



ROLE OF A LIFETIME by MARK SAFRANKO
Art by RICHARD WATTS in SAVAGE KICK #1
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Role Of A Lifetime

Eddie Marino shouted something about “loving ’em skinny!” over the drone of the slick, soulless techno-beat. It was 1996, in the time before a zealous mayor made it a crime to have a little fun too close to churches and schools.

Eddie’s pal Hank Ahmet echoed his enthusiasm. “Really something, isn’t she?”

The eyes of the men were fastened on the willow-thin topless dancer who’d just flounced onto the smudged boards from behind the brocaded curtain. There wasn’t much room up there to move around, but the stage was wide enough to hold three, four, sometimes five nearly naked, stiletto-heeled goddesses at the same time. Hank and Eddie were habitués of the Melody House of Burlesque in Lower Manhattan, but they’d never seen this girl before; since dancers appeared and disappeared all the time, that was nothing new and part of the allure anyhow. With her mane of sleek, chin-length black hair and the purple and scarlet viper tattoos slithering up her long calves, she was like the hallucination of an oasis in the Sahara. And every bit as frustrating when you were stranded at a distance.

Like all the strippers at the Melody, the new girl made her

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way off the stage after a short set and waded into the crowd. It was a Thursday night, and the place wasn't nearly as packed as it would be come the weekend, but still there were pockets of enthusiastic males everywhere in the grungy hall. When she closed in on the table where Hank and Eddie were sitting with their beer bottles, Eddie, the more gregarious of the pair, asked her name.

"Esmeralda," she answered with a sensuous toss of her hair, exuding a heavy perfume into the rancid atmosphere.

"Like the hunchback's beauty," Eddie said to Hank out of the corner of his mouth as the dancer gamboled around them shaking her magnificent breasts. Eddie was an actor -- he knew something about literature.

Esmeralda didn't catch the remark. She reached down and simultaneously massaged the crotches of both men. Hank, by far the more flush of the two, pulled out a ten-spot and handed it to her. He always carried large amounts of cash on his person; the habit was part of Hank's immigrant mentality, or so Eddie liked to think. And there was at least some truth to it. Hank was brought to America from Baghdad by his family at an early age, and to this day he was wary of leaving all of his significant holdings in the bank or any other place where he couldn't get to them at a moment's notice.

"You like me?" Esmeralda flirted, pursing her violet lips.

"You're gorgeous," Eddie said hoarsely, pulling her closer. The Melody was the kind of place where you wouldn't be banished by management for getting a little familiar with the girls. They figured that the happier a client was, the more money he'd spend.

Esmeralda, lifted a silken leg and draped it over Eddie's lap. "I'd like to dance for you," she purred.

"How much?"

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“Twenty.”

Hank slipped his friend a pair of bills. As usual, Eddie was broke -- he hadn't worked in a long time.

Eddie shook his head. “I can't, man. I'm in the hole to you for so goddamn much as it is.”

“Forget about it already! Enjoy yourself,” urged Hank with the faint trace of an accent. And he meant it, Eddie knew, though he felt obligated to make the gesture to decline.

Hank and Eddie went way back together, all the way to L.A. Though he hadn't become famous, at the time Eddie was doing half-decently between commercials and occasional supporting roles in indie films and TV shows, and Hank was driving a hack to pay his way through college. A strange, symbiotic relationship developed that was established on day one when they met in a Santa Monica bar -- which is the case with most human friendships. Hank, the alien from a third world country, was grossly overweight, shrewd but inarticulate, someone who understood instinctively how to make money. Eddie was handsome in a classic fashion -- a cross between Peter Falk and Rock Hudson, some people said (though his looks had begun going to seed from too much down-time drinking). The son of a well-to-do Westchester orthodontist, he was soft, with the natural disposition of a child of privilege, someone who in his youth attracted women like a magnet, which was why he'd made his way out to Hollywood in the first place. In other words, each man had what the other coveted. When Hank wanted a good time or women, Eddie provided. When Eddie needed company -- and later, cash -- Hank never let him down. After the roles dried up and his agent dropped him and Eddie married a vacationing nurse from Belfast and moved back to New York, Hank followed a few months later,

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landing a ridiculously high-paying job supervising a computer programming team on Wall Street.

Eddie accepted the bills from Hank and tucked one into Esmeralda's sequined thong. Then she brushed his lips with her nipples and ground her pelvis into his thigh.

Eddie couldn't take it anymore. "Do you make house calls, baby?"

The stripper laughed.

"I'm serious. How'd you like to put on a private show for me and my buddy?"

