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To Kill a Spider

By Stephanie Haddad

Eyes fixed on the white wall, just under the molding where the ceiling paint had begun to chip from water damage, Lauren screamed.

“It’s right there, can’t you see it?” she panted, pointing with great vigor toward the tiny, nearly invisible entity. With her other hand, she slapped her husband repeatedly on the arm.

“Are you sure?” Steve squirmed to get away from her energetic abuse.

“Would you just listen to me? I know what it is, so go get a chair and some paper towels already!”

As Steve turned toward the kitchen to retrieve his necessary effects, he mumbled to himself something that sounded quite unkind toward Lauren. Accustomed to this routine after five years of marriage, she shrugged at Steve's commentary and kept her attentions where they were needed. Lauren knew she was right, and that was all that mattered. When it came to matters of arachnid invasion, she was always right.

In her early childhood, Lauren had developed and refined her own kind of spider-radar. What others would take for a mere speck of dust, Lauren would correctly identify as a spider from up to a room's length away. This was surprising to friends and family since Lauren's eyesight with respect to other distant objects and road signs, especially, was poor at best. Those around her, when such a sighting took place, usually had the audacity to doubt her. Often, confirmation of the invader could only be made with the assistance of a chair or step-ladder in extremely close proximity. Lauren herself would avoid such a proximity at all costs; thus giving rise to the now infamous tennis shoe target practice incident that claimed the life of one passing arachnid back in 1992.

Her sighting accuracy was both impressive and irritating to Steve; would it really matter if one of the little creatures got away unscathed? Undoubtedly yes, Lauren would argue. Such an intruder was to receive the ultimate in cruel punishments: a healthy (read: fatally unhealthy) dousing of Dow bathroom cleaner and a paper towel. If the spider was small and less threatening, Lauren granted it a merciless execution by shoe sole or death by squishing in a Kleenex. But her rule was firm; none shall cross her line of sight and live to tell the tale. And of course, as Lauren was queen of her surroundings, all treasonous offenders would be dealt with by her beloved husband Steve, the loyal executioner. This had been the law of the land for their entire courtship and marriage.

Lauren stood, tapping her foot impatiently, with her arms crossed and her stare fixed on the criminal. She was used to Steve resisting her demands, but this time he seemed to be taking much longer than usual. Feeling confident that the little creature could not possibly descend three feet of open wall space and viciously attack her within five seconds' time, she allowed herself to break her gaze and look toward the kitchen for Steve, who stood in the doorway with a kitchen chair and a roll of white paper towels.

“Aren’t you going to get up there and kill it?” she hissed, growing nervous with every extra second of life the spider was granted. Steve stood still, a look of troubled pensiveness on his face. “What’s the matter?”

“Well, I was just standing here, thinking. I’ve never really given much thought to the implications of killing spiders. I’m not really sure that I want to do this, ya know? It’s just that...”

“What?!”

“Who says we have the right to kill them all?”

“The right?” Lauren all but spat the word back at him. “Are you insane? It’s a spider!”

“Exactly. It’s a living, breathing, thinking being.”

“Spiders don’t think, Steve,” Lauren chuckled. “Quit joking around and kill it.”

“How do you know? They can respond to predators and prey; they have instincts that protect them and keep them alive. That sounds like thinking to me.”

“Acting on instinct is much different from thinking. Humans have both; spiders only have instincts.”

“Instincts that were programmed by God,” he retorted, starting to look smug.

“What?!” she almost shrieked. This nonsense was wasting precious time. There should be a spider carcass in the trash by now. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, in the Bible...”

“Steve, you don’t even like the Bible.”

“Yes, but most people do. You sorta do, don’t you?” He looked to Lauren for

confirmation and received nothing but a laser stare that could rival Superman's. "Well anyway, in the Bible it says that God created all creatures. Shouldn't you be more sensitive to the lowly ones?"

"If you'd continued reading, you'd have learned that God also created man to rule over the other creatures, which tells me that we get to decide if we domesticate them, eat them or kill them," Lauren punctuated her reply by waving her hand across her own throat. "Honestly, Steve, if you're going to start putting stock into the Bible now, you have to take the whole text together... You can't just pick out the parts you like and use those to back up your argument."

"Why not? That's what they do with statistics," Steve, gaining confidence by the minute, assumed a relaxed position seated on the kitchen chair with his arms crossed and the paper towels resting across his lap. He knew that he had Lauren's full attention now; she hadn't looked up for the spider in almost four full minutes. "For example, did you ever hear the statistic that you swallow an average of eight spiders a year while you're sleeping?"

Lauren gagged audibly.

"It's probably true, but they fail to mention how many other bugs you probably swallow in a year. Spiders might not even be the most popular choice for late-night insect snacking. They chose that stat to launch an entire slander campaign against spiders."

"Slander?" Lauren slumped into the battered, second-hand recliner and cradled her swimming head in her hands.

"Yes, Lauren. Mankind has painted a picture of spiders as lesser-beings, who should be subjugated and slaughtered. It's wrong, just wrong." He stood up dramatically, and the paper towels fell from his lap, unrolling as they traversed the blue carpeting. "Spiders are helpful and necessary creatures!" he proclaimed.

"Exactly how is terrifying the living daylights out of me a helpful skill?"

“Not that. It has nothing to do with you. It’s so much bigger than that,” Steve was gesturing exuberantly from atop the chair. Just a few feet to the left and he could kill the damn thing, Lauren thought bitterly. “They are a key link in the food chain, Lauren. They eat all those little annoying insects who...”

“Are far less menacing? Have fewer legs? DON’T EAT PEOPLE?!” Lauren picked up the unwound roll of paper towels and waved them wildly in the air. The loose towels fluttered like a white flag of surrender.

“I think you’ve just got a bad attitude toward spiders,” his tone lightened as he knelt in front of her. “You just need to understand that finding one inside our house does not give us the right to sentence it to death.”

Suddenly inspired to violence, Lauren threw the mass of paper towels directly at Steve’s head. To her dismay, her agile husband ducked and jumped off the chair to avoid the blow.

“You traitor!” she shrieked, a little too loudly. Checking herself, she continued more calmly. “YOU need to understand that I am afraid of spiders!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What’s the little guy really going to do to you?”

Lauren wasn’t budging. “I am your wife and you are supposed to protect me!”

“Honey, if I honestly thought you were in grave danger...”

“Ok, well, I’m in danger. If you don’t kill this thing and he grows into a giant man-eating spider, and then calls his friends...” She babbled wildly.. “And then we have an invasion of 10-foot tarantulas on our hands. I will make sure that I kill you myself before they get the chance.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Steve tried in earnest not to laugh at his frantic wife. “I promise that if a 10-foot tarantula, even a singular one, came after you King Kong style, then I would have something to say about it.”

Lauren stood unmoving, hands crossed tightly against her chest.

“But this little guy,” he gestured toward the eight-legged offender, “He couldn’t hurt a – “

“Oh yes, he could hurt a fly!”

“Sorry, wrong choice of phrasing. He could hurt a fly, sure, but is he really interested in hurting us?”

Steve crossed the room as he spoke and took his wife’s hands in his own. He watched with amusement as Lauren’s expression softened.

“Probably not...” Lauren admitted, begrudgingly.

“Then I really don’t want to hurt him either.”

Lauren drew in a breath, hesitating. She studied Steve’s face, looking for any sign that he was full of it. Nothing. “I guess I didn’t realize how passionate you were about this. I don’t really have anything to say to that.”

“Thank you.”

“So I guess I’ll just head to bed. Are you coming? It’s already after 11:00,” she crossed the living room and headed for the bathroom. Steve could hear the water turn on as Lauren brushed her teeth.

Steve took a deep breath. “Sweet victory,” he muttered to himself. “Live another day, little guy.” He gave a quick wink to the spider, now nestled cozily into the east corner of the ceiling, and followed Lauren to bed.

Five minutes later, while Steve was busy in the bathroom with the door closed, Lauren returned with the biggest can of Aquanet she owned.

Trés Cher

By Nicole M. Bouchard

Clearly there was care in writing and placing the small note. The paper was yellowed and lovingly worn around the edges with the sacred musty smell of timeless struggles emanating from it; the passage on the back was a stanza torn from a poem. “We try to love, we try to win, we try to be still, we try to breathe; but the truth of love is this- so oft the best we can do is to leave...” In careful, quite careful, penmanship, deep, black and heart-stricken on the top of the note, were the words “trés cher”, meaning “very dear”. Mildred Maunahan hadn’t used French since she was a school girl. Awkwardly, the forty-year old assistant orphanage mistress read the words aloud and it came out onto the January air sounding like “treasure”. The baby with the wide blue eyes beneath the blanket on which the note was pinned, looked at her, acknowledging her voice. That was how Treasure came by her unusual name.

It was cold; cold like the passing in and out of hope beneath doorways and under windowsills, always escaping. An orphanage in nineteenth century England was a simple holding room for wayward souls that were ushered off of the street so as not to disturb the pleasant notions of life the wealthy kept. About one-third of children in English and French villages at this time had lost at least one parent. Amongst the hardness of life, disease, labor, and illegitimate pregnancies, there was a growing and persistent number of abandoned children. Private donations and religious institutions were depended upon to handle the problem. Initially well-meaning women having no children of their own, might volunteer as an orphanage mistress. Yet after the illicit adoptions, abused children with wild temperaments and invasive committees come to skewer their efforts to the committees’ own ends, the women would change into something angry, spiteful and terribly damaged like the cut-outs of the world around them. Mildred came to aid the North Tower orphanage mistress the winter that Treasure appeared on the doorstep.

Like most things unusual and extraordinary, Treasure’s abilities should have been kept secret. Yet from the day she was born, she was never one to be hidden away.

Even as an infant, she had it. "It" being touch. Each time prospective couples would come to the orphanage, they lingered over the beautiful child with the red wisps of hair and brilliant indigo eyes. One of the orphanage volunteers would pick her up from the rudimentary wooden cradle and offer to let the prospective parents hold her. The baby would be calm up until this point. But once in their arms, she would wail a storm of glass-breaking cries. The Mistress El, as they referred to her, would customarily whisk the child away, promising them a far more valuable, tractable child.

Often punished for her erratic behavior, Treasure was assigned a great deal of chores from the moment she could walk. It seemed to Mistress El that the child was the antonym of her name and would have no other purpose but to labor. Yet Mildred saw something different. She saw a child who was exceedingly bright, perceptive and warm when she learned to trust someone. She also saw a child growing and struggling with herself in great pain, lacking patience and understanding with her own mind.

A gentleman with a top hat and a handsomely trimmed red jacquard coat came into the orphanage with his wife; a quiet, meek woman with downcast eyes, many years his senior. Treasure did not look up when they entered. It seemed terribly childish to her by the age of five to think that any family could possibly want her. Mistress El told her she was "chalk full of demons" and sounding so terrible, Treasure convinced herself that there was no way of fixing something like that. But as the gentleman, and to a lesser extent his wife, looked at the children, he happened to spot the fiery red haired girl in the corner, dusting the bookshelves with more preciseness than common in one so young. It made the corners of his prim mouth upturn in amusement; though the middle line of his mouth stayed in its straight line. Mistress El could practically smell the money on them. 'Ideal, ideal...' she thought. The Committee couldn't deny her this victory and demean her adoption quota. They'd ease off of her and send the funding necessary for the new arrivals that had only been placed in her care that Thursday. She set about looking for the well-tempered blondes with the

pleasant rosy cheeks. They were young enough, pretty enough, strong enough. She had three girls, all under three years old in tow, behind her large, dancing skirts. When she saw the gentleman heading towards Treasure, she stopped short and held her breath, causing the three children to collide in back of her. She thought that if she herself froze, then perhaps time itself could freeze and nothing bad could happen. If she just stopped right here, oh so still, he would reverse his momentum and turn around. If she thought hard enough, she believed she could make it so. Not even her eyelashes fluttered as she summoned the power not to blink. It was one of those moments before the priceless china vase hits the floor and shatters.

