

Kristine

By Rob Loughran

I grew up in the Midwest, Kansas, in a little Norman Rockwell looking town, with Rockwell-looking people, and dogs, and flags, and picket fences. But old Norman never painted the town teetering near insanity from the August heat or freezing to death when it's snowing parallel to the ground because of the wind. Nor did he paint the Postman with a penchant for little girls, the Schoolmarm who caned children for a mote of dirt beneath their fingernails, or, in my mother's case, the Preacher's Wife who knelt before both local and Just Passing Through Males with the same alacrity that her husband knelt before the hallowed altar of Jesus Christ Almighty.

That would have been a suitable-for-framing *Saturday Evening Post* cover: A multihued and vibrant summer's Sunday sunset scene:

People strolling past the Pastor's house, he's in collar and shirt sleeves, stirring up lemonade for the kids playing baseball in the trimmed and spacious front yard. A tabby slumbers in the hammock; a collie paces the runner rounding third; a pigtailed and freckled little girl sits on the bottom step and pouts over her exclusion from the baseball game.

A pie cools in the kitchen window.

And in the cool shade of the elm tree out back, the neighbor moans and squints in cross-eyed ecstasy as my mother services him orally. The painting would be entitled: *I Hate to Rush the Blowjob Harold, But It's Almost Time to Serve the Apple Pie.*

Seeing something like that would probably upset and disconcert any nine-year-old boy who had abandoned the baseball diamond to answer the call of nature and happened to accidentally view the event through the bathroom window, am I right?

So as a kid I became confused, reticent, withdrawn and apathetic.

Until my hormones surged during my fifteenth summer, then I became brutal and antisocial and unruly. You see, the normal horndog feelings that cause confusion in male adolescents, for me, resulted in deep and profound feelings of betrayal. Not a murky, haunting disloyalty or duplicity; but absolute betrayal. I had plenty of sex: a great American Myth, *You Can Only Get Laid in the Big City*, should be dispelled: farm girls who all their lives see hogs and dogs and cows and horses doing the procreation rumba are plenty willing and curious as to what's the big hubbub—but sex for me bordered on the violent, if not the sadistic, end of the spectrum. I've just recently figured out that sex, up to and including my third marriage filled the same void it had for my mother. It wasn't a release or consummation; but rather a consolation for the drear, lonely, and counterfeit existences we had become. She wasn't Emily Forrester, Woman; she was Reverend Forrester's Wife. So, I suppose, oral salaciousness became her drug of choice; her escape.

I often wished that she'd had the common decency to become an alcoholic.

And so my mother acquired not only a reputation but also a new, snide and lubricious sobriquet. (Ever notice how we ex-cons have such breathtaking vocabularies?) I kept a taut mental inventory of everyone in that town I ever heard refer to my mother by this accurate, but none-the-less demeaning nickname.

And I made it my mission, my duty, to kick-the-shit out of each and every man or boy who spoke ill of my less-than-sainted mother. It also became my obligation, my self-appointed aegis, to screw-the-shit out of all their daughters and sisters.

And I did.

I was such a cruel and vindictive bastard, but like I said, seeing that backyard act, that maternal degradation, would probably upset a person, am I right? And I don't offer that as an excuse, there is no justifiable pretext for my behavior: it takes a lot of resolve and exertion to stay pissed at an entire community for your entire teenaged existence. I was an animal and out of control; I just bring it up as an example of how a single incident can resound—good or bad—inside you and change your life forever.

In my 77 years of living, these unforgettable, watershed, life-altering nexuses have occurred three times. The first, with mother, I just told you about. The second was the Korean War, which I'll spare you: the war scenario has been told *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*: the appalling horror of it just rotates from tropical to frozen to desert to urban to tropical and back again. The third nexus transpired about forty-five-years-ago but I feel like the incident happened yesterday.

It was 1961.

I'd been out of the Marine Corps about six-years. I had a parole officer in Oakland I had to visit twice weekly. My *business*, despite the P.O.'s attention and tutelage was dealing in pilfered merchandise. No specialty; anything stolen. Looking back it would have been easier to maintain gainful employment and pay taxes than to travel as much and work as hard as I did.

With this particular deal, in 1961, this minor-league thief resided in a house the second Little Pig wouldn't have called home.

Ramshackle boards, assorted street signs, and cement-cruled foundation forms were tacked together; not to keep the wind out, but to, perhaps, slow it down. A week's dirty dishes were piled in the sink. A three-legged kitchen table stood by virtue of three empty Budweiser cases supporting a quarter of the burden. A six-socketed junction coiled on the table. It connected with a frayed orange extension cord curling in through a cracked windowpane above the sink: electricity "borrowed" from the neighbor. Six extensions of varying shades and colors poked from the power source: snakes from Medusa's head. Impudent cockroaches on parade scratched and clicked across the yellowed linoleum counters, tolerating *our* existence.

And the place smelled.

Smelled like an old, wet dog drying in front of a dying campfire: mildewed and dank and charcoaled.

She had told me not to knock—she never answered her door—and I stood in the kitchen until, wraith-like, she appeared and nodded for me to follow her. We trailed a pale-blue extension cord down the hall, passing a bathroom so rank, the germs must have felt crowded. She fished in her baggy Levis for a key and opened the door. Without a word she plopped on the bed and plugged in one of the electric guitars she needed to sell me. She tweaked a dial on the amp, huddled over that Gibson Hummingbird, and banged out three bluesy chords. Then three more. Then another, slower, rock-and-roll riff. She said, "Chuck Berry."

