

BLENDED

2015



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**SIMPLICITY -
Gary Queen**



PHONE CALLS

Klaus McHendry

November 3rd, 2011

4:12 am

The phone rings in the kitchen. You would like to say that the first time that it rung, you woke up immediately and answered it with some concise, appropriate response such as “Yes? Hello? Who is this? Has something happened?” like you always saw people do in movies. And of course you would have to ask who was calling because you don’t have caller ID six years after you bought the plan and you never really bothered to upgrade.

You regret that in hindsight.

At your feet, an aged tortoiseshell cat stretches her long body before padding her way up to your head to curl directly against your face, fur sticking into your nose and irritating your skin until you wake up with a groan. Distantly, you hear the shrill tone of the still-ringing phone for a moment before it cuts out. You don’t have an answering machine. You push the cat away with one hand and roll over between your tangled sheets.

Five minutes later, the phone rings again. This time, it registers. It’s 4 in the morning, and your phone is ringing.

You don’t remember how you get out of bed or out to the kitchen, don’t remember the displeased yowl the cat made when she was accidentally pushed off the bed in your rush. You’re breathless for some reason when you press the receiver to your ear with a shaking hand.

“Hello?” you gasp into the handset, and your voice is raspy with sleep, so you clear your throat and try again. “Hello?”

The cat strolls out of the bedroom moments after you to rub up against your left leg, meowing plaintively up at you. She skitters away when the phone hits the tile with a sharp *crack* that your downstairs neighbor probably heard. A tinny voice can still be heard emanating from the aged speaker, but you’re not listening to it anymore. The cat returns almost immediately to rub at your other leg, purring almost loud enough to drown out the choked sounds you’re trying so hard not to make.

In one of the neighboring apartments, a rerun of *Wheel of Fortune* starts to play on the television.

November 7th, 2011

2:43 pm

The funeral is attended by a spattering of distant relatives you didn’t know you had, one or two friends from her work, and yourself. The cat was left with a neighbor who kept making little sympathetic noises while you explained why you needed someone to take care of her for a week, just long enough to get everything in order back home. You’re not looking forward to going by there again if and when you ever go back to your apartment. The prospect

of not returning is becoming more and more appealing as you stand beside the grave. Snow dusts your shoulders and hair lightly in the sharp afternoon cold. You hadn't spoken during the service, and that's okay with you. You don't think she would have minded, anyway. Your mother was never particular about things like that. All around you, people are talking quietly about her, and every so often you can pick out a word or two. Nothing concrete though. Words come to your ears in disjointed bursts of *accident* and *drunk driver* and *such a shame* and *with her husband now*. None of them mention you, which is just as well. You don't know these people.

You stay silent and stare at the gravestone before you with red-rimmed eyes, the slab bearing the names of both your father and mother now. You were named after your father, so it's your name that you see above your mother's. It must have taken countless hours to dig a suitable grave out of the frozen ground.

A hand alights on your shoulder gently, and you tense at the touch before turning slightly to glance at its owner. The face that greets you is young, female, and smiling at you with pity, that same damned pity that your pet-sitting neighbor had virtually dripped of when you left. You think she was one of your mother's coworkers, though she couldn't possibly have known you before the funeral. You haven't been back here in six years.

"I'm sorry," the young woman says quietly, giving your shoulder what she probably thought was a comforting squeeze but in reality was mildly painful and made you want to shrink away from her. The *for you* part remains unsaid. Her lips and face are blushed a light red from the cold, and the steam from your breath mingles with hers in the close proximity. "She was a kind woman."

"Yeah," you croak, your voice once again hindered by disuse and from trying not to cry in front of a group of mostly older women.

"She was proud of you, even if you didn't come 'round as often as she would have liked."

"Mmm." A noncommittal sound.

"She had a photo of your graduation on her desk."

That takes you by surprise. "Did she..."

"I always thought you looked cute in that photo. You were smiling."

Oh.

The woman takes her hand from your shoulder as she moves to stand in front of you rather than by your side. She removes a thin glove from one hand (it must be a fashion choice to wear them, you think, because they can't possibly be doing anything to cut the cold) to search her purse.

After a moment she produces a card from her bag, but doesn't offer it to you right away. Before you have time to react, she pulls you against her in a hug that you awkwardly try to find a way to return, eventually settling your arms around her shoulders because she isn't making a move to step away.

"I know this has got to be a hard time for you," she says quietly into your jacket. "But you don't have to go through it alone." You feel her slip one hand down to put the card into your pocket, and you want to be alarmed, but her

body is warm and actually feels really good for some reason, and you have *no idea* why she is taking an interest in you. Especially at your mother's funeral, of all things. You hate to think what your face probably looks like right now.

It feels like forever before she lets go of you, though it couldn't have been longer than thirty seconds or so. Still feeling dazed, you allow yourself a moment to really look at her. Her brown hair frames her heart-shaped face in a way that is both endearing and coquettish in a way that you've never seen before. From what you felt when she hugged you, she is thin and lithe beneath her wool coat, and for a moment, you allow yourself to think about what it would be like to make love to her, feel her beneath you or above you, hear her cry your name.

She kisses your cheek briefly, and the moment is over. She's smiling at you one last time before walking off in the direction of the parking lot, and you can feel yourself rapidly coming back down to earth. You fumble a gloved hand – real gloves, not for aesthetic purposes – into your pocket for the card the woman had placed there, and you take a few unconscious steps away from the grave as your eyes scan the name, the phone number listed on the thin piece of paper.

You stumble to your knees, hunched over, bracing yourself with your hands on the ground and the card fallen, lost somewhere in the snow. Your stomach heaves with a horrid mixture of sudden revulsion and shame and now you're gagging, uncontrolled sobs and lurches in your throat that make you want to disappear into the snow. You wonder how long you would have to lay here to be buried in it.

November 8th, 2011

9:02 pm

It's your third day in the dingy motel outside of town, and you're starting to regret not staying in your mother's house like her lawyer had suggested during the second phone call. There's a small television set that must be a decade old set on the cabinet near the foot of the bed set to some 24/7 news network that you've left running for three days now. You're getting really tired of the newscaster's voice.

Out of the corner of your eye, you spot a cockroach mountain-climbing its way up the wall beside the window. You don't pay it any more attention as you pour hot water into your mug with the instant coffee mix supplied complementary by the motel. On the television the newscaster is rehashing the same story about Christmas shopping statistics for what feels like the thousandth time, and you fight the urge to cut the power cord.

Instead, you raise the mug to your lips, taking a sip of what you are now aware is incredibly low-grade, weak brown water. Disgusted, you set the cup back on the counter next to the hot plate just as your phone begins to vibrate in your pocket.

It's a disposable, some piece of crap you bought before you left so that you had a phone number that you could leave with the cat-neighbor, your employer, and the landlady in case of emergency or if you disappeared, the latter being far more likely. You wonder what's happened with only minor interest. Maybe the cat finally bit it.

You mumble something about ungodly hours and press the receiver to your ear. "Hello?"

"Hello? Hello, is this on?"

“Yes, I can hear you,” you groan, recognizing the sound of your landlady’s voice over the wire.

“Hello? I can’t hear you very well.”

“Jeana, you’ve got to hold the speaker by your ear.”

“What?”

“Jeana. Hold. The. Top. Of. The. Phone. To. Your. Ear.” You’re half-shouting into the receiver now. You’ve had this conversation countless times with her, but you’re patient with her because she gives you a lower rent and occasionally bakes you cookies. You can’t get one without the other.

“What? One second.” A scrabbling sound wrought with static comes across the line, and then her voice is clearer in your ear. *“Okay, I think I got it now.”*

“Good job, Jeana.”

“Thank you.” The sound of papers rustling. *“I’m calling about the rent.”*

“What about the rent.”

“It’s late.”

“I know, Jeana, we had this conversation before I left.”

“What?”

“I left town three days ago, remember? I’m on the east coast.” You rub your eyes sleepily with your free hand. “Do you know what time it is here?”

“The rent is still late.”

“Jeana, I’m on the other side of the country. I can’t pay right now. Look, I just buried my mom, I had to buy plane tickets, and I’m off work for another week after this. I just don’t have the money, and if I did, I couldn’t get it to you for another two days.”

“I’ve got mouths to feed too, y’know.”

“Jeana, I can’t pay. I told you this *when I left*. Please, give me a few more days.”

“It’s a week late already.”

