

THE FOREST DARK

Copyright © 2013 **Jim Arnold**
All rights reserved.

Eureka Street Press

ISBN: **1-4823-6614-2**

ISBN 13: **9781482366143**

Library of Congress Control Number: **XXXXX**

Dedication

For Mary C., who is not one to suffer fools.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank my UCLA writing teachers Claire Carmichael and the late Linda Palmer for their always enthusiastic encouragement, as well as for invaluable insights into the writing process and story composition. Also, to my fellow writers Justin Reichman and Rhonda Scott, for helpful feedback on this particular story. And, as always to my cousin, Mary Cerutti, for her honest opinions on my draft work, without which I'd be rudderless.

Chapter 1
Eden, July 1984

She could always use the scissors in her bag as a weapon. *If it really comes to that.*

Eden von Eiff brushed a strand of curly blond hair away from her face. She sat at the edge of a shaded wooden bench outside the dirty white slabs of USC's Annenberg Communications Building, ready to run if she had to.

Campus in summer was a heat-blasted dead zone. In the forty-five minutes she'd been waiting for her ride, exactly two cars had passed.

One was a Yellow Cab, which didn't have a fare but did have a jowly, older driver wearing thick dark glasses who looked like a criminal. A rapist, to be exact. He circled the block, probably looking for his next target. Now, all blacks couldn't possibly be bad and she didn't like it when people jumped to conclusions, but what about this guy? What about him?

Don't be such a ditz. Breathe, Eden. You've got the bachelor's now.

The other vehicle was a waxed red convertible with white leather seats, carrying two tanned, Ray-Ban-wearing college boys. It stopped at the university gym right across from her. A third kid joined them, tossing a battered orange surfboard into the backseat before hopping in.

For real. A *surfboard*. That car peeled away.

Eden was about to go look for a pay phone—shouldn't she call the police?—when an ugly brown Toyota pulled up in front of her. The driver honked.

* * *

Her first impression was that red-haired Noah Baldock was flustered, perhaps a bit shy. His jeans frayed at the bottom but his brown leather sandals looked new and his toes weren't dirty. He wore his white polo shirt with a studied, upturned collar.

"I'm shocked you're down here alone," he said, rubbing the back of his hand across his wet forehead. "Don't they have guards or Secret Service or something like that for people like you?"

Like he was just so *put out*. She was used to attitudes like this from strangers her own age.

"Are we going to the TV station?" she asked.

"I'll take the scenic route," he said. "You know L.A. at all?"

She liked that he was not overly polite. Most guys would try to please her in some way—at times it was OK; often it was annoying—but Noah didn't have that kind of immediate pretense.

As they cruised through an apparently endless neighborhood she figured was a slum, he cranked up Cyndi Lauper assuring everyone that “Girls Just Want to Have Fun.” “Stupid song,” she muttered.

He glanced over. “What? You do want that, right? To see the office first?”

“I suppose,” she said. “Look, I’m really thirsty. Could we stop somewhere?”

Vermont Avenue was bumper-to-bumper with cars, the heat shimmering off grimy metal rooftops in painful waves. They passed a bus bench where a black kid in a red T-shirt, maybe eleven, lay with his arm over his eyes, possibly taking a nap. An ad for an abortion clinic screamed at them from the bench’s backrest. The car next to them honked. The kid jerked his white-high-top-covered foot.

Noah smiled. “I know a place.”

On the next block workmen were already rolling out a billboard of cheery Walter Mondale, Democrat for president. “They’re not wasting any time,” she said.

* * *

Eden’s father, Republican senator Henry von Eiff from Michigan, had arranged for her summer internship at L.A.’s public television station KCET.

She could have killed him for running for vice president of the United States—or for making the overtures to do so, even if he didn’t have much of a chance. Why would he put Eden and her mother, brothers and sister through all that? Not that those obvious, simple facts would ever cross his limited radar, focused as it was on his political career.

