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### **THE WALLS OF PRAGUE**

By: Alana Cash

Naomi spent most of the day in the Kafka Gallery studying the mournful loneliness of the dark charcoal drawings of tilting buildings. When she went outside into the overcast afternoon, she considered going upstairs to the Café Milena to find an American, someone from Columbus, Ohio or San Antonio, Texas who would ask, "How're you doing?" in English.

Instead, she began walking across Staromestske Namesti, the huge, open square in Old Town, past the vendors selling stacking dolls, puppets, little crystal animals for the tourists. The square always entertained her with its magical qualities the enormous church spires one of them housing a clock that

magical squares, the enormous church spires, one of them housing a clock that commemorated the hour with a parade of life-size figures circling out in front of it, another that looked like a castle at Disneyland. She caressed puppets and crystal as she passed the vendor stalls and on the far side of the square turned down Parizka Uliza toward the Jewish Quarter.

As she passed a long, parchment-colored apartment building – its pillars carved in the shape of strong, naked men, their heads bent forward to hold the weight of a small balcony on the backs of their necks – she remembered being mesmerized by Hrabal's baritone voice as he explained every detail of how the building was constructed and what suffering had gone into it.

She leaned her back against the wall, absorbing it for a moment, before moving on to stand across the street from Hotel Rott. It was once the house of an iron worker and the exterior was decorated by the 19 C. painter, Mikulas Ales.

Hrabal had said, "How can artist expect to make living in Prague, when whole city is littered with beauty?"

Hrabal's gray eyes.

She lived in Old Town in a pension that had once been headquarters for KGB interrogation. Her room was in the basement, and the door was thick, solid iron. There wasn't enough light from the small barred window in the far wall for her to naint and no room to move around at all. So each day after a

was not her to paint and no room to move around at all. So each day after a double latté, she took the tram across the river to Smichov. And to Hrabal. He lived in the same building the Einstein's had once lived in, and for luck, she always rubbed the head of the Einstein bust on the front wall of the building as she entered.

Today she was alone with a decision.

She turned around and went inside the Old New Synagogue. It was just one small room lined all the way around with wooden chairs. Hrabal had brought her to the synagogue and touched her arm as he told her the story of Rabbi Loew and the golem. She touched her arm in the spot where he had put his hand lightly. He knew everything about his beloved Prague, and he was the reason she had come there. The reason she had studied painting there for over a year, learning his language literally and figuratively. He touched her arm there.

An artist in New York introduced her to Hrabal's artwork, so beautiful it made you cry. As a teacher he was extraordinary. Working with him, her work had improved. Her ability to feel a painting long before she prepared a canvas. Her composition, style, use of color, all were vastly richer. She had confidence and enough work completed to have her own show.

"Just say the word," Jeremy e-mailed her. Just say the word and she'd have her own show at the Aardvark Gallery in Trieca.

She sat down on the velvet upholstered seat of one of the chairs in the synagogue, and closing her eyes, ran her right hand over the rough plastered surface of the synagogue wall. Maybe she should go back to New York. She could take Manion Edelstein's class in sculpting. Voices interrupted her meditation on choices, and she opened her eyes as some Asian tourists entered the building.

She went outside, and when she passed a window in the wall surrounding the cemetery behind the synagogue, she stopped to look through it. This Jewish cemetery troubled her. The tombstones were jammed together so tightly, wedged on top of each other, and no room for walking or placing flowers or burying anyone else. Someone nearby her took a picture through a different window in the wall.

She moved on feeling anxious.

Even on Monday afternoon, the city was quiet. There was never much traffic in Prague at any hour, at least not compared with New York. And, with the exception of tourists in certain areas, people were never loud on the street. There was no noise of televisions or radios, no stores blaring out the newest CD. Sometimes it was disturbing, such quiet.

She turned onto Karlov Most, the Charles Bridge, stopping near a beggar with one leg. He was dirty, his gray hair matted, and at his foot there was a

small box with a few coins in it. In Czech, he was telling a fable about the castle. She smiled, thinking that tourists probably thought he was crazy and mumbling to himself.

The late afternoon sky was a sulfurous yellow and the river a gloomy gray color. She leaned her chest against the concrete roughness of the bridge, and watched a duck paddling slowly down stream. Looking at the river, she thought of jumping in it. Her desire wasn't to drown herself, but to float away with the duck, downstream to someplace without decisions.

Down the river on the left was Hradcany, the compound of castles and churches that once housed the Holy Roman Empire. She was with Hrabal there last night in the fog. He held her hand, which surprised her and didn't surprise her. His massive hand held her smaller hand.

When he stopped walking, he said in English, "There is castle legend about beautiful girl name Aneska and Emperor Rudolph. She was daughter of one his finance peoples which was how he discover her. Rudolph is impotent already, so he cannot have her, but he is collector of exotic and bizarre. He has nails from Ark of Covenant, finger bone from Saint Nicholas, and from Emperor Charles he inherit one breast of Mary Magdalene."

"Stop it," Naomi said, thinking he was mocking her with a lie.

"No. Is true. Is serious. We have strong religion history in Prague," he said and continued. "This girl is *camerknechte*, property of the emperor, so

Rudolph own her entirely without asking. And his invitation for her visit him in castle is actually demand. She not like way that he smell and no sits near him. This stimulate him in perverse way and girl knows.”

