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Come in...and be captivated...



"405 South, Last Days" by Ren Adams; <http://www.renadamart.com/>

About this image: *The Desert (Loss)* series investigates the suspension between loss and distance, through the language of a fractured desert. These remixed landscapes imply the weirdness of the West; vastness and density become memories of memory, mutations of a white-hot encounter. Historian Simon Schama says "landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock," just as our own stories and memories are constructed of layered moments. —Ren Adams

Fiction

With gratitude, we dedicate this page to 2017 WPWT Arts Patron, Anita Solick Oswald. Anita is a writer of non-fiction and fiction, with a forthcoming collection entitled, West Side Girl due out later this year.

Welcome to Our Fiction Section!

Featured Stories:

"Shells" by Joshua Shapiro

"Blizzard of 1888" by Michael Tidemann

"The Color of Amor" by Claire Ibarra

Shells

by Joshua Shapiro

It is the color of the water that surprises him this time. He comes to the beach every week and always there is something surprising: the size of the waves, their dark sound, the near-silence when the water is calm. Today it is the unhealthy pallor, as if the ocean held no life at all.

He begins to look down, to do his errand. There aren't many shells today, or many at this hour. He knows it has to do with the tides, that there is well-understood science behind it. Simple physics, really, and one of these days he'll learn it. He bends to pick up a colorful shell he can't identify. It will fit perfectly in a small hand. There are a few larger shells, gray asymmetric ones that even he knows are clams. These aren't worth picking up, and he knows they would feel lifeless and heavy if he did.

Elf would love it if he can find a conch. She even asked for one without knowing the word. *The swirly ones with the point.* The idea so powerful in her tiny imagination that a lack of words wasn't about to keep it in. But a conch is too much to hope for. He's seen one here (or it might have been a mile up the coast, or down it) back in the summer. She was with them then—not with him as he walked, thinking only of his own business, but back on the blanket with her mother. He wished now he'd picked it up, but

at the time he had his cell phone in his hand. For some reason it seemed wrong to hold the device and a seashell, both, as if one would contaminate the other. But he wasn't the scavenger then anyway, Elf was. She collected the shells in a pink bucket and spread them on the blanket and her mother said, "That's wonderful, honey," without looking up from her book.

Remembering this causes a small spasm just below his neck and above his heart. These almost medical events have been occurring at unexpected moments, alone in the car or out here. Also at inconvenient moments, at work, even in meetings. But only when he is away from Elf, not with her. Thankfully not then.

Then he sees the woman, or rather feels her presence, standing further back from the water's edge: tall and elderly, wearing a parka the color of a crayon that a child might choose to draw the sun. Her hair is white, or very pale yellow. The hair of someone who was once blonde. Her skin is a web of fine wrinkles, like a miniature fishing net. She has the bright eyes of a much younger woman. She speaks to him.

"They're more plentiful up there."

"Really? I thought it was the time of day."

"This isn't the best spot any time of day. The currents up by the cove seem to bring them in. Isn't it beautiful, though? The way the shore curves, and those rocks, how the waves break on the tip of them. Don't you agree?"

He sees the things she describes but not the beauty, and so he says nothing.

"You seem to be looking for something in particular," she says.

"No—not exactly. Just anything unusual or pretty. They're not for me."

"I see."

The sun is hanging, pale and delicate, just above the dunes. Has it just come out? Or has it been there all along and only now is he aware of it? The woman turns her face towards the sun, the motion seemingly involuntary, like a plant's. The skin that in shadow was a fine mesh looks smooth, fresh.

"Watch out!" she says, but happily, childish almost, as though there is no danger.

And there is none. Only the water beginning to lap at the soles of his loafers.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be out here dressed like this.” He tries to say it laughingly too, but can’t catch her spirit. In his own voice he hears a bleakness that he hopes she does not.

“You must be coming from work. A salesman or—no, let me guess. A young executive.”

“Wrong and right. An engineer. But I manage a big group.”

He is eager to mention this, and looks for evidence that she is impressed. Instead she says:

“Are you a religious person?”

“I’m—”

It seems an impertinence, and besides he can’t say because he doesn’t know. A year ago, six months ago even, he knew. It was a rational world, an engineer’s world. This seems a very long time ago.

“I only ask because—well, because I wasn’t. But people change, or are changed. Now when I’m out here I get overwhelmed by...but your face tells me it doesn’t affect you that way. You have to admit it’s magnificent, though. Whether you believe it was designed or not.”

It seemed an uncontroversial point, the beauty, but still he can’t acknowledge it.

“The shells,” she says. “For a child?”

