

## Aura

By Mel Thompson

Her home was underneath a freeway overpass. This young woman never had a friend long enough to accompany her underneath the structure; they feared her; she was unearthly. She was born with wings -- a winged stranger who was lost.

She did not have a name. But soon adopted one after a drunken vagrant muttered "Aura", after he had "seen" a yellowish-orange glow around her head one night, as she gathered up a pair of shoes next to him.

#

A Chinese restaurant was the place where Aura met Victor -- the unassuming companion who was just as impoverished as she (but at least he had a respectable roof over his head). She was wise enough to cover her wings with a sweatshirt long before wandering into the restaurant looking for food -- a precaution she partook before venturing anywhere in San Francisco.

Victor, who Aura surmised was enraptured by her elegance, even though she was shabbily dressed in stained pants and untied, holey tennis shoes, offered her a seat. Victor had been looking for work that day, but, instead, found her.

She had written a few words on paper then handed it to Victor, as she nuzzled into the seat across from his table: *Name Ora. Need food.*

It had been a long time since Victor had dined with anyone. So he welcomed her and offered her portions of his lemon chicken with steamed rice.

There was not much in the way of conversation because she could not speak. But she opened the gateway of communication for Victor's kind heart and patience.

#

Aura had no other way of showing her gratefulness to Victor but to reveal her true self. So she chose a vacant alley in downtown San Francisco later that afternoon to reveal her wings to him.

"I've never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life," Victor said. "The only thing that comes close was seeing a rainbow for the first time when I was a child. But your wings are touchable. Rainbows are just a mirage."

He touched the brownish-colored wings.

"Can you fly?" asked Victor.

#

Standing on the edge of an isolated beach cliff later that afternoon, Aura looked down at the smiling Victor, who stood firm with his arms outstretched in the sand below. There was a security in his smile. And he would be there to catch her if things went wrong, which was enough for her to propel herself from the edge. And for a moment she glided but couldn't flap her wings. Victor broke her fall, however. And she was relieved...and safe...in his arms.

At that moment, she could not move. It was a stronger feeling of security than his smile from before. And she wanted it to last.

Victor did not seem to want it to end either, she supposed. His eyes were locked on hers with a gaze so strong she had to turn away.

"I want to help you find your origins," he said.

Aura blushed then quickly freed herself from his grasp, rising to her feet, feeling ashamed.

"I'm sorry," Victor said. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. But, please...allow me to make my home your shelter."

#

At midnight, in Victor's one-room, studio apartment, he awakened Aura. She opened her eyes to the brightness of the television screen; Victor's favorite program was about to begin.

"Freak Show" was an outrageous talk show that exploited people who were born with extraordinary talents and deformities.

Aura fixed her sleepy eyes on the screen to see a talk show host introduce a man born with an unusually long torso.

"You're going on that show," Victor said. "Your creator should find you."

Aura was riveted by what she saw; her sleep faded.

#

Dr. Solomon Griffin was determined on being accepted back into The Society of Scientific Research after being barred for an indefinite term. His soon-to-be greatest experiment in the realm of artificial intelligence was cut short, by his illegal method of obtaining a cadaver without permission from his alma mater university. And while sitting on the couch during a late night, he pondered his past transgression and wondered what would get him back into the "society". He needed to be back "home" with his colleagues, since his current home was filled with loneliness and anxiety.

His daily, lifeless activity was of constant channel surfing, while surrounding heaps of paper scribbled with concepts and formulas closed in.

But there was relief! There was a breakthrough! And the breakthrough was utterly inconceivable! The image of a young woman with wings appeared onscreen. She was seated on what appeared to be a talk show panel. Solomon shot up the volume with the remote control, but it would not make any difference, for the image of the lovely creature was "deafening" and seemingly drowned out all sound. He did manage to catch bits and pieces of the dialogue, however. *"She doesn't know who she is...or where she's from,"* a young man's voice said. Then the camera cut to him. Then the audience stirred - probably from disbelief and shock, Solomon concluded. It was obvious to Solomon that the

audience had never witnessed anyone like the winged creature. Yet others yelled out: "Hoax!"

"So she's lost without a home?" the talk show host asked.

"Yes," Victor replied.

Solomon rose from the couch and gravitated toward the screen, dropping to his knees. "Her home is here," Solomon had said aloud then called the number that appeared on the bottom of the screen.

#

Still not fully convinced, Victor took Aura along anyway to meet with the "doctor" who called the talk show claiming to be "her father".

Victor expected a large mansion filled with scientific wonders, but soon realized that Solomon was hanging on to the tightrope of his life with one last finger, when he saw the dishevelment of his apartment. Solomon went as far as to shove the papers underneath the couch pillows in order to make room for he and Aura.

But Victor was not going to sit, nor would he allow Aura; he did not want to become vulnerable to the suspicious doctor. So they remained standing. Plus, it was more convenient for Aura's wide wingspan.

Victor soon removed the sweatshirt from Aura, allowing her wings to bloom. And to Victor's surprise, Solomon reacted far differently from everyone else at the television studio; Solomon remained calm.

"You're not surprised. This is a girl with wings." Victor said.

