



Voices

arts & literary magazine
spring 2012



Voices

Presented by Rock Valley College Journalism 139 students
www.rvcvoices.com

"I turned silences and
nights into words. What was
unutterable, I wrote down.
I made the whirling world
stand still."

- Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*

Rock Valley College

Prize Winners



Gracie Cannell
by Meico Gowan
pg. 7



Unequally Yoked
by Rachel Talan
pg. 18



Ascend
by Stephen Ramberg
pg. 24



Death's a real
Mother...
by Darius McCasky
pg. 30

Voices is produced each fall and spring semester by students enrolled in Journalism 139 under the direction of Professor David Pink, with the help of Instructor Scott Fustin.


Submissions are accepted from current students, alumni, faculty, and staff. All submissions are assessed anonymously, and current student winners in art, fiction, photography, and poetry are awarded prizes. Acceptance, publication and awards are based on artistic quality as perceived by the student editorial staff. The views or opinions expressed in this magazine are those held by the artists and authors.

Current and past issues of *Voices*, submission forms, instructions, and deadlines are available at rvcvoices.com. Bring your own voice to the discussion by joining *Voices* as a member of the JRN139 class. Anyone can take the class as an elective to gain experience managing an online and print magazine. *Voices* also sponsors students to attend conferences. Registration information is regularly available at www.rockvalleycollege.edu/onlineservices/

The class meets once a week on Wednesdays at 4:30-5:45pm.

Send any questions to Professor David Pink at d.pink@rockvalleycollege.edu.

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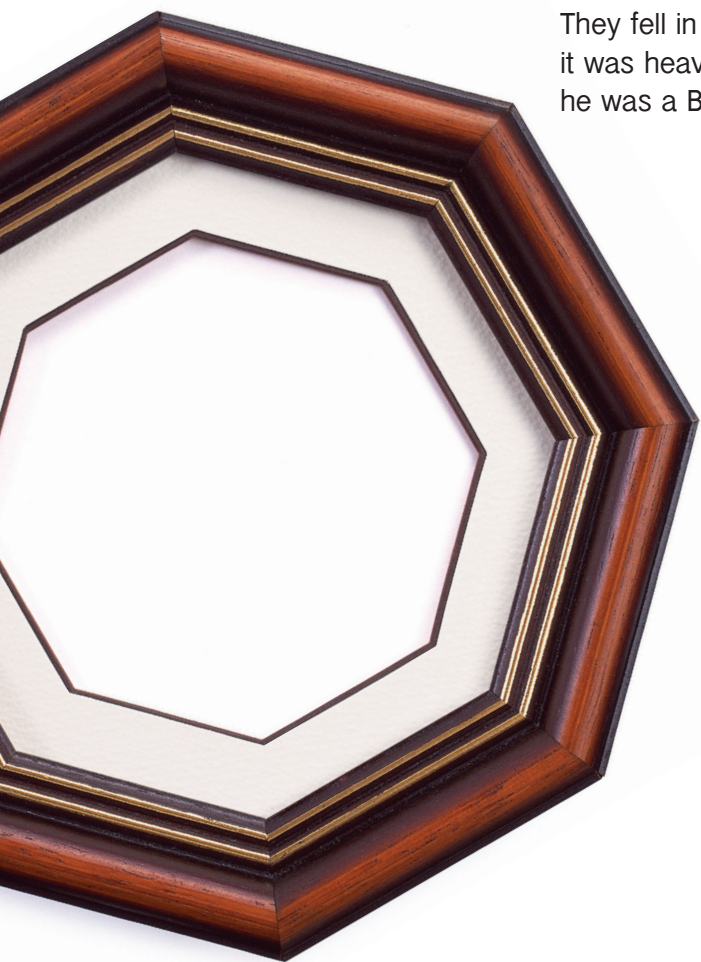




Unequally Yoked

by Rachel Talan

They fell in love, and
it was heaven --- till she learned
he was a Buddhist.



Stories of a Broken Childhood

by Courtney Kendall

My Daddy, he
made me a princess warrior
when the scars he left me with
were too big for stitches,
too large for my tiny hands to
hold.
And he'll never see the
empty in my eyes
or the hollow my heart beats
when it's too shallow for me to
feel.
Last week I looked into his mouth
and saw the pieces of flesh
he left wedged between
his sharp molars like
an animal trap.
He must've thought his honey-
touch
was sweeter than his vinegar-
words
and he could lure me into his
cavern
with his prey-ers
and eat me like cold
left-over Thanksgiving turkey,
but I'm not thankful
when his fists make indents
in my sensibility
carving five finger fuck-yous
into my heart strings.

I remember when
Daddy said he loved me,
he said I was his little girl,
his only girl,
Mamma was just his
beauty queen
and I was his Nigerian princess
slipping between my hot pink
sheets like the summer breeze
that blows in the empty spot
he so badly wants to fill.

He told me to thank the
Father
for that fact we
know each other
but I'm not so sure
I'm supposed to know
Daddy like I do when

his prayer words
spread shrapnel throughout
the land mines of my Arabian
temple
and they are etching patterns
of regret that are in time
with the explosions I call heart
beats against the wall,
Daddy, you're hurting.
Daddy, where is Mommy?