“Yes. For my daughter. She’s almost four. She’s—”

He stops himself. Already he has said more than he intended. He knows this woman—not personally, but he knows her type. Not quite sure where the boundaries are, the insistent cheerfulness a result not of a mind that is whole but of one that is slipping. He is ready to get on with his day, with his duties.

“It’s a wonderful age,” she says. The only words she’s spoken without a smile.

He walks on, realizing only after several minutes that he is walking away from the car and towards the cove. The pickings are so slim today that he is ready to test her theory. If she’s correct he can thank her next time. The obvious question—whether there will be a next time—he refuses to consider.

The cove turns out to be further than it appeared. With the daylight going there will soon be no point to it. He walks quickly, feeling cold and exposed in his suit jacket. He expected the search to be closer to where he parked, and briefer. He thinks again of the tides, of the moon’s gravity and the equations that describe the process. He can find the equations easily enough, but decides against it. The ocean isn’t going to reveal itself that way, and he doesn’t want it to be revealed in any event. The rocky promontory, the southern barrier of the cove, looms dark and close. He begins to run.

When he reaches the cove the ground is covered with the things. He picks up a few of the larger shells, trying in the dying light to determine which might have the colors she enjoys. Then he sees her, is startled by the brightness of the yellow parka.

“You were right,” he says. “They’re all over the place.”

“Yes. But we have to work quickly. She’s four, you said?”

He does not question the implication that they will work together, or how an old woman made her way along the beach so quickly.

“Almost four.”

“A wonderful age. Here, I’m sure she’ll like this.”

It is a perfect specimen, not the largest but the most elegantly shaped. He can make out streaks of gold. How is it that she found in a moment what eluded him all along? How is it that at twice his age she appears to have twice his vitality? There is an animation, a buoyancy, in her gestures and in the smallest things she says.

“She’ll love it,” he says, feeling the soft ridges, the weightlessness. That he took it from her—that he didn’t refuse her help—makes no sense and yet feels both right and inevitable.

“What’s your little girl’s name?”

“Eleanor. But we call her Elf. She’s always been tiny.”

As soon as he says this the spasm comes, but a small one, not too difficult to control.

“And how long has she been ill?” says the woman.

“Not long. It all happened fast. One day she’s running around and the next my wife is calling me at work. It was just before Christmas, and—oh, I’m so sorry...” It is more difficult to control than he thought.

“Nonsense,” she says. “What you’re feeling is perfectly natural.”

For some reason he is not ashamed. When he recovers himself he asks: “Did I—did I mention that my daughter is sick?”

He notices the youthful eyes are the color a child might imagine, or wish, the sea to be. At first she doesn’t answer. Then, bending spryly to pick up two irregular shells, she says:

“When I was younger, younger than you, I lost my son. And I do believe it marks a person. We know something that not everyone knows.”

“But how can you be so...so content? It seems impossible, illogical even.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” Her smile broadens and the finer wrinkles disappear. “Do you know what this is, or was?”

“An oyster?”

She puts the two halves together, as if the creature were again living, and says, “What you’ve lost—what you’re losing—will become a hard, sharp stone. It will always be there. And then time goes by. The edges soften and it becomes something interior, sealed off. Protected almost, the way precious objects should be.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“I didn’t either. I still don’t, but I no longer expect to.”

Then she does a sympathetic thing, exactly what he needs at the very moment he needs it. She leaves. He looks out the open side of the cove to the distant line where the unblemished water is indistinguishable from the sky. He sees the beauty in it, and feels it. And then he notices, sticking partway out of the shallow pool, the conch. He picks it up hastily, as if it were about to wash away. As he does a terrible and wonderful spasm deep inside makes him cry out a little. He holds the precious thing close, to protect it. It is exactly what Elf asked for: a swirly one with a point.

Bio: Joshua Shapiro has published short fiction in *The Literary Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Phoebe*, and *The GW Review* (George Washington University's biannual literary review). He's recently completed a novel about the American culture wars called *Providence*, and is at work on a second novel. He is also a musician and music teacher, and lives with his wife and family near Boston.

Blizzard of 1888

by Michael Tidemann

“No. The pitch is not steep enough. You must do it over.”

Olaf Jensen looked down from his scaffold perch bemusedly. The person who had just addressed him was the new wet-behind-the-ears schoolteacher, but a child herself. Out here in Dakota Territory, a teacher needed only to have finished eighth grade then gone on to a year of normal school to take on her own covey of country school students. And Sonja Hannahsdottir had done just that—qualifying her as a teacher at the ripe old age of fifteen—just six months older than his own daughter Elizabeth. “Oh? And what pitch would you like?”

