

Fog

By Michael Parra

With a satisfied grunt, Lena Donahue heaved her young husband's sweaty torso to one side and slid out from under him, spent. She lay sprawled on the floor in front of their almost new sofa, staring up at the cracked ceiling of her former living room. One arm bumped against an empty pizza delivery box. Her other hand mindlessly caressed the curls of Ian's chest hair, savoring his heart pounding heat. She knew from experience that he'd be asleep in a moment. Soon enough he'd start to snore. Lena had promised herself that she wouldn't let this happen again...but, DAMN!

She tossed Ian's limp arm away and picked up the over turned wine glasses. They'd drunk only one bottle, not bad considering their history. She dressed quietly in the dark and then grabbed her crock pot, the pretense for her return to the old apartment. She paused at the door to admire Ian's physique, great arms with a farmer tan that she could distinguish even in the meager shaft of light from the hallway.

"Better stay out of the sun Kiddo," she whispered as she backed out the door, "You red heads burn easily."

"Hey! Lena! Snap out of it! I'm dyin' here!"

With a tilt of her black baseball cap, the snug one that went so well with her sleek, pin striped, warm-up suit, Lena shook her chestnut curls to clear the memory of last night's debauchery, and hooked her hair behind her ears.

"Right, sorry about that Ladies."

Her fitness clients, Barbara and Katherine looked ridiculous in their bright red workout shorts and baggy San Francisco Bay Club t-shirts. Overly round Barbara laughed as she toppled from a one-legged balance. Sour faced Katherine dropped the ten pound dumb bells onto to the wet grass of the Marina Green and smashed her fists onto her skinny hips. Lena wondered why she bothered with these two...well the one hundred dollars per hour probably had something to do with it.

"Jesus, I thought my arms were going to fall off!" Katherine bitched, "Can you believe this wind?"

Beneath patches of blue that teased the northern horizon, swathes of summer fog obscured the Golden Gate Bridge towers. Cloud obliterated the view at sea level, but you could hear the lapping waves and the swing of sailboat rigging from the nearby harbor.

"Okay Barb, give me ten pushups; and you Katie..."

"Ten? Lena, you mean straight legged push-ups?"

"Barbara, when have I ever asked you to do a real, full-out pushup? No, I meant for you to get down on your knees; and Katie, you do side to side squats with the medicine ball."

"Oh joy, my favorite," Katherine replied and then muttered to her workout partner, "Lena's thinking about that no-good husband of hers again."

“How can you tell?” Barbara wheezed.

“Oh, you can see it in her face, the way she gets all dreamy.”

“Lena Honey, you’re not still sleeping with that man. Are you?”

“Well no...we’re not technically SLEEPING...”

“Oh Dear, I thought we’d already discussed this issue.”

“Come on Barb, she’s young, and he’s younger, not yet thirty, isn’t that right Lena?”

“Well, yes...but Ian’s very mature for...”

“Oh Lena, PLEASE! Mature? He’s a hot, buffed, construction worker, fresh off the boat, and...”

“Excuse me,” Lena interrupted, drawing her petite frame up to its full 5’2” height, “my husband is a licensed contractor with his own company.”

“You mean that pickup truck and his two burly cousins?”

A couple of male joggers, grim faced against the wind, sped by the trio. One of the men turned around, jogging backwards for a bit. His eyes were hidden by dark sun glasses but his rakish smile was a clear come on.

“Now HE looks like good exercise.” Katherine said between knee bends.

“Well he’s certainly fit.” Barbara agreed, tugging at her oversized t-shirt as though it might somehow cover her ample hips. She made a little curtsy and half-raised one shy hand in greeting.

“How about him Lena? He’s obviously interested. Are you dating yet?”

Lena returned the jogger’s smile but zipped her fleece wind breaker up to her chin. The runner saluted the ladies, turned and rejoined his companion.

“No, not yet anyway. You know, I want to get my own place set up...and Ian and I still, uh...visit occasionally.”

Katherine stopped her knee bends and placed a hand on Lena’s shoulder.

“I brought my old dishes with me today Lena. They’re boxed in the back seat. We can move it to your car after the workout. There’s some extra furniture in my garage that you might want as well. It’s not great stuff, but you know...until you get on your feet.”