I think I tried to scream,
but I'm sofucking
and my lips are in places
reserved for wedding vows
and holy matrimony
not black bruises
and open wounds.

When I went to school that
Monday,
Debbie saw my shaking fingers
tracing my heart in x's
with my middle finger
and in gym the teacher
saw the rainbow spread between
my thighs, only not so happy.
But they didn't ask any questions
because Daddy is the pastor
sent from God to lead his sheep
from the damning fire of hell,
where I will be going
in nine months
when the world sees
my windblown heart
in the delivery room
sprawled in Daddy's arms
as the one he calls his
granddaughter
but I know as his child.

Choice Topics

by Kelly Gustafson

We wait with great anticipation,
To receive the assignment of the month,
The topic that will busy our days,
And the due date we will dwell on by night.

The teacher gives a list of historic names,
That are as foreign to us as the stars,
Tells us to choose one person to study.
But how to choose?

My friend makes her choice wisely,
Discovers an astronaut for her report.
I risk a name I think sounds decent,
So I spend my month researching
The inventor of dry cleaning.

Paper Tyranny

by Rachel Talan

We are paper dolls
in a paper world, and all
must fold before you.

Your wicked lips, like
paper clips, are click-clicking
over paper ears.

Crumpled citizens
listen and watch, faces blank
with unprinted fears.

Your scissors above
are casting shadows and dread:
Snip. Snip. We're all dead.



Record Store Blues Music.

by Jennifer Marsh

I worked at a record store as a part-time Marxist
with pacifist tendencies
on the corner of Height and Ashbury
20 years after the music died
along with the flowers.
And love.
When he walked in and caught my eye
with his fingers intertwined with lies
and his breath full of whiskey.
And he kissed me.
He wore the scars of a desert storm on his face
and the screams in his chest
and I was instantly fascinated.
He was a jigsaw puzzle
with 27 missing pieces
but damn it if I wasn't going to spend all night
trying to fit him back together
with my fingertips.
Scratch my life story into his back with my nails
and
lick the salt from his skin instead of talk.
Because we're both half a centimeter from the edge
and one word would be enough pressure to
fall.
And when I woke up he was gone.



The Humdrum Life

by Andrew Tibbett

Darling,
Sit on the shores of my psyche
Tanning your legs in the moonlight
Don't be afraid just to go home
and let these blue waves crash in a cove

Begging,
Just to be free of this conflict
Holding the love in a vial
Washing your hands in the Teton
Hoping to be free of this new Hyde

Cast out,
Left just to wander the ice veins
None of the good ones will take you
You're left to pick from the devils
whose hearts only beat to elude you



A dark brown leather frame with a gold inner border, containing the text "Traditional Artwork". The frame is made of dark brown leather with a cracked texture. It has a gold-colored inner border. The corners of the frame are reinforced with a lighter brown material, possibly wood or a different type of leather, which is also cracked. The text "Traditional Artwork" is centered within the frame in a dark gray, serif font.

Traditional Artwork

Ascend (ceramics)

Stephen Ramberg



Untitled

(gesture drawing of Matthew Vincent)

Richard A Gessert



Untitled
(ceramic mask)
Richard A Gessert



The Eyes Have It

(oil on canvas)

Cynthia Nelson



Just Another Woman In White

(digital artwork)

by Collin Harrison





Death's a Real Mother

by Darius McCaskey

One night Death came to take a woman's only son to the Underworld. Just as he was drawing back the boy's blankets, Death spied a light from the corner of his empty eye. He turned his creaking neck to see the boy's mother clutching a candle to her chest. She recoiled from his skeletal gaze, tears flowing from her puffy eyes. "Woman," Death said, "there is no need for tears. The disease in the boy's bones is done. I have come to take him from this place of pain." The woman, still trembling in fear of the horror before her, drew a long breath and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I know," she said, "but I will do anything for just one more minute with him." "Is that so?" replied the Reaper. "Yes," said the woman. Death asked, "Even if it means giving up all that is good in the thing you love most?" "I love my son more than life itself, and you're taking him from me either way. Name your price, fiend, and I will gladly pay it," said the woman. "Very well," said Death with a hollow sigh. "The currents of the river Styx are turbulent, and my boat must be carefully balanced or it will surely tip," he continued. "Find another soul to balance my boat, and you will have your moment with the child." The woman nodded and turned away. She walked briskly down the hall, rounded the corner to the kitchen, and drew the longest knife from the block. The woman then spun on her heel to retrace her steps. At

the end of the hallway, the woman stopped to think.

