

Dedicated to Ron

"Here cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels
sing thee to thy rest."

--Hamlet--

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Studio E

The Werewolf Whisperer

By

Marilynn Byerly

"It's a wolf!" Fred Duggans backed away from the open tailgate of the vet's station wagon.

Megan Winters stepped closer and peered inside at the great silver and gray beast sprawled in drugged abandon on its side. A cast covered its left front leg.

For a moment, her heart wrenching in her chest, she saw her Heidi, dead now almost ten years, then she noticed the animal's massive shoulders and other obvious evidence of its maleness.

The vet glanced at his watch. "It's a dog. Pick it up. I've got to get out of here."

"A wolf," Fred insisted.

"I had a dog like that when I was a little girl." She patted his arm in reassurance. "It's a Silver Shepherd. They're quite hard to find."

"Well, if you say so, Megan." Fred smiled trustingly down at her, then eased his huge hands under the dog's ribs and, grunting with effort, cradled the limp animal in his arms.

"Put him in the special run since he's hurt." She glanced worriedly at the dog and the attendant who seemed to be having problems with the animal's weight, then she turned her attention back to the vet. "What happened to him?"

"A car. Last night. He was chasing a rabbit. The guy who hit him brought him in, paid for the vet work, and left." The vet slammed his tailgate closed. "The usual routine."

"Where was he hit?"

"Does it matter?"

"If we know that, we may be able to find his owner. This is an animal shelter. That's what we do."

"Boy, do you have a lot to learn." The vet glanced down at the Moravia Animal Shelter volunteer badge on her breast. "Must be a new recruit."

"I've volunteered here a year. The location?"

"The wooded area near the airport. North of the Interstate 40 junction on Lake View. The middle of nowhere. Typical spot for someone to dump a dog they no longer want."

"Thank you."

She turned and walked back through the gate into the dog compound. Barely noticing all the barked greetings from the caged animals, she passed through the building to the special run.

Fred stood nervously just outside the open run door. The Silver Shepherd sprawled on a bed of shavings.

As she stepped in, Fred stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Big male doggies can be mean. Especially big male hurt doggies. He has big teeth!"

"I'll take care."

"All doggies like Megan. Even big, mean doggies." With a nod of decision, Fred lifted his hand from her shoulder and trudged away.

Touched by his concern, she smiled then went into the cage. Kneeling, she stroked the animal's head. Its tail thumped sleepily in response, and it whined.

"You are the biggest Shepherd I've ever seen." She ran her hand down its neck to its well-muscled shoulder and down to its flank. "But what a beauty! Someone is certainly missing you."

The animal opened its sleepy yellow brown eyes and tried to sit up, but its cast-covered leg made it flounder a moment before it sank back down with a pained grunt.

Wincing, she stroked its head in sympathy. "That must hurt!"

"Like hell."

At the man's words, Megan glanced back toward the door, but she didn't see anyone. Except for Fred, no one was in the building, and Fred didn't have such a deep, rich, intensely male voice.

"Stroke the ears again, pretty lady. It feels good, and I'm so hung over from that dope the vet gave me."

Spinning, she gaped down at the dog. "You? Certainly.... No, I refuse to believe

it."

The animal sat up abruptly and studied her with astonishment. "You heard me?"

Its lips didn't move, but the voice trembled through her nerve endings and echoed in her head.

She clutched her temples. "This is crazy."

"This is impossible." The dog twisted his head quizzically. "Are you of the pack?"

"What?" She backed away on her knees. "No, this isn't happening. Dogs don't talk like this."

"No, and neither do werewolves, but we are."

"Werewolves!" Sagging down, she sighed. "I am going crazy. Absolutely and completely crazy."

"Before you start babbling, could you get me some water. I'm about to die of thirst."

Lifting the water dish, she held it out for him.

When he had half-emptied it, he rested his head on his paws and gazed at her with intense, intelligent eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." An hysterical giggle rose in her throat, but she forced it back down. "You can't be a werewolf. Beyond the fact they aren't real, it's daytime and not a full moon."

"How long since the full moon?"

"That was Tuesday. Six days."

"That long!" The wolf shook his head like a human who couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Six days! No wonder I was almost lost until you touched me."

"How can you be almost lost? Either you are or you aren't."

"When we change, we hold onto our human selves as well as gaining our animal selves. The longer we stay animal, the more humanity we lose. Finally, we are totally animal and can no longer change back."

"So you stayed a wolf too long."

"Not intentionally. I'm not an idiot."

Megan considered all the lore she'd read about werewolves. "A gypsy curse?"

"No. A damned herbalist."

"She was cursed?"

"No, a cursed bad herbalist!" The wolf stretched back out. "Would you please rub my head again."

"My head's beginning to ache, too. This is just too much to take in." She sat down, cross-legged, by his shoulder and began to massage his ears and neck.

With a grunt of pleasure, he rested his massive, surprisingly heavy head in her lap.

Amazed at herself, she continued the massage. Somehow, she couldn't be afraid of a man with such a deep wonderful voice which vibrated through her with its textures of dry humor, tenderness, and caring. Textures of his soul. Even if that man was a werewolf.

A sigh of male happiness echoed through her brain, and the wolf wiggled comfortably. "You have wonderful hands. Smell good, too. Sweet and sexy."

"About the herbalist."

"Megan's a nice name. Suits you."

"What's your name?"

"Gray, I think it's Gray. Yes, call me Gray."

"About the herbalist."

"When you sniff a trail, you don't give up." His voice was more amused than annoyed. "Very well. We change once a month, but sometimes, it's inconvenient so we delay the change."

"With herbs."

"Exactly. When I took the delay herbal mixture, it didn't stop the change, and I couldn't change back. I still can't change back. Will you help me?"

"How?"

"Get me out of here."

"I can't. At least not for three days. That's so the owners can claim you. I mean claim strays."

"Then you'll free me?"

"I certainly won't let them gas you!"

A shiver ran through his frame.

"How do we change you back?"

"Miss Winters, what do you think you are doing with that new dog?"

The woman's shrill voice jerked Megan's attention back to her surroundings, and for a moment, she feared the other woman had heard Gray's voice, then she dismissed that worry. "I'm talking to him and rubbing him to ease his discomfort. He's waking up from the vet's drugs."

She glanced toward the door.

The short, stocky shelter director tapped her keys against the bars of the door and scowled down at her. "Get out of there immediately. That dog's a monster! He could take your hand off in an instant. Don't you have a lick of sense?"

"I'll be back," Megan thought and hoped the wolf could hear her as well as she could hear his silent speech.

He blinked understanding as any dog would and lifted his head slightly to let her slide out from under him. The sound of his thumping tail followed her out of the cage.

The director slammed and locked the gate behind her.

* * *

The whisper of wolves' paws padded through Megan's troubled dreams. Shards of moonlight through the foliage barely illuminating her surroundings, she wandered through a forest's darkness. Fallen leaves crunched under her bare feet, and the wind ruffled her cotton pajamas.

The odor of the death gas used to kill unwanted pets drifted by.

Moaning, she covered her nose and gagged. Only once had she been careless enough to be at the shelter when the filthy act was done, and she'd been spared the sight and the sounds, but the smell of the gas and the death....

She'd redoubled her efforts to save as many of the animals as she could after that day and had started a movement to open a no-kill shelter. She'd even been spending her summer break from teaching at the shelter.

Death gas! Had they gassed Gray? Her insides turned cold.

The whisper of a wolf's tread on leaves.

She turned.

His eyes glowing with moonlight, a wolf stared at her from a nearby rock outcropping. He was all raw primal energy and fierceness.

"Gray?"

The wolf bounded toward her.

Unafraid, she waited until he reached her.

Dropping to her knees, she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. "I was so afraid. I smelled the gas...."

"Not yet." He pulled away and licked the tears off her cheeks. "Not yet, pretty lady."

"What can I do?"

The wolf said nothing but stared at her with his yellow-brown eyes. The full moon was reflected within them, but it seemed to wane, growing smaller and smaller.

Mesmerized, she watched it disappear.

"Megan."

A man knelt where the wolf had been.

She glanced down at him, realized he was naked, and hastily lifted her gaze to his face with its high cheekbones, aquiline nose, and full lips. His hair was straight and black with silver around the temples although he couldn't be much older than her twenty-five.

He smiled tenderly, cupped her cheeks in her hands, and kissed her, his lips just caressing hers. "You taste sweet and sexy. Just like you smell."

"Hello, Gray. It's nice to finally meet you."

"Your hair is as red as I imagined." His fingers tangled in her long hair as he stroked down to her shoulder.

"Irish Setter red?" She grinned mischievously at him.

"Absolutely. And eyes as green as Ireland. Full color is the only human sense I miss as a wolf. All the other senses are heightened."

"This isn't a dream, is it?"

"I don't think so, but I'm sleeping in a cage in that shelter deathtrap."

"And I'm sleeping in my apartment."

"Our minds are touching as they touched in waking when we were together."

"But the boundaries are loosened because we sleep so you can show yourself."

He glanced down at his bare body and grinned wickedly. "Showing considerably more of myself than I'd like. Fur does have its advantages for a modest soul."

"How did you become a werewolf?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, but no gypsy curses. I was born with this as my parents were born with it as their parents were born with it."

"A genetic mutation."

"Yes, and over thousands of years we've found those with the change genes, and they've joined the pack."

Bending, he nuzzled her neck. "I've discovered something else I lack as a wolf."

Goose bumps spread across her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"What?"

"I can't do this." He kissed her again, his lips more demanding, and pulled her against his frame.

Moaning, she answered his kiss and melted into him.

Finally, gasping, he straightened. "You call me, Megan. You call me like the moon calls. But I'm trapped in my wolf self. I may be trapped forever."

* * *

"I want to adopt the Silver Shepherd."

The shelter director looked up from the paperwork on her desk. "I expected as much. You've spent every spare minute with him since he was brought in."

Clasping her hands tightly in front of her, Megan wondered what the director would think if she discovered that Megan spent her nights with him as well in a forest of dreams and passion where she'd fallen in love with him. "He's officially been here three days as of five minutes ago, and no one's claimed him."

"Very well. Give me a check for his adoption fee, shots, and neutering expenses, and I'll do the paperwork."

"I don't want him neutered."

Pursing her lips, the director glowered at her. "You know the rules. All adoptions must be neutered."

"I know the rules, but Silver Shepherds are extremely rare, and he looks like a show dog. It would be wrong to neuter such a perfect sire. Think of all the silver puppies!"

"Think of all the unwanted puppies we have to gas every week here."

"I won't let him roam. I swear!"

"We have him because he was roaming." The director tapped her pen on the desk in front of her. "Besides, a dog, even a Silver Shepherd, is worthless as a sire without his pedigree papers."

"I know. But I think I know how to find his owners."

"And why haven't you done so?"

"It will take time. I want him safe with me while I look."

The director lifted an inquisitive eyebrow.

"The vet told me he was hit close to the airport. I believe he was being shipped somewhere and got loose in transit."

"That has happened."

Megan nodded. "I have started inquiries."

"And if they want their dog back?"

"As long as he's safe...." She blinked tears realizing Gray hadn't promised her he would stay. "That doesn't matter as long as he's safe."

"That's all very noble, Miss Winters, and you are one of the finest volunteers we've ever had, but rules are rules. I'm sorry."

* * *

"It's hopeless! She just wouldn't listen." Megan brushed away tears with her

sleeve and slumped down beside Gray in his cage.

"Damn!" The wolf growled and limped around the cage for a minute until his anger cooled, then he lay down beside Megan and rested his chin on her knee.

"Are you certain they won't return?"

"My broken leg will heal when I change, but I've never heard of a lost limb or other important piece of anatomy ever returning. Body mass remains the same, or it loses a bit in the change, but it never grows."

"I was afraid of that. What else can we do?"

"Escape?"

"How? This place is locked up tight at night with a guard."

"Do you think Fred would look the other way?"

"If it were only Fred.... He'd help me, but none of the other staff members would. And we can't make a fast escape with that cast on your leg."

"Damn." Gray's sigh shook through her head. "Being neutered or being gassed? What a choice."

* * *

Megan walked wearily toward the dog compound. Five days had passed, and she and Gray were no closer to finding a way out of their dilemma than before. Her hopes of finding the herbalist who had caused this mess and could cure it had been dashed last night when she'd contacted the woman's home and discovered she was out in the middle of nowhere on a herb-finding expedition and completely out of touch for another three days. By then, Gray would be dead or mutilated.

Fake owners were an impossibility because she had no way to falsify the kinds of documents needed to prove ownership, and elementary school teachers like herself weren't exactly in touch with criminals who could provide them.

She couldn't even prove the truth because no one would believe her if she told them Gray was a werewolf since she was the only one who could hear his human voice. His human memory was so foggy from being a wolf for so long that he hadn't been able to give her any contacts among the pack who could aid them. It had been incredibly lucky that he'd even been able to give her the herbalist's name. More of that human memory was fading every day even with her presence.

He was also having more and more trouble becoming human in the dream forest each night so that even if she could get him out of this shelter alive, he would soon lose so much of his humanity he would be lost to her forever except as a beloved pet.

A cacophony of barks, howls, and frantic scratching at cage doors greeted her as she entered the dog compound. Many of the dogs lunged at their cage doors as if trying to push them open. Covering her ears, she ran to Gray's cage to see if he were infected with this madness.

His head on his paws, he lay in his bed of shavings.

"Gray?"

With a toothy smile, he looked up at her and thumped his tail in greeting.

"What's wrong with them?"

"A bitch in heat. The attendants haven't taken her out yet. Fred's looking for her now."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"I'm not a dog, and the only human female who attracts my human half just arrived."

"Oh." Inspiration hit her in a flash of brightness so intense she could only gape for a moment. "Oh!"

"What's wrong, pretty lady?"

"Gray, whatever happens, don't pretend you're like the dogs. Just keep doing what you're doing. Do you understand?"

"Sure. What?"

"Later."

She practically dragged the shelter director out of her office and toward the dog compound.

"This had better be an emergency, Miss Winters," the woman grumbled as they entered the dog compound.

The volume of the male dogs had increased to the point of being physically

painful. "You have to see this."

"What in the world?"

"A bitch in heat," Megan shouted.

"Tell the attendants to..."

"Fred's trying to find her now." Megan tugged the woman toward Gray's cage. "I want you to see this."

Gray greeted them with a thumping tail, but he remained down, his head on his paws.

"Look!" Megan pointed at the wolf.

"So?"

"He's male!"

"So?"

A greater frenzy of barking erupted nearby.

Megan glanced backward at Fred who was tugging along a small brown mixed breed on a leash. She motioned to Fred. "Bring her here."

The attendant glanced worriedly at the shelter director and at the nearby cages where male dogs were launching themselves at their cage doors, but he obeyed her.

When he reached them, Megan pointed to the disinterested wolf. "See! See! He isn't reacting."

"So?"

"He's an unneutered male, and he isn't reacting. He doesn't have to be neutered because he won't cause unwanted puppies." She flourished dramatically. "Gray is gay!"

* * *

Fred Duggans smoothed his new uniform and stood at attention as the dignitaries moved past him toward the ribbon strung across the entrance to the new no-kill animal shelter.

Megan winked at him as she passed on the arm of her husband of a year.

If it were possible, she was becoming even more beautiful because she glowed with life and happiness. She obviously loved Adam Grayson, and he seemed to return that love. He was good and kind, too. Just like Megan.

And he loved doggies as much as she did. He was also rich enough to build this shelter for her.

Grinning secretly to himself, Fred remembered how she and Adam had talked to him earlier and shared a secret. Megan was going to have a baby!

With his strangely familiar yellow-brown eyes twinkling, Adam had joked that he'd finally proven certain "aspersions to his manhood" wrong. Fred hadn't a clue what that meant, but he had smiled anyway.

That didn't matter. All that mattered was that kind, sweet Megan was happy, he had a new job playing with doggies instead of locking them up, and most importantly, no doggie would ever die here because some human didn't want him. That was the happiest of all endings.

THE END

The Love That Binds

By

Suzanne Egle

The blinding glint of the setting sun bore down relentlessly on the hood of Anna's faded green Volvo station wagon. She was getting a headache from fighting the sunlight in her eyes.

She glanced at her fourteen year old son, Kevin, sitting silently in the

passenger seat, his "Florida Gators" cap pulled down over his eyes. He had barely spoken to her since they had begun the three hour drive from Miami to Key West, the final leg of their journey. Kevin was not happy about moving from Orlando, and he made no effort to conceal that from Anna. If only she could get him to talk to her, but every time she tried to start a conversation, he'd slouch further into his seat as if trying to disappear from the car all together.

At the end of U.S. 1 they arrived in Key West, the last island of the Florida Keys. Anna knew this road so well; it forked here: to the right was Roosevelt Boulevard that took you to Duval Street, otherwise known as "downtown." They headed left towards Flagler Avenue. Her brother Jim had bought a house he was planning to refurbish as a vacation rental. He had offered it to them in the interim.

Anna followed her brother's written directions and easily found Riviera Drive.

Driving slowly, she squinted her eyes looking for the address.

"Ah, here it is." She turned into the driveway of a slightly run-down tract home.

"Oh, boy, this is wonderful," Kevin complained sarcastically as he kicked open the car door.

She ignored him and grabbed a suitcase from the back of the Volvo and walked toward the house. The wooden shutters needed paint and the landscaping had been neglected, but it looked like heaven to her, faded shutters and all. She fished into her purse for the keys, and after struggling a minute with the lock she pushed the door open, and motioned to Kevin to come in.

He wouldn't let up.

"We already had a perfectly good place to live until you decided it was time for a change. You never asked me what I thought; if I thought it was time for a change. I'll never forgive you for this!" He stormed into the house dragging two suitcases with him. Anna sighed and picked up the last of the luggage. She knew in her heart that they had to leave Orlando. They had to get away from her ex-husband Mark, and his abuse. Time would prove her right.

Later, as she was putting her clothes away in a white wicker dresser, Anna heard the screen door slam. She ran to the door and saw Kevin walking down the sidewalk with his baseball mitt and ball.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"I saw a baseball field near here and I want to go check it out." He walked away, casting a long dark shadow behind him.

Anna let him go. She knew Kevin needed his space to adjust to their new environment, and the more space she gave him, the better it would be for both of them. He loved baseball almost more than anything. Maybe he'd make a friend.

It was nine o'clock when he finally returned. She had begun to worry, but she swore to herself she wouldn't let him know that. "Mom, I'm not a baby anymore," he constantly told her. But she had a difficult time accepting that. He was only fourteen, not even driving yet!