“It’s too late in the evening for this. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“How is it late? It’s only six-o-clock.”

“I’m on the *other side of the country*. Time zones and stuff.”

“*You’re on the east coast?*”

You groan audibly and flip the phone shut, severing the connection. You’re too tired to deal with this right now. You knew you wouldn’t be able to pay rent after the funeral. What with the cost of the arrangements and the plane tickets and the motel, you can barely afford food. Tomorrow, the will is going to be read, and that might just save you. But your credit cards are maxed out and your bank account is bordering empty. You don’t really expect to make it through this.

The television starts to play a short infomercial for padded seat belt covers, and you pour the contents of the coffee mug into the back hatch of the set. The voiceover cuts out with a satisfying burst of sparks followed by silence.

December 25th, 2011

7:38 pm

You walk upstairs with some difficulty. Your left shoe has been rubbing a blister into the back of your foot all day, and though you have yet to check, you think you might be bleeding at this point. Distantly, you are aware that you are tracking wet snow all over the staircase and hallway.

It takes you a minute to remember which room you need to go to. You limp your way gingerly down the hall to pause outside the thin door, wondering why on earth you decided this was a good idea. Through the door, you can hear the sound of people talking, of laughter, and of the clatter of silverware against plates.

You slowly wrap a hand around the doorknob and twist, opening the door a few inches. Inside, a family of six – an elderly couple, a young set of twins, a man, and your former neighbor – are seated around a table laid thick with food and unwrapped gifts. They’re all smiling and laughing and the brother-sister pair are teasing each other about nothing.

You open the door completely, eliciting a squeak from the hinges. You wince as six heads turn at once to look at you, standing in the doorway in your snow-sodden clothes, your hair and stubble dusted with frost.

“Evening,” you say quietly, looking at your feet. “You... you wouldn’t have happened to see my cat, have you?”

The woman stands slowly, the look on her face bordering on incredulous as she approaches you with caution. Recognition sets in completely as you look up, matching her gaze.

“You... you’re back.”

“Yeah, I’m back.”

“It’s been over a month and a half. We thought you stayed on the east coast for good.”

“Well, turns out I didn’t.”

Her face becomes soft, the lines around her mouth and eyes easing for a moment. “Oh, you poor dear... what has

happened to you?”

You clear your throat quietly, looking at your feet again. “If you don’t mind, Isabelle, I’d really just like to have my cat back. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Nonsense. It’s Christmas. Come sit down.”

“Isabelle-”

“None of that,” she snaps, and you fall silent. “...you look terrible.”

“I’ll bet.”

From behind her mother, the little girl dressed in her Christmas best peeks out at you. In her arms is a tortoiseshell cat with grey around her eyes and a bald patch on her tail. The cat purrs contentedly.

Something catches in your chest then, and you feel yourself submit. All your walls come down as you are led back to the table, a chair pulled up to the table and a plate procured from the kitchen cabinet. Conversation has struck back up again at the table, but you can feel the attention on you, the raggedy stranger who has appeared at their door on Christmas day. You try your best to smile around at all of them.

From across the table, the cat picks a path around the plates and dishes to step daintily onto your shoulder before curling around your neck. Heat emanates from her warm, furry body, and you feel somehow like you are home even though you haven’t had a home in weeks.

“What happened?” your former neighbor asks quietly once you’ve settled down. Her eyes are full of concern, her hands folded beneath her chin. “Why aren’t you on the east coast?”

You let out a long breath. “It’s all gone, Belle. The money, the house, it’s gone. My money’s gone. Bank took it all.” You pick at the potatoes on your plate. “I was deep in debt. I lost my job. It’s all gone.” The cat rubs against your cheek, purring softly.

She doesn’t say anything, just looks at you while her family eats and talks around her. There’s something in her eyes that reminds you of your mother, and it tugs at you in a way that you can’t push away. You look down at your plate.

“Merry Christmas, Isabelle.”

“Merry Christmas.”

Out in the parking lot, a disposable cell phone crunches beneath the tires of a truck as it pulls out of its space. It goes unnoticed by the driver. In less than ten minutes, it will be frozen into the slush that accumulates along the white lines of the parking space. You won’t be looking for it.

WINTER BLUES

Adria Cannon

A Woolish layer of fog descends,
Through a silhouette of charcoal limbs,
Reaching for abandon,
As her roots cling perilously,
To a steadfast soil,
Searching for her refuge,
Distending,
Her once relied upon strength,
Swirling grey weight,
Seeping into her circular rings of life,
While her thin miniscule branches,
Peer out above the damp,
And grasp toward the promise of a heaven,
But sag down in a muggy oppression,
Surrendering to the mist,
Settling into her death,
She falls to the carpets embrace,
The forest floor swaddles,
Her once more,
To nourish a new life....



**BEAUTY IN
RUINS -
Beth Morris**

THE DAY MY WORLD CHANGED

Leah Sales

I can remember the events of that dreary cold winter afternoon as if it were the only memory distilled into my brain. I was getting ready to turn five years old, when the world I thought I knew came crashing down. You may ask yourself how a five-year-old girl could feel this way at such a young age and feel so hopeless. That is why I am here, to tell the story from beginning to end. The day I was born would be the day that started the sequence of unfortunate events.

On the morning of February 21st, 1989, my mother was 35 weeks pregnant with a little girl. On a routine drive to work that she made every day, she was in an abrupt and scary car accident. While stopped at a red light, the car behind her did not stop, and she was rear-ended at a speed of 45 mph by the other vehicle. EMT's rushed to my mother's side and prepared to head towards the county hospital in Omaha, Nebraska. Once she arrived at the hospital, the doctors informed her of some news that she was not expecting. My mother's water broke in the wreck, and she would soon go into labor and proceed with delivering me prematurely. By this time, my father had left work and rushed to be by my mother's side. Shortly after my father arrived to the hospital, my mother continued with labor and delivered me on that very same evening.

What would seem like a beautiful moment for most was one that soon turned into fear. Because of my mother delivering me five weeks early, there were complications. My lungs were not fully developed, so I was unable to breathe on my own. I also had to stay on a heart monitor day in and day out. Between my mother having to take care of my sisters and my father having to work, things became even more stressful. My father began to skip sleeping at night to be at the hospital between his work shifts. My mother started to bring my sisters to the hospital just so she could be with me. Everyone was working together as much as possible so I would never be alone. On the morning of March 23, 1989, I was finally breathing on my own and the doctors said I could be on the heart monitor from home. My parents packed me up in my car seat and prepared us for our trip home. It was a time to celebrate, mainly for my parents. They were finally able to take their newborn little girl home.

After being home for several days, things were starting to fall into place naturally. My family was officially a family of five, with me being the youngest of the three children. On March 28, 1989, just five days after returning home from the hospital, my family would suffer another tragic life-altering event. My father worked the second shift at work, which was 6PM to 4AM. His shift had finally come to an end, and he was on his way home to catch up on some much needed sleep. Between taking care of a premature daughter and trying to keep up with work, exhaustion was beginning to weigh heavy over him. As he was driving home, he veered into the opposing lane and was struck head on by another vehicle. Even he did not realize how exhausted he had become. According to the coroner's report, the driver of the vehicle that struck him was under the influence of prescription drugs and alcohol. My father's life came to an end that cold March night. The saddest part of it all is he left three little girls and a widowed wife at the young age of 21 behind. My mother had to cease and overcome every obstacle she had in front of her all on her own. Since I was only five weeks old I had no understanding of this heartbreak or what had happened. Eventually one day, everything would come to light, and I would learn the truth on what happened to my father.

As time passed my mother remarried a wonderful man, a man I believed to be my father. I even shared the same last name as him, so naturally to me he was my father. At this time I was still unaware that my biological father had passed away. During the year of 1994, I was attending a private Catholic school, and I was enrolled into preschool. I remember the day so clearly—memories I will never forget. It was parent teacher conference day, a day I was so excited for. My teachers were going to tell my parents how good and well behaved I was. I was excited for this because I knew I would get a treat for being so well behaved for the teachers. Normally students did not participate in the meetings, but for this one I was going to be joining the adults, I felt like the luckiest kid in the world!