Naomi took a deep breath of Hrabal’s smell of body odor and turpentine.

“Aneska tell Rudolph that she love, David, goldsmith’s apprentice. This is large mistake. To convince the emperor that David deserve her love, she tell Rudolph that David know alchemy, secret for turning lead into gold. Rudolph has look for this secret, everyone knows, and he insist that Aneska bring David to castle following afternoon, and she does. When David cannot make lead into gold after many tryings, Rudolph order that David be sealed up alive in the castle walls. This is usual punishment for alchemist who fail. Aneska is forced to watch David put into a small alcove that is close up with bricks. The emperor goes to bed, leaves Aneska with her body press against the wall and calling David’s name. She stays by wall without eating and died shortly. Her ghost haunts castle.”

“What did her father do?” Naomi asked him.

“He stop making loans to the Emperor, which I think was seed for expulsion.”

He was happy last night. In general, he didn’t make a point of being the tortured artist, he was too gregarious and passionate for that, but his woman of

five years had left him a few months ago. Two weeks afterward, she had married his best friend. That source of anger was aroused at any mention or reminder of *that pathetic sculptor and his new model*.

When Hrabal finished his story, he turned to look at her very directly. She was caught by the expression on his face. She was about to say something when he quickly took her long hair in his fist and tilted her head back. He kissed her neck and then her mouth. If he had let go of her, she would have fallen over. It was quick and unexpected and changed everything between them.

Now she was full of questions. What was she to do? What happens to a woman who becomes the lover of her painting teacher in a foreign country, his country, she wondered. How long did she want to live in Prague? What effect would a love affair have on her artwork? Would he teach more or less? Would she learn more or less?

What is love?

She watched the duck swimming down the river. So far away. So tiny. Yet leaving such a long, gentle wake.

Next to her, the old beggar man bent forward to count his money. He was wearing a pointed woolen cap and someone walked past him and brushed it off his head. Still bent over, the old man turned to watch the offender walk away. It was a sad moment, and she stepped over, took hold of the hat, and

offered it to him. He looked at her.

He smiled with yellow teeth and said in Czech, "Thank you".

They looked at each other for a few seconds. Feeling human together. In those seconds, life was the way it was supposed to be.

"I have many stories," the old man said to her in Czech.

She nodded.

"But it is better to live a story than to tell one," he said quietly.

"Yes," she said.

### **HOUSE OF REFLECTION**

By: Nicole M. Bouchard

A house with all its windows, doors, corners and crevices is a process of building a life. We lay the foundation, we raise walls to insulate ourselves, we make doors to constantly change our surroundings and we insert windows to present a finished face of ourselves and observe while we keep the interiors on the inside.

Walter Harsgood was methodical in every area of his life, all his life. Even in his childhood, he had planned nearly every detail of his existence. He was already performing well in school, so that would lead him on to secondary school, no time to waste there, then onto college and finally graduate school where he would study to become a lawyer like his father. He would marry at thirty, living in an elegant townhouse until he could afford to build a home of his own. Children would come, he might retire early and pursue his interest in botany, and then, one day in his old age drinking brandy alongside his wife on their wrap-around porch, he would die rather thoughtfully...without dramatic ceremony.



His plan, it seemed, was a steadfast one, being fulfilled nearly to the letter and year of its proclamation. At thirty-two, Walter and his pretty, young wife Anne, were ready to commence the building on their own home. Crown moldings, raised paneling, and stained glass windows were hand chosen by the couple for their prominent Victorian on Elder St. which would showcase Walter's hard-earned wealth.

Yet even the most carefully executed plan can go astray, and the house did- from the first piece to the last.

Tentatively, with the most acute perception, Walter had selected the materials. They were of fine craftsmanship and they were placed by fine builders upon a delightful patch of land framed by seemingly miraculous rosebushes with deep, dark, dusky red blossoms that had bloomed quite suddenly mid-winter. Antiques from England made their way across the ocean. Two years went by quickly and by the second December, the towering house set upon a snowy backdrop amidst crystal dotted blood-red roses was ready, warm and glowing for the night of its debut. The guest list was a prominent one. Two senators, the Governor, and their wives, family from both sides including elite lawyers and doctors from the surrounding community. Even Walter's ailing great-grandmother summoned her strength for the trip.

Boughs of holly adorned the front double glass doors as everyone was ushered in out of the cold. Anne looked lovely in a champagne evening gown as she welcomed the guests. Walter stood further in near the drawing room with brandy for the men. Two handsome cousins held Walter's great-grandmother's arms as she ascended the steps unsteadily like fine china rattled in its cupboard during a thunderstorm. Her thin black gloved fingers reached out and crushed a red berry of the holly between them.

"Poison..." she muttered, letting the shell of the berry fall to be crushed under her foot coming in the door. A red stain was smeared across the threshold.

"Georgette," Anne beckoned both sweetly and dismissively. The cousins hid their smirks as they ushered the old woman toward Anne's extended arms. Guests spilled past the drawing room into the main parlor and took positions in polite, nearly choreographed movements upon both new and antique furniture.