Sonja’s arms formed the angle of a country church steeple.

“A *twelve-twelve*?”

“No. A *sixteen-twelve*.”

“A *sixteen-twelve*? Do you have any idea how much wood that will take?”

Sonja stood stubbornly, blond, blue-eyed, unyielding. “If I am to teach here, that is the only way.”

“If you’re going to teach here,” Olaf snorted. He glanced to Elizabeth who was handing him another two-by-four. As president of the board of Stateline School No. 2 he was Miss Hannahsdottir’s boss—as well as landlord. And she was giving *him*—a master carpenter—orders on how to build? He had never heard of such a thing. “What makes you think we’ll ever have that much snow?”

“The animals.”

“Animals?”

“Their coats are still heavy and the dirt around their burrows is deep—and it is only June. The old Viking stories we were told in Iceland say that is a sign of a bad winter.”

“Dirt around their burrows?” Olaf scoffed and looked down at his daughter Elizabeth who offered up a shrug.

“You’d better do what she says, father. She’s the only teacher you could find.”

Elizabeth was serious, pragmatic, and quiet. As a child, she’d been incurably shy, so her parents kept her home an extra year before sending her off to school, wondering if and when she’d adjust. Olaf hadn’t expected more than an answering look in reply from Elizabeth in the presence of a stranger. Her words were enough to sway him.

By mid-August, a brand new country school, thirty-by-forty, with church steeple pitch had risen on the stark, Dakota prairie. The men on the school board had chosen a particularly pretty spot, a high knoll reaching high above the Big Sioux River Valley, looking toward Minnesota just across the river. Statehood was fast approaching, and within a couple of years Dakota Territory would be North and South Dakota and the South Dakota eastern border would follow the Big Sioux River in the south then jut east, carving out a few extra miles into Minnesota. Then the South Dakota border would veer west again, lapping Big Stone Lake then leaping the north-south Continental Divide to Lake Traverse to the Bois de Sioux that would eventually join the great Red River of the North.

To Elizabeth Jensen, things like borders and rivers and territories and states were not as important as her life, here and now, on the unending sunflower-decked prairie as she watched Sonja Hannahsdottir hang fresh laundry on the clothesline. That had been Elizabeth's job until Miss Hannahsdottir had started boarding with them this summer. Her father had considered Miss Hannahsdottir's boarding as part of her pay. *I have to do something, though. Or else I'll not feel part of the family*, Miss Hannahsdottir had insisted, no doubt prodded by some Icelandic work ethic instilled by her parents. So Elizabeth's mother Emily had chosen a few select chores for Miss Hannahsdottir—nothing too strenuous. Things like laundry and canning and feeding the chickens.

That meant fewer chores for Elizabeth—which she didn't mind a bit. She was free to further her reading in her private time, unbeknownst to her family. She had secreted a few volumes from her father's shelves that were otherwise no more than dust gatherers. She didn't mind being seen as the dutiful, diligent, albeit not all together too clever, daughter. Now all she had to worry about was helping her mother with cooking and cleaning while her younger brothers Benjamin and Steven helped her father with field work and caring for the livestock.

As Sonja stood there, hanging laundry, the steady wind limning her legs and stomach like a stream over a boulder, Elizabeth could only think of how beautiful Sonja was—long, blond hair cascading in the wind, rosy-cheeks, her blue eyes dancing prairie violets. Elizabeth's skin was far more dusky, hair raven-black, eyes brown garnets. Her parents, neighbors, even a few boys had told her how pretty she was. But she envied Miss Hannahsdottir's nearly white-blond hair, blue eyes, colt legs. She was only half a year older, but to Elizabeth she seemed so much older and more mature.

Though laundry was Miss Hannahsdottir's job—and Elizabeth doubted she really needed help—Elizabeth left her bedroom window and stepped into the hallway and trotted down the narrow stairs and out the front door to where Miss Hannahsdottir was stretching a sheet across the clothesline, the fabric flapping like a mainsail at sea.

“Here, let me help you with that, Miss Hannahsdottir.” Elizabeth thrust a handful of clothespins in her mouth and helped stretch the sheet out on the line.

Miss Hannahsdottir crinkled a smile at her, lips cherried from the wind, skin naturally blushed. “Thank you. And you may call me Sonja when we are not in school.” She bit her lower lip so it cherried even more.

Elizabeth stepped closer, grabbing the same sheet Sonja had in her hands as though they were about to tussle over it. They laughed, and Elizabeth stepped closer, toe-to-toe with Sonja whose face was inches away. “Your hair. It’s so pretty. Can I touch it?”