To my surprise the meeting was not what I thought it was going to be. As I walked into my teacher's office, there sat my principle, teacher, and my parents. I automatically thought I was in major trouble, but couldn't understand why. My mother asked me to sit down next to her because all of the adults had something important to talk to me about. My father began to speak first, and explained how much he loved me. The next part came when my mother proceeded to share the story of my biological father and what had happened to him five years prior. I was so confused how this man sitting next to me could say he's not my real father, and that my real one in fact passed away. I was so confused on why all of this was happening and why no one ever had told me before. The teachers and my parents tried to explain it was because I was so young and that everyone wanted to wait until I was old enough to understand. The meeting was to also tell me that since my birth certificate said my last name was Sales, I would no longer be going by Leah Roy anymore.

Everything was changing so fast and my world felt like it was over with. After the meeting was over, my parents checked me out of school so I could have the rest of the day to think about the news I just received. It was hard to take in and understand why all of this happened and why no one ever told me. It was something I had to learn to deal with as I continued on through my childhood and now my adulthood. Even though I am not that five-year-old girl anymore, I still question why him, and hopefully one day I will have my answer.



WEIGHTLESS – Athena Zinga

In the center of this photo lies a woman covered in only her most private areas by the red, white, and blue colors we pledged to every morning as children before school. She seems to be careless and chillingly calm as she appears to be traveling down a rushing body of water into the depths of darkness. She is surrounded by sleek yet jagged rocks that guide her down her mysterious path. The outer edges of her chosen surface are thick green forests of moss that abruptly end at the banks of the water. Vivid blues illuminate around her against the shadows she so effortlessly aims for. She seems to be at peace with herself and the elements around her. Greeting her at the end of her deathly passage is an opening kissed by sunlight creating an inviting glow around the edges of the water. She seems to be a symbol of serenity, freedom, and mindless peace.

**SPECTATORS IN A
HAUNTED ROOM**
– Maria Warns



Upon my awakening in this nearly ancient bed, wood splintering from the posts on all sides, I prepare myself to sift through the garbage my mind spawns every night. The horrible burden it is—oh, why must these wretched things be used? I carelessly reach for it above my head, snatching it from the wall. The horrible things I've seen because of this, the beasts who come out every dawn, yet nothing helps me bear them. I put my hands on the dreamcatcher—no, this is a nightmarecatcher—and throw myself into misery.

I remain on my bed—my door bursts open with a booming sound—darkness, flowing robes, a man with no face. Floating towards me—reaching one bony hand to pull back its hood—screams in my ear, I have no way out. I shut my eyes but I can still see. I don't want to... make it go away—and I feel my soul stripped from my body.

I'm in an alleyway—neither end in sight, who could build such a thing? Rain coming down—people in yellow coats approaching from both sides—I hear the click of a switchblade. Faces in shadows, my heart beats faster—I feel as though an ant surrounded by giants. Running doesn't help—people seem like a concrete wall. My back—God, my back—searing in pain, blades in my gut—I collapse. Laughs echo around my dying ears.

I'm driving a car—just a car? Nothing around me happening—not yet, but only a matter of time—on a freeway, others rushing by every second. I notice my family in the other seats—talking, laughing—oh, I dread so deeply the moment this nightmare reveals itself. I'm in control—which makes it so much worse when it goes wrong—my arms move like the air is water—I can't grip the wheel—I can't follow the road. Panic fills the vehicle—it careens into traffic—my body jolts forward—broken glass falls into my face. I see blood spattered against the dash.

I'm here again—in whatever my mind believes hell should be—why must it be the same? Why do I have to endure this same nightmare, snatched away from my mind in the middle of the night? Flames lick the sides of my hands—the ceiling drips with boiling liquid—how even demons would live here is unimaginable. Yet they approach me—slowly, inching—claws sticking through the fire—their features indistinguishable. I can't move—I would burn—demons on all sides—their grip around my neck. I feel a snap, but I never die—I want to leave—but I can't.

I held the dreamcatcher in my hands. Oh, what a clever mind I had—a nightmare disguised as real life. Who would've noticed but me—I knew it all too well—tied strings, leather, all the catcher's details. It was wrong, the clever old thing—it thought it was so bright trying to trick me—now I had the upper hand. No repercussions for this in a dream—I tore the fragile strings out of their knots—one by one—angry at it, angry at the people who made them—ready for the evil to show itself now. The damned thing never did.

I held the dreamcatcher in my hands. Paranoia set in. I frantically checked its details, sighing in relief, as it seemed real. My shaking hands hung it back up on the wall. My mind spun; was it trying to control me now? Would it have trapped me within it? I couldn't bear the thought any longer. I didn't trust it from the start, and I certainly didn't trust it now. I walked out of the room, my wife happening to open her door across the hall at nearly the same time. I greeted her first.

She said good morning in return, and asked how my dream recall was.

I told her it went fine, clearly a lie given what I went through. It was too much of a burden to carry for me to explain what occurred. I asked about her recall.

She told me it was bearable. Not like some of the other times. She still didn't understand why we had to do it.

I told her the truth, as I always did when she asked. They were trying to suppress us. Render us powerless, like pawns to be toyed with. No matter the threat, I stood resolute in my vow to protect my family.

**MARIONETTE –
Christa Guzman**



Christa Guzman
MARIONETTE

Dreams
Help me build my life
Because talking to the walls gets lonely
And I'm only a boy
Trapped in a man's body
If I can even be considered so

Dreams
Help me live my life
Because walking through the walls gets lonely
And I'm only a girl
Trapped in a woman's body
If I can even be considered so

Consider me
When all they see
Is a prideless project
When they look at me
As though transparently
Through black and white eyes

Beauty
Help me love this life
Because stalking through motions gets lonely
And we're only orphans
Lost in the needle's haystack of ideologies
If it can even be considered so

And we're only
And we're lonely
If we can even be considered so...



**OLD
DEMON -
Stephen
Voyles**

I step onto the curb and see a window pane. It's nearly full with writing. Scribbled bits of advertisement and promotion. Outdated and new posters stuck up on the door, the whole thing rimmed with peeling red paint. There are paintings leaning in the window that seem to pulse with hidden fire. I can't make out anything behind the shining glass. Blinding me. I try to walk by, wrought iron pieces dance through my memory and I can't remember where I saw them before. Where they are in my disorientation.

I stumble over a metal dog, sitting staring across the street, intently focusing on something. Its eyes seem to pulse with the same fire. As I hit the door, it falls open and envelopes me. I can't seem to catch my balance, and I fall for what seems for ages. I hit the floor only a second later, its color is somewhere between red, brown, and gray. Indiscernible and not able to be comprehended. Colors flow around me and the scents that touch my nostrils are confusing; burning and swelling in my lungs.

I can taste sweat and coffee, old paint and mildewed wood. The scent of long dead couches still in use sends a shiver down my spine. Incense burns my throat and eyes.

I can see the red walls, the yellow walls. I see the couches, covered in doodles. I see paintings with no end and no beginning on the wall. Graffiti style legs and arms twist around me, forcing me to look at terrifying images. Images from troubled imaginations. Angst and terror. Old computers hang from the walls as if they stopped trying to stop the insanity that seeps up through the floors and from the couches. The paintings wrap around me, twisting and turning my mind and senses beyond recognition.

The couches would sink forever if you sat, wondering where they've been before. What's been done on them. Sweat, blood, spilled drinks. Covered now, with drawings. Writing in a language and font you could never understand. Leering down at me are so many twisted faces. So many muscles and bones dangling from loose jaws and anorexic chests.

My eyes water and my nose runs. I try to swipe them with my sleeve, and the world tilts. I miss and nearly blacken my eye as I roll onto my back, lying flat on the floor and looking straight up at the wall that is now at my right. It bends over me, flashing disturbing images from maudlin minds that flutter by as I stare in horrified fascination.

Out of the deep, oozing red paint, comes a painting. Three pigs fit the canvas, backdropped with black, drips and swirls of paint with no order or shape. No form. Amorphous. I dread it nearing.

The three faces that look down at me from their side wall sneer, their lips rippling with the effort. Cigarette loll at the edges, as ships roll on a turbulent sea. Their pupils are dark red, burning with hate, searing with disgust, and smeared with glassy impatience, lack of intelligence. The shapes their eyes take make me shake to the core. Some moment wide and terrifying, next instant narrowed, snarling. Sometimes both. Their eyelashes wipe about as their eyes snap open and shut in a beating rhythm. Their looks dart and flick. The teeth rot out of their mouths as I watch, they fall beside me in a macabre tempo of death trap metal music. Shrieking lyrics are mangled.