"You've come home..." Solomon whispered.

"What do you mean by that, doctor?"

Solomon overtook the unsuspecting Victor and pinned him against the wall. Victor saw the doctor unleash the ghastly syringe, followed by piercing to the side of his neck. Soon he was sent him into "temporary sleep".

#

Victor awakened on the pavement near soggy garbage between two buildings. It had rained but Victor slept through it for a dangerously long time: ten hours.

The morning sun assaulted his eyes. Then shrieking paramedic vehicles cut into his eardrums like blades, as they rushed through downtown. He also grimaced from cottonmouth and grogginess as the drug residue lingered.

Yet he had to get moving; he had to find Aura.

But first he had to find where he was.

#

The beach looked familiar to Aura, as she stood next to Solomon, enveloping all that was around her. Not just the landscape, but also - as she recollected - the road leading to it.

"Do you remember all this?" he asked while gesturing to the vast ocean.

Aura still could not answer.

Solomon turned Aura to face his rented beach house.

"That's the house where you were raised."

Aura remained perplexed.

"I'll take you inside. You should remember then."

And as she viewed the external surroundings of the beach in front of his home, he persistently tried to persuade.

"I would bring you out here before dawn and train you to fly. Remember?"

Aura's brain churned but still couldn't recall nor speak in response.

She shifted her focus to a cliff that was in the distance. The height and the edge of the face were distinct; so

recognizable that her heart skipped, causing her to "place herself" atop the cliff with her imagination. And that's when she began to remember. It was the cliff where she leapt from and into Victor's arms!

"That's okay. If you don't remember this place, I'll take you somewhere that you will," Solomon said.

#

With relentless endeavor, Victor rang the doorbell to Solomon's apartment. No answer.

He did not expect them to be there after what Solomon attempted. Victor knew he could have been murdered, but was spared by a debilitating injection.

As he left the apartment complex, Victor pondered the city to be a place of hundreds of thousands, and knew the monumental task ahead of him.

But before he would begin the massive search, his heart signaled for him to return to the beach where he and Aura grew one step closer. He needed a place of solitude; plus, a place to reminisce.

#

Solomon managed to "talk" his way back into The Society of Scientific Research by revealing his "discovery" to the head of inventors (it only took a week for him to convince the chairman).

But he also had to present his find to a committee. And he did so by escorting Aura into a laboratory where a select few of fellow inventors waited.

All was to his advantage. The anticipation was at a fever pitch. And he had not yet pulled off Aura's sweatshirt to reveal her "features". But when he did, there was a collective gasp from the hardened scientists. Each and every scientific hand caressing every inch of Aura's wings soon followed.

Then Aura dropped to her knees.

Solomon noticed the sickened expression on her face as she curled herself into a ball on the laboratory floor. Then Solomon heard -- or, at least, *thought* he heard -- Aura whisper: "Victor..."

#

For the days that followed Aura's "exhibition", Solomon basked in the glory of watching the stunned faces of his colleagues, as he explained his "creation" to a packed auditorium. He spoke of the process of gene-splicing where he extracted DNA from a sparrow and crossed it with genes of an infant female. He further explicated the high level of secrecy surrounding the experiment, which baffled the inventors even more, since they had no clue as to when and where it took place. Nevertheless, word soon spread throughout the "society" -- all the way up to the founder -- and Solomon eventually replaced the head of inventors and restructured the division to focus its efforts on gene-splicing.

Aura, meanwhile, was hidden from the commotion. Solomon had witnessed that she was becoming more distressed by the prying eyes and curious hands of the scientists. He had no choice but to keep her safe and isolated.

#

Aura was suffering from "cabin fever" as she wandered through Solomon's beach house as he was away. She did not know how things worked around the place. She was only given portions of food set out on a series of plates on the kitchen table. There she was instructed to choose whatever she felt like eating from a variety of foods.

But she was not hungry.

All she could do was cry and scratch at the doors, which she was unable to operate.

Then, in the midst of her growing panic, she pulled the curtains and revealed a window facing the beach. She clawed at the glass. An obstruction. Her hand clenched into a fist as her frustration intensified. The soft raps on the glass grew into fierce pounding until the window cracked. Then with one powerful blow, she shattered the entire window, causing instant bloody injury to her hand.

But her body was numb to the stinging pain; freedom was the remedy she sought.

She climbed through the window, slicing her legs on the shards of glass. But she was still unfazed, since the outdoors beckoned her.

#

Aura trotted across the front yard and onto the sand. She was heading toward the ocean and would not stop until she reached it; there she wanted to swim away until she could no more.

She gasped as the cold water struck her ankles. But she continued on, the saltwater reaching her waist and searing the leg wounds. The tips of her wings were facing lasting damage as they were becoming soaked. The frigid water level rose to her chest, ripping the breath from her lungs, as she hyperventilated.

"Aura," a voice bellowed from behind her.

She turned to find Victor sprinting across the sand and diving headfirst into a crashing wave. He emerged with arms flailing as he swam toward her. Then he wrapped his arms around her, escorting her safely back to land.

"The sea is not your place; you belong in the sky. What were you thinking?" he asked with a grin.