Kevin came into the kitchen and poured himself a big glass of orange juice. He sat down at the yellow Formica table and wiped his forehead with the back of his dirty hand.

"Mom, I had a really cool time. There was a team practicing for a summer baseball league."

He gulped his juice down without taking a breath.

Anna refilled his glass, not daring to interrupt him. She was so happy to hear him excited about something for a change.

"The coach, his name is Tom, is a really cool guy. He said I could join the team. They need a good catcher, so I told him yes. I hope that's okay."

He tossed the baseball in the air mindlessly catching it in his mitt over and over again. It was like a mantra calming him down as he spoke.

"Well, I think that's terrific," said Anna, hugging him. "Hey, let's go celebrate and get a pizza!"

They drove over to the Pizza Hut. It was crowded and noisy--just what Anna needed after their shaky first day. They spotted an empty table in the corner and started walking toward it when someone called out, "Kevin!"

"Hey, there's the coach!" said Kevin waving.

Tom stood up motioned them to join his table. Kevin introduced his mother.

"So Kevin tells me you just moved here. How do you like Key West so far?" Tom asked, pulling out a chair for Anna.

"We literally just arrived," she said smiling at the handsomely tanned face with friendly hazel eyes. He poured a Coke for Kevin.

"Beer?" he asked Anna reaching for another glass.

"Yes, thank you. Actually I grew up here so it's a homecoming for me. I just hope Kevin likes it here as much as I do."

"Me, too. He's a great catcher." said Tom winking at Kevin. The boys went to the video game room, so Anna turned her attention to Tom.

He was a fighter pilot stationed at Boca Chica Naval Air Station, he explained. He had been there for two years and was hoping to be transferred soon.

"Don't you like it here?" she asked him, strangely disappointed to hear that.

"Well, it does get to you after awhile. Some of the guys get pretty crazy sometimes with nothing to do, so that's why I decided to coach baseball."

"Key West is really serious about baseball," he continued. "They've won the State championship three years in a row. This will be a good place for Kevin to gain confidence and discipline."

Anna looked at her watch. It was eleven o'clock, and she was exhausted from the long day. She tried to catch Kevin's eye, but he ignored her.

Tom grinned knowingly, then stood up and whistled to the boys. To Anna's surprise, Kevin stopped playing and walked over to the table. He hadn't been that quick to respond to authority in a long time.

"Okay, Coach. See you later!" He gave Tom a high five.

Tom stood up to leave too. "Hey, if you two aren't doing anything tomorrow, would you like to go to the air show at Boca Chica?" He smiled at her, and something stirred inside her. She would love to see him again.

Anna looked over at Kevin, who shrugged his shoulders; a dark cloud had crossed his face again. Anna's heart sank.

"Well, Kev, would you like to do that?"

"I guess," he said sullenly.

"Is it settled then?" Tom asked Anna.

"Sure. Thanks, Tom." She gave him the address and shook his hand. His grip was strong yet gentle, the hands masculine and weathered from hard work.

Anna wondered what had come over Kevin. He had been in a good mood until Tom asked them both to the air show.

"Honey, is anything wrong? I thought you would enjoy going tomorrow with Tom?" she asked him on their way to the car.

"You always assume you know what I would want," he snapped at her. "Why did I know this would happen?" He got into the car and slammed the door.

Kevin's accusations stung Anna. She had no idea why he was so angry with her, but she decided not to argue with him tonight.

Anna woke up at seven o'clock. She had attempted to wake Kevin, but he growled and turned his back to her. Never mind, then. He could sleep.

A car drove up at 10:00 am sharp. She peeked out her bedroom window as she watched Tom walk up the sidewalk. He was dressed in khaki shorts, white polo shirt and topsiders. His rugged suntan face was clean-shaven, and his aviator sunglasses that gave him the air of a self-confident fighter pilot. Anna was nervous yet excited about being with him. She met him at the door with the news that Kevin would not be joining them.

"What happened? Should I talk to him?"

"No, that's okay," said Anna. "He's having a tough time adjusting to the move. But we can go and enjoy ourselves."

She grabbed her purse and followed Tom to his car, a shiny black Acura. He opened the door for her, a gentlemanly gesture she hadn't appreciated in a long time. He put a CD on, and the music carried her away as if on a chariot. She felt as if she would fly away at any moment. It was pure, unadulterated freedom to her!

The air show was a thrilling spectacle. Anna had forgotten how much she loved watching the F-14's flying in precision formation. She and Tom enjoyed the afternoon drinking beer and munching on barbecued hot dogs. Anna felt like a kid again, without a care in the world. It felt good to be relieved of the mantle of responsibility for a day.

Later they drove to the Pier House to watch "sunset", a nightly Key West ritual. As they listened to the hypnotic calypso music, Anna felt as though the

shattered pieces of her life were beginning to come together. The sun spilled brilliant hues of orange and red over the horizon as it set over the Gulf of Mexico. The sense of peace that came over her was overwhelming. It had been a perfect day.

"I can't remember when I've had a better time," she said to Tom as they walked up the sidewalk to her house. "Would you like to stay for dinner. I was going to barbecue some fresh fish my brother sent over."

"That sounds great!" he said opening the screen door for her.

Kevin was not home. He hadn't left a note either. Anna was angry and worried. "I don't know what I'm going to do with him," she said, exasperated.

Anna grabbed two bottles of beers from the refrigerator and handed one to Tom. He took hers, as well, twisted off the top then handed it back to her. She felt a comfort in his presence and kept on talking.

"His father, my ex-husband, was so hard on him, such a disciplinarian. He had grown up in a military home, and he believed kids should be raised with an iron hand. Finally I couldn't take it anymore-- the yelling, the hitting, so I filed for divorce."

"Did you stay in Orlando?"

"Yes, for two years, but he kept harassing me. One day I just packed us up and left."

They ate dinner under the moonlit sky. The tropical breezes cooled the night air making Anna feel refreshed, renewed. Tom's presence was so comforting, yet intoxicating. She felt her innermost fibers trembling at the thought of being close to him. It had been too long.

At eleven o'clock the screen door burst open. Kevin walked in and went into his room and slammed the door. Tom looked at Anna. "Would you like me to talk to him?"

"No, I should do this." She took another sip of wine and went to his room. She knocked quietly. "Kevin, can I come in?"

He didn't answer. Slowly, she opened the door and peeked into his room. It was dark. She could see his outline on the bed staring up at the ceiling, not moving. Anna sat on the edge of the bed. She touched his head tentatively, and began stroking his hair like she used to when he was younger. About a year ago he began to pull away from her emotionally. She knew it was a normal part of growing up, but lately he was infused with anger aimed at her, and it saddened her deeply.

"Kevin,..." she began, but he interrupted her. "I'm tired, Mom. I want to go to sleep now." He turned his back to her.

Anna rose from the bed and walked out, closing the bedroom door behind her. Suddenly she felt very tired.

She had to make a choice right now, a very painful choice.

"Tom, maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while. I need to work things out with my son now, and it would be best if we could do it alone."

Tom's eyes filled with regret, but he gave her an understanding nod. "I understand, Anna, but you know, I do want to see you again soon. I really enjoyed myself today," His voice was so tender she almost changed her mind; she so desperately wanted to surround herself in his strength, to let someone else make decisions for her.

"Me, too. Thank you for a great day." She walked him to the door. In the shadow of the moonlight he took her face in his hands and kissed her gently. Anna watched him walk away in the night, then she turned around and slowly turned off the lights in her house and climbed into bed.

The next night Anna was home alone washing the dishes. A tiny television kept her company while a rattling oscillating fan tried valiantly to create a breeze. But the thick, humid air was oppressive, and Anna was trying an old baker's trick of keeping cool by rubbing ice cubes on her wrists.

The phone rang. She wondered who it could be. Tom was at practice with Kevin, and she hadn't given her number to anyone except her brother who was in Clearwater with his wife for a few days.

"Hi, Anna." It was Mark.

Anna's heart stopped. How had he gotten her phone number, she screamed in silent panic. Her temples began to throb.

"Kevin called me yesterday. You were out at some air show or something... with a

Navy guy, I think he said? Sure didn't take you long to find someone. You always did have a thing for those fly boys." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"What is it, Mark?" she said impatiently.

"Okay, I'll get to the point. Kevin says he wants to move back to Orlando and live with me."

"I don't believe you," she said icily.

"Well, believe it. He says he hates it there. He's old enough to decide where he wants to live. I'm flying down next weekend to get him." The line went dead.

Anna hung up the phone in a daze. She sat down slowly, the dishrag limp in her hands. The emotional devastation was too much. As much as she tried to fight it, she felt lost and overwhelmed. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled onto her lap. She watched them make splotches on her sundress and felt their salty sting on her face. She didn't care. She didn't care about anything anymore, and she was tired of fighting Kevin and now Mark again.

She stood up numbly, wiped her face and hands and went into the bathroom to clean up. She put on a clean dress, set the table for dinner and sat down to eat. Moments later Kevin came home. He looked curiously at Anna eating alone, silently. He served himself some spaghetti and salad and sat down tentatively next to her.

"Your father called." Anna said simply.

"Oh? What did he say?"

"I think you know, Kevin." She stopped, waiting to see if he would say anything to her, if he would deny what he had done to her.

She continued. There was no emotion in her voice, no anger, only resignation.

"Why don't you get yourself packed up. He will be here Saturday to take you back to Orlando. You're old enough to know what you want, and I hope you find it. I'm sorry you are so miserable here with me. By the way, you'd better call Tom tomorrow and tell him you won't be playing baseball."

She rose from the table and put her plate into the sink. Then she went to her bedroom and closed the door. Kevin didn't say a word. He stared down at his plate of untouched food.

Twenty minutes passed. It was eerily quiet in the house. Then Anna heard the bedroom door slowly open. Kevin tiptoed into her room. She was lying on her bed, her back to him. She felt so small and tired, not the pillar of strength she always tried to be for him. Anna did not want to be cheery anymore. She only wanted to cry now, to cry for all the years of pain she had had to put up with, for all the mistakes she'd made in raising her only son, for herself.

She heard Kevin approaching her softly. He sat on the bed and touched her shoulder gently.

"Mom, can I talk to you... please?" His young voice was so full of sadness.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you. I've been a real jerk. I don't know why I did what I did it. I was just trying to make you pay for moving us here. But I didn't think you'd let me go. Never in a million years! I was angry at you, and I acted without thinking. You know I don't really want to go live with him; I know what you did was the right thing for us. He stopped talking. His voice had started to tremble, but he continued.

"I promise if you let me stay with you, I won't complain about living here anymore. I won't ever do anything to make you mad ever again. Mom, please look at me and tell me it's OK, like you always do."

He started to cry. Anna needed to stop his pain now.

"I don't know about the 'ever again' part, but I'll be satisfied with the 'no more complaining' part."

She turned to Kevin and hugged him.

"I'm sorry..." they said simultaneously then they both started to laugh.

"What about my dad?"

"Don't worry, I'll handle it," she assured him.

"No, I'll handle it, Mom. I got myself into this mess and I'll get myself out of it. I'm fourteen, you know, not a baby anymore."

He grinned at her.

Anna hadn't seen that ingratiating smile in so long, and she was delighted to have him back. She put her arms around Kevin's shoulders as they walked into the living room. The door was open and the evening breezes were beginning to cool the air again.

"Hey, how about a walk along the beach?" she asked him. "We never got to do that in Orlando, did we?"

"Mom? About Tom. I was really a jerk about that. You can see him; you should see him. He's a great guy." He put his arm around her. "You know this place really is pretty cool, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded relieved. Yes, it was very cool.

Jump-Start
by
Christina Morgan Ferraro

"We bought this on our honeymoon," Emily whispered to herself, grasping the porcelain mug as tightly as the memory.

A typical tourist keepsake, the coffee mug bore a trolley car and the bold letters of her name. They had wandered in and out of numerous gift shops on Fisherman's Wharf until they found one with his name on it, too. The mug hadn't been an exact match, but then, neither were they. Since he walked out on her last year, she hadn't seen him or his mug, either.

Emily released a sigh. Packing up and moving seemed like such a good idea a month ago. She had had fun viewing apartments and imagining new adventures. Now, as she wrapped her dishware in newsprint, sentiment and determination warred within her.

A knock sounded at the door. She ran her fingers through her temples, the premature gray strands now colored to match her natural auburn. She was expecting her landlady, Magda, and a guy who had seen the "For Rent" sign posted outside the building.

"I'll only show your place if you're sure you want to leave," Magda told her over the phone earlier. "It's not too late to back out."

Hope had feathered at the last-chance offer. But her logical voice won out. "Thanks, Magda. Go ahead and bring him by."

She and Magda had become friends over the years, chatting by the mailboxes. After Emily's husband moved out and her world lost its color, Magda had taken to checking in on her, offering bagels and a listening ear.

Months later, when Emily still did nothing more with her weekends than laundry and crossword puzzles, Magda put down the kid gloves. "Your social life doesn't have to end because your marriage did. You're a pretty girl. Get out there and turn some heads." Emily had wanted to laugh, but the months of loneliness and bitterness fused together in a surge of yearning. "I want to," she'd admitted. "But I'm afraid of hooking up with another jerk."

"There are plenty of good, decent men out there. But you aren't going to meet them in your living room."

It had been Magda's urging--and an early morning encounter with a broad-shouldered stranger--which ultimately spurred Emily into activity. She had taken a frank look at her life and admitted she was in a royal funk. A box of hair dye and some outfits had been easy. Finding the courage to consider a new place had been something else. Until she had learned about the complex across town, with the rec center and hot-and-cold running singles.

Moving could solve her troubles, she had told herself. Even if it meant leaving her friend and everything familiar behind.

She opened the door and offered Magda a half-hearted smile. A figure loomed in her peripheral vision, a blur of dark features and denim. "Come in," she said. "Sorry about the mess."

Magda dismissed her words with the wave of her hand. "Emily Iverson, meet Tom Sturgis," she said. "Tom's new in town, about to start a job at the industrial park."

The stranger stepped into view. It was her stranger, her handsome stranger. "I--I know you," her words tumbled out. "I mean, we met. Sometime back."

His olive black eyes flickered with interest. "Sure, last month. When I was out here interviewing. You were having car trouble."

She had come out the to the street in the cool morning light to find her battery dead. The service station had put her on hold, and she had stood beside the open hood for minutes, cell phone at her ear, peering at the tangle of metal and wires.

He had slowed to a stop, then idled inside the white Taurus. "Have a problem?"

"Dead battery."

The stranger with the sculpted features and tailored business suit stepped out and opened his trunk, his well-toned body moving with easy grace. "You're in luck. This rental car has cables." He aligned the front of his car against hers, fiddled with the cables, and called out at the moment of their connection. "Start the engine!"

A silly smile crept all over her face. "I really appreciate this."

"My pleasure." He came back and rested a ring-free left hand on the rim of her open window. "Anything else I can do for you?"

Take me to dinner, she surprised herself by thinking. But she had politely shaken her head and thanked him instead.

His random kindness and uncommon good looks lingered in her thoughts. If there was one great guy still out there, perhaps there would be another...

"How's the battery these days?" A smile tipped the corners of Tom's mouth.

"I replaced it. No trouble since."

After several beats of embarrassed silence, she realized she was not only staring at him, but blocking his and Magda's entry. "Oh," she said and laughed lightly. "Come in, come in."

Magda adopted her professional tone as she walked Tom through the living room and kitchen, making comparisons with the empty apartment they had toured upstairs. Emily had every intention of returning to packing, but followed them nonetheless.

"Darn," Magda said after examining the telephone number on her beeper's display.

"It's that couple in unit fourteen again. I've got to run up there for a few minutes." She turned to Emily. "Finish showing Tom around for me, okay?"

Emily nodded. "Any questions so far?" she asked as she led him down the narrow hallway.

"Yeah. Why are you leaving?"

Her heart thumped unsteadily and she did not turn around.

"Getting married?" he asked. "New job?"

She paused in the doorway of the bedroom. "No, nothing so dramatic. Just time for a change."

"Don't tell me this complex is too sleepy for single people."

"Not really. There's a nightclub a couple blocks over, and a coffee house down the street." A smile found its way through the knot of her uncertainty. "I guess like most places, life around here is pretty much what you make of it."

"And you're looking for something more in yours?"

"I was divorced recently," she heard herself admit. "And I've had some trouble getting back on my feet."

"I'm sorry. Divorce is never easy. But couldn't you just take a night class or something?"

She did not intend to defend her decision to this stranger. She was having enough trouble trying to convince herself.

A couple footsteps took her into the bathroom. She flicked on the overhead light.

"Nice wallpaper," he commented and touched the textured finish. "You put it up yourself?"

"I helped." Her thoughts circled back to the stress-filled weekend she had worked alongside her ex. He had complained that she couldn't do anything right and ultimately finished the job alone. But time had blurred that memory. Unlike the coffee mug, the wallpaper evoked no emotion. The pale blue walls and fluffy bathroom rug were just

more of the warmth that drew her home from work each evening.

"So, what do you think of the place?" she said after they had re-entered the living room.

"Oh, I like it. But it has one big drawback. If I take it, you move out. And I don't want you to go." He looked her full in the eyes. "I realize we barely know each other. But every time I thought about this town, about transferring here, I thought of you. So I came back to this neighborhood, to this block, hoping to find a vacant apartment--and you."

She felt a catch in her throat. "I'd like to get to know you better, too."

"What do you say we continue this conversation over dinner tonight?"

"Sounds wonderful," she said and grinned.

"In the meantime, I'm going to track the landlady down. And tell her I'm taking the place upstairs."

Her smile deepened. She guessed she would be talking to Magda herself about staying on inside the walls that so thoroughly cocooned her. And staying near Tom. The spark flickering in his dark eyes had re-charged her deadened heart. She couldn't think of a better way to give her life a jump-start.

ANGELS DO WEAR UNIFORMS, SOMETIMES

By

Victoria Giraud

When she saw the first signs outside San Bernardino for Highway 15 to Las Vegas, she knew she'd left Los Angeles behind her, maybe for good. Just last week her life had been quite wonderful; it was amazing to her how fast things could shift. She felt hopeless to change things back again; she just knew she had to keep driving, driving, driving. Since she left Beverly Hills early this morning, there were no plans in her mind, it was just a jumble of hurt, shame and fear. Perhaps her flight could at least help her put her life into perspective again, and then she would decide what to do. The drive down the superhighway to Vegas with its large vistas of barren desert fringed by lonely, granite mountains would give her plenty of time to think and deal with it.