Back still turned from him, she did not see his approach. Treasure was accustomed to ignoring the hope of prospective parents. He reached down his hand to touch the bare sliver of shoulder, put into view by the child's over-sized garments. Mistress El's breath finally escaped in what came out as a kind of cry when the hand touched down. It was the metaphoric vase meeting the unforgiving floor. Treasure inhaled sharply, her eyes bulged and her shoulders raised themselves high and stiff. Like a frightened animal she was unable to move for a second or so. Then before the gentleman could offer any words of comfort, she screamed, whirled herself to face him and slapped away his hand. He tried to steady her by the arms and talk smoothly the way he did with his horses. But she wouldn't yield, even as the grip tightened uncomfortably. Mistress El watched with horror as the child scratched and kicked this society gentleman. Had she been any less shocked, as this was the worst of Treasure's reactions, she would've yanked her out of the room by her hair. Once free of the man's grasp, Treasure ran as fast as she dared. No one followed her. No one even found her until the next morning when one of the volunteer women opened the cupboard for flour.

Mistress El replayed the scene in her mind all that night. But her versions went differently. The couple chose one, no, maybe all three of the charming little blondes. The gentleman thanked her, shook her hand and nodded gracefully. He didn't storm out with his pristine white shirt cuffs turning red from bloody scratches. Though she was not one to beat the children, merely reprimanding them with work-sharp words and a switch, she felt

merely reprimanding them with work, sharp words and a switch, she felt quite certain if she saw that unholy child again she might lose control and smack her till she was dead.

Mildred tried her level best to discourage Mistress El from throwing the child into the street. In her own mind, Mildred couldn't explain how she could cradle Treasure in her lap as she read to her and then see that same tepid five year old transform as though she'd been bitten by a rabid dog in the street. Fearing for the little girl's welfare, she instructed the other women, should they discover the child first, to immediately summon her; Treasure wouldn't last if Mistress El found her first. To secure such a bargain, Mildred threatened to inform El that these women who prettily volunteered from the church, were stealing supplies and bringing them home to their own over-large broods. Help was hard to find, but not so hard that they couldn't be replaced. Mildred always kept things like that about people in her back pocket should she ever need to use them someday.

A light knock woke her from her sleep. It was a bit past dawn and she hadn't slept more than a quarter of the night. The woman who'd discovered Treasure ushered her upstairs to Mildred as she was instructed. Why Mildred kept trying to save that girl, she couldn't pretend to understand. "There you go now, and be quiet," she said as she patted the child's backside to push her through the door. Mildred was sitting up in bed now. She and Treasure were alone in the room and the door was closed. Looking at the child with morning's light giving her tear-stained face a comely golden glow, she couldn't imagine how Treasure could be anything else than the darling she knew her to be. Mildred shoved to the side and threw down the right edge of the quilt.

"In," she instructed. Treasure crawled into bed beside her, hiding her face in the sheet.

"Why?"

The child cried deep shuddering sobs, soaking the sheet at Mildred's elbow. Mildred couldn't see the nightmares behind the girl's eyes. But she could feel them.

"I... I see pictures no one else can see..." Treasure gasped out in between pained breaths.

"What kinds of pictures?"

"...it...it's like being in rooms with people, but they can't see me."

"What rooms?"

"Not the room my feet are in... other rooms that I see like dreams and colors."

"You have to tell me how and when it happens. I can't save you if you don't. I know it's hard. Try to breathe for a moment. There. Now try to tell me."

"It happens when people get close to me... I can't stop it- I swear!"

"Alright, alright. What do you mean by 'get close'?"

Treasure lifted her puffy eyes and rolled up her dress cuff which fell too long, to reveal her hand. She grasped Mildred then, touching her bare arm. Mildred felt nothing, but noticed that the child's eyes had become clouded, seemingly a world away. But her face looked relaxed, trance-like. Treasure let go of her arm and smiled.

“See. I know who you are.”

“Of course you do. I’ve been with you everyday since you were brought here.”

“No, I mean I *know* you. I saw you jump in the river with your best Sunday dress when that little brown-haired boy fell in. You have pretty colors like different colored candle flames all around you. I’ve seen lots of things when you hold out your hand or brush my hair, or wash my face...”

Mildred was incredulous. She had to have been eight years old the day she jumped into the water to save her brother. They made a pact not to tell their au pair for fear of their mother finding out. It was a proper family with elitist ideals. As it was summer, Mildred had let her disgustingly lacey white dress dry on a large rockface in the sun before going home.

“So...you see things when your skin is touched?”

“It has to be my skin meeting someone else’s to happen. When you wear your garden gloves in the courtyard, I don’t see you that way.”

“What did you see yesterday?”

Treasure broke into sobs again quite suddenly. The hand upon the small exposed area of her shoulder had shown her things so horrible, she was ashamed to relate them.

“Treasure...” Mildred urged.

“I saw...other children. They were being hurt by that man. When he tried to make a little girl do something... stealing something... she didn't want to, he...”

Mildred embraced her, understanding.

“Dark colors are around him. I screamed when the little girl reached out to me. I thought it was her hand on my shoulder. She's dead.”

Mistress El knew the one place that little harpy, that little evil sprite, would be.

Mildred heard approaching footsteps, heavy-sided on the left. She told Treasure to hide and she fixed the blankets just so to conceal the child.

Mistress El threw open the door. “Where is it?!” she demanded with a scowl the likes of which was reserved only for her most fearsome temperaments. The one she used to throw troubling orphans out onto the street to brave the societal and seasonal elements.

Mildred yawned and stretched her arms wide. “I know you're upset about the other day, but I can talk to her, El. She's only five years old. She's little more than a tot.”

Scanning the room carefully, Mistress El consoled herself with the idea that the child was not here, but had already run away, making her job so much the easier. She'd only resent the satisfaction she might have had seeing the red hair roll into the dust of the road.

Then she saw it. The strand escaping the piled white sheets, calling in the

brazen sun. To her it was a line of congealed coppery rust, the stubborn ilk that she scrubbed on her hands and knees each week till her hands were ragged and raw, no longer recognizable. And just like that, she wished her gone. Not gone in the sense of removed, but utterly and completely gone with the mercy of God.

Mildred followed the sickening stare and to her great dismay, she saw the red strand of hair upon the stark white pillow that had evaded her.

It was a violent chase. One that Mildred would have avoided all together if she hadn't loved that child like she did. Stone stairways and mis-fired intentions could be blamed for what happened. In the middle, Mildred took a tumble that wouldn't have been fatal if she had reached out in time to stop the fall. But perhaps she knew it was the only way.

Mistress El was so guilt-laden and distraught over the sight of Mildred's lifeless form at the bottom of the stairs, a line of blood on her forehead that the child was wiping away with the sleeve of her dress, that she was unable to find her breath. She knew that the child could not be turned away now. She half-blamed Treasure for what she referred to as the 'most unfortunate incident of her life', but just the same, she kept Mildred's wishes in mind.

At the wake, Treasure removed the second-hand glove from her hand and touched Mildred's cold face. She couldn't see the pictures or the colors now. It was as blank as her heart. No one and nothing to fill it.

By nine years old, she had found a way to avoid or at least contain the visions that not another soul in the world shared. Her ability, her secret, was shamefully buried with the person who'd understood it. No one had any call to touch her by this age as she'd become self-sufficient and she was scarcely without the faded white second-hand gloves that she'd been given for Mildred's wake. Though she was obedient now, Mistress El wouldn't have bothered to scold her if she wasn't. As a superstitious woman, she felt that Mildred's spirit remained behind as the child's constant guardian. And

that Mirela's spirit remained behind as the child's constant guardian. And even though Treasure's tantrums had stopped, she was still never the one chosen to go home with any of the prospective parents that traversed the orphanage grounds in an almost fad-like fascination; wasn't it quite fashionable these days to be altruistic?

Keeping to herself, wanting to blend with the walls themselves, Treasure might have forgotten her ability all together had she not seen him again.

The man with the top hat and the dour, naïve wife had returned. Not to see her of course, but to refresh their stock of youths. Mistress El didn't recognize them, but she could smell the familiar smell of money on their clothes; a coppery scent... much like blood. 'A fine home they'd provide' she thought to herself until the haunting little hand in white tugged at her skirt, leaving her spooked. She looked down cautiously. They primarily eluded each other out of a necessity not to remember what they both saw four years ago on the stairs.

"What is it, child?! Be quick about it."

Treasure thought quickly. "One of the little boys, the new ones, just scraped his knee in the courtyard. It's bleeding and he's crying, wailing a storm."

"Then tell one of the other women to fetch water and dressing linens. I have business to attend to."

Treasure stepped in front of her. As though she was a black cat, with blazing green eyes, Mistress El wouldn't dare cross the girl's path.

Treasure tried again. "I don't mean to make trouble but..."

Her audience was held captive by fear, but that didn't mean the message was being listened to or acknowledged.

Changing tones, Treasure lowered her voice to a scratchy womanly whisper that belied her years: "If you don't come aside and listen to me, I'll bring down heaven and earth to make such a scene that no one will ever want to come to this orphanage again..."

Mistress El widened her eyes in amazement and fury. How she wished something would swoop down from that very moment to devour the girl, leaving no remains.

"...on Mildred's dead spirit, I swear I will."

That did the trick. Grabbing the child by the shoulders, she steered her to a quiet spot in the courtyard away from the rest. She couldn't help wondering if anyone could hear her scream from this distance... Her rough hands at the unearthly pale throat... But there was Mildred to think of...

"Out with it, brat." The bitter word felt good once it was let go, like vile soap bubbles in the throat of a child who wouldn't mind her.

"I've seen him before. He's no good."

"Hah! So you mean to chase this fine society gentleman away, do you? Denying the other children a nice home just because no one would ever choose you!"

"I told you! He's no good!"

“Prove it.” It was one of those impossible challenges that Mistress El thought for sure would end this ridiculous conversation with this ridiculous boil of her existence.

With fierceness in her eyes, Treasure whipped off the white gloves she always wore. Mistress El half expected the action to reveal gnarled shiny black crow’s claws.

Not knowing what she’d do next, Mistress El at her heels, she approached the man who had robbed her of sleep for so many hours that it could easily equal a year of no nocturnal rest. He didn’t notice her at first. His fingers were winding and unwinding the curls of a classically beautiful brunette four year old. If Treasure could have bludgeoned him with her small fists, she might have. But she still had a use for him. The say-nothing wife saw the redhead approaching first, though she didn’t think to warn her husband of this determined looking orphan who had all but disappeared since the last time she saw her. With no warning and no outlined plan in her mind, Treasure seized his wrist, forcefully drawing it away from the brown curls of the four year old. Her grip was astonishingly strong. Squeezing her eyes shut and turning away from him, she let the visions through, searching for something. Her sudden pallor startled even Mistress El. Once she released his wrist and he regained his wits, he watched with marked curiosity as she suddenly exited the room. Mistress El fumbled through her excuse that the child was a simply a troublesome, jealous, ‘unwanted’; always eager for attention.

There was something else, he was certain. He could palpably smell her disgust. No one ever looked at him like that. He was a respected man. But that child... that wisp of a ghostly child seemed as though she could see past the closed doors of his very soul. Looking in her direction with a dire severity she’d not seen before, Mistress El felt something she couldn’t recognize. Surely it couldn’t be concern for the child. Was it suspicion? But that was foolish; Treasure was the problem, no one else. Regardless, she authoritatively told the couple to return a few days later and they could

she ultimately told the couple to return a few days later and they could spend a much longer time with the children they were interested in bringing home with them. She assured herself that this was a necessary precaution of sorts. Perhaps, hope against hope, the redhead would evaporate somehow by then.

Treasure vomited into an empty apple basket near the pantry. Sick and swimming through the hot water of what she'd seen, she tried to relax herself enough to sort the images. What could she use? That's what Mildred would do. She'd find the convincing, indisputable thing.

A letter arrived at the orphanage the next day. It was from the gentleman and his wife. They'd invited Mistress El to their home for tea so that she might see the kind of life they could afford to give a child. A line scrawled toward the bottom insisted upon one stipulation: that she bring the fiery haired girl with her. It seemed suddenly that the air was spinning fast around her head. Bring Treasure? Though it was strange, she let it assure her that only the most kind-hearted, glutton-for-punishment sort of people would want a child like that. This could vouch for their character.

He wanted to assess her and her secrets on his own grounds. A place where she couldn't hide from his ever-watchful eye or escape.

Treasure agreed to go because she'd seen that one indisputable thing and she couldn't get to it unless she walked straight into the open jaws of the lion.

In the carriage, neither she nor Mistress El spoke. They were both in separate worlds.

