

## [The Write Place At the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Commentary On Two Years](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Writers' Contest!](#)

[Book Reviews](#)

[Exploration of Theme](#)

[Archives](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Professional Services](#)

Come in...and be captivated...



"Fleeing the Furies" by Jim Fuess; [www.jimfuessart.com](http://www.jimfuessart.com)

**Welcome to our Fiction section!**

**Featured Stories:**

**"Choices"- by Linda Emma**

**"When the Devil Walked Through Salem"- by Denise Bouchard**

**"Say You'll Be My Darlin'"- by Elizabeth Dunphey**

**"The Age of Victoria"- by Nicole M. Bouchard**

**"Ad Vivum"- by Bill Mesce**  
**"At the Chelsea Restaurant"- by Harvey Havel**

Choices

By Linda Emma

Trish wiped her hands dry and tried to remove the rest of the finger paint from beneath her nails. She felt a tug at her leg.

“Miss Trisha,” Tighe asked, “is this right?”

The little boy with milky dark skin and fiercely blue eyes had just shoved his art work at her, hitting her pant leg with the purpley mix of colors.

He realized almost instantly what he had done and backed suddenly away from her, as if he’d been struck. Trish bent to his short stature, reached not for his arm as she might have, but for the paint soaked, flopping paper.

“Tighe, this is perrrfect,” she said with great affectation, “just the exact amount of red and blue I was looking for.”

His eyes transfixed on the splotch of paint on her leg, Tighe seemed not to notice her smile or her effort to point to the area of his picture to which she was showing particular admiration.

Trish brought her face closer to his, twisted her body to shield the offending mark from his view. He sidled his own body just a bit, further trying to see the damage he had done.

“Tighe, can I ask you a really big favor?” she started.

He loved to help, was a sponge for it. This diverted his attention and he looked into her eyes, brows up. He waited, nodded slightly.

“It’s really big, so you can say no if you want.”

“I help you Miss Trisha, whatever it is.”

Trish smiled.

“I haven’t even asked you Tighe,” she said. “You can’t say yes to something before you’ve even heard what that something is,” she scolded.

Tighe smiled. He’d been told this before.

“But I’d do anythin for you Miss Trisha,” he said.

How could she not love this kid? She thought. No favorites, no favorites. But God how could she not have a favorite?

“Well, I’ve been looking for this exact shade of purple -orchid- for my new bedroom comforter but it’s only been in my head up until now –“

He was nodding, mouthing some of the words.

Orchid – comforter.

“Comforter?” he asked

“A big, puffy blanket,” she answered.

“And if I could just borrow your painting,” she started, “just for a day-” she assured.

“Miss Trisha,” he interrupted -something he rarely did- “you can have my painting.”

“Oh, I couldn’t-“

The front buzzer sounded.

Trish touched Tighe’s arm now, barely, gently. She rose and glanced to the monitor that viewed the vestibule.

“I’ll just borrow it Tighe,” Trish said as she stepped to the counter and buzzed in the young woman at the door.

“You can have it,” Tighe reiterated.

Through the door came a young girl, strikingly clad.

Trish sized her up in a second –her demeanor, her dress- then turned her attention back to Tighe.

“Are you sure Tighe? Maybe you could give this one to your mom?”

“Aw, she’s got plenty of ‘em,” he said.

Trish knew she did not, knew that Tighe rarely showed her his work or interacted with her on anything but the most tenuous of levels.

She accepted the painting, gave a gentle rub to Tighe’s back and then sent him on his way back to the pre-school room.

She turned her attention to the girl.

Not remarkable attire, at all, Trish rethought. She’d seen louder fashion statements, by far.

The girl’s spiked, ink black hair was short and misshapenly cut. Her skin was pale white, rendered even more so against thick dark eyeliner and mascara and the oversized black denim jacket she wore. Beneath the jacket was a gray tank top with the words Atheist Rap in black script across it. From beneath black leggings, pink fishnets reached to her ankles, almost meeting the high tops of her black converse sneakers. She was small, but stood, with shoulders back and feet slightly spread, with a defiant look in her eyes, on her lips. Her stance seemed ready.

Ready for a fight, Trish thought.

Trish walked to the girl.

“May I help you?” she asked with a smile.

“Yeah,” the girl answered, “I need to talk to someone about –“

She cut herself off –only for a second- but Trish could tell she was immediately angry with herself for the hesitation. She’d practiced this line, was determined to present the same tough exterior she used in the rest of her life.

“-about getting an abortion,” she finished, raising her chin slightly, clenching her fists, standing a bit taller.

Trish approached closer, reached her hand to the girl’s shoulder. This same tentative movement sometimes had the effect of pushing girls to the brink, of taking their toughness and melting it away with the speed of a blow torch.

Not this girl. But then Trish had known that before she made the gesture.

“Why don’t you come in back?”

Trish turned, without waiting for a response. The girl followed, first with her eyes, scanning the room.

There was a lone woman in a corner, behind a computer screen. Otherwise, the room was empty. The girl went after Trish into a back office that was equipped with a couch, table and chairs. Trish purposefully sat, not on the couch, but rather on one of the office chairs with rolling wheels. She understood the nuances with which these next moments would be imbued. She hadn’t always. But now, after years at the game, she understood the myriad of scenarios that could play out from any particular moment.

As a middle school teacher, Trish had known the comedy and dramas that could unfold on any given day. She could have written the scripts, crafted the characters -all angst-ridden and rife with raging hormones. This girl could easily have been one of her former students.

Trish busied herself with papers on the desk while the girl hesitantly stepped over the threshold. Until she took a chair, got her feet off the floor, the girl might just step away. Trish had seen it before. Had seen so much in the years she’d been working at the Planned Parenthood clinic.

The girl sat down. Trish looked up, smiled.

“What was the date of your last menstrual period?” Trish started.

With this girl, she knew, there should be no lead-in, no pulled punches.

When Trish was still teaching, she had learned when to push and when to back off. With failing students, sometimes it really was about the work, the concept, the test. A push or shove in the right direction could motivate, inspire or even inflame to action. More times though, particularly with the girls, it wasn't about the material at all. And even a simple nudge could catapult them over the edge.

Trish knew she had a reputation as a hard-ass teacher at her school. Not warm and fuzzy, she would admit. She maintained a controlled classroom, graded hard, held everyone to the same high expectations. She didn't believe in extra credit and she never scaled grades.

“You hardly ever give out any A's,” she remembered one of her better students lamenting after a poor essay result.

“I don't give any,” Trish assured the pleading student, “but you can earn one.”

Even after the angry parent phone call, and with less than full support from her principal, Trish had held her ground.

Eventually, the girl did earn A's. By third quarter, Trish had even happily given the girl an A- on her report card. And four years later, when Trish attended the class graduation, the girl sought her out and thanked her.

Trish still missed teaching. Sometimes, in fact, she ached for it. And of course, it had always been about the students. She loved the kids. And she did have her favorites.

Brooke, however, had assuredly not been one of her favorites. The girl behaved well enough, but there was something Trish simply did not trust about her. A blonde cheerleader –complete with entourage, she was the must-have at any party, pet to all the male and most of the female teachers. She was always perfectly coiffed, dressed in designer fashion, attached to the best boy du jour. And a smile. Trish rarely saw Brooke without a beaming, painted-on smile. It was that smile, Trish suspected, that both enamored her to most, and left Trish too fully suspicious of the girl. Trish always felt as if she were hiding something

dark behind all those white teeth.

“Brooke, wait up,” she called to her one day after class.

“Yes, Miss Foster,” the girl answered, sweetly.

She’s only a little kid, Trish silently admonished herself. How could her simple response grate on Trish so?

“I glanced at your paper,” Trish started. “You didn’t fully answer the questions.”

“I didn’t?”

Brooke wasn’t looking at Trish. Instead, Brooke’s eyes were on the friend in the hall, waiting for her. Brooke was gesturing to her friend with her hands.

“No Brooke, you didn’t. This is the second homework you’ve handed in this week that’s been incomplete.”

“I did the homework,” Brooke protested, but she was still looking at her friend, stifling a giggle.

“Brooke,” Trish said curtly.

“I did the homework, Miss Foster,” Brooke said with a spike of irritation in her voice that she quickly suppressed. “I did it.”

“Yes, you did,” Trisha said, “but it wasn’t done completely, or well.”

Brooke was still motioning with her hands to her friend.

“Brooke,” Trish said, forcing control into the tone of her own voice.

Brooke raised her eyes to look at her teacher. The smile was gone, but so were the words –just silence.

“You know this material,” Trish started. “In fact, you seem to have a real grasp of it.”

She did, too. It was the first confirmation of real intelligence Trish had noticed from the girl. The sonnets and odes stymied many of her classmates, and yet this kid seemed to get the deeper, intended meanings, the subtleties and nuances of the old English. Trish would venture to guess that Brooke might actually enjoy the escape of literature, even if she was wont to freely admit to such an uncool idea.

Brooke was rolling her eyes at the compliment, for the benefit of the friend Trish understood.

Trisha turned to the other girl.

“Would you please give us a minute?”

The girl, with a caught expression, mumbled an assent, gave a last glance to Brooke and moved on down the hallway.

“Brooke, you seem to understand this material quite well. In fact, I think you could lead the next section.”

This caught Brooke’s attention; Trish noted surprise in the girl’s eyes. But Brooke quickly regained her composure.

“Yeah, right,” she said, dismissively –eighth grade cool.

Trish thought to the weekly team meetings where faculty assessed student issues, usually to lament those falling behind. In the name of fairness, however, they painstakingly touched upon every student at some point or the other. Brooke was inevitably lauded as a pleasant student, but no one seemed to want to explore further. The single time Trish suggested that Brooke needed a bit of a push, the other staffers disagreed pretty unanimously. Trish wondered if it was her own naiveté with regard to the girl –or theirs. Just because she wasn’t particularly fond of Brooke, didn’t mean Trish didn’t see potential there. Brooke was savvy, sure, but Trish felt Brooke’s shrewdness was rooted in raw intelligence. She was smart, Trish had concluded. Why her colleagues were blind to it, Trish wasn’t sure. Perhaps they took in the smile, the girl’s satisfaction with average grades and her pleasant demeanor and just thanked the ease of it all.



“Brooke, you’re doing a great job on this unit. You’re very capable.”

A flicker of something. Trish looked into her eyes. Doubt, or wariness, Trish wasn’t sure.

“I’m serious,” she said. “You’re a smart young lady. Don’t be afraid of that.”

“Yeah, me and Abby, right?”

Abby was the class know-it-all, smart, sure, the ultimate overachiever.

“No, Brooke,” Trish started. “You’re nothing like Abby.”

A satisfactorily confirming nod from Brooke.

“With regard to this material, you’re much smarter.”

Trish shouldn’t have said it, she knew. However, she also knew that it would not be repeated.

Brooke narrowed her eyes.

“Just finish the homework,” Trish concluded. “I’ll post your name to lead Elizabeth Barrett Browning –two weeks, that gives you.”

Brooke just stared at Trish.

“You can do it, Brooke. I know you can. Just do the work.”

Trish didn’t wait for a response. She turned and walked back into the classroom, leaving Brooke alone in the hall.

That single encounter fully changed their student-teacher relationship, knocked it slightly off-kilter, like a planet shook and suddenly set upon an alternate axis rotation. While Trish and Brooke remained respectively suspicious of one another, there was now at least a modicum of respect there as well. And when Brooke chose Lady Geraldine's Courtship as a poem to share with her classmates, Trish’s initial comment was an awed, “wow.”

By the time Brooke had moved on to high school, Trish counted her among her successes. While Brooke still received low C's in most of her classes, in English Literature, she had earned a B+.

The girl's hand shook imperceptibly. The shadowed half moons below her eyes contrasted, night to day, against her skin. With an index finger, she nervously traced above her eyes and Trish noted the bare existence of eyebrows that looked not so much overly plucked, as fully decimated, as if they were just resprouting after too many rounds of chemo. This girl, who gave only a first name –Aimee- seemed such a mix of toughness and fragility that Trish found herself speaking to her, not as she had to the countless kids looking for birth control and pregnancy solutions, but rather as she did to the little kids who brightened her day from the attached day care, pre-school and kindergarten.

She quietly solicited the required information, explained the options available. Trish gave Aimee a pamphlet on the procedure that included the number to call to schedule an appointment.

The girl was biting at the inside of her cheek, still rubbing at non-existent eyebrows. Trish reached to a corner of the table and pulled a stick of gum from a pack, offered it to Aimee. Aimee took the gum and began folding its paper in origami formation, looking up occasionally to Trish's words, paying little attention to their source. Aimee's toughness had melted into the shape of the chair. She sat slouched, with her shoulders folding in towards themselves. Her foot gyrated, but her hands, which had started shaking, were now steady in their task.

There was a knock on Trish's partially open door; a face hesitantly appearing in its opening.

In a more traditional counseling setting, such an interruption would have been a breach of client decorum.

Trish took a small inward breath, looked up at Janine. There was urgency in her eyes.

“Sorry, Trish,” said Janine, “a problem.”