She peered into her son's room at the robed figure hovering at her son's bedside. Death slowly nodded at the woman. Clutching the knife in one hand, her candle in the other, she crossed the hall to her own chamber. The light from the candle danced across the blade of the knife, casting terrible beams upon the drooling, snoring face of her husband. The woman gripped the knife handle so hard her knuckles cracked. "Please forgive me for what I am about to do, dear husband, but I love my son more than anything," the woman whispered as she approached the bed. The first slash was deep and true, perforating the windpipe and opening the carotid. The second and third strikes decimated the remaining vascular tissues. The husband awoke in a font of his own blood just as the fourth, and final, blow caught his spinal cord. The now-paralyzed husband could do little more than stare in disbelief at his wife as his lips moved to suck in air like a beached fish. The woman climbed into bed next to her dying husband. His lifeblood flowed freely, and a low whistle played in his mangled throat. The woman repeated a mantra in her husband's ear: "For our son... for our son." She stroked his hair and face until the whistling stopped. Once her husband was dead, the woman returned to her son's bedroom. Death let out a bony chuckle as the woman handed him the mur-

derous weapon. Tears again wet the corners of her eyes. "There. You have your soul," she said. "Now give me my son." "My boat will certainly float well tonight," Death said, "but there is another task I require of you." "But I just killed my husband," the woman exclaimed, "I thought..." Death interrupted the widow. "And I thought you said you'd pay any price." The woman cast her eyes down at the floor. "Yes," she said. "Anything for my boy." "Hmm, I suspected you'd say that," said Death. "My task is lonely and thankless. For centuries I have searched for someone to share in my suffering," he continued. As Death spoke, the horror of what was to be asked of her slowly dawned on the woman. In a whisper at first, then rising to a near scream, the woman voiced her objection: "No... no... no... no!"

"No?" the Reaper questioned. "I offer you that which you have asked for – a chance to share one final moment with your son – and eternal existence beyond that, and all you can say is 'No?'" Death probed further. The woman, desperate now, fell to her knees before the robed specter. "Please," she pleaded, "I know you will carry on as you always have after tonight, but my world has been destroyed. Give me my moment with my son, but do not ask me to betray my husband a second time tonight. It is more than I can bear."

Death roared with hollow laughter. "More than you can bear? Imagine how he must feel," he said. At

this, the woman, crushed by her guilt and grief, wept silent tears.

After what seemed like hours, Death held his hand out to the woman. She took it and rose to her feet. "You have a choice to make, woman; become my bride and see your son live for a few more moments, or walk away and begin to rebuild the tatters of your life," Death said. The woman looked up into the empty pits where Death's eyes should be. "I love my son," she said. With that, she reached down and pried her wedding ring from her finger. She placed it in Death's open hand, where it melted away.

Death pulled the third finger from his left hand off, and twisted it into a gruesome ring of bone and sinew. "With this ring I thee wed," he said, "Take it, and you will know my touch only once." The woman nodded, and held out her hand to accept the token. Death slid the ring onto her finger. The woman clenched her left hand, the weight of this new ring foreign to her.

"Now, of course, the marriage must be consummated," Death said. The woman nodded silently and unbuttoned her bloodied nightgown. She slid it off her shoulders, and it fell to her feet. Her nude body looked almost as gaunt as her new groom's in the pale moonlight. As she gazed, unfeeling, at the pile of clothes on the floor, Death slid his finger down the front of his robes, undoing them as if zippered. His skeletal body nearly glowed.

The woman finally looked up from her nightgown to see the horrid figure before her. She began to ponder how he could take her without flesh and blood to fill his form, but before she could finish the thought, he was upon her and inside her. She expected him to be cold, but found his touch to be as a furnace. Pinned against the wall by her son's closet, the fiend's breath singed her hair.

She opened her eyes for but a second, and nearly shrieked. The sockets of Death's skull, formerly empty, now blazed like magma.

The woman turned her face from him, and his moans of pleasure burned her neck. Bony hand prints scarred her breasts, and her thighs blistered. Within minutes, it was done. The woman fell into a heap on the floor.

"Dress," said Death as he callously tossed the nightgown at the woman. His robes had re-formed, and his eye sockets had returned to the empty pools of darkness they were before. "You have done all I asked as payment for a minute with your son before he is taken from this world," the Reaper continued, "but he should not see you like this."

The woman pulled the gown over her shoulders, and began to button it. Each movement now took tremendous effort from her abused body. The cloth's soft, cotton touch felt as though wool on sunburn. She winced as she finished dressing.

The woman took her place at Death's side as he reached down to open the boy's eyes with his bony fingers. "Awaken," he said. A fog rolled out of his mouth, and encircled the boy. The room grew noticeably colder. The boy's eyes fluttered for a moment, and then he began to scream.

"Momma, it hurts! Help me, momma, please!"

The boy writhed in agony, thrashing in his sheets, and clenching his teeth until they cracked. Though she tried, the woman could not comfort her son; she could not hold him. She wanted to cry, but there were no tears left in her body. She wanted him to know she loved him, but her words were drowned in the child's screams. Finally, after a minute had passed, the boy's body fell limp, and his anguish was again extinguished.

With fire in her own eyes now,

the woman turned to Death. "You monster!" she screamed. "I'm the monster?" Death asked, incredulous. "I, who came to take your son from pain; I, who gave you the chance to deny your selfishness and remain faithful to your family; I am the monster?" Death further probed. "I think not," he said.

"And now you shall pay the eternal price for your selfishness and faithlessness," Death said. "You will accompany your son, your husband, and me on the river Styx, and you shall explain your misdeeds to them. They will hate you forever, and you have earned their animosity. Further, whenever a child dies in pain henceforth, it will not be I who reaps their souls; it will be you. You will hear their screams, and in them, your son's. And you will weep evermore."