The house was immense and dark- a harbinger of shadows... of all dark things, in Treasure's opinion. Her goal was to slip free of her adult company and find that which she needed. It would take some doing. The image she'd seen was just that- an image. She would have to find the place

whose surroundings matched. Barely through the large, lavish foyer, she went swiftly over the black and white diamond floor with the excuse of desiring something from the kitchens. A maid was quick to accompany her, for as she was so thin, it seemed plausible that she would want nourishment, but given her station, it was also plausible that she was a thief.

Mistress El was escorted to a daunting room with dark emerald-hued sofas, seemingly heavy with their velvet trimmings. A tall, thin man with squinting, barely perceptible eyes was already in the room when they walked in. He tried to make himself look important as he leaned like a twig in the wind on the cherrywood desk. There were papers. Mistress El fussed with her hat. Good Lord, how long had it been since she wore this? She was a girl then. A very, very different girl. The gentleman's charming smile made her reflect pleasantly for a moment... But then this was now. The charm faded and here they sat. She was as old as the building which housed the fates of countless children. Life had been bitter and hard, but she'd done her level best.

Julianna was nervous and exhausted standing outside of the orphanage door wondering if she had the right to be there. Treasure's birth mother tugged at her unusually red hair until it was all undone, simply so that she could do it up again, tucking in the stubborn strands. She had to look respectable. It seemed a lifetime had passed since her former lover took the infant away and placed it on the front stone steps that haunted her dreams. He was gone now. Thus was the way of impulsive, destructive love. Working for years at odd jobs wasn't enough to make a life for someone else, so she took advantage of her unique look with her fiery red hair and became a married man's mistress. Discretion, seduction, obsession, it was all a game. But he'd been generous. Once, in the middle of the night when his head lay resting on her bare chest and she could see clear colors and images in her mind of him like full purple, spherical grapes fed to royalty, he asked what she wanted most in the world. He could've anticipated a million answers, but never the right one. "My daughter," she replied faintly. He was getting older, their luscious affair couldn't go on much longer and she'd been a superior companion to him - sensuous and educated

longer and she'd seen a superior companion to him, sensible and educated as she was. "You'll have the resources. I'll hire someone to help you look." He passed away that January, but made good on his promise. So tying up her hair to look tight and contained seemed the most important thing. 'I'll be worthy of you, girl... I'll show you that I can be a mother...' It wasn't long before the child was found. Anxious still, Julianna knocked at the orphanage door. The subsequent disappointment left her breathless. The red-haired little girl wasn't there? After all this time, nine lucky years without having been adopted, she was only being courted by a family now? Removing her black leather glove, she shook hands with the orphanage volunteer.

With quick footsteps and a strong desire to steer the wandering child by the ear, the maid, being significantly overweight, was breathing hard by this point; Treasure drifting swiftly, farther and farther from her. A wind or two in the cathedral-like, arched halls, and the little imp disappeared. This would be a long day and not nearly matched by her meager wages.

Mistress El found the wife's silence unnerving. She was relieved when the woman shyly nodded to excuse herself. Alone with gentleman and his paltry thin companion, she found herself twisting the dusty lace of her dress while she spoke.

"Forgive me, Madam, for being so untoward, but the truth is, my wife and I would very much like to adopt Treasure. It seems that she's endured more than her share of orphanage life, though you do your utmost best, and we wanted to expedite the process. This is my lawyer, Mr. Sherman, and he's here with the sort of official papers needed for this kind of thing. On his request, one of the volunteers at the orphanage gave him the necessary documents. Your signature is the only element keeping Treasure from a happy, balanced home."

Flushed with initial delight and disbelief, Mistress El struggled to compose herself. "I...I don't pretend to understand your earnest interest in the girl,

she's perfectly... perfectly... horrid at times to be frank with you."

The gentleman frowned at this in a way that she couldn't tell disappointment from annoyance. "Yes, yes, but that's her unstable environment. Wash your hands of her and I personally guarantee that you'll never have to worry about that child again."

She took the quill in hand. Was it the fact that she thought this day would never come? It should be utter relief. But the writing instrument shook a bit in her hand when the first dot of ink fell on the paper.

This was the room. Treasure recognized it. The sight of this location made her stomach lurch. The beauty of the Oriental rug would have made her, in any other circumstance, throw herself down upon it in a sort of wistfulness, rolling in its soft texture and perfume. The flowers in its swirling pattern very nearly smelled real. Nothing was in disarray. But she knew something that the casual observer didn't. In this library of fresh smelling dark wood, there was a hideous secret. Tearfully, she stooped to lift up the front edge of the rug. A tight hand clasped down on her shoulder, sending her nearly swooning with fear.

"Do you think you could really escape him? Win his game? Oh, you, stupid, stupid girl! I don't know how you know, but there is no proving him wrong. I recognize you from the first time, four years ago. I watched your reaction so carefully. You weren't like any of the others...timid, obedient and hopeful. No; you knew what he was like. And then you step forward again when you should have just let well enough alone. Well, you haven't saved anyone or changed anything. She still died and the others... mine... sons... were worked to the bone before they got free of him... but now it'll be you to suffer, you with your fine red locks spilling out all around you like Ophelia in the water. If I can't escape him, you sure as hell won't either." Her spiteful speech concluded, she called for her husband. He might reward her for this catch with the slightest bit of human acknowledgment. From the day they married and her money went in his name... well, she

might as well have been dead. And then the fair child they adopted because she could no longer conceive, died; it was supposed to have been some small sign of hope. He destroyed everything he came in contact with.

Upon hearing her voice, the gentleman rose quickly to his feet. He rubbed a hand over his sandy beard, thinking for a moment. “Mistress El, Mr. Sherman will help you finish signing the papers. I’m afraid our business is concluded here. Thank you for coming to our home.” He kissed her hand in a most reserved fashion and winked. “Please excuse me.”

Her hands, though completely healthy, couldn’t seem to consign themselves to signing the papers. Mr. Sherman was leaning so still against the desk with a bored air about him that now, she noticed he was lightly dozing in the gray tedium of mid-afternoon. Barely through her first name, she dropped the quill and went to find that which in this moment had suddenly become not worth losing. A cold crept beneath her layers of clothing. Mildred would want to make sure. No, she wouldn’t surrender the child; not yet, anyway. There were more formalities in a thing like this. With more quiet than she needed, she followed the path the gentleman had treaded in the hall, her lavender skirts dragging whispers in their hems.

She knew there was trouble. She’d seen the image, through the memory of the orphanage volunteer, of Treasure at four years old, screaming upon the touch of a hand on her shoulder. The volunteer was worried. That same man had come back. Once Julianna had the address, she climbed back within her carriage and demanded that the driver take her there immediately.

“You, my dear, are just more trouble than I have a mind to deal with... It’s a shame. You being so pretty and ferocious as you are. Hold her,” he sharply instructed his wife, “...keep your hand over her mouth. That low class sow from the orphanage will never miss you, pretty.”

Calling hesitantly in the hall, Mistress El was becoming increasingly righteous about the lack of propriety in the whole business. There were voices in a room around the corner. She stood in the doorway, her mouth opened wide to speak, yet no sound would come out. The fine Oriental rug had been thrown aside. Loose panels in the ebony floor gave way to a door. Treasure was being held tight by the seemingly benign wife and the gentleman was opening the door.

“This is what happened to the little girl who didn’t obey me... She was put away and punished, starved so some sense got into her brain... The little weakling lost consciousness... How was I to know?! The others stood up to much more and survived... but that’s neither here nor there... You won’t make me out to be a monster! I don’t know if you’re some kind of little witch, but you can see her, can’t you? That ugly little spirit hanging on my shoulders like a god-forsaken noose at every moment! Every moment! Well no one is to ever find out and we’re going to play a little game and see how long you can last down there before you’re completely forgotten...”

Mistress El couldn’t quite think but somewhere inside she was desperately trying to find her strength; she needed to move. Years of hard labor couldn’t have left her a weakling like this.

He felt himself being roughly shoved forward from behind. The shock of it made him lose his footing. His dark deeds were calling out revenge as he stumbled into the blackness beneath the floor. It wasn’t deep. Standing up, he could reach his head above floor level. His wife could see it so clearly now... what she had to do. She threw the girl to the side and reached around to lift the tossed back door. Mistress El had a mind to throw her in too, but they needed their collective strength to force down the door upon him. He struggled against them, pushing back with all his might. It wasn’t that he was stronger than them. His desperation of getting out of that seething, blue, black and gray riddled pit caused his adrenaline to rush and pound in his veins.

Julianna rushed in, pushing anyone she encountered to the floor. The sounds were enough to put her on the trail. It took the weight of a mother's heart to seal his fate. Slithering down, he would never get away from them, from all of them.

His wife walked out, tossing aside the fake wedding ring. Not even her name was real. So she could shed this. None of it was real anymore. If it was a spell, she'd broken it. If it was a nightmare, she'd pinched herself awake. If she'd aided a murderer in some fake existence, then she'd murdered him in the real one. She could die with that. She could live with it too.

Treasure had been knocked unconscious when she was thrown to the side. Back at the orphanage, she was wrapped up in blankets. It was Mildred's old room. Mistress El still shaking off the ordeal a day later, offered Julianna tea. It was waved away. She studied her daughter's face. Treasure stirred without opening her eyes. She was dreaming of the way that she'd use her ability to help the children find good homes. There was so much she could do with her life if she used what she had.

A pair of calm, cool lips pressed themselves to her forehead. She didn't need to open her eyes to know that those were the lips of her mother. A pleasant, peach light came into her mind. Visions of a young woman years ago, walking the floors with an infant that she loved more than she loved herself...

Foxie

By Mark Barkawitz

I'd just returned from a run. As was my habit, I grabbed a chilled Gatorade from the freezer and sat in the canvas chair on our front porch feet up on the

from the freezer and sat in the canvas chair on our front porch, feet up on the railing, peering past palm fronds which overlapped the nearby San Gabriel mountains, now book-ended by my size ten Reeboks. As I sipped and cooled down, a large, roundish guy in skin-tight, neon red-and-yellow cycling shorts and matching top pedaled feverishly past. Under his likewise yellow helmet, he looked like Humpty-Dumpty. I laughed to myself, wondering if this guy owned a mirror, and if so, how the hell did he see himself in that outfit? But at the same time, there was something oddly familiar about him.

My wife's Explorer pulled into the driveway. She was tall and svelte, still not showing the three-month-old fetus—our first child—inside of her. “How was your run?” She tousled my hair like a little kid's before disappearing into the house.

“Good.” As I took another sip and glanced down the block, Humpty-Dumpty approached from the other direction, his heavy legs working more methodically now. It suddenly hit me—Maple Mouth—so as he passed, I yelled from the porch: “Hey, Dick!” He looked over. I waved and yelled: “It's Mike.” He braked and turned around. I got up and walked off the porch to greet him.

A few years ago, Dick and I had played on the same baseball team. It was sponsored by a local bar, which all of the players and fans frequented. He was the back-up first baseman and lived in the back house next door to where I'd lived before getting married. He had put on a few pounds, but was heavy even back then. He recognized me as I got closer, smiled. We shook hands. He unbuckled his helmet. We reminisced about our good ol' days as ballplayers, then caught up. He had gotten divorced. And re-married. And re-divorced. Told me all the sordid details of each. That was why we called him Maple Mouth—once tapped his mouth never stopped running. When I finally got a word in, he was surprised to hear that I was still married.

“Why?”

“Come on, dude. You were a hound in those days.” His beefy face smiled, as if it had swallowed secrets from my bachelorhood past.

“I was single then. Now I'm married. Different breeds.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he scoffed, then got serious: “Did you hear about Foxie?”

“Foxie?”

“My first wife’s sister. Remember? She stayed with us in the back house that summer.”

“Oh, yeah. You mean Helen. What about her?”

“She died of AIDS, man.”

“AIDS?”

“Yeah. You didn’t hear?”

“No. No. How would I?”

“Bummer. Huh?”

He kept talking, as was his habit, but I stopped listening, as was mine. AIDS. She died of AIDS, man. It hit me like a fastball on the helmet. Not that I knew her that well. She was this sexy, twenty-something, bi-sexual hooker who had had to get out of L.A. that summer—something about some john with a knife—so she had stayed with her older sister—Maple Mouth’s first wife—in their little back house in Pasadena until things chilled-out. She already had one scar from a knife—a small, diagonal slash on her cheek from a jealous woman—and was trying to avert another. She was the first (and only) hooker I’d ever met. But aside from her profession, she wasn’t that different than other girls I’d met in bars or at college. Of course, she had this dark side. We talked over the fence mostly. Just for those few weeks that summer. Temporary neighbors mostly. Mostly . . .