Lena stared up into the June gloom, letting her imagination drift idle among the varying depths of gray. What to assign these two next, yoga stretch or more cardio? Despite three cups of coffee her mind refused to shift out of neutral and into first gear.

“I may have a few things Lena can use as well, though I don’t think its right that she leaves him everything.”

“Barbara, it’s not like he cheated on her. Lena is the one that called it quits and moved out. Good thing too, what with his drinking and all.”

“Those Irishmen...”

“Hey you guys, I’m right here. If you’re going to talk about me at least wait until I’m out of ear shot.”

“Oh Honey, we’re not saying anything that we didn’t hear from you first. Maybe we should talk about it over lunch at the Yacht Club.”

“They make a great Cobb salad!” Barbara said.

“Oh, you like the Cobb?” Katherine said. “I prefer the Asian Chicken. Now we’re not really dressed for the upstairs’ restaurant, but the grill downstairs has a tri-tip sandwich with fries that...”

The electronic arpeggio of Lena’s cell phone rippled through the damp air.

“Hello? Mrs. Donahue? This is Francis Fleishman from California Pacific Medical Center, the Davies Campus. I’m calling on behalf of your husband Ian Donahue.”

An icy shroud wrapped itself tight around Lena’s shoulders.

“Oh no! What happened?”

“Mr. Donahue fell off a ladder and sustained some injuries. He ...”

“On my God, can I talk to him?”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Donahue; your husband is not available at the moment. He’s in the emergency room being treated for head and hand wounds.”

“No! On my God! Please tell him I’ll be right there!”

Lena’s quivering fingers could barely close the phone. She wiped her tears and spoke between sharp, shallow breaths.

“I’m sorry guys, I have to leave. Ian’s been hurt.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know! I don’t...I’ve got to get to Davies Hospital.”

Lena bolted for the parking lot. The astonished pair, stranded among abandoned dumb bells, foam rollers and plastic tubing, watched their trainer’s fleeing figure disappear into the mist.

Fog and imagined gore splashed across the windshield of Lena’s Honda Civic. She pictured her husband’s mutilated fingers splayed across a sawdust covered garage floor...his handsome face twisted in agony while he rocked a mangled stump to his chest...screams and then Ian collapsing onto his back...a red pool seeping around his unconscious form. She pressed her forehead against the steering wheel. Her knuckles went white as a wave of nausea threatened to overwhelm her.

Control, damn it. Lower your collar bones. Slow the breath. That yoga instructor certification cost a fortune. It ought to be good for something!

Of course everything would be fine once Lena got to the hospital. She would take charge. Her entrance would be calm and commanding. The on-duty nurses would scurry at her approach and Ian would awaken to her kiss, like the prince in that children’s fairy tale. Or was that a princess? Whatever. She floored her battered hatchback up one side of Pacific Heights and down towards Japan Town. Nothing in her life made sense at the moment, but she was certain of one thing.

Lena loved Ian Donahue.

Indeed, she would not, could not, imagine life without him. Although...wait a minute...wasn’t that exactly what she had been attempting to do? Fed up with his inconsistent affection, seeming indifference and endless arguments, Lena had packed her bags. She was just too emotional; that was her problem. Clearly love was not enough, not when the two of you looked at life from completely different points of view. Decisions made with your heart wouldn’t stick. Once the

tears and love making played out, real world consequences had to be faced. She could deal with coming home to a silent, barren apartment. Replacing the big, flat screen television, now that was another thing altogether. They'd bought it with wedding gift money. And what about her plans to go back to college? What about health insurance? What about possibly facing the rest of her life as a single mother?

Lena braked as another car backed out of its parking space. This part of Scott Street behind the Mount Zion medical complex was always slow going. Normally Lena got competitive in tight traffic, but not today, not around sick people, hurt people. Her gynecologist's clinic was just around the corner. Three weeks ago, not long after she'd left her husband, Lena got called back to the doctor's office following a routine examination.

"Congratulations Mrs. Donahue..."

"What? You gotta be kidding me!"

Ian had to be the father. There hadn't been anyone else. Lena hadn't told a soul, not even her best friend, certainly not her estranged husband. Ian said that he wanted kids one day, but he never acted like the father type. More importantly, Lena wasn't convinced that she was the mother type. Even if she did have the kid, she sure didn't want a resentful Ian sticking by her just because he thought it was the good Catholic thing to do.