As Death chided the woman, her skin changed and became like gauze. The places where Death touched her darkened to pitch. Her hair grew thin and white. She turned from her son's bed, and her nightgown dropped to the floor through her body.

Her transformation complete, she could now see the spirits of her son and husband, their eyes filled with tears and fury. She reached out to caress and comfort them, but her hands had become claws, and the glint from her bony wedding ring shamed her. She clasped one hand over the other. She opened her mouth to speak: to explain she was tricked, that she didn't know — couldn't know — what Death intended, but only the sound of wailing anguish could escape her.

Death ushered the woman's former family to his boat. He did not speak to them, but caressed the boy's hair as he climbed aboard the raft with his father. The woman took her place at Death's side after a few moments, and he cast off. Silent they floated to Hades.



Left Unsaid

by Kassandra Bowman

"Hey kid!" the familiar voice jarringly sounded through Tyler's dream accompanied by three thunderous knocks. "We're wasting daylight."

Realizing the voice was coming from an external source rather than from the comfort of his subconscious, Tyler awoke, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and grudgingly sat up in his undersized bed. Ah, hell, it was the day he had agreed to go fishing with his grandfather, whose questionable mental wellness had never bothered Tyler until this moment. Looking out his window, he realized the sun had not yet become visible over the heights of their mountainous town. Yeah, his crazy was definitely bothering him now.

Hearing more impatient noises from outside his door, he shouted a reply, "Yeah," he continued to wake himself, placing his feet on the cold floor, recoiling and trying again. "I'm coming, old man."

"Alright," Gus huffed, "No use in sleeping the day away." Tyler heard his shuffling footsteps and the familiar squeak of the recliner as his grandfather reclaimed his post.

Tyler moved slowly around his room, the sleep still half-heartedly holding him and grabbed a sweatshirt from where it laid resting on his desk chair. It was his favorite hoodie, once belonging to his dad; as improbable as it was, Tyler continued to wear it because occasionally he would catch a whiff of his father's scent. Dressing himself, he accidentally hit his knee against the oak dresser and fell backwards onto

creaks of protest from the bed's unforgiving metal springs. He imagined his father chuckling at his clumsiness, which he seemed to have inherited from his mother, or so he would say. As if a chain reaction to follow this memory, his gaze focused on the photograph that was always stationed next to his pillow; the caption read, 'Anne and Michael - Christmas 1999.' It was the last Christmas Tyler spent with his parents before their truck skidded off of Delaney Bridge, killing them both. He tried to remember his parents just as they appeared in the picture he held in his hands, rather than the gruesome images his own grief had conjured up to fill the gaps where he still had questions.

Hearing the commotion, Gus shuffled back to Tyler's door and interrupted his thoughts, "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah, Pops," Tyler answered in as strong of a voice as he could manage and returned the photo to its rightful place, "I'll be out in a sec." Once again the old man made his way to his haggard throne. Tyler smiled softly at the very familiarity of his grandfather's actions, despite the tears that threatened to fall.

After finishing his morning routine and wiping all evidence of the sadness he knew haunted his face, Tyler emerged from his room and walked the few steps to his now sleeping grandfather.

Shaking his shoulder, Tyler returned the favor by pulling him out of his slumber. "Hey, old man," he

said in a mock whisper, "I thought we were gonna be countin' fish, not sheep."

Grunting, Gus awoke, "I was only resting my eyes. You ready now?" he asked, standing with unasked help from his grandson and rubbing his arthritic back. "You drive this back's been hurting me some-thin' fierce."

Gus always seemed to make an excuse when it came to driving; Tyler suspected it had to do with his parents' accident but he knew better than to push for an explanation. When it came to Gus, a lot was left unsaid.

"You know what it's from, Pops," Tyler began to lecture, an ongoing argument that was never resolved, "That damn chair of yours. You need to sleep in a bed, especially at your—"

Gus cut him off with the tone of a disobedient child, pulling Tyler from his sour mood, "At my what?" he asked, "At MY age? Boy, I could still show you a thing or two," and he tried to grab Tyler in a mock choke hold, a sense of vigor returning for a brief moment.

Tyler agilely maneuvered out of the old man's grasp and ran out the door, towards the truck, "If you could catch me old man," he laughed once he reached the vehicle and waited to open the door for his passenger.

Leaning against the frame, Tyler watched his grandfather walk slowly towards the vehicle with both affection and concern; his energetic moment left only a false sense of security. Tyler could tell it took a lot

out of the old man. Was he limping? Does he look a bit paler today? Tyler shook his head to clear the thoughts that maliciously caused worry lines before they were due.

He straightened up as his grandfather grew closer, not wanting him to see his unease and helped him into the truck, placing Gus' hand on his shoulder for support.

"Thanks kid," Gus said as soon as Tyler had walked around the back of the truck and joined him in the cab, "I'm not a quick as I used to be."

"You lie, old man," Tyler laughed away his anxiety, reminiscing. "I remember when you caught me with a tin of chewing tobacco. You chased me all the way to the train tracks."

Gus joined in, chuckling, "Took me a while, but yeah, I got you," he spoke with a smile. "The town finally caught onto our crazy that day."

"You're the crazy one, old man," Tyler shuddered dramatically as he remembered his punishment. "You made me eat that whole can. I puked all over the neighbor's rose bushes."