It was hot that summer. I was watering the yellowed front lawn of the little house that I rented near the college, when I spotted a pair of red, lace panties on the driveway next door. They looked clean—as if just laundered—so I picked them up, dropped the hose on the lawn, and walked down the driveway to the

them up, dropped the nose on the lawn, and walked down the driveway to the rear house, where all the blinds and drapes were closed. The stereo was on inside; some English-sounding band sang a love song about a sex dwarf. I knocked. After a brief pause, the stereo lowered and the door opened partially. Foxie peeked out at me, her pretty face betrayed by the small scar on her cheek. I held up the red, lace panties.

“Do these belong to you?”

She smiled sheepishly. “I was looking for those.” When she reached out to take them, she was wearing a black corset, which squeezed her breasts upward and together, as if in offering, and her black, net stockings were gartered. Behind her through the now-opened doorway in the center of the darkened living room lit by candles, a naked, bald-headed man knelt on his hands and knees with some sort of saddle strapped to his back. She explained: “I’m working. I’ll stop by later to thank you.” She smiled again—but not sheepishly this time—and slowly closed the door.

“I hear that shit can hide in your system for years, then one day—Wham!—you got AIDS. Are you listening to me, man?” Dick asked.

“What? Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking about your sister-in-law.”

“Ex-sister-in-law.”

“Yeah. Ex.”

Dick talked some more, but eventually got back on his bike and rode away. His colorful, egg-shaped figure balancing on inch-wide tires reminded me again of that nursery rhyme: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. I killed off the Gatorade.

Sitting at the dining room table, my wife worked on her shopping list.

“Friend of yours?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“The guy you were talking to outside.” She looked up from her list. “On the bike.”

“Oh. Sort of. You remember Dick. We used to play ball together. Lived in that little back house on our old block.”

She nodded. “Of course. Who could forget Dick?”

I nodded back.

“The doctor’s office called. They changed my appointment to Wednesday.”

“Appointment?”

“For the ultra-sound. Remember? You wanted to come with me.”

“Oh. Right.”

She wrinkled her brow. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“You seem a little distracted.”

My wife left for the market. I grabbed a can of beer from the refrigerator, sat in the tub, and let the steamy water run over my feet as it filled. I sipped the beer. That shit can hide in your system for years. I wondered if Foxy had already been infected that summer. I tried not to think about it. But like Maple Mouth’s mouth, my brain was already tapped and running.

It was pretty late that night when there was a knock on my front door. I was working at my desk in the front room with the stereo on low. When I opened the door, Foxy smiled in at me, wearing a tank top sans bra with cut-off jeans. “I wanted to thank you. You know—for returning my panties.” She smiled sheepishly again, her lips glossy-wet, and held up a bottle of gold 1800 tequila. “Got any mixer?”

I smiled back. "As a matter of fact, I do."

She came in and we mixed a batch of margaritas in the blender, then sat on the couch in the living room, drinking and talking. She seemed to want to talk. I didn't mind listening, though hers wasn't the cheeriest of stories. Her step-father had sexually molested her as a teenager, so she had dropped-out of high school and moved out on her own at sixteen. But she liked to read, so was well-spoken and informed on an array of subjects. Her voice was small, her features and frame petite. She shared an apartment in Venice Beach with her lesbian lover. For the most part, she didn't like men. Just worked for them.

"But you're okay." She stared over the salted rim of her mushroom-shaped glass. "You can call me Helen."

"Thanks." I tapped my glass with hers. "Helen." We smiled at each other and drank up. It was soon after midnight and we mixed another batch of margaritas in the kitchen. While the blender blended, Helen leaned against me.

Parked in the driveway, I brought in the groceries from the opened back end of my wife's SUV. She made dinner. We ate. She was tired and went to bed early. I stayed up to watch a ball game, but fell asleep on the couch. When I woke with a start, the game was over and the nightly news was on. I grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned off the TV, but just lay there in the darkness.

Helen sat on the couch again, sipping her drink, sun-tanned legs crossed, nipples protruding under her cotton top. It was easy to see why men paid her, sometimes as much as a-thousand-a-night for what she termed "specialty sex." Her specialty. She wasn't the type you'd find standing on a street corner. She had a "clientele," as she called them. I sat down next to her, sipped my drink.

"Where's your girlfriend tonight?" she asked.

"We broke up."

“Too bad.”

“Yeah.”

I got in bed quietly, so as not to wake my wife. But I just lay there, too. I couldn't sleep now. I contemplated getting back up. To do what? Inevitably, I would fall off to sleep. I knew that. Just not yet.

She finished her drink.

“I think there's a little left in the blender.”

“I'm good.” She put the empty glass with a red lipstick mark on the coffee table and turned towards me, pulling her knees up under her on the couch. Her dark eyes were sleepy now, but her lips still glossy-wet. She took the drink from my hand and put it, too, on the coffee table. She leaned closer. She smelled intoxicatingly good. I told her so. She touched my bare bicep with her index finger, the nail of which was long and crimson, and bit her lower lip, while staring back at me.

“Um—”

“Sh-h-h.” She moved her finger to my lips to silence me, and then leaned in. But as I closed my eyes and awaited her glossy, wet lips, there was a sudden, startling knock-knock-knock at the front door. We both sat upright.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Again, knock-knock-knock.

“Who in the hell?” I got up off the couch without a clue as to who would be knocking at my door at this hour of the night. My ex-girlfriend? The cops? But when I opened the door, it was only Dick on the other side.

“Hey. I just got back from the bar. The ol' lady's cracked out. Saw your light

hey. I just got back from the bar. The old lady's crashed-out. Saw your light on. Figured you were still up." Without an invitation, he walked into the room. Spotting a beautiful, sexy woman on my couch, two partially-consumed alcoholic beverages on the coffee table, and calculating in the current hour of the evening, a more intuitive mind might have figured: three's a crowd. But not Dick. "Hey, Fokie. Oo-o. Margaritas. My favorite. Got another glass? In the kitchen?"

And before I could throw his oblivious ass back out my front door, he was already headed in the other direction and disappeared into the next room. Helen and I looked at each other. The blender blended in the kitchen. She shrugged. Reluctantly, I shrugged, too. From the other side of the wall, Maple Mouth informed us:

"Man, did I kill on the pool table tonight. You guys shoulda' seen me. Ran the table twice. Couldn't lose if you shot me. Just one a' those nights. You know? Everyone was asking: 'Where the hell's Mike tonight? Where the hell's Mike?' Especially after your ex-girlfriend showed up with some other dude."

He stepped back into the room, head tilted back, drinking from a juice glass with a heavily-salted rim. He lowered his drink and smiled—pleased with himself for some reason—oblivious to the coarse, white salt on the tip of his nose and at the corners of his mouth, like a clown's make-up. Helen and I cracked-up laughing. Dick hadn't a clue.

A few days later, Helen moved back to Venice Beach. I never saw her again. A few weeks later, my future wife moved into the apartment building two doors down. The rest is history. Inadvertent, geographic, fortuitous history. In my case anyway. I looked over at her sleeping peacefully in the dark next to me, our child safely inside of her. In their case, too.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall: Are you listening to me, man?

Yeah, Maple Mouth. Just this once. I'm listening.

Editor's Note: This story will be published in installments. This is part one—enjoy!

Jump the Gun

By Linda Emma

But then, she wasn't supposed to live.

Gillian was born a preemie, too eager to get out and get going, her father often said.

Later, her parents said that, much later. After the touch-and-go hospital stay, after the countless back-to-back visits through emergency rooms and to a fretting physician who never gave Gillian the hope she came out with. Dr. Thomas, who hadn't believed in the conception, much less the birth, had suggested that a change-of-life baby to a mother with a genetic heart defect might do more than change Sarah's life; it might well end it.

But Sarah knew she would see her baby born, just like she knew there would always be a surviving crocus or two by the mailbox, in spite of the frost and the road salt, regardless of the gorging squirrels and the chomping chipmunks. In spring, there would be blooms.

Gillian checked out of the hospital on what should have been her birth date, like there had been a miscommunication to the womb and she hadn't received the revised memo. And she crossed the threshold to their old colonial on a sunny April morning, snuggled in the gently rocking car seat held with a white-knuckled grip by her father's calloused hands. He placed her on the kitchen table, front and center, and fumbled with the strap –big hands not made for small doo-dads.

Charlie Sampson was too old to be a dad. He knew it. Too old to learn how to take care of this tiny, tiny, little person, who couldn't even breathe quite right on her own. Christ, the apnea monitor she came home with weighed almost as much as Gillian did.

Came with her, just like her own set of batteries, Charlie told the boys at the plant. Just plug her in and turn out the light. No big deal, he said.

But it was a big deal. Everything about it was a big deal.

When Sarah told him she was pregnant, it didn't stick. They'd wanted kids, sure. But that was years ago.

Sarah said the word three times: pregnant.

There was a second, a split second, in which a smile pulled at his lips, involuntarily. But he swallowed it back, guiltily, feeling like the time he gloated over a jump shot he'd gotten past his nephew. She couldn't be pregnant. Shouldn't be.

Sarah saw the protest in his eyes, but preempted it with a litany he knew she must have rehearsed, before he could give voice to any of it. He shook his head, stuttered out the beginning of a mass of fears, but she took his face in her hands, soft, small hands, warm -those hands could melt him away- and told him it would be okay.

Sunday mass attendance was borne of habit, not conviction. Charlie had inherited the ritual from his mother, like his red hair, and he would no more think of halting it than he would consider dyeing his hair. He went, but he wasn't really there. He stood, he sat, he knelt. He repeated the Catholic recitations with nothing behind the words but the contraction of larynx, the push of air. Sometimes he scanned the pews for familiar faces. Sometimes, he took in the expanse of the cathedral in which he'd been baptized, confirmed, and married. On the way out, he might give the priest a nod and say, "Father."

Father Catena knew Charlie only as the missing half of all of Sarah's work for the church. Charlie stood obligingly next to his wife on Sunday mornings but Father Catena never felt that he reached Charlie. When his secretary told him one of his parishioners was there to see him, Father Catena repeated the name: "Charlie Sampson."

"Alone?" he asked.

Charlie needed an out from the church, a way to let the baby go before it really was one, he explained. Wasn't there a way? Big, broad-shouldered Charlie, the

scar above his left eyebrow badge to a victory on a school yard years ago, looked like a little kid at the principal's door, pleading. But the Catholic Church didn't have an "out" for Charlie.

Now, an icy chill radiated out from his innards to the very pores on his skin when he thought of that long ago plea.

Sarah had been right. Sure, Gillian came out a little too soon, a little too small, but she jumped to earth as if propelled by a rocket booster and took to everything with that same explosion of kinetic energy.

For all the further complications that the doctors assured them she would likely encounter, Gillian seemed hell-bent on proving them all wrong. Developmentally, they said, she'd be a little behind for a few years, maybe all her life. She would hold her head up later, smile later, roll over later.

She didn't.

She was walking before she turned one. Looked like a doll, too small to be real and roving on her own, looked like a dwarf, Charlie knew, but he didn't care. He tried to squelch the feeling a bit, but he couldn't help it. Hiding his pride in that little girl would have been like trying to stuff the sunlight under his shirt.

Gillian was a dynamo, full-forward force, and always in motion. Once her bill of health deemed her self-sufficient on the breathing front, the only lingering affect of her early arrival was a small frame and a touch of asthma.

While Sarah's initial plunge into parenthood had been fearless and determined, now that her fragile little person was real, she wanted to wrap her up in a coddling blanket and hold her close. But as the weeks turned into months and years, all Gillian had to do to thwart Sarah's protectiveness was give Charlie a plea of her batting blue eyes and weighty dark lashes to garner daddy's support. She could have found no better ally, no one more willing to play advocate against the world for whatever new obstacle she wanted to overcome. Daddy would do anything for Gills, anything.

And because Charlie didn't say no, Gillian did it all. She tried swimming and

karate and baseball and, improbably, basketball. But by the time she was heading up to middle school, she had honed her skills and hyper-focus to be a standout on the lacrosse field. And whatever Charlie had to do, with whomever he had to switch shifts at the plant, he did not miss a game. Sarah, too, was a faithful sideline cheerleader, but as Gillian grew in age and skill, the game she played so well, also evolved. The little kids whacking stick to stick were morphing into the aggressive checkers that would dominate a high school field. When Sarah watched the coach of one opposing team and his distorted version of “pre-checking,” she grew white with fury.