Walter encouraged his wife to give a guided tour of the house to the women present. Happy to oblige her husband, Anne gathered the small crowd and led them to the second stairway hidden by a door in the kitchen so that the men could have the run of the rest of the house. Her light silk-slipped feet ascended the dark stairway gracefully with her fingers gliding along the freshly painted wall searching out the light fixture. Eager female voices twittered up the stairway after her. The moment her hand felt the switch, she flipped it upward, glad for the light, until it flickered out with a blue spark and the sound of a gun shot rang through the walls. Anne hushed the screams of the cowering women and told them to be still and quiet in the nearly pitch black stairway. Heavy footsteps thundered above them and she knew that someone was coming down from the third floor on the main stairway.

"Anne! What in God's name are you doing?! Anne!" she heard her mother whisper fiercely through the darkness.

Without answering, Anne crept up the stairs further, wondering if she might catch the attacker off-guard from behind when the second shot was fired. Her legs were pulled from under her by her mother who pressed her to the stairwell with her own body covering her daughter's in case the door to the second stairway should swing open revealing them. A tumbling sound like that of a listless body came from the main stairs leading from the second floor to the first floor. All the women gasped, a few cried out a little but muffled the sound into their hands.

Although it was three days after the night when Walter found the women

huddled in the stairwell, Anne couldn't shake the image she saw once out on the second floor landing in front of the stained glass coat-of-arms looking down the main stairway. She had never seen a dead body and had certainly never been so close to a murder. Despite the fact that professional cleaners came after the evidence was collected, Walter could not seem to scrub out the blood embedded in the newly made stained glass window where Anne had stood looking down that night. He scraped the dried blood with the edge of his fingernail, lamenting how this awful turn of events had become the house-warming of his new home.

His great-grandmother phoned in an agitated state. "Were I to tell you to leave that house immediately, would you?!"

Anne took up the phone after Walter waved her off, shaking his head. Anne repeated over and over again in cool tones that what had happened was a one time tragedy of a desperate man and that man had not only been apprehended, but he had taken his own life in jail. Yet Georgette pressed on with her misgivings. Exasperated, Anne ended the conversation.

Walter broke the window with a chair and had it replaced. A few weeks passed and Anne discovered that she had become with child. She was sworn to bed rest by the family physician. Having become partner at his firm, her husband kept long hours, yet she hardly minded the extra time to herself. Turning her head into the pillow, she nestled more deeply into her dreams. They began lightly with memories of a young man, another suitor who had fought for her favor. But the clouds over their picnic darkened and the sunlight faded. Loud, violent splintering sounds seemed to be coming from the bleeding lightning struck trees themselves. The forest was closing in on them, falling, breaking and crashing down until a powerful soaring branch sailed into her stomach, knocking her into the water. She screamed and struggled till it all turned black.

Her husband was surprised to come home and find that Anne had not turned on any of the lights. The house was eerily silent when his key

opened the door. Instinctively, he switched on the downstairs lights chiding himself for having felt foolishly anxious. Walter surmised that Anne was asleep and he stepped lightly up the main stairs so as not to wake her. A certain heaviness in his chest made him stop at the second floor landing in front of the newly replaced window. He gazed at it momentarily, glad that they'd made the decision to get rid of the old one. A flicker of red caused him to quickly look twice. The same bloodstains were somehow still there, even on the new window. Fear choked his throat and he ran up the stairs to Anne, dropping his briefcase of papers as he went. The door was wide open and the light was now on though it had not been before.

"Anne..." he called softly through trembling lips before stepping inside their room.

The entire ornate four poster bed had collapsed in on itself. Dangerous shards of burnt wood looking as though they'd been struck with blinding white lightning lay all over the sheets. He could hardly see the top of her pale head. Sickened and terrified, he dove into the wreckage to retrieve her delicate bruised body. She hung limply in his arms while he screamed.

Though the doctor was able to save her, they'd lost the child. The room was cleared of their things but deep scratched grooves in the wood remained on the floor. Walter again wanted to do away with any remaining signs of the incident, so he called in a carpenter to rip up the floor of their former bedroom and replace it. Not entirely able to cope with the incident, Anne ignored Walter's demands to avoid the room. She brought a rocking chair in when he was not at home and sat pondering what she had lost, watching the scratch lines in the new floor slowly reappear day by day.

In the weeks that followed, glasses broke in carefully padded cabinets, new clothes appeared torn, lights blasted into pieces leaving them in total darkness, and finally, Walter's study caught fire. As frantic and obsessed as Walter was with wiping up all of the messes, fragments would simply reappear in the same or new places. Though his sanity was fraying at the

edges like a garment being unwoven stitch by stitch with someone pulling the thread, the final straw was when Anne was found on the grounds near the blood-red rosebushes with stained glass all around her as though she'd been thrown through the window. Her expression, they say, hinted that she was as shattered within as she was without. Walter set the house aflame to watch it burn. Something inside the house exploded and he was crushed by debris even though he stood a good distance away. After everything down to the foundation was taken away and there was nothing but re-seeded dirt, a dark spot grew in the middle of the grass where the house once stood.

Elderly people in the community that remember the house built in the 1930's like me to believe that the dark spot in the grass and the blood-red roses only disappeared when I chose to build here. And I would be far more afraid to live in this place if I didn't know the rest of the story. Two people living together can only hide so much from one another until it starts to show and that house showed everything.

When the ninth glass in her butler's pantry broke, Anne slammed her fists down upon the counter and searched her mind for all of the details of the "incidents" that had occurred up to that point. Nothing of consequence came to her and she knelt defeated on the floor to brush up the broken glass. Walter pushed past her with the broom.