Samantha didn't know yet whether she'd stop in Vegas or keep driving. She had filled the little Austin Healy's gas tank yesterday by chance, not knowing that she would flee today. If she'd thought about it then, perhaps she would have guessed that Peter couldn't handle her news. His age did determine some things, even though she'd long ago accepted the thirty-year difference. Although his health was exceptional at fifty-five, there were close friends and family that he'd seen sicken and die. His own brother, only five years older than he was, had died last year, just before she'd met Peter.

Samantha had grown to trust and love his gentleness and support, and had felt that he would be there for her, forever. He'd said it enough times. When she mentioned she had always wanted to travel, he took her on a trip around the world to all the places she had fantasized about as a child Egypt, India, Greece, Paris. And had indulged her with jewelry and clothes. Growing up in St. Louis, she'd dreamed such things, but during this magical time with Peter she tried to remember if she really expected them to come true.

She'd been living with Peter in the large mansion that movies had built for nearly a year now, and because of his position in the entertainment industry had met and grown to know many of his high-powered producer and actor friends. Listening to Walter Matthau tell jokes at a poker party was an indication that she'd arrived in another world. But now this world was going to disappear just when she was beginning to feel that she belonged; she

just knew it. And where would she be then? Who would want her? What would she do? Could she survive?

These nagging questions plagued her as she drove aimlessly, not paying particular attention to anything but her gloomy thoughts. She glanced at the speedometer by chance to discover she was creeping up on ninety-miles-an-hour. A tear slid down her cheek, as she pushed the accelerator harder. The tiny car vibrated with the speed, but the element of danger only made her more determined. She didn't care if someone stopped her; she didn't care what happened next. San Bernardino's outskirts were past her and the long, empty highway stretched in front of her. The day was sunny and clear, but it was too early for the desert heat. The little car could never have gone this fast with the air-conditioner on. The fresh, early morning air blowing through the vents and the crack in the driver's side window revived her feelings a bit. Perhaps there were some answers. She let up on the accelerator; there was no need to be so hasty, putting herself in peril until she had thought things through.

She'd come to Los Angeles to fulfill a dream, drawn to the flame of the movie industry like so many others. In St. Louis she'd already proved to herself that she had talent in several different areas. She had outgrown its possibilities; the next step in her mind had been to try her luck in Hollywood.

Named Samantha by her mother and shortened to Sam by all her friends and eventually family, she liked the name's mixture of masculine and feminine. It gave her an edge that helped her make her way in a white world; it gave her a certain measure of strength as a black woman.

Sam's early life had not been easy, but she did not feel sorry for herself. Experience had proved that if she persisted she could eventually mold life more to her liking. Sam's mother, grandmother and younger sister had managed to hold onto an older, three-story, brick home on a tree-shaded street in a middle-class neighborhood, sometimes just scraping by, but somehow always managing the small mortgage. Her attractive and energetic mother worked long hours as a saleswoman in a well-respected department store downtown that appealed to wealthier women. Her grandmother took in some sewing and alterations to help the family survive. During her teenage years Sam was bright enough to excel in school while working a part-time job.

Frustrated by her two failed marriages and the abusive second husband she had forced out soon after her youngest daughter was born, Sam's mother was a weekend alcoholic. She never touched a drink during the week, but come Friday evening after store hours, her mother would bring home an inexpensive bottle of vodka and a six-pack of Coke. Friday and Saturday evenings were devoted to getting as drunk as she could in three to four hours, even if she had to work on Saturday. The rest of the family stayed clear as she did her drinking in the living room watching programs on an old black and white television set. Her smooth, and dignified creamy almond-colored face did not betray her rage or the effects of the alcohol as she drank, but her voice did.

If Sam happened to be anywhere in the vicinity, and it was hard to get to the kitchen without being seen since the kitchen door led into the living room, her mother would yell at her. Her voice would slur, but her theme was a constant one, and it seemed reserved for Sam and not her younger sister.

"Samantha, you listen to me, ya hear?"

"Yes, Mama."

"You don't get mixed up with any old nigger."

"No, Mama, I won't, Mama."

"You make sure they treat you right, girl. You understand how important that is?"

"Yes, Mama."

"No nigger's gonna treat my daughters like their daddies treat me."

One night when Sam was twelve, she discovered her mother's passionate anger could lash out at anyone. Sam had gotten caught as she was trying to leave the kitchen. She no longer remembered what was said, it was probably the same old discussion. Her mother had consumed enough of the vodka to ignite her fury with even the slightest suggestion of back-talk. Her reaction was swift and shocking as she picked up the six-pack of Coke

beside her chair and threw it at Sam. It shattered into deadly shards of glass and sticky liquid. The sound of Sam's ankle breaking blended into the sounds of smashing glass and screams. The screams seemed to come from everywhere. Sam vividly remembered the searing pain, a combination of the physical hurt and the emotional anguish and shock of being the target of her mother's wrath. Since she had long ago managed to dim the edges of memory regarding the event, Sam only vaguely recalled her mother's guilty reaction. The drinking did not stop for another ten years, but her mother stifled the rage, and the conversations were shorter during the drinking hours. Sam tucked her pain away, and continued loving her mother.

During the week Sam's mother was attentive the few hours she was home, and made certain her daughters were clothed and fed to the best of her ability. There was never a discussion of why her behavior changed during the weekend.

When she was thirteen, Sam suffered another outrage to her personhood and her female psyche. She was raped by an uncle, a tall and muscular stepbrother of her absent father. It was during a family picnic in a park fringed with dark woods. He had terrorized her so that she promised to keep it secret. Sam's mother had been suspicious, but after a night of drinking had forgotten the secret, hurt look on her daughter's face. Sam absorbed the wound, but found it hard to deal with the fuming anger that would rise to her throat when she least expected it.

Later that same year Sam became very ill. She was diagnosed with cancer. Before she'd had a chance to envision a loving family of her own, her life-bringing womb had been cut out, declared a death threat. She kept her pain to herself, putting another stone in her heart and building a stronger wall around herself.

Her grandmother was a source of strength and peace at home. Sam spent time in Granny's room on the top floor, talking of this and that, but never mentioning what was really troubling her. Granny's dark, sad eyes seemed to understand that Sam must keep her pain to herself, a secret shadow treasure, never to be shared.

By the time Sam went to high school no trace of her cancer remained, and she resolutely forged a place for herself as a cheerleader and acquired both black and white friends. Her caramel-colored skin, softened hair worn in a shoulder-length flip, and her voluptuous figure set off by a tiny waist, gave an exotic touch to her all-American look, a face and figure envied by white girls and black alike. The male attention began then and had never stopped. From her childhood experiences and a growing sense of her own female power, she overcame by force of a steely will her early agonies and determined she would learn how to manipulate the male to her advantage.

Taking college courses and working at a variety of jobs, Sam explored her talents. She made friends with local artists and experimented with painting and graphics. When she found a lack of money in the arts, she tested her physical prowess and intuitions by becoming a policewoman and a few years later reached a pinnacle of midwestern fame as the first black anchorwoman on local television. It suited her need for adulation and attention. She enjoyed the power and fame, but it only made her hunger for more.

By her mid twenties Sam knew she would have to leave St. Louis to accomplish anything on a grander scale. She knew her looks would take her farther in a place like Los Angeles than the backwater St. Louis had become to her. She would never be satisfied in St. Louis, she had to explore greater themes for her life.

When she arrived in Los Angeles, she got an immediate job as a feature film extra. Although she sometimes tired of standing around waiting for filming to begin or end, she found the business fascinating and took the time to ask questions and get to know the players both in front of and behind the camera. Her striking looks, with her added knowledge and flair for the right clothes that attracted attention while emphasizing her unique figure, encouraged many a director or producer to talk with her.

On a hot and crowded set one day while filming a crowd scene in a busy parking lot, Peter sauntered up to her during the lunch break. Six-feet tall with a tanned, muscular body, a Germanic face and thinning blond hair going gray, his studied informal air and casual but expensive clothes gave him away as a producer. Sam perceived all this in an instant; to protect herself she had always been observant and perceptive. He stood in front of her, removing his sunglasses to reveal startlingly azure blue eyes. He gazed frankly into her eyes, assessing her looks and manner with no apology; he had been in this business too long to waste time on courtesies. Her height, in small heels, was equal to his; her forward gaze did not flinch or look away modestly. She took a few lazy moments to give him a

slight smile, her nose flaring as she smelled his expensive cologne. She was at ease and ready for any banter he might direct her way.

"Miss?" he opened, casually.

"Hunter. Samantha Hunter."

"I'm Peter Hood, the producer for this epic!" He laughed.

She smiled coolly. "I know."

"I haven't seen you before. Are you new at this game?"

"Fairly."

"I imagine you get impatient on days like this, when it's hot and crowded."

"Actually, no. I thoroughly enjoy this business, even though I am at the bottom... for now."

She could tell her reactions were intriguing him. He was probably so used to the starstruck, over-impressed, naive routine. The chase, she thought to herself, how they love the chase.

"Would you care to learn more about the business?" He paused for emphasis, testing her self-contained manner. "From a producer's point of view?"

"What did you have in mind?" She could just imagine, but she gave no hint of sexual interest, it was too early in the game.

"Dinner this evening... perhaps by the ocean."

She deliberately took her time answering as she slowly smiled at him, her dark eyes, pools of mystery. "Yes... I'd be honored," she answered with just a hint of sarcasm.

He laughed, genuinely delighted at her comment, and knew he might not be the master of this game. Here was a woman that looked like she would lead him around if he were not careful, a challenge to an attractive, powerful man used to getting his own way. He was heartily tired of having women gush and succumb over him so easily because of his money and position.

They had dinner in Malibu, sitting by the expanse of window at one of the trendier, wood and glass dining palaces perched along the coast. Each crash of the incoming waves seemed to meld these two passionate natures together. Sam was sassy and direct enough for him; Peter was more mellow, but opinionated and strong enough to fight for control. Sexually the chemistry blazed, and they lit the fire that first night. He took her home, and she'd been with him ever since until she left this morning, before the sun was even up. Thinking of how their romance began, Sam's tears began to flow again. They became sobs that racked her body, so powerful they sent pains through her chest and back. She nearly lost control of the car, and was forced to drive more slowly. As she gained control of herself and the car, she began to analyze.

Why couldn't he accept her as she was, slightly damaged? He knew she had inner strength, had survived much for her young years. Hadn't she told him some of her darkest secrets? Maybe she should never have opened up to him; he wasn't the father figure she never had. Was that what she expected? When would she stop looking for the strong, caring male? They did not exist. This thought brought tears again, but she willed them away. She needed some music and grabbed for a tape in a holder on the console. She put one on without even looking. As she started to listen she recognized Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. How appropriate, she thought ruefully -- star-crossed lovers, only happy in death. What a beautifully sad piece of music, certainly in keeping with her mood. Why didn't she drive off the highway now, and end it in a flash? But what if it didn't work, and she became more maimed than she was already. She wanted something certain, at least in death.

Sam recalled her doctor's visit and what had transpired afterward. She had finally gone to the doctor last week after several weeks of incredible stomach pain that she had endured stoically, never letting Peter see her wince. He was so busy with a movie he was producing that he didn't realize their sex life had been on hold the past few weeks. When the doctor told her after comprehensive tests that she had cancer, she nearly fainted. How could that be, she had screamed at him. She had already beaten the disease. She no longer had her uterus and ovaries. How dare it come back to haunt her! It had nothing to do with her female organs, he had said. She had a tumor in her intestine. It would have to come out; she must go through a series of chemotherapy treatments. He felt sure she'd beat it this time as well, but the sooner they scheduled the operation, the better.

When she managed to get her emotions under control, she went through the rest of the interview as if she'd been issued a death sentence. She was numb. How could she tell Peter that his sexy, young lover had cancer, that she wasn't all he hoped she'd be. Would he stick by her? Why would he when there were thousands of beautiful faces looking for

a meal ticket in L.A.?

She took the painkiller prescription the doctor wrote for her and made another appointment. They would set up an operation date next week, but first she must get her life in order.

At home she numbly planned a meal that could be delivered and found a low-cut, buttercup-yellow sundress that Peter had called "delicious." He'd find out soon enough that she was no longer edible; she was poisonous. She poured herself a stiff vodka, straight, no Coke like her mother, and sat in an overstuffed chair waiting for Peter in the dimly lit living room.

She heard the sounds of his Porsche drive up the steep driveway at 10 p.m. He walked in disheveled and exhausted, a disgusted look on his face, eager to share the frustrating details of the day.

"I can't believe that director; he thinks the investors are made of money. Take after take after take. I told him he'd be off the picture, contract or no contract if he didn't plan his shots better."

Peter continued to describe his day, not realizing until some minutes had passed that Sam had said nothing. Finally he stopped, concerned, and looked at her carefully.

He walked to her chair, leaned down and kissed her gently. "What's wrong, little Sammy?"

The pet name undid her resolve to remain calm; she burst into tears. Her sobs filled the room with palpable sorrow. Her body shook as she curled into herself, shoulders hunched, hugging herself and shaking away Peter's attempts to comfort her. What seemed like hours later, but was only minutes, she managed to pull herself together.

"I've got cancer," she said finally, in a barely audible voice.

"What? What did you say?"

"C - A - N - C - E - R," she spelled slowly as huge, sloppy tears rolled down her cheeks. "Baby... Sammy... It can't be. It can't be true. You're too young."

"Yes, it's certain." Her voice was strong and low, now without emotion. "I have a large tumor. I need an operation." Her voice drifted off as she put her hands over her face, overcome again.

"No, no, no. Not after Terry. I can't deal with this... I can't go through it again. It's too much... It's too much."

He started to sob, painful choking sounds. It was terrible for her to hear. Listening to a man cry was frightening, disturbing. She was asking too much of him; he could never handle it. She left him alone and stumbled up the stairs to their bedroom. When she collapsed on the huge bed, a bed that had held so much passion, she found she had no emotion left. The painkillers and vodka had done their work, and she fell asleep in seconds.

When she awoke, groggy and feeling miserable, moonlight was streaming through the sliding glass doors into the spacious room, a ray illuminating her face. At first she couldn't remember where she was, or why she was still dressed, lying face down on the bed. Then it came back to her with a jolt, as if someone had smashed her in the stomach. "Oh God," she said aloud.

The house was totally silent. Where was Peter, she wondered? What would happen to them now? She softly tiptoed downstairs. The solitary lamp she had turned on earlier still glowed beside the overstuffed couch, but she did not see Peter or hear his sounds. She opened the front patio door and stepped out onto the flagstones. His Porsche wasn't in the driveway. He'd left her. He couldn't handle this, and he'd gone. She would probably never see him again. Fine. She would leave too. Perhaps she'd end it all; she was of no use, anyway. Who wanted the burden of damaged goods, sickly bodies?

By 4 a.m. she had aimlessly packed a small suitcase, not caring what she put in it except for the large container of painkillers she'd picked up at the pharmacy yesterday. She was on the freeway and out of Los Angeles when the sun came up, driving east with no set destination in mind.

It wasn't even ten in the morning when she crossed the Nevada border. The billboards and gaudy hotels at the little town of Jean did nothing for her mood but darken it. Less than an hour later as she drove through Vegas, noting the furious construction going on everywhere she looked, she felt more discouraged. Vegas was nothing but a movie set, an amusement park for adults. She would solve no anguish here. The coal black pyramid of

the Luxor reminding her of ancient Egypt's focus on death. Just thinking of stopping made her wonder what point there was to life. Was it only about enjoying yourself, spending money, sex, gambling? Business and amusements to stave off the inevitable? She had always thought she had goals worth pursuing a career in the film industry, an important intimate relationship, perhaps a family of adopted children. Now she wondered if those seemingly unreachable steps would ever be truly attained. She had put her career on hold for the past year, and where had it gotten her? She felt that she could fight the disease and win, but what was the use? Life had taught her to be independent and enjoy it, but she wanted a man to share her life. Who would choose her, tainted with cancer? Where were her answers? There were no answers. Why not end it? Her mother and grandmother had enough to deal with helping her younger sister get through college. Who needed her? Peter would be better off. The world would be better off. She had nothing left to contribute, nothing, nothing.

The sobs came again, but determinedly she continued to drive. She would not choose death in Las Vegas, no matter how desperate she was. Aimlessly she drove, following the freeway, not even realizing until early afternoon that she had crossed into Utah. The mountainous terrain was lovely, but she could not appreciate the scenery.

When she saw the sign for St. George, she briefly snapped out of her depression. She must make a decision; she was tired of driving. What was the point? Her first boyfriend's name had been George, a reason as good as any to stop there. As she drove down the main street of the small town, which might have been interesting in its mountain setting at a better time, she looked for a suitable motel, something ordinary where they would not ask many questions. She hadn't looked in the mirror, but she knew she must look distraught, and she wanted to be left alone.

Sam pulled into the parking lot of a small, two-story motel. There were only twenty rooms and just a few cars in the lot. Before she got out of the car, she did what she could to her makeup with a dash of blush, and decided she'd have to keep on her dark glasses. When she looked in her wallet for money, she realized she only had ten dollars. Now what would she do? Her mind was so dulled from the drive and her misery, she could not think. She sighed and a thought clicked in. She had Peter's credit card. That would do it. She'd already used it once for gas, and they hadn't questioned her.

As she walked toward the tiny office, she was thankful that she had worn a straight, black skirt and simple dark, red jersey top. The clothes would not draw attention. Sam tried to put a pleasant look on her face, but could not look the desk clerk in the eye, despite her sunglasses.

"Welcome to Utah, honey," said a plump, friendly clerk, her plain face enlivened with green-framed glasses. "What can I do you for?" She laughed, and her breasts jiggled against the counter.

"A single for a night or two," Sam mumbled.

"We can do better than that. It just so happens I've got a lovely room downstairs with a queen size bed and it's only \$25 a night."

"Fine," Sam answered as she began filling out the guest information sheet, and handed over the credit card.

"You drive from L.A.? I see you have California license plates." The woman wanted to make friends despite Sam's obvious reticence.

"Yes."

"Enjoy yourself, honey. There's a coffee shop across the street." She gave up any further questions as she looked at her quizzically.

"Thanks."

The room was clean and quiet and impersonal. Just what Sam wanted at this point. She dropped the small suitcase on the floor and searched her handbag for the pills. Her stomach was starting to hurt. Sharp pains, some of them excruciating, ran across her belly and up her spine. The thought that she hadn't eaten for twenty-four hours did not occur to her, all she could think of was dulling the pain. Ignoring the instructions on the plastic container, she took four and swallowed them with water. She took off her loafers and her sunglasses and sprawled crosswise on the bed. With the lack of food, the pills took effect almost immediately and Sam sunk into a drugged sleep.