Sarah held her tongue only until they were quietly celebrating the team’s victory in the pizza parlor on the way home. She tried to lightly suggest that Gillian might find a new sport at high school, but she was quickly rebuffed by Gillian and Charlie. When Gillian left to find the ladies’ room, Sarah sought Charlie’s support. She should not have. It wasn’t forthcoming and her pleas to reason were not complete when Gillian rounded the booth’s bend to hear her mother’s frantic voice: “Gillian isn’t big enough for this sport.”

It was a forbidden utterance in their household, Sarah knew, a notion that had died when the baby and mother had not. Gillian could do anything. It was the family mantra and Gillian had yet to dispel the notion. Sarah’s suggestion to the contrary was blasphemy. The pizza sauce burned Sarah’s throat like acid, but not as strongly as the gazes of her family.

From that day forward, a line was drawn, an us-against-her divide that Sarah disliked but abided and understood. Charlie and Gillian did not exclude Sarah; they merely filtered that to which she would be included.

She could have chosen jealousy, taken the unintended slight as mortal blow, but a look at that huddled pair as she entered a room or the secret exchanged smiles between father and daughter and the only emotion Sarah could feel was love. This was the family for which she had long ago stopped yearning. Charlie was a better father than she could have dreamed and yet he remained the same, devoted husband he had promised to be in his ineloquent proposal three decades earlier.

So Sarah watched and waited. The middle school lacrosse league was modified-

check, but it was also, Sarah knew, a training ground for the ferocity of the game to come. Gillian's speed would protect her only to the intersection of her fearlessness where she so often willingly put herself in harm's way. There were no pads or helmets that could transform her tiny body into something it wasn't. Sarah could not be the only one to see that. The cutting coaches at the high school level would know that her scorebook stats would not compensate for Gillian's physical limitations.

But having seen coaches run amuck, Sarah didn't put her full faith in their sound-mindedness. And she did something she had never done before, an almost pagan tradition she had watched her mother and grandmother perform on countless off-hour visits to their church. She lit a candle. Not a prayer so much as a silent wish that something, anything, would wrench that lacrosse stick out of Gillian's hands. And as she pushed the dying ember of the wooden match into fine white sand and watched the pungent waft of smoke dissipate into stale air, she believed her prayer had been answered. No -she knew, much as she had known that she would deliver and watch a baby girl turn into a young woman.

Sarah woke in a jumble of sheets and sweat, saying the words aloud.

Not this way, not this way.

The cool air hit her like a slap and she sprang up. The dream had been a replay of the game -again.

It was the championship game and Gillian had assisted on two team goals, but they were still down by one with less than two minutes of play. Edge-of-your-seat stuff, Sarah knew, but her nail-biting was fraught from the one player who seemed determined to send Gillian to her ass at every encounter. And successfully, the girl did it. But Gillian kept popping back up like one of those Bozo Bop Bags from a years-ago childhood.

Got back up and got the winning goal. Jettisoned it into the net with a twist of her body, and a flick of her wrist. And it swished to the target with an almost audible hit, in a swerving arc, as if sucked there by an electromagnet.

Under the smothering hugs of her teammates, pumping fists, and slapping backs, amidst the thunderous applause and cheers, there was a missing baritone, a vacuum of space in her auditory passages where Gillian should have heard her father's voice.

Gillian stood tip-toed, and hopped, jumped and stretched, but her vision to the sidelines was obstructed by a mass of admiring teammates, their attention most wholly on Gillian and her dramatic last second goal.

Where was he? Why couldn't she hear his voice, his too-loud, too-proud, yelling, cheering crazily straining voice?

Something was wrong. Gillian knew it. Like her mother always seemed to know things. Gillian hated her inherited penchant for premonition, always ignored the itchy, intense stirrings that sent warning signals to her brain. But not this time.

Gillian burst out of the crowd, mowed down the center attack in her lunge for the sideline, and caught an elbow to her head as she rushed off the field.

There was a sphere of fans, their attention diverted to an epicenter Gillian could not see. She rushed toward the encircling crowd as her senses picked up the peel of an approaching ambulance and she felt the stinging pepper of gazes shot in her direction.

By the time she reached her father, prone on the grass, and her mother, a collapsed ball at his side, Gillian could feel her airways constricting, her breath coming in tiny, spastic bursts. She gulped at it, swallowing it into her lungs, wishing it to the retreating synapses of a brain that could not comprehend what was so clear to the dwindling mass of spectators.

Sarah half-heartedly enjoined Gillian to try out for the high school team. *It's what your father would have wanted*, she managed to get out. But they both knew that it was beyond their strength to again step onto a field too reminiscent of where he had perished.

Instead, they stepped through their days, quietly, politely, gingerly. The one

specter at all of their conversations, at every dinner-time interlude wasn't Charlie, but rather the shroud of guilt they both wore like internal scars, molten to their cores. Sarah knew it was her answered prayer that had killed her husband; Gillian knew it was she and her game that had felled the watchtower of her life.

Maybe Sarah could have remained at the part-time job in the school administration office until Gillian graduated. Maybe they could have gotten by with the money from his pension. But with Gillian more absent than ever, even when she was home, the walls of her once-beloved home now closed in around Sarah like a coffin. She needed to get out. So she began working full time at the office of a local attorney and family friend. It was work, productive and right. This was the next chapter of her life.

Gillian's new chapter was less forward-moving. No sport or extracurricular activity filled the lacrosse void and her dropping grades were testament to a new dour philosophy on learning. She listened and regurgitated what had been done in class. But homework and projects were left undone and they negated her high test and quiz grades. A once all A student, she was now squeaking by, leaving the accumulated accolades of her middle school years behind her like the shed skin of a slithered out snake.

And there were drugs. Not the desperately-hooked-on, teetering-on-overdose-danger drugs. Not the party-with-the-pals, over-the-top-indulgence drugs. No, Gillian's abuses were solitary and solemn. And infrequent. She tried but couldn't find the numbness she was seeking from a pill or a joint or a drink. And moreover, she couldn't allow herself to lose control. Control was all she had left.

For Gillian's first year of high school Sarah tried desperately to break through that concrete fortress of Gillian's control, to no avail. Sarah's own tools were diminished. All that she had once been so certain of had fallen apart at her feet. All which she had come to depend upon was gone. The instincts that had served as barometer to her life were woefully absent of late, and she no longer felt sure of anything. Where once she saw the next turn in the path as if she'd built the road herself, now every avenue seemed draped in a dense, covering fog.

Even after Sarah took possession of Gillian's full school records to thrust them in the face of the harried and hurried guidance counselor assigned to her daughter, Sarah seemed the only one ringing alarm bells.

Gillian was doing fine, they all assured Sarah. An average student, they said. She heard words like "transition" and "rigors" of a high school curriculum. Even the therapist to whom Sarah dragged a protesting Gillian seemed only to look at the microcosm of Charlie's death. Sarah could have gotten more advice from a fortune cookie: this too shall pass.

By sophomore year, Gillian had solidified her new role as an average, apathetic student. She walked alone through the crowded halls of school, came home to an iPod or a book, had a quiet dinner with her mother. Rarely was her former self on display. The assertive, go-getter was gone.

And save Sarah, no one seemed to miss Gillian's former self. The girls who Sarah once considered stalwarts in her daughter's circle of friends tried, tried and then gave up. The phone wasn't ringing; there were no beckoning knocks on their door.

In class, teachers noted Gillian as an easy student. She didn't talk back, or bombard them with inane questions, or know-it-all answers. If they suspected that she wasn't living up to potential, they didn't express it. Gillian did little, demanded nothing –and wasn't failing.

So, in the least-strong sense of the word, school went well. Gillian got by in every class.

Except in U.S. History.

If she had cared enough to voice the notion, certainly she would have felt that Mr. Mahoney had it in for her. Constantly he prodded her, sought answers from her disproportionate to her classmates, tried to elicit her opinions, rattle her brain, spark a sense of outrage at some of history's more blatant inequities, or failing all of that to spark anger in any form, if not directed at the travesties of the modern world, than gladly toward him.

It didn't work. It wasn't so much a reluctance to take the bait as it was Gillian's total oblivion to her as its intended target. It was as if rather than magnifying the dangling lure, murky waters made it invisible to her. How could she reach out for something she couldn't even see?

"Don't change after gym class," Mr. Mahoney told her.

Gillian was confused. She understood the detention; he'd warned her that the next missed homework wouldn't be just a 0 as it was in all her other classes. But what did he mean, don't change? And how did he even know she had gym last period today?

She didn't ask the questions out loud. She arrived to detention dressed in shorts, t-shirt and sneakers. Seated behind a pile of papers at his desk, Mr. Mahoney popped up upon Gillian's entrance to the classroom.

"Great," he said, coming around from his seat. "Let's go."

Gillian noted he was similarly clad in running shorts, t-shirt and sneakers, but didn't say a word. She wanted to ask the obvious –go where?- but she didn't. Gillian wasn't interested in engaging in the conversation the question might spawn.

Once outside the building, Mr. Mahoney stretched out his calf muscles, employing the concrete steps of the school for their resistance. He stretched his quads, loosened his shoulders, his arms, the muscles of his back. Gillian stood silently still, her left hand clutching her right elbow.

"Let's go," he said, and set off at a jog out of the school parking lot.

Gillian waited a second.

Mr. Mahoney didn't turn to see if she was behind him. She wondered for a moment if he was kidding, if he really thought she was just going to follow him.

Then. she did iust that.

She caught up with him and fell into his quickening stride. Neither of them said a word.

Gillian didn't know, but they ran a four mile loop that brought them back to the school's track and its surrounding bleachers. Mahoney slowed to a jog, then a walk, and took one pass around the track.

Gillian did the same.

When they were done, Mahoney used the bleacher seats and again stretched out while Gillian watched. Finally, he rose from a last stretch and shook the hair from his eyes, tossing his head like the boys in class always did. He raised his chin in Gillian's direction and met her eyes.

"Make sure you pass in tonight's assignment," he said.

And he walked away, across a patch of grass, over the sidewalk, and into the red brick building.

Gillian handed in her homework for the next three nights. But the weekend assignment, she didn't bother with. It wasn't intentional and it didn't even occur to her that there would be a consequence until he called for it. She felt just a flutter of reminiscent anxiety as the students passed their assignments forward, and then relief when Mahoney didn't announce a detention. It was premature. As Gillian started to exit the classroom, Mahoney said her last name: "Sampson."

She stopped. She didn't have to, she thought. He said it so softly.

She could have just pretended she hadn't heard, skittered out past the incoming students vying for a little of Mahoney's attention, be gone in a second.

But she stopped.

"Change into your running gear after math," he said. "I'll meet you out front."

Gillian stared at him, her blue eyes to his. She knew she wasn't the only one who hadn't done the assignment. She took a breath. Mahoney waited. An incoming student jostled Gillian and diverted Mahoney's attention.

"Yo, Mr. Mahoney, did you see the game last night?"

When Mahoney looked up, Gillian was gone. It was a different route, a little longer, but the same silent routine that led them both back to a last walking lap around the track. At the bleachers, Mahoney began his stretching routine as Gillian stood statue still.

"You should stretch out after you run," he offered.

"I don't run," Gillian answered.

A smile broke across Mahoney's freckled face. He gave a slight nod.

They were told to partner up for the project. Not a problem. There was an even number of students. Yet, at the end of class, Gillian was working alone. Mahoney called her on it after class.

"I'd rather work alone," she assured him.

"It's a group project."

"But I'm fine alone."

"I doubt that," Mahoney said, "but that isn't the point. The assignment was to choose a partner and work together. The working-together is the point."

Gillian didn't say anything, just stared at Mahoney in the door's opening. Mahoney took a small breath, waiting for Gillian to fill the space of air between them. Gillian said nothing.

"Partner up tomorrow," Mahoney said.

But Gillian didn't

But Gillian said,

When class was over, Mahoney stood sentry to the exit. Gillian looked at her shoes as she tried to walk past him, but was stopped just shy of the threshold.

“Sampson,” Mahoney said, “I’ll see you out front at the end of school.”

Gillian stopped and pivoted to face Mahoney, her chin up, her eyes narrowed, and dead on him.

