

The Red Snowflake

From the designated driver to the unyielding drunkard, Michael's imagination gives each a background, a set of strings with the spirit of a marionette. Eyes graze the bar, the drinkers of the night, poured shoulder to shoulder within downtown Fullerton. Passing, smile to smile, grimace to grimace, ventriloquism skips through psyches, sliding, until his talents fall upon willful Cleo sitting at the opposite end of the bar. A close examination on Michael's part reveals a red snowflake on the neighbor's wall, a circle rich at its center and dim at the outskirts, an outline of a head with thick red dumped on its floorboard. To this, he is reminded that playing the role of God is not a deed for the faint hearted.

To this, thinking of Cleo's mother, Emily, setting his mind back seven years, he marvels at the beautiful spirit, in mind, arriving home that day to find his kitchen window shattered, his personals thrown all about. In an effort to clear Michael of suspicion, Cleo's mother confessed herself guilty of breaking and entering. Emily hid truth underneath a lie, one saying that she had robbed Michael's apartment for his gun. The truth was a divine gift from above, dished out by the hands of Michael, complements of his station, his sweet combination of an apartment handyman and armed security guard, standing in front of the bank, mind constantly racing out of boredom. The truth was that he had purposely left his loaded pistol underneath Emily's sink while Glen, that bastard of a stepdad and husband, was out trucking. After seeing Emily black and blue too often in an early morning's greeting, he wanted to see what the woman would do with his gift of free will within an open black work bag. Our arrogant hero had even gone to the

extent of leaving on an out of state vacation. And Michael wasn't gone but three days when he received the phone call from the police. His neighbor, they said, had broken into his apartment, stolen his gun, and then shot her husband in the head, spraying red Christmas on the wall. Confessions in the form in of a string of explosions told it all. So Michael headed home, god-like on a chariot.

Upon arriving back home and entering their doorway, passing underneath the yellow tape, he found the red snowflake inside of the studio. The sight was amusing, because the snowflake sat at the dining table as a guest might do. The table was pushed up near the corner and Glen had sat directly against the wall. The visualization struck Michael into a laugh: the scoundrel sitting there eating his porridge, and sweet Emily hovering out a bit of grace, followed by a loud pop ending in a pleasant thud. A proper ending for any man that would lay a hand on a woman, thought Michael. Seeing the red snowflake, Michael's chest heaved up, abandoning the idea of a guilty God based on the free will of mortals, justifying himself with the knowledge that he had merely opened a window of opportunity, and Emily, the beautiful spirit, the victim of an unjust legal system, placing that opportunity dead center into Glen's forehead.

Bringing his mind forward seven years and into the present, he again looks across the downtown Fullerton bar towards the woman's seventeen year old willful daughter, Cleo. She stands up, walks through the crowd, looks over her shoulder, and leaves the premises, knowing that the common thread will lure our arrogant hero to her.

"I hoped I'd find you somewhere out in town," she says, hovering a sandal and toes over a curb. "I always remember you coming home late on a Friday evening. I remember wishing

that it'd be our door you'd enter. I'd lie on my little mattress, hear you click up the steps, and I'd pray that it'd be our door knob. It never was."

A train whistles through town at the nearby station, and into every direction hundreds of wanderers of the night hop from bar to bar, passing underneath the trees lit up with wound rope lights, the lot cascading down Harbor Boulevard. These are the sights which trace Cleo's movements, and Cleo is the sight of Michael's curiosity, walking side by side with the girl, conversation struck to the nil. The right turn at Chapman Avenue tells Michael that they are headed home, to a memory. Half a mile down, they walk up the steps and pass into the right door, Cleo's old apartment.

While watching Michael's surprise upon entering the lit up apartment singing Billie Holiday's *Solitude*, its current tenant out of sight, she silently prays that time had not made a bastard out of the man. She motions to the closet, and as Michael opens the door, she skids a dining table chair across the floorboard to sit.

"Please join me, Michael," she says, watching his face turn to shock upon finding his neighbor in the closet, tied up and blindfolded with thick muffs duct taped to his ears.

He too skids a chair, Holiday sings *I Cover the Waterfront*, and Cleo watches Michael's mind race, reevaluating confessions of the past.

"It's been too long," she says. "But before getting into all of that, I believe that a little peace of mind is in order.

"I held you up at gunpoint," she continues. "Inside of your apartment you'll find valuables missing." To this, she places a few hundreds on the table. "I hope that covers it. I'm sorry that your neighbor has to suffer through this. But he's unharmed. While he slept, I crept

in, woke him with a pillow case over the head, and walked him through the ordeal with a knife to the neck. All he knows is that a woman broke into his apartment; he did not see my face.”