Sonja smiled curiously as though she found Elizabeth a bit odd. “What a strange request. Yes, you may, if you would like.”

Elizabeth reached for Sonja’s hair and felt it sift through her hand like flax. She loved how it flowed in her hand as she stroked it, Sonja’s eyes closing dreamily. Heart racing, Elizabeth inched closer and studied Sonja’s face as she stood with her eyes closed. Elizabeth searched Sonja’s face and body for some flaw, some imperfection, but there was none. She was absolutely perfect. Unable to help herself, Elizabeth leaned forward and kissed Sonja on the lips. Sonja’s eyes opened and Elizabeth expected a scolding—or worse. But Sonja only clasped Elizabeth’s wrist to her shoulder and laughed. “What was that for?”

“I only wanted to kiss you. To make sure you were real. I’m sorry. I’m so embarr...” She covered her eyes and ran back toward the house, in tears.

“It’s all right,” Sonja called after her softly. “It’s all right,” she said again to herself.

Elizabeth didn’t call Miss Hannahsdottir “Sonja” for a long time after that—even at home. “Miss Hannahsdottir” she was to her as a teacher and Miss Hannahsdottir she would remain.

Miss Hannahsdottir called on Elizabeth often in class that fall, sensing that she knew the answers but was reluctant to express them in front of others. If ever there were a hesitant student in the classroom, it was Elizabeth. She blushed with shame whenever Miss Hannahsdottir saw fit to praise her work, and whenever asked a question, she offered a startled look as though caught doing something naughty. Seventeen other students filled the classroom, ranging from age six to Elizabeth at fourteen. Their other teacher, Miss Beardahl, who had been forced to resign after she married Mr. Gregg, had been something of a nag, standing students in the corner

when they didn't have the right answer and even rapping a ruler across the older boys' knuckles when they tried to dip a girl's pigtails in their ink wells. But Miss Hannahsdottir was nothing like that. Every student—first grade on up—sat at the edge of the seat, eager to hear Miss Hannahsdottir's questions and be first to give the answer.

Summer had crisped to fall, and outside the school windows the slowly browning prairie grass danced in the steady wind like God's hand stroking the fur of some great animal. The other kids were outside playing, their muffled shouts just loud enough for Elizabeth to hear. The boys played a stick and ring game while the girls played tag.

Miss Hannahsdottir gently closed the book she had been reading and laid it on her desk. She had been watching Elizabeth more than reading, pasque-blue eyes meditative. She stood and came around her desk and walked straight toward Elizabeth.

Elizabeth looked up, heart racing.

"Elizabeth, there is something I have been meaning to tell you." Miss Hannahsdottir's hand rested on her arm and her warmth soaked clear to her bones.

"Yes, Miss Hannahsdottir?"

Her teacher smiled and with her other hand stroked Elizabeth's hair, touching it lightly, then her shoulder. She kept stroking, her hand warm against her back, neck, and shoulder. "I get the impression that you've never been told how intelligent you are. Perhaps even you are unaware of your capabilities... It might be that no one thought to take notice before. But I wish for you to know that I see that as surely as I feel there is something unspoken between us."

Elizabeth closed her eyes as Miss Hannahsdottir stroked her back, pressing herself against her hand, hoping and praying she would never stop. "Oh, Miss Hannahsdottir." Tears trickled down Elizabeth's cheeks.

The stroking continued, long, gentle strokes going from Elizabeth's hair to her neck to her back and shoulder. "Sometimes all we need is to be seen and touched with kindness, don't you think?"

“Oh yes, Miss Hannahsdottir,” Elizabeth said, eyes shut so tight she thought they would break.

At home, Miss Hannahsdottir was Sonja after that. Elizabeth couldn’t understand why, but whenever she was close to Sonja her stomach would heat up and she felt so wonderful she seemed to be in heaven. And whenever Sonja drifted into the same room, blue eyes lit like beacons, Elizabeth knew Sonja felt the same.

One night a terrible wind came—the last fall thunderstorm. Lightning slashed the sky, shattering the ancient oak in front of the house clear to its base. Elizabeth jumped from beneath the covers and ran to Sonja’s room and crawled under the quilt and clung to her narrow waist. “I’m so scared.”

The bedsprings creaked as Sonja turned, repeated lightning flashes outlining her smile as she put her arm around Elizabeth and pressed against her, lips inches away. “That is all right,” she whispered. Sonja held Elizabeth as she sang an old Icelandic folk song, the melody timed to her stroking her back, as Elizabeth drifted off to sleep.