“You can’t do that,” she protested.

“But I can,” he assured her.

She knew he couldn’t, that he was bluffing, that no way was he allowed to hijack his students as running partners, especially not girls, she thought.

Mahoney noted Gillian’s clenched fists grasping the history book in her arms, waited for further fusillade, a continued volley. Instead, Gillian set him with an icy stare, turned on her heel and fell into the sea of the hallway.

Mahoney thought she might not show, might just say f*&% you and be done with him, but as he was stretching out, he spotted her coming around the corner of the building, upright and swift. She was approaching him with a focused gait and if she were a man, he would have readied himself for a blow. Instead, she stopped short right in front of him. Mahoney nodded to her. She said nothing.

He started off in a jog and Gillian fell into line with him. In a moment, though, Mahoney felt a change in her pace, a lengthening of her stride. He followed suit, staying abreast with her. She stepped up the pace. He did the same. She pushed it further and he met her effort by taking a small lead. They ran at an unsustainable clip, but kept at it nonetheless.

By the time they rounded the bend in the last turn toward school, they were sprinting. They finished in a final push, Mahoney just yards ahead of Gillian, both of them spent and panting. They walked, non-speaking, the lap of the track. At the end, Mahoney stood at the bleachers, readying himself for his stretches

stretching.

“You really should stretch,” he said to Gillian.

She stood, her breathing returning to normal, with one arm clutching the elbow of the other.

As Mahoney performed his routine, he looked up at Gillian.

“If you give me quality work, you can go it alone,” he offered, “no partner.”

Gillian eyed him with suspicion. “I turn in an A project and I can do it by myself?” she asked.

“Better than an A,” he said. “The best you can do.”

How would he know what the best she could do was? Gillian silently wondered. She gave it no voice, just nodded slowly.

Mahoney finished and started his way back toward the building, then turned back to Gillian.

“Gillian,” he called to get her attention.

She looked up at him. She couldn’t remember him ever before using her first name.

“I’m out here every day, rain or shine,” he said.

He crossed the walk and went into the school.

Gillian looked after him for a moment, then sat on the grass and stretched the muscles of her legs.

Gillian showed up the next day, without a word. She ran side-by-side with Mahoney, not at the frenetic pace of the day before, but at a healthy clip. They

Mahoney, not at the hectic pace of the day before, but at a hearty clip. They both finished, moist with sweat, and stretched at the foot of the bleachers.

Because Sarah arrived home from work after Gillian every evening, she didn't immediately note the change in her daughter's routine. What she did notice were the socks and sports bras, shorts and tee's that were making their way back into the laundry. And a computer, all but mute for the last months, turned on again. Sarah saw the reemergence of school books, as if they were returning from a distant vacation, and colored pencils, glue sticks and paper left at-the-ready on Gillian's desk. Sarah discreetly looked for signs to a finished product, but did not ask Gillian about it directly. Nor did she ask about her wet sneakers or the new running outfit she noticed in a drawer. Desperate as she was to know what had changed, Sarah was too unsure of its permanence, too leery of its fragility. She was reminded of a tiny baby, handled more gingerly than eggs. Even the loudening cries of that infant's expanding lungs were not enough to assuage Sarah's early fears. It was an effort for Sarah not to hold her own breath as she held her new daughter.

Mahoney hadn't lied; rain or shine he ran. And now, so did Gillian. Without fail. Without complaint.

On one particularly frigid January morning, when Gillian's asthma acted up enough to prompt a blast from her inhaler, Mahoney suggested they stop, but Gillian waved him off. In fact, in a final burst, she sprinted past him as they entered the parking lot.

"Christ, Sampson," he said when they stopped. "When you finally decide to do something, you do it all the way, don't you?"

He was smiling at her, beaming really.

And Gillian smiled back, gave a noiseless chuckle, and shrugged her shoulders. "I guess."

By spring, Mahoney had enlisted Gillian for the track team. When he bent over her shoulder as she filled out the sign-up form with its blank boxes next to events, he said in a whisper, "Check 'em all."

Gillian looked up at him, eyebrows raised.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“What Sampson? Is there something you can’t do?”

She didn’t do it all, but she did compete in as many running events as she could without conflict, including the 100 Meter, the 400 Meter, the mile, and the hurdles. When she balked at the relays, Mahoney didn’t push it.

Until the third meet when their anchor was out.

“Sampson,” he said. “We need someone for the relay tomorrow.”

Gillian looked at him, swallowed and shook her head.

It was one thing to run for the team in her designated lane, by herself. It was an entirely different matter to tie her fate to others; or theirs to hers. Gillian had come to love running specifically because she need not have the wide-angle view she had used on the lacrosse field. She could narrow her focus, leave to the fuzzy periphery all but the end goal. She was part of the team, but not really. Her teammates were dependent upon her only for the individual numbers she could post.

After class, on the morning of the meet, he said it again.

“We need someone for the relay.”

Gillian’s eyes went wide.

“It’s time, Gills,” he said, quietly. She barely heard him.

She swallowed hard, tried to slow her quickening breath, and left the classroom at a trot.

When Mahoney held a baton to her in his outstretched hand on the bus ride to the meet, Gillian looked up into his blue eyes and waited for his final plea. But

the meet, Gillian looked up into his blue eyes and waited for his final plea. But Mahoney remained silent, merely presenting the baton to her like a calumet.

Gillian took a breath, left his gaze and dropped her head to stare at her sneaker laces. Then, she slowly, but steadily reached her hand out and took the baton.

She ran anchor at that meet and thereafter. Moreover, she became part of the team in a way she hadn't been before.

By the time she had earned a slot at States, Gillian was a star runner and reluctant leader to her teammates. They looked to her, not just for guidance on the track, but to answers off of it. Even though they all towered over her, Gillian knew they looked up to her, and eventually she was able to accept her new role.

When Emily invited to Gillian to spend Memorial Day weekend at her lake house, however, it was untrodden territory. Gillian didn't socialize with her teammates. She answered that her mother probably wouldn't okay it, although she knew Sarah would. It wasn't until Emily's older brother Jason asked Gillian if he'd see her that weekend that she began to reconsider her hasty no. He reiterated the invite, adding that he hoped she could come.

Hoped.

Jason was a senior, popular, hot -by everyone's standards. Gillian tried to tamp down her rising enthusiasm.

For the rest of the day, Gillian smiled, an unforced, confident smile. She was happy. And finally, she allowed herself to be.

At the lake house, Jason was attentive to all of his sister's friends, but was Gillian imagining that he gave her just a little more? Gillian learned that the Memorial Day weekend invitations went out to the friends of Emily and Jason in alternating years. This was Emily's year, so Jason was host and helper. He had brought only one friend, but the boy's comfort level in the family dynamic made him seem more like an additional sibling than a peer. Gillian watched the banter among the three of them and wondered, not for the first time, what it might be like to have a brother or a sister.

Friday night, the sun was swallowed into the lake in a burst of color. Gillian sat on a deck chair with her teammates. She drank the hot chocolate Mrs. Assante made for them and cupped it in her hands between sips. When the girls, armed with sticks procured from the dense underbrush surrounding the property, made their way to the dying embers of the barbecue to toast marshmallows, Gillian begged off. Solitary was still her default position. She had less and less of it lately, and part of her missed it. There was something reassuringly predictable about remaining in the company of one.

She had that sole company for only a few moments. Jason found her and plopped his large frame into the lounge chair by her side. Gillian tensed, practicing how she would respond to whatever he said. But Jason let the sun continue its descent, uninterrupted by the banter of conversation.

“I wonder if you ever grow tired of that,” he said finally. Directed to her, she thought, but then when he said no more and didn’t solicit her response, she thought he would have said it even if she wasn’t there. They talked for only a few minutes, but it felt like more, was somehow more filling. Confirmed to her was his place in their high school, the college he would attend in the fall, and that, yes, he would still play football. Division 2, he said, as if she might jump to a conclusion he didn’t deserve. What Gillian took from his slightly self-deprecating manner was the sense of a boy who was confident, not cocky, sure about the things that counted –not taking those for granted- less sure about where he might be down the road. It was clear that he had to work hard for what he attained, from his grades, to his spot on starting offense, to the pocket money he earned from a part time job.

Emily was soon upon them bearing gifts of smores and pulling first her brother, then Gillian up for a high-competition game of Monopoly. The Assantes joined the kids in the room, although not in the game, and when Gillian got up to place a glass in the sink, Mr. Assante congratulated Gillian on her victory at States.

“Your parents must be proud of you,” he said.

Gillian only nodded, tried to smile.

The next day, having made a nest not to turn into summer clothes, the girls rose

The next day, having made a pact not to turn into summer slumps, the girls rose early and headed out for a run. They were only a couple of miles into it when the laments of “tired,” “sore,” “how much farther?” were being passed from girl to girl. Gillian smiled, conceding in her head that none of these teammates were, after all, distance runners. Mahoney had already drafted Gillian for next year’s cross country team and Gillian had mapped a routine that would assure her preparedness in the fall.

When Jason’s friend honked the horn behind them, the startled girls let out a range of screams and giggles, and then piled into the car. Gillian declined the offer.

“She’d probably beat you back anyway,” she heard Jason tell his friend from the passenger seat.

The vote of confidence probably propelled Gillian a little further on in her effort to maintain a healthy pace. As the car accelerated, Gillian stepped it up, urged on by a loudening chant of “go Gil, go,” from the girls.

He knew the curve of the path better than Gillian, the rut in the road. Gillian knew only the routine of the run. And today her concentration was scattered, her footing a little unsure as she jogged through this new and preliminary life she was carving out for herself.

Traveling a little too fast, the distracting chants and laughter engulfing its interior, the car jerked and avoided the familiar pothole, then compensated with a sudden turn toward home. Gillian didn’t know the road’s surface, the shortcut back, didn’t know that, even at her quickening pace, she wasn’t fast enough to get out of the way of an engine-driven force.

Maybe if she had been just a little bit bigger, had a little more weight on that tiny frame. Maybe then, she wouldn’t have shot up so easily, so far into the air -landing back down with a deadening thud, like a crumpled little doll.

It wasn’t a bright light, but rather an engulfing warmth, like a silkily soft blanket. She felt as if she were lying on the gently rocking waves of a tepid sea, buoyant and unbothered, liberated from a weight she didn’t even know she

supported. Gillian had never felt so totally, finally at rest. It was in her breath, sometimes gasping, sometimes held, often panting, was finally being let out.

Gillian saw the outstretched hand, felt the familiar, yet too longingly distant touch of fingers to fingers, palm to palm. God, how she missed this. She smiled and felt a pulse of warmth from the hand around hers, let out the pent-up air of a long, slow breath, then opened her eyes. The light blinded her and she blinked.

Stark, white walls. IV, medical monitors. Cold.

But Gillian looked into warm, teary eyes, and squeezed the hand in hers.

“Mom.”

-end of this installment (To Be Continued...)





"Mr. Mole for Underground Observer Magazine"- N.M.B copyright 2009

Exclusive Interview- Was Thumbelina a Fair Fairy?

Mr. Mole's Musings (As told to Underground Observer Magazine)

By Denise Bouchard

When he limped with the help of his cane into the underground pub, I recognized him right away.

He looked like a secret emissary sent to impart ancient knowledge, what with the monk-like hood on his head and his dark glasses keeping out any traces of sun, even though the restaurant is an enchanted underground lair lit only by candles.

It is a dark, cavernous place and I wouldn't have believed it existed if I hadn't gone there myself on this interview.

Before he came in, the bar had been quite noisy with all of the other disgruntled underground regulars in there. When Mr. Mole entered, however, the room became quiet.

Not only is his large, grotesque presence off-putting by anyone's standards, but there's also the fact that everyone's heard the rumors of how he was supposedly treated by Thumbelina. This is probably the reason why he was escorted by the wait-staff with a quiet, reserved respect to my table.

In fact, before he arrived, the bartender, on finding out who I was and why I was there, confided to me that Mr. Mole never makes conversation with anyone. "But," he remarked quietly, "...at least he doesn't throw his problems at me like all the other characters in here do."

He arrived from the subway as surreptitiously as possible, as he makes most people scream. Still, I wondered why such an anti-social would choose such a popular place with the fairy tale set for an interview.

When Mr. Mole extended his claw to me, I tried not to flinch, as they were large and lethally pointy, quite filthy from the subway station floors. I had to remember that I had asked him here, hadn't I?