Cleo slides black and white photographs of early twentieth century seamstresses across the table towards Michael. “Take your pick. Who am I? Are you willing? You must believe me, Michael, that none of this is of malicious schemes. I had to speak to you, and I could think of no more of a proper place than this. You and I share a special bond. Don’t think for a second that I didn’t understand what you did. I was ten, but I was not an idiot.”

“It has been too long, Cleo.”

“Many years, Michael. I pray they treated you fair? Me ... the years have tracked me across foster families. The last ... God ... they tried so hard to take on the names ‘mom and dad.’ I suppose they were decent, very moral and all, but that was a bit much. When I was alone one night I held up their pic and gave it a whirl, the old ‘hello mom and pop,’ and then I shattered the frame on the floor and had this taste in my mouth like I had downed Drano. I knew then that it would never do. So, I ran.”

Cleo’s eyes shift to the kitchen, to the sink, to the memory of finding Michael’s gun while her mom was out grocery shopping. There had been something in Michael’s eyes just hours earlier that day, something like tenderness or sympathy. Justice, however, was the bottom line. But to hand the gun over to mom would’ve been to drop Michael’s great gift, to translate great ambitions to fruitless dreams.

“The years, Michael, have been ... mixed.”

So she held ambition in her hands, stuffed it into her toy chest, and slept on the idea, nightly, until the bastard came home.

“It’s maddening visiting my mom, knowing that she’s in there because of my actions. And each visit is an inevitable trip to a new fake family. Michael, I still don’t know whether I’m here out of kindness or cruelty, but whatever it is, just know that I mean nothing but best intentions for you. A gift of clarity, Michael, is what I bring to you. Likewise, I ask only for further divinity, a gift, through your hands, of serenity.”

Clarity is little Cleo, seven years back, sitting on the edge of her mattress at that comical hour when the bars come to rest and its customers stumble home. Emily slept soundly at the opposite end of the studio. That bastard of a stepdad had come into town after trucking over the previous week and he wanted a meal sitting at the table waiting for him. Cleo said she’d take care of everything. She’d make him a fine meal, decorated with candles. She sat at the edge of the bed wondering if she’d have the courage. Over the past couple nights it had been so easy, visualizing the banishment of mom’s suffering, visualizing her getting smacked in the face for speaking her mind against his frequent trips to taverns and strip clubs. In that moment of justice, Cleo would foresee the years ahead, mom’s timid cries telling him she’d leave, followed by the cowardly threats of murder if she did. She’d look into the future and find mom’s light extinguished, her soul, trampled beyond recognition. She’d find hatred, but would that be enough?

Hearing his car pull up, Cleo lit the candles surrounding the fine Italian meal.

“You told us you’d be here earlier,” said Cleo.

“You told us, oh you told us!” he mocked in a high pitch.

“Aren’t you happy that she went through all this for you?”

“I admit, she did a damn good job tonight. Lasagna, garlic bread, candles even. I told her I was coming home. She did good.”

“You told her you’d be home hours ago.”

“And I lied, Cleo. That’s what grownups do. Now get in bed. I’ve been on the road and don’t need to listen to you.”

She stood and watched him plough his fork into the meal, sliding her bare foot against the black bag on the floorboard. Slamming his fork down and grabbing her shirt, pulling her in as he stood and bent over the table, he growled, “I said get in bed! Mind yourself, little girl, or I’ll break you in proper, just like I’ll do to your mom tomorrow morning for not keeping you on a leash.”

In that brief moment, Cleo caught a whiff of perfume on his clothes, and for the sake of justice, she envisioned the happenings of the past few hours. In mind, she stood inside of a piss ranked tavern and watched a harlot rub herself up and down the pathetic excuse of a man. Pulling her mind back to the Italian meal and the pig sitting before it, she bent down and pulled the gun out. It was frightening, knowing that she was about to flip his switch off, just like one of the dolls that she had grown tired of five years back. Emotional conflict was expected, but while looking at him hunched over, pig-like over his pasta, oblivious to his doom hovering over the table, she could not see him as another human-being; he was more like a slab of filth that ought to be buried in the landfill. A nursery rhyme came to consciousness. It was a rhyme that her mother used to sing, lyrics concerning pigs going to the market and eating roast beef and whatnot. She sang it to a whisper, and he slowly lifted his face. Seeing the barrel hovering over a candle, he dropped his fork and spat out pasta.

“This little piggy cried ...” Pop!