I try to stand again. I get only to my knees, before a winged angel dives toward me, in the last

instant morphing into a deadly devil with winged sandals, holding fresh skeletons from the talons extending as fingers from the first knuckles.

I close my eyes and try to shut out the noise. Try to block away the pain from the scrapes and scars. I crawl, an infant once more, towards a rectangle of sanity. I push pathetically on the door as tears roll down my cheeks.

I fall down, my elbows folding into the spongy floor. The door crumbles under my weight and I collapse out onto the street. Plain gray concrete, a tree nearby swaying slightly while a crow prowls around the base. The bird sends me a knowing look as I lie on my stomach, trying to fight the nausea and the questioning stares of passing people, before it flies off over the old Victorian buildings.

I catch my breath and my sanity. I stand shakily, wiping the tears from my eyes.

I straighten my suit and glance back at the beckoning, shimmering doors. I turn firmly away.

I straighten my tie one more time and take the first step away from the odd place. A smile curves my lips. A single phrase whispers from me.

“Not my world,” I murmur, striding away, never again to come back.

WE ARE A BATTLEFIELD – Rose Robles





IMPRISONED BY EXPECTATIONS – Langley Davis

A WOMAN

Alisa Creech

A Woman's Place

beneath his feet

A Woman's Pride

trampled on and undermined

A Woman's Hope

shielded in her soul

A Woman's Scorn

rage of unparalleled cold

A Woman's Love

Man's rib ripped from his chest

A Woman's Future

written by the rest

A Woman's Life

entwined with strife

A Woman's Goals

fictional & frustrated in outward minds

A Woman's Role

ever redefined

A Woman's Home

Locale of no complaints

A Woman's Ribbon

the snippets she's given

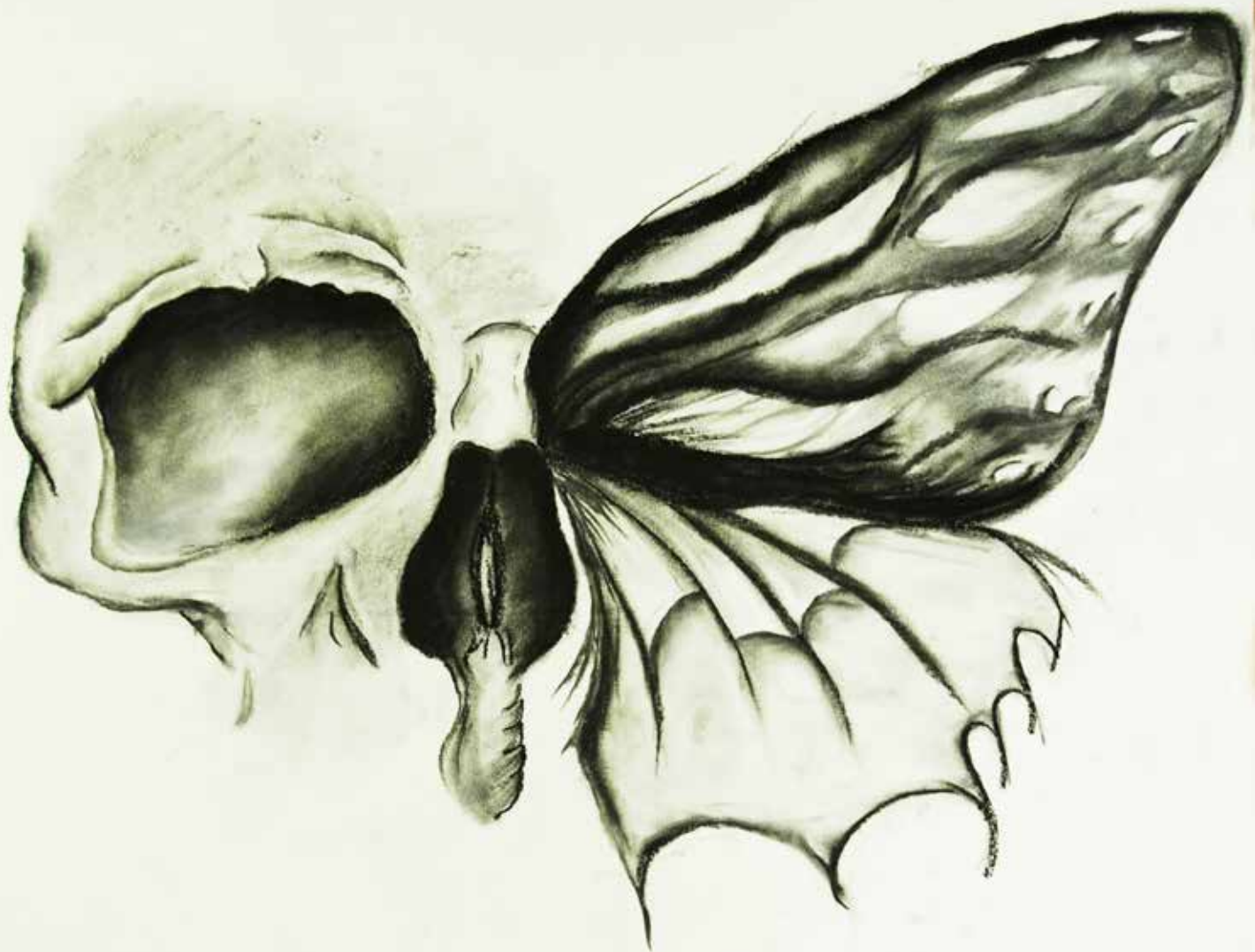
A Woman's Thanks

God's whisper of her worth in her ear, smile endeared

Inner girth plateaus ribbed with her sows,

When shall Woman Reap?

Creatively, Intuitively, Completely...A Woman.



STRENGTH IN STRUGGLE – McKenna Badkin

Why do I stand among them? Where All
My dearest are trapped resting for eternity? Of
All of the places I call home, the cemetery? My
Memories are drawn here. My precious Memories
Love and loathe it, despise yet dance, they Are
Cherishing their smiles, vivid flashbacks are Hiding
But they yearn to yell and whine. To be known Within
And without me. Learning how to hold and let go of My
Treasured hopes, secrets only the dead know, my Heart

Can only handle so much grief, grief a gruesome groan, But
The pain is my method of coping, and it is My
Escape from my conscious. My Conscious
Is insane, it forces me to cry, forces me to Still
Hallucinate that they are alive. That their Echoes
Whisper and jeer in my exhausted ears, my deaf eyes To
Believe that apparitions are solid, vocal. I know that is Not
True. I wish I could thrive inside untruth, to not Hold
So securely to those memories. No, don't give my heart Back.

All of my memories are hiding within my heart,
But my conscious still echoes to not hold back.

GLASS AND COPPER BRACELET – Gordon Lindsay



I am an immigrant; being inaccurately labeled as abandoned by my parents has been my exportation. When I was four, strangers came to my home and removed me. I left my family and culture to arrive in the city of tongues. I screamed when I was held, touched, and bathed by people I did not know. I was the new infant with caveman communication. Nobody learned my language, but I soon realized that I had to learn the one surrounding me for them. I had to survive. I had to make it.

I embraced the new language by disregarding the yearning in my heart for the familiar. Each day I would replace a common Romanian word for that of an English one. I listened to music, counted, or read a book to practice my ABC's. I was an English parasite! I was improving closer to my ticket of salvation: acceptance. I stopped rolling my R's and I had forgotten how to. With each new accomplishment I was forgetting my past and leaving it to get buried by time. The fading of my native tongue was something the people who adopted me were proud of. I was becoming Americanized and that journey was palpably enshrouding me.

One day, the woman who had adopted me had devoted her time to fixing my hair. She loved braids. She did not do this often, but she styled my long and dark Rapunzel hair. I was told to put on my red velvet hand-me-down dress with tights that matched the lacy white stitched on bib. The texture had always made me feel like I was enveloped in a cat's tongue. My cat enjoyed licking me though I could not tolerate his itchy, scratchy, and unbearably uncomfortable tongue. My spine would always tingle with the afflictive feeling. We left the house and piled into the gigantic used old van with fourteen seats. This day, the foreign children would go on a field trip. I was not certain of where we were heading. So much was unsaid. I was wondering and not comprehending. Are we going to the church? We had soon passed St. Mary's. Why was I in my best outfit I wore on Sundays? My mind envisioned multiple childlike scenarios, but I was not able to confirm any of this. I only knew it was important.