Peter returned home in mid-morning after a hellish night of self-recrimination at his selfish reaction to Sam's desperate news. He had gone to a favorite bar, but when the scotch could no longer dull the pain or the reality of Sam's cancer, he drove to the beach

and walked until the sun rose, and then sat watching the waves for a few more hours. When he entered the quiet house, he was surprised to find Sam gone; he had never imagined she would leave. He found her closet open, and a large suitcase open in the middle of the floor. He remembered that a smaller suitcase had been stored in the larger one. Some of her drawers hadn't been closed and makeup appeared to be missing. Where could she have gone?

He spent the next hour puzzling over her destination and making some phone calls. He checked flights to Missouri, and called her mother telling her that he and Sam had a horrendous fight the previous night, but didn't mention the cancer. Then he thought about the credit card he'd given her and his good friend, a Lieutenant with LAPD. There were only so many directions out of L.A.; surely Bud could find a lead. By mid afternoon Peter had the information he needed, the name of the St. George motel, and he was on his way to the airport. He'd fly to Vegas and rent a car for the short drive to Utah.

The noise of a sixteen-wheel truck idling woke Sam from her deadened slumber. She wondered where she was as she looked around the darkened room, and then it came back to her with all its anguish. She didn't want to be awake. She did not want to be alive. There was no hope for her; life was pointless. She'd take enough pills to end it all. That was the way to do it. Painlessly. Just go to sleep. Hamlet's famous speech came to her mind, "To die, to sleep no more, and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to."

Groggily she dragged herself from the bed and searched for her bag. No, she had put the pills on the bathroom sink. She found them and then wondered how many to take. What would do it? She could not make a mistake. There was nothing to do but take them all. Damn, there didn't look to be as many as she first thought. He must have prescribed just for a week since she needed the operation right away. God damn it! She poured the pills into her hand and counted. She was so drugged she couldn't remember if there were nineteen or twenty-four. How could she remember Shakespeare and not be able to count? To hell with it, just take them. No one knew she was here; they'd do the job for her even if it took the rest of the night. She sat on the bed and poured the pills onto the little nightstand; there was still enough daylight coming through the cracks in the curtains to see. She had a difficult time swallowing them all, even with water. Her throat was dry; her stomach growled its emptiness. Several times she gagged and thought, frantically, that she'd throw up. She calmed herself and took three at a time, slowly, waiting a long time between swallows. When she'd taken the last three, she lay back and waited for the inevitable.

"Please God, forgive me, for I know not what I do. Take me to thy bosom, fast. I know you understand."

She giggled a little at her remarks. Life was silly, she thought as she started to pass out. Loud pounding penetrated her fast-disappearing consciousness. She turned over. Was this hell? The noises persisted. Then they stopped.

"Sam, Sam, my little Sammy, wake up my love. You're coming with me," said the loud, male voice that was coming from so far away. It continued, echoing, dragging at her from somewhere.

Sam opened her eyes and saw a worried male face. Was she in heaven or hell? Was this an angel? If it was, he smelled like Peter. She mumbled and blinked her eyes at the bright light. Then she felt hands around her shoulders pulling her up.

What was going on? She was no longer in control of her body.

"Sam, we're going home, sweetheart. Help me. Did you take a sleeping pill? Well, you have plenty of time to sleep on the way back to Vegas."

She heard voices, but could make no sense of what they were saying. Then she was in a car, her head leaning against the rolled-up window, and the car was in motion. The movement lulled her and she was slowly losing consciousness again. Fine. The pills were working.

The noise of a siren penetrated the fog rapidly enveloping Sam. Couldn't they leave her alone to die in peace? Turn off that noise. The lovely humming and motion of the vehicle had stopped suddenly. Now what was happening? The floating had stopped, they wouldn't let her go in peace. She heard a male voice beside her cursing. Then an arm moved her head from the window and rolled it down. Through the haze that had become her environment, a peaceful gray and muffled haze, she saw a hand. It was strangely

comforting, but it took a while to register the thought. The hand was that of a black man. Then she closed her eyes, and the fog completely enveloped her.

"Officer, was I going too fast?" Peter asked impatiently.

"No, sir. But this woman is very ill and needs to be taken to a hospital."

Peter looked more closely at Sam, now slumped onto the seat.

"I thought she'd taken a sleeping pill."

"It's more than that. Follow me. I'll take you to the nearest hospital."

The patrolman quickly got onto his motorcycle and led the way, sirens screaming. Peter gunned the motor, reacting quickly despite the fear that gripped his heart. Why hadn't he noticed that it might have been more than a sleeping pill?

When Sam awoke to a sun-brightened hospital room the next morning, her personal fog had lifted, and she noticed the splashes of color in vases throughout the room. Vases spilling out red and white roses, vases of purple gladiolas, other vases jammed full of pink and yellow roses. Was she in heaven? She swallowed and then remembered. Her throat was terribly sore, and her stomach felt queasy. Her stomach must have been pumped, but she felt so much better. Then she remembered Peter's face. He must have come to get her; she remembered smelling him, but when was that, she wondered? He must care for her. A large tear wet her cheek. Poking into her memory was the vision of a black hand on a car door, a blue uniform at the wrist. A policeman? What was that about?

Peter softly crept into the room. "Are you awake, sweetheart?"

"Yes. Thank you, Peter darling. That was a horrible thing I did."

"Don't thank me. I did come and get you, but I did not realize what you'd done. I was driving us to the Vegas airport."

"What happened?"

"A motorcycle cop pulled us over."

"Yes, I remember it, but it's a hazy impression."

"Somehow he knew you were sick and needed to get to the hospital quickly. So he turned on his siren and led me here. He disappeared before I could thank him."

"You can thank him today. We should let his commanding officer know what he did."

"Those were my thoughts too this morning."

"Did you locate him?"

"That's the odd part. I knew he was black, and I had one of the hospital secretaries check him out. Apparently there are only two motorcycle cops in the whole southern end of Utah."

"That makes it easier."

"Neither one of them is black."

Up Where We Belong By

B. Lynn Goodwin

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I needed a change of scenery, a break in the routine. I was looking for something different when I took off the weekend before Thanksgiving. Alone as usual, I headed northeast and landed in Reno. Restlessly, I prowled the casinos. Sometimes in a casino I got a sixth sense about what to bet, but not that night. Everything felt wrong, and I was sorry I had made the trip. The next morning I left early for Pyramid Lake. The name intrigued me. Pyramid --a mysterious, ancient Egyptian structure where kings and queens were entombed, built by some process lost to modern man. I looked forward to traveling on the

Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation, a place preserved for centuries, untainted by European settlers. I looked forward to the vast stretches of desert and to being alone with my thoughts. I cruised along at the speed limit on Nevada's Highway 447. The road was narrow but recently resurfaced. I remember passing a truck that had spilled over. The driver was lifting wooden crates out of the sand, and someone had stopped to help him. The radio was playing "Lord Lift Us Up Where We Belong" and my spirits surged and soared with the music. I wished for a sun roof so I could look up and find that place where I belonged. I was often apart and separate: the idea of belonging appealed. The music was so beautiful I couldn't stand the constriction of my seat belt. I released it and thought of myself as surrendering, letting go. There was a joy in surrendering to the music. A thud brought me back to the road. I had veered too far to the right. My wheels were on the rim...no further...into the drop. I slammed on the brakes, and yanked to the left. I was out of control; the car fishtailed. I pulled with all my might back to the right, still braking, still

traveling too fast. I needed another correction, and yanked the wheel to the left. The car flew across the road, and skidded into the dirt. Then my right wheels were spinning mid air as I thunked to the left, careened onto my side and kept on going. There was a horrid crash of metal, and the tinkle of breaking glass. The car came to a stop, upside down, roof crunched in. Everything was still, except the radio which blared some mindless tune. A boulder was next to my door. I pushed, knowing it was futile. "I have to get out of here before the fire starts!" My heart raced. This was the end. I was relieved to know how I would die. I gave up on the door, my second surrender, and realized my feet were sticking out where the rear window had been. Somehow my body had flipped around completely and reversed itself as the car rolled. I was lying flat on my back, my feet protruding where the rear window had been. I had taken the seat belt off a minute before the accident and have always believed that action saved my life. I inched myself out, my feet dragging on the soft dirt behind the car. Shards of glass hung over me like daggers and I thought, "No way I can get through this space without scraping my body raw. Guess it's too late for a diet." I sucked in and slid out. I stood up. That meant I was able to stand. Nothing was broken, sprained, or dislocated. Trembling and dizzy, I backed away from the car and looked out on the vast expanse of sand and sagebrush. I considered walking out into it and disappearing forever. That would have been the ultimate surrender. Instead I capitulated to whatever kept me alive. So where was my earth-shattering, burning-bush moment of clarity? Why wasn't I rejoicing like a movie-of-the-week heroine? Why wasn't the true purpose of my life instantly revealed? I felt none of the joy of "Lord Lift Us Up Where We Belong." Instead I felt almost guilty, like I had gotten a break I didn't deserve. I was afraid to hope for joy. As soon as it was within my reach, it would be snatched away from me. Too many good moments had already been snatched. I didn't see the irony of that thought, despite the fact my life had just been spared. The wheels of my Toyota were still spinning when a wonderful middle aged couple on their way to a wedding in Reno rescued me. There were a million practical things to deal with--the police report, a rental car, a new car, cleaning out the trunk of the totaled car, waves of dizziness, and resuming my life. For a long time, I still imagined myself escaping into the desert. I am not a churchgoer, but I know some Higher Power, some angel, some spirit of a long dead Pyramid Indian was guarding me as my car rolled. I had not finished whatever I was here on earth to do, and I was being given a second chance. There is no other explanation, certainly no scientific explanation, for my walking away from the wreck unharmed. Out on the desert, I found the luck that was missing in the casinos. Seven years have passed and I am thankful now. I no longer fear that hope and joy will be snatched from me as soon as they are within reach. I still believe God has not yet finished with me. A Higher Power has something for me to do on earth. I hope today I am doing God's will, whatever it is.

HARMONICA MAGIC

by

Anita Gunnufson

Sam Cohen never went anywhere without a bit of magic in his shirt pocket. For Sam, my beloved father, the harmonica was more than a hobby. It was his best friend. Since age 12, he used his gift to entertain others. He brought along his trusted friend on every hay ride, cruise ship, and tour bus he was ever on. I have many fond memories of him playing it during our vacations.

Although his older brothers are accomplished musicians with formal training, my dad had none. He never learned how to read music and played strictly by ear. He recounted, "I don't know if I was actually taught how to play by my brother, Morry, or if I just learned by watching and imitating him. He always saw me as just a kid brother." Eventually, in his sixties, he had his chance to prove himself. They were both on stage entertaining some group, and Sam pulled out his chromatic harmonica. "For the first time, I felt he really respected my ability. It was a great feeling." When I asked him to relate his favorite memory involving the harmonica, he responded immediately. "It happen on a ship during the war. We were going from Hawaii to Iwo Jim, and one of the soldiers asked if anyone else had an instrument and would like to play along with his guitar. I pulled out my harmonica and another soldier had drums. The three of us formed a spontaneous band. We played our hearts out for hours."

When my parents went to Alaska, they were on a train which was stopped by a rock slide for four hours. The event was newsworthy because Prince Andrew was a passenger. My mother saved the article. What it didn't mention was how my dad and his harmonica made the four hours slip by for those lucky enough to be in his car. They had an impromptu sing along.

Dad felt that his ability was nothing really special, and he tried to teach his three children and the oldest of his eight grandchildren how to play. But to no avail. That's because he had something the rest of us don't _ magic.

To make a living, he repaired televisions and other electronic equipment. He never fully retired from the work he loved, but once he was semi_retired, he joined a harmonica band made up of other senior citizens. The band had ten members at the time, three of which were ladies. They practiced once a week and performed at least once weekly for senior citizen groups, convalescent homes, hospitals, and organizations like the Masons. He was one of several who played the chromatic harmonica in the band, but he was the only one to play harmony _ self taught and no small feat. Dad loved performing with them because their concerts brought happiness to others. Whether sitting in chairs or wheelchairs, the men and women who had the

opportunity to listen to the band sang and clapped along to the lively, nostalgic music. Some of his best friends were in that band. During his last years, he wrote a column in a national harmonica newsletter. It stemmed from a letter he wrote to the editor suggesting a column on hints on how to take care of the harmonica, and the editor wrote back asking him to do it.

The highlight of his year was the annual Harmonica convention, where he not only got to play with others, but he could listen to concerts given by the best. At one of these conventions, he was caught on film by a newspaper photographer in the men's room. The photo shows a line of urinals in the background with three men standing in the middle of the room playing their instruments. The caption under the photo explained that they were utilizing the room for its acoustics.

The highlight of my year was when he and mom would telephone me on my birthday. He would play the traditional birthday song while Mom sang along. It's one of the things I miss most since his death.

This is the memory I cherish most. In 1996 my dad, who had heart failure, was sent home from the hospital to die. His best friends came over to bid him good bye, harmonicas in hand. They wanted to play for him. Dad joined in, despite the fact he was bedridden with an oxygen cannula in his nose. He even did his famous stint on Spanish Eyes, where he played the harmonica with one hand and shook the maracas with the other. My mother and I sat there with tears in our eyes as the audience to this final performance. They had the chance to play once more with him. The whole band played at his funeral, and we all knew that dad was in heaven playing harmony with them.

The Dance of the Painted Ponies

By Loretta Kemsley

The lilting tune of the organ caught me by surprise -- the unmistakable call of the carousel. On the beach in Santa Barbara? I followed its lure willingly, let the memories ebb and flow like the restless tide washing the sands clean. Across the street, through the traffic, into the park. And then there it was. Splendor. Love. Pure love. Dad's love. He loved me. He loved the carousel. I don't know which he loved more. It doesn't matter. The two are inextricably linked in my heart. Dad's career began with a carousel in a park in Ogden, Utah. He was fourteen, not much younger than the boy running this carousel. The sign proudly proclaimed the carousel's age: built in 1902 by a master craftsman, one of three that still survived. 1902. Born seven years before my father. Forty-five years older than the merry-go-round that sat in my backyard, fading, forlorn now, perhaps missing Dad as much as I do. The morning was cool, and I had plenty of time. I leaned on the fence, studying the horses as they flashed by. Mouths open, ears pinned, like chargers racing forward to meet the foe. The center art depicted scenes from America long ago. Wilderness. Bears. Stagecoaches. Indians. The horses matched the scene, one painted pony for the Indian, draped with a bear skin carved as deftly as the wooden saddle. Like every carousel, this one contained two sleighs, each decorated with the same theme. As the platform spun round and round, my head whirled, revisiting a time long ago, when I was much smaller and my imagination more vivid. I was the Indian princess or Annie Oakley, riding the chargers with such skill and deft the brass ring was easily mine. I could still feel the up and down surge of the horse beneath me still. High above, the iron turnstiles churned, their magic just as real, lifting the horses high, then gently lowering them again. I loved lying on the platform, mesmerized by their rhythm. The colors of the draped breast plates and saddles still intrigue me. Bright. Bejeweled. Happy. Just plain old happy--like the faces of the people climbing aboard. A grandmother and granddaughter--about four years old. A father and son. A Japanese man, about forty, embarrassed, bashful, eyes down, still determined to sit astride one of the colorful horses. All faces smiling. These faces are what my father saw every day he went to work. He was a simple man, contented with his career, refusing all who tried to lure him away. It was as if he was born just for this. He never caught the normal childhood diseases--not even as an adult. He must have been exposed a few thousand times to measles, mumps, colds and chicken pox in the seventy years he worked. Nary a spot. Hardly a sniffle. Memories flowed past, a river of happiness shared. The young girl at Halloween, a miniature lady from the Middle Ages, cone hat rising high above her head held proudly, its gossamer scarf streaming behind as she rode. The tiny, old woman hiding in the curved footwell of the sleigh, her money too meager to afford more than one ride. She hoped we wouldn't notice. We tried hard not to but safety considerations demanded otherwise. Dad approached her as gallantly as a knight of old, holding out his hand and chivalrously helping her to her feet before seating her upon the sleigh's bench. She rode all afternoon, strumming her uke and singing the songs of her heart. There was danger too, especially when he drove his self-contained merry-go-round into the ghettos of Los Angeles. Mounted on a truck, he could stop on any street corner and sell rides. Like ice cream men everywhere, the children rushed from their homes, glad to hear his music. Sometimes the police ignored him. Other times they asked him to move on. One day, a cruiser pulled to the curb, and he prepared to leave. The man in blue questioned him. "Planning on being here long?" Dad looked at the disappointed kids but knew he couldn't argue with the law. "No, I'll just finish up this ride and leave." The cop frowned. "I was hoping you'd stay awhile. I live three blocks over and wanted to fetch my daughter and her friends." Eager kids cheered as the black and white pulled away, and the rides started anew. They even cheered when it reappeared, disgorging several more children who ran to join the line. He worried about hold-ups, although no one had ever tried. He'd long ago decided his wallet and cash weren't worth fighting over. If it ever happened, he'd hand them over without protest. One day, toward the end of his career, he noted three young men hanging back from the crowd. Their clothing screamed "gang members," and their demeanor said they were neighborhood toughs. Only a half hour before, Dad had stashed most of the afternoon's revenue under the seat of the truck. He had a bit of money in his pocket and hoped it would be enough to satisfy them when they finally got up their nerve. They waited until most of the kids were done riding, then approached, spreading apart in a semi-circle. Dad kept his back to the truck and faced them. "Afternoon. Can I help you gentlemen?" Two looked at the ground. The other looked away, casing the street

for witnesses. Finally, he turned back. "Yeah, we were hoping you'd wait while we go get our little brothers and sisters. We ain't got much money, but we could help round up more kids and keep them in line." The deal was struck and Dad stayed another two hours, every ride full. In the years before he died, Dad shared stories of his life before I was born. As a teenager, he already owned a few ponies and sold rides at the county fairs in Utah. One year, two younger brothers accompanied him as they rode the ponies from Ogden to Salt Lake, planning on earning a few dollars at the fair. As night fell, they searched for a place to sleep but didn't find anything until well after dark. At last, they came across a deserted barn with enough hay to feed the ponies and provide a soft bed to sleep upon. They were soon fast asleep. Dawn was long gone when a farmer's boot poked his side. "You boys better get up soon, or you're gonna miss breakfast." The barn was fifty feet from his farmhouse. Inside, his wife had set a table filled with home cooking. Dad tried to pay them, but they laughed and refused. "We're just glad for the company. You boys stop back by on your way home." Dad left behind this marvelous gift. What better legacy than the joy on the faces of people at the carnival. Kemsley's Kiddie Karnival. Popcorn, snow cones, swings, whips and bombers. Glittering lights that whirled and sparkled. Ponies that snatched cotton candy from unsuspecting kids. We had them all. It was with reluctance that I finally left the carousel on the beach. I bought a CD with my favorite tunes, sweetly played upon an old fashioned calliope. I took with me photos and notes on lined paper. I didn't want to forget a moment of that morning or the memories it inspired. As I sit writing this piece, the CD is playing and those notes sit before me. Dad's gentle insistence on living his dream is also beside me as I reflect upon my life. I don't remember a time when I didn't know how to read. My mother wrote, in my baby book, I finished reading a set of childhood story books at age three. She was wrong. All thirteen sit on my shelves today, and I still read them, but her handwriting makes me smile. I wonder if she knew how much they meant to me, with their exquisite art and fancy letters, books I could climb inside and letters I could hide behind, becoming one with the story, joining the adventure at the hero's side. It was on their pages I met Long John Silver, Gulliver, and a host of others. They took me to the South Seas, to the frozen North and backwards in time to visit ages past. In that same baby book, I wrote, at age twelve: "I want to be an author." And so I am. Thanks Dad. You taught me how to dream--and how to follow that dream. I just hope I can live up to your example.