One January morning gray clouds brooded the Dakota horizon. Hovering like a great wall, at first they carried topsoil, hundreds of tons sifting and churning, boiling, a sea of dust, choking everything in its path. And then the clouds turned white as the snow came.

Like many Dakota farmers, Olaf Jensen had learned to read the signs of the seasons. He knew a storm had been brewing. But when and how much was another matter. He had left it to Miss Hannahsdottir if she were going to have school that morning, with a strong hint that she had better if she wanted to keep her job.

So there they were—sequestered in the tiny, one-room school, a full four cords filling the cloak room. Miss Hannahsdottir had seen to that, saying it was going to be a hard winter, that a terrible storm was about to come. So she had made every student carry in wood for a whole week, making a math problem out of it. *Let’s see how much you can add*, she said to the first- and second-graders. The third-graders she taught how to multiply chunks of wood and the fourth-graders how to divide them. And the rest? Well she had them determine volume. *A cord is four by four by eight. And how*

many cubic feet is that? A hundred and twenty-eight? Very good! Now let's see if we can't fit three more cords inside.

And they did. Plus jars of food Miss Hannahsdottir had asked her students to bring all that fall. *So why are you needing all this food?* the parents asked her. *Oh, just in case we get snowed in, Miss Hannahsdottir laughed. Not that we will ever need it.* So, all that fall, every Monday, each student brought a pint or quart jar of canned beets or carrots to potatoes or sauerkraut or meat as Miss Hannahsdottir called upon the ancient Norse gods Thor and Odin to prophesy the coming storm.

It descended as a fist, a blow, hundred-mile-an-hour winds and feet of snow day after day. Across Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakota, snow-laden school houses collapsed and teachers and children and students froze to death. Cattle froze standing, carcasses upright until spring.

But in one eastern South Dakota school house, the roof held. Snow piled on a foot, two, three, then sloughed off as kerosene lights cast ambered glows onto the snow sifted by wolf-howling winds. Whenever the children despaired into wails, Miss Hannahsdottir made a game of it. *See how high the snow's getting? Would you like to go out and play in it? No? Well then let's study geography.* And never did students learn more about parallels and meridians and continents and oceans than they did in that little Dakota country school in the Blizzard of 1888.

Because he raised dairy and not beef, Olaf Jensen's cattle were safely sheltered in the barn. He had strung baling wire all the way from the house to the barn to feed the cattle and hogs and chickens, and every time he returned from milking or feeding the livestock he collapsed in his rocking chair and sobbed, wondering what was happening to his children.

"Don't worry, dear. We have two good, strong, resourceful girls watching out for the rest of the children," Emily comforted him. By then, Sonja was like their own daughter.

"Oh I hope so." Olaf seized both of Emily's hands in his. "I certainly hope so."

As day darkened into night, Sonja and Elizabeth had the children lie on their coats around the banked-up woodstove as they sang them to

sleep—first Sonja singing an ancient Icelandic folk song then Elizabeth singing in Norwegian. They sang until little ponies nickered throughout the room.

Elizabeth went over to sleep beside her brothers when she felt a hand around her arm. Miss Hannahsdottir looked steadily at her, a slow smile creasing her lips. “Would you like to sleep beside me?”

Elizabeth’s stomach stirred and her mouth went dry. The wind rattled the windows and the woodstove and pipe glowed orange, a dull roar of air feeding the banked-up oak. She let Miss Hannahsdottir lead her behind her desk where they laid down their coats. Miss Hannahsdottir’s face was barely lit by the yellowed glow through the woodstove isinglass as she gently clasped Elizabeth’s arms then knelt down and patted the coats beside her. Elizabeth sat and looked wondrously at her teacher, her best friend. Miss Hannahsdottir stroked her cheek and smiled and lay down and watched Elizabeth. Elizabeth lay down beside her, their faces nearly touching, as Miss Hannahsdottir pulled one of their coats over them. “Don’t worry. We’ll be warm here,” Miss Hannahsdottir said in the fading firelight.

Elizabeth edged toward Miss Hannahsdottir so close they exchanged breaths. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes.”

Elizabeth’s body and soul both were frozen, aching to hold Miss Hannahsdottir but unable to move closer.

Miss Hannahsdottir’s arm went around Elizabeth’s back and her lips nuzzled her forehead. “Is this all right?”

Elizabeth sighed heavily. “Yes.” She pressed herself against Miss Hannahsdottir and they drew warmth from each other through the cold, malignant night.