Her role as the tan, blond and green-eyed eldest daughter, appearing alongside Dad on grassy Michigan town squares, was one thing. Mounting a national bid and taking on those hateful Reagan and Bush kids was something else entirely.

It wasn’t only that. The truth, however hard it was to face, was that she simply didn’t like her father, let alone love him. He was a generous, at times even doting meal ticket, and she was that hateful twenty-four-year-old daughter who accepted his support gladly and hid how she really felt.

She had at least one good reason to dislike him. She was sure it was his overbearing personality that finally sent her college boyfriend Paul Gonsalves packing.

A hot gust off the street blew her hair into her face and mouth. She pulled it back, anchoring it behind her ears.

I may not need a touch-up after all, she thought. This goddamn sun will do the bleaching for me.

* * *

Noah stopped at the Jungle, a bar and grill painted a nondescript green on its stucco exterior but hiding a seriously tropical garden in the courtyard. He told her it was in Silver Lake, “close to the station.” By three P.M. on a Monday, when the two older gentlemen who had been having a late lunch left, they were the only patrons there.

“This isn’t very exciting,” she said as Noah set a sweating bottle of Corona on a napkin in front of her.

“I thought you wanted a beer. I can get something else; my boss is paying—”

“The place.”

A soggy, drooping leaf from a sideways-growing banana tree brushed his shoulder.

“It’s down the street from KCET. I figured it was convenient,” he said, pausing.

“I come here all the time, but we can always find another bar.”

She put her hand on his freckled forearm and squeezed. “Let’s decide after we finish the first beer.”

“Excellent,” Noah said, toasting her with his own bottle. He pulled his arm away.

“What can I tell you about the station? About L.A.?”

I bet he thinks I’m after his job, like I’d even ever want it! “Did you think you’d shock me by taking me to a gay bar? Is that why you brought me here?”

His eyes widened, as if he was about to say something scolding.

“I know,” she said, taunting. “It was in the neighborhood.” She never should have touched him, she thought. Now he was offended.

Noah took a giant gulp of his beer. “I didn’t want to drive too far because my car just got out of the shop yesterday.”

“Maybe you should think about getting a new one.”

He laughed. “Yeah, right. On my salary, I don’t think so.”

Eden reached into her black shoulder bag for the pack of Newports. She tapped out a cigarette, then dug around for the Trojan lighter she’d picked up at the USC bookstore.

“I got a match,” he said, stretching back to dig into his front jeans pocket. He pulled out a crumpled dollar bill, what looked like a blurry receipt, and a crushed book of matches. He flipped it open to light one for her, discovering it was empty.

I’ll never become a fag hag, no chance in fucking hell, she thought.

“Here you are, miss.” A hairy, muscled arm crossed the space between them. One of the Jungle bartenders, tidying up the patio, lit her cigarette.

“Thanks,” she said, giving him a smile. As the man walked away, Noah tossed the empty matchbook into the planter just behind their table. “What did you do that for? After that nice guy came over? He’s going to have to clean up your mess.”

At first Noah just sat there, his eyes unfocused on the far wall behind her. Then he bent over to pick it out of the dirt. “Is this what summer’s going to be like? I can’t *believe* they’re making me hang out with a Republican.”

She looked around at the perfect patio landscaping, where a mist from a previous watering still hung between two dwarf palms. “You could’ve just told me you were gay, if that’s what you’re trying to accomplish by all this.”

Noah waited, perhaps thinking she wasn’t finished, then said, challenging her, “I suppose you think the president’s doing a good job.”

She drank some more. “I do. He’s the best thing this country has seen in a long, long time.”

His hand trembled as he reached for his Corona. “Right, like half the world is now boycotting our Olympics?”

She exhaled across the little round table, blowing smoke into his face. “Then it’s a damn good thing I’m here to do some great work for the *American* athletes!”

“Ever hear of AIDS?” He stood, pulling his own pack of cigarettes out of a back pocket and tossing it on the table. “Wait—don’t even answer that. You couldn’t possibly, because *your* president’s never mentioned it.” He pushed the chair in, scraping it on the rough patio tile. “I’m going to see your bartender friend about a light.”