It was sunny when we left but it was pouring when we arrived. The rain was the visual of my inside turmoil. I was not surprised that the Oregon weather had changed so drastically, so thoroughly unpredictably. I shoved open the heavy metal door and apprehensively protruded my feet out of the vehicle. I had forgotten my jacket and did not want to ruin my fuzzy dress. My oldest sister grabbed my hand and we dashed in the direction in which we were being taken. The building was a giant and I was just a germ diseasing it. A dome embraced the roof. Pillars were supporting the sturdy infrastructure as we entered the miniature White House.

Inside the people shuffled about. Men wore suits, carried briefcases, and checked their pagers. Women were in pinstriped skirts and blazers. I was surrounded by sophistication and my nylons were ripping. I could not stop staring as we dodged the on comers. Only the strongest survived here. A stop at a long desk instructed us on furthering our dwelling down the tunnel. I was Alice peering through the looking glass. We proceeded under arched doors and were greeted by the sourest of men. Everybody was talking in a manner that was so formal and yet so equivocally ancient. A stern man with a wrinkly face asked a couple of questions to my clan before separating me, the weakest imposter, from the herd. I was taken to a room no bigger than my bedroom when the questions started. Before I knew it, I was asked to

raise my right hand. I was statuesque but I had the urge to pee.

He asked me if I understood why I was there. Where was I from? What country am I in now? Who were my parents? Did I promise to uphold the laws and protect the US? They thought I was a terrorist! I examined all of my questions. Exposed, I bore a hole in the American flag portrayed in the corner of the room before I answered each one. I was worried that I would be locked away. I was even more worried about being shipped away. In the court shows I watched on TV, if the people answered incorrectly, they got punished. What if I was going to get punished too? I must have said something right because prune face smirked at me. His coworker peeked out from behind him and did the same. The butterflies in my stomach stopped fidgeting so consistently but the spotlight was again on me when I was rushed to get my picture taken. Smiles were predominant when I saw everybody again. I thought they all looked like jack-o-lantern grimaces.

My almost nine-year-old self became a new person that day. I was no longer an alien. I had surpassed that label by becoming a legal citizen. I didn't realize that I would forever lose my Romanian citizenship. I didn't realize that I would have to smile when outsiders would question me exponentially when discussing my past. I didn't realize that I would someday have an identity crisis and wonder who I was!

The people who adopted me could control their contentment no longer. Talks of home ended. Home was permanently nonexistent from that day forward. It was a fantasy I dreamed about. I was fully American now and had no need to talk about my past any longer. I was given equal rights that day, but I felt cheap. This is what I had spent all of my time preparing for? There were no fireworks ignited inside of me. I thought I would feel different, but I only felt unworthy of this prize. What I got so easily, I wanted to give to somebody who wanted it out of their own accord. My choice was thrust onto me. I wanted to rip out my braid, peel the sticky tights off of me, and run away. I didn't know where I would go. I thought back to my Romanian family who wanted me to have this life. I wished they could have had it instead. I didn't want to be the sacrificial lamb that cleaned their guilt and took it away. I didn't want to replace my life with something else, something none of us understood. My gift was Pandora's Box. The darkness cloaked me as we headed out for the celebration of my new life.

MTOTO - Caley Riggs



The King's Gate

Upon a massive cliffside, a castle stands, isolated. Its dark walls and great towers seem to appear as black as a crow's feathers, while the sky is a dark blue in sync with the dark storm clouds. Lightning flashes, and the heavy rains fall. The tallest tower in the center of the castle looks as if it is so tall, its tip is above the clouds, above the rain. Below, the gates, composed of some unknown metal, are closed. The castle is isolated.

There is a large gate leading to the castle, stretched out above a deep abyss where the castle stands, a plateau that looks like an island in an ocean without water. Near the castle gates, two golems wait, motionless and lifeless. Perhaps they were once used to open the massive gates, for surely, no mortal man could push them open or operate any sort of device heavy enough to budge them. There is no life outside the gates. Inside, the grand halls are nearly empty but not shy of grandeur. Hardly a soul occupies these walls. Perhaps the king has left, on a far away journey. Wherever he is, he will not return soon.

The halls and stairways of the castle seem sad and abandoned by all except the few knights who aimlessly guard it from an absent enemy. They roam the halls, without making a sound or wandering too far from their posts, as if they walk in their sleep. There are not many of them left. Most of the occupants of the castle are mere golems, free of their own will, and waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Perhaps there is some secret buried within these grand halls, something that nobody knows is there. It does not matter to those inside, for their minds are not their own anymore. They are lifeless, but wandering. Mortal, but hollow. Indeed, there is a secret here that the knights do not remember. There is passage under the castle to another place, somewhere protected that is meant to block any that would do the world harm. But nobody can come to uncover what this castle hides. The world is dying, and the castle is isolated.

The Old Asylum

High above the mortal world, hidden in the mountains, an old, crumbling ruin stands overlooking the world. Within its walls are kept those who were cast away. Rotting like corpses, the soulless beings wander the halls or weakly beat against their jail cell doors. Their minds have wasted, and now there is nothing left. Some of the prisoners lay curled up in the old halls that were once lit by dim torches. Nobody cares for this place anymore, nor those inside it. The place is in ruins, as are the minds of its inhabitants.

The breaking rock that once formed the strong walls are withering away to dust, as there is nothing left to see to the well being of the place. Souls once cherished and loved now waste away here, without any awareness of the dead world around them. Rats scurry about in the floors and in the cracks in the walls. Their minds are more intelligent than those of the wasted humans scattered about. Some of the small furry creatures feast upon the living corpses like people, who have no perception of the little beasts. Outside, the air is occasionally occupied by the crows who live in the region. Unlike the deserted ruins below them, they thrive in their world. The asylum waits in silence for an eternity, for someone to emerge with enough sanity to restore himself and rekindle the world.

The Great Cavern

Beneath the ground is a place that has been untouched by mortal men for ages. It is a sacred, bright place, lit by the luminous flowers and mushrooms that emerge from the shallow waters that cover the path. One must look closely to see where there is ground beneath the water and where there is a bottomless pit. The massive cavern has a soothing feel to it. The flowers glow eternally, emitting a comforting blue light. The creatures of the place are scarce, and consist mostly of festive fireflies. But there are more than fireflies here.

Throughout the cavern that extends further than the eye can see, a voice can be heard. It is a girl. She is singing. Her voice is not eerie, but comforting. She seems to encourage the fireflies to emerge from their hiding places, and she offers peace to any suffering creature. She sings in a language that nobody can understand, not even her. Her beautiful voice competes with that of another, an accursed being that wishes to counter the comfort of the girl's singing. It's voice is only heard near the end of the cavern, a dark place where there is little life, and thus, little light.

The cavern is a place of sanctuary for the weary, a comfort for those who are burdened with death. Those who enter remain there forever, kept calm by the sweet voice of the girl. However, some wander too far away, and are driven mad by the voice of the accursed being who lurks in the shadows. Perhaps a mortal soul will find its way down to this place and silence the dreaded voice.

The Archive

The deeds that took place in this massive, twisting place will haunt the world forever. It is a well kept structure. The subjects of experimentation roam the halls, some simply deformed, while others have been turned to abominations. Despite the dangers posed by these creatures, the Archive has long been a destination for those who seek the knowledge held within it. There are perhaps thousands of book shelves, each stocked with the findings and records of a being once driven mad by the weight of knowledge and solitude.

So far, none have entered the Archive and returned. The scientist is still there, everlasting, in search of something to ease his ailing mind. But even in this vast place, there is nothing. Inside, there are long halls, great elevators, and even staircases that can be moved with the operation of their respective levers. With each position, they can lead to separate destinations. Much of the Archive is built like a maze, meant to trap those who wander inside until they can be collected and subjected to whatever the scientist requires. He is so ancient that nobody can remember his name, or if he is even human. Some whisper that he has discovered the secrets of immortality and hides in the walls to keep his knowledge to himself. Others dismiss the tale of the Archives as a tale meant to keep children from wandering from home. Where did this scientist come from? Why does he lock himself away, and what does he want? Perhaps if you are brave, you can seek the answers for yourself.

The Journey

A man travels through the forest, pushing on against the rain and wind. His sensitivity to the biting cold and the sharp branches that scratch his face have numbed long ago. He left days ago, and has not rested since. Where is he? What has happened to his family? He can't recall the answers. All he can process is his desire to move forward, and so he does. A glimpse of memory flashes in his mind. An image of a woman...and a child. Where are they? Who are they? He can't remember. Maybe he will find answers when he reaches his destination, wherever that may be.