A CHRISTMAS TRADITION

By

Susanne Knight

Staying in touch with relatives takes on a whole new meaning when your father is one of eleven brothers and sisters. Most live in mid-western states like Missouri, Illinois, and Kentucky, but we also have members in California, Oregon, New York, and Florida. We've never shared a '93 Family Christmas, '94 but have shared something else: Grandma's priceless, story-telling quilt. My grandmother was a very special lady. She married at the young age of nineteen, only to be widowed by a freak accident at twenty-two. Left with a two-year-old son (my father) and a nursing baby, Grandma managed the best she could until five months later, when tragedy struck again. My father's baby sister developed pneumonia, and died. It was then, under this cloud of grief, that Grandma decided to sew a tribute to her loved ones. Spanning the years

between her first marriage in 1915, until 1966 the death of her second husband, Grandma's story-telling quilt commemorates births, weddings, deaths, and any of life's triumphs, for example, the end of World War II. Some of the six inch squares depict picturesque scenes tiny paintings done in fabric. Others feature painstakingly appliquéd items pertaining to each of her children. My father's three stripes as a seaman in the Navy proudly announces his military service. Grandma's two marriage rings hold places of honor in the center.

My grandmother's arthritic fingers signaled completion of her project. For the remainder of her years, this blanket of love decorated her living room wall. When this extraordinary woman passed away, her estate, along with her possessions, were divided among the children. However, there remained one problem: who would inherit the quilt? As the oldest, perhaps my father should have gained possession, but since the daughters outnumber the sons, protests were vocal. One daughter insisted that because she had the most children of her own, she should be the beneficiary.

That suggestion didn't go over well, either.

As Christmas time approached, the quilt suffered silently inside a cardboard box. My mother, bless her heart, fretted over this neglect. It was her turn (or more precisely, my father's turn!) to write in the round robin holiday letter, and as she sat down to read everyone's news, she thought of a solution. What a wonderful Christmas tradition it would be for each of the ten living brothers and sisters to receive the family heirloom for one year, then hand it to the next sibling down the line. And that is how this symbol of our heritage came to be evenly divided. Our history is visually told through each square lovingly sewed on the quilt, and also through verbal remembrances to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For one whole year, the quilt adorns the lucky family's bed. Everyone shares in the joy. My grandmother's life will never be forgotten. The price of this living present is only the cost of postage and insurance. True, it takes ten years for the quilt to circulate through the family, but it is certainly worth the wait. And talking about wait, I'm looking forward to Christmas time in 2003, when it will again be my parent's turn to be guardian for Grandma's priceless, story-telling quilt!

THE GIFT

By Katriena Knights

Scotland, 1307 Affrick sat on her usual rock by the kaleyard, transferring wool from distaff to spindle, practiced hands changing it from fluffy, combed wool to tight-spun thread suitable for weaving. She'd been spinning since she was a little girl; she couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known how to do it. Yet sometimes it still seemed like magic as the movement of the twirling spindle drew the fluff of wool into the firm length of thread. "'Tis today, is it not?" The voice at her right hand failed to startle her, though she hadn't seen Joneta approach. The other woman sat on the ground next to Affrick's perch and launched her own spindle. "Aye," said Affrick. "Just after midday."

"Gilly's a fool." Joneta spoke without rancor; Gilly was her brother. Affrick only smiled. "He's a man, is he not?" "Aye, that he is." Joneta watched her spinning a moment, building momentum. "You'll be there?" "Oh, aye. This I wouldna miss for all the world." # Affrick couldn't remember a time when she hadn't known Gille-Críst MacLaren. The son of the MacLaren, he'd always been prouder than he should have been. Affrick couldn't remember a time when she hadn't loved him. Joneta had never much cared that Affrick was a foundling. Gilly hadn't been as diplomatic, and on his ninth birthday, Joneta dared Affrick to kiss him, a lesson as vengeance for the bug he'd put in Joneta's bed the night before. Affrick scrunched up her freckled nose, thinking she'd rather collect cow dung for the fire than admit she actually wanted to kiss Gille-Críst MacLaren. Plus she didn't like the idea of her kisses being as repulsive as a bug in your bed. "How long must I be kissing him for?" "Not long," Joneta assured her. "Only long enough that I'll see it. I have to be sure it really happened, ye ken?" "And what'll ye be giving me for it?" "Those fine, wee buttons Da brought me back from Edinburgh."

It was enough for Affrick. The buttons were lovely, from France. It wouldn't be hard to convince Joneta she took the bet for the buttons, and not because she'd dreamed of kissing Gilly. Gilly sat on a rock by the kaleyard, sifting through the stones he carried in a small bag wherever he went. His mother had made him the bag from a scrap of his father's tartan, only a few weeks before she'd died of fever. Gilly sat on the rock, and his bare feet were dirty, his long, white shirt tattered at the tails and cuffs. His dark hair, pulled into a tail at his nape, had hay in it. Too young for trews or tartan, he swung his bare legs, unmindful of the scratches on them, the scrape at his ankle, the scabbed knees. Affrick didn't notice them, either. She was rarely out of trouble, and her knees looked much the same beneath her own white shirt. All she saw was Gilly's hands, his clever fingers turning the shining stones. She stood still, hidden behind the corner of the MacLaren cottage, watching those fingers turn the stones, one at a time. A round, brown stone, polished by the river. A black stone, sparkly, streaked with red. A lump of white quartz.

She wondered what he thought about while he turned the stones, if they were his way of remembering his mother. Affrick had no such ties to her parents. She didn't know who they'd been, only that they'd abandoned her and she'd been found wrapped in a blanket on the roadside by the woman who had raised her. She didn't really need to know more than that, she supposed. She swallowed hard for courage and went to sit next to Gilly.

"Those rocks are pretty," she said. "Could I look at them?" He looked at her with disdain. Affrick, not one to be cowed, smiled back. "That black one's very bonny. I've never seen anything like it." His black eyes softened, and Affrick's heart melted. She'd dreamed of the day he'd look at her with something other than contempt. He handed her the black stone. "Here," he said. "Dinna be dropping it." She turned the stone in her fingers, feeling the warmth Gilly's hand had left behind. The red streak in the stone broke in a few places, like bright lightning. Affrick closed her hand around it, then leaned toward Gilly. He looked up, his eyes wide, like a startled deer's. "Here," she said, pressing the stone back into his hand. At the same time, she pressed her lips against his cheek. Joneta's squeal of laughter told her she'd completed her task. Still, she held herself close to Gilly, smelling his nine-year-old boy smell, until he came out of his initial shock and began to shout. Then she turned tail and ran. # Two dozen people, most of them women, had gathered in the village square. The sun sat high in the sky and most of the morning's fog had burned off. "Look at them," Joneta said, shaking her head. "So bonny and yet so daft." Affrick smothered laughter. The girls were bonny, that was certain--every pretty girl in the village had come for the occasion, and most of the not-so-pretty ones. None had come without a gift--but that was the point. "You've brought something, of course," Joneta said to Affrick, who answered with a pained smile, "Aye,

my bruised and battered heart." "I've never seen a dafter man than my brother, not to see you pining all these years." Affrick's cheeks went hot and she pulled her plaid closer around her shoulders, protectively. "Never in my life have I pined." "Aye, and it's as ye say." Wisely, Joneta let it drop. The crowd of women fell suddenly still. Affrick looked toward the MacLaren cottage. Gille-Críst ducked his head to come through the door. His height had surprised everyone. He was taller than the MacLaren had been--taller, it was said, than any MacLaren before him. His black hair was pulled back from his face and tied at the nape of his neck. It glistened in the noon sunlight. Black brows drew down severely over black eyes. Handsome, Affrick thought, as she always did, like a black-eyed Faerie King. Time had been unkind to him, though, putting lines on a face not yet thirty. The loss of his mother as a lad, the loss of his father, then his young wife in childbed with twin boys. There were those who said he'd forgotten how to love. Affrick thought him simply afraid. Gille-Críst stood tall in his carefully draped plaid, regarding the crowd of women with neutrality approaching disdain. "I'll see ye one by one," he said, his voice firm and carrying easily to the edge of the crowd where Affrick waited. "I expect to come to a decision by the end of the day. The lass who presents me with the best gift will become my wife." He sat down on a stump with a grand flip of his plaid, and the first girl approached, timidly proffering a package of gorgeous French silk. At the edge of the crowd, Affrick set her chin on her fist and remembered a time when Gilly had laughed. # There had been flowers everywhere, and it was hard not to hate the slip of a girl who was to become Gilly MacLaren's wife. Affrick had hoped too hard, and too long, and her sixteen-year-old heart had lain in a hundred pieces within her as Gilly lifted his golden-haired bride and kissed her full and long on the mouth. The ceilidh would go on all night, most likely, and Affrick would be hard-put to escape it. She tried to sneak away, thinking perhaps the sheep would make better company, but Joneta caught up with her from behind and grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?" "I'm tired," Affrick lied. "Mother said I should be resting after that dunk in the river." "That was days ago. Come dance." "'Tisn't you I'd wish to be dancing with." It came out in anger, and Affrick clapped both her hands over her mouth. Joneta studied her, frowning. "I suspected it, but I'd hoped ye had better taste than to pine for my daft, hairy-arsed brother." "I don't pine!" Affrick protested, but her voice broke. Mortified to the depths of her soul, she turned and ran. It was even harder to hate Gilly's wife a year later when her screams had filled the village for most of a day and a night. She was too small to bear the twin boys she carried, and in the end they'd laid mother and sons beneath the kirkyard.

In the woods a few days later, gathering herbs and losing herself in the sweet smell of heather, Affrick found Gilly sitting alone on a half-rotted log, plaid askew, knees bloody, scratches on his face and his lip split open. Startled, Affrick came to a halt, nearly dumping over her basket. "Gilly, what's happened to ye?" He looked up and the deadness in his eyes frightened her. He put his face in his hands. "Running through the forest willna kill ye," he said. "Slamming full tilt into a tree willna do it, either." His shoulders sagged, and to Affrick's horror, the next words came out between sobs. "I wanted to jump, but I couldna do it. 'Twould have been better. I could be with them now. . . ." Affrick dropped her basket of herbs and ran to him, sat next to him on the log. It disintegrated beneath her as he slumped half into her lap, weeping out his broken heart.

It was only the second time Affrick had ever seen him cry. The first time had been when he was twelve and he'd lost the bag of stones his mother had given him. He wept and wept, smearing tears and blood on Affrick's plaid, and after a time he fell asleep.

Affrick combed her fingers into his long, black hair, her own tears falling on his face. "I love you, Gille-Críst MacLaren, ye sorry, blubbering fool. I'll love ye till the day I die."

She bent close and kissed his face. # Affrick moved closer to Gilly's self-appointed throne as one by one the village girls simpered and curtsied before him, presenting the gifts they hoped would win his heart. A bag of gold buttons, a yard of silk, rolags of beautifully dyed and carded wool ready for the spindle. A pig. An absolutely glorious sheep. One by one the gifts were gathered and taken away, to be judged later. Affrick had called it a daft idea, but in truth it was perfect. The perfect way to silence the critics in the village who'd been after Gilly to produce an heir. The perfect way to do it without ever having to involve his heart. The village girls, of course, thought there was a chance of softening that heart with the single, perfect gift. A pretty lass with doe-brown eyes tried to find a chink in that armor now, singing a lovely Gaelic love song, pouring her heart out into it. When she had finished, Gille-Críst smiled gently and thanked her. But Affrick could see he hadn't been moved. Finally the last girl took her turn, so shy her mother

had to shove her forward so she nearly tripped and fell at Gilly's feet. She presented buttons of wood, likely carved by her own hand. Blushing, her tongue tripping over itself as she tried to speak, she finally turned and ran. Gille-Críst watched her go, fingering the small buttons. At Affrick's elbow, Joneta said, "Go, lass, else he'll be leaving." Gilly was, indeed, standing, adjusting his plaid as he prepared to make another, most likely arrogant announcement. Affrick hesitated a breath, then said, "Wait." Gille-Críst looked at her in surprise, as if only then noticing her. He probably hadn't noticed her-- she'd stood in his shadow so many times, for so long, she probably seemed part of his everyday scenery, like a tree, or a rock. "Affrick?" he said. "Aye." Affrick stepped toward him, hands covered by a fold of her plaid. She'd carried her gift all day, tied to her belt and hidden by her clothes. "Have ye a gift?" Scorn edged his voice. But not for her, she realized. For himself. Because he didn't care for what he'd done this day, because he'd done it out of fear. "Aye, Gilly, I've a gift." "Bring it. I'll consider it with the others." Most of the other women still lingered, undoubtedly to assess the competition. They drew closer again, all eyes on Affrick. She stepped close to Gille-Críst, lifting her chin. "Hold out your hand." He hesitated only a moment before extending one hand in front of him. Affrick looked at it a moment, at the long, clever fingers. Then she laid a small bag in his palm. He stared at it a moment, as if memorizing the pattern of his father's plaid. "What is this?" he said, his voice strangely thin. "Open it." He did, pulling the drawstring open to tip the contents out. A round, brown stone, polished by the river. A black stone, sparkly, streaked with red. A lump of white quartz. Someone behind Affrick laughed. "A bag of stones! She's given him a bag of stones." But when Gille-Críst looked up, his eyes were full of tears. Affrick laid her hand against his cheek. "Gille-Críst MacLaren, I canna give ye your mother back, or your lost love and her wee bairns. I canna even give you the same stones ye lost all those years ago. But I can give ye this--I love ye, Gilly. I've loved ye all my life, and I dinna see that changing." She started to lower her hand, but he caught it with his, pressing it back against his cheek, then against his lips. "The stones," he whispered. "How did ye remember?" "'Tis an easy thing to remember." She looked into his eyes, marveling at his tears. "'Tis not such an easy thing to forget. I wouldna ask that of ye." "What would you ask of me?" "Only that ye smile, and try your best to love me." He did smile, the first smile she'd seen on his face in a long time that was without bitterness. "It sounds a good bargain," he said, "but I think a wiser man would have kept the sheep."

O'REILLY'S POT O' GOLD

By

Terri O'Hanlon

Patrick O'Rourke sat on the edge of his bed with his forearms resting on his knees. Taking in and letting out a deep breath, he tried to shake the depression that made him unable to concentrate or even function. He forced himself to stand and stretch to his full height of five foot ten then walk over to the dresser. He cringed at the man he saw in the mirror. His dark hair was disheveled from a night of tossing and turning. Dark circles hung under his eyes. He was struck by the fact that he looked so alone, felt so alone, was so alone. Patrick was acutely aware that this would have been the tenth anniversary of his marriage to Sarah, lost when she was struck down in a crosswalk by a drunk driver two years before. He showered and dressed mechanically to go to work. Discovering that he'd misbuttoned his shirt, he missed her even more because Sarah would have laughed. She had such a wonderful sense of humor. He missed her so much, missed the joy and laughter she had brought into his life. He ached for Sarah, for the love she taught him to

feel and accept so unconditionally.

She always described Patrick as pleasantly handsome with blue eyes that were a dazzling mixture of every color of blue in the rainbow. But since her death, he hadn't wanted to be good looking, hadn't wanted to attract women. He didn't want his heart to be broken again knowing he couldn't survive a second time. Feeling so very out of sorts, he padded over to the telephone and dialed the number to his own office.

"Mr. O'Rourke's office."

"I won't be in today, Jenna."

"Are you okay, Patrick?" Jenna asked with concern, knowing full well what day it was. When he didn't respond, she added, "Take care of yourself, Pat. You come first."

"I'll see you tomorrow or Wednesday." He touched his fingertips to his lips and closed his eyes. The warm tears dribbled down his cheeks.

Fighting the pain his tears represented, he grabbed his knapsack from the hall closet. He stuffed a hooded windbreaker into the bottom then tossed in some fruit and cheese, a bottle of water, and two bags of M&M's.

He rummaged in the closet for his favorite Cubbies baseball cap, but could only find the hat Sarah had given him. He rolled it and tucked it in with the rest, then, as an afterthought, snatched a little book of poetry from the nearby end table and tucked it into the side pocket of his knapsack. His heavy hiking boots and a pair of thick wool socks went in next, then he threw the knapsack over his shoulder.

His hand turned the knob and pulled the door to his apartment open, but he stopped in the doorway. He was forgetting something but he didn't know what. Something. He slumped and hung his head. Couldn't think.

A tug at the top of his knapsack caught his attention and he was immediately enveloped in an intangible aura. He was suddenly aware of Sarah's presence and felt her lips on his cheek. He closed his eyes and tipped his head toward the sensation on his face. Warmth filled him with a sense that everything was going to be okay. He lifted his head and continued out the door, closing and locking it behind him.

He tossed his knapsack onto the passenger seat of his midnight blue Porsche Carrera and climbed into the driver's seat. The Carrera pulled out of the parking garage and pointed toward the freeway. Patrick absentmindedly steered the little car eastward, toward the mountains. A slow smile curled his lips as the fondest of memories came to mind. He and Sarah hiked on weekends in the meadow. He smiled at the thought that maybe Sarah was steering the car, wanting to spend the day with him there.

A half hour later, Patrick turned off the highway onto a hidden one-lane road. Ahead he could see the huge California Ponderosa Pine that marked the beginning of the hiking trail. He parked the car and opened the door. It was a beautiful spring morning in April and the meadow was brimming with wildflowers. The warmth of the sun felt wonderful on Patrick's face. He felt encouraged and even hopeful that the day would be pleasant enough.