* * *

Of course Eden had heard of AIDS. Did this clown think she was uninformed? She was a senator’s daughter who went to Brown, for Christ’s sake.

Not like she knew anyone who was affected, but still. With best friend Hannah Livingston, she was down in New York often. Village lofts, the Haring exhibitions, even Danceteria. For a Republican co-ed, she was on the cosmopolitan edge. True, she was lucky—she had a small income from a Dodge trust fund on her mother’s side, but it wasn’t like she was a millionaire.

Maybe there was something to the idea that minorities always seemed to blow what was happening in their world way out of proportion. That certainly was the modus operandi in Michigan, except for Detroit, which was out of control and another story entirely.

Too bad Noah was gay. He was sexy and likely helpless in that skinny little red-haired-boy kind of way. If she were a certain kind of girl, she’d take him somewhere and make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Then again, she wasn’t that kind of girl. Eden moved him easily from the “possible boyfriend” into the “possible friend” column.

He came back with his cigarette lit, a big smile on his face. He’d been gone for more than a couple of minutes, so Eden guessed there’d been flirting involved with the charming bartender, winks, perhaps numbers exchanged. She couldn’t really blame him. In fact, she was jealous. Her last kiss from Paul Gonsalves had been months ago. Her last night with him, even longer.

She tilted her head back and slugged down the rest of the Corona. “Drink up, Noah. I want you to show me more of L.A.”

* * *

In the *Detour Bar*, except for Noah, the few men were shirtless and seemed to stare at them like mute statues in a dark gallery. Maybe it was because she was a woman, and the only one at that. She picked up a definite hostile vibe and asked if they could leave just as soon as they finished their Cuervo shots, which were helpfully provided by a stray Republican tourist who just happened to be a fan of Senator von Eiff.

“It would really be OK to go to a straight place,” she said.

“Next bar, I promise.”

But the drinks opened Noah up, and they lingered. He mentioned his blond boyfriend Ronnie Perkins, talked about the fun they’d had in the short time they’d known each other and about how Noah was crossing his fingers that something might actually work out for once. Their planned dates for the Games. The empty drawer in his apartment, soon to be filled with Ronnie’s clothes. Maybe a real shopping trip for that new used car, up and down Brand Boulevard in Glendale till they found the specimen they both liked, even though Noah would be the one buying and driving it.

He showed her the photo he kept in his wallet, which was creased but clearly proved how handsome Ronnie was, even when he’d been squinting in the morning sun with the Santa Monica Pier’s paint-chipped carousel in the background.

Then they were back in the Toyota to drive the couple of blocks to KCET, where Eden would meet the rest of the staff who’d be involved in her internship. Out her window, on the slow crawl up Sunset, she noticed the little Hawaiian-like shack with a goofy sign reading “Tiki-Ti,” which had its door propped open invitingly.

“We have to go in there,” she said. “Please?”

* * *

“We don’t get many out-of-towners since the neighborhood turned bad,” the bearded, Hawaiian-shirted bartender said as he flipped on the blender to mix Eden’s choice, the Cobra’s Fang, a rum concoction colored pink with grenadine.

To be heard over its buzz and Dean Martin’s “Everybody Loves Somebody” pouring out of a speaker attached to a rafter above, Noah raised his voice. “You like to drink, don’t you? I’m thinking you’re a real party girl.”

“Does that mean you’re a real party boy? It’s not like I’m forcing you—”

“I don’t want to get fired,” he said, taking the first sip of his own Shark’s Tooth, likewise a rum drink, though not pink. “That would suck.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll go in a minute, OK, Jet Boy? I’m on vacation, sort of, till my dad gets here. It’s a lot different when he’s around.”

* * *

Other than a minor stumble when her sandal caught on a piece of loose orange carpet outside the office door, Eden thought the introductions at the station went smoothly.