Emily jumped out of bed with a shriek, Cleo spun to face her mom, and after a couple of seconds of hovering upright, Glen fell over, face splat into the lasagna. Emily staggered through the faintly lit studio towards the table, catching Cleo’s wide eyes in the candle light, and, pressing her waist to the table’s edge, she leaned over and stared at the filth. She walked to his side, lifted his head out of the meal, dropping his lifeless chin like a toy soldier nutcracker, and then the hair which she held plopped off like a potato head, and with it came skull fragments and wrinkles of brain in the form of pulled pork. Having left a canoe atop his head, his face once again fell splat into the pasta. Emily shrieked, once again, and after staring at the pig’s repulsive, sloppy chunk of dome, she threw it into the seasoned garlic bread.

“I broke in and stole Michael’s gun,” said Cleo.

Emily staggered in circles, patting her daughter on the shoulder and bouncing her eye lids. This commenced, Emily in silent staggers, Cleo, her spectator, and then the red lights appeared outside. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Emily grabbed the gun and pointed it to the back of his head. Upon hearing the steps clicking up the stairs, she unleashed a string of explosions, emptying the clip into his skull, sending white chunks off like embers in a pleasant evening’s campfire, and shouted:

“Pig! Beast! Dead! Dead! Dead!” The police kicked the door in, and she threw the gun into the corner and continued shouting. “I did it! He’s dead! I killed him! I killed him! No more! Dead!” Cleo had thought it a dramatic fit to take the blame, but after looking into Emily’s manic eyes, she knew that it wasn’t all acting. He was dead, finally, and she was giving a boisterous

celebration. The joy slipped into a sadistic laughing fit, while repeating over and over, mainly to the direction of Cleo, "I killed him! I did it!"

Seven years ... seven years later and Cleo can still see her being forced into the back seat of the police car. It had been a long seven years of desiring a confession in order to free her mother. However, she knew that Emily would never allow the truth. Visiting days were met with intense affection on Emily's side. She'd look to her daughter with awe, as a hero and a savior, and out of fear, she'd threaten Cleo, whispering that if the truth ever came out, then the first thing she'd do is kill, turning herself into a proper murderer, and so that way she'd be right back in, a mother and daughter reunion. She whispered, 'There's no point, Cleo; what's done is done, and never forget, you did the right thing. You're a hero!' Yes, it was maddening, finding mom caged, but she believed her mother's threats whole heartedly, and she knew that a confession would not end well.

Finding herself back at the table, across from Michael, Cleo says, "So there it is. It wouldn't be right for me to withhold the truth from you, Michael. I know that you're a good man, and I know that it might be frustrating knowing that that night went beyond the justice that you so kindly offered, to know that the aftermath has been years of pain, watching my mother caged over my actions, but you and I share a bond that has no place for secrecy."

"Where will you go from here?"

"When I settle, I'll let you know. Michael, I don't know where I am. I needed to hear your voice, to see you in person."

She wanted reassurance. She wanted to know that if the wheels were turned back, then would she be right in doing it all the same, with the knowledge of its fate. All actions lead to

multiple outlets of a reaction, and not all of them are pleasant. Purity is a state only for the risen.

“Sister, your mother has not condemned you, and neither do I. Leave this place and live a fruitful life. She was right. You did the right thing and you are a hero.”

“Thank you, Michael, thank you. I knew that you’d be the only person who could set my mind at ease. Let this not be a goodbye. I pray that we’ll keep our connection throughout the coming years.”

To this, Michael gets up, places his divine hands on the girl’s cheeks, and kisses her forehead. With the two going their separate ways, Michael convinces Cleo that their connection will last. The powerful experience sets his mind wavering, forgetful of his tied up neighbor in the closet. He turns off Billie Holiday, turns off the light, and heads back to the lights of downtown Fullerton.

While narrowing in on Chapman Avenue and Harbor Boulevard, he looks upon his hands and marvels at the power which he knew to pass through their veins. Around the corner, down Harbor, a convertible swerves through the road with its drunken teenage cargo laughing at the large world. Turning to the side, to a barber shop window giving a reflection, Michael kisses two fingertips and presses them to his image; and one of the drunken youngsters flips an empty beer bottle over his head, shattering it on a vintage shop doorway. He will head to Soco District, Michael thinks, pressing the crosswalk button. The kids in the convertible sing merrily. Yes, Michael had given Cleo a great gift tonight, like he had seven years back. “You are forgiven, Cleo,” Michael says to himself, prideful of the sound, laughing while he steps foot onto the intersection. The left tire of the convertible stumbles onto the island which splits the boulevard

in half, and then it falls back to the asphalt, giving its drunken residents a jolt and a greater fit of laughter. "God is great," Michael says. "I am great." The headlights of the convertible dance down Harbor, left to right, all about, a drunken recital of steel. They grow wider through the passing seconds. To his left, Michael senses a divinity materialize out of the evening. And why not, he thinks. "Let your light shine on me!" he sings, laughing, nearly reaching the center of the road. "Yeah right, Michael," he says. "You are the light, my boy. Yes, you are the ..."