Esmeralda folded her arms behind her head, made wings like a butterfly, and gyrated tantalizingly. "When?"

"Tonight. At our place," Hank chimed in. "We'll make it worth your while."

"I'd have to pay them off first," she pouted, nodding toward the stage.

As regulars, Eddie and Hank got it. The dancers are required to lay down a 'key fee' to management for the privilege of working. Their profits are made solely on the generosity of strangers -- men.

"How much do you need?"

"Fifty?"

"Here you go," said Hank, reaching into his pocket again.

"Where do you guys live?" she said, closing her fist around the lucre.

"Sixty-five East Thirteenth Street," said Eddie. "And hurry up."

A half-hour later the buzzer sounded in Hank Ahmet's spacious bachelor pad. He and Eddie were already working on

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mixed vodka tonics, and Eddie had kicked away the boxes he'd been living out of since he began sleeping on his friend's sofa several weeks ago, when his wife decamped from their rented Park Slope brownstone with their son Declan to return to Northern Ireland. After a couple of years of supporting Eddie in New York and waiting for his ship to come back in, after the humiliating extra work, the measly walk-ons and non-paying bit parts, the near-hits and heart-breaking disappointments, she'd finally had enough.

"It's either us, Eddie, or that so-called career of yours!" she'd groused in the months before splitting. Eddie wanted to keep his wife and son, but the notion, after trying for so long, of giving up any hope of making the big time as an actor was too much to bear. The idea of sitting at home with all of his bottled-up resentment and bitterness in a dank Belfast suburb minding a two-year-old was more than he could stand. And even though he realized that at the age of forty the chances for a major breakthrough were slim to nonexistent, he was perversely determined to hold the fort in New York until there was no fort to hold.

Until then, he figured, he might as well enjoy himself.

A clothing bag was slung over Esmeralda's shoulder, and she was wrapped in a trench coat, which made her look altogether different than she did on stage -- she was even more tempting. Because now she was something other than just an exotic dancer, she was the kind of unapproachable beauty you saw on the street every day, the beauty you craved but couldn't have.

"Guys -- let's deal with the money thing right up front, okay?" she proposed, shedding the coat, then unsnapping the top button of her skin-tight jeans. At first Eddie and Hank could only stand there and stare in awe at her business-like movements. This

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time it wasn't a matter of just tens and twenties, but hundreds Esmeralda wanted, and Hank paid her off in large denominations. Eddie watched as she quickly took in the ambits: the expensive original artwork -- oils, watercolors, pen-and-ink drawings -- on the walls (Hank was a collector on the advice of his financial planner), the upscale furnishings, the top-notch audio and video equipment scattered around like toys. If Esmeralda turned many tricks for a living, she wasn't used to turning them in a place like this, Eddie figured.

Without fanfare, Esmeralda began stripping off her silk blouse and underwear, which was nothing more than that sequined thong.

“Which one of you goes first?”

Eddie knew the deal without having to discuss it: whoever pays enjoys first privilege.

“She's all yours, Hank.”

Esmeralda rummaged in her bag and produced a package of prophylactics. “No rubber, no fuckee,” she giggled. Then she and Hank disappeared up the short flight of stairs into Hank's loft.

Eddie lay back on the sofa and turned up the volume on the TV. He picked up his dog-eared copy of *Huey*, the O'Neill play he hoped to perform one day, but how could he concentrate on the lines with a sex act taking place a few steps away? He sipped his drink and tried to imagine what his wife and child might be doing thousands of miles across the Atlantic. Tears welled in his eyes when he recalled the bird-like voice of little Declan as the boy scampered gleefully through the rooms of the place in Brooklyn. It was a hell of a thing that had happened to him, all right, the kind of tragedy that could break a guy once and for all.

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There were footsteps overhead. Eddie glanced at his watch -- they'd only been up there maybe twelve, fifteen minutes. He turned to see Esmeralda, naked except for one of Hank's bath towels wrapped loosely around her slinky trunk, moving toward him. At first he didn't recognize her. The black mane -- her wig, he realized now -- was gone, leaving her with a skull blotched by sparse, closely cropped tufts of lackluster brown.

"What happened to your hair?"

She really only wore it at the club, she explained. To Eddie's disappointment, her appearance had turned somewhat mousy. But mousy was sexy nevertheless: there was still the breathtaking face with its almond-shaped green eyes, the high cheekbones, the fat lips...and still that body, with its oversized, natural melons hanging deliciously from a slender rib cage and the long, exquisitely shaped legs. Esmeralda sat on the sofa, took a joint out of her bag, and fired it up with her plastic lighter. When she moved, the towel fell open, revealing her pierced navel and genitalia.