Noah’s two colleagues in the little office the three of them shared were both around. John Converse—tall, dark haired and with an easy friendliness—smiled outright. Marybeth Hardesty, who looked as if she was a few high-impact aerobics classes shy of a size fourteen, had a spiked pixie cut a shade lighter than Eden’s. She didn’t get up to acknowledge them until Noah called her name a second time.

Typical, thought Eden, for a girl like that when another female is suddenly inserted into the scene.

Sandy Torkelson was Noah's boss. Mostly bald, he wore a white short-sleeve shirt with the collar buttoned up, topped by a skinny brown tie. Some of his neck fat spilled over the starched crease, telling her he'd been slimmer when he bought it.

"We're lucky to have you out here for the summer, Eden," Sandy said. "I've got my best guy watching out for you." Noah's eyes widened, but he didn't say anything.

These two don't get along, she thought. Funny how easy it was to pick these things up. Even though they'd just met, she felt a tiny bit protective toward Noah. There had to be something wrong with Sandy if Noah didn't like him.

The five of them sat at a polished maple conference table in a second-floor room that had its row of chipped casement windows open to the sounds of traffic on Sunset Boulevard below. Through the haze Eden could see the famous Hollywood sign.

Sandy sat at the head under a large portrait of Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley. She and Noah located themselves as far from him as they could get, directly across from Marybeth and John.

Noah, it seemed, was avoiding eye contact with her. He bit his lip and crossed his arms while staring at the bare tabletop.

They were both drunk.

Best to take control of the situation.

"I'd like to focus on some of the women in the . . . Games," Eden said. "Mary Lou Retton, the gymnast, for one. I think she's going to be big. In running, there's that Mary Decker, and of course, Evelyn Ash . . . Ash . . ."

Marybeth held up her pen. "Ashford, the sprinter?"

Eden covered her mouth to hide both a yawn and booze breath. "Right," she said. "Ashford."

Marybeth glanced to John, who scribbled it all down. Sandy smiled broadly. "Noah, take notes," he said. "How do you expect to plan all this if you don't have details?"

He jumped out of his seat. "Sorry, Sandy. I have to be excused. I'll bring back a pen!"

Noah's get-out-of-jail-free card, Eden thought, amused. They *were* on the same wavelength. She had to pee too. If this meeting didn't break up soon, she'd have to run out. As Noah carefully closed the door behind him, she felt abandoned, even though Sandy, Marybeth, and John all continued to look her way. Waiting.

"So what else?" Marybeth asked, adjusting a shoulder pad that slid too far forward under her navy blue blouse. "Which other venues are you planning to cover? Any special needs I should watch out for?"

* * *

In retrospect, stopping for drinks probably hadn't been the best idea, and Sandy could easily have fired her before she put in an hour of honest work. Yet the buzz made it easier to fit in. Eden was convinced that the others thought any assignment, any job she got, was a merely the result of her father's intervention.

People simply assumed Eden von Eiff *had* to be an airhead.

Noah took her back downtown to USC to pick up the suitcase, which she'd stashed in a faculty adviser's office at Annenberg. He then stopped at the Vagabond Hotel on Figueroa, where she had a reservation. Good thing he went in with her, because they'd fucked it up—they were full up because of the Games, and they didn't care who she was; she wasn't going to be able to stay there.

What made Noah offer up his couch for a night Eden didn't know, but that was where she found herself by eight P.M.: sitting in his Los Feliz apartment living room with Ronnie Perkins watching *St. Elsewhere* while Noah took a shower.

Even better looking in person than the snapshot she'd seen, Ronnie was gracious as a host even though he didn't really live there. Eden understood why Noah could be in love with him.

"So what's Mrs. Reagan *really* like?" Ronnie asked.

Tired, but with no desire to be short with him, especially since he was so cute, Eden said simply, "She's a very complicated woman." He nodded like he understood perfectly, turning back to the hospital drama on the TV.