"Leave it," she said, tired of trying to hide whatever it was that kept resurfacing.

"No, no, they're my drinking glasses... I'll clean this up. Just go sit and relax, my dear..." He struggled to say it calmly, but there was a wild franticness in his eyes.

They were his glasses. Only his. His torn clothes, his bed that he chose specifically, his family's coat-of-arms in the stained glass window... Though so often she thought that as his wife they shared everything, there was a

sickly shame and responsibility she could see only in his face every time something happened in the house.

The man who had been arrested that previous December for the murder of one of Walter's associates the night of the party had reportedly hung himself in jail. Yet when Anne probed harder, she discovered that the murderer was also one of Walter's associates...one that he had been in direct competition with to make partner. The victim, when hauled away by authorities was wearing her husband's coat and since he had come down from the third floor, he had to have been in Walter's study. When questioned about the coat, Walter had said simply that he wrapped the victim in it when he found him on the stairs. But to slip it underneath the body, the body would have to have been moved and by having seen the bloodstains, it was clear to Anne that he had not been. She knew now that the murderer must have followed the victim up the stairs to the study thinking he was Walter and shot him twice.

"Would you rather have had it be me who was murdered, Anne?" He wasn't incredibly shocked when his wife confronted him.

"What did you do to deserve all this, Walter? Why won't the stains of it wash away?"

He raked nervous hands through his russet hair. "Plans, Anne, plans... I make them and expect them to be followed. Joe was killed in jail because I didn't want him saying how I blackmailed him out of being partner. That's why he shot Kevin who was wearing my coat... he wanted me dead. And just as I was meant to be partner, you were meant to be my wife. Brian McGitty wouldn't let you go. We were climbing trees together and I let him go. He fell and broke his neck, we got married. You have to understand, Anne, all I do, I do for us...our life...this house..."

"This house?!" she screamed. "It's cursed with you! With everything

you've ever done! I...I won't stay another minute!"

Anne turned to leave and Walter grabbed her fiercely by the arm. "No, you don't understand. I planned to live out our lives together...you can't leave. It wasn't meant to be this way..." His grip tightened as she tried to wrench herself free and run from him.

Though she was thrown to her death, there are those of us who like to think Anne had her revenge. There was nothing to explain the explosion that killed Walter, except that a piece of the debris that impaled him was a wood bar from her rocking chair.

And that's why I feel comfortable living on these grounds...because I haven't committed any unjust crimes and because I place flowers on Anne's grave each Sunday. I'm certain that she's crossed over by now, but sometimes, late at night, I hear quiet rocking in the room above mine in my freshly built home and I'm soothed by the gentle presence of my great-great aunt who flows in my blood.

### **COLD CALL**

By: Linda Emma

The telephone's ring resonated over belly laughs emanating from the tumbling folds of a teepee camped at the threshold of the family room.

"Hello," Andrea answered while filling her friend's teacup. Her chestnut hair fell into dark lashes and she brushed it back. She stepped to the refrigerator while Laurie got up and rescued their three-year-olds from the wrinkles of the tent.

"OK my little natives, time to wash up for lunch," Laurie said lifting first Tyler then Garrett with a flourish. "Wash your hands and then come sit down at the counter."

Andrea spoke into the phone. With her free hand, she poured milk into two Thomas the Tank Engine cups.

"No. The computer keyboard works for AT & T." Andrea said. "No trouble."

NO, I'M SORRY MY HUSBAND WORKS FOR AT & T, ANDREA SAID. NO TROUBLE, she concluded, hanging up the telephone.

Laurie cut crusts off bread, sliced an apple and split it between two plates.

"Since when does Jerry work for AT & T?" she asked.

"Boys, come sit down," Andrea called.

She turned to Laurie, a sheepish look in her big brown eyes.

"Oh, I know. It's just easier," she answered.

"What?" Laurie asked, in confusion.

"Whatever they're selling. I either tell them I already have it -new windows, siding- or, that my husband works for the other guys -lawn service, furniture company, phone company. Whatever."

"It's an annoying sales call. Just hang up," Laurie advised.

Laurie was incredulous. A tall, striking blonde, Laurie oozed confidence. Andrea was nothing like her. A tiny dark speck of a woman, Andrea was sweet and petite. At least that's what they'd dubbed her in her high school year book years ago. And hopelessly indecisive, she knew. She saw both sides to everything. It would have been the foundation for a grand career as a mediator if she could ever muster with the wherewithal to render a final decision at some point.

"I can't do that," said Andrea with a wrinkled nose. "It's so rude."

"You're kidding," said Laurie, in utter shock. "They're the rude ones. Those calls are a pain in the ass. I hang up. In fact, I relish in it. Click," she added with a twist of her wrist, hanging up an imaginary telephone.

"I just can't."

"So you lie, instead."

"It's not a lie," said Andrea without conviction. "OK, it's a little white lie."

The boys' thunderous arrival upon kitchen stools saved Andrea from her further lame defense.

Andrea knew it would be easier to just hang up. Jerry had told her that a hundred times, but each time she heard that hesitant pause at the other end of the line, when she still owned that split second in which she could anonymously sever the call, something stopped her. The indecision cost her countless conversations over the years with oftentimes rude sales people at the other end, yet still she waited and politely answered their questions, declined their offers and yes, lied.