But with the exception of the mounds of paperwork in which Trish always seemed awash, there was little about the goings-on at this clinic that were traditional.

“Can you give me a moment?” Trish asked Aimee.

Aimee looked up Trish, toward the door at Janine.

She shrugged her shoulders, but then reached for the foil wrapper from her gum and consumed herself with rapidly moving finger tips and folds of paper.

Trish calmly got up and left the small office, closing the door with an ever-so-subtle click as she left.

Click.

Aimee’s hands stopped, mid-fold.

And they shook –barely.

It was just the quiet click of a gently closing door. Not a slam. Not the cascading locks of a prison cell unit.

But Aimee’s hands shook, nonetheless.

Her eyes flitted to the door.

She could hear muffled voices, activity.

Panic was the word that rose to her mind’s vocabulary, but she wasn’t panicked. Not yet.

They weren’t talking about her, Aimee told herself.

She took measured breaths, waited.

She strained to hear, but the door now blocked even the faintest of the activities behind it.

In Aimee’s auditory processing the silence rose to a near crescendo.

She stared at the door for a moment more, then filled her lungs with a gulp of air, rose from the chair.

“I’m outta here,” she said to no one.

She kicked back the chair as she rose from it, grabbed the door handle and opened it with a sudden forced motion.

And was greeted with a rush of activity that set a fire to her fears.

Men, just outside the door.

Cops, Aimee thought, even though none wore a uniform.

No passage out, but by them.

Aimee was frozen in place for only a moment, but it was enough of a time gap to allow Janine to nudge Trish and move Trish to action.

“Aimee, I’m sorry,” Trish started.

The panic Trish saw in Aimee’s eyes was palpable and it stopped her short.

“Aimee,” Trish said, regrouping as she approached her.

She stepped to offer her body as shield to Aimee’s view, but Aimee looked past her.

“I gotta go,” said Aimee, her eyes darting at the commotion just outside the clinic’s door.

Trish reached for Aimee’s arm, but Aimee flung it away.

“I’m outta here,” she said, her voice raising. But she made no forward advance.

“Aimee,” Trish said quietly.

Trish smiled slightly, looked Aimee directly in her eyes. She saw a mix of fear,

anger, insecurity there.

“Aimee, this has nothing to do with you,” she started.

“Yeah, whatever,” Aimee replied as she took a step to pass Trisha. “I gotta go.”

There was a pleading whine to her voice.

“Yes,” Trish started. “You can go.”

Aimee looked at Trish now, a break of relief coming to her eyes.

“In just a bit, okay?”

Aimee tensed.

“We have a problem. One of the women we help. She and her son are here, safe. We want to keep them that way, can you understand that?”

Aimee didn’t understand, but Trish’s voice was reassuring, measured, quiet.

Aimee looked into Trish’s eyes again.

Trish explained to Aimee that, of course, Aimee would be allowed to go. Just as soon as it was safe. She didn’t use the word “lockdown.” Instead, she talked about the little boy who was painting in the preschool, who was funny and smart. Trish talked about the young woman, picking up the pieces of her broken life. Rebuilding it all for her little boy. And Trish told Aimee about the abusive boyfriend. The man who would soon be arriving at the clinic. They had been forewarned, this time.

As Trish spun the horrible scenario, Aimee’s posture relaxed a bit. She listened. And, Trish was sure, she heard.

Trish gently touched Aimee’s shoulder and showed her a back hallway that led to the pre-school. She gave a squeeze to Aimee’s hand, felt a small response. Then Trish asked if Aimee wouldn’t mind helping out in the school, just until it was safe for everyone. Janine appeared and led Aimee in the direction of the school. Aimee followed slowly, catching with a last glance as a police car pulled

to the curb.

When Trish had reached for Brooke's hand that day, she was surprised by the force of the girl's return squeeze. She seemed lost, frail. Devoid of her usual smile, it was as if, Sampson-like, Brooke had also lost all her strength.

Brooke was a sophomore when Trish found her alone in the high school locker room. Still the bubbly blonde cheerleader, she nonetheless looked to be a different girl from the one Trish had known just two years earlier. The hair was bleached now, starkly so, and unnecessarily thick makeup gave her a pretty doll look. Trish didn't like it, but in spite of herself, she broke into a grin when she almost literally bumped into Brooke carrying the oversized bag of soccer balls, equipment, clipboard and stopwatch she used for the JV team she coached.

"Brooke, how are you?" Trish asked.

"Hey, Miss Foster ."

In her eyes more than upon her lips, was a smile. They'd never had a relationship beyond the single class, and yet, Trish could see a flicker of something genuine there.

After all this time, had Brooke decided that Trish wasn't quite the bitch she'd been called so many times? Trish wondered.

"Are you here for cheering practice?" Trish asked.

"Yeah, we just finished."

Before the conversation went any further Trish lost her effort at a balancing act. The netted balls came loose from her grip, and in trying to clasp the net shut, her clipboard, papers and stopwatch came tumbling down, which in turn meant that the balls were now free to escape their narrow opening.

They both laughed.

"You need help?" Brooke asked.

“Ya think?”

They gathered the rolling soccer balls, picked up the papers and such and landed on the bench facing a bank of dented green lockers.

“So how are you?” Trish asked tilting toward Brooke. “How are your classes?”

Brooke smiled, shrugged her shoulders a bit.

“Okay. You know.”

Trish looked into Brooke’s eyes, waiting for more.

“I like Mr. Hendrickson.”

Hendrickson was a favorite history teacher.

“Earning an A?”

Brooke shook her head.

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

Brooke didn’t answer. Trish didn’t expect her to.

“What about everything else? Are you having a good semester?”

“Yeah,” Brooke answered, still with a shrug.

There was something missing, Trish thought. The smile, yes, but something else, too.

Her guard, maybe?

Trish turned her body more fully toward Brooke, her knees hitting against Brooke’s bare legs. Brooke pulled from the accidental contact.

“Not a good semester?” Trish questioned.

“No, it’s fine, really.”

Brooke smiled.

“What about you? How are the little kids treating you?”

Trish smiled.

“They’re great,” Trish answered. “Some of them try my patience, a bit,” she admitted.

Brooke nodded, a small, knowing smile on her lips.

“Like I did?”

There was something so alien about this normal conversation. Trish felt as if she were discussing her pupils with a colleague. And still, as comfortable as it was on one level, as ingenuous as Brooke seemed, Trish was disquieted by this adult interaction with a child.

Trish looked at Brooke more intently. Her posture was slightly slouched, her eyes tired, her hands together in fists between her legs.

“But you shined in the end,” Trish stated, “didn’t you?”

Brooke smiled, but offered no agreeing nod.

Had she found no one else to dole out such meager compliments? Trish wondered.

“I’ve gotta go, Miss Foster,” Brooke said, abruptly. “It was nice seeing you.”

“It was nice seeing you too.”

Brooke was almost out the door.



“Brooke,” Trish said, “is everything okay?”

“Just gotta go,” she answered dismissively. “Good luck with the game tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Trish said to a closing door.

Trish regained her faculty footing upon their next encounter. Rather than delve into whatever was bothering Brooke, and offering her help, Trish asked for some. JV coaches had the same work responsibilities as varsity, with none of the support. Because JV was also relegated to the late field schedule, Trish knew that Brooke’s cheering got out before her team’s soccer games, and sometimes even practices, got fully underway.

“Hey Brooke,” Trish called to her one day.

The big, beaming smile, a suddenly hurried gait.

Defenses up, Trisha thought.

Rather than start a casual, got-a-minute conversation, Trish dove in.

“I could use your help,” she began.

Trish later gave herself credit for the way she had manipulated the conversation. Trish needed the help; Brooke knew the game, and could use the community service credit. Trish would just ask someone else if Brooke wasn’t interested. Taking a shot, Trish used the name of a middle school rival of Brooke’s hoping that even if they’d mended fences, there was still a hint of competition to grab onto.

It worked. Brooke became Trish’s de facto assistant for the rest of the season.

And because they were now together on a regular basis, Trish began to know and more clearly see the girl who was once her student. Rather than assuage Trish’s uneasiness, though, Brooke was confirming the still undeveloped fears that something was going on in Brooke’s life which she was unwilling to share.

Something’s wrong, Trish thought time and again. Something’s really wrong.

When she found Brooke, out-of-context, on a city street on a February afternoon, she found also just how wrong things were for Brooke.

It was the back of a head, a stooped posture, cigarette dangling from a shaky hand; the girl fit well into the anonymity of the city. Trish could have easily passed her by, but there was something in the stance. She turned for a moment in Trish's direction, and even though the big sunglasses hid her eyes, and Trish hadn't seen Brooke since the close of soccer season, the girl in front of Trish was too familiar.

"Brooke?"

She turned at her name, then away.

Brooke dropped the cigarette to the pavement, ground it out under her sneaker.

Trish walked toward her.

"Brooke, I can't believe" –she began with a scolding tone.

Brooke turned toward her. Even under the disguise of the shades, what Trish felt perhaps more than saw, stopped her.

"What is it?" Trish asked.

Brooke stared at Trish, her hands clasped together in front of her.

She shook her head, barely.

"Brooke," Trish said, reaching to the girl's shoulder.

Brooke tilted her head, puzzlement in the gesture, as if it just dawned on her that she knew this woman.

"Hi Miss Foster."

"Brooke?"

Brooke brought her hands to her arms, hugging herself against the winter chill.

“What is it?”

Brooke looked into Trish’s eyes. Trish could sense a glimmer of worry, hesitation.

Brooke raised her chin and nodded in the direction of the non-descript brick building in front of them. Trish followed the motion, didn’t understand. She scanned the people, the building, for a clue. In the glass front door, a purposely small sign read: Planned Parenthood.

Trish allowed herself a moment for fuller comprehension and then she looked at Brooke, started to say something, stopped herself. Brooke gave her a shrug, a half smile, and Trish reached out to her, and gently took her in her arms.

They went into the facility together, but Brooke made her own way to a back room where an older woman with a gray-haired ponytail and a kind smile greeted her and took her hand.

Beyond the crumbs of information Brooke shared while they waited for that woman, Trish garnered little. And on the drive back to Brooke’s home, Trish swallowed her questions. Instead, she allowed Brooke to silently stare out the window.

“Could you drop me at the end of the street?” Brooke asked as they neared her neighborhood.

“Sure,” Trish nodded.

Brooke had the car door open before they came to a full stop.

“Brooke,” Trish said quickly.

Brooke began her exit, but stopped, turned.

“We’ll talk, right?” Trish asked, “later.”

“Yeah, sure, Miss Foster,” Brooke said, “whatever.”

She would have run from her, Trish guessed, but Trish reached to her, pulled her in for a hug. Brooke didn't resist, but neither did she respond; there was no reciprocal warmth.

When they finally sat to talk, Brooke gave Trish sparse details –a bad choice, a bad boy- but Trish felt as if the connection they'd built, which had perhaps been always tenuous, was now fully broken. Instead of the slow and growing warmth Trish had begun to feel, there was the old wall, a smile as its facade, with nothing behind it, save for echoing emptiness.

Trish begged for details, urged Brooke to see a counselor, to tell her parents, but Brooke refused. Particularly when Trish told her to let her parents help her, Brooke was adamant.

“They would kill me,” she said.

Not with an, oh-I'm-in-trouble panic in her voice, Trish thought, but rather stated matter-of-factly, as if this was what the girl truly believed.

Trish had never met Brooke's mother, had seen the father only once. He was sternly scolding her, but had gone silent as Trish approached.

“Brooke, get your things,” he said, and the girl did immediately as she was told.

To Trish, he was pleasant, overly so, she remembered thinking. She also remembered placing him quickly as the source of all those characteristics which Trish had so disliked in her earliest encounters with Brooke.

As a morsel, Brooke told her that Anna, her best friend, was taking her to the appointment. She would be fine, she assured Trish over and over again.

And yet Trish's gut instincts told her that Brooke was lying. About everything.

Trish took a personal day and waited outside the clinic on the Tuesday morning of Brooke's appointment. She arrived, as Trish had suspected she would, alone. Trish got out of the car and reached Brooke as she reached the door. Brooke looked up at her, but didn't say a word.

Taking a breath, Trish opened the door and waited for Brooke to pass before her. Brooke took a breath of her own and entered the facility.

During the aspiration, Trish wiped the few tears Brooke allowed herself and held Brooke's hand. Brooke said not a word but squeezed so tightly that Trish's hand ached later. And later still, there was a sort of phantom ache, when days and weeks had passed and everything had changed.

Trish took Brooke back to her apartment, made her something to eat, set her on the living room couch with a blanket and the television remote. Eventually, Trish came and sat beside her and when Brooke made an effort to move and give Trish room on the couch, Trish just lifted Brooke's feet and rested them in her lap.

It was in the ticking moments of that afternoon that Trish pieced together the stories of Brooke's hidden life. And when she finally dropped Brooke off, at the end of her street, Trish knew that what she was about to do would change both of their lives forever.