As he sat however, and took off the sweatshirt and hood, he took on a whole different persona. He wore a colorful vest under a green smoking jacket and made direct eye contact. He was confident and almost flirty with a good dose of conceit, which explains how he had the courage to ask Thumbelina to marry him in the first place.

After some small talk on New York vs. the Woodlands and quite a few laughs, the interview began in earnest.

DB: Thank you for granting us this interview, Mr. Mole.

MM: (He nods and says almost sarcastically) You asked for it!

MM: (He nods and says almost sarcastically) YOU ASKED FOR IT.

DB: Yes, of course. Mr. Mole, how did you feel when you first found Thumbelina was gone?

MM: (Shaking his head for a few seconds) How do you suppose I felt?! (He laughs forcefully three times and ends with a wheezing cough, looking at me as if to say 'Isn't it obvious?')

DB: Yes, I understand, Mr. Mole, but why don't you just tell us. Just put it all into your own words.

His mouth twitches and his whiskers quiver. He glares at me with his beady black eyes and for a moment, I'm almost afraid he'll attack me. Then he begins with a sigh and as he moves forward, his hands shake. He speaks with a sincerity that I find surprising... and a sad honesty that will always haunt me.

Here then in its entirety, is the story of Thumbelina from Mr. Mole's point-of-view as reported to Underground Observer.

MM: I was devastated. I know it may sound cliché but that's the word that completely describes the loss of- well, I liked to call her 'my little fairy sprite'. (He almost looks wistful) I can't say exactly what it was that caused her to fly away. It came as quite a shock to me to discover that she was gone forever, after all, we were to be married, you see. You must understand my dilemma and shock! I guess in order to help you understand my perspective, I'll need to take you back, back to the beginning and provide you with a view of our deeply caring and warm relationship. Do you understand why I must do it this way?!

DB: Yes

DB: Yes.

MM: Do you see where I'm headed?! (He starts to wheeze)

DB: Yes, Mr. Mole. You're doing very well. Please go on...

MM: (He squeaks and shivers as he leans on his cane, looking far older than his years) You see, I found her in need. She'd clearly been through a lot out there.

Well, you see, dear girl, I found her in the tiny hut of a field mouse. Imagine her living like that! (He laughs his wheezy laugh again)

Well it was just absurd! I offered to marry her right off- I did! It was the decent thing to do. Yes, it was!

I suppose you think I live in a hovel...

DB: A hovel?

MM: Certainly not. Why, I live in a palace! Just lovely, and well-kept up too. I have a maid, yes I do. And Thumbelina wouldn't have had to lift a finger. Why, she could've lived as a queen. And I'm a learned man as well... Why, I would've read to her each night from my favorite chair. She would've woken up to a full breakfast in my fine and cheerful kitchen.

In retrospect, there were signs of her unhappiness with me. I suspect she found my table manners to be crude. Not that she

said so! No indeed! (Squeak!) But I felt her eyes on me all the same. Judging me, always judging me as crude. You know I'd heard the rumors that she'd taken up with a swallow and had almost flown away early on, but I ignored them. After all, she stayed with me, did she not?! (He bangs his cane loudly for emphasis) It was said that she told him off in no uncertain terms, too! "I'm to marry Mr. Mole," she said. Yes, well! Yes, she did! Indeed!

Well, when I heard tell of this, I even found her a tiny spinning wheel, I did. I stole it, I tell you, from a sprite colony. Oh how she loved it... and was quite pleased with me then, and oh how I loved to watch her spin her tiny spools of the yarn that she'd gathered during the day. She seemed so content. She did! Why, she was even sewing her wedding dress! But all the while, she was just tricking me, making a fool out of me!

DB: Mr. Mole, let me just interject here, do you think she simply needed her freedom? She is very different from you, you know...

MM: (Swinging his cane wildly, throwing my papers on the floor and pointing his frightening long-nailed finger in face) She never told me!!! Never said she wanted her freedom. Never said she wanted to roam the forest again like some, well, some little harlot! (He goes back to banging his cane on the floor, banging now with each word shrilly yelled for emphasis) SHE-LEFT-ME-ON-OUR-WEDDING-DAY!!!

I ordered him another scotch.

MM: On our wedding day... (he says more quietly, subdued)

He hung his head and shook it side to side.

MM: All I ever wanted was to make her happy... and she just treated me like I had no feelings... If she'd ever once communicated with me her need to live in the open, her preference for blue-eyed fairy men, sprites like herself...

DB: Would you have let her go, Mr. Mole? Be honest now.

MM: Well, not very easily, my dear girl... no, I daresay not very easily a'tall...

After this article was published in 2008, Mr. Phil T. Mole was voted Underground Observer's Hottest Bachelor of 2009

When Doves Cry

By Jeanine DeHoney

There is something deep inside of me that often causes my laughter to shrivel up for no reason at all. Not even an old episode of *Good Times* or *Roseanne* can tickle my funny bone when my blues comes a calling. I cry at the drop of a dime. Tears stream down my face, streaking my black mascara and mint green eyeshadow that I've somehow developed a compulsion for and can't quite figure out why. I guess that is why Surli is threatening to move out. No, not because of my green eye shadow, but because of my tears. He has had enough of my water faucet being turned on so frequently.

Surli is one of those men who knows how to control his emotions. When his mother died he did not shed a tear. His cheeks were as dry as a box of prunes whose supermarket shelf life had expired, the whole time we sat in the church. He seemed irritated that I could not stop whimpering. That my snot and my tears might get on his suit. Surli began to clasp and unclasp his hands. His hands looked so dry. I reached into my bag to give him some lotion and to get more tissue for myself.

“I’ll be back,” he said not looking at me, not taking my offering for softer hands. “I see my cousin Lenny and his family,” he said prying his arm away from my grip before the service began. “It’s been ages since I’ve seen them. Humph... my mother called him her 'second son'... and his kids, she treated them like they were her grandchildren.”

I tried to decipher the messages in Surli’s few sentences. Something was tormenting him more than usual, and today, at his mother’s funeral there was no escape route. Surli had never mentioned his cousin Lenny before. I found that strange if he was a 'second son' of his mother’s, even though it wasn’t by birth but through her adulation.

Maybe he was jealous, of him, or his children. He once said not long after we started dating, “My mother will never understand why I don’t want to have any children. She won’t listen to my reasons, turns the television volume up to drown my voice when I try to explain to her that there are too many children in the world already. That I don’t want to add to its overpopulation. She has never listened to me Christina. She does for me but she does not listen to me. I guess that is why my father left her.”

I positioned my body on the hard wooden church pew so that I could watch Surli. He walked with a stooped back, like a man holding a heavy burden. I

watched as he walked to his cousin and his family. His cousin's wife was holding the hands of two cute children dressed in white. They were so beautiful they almost seemed surreal, as if every feature on their face was professionally airbrushed. Surli hugged his cousin and his wife quickly and then awkwardly patted the curly locks of their children before walking out of the door to the front vestibule. Maybe he is taking a cigarette break I told myself. Maybe it was not me and my tears he was running away from.

I met Surli three years ago. I never met his mother until the day of her funeral. When I was due to go and meet her at her home in New Jersey she had taken ill; she had a bad heart. Surli and I had been together for six months. By then she needed special round-the-clock care from visiting nurses and an oxygen tank by her bed for her shortness of breath.

That evening, Surli asked me to marry him. It was a simple proposal. No fanfare, no loving sentiments.

“Will you marry me Christina?” he asked clasping and unclasping his hands. His hands were dry. Like the bark of a sycamore tree. There was no ring like I knew there would be none. I can hear my mother's voice in the background saying, *This is not a true proposal Christina. When a man proposes to you he should at least come with a ring, and not just a promise.* I have not talked to her since I became engaged. Surli's name is like bitter bile in her mouth whenever she mentions him. What is it that people see in him that I do not? Julia says that I love men with my venetian blinds drawn. But that with Surli I refuse to let even a hint of sunlight come through and that is why I am so miserable.

I remembered once my best friend Julia told me that her boyfriend gave her a ring in a box of Cracker Jacks. I thought that was the most romantic thing a man could do. They shared a box while they were at the Botanic Gardens and when she took the last morsel of the sweet nutty coated

popcorn, she felt something and pulled out a diamond ring. I used to dream about Surli doing that with me, something silly but nonetheless meaningful. Something we could reminisce about when we're old and gray and settled like the dust on unused china.

"What do you love about him?" Julia often asks me. "Even a fish would die from loneliness and the lack of affection in Surli's care."

"Maybe it was his aloofness that drew me to him," I answered unsure of my own reason for being with him. In the scrapbook of our lives there can be no magic or laughter or unabashed intimacy. Only pages that are water-logged from my tears.

"Why do you want to marry me?" I asked Surli right after he proposed.

"Now that my mother is dying, I need a wife."

I did not ask if he loved me. I knew that he did, in his own way. In the way that had been shown him from the time he was a child. Relationships and talking about them, were uncomfortable for Surli. He did not think a relationship would work because you talked about it, broke it into sections like sex, or finances, and tried to figure out what was good or bad about it. "It is or it isn't. You are either a fireman or a hydrant," he would say nonchalantly when I pushed him to open up. "You each play a role in putting a fire out but you can't be both."

I was not offended by Surli asking me to be his wife because his mother was dying. His mother kept him happy all of his life and then I came into it

rying. His mother kept him buoyant all of his life and then I came into it when his limbs were too heavy to stay afloat. I would take her place and do the same except I would not coddle him like she did. Surli knows I loath cooking, doing laundry and picking up behind him. He believes in us working side by side. If I have added pasta to a pot of boiling water, not expecting anything to go with it because I can eat it plain with just a sprinkle of parmesan cheese, Surli will get out a skillet and fry garlic, peppers, and onions in olive oil and add basil and oregano and tomato sauce to serve over it. There, that is what I love about him. He is a man that is not afraid to help out in the kitchen.

Before Surli's mother died, I sent her Hallmark cards with syrupy verses and bouquets of flowers full of chrysanthemums, oriental lilies, carnations and baby eucalyptus. I always signed the card, *Christina- a close friend of Surli*. I decided that she did not need to know that I was his fiancée. Surli was her only son. They were very close. Knowing that she would soon be replaced by another woman could only cause her more sorrow.

Maybe, even in her death she had power though. I am still Surli's fiancée. He says he will not marry me until I stop all of this pathetic crying I do.

I tell him a quote I remembered from a paper I wrote in college. "Washington Irving once said, 'There is sacredness in tears. It is not the sign of weakness but of power...'"

"Humph, yeah right. You are a weakling. There is no power in being such a gentle dove. I've never been with such a water faucet," he says when my dam bursts at his words.

"I can't help it," I tell him. "When I hurt I cannot hold it in. It is like gas and

belches. You men can never hold it in. At least my tears don't smell of rotten eggs."

"No, worse, they irritate the hell out of me, for I know no matter what, they are coming."

I laugh. I want Surli to laugh with me. I wanted him to say, "You are so funny, Chrissie." He does not. I wonder why I expected him to. He is not a humorous man. Even so, he should not have to wallow in my incessant melancholy.

My life reminds me of the sad song in Prince's movie *Purple Rain*. During college in my dorm I would watch that movie over and over just to hear that song. I would cry when I heard it. "How can you just leave me standing? Alone in a world that's so cold? Maybe I'm just too demanding, Maybe I'm just like my father too bold, Maybe you're just like my mother... She's never satisfied... Why do we scream at each other? This is what it sounds like when doves cry..."

Surli was not a happy child. I know this by the pictures he has on his bedroom chest in his apartment. He is not smiling in any of them, even the ones with his mother and father when they were still together or the one when he is eating a piece of birthday cake. In one picture he is dressed in his Catholic school uniform and his tie seems as if it is cutting off circulation in his then chubby neck. Whenever I glimpsed at those pictures I felt sad and felt sorry for the lost boy in them. I wondered what ghosts haunted him back then to cause him to be so solemn. Now that solemnity has drifted my way like the dense smoke from a factory, especially when Surli wants to talk about politics or the economy.

It is around our breakfast table that he rants the most. Over fresh squeezed juice and a two egg omelet with chives and a dusting of parmesan cheese, that he will angrily bang his fork on the side of the table and discuss the genocide in Darfur and what we Americans must do about it. "We're no longer ignorant about what's going on there," Surli says between bites of his omelet. "There's absolutely no excuse for our inaction."