"And you never tried it ever again, did you?" Gus asked, affirming his choice of punishment with a nod of his head.

"No, sir," Tyler replied as he started the truck and pulled out of the driveway "Those damn rosebushes..." he trailed off, shaking his head.

"Those damn rosebushes," the old man agreed and clapped him on the back, shaking his head as well with a smile upon his lips. "They were never meant to survive you, Ty."

Tyler smiled faintly at the nickname Pops had given him when he was still running around barefoot and causing more grass stains than his mother could count. But she was gone now; it was just Tyler and the old man left to fill the spaces in their weather-worn home, seemingly too small for the two sets of breath

that seemed to expand the walls that threatened to burst under the pressure of sighs and thoughts left unsaid. Every glimpse of a memory was a small reminder of happier times that neither one could bring themselves to speak aloud. Smile gone from Tyler's face, they both faced forward and settled into the subject's silence as they rode the rest of the way to their usual fishing spot.

It was what Gus had called the "sweet spot," for as long as Tyler could remember. When he was young, Gus would take him there on the occasional Sunday, even more so when Tyler's parents were killed. "Fishing brings you closer to God," he'd always say when Tyler would ask about them. It never directly answered his question, but there was always an unspoken understanding of what the old man meant. By the time these thoughts had run their course through Tyler's mind, he was parking the rusted truck and helping his grandfather grab the gear from the bed.

"Let's go kid," Gus huffed with exertion, doing so little tired him out these days, "I ain't gettin' any younger."

Tyler followed behind his grandfather, not commenting on his slow pace or struggles with the rough terrain for fear of upsetting him. The old man was tough, Vietnam Vet tough, but Tyler knew his age was getting to him. After losing his parents, he couldn't fathom what it would be like without—

"You comin' or not?" Gus' voice interrupted his melancholy thoughts as they got closer to their destination.

As they weaved their way through the dense trees around the stream, they heard voices and saw the reflection of lights in the water. The two rounded the corner around the large, gnarled tree that marked their arrival to the fishing spot and

stopped dead in their tracks. Two police cruisers sat silent but shining next to a large crowd roped off by caution tape, right where Tyler should be setting up their lawn chairs.

"What the hell is this?" Gus blustered storming towards the group, somehow having turned his exhaustion into a determined strut.

Tyler chased after his grandfather, fearing for whoever was at the receiving end of the old man's anger. If there was one thing that should never be interrupted with Gus, it was his fishing. As they got closer, the chase came to a halt in front of the police line at the sight of an open body bag, a flash of porcelain barely visible from their vantage point.

"Anne..." Gus choked, dropping his gear and his momentary pause shattered as he headed towards the black plastic, propelled forward by some force unknown to Tyler.

Tyler scrambled after the old man who had just uttered his mother's name aloud, for the first time since the accident.

"Whoa now," the police officer closest to Gus held his hands to stop him from crossing the forbidding yellow line. "This is an official crime scene. You can't go in there."

Gus disregarded both the tape and the officer and barreled underneath the police line taking both Tyler and the surrounding officers by surprise. As one officer stumbled to race after him, the other stopped Tyler's immediate pursuit, looking smug with his authority. Ignoring the man's attitude, Tyler craned his neck in attempt to see over the large mass of sheriff's deputy and locate his grandfather.

"Anne?" Tyler heard from the other side of the obstruction and as a knee-jerk reaction, pushed to get closer.

The burly cop all but growled at him until an order was heard over the noise, "Let him in, Rick." The

voice rang true to both authority and exhaustion and Tyler ducked under the line, frantically searching for Gus.

He found his grandfather deep in hushed conversation with an older gentleman Tyler knew as the retired police chief, the one who had given the order to allow him entrance. Tyler remained at a respectful distance, remembering the man's face when he came to tell Gus that the river had flooded and there was nothing they could do—the same pained expression was now etched into the man's deep set wrinkles. Remembering the body no more than a few yards away from him, he empathized with whoever would be at the receiving end of that look next.

Over the noise of the bystanders, all Tyler could make out of the conversation were snippets sounding like, "... not her," and "... gotta let go." Confused, he shook his head, stepping closer to the body, unable to resist his morbid curiosity. The thawed ground squished under his feet in a reassuring way that promised winter was over but as he neared the black plastic, keeping a safe distance from the techs scurrying around the body, he felt the chills running across his spine.

The body itself was different than he had expected it would look. He wouldn't know; his grandfather had insisted on his parents having closed casket funerals. Gus' only explanation had been that Tyler was too young to see death so close like that; apparently the same rules did not apply now. He had never seen a dead body other than on the archaic television that sat at home, and those were covered in faux gore with pained expressions on the actors' faces. This seemed more peaceful. The body was that of a

woman, about how old Tyler's mother would've been if she had survived the fatal car crash. She was quite similar in appearance actually: brunette hair and a dusting of freckles. His thoughts reverted back to the Christmas photo, yet the image bubbled like a Polaroid under flame in his mind when the sound of the creek redirected his thoughts to Delaney Bridge.

His grandfather's voice startled him from the memories that flooded his mind, "You know her?" he asked in a shaking voice he tried to mask with gruffness, kicking Tyler's boot with his own and nodding his head towards the body.