When Brooke pleaded with her to stay silent, when she insisted that Trish had it all wrong, that she'd misunderstood everything, and when she said in final defeat that Trish would ruin her life, Trisha was confident that she, and not her young student, knew best. But later, when the events had all played out, she knew Brooke would perhaps always believe that Trish had indeed ruined her life. On some level, maybe she had.

Brooke's father was brought to trial, convicted. Brooke's mother and she moved, out of the school district, wisely, but also out of the big house and the affluent lifestyle. The house of cards in which they had always lived fell apart, Brooke buried in its tumbled rubble. For the steep price Brooke had paid, in the end, there was little left in the form of reward. If only Trish had stayed out of it all, Brooke screamed, Brooke would have been gone to college in a few years –and then been gone for good.

The final memory Trish had of Brooke was as she venomously spewed a rant which ended with a quieting chant of "I hate you, I hate you."

The final image of the school to which Trisha had dedicated the last six years of

her life was as she left before the semester's end with a box of her belongings on a rainy spring morning, jonquils fighting ineffectually against graying skies and splattering mud.

Even as she made the moves, Trish had known she was stepping over lines, breaking rules. Rules that made sense. Rules which Trish could have supported -had she not needed to weigh them against what she thought was best for her student. Against that, all else had paled.

At some point, Trish made her way into the preschool. She knew she needed to be there as end-of-day routines played out. Wanted to be there.

The kids were involved in their activities, oblivious to the events still unfolding yards from their door. Little people were set about the art center, the crafts' table, the reading circle.

Trish smiled.

Two boys playing with trucks on a road-patterned rug were tussling about when heads bumped and tears spilled. Trish stepped in to help and soon had Tighe's arms wrapped tightly around her neck. For a few precious moments, she selfishly allowed the little boy to be enfolded in her protective hug, gently rubbing the back of his neck, holding his hand.

And when he asked her to read him just one story and crawled into her lap, she allowed him to remain there.

In hyper-vigilant times when touches were suspect and hugs were discouraged, when there were actual written rules on how a caregiver could assist in a potty run (buttons, yes; zippers, no), Trish knew that giving in to Tighe was against policy.

She didn't care. She engulfed him in her arms, the book forming a closed door to the rest of the children.

Wrong, she thought. But it shouldn't be.

She let her lips graze the fuzz of his short clipped hair and read to him as if they

were alone. Even as the other children gathered round for the treat of Miss Trisha as guest reader, she blocked out their presence. And the presence of a day that had gotten away from them all.

Later, as mothers and fathers, grandparents and friends came to retrieve their children, Trish explained the day's event in the most cursory way she could. There were details they may have wanted and she might have shared; she didn't. Instead, she offered them only assurances that the children were always safe. In her mind, she thought of a police blotter version of events. She knew the story could either be that simple, or if any media outlet had caught wind of it, lead the six o'clock news. The bottom line was that a man was arrested and charged, a restraining order issued. And a young woman and her son were safe—for now.

At the end of the day, as Trish pushed books into shelves and pulled papers into recycle bins, she noted that Aimee had never gotten outta there. There she was, sorting paints and markers, replacing art supplies to cubbies.

Trish walked to the art center and, kneeling beside Aimee, used the spray cleaner and paper towels to wash the surfaces of mini tables and mini chairs.

In the center of the last spritzed table, Trish noted a blue piece of construction paper that was a kidney-shaped cutout and scattered with a virtual pond of origami swans in various colors and sizes.

Trish smiled at their simple complexity.

She took a breath.

Had she given this girl any time at all?

"I don't know if I answered all of your questions," Trish started, "but we could schedule your appointment, if that's what you've decided."

Aimee rose with a stack of tightly capped paints, placed them in their appropriate spot on the shelf.

"That's okay," she said. "I'll call and make the appointment. I just—"

She didn't finish the thought.

"Did you need any more information?"

Aimee shook her head.

"No, thanks."

Aimee stepped to the sink, soaped her hands and ran them under the faucet. She used the paper towels to further remove paint from beneath her fingernails. She dried her hands and then retrieved the oversized denim jacket she had finally shed. She put it on, turned slightly away from Trish, as if readying to leave. Then, she turned back to Trish and extended her hand.

"Thank you," she said.

Trish didn't really know for what she was being thanked, but she took Aimee's hand and shook it. And then, and she didn't know why exactly, she pulled the girl to her and hugged her. Aimee hugged her tightly in response. They separated.

"Aimee, you can call," Trish said, "any time."

Aimee nodded.

Trish nodded in the direction of the just cleaned up room.

"We're always looking for volunteers," Trish offered.

Aimee nodded again.

"Thanks," she said "maybe."

And she left.

Trish wondered if she would ever see the girl again, wondered if Aimee would call even to schedule the appointment.

She watched Aimee leave and then finished cleaning up, and turned out the



lights. By the time Trisha left the building, the crystal clear day had ceded to a dark moonless night.

### When the Devil Walked Through Salem

By Denise Bouchard

Each afternoon I read his letters as the gauzy muslin curtains fly in the breeze of this small cottage and I relive our early years together. His letters, our one year old daughter, these are the only two things that keep me from walking straight toward the seductive call of the waves.

*My Dearest Emily,  
The house is almost finished and I can barely wait to show it to you...*

*My Dear Em,*

*I wanted to wait to surprise you with this but find I can scarcely contain myself. I have created a room just for your quilting. I have added as well a nook off the kitchen for your herbs and the making of your simples with wooden pegs to dry your flowers. I will meet you at the docks on the first of June.*

This last, always brings me back to Salem Village, the house and my excitement when I first saw it. When I met him at the docks, did we hug for too long a time? I always look, in my mind's eye, for the exact moment of my ruination...

"I'm so glad you're here," he said when we separated from our embrace. "I've made arrangements for you to stay in town until we are to be wed but certainly it cannot be improper for me to show you the house. There is no law that says a wife cannot see the house that will one day be hers, is there?"

He seemed quite nervous at that moment and it was so disarming as I was anxious as well. When I first saw the homestead it was fall, red and golden with leaves and every time thereafter for different reasons I was always in awe. Almost every other house was a dark brown. Some in town were white but this was a deep cranberry as was the barn and set against the water as it was, made it a picture of New England beauty. The heavily carved wooden door with wrought

iron and glass insert had been brought over on a ship from the West Indies, bading me enter.

Pumpkins already sat on the stone walls and steps leading to the house, all by Ethan's design. I remember how he carried me across the threshold and how we then shut the door, embraced and kissed as though we were starving.

This had never been our way before. Always having been chaperoned by my family in South Carolina, we had rarely been alone since the day we met. When Ethan had first met my father to talk of his craftsmanship expertise as well as admiring his farming skills, Ethan was then traveling between South Carolina and Boston as a merchant. It was on my mother's front porch that I met Ethan as I sat barefoot on a make-shift swing in front of our home. I had not expected company on that afternoon and I was flustered to be seen in a plain dress with my hair loose and flowing, without a bonnet.

My hair then fell free again in waves down my back as we kissed in the new house and I reached for my bonnet to recover that which should not be seen in daylight and Ethan's large hand stopped my small one.

"No," he said, as he touched my face and put his hands through my hair. No one had ever done so before and oh, had anything ever felt so good? I felt free.

"I've waited so long to do this," he whispered.

"Show me the rest of the house," I asked excitedly in order to slow him down.

He then took me by the hand, showing me, room by room, of his handiwork. In the kitchen was a hearth made of hand-chosen fieldstone. My favorite thing, though, was a golden-hued cabinet with many shelves which he filled already with my prized redware and supplies which he had bought me from the apothecarist; tinctures, a mortar and pestle, and two leather-bound books- one on herb wifery, the other on simples. When he told me there was more, I could hardly bear it. We walked through an elegant, raised-panel dining room, a keeping room and upstairs he had built a window seat in what he hoped would one day be a nursery. There was a large bedroom for us with a carved fireplace but he saved the best for last- a room for my quilting as promised in the letter. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. It was all more than I ever could have imagined. This room had wooden cubicles for fabrics, long shelves and a large

window with a wooden table in front of it where I could work and watch him come in from the fields. I loved the smell of the sweet, raw wood... running my hands over every surface. I wanted it always to stay just like this, simple and beautiful, no ugly dark brown braided rugs like everyone else had, except for the addition of my brightly colored quilts that I'd soon make. I loved the house for its subtle charm. I loved every beam, casement, rafter and odd squeak here and there of the wide plank floors.

He then pulled my hand as we raced outside for him to show me a closer view of the water and the large barn. We kissed again with passion against the barn's new golden-hued wooden walls till in weakness we fell to our knees. I did not know of such a weakness or that it could overtake a person. I almost needed to lay down but then my senses did come over me once more and it was my turn to say 'no'. We stood again, composing ourselves and separated but he looked so crestfallen as though he thought me angered towards him. I then teased him with my red woolen shawl. I ran from him, letting him chase me through the barn to its uppermost level. We were laughing, screeching and playing like children when suddenly, through the top window of the barn, I saw movement from the window of the neighbor's barn. I spied a large belly trying to quickly pull itself back and I thought to myself, 'We are being watched, judged...' I told Ethan of my feelings on this and he laughed and said, "When you see for the first time his hatchet-face wife who is too fat to chase you will understand why he watches you."

This did not appease me, I had heard tell of neighbors such as these, especially in Salem. I put my bonnet back on and we were well-behaved. Thus I remained a virgin until the day we were wed in mid-September when the house was finished. I thought that remaining chaste would be very easy. At first I had feared being alone with a man but rather now wonder if it is a sin to say that it was difficult to wait. I asked myself, 'What is this want to hold him so close?'

It was mid-October and our lives were very good together. We were very happy. My parents had worried needlessly for me and I needn't have feared my husband who was ever gentle and kind. Ethan took to farming and our land caught lovely breezes off the water... though I did not fit in well near the homestead, we did have a few friends in town, being the merchants and their wives with whom Ethan was friendly before he took to farming. I had even sold a few of my quilts and the apothecarist was selling my simples. Still, I felt in the back of my mind that the next door neighbors might be friendlier if I made an

overture of good will towards them. My mind was thusly consumed as I prepared lunch for Ethan one afternoon. Though we had a maid sent by my parents, I continued to prefer to prepare the meals for Ethan myself. I watched him from the kitchen window as he splashed his face at the well. He was so beautiful to me. He caught me watching him as he swung his dark blonde hair from his large hazel eyes.

“Where is my lunch, wench?” he teased as sat in the kitchen and pulled me onto his lap.

“You must behave yourself, husband, or there will be no lunch...” I laughed.

I told him of a funny anecdote that had happened just that very morn as I was washing the breakfast dishes. Three wild turkey vultures were coming towards the front door; two stayed in the background and one of them came forward and pecked the door until I opened it, telling him to schoo.

“Perhaps they had an ordinance banning us from shooting them for the harvest feast,” Ethan chided.

I told him that they were all black, not the usual golden wild turkeys and that they resembled the elders!

“Well, mayhap it was the Reverend Parris and his helpers turned into fowl by witchcraft...”

Later, I wondered if perhaps I should’ve seen all this as an omen as I re-read Ethan’s letters pronouncing his love for me. At the time, I told Ethan I remembered my momma saying that a bird pecking on the door or window was bad luck. He just laughed and said, “Keep the Southern superstitions down South. Our luck is too good to be true.” I laughed uneasily for I knew well that there were stories of doors being knocked upon when innocents were accused of witchcraft. Not long after, our neighbors accused us of something. It was for building our barn too high and supposedly blocking their barn’s view of the water’s edge. It was a simple dispute which we won, but things had begun to sour.

Sarah Tarcher made me out to be a raging harlot, much whispering went on behind my back and our many absences at Sunday morning meeting did not go

unnoticed. Also noticed were my colorful shawls which were actually not at all unusual down South. It seemed I could do nothing to please so I gave up trying. Cheri, our maid, by way of the West Indies did all of my errands. Was it wrong that I was shying away from town? She told me of the ongoing stories from the mercantile and how it seemed that those stories now included me. I heard things too, right from the comfort of my own homestead such as, *'All I know about her is that her father is a successful craftsman and farmer but I hear tell that she be a real simpleton... She dresses like a hussy in bright colors which announce what she is- a common harlot.... They be a wild couple... It is a sin not to attend meeting and see how she stays away from town... I have heard them at night whilst walking; she takes pleasure in the sinful act yet I pray my husband leave me be...'*

In early February when I told Ethan that I might be with child, he was happy but unsettled. This was our home but we were not all together content with raising a child in this narrow-thinking environment. Also, the crops had had a strange mold that fall. The ground had not been as fertile as the wild minds of those endeavoring to plant it, so they sowed lies, doubt and fear instead. I knew that no good could come of this. My parents bade me come home for awhile to have an easy pregnancy and birth but Ethan and I thought we'd rather be together even amidst trying circumstances.

I finally decided to have a little celebratory gathering at the homestead and invite those neighbors who had been unkind. I even invited the Tarchers. Though it took convincing, Ethan eventually gave in for the sake of the higher good, primarily my higher good.

"Perhaps you are right, Em. They will fall in love with you once they get to know you."