Andrea, who'd just finished reading through *Goodnight Moon*, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, tucked Tyler in bed and allowed him his third trip to the bathroom when she finally descended the stairs to clean up the few plates from dinner. With Jerry out of town, the house was chapel still and eerie. As much as she loved the big old house, she never felt at home alone in its cavernous rooms when the winter winds shook its windows and rattled the shutters. If Jerry were home, there'd be a blazing fire, scented candles, maybe a game of Scrabble.

Passing from the kitchen, Andrea was startled by a light through the window.

Just her neighbor, returning home.

Andrea pulled her sweater more tightly around her shoulders.

The phone rang.

*Early*, she thought. Jerry usually waited until he knew Andrea was propped in bed with her latest romance novel or Cosmo issue.

"Hello," she answered.

"No, thank you. No, my husband works for an investment firm. Ahh - Fidelity."

It was the first one that popped into her head.

"Oh, really? Ummm. No, not Boston. Right, he works in that office."

The further the conversation evolved, the more Laurie's advice to "just hang up" came blaring in Andrea's ears.

On the other end of the connection was 24-year-old Michael Whelan. He'd graduated with a degree in Finance from Babson but had yet to land the dream job. Making cold calls in after supper hours as a broker wannabe wasn't his plan but it was worth a shot. Or was it? What did Andrea think? Since her husband did it for a living, she'd know better than anyone how long it took to "make it" and whether it was worth it. Had he made the right choice? How much time should he give it before he threw in the towel?

Andrea knew she needed to find a way to fess up or hang up but Michael was a pleasant voice in an empty house and it seemed anonymous and harmless. He was full of exuberance and optimism that tweaked at a sense of nostalgia in Andrea. His sales pitch abandoned, he began joking about the hovel he lived in to avoid moving back home and the roommate whose idea of dining was a stack of TV dinners in front of ESPN. Enthralled with both his humor and ease, Andrea hadn't realized how long she'd been on the phone until Jerry's call beeped her into reality and she severed the connection.

"Hello," she answered with a catch in her voice.

"On another call?" Jerry asked.

"Umm. Yeah."

"Your dad?" asked Jerry. He knew Andrea's father always called when Jerry was out of town. It was Mr. Vitale playing overprotective father to his baby daughter and Jerry was appreciative of it.

"Yeah— No, I mean— " *What was she doing?* "No, it was just a sales call," she said, still stumbling over her words a bit.

"Just hang up," Jerry said.

Andrea ignored the comment. "How was your flight?"

Days passed and Andrea dropped the peculiar telephone conversation to the back of her brain. It wasn't until she bumped into Laurie while ducking from the host of a holiday party with a penchant for sharing his latest sales conquest, that her own story came back to her. Maybe it was the collision of mood and wine, but Andrea shared with Laurie what she still considered her mild stupidity. Feigning indifference, she related her telephone episode as a silly anecdote that only proved Laurie correct on her affront to sales calls. The moral of the story, Andrea was trying to allude, was that next time she would indeed hang up.

Laurie missed the moral —and the point.

She was aghast, reacting to the story like an angry parent.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"What?"

Andrea regretted opening her mouth.

"It's no big deal. Next time I'll hang up."

"No big deal?"

Laurie's voice was raised and Andrea sshhed her. And in that split second reaction, she realized that she hadn't told Jerry either.

*Why?* she wondered.

Laurie lowered her voice but continued chastising her friend. Laurie asked what else, besides confirmation of her name, phone number and address had she given the caller. She spun horrific scenarios, all of which had Andrea raped and dead at their conclusion. Instead of allaying her fears about Andrea's misplaced lie, Laurie had thrown fuel to the fire of Andrea's own burgeoning imagination. She was officially spooked and silently wished that Jerry could cancel his next business trip. She had been gullible —Laurie was right and

Andrea was shaken. She did, however maintain enough of her wits in her conversation with Laurie to elicit from her a promise not to repeat to anyone her now less than funny story. *She had been stupid*, she thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

The peal of the phone broke Andrea's concentration and she jerked her hand, smearing paint from the line of trim.

"Damn," muttered Andrea.

Grabbing a damp rag and remedying the color confusion on the wall, she glanced at her watch. It was already 2. Tyler would be up any minute. She pulled the latex gloves off and reached for the portable.

Jerry had been traveling out of town so frequently lately that Andrea had formulated a list of work that she could accomplish on each of his trips. If she wasn't working outside, then the least she could do was work inside, she'd told him when he'd discovered the dining room chairs reupholstered upon his return from one business venture. This week's project was painting the family room. Tyler had been such a great "help" yesterday that she'd had to work late into the evening last night to rectify his handiwork. Today, she'd been wiser, waiting until nap time to tackle the last of it.

"Hello," she said, still mildly irritated at the smudge.

"Mrs. Miller?," the voice intoned.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Miller. It's Michael. I'm sorry to call you. I know this is a little weird."

Andrea felt a chill across her skin.

"Michael?" *It had been more than a week now. Could it be a different Michael?*

"I just --" he broke off. "OK, it's really weird. But I just landed my first account and I --

I don't know why but I wanted to tell someone and-- OK, this was realllly a stupid idea," he stammered.

"OK, so any way, I called, I'm dumb," he continued. "I'm not some crazy stalker guy. I just-- Anyway, I've got my first account. And well, that's it."

"Umm," Andrea hesitated.

