then there was Penn's gorgeous Polynesian wife—the raven-haired beauty to whom Myrna could never possibly compare. She looked like the temptress who caused Gauguin to abandon his wife and family.

"That's a song—"Pretty Woman,"" she said. "From back when we were kids. Roy Orbison, I think. Remember?" Penn just stared at her as though he had been bewitched.

"I have something to show you," she said, slipping her coat off. She draped it over a chair and began undoing the buttons on her housedress.

"That's not a good idea," he said, struggling to raise himself up from the bed. Then he dropped back against the pillow and heaved a sigh. "Myrna, please leave your

clothes on. You know this is wrong. And besides, I'm having some minor chest pains, in case you hadn't noticed. The last thing I need is more stimulation." But his protests didn't ring true; she knew he was staring at her body.

"You've been released as bishop," she said. "Don't forget that." He closed his eyes and attempted to speak but apparently thought better of it. The sweat from his collar had now spread to the front of his chest so that she could see the outline of his garments under his shirt.

She paused on the third button down. "Do you need the paramedics?" she asked.

"Nothing like that," he said. "I just need to rest a minute." Assured he was okay, Myrna stepped out of the dress in a fluid, slow motion that rivaled baseball game replays. He looked at her and laughed in that silent way he had, where his belly shook. "Your old orange bikini," he said with a broad grin. "No kidding."

Myrna stared at him. Did he think this was just a joke—that she was performing for him in that old roadshow fashion? Didn't he know how much this

was costing her? She fought to remain dignified, in case he rejected her. She remembered her mother's advice about maintaining composure: Pretend there's a book lying flat on your head and you must keep it balanced. Myrna held her back as straight as possible and stared intently at Penn's heaving chest.

"You never could laugh at yourself in the old days," he said hesitantly, "but then, who could blame you, when I was soured all the time, beating on you?" His voice softened. "You were a good kid, and a good wife to me. I was a rotten husband." He pressed his hand against the left side of his chest and held it there as if trying to stop the pounding of his heart.

Myrna could see he was fighting tears, as she was. He had always been emotional about family weddings and pets dying and friends moving away. She was glad life hadn't hardened him. "Come here," he said.

Myrna pressed one knee tentatively into the mattress and leaned against his chest, frightened of her own reserve. His breaths were shallow, like a dog's after a long walk. She pressed her cheek against his, finding it smoother than any man's she had ever touched. Penn had never been able to grow a beard, ever. He stood up slowly,

his bones creaking, raising her with him, his arms around her.

"What happened to the ring?" she asked, surprising herself.

"Buried with her," he said.

Myrna drew in her breath, insulted. "I didn't mean *that* one," she said. "I meant my own wedding ring—the plain, cheap silver band that I left on the kitchen window sill the day I walked out on you."

"Sorry, I don't remember," he said, holding her for a minute or two, their bodies pressed against each other, full length, her forehead touching his clavicle, his hands clasped around her waist. She felt parts of his body that she knew should be reserved for the marriage bed, but it didn't bother her. It was nothing new. He was her former husband, after all.

She wondered if he could sense that she still loved him, or if he ever thought about the day she left him. One summer morning, three months after their marriage, after being on the receiving end of his fist—twice—Myrna climbed the steps from their basement apartment, dragging her trunk. Penn was in the driveway, washing the *Fury*, wearing a red flowered lava-lava, cut high over the thighs, and nothing underneath. She stumbled down the sidewalk, dragging the small blue metallic trunk, then hefted it into the backseat of her VW bug. Penn flipped the hose in the air, drenching her blouse and toreador pants in the waterfall. He laughed, with his head tilted back, his perfect white teeth gleaming through the spray of the water. She never looked back.

Decades had passed since then. Now here he was—once again in her bedroom, holding her in his arms. At one point, she felt something wet on her scalp and when she drew her head back and looked at him, he had tears gleaming in the deep furrows beside his mouth.

Finally, he let go of her and said, "Don't take this wrong, but I need to lie quietly, alone, just for a minute. I don't want you to touch me or anything. I just need to. The chest pain's getting worse. Put your dress back on, please, Myrna."

Her cheeks burning, Myrna slipped back into her housedress and buttoned it up. She watched him for awhile. His head made a deep indentation in the pillow sham. "Are you sure you don't want an ambulance?" she asked. He lay there on her flowered quilt, panting, but then he seemed to fall asleep. To see if he was still alive, she pulled a clean handkerchief from her pocket and draped it ceremoniously over Penn's face. There was a muffled intake of breath; then he lifted the hanky slowly and just stared at the ceiling, breathing out with great effort, making Myrna wonder if he was about to have a heart attack like her father had done.

"I get these pains sometimes. It'll pass." She pictured reporters in her bedroom, and photographers, and the entire Relief Society scandalized as they appeared with their bread loaves and casseroles. But nothing else happened.

Myrna sat silently on the bed beside him, caressing his

big toe as she stared at the yellow throats of the hibiscus flowers on her quilt.

He got up, handed the hanky to her, and said in a quiet voice, "A touch of angina. But it's passed now." He trudged down the hall with his slippers flapping, not saying a word of farewell or acknowledging her at all. He was no longer lithe and agile like the athlete he had been in his youth.

Myrna called after him, "This night was about as long as our marriage," but he didn't answer. She leaned over the stair rail and shouted, "You stole my faith from me. How could I go on believing in anything, when they made you my bishop? A drunk and a bully."

She heard the door slam downstairs, then ran to the balcony and saw him weaving behind the hedge and down the street toward his house, his rubber slippers flapping. He plodded like an old man with sore feet.

Back in her room, she tore off her dress and undid the bikini bra. She slid the bottom of the bathing suit down around her ankles, and tossed both pieces onto the bureau. The rubber pads of the bra stuck straight into the air. *Oh, Pretty Woman*, Roy Orbison was singing somewhere out the window, maybe on the balcony, maybe across the alley, maybe in the ward's recreation hall under crepe paper streamers.

Likely, Penn had forgotten dancing with her, kissing her, buying her coffee, necking with her through all those Steve McQueen movies. They were decades past the pathetic hovel where they had first lived together as husband and wife. In that basement bedroom he had blackened her eye because she'd talked to another man at the grocery store. Right before he had punched her, he shouted, "You're my wife, and my wife does not ever, ever talk to another man without my say-so. Got that?"

**M**YRNA TURNED DOWN the covers on her bed, running her tingling hands over the cold yellow sheets. She could feel the contracture of the nerves in her wrists. No blood was getting to her hands. Thinking of Penn lying there on her quilt, asking her to put her clothes back on, she felt humiliated. But then she told herself, I made his heart flutter or beat faster, or caused it to set off little explosions of blood somewhere deep in the vessels. I affected his heart so much that he had to lie down until the feeling passed. Even better, maybe one of the "Insiders" saw him stumbling home in the dark, staggering like a drunkard, his mind confused and disturbed by the passion he had felt.

When Myrna awoke an hour later, her hands were completely numb. She had to shake them from the wrists for a full minute to get the sensation back. She opened her mouth to shout, "Mama, Mama," then closed it slowly. Her eye caught sight of the ridiculous bright bathing suit resting on her dresser, as she glanced sheepishly around the room, afraid that someone had heard and understood her foolishness.