The night of the party, Ethan was in good spirits. The merchants, all of his friends from the ordinary, and even the neighbors accepted our invitation. Most everyone loved the house and Ethan showed off the nursery, the window seat and the cradle he'd recently carved. The Tarchers, childless and smileless, kept to themselves but touched every nook and cranny of the house. Sarah sat herself in front of the raised panel fireplace in the keeping room like she'd never leave it.

I was four weeks pregnant when Cheri came running in breathlessly through the

side kitchen garden to warn me. She was looking at me fearfully. I caught her in my arms and asked, "What's wrong, ma Cherie?"

"They come with papers."

There was then a loud banging on the front door. A man in black held out a summons. Two others stood behind, not unlike the wild turkeys. The official summons was read aloud as Ethan came in from the barn where he was finishing a chair just in time to hear the man bellow: "Emily Endicott Morrow is hereby summoned to appear for questioning subsequent to a trial scheduled for March 28th, 1692."

Shocking as it was, I thought that we had time. I assured Ethan that we did. I was brought in that day for questioning. I was not to go home. It seems that I was thought guilty without even having been questioned.

"You have been seen conjuring and mixing potions!"

"I only mix simple medicines for the apothecarist."

"It is a lie!" they yelled.

"You have conceived a child while moaning like an animal in the barn, alone..."

"This child was conceived in sacred love by my husband!" I cried out.

"How self-righteous she is!" the neighbors called out. "You will burn in hell when you die for not going to meeting!"

Ethan screamed at them. "She is the only pure of heart amongst you jealous, lying heathens!"

As he was dragged from the courtroom, I heard him yelling, "I won't let them harm you, Em! They are the hags, the witches, the uncharitable!"

Sarah Tarcher, smiled.

The rest, I can hardly bear to remember. For, to do so, will age me before my

time. Initially I was placed in a very tiny, narrow cell where I almost had to stand for many hours. I can tell you that a pregnant woman is quite unable to do so. Soon, I was standing in my own waste. I cried out endlessly, “Nooooo...” fearing for my unborn child.

When they finally let Ethan see me for the first time he was screaming. “No! Take me! You cannot do this to her! I am the one you should fear!”

I was so upset for him as I saw that he was pulling on his hair, thus I tried to gather myself together for his sake. He knew, however, that I suffered. That very same day he returned with far more money for a “good room”, which is to say a bigger cell. Oh yes, dear readers of a future date, to add insult to injury, we had to pay room and board, to pay for the shackles round our ankles and wrists, to pay for the luxury of being unfairly accused and put into this hole of hell. Ethan then bade them to give me a chamber pot as well as regular meals and a place to lie down. For a man who had built his wife the finest home he possibly could, a man who had sweated and carved and worked his hands raw because he loved so deeply and thought his wife deserving, this was the ultimate torture. He could not eat nor sleep and I feared more for him than myself at that point in time. They, mayhap, would get my body and the body of my child, but as for Ethan, they wanted his very soul. He was allowed visitation once a week as was Cheri. I seemed to drift in and out of sleep on the very small amounts of food they allowed. Ethan would sneak in nutritious things and whisper, “I’ll find a way to help you, Em...”

I’d sleepily say, “I fear that I look dirty and ugly before you...”

He’d respond, “A light shines through you... Your very skin glows and your hair still shines as glowing copper.” He worked behind-the-scenes day and night to have me set free. The merchants were in an uproar knowing that an innocent woman would have to give birth in jail and perhaps burn or hang in the end because of untruths grounded in jealousy. The last thing Ethan told his friends was, ‘They will never live in our home or on our land...’

He sold furniture as fast as he could make it. He let the farm go completely and worked tirelessly to find help. A conversation would later be recalled by many that one night at the ordinary he confided to his friends, ‘I wanted to give her the world and yet it is as if brick by brick I put her in that prison instead, just by bringing her here to this godforsaken town...’

‘Had anyone of ill will seen your home?’ he was asked.

‘Were you not at my house gathering in February?’ he put his head in his hands and continued, ‘...never was there a bigger fool than I. Oh, t’was me who put her there, alright, for in my naivety I showed off better than a jester at medieval courts.’

‘Pull yourself together man... Have you heard of Giles Corey as of late?’

‘I’ve been to busy trying to help Emily. I’ve even been to Boston. What has happened to my friend Giles?’

‘Well, as you know, he was convicted of witchcraft and all because he defended his innocent wife and spoke out. On gallows hill they literally tried to press a confession out of him with heavy stones. Each time they asked him to confess so that legally his land would be forfeit, he replied, ‘More weight.’ He saved his family’s land for his sons-in-law by refusing a trial where he would’ve been convicted. He was a hero but it was a terribly slow and painful death.’

They all knew that night that the magistrates would be coming for Ethan as well. Ethan and his friends decided there and then that they would contact anyone and everyone, including the Governor.

I was doing a great deal of ruminating with the time I had. I thought it interesting how people sinned in God’s name... How they fashioned their own rules to explain away their core jealousies and hatred in order to justify their own means.

The last of it is a blur... I did give birth in jail. I had been slated for gallows hill. There were many rumors flying, even that the baby and I had died in childbirth. My thoughts were growing delirious. I sometimes laughed at how funny it was that the religious faction felt that God hated the same people they did. Cheri was allowed to come more often by then. She was there the afternoon they came to my cell and said simply, “You are to be released, Mistress Morrow.”

I was almost blinded by the sunlight once outdoors. I was malnourished and confused. “Where is Ethan?” was all I could think to ask. “I have not seen nor



heard from him in days, Mistress,” Cheri answered timidly. There were people milling about, staring. My footsteps faltered. Cheri held the babe.

A man from the crowd called out, “Let me help you!” I did not know him but he had kind eyes as well as a horse and a carriage and as I felt weak and tired, I let him. When we reached the homestead I did not understand the smoke and blackened shapes on the ground at first. Had the townspeople burned it?

“I am sorry to say, Mistress, I think ye are too late.”

I looked confused and he tried again.

“It seems the good gentleman farmer has taken his departure from this earth. I’m dreadful sorry, Mistress.”

I was too weak to even cry out. Cheri was there holding the baby and me as well. We just seemed to hold on to each other for the longest time, staring at the remains of my life. The driver came over to where we stood.

“Pray you, Mistress, stay with my family and I. We knew your husband. Ethan was a good man.” He looked over at the Tarchers’ ill-cared for property and seemed ashamed for them. I had nowhere to go, too weak to think on a plan and for lack of a better offer, we stayed with strangers. They carefully nursed me back to health whilst understanding the need to let me be. These kind people took care of us for four weeks when news came from my father. The merchants had gotten word to him and he had procured safe passage for the child, Cheri and I. Before I got onboard the ship, I made a pact with myself—that my daughter and I would never again set foot in the Bay Colony for the rest of our days. I then spat on the ground, nearly gracing the magistrates shoes. He watched me closely, mayhap making certain that Ethan was not hiding out somewhere ready to set sail with us. He needn’t have worried. I knew that Ethan was not there. I could feel it. He would’ve provided word if he had been.

Mamma says that it is a fact that a babe knows whether or not it can trust its parents early on and so I tried, in a Herculean way, to be there for Rebecca. Cheri also tried. She loved Becca as her own. We feared the babe would not survive the voyage to the Carolinas but the rocking of the ship and Cheri’s songs seemed to soothe her, keeping her sleeping. Cheri’s concern lay more with me

though I tried to be spirited when we arrived in the Carolinas. I chose a cottage by the sea against my parent's wishes. I needed to be near the water and I needed to be somewhat alone.

I try to laugh, to smile for Becca. She sees and feels me all too well, though as I sometimes catch her looking with such sadness for me, so intelligent and sensitive is she. Cheri often takes care of us both. Her Creole singing soothes. Becca resembles both Ethan and I with my copper hair and his big hazel eyes. The child is of such good humor with a deep laugh. I am no longer able to bring such joy to the surface as easily as I once did. Still, we will laugh, this child and I. The sunset tonight over the water is beautiful beyond imagining. We walk to the water's edge and I playfully splash my daughter. She is a golden child, exquisite in the light of sunset. I wish her father could see her; mayhap he can. There is a white heron nearby. I used to see this as a good sign but I no longer believe in such. Every day at this time I walk back to the cottage and see if there are any letters, any news. Cheri will always take Rebecca from me at this time and I will sit on the sun porch.

There is a letter on this day, it is always the same, letters from my parents beseeching me to leave my cottage by the shore and join them inland. I cannot go home, I am not the same. I am not the Emily they remember. I will visit with them often but I will always prefer to be near the water now. It is the one thing I take from the town of Salem as a good memory. I use the letter to fan myself. It will be a humid evening. Still, there is a comforting breeze moving the curtains. I notice that whenever I stop fanning myself and rest my hand, that the envelope feels thick; heavy with persuasion, mayhap. It is then that I notice that the envelope looks different. There is nothing about it that has the look of the local environs. It becomes familiar when I open it. The handwriting is very familiar and it begins thus:

*My Dearest Emily...*

A sound escapes me that causes Cheri to come running. I go on reading aloud and the household stills.

*I thought I had lost you. I was told that you and the baby died in childbirth in the jail. I destroyed the barn first, the thing most hateful to me, because everything started with a dispute over it. I then set the rest of the land on fire. "They" will never live in our home nor on our land. I heard tell that you are*

*living in the Carolinas and am sending this as soon as I could. I am filled with joy knowing that you and the baby are alive. I am living in the West Indies working as a trader but until now, my soul has not been with me. We will never be able to forget what we went through, but if I may join you, mayhap we can have a life together if you shall still have me.*

I was lost in reverie. He told me that he could never promise to be the same man, that he was now unable to spoil me with praise or amuse me of any lightness of being. 'Should I,' he asked, 'still come to you then?'

"Yes," I answered even as I read aloud. "YES!"

We made our way back to one another from such a long distance and, I'm not talking here about the ship sailing from the West Indies to South Carolina, but of the few inches or so that separated us in our bed. He was wrong about himself though. Slowly, he was able to love and even laugh again. And I, was ever slowly, again able to trust another's touch. There was finally a night as we lay side by side when our fingers touched and then laced together. He waited for me to reach out to him first. A few nights later I turned towards him and he held me with such tenderness. We did not kiss with hunger like before.

On this night, we both did cry quietly and privately together. My tears running down his shoulders and chest for all we'd been through, for all of the others who suffered unspeakably and unfairly and for all that we'd built and lost.

The Reverend Parris used to say that the devil was in Salem. As I think upon it now, I guess it was easy to believe because it was as if he walked through our town, passing an evil hand over the crops, just brushing against someone's shoulder would've ruined their lives... The Reverend would have me believe that he mayhap had walked by the waterfront and couldn't help but notice our beautiful red house and barn, the color of fire. His jealousy would've been so great that one look towards the windows of our homestead would've brought this upon us. Yes, that would explain things, Reverend, but I no longer see it that way. No, it was the lies, the petty jealousies, and the fear which you instilled in your own congregation; that, Reverend Parris, is what brought us down. That and the power which you gave people to tap others on the shoulder and say, 'You're it,' like the innocent game of tag which we all played when young. When power is attached to those words, there's no telling what evil can be conjured.

We made the journey back to ourselves with patience and love. We live a good life together. No, it is more than that, much more. The three of us actually thrive.

Post log- I have recorded all of this in a diary that I hope someone one day finds, hopefully in the 1700 or 1800s neighbor will befriend neighbor. Let this be a warning against jealousy, lies, meanness and false judgments.

*Historical Note- In 1693, the Witch Trials finally came to an end. Twenty-four people died as a result of this hysteria, most by hanging. The end began when they started accusing Governor's William Phips wife and the use of "spectral evidence" was no longer allowed. The court of Oyer and Terminer was dissolved in October of 1692. Even after Governor Phips pardoned and released many of those accused still in jail, Deputy Governor William Stoughton, who had been appointed Chief Magistrate, attempted to issue execution warrants for those woman who'd received reprieves do to pregnancy. Phips did not allow this and Stoughton had to leave the bench as a result. Except for the mention of Giles Corey and Reverend Parris, this account is purely of the author's imagination but this dark time in our country's history was very real.*

---

Say You'll Be My Darlin'

By Elizabeth Dunphey

People would talk about the 70s like it was the best decade or the worst. It was the years of Jimmy Carter saying he had sinful thoughts, and political chaos. Archie Bunker and that red head from One Day at a Time, Mackenzie Phillips, bone thin from drugs, toughing the real world out. Maybe the grooviest pot smoking songs in history. Dreamy people like Fleetwood Mac and Bread postulating an imaginary universe without violence.

Older men, younger women everywhere too. This wasn't particularly a seventies thing, but it was a common pairing in urban places. Add to it the interracial mix and you had a formula for a Norman Lear comedy. Baby, baby, it was a steamy universe. In New York, there were lots of skinny girls. Many dark girls in minis who could pass for white, who might have been anything from "Spanish" to

"French", tapping their long legs on the side of the West Side Highway, turning tricks for nothing but the fact that they liked men and needed cash. End of story.

