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## PAULA'S OLD TYME PIRATE PHOTOS

### KATIE CORTESE

One minute, we're strolling down George Street and the next Carl's got my wrist in his hand, tugging me into the studio. He goes to the glass-topped desk to get us on the wait list while I check out walls full of all the pirates who've gone before us. There's a couple getting shot right now: the lady in purple satin and black mesh and a plastic dagger at her hip, and the man in short black pants and an orange silk shirt and a stick-on Jack Sparrow moustache.

"Ten minutes," Carl says, and he gets his arms around me from behind, one hand holding tight to his other wrist. I put my hands on top of his, and the ring he gave me last night is cold and loose on my finger. The studio smells of sweat and moth balls and bubble gum, and outside the window people flow by at a tourist's pace, eyeing us like we're rentable by the hour.

"How much?" I say, and hit my new ring against his knuckle. "We have to start saving."

"We will. After this weekend," Carl says, pressing his lips against my neck, and, even though I don't like to PDA all over the place, it's a special weekend, so I let him.

The pictures on the wall are sepia-toned, and Carl points out one with a German Shepherd in a buccaneer's hat with a large, curved brim. The woman in the picture has her blond hair in an eighties ponytail beneath her dark bandana. Her pirate

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Behind the glass counter, a teenage girl with a camera holds up two fingers. "A couple more frames," she says, and snaps her gum. The man standing on the fake prow of the fake boat they've got for scenery draws his fake sword and acts like he's going to run his lady through. But she gets her plastic dagger between her teeth and puts her hands around his neck like she's strangling him. They are both laughing too hard, and the girl with the camera stands there blowing bubbles until they can hold their serious faces for more than two seconds in a row.

"That one'll confuse the grandkids," Carl says.

"If they make it that long," I say. Then the two frames are up, and the couple disappears through saloon-style doors to the dressing rooms. The girl waves us forward. She pulls out a pinkish dress for me, purposely torn over a lacy bodice. Carl gets black-and-white stripes, a wide, yellow scarf at his waist, and a giant hoop earring.

"Are you Paula?" he asks the girl, who stops chewing long enough for a close-mouthed smile. She shakes her head and Carl goes on. "We've been engaged for eighteen hours."

She nods with her eyebrows arched, simulating amazement. We're boring her. This is just her summer job before she goes back to Jacksonville State or U of F, and, to her, we're no different from the last couple she shot: just another picture to cover up another swatch of wall.

"He told me he had a conference out here," I say, as if I can make us real for her in ten minutes or less. "But it was a setup. He hid the ring in my chocolate mousse." I'm grinning at Carl over my shoulder, and his face is red from sun. I want to lay him out here on the floor and draw circles around his belly button with my tongue, but I wonder if even that would set us apart. As it is, the girl slings the heavy camera around her neck and puts us in a tableau with three shoves of her thin, nail-bitten hands. When she's done, I'm standing in front, and he's behind, our faces to the camera, his hands clutching the rip in my dress like the prelude to a rape.

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“For posterity,” he says, a second before the flash goes off, and, though we take ten or twelve more frames, the first is the one we go with. His face is curled in a lunatic sneer, hips thrust forward, sword pointing back, and I am limp in his arms, head lolling against his shoulder, the bready tops of my bosoms bared between his hands. It’s the look on my face, though, that’s priceless, Carl says at the counter when we see our shots on the flat screen. My eyes are open so wide, and my lips are parted with no trace of a smile. “You don’t even look like you,” he says.

And I wonder if that’s what the grandkids will say when they find this photo in a shoebox of mementoes. Carl, young and virile. Me, thin, smooth-faced. Both of our hairstyles long out of date.