"Let's go, Sarah," he said softly once his boots were snugly laced. "I'll take you with me in my pocket."

He walked along the well-seasoned footpath along the north edge of the meadow where melting snow formed a little brook this time of year. A feeling of contentment came over him and he stopped.

"This is where I will let you go, Sarah. I know you loved this meadow." He felt a gentle breeze brush his cheek as he opened his pocket to symbolically let her out.

"Come walk with me for a while, Sarah." He felt the breeze against his legs and continued walking along the brook where young mountain daisies and buttercups were beginning to perk their little heads through the meadow's grass toward the warm spring sun.

This was heaven for Patrick. If any place on the face of this earth could help him heal, it was this place. He wished he'd come here sooner, then realized that perhaps only now was he ready to say goodbye.

About half way around the north edge of the meadow was a huge Jeffrey pine tree, a perfect place to sit and rest beneath its cool shade. Patrick tucked his hat and sunglasses into the knapsack and took out the little book.

"This isn't the book of poetry I thought I brought," he said, studying the front of it.

"I don't remember this one. Irish Folklore," he read. "Must have been Sarah's." It was a collection of Irish folk tales and, as he flipped through the pages, he found a handwritten inscription. According to the date, Sarah had given him the little book on their last

Christmas together. "To my favorite leprechaun. Wishing you many hours of joy with the little people. Love forever, Sarah." He didn't remember seeing that inscription before either. It not only surprised him to find it there, but it unexpectedly warmed his heart. He munched on a handful of M&M'S as he read the tiny book. The first story was about a leprechaun named O'Reilly and his precious brass pot of gold. The second story was about a ring of trees where leprechauns lived.

When he had finished the second story, he put his head back against the tree just for a moment to enjoy the warmth that was filling his heart and pushing some of the bitterness and pain from his soul. He felt a faint breeze brush across his body and closed his eyes to savor Sarah's presence.

A rustle in the bush behind him alerted Patrick and he turned to see who or what was back there.

"Shhh! Don't say anything or she'll hear ye," came the hushed voice. Patrick cocked his head when he detected an Irish brogue.

A little man about three and a half feet tall peeked at him from around the huge tree trunk and jumped back behind it when Patrick caught a glimpse of him. A leprechaun?

Patrick smiled and sat very still, knowing he would see the little man again.

"Okay, I'll be very quiet. Who will hear me?"

"The curse of me life," he muttered.

"Tell me about it and perhaps I can help."

"I don't think that's possible, sir," he said with a wistful but definitely lilting Irish brogue.

"Tell me anyway. I have lots of time. My name's Patrick O'Rourke. What's yours?"

The little man came from behind the big pine tree, tip-toeing carefully. "Name's O'Reilly, sir," he whispered. "Pleased to meet ye." When he bowed, off his head toppled a dark red hat nearly half as long as he was tall. He snatched it off the ground.

"Argh! Will ye look at that!" he said, disgusted. His hat was pointed at the top, at least it once had been. He slapped it against his knee then he jammed it back on his head, slightly askew. The wide, flat brim shaded his face and there was a wide black hatband held to the hat by a big brass buckle the size as the buckles on his pointed shoes. Patrick could hardly see the little man's face through all that unruly persimmon hair and eyebrows. "Uh, the buckle isn't in the middle."

The leprechaun pulled the hat off his head with his stubby work-worn hands, centered the buckle, and placed it a bit more carefully back on his head. "Will ye just look at what the woman is doin' t'me?" he asked with his arms outstretched. "I ask ye." His eyebrows were so bushy they nearly covered his forehead and his wiry persimmon beard was so long, the tip of it nearly touched the ground. On the most bulbous nose Patrick had ever seen was perched a pair of round gold-rimmed glasses. O'Reilly's dark green coat buttoned down the front with big black buttons. Matching knickers were buckled just below his black stocking-covered knees.

"How did you get so dirty?"

"I've been running from Katie. She's got 'er little 'eart set on marryin' me. Will ye just look at me suit? Me best one, too."

Patrick tried to help him brush off the dust. As far as he could see, O'Reilly didn't have much of a neck, so his round, dusty collar sat just under his rather big ears. His stomach was an overwhelming feature of his profile, suggesting a hearty appetite, and perhaps a love of the brew.

Patrick was thoroughly captivated with this little man's manner as well as his delightful brogue. "Mr. O'Reilly," he began.

"Oh, no, sir. Just O'Reilly. I don't think me mum gave me a first name." He looked thoughtful and stretched upright as if it would make him think better. "No, I guess it's just O'Reilly."

Patrick threw his head back and laughed and that felt good. He hadn't been so genuinely amused in a very long time. "Where is this Katie, O'Reilly?"

"Last time I saw 'er, she was on me heels, runnin' after me through the forest." Suddenly O'Reilly backed up against the big tree as if to hide his presence.

Patrick looked around the tree.

"You see 'er, sir?" O'Reilly asked.

Patrick looked around the other side of the big tree. "No, but then I don't know what she looks like."

"Oh. Well, she's a wee bit taller than I am if ye count me 'at." O'Reilly extended his arm upward, his wrist bent with his fingers pointing toward the top of his hat, crumpled as it was.

"Well," Patrick rubbed his chin. "That would make her, what, five feet tall?"

"Aye, that's about right, sir. She's a tall lass."

"She'd be just about right for me," Patrick said with a wink.

The little man's face lit up. "Ye're a pretty smart fellow, Paddy. Now, Katie's a very pretty girl, don't ye know? A real Irish beauty and sweet as Irish sunshine. She's yours, then, aye?"

"Oh, I don't know, O'Reilly," Patrick answered in a sincerely disheartened tone of voice. "I haven't been in the right state of mind for a long time to take someone new into my life." Patrick brushed nonexistent dirt from his jeans.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Paddy. Did ye 'ave someone once?" O'Reilly asked empathetically.

"My wife. Sarah," Patrick said without looking up. "I loved her with my whole heart. She was taken from my arms forever."

"But she's still in yer heart, isn't she, Paddy?" O'Reilly asked.

"Yes. But I can't see her face any more or hear her voice. I miss her terribly."

Patrick's eyes welled with tears. "My soul is empty," he choked out as a big teardrop fell down his cheek, then was swiped quickly away.

"Patrick," the leprechaun prodded. "Paddy!"

Patrick looked up at O'Reilly and when the little man's periwinkle blue eyes twinkled, Patrick had to smile.

"I want ye to meet Katie," he said with a knowing nod.

"If she's so wonderful, why are you trying to hide from her?"

O'Reilly bent and whispered, "She wants me pot o' gold as sure as the sun shines every day in Ireland."

"It rains every day in Ireland, O'Reilly. Besides, not every leprechaun has a pot of gold."

"Well, this one does!" O'Reilly answered indignantly. "I've been savin' me gold me entire life and I'm not intendin' t'share it with anybody!"

"Leprechauns will do anything for you, but don't go near their gold," Patrick mumbled.

"Oh, it's more than money. Ye can always see the sparkle of the Irish sun in a gold coin even when the weather is gloomy. Anyway, mine's buried where not Katie nor anyone else will find it." He put his fists on his hips and nodded such an affirming nod that his hat pitched off again and rolled toward the brook.

"I'll get it," Patrick said. He hopped up and chased after the rolling hat, catching up with the millinery wonder just before it rolled into the water. Smacking and blowing the dust off of it, Patrick returned to the tree where he had been sitting.

As he handed the hat to the little man, he noticed another pair of feet standing next to the tree. A female pair of feet attached to very shapely legs.

"Paddy, this is Katie." O'Reilly graciously swept his arm toward the newcomer.

"Top o' the mornin' to ye, sir," she said with a curtsy, and when she smiled, a glow filled the entire meadow. Patrick felt the breeze again on his face and then he saw the breeze blow through Katie's cascading auburn hair.

Patrick was dumbfounded. She was the prettiest woman he'd ever seen. Her petite figure was slender, yet rounded in all the right places. She smelled of the flowers of shamrocks and the fresh breeze off the Celtic Sea.

Her eyes were the color of bright spring shamrocks and her cherry lips stretched across her entire face, revealing perfect white teeth. She had only one dimple. It was in her right cheek and it drew Patrick's eye to the natural flush of her Irish cheeks. Her hands clasped behind her back as she twisted back and forth demurely.

O'Reilly looked from him to her to him to her as they stared at each other and slowly stepped backwards so as not to disturb any magic that might be happening between them.

"Good day to ye sir," she greeted him a second time. "My name is Katie." She spoke in a charming Irish brogue as thick as O'Reilly's.

"H-h-hi, K-Katie. M-my name is Paddy, uh Patrick." He reached to shake her

hand. He was thoroughly taken with her and held on to her hand, unable to let it go. O'Reilly clapped his hands gleefully and chortled with joy, then cleared his throat before either Katie or Patrick noticed his amusement. "Well, now," he said. "Isn't it nice to meet new friends?"

"Might ye stay for tea, Paddy?" she asked in her beautifully melodic accent. "I've just baked some apricot scones."

"Thank you, Katie. I'd like that. I'll just..." Patrick sat down and ran his hand over his face as if to clear his thoughts and still his pounding heart. He gathered his things and stood.

But they were gone. Both O'Reilly and Katie. Gone.

"Oh. That's too bad," Patrick said to himself. He hefted a deep sigh. "Really too bad."

Seeing that the afternoon sun was low in the sky, Patrick headed back to his car where he discovered another car parked next to his, a cute little yellow VW bug. As Patrick changed shoes, he was suddenly aware that there was someone else nearby. Out of the bushes came another hiker wearing a Cubbies baseball cap and sunglasses. Patrick instantly smiled. He was so focused on the cap that he didn't notice the person under it.

He spoke first. "Hi there."

The hiker stopped and looked up. It was a feminine voice that answered, "Hi, yourself." She pulled off her sunglasses and cap and shook her head, allowing an abundance of auburn hair to cascade around her shoulders.

Patrick sat frozen, stunned. She looked just like Katie, bright green eyes and all.

"My name is Kathleen."

"Patrick." He stared at her and tilted his head, "Does anyone ever call you Katie?"

"Now and then," she replied, amused at his stare.

"Are you from Chicago?" he asked, referring to her baseball cap.

"No. Oh, no, I just like to root for the underdogs."

"Me too." This is too much, Patrick thought to himself. She even had Katie's smile. He couldn't help but stare at her even though he was embarrassing her. He knew that because her cheeks pinkened. Just like Katie's.

"I work in the city for an architectural firm," he said, handing her his business card, hoping it might connect them.

"How long have you worked for this firm?"

"Fifteen years. You?" He wanted to know everything about her.

"Well, that's a curious coincidence. I'm a freelance landscape architect. We should get together and create an association. For business."

Patrick again noticed her brightly flushing cheeks. "Would you like to have dinner with me? If you're not married or something."

She stopped fiddling with the laces on her shoes. "I'd love to. And no, I'm not married or something. What's your last name, Patrick?" she asked, referring to the card he had given her.

"O'Rourke."

"Mine's O'Shea. We seem to have a lot in common."

Her smile set off a warm glow in the pit of his stomach. He absently reached inside his knapsack and held up two pieces of fruit. "For dinner, you can have an apple or an orange."

Her laugh was melodious like Sarah's but different enough to be her own. "I love your laugh."

She studied him. "Anyone in your life, Patrick?" A fair question.

"No. I mean yes. I mean I didn't ten minutes ago. I'm sorry, I just don't want you to get away from me this time."

"This time? Have we met before?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Can we talk about it over pot roast? Would you like to come to my house for dinner?"

"Yes," he whispered. "I'll follow you. Just don't lose me or I'll never find you again."

"That's not going to happen, but just in case, here's my business card. It's my home address and phone number. But, I don't intend to lose you," she said with a wink.

As Patrick's smile broadened, he felt a slight breeze brush across his face and thought he heard Sarah whisper, "Goodbye, Patrick, my love. Be happy."

#

Oh Mother, Please
By
Heather Renea Simpson

For some people it took the tragic event in September to make them realize how precious life is. I knew long before that how fast it all can be taken away from you here's a story I want to share.

Oh Mother, Please

Some say that mothers are ordinary people who become extraordinary . I believe in my mothers case she always has been extraordinary. Her hair was as dark as the nights sky and eyes like the grass had kissed them green. A medium frame and happy white smile always greeted you at the door. I hear on the news that parents should be parents and not your friend. My parents were both my best friend up until their passing. I believe they will be the best friends I ever have. I never got the sex speech, the don't smoke or do drugs speech it was just a given. I didn't want to do anything that would disappoint my parents. Because when someone believes in you with all their heart the last thing you want to do is disappoint them. Sure we had our fights where it always began "Oh mother, please what year are you living in" or something to that extent. If it wasn't a party I wanted to attend it was a sleepover or another get together at a friends house. I did my fair share of screaming and crying and stomping my way to my bedroom. The difference is my mother came to my bedroom not long after my teenage brigade and talked to me. We would watch some taped Andy Griffith shows or play some video game and we'd end up laughing until we cried. Every night no matter what we always said I love you, it was a beautiful melody heard throughout our house daily. My mother and father were married for twenty-two years when he died. I was twelve and even though I didn't have a clue what to do I stepped in. Some might say I lost my childhood because of the death of my father. I believe I just stepped up and became my mothers best friend like she always had been for me. My mother stood almost five foot five and she was in her mid forties. She got up each and every morning and walked to work. I remember on snow days I would get out of school I would see her grab my coat and gloves and double layer. She never said I can't go I am sick I hate walking all that way its so cold. She walked in snow, sleet, rain or hail whatever it may have been she was there. It to this day breaks my heart recalling her walking in from a hard day at work and walking home.

I got a job and sometimes pulled in double shift just to help make ends meet. My mother and I would both walk to work her work was the closest so I walked would walk by myself. I was twelve years old and I never told anyone at school that I was pulling double shifts. Its middle school the girls were worried about boys and makeup. I was worried about bills and house payments. Some might say that it wasn't fair for my mother to allow me to work and worry. I don't think I could have lived with myself if I hadn't helped her out. Over the years we became closer and even throughout high school she was my best friend. I had put on alot of weight after my father died, what they now call emotional eating. I couldn't express the feelings of loss I missed my father so much but I never had time to cry. Kids are cruel in high school if it wasn't my weight it was my clothes which

my mother had worked so hard to afford. I would just hold it all in and go home and cry to my mom. She would go walking with me and by the time we made it home I would have forgotten all about the bullies. We'd gather around the television eating dinner and watch TV Land. She was the mother you could wake up at 3 am and ask her to watch television with you because you were bored. She'd wake me up during the summer or days that she was off of work, in the middle of the night. We would watch old movies and work on pages in my scrapbook. When I was seventeen she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was scared to death but together we fought it and fought it. I missed school to be with her through surgery, chemo, and radiation treatments. I had a list of all her medicine with me and the numbers to all her doctors just in case. I spent my 18th birthday in the cancer center waiting on her to get her 11 am radiation treatment. Her spirits were always high and throughout all her fearful times as long as I was there she said she wasn't scared anymore. The worse she got the more I had to do which I felt guilty for if I wasn't there. I didn't attend any parties throughout high school, sleepovers, sporting events I don't recall one movie I saw. I stuck by her side because she would have done the same for me. We all know that our parents won't be around forever, but when that times comes we hope we are much older. My mother died in a hospital bed that had been set up in our living room. She was right where she wanted to be the only thing she loved more than the lord and her children was the house. It was mothers day and I couldn't get her to wake up completely to take her medicine. Which I had figured was getting to her so I let her sleep and just kept an eye on her. I slept on the couch and I watched her from the couch. It was 10:30 at night on Mother's Day when she died. I remember the call I made to 911. The information I was giving to the medics in my living room. I remember the night before she said she didn't want to be alone. So I climbed into the bed with her, she tried to put her arm around me and hit me in the mouth. She said she was sorry in slurred speech her medicine did that to her. I layed my head on her chest like I was a kid and I wrapped my arms around her waist. I said "Mom I am so sorry for ever yelling at you or hurting your feelings if I have ever been mean to you I am so sorry". She said in the plainest speech I had heard from her in days you have never been mean to me. I cried as I held onto her like if I didn't let go she would stay with me forever. I got up later she told me she was scared and I said there's nothing to be scared about momma. She died the next day and I can't explain how that feels. I remember watching all these television shows and seeing how relatives take kids in who lose their parents. How aunts, uncles and grandmas shower them with love and embrace them into their homes. That never happened with me I haven't heard any kind words from them since her death. Its been eight months since my mother has passed away and I have dreams about her. Everything I do its because I know she is watching and would be so proud. It didn't take current events to make me realize how precious life is. I understood that long before my father died both of my parents had illnesses for awhile. I don't know exactly what it was being poor and being grateful for everything we ever got. Going to church or was it the love of my parents who always taught us to be thankful for every day. Now at nineteen I find myself saying "Oh mother, please be with me".

Marrying off Murphy

By

Connie Vines AKA Addison Murray

"It all started off harmlessly enough." Sylvie Dupree said, fingering the only letter postmarked from outside of Opelousas Parish. She only had twenty minutes to make the deadline on her column and she hadn't written a word.

"Phillip won't hold the presses!" Tallulah LeBlanc warned as she whipped past Sylvie's cubical.

Sylvie plastered a smile on her face and reminded herself that she was paying her dues, as the slender blonde turned to hover at the edge of her desk. She wanted to be a feature columnist in New Orleans, Sylvie reminded herself as she swallowed her retort. Tallulah had thought up this matchmaking column to help boost readership in OP News, a small weekly paper--at least that's what she'd told Phillip Davis their publisher,

but Sylvie knew the truth. Tallulah's ideas were always self-serving. And in this particular instance, Sylvie had the unsettling suspicion that this week's featured bachelor was none other than Tallulah's socially inept stepbrother, Murphy Flynn.

Not that Sylvie had anything against Murphy, aside from the fact his parents had shackled him with an impossibly nerdy first name, and a fashion sense that could only be described as cursed, but it was the fact that Tallulah expected her to unearth a date for Murphy by the end of the month from only a handful of letters mailed into the newspaper, that had her in a dither. She wasn't a miracle worker, or a fairy godmother! She was just Sylvie Dupree, a black-haired, blue-eyed, Cajun girl who had a hankering the live in the Big Easy.

Like it or not, this matchmaking column, could be her ticket out of this backwater town. And she intended to snag that chance, even if it meant wading out into the swamps to find a suitable mate for Murphy!

"I always make my deadlines," Sylvie reminded her boss as she slit open the letter.