Vivien wasn't like those ghetto girls. She went to a private school. She spoke perfect English and painted like Chuck Close. The school was for gifted children, and everyone had a talent. She wore a plaid skirt every morning with a blue tie. These were smart street kids. Smart and savvy. They teased authority.

Vivien was sipping her milk cartoon, cool as can be, when she noticed Alex. He said his name was Mr. Berkowitz, but she could call him Alex. It was a liberal curriculum, with criss-crossing boundaries of jurisdiction.

Alex Berkowitz had big brown eyes that entranced Vivien Glass. He was a white man, a Jew. This didn't matter a lick; but he made it known to her the first afternoon they met. His faith was important to him - it was more than keeping kosher, it was a whole universe of rituals and exploration of texts like the Talmud. He removed his beret and she saw his hair was falling out a little at the crown but it touched her. This was her music teacher, and she was sixteen years old and black- light skinned enough to pass, but basically his opposite. She had one thing going for her though. She looked like Ronnie Spector, down to the girl group bangs.

Alex called her up on the telephone one evening and her heart raced. "Can I escort you to the prom as a pal? I'd hate for you to miss the prom just cause some teenage boy didn't ask you."

She wore an egg shell green dress that had no straps, molding to her body like the ocean to the beach. With her sooty hair down for once, straightened, she kind of looked like the model Pat Cleveland. Pat had the pallor of a Japanese geisha. Her mother even took a photo of the two of them on the stoop. Of course, Alex said he was just escorting her into the building, and of course they couldn't dance together in public or kiss. That came later.

On the train home, he said he would show her his guitar collection. She had never been to Westchester, his preppie homeland. She didn't think girls "like her" would make it there. It was so different there - so White Protestant. But at night it had an eerie beauty, just a stones throw from ghastly Sleepy Hollow. And so odd to be with a man in his thirties, who cradled his guitar with passion.

One of their songs was about a bunny who could not find it's owner in the woods. No boy had broken her yet, there were no scars on her heart. She sat down on the couch and sipped her brandy in a paper cup and listened. "Alex," she said thoughtfully, "You've got soul." And in her young mind he did.

In public, Mr. Berkowitz had a Sutton Place shiksa too, a demure tigress you would imagine on her back in Vogue, model style, doing all the things white girls do in their white girl world. But Vivien knew she was just as pretty and in the bedroom, her teacher held her.

For a moment, she knew she had won. For how long she would win, how long the island of teenage years would save her, and what hypocrites would tear their two races apart, Vivien did not know.

Maybe their secret love would last 'til eternity, like Ronnie Spector sang in "Be My Baby". She imagined herself as being Ronnie; that superstar... And so beautiful, cocoa skinned with those Cherokee angles to her dark face. Locked in a record room with Phil Spector. Locked to the genius who would one day gun down his lover. Ronnie: locked away for posterity, a beautiful girl, a beautiful song.

Whatever would come of the future, she could feel with the patter of her heart that this, her story, was a Motown gem in the making. Wistfully, she smiled.

---

### The Age of Victoria

By Nicole M. Bouchard

With one hand behind him, his eyes closed and his back against the cherry wood hutch, he felt about the sapphire velvet-lined drawer with purpose. When his hand closed around the cool metal of his quest, he breathed a deep sigh of surrender. Round caliber, thirty-nine mm at muzzle, smooth bore barrel at three hundred and thirty-three mm; a British service blunderbuss that was used by the East India Company in the earlier part of the century. A symbol of the unyielding British fist-hold over the rest of the world. It seemed fitting given the circumstance of his defeat. She had been as bitterly cold and indifferent to his existence as the weapon he now held

in his hand. Uninvited, she'd overtaken every natural resource he possessed using them to her own ends until she discovered the treasures stowed away in his heart. Her blue-blood veins showed beneath the porcelain skin as she seized the last of it in her hands, bleeding him dry.

He stopped to think of how he'd come to this...

Across the Atlantic, England glimmered lush and green with promise. Like his father, he was a merchant of trade. Unlike his father, however, he was ambitious to a fault. No more than a year after his apprenticeship was through, he was being courted by employers. Each experience a draught to cure his restlessness, he grew immune ahead of his time. Wanting more each passing day with a sharp mind and a touch of arrogance, it wasn't long before he was struggling out on his own to establish himself. Like a fledging turtle left to fend for itself, he washed from the sand to the sea, knowing it was sink or swim. It was a frantic pace at first, kicking, arms flailing, fighting for breath. The commotion, the desperation, helped to learn him of the ways of the tides. Soon he'd found an imperfect stroke that helped him touch the surface on occasion, never sinking low enough to lose sight of the sun. The awkwardness smoothed until he'd developed a staid sort of consistency. He was not yet a master of his environment, but he had become a master of himself, reigning in the impertinence of youth. Humbled by the struggles, he achieved the ability to be perceived as a dependable commodity.

Beneath the neat clothes and the checked features, still existed a hunger for more... It was tucked and folded quietly into his dreams where his feet walked the surface of golden waters. As with the beginning of every great chance or adventure come what may, it was this hunger that tempted a smile from the face of Lady Fortune, bringing a set of circumstances his way.

"I don't care for this venture of yours," his father said quietly as William bent forward in front of the parlor fireplace with the printed pamphlet in hand. "Your reach exceeds your insatiable grasp, Will."

Charles Abrams was skeptical of British interests as the papers toted the

questionable actions of Charles Elliot, the British Chief Superintendent of Trade, and the words of William Gladstone, a member of Parliament who deemed the First Opium War as a way to favor Britain monetarily while supporting the drug trade that besieged Chinese society. He would not voice these arguments to his son who saw only the more positive aspects of legal trade and opportunity. Were he to be burned by his actions, William would have to learn to fall and recover of his own volition.

His mother was watching the pair of them. Nearly always at odds with one another, their characters made it seem as though the bricks of their Boston home weren't nearly numerous enough to hold them both. William was a child born with his eyes open wide, fists waving at the air in sheer anxiousness to get the process of life going faster. He filled rooms with his entrance. Easily she could have fit twenty average young men in the room at once. Though this facet of her only son contributed to the upset of balance in their home, it was also that which endeared her to him all the more. She was certain the wild fire in his blood didn't come from her even-tempered husband. When she looked at her son like this, she entertained the notion that it was something that had come from her... a wind spirit that had once asked her to leave the nursery on a blustery day... Yet not daring enough to acknowledge the risk that came from within and invite a storm, she declined and shut the window forever. Some days she would still look out and see that wildness. A slight yearning stirred her blood, but she would then turn away, back to the appropriate roles society had planned out for her. This was either her virtue or more than she cared to admit, the fear that if she ventured out to call that wind, it wouldn't come to her anymore.

"Charles..." she entreated her husband.

Her gentle voice always had a way of smoothing his hardest edges.

"You're a man, Will. I cannot chart your course any longer. I just wonder what will ever be 'enough' for you." Auburn curls tinged with gray caught the light from the fire, making his downturned face more ominous than he gave it credit for. Yet the aversion of the eyes meant that he'd spoken his last words on the subject. His concerns were silent and if he had wished to reveal them, it was not in his nature to.



Will didn't want to disappoint his father who'd lived a good life of content moderation, but it didn't feel as though his thirst had an all encompassing power to corrupt him. It felt more like a beginning than a path toward an end. No doubts pulled at his trousers. Only aspirations moved under his heel like a current, already decided. If he could just make his father see it as he did... He was always one to make decisions according to his sole opinion, yet for this one rite, in a way he couldn't explain, he wanted the approval of Charles Abrams. Certain it would not come now, he abandoned his place by the fire in front of his father, feeling foolish for having made himself vulnerable with the mere presentation of it. The pamphlet was hastily shoved into his dress coat as he braced himself by the window where their small city garden prospered under gray skies.

Charlotte Abrams didn't know which man was more in need of her comfort. In the end, she placed her hands on her husband's shoulders. William was young enough to heal from these moments. The burden of their disagreements was always on the preceding generation.

She caught up to her son after supper as he put on his topcoat and hat to go to the club. "Will, dear? Wait a moment..."

Deep in thought, he paused simply out of instinct, rather than for consideration of her presence. The deep brown waves of his hair were smoothed back precisely. Only a hint of auburn glimmer in the light of the foyer and the distinct character of his chin gave any resemblance to his father. Charlotte chose a small space in the shadow of her son to stand in until he was ready to acknowledge her.

"I suppose you'll tell me not to cross Father," he said flatly.

"I never stood in your way, Will. And your father is merely concerned for you. I know that you won't be caged so I'll let you spread your wings across the sea. I realize that you wouldn't have approached this in such a fashion if you weren't seeking some sort of approval. I give you mine with my heart. Take care, child, not to break it." She cupped his face in her raised hand and stretched upward on tip toe to kiss his cheek.

He embraced her in his young man's arms but his smile was that of a little boy. It felt like the last time he would embrace her for years even though he

wasn't set to depart from Boston for another two weeks. There was a separation beginning from his old life and despite the fact that he'd anticipated this moment since his youth, it didn't come with the elation he'd expected. Instead, he felt adrift, cut loose without paddles in the boat. She tightened her hold sensing his thoughts, knowing she'd keep the candles lit in the windows each night until he came home in hopes that their glow might reflect in the mirrors of the stars, always guiding his way.

It was those stars he watched as the ship bore him away from the familiar shores of Boston to the British Isles in the spring of 1843, shortly after Queen Victoria had declared Hong Kong a British crown colony. The Treaty of Nanjing was rapidly opening doors that had previously been barred.

Specializing in antiques, gold and silver, William had caught wind of the lucrative merchant trades between England and China under the Qing dynasty. Taking the most of his profits to invest in silver, he was headed to bustling London at the invitation of Lord Hamilton who had heard of William Abrams' diligence and savvy from his nephew Alexander who had encountered William in Boston on a business trip. Alexander Daughtry was taking in the picturesque city while awaiting shipments of silver coming in from Mexico. It was down at the docks where he first encountered William Abrams who walked in his tailored suits with a confidence beyond his station and a startling spark in his eye.

The overcrowded streets of London reeked of a growing world's excesses. Industrialization had driven an enormous population into the city looking for employment. Row housing, the advent of sewage, coal fires and poor hygiene created a thick, surreal smog despite the sun. Each cobblestone, whether raised or smooth, swayed the carriage ever so slightly, upsetting his nausea. Fetid aromas assaulted his nose, seeming to reach down the back of his throat with skeletal, impoverished hands. His only means of defense was a white handkerchief his mother had embroidered with his initials; this delicate sovereign served two purposes- the first being to shield his nose and mouth from the odors, the second as a preventative shield over his lips should he vomit. Dazed and pale with a damp brow, he arrived on the stone steps of the stately brick home a touch disheveled, looking worse for wear. The driver, upon noticing the young man's condition, not only opened the door, but assisted his passenger to the top step. Had he felt

brave enough, he might have suggested that the boy take a moment to straighten his appearance before knocking upon the opulent double doors; the sort of thing he might have said to his own son. Yet this American had his jaw tightly set, trying to piece together his pride and one wrong word might have negated a gratuity. With money pressed into his hand, the carriage driver departed quickly, not quite wanting to linger for the next scene.

Exhausted and undone, William thought to smooth his clothes, but his hair and moist, flushed face were neglected and most in want of attention.

When the butler opened the doors, he did not know immediately if he should call for a physician or the local bobbies\* .

Darkly, William noted that the only reason the butler saw fit to admit him into the foyer at all was the presented letter from Lord Hamilton in his hand. He wondered what he might have done if he'd been turned away from the house without the knowledge of his host. Would he've wandered about in this foreign country, centuries away it seemed from Boston? Tried to wait a night walking uncertain streets until he encountered his party at the offices? The thought was intolerable.

He was bade to wait in the foyer until the butler had formally announced him. It was there, as he stood in a harried state of disarray that he first caught a glimpse of the shimmering black tresses set against sapphire silk and porcelain skin as she moved from the sitting room to the main parlor, oblivious to him and her greater surroundings like a phantom waltzing across a dream. His breath was suddenly cold as the sensation spread through his chest as though he'd been struck in the ribs. He didn't hear his name called or see Lord Hamilton approaching. She had vanished, yet the vision of her lingered to hold his senses captive; it was a dark spell to which he fell victim willingly- if only to feel its pain once again.

A touch upon his shoulder shattered the moment and temporarily vanquished the mirage.

Lord Hamilton appraised him as he would his collectibles. William Abrams didn't look like much upon a cursory glance yet there was a tangible hunger about him that shown bright with promise.

“Come, come my boy... It must have been a tiresome journey. Let us venture to my study where we can discuss our matters of business.” It was a curtly, if politely, issued command rather than a suggestion.

William wished that he had been permitted to freshen his face and change clothes first. It wasn't only his appearance that he wanted to improve but also his mindset. Without so much as a moment to speak, let alone an opportunity to request an altered course in plans, he was ushered elegantly with a phrase and a sweeping arm toward a different life. He nodded with a smile, casting one last glance at the entryway of the main parlor.