"It's OK," Michael said. "You don't have to say anything."

"No, Michael it's alright. Congratulations," said Andrea. "It's just I'm surprised to hear from you."

"Ya think?" Michael said.

"It's a little—," Andrea started.

"Weird, I know. A lot. I already said that," said Michael.

This time it was Tyler's call through the baby monitor that knocked her from the ease of conversation with this genial stranger. *How long this time*, she thought to herself. She'd exited the call abruptly but pleasantly enough to realize that she'd said nothing to dissuade him from calling a third time.

Andrea sat at the small table, rolling the cloth napkin between her fingers. She sipped her glass of water, glanced at her watch. Early and fidgeting, she put her fingers to her mouth and then jerked them away. She hadn't bitten her nails since college.

*This is ridiculous. What the hell am I doing here?*

More than a year had passed. Tulips were pushing through intermittent patches of snow still spotting the Public Gardens. What had transpired to lead Andrea to this particular juncture, at this café on this crystal spring afternoon, still seemed disjointed and unreal. *But what was the harm?* Andrea thought.

*How many times had she told herself that over the last months?*

Michael and she had never met. She'd found his picture on Facebook, but didn't have a page of her own and had refused to send her own picture online. She had had steadfastly refused him that one intimacy. With other requests she had not been so resistant. The telephone calls had morphed to email correspondence and instant messages and what had started for her as an occasional perusal for his email address had become a daily obsession. It was a ludicrous proposition and Andrea knew it to her core. And yet, she began to count on Michael's friendship in the same way she always had with Laurie. And as off putting as the secrecy of it was, she felt powerless to sever the connection. Today's lunch time rendezvous, however, was the goodbye they'd both anticipated from the beginning. There would be contact still, but Andrea knew that this goodbye was a more natural transition than anything else about their relationship. Michael had finally landed his dream job. The only client he had ever managed to pull in with his cold calls had taken to Michael's affable and competent personality. The job offer was quick, well-paying and far —the London office- but Michael said yes without hesitation.

The hostess rounded the corner, a menu in the hand she gestured toward Andrea's table. Andrea looked into Michael's smiling eyes.

*This is fine*, she thought.

Andrea stood up, reached for Michael's extended hand and pulled him in for a gentle hug. As she pulled away and Michael reached to pull her chair out for her, Andrea felt a tension lift from her shoulders, and all apprehension drain from they day.

Andrea was seated by the fire, a glass of wine in her hand. She picked letters from the Scrabble tray and turned the board to position it more closely.

The phone rang.

She reached to the end table.

"Hello," she answered.

"Umm. Uh huh. Welllll –" she hesitated. "Actually my sister is a real estate agent," Andrea answered smiling.

Beer in hand, Jerry came into the living room as she was hanging up.

"Who was that?" asked Jerry.

"No one -just one of those annoying cold calls."

## **REACHING OUT TO YOU**

By: Nicole M. Bouchard

If I hadn't reached out for your hand, I think we might have survived the fall. But I did and we didn't.

It seems like everything and nothing has passed since that moment.

Him with his deep purple scar above his left eye, an over-inked stamp for safe passage through the fair grounds of life. No amount of pastel Jordan almonds or little girls in fair-hued dresses could have kept him away on our wedding day.

I wish you could hear me. A storm is stumbling in after a night of too much drinking and the clouds are wringing the alcohol out. It's quiet in my house. The kind of quiet that makes you stir crazy and wish for all kinds of sounds...exotic birds from the Amazon, monkeys at the zoo, even a car crash to stem the silence.

I don't want to write sad stories anymore. As if it's ever a choice when the words come to you... But if I had a choice, I'd say that I want to write about triumph and saying what we mean. Then I'd catch up to you, match your small pace and ask you what you thought about this new choice of mine. But that would be like bleeding onto red velvet. You wouldn't be able to see the pain it would cause me just speaking to you in a familiar sort of way.

Now I find it strange how the word *liar* is innocently contained in *familiar*. The more familiar we are with one another, the more we lie to each other. We write a bible of secrets and pray them to someone else, someone removed from it all as though they'd understand. But it's only the people who were actually there, Vivian, there in the everyday mess of it with mud in our hair and holes blasted through our hearts, who really know what happened.

It was snowing when we met. It was a glassy fragile ice world with a mauve lit sky reflecting the light in our hearts. You were twenty and had spent two decades filling the earth with the magic that had left just before the Age of Reason. You were barely noticed as only one of eight children, most of them strong athletic boys. I was a shy, tender twenty-four, returning home after studying abroad in Japan. I pulled you back to the sidewalk from the street as a fish truck lost its bearings on the ice and slid past us.

In the very first blushes of spring by the river Seine, you told me about the dark figure that had once tempted your affections and now haunted your dreams. But cold nightmares with warm hands seemed so far away in the sunlight, in Paris, in the new fine clothes I had purchased us for the trip.

I was foolishly shocked standing at the edge of the muddied path in my groom's tuxedo as he drove off with you still in your wedding dress, bunches of tulle stuffed into the navy leather backseat of his car. A porcelain doll taken off the shelf. It was the dead of summer and it started to rain. You were crying.

Now so many years later, I look over at your letter sitting on the mantel above the fireplace. I read your words about life, love, helplessness and decisions. I read the part where you said you were coming back to me to stay. I read it only a thousand times. But the letter is a few weeks old now.