Above him, lightning flashes and thunder roars as if the gods themselves scream from the heavens. The darkness of night hide the clouds, but they are surely there. The wet trees sway in the wind, and occasionally, a branch is torn away. The man walks through a large puddle, and before him, one such branch falls. It misses him by mere inches, and the weight would have crushed him if he were struck. But this miraculous luck does not matter to him; he must push on.

Finally, the forest begins to thin. One would have expected this man to have fallen and succumbed to exhaustion long ago, but somehow he pushes through, driven by something unnatural. Maybe he will find the woman and the child. Are they a dream or a memory? He can't remember. His cloak and garments have been soaked through completely, and no longer have any warmth to offer. The weight of his clothing is massive now due

to the water in them, but he carries them as if they were dry. He can see the end of the forest ahead. It doesn't seem long before he reaches the treeline. He looks out upon the world. Suddenly, the clouds disperse and the sun shines through them. The last raindrops fall, and he begins to dry. Birds sing, and the grass looks warm and inviting with the river cutting through the landscape. On the other side is a small house. He runs to it, running through the lazy water that only reaches his knees. He throws open the door and rushes inside. Perhaps he will find his family here, for now he remembers, but the house is empty. It appears abandoned. Spiderwebs occupy every corner, and a thick layer of dust covers every surface. The man takes a quick look around, confused. He walks to the front door, and opens it. He sees a large, dark forest in front of him. It is raining heavily, and the ground is like one massive pit of mud. The man steps out into the rain, and ventures into the forest. He looks around. What is this place? He can't remember.

The Bustling Cathedral

A large, man-made island of stone rises from the ocean waters, connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge. Upon this stone island is a massive cathedral, its gothic structure soaring into the sky. People occupy the bridge constantly, coming to and from the to the building. Those who go towards the cathedral have prepared themselves for long hours of prayer. Those who are leaving are satisfied with themselves, confident that the gods will grant them another month of prosperity.

The cathedral is guarded by powerful giants that stand several feet above the heads of the normal men and women, and they wait, armored and armed, for someone to dare defile the house of the gods. Inside the open gates is a large sanctuary. Scores of people sit on the benches, stand off to the side, or kneel before the altar. They offer donations of gold and silver, priceless pieces of jewelry, and expensive artifacts that were passed to them from their ancestors. The Great Magnus stands behind the altar, looking upon the people, grinning as they witlessly give up their greatest physical possessions, blinded by the lies that they were told about the power of the nonexistent gods.



**NATIVE
AMERICAN
EXPRESSION-
Carlos Pablo**

UPON A HILL

Andrew Pierce

Perched upon a hill
where the wind brings no sudden chill
Sitting in solitude
where nature pronounces her murmur
The Sun shines evermore against the glowing horizon line
Then nights sky brings a lullaby
Such a song is graced on the hill

Seasons change with the colors
A grey withering is but a point in time
soon following a green blossoming and a fragrant chime
Coming full circle, never ceasing

Tis a distant cry of a crow that brings forth a sudden sadness
And to me such a sound will always be but a glimpse of this
Reality that runs through the soil
seeping into the soul
Painting a picture from this hill
that is sublime yet not whole

Mornings taste is bittersweet
Yet another day for me to meet
What will this new day unveil?
I sit and wonder
Will there be fire will there be thunder?
Will there be gold will there be new life?

My answer is yes for I have seen it all on this hill.
A silk and safe cocoon revealing a moth one day
Then a hurricane from the flap of its wings the next
The fresh sweet smell of spring rising at dawn
Swiftly encompassed by smoke at dusk

Cassandra had finally gotten away from her parents, especially her father. She had a job, but nowhere to live, so she rented a motel room on a monthly basis. It had a bed, TV, and dresser. It also had a tiny kitchen, as well as a bathroom. The first night she lay in bed, pondering on what had gotten her to this point.

She was the oldest of five children born to alcoholic parents. They never seemed to care much what their children did. Cassandra started hanging around with an older boy. They had sex often and had even agreed to someday marry each other. As Cassandra remembers it she must have been around six years old. Cassandra had fond memories of taking care of her siblings. She often made oatmeal for them. It was the only thing she knew how to cook. To this day she makes the creamiest oatmeal. Her baby sister, Barbie, use to wait for her every afternoon to get off the school bus. She always called Cassandra by the name Sissy. There were many times when she hid in the bedroom with her siblings, trying to calm them, when their parents would fight. Often Cassandra's parents fought. Not just verbal, but physical fighting. It seemed to her they punched each other every day. She remembered them fighting one time with butcher knives.

The family moved often. One time they picked up a hitchhiker that sexually touched Cassandra. Her parents were drunk too often to take notice, or care. He rode with the family for quite a while. Once she walked in on this hitchhiker and her mother having sex, while her father was watching. Cassandra was beginning to think sex and love were one in the same.

When Cassandra was eight years old her family moved to Gallup, New Mexico. Her parents worked at the bus terminal and left the children with a sitter, a lady who had a teenage son. One time the lady had to go to the grocery store and left the children with her teenage son. He tied the bedroom door shut with himself and Cassandra inside. He asked her a question in a language she didn't understand, but could tell it was a question, so she said yes. Then, in English, he told her to take her pants off. She promptly untied the door, gathered her sisters and brother, and walked to where their parents worked. Their mother took them back to the sitters. It seemed to Cassandra she didn't believe, or didn't care, about what had happened. Or maybe this was normal.

Cassandra didn't know how long they had lived in Gallup when a day came that would change her, her brother and three sisters lives forever.

It started out one Easter morning. Her mother had not come home so her father left the kids with a sitter while he went looking for her. Cassandra remembered that her father had beer in his pockets and the sitter tried to get him to leave it behind. But he wouldn't. He didn't come back. Cassandra wasn't sure how long he'd been gone. Some days later, maybe weeks, she and her sister, Patty, came home from school to find out that the sitter had called the authorities and they had taken their siblings away. Later, they came back to pick up Cassandra and Patty. They took them to have ice cream and then to where they had taken their sisters and brother. It was a juvenile home.

At the juvenile home they cleaned up the children and fed them. Cassandra remembered there was a girl there who would take a drink from her glass, but instead of swallowing it right away she would

chew it. The drink would drool down her chin.

There were two bedrooms, one for the girls and one for the boys. At bed time all the children would gather in one room where the house mother would read them a bedtime story. One boy and Cassandra would always lay together, playing with each other. No one seemed to notice.

The day came when one of the house mothers packed up the few belongs the children had. A man picked them up and they went to the airport where they flew to Michigan. New Mexico was the kind of state that tried to get rid of foster children, if at all possible. Since they were from Michigan that is where they sent them. They were met by their grandparents in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Cassandra thought about the bottle of 'cough syrup' that Grandpa use to keep under the driver's seat. They spent the night with them. The next morning two men picked the kids up. As one man drove, the other passed out toys. Cassandra thought about the little doll that she and Patty both wanted. Because Cassandra was the oldest it was given to her. She learned to hate that doll. She wished she had let her sister have it. One by one the driver dropped the children off at foster homes, until there were only Cassandra and her sister, Terri, who was two years younger. Some years earlier the children had been taken from their parents but given back. The family that had Terri back then wanted her again. They agreed to take Cassandra until the state could find a family that wanted her. She was very much aware that this was just a temporary home. No one wants an eight year old.

Eventually, the state went to court to have the children permanently taken from their parents. Cassandra, because she was the oldest, had to take the stand. She told the truth about what her parents were like and the state won their case. She often blamed herself for that.

Almost from the beginning, Cassandra was being touched by the foster father in her private areas. She sort of felt like it was wrong but she liked the way it made her feel.

When Cassandra was almost ten years old the foster family decided they wanted to adopt her, Terri, and another foster child, Karen, who was six years older. Finally! A family wanted her. She felt like she belonged somewhere. She had a new mother and father. But the father kept touching Cassandra, until eventually he tried having sex with her. They said they loved her, so sex and love must be the same. The older Cassandra got the more she felt what was happening to her was wrong. She cried often and tried to never be left alone with her father. Her sister, Terri, saw her crying all the time and eventually said something to their adopted sister, Karen. Somehow, Karen knew what the problem was and told their mother. That's when all hell broke loose.