What if Ian were hurt so badly she had to support him for a while? She tore through the next intersection much too fast, but came to a full stop just past the high school. The district south of Geary Street got a bit sketchy and you had to watch for cop patrols. Lena had reluctantly rented a cheap apartment way out in the Avenues, but at least it wasn't in a rough area.

Now her friend and coworker Mike, he'd found a great location. Mike lived right across the street from the hospital where she was headed now, an ideal spot for a small personal training studio. You could feel the affluence all around. Three-story houses with views of Duboce Park dominated the blocks around Mike's rental cottage. His home gym occupied most of the bottom floor. Last week Lena had brought a bottle of chardonnay to a planning meeting with three of her colleagues. They were going to produce an outdoor boot camp together. Ian was renovating a Victorian home just three doors down the street. Lena spent half the meeting missing him. When she wasn't thinking of her separated husband in his tight t-shirt she was distracted by envy. She wanted a setup like Mike, independent, inspiring, something she could call her own. But how? In the end, achievement had more to do with popularity than skill or education. Success was all about sales. As it was, her Bay Club clientele had depleted so much that the Company was about to terminate her medical benefits. The timing couldn't be worse.

Alamo Square sat atop the last hill in Lena's frenzied path. From there she could see the dark grey of the hospital's north tower. It was an ominous structure, especially when she thought of poor Ian imprisoned there, but its concrete silhouette became less threatening as the sky cleared. Bright rays of sunshine pierced the haze and bounced off the brown roll-up door of a double parked UPS

van. Lena found herself boxed in by a line of left turners. She slammed both fists onto the horn. The Civic bleated a thin, powerless whine. Tears blurred her sight. She saw an opening in the traffic and gunned the little hatchback around the delivery truck.

Lena heard the scream before she saw her, a young mother with hysterical eyes clutching her toddler to her chest. Lena had no idea there was a crosswalk right there. She jerked the wheel to the left, missing the pedestrians but placing herself directly in the path of traffic. Through her passenger window Lena watched the mouthed obscenities of the oncoming driver. Metal shrieked against metal. The Civic rose into the air and pitched like drift wood tossed by an ocean wave. Then a dark mist enveloped the world.

“Mrs. Donahue? Lena, can you hear me? Mr. Donahue, I think she’s coming around.”

“Lena darlin’, Honey are you awake?”

The edges of her vision were fuzzy, like looking through a dirty window or a cloud, but she could make out her husband’s face as he bent over her. Ian had a gauze patch taped over his left temple. Lena felt his bandaged fingers caress her cheek.

“Ian! Are you alright?”

He waved his injured hand toward his head, “Me? You mean this little thing? Sure darlin’. It’s just a scratch. I only had the nurse call you because I couldn’t press the phone keys while they were cleaning me up. Me pals and I were just going to use it as a reason to visit the pub when you...”

“What? Do you have any idea how worried I got?! How I panicked and...Damn you Ian. I’m so mad I could...” She sat up and cocked her arm to punch him on the shoulder but her swing was trailed by intravenous lines attached to her wrist.

“Hey, what the...?”

“Better cuss me out later Babe. You’ve been in a bit of an accident yourself.”

“Excuse me Mr. Donahue. I think it’s time we changed your wife’s dressings. Hello Lena, I’m Nurse Fleishman. You may call me Francis. Would you like some privacy while we attend to your needs?”

“Needs? What’s the problem? I feel okay.” It was then that Lena felt the contour of a feminine pad between her legs.

“Well Mrs. Donahue, I’m sure you’ll be fine. You were hemorrhaging when you were admitted, but that seems to have abated. We just want to keep our eye on you to be sure and of course to keep the area clean. Nothing to worry about, but the doctor will probably want to order a few tests before you’re released.”

Outside the window, clouds once again swallowed the sun and the city skyline. Inside the hospital however, the constant, overhead fluorescents forbid shadow to interfere.

“Lena darlin’, I need to check in with me crew. The guys are at a deli just down the street. You’ll be okay for a bit, won’t you now?”

“I don’t know Ian. I really don’t know.”