"No—" he said, clearing his throat to steady his response, "No sir." He took a step back as Gus leaned in closer to the body. Tyler suddenly felt sick at the sight.

"It's not her," Gus agreed after a few moments of quiet inspection, expelling what seemed like a breath caught between relief and a stifled sob; he turned on his heel and walked in the direction of where they had parked the truck, nodding to the police officers protecting the perimeter, who ignored his gesture.

Dodging the uniformed men's disapproving stares, Tyler scampered after him, both afraid of being left with the body and propelled forward by his confusion concerning his grandfather's response. Grabbing the abandoned fishing gear, he looked back at the scene to find the police chief staring after them with a pained expression; the look of empathy masking defeat seemed to haunt his face and Tyler wondered if this new ghost would add to the shadows that seemed to follow him.

He quickened his pace to catch up to his grandfather and grabbed

his arm. "What was that about?" he asked, panting from running and the exhausting thoughts racing through his mind.

Gus shrugged out of his grip and kept walking in silence. The look on his face was one that Tyler had never seen, stopping him from questioning further. The old man seemed numb, not noticing the thorn branches and burs that he had struggled to avoid on the journey there. The ride home was suffocating in the silence that once again sat between them, continuing even after they had returned home and the engine grew cold as they remained sitting in the musty cab.

After what seemed like an eternity, Tyler was the first to speak. "She looked like she was sleeping," he said quietly, keeping his gaze focused on the cracked leather covering over the steering wheel and choosing his words carefully. "For a second, I thought of Mom. You know, I never saw her. After. Was she like that? Peaceful?" he looked expectantly at his grandfather, his fingers nervously picking at the seam of the seat.

An unfamiliar wetness covered the wrinkled cheeks of his grandfather now that Tyler had turned to face him, one he had seen only once in his nineteen years of life and he watched as Gus fumbled to leave the cab, as if the weight of the question created more pressure than the agonizing silence.

He looked back at his grandson before closing the door behind him, "Death is never peaceful, son, not for the ones left behind." He spoke softly, the exhaustion even more pronounced in his posture. "Not for the one's waiting with goodbyes left unsaid."



The Monster

Emilyann Miranda

Her nightly routine was always the same. She washed her face and brushed her teeth. She stripped down to the lace— or sometimes silk lingerie— that she wore beneath her clothes. The expensive undergarments were usually either pure white or blood red. He always loved how she looked in those colors.

Once in the proper clothes, she left her personal bathroom to walk to the exquisite cream-colored vanity table that was pressed against a wall of her bedroom. She sat on the matching chair that was somehow more comfortable than even her childhood bed, and she ran her fingers along the platinum colored lining of the chair's armrest. She always wondered if, just maybe, it was real platinum and not some painted-on substance.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, and she saw calm, light blue eyes staring back at her. She made a few faces, some silly and some serious, analyzing her reflection as she did. But she tried not to look at her face too much. She was insecure at her core, and she knew she'd spend hours picking at her flaws if she wasn't careful. Instead, she focused on her hair. She loved the loose curls of chestnut brown that cascaded past her shoulders and down to her lower back.

She carefully brushed her hair, playing with it and letting it slide between her fingers. Every once in a while, she'd lose herself in doing so, and he'd catch her. Most of the time, she tried to be in bed by the time he arrived. He liked when she waited for him.

Her nightly routine was always the same. That was why she didn't react immediately to the dark reflection in her vanity mirror. Her eyes were drawn to the figure. Her head tilted to the side, and her eyebrows furrowed in curiosity. It took her a full second to realize the shadow wasn't a trick of her imagination. It took her another second to decide whether to cover her body, or try to run. By the time her own soft hands reached for the armrests of her chair, there was a large, leathery gloved hand covering her mouth. Her attempt to scream was muffled. She flinched when she felt the painful jab of a needle into her neck, and she blinked slowly as her entire world faded to black.

She felt exhausted when she awoke. Her eyelids fluttered as she opened her eyes, and she found herself gazing into an unfamiliar darkness. She tried to move, but she was bound. The skin of her legs stuck to the hard, cold metal chair beneath her when she struggled.

She let out a scream, but heard a diminished, muffled attempt. Despite the tight cloth that kept her from making too much noise, she didn't stop trying. She didn't know what else to do. She screamed until her throat hurt.

And then, she resorted to the same thing she always did when she felt any kind of despair. She cried. Her head fell as she gave up, and the warm tears that streamed down her cheeks fell from her chin down onto her legs. Her crying didn't calm until she heard a noise. "Calm down, Mrs. Goodman." The voice was softer than she expected. She knew to listen. The young woman didn't allow herself to start crying again. She did everything in her power to stop sniffing. She heard footsteps, and after a moment, she was able to make out a figure in the darkness.

"Do you promise not to scream?" She thought for a moment about what that question meant. Then, she nodded vigorously. Even though she knew it was coming, she couldn't help but retreat from the hand that reached for her mouth. She was able to stop herself from making any noise, but she couldn't keep herself from shaking. She was still scared. But there was only so much room for her to cower away from him, and the man carefully pulled the cloth from

her mouth before slowly retreating.