It seems her father had done the same thing to Karen and the mother knew about it. She had stopped it and that's when he started getting more aggressive with Cassandra. The mother, in private, told Cassandra that it happened with Karen, now with her, and if it happened with Terri she was going to leave our father. What a thing to say to a fourteen year old. At the same time it seemed to Cassandra as though her mother blamed her for what had happened. For weeks she went on and on about Cassandra not saying anything to her. She made it sound like, because she hadn't said anything, it was her fault. When the father started up again with Cassandra, she stayed quiet. In her mind a divorce was the worst thing that could happen.

Cassandra continued to live at home. She made it a point to never be alone with her father, but there were times when that was impossible. She fought him with everything she had when he tried

forcing himself upon her. He said if she said anything he'd kill her. She never really believed that but she continued to keep her mouth shut. After she graduated from high school she left.

Now, here she lays in this bed, thinking about how things were and how they could have been different. Now that she's older she realizes she should have said something to someone, anyone. Divorcing her father was probably the best thing for her mother and herself. But she didn't. She's on her own now. She knows she'll still have contact with her parents. She feels she owes them that. After all, they took her in when no one else wanted her.

Love and sex are not the same. Or are they?

SCARED-
Gary Queen



“You cannot walk. You are not excused from—”

The *end* button had looked promising, and, with a hasty, deliberate press, it delivered. I flung the TracFone into the passenger seat where it impacted with a barely audible noise. The vehicle was silent. A calming, subtle wind pressed itself lightly against the doors and windows. Pines bordered the left edge of the road and a steep decline the right. Two miles stood between my front drive and me. My head started to swirl while the thumping in my chest increased swiftly into an erratic fast-tempo.

“Ugh,” I sighed loudly with a lingering groan. It eased the tension slightly, and my heart rate attempted to drum steadily. “What have you done? What have you done?” I repeated with a distraught, absent-minded calmness, my eyes stapled to the winding stretch of grey.

They will not let you walk. An accidental notion escaped the barricade around my mind. It came as no surprise, though. I knew it. I knew it all along; I just did not want to accept it. *Who are you to put Andrea in danger? What about Violet? You spineless pushover!*

My hands squeezed tighter around the leather of the steering wheel until my knuckles bore a distinct similarity with the lines on the road. *How the hell could you have done this? Who are you? Were you sincerely that desperate?* I let out a grating growl. As my jaw clenched and unclenched with frightening tension, fear drove me to grit my teeth. A watered-down glass of cranberry juice could have been my face’s twin.

Rounding the last curve that led directly into my cul-de-sac, I stole a two-second gaze that spread itself over the majesty of the mountains in the not-too-far distance. The short-lived rage died almost instantly as an untamed flame caught in the domineering downpour of the rain while a hint of melancholy flooded my frontal lobes.

Maybe it was just the simple idea of young love that my wife and I had shared. Do not get me wrong; I loved her to Pluto and back. I loosened a link, though. I lost her trust. I was rapidly drowning in desire to see my daughter share the initial first love with someone as my wife and I had nurtured when we were youths.

Choking back tiny sobs, I pulled into the roundabout. The digital clock on my dash read 8:43 AM. I sighed. It felt as if it were another normal, dew-laden morning on Arlington Drive. Except, it was not: At least not to me.

I coasted steadily. The SUV slid silently past the other houses where neighbors were in their yards. Mrs. Viednok was holding a sputtering garden hose; Sir Gordon was reading his newspaper at the end of his walkway; Young Simon Abel was rough-housing with his enthusiastic golden retriever. Everyday activities were reeling. The only difference between this day and the countless others was that none of the usually nosey neighbors waved. They just stared, paralyzed. When the greeting of my hand received no response, cold chills tormented the length of my body. *They know.* Yet, they could not have.

Once I parked the vehicle in the driveway, I stumbled out of the driver’s door, knowing that attentive eyes were altering my very flesh with the intent to mutilate me. I turned and glanced away from me as soon as I had cautiously closed the vehicle’s heavy emerald door. Chuck was standing there.

“Hey, uh... h-how are you, Will?” he managed to stutter out. He clearly believed that there was a disoriented state about me.

I clicked that annoyingly miniature key-chain accessory that implored the SUV to lock tight with a honking beep before resting my face towards his, forcing a five-foot distance of eye-contact. “Uh, great. Bill, it is great.” He gave me an insulted gander.

“The name’s *Chuck*, William.”

“Oh! I am so sorry. I have had somewhat of a... strange morning,” I shifted uncomfortably in my ebony wafers.

“Oh... strange? How was it stran—?”

“Sorry, Chuck. I have to go prepare for the rest of a long day,” I nervously spat out as I skipped down the pebbled path that led to my front door, “I will see you later, Mr. Neil.”

Chuck stood haphazardly staring after me. When I whipped my head around to look at him one last time before stealing into my house, I noticed the neighbors in the background, all still with their eyes glued in my direction. Weird. I smiled weakly at Chuck and ducked inside.

The six well-assembled, high-quality locks clicked and I tore off my over-jacket all in five seconds. The rest of my semi-formal attire followed shortly after. A brief moment of paranoia clung needy to my chest and head; the house was utterly silent, absent of the cozy scent of molasses-soaked waffles or accommodating toast. I rushed down a shadowed hallway and into the main bedroom with much haste. I hovered near the last doorway. Sighing relief, I kissed my sleeping wife’s forehead where she laid with our daughter’s cuddled, drowsy body.

“Mm. What, honey?” A glistening grin spread her mouth into a lovely shape.

“Oh, nothing. You can go back to sleep if you wish,” I whispered apologetically, preparing to leave the two in rest.

“Gotta make breakfast, though,” she cooed, half-asleep, rising from under the silk sheets, stirring the two-year old.

Smiling dumbly, I turned and left the room with a sense of serene gratification.

Once in the dark of the dread-wreathed hallway, however, I remembered my current situation. “Shit,” I breathed under my punitive breath. Rushing into my polished study down the hall, I headed straight for the closet. I made sure to close the study’s sturdy door with a slide of the silver, bolted lock. *Grab bag. Grab the grab bag. Check it over. Hurry. Now!* The commands slung themselves over my eyes and blinded me partly out of dizziness. I had a pre-partitioned collection of getaway goods that I had zipped into an efficient, canvas duffel bag; it waited in the closet for me.

I waddled into the living room carrying the bag at my side. My wife hummed the melody to “Every Minute” by Lovelife while she flipped the waffle-pan and tended to the heating toast, her sandy-reddish hair done-up in a loosely-fitted pony-tail that clung slightly to the back of her neck. I shivered. I smiled. Both felt equally unner-ving. To top it off, the sunshine drew upon us such illumination that the kitchen and living room began to glow. *This is what taunting alienation feels like.* I left the bag at the sofa’s side and approached my wife hesitantly.

“Andrea,” I croaked, instantly petrified. *Oh, yeah. She’ll forgive you. Not!*

“Yeah?” she inquired casually, still focused on shuffling through the breakfast creations and sucking a dollop of batter from her thumb.

I gulped inaudibly. The heartache to come will assail like thousands of soldiers charging up an embankment, piercing the veil with their wickedly sharpened weaponry. I freaked. “There-there are moon cookies for later, dear. I picked some up this morning. I, uh, put them under... I mean, in that cupboard to your left.”

“Oh, thanks, honey!” she squealed with anticipation of the crumbly goodness that would not come later that evening. Andrea did not look up, either. Her attention was devoted to the gourmet breakfast that she had been cultivating since the time she awoke. She failed to hear the mess of my words or the falter in my crumpled, anxious appearance. My assumption was that she disregarded my behavior as the mere weight of the early morning. I removed my eyes from her and read the time on the microwave that sat beyond. *9:24 AM.*

For the first time that day, I heard my daughter’s giggles sounding from the room adjacent to the where I was standing. As a quick dose of heavenly distraction, I zipped into the den. “Whataya doin’, Violet?” I teased as I brought my rump down to the cushion of the loveseat that was positioned facing Violet’s toy army in the middle of

the rugged room.

“Playin,’” she laughed, dragging a plastic shovel across the carpet in order to knock over a modest stack of wooden cars.

“What’s with all the toys in the middle?” I asked, feigning ignorance.

