THOMAS PYNCHON

Inherent Vice

VINTAGE BOOKS
London
she always used to. Doc hadn’t seen her for over a year. Nobody had. Back then it was always sandals, bottom half of a flower-print bikini, faded Country Joe & the Fish T-shirt. Tonight she was all in flatland gear, hair a lot shorter than he remembered, looking just like she swore she’d never look.

“That you, Shasta?”

“Thinks he’s hallucinating.”

“Just the new package I guess.”

They stood in the street light through the kitchen window there’d never been much point putting curtains over and listened to the thumping of the surf from down the hill. Some nights, when the wind was right, you could hear the surf all over town.

“Need your help, Doc.”

“You know I have an office now? just like a day job and everything?”

“I looked in the phone book, almost went over there. But then I thought, better for everybody if this looks like a secret rendezvous.”

Okay, nothing romantic tonight. Bummer. But it still might be a paying gig. “Somebody’s keepin a close eye?”

“Just spent an hour on surface streets trying to make it look good.”
“How about a beer?” He went to the fridge, pulled two cans out of the case he kept inside, handed one to Shasta.

“There’s this guy,” she was saying.

There would be, but why get emotional? If he had a nickel for every time he’d heard a client start off this way, he could be over in Hawaii now, loaded day and night, digging the waves at Waimea, or better yet hiring somebody to dig them for him . . . “Gentleman of the straightworld persuasion,” he beamed.

“Okay, Doc. He’s married.”

“Some . . . money situation.”

She shook back hair that wasn’t there and raised her eyebrows so what.

Groovy with Doc. “And the wife—she knows about you?”

Shasta nodded. “But she’s seeing somebody too. Only it isn’t just the usual—they’re working together on some creepy little scheme.”

“To make off with hubby’s fortune, yeah, I think I heard of that happenin once or twice around L.A. And . . . you want me to do what, exactly?” He found the paper bag he’d brought his supper home in and got busy pretending to scribble notes on it, because straight-chick uniform, makeup supposed to look like no makeup or whatever, here came that old well-known hardon Shasta was always good for sooner or later. Does it ever end, he wondered. Of course it does. It did.

They went in the front room and Doc laid down on the couch and Shasta stayed on her feet and sort of drifted around the place.

“Is, they want me in on it,” she said. “They think I’m the one who can reach him when he’s vulnerable, or as much as he ever gets.”

“Bareass and asleep.”

“I knew you’d understand.”

“You’re still trying to figure out if it’s right or wrong, Shasta?”

“Worse than that.” She drilled him with that gaze he remembered so well. When he remembered. “How much loyalty I owe him.”

“I hope you’re not asking me. Beyond the usual boilerplate people owe anybody they’re fucking steady—”