“I had hoped that your ship would have arrived earlier in the day... but no matter. We have time to talk, you and I. Tell me of what you wish to accomplish here, young Mr. Abrams. We are living in a time of great opportunity. Innovation, change, progress are all ours to be had. Would that I were again your age to take part in it all. Tell me, what is your annual income at present?”

“Presently, if I were to name it in pounds, it would be 4,000. However, with time and experience here I plan to”-

“What if it were to double by this time next year? Now just think on this- if you were to come onboard here, how much time would you invest?”

“Lord Hamilton, I can assure you that I would put every effort possible into expanding your trade exponentially and foresee spending a great deal of”-

“Two years and see if you are not one of the wealthiest merchants in England. Men three times your age are struggling to make a decent livelihood. Think of the life you'll be creating. Now what goods have you invested in?”

“I've studied the trade of the British Empire and invested a great deal of my earnings in silver. I believe firmly that we can improve the negotiations with Mexico to increase our profit and diminish our cost by a percentage of”-

“Silver is the past, Mr. Abrams. I've seen the great work you've done but

now it is time to pair a skilled merchant with the proper tools. Sell off your silver and at a low percentage we will furnish your position with the most lucrative item in the Sino-British trade. You'll have the larger of your profits and rather than have you buy much of the goods at your own expense, we will provide you with them."

William would come to know that Lord Hamilton seldom asked questions to which he did not already have the answers to give. The figures on the paper that changed hands in the study astounded him. The offer was more than generous and the costs were greatly diminished by the trading of an item from regions under the British empire, whereas the cost of silver was high in dealing with Mexico and continental Europe. Rather than buying products which they could sell, they already had possession of the wares intended for trade; opium from Bengal and Malwa.

"You would never have had an opportunity like this in Boston, my dear boy..."

Hearing a creak upon the polished oak floors, he opened his eyes and lowered the blunderbuss back into the drawer in the event of someone's unexpected entrance into the study.

Wearing the same gown as when he'd first seen her, she stepped into the room and paused her approach when she caught sight of him. With a near feline curiosity, her head tilted in the shadows while her eyes glowed with fascination. Never one to be seen disheveled, William always took special pains to look the part, particularly when in the company of those who out-classed him. It had been some time since their last encounter. He had been in China for two months and yet he looked as though an eternity had come and gone across his face. Sleepless dark crescents beneath his wild eyes were accentuated by the curves of his high cheekbones that had become more prominent due to a sudden loss of weight.

He pushed the drawer closed behind him abruptly as one would a chest of treasures from prying eyes and the sudden noise seemed to shake her.

There was something fierce that had made its way up to the surface of his

being. Something she'd not seen before, something she'd unearthed by digging her nails deep down into his soul. Typically, the men she destroyed didn't look like this. They looked like ghosts; apologetic for being alive. Everyone could recognize the men who had been scorned by her love. They were the half-men walking the streets of London, whose forms seemed undefined, unsure, so that you might walk right through one of them without noticing. William had a dangerous, undone look about him as though he was capable of any given thing at that moment. The flames hadn't consumed him; instead they'd become a part of him.

"You seem surprised. Don't you recognize me?" he asked sharply. "You ought to know your own work."

He hadn't given her any time to compose herself and without another word walked directly toward her as though he might throw her aside in his vicious attempt for the door, the one escape from the room. Instead he turned sideways at the last moment and brushed past her, his body and gaze unapologetically searing across her. It was to his back that she finally spoke his name. He stopped at the sound of her voice yet did not turn around.

"You're wanted in the courtyard, my uncle sent me to find you." If she didn't openly acknowledge his behavior, his words, the gnawing desire to say more, she could remain as she was; unharmed, unmoved, blissfully unaware.

"Indeed." His low reply was nothing other than a confirmation of what she was playing at. Of course, he was saying, of course you would lack the depth and decency to acknowledge your sins, of course you would make it seem as though you were made to seek me out and couldn't be bothered to think of me otherwise. It was startling to think that anyone, least of all one of her victims, would have her figured out so well. Though she feared very little from life, she was petrified of the day someone would know her enough to render her powerless. Electing to put the game to rest for the space of the day, she stayed alone in the country house, pressed to the doorframe of the study looking for the answers she didn't want to see.

"William, dear boy, finally took it upon yourself to join us, eh? Sit down and pour yourself a brandy. One day back and you look rested already. Tell

me, how did you fair this time? No troubles, I suspect?”

It was clear to every gentleman present that the once vibrant young man looked drawn to the edge yet amongst their circle, with the exception of William, Lord Hamilton’s comment was meant to be rather facetious.

Though it took the first two years instead of one, William’s income had doubled as promised. Now a full six years later, he was earning 12,000 pounds each year. Centuries, layers of memory and self had gone by since he left Boston. By many standards he was a success yet he it was always made clear to him that he could only reach so high. Even though he had made the aristocrats around him wealthy men, helping them to recover squandered fortunes, he was not nor would he ever be one of them. It was an elite club that reached centuries back in birthright and no notions of progress or industry would change that. He was also at a point where he could no longer convince himself of the legitimacy of his work. In the beginning he chose to make himself think of opium as more of a medicinal drug than a recreational one and saw no harm in the selling of mass quantities to the Orient. Free trade was legal and encouraged.

His father’s letter in the year of 1844, announcing the American treaty banning Americans from selling opium did little to deter him as the trade went on- both native British and Americans were only held accountable to their consuls and it was only a matter of time before the trade was legalized under the Treaties of Tianjin. His letters home became more and more distanced, the space of the entire ocean between them fixed within the space following each word.

It was an age of moral consciousness- to what ends the opium was used, he believed was a personal matter. Were the taverns subject to prosecution because of the local drunks that frequented them? Right and wrong had become very fluid concepts as the world around him became a golden one. And square in the center of it was Victoria. Named in the likeness of the queen, she had every grace and charm available to her through her noble heritage with a beauty that seemed to burn. She was his obsession, the drug that he could not survive without. He worked with the vigor of twenty men to create a life worthy of her, believing that if he could accomplish all that was set before and more that her heart would soften and Lord Hamilton would deem him worthy enough to place a ring upon his niece’s

finger.

There was the first Christmas when the British novelist, Charles Dickens, published the story of A Christmas Carol. William had asked Victoria to accompany him to a holiday musical performance at Hoxton Hall. The first snow of the season had begun to fall as they rode in the carriage on their way there. Dressed in a fine frockcoat, a coordinating waistcoat, cravat and trousers that he had spent a great deal of his earnings to have a respected tailor handsomely craft, he clutched his top hat nervously in his hands. Alongside him, she sat stiffly in a burgundy silk gown that bared her shoulders beneath a fur shawl. Her hair was gathered so that curls spiraled down upon her shoulders, yet the thick waves were tucked away from her face. Having come upon her numerous times when she was reading Great Expectations\* in the garden or by the fire in the country manor house, he knew of her fondness for Dickens. Wrapped in vibrant, emerald silk ribbon, tucked under his arm was the copy of A Christmas Carol that he had purchased for her. He kept it hidden during the performance. It wasn't until they arrived back at Lord Hamilton's home and he reached for her hand as she descended the carriage that he took her gloved hand and held the book out to her. Makepeace Thackeray had hailed it in a review, calling it "a national benefit" and "a personal kindness" to those who read it.

Turning it over in her hands, she seemed vulnerable for a moment, more like the child she must've been, in his opinion. Catching his glance, she shivered slightly though the flush in her cheeks indicated that she felt warm despite the cold.

"William," she scolded, "...you're far too sentimental." Her laugh cut through the frigid air, attempting to slice apart any significance the moment might have held. Not yet willing to surrender, he stopped her from walking past him to the steps with a light touch upon her arm.

"Are you always in a play?" he asked, his hand lingering upon her forearm. "Tonight, here outside in the silence before the snow loses its white from the rest of the world, betray yourself and consent to a kiss. I ask for no false kindnesses or idle, sweet words of your mouth nor its venom- just for your mouth as it is..." Her eyes remained on his hand and closed when he cupped her face in his



free hand to press her lips with a restrained passion that asked her to be someone else in his arms. Perhaps for that moment she was, even though she knew that she would come to make him pay dearly for it in the end.

Lord Hamilton scrutinized William's face for the sign that would tell him whether he had gotten his full use of the young man or whether there was more road to be had.

"No troubles, as you say," he replied, taking a drink in hand. The gentlemen exchanged glances of relief and settled more deeply into their chairs. William looked at Lord Hamilton directly and found the old man's chin raised in amusement. He knew that William would continue the game for the moment but disillusionment had crept into his bed and like a desperate lover would take no leave of him until it was satiated with the possession of his heart.

Hong Kong was riddled with the delirium that it had been handed, replaced by the former virtues served on silver spoons. No troubles... At least none that could be felt if you made yourself numb enough and by the time the haze cleared, you were glad that you weren't conscious of how it was all tumbling down around you. The imperial court had insulated itself in the heart of Peking behind the walls of the Forbidden City.

William had run into Alexander Daughtry on his latest trip. Alexander could not help but wonder if it had been an entirely different man he'd seen six years ago on the docks in Boston. He had heard of William's success and his uncle's profits. Why was there no sense of accomplishment or content worn on him then? Over bourbon, William alluded to all of the hopes and dreams that had come, gone and continued to evade him while he sold away pieces of himself with every venture. Alexander nodded with a deeper understanding than he cared to admit. He had only wished to give to William that which he thought he wanted. He knew the rules all too well. To keep afloat, he chose to stay within the circumstances that his birth afforded him. This did not mean that he couldn't see how it would unravel someone inducted from the outside who too late discovered that it wasn't the world he expected it be.

"You have a look about you, Will. I know that look because I've seen it on

many lads before you. What of my cousin Victoria, then?”

At William’s silence, Alexander confirmed his fear. “I think you should understand something about my uncle. He uses whatever resources make themselves available to him. He would not take in the orphaned child of his sister without a purpose in mind. She is very beautiful. Don’t you think it strange that she has yet to be married off? If you think the worst of her, just imagine how sinfully bittersweet it is that she has no knowledge that she is being used like a product of trade; she inspires and entices promising young men to reach great heights in working for my uncle. When they expire like over-worked horses, he counsels her to let go of them quite suddenly. She is no innocent yet he has molded her into what she is simply by neglect. Don’t think that he won’t one day revoke his sponsorship of her when her prettiness wanes... I cannot hate the man and yet I cannot abide him either. Lord Hamilton paid for my education- it was through these connections that I carved a life for myself. I don’t mean to make excuses or pardon my own choices. I love my wife and children, Will. How I make my way in the world is not paramount to me.

I thought you wanted the same things. I didn’t think... I assumed that it would be different for you, as opposed to the others. I thought that he wouldn’t bother to dangle Victoria before your eyes...”

“You thought me unworthy enough to be safe?”

“No. Not I. I thought that they would think you unworthy enough to let you alone. You proved to be too much of a valuable asset for your own welfare. And you’ve discovered that the treasure isn’t worth the trial... I’m sorry, Will.”

“I’m no less guilty than you. You gave me what I yearned for that day in Boston. If I’ve changed and become more or less of a man, it is through no fault of yours. I fell prey to my own ambitions... and knowing what I know now, if she offered me a draught of poison, I would gladly take it of her.”

Victoria listened to his footsteps until she was certain that he had exited the house. In the quiet aftermath, she crossed the room to the hutch where he’d stood moments before. Her hands ran over the cherry wood doors that

revealed nothing but the books, papers and silver desk ornaments of her uncle. It wasn't until she tried the first drawer that she discovered the British service pistol. Tentatively, her fingers brushed the metal. She gasped, turning her back to it sharply and shoved the drawer closed. Was it pity over his willingness to end his life that clasped cold hands around her neck as she tried to catch her breath? It was far too intense a feeling to be pity. It was anger that kept her back against the wood, anger that anyone could be so foolish, anger over his weakness, the beginnings of a rage she couldn't explain. Deep inside, she screamed.

"Uncle, he's become quite dull and tiresome. How long do you intend to keep him here?"

"I feel, my dear, that he'll soon be leaving us, regardless of whether he's dismissed. There will be others, there will always be others... I cannot grasp why a promising young man like Abrams would choose to ruin himself now. I've done all that I can for him. Fear not, I don't desire you to pay him any further attention to indulge his ego. There are many who would have his place and so they shall. Better for your future if you direct your affections toward them."

The tight feeling in her chest spread.

"Am I to choose a husband of noble birth from amongst them?"

Lord Hamilton had not looked at his niece until then. "You are still so young, my dear. We'll want to await a proper match."

"But Uncle,"-

"Perhaps, my dear, perhaps..."