"I know." I counted silently to seven—letting some tension build—before I asked, "What do you play for your boyfriend?"

“He ran off.”

“If someone were here and you wanted to melt him, how would you play?”

Negotiations had already begun; but only I realized it.

She unplugged the stolen guitar and repositioned it across her skinny thighs. Junkie, whore-thin, and sallow, she sat erect, assuming, incongruously, the posture and attitude of a proud and vigilant military cadet. Her right elbow protruded, and then quivered as hands danced like white spiders on guitar strings. She sucked on her bottom lip and strummed a languid yet forceful Andalusian strain; music the solid-bodied voltaic guitar should not have produced. Eyes closed, she strained and stressed the strings, raising the hair on the back of my neck.

That kid could play.

She stopped abruptly, self-conscious and embarrassed about being swept away by her music at this, a business meeting. Fetid surroundings; but business is business. The strings quavered, counterpoint to her sudden, sullen, bitchy demand, “How *much*?”

“Where’d you learn to play like that?” Negotiating. Always, I’m *always* negotiating.

She flipped the guitar face-down on her lap, “How much for the guitars?”

“Keep playing. Please.”

“How much for the goddam guitars?”

I counted silently: *Thousand-one, thousand-two, thousand-three*; and then I said, “How many guitars?”

She told me how many, how much and I feigned indifference while calculating probable revenue after unloading them.

She’s not much younger than I am; but she’s much too young to deal with a man like me. Too young; some people are just born too young.

I muttered, “Too much,” and named my price. Then I shrugged and turned to leave; the doorknob was cotton-candy sticky. I wiped my hand on the doorjamb; hardly an improvement. I pulled a handkerchief from my Eisenhower jacket and tidied my hands. Buying time. Sweating the dulled and deprived junkie. She’s desperate for this deal. I’m not. I stood there silent, looming over her, glaring at her and I watched her cave. She acquiesced with a pitiful and remorseless ease. I knew she gave-up and gave-in often. Her future life would be one of submission and compliance and backstreet conformity until she’d had enough and knifed a dealer or picked a fight with some drunk in a bar who’d take her head off. So we reached a price—my price. She had diverted, stolen, a shipment of guitars from her boss, and I handed her some crisp cash and all but stole them from her.

America, America. My God, what a beautiful country.

I took the joint she had fired up to celebrate the deal, pressed it to my lips and puffed. I passed it back to my new best friend and she sucked like a calf at a dripping, sodden teat. In that business there was a unique handshake for confirming each transaction: a glass of red wine for Italians, a shot and a beer for the Polish and the Irish. Today with this kid, with this weed, this deal is done.

And I needed to flee this filthy, excremental abode. I needed to smell the cool sweet air from my Chrysler’s a/c. “I’ll load up the guitars and let myself out.”

She nodded, snubbed the joint between thumb and forefinger and deposited it in a torn shirt pocket. I opened the door and followed the pale-blue snake back to Medusa's head.

Seated on the table, playing with the tangle of extension cords, sat a soiled, nearly naked, barefoot child; her fingernails chewed to scarlet nubs. Her straw-colored hair had been chopped askew, bangs crooked across her forehead, the longer strands and tendrils plastered to her face with sweat and snot. Her filthy, scabbed, mud-caked feet dangled.

She smiled; with rotten, mossy, yellow teeth. She stared with impossibly proud and pristine brown eyes and said, "My name's Kristine."

I said, "Hi, Kristine."

"My name's Kristine." Both her feet moved quicker; an urgent swimmer's flutter kick.

"Hi Kristine."

The feet moved quicker yet; her brown eyes goaded me; I heard some muted and mournful Segovia from down the hall. "I *said* my name's Kristine."

"They call me Jeb."

She motioned, vaguely, toward the source of the guitar music, "Does my mommy call you Jeb?"

"Yes," I lied. "Yes, she does."

"She calls me Angel." Her feet stopped. "Sometimes."

I nodded and walked to the door. Kristine's eyes followed me

"See ya', Jeb."

In my car breathing the welcome, sterile air-conditioning I said: "Kristine. Kristine." I shifted to drive and sped away from that hovel, without the guitars, I had abandoned the transaction.

Immediately, I knew I needed to get past that moment with Kristine, to will that memory, that squalid child—her life was already over—into my past tense.

I needed Kristine to become history.

But I am still plagued and somehow shamed by the stubborn image of that skittery, filthy, fragile brown-eyed child. Kristine's memory, to this day is so substantial and immediate that it makes me queasy. And I don't know precisely why her brown eyes still disturb me. When it concerns Kristine, and only Kristine—no one else—my mind can't sit silent long enough to allow me to figure it out. It is a tangible, terrible confusion.

Kind of like war; kind of like mothers.

Am I right?

"Kristine" is a story about a real little girl named Kristine, that I met only once, in more-or-less the same circumstances as the story. I was so upset that day I immediately wrote my feelings out in a poem, which was terribly maudlin and sucked. But the haunting emotions Kristine inspired in me eventually found their way into story form. Today, if the real Kristine isn't dead or turning tricks for crystal meth, it's a miracle. Poor kid, I only met her once and probably ended up writing her obituary.

"Kristine" and 19 other stories are available in my collection, "What Happens When the World Doesn't End?" at www.unlimitedpublishing.com/loughran