Aura nuzzled her face into his neck and embraced him.

"If you could only fly, we'd be back home much quicker; it took me hours to get here. So many trains...so many buses. And you're here...incredible." Victor said.

While Victor guided Aura across the sand, she began veering him toward Solomon's house.

"Who lives there?"

Aura only seized his arm and led him to the broken front window.

#

Solomon's fame plummeted, as quickly as it rose. In the span of twenty-four hours, Solomon's past had tapped him on the shoulder. A rival colleague, who had reported to the committee of Solomon's stolen cadaver, which led to his first ousting, had also debunked Solomon's claims of Aura's creation. The fellow scientist had been conducting human / animal gene-splicing with disastrous results, long before Solomon came forward with Aura; the program was discontinued indefinitely until advanced technology was accessible.

The humiliation and devastation sent Solomon into an emotional tailspin, leading him to near-extinction.

#

"What did he do to you?" Victor asked, becoming angry.

Aura sat on a couch in Solomon's living room holding a notepad and pen, looking downward. The blood on her hands and legs had dried.

"Did he say where he was going? When he'd be back?" Victor asked.

Aura began to write something on the pad but her hands shivered.

"You must be cold," he said.

Victor headed to the bedroom. He emerged holding a few t-shirts then entered the bathroom. From there he returned to the living room with a towel. He draped the towel around her shoulders and bandaged her leg wounds with the shirts.

Thus she was warm. Healed. She was comforted by Victor's care. It was just enough to get her to write again. But she paused after hearing the sound of keys being inserted into the front door, and the doorknob turning.

Solomon entered with his head low; a man demoralized. As he raised it he noticed Aura and Victor, but was not alarmed.

"Victor..." he muttered.

Victor rose to his feet. His fists clenched for a possible confrontation. But Solomon remained non-aggressive.

"You might as well stand down, young man," Solomon said.

Victor relaxed then stood next to Aura. He was her guardian.

Solomon drifted over to the shattered window and touched a bloodied shard of glass with his index fingertip. "I've caused you pain," he said as he faced Aura, while examining the blood on his finger. Then he knelt before her on his knees. "Where are you from?" he asked, gazing into her eyes.

"I thought you created her?" Victor asked.

"I did not," Solomon said, his eyes transfixed on Aura's.

Victor reeled at the unexpected revelation.

"Who are you?" Solomon asked Aura. "Do you have a mother? A father?"

Aura remained expressionless.

"Here, write it down," Solomon said.

Aura struggled to write.

"She doesn't know," Victor said. "Or else she would have told me by now. Don't you realize that?"

"She does know," Solomon said.

Aura wrote a few words then stopped.

Solomon rotated the pad so he could read what was written:  
*Du nott no*

"Then where are you from? Where is your home?" Solomon asked.

After scribbling on the pad, she turned it around to show Solomon: *Victor*

Victor read the notepad then tilted Aura's head upward. There was a glaze in his stare as his eyes met hers.

Solomon detected the exchange between the two. "So be it. It looks like you've found solace in Victor. But you're still a mystery," he said, and then turned to Victor. "If you claim her, then you must protect her."

"I've sworn to that," Victor said.

"You have to understand that men will be looking for her. Scientists now know the truth. They know she's an anomaly of mankind. She may or may not be of this earth. They'll try to find her origin through hundreds of painful tests that may end up killing her.

"I'll throw myself in front of a bullet to protect her."

"Very noble. Just don't expose Aura to the public again...ever."

Victor took Aura by the hand and brought her to her feet. He examined Solomon one last time.

"Why are you letting her go?" Victor asked. "You're a scientist like the rest of them."

"I don't deserve her..." Solomon said.

Victor and Aura walked out the front door, leaving Solomon alone.

#

A ray of spring sunlight cut into the window of Victor's studio apartment.

Aura was already awake, chuckling while watching the beam of light rest on his sleeping face.

She was lying naked next to him underneath a blanket, and began playing with a lock of his hair that draped over his face, thinking of the love they made the night before; a breathtaking, first-time event that she would never forget.

But she had to leave.

She wanted to say goodbye but did not know how. She wanted to wake him and thank him for everything he had done. He kept his promise by protecting her from the eager scientists for many months. Yet the eternal gratitude would be too much for her to write.

So it was time for her to part ways.

She slinked her body from underneath the blanket so she wouldn't wake him. She opened his window then climbed through, peering down from three stories up. She looked back at Victor one final time and wept.

Then she jumped...

#

Awakened by chilly morning air, Victor rolled to his right on the bed expecting to embrace Aura. But his arm fell flat. He sat upright with eyes darting around the empty room.

*A breeze...*

Victor traced it to an open window. He rose from the mattress. Naked, he approached the windowpane.

"Aura?" he called out, looking down at the pavement. But he only saw passing pedestrians going about their way.

Then he was struck with a strange curiosity; he looked to the sky. Clouds had just blocked the sunlight, momentarily tainting the joyous occasion of spring. Soon a flock of birds -- black specks in the foreground of the gray clouds -- soared past Victor's view. As he squinted, he noticed a much larger winged-object trailing close behind. It soon parted from the group then disappeared into the clouds.