I know about the train, the twisted metal, the fire, and the shards of glass in your waist length black hair.

I think back to the moment he burst into the church to halt the wedding. When I reached out for your hand at the altar roughly, possessively, desperately, did it scare you to see how brutally I needed you?

I still think we might've survived the fall from grace if I hadn't reached out for your hand at that moment. But I did. And we didn't.

### **THE SOUL'S REMEMBRANCE**

By: Denise Bouchard

The flames infiltrated the inside of the barn, emanating from the roof. They had bolted the barn's massive front doors from the outside and they were now torching it. What few townspeople were left had no more hope. The screams were deafening. Sweat was pouring down her face and the screams she heard were her own.

"Kate! Wake up! Katherine you're having that dream again, dear."

Her mother touched a cool washcloth to her face.

"Mother," Katherine groaned as she began to awaken, "...it was even more vivid this time. I could feel the heat and smell the thick black smoke."

"You've got to see someone about this, Katherine. You can't go on having these constant nightmares. I just don't understand where all of this is coming from."

"I have other dreams of Ireland... Peaceful dreams with thatched roof cottages. I often see a beautiful old woman calling out to me. She gestures, asking me to come over to her. She has long reddish hair like mine. She says, "Come home, darlin. Come back to us."

Suddenly, Katherine's mother looked stricken as if she'd been slapped but Katherine pressed on anyway.

"Do you think I could've had a past life in Ireland?"

"There is no such thing as past lives. You only live once. I don't know where you get such foolish ideas. You would do well to stop letting your mind run away with such ridiculous thoughts." She shook her head as she left the room as if to shake off Katherine's notions.

What Katherine could not see as her mother turned away was the look of astonishment upon her face.

Katherine sat up in bed and looked around her room at all of the trappings of her rich upper class lifestyle. Wedgewood china, ornate jewelry chests, gilded mirrors...none of which seemed to suit her. Her mind suddenly went to the schedule of the weekend and she closed her eyes against it. The endless parties and balls...these suited her the least.

She joined her parents at breakfast where they were discussing the weekend's busy itinerary.

"I'd like to go to the medieval fair with Sean."



Her parents just stared at her as if she'd just announced that she was setting off on an interplanetary space mission.

"Now Katherine, we've had this discussion before. We do not want you with that boy. There are so many young men at the country club..."

'Here we go,' she thought. She knew the boys at the country club all too well. Gordon the groper with the atypical hairline, Moody Matthew who kept impressive tabs on death and disaster, Peeping Pearson who was once caught peering out in the girl's locker rooms outside the tennis courts, his strangely skeletal body partially hanging out of the laundry shoot...all pretentious, all hypocritical and plainly boring.

"You're an Ashton," her mother droned on, "...born and bred. You'll need to marry into the life which you are accustomed. There's a dance tonight for the younger set at the club or you could go to cousin Elizabeth's house for a sleepover. Your father and I have to visit your uncle at the hospital out of town. We'll probably be out late and we don't want you alone."

Knowing the sound of opportunity when she heard it, Katherine called Elizabeth at once. If there was anyone she could count on, it was Lissie.

They made plans to each go their separate ways and get together at Elizabeth's house for pizzas, movies and a sleepover. At least, she surmised, she was doing what she was told in the latter part of the day.

For the earlier part, however, she would be with Sean. Her Sean. She didn't understand what her mother had against him and it pained her to be without her family's approval.

Katherine thought of how she'd run to him when she saw him. He was

Katherine thought of how she'd run to him when she saw him. He was lean but muscular with wavy, thick hair of the dark Irish, soulful brown eyes, and a nearly olive complexion. They were an attractive match of opposites with her red hair, fair skin, and hazel eyes.

Under the wavering gold sunlight filtering through the leaves of the tall trees at the fair, he stood waiting for her. She felt a loss of breath when she spotted him and ran into his arms. He caught her in mid-air and spun her around.

"For you, m'lady," he said in signature medieval fashion, and held out a beautiful summer bouquet of daisies and lavender.

He took her hand and there at the fair, away from prying eyes, both were able to act their age and be themselves.

After taking a limited tour of the various shops and stands, they became hungry. They sat at a large wooden table which they had all to themselves and feasted upon turkey legs and mulled cider. Once they had their meal, they took in a Shakespearean play and saw a joust. Katherine insisted that they climb onto a large swing whose ropes were intertwined with flower garlands. She turned to him after the ride, still swaying and a bit dizzy.

"I wish it could always be this way, Sean. I don't ever want to be apart."

"I think your parents would have something to say about that."

Seeing her face fall from a smile to a worry wrought frown, he decided to try and make her laugh.

"Race you to the apothecary."

She was after him like a flash. She loved the large area of gathered herbs for every malady or misfortune. She was especially interested in the herbs with mystical properties.

Stopping once to catch her breath, she suddenly realized that she couldn't find Sean. It wasn't unlike him to hide on her to tease her.

"You look lost." An older man with thick braided gray hair approached her from the side of a spacious maroon tent.

He wore a black tunic over a loose cotton shirt and jeans. A carved wooden pendant of an owl with a lightening bolt in its center hung around his neck.

'You've no idea,' Katherine thought.

"Why don't you step in for a reading and I'll help you find your way..."

'Why not?' she said to herself. 'Let Sean search for me for awhile.'