"Some place you got here," she remarked, dragging hard.

"*Hank's* place," he corrected her. He accepted a hit of weed while stroking her flanks. Eddie knew that Hank wouldn't come downstairs until he was through with his business -- the guy was a prince.

"How'd you come by the name Esmeralda?"

"Not my real name. My real name's Amy."

"No kidding," he said stupidly.

"Amy Sinnett. From Seattle."

"Amy Sinnett from Seattle -- okay."

That was all the talking Eddie felt like.

"Don't get anything on me," Amy -- Esmeralda -- instructed

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sternly as he mounted, wearing the industrial-strength prophylactic she insisted on. Still, it was a relief to enter a woman without that absurd romantic warmup most females, like his wife, demanded.

And for a paid performer, Amy was good -- very, very good; she was genuinely enthusiastic, not like a pro at all. "Go on, come inside me," she coaxed when he was about to explode. After the months of turmoil with his wife, Amy Sinnett was just the release Eddie Marino needed.

"Nice working for you guys....We can make this a regular thing, if you want," she broached when she was dressed and about to leave.

"Well -- I don't know."

She ceased fastening the buttons of her coat. "What's the matter? Didn't like me?"

Eddie wanted to say sure, you can come back in a heartbeat. But where was he going to come up with the money to pay her?

Amy grinned. "Think it over. Your friend, too. You know where to find me. I'm at the Melody Wednesday through Saturday -- unless something better comes along."

When she disappeared, Eddie made a move to follow. Then, realizing that he was naked, he changed his mind.

When Eddie's eyes popped open in the morning, Hank was in the process of knotting his gold and cranberry-striped necktie in the antique mirror that hung on the wall inside the front door.

"Hell of a night, wasn't it, man?"

Hank grunted, smiling crookedly at the memory.

"That 'Esmeralda' sure was something else, huh?"

Hank's grin devolved into a sneer. "She was a little fucking

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cunt.”

“What do you mean?” Eddie sat up. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened. It was just that whole bullshit phony name thing. I don’t trust her. She’s a slut. I know a slut when I see one.”

It took a moment before Eddie could surmise where this tirade was coming from: it was the residue of Hank’s old-world mind-set finding its way into his mouth, as it always did when the subject was women.

“She’s a stripper -- of course she’s a slut,” Eddie guffawed, reaching for the cigarette pack on the coffee table. “But you nailed her, didn’t you?”

“Fuck no, I didn’t nail her! Who knows where the hell the little slut’s been?”

Eddie was amused. Hank went on to explain, without making much sense, that he would accept only oral sex from Esmeralda because he feared any closer intimacy could result in his contracting a venereal disease, or worse.

“I mean, let’s face it, she did do that porn flick.”

Eddie blinked. “*Porn* flick?”

“Oh, yeah. She didn’t mention it to you?” By now Hank had pulled on his jacket, the top half of an expensive imported suit Eddie hadn’t seen before. Frankly, despite his girth, Hank cut an imposing, almost handsome figure. But not quite.

“No, she didn’t say anything to me....” A flush of excitement ran through Eddie at the idea of Amy performing sex for the camera.

“She says she did *one*, right,” Hank continued. “But how many did the bitch *really* do? Ten? Fifty? *Did she fuck a dog?* See what I mean? No way I was going to, you know -- *expose* myself. I

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got too much to live for.”

Hank reached for his briefcase, which was in its usual place on the floor near the coat rack. “How about you? Did you drill the little whore?”

Eddie hesitated. “Well...yeah, I did. Then again, I didn’t know what *you* knew.”

Eddie was thinking too about the fact that he’d cheated on his wife, the second or third time he’d done so, and even though they were informally separated, he was feeling vaguely guilty. Hank reached for the door knob. “You didn’t give her the phone number here, did you?”

“No,” Eddie answered, truthfully.

“Good. I don’t want her here again.”

“You don’t have to worry, man. She’s not coming back.”

Eddie jumped up and pulled on his jeans. He was determined to start working the phone in search of auditions, a truck-driving job, a house-painting gig -- anything. He’d been mooching off Hank for too long now, and he didn’t want his host feeling imposed upon. “Hey, Hank. Thanks for -- you know, the treat last night. A piece of ass like Esmeralda made me feel like I was twenty-five again.”

“Whatever I have is yours til you’re on your feet again,” repeated Hank for what seemed like the hundredth time. He threw the locks and opened the door. “Need any spending cash for the day?”

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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