When Elizabeth graduated from eighth grade that year, she told her parents she wanted to be a teacher. *You’ll have to go to normal school*, Olaf told her, so Elizabeth enrolled at Madison Normal School while Miss Hannahsdottir continued to teach and live with the Jensens. When Elizabeth graduated, both she and Miss Hannahsdottir took teaching jobs on the Shoshone-Arapahoe Reservation in Riverton, Wyoming. Olaf and

Emily's loss was doubled, because by that time Sonja had become a second daughter.

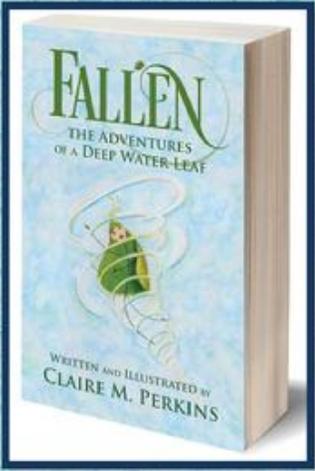
Olaf kept waiting for Elizabeth to write and say she was getting married. *You'll have to give up teaching, you know*, Olaf was ready to tell her.

But Elizabeth never did marry. Nor did Sonja. They traveled together around the West and the world, teaching and going on to university. They grew from pretty girls into beautiful, elegant women. And still they never married—something no one could understand. Nor could anyone understand why they took in the dozens of misfits and castoff children—the forgotten and abandoned—under their tutelage. Those same orphans, who grew up to become successful doctors and lawyers, bankers and accountants, along with their myriad progeny, thronged the grave of Sonja Hannahsdottir, master's in architecture from Kansas State, who passed away December 1968, then returned three months later to honor the memory of Elizabeth Jensen, master's in letters from the University of Minnesota.

Old maids, what a pity, people said as they visited their graves alongside each other. Together in death as they had been in life.

Bio: Michael Tidemann is an adjunct college English instructor in Estherville, IA. His nonfiction has appeared in *Overdrive*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, and *Writer's Journal*. His fiction has appeared in *Black Hills Monthly Magazine*, *The Longneck*, *Struggle*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*.

His author page is amazon.com/author/michaeltidemann



FALLEN: THE ADVENTURES OF A DEEP WATER LEAF
WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY CLAIRE M. PERKINS

What if your whole life was a dream? And what if YOU were the dreamer?

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Available March 2017
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The Color of Amor

by Claire Ibarra

"I think I will go to America to make money," Miguel told his mother.

"Why don't you just make money here, *hijo*?" his mother asked as she put a bowl of cream of squash soup in front of him. She stroked his dark hair as he leaned over to eat.

Miguel lifted his spoon in the air and said, "Because in America, money grows on trees!"

Suddenly his mother had a vision: tall, bare trees across a dry, wintry field. Her son appeared, walking through the open field as it drizzled a light rain. Leaf buds began to sprout from the tips of the moistened branches and they rapidly grew and unfolded in pale greens. As the leaves unfolded, she imagined they were covered with the faces of great historic politicians of that great country.

“I think you should go, son. I see that you will be lucky in America,” she said and then kissed the top of his head.

So Miguel left Peru and crossed into the United States through Baja, California. There wasn't much control at the border in 1963, and so he flew into Mexico, D.F. and then over to Cabo to take a bus up the dry, desert peninsula. He walked by foot into sunny and welcoming Southern California, but he had to leave behind the glamorous mirage of the Beach Boys, blonde, busty surfer girls, and palm trees to live with an uncle in Missouri.

There he worked odd jobs and lived in his uncle's garage because his aunt had a nasty temperament and refused to lodge “free loaders.” Miguel found himself struggling, poor, and living the disconnected existence of a person without a voice or the proper documents to prove he was a person at all.

He signed up for free English classes held in the basement of a church. They were evening classes, which lured him with the hope of not only improving his English, but also of breaking out of his loneliness.

Miguel fell in love with Josephine the moment she walked in. In a basement that smelled like mildew and Clorox, she smelled like lilacs, and appeared to him to be the very image of an angel who had descended from heaven, down through the floorboards of that church.

They all huddled together. Their small group was a few from Latin America –Nicaraguans, Mexicans, one Chilean and Miguel; three from Russia; and an elderly couple from Laos. He went every Tuesday and Thursday, never missing a class, just to be near Josephine and listen to her angelic voice. She was the instructor. She taught them basic introductions, which they repeated over and over:

“Good evening. How are you?”

“I am fine, thank you. What is your name?”

“My name is Josephine. What is your name?”

“My name is Miguel. Nice to meet you.”

After nearly three months, Miguel finally summoned the nerve to ask her out after class. “Do you like café, Miss Josephine?”

“Yes, I like coffee.” She pronounced her words very clearly.