Tallulah strummed her manicured nails on Sylvie's desk. Ignoring her as best she could, Sylvie unfolded the single sheet of pink stationary and skimmed over the embellished handwriting flowing along the scented paper.

An imperial sneeze punctuated the air as lilac fragrance wafted though the cubical.

"Sylvie—"

"I'm on deadline," she reminded Tallulah as she set the letter down. Reaching for the mouse, she clicked the icon that held the bio. The computer belched and her typed copy glimmered into view on the monitor.

With a muffled sneeze and irritated click of high-heels, Tallulah left Sylvie alone to complete her task.

She had to do something about this bio, Sylvie realized, nibbling on her lower lip. Single, Forty-year old male is searching for. . .talk about predictable and boring copy! Sylvie poised her hands above the keyboard. She wasn't going to lie, not exactly. . .she was just going to. . .sexy him up a bit. . .

#

Two days later, on the campus of Natchitoches University, Murphy Flynn sat down at his desk and pulled out the copy of the OP News his stepsister had faxed him. I Want To Get Married, the headline read. When Murphy realized the grainy photo that stared back at him beneath the Tabloid-like headline was a photograph of him, he upended his thermal-coffee-mug.

Jumping to his feet, he snagged a stack of scan-trons holding the results of his student's final exams from the before they were saturated.

"This time she's gone too far," he growled.

"Who?" Booker James asked as he set now the chessboard to help Murphy mop up the mess.

"Tallulah." Murphy spat out his stepsister's name.

Booker grinned. "How bad can it be?"

"How bad?" Murphy replied, tossing the fax on top of the chessboard. "This is how bad!"

"Holy, Moley!" Booker exclaimed, as he read the headline and looked at the most unflattering photograph he'd ever seen. "The two of you bring the term sibling rivalry to a higher level, more technical level."

Murphy frowned, and combed his fingers through his collar-length auburn hair in mounting frustration. "I still need a date for the awards ceremony on the 28th. And now I have this to deal with."

"Well, it looks like old sis is knocking herself out to fix you up with someone special."

#

"Tallulah Belle!"

Tallulah Belle?

Sylvie nearly bolted from her chair when Murphy Flynn's cultured baritone vibrated the wall of her cubical.

"This time you've gone too far," he ranted. "You've made me the laughing stock of the faculty. And, the co-eds. . . I don't even what to talk about what they're doing."

"Oh, lord," Sylvie groaned.

It appeared that Mr. Calm-and-Stuffy had a temper.

She frowned. For some reason she'd never thought of Murphy as being a man of passion; but if the rolling rumble of his voice was anything to go by. . .well, mercy, the man had possibilities!

Her naughty thoughts sent heat rushing to her face. Possessing a healthy portion of reporter's curiosity, Sylvie resisted the urge to peek over the blue divider that separated her office from Tallulah's. The last thing she wanted was to be smack-dab in the middle of a family quarrel.

"Murph—" Tallulah stammered.

"Don't Murph me," he snapped. "Who's keeping this pet project of yours afloat?"

"Murph, you wouldn't?"

"No? Try me."

"You can't! Not the OP News. . ."

He grunted in response. "You should have taken that into consideration before you ran that. . .sleezy—"

"Sleezy!" Sylvie cried, then clamped her hand over her mouth, praying no one had heard her. The fact that Murphy had all but confessed that he was the funnel of money that kept the paper afloat barely registering in her mind.

After several minutes of what Sylvie assumed was groveling on her boss' part, a slightly pale and less confident looking Tallulah stepped into her office.

"Sylvie," Tallulah began, her gray eyes flashing worry. "You've got to help me—"

Sylvie uttered an unlady-like snort. "This was your idea remember?"

"It's too late to split hairs. Murphy's talking about slander—"

"Slander? You had his permission. . . ." One look at Tallulah's face told a different story: Murphy could hang them all out to dry on this one.

Sylvie saw her dream for a brighter future plunge into the dank waters of a bayou.

Oh, no, he wasn't. Murphy Flynn wasn't going to ruin her one big chance!

"What do you want me to do?"

Tallulah blinked. "Do? I don't know what you should do. Just do something, fast! Murphy's angry about the article, but I think he's even more upset about the picture." Poking her finger at the offending photo stationed on Sylvie's desk, she said, "Did you have to use picture that made him look like. . .a—"

"College professor?" Sylvie inquired, surprised at the injured tone of Tallulah's voice. Maybe her boss had a softer side after all.

She nodded.

"He is a college professor, remember? Well, maybe I could. . . ." Even as a plan formed in her mind, Sylvie was aware of Murphy entering her office. It was his probing gaze, she realized. He might be standing several feet away from her, but he was watching her and she experienced the uncomfortable sensation of being catalogued from the curling tendril of hair slipping from her hair clip to ruby painted tips of her toenails. The pulse in her throat fluttered and her mouth went dry. Gathering her courage, Sylvie blurted out her plan.

"I'm going to make a new man out of you Murphy," she said jumping out of her seat to grab him by the wrist and lead him out the front door of the OP News. "Even your own mama won't recognize you."

#

He hadn't argued with her. That was what surprised her the most. Murphy was next door getting a hair cut while she searched for something suitable for him to wear for on the 28th. He was getting some award for his work in Quantum physics. He taught Quantum physics. Lordy, she'd known the man was brainy, but she hadn't realized he was a genius. Examining the tailored shirts on the circular rack. She felt her stomach churn. Maybe she should just apologize and start looking for another job. Instinct told her that her efforts were doomed anyway. Even if she managed to make him look trendy and found him a date, one thing would never change, Murphy was—

"Sylvie."

She glanced up from her task. "Yes?" she asked, frowning because the tall man looked vaguely familiar, and he was blocking her view of the doorway. She needed to make sure Murphy didn't change his mind and leave without here.

"Sylvie, is that the shirt you'd like me to try on?" he asked, reaching for the garment.

"What? Ah, yes," she said, releasing the metal hanger with nervous fingers.

"Murphy?"

He arched one eyebrow in question. "Yes?"

Sylvie knew her jaw had gone slack and she was staring, but she couldn't help it.

Murphy had gotten a short hair cut, and he'd shaved his beard.

What a difference! His cheekbones had a Slavic slant to them, and his jaw was firm and. . .sexy. Sylvie swallowed and tried to respond to his question. "The slacks are over there, by the wall," she croaked.

While Murphy was in the dressing room, Sylvie searched for a tie to go with the navy suit. She had to stay focused. This was business. After she convinced him that the OP News had only improved his image, she was going to wash her hands of this whole business. . .There'd be another shot at New Orleans.

Sylvie's neck prickled, something it always did when she knew she was doing something wrong. She couldn't just dump the man, her conscious reminded her. She had to make certain Murphy had a date for the awards ceremony. Shoot!

"An excellent, choice, sir" the salesman was telling Murphy.

Glancing at the open dressing room door, Sylvie sucked in a sharp breath.

The crisp white fabric of the shirt deepened Murphy's eyes to emerald, and tamed the color of his hair to a rich, deep auburn. When he handed the jacket to the salesman, Sylvie realized just how broad his shoulders were. Good Lord, Murphy Flynn was a hottie!

"Sylvie, what do you think?"

"The suit is. . .you," she said, knowing she must look like a fool with a selection of ties dangling from her arms. "Now which tie do you like?"

"I have ties—"

She'd seen his ties. "I'm sure you do," she replied, diplomatically, "But—"

He shook his head. "I like my ties."

She could deal with this. Plastering a pleasant expression on her face she said,

"Why don't tell me what your tie looks like so we can find a handkerchief to match?"

"By your elbow. That one looks like my favorite tie."

She glanced down at her arm.

"No. Behind you."

Glancing over her shoulder she located the offending accessory, "That's a bow-tie."

"I know."

"Then you'll need a pair of a pair of suspenders to go with it."

#

Sylvie stared at the mailbag filled with letters resting against the wall. She'd read them all, yet none of the women seemed right for Murphy. Still, she had a job to do and over the course of the past three weeks she'd dutifully selected the five best letters and published them in the paper.

"There's only a week left until the award ceremony," Tallulah reminded Sylvie.

"The e-mail is running four to one in favor of Eunice. We've got to announce the winner in tomorrow's addition. Sylvie, Sylvie are you listening to me?"

Sylvie jumped like a child caught daydreaming in class. "I'm not sure Eunice is right for him," she hedged, reaching for her cup of chicory coffee and taking a sip. "She sounds so desperate—"

"Of course she's desperate, they're all desperate. Why else would they want to go on a blind date with my stepbrother?"

"Why? Maybe because he's a nice guy, that's why."

It was too crazy. Her emotions were tangles in a knot right now. She'd been spending hours and hours with Murphy these past three weeks. He didn't seem nerdy after you talked to him for a while, he seemed. . .sincere, dependable, and kind. And the funny thing was she could barely keep her hands off of him. Which made no sense; Murphy wasn't her type.

Tallulah gave her one of her looks. "You're jealous. You're actually jealous.

You don't want Eunice from Abbeville, or Tanya from Hackberry, or anyone else, for that matter, going on a date with Murph, do you?"

Sylvie shrugged her shoulders and glanced at her boss with a hungry expression in her blue eyes.

Leaning forward, Tallulah hit the delete button on Sylvie's keyboard.

"Get busy," she prompted. "Tomorrow's paper is going to publish the winner."

"Eunice—"

"No," Tallulah told her. "S.D. from Thibodaux wrote the winning letter."

Sylvie's eyes widened. "That would mean you fixed contest! —I can't do that. .

."

"You'd better. Otherwise Eunice from Abbville. . . " "Okay, okay."

Tallulah was right she didn't want Eunice or any other woman going out with Murphy.

As her fingers flew over the keyboard, Sylvie composed her letter. She'd sort out her feelings after her date with Murphy.

#

The ballroom of the old mansion was like something out of a dream, Sylvie thought as Murphy escorted her from the dinning room. Murphy hadn't seemed a bit surprised when she showed up on his doorstep this evening, dressed for the ceremony. He handed her a spray of roses for her to wear on her wrist and told her how lovely she looked.

Lovely. The word was old-fashioned and sincere, just like Murphy. Pleasure bubbled inside her like party champagne. It had been quite an evening: first with the awards, Murphy's speech, and then dinner.

The soft glow of wax candles filled the holders the French crystal chandeliers that marched down the ceiling of the long room.

Murphy took her by the hand and led her to the dance floor. Then in one graceful movement, he pulled her into his arms and they waltzed around the dance floor.

Sylvie's nerves tingled. The tempo of the music increased and she stopped breathing, her fingertips resting in Murphy's strong hands. She didn't want the night to end, she realized.

She wanted it to go on forever.

Suddenly the music stopped, and reality intruded.

But Murphy was still there.

"Let's go outside and get some fresh air," he prompted, guiding her beyond the tall French doors to the ballroom's terrace.

As Sylvie glanced at the dark street below, she wondered what tomorrow would be like—without Murphy.

"Murphy, I never apologized for writing the column for the paper. . ."

He gazed at her, his expression unreadable. "Our paths are always crossing. Did you ever notice that?"

She frowned and nibbled at her lower lip. "I've never given it much thought before. . .but I guess that's true. Which is rather odd because—"

"I work in Natchitoches?"

"Yes, and--"

"It happen too often to be a coincidence—"

"Murphy? Are you trying to tell me that you new about the contest?"

"No," he said, moving closer. "What I'm trying to tell you is that I've been trying to get you to notice me for the past two years."

"Oh." She slid her hands into his hair, holding him still for a sweet and gentle kiss. Then she stepped back and gazed up into his face, her blue eyes brimming with emotion. "Oh, Murphy."

Murphy raised his hands to her wrists, but that didn't stop her from sliding her arms around his neck, from pulling his head down for another kiss.

"Sylvie. . ." his voice was a groan against her parted lips.

"Ummm," she murmured, toying with the knot of his red, white, and blue bow-tie.

He closed his eyes, and he dragged a deep breath of strength, and then blurted out what he had to say. "Will you marry me?"

Sylvie wasn't certain she'd heard him correctly. Stepping back a pace, she stared up at him, the music from the band throbbing in the background. "What?"

"I want to get married, Sylvie."

"To me?"

He nodded.

As she looked up into his incredibly green eyes, she realized, she'd fallen in love with him years ago.

Her thoughts must have been visible on her face, because he stroked her cheek with an unsteady hand.

"Sylvie," he growled.

Murphy felt her breath on his jaw, smelled her fragrance when he breathed, he knew he couldn't go on living without her. "I love you."

"Oh, Murphy, I love you, too," she confessed.

"And will you marry me?"

"Ye—"

Before she could finish, he pulled her back into his arms and kissed her.

Sylvie Dupree closed her eyes and felt Murphy's love surround her. "Laissez les bon temps rouler," she murmured against his lips. Let the good times roll!

The Times They Are A Changin', or Not

By Raven West

My daughter Kimberly turned seventeen last week and the changes in my life seemed to have happened overnight. Cases of Huggies have been replaced by boxes of tampons. In first grade, she came home in tears because her best friend had just told her she no longer wanted to play with her because she'd find a new best friend. This year her best friend no longer wanted to play with her because she'd found a new boyfriend. When she was two, I got angry with her for getting into my makeup...well, some things haven't changed. I suddenly felt very old. How could I be the mother of a High School Senior when I just graduated two years ago myself? OK, so it was more like thirty years, but I can still remember every magical moment when I was seventeen. The future was full of unlimited possibilities and my biggest worry was who was going to take me to the prom. I have to admit I am a more than a bit envious of the advantages she has that I didn't at her age. My word processor was an SCM electric typewriter and erasable paper. My parents couldn't help me with homework, the WWII had halted their education in mid-term. They only knew that they wanted their only child to go to college, but they didn't have a clue as to which college or how to find the means to afford it. I took the SATs once, without the slightest idea of the enormous weight the scores would have on my future. My guidance counselor had very limited information about scholarships and financial aid and I had absolutely no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. Now, less than three decades later, the sources for information are vast. There's workshops, study guides, and SAT software. She can take the SAT several times to get the best score. College web sites are just a mouse click away on the Internet. Scholarships sources and financial aid are also on-line and ready to help finance her education. And she has absolutely no idea what she wants to be when she grows up. Oh well, some things never change. It was much more fun being a teenager than raising one. At seventeen, I had my own room, my own phone and my own car. Parents complained about the crazy music they couldn't understand and how something needed to be done about the sex and violence on television and in the movies. Our country was at war in a foreign country. My daughter turned seventeen last week. She has her own room, her own phone and her own car. Parents complain about the crazy music they can't understand and that something needs to be done about the sex and violence on television and in the movies. Our country is at war in a foreign country.

Unfortunately, some things still haven't changed.

DEARLY BELOVED

By

Karen Woods

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here..." the minister began the marriage ceremony at six o'clock on the first Friday evening in June.

I stood as Becky's maid of honor. Steve's ring, or rather the ring that Becky would soon give Steve, fit loosely on my thumb. It hadn't been all that long ago that I had thought that I would be the one to marry Steve. But, here Steve and Becky were tying the knot. I'd had almost six months to get used to the idea. Honestly, the news that Steve had proposed to Becky had been more of a relief than a grief. Steve and I had hung around together more out of habit than anything else.

Here I stood, the maid of honor and not the bride. It was the seventh time that I had stood right here as a maid of honor when one after another of my friends had gotten married. I was happy that things worked this way for Steve and Becky even though I wasn't fond of the gossip that had been generated by this particular turn of events. I had overheard a couple of the local biddies talking about what a shame it was that Emily Rogers lost that nice young man to her best friend. Then, the old gossips, sitting in my restaurant mind you, wondered how poor Emily was going to deal with her broken heart. And they wondered what Becky had been thinking to ask Emily to be her maid of honor, and what poor Emily was thinking to have accepted the honor.

Emily Rogers, that's me, the last unmarried member of the circle of my high school friends. Funny, my single status hasn't bothered me at all. I'd been too busy just trying to keep the restaurant running smoothly after Mom and Dad had died to have time to worry.

Here I was all of twenty-five, fairly attractive, and reasonably prosperous- at least I was making a good living and providing a living for others with the restaurant. I was also alone. I decided right then and there while I was standing as Becky's maid of honor that I would not remain alone for long. It was time to start looking for Mr. Right.

Umm.....Right, I immediately dismissed cynically. Sure I would look. Sometime between when I got up at four in the morning to go into restaurant and when I came home after closing up food service at ten at night, I'd have time to look. Sure I would. Heavens! I didn't even have time to think about getting haircuts, which is why I wore my hair long and blunt cut. How in the world would I ever have the time for dating?

The only reason I had time to be Becky's maid of honor is that I closed the restaurant to the public after the lunch rush. My staff was there even as this ceremony was going on, putting the finishing touches on the wedding reception. I'd baked and decorated the wedding cake yesterday. All they had to do was to set up the tables, finish the decorations, and put the finishing touches on the sit down dinner for two hundred. All? That was enough work for an army. I felt guilty that I wasn't there doing my share of the work. But, I reminded myself that I had worked hard on the previous few days with preparations of all the things that could be done ahead of time and that before I had left the restaurant today, I had gone over the timing list with everyone. The meal would be perfect. I hoped. Because if it wasn't then the biddies would have something else to gossip about. I could hear it now, "Poor Becky, that rotten Emily spoiled her wedding reception in a fit of pique. But, then again, maybe she deserved it, stealing Steve from Emily like that." I really couldn't win.

Somehow, I managed to get through the wedding ceremony without making horrendous mistakes. Thankfully. I took Becky's bouquet at the correct time, handed her the ring, helped her with the train of her dress, signed the marriage documents as her witness, and generally did all that was required of a maid of honor.

Right after the formal photographs, I ducked out, and went to the restaurant. Although the newly weds didn't know it yet, the reception was my gift to Becky and Steve. Becky had planned it just the way she wanted it. But, I hadn't let her pay anything in advance. And I wasn't going to let her pay for it.

When I got back to the restaurant I was informed that one of the servers wouldn't be coming in. Since she was in the hospital with a shattered leg from being hit by a car and would be undergoing surgery to repair it the next day, I couldn't work up any anger at her. Anger at the idiot who had hit her, sure, that, I could manage. There being no help for

it, I changed out of my wedding finery and put on my working clothes- a white Victorian collared blouse, a black, mid calf length, skirt and apron, and sensible shoes. Pulling my deep auburn hair up into the understated elegance of the Victorian topknot, I looked like all of the other waitresses.

Then, as the guests began arriving, I made sure the cash bar was open and that the band had begun to play.

When Rusty, the regular bartender, took a break well into the evening, I covered for him.

"Bloody Mary and a scotch rocks," a male voice ordered.