Katherine sat and took in the deep black velvet tablecloth with the astronomy charts upon it, the colorful secret-telling tarot cards, the requisite crystal ball and the rune stones. Her mother would've killed her if she'd known where she was going. Katherine smiled to herself over that thought and handed him the money for the reading.

"Say your name three times over." His voice was deep, relaxing, and yet strangely powerful. She had never known much about magic, but he seemed to carry the very essence of fire in his blood. Destructive and

healing at the same time.

"Katherine Ashton... Katherine Ashton... Katherine Ashton..."

Each time she'd spoken her name, she felt herself fall further and further away from the bustling world outside the tent.

"You had a very significant past life, Katherine Ashton... You were a person of high importance in your community. I'm seeing Ireland..."

Katherine was unimpressed. It was clear that she looked Irish, though no one in her family did. This was something he probably told everyone with her hair color and complexion.

"Give me your hand."

Katherine grudgingly put her hand into his which was covered with tattoos of dragons, mermaids, extended up to his arm which was a tapestry of all manner of mythical beasts. Absently, she envisioned the Hydra as a shoulder design.

Yet when her palm touched his, a dark intensity like the sting of a scorpion flowed between them. The room seemed to spin like a small globe released from a controlling hand. The air felt electrically charged as though tiny sparks of static might appear in the narrow space between them. He spoke quickly now as if he was trying to name all that he was seeing.

"...you lived in medieval Ireland. You were in love with a dark Irishman. You were a Lord and a Lady together. There were many peaceful years until a competing tribe came...and then there was carnage...a fire, and your deaths. I'm seeing burning hales of hay, smoke billowing

me...and your death. I'm seeing burning piles of hay...SMOKE BLOWING into the sky..."

Katherine pulled her hand away as if she'd been burned by the words. His dark eyes flickered open.

"That doesn't normally happen. I only tell people what they're ready to hear. I didn't mean to frighten you. It was a trance-like state and I saw things clear as day."

She had been ready to jump up and leave, but as her heart slowed to normal, she reconsidered.

"Would you mind if I bought another fifteen minutes of your time?" she asked, with unusual daring.

"I'll give you another half-hour for that price," he said with a smile. "I don't normally do this, but my other customers can wait."

"Would you believe me if I told you that I dream of that exact scene all the time?"

He smiled with a knowing gaze at her question. "It's a question in the air around you...it wants to be solved. Are you up for exploring this further?"

"Please go on," she replied, leaning further in over the table.

"You've always painted... Colors follow you like an aura. That trait has been with you since that life."

"Tell me more about the man I loved," Katherine said with a mix of concern and curiosity in her voice, aware that it must've been Sean.

"He vowed to you before his death that he would find you in another lifetime."

"I believe he's the one in my life now. But my mother won't allow me to see him."

"Your mother needs to move aside and let you live your fate, not hers. I see strongly and clearly that you were adopted... That being the case makes it especially necessary that you live your own life now."

"Oh- you're mistaken on that. I'm definitely not adopted. There are family pictures, stories..."

"Do you resemble your family?"

"No, but I know a lot of kids that don't look like their parents at all!"

"I'm just asking you to research your history. It's very important in this lifetime."

Now Katherine did leave. She almost ran from the tent and bumped into Sean as she was exiting. He looked tired, frantic, and exasperated.

"Where have you been? I thought something could have happened to you! I've been going out of my mind!"

He stopped questioning her when he saw the stricken look on her face.

"Kate... What is it?"

She quietly led him to a desolate area of tables and told him everything. It rendered him speechless to think that all she had ever yearned for in her mind was the truth and that they had shared a previous life together.

"It's not hard imagining us having been together before... But he could have fabricated some of it too."

"Well, I don't believe that I'm adopted, but he couldn't have made up the fire, Sean. He described it exactly the way I re-live it in my dreams. How could he have known that? No one has ever helped me understand those dreams."

"Kate... Would you marry me if there was a way?"

"I want to be with you, Sean. I'll try to find a way. That's all I can promise. But I'm suddenly not sure who I am."

"I know who you are, Katherine."

That night at Elizabeth's, she related the whole story once again.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you anything about this, Kate?"

"What are you saying? Tell me everything. What do you and everyone

What are you saying? Tell me everything. What do you and everyone else seem to know that I don't?"

"It should come from your mother and father."

"Elizabeth, I need to know."

Kate sat and listened, stunned, as Elizabeth told her of a family birth, a cover up, and records destroyed. Even the fact that her mother couldn't have children.

"You are of Irish ancestry, Kate."

"It explains so much...but my mother still won't allow me to marry Sean."

"Well, I think that will all this coming to the surface that you and your mother should sit down and have an honest heart to heart discussion about this. I like Sean and I know he's right for you. Your mother can be a difficult woman, but to her defense, she does love you and she may just be afraid to lose you to a different way of life."

Katherine sat staring out the window at the full moon. "It's interesting how our genetic traits cannot be denied. They're like a branding mark on our souls. It's as if our pasts and ancestors are always an underlying part of us, like an under drawing of a canvas beneath the finished painting."

That night Kate fell into a peaceful dream state. She and Sean walked through a field of flowers holding the hands of a little golden-haired boy between them, swinging him lightly. They came to a village of thatched roof cottages overlooking the water. A woman called them over... They ran



to her.

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