Miguel shook his head and took a deep breath. “No, do you like coffee with me?”

Miguel still wasn’t sure if his meaning was clear.

Josephine blushed and said, “Oh, yes, I would like to have coffee with you.”

They walked down the street to Denny’s. They sat in a booth for over two hours, and although Miguel didn’t really like coffee, he loved watching Josephine sip from her cup. He loved listening to her as she told stories about growing up in Chesterfield. He didn’t understand most of what she said, but it didn’t matter to him.

Every once in awhile, the waitress passed by to ask if they wanted anything else. Miguel noticed that the waitress directed her gaze and questions at Josephine. She had looked at him only when they first sat down, her arms crossed and her lips tight, expressionless. Josephine must have noticed all this as well, because she told him, “Don’t mind her. She doesn’t seem to know any better.”

Josephine had a natural affinity for the Hispanic culture. She sometimes imagined that in a past life she’d lived south of the border. The first time she went to Mexico she cried, realizing that she had been living in a state of homesickness and hadn’t even been aware of it. Though she was shocked by the poverty in Juárez and certain sights had pained her, tears of belonging streamed down her face from the welcome feeling that she had finally made her way home.

Her mother, Mabel, regretted letting her daughter go to Mexico with their church missionary. Josephine had begged and pleaded every day, until she finally wore her down. Even Pastor Bob helped convince Mabel. Josephine was never the same again; she spent the rest of her youth searching for that same sense of home.

Mabel was suspicious and looked down on the humble Mexican community

working in the crops along the periphery of their town. She said the word *Hispanic* with a hiss and her nose tilted upward.

A few weeks after their first date at Denny's, Josephine took Miguel to her house. They sat on the steps of the porch, drinking Coca-Cola out of bottles when Mabel came out wearing an apron dusted with flour. Miguel stood up and Josephine said, "This is one of my best students, Mother. His name is Miguel and he's from Peru. That's a country in South America." Josephine tugged at a long wavy strand of her sandy hair.

"I know where Peru is, Josephine. You think I'm some kind of ignoramus?" Actually, Mabel had no idea where Peru was.

Miguel shook her hand, which she had offered to him reluctantly, and instinctively he knew not to kiss her cheek, the custom in his own country. She wouldn't make eye contact but rather tilted her head and conversed curtly with his left elbow.

"Ma'am, I am so very glad to meet you. I have great respect for your daughter. She is a wonderful, kind person." Miguel spoke very formally. He had practiced those very lines many times, but he couldn't help the slight accent that slipped through, especially with the word "Ma'am," which after repeating over and over, didn't sound so much like "Mom" but more like a bleating goat.

Mabel was surprised by his smooth olive-skin, yellow ochre eyes, and well-trimmed goatee that she only associated with poets and degenerates—and she immediately decided that she would die before admit to anyone that she found him so attractive. He wasn't anything like she had expected. Not like the stereotypical Latino men she had in mind with their straw hats and dusky aspects.

Miguel and Josephine's relationship flourished, while Mabel and her husband treated Miguel with subtle prejudices that were difficult to explain and pinpoint. With Josephine, they were straightforward and blunt: "If you marry him, you won't be welcome in this house."

Mabel had acutely narrow vision when it came to cultural enlightenment. She named her daughter Josephine because, although just a simple farm wife in Missouri, she couldn't hide her illusions of grandeur

upon discovering her French heritage. She had an altar-like display in the living room, on the mantel above the rustic fireplace. There were some old photographs taken in the French countryside, or so she told every visitor who passed through her front door. Carefully placed next to the photos were a small purple bottle of perfume, a lace doily, a few postcards of impressionistic landscapes. Everyone knew that she made up stories to go along with the trinkets that she bought from the Salvation Army Thrift Store.

If only Mabel could have understood how much alike she and Miguel were: both dreamers on a grand scale. Yet clearly, their dreams were different. While Mabel looked to impress, Miguel strove to better his life. In Lima, he worked three jobs to help his widowed mother with the financial responsibilities of raising his younger siblings. And as the eldest son, he was expected to achieve great things. His grandfather had taught him a life lesson, as the old man collapsed on the bed to unwrap the girdle supporting his cancer-infested stomach, by telling Miguel, "Always be a pillar of strength to your family, and never allow your weaknesses to overtake you." Miguel's dream was to be a veterinarian.

Miguel preferred to call Josephine "Josefina," or sometimes just "La Fina" because he said she was the truest and finest jewel, and sweeter than any French delicacy her family could aspire to make. He thought the name suited her splendidly. Until he met her, he had felt like a lonely wanderer, a drifter. She taught him more than a language; through her love and acceptance, she taught him how to set down new roots while reaching up toward the sky to dream of something greater than himself.