She lingered in the hall close to the room where William slept. It would be for the better when he left them. It was the previous spring that came to her mind when they had returned to the manor house to escape the din of London. After an extravagant nine course dinner with guests from the city, everyone gathered in the evening for a game. One gentleman and his wife suggested charades, another couple rallied for "The Laughing Game" and two young merchants threw in the choice of "Poor Pussy Cat". There was

something in the sheer degradation of the latter that inclined Lord Hamilton toward it. He appointed Victoria to choose the first victim. It was too deliciously cruel an opportunity to pass over and the seductive sway with which she approached Will was predatory. Intoxicated with the power she held over his and so many others' affection, she leaned toward him to whisper in his ear as he sat, the neckline of her gown trying the border of scandalous with just a bit of lace to bring it back to the side of acceptability. His jaw tightened, his eyes flickered to a darker shade of green as she shamelessly relayed the rules to him. The memory of his eyes, the way they regarded her in those moments... the mix of pain, anger and humiliation...

He was to crawl on all fours in his fine evening clothes amongst the present company, meowing for pity, crouching in front of their guests in order for them to utter the words, "Poor Pussy!" and if they maintained complete composure, if neither he nor they laughed, he was condemned to crawl to the next person until someone laughed, relieving him of his task. She knew that he couldn't refuse the whim of his fellow colleagues who by now were uproarious with the notion of the game and the fact that its first victim had never played it. She hadn't hesitated. It only struck her now how she must have felt something enough to remember it all in such detail.

As he rose, she took his seat. Will reluctantly lowered to the floor, first to his knees in front of her. The same dark expression on his face. Had she expected to see some glimmer of hope in his eyes that she might think better of it and relieve him of this? Take his place? His gaze remained unaltered, knowing she would grant no pardon. Perhaps it this that led her out of spite to utter, "Poor Pussy!", in a most mocking tone with her features straight so that he would have to continue to crawl... subject to the mercy of the others.

Quite suddenly, his expression warped into a wicked smile and he laughed.

The others clapped in delight, calling out, "Poorly played, Will! You couldn't last in the game a second! Now Victoria has to take your place!"

With a feigned smile of good humor, she realized that he had wisely turned the rules against her.

"Up, Victoria! Up! Give Will his seat and show him how its done!"

She shrank to the floor, her pride disappeared amongst the heaps of her gown and crawled away towards the other guests with exaggerated meowing and silliness until she could make one of the others laugh.

Leaning against his door, she heard his breath deep and even as he slept. He would never be her fool and that was why it was best that she cut him adrift...

He dreamt of Boston that night and the stars he had seen from the ship as he crossed the Atlantic.

It was a week later when a letter arrived bearing his father's writing.

"Will, this has just come for you," Lord Hamilton called out from the study.

Will accepted the envelope. The script of Charles Abrams was sharp and rigid. Though indeed his father's penmanship, the writing on the outside of the envelope was scratchy, uncertain with loose letters hardly touching the paper as though they apologized for being there at all. Will wordlessly returned to his room to read the letter in privacy.

"I'm needed at home. My mother has taken ill. I'll be returning to America on the morning ship."

Lord Hamilton nodded solemnly, hardly surprised that the time had come, yet a frown was etching itself into the corners of his mouth beneath the bristling edges of his mustache.

"I'm sorry to hear of this. Please convey my regards to your mother and father. When do you plan to return?" he asked with his gaze averted, hands clasped in order to appear noncommittal.

"I don't, Lord Hamilton. I will be leaving England tomorrow to return home to Boston. I believe we can agree that we've both profited by our business together. I understand that you have others vying to fill the position. You will hardly be left in need. I have here the documents that detail the trading relationships I've established. Everything is in order."

“Your decision is final then, my boy?”

“It is.”

“Ah. So be it, then. You’ve done well. You shall be”-

“Missed?” Will interjected.

Lord Hamilton unclasped his hands and leaned back further in his seat, retreating a bit. “Yes. Missed,” he replied, wondering if perhaps there was more truth to that than he cared to admit. He had had his use of Will, they would not remember their time together in any sort of fondness, yet there was a sliver of pride when he regarded the young man who stood before him, ready to leave, ready to defy.

“Thank you for your gracious role as host. I’ve left a sum for the servants.”

“Shall I send someone up to help you pack your things?”

“I can manage.”

Will extended his hand and they shook firmly, breaking the bonds that had tied them together.

He thought it best to depart without engaging Victoria in what would surely be a frigid farewell. It was the end of so many things that he could not pardon himself if he allowed her to inflict any further pains.

In the cool damp of early morning, a carriage waited for him, piled high with his belongings. He went to retrieve the British service blunderbuss from the study to serve simply as a reminder, yet as he reached for the drawer, thought better of it and left the whole of his sorrow behind.

The driver was the same who had first brought Will through London six years before. He had met the boy yet was now introduced to the man who had taken the boy’s place, for better or worse.

Stirred from her sleep by the sound of the horse below, Victoria rose and peered from her window just as the door to the house was shut firmly

against the cold. With curiosity she eyed the carriage until she saw him descending the stone steps. The luggage confirmed that his departure would not be a temporary one. She straightened and steeled herself as the carriage pulled away, the turn of its wheels somehow unwinding some part of her. So this was the end. It was as it had to be and she had not had to feign a goodbye... One more conquest come and gone. She watched the carriage merge into the streets of London till it had vanished from sight. It was only a passing thought, a cloud against the sun swiftly drifting by, but she wondered if he had turned at any point to glance up at the bay window where she stood.

Standing outside the brick home of his youth, he hesitated, conscious of all that had transpired in what seemed to be a lifetime since he'd seen it last. Could he still step over this threshold and find himself welcome? Did he deserve to? He would have lingered there longer had the door not suddenly been shoved open, his father's strength behind it. They took a long look at one another. They had parted on a handshake, neither one demonstrative with the other in affection.

It was with immense joy and relief that Will found himself in the tight embrace of the man he held above all others. He returned the embrace tearfully. It was unconditional acceptance, regardless of his choices, that he had come home to. It was one of his deepest fears that he see the disappointment in his father's face, that his father would turn from him. Will had felt the world constantly spinning him and now, quite simply and easily, it stopped without pause or catastrophe.

Charlotte smiled weakly up at her son when he lifted her from bed in his arms. "I knew I could guide you home again," she whispered.

Outside the blustery winds lifted loose leaves to swirl round the house. The window in the bedroom had not been locked fast and the glass panes suddenly flew open, sending up the curtains. Charlotte turned and smiled, biding her husband not to push them closed just yet. The wild wind that she felt she had been missing since she was a child had discovered her again. It had brought Will back swiftly across the sea. She felt quite sure as she breathed it in that it was strong and cool enough to blow the fever away as well.

Though the bout with Scarlet fever had weakened her, Charlotte had made a considerable recovery. Will had taken the days to read aloud to her. She stopped him only once to ask that he tell her instead all of that which he was choking back inside. When he heard her gentle request that he speak his mind, a heavy weight lifted from his lowered shoulders. At times they spoke through the night into the morning. Even when his father appeared, Will did not stem his speech. It was pouring out of his soul and he couldn't halt it if he tried. Years disappeared off of his face in mere weeks as he tried to piece his life together again.

One evening while his mother slept, his father sat with him in front of their fireplace. "What do you want to do now, Will? How will you write the story of your life? It cannot be an easy thing to contemplate quitting a profession in which you've succeeded so greatly..."

"My story..." Will murmured, the beginning of an idea taking form in his mind. "Father, do you still have the Gladstone writings on the trade?"

"Perhaps in my papers... Why do you ask?"

"To make sense of my experiences, I might want to record my story through ink and page; I want the research of what it looked like to outsiders to supplement it."

Lord Hamilton threw down the newspaper onto his desk in a rage. A young, married merchant from Canterbury sat across from him as his new protégé. The merchant didn't flinch at the angry display. "It doesn't name you..." he offered. "It's just another little sad story and with the Taiping Rebellion, it's garnering more attention from the press than necessary."

The byline of 'William Abrams' glared up in bold, black print. Not only had Will put his thoughts to paper and submitted his work to a London newspaper, yet he was on the advent of a promising career as a journalist working for a paper in Boston.

"He's a joke. He was making twelve thousand pounds a year and now he'll get his ink-stained fingers on a mere, what, three hundred pounds?"



Hamilton felt his foothold slipping. None of the other merchants could match Will and due to the fact that the British-Sino trade was no longer much of a novelty, there was a great deal of competition and rising costs. Victoria had become more taciturn, indulging the worst of her spoiled tendencies in recent months and her reputation was spreading within the inner circles of society so that gentleman would still be drawn by her beauty into teasing flirtations but would not take her seriously enough to be manipulated by her or remotely consider marriage. She was no longer the chess pawn she once was to him and ladies of society knew that though still young, she was past the plum marrying age.

“Did you not say that you knew of a Danish merchant who was seeking a wife?”

“Oh you’re speaking in concern of Victoria... Finally going to marry her off before she ruins us? Yes, the Danish lad might be a prospect. He has no title and his income is still modest at six thousand a year but he’s unfamiliar enough with our connections to know of her. Even should he learn of her temperament, it would be a profitable union and he isn’t young enough to have ideal choice. I expect she’ll find his appearance thoroughly tolerable, if not handsome. Ah, the silly motherless girl... She doesn’t even know how grateful she ought to be. Shall I write him?”

“Indeed, do. She’s partaken of my generosity long enough. She’s spited herself, you see. If she can no longer earn her keep by being of use to me, I must find her a husband before the sheer expense of my tolerance condemns me. That fair face will begin to wilt soon enough with all her scowling.”

“I am, as ever, at your service, Lord Hamilton. Consider it done.”

She held her breath in the hall, wishing to disappear entirely. Thinking her uncle at his office, she had wanted to search his study for the newspaper containing Will’s article. The eavesdropping had been unintentional. Rather than feel fury over the betrayal, she accepted it and added it gracefully to the mantle of guilt and shame she’d worn each day since Will had left. It was a weight heavy enough to sink her to the bottom of the sea and if she was to drown, then she would do so on her way to him.

When Lord Hamilton sent for Victoria, the maid timidly returned to the main parlor, stuttering her words. The room was empty, all possessions taken.

Her raven hair waved in the cross winds. She had not bothered to change clothes, freshen her face or style her flowing tresses. She wanted to appear as pure, bare and natural as she could when she offered all of herself, everything to him.

The busy office was loud with male voices yelling over printing presses about deadlines and story assignments. It was poorly lit with words being the only currency they dealt in. Raw passion ignited the air with every idea and conviction pens held.

Will looked up when an assistant knocked on his meager office door. "Someone to see you, Abrams."

Tossing aside a draft of a story he'd been working on for the past three hours, he ventured into the newsroom to see no one and nothing out of the ordinary. The assistant caught his gaze and jerked his head to the right. Will weaved through the mess of papers, presses, desks and men until he reached the hall. He looked one way and saw the other row of offices.

Victoria was trying hard to steady her trembling hands when she glimpsed the back of his neck as he emerged.

There by the bench she stood to meet him. Her wild hair seemed more black now than the ink imprinted onto his fingertips. Her face, free of rouge or powder, glowed with a natural radiance that he had never seen before. She was wearing the sapphire gown that he had tried, most ardently in his mind to forget. Disheveled by wind and sea, she was far more of a beauty than when he had seen her in society's constraints.

He was prepared to doubt, mistrust, even attempt hate. Instead he stayed his ground when she approached him.

"You seem surprised. Don't you recognize me?" she asked softly, mimicking the words he had said when she had come upon him the

afternoon in the study. “You ought to know your own work.”

At this they both shared a tentative smile.

With the joy of seeing him again, she began to cry, letting every wall she’d built crumble before him. How could he stand there and not turn her away? His love was almost more than she could bare.

She held out the worn, lovingly weathered copy of *A Christmas Carol* that he had given her. When he put out his hand to take it from her, their fingers touched.

Meeting one another’s gaze, they stayed perfectly still. She was the first to move toward him. With her hands now clasped tight against her heart as if in prayer, she walked forward piously until she met his chest, turning her face to the side so her head could rest against him. It was in this way that she offered her love, not demanding that he embrace her in return. She felt anything could happen then; he could push away, he could politely recant his feelings for her, he could just let her fall and never put his arms around her. She would allow any punishment he gave. Only for a time, minutes at best, did she want to breathe him quietly like this. Let the world fall apart after...

In her last moment of hope, a firm hand steadied her back. She lifted her head to look in his eyes as the powerful arms enclosed her, saving her from drowning.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I know,” he answered quietly as he leaned down to kiss her.

He felt her smile against his mouth.

It was not a perfect love yet it was nonetheless a powerful one that lasted through the remainder of their lives well into the next century to see the changes of the world beyond the age of Victoria...

*Editorial Note~ The novel, Great Expectations, was not published until 1861 when it debuted in serial form. For the purposes and themes of this story, the novel is depicted as*

*having come out in the time period in which the plot is set.*

Ad Vivum

By Bill Mesce

"OH! I'm sorry. Pardonnez moi, mademoiselle."

"Excuse me?"

"Ah! English?"

"American, actually."

"Forgive me. I was staring at you. I was across the boulevard, I saw you at your table..."

"Oh?"

"You look- I thought you looked like somebody I knew. I didn't mean to? I thought you saw me staring at you."

"Well, no, you see I was..."

"Do you mind if I come round? I feel a bit awkward here on the walk. As I say, I was staring at you. You didn't see?"