“Party!” she yelled, excitement in her plump, round jade-tinted eyes. Her hair had grown out to her waist and she found it rather difficult to stoop around the rug, mulling over all of her piles of toys. She huffed and resumed building the mounds. I felt a fond smile creep across my face and my heart felt as if it were beginning to stew in a lovely melting pot of all that we, as a family, were. Next, it became clear to me that I was in so deep that I had as much a chance of escaping this as the model on the cover of the magazine on the stand was slim. It ached. I could feel a fever begin to fester, so I had to leap up and stow-away to my study, leaving Violet to act-out imaginary adventures between *Bob the Builder* miniatures and *Hot Wheels* cars.

Long moments of stitched-up stress passed. I watched closely from behind my cedar desk as brightly-colored birds fluttered and darted through the hanging gardens on the other side of the sliding glass doors. A few blurs of crimson and cobalt, playful. The silence of the house offered an almost unearthly existence of sound to the winged critters that were being muffled by the thickness of the doors. If I listened attentively enough, I could hear stray notes of my wife’s hauntingly angelic voice seeping slow and hesitant from the distant kitchen where she was still preparing breakfast. It was a wake-up call in itself.

My hands shook shyly. I had not realized that I was sweating until a cold bead raced from my hairline, flailing down the flank of my scalp.

A sharp ring lacerated the silence, and before I knew it I was jerking the phone cord out of its place in the wall next to me. I was surprised my wife did not question me from the other room, for my house had two phones: One was in the kitchen.

This is it, my conscious blurted out, *this is what they want from you: To be fearful, trapped: Crippled*. I started to inadvertently hum, attempting to cut the incessant thoughts that had decided they were moving in immediately. *First they mentally cripple you. Then they aim for the heart. And, if you’re lucky... they let you take care of the physical component in this screwy equation*. I glanced at the clock. The time read 10:10 AM, the arms of the device stretched in warning: An SOS. *It cannot be long before they come*, I panicked within my headache.

My wife stopped singing.

I blinked. Looking outside, the garden was empty. There were not any blurs. No birds. No sound. The house seemed even more in death than before. Thirty seconds passed over a year’s length of morbid, indiscreet silence.

My wife’s voice entered as a mouse’s squeak from the space between the door and the doorframe, an inch’s canyon.

“Honey, there are men at the door.”

They were here...

I pushed past my startled wife at my study’s door that I had forgotten to close and lock.

Violet remained as a shadow in the den as I heaved the bag, still patient for this moment, over my shoulder.

“What is going on?” There was distinct pain in my wife’s throaty question as she frantically found her way into the room.

“I have everything we need: Violet’s change of clothes; many rations of food; tools—”

“*What* are you saying?! Are we going somewhere? So, what? Men show up at the door and you are ready to just... leap out the damn window?” She was livid. And she was scared. Her face was knitted into a hurricane of confusion and anger; her brow was scrunched into numerous creases.

“Andrea—”

“*Don’t* ‘Andrea’ me! This is uncalled for! Why are we supposed to be leaving?”

If Andrea's face had been the hurricane, then the rap at the front door was Earth's end. All three of us glanced in its direction. Turning to me, Andrea addressed me again.

"Who is that at the door, William?" she asked with hushed, calm frustration. I thought I saw her magnificent green eyes begin to well.

"I'm not really sure, but can you please tone it down a—?"

"William SS. Walker! Who is at that goddamn door?" she quivered. A few droplets of sodium-based liquid streaked impatiently down the sides of her face.

"We have to go," I managed to placidly inform her once again as she stepped toward Violet and heaved her over her shoulder.

The Earth ended again.

"Will, I want a—" I knew she had broken when she resorted to using the short version of my name. She did not have time to finish, though.

Our entire home instantaneously combusted as bullets sung through walls. I remember falling once or twice, mainly to save my head from bursting like the vase next to the magazine with the model on it had done. My previous consideration of exiting through the large, man-sized window in the kitchen disappeared when the *kitchen* disappeared into a whirlwind of fire. We ended up in my study. Miraculously, the glass doors that led into the gardens had not been pelted with shrapnel rain. All I can remember, though, was prying open the lead-heavy exit and then being thrown face-first into a patch of strawberries. Maybe it was a patch of weeds with a dressing of blood?

An extremely high-pitched droning was drilling into my brain when I became steady on my feet and turned around. The distance I had flown was inconceivable when I measured it with blood-shot eyes. I squinted through the rising of smoke and flame and saw that the glass doors had been shattered from their position of hugging the garden entrance. Andrea was no longer in the study from what I could make out; neither was my bag slung across my shoulders anymore. That did not matter, though, for Violet came running into view as fast as her two pudgy towers of muscle would allow. My heart leaped from my chest and cowered in the corners of my head as I raced towards that girl in a purple shirt: That girl with her mother's eyes and my determination.

Suddenly, before I could reach her outstretched arms, tiny torpedoes of treachery bulleted in from my left. Bullets riddled her body. Three. Five. Eleven. Her body folded and fell.

That heart in my head ceased to beat.

I could not recall what chain of events occurred in great detail following that. I knew that I knelt, defeated at her side. I knew I picked her up. I knew that she fitted into the cradle of my arms. I knew that I bolted across the garden's floor, broke through its tented wall, and bounded down the side of the hill our house had stood upon, vanishing into the ominous, yet welcoming woods. I knew that Andrea's toast was burning by then.

To Be Continued

Promise You Will
--Andrea's Lullaby--

When you wake from the layers of our skin
Let me know where you'll go and I'll show you where I have been
When you wake from the dreaming world so slow
Let me see your lovely, round, wide greens and all that they know

When you cast a shadow
Follow to where it may lead
When you have grown too old to color or to cuddle
Promise you will remember me

When you wake from beneath the star-lit skies
Let me know where you'll go and I'll show you the way to fly
When you wake from the nightmare realm so fast
Let me see your lovely, round, wide greens all while they still last

When you cast a shadow
Follow to where it may lead
When you have grown to build a home better than this be
Promise you will still take me



PRETTY IN PEARLS – Maria Warns

REMINISCENCE

Gordon Lindsay

Thinking of you
is like touching my favorite scar,

it always brings a smile,

and a little surprise

when I find

it's still a bit tender
if I dwell too long.

He came to a door and reached for the knob. He found it to be oozing with some invisible goo, and he drew his hand back in revulsion. A faint hum emanated from this door, carrying with it alien desires that would not sit well in the heart of any mortal soul. He shivered and continued down the gloomy hallway, which seemed to be filled with an endless number of doors.

One door, dark oak with a shiny, black polish, yawned open like the maw of a hellish monster. He peered inside but could see nothing of the space beyond. Gradually, as one becomes aware of a spider creeping gently up one's spine, he developed a definite cognizance that there was something watching him from the darkness through the door. Many somethings. The gazes of thousands of ravenous eyes tore at him, electrifying the hair on the back of his neck. His stomach in a knot, he closed the door on that malevolent scrutiny.

Footfalls again. He tried to wring the fear out of his head. He passed a closed door that glowed with a heat too impassioned to be measured in Fahrenheit, too stubbornly impetuous to be calmed by appeals to reason. Behind it was the hatred of a rent soul. Across the hall was a cooler spot, a light blue entry into humane melodiousness. He turned the saccharine knob and found a spotless room. Somehow he knew that it was replete with noise from the sweetest instruments, the strongest throats, and the most adept composing minds, but he was deaf to all of it. No matter how hard he strained his ears he could not hear the music.

Footfalls once more. There was a large patch of yellow wallpaper, musty yet florid, surrounding a pale brown door. This entire segment of the hallway was out of place, like a newspaper clipping pasted onto a breakfast menu. Here was something familiar; it called to him, awakening from the depths of his memory some hidden treasure of experience. He pushed open the door and revealed a sweeping panorama filled to the horizon with long, wild prairie grass. A gentle darkness hung over the scene, made softer by the thousands of stars above. There was a small house upon a distant hill with lights showing in the windows. Faint shadows crossed the windows, happily, jauntily, as if this were no ordinary night but one of celebration for the family living on the hill. He looked out to the house wistfully and reached out to caress its weathered walls, but alas, it was too distant, both in space and in his heart. Reluctantly, he shut the door on the scene.

The last door in the hall appeared. It was simple, unassuming, but he knew without having to be told that it did not exist to impress because it was the last door he would ever face. Beyond lay unknown emotions as yet hidden from his soul. Perhaps he would find something like tranquility, a quiet acceptance of the motion of the universe. He would be able to stop fighting at long last his nostalgia, his fears, and his sorrows because they would exist behind other doors. He pulled the last door open and walked through.