After a moment, he said, "But little Ronnie must be a fag, right? I mean—there's that ballet and all."

"That's a really stupid thing to say," Eden snapped. "I don't even know where to start!"

It had now been hours since the Jungle, Detour, the Tiki-Ti. She guessed there might be some beer in the fridge. She had that throbbing headache she sometimes got on party weekends at Brown, whenever there'd be an unplanned interruption in alcohol consumption.

Noah came out of the bathroom with a green towel wrapped around his wet head, shirtless, his jeans slung low on his hips. She'd realized he was lean, but now she saw he was skinny. There was a small patch of reddish brown hair between his breasts.

"You must be starving," Noah said, misinterpreting her stare for a different kind of hunger.

* * *

Set on the street-side corner of a Silver Lake mini-mall, with large dirty windows mere inches from the cars snaking down Sunset Boulevard, the Crest Diner had red vinyl-upholstered seating and waxy fake philodendrons strategically placed to hide imperfections in the creamy wall paint.

Noah and Ronnie sat across from Eden. She needed a shower badly. Noah had offered, but she'd declined. Right before bed was her habit. Now she wished it had been before dinner.

"They have a good brew selection here," Noah said, grinning.

“Outstanding,” she said. “I guess we celebrate my job in TV and my new friends, a *gay couple*—” She broke off to shake her head. “Mother and Daddy would *die*, I mean really, you have no idea—”

“You going to have to hide us from your parents?” Ronnie asked, eyebrows raised. Noah turned to him. “Of course not.”

“Actually, Ronnie’s right,” Eden said. “Not so much my mother, but my dad is a real piece of work. Hates ‘faggots’—that whole thing.”

Ronnie stared at his plate, frowning. A chubby middle-aged man in the booth behind the boys turned around and glared at her. “Young lady, please watch your language. We don’t use words like that around here.”

Good thing they served alcohol. Mostly, they ate in silence after that: cheeseburgers, chili fries, a second round of Coors. She noticed Noah ate most of Ronnie’s fries. How did he stay so slim? When he was done with that he ordered a side of macaroni and cheese.

Occasionally, he brought up this or that fact about KCET or Sandy Torkelson. Eden figured Noah had a low opinion of the guy, even though she hadn’t yet determined what was so bad about the boss. He seemed mostly OK to her.

“You don’t like Mr. Torkelson, do you?” she said. “He’s a prick?”

Noah looked surprised. “You’ll find out.”

One of Ronnie’s coworkers at Equipment, the beach store out in Santa Monica, had been sick for more than a week. That meant Ronnie had to pick up extra shifts. He said he hoped it wouldn’t affect their plans to attend Olympic events. This guy was out sick a lot, Ronnie explained, and “no one really knows if some or maybe all of this is bogus.” It was a wonder he hadn’t been fired already.

“Remember, it all depends on the station,” Noah said. “If there’s any free tickets that trickle down my way. Otherwise, the Games are sold out.”

Eden set her napkin on the table. “I *wasn’t* calling you names—before,” she said. “You know that, right?”

* * *

When they returned from dinner she took a look at an available furnished apartment upstairs in the back. Noah said the place was being advertised as a summer sublet for Ruth Taylor, a *General Hospital* actress on hiatus.

Too excited to sleep, Eden lay on her back on Noah’s couch, staring up at a water stain on the ceiling. She suffocated in the thick cotton of an old nightgown, way too heavy for a hot place like L.A. She’d have to get something new.

Leaves occasionally rustled against the window screen next to her, a siren echoed in the distance and over that she could hear the moans of Noah and Ronnie in the bedroom.

She tried not to think about what, exactly, they were doing to each other through the drywall, though she realized it probably wasn't anything other than Paul had asked her to do once.

OK, maybe twice.

And it wasn't such a bad idea to rent Ruth's place, she thought. Close to KCET, affordable, Dad wouldn't loathe it, and of course, it'd be close to Noah. Ronnie too—the only people she knew in Los Angeles.