She almost started crying again, but she stifled it. Her breathing was erratic and quick, but she closed her eyes tightly and managed to force one word to slip from between her lips. "Why?" Her voice was weak as she asked the simple question.

There was a long silence. She didn't know if she was going to get an answer. She slowly lifted her head, and opened her eyes, trying to see through the darkness. She couldn't. She wondered if the man was even still in the room, but when she listened more closely, she could hear his long, slow breaths. She opened her mouth to speak again, but found that no sound came out. She faltered, and then pressed her lips together again.

"Your husband... is a monster." On the surface, his voice seemed calm, but there was a rage behind his words and the way he spoke them. It was a combination of rage and pain. Before the scared young woman could ask what his intentions were, he spoke again, better concealing the pain and rage in his voice. "I won't hurt you... You're the bait."

There was another long silence. Minutes passed before the weak, feminine voice echoed through the air a second time. "Cecily..."

"What?"

"You called me... Mrs. Goodman. I prefer Cecily..." Her voice faltered in the end. She looked down when she didn't get a response. A moment later, she flinched as the room was filled with a dim light. The man was hidden in a shadow of the room's corner, but Cecily saw the unpainted walls around her. She saw the chair she was bound to, and the jacket that covered her previously half-naked form. She had been too scared to notice it before. "What—" She cleared her throat. "What are you going to do to him?" She asked

the question carefully, with fear in her voice.

"Nothing less than he deserves," the man answered quickly. "Do you know what your husband did to my sister?"

Cecily was quiet as she thought about his question. It didn't take long for her to piece it together. Her eyes lowered to the floor as she nodded solemnly, her long, dark hair falling around her face. "The reporter?"

The man nodded slowly. "So you know your husband has a reputation for making anyone that crosses him disappear. Including my... my baby sister. She would have exposed him." The rage in the man's voice became clearer as he spoke again. "He should have let it happen. Now he deals with me."

Cecily's breathing quickened as she heard the anger in the deep, masculine voice. "I-I'm sorry..."

The man took a moment to calm down, and then he spoke in a softer tone. "What are you doing with someone like that? You know he's a murderer..."

Cecily let out a weak laugh. "What do you think?" She sniffled as the wet tears escaped from her eyes and started down her cheeks again. "He... he was sweet at first. But he... he barely knew your sister. If I tried... If I..." She gulped, and spoke barely above a whisper. "What do you think he'd do to me?" She kept her head down as she let her hair hide her face. "Please... let me go back. I have to go back. He—"

Her words were cut off by the sound of her own gasp when the light clicked off, and the room was filled with darkness once more. Before she could ask what was happening, she heard the door close. She knew that meant she was alone.

The man returned hours later, and Cecily woke to the feeling of a cloth against her face. She didn't cower at his touch this time. She let

him wipe the dried tears away from her cheeks.

"Does he hit you?" The question took Cecily by surprise. She didn't have to answer. The look on her face spoke volumes. They both were silent then. The room was only dimly lit, but the man was close enough that Cecily could almost make out his face. His eyes were darkened by the hood that was meant to hide his identity, but his face was covered in wrinkles. He wasn't old, but the loss of his sister made him appear much older than he was.

It wasn't until the man began to walk away that Cecily spoke up. "He's alone." The man stopped in his tracks. Cecily took a breath before explaining. "He'll have fired his security team for letting me get taken. Maybe... Maybe even worse. Everyone else should be out looking for me. My husband doesn't react well to his things being taken. But in case I somehow come back on my own... he should be waiting at the house, giving the search orders from there. He's alone. Unprotected. I..." She cleared her throat, and slowly shook her head. "I can't live like this anymore. I can't leave him. This is the only way."

The man turned to face Cecily. "You really want to help me take down your husband?"

She nodded. "You're right... about him. He's a monster." As the man walked toward her, Cecily didn't know what was happening. But a few moments later, she was released from the bonds that kept her trapped in the uncomfortable chair. She let out a sigh of relief. She carefully stood up from the cold chair, thankful to be able to move her legs.

They planned. The man already knew the layout of the expansive home from his initial kidnapping plan, but Cecily told him exactly where her husband was at any time of the day. The two were careful not to take too

long. They had a window of opportunity.

They talked in the car. They talked about how Cecily ended up with the corrupt businessman in the first place. They talked about the man's sister. He confessed his name. Adam Wood: a man avenging his baby sister Rachel. They reached the home, and they were both silent. They crept through the estate toward the elaborate office that her husband was surely in, avoiding any witnesses that may interfere with the plan.

Cecily entered first. Her pale blue eyes met with the black ones of her husband, the ruthless businessman who was no older than thirty. "Cecily," he breathed out in a thankful whisper.

"Cedric..." She replied, barely above a whisper. From behind her, Adam entered. Cecily looked over at the firm hand that held a gun pointed at her husband. Rage came across the corrupt businessman's features, but his eyes softened as they rested on the sight of his wife.

"Did he hurt you? Did he lay a hand on you, Cece?" Cedric asked the question in a deadly tone, but Cecily calmly shook her head.