He had struggled to make his mark in a big world, a world much larger than his neighborhood in Lima, where everyone knew his name and everyone respected him. Arriving in the States, he was a Don Quixote slaying windmills, always searching for love even as he swept the floors of the high school gym. He transformed into a knight, a defender of the underdog, while driving a tractor he named "Rocinante" while searching through the fields for his lover, Dulcinea, because Miguel was a divine romantic even while sweating in the noonday sun as a field hand.

The very day that Miguel received his papers in the mail and was officially a legal resident, Josephine and Miguel stood on the porch of her parent's country house. Her father ignored them as he read the newspaper, and her

mother fidgeted with her needlepoint. Josephine tilted her head and made a gesture, so Miguel sat down next to her father and waited. The old wooden chair creaked and Miguel gently rocked back and forth and then looked down to check the legs to make sure they wouldn't collapse under his weight. Several moments passed before her father lowered the newspaper, carefully folded it and then placed it on his lap.

Miguel glanced across the porch toward the horizon, noticing wispy cirrus clouds in the dark blue sky. He noticed the glittering green fields beneath the sky and when he inhaled the air was cool and fresh. Suddenly he felt more alive. He cleared his throat and said, "Sir, I love your daughter and I want to marry her. First, I ask for your permission." Miguel watched as her father sat motionless.

After a long minute, her father replied, "I can't say I rightly approve of this. But I suppose this girl has always had a mind of her own. Good luck to you both." He rose, opened the screen door and lumbered into the house. Mabel sat with her mouth hanging open, staring at the warped floorboards.

Finally, Mabel said in a chirpy voice, "Where will you live, how will he support you? Are you pregnant, Josephine?"

"I'm not pregnant, Mother. But, even if I were, it wouldn't be such a bad thing since we're getting married anyway. With or without your blessing." She looked over at Miguel's noble, kind face, as he gazed at the distant fields. She imagined the feeling of his warm caresses and breath on her lips, as she told Mabel, "I *love* him, Mother, and he loves me. We have the most important things right, and we've begun to plan our future together. Miguel's already enrolled in classes at the college. He's going to be a veterinarian."

And so Miguel and Josephine stood side by side, facing the clerk who sat behind a large desk. Josephine wore a simple cream chiffon dress and held a small bouquet of baby pink roses, which they had bought from the florist just down the street from the City Hall. Miguel wore a hand-me-down suit that his uncle had given him the first week he arrived in the United States. As they stood holding hands, listening to the not-so-romantic legalities of their sacred union from the county clerk, Miguel leaned his head toward Josephine and took in a deep breath to let the sweet aroma of lilacs calm his nerves. Josephine stood serenely and smiled.

The clerk asked them, “Do you have anything you wish to say?”

Miguel turned to face Josephine. “Mi amor, I will always take care of you. The world can be harsh, but don’t worry; I was born to be with you.”

“I know—and me too,” Josephine said as she smiled and squeezed his hand tightly. She thought for a moment about the feeling she had carried with her since that first trip to Mexico. “Somehow we found each other, across a great distance, and now we are both home,” she said to Miguel with tears in her eyes.

They took turns leaning over the desk and signing the papers. Then the secretary, who was also the witness, said, “Okay, honey, now why don’t you kiss your pretty bride.”

Six months later, they sat at a small linoleum table in their one room apartment eating leftover spaghetti. Josephine’s belly burgeoned on her thin frame.

Miguel watched Josephine as she twirled the noodles onto her fork and then zealously stuffed them into her mouth. A tip of a noodle dangled as she chewed. Miguel stood up from the table and walked over to her. Placing his hands on her belly, he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“Is anything wrong, love?” she asked.

Before he answered her, he walked over to the window and looked out at the lawn of naked trees. It was almost April, and the oaks had sprouted buds at the tips of their dark branches. It had been raining cool, light drops all day and now the buds were unfolding in pale greens. Not the green of dollar bills but the color of spring and new life and fresh beginnings.

“Nothing is wrong, Fina. I know that everything is just right.”

Bio: Claire received her MFA in creative writing from Florida International University. Her fiction has been published in many fine literary journals and anthologies. Most recently, her work has appeared in *Eleven Eleven*, *The Tishman Review*, *Flash Frontier*, *Boston Accent Lit*, and the anthology *Among Animals* by Ashland Creek Press. Claire worked with nonprofits, teaching creative writing to incarcerated women in Florida. Currently, she

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