My chest tightens and my breathing gets shallower. I want to bawl when I hear this. But I quickly reroute the conversation to stop my emotional tremors. "Surli you really should use eggbeaters to make your omelets so your cholesterol won't go through the roof," I tell him as I munch on dry toast. My appetite lost. He is quiet for a long while. I stir my lukewarm coffee with my finger.

"People have to die from something," he always retorts.

My lips again start to quiver. I try to bite the top one to feel pain, or draw blood to stop the tears. They fall. First one lone teardrop from one eye and then the other. I inadvertently wipe them and touch my mouth and taste their saltiness.

"Don't say that," I say this morning instead of letting it pass. "I don't want to ever hear you talk of dying. You will live a long life and so will I and we will be like that lady in, well I forget where, but she's 109 years old. Imagine that, baby," I said. "Us living to become centenarians." I wipe the snot from my nose.

"See, this I can't take. I've had enough already."

“So now that is where we are at. Are you threatening to leave me Surli because I cry? There could be a lot worse things I do. I could be hooked on drugs or be a closet stripper or a kleptomaniac. Don’t leave me just because I cry Surli. I will stop, I promise.”

I can hear Julia’s voice scolding me. “You are pathetic, Christina, in his presence. Why are you so afraid to stand toe to toe with him?”

I push Julia’s comments out of my mind. I cry for so many reasons that have nothing to do with Surli. How can I not when we live in such a cruel and insensitive world? How can I not have meltdowns when innocent babies are being killed in third-world countries and there are unforeseen tragedies, and frustrations, and disappointments that overwhelm my spirit and send messages to my brain that trigger the ebb and flow of my tears..?

"But is it the world or is it Surli?" I can hear Julia ask. I push her out of my mind again.

“Do you want to watch a movie,” I ask Surli later on that evening after realizing that he wasn’t really going to abandon ship.

“I guess,” he answered nonchalantly.

I carefully sift through our extensive DVD collection. It is a mixture of both of ours. Surli’s collection consists of movies like *Raging Bull*, *Bad Boys I and II*, and *Scarface* to name a few and mine consists of *Mr. Deeds*, *Blue*

and II, and *Scarface* to name a few and mine consists of *MO BETTER BLUES*, *Titanic*, *An Officer and A Gentleman*, and of course Prince's movie *Purple Rain*. I hesitate only a moment before choosing that one. I haven't seen it in years. I'll see if I can watch it without bawling this time when I hear him sing "When Doves Cry."

"He's very short," Surli says as he watches Prince prance across the stage.

"Yes, but so talented," I say as I snuggle closer to him. "I remember the Prince concert I went to while I was in college. I screamed so much that I lost my voice," I said, letting my laughter trail behind me to sheathe Surli's unresponsiveness to what I just said.

"She's very pretty," he says as he watches Prince's love interest Apollonia. "So exotic. All my buddies had a crush on her," he says munching on the unsalted popcorn that is plopped in my lap.

I try to hold it in. Insecurity is rearing its hideous head. I am not exotic. Nor have I ever wanted to be until now. Until I have heard Surli comment about someone else being that way. I am no longer enjoying the movie. I imagine Surli with his buddies, drunk and horny, salivating over Apollonia.

He is tapping his finger on the arm of the chair as he listens to Prince sing. I now wish I had chosen a different movie. I try to conceal the tears that escape from my eyes and land into the bowl of popcorn, seasoning it with my gloom.

"How can you just leave me standing? Alone in a world so cold? Maybe I'm

How can you just leave me standing? Alone in a world so cold? Maybe I'm just too demanding... Maybe I'm just like my father too bold... Maybe you're just like my mother... She's never satisfied... Why do we scream at each other? This is what it sounds like when doves cry..."

I get up to use the bathroom so that I can wipe the residue from my tears off of my face. Tonight I will be back in my apartment thanks to Julia. She had threatened to sever all ties with me if I gave it up after Surli asked me to marry him. "At least sub-let it," she said, "just in case."

In the bathroom, I wipe my face, slowly, tenderly, taking off the last bits of my streaked green eye shadow as I wait for the movie to end so that I can tell Surli it is over between us. I then take the compact with my green eye shadow, the only thing I had in his medicine cabinet and apply a bit more on my eyes, a bold stroke, not the whisper of a stroke Julia always tells me to put on so that I won't look so outlandish. Then I snap it shut and put it in my pants pocket.

"Did you add salt to this popcorn?" I hear Surli call out from the couch.

"Yes Surli," I tell him. "You have to die from something."





"Eternal Stones" N.M.B Copyright 2009

Eternal Stones

By Nicole M. Bouchard

It's strange how we reach down to collect the milestones in our lives, the rounded textures of them in the palms of our hands, the dirt from the road we've been traveling thinly upon them... We collect them all throughout our lives and if we are lucky, we have enough to build a monument at the end so that a symbol of our story lives on eternally. I think that is why the shoulders of the elderly sometimes stoop forward slightly. They are bearing the weight of all the milestones and memories they've picked up along the way.

One milestone of mine, smooth, serene and thick milky white stands apart from the others not only by appearance, but by its shared thread to someone's equal and opposite stone. I collected mine near a beginning in my life and he collected his stone near an end. My first kiss was his last. I often clasp the memory in my hand and remember a realm unsettled and deceived by a war, a love deterred by time, and a sunset that delivered a last breath...

In the seven hundredth and forty-first fortnight since the Vendolian proclamation, time was being stolen in tiny increments from the once great city of Caimeron. Upon the Vendolian king's death, his son and sole successor to the throne, had made amenable promises of friendship to the sister cities ringing Vendolian borders. Since the commencement of his reign, King Freidinfyre broke down doors, walls, and fortresses and promises to his neighboring brethren. Twenty-eight years before, during

his father's rule, there had been a proclamation of peace providing Caimeron with the sworn protection of Vendolian forces after the battle with the city and its allies was lost, securing Caimeron's victory.

Now the strongest walls in existence were being thundered down upon by a force they had once defeated. Panic stricken citizens in the city knew that not only had they the Vendolians to fear, but worse, the division within the city walls. Half-breeds came as a result of proximity during the twenty-eight years of peace between Vendolia and Caimeron. Friends, families and lovers were suddenly forced to choose allegiances and once they were divided, they were as good as strangers to one another. My eldest sister, Melinda, was in love with one of them.

I was eight the year Gordonian stopped coming to our suppers. I missed the warm sound of his laugh and the light-hearted games he used to play with me. He could make shapes of animals with the smoke drifting from the incense on the floor and they put on a show for me. There are things that now I can look back on and see as insignificant, yet they were important to me then and the fact that he, being older, acknowledged their importance, lingers in my heart still.

I had a simple, smooth fallen branch of wood that I deemed a divination stick. I and a girl my age whose family shared a plot of land with mine sat for hours until sunset taking turns holding the stick and trying to read each other's thoughts through its assigned power. We smeared berries down its length to give it a translucent, glossy scarlet finish. On the way home in my excitement over the stick's supposed magic, I tripped over a cobblestone in the street, sending my newfound treasure splintering to the ground. I tried to collect the pieces but some mischievous younger boys kicked them away into the dirt. I spent the rest of the evening brooding with my arms positioned in the space of my open window. My solemn expression changed to one of curiosity when I saw Gordonian approaching the front door. He knocked quietly. I ran down to open the door and greet him, yet when I got there, I saw that he had left. In place of where he was standing was a new branch, somehow melded artfully with pieces of the original, bound together with red ribbon. It was these simple kindnesses wanting no

bound together with red ribbon. It was these simple kindnesses wanting no acknowledgment that defined him in my mind.

When he voiced his decision to aid the military arm of the Vendolian army, my sister was devastated. My father and brothers forced him away from our table and home with coarse words that scraped along the walls and the ceiling, causing my sister and I to writhe inwardly. She shook her head as though she hadn't heard him. Yet somehow, coldly, without pause or wise concern, he'd convinced himself that the only future he saw them together in was a Vendolian one. It was in his blood just as our history was in ours. I asked my sister how she could weep for him, her eyes marred and heavy with grief. Her skin and hair still held the emanating glow that came of loving him, though he was gone, causing her great pain.

"Don't you see?" she asked me, shaking me roughly by the shoulders. "I would gladly die by his hands, wanting only on my last breath, for him to know the depth of the love I feel for him."

In that moment I feared love and its bloody tight ties around its victims that never loosened; not even when the love was gone. We were at war, and my sister who I'd thought naïve then and blinded by the ardent fever of her heart, was incapable of knowing it. With sadistic wiles of temptation aimed at a vulnerable soul, the enemy was already consuming our family from the inside out.

When the Vendolians came to our shores feeding us their gods, their military advancements, their politics... we weren't asked to sample the meal. It was being force-fed into our society that had thrived alone for a thousand years. Doors once left ajar were closed to one another and many stands in the marketplace folded and tucked themselves away out of fear, seeing their usual silky stream of customers torn into separate threads of hate. My father said that we had to define ourselves now or be lost forever. I knew I was a daughter of Caimeron and that no Vendolian amount of fire and spite could tell me otherwise. Our roots were ancient. My mother

knelt over the turquoise stones embedded in the floor of our home and prayed. She was a healer and she knew that the city was sick and weak from within. There was little to do but resist and wait for the inevitable.

King Freidinfyre had built a tower located just between Vendolia and Caimeron. It directly cut off sea access to the city for what few allies we had remaining. Strategically, move by move, the Vendolians tightened their hands around our throat. Our men had been stationed at the outer wall fighting off the impending imposing troops. Locked inside our homes, we worked what spells our shaking hands could remember by the dwindling candlelight. The herbs we threw cut through the flames turning them the aquamarine shade the deities had worn when they had first raised the city from the sea. My sister sat by us, her hands purple from pressing the petals of the flowers and herbs between her delicate long fingers. I saw her lips mouthing a soft, sweet spell for Gordonian as she silently wept and bit her lip intermittently until my mother caught sight of the incantation and slapped her. We were all silent then, sitting in a circle, appraising the secret thoughts apparent on one another's faces.

The first resounding crack of what seemed to be the thunder, shattered the quiet of the city. We all closed our eyes and reached for each other's hands. Our enemy had made it over the wall. Without warning or ceremony, the building next to ours collapsed in flames. People were running out into the streets to either fight or retreat, knowing they had a better chance of survival running than they did hiding in the solid buildings taking the brunt of the Vendolian fire carried on the wind. Our fingers clasped one another's hard for what we knew could be the last time. My father cautiously led the way to the street. Once beyond the doorway, my sister dashed off in a mad fever, searching for Gordonian amongst the infiltrating ranks. I prayed that they might let her live if she surrendered.

In painful defiance of our parent's screams for us, I ran as quickly as I could after her into the crowd. Through the shoving, fighting throng of citizens and soldiers, I lost sight of my sister. Clinging to the outer edge of one of the fortresses still standing I saw him through a cloud of dirt rising un

the tormented sun sinking, I saw him through a cloud of dirt rising up from the road. Though a shadow had fallen upon the city, the sun glared mercilessly down upon us. He caught sight of me standing there in my white cotton nightdress. I wondered what death might feel like when the Vendolian soldier's gaze lit upon me. I stood fearless and still staring through the space between us. His weapon was raised as he approached, my reflection in the silver blade of his sword.

Only now with mere steps between us could I recognize him. I didn't call his name. At the same moment, his face filled with a kind of recognition heavy with regret. His mouth opened up a bit, his eyes grew less fierce and neither one of us saw the Caimeron soldier come up from behind to run him through with his sword.

Aghast as he fell to his knees, I ran to him. "Gor..don..ian..." I stammered through my tears. His eyes whispered, 'What have I done...' There was no blame, no differences between us at that moment. There was only a mutual human understanding. He looked up into my face framed by the sun and I realized that he wanted to see Melinda in my dark eyes, tan skin, and thick hair. "Kiss me..." he whispered. Obediently, sympathetically, I did so. I wanted his last memory to be of my sister's love. I understood then what she meant and I no longer feared love as much as I feared the absence of it. The sun over us was setting and he drew his last breath as his eyes fluttered closed.

The sun also set on Caimeron that day. Though my family and I survived in a literal sense, a part of us died with him on the same dirt road. We were forced to adopt the Vendolian ways. The battle, my first kiss, both beginnings and endings, all milestones of a significant weight added to my tiny shoulders that will forever remain a part of my story.

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