



Image from Freepik

## California Aphrodite

Jonah Raskin

For the good part of a year, I spent days and nights holed up in a small bedroom in a sprawling farmhouse painted yellow on a chicken ranch within walking distance of the old North/South Highway that ran from the bridge to the border. I arrived from the East with little more than one suitcase and felt like an orphan. My lover shared her big bed in a small room, and though she wasn't Mexican, she passed for Mexican. I assumed that she was also indigenous.

Her mother called her Judy, but she went by the name Speranza. I named her Aphrodite. She was a dark Aphrodite, an Aphrodite of the night. Saturday mornings she listened to gospel on an FM station from Berkeley. During the week, she listened to Delta bluesmen: Mississippi John Hurt, John Lee Hooker and Robert Johnson. She expanded my ears after years of listening to nothing but rock 'n' roll from the Everly Brothers and the Stones to Creedence Clearwater Revival and Sly Stone. Before I left the East I heard a lot of reggae, mostly Jimmy Cliff, just when I'd given up on all recorded music. Aphrodite also introduced me to John Fante. As soon as she finished one of his books, *Dago Red* or *Ask the Dust*, she went back to the beginning and read them all over again as though for the first time.

We had five housemates; two of them, Gretchen and Mary Ann, worked in the ER in a hospital in Marin and tended terminally ill cancer patients. A third woman, Liza, a college student, made money as a pole dancer at a bar called Nobody's Talking. Jane, the fourth woman in the house, had been married and divorced and had a trust fund. The embodiment of generosity, she paid for everyone's gas, beer and cigarettes and both the phone bill and the PG&E bill which were in her name. I didn't own a car or smoke cigarettes or drink beer and didn't need money. Or so I thought.

For a time, the only male in the house beside me was Robert, an ex-boyfriend of Aphrodite. A rich kid, he had followed her west when she hitchhiked from Alabama to California, but he couldn't take a hint, not even after I moved into the house and settled in that big bed in that small room. She finally kicked him out on the street.

The pole dancer's boyfriend, Jimmy, who was curly-haired and scrawny, visited and talked non-stop about "the system," as he called it, which put people in warehouses as though they were things to be stored and used and thrown away like old appliances. Raised in LA, he worked in a restaurant off the Freeway, purloined steaks, smuggled them past the security guard, brought them to the yellow farmhouse and grilled them at 11 pm or 12 midnight. So I never went hungry and I gained weight.

When I first met Aphrodite she worked as a waitress in Rosie's, a restaurant that served hippie food to hippies and where I washed dishes. Jimmy called me "a pearl diver." Rosie's owner, a woman who drove a Jaguar, sacked me and so I had my nights free to wander along the creek, in the hills and along the edge of the vineyards which had just arrived.

With the exception of Gretchen, who was blond and plump, the other women in the house were coming out of the closet. They didn't object to my presence seven days of the week but they objected when I showed up with Aphrodite at a for-lesbians-only dance in a place called the Beginning of the End where Jimmy sold grams of coke and made out like the proverbial bandit who belonged in in Fante novel. Tillery played the piano and sang; the lesbians danced cheek-to-cheek and looked right through me. It was weird. I was an invisible man.

Speranza could be jealous one moment and in the next moment she would tell me, "I don't give a fuck who you fuck or want to fuck or who you think about fucking. Go ahead and fuck Gretchen if you want." After she spoke those words I had no interest in fucking Gretchen.

I know now that I objectified Aphrodite, though she mostly didn't object, not at the start of our relationship, nor when I began to call her "Aphrodite." She thought that she had the perfect body and so did the other women in the house; her hips seemed to have been shaped by a sculptor. In my eyes, she had perfect breasts, a perfect belly and a perfect ass. She often roamed the house without any clothes and sunbathed naked on the deck at the back of the house. Carlotta, a woman in love with her, took hundreds of pictures of Aphrodite naked, developed them and then destroyed them because, as she told me, "They're pornographic."

I have no recollection of sex with Aphrodite. Perhaps I'm in denial. I do remember that in the evening she discarded her boots, jeans and work shirts and put on a red silk nightgown. I remember, too, that the bed we shared had a cast iron frame painted yellow, and that on warm summer nights with the window open I could hear a bird that I assumed was a nightingale, but was probably a Northern Mockingbird that put me to sleep, delicious sleep, the sleep of the angels.

---

Jonah Raskin is the author of six works of nonfiction, including *The Mythology of Imperialism*, *A Terrible Beauty*, *Out of the Whale*, *Field Days*, *Marijuanaland*, and dozens of newspaper and magazine essays he has published over the past sixty years. He is now writing his memoirs.