"You killed my sister." Even though Adam spoke, Cedric's eyes stayed locked with those of Cecily. "My innocent baby sister... You'll pay. You'll—" Adam felt uneasy when he was interrupted by a cruel, deep laugh. Even the laugh of Cedric Goodman sounded villainous. "What—" This time, Adam was interrupted by a gunshot. More than the sound, he was interrupted by the searing pain of a bullet through his knee. He let out a scream of pain as he fell to the floor, then tried to fire back to no avail. Adam squirmed in pain on the floor. He didn't under-

stand. Not until he saw his gun's firing pin, held in the air and grasped between the fingers of Cecily. Now Mr. Goodman stood tall, holding a handgun he had grabbed from his desk.

With Adam rendered useless, Cedric went straight for his wife. His big arms wrapped around her and held her close, and Cecily put her own arms around her husband's neck. She moved one hand to his hair as she played with the sandy blond strands. "Are you sure he didn't hurt you, my love?" Cedric searched his wife's eyes for the truth.

"He didn't. It wasn't pleasant, but it could have been worse for a kidnapping." Cecily rested her head against the silk shirt of her husband. "I missed you," she spoke in a breathy voice. In his arms, she finally felt safe. She was always safe with him.

"I missed you, too. I was so worried. All of this... none of this matters without you. You know that, don't you? I'd be lost without you, Cece," Cedric promised.

The couple's moment was interrupted by the betrayed man on the floor. "But he... you said..."

Once again, Adam's answer came in the form of a villainous laugh. But Cedric looked to his wife for an answer. "What did you tell him, Cece?"

Cecily's eyes strayed over to Adam, then went back to her husband as she gave a light shrug. "I may have let him believe you hit me."

"I would never hit you, my love." Cedric ran a finger along her cheek.

Cecily smiled. "I know. And I told him you would kill me if I ever left you."

"Well," Cedric interjected, "That part's true."

Cecily wasn't bothered by his words. Instead, she nodded. "Mm-hmm. I just didn't tell him what I'd do to you if you ever tried to leave me." Her lips curved into a devious smirk, a smirk that was met by a soft kiss from her husband. "I should let you work. I miss our soft bed." Cecily looked over at Adam, but continued to speak to her husband. "Don't be too hard on him. He was actually decent to me, aside from sticking me in the most uncomfortable chair in the world."

Cedric looked disappointed about her request, but he seemed ready to follow it. It wasn't until Cecily was almost out of the room that Adam made the mistake of speaking. "I was wrong. *You're* the monster."

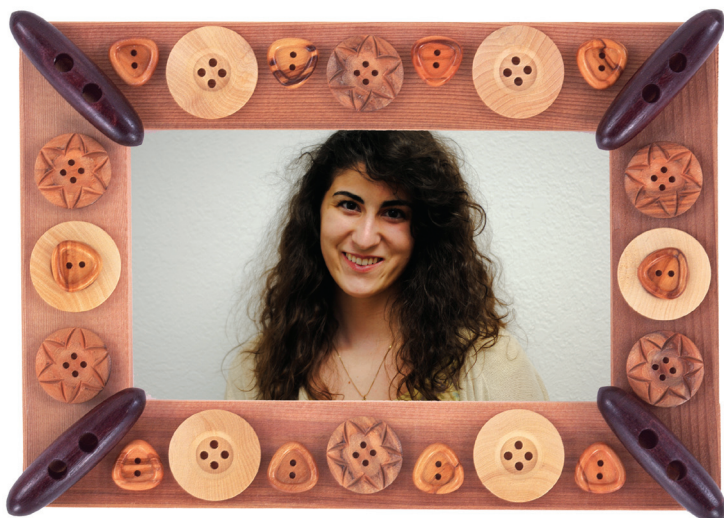
Cecily stopped. She was hurt by his words. The pain was clear on her face until her eyes rested upon her husband. "Maybe I am. Maybe deep down, I've always been one. But he knows me. He knows me to my very core, and he loves me anyway." Cecily turned her head to look at Adam. "I couldn't let you take that away from me. He's the love of my life. No matter what he does to everyone else, he treats me better than anyone has. He's amazing to me. If that makes me a monster... then so be it. As long as I have his love, nothing else, no one else matters." Cecily flashed a calm smile at her husband, and then continued to walk out the door. She spoke a few parting words. "Nevermind, Ced. Enjoy. I'll be in our bed." With that, she took back her earlier request, and left Adam at the hands of her husband: the monster with his twisted smile, and his dark intentions. Her monster.

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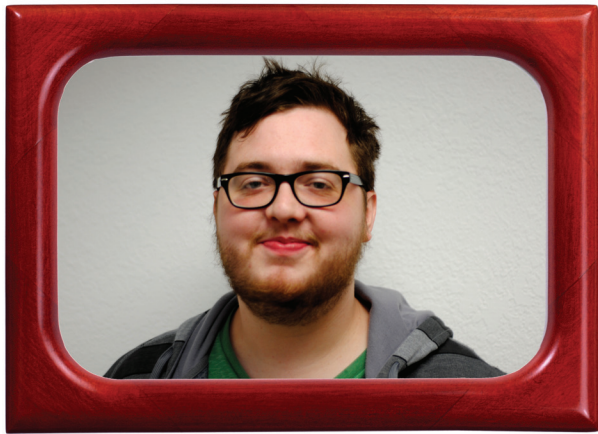


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