"I really hadn't noticed. I was reading."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you. It's just that, well, I thought surely you saw me staring at you."

"Because I remind you of somebody."

"Yes."

"No harm done. I wasn't even aware of it."

"Then my apologies for the intrusion. Um?.."

"Yes?.. Can I help you with something?"

"It's just that... May I sit? I know that's a bit presumptuous, but... May I get you something? A drink?"

"Actually, I'm not really comfortable accepting--"

"No, no, it's not like that. I feel I owe you something for the intrusion, don't you think? For disturbing you? Certainly at least a coffee."

"I prefer tea, truthfully."

"A tea, then."

"Of which I already have a cup, thank you. You do know that you're staring again, right?"

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. Should I go?"

"I haven't asked you to stay."

"Oh, yes, that's true, isn't it? This has been terribly presumptuous of me and utterly embarrassing. I must seem like a cad. I am sorry."

"I hope this acquaintance of yours realizes what a deferential companion she's lost."

"What makes you think she lost me?"

"Hm?"

"I mean- Well, how did you know?"

"It's not all that hard to see."

"Really? Oh, I am sorry!"

"What are you sorry for now?"

"It looks like... Well, doesn't it? Heavens, I shouldn't want you thinking I'm walking down the avenue looking for sympathy. That is how it looks, doesn't it?"

"I'm not in a position to judge--"

"Because that's how it seems to me as I consider it. I shouldn't want you thinking that. I'm sorry if that's how I've presented myself."

"Honestly, I hadn't thought about it much one way or the other. You simply seem... in search of something... a missing piece. That's why I assumed you were the one who was lost. You're also undoubtedly the most apologetic human being I've ever met."

"Oh, I'm--"

"Please don't say it."

"I almost did it again, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"I had to catch myself."

"Well, there are worse habits. Tell me..."

"Yes?"

"I don't mean to pry."

"At this point I should consider you entitled."

"You've made me curious enough to put down my book."

"Then the responsibility falls to me to allay that curiosity."

"This relationship was recent, wasn't it? You and your companion?"

"I don't believe so. I mean, not by the calendar."

"Oh. You seemed so... It seemed recent."

"I cared for her very much. I suppose that carries quite a long time."

"Yes it does."

"Would you mind terribly if I join you for a cup of tea? Can I get you a fresh pot and tell the rest of the story?"

"Alright. Yes, that would be nice. Thank you."

"Let me get the boy- Excusez-moi, garçon? Deux thes? Do you take lemon or? Never mind. Limon et crème, s'il vous plait. And, um, the tea cakes. What's the word? Les gateaux petites? Um, patisserie? Comprenez? Ah, bon! That's a platter, yes? Plateau? Please, merci."

"You're, um, English, I think? Your French --"

"Save your compliments, it sounds better than it is. You've heard nearly all my repertoire. And you're American. I should have known. Traveling alone. Quite adventurous, really. Very daring, I should think. First time?"

"Here, yes. And you?"

"No, not the first time. But the first time in a while... Ah, here's the tea. And the cakes! Please, try them. You couldn't do better than French pastry."

"You didn't have to do that."

"Try one. I insist! I got them for you. I promise; no more fawning apologies as long as you try at least one. A little decadence keeps the soul centered. Resisting temptation is hardly admirable if you don't know what you're missing."

"Interesting, if debatable point. Does this philosophy of yours have anything to do with the woman I remind you of? If she knew what she'd left? It seems to

me a woman who would leave someone as dear and considerate as you--"

"You're just catching me on a good day."

"Still, in my view, it doesn't speak well of her from what I can see."

"You're very kind. But --"

"It may even have been for the best. It is possible, you know."

"All wounds heal, yes?"

"Yes, they do. You must have cared for her very much."

"Very much."

"But in time you'll see that what's meant to be is meant to be; life goes on."

"Out of adversity comes opportunity? Plenty of fish in the sea and all that?"

"I didn't mean to- It's my turn to apologize, I'm being an insensitive clod."

"No. It's all right. You see--"

"Just totally insensitive--"

"You see, she died."

"Oh."

"Yes."

"My God, how awful I must sound... I'm so sorry for your loss."

"No, no. You needn't think you're obliged to say anything. I feel terrible putting this on --"

"This is your first time here since, isn't it?"



"Quite right... I never traveled much myself. When we married, we honeymooned in Brighton. That was me. A few days in Brighton, that was as imaginative and daring as I could manage. For our honeymoon! It's a wonder she- Well. She was the adventurous one, you see. She would tell me, 'There's a world out there; shouldn't we see a bit of it?' If it hadn't been for her, I'd never have seen this. And after that, we'd come every year. This was before the war, of course. No occasion. She would just say, 'I think it's time to give the eyes a treat, don't you?' And she had a rule. We could never stay in the same place twice. Sometimes it was a grand hotel, other times, a little place on a side street. I would grumble, mind you, but I did enjoy the newness of it with her. She used to love the cafes. She would sit, as you are."

"As I am."

"Yes; only rather than holding a novel she had a small sketchbook. She would just love watching the world... You see, in the beginning, you don't think- you don't think you'll go on, that there'll ever be anything else for you. But there is. And after you go on for a little time, it's not even all that difficult. And that's good. That you can go on, find other things. It's just... I miss her sometimes. I see aspects of her in different faces but none so much as yours. It was startling at first... Forgive my awkwardness. I can't believe how I've prattled on... I just- I should go."

"You don't have to."

"Actually, I had been on my way to meet some people. Check!"

"No, please, my treat."

"I couldn't allow that. This isn't America, dear lady. And especially after I --"

"Ah, you imposed, you are the transgressor! I get to decide what amends there'll be. Waiter, I'll take that, thank you."

"That's terribly kind. Actually, you've been terribly kind all along."

"You know... I envy you. I envy the way you miss her. I've never loved anyone like that nor have they me. She was very lucky."

"So was I."

"Yes. In many ways lucky still..."

"I do believe you're right."

"Will you be in the city long?"

"I don't know just yet."

"I was thinking, if you come by here often..."

"Sometimes."

"So do I. If I see you, maybe we can share another pot of tea?"

"And cakes?"

"I would like that. Someone told me you can't do better than French pastry."

"Until that time, then."

"Until that time."

---

At the Chelsea Restaurant

By Harvey Havel

My boyfriend and I decided on a late evening dinner down in Chelsea to a restaurant we know that served an excellent veal scaloppini for me, and for my boyfriend, he would be having the filet mignon, as he hadn't eaten a good cut of steak in a while. We both left our loft around nine o'clock and caught a cab into the heart of Chelsea, not far from the well-known Chelsea Hotel that had been completely restored and remodeled in recent years. The evening was cool and dry with a slight breeze that tickled my cheeks and hair, and I really felt that I had finally arrived at what life was supposed to be about for a recent college graduate; a loving, committed boyfriend, a good job in advertising, a loft in the East Village where we shared our bed, and now a cool evening where we could

dress up for a change and walk hand-in-hand down Seventh Avenue. It felt regal to put on a skirt. We could even see a star or two up in the sky despite the tall skyscrapers and many lights that kept the city eternally aglow.

The restaurant, we liked to think, was the perfect place for us. It was the type that had cloth napkins, Spode silverware, a decent wine list, and well-dressed people who were also on the younger side and starting their adult lives just like we were. We would leave the restaurant well before they dimmed the lights, as we no longer drank and danced so much as we did when we were undergrads in college. We had moved on, because it was our disposition to do so. But at night, by the time I'd be cozied up to my boyfriend in bed, the restaurant would attract a more fashionable crowd. But we were fortunate enough to have moved on.

When we had been shown our seats upon entering, we ordered a nice bottle of Italian wine with some bread and olive oil for starters. I then noticed that there was this one man at the middle of the bar who didn't seem to belong there. For one thing, he had a dark complexion, highlighted by three-days stubble which was somewhat unusual for this preppie part of downtown, but not totally outrageous. But what was more, his body language, the accent coating his mutterings to no one in particular and his clothes, while trying to remain tailored properly to his body, were too tight on him. He was an overweight man approaching obesity and had this depressed, haggard look on him that in no way matched the ambiance of the restaurant. He looked like a character who had just walked off the studio set of an old movie, like a Fatty Arbuckle, an Oliver Hardy, or a Lou Costello. I actually found the peculiarity of it amusing at first, because he sat on his bar chair as immobile as a stone, and ordered beer after beer after beer. He drank pints of Amstel Light.

When our meals came, my boyfriend and I discussed some family matters. His sister was getting married to an investment banker, and his grandmother would be celebrating her ninetieth birthday up at the family's farm in Vermont. We would be taking the train, he said. And yet every so often, I would look beyond his shoulder and check on my project, this man I had been monitoring. By this time he tried to start a conversation with the woman tending bar. She was exquisite, by the way, and was the type of girl who would one day find herself working on Union Square. But she still had the job of serving her other customers, and so every attempt the man made at having some sort of dialogue with the woman, who had now become the object of his affections, I should

think, failed miserably. She smiled at him when he spoke, and for some reason, he talked about the things you're never supposed to talk about in bars, namely politics and religion, and this woman, who probably wasn't interested in anything remotely connected to the gravity of the topics he discussed, had to stand there and take it all.

Soon his voice grew louder every time she came by to serve him. I overheard him talking about women and their nature, the daily newspapers and what they had printed, political conflicts in third world countries, and the supposed sorry state of American literature. She was flabbergasted and had to move away from him frequently just to avoid talking to him. But she did return every so often to serve him his pints of beer. Soon after, though, she would quickly move to the other side of the bar, finding relief and comfort in the other customers who hopefully didn't talk about the same frightful things. And the man looked on quite jealously as she paid more attention to the others and not him.

By the time our desserts had arrived, (my boyfriend, the apple pie à la mode, and myself, the chocolate soufflé), quite a few people had entered the restaurant, and there were several similarly exquisite women at the bar who had ordered cocktails, some of them with male companions, others without. But from what I could see, a lonely bubble enclosed the man I had been monitoring in the middle of them all. He still sat like a stone, quiet and sullen. The patrons seemed to be mingling quite well on their own, but it was very clear that he was not. He knew this, because every so often his drooping head swung from left to right in the search of someone to spend the rest of the evening with. His eyes were bloodshot by now, his clothes bursting at the seams, and yet he still tried to fit in somehow.

He finally fixed his sights on two women chatting at the far end of the bar, and at that point, I thought that he'd make an attempt, perhaps, at reliving some past moment of former glory. Sure enough, he slid his weighty body off of the bar chair and wandered down the length of the bar. Fortunately, he wouldn't be driving that night, because he certainly couldn't walk evenly. He nudged himself up to the two women who were much too well-dressed for him, and since he stood there, he had interrupted their conversation.

At first they were polite and respectful, but for some reason he interpreted this as an unconquerable coldness that could only be defeated if they loved him completely in return like the key to a character's freedom in a fable. He tried to

smile – I’ll give him that – and I couldn’t hear exactly what was exchanged, but then I overheard the women respectfully saying that they were having a private conversation and that they wanted to return to it. The man, however, just wouldn’t leave them alone. I couldn’t say that it was harassment exactly, but the man was so incredibly persistent with them that the two women told him to get lost after several agonizing minutes of his badgering.

Well, the bartender had been watching this display the entire time, and by the time more people had entered the restaurant, the man had returned to his seat to order yet another beer. The bartender served a few of her other customers first, and it seemed that the more formal evening of the restaurant had been gradually coming to a close and being replaced by the more fashionable and club-like atmosphere that defined its later hours. The music played a bit more loudly, the lights were dimmed even further, the styles of the women’s dresses were even swankier, and the din of the place grew heavier.

Our waiter presented my boyfriend with the check, because we really didn’t want to stay any longer. We had tired of all of this long ago. He slid his credit card into the leather valet and got up to use the washroom. I now had a complete view of the man I had been watching all night. He still waited for the bartender to serve him another beer, and he was getting anxious about it, as though his senses had been stirred by the lack of it.

The bartender finally returned to him, and I heard her say, “You’re cut off. You’re going to have to leave. I’m sorry.”

What followed was both sad and amusing, because the man started berating her from his side of the bar. He had been instantly transformed into a third-world tyrant, an irate mobster, a disenfranchised thug, as he growled at the top of his lungs, calling her actions unfair, unlawful, and altogether unconscionable, and that one day she would be haunted by the very same act of unkindness that she showed him. I think he called her a bitch too. He slammed a few twenty-dollar bills on the bar and dizzily left the restaurant.

When my boyfriend returned and finished signing the bill, I looked into his blue eyes dreamily for a moment. I noticed the curves of his smile. I thanked my lucky stars that he was truly my boyfriend and nothing remotely like the man I had been watching all evening. He would never be like him. Never in a million years.

Yet a disturbing thought tugged on my arm as we walked through the door together. What if that man had once been happy? What if he had been content, had his life together, had someone to love? What if he had been in his youth much like my boyfriend was now? I wondered what circumstances could have brought him to his current state. I reached for my lover's hand, smiled at him and vowed never to be the one to give him a reason to come undone.

© 2010 *The Write Place At the Write Time*

This on-line magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.