I looked up to see Becky's cousin, Hank Crowley, standing there. Until the rehearsal dinner, last evening, I hadn't seen Hank in ten years. He had been a boy then, a boy heading off to boot camp. Now, he was definitely all man.

"Certainly," I said as I forced my eyes off of his face. There was no sense of mooning over him like a lovesick calf, I told myself. I poured the Bloody Mary from the five-gallon jug I kept refrigerated beneath the counter. I set the glass down in front of him. Then I poured the twelve year old Scotch over several cubes of ice. "Six dollars."

"How are you, Emily?" he asked in concern.

"Busy, as you can tell."

"Obviously. I'm surprised that Becky asked you to stand up with her, seeing that you and Steve were an item from high school until recently."

"That's all history. Steve and Becky are the future," I dismissed, although I wanted to cringe. It was bad enough that the biddies were saying these things. Were other people believing that I was nursing a broken heart over Steve? "What brings you home, Hank?" I asked, changing the subject.

"It's not common knowledge, yet. But, I'm taking over Crowley Operating Engineers. Dad and Uncle Ray both want to retire while they are young enough to enjoy traveling."

"It'll be good to have you home, again," I told him.

"Will it?"

"Of course it will. Come in one evening and have dinner as my treat."

Hank smiled at me. "Can I bring a date?"

"If you want," I told him quietly. Then with more boldness than I knew I possessed, I added, "Or you can come and have dinner with me."

"You are a dangerous woman, Emily Rogers."

"I'm just a woman."

"There's never been anything 'just' about you, woman! I doubt that there will ever be," he said thoughtfully. "You've always been a shining beacon of light in a dark world."

"Now, I don't remember you being so full of admiration before you left for boot camp," I dismissed with a laugh. "As I recall, you used to call the eight of us, 'Becky's brats'."

"Even then you stood out."

"Sure I did. You used to call me 'that trouble making redhead.'"

"I'm surprised that you even remember me at all. You only had eyes for Steve back then."

"Everyone's entitled to a mistake or two in their youth," I offered.

"Well, you're the last single one from Becky's brats."

"Some of us are just destined to be old maids."

"Really, is that how you see yourself, an old maid?"

I shrugged and replied, "It's as good of a description as any." Rusty came back from his break. Then, I excused myself and went to check on everything else.

I saw Hank take the drinks over to his parents, Becky's aunt and uncle, Glenna and Mark. Then I saw him walk over to the beverage table and pour himself a cup of coffee. Black. Two sugars. Personally, I thought that sounded good. I was beginning to really need a caffeine jolt, myself. It had been a long day, already.

After I had my coffee, I worked the room, making sure that everything was going smoothly. Becky and Steve were dancing. She had bundled her train into a bustle and had removed the netting from her veil, leaving only the pearled headdress. She had been such a beautiful bride. But, then again, Becky had always turned heads. Steve was looking at her as though she were the most precious person in the world to him. I was glad for them. It was good to see two people who loved each other that much together. Blinking back happy tears, I turned away and walked right into Hank's arms.

He spoke to me with an edge of harshness in his low voice, "Emily, I won't let you ruin Becky's day just because you are still carrying a torch for Steve. So, blink back those tears and dance with me. People are looking. And they'll soon be talking. You don't want to give the biddies something else to hurt Becky with." Then he urged me onto the dance floor while the band was playing a slow tune.

Hank held me with a gentle firmness as we swayed to the music.

"I'm not carrying a torch for anyone," I protested softly as I enjoyed the sensation of being in his arms. It felt so right to be held by him. I wondered how it would feel if he kissed me. "Steve and Becky are two of my best friends. The tears were happy ones for them," I offered, as I tried to force those other thoughts from my mind.

"Pull the other leg, it's shorter," he said in disbelief.

"Oh, just shut up and dance with me," I said lowly.

He pulled me even closer to him as he muttered, "Yes, m'am."

The song ended, but Hank didn't let me go. Instead, we danced through the next two songs without either of us saying a word. I don't know what Hank was feeling, but I was definitely lost in the sensations of being in his arms.

But, that didn't last long. "Em," one of my staff members said in a worried tone from just beside me, "could you come? I hate to interrupt. But, you need to deal with this before the sheriff needs to be involved. It's Jimmy Greer and Pete Williams. They're fighting again. I've called Jack at the Countywide Taxi. He's sending two cars."

Hank followed me. On the way out the door, I grabbed my airhorn. Two of the wedding guests had taken a "conversation" outside and were attempting to settle their disagreement with their fists. It wasn't the first time that I had broken up a drunken brawl at a wedding reception. It wasn't even the first time that I had broken up a brawl between those two. I was grateful that Jimmy and Pete had possessed at least enough sense of decorum to take it outside. Or maybe they had just remembered the huge damages they paid the last time that they brawled in my place. Replacing the mirror over the bar, a table, a number of glasses, plates, and cups, as well as three maple chairs and the emergency room bills for a couple of my employees who had been hit with flying glass had not been cheap. But, they had paid every last cent.

I tried to get the attention of the brawlers. But, my voice couldn't be heard over their shouting at one another. So, I held my arm over my head and blew a blast on the airhorn. That got their attention. "Okay, guys. I don't care who started it. I just want you off my property as soon as your taxis arrive. Mary Louise and Carolyn are both having a good time at the party. It would be a shame to make them leave. I'll tell your wives that you have each gone home. Leave your car keys. You're both too soused to drive."

The pair of them looked at me sheepishly. "Ah, Em, we're jus' havin' a friendly talk," Jimmy said thickly.

"Your keys. Now. Both of you. Or perhaps you would rather I get the sheriff out here and let him haul you both in for Drunk and Disorderly or worse for DWI. He's just inside enjoying the reception. It would be no trouble to get Doug out here. Neither of you could pass a field sobriety test, let alone the new Breathalyzer that MADD just gave the county. And you know it. You also know that you can't afford what a DWI or a D&D would do to your insurance rates. And I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if either one of you killed yourselves or someone else while driving home drunk. Now, would you want to do that to me?"

The two men grumbled, but dug through their pockets and produced their car keys.

My employee had gone back into the restaurant.

The taxis pulled in. I saw each man safely off to home with the instruction to the drivers to bill me for the rides. I had a standing account with the company.

I'd almost forgotten that Hank was standing there until he spoke. "And what would you have done if they had been nasty drunks?"

"Whatever I needed to," I told him. "I've handled nasty drunks before. I probably will again. It goes with the territory of running the place. But, these guys aren't particularly nasty drunks. The only people they pick on are each other."

"Still the same Emily. Willing to tackle the world single-handedly and charge into situations alone that should take several people to handle," Hank said, but his tone wasn't complementary.

"When you're alone you don't have a choice, Hank. You either handle situations or they handle you. I prefer to do the handling."

"You're one skinny woman, not a whole battalion. Don't you realize how easily you could be hurt, woman?" he demanded of me.

"I'm stronger than I look, Hank. And I know how to take care of myself."

"You look like a strong wind would sweep you away."

"I can take care of myself."

"Sure you can," he agreed in a condescending tone. "About as well as an hour old babe."

This man was really making me angry. "Leave me alone, Hank."

He shook his head negatively. "I don't think I can," he confessed as he took me by my hand and pulled me to him. "And I don't think that you want me to. Do you?"

"No."

"You've always been painfully honest," he said, his voice thick, as he held me tightly.

"Hank, this isn't the place or the time."

"Where and when?"

"I have to get back inside," I told him, but I didn't move out of his arms.

"Emily Jane," Hank said firmly. "Kiss me."

"Why?"

"Is a kiss so hard to give? Are you still in love with Steve?"

"No." So, I kissed him for all the wrong reasons. I'd intended for the kiss to be a light, friendly, sort of kiss. But, Hank had other ideas. He kissed me as if he was starving and I was a six-course meal. Naturally, I returned his kiss equally. He touched something in me that I didn't even know existed. I'd heard of becoming weak in the knees. But, it was the first time that any man had affected me that strongly with only a single kiss.

"Emily," he began.

I didn't know what he was going to say. But, I was afraid to hear it. The man confused me. Part of me wanted to run as hard and fast as I could away from him. Another part of me wanted to throw myself into his arms and stay there forever. Running won.

"I have to get back in. Becky will be throwing the bouquet soon. She's threatened to toss it at me."

"Do you want to be the next bride?" he asked lowly.

"Why? Are you asking me to marry you?" I challenged.

"No."

"Then why would it matter to you what my wants are? Excuse me," I said coldly.

"Emily," he protested as I walked away. But, I just kept on walking.

"Boss, you don't look so good," Tami Quinn said as I came back into the kitchen.

"I'm fine, Tami. How's the party going?"

"The bride will be tossing the bouquet shortly. The groomsmen are making noises about the garter."

I forced myself to smile and returned to the party. The crowd had thinned out somewhat. I gave Jimmy and Pete's keys to each man's wife and filled each of them in on the situation. It wasn't the first time that either of their husbands had been sent home in a cab. If either woman was embarrassed about it, I didn't see any sign of it. But, both women left within twenty minutes of getting the keys.

Several guests had left, but the party was still in full swing. And it showed every sign of continuing for some time.

The only reason I stood with the single girls for the bouquet toss is because I knew that it meant a lot of Becky. She fulfilled her threat and did toss the flowers at me. And I caught them. Naturally, Hank caught the garter. The inevitable teasing followed. I shrugged it off. Hank left without saying goodbye.

The reception finally wound down well after midnight.

Becky came to me. "Send me a bill, Emily, for the party."

"No. It was my present to you."

"You can't afford this."

"Yes, I can. Now, don't argue with me. Your husband is waiting for you. Go to him. Be happy. I'll see you when you get back from the Bahamas in a couple of weeks."

The cleaning crew went to work. I went into the basement to my office to crash for a few hours. I was too tired to drive home. It wasn't the first time that I had sacked out on the sofa in my office after a long party. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the arm of the sofa.

At four, I got up and went home. A quick shower and change of clothes, then I was

back at the restaurant by five. By then, of course, the morning crew had already opened. The breakfast crowd started arriving at five fifteen.

Hank walked in at six Saturday morning, right in the middle of the breakfast rush. He took a table by the front window. He wasn't there more than long enough to order coffee before his dad and Becky's dad came in and joined him.

I took over that table. The Crowley brothers always drank coffee- no cream but with lots of sugar. So, I brought over the carafe. "Morning gentlemen. What can I get for you?"

"A bill for the reception," Becky's dad, Ray, said after he sipped the coffee. "I wish that Catherine could make coffee this good, Emily Jane."

"The beans are a special blend and I grind them fresh as they are used, Ray. It makes a difference," I told him. "As for the reception. Forget it. Last night was my pleasure. I wanted to do something nice for Becky and Steve."

Hank looked at me and smiled. "The lady is stubborn. I'd listen to her Uncle Ray."

"I'll find a way, young woman, to pay you back," Ray Crowley said softly. "Even if it is only ten dollar tips whenever I come in for a cup of coffee for the rest of my life."

"Ray, if you come in for a cup of coffee and leave me a ten dollar tip, I'll put it in an account for Becky and Steve's children. I swear I will."

"You've always been difficult," Ray complained quietly in a tone that said he knew he was not going to win this one.

"And always will be. Now, what will you have for breakfast?"

I took their orders and left them to their coffee.

A few minutes later, I returned with their food. All of the men were reading copies of a contract. I assumed that it was the agreement to turn the business over to Hank's control.

I came back a few minutes later with the coffee carafe. "Emily," Hank's dad, Mark, said, "I'll take another cup of coffee."

"Well, son," Mark said quietly, "you've got yourself a business. Now all you need is a house and a wife."

"The house I'm working on. I talked Jake Edwards into selling me his lot out at the lake," Hank said as I poured coffee into Ray's cup.

"Jake and Betty are retiring to Florida," Ray said.

I was pouring coffee into Hank's cup when he said, "As for the wife part of that equation, well, that's not likely to happen. Unless of course, I can talk Emily here into marrying me."

I warned him, "Anyone ever tell you, Hank, that it's profoundly dangerous to tease a woman who could easily pour a half carafe of hot coffee over your head?"

"I'm not teasing, Em."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said coldly. "But, I believe that you are the one who told me- just last night- that you weren't asking me to marry you."

"I wasn't, then. However, a man's entitled to change his mind," Hank offered.

"At least until he finds one that works," I countered dryly. "I'm not sure that you have."

Ray and Mark chortled.

"That dinner invitation still open?" Hank asked, ignoring both my barb and the laughter of his relatives.

"Of course. What time would you like your reservation for? And will there just be us, or are you bringing a date?"

Mischief twinkled in his eyes. "There's not a woman on earth who challenges me the way that you do."

"I never know if you are complimenting me or insulting me."

"Trust me, if they were insults there would be no doubt."

"How reassuring," I replied dryly. "Dinner at eight. By then, most of the meal crowd has cleared out and the Saturday night party crowd has begun."

"I'll be here. What's on the menu?"

"For you? Ptomaine laced potato salad and spoiled meat."

Hank chuckled. "Then the appropriate wine would be a Merilot laced with cyanide."

"Or arsenic," I teased. "But you'll have to drink it by yourself."

"I knew it, you just love me to death," Hank replied teasingly.

"I've always done extremely well in meat cutting competitions. I could just as easily love you to pieces, Hank. Tiny, unidentifiable, pieces."

"Dangerous woman," Hank replied with a small chuckle.

"Potentially," I teased. "So watch your step, Marine."

"Yes, m'am! You're closed on Sunday."

"Yes."

"After Church will you go on a picnic with me out at the lake?"

"What makes you certain that I still go to Church?" I asked suspiciously.

He smiled at me. "You go to Church, every Sunday, according to my mother."

"I suppose that you want me to pack the picnic?" I asked quietly.

"No. I'll take care of that. Will you come on a picnic with me on Sunday, Emily?"

"I'll think about it. Dinner tonight will be at eight. If you're late, you won't get dinner. I close the full kitchen tonight at eight fifteen. After that you'll have to make do with short order," I said gruffly just before I walked away from them.

But, Hank didn't make it to dinner. In fact, I didn't even see him until the next morning at Church when he slid into the pew right next to me. He appeared both tired and worried. I'd heard the news about the fatal accident on one of the job sites. I took his hand and squeezed it. He looked at me and smiled in relief.

"I'm sorry for missing dinner last night," he said from his position just beside me after services were over.

"How are Marge Jenkins and the kids holding up?"

"They're handling it. Losing Larry was a shock to everyone. I suspect that the insurance company will pay out a lot of money over this. But, then that's why the corporation carries insurance. I'll make sure that they're taken care of."

I nodded. I knew that he would do the right thing for the widow and children of one of his employees. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he was an honorable man.

"Are you ready to go on the picnic?"

"You planning sitting on the ground while wearing that suit?"

"No. I'll go home, change, and pick up the basket. Then I'll stop by and pick you up. Is that good with you?"

"It'll be fine, Hank. I'll see you in a little bit."

I changed from my dress into jeans and a t-shirt and I wore my swimsuit under everything. A summer picnic at the lake usually meant swimming as well. This was the first weekend after the end of the school year so there would likely be all kinds of kids out at the lake in boats and swimming.

Like dancing, I couldn't remember the last time that I had been out on a picnic. High school, probably. But, I was bound and determined that I would enjoy the afternoon off. Normally, I spent Sunday afternoons in the kitchen trying new recipes, reworking the menus for the week's specials, and catching up on my paperwork.

Maybe he was serious about marriage, maybe he wasn't. I wasn't going to worry about what I would say if he seriously asked me to marry him. Yet, in making that resolution, I had to admit to myself that I was worrying about it.

Marriage to Hank, now there was a concept to think about. What did I know about him anyway? He took family seriously. He had always been Becky's defender. He had spent ten years in the Marine Corps. Rumor had it that he was still in the Reserves. He had a good singing voice and he knew many of the hymns we sang this morning by heart. But, that didn't tell me who he was. I did know that he was capable of curling my toes. All that told me was that I was attracted to him. Attraction wasn't enough to base a marriage on. But, it was a good start. Wasn't it?

I was snapped out of my reflections by the sound of the doorbell ringing. Hank stood there at the door. He wore a tee shirt with the Marine emblem, a pair of well-worn jeans, and tennis shoes. I had to admit he looked incredibly, mouth-wateringly, nice.

"See anything you like?" he asked as he walked into the house and closed the door behind him.

I felt myself blushing at his knowledge of my appraisal of him. I looked him in the eye and countered, "I could ask you the same thing."

"Unless you want to forget about the picnic, and spend the afternoon in bed together, I suggest that you don't ask that."

"You're making assumptions."

"No. I'm not. You want me as badly as I want you. When I kiss you, we both go

up in flames."

"I don't hop into bed with anyone."

"No, you have to date them for several years first."

"Was that another crack about Steve?"

"Forget it," he muttered.

"For your information, Hank, Steve and I never..." I knew that I was blushing boldly. My face felt incredibly hot. I turned away from Hank.

Gently, Hank turned me to face him. "Emily Jane, I'm sorry. I've been acting like a jealous fool."

"Yes. You have. Now, cut it out!"

"Yes, m'am! You don't give an inch do you?"

"Not usually, no," I admitted dryly.

He looked at me for the longest time. It was clear that he was trying to find a way of saying something. Finally, he blurted out, "Emily, are you a virgin?"

I couldn't help it. My face heated. The bluntness of the question embarrassed me.

I was sure that I was as red as a vine ripened tomato. I've always blushed easily. That tendency goes along with the red hair and freckles. "That's none of your business," I stammered, not knowing what else to say.

"And that's the most ridiculous thing you've ever said to me. Of course, it's my business, woman! Sooner or later, we're going to be in bed together. I don't want to hurt you. I happen to love you, Emily."

I know my jaw dropped. When I was able to speak, I told him, "That's a fine way of telling me that, Hank!"

"Tact isn't my strong point," he said gruffly. "Never has been."

"I've noticed that," I replied with a chuckle.

"Are you laughing at me?"

The chuckle became a full-bodied laugh. Soon, he was laughing with me. Then, he pulled me into his arms and kissed me.

I knew that he wasn't lying. He did love me. More than that, I knew in that moment that what I felt for him wasn't just desire. I couldn't imagine a future without him sharing it with me.

"I hope you like children," I said quietly. "I've always wanted a large family."

"I think that can be arranged," he replied just before he kissed me again.

Somehow, we never made it out to the lake that afternoon.

At ten o'clock, on the first Saturday morning in July, Hank and I stood together and listened as the minister began, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here together in the face of God and this company to join together Emily Jane and Henry Alvin in the holy state of matrimony."

THE END

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