

JOAN

By Naomi Vondell

“I’ve never told anyone this.” Paul sat up in bed, adjusting his pillow. He pushed his tray table away.

“Let me get that for you.”

“Don’t bother.” He leaned forward. “I need you to listen. Thirty years ago, I had an affair.”

Laura swallowed. The monitor beeped.

Paul’s voice was steady and resolute. He didn’t look away. “Every summer, your mother and I went to Mariposa. She decided not to go that year. I’d never missed it, so I went alone. One of the new performers was someone I knew. Knew very well.”

Paul closed his eyes. He could see her so clearly. Her dark flowered dress, tight around her ample breasts. The way her hips swayed with the fringe around her poncho. Her long, brown hair bouncing around her shoulders.

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Joan was fiery. Passionate. Paul knew her passion.

In their first seventeen years, he had never cheated on Astrid. Astrid was his perfect partner. She made his life comfortable.

Joan was different. Colorful. Eccentric. A wild card he couldn’t afford.

So much time had passed since that night in Madrid. And he’d almost forgotten Joan’s bright smile. The smile that was spilling all over him as she strode forward, her brown eyes glowing.

They exchanged pleasantries and stood awkwardly. He liked the way her poncho hugged her curves. Astrid's clothes were solid—brown, gray, beige—and Astrid was thin enough to wear them comfortably. Joan's body, like her spirit, strained to break free.

“I..I liked that last song you did.”

“Oh, yeah.” She looked down. “You know—I wrote it about Madrid.” She smiled shyly.

Paul's pulse quickened as he took her hand. “There's a coffee shop around the corner. Want to catch up?”

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Paul lifted red-lidded eyes. His throat tightened. “Your mother and I, we fit together. To the day she died, we never had a fight. Not even a tiff.” His eyes brimmed. “She was the mother of my children. She kept my world together. But Joan—Joan was different.”

Laura smiled. “Never in my life have I known you to do anything that wasn't safe.”

Paul picked up a letter. “Mail it.”

“Really?”

“I've waited too long.”

“All right,” she said softly.

Paul smiled, and closed his eyes.

End