

Linda H. Heuring

Nibbling at the Bloodstains

This girl moves like she's underwater, practicing for some mermaid show at Weeki Wachee or something. What I really want to do is grab my sunflower seeds and water bottle off the counter and run out the door. Let mermaid girl keep my \$18.21 in change, put the cash in the pocket of that massive company smock that hangs on her pointed shoulders like a poncho and later buy a six-pack or some milk for her kids and never make a peep if the cops come asking.

Here I stand, though, waiting, watching, because she reminds me of my daughter, Melissa, a rescuer, the weight of the world on a narrow frame. There's a cross dangling from the chain around her neck, and not a plain one either, but one of those Catholic ones with Jesus stuck on there like that's how he'd like to be remembered, all nailed up and nearly naked. No, this girl would run after me, leave a note with my complete description "in case the poor woman comes back for her change."

My silver-blue-haired grandma would have handed over exact change to begin with, paying for a dozen aspirin with a nickel and two pennies and slipping the brown and yellow tin into her pocketbook, giving me the empty one. I packed it with dimes. I was six. She was 60. Now I'm that combined. Sixty-six going on nothing if I don't keep moving.

The girl waits for me to stick out my palm, and I raise my right arm, but substitute my left, like a kid playing games. She starts with the penny, layers on the dimes, the bills. She counts with her mouth, just like Melissa's husband Brandon does. Did.

"And twenty," she says. She smiles and bumps the register closed with the heel of her hand.

Bottle sweat stings the rope burn on my right palm.

“Have a good day, and God bless,” she says. I open the door with my hip and set off down the road to where my skiff is tied to a stake on the bank of the Okeechobee Waterway.

The air tastes like asphalt, as if the squiggly heat waves from the pavement coat my tongue when I inhale. I find a patch of shade under a trio of Christmas palms. Even in the shade the humidity holds me close, comforts me. The palms rustle from a breeze far over my head. At my nursery, only a few miles away by water, the rows of palms planted a year apart alternately catch the wind like this when it rises off the big lake. Will Melissa stand there today, listening to the wind play their fronds like harp strings?

I dump seeds in my mouth directly from the tube. I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday. I need salt, water. I chew the seeds to pulp. A pickup shows up on the horizon, fuzzy and shimmering. I step behind a tree trunk, even though its diameter is half mine. Age has spread my hips, and my shoulders are broad beneath my work shirt. My sun hat, rolled no bigger than a bratwurst, is snug in a pants pocket. I pat my waistband out of habit, but my gloves aren't there. They are on the bottom of the canal, somewhere west of Lake Hopcochee where I dropped them overboard last night. I figure catfish are picking at the frayed canvas. Nibbling at the bloodstains: mine, his. The story problem is this: if 200 pounds of flesh falls 15 feet at the end of 115 feet of rope on a four-inch pulley, how much friction will it generate? Enough to burn through a pair of heavy duty work gloves and rip a bloody trench into an old woman's hands.

My boat is where I left it. I yank the metal stake from the scrub and carry the line down the bank into the skiff. It's the same rope, practically, as I use in the shop: 12 strands woven together, not too much stretch, abrasion resistant. To the arborist it's a rope; to the mariner it's a line, but they serve the same purpose. They tie up things you want to stay put, and they keep your loved ones safe. That was the plan, anyway.

Just after two o'clock I reach the Caloosahatchee River that connects the waterway to the sound, and I motor past the

Ft. Myers bridges and into a nearly full marina, a world away from the lake that was my home. Here fancy trawlers with perfect canvas sport flat screen TVs. The sailboats are at least 32-footers. Behind me are million-dollar condos no one is buying, even though a flapping banner says they're now only \$359,000. Ten out of 200 are sold I read somewhere. It's the market, supposedly. That's what Brandon blamed for his failure in real estate, not his drinking, certainly, or that look in his eye that contradicted that capped-tooth smile he whitened with overnight trays from the drug store. Couldn't tell by my business. People never stopped wanting more shade, or more oranges, or more bougainvillea. Brandon had no eye for landscaping. No, his eye was on the brass ring, or more likely the belly ring barely visible under the silk blouses of our biggest corporate buyer. Meeting clients and marketing was what I hired him to do. But as much as Melissa prayed otherwise, he was really a meat market kind of guy.

"If he could just make a go of it," she told me. "Get his confidence back. He might not need..." She twisted a curly strand of hair into a corkscrew.

"You know," she said. "Those others."

There was a parade of them, and as each one was discovered, or blurted out in a drunken rage, I saw Melissa square her shoulders, set her jaw and narrow her eyes in determination.

Melissa could coax a neglected seedling to sprout leaves or an abused and abandoned kitten to eat from her hand. She tried her magic on Brandon, but unlike the seedling that grew to shower her with peaches or the cat who dropped furry field mouse heads at her feet, Brandon kept up his nefarious ways. No, he flat out defied her, and it was me who tired of waiting for him to change. I watched her shoulders grow thin, her eyes draw back in their sockets, and that determined jaw tremble more often than not. Melissa saw it as her personal failure and tried harder. Not me.

Two men work the condo grounds. One, on a stand-up mower, spins circles around a young azalea. Another sprays impatiens with a hose in full sun. I step off the brick walkway into the grass, then stop myself. Not my crew. Not by a long shot.

The harbormaster's nose is in a book when I enter the office. The cold air catches my tonsils unaware. I cough.

He looks up.

"What can I do you for?" He puts his book down open, spine up.

"That fresh coffee?" I point to a pot on top of the file cabinet.

"Help yourself." He stretches in his chair, a man in no hurry. A fisherman, no doubt.

I sip coffee. The bulletin board has snapshots of men holding big fish, some business cards, boats for sale, and one for rent. I watch minnows in the bait tank and survey a wall of lures. Five reels of line are mounted underneath. A red reel just like mine.

A young girl in a bikini walks by as I carry my coffee outside. Her sarong is tied low on her hips, and a belly ring sparkles against her tan abdomen.

The buyer had a belly ring just like that, but a pale and puffy stomach. Did she sneak back in last night to get the rest of her clothes or did she pretend nothing happened? Make believe her lover's mother-in-law hadn't found them pressed together on a bale of burlap in the barn, Brandon's white butt lit purple in the bug zapper's light? I had tossed her abandoned shoe, a black Jimmy Choo with silver stars, into the baler with Brandon before I encased him in the net like a Christmas tree headed for the top of an Escalade. Let him sober up hanging from the boom of my truck, an evil-doer captured by Spider Man. When he saw his philandering naked self hanging 15 feet above the ground in a tree net, maybe he'd morph into a new man.

I squint in the sun. A man in a green shirt waves a

clipboard and points a pencil stub at an ailing palm tree harbor side of the closest condo tower. I see the problem: a load of mulch piled around the trunk. Between the heat and trapped moisture, the tree will die from the ground up. The workers take a shovel and tamp down the mulch, compacting it.

“No, no, no!” Clipboard man gets on his knees and pulls mulch away from the trunk.

“I wonder who made the first mulch volcano?” I say. He looks up at me and shakes his head. The base of the tree is exposed. It’s wet and soft. I kneel down and prod the bark with my fingers, looking for any hint of the telltale white wafer from gandoderma butt rot. It’s felling palms all over Florida, and there’s no cure.

“Looks like it’s just heat and moisture,” I say. “No gandoderma.”

I sit back on my heels and look him in the eye.

“She’ll need some looking after,” I say. “Not to mention the others. And the crepe myrtles? Could use an artist.”

“Done this before?” he asks.

I nod, but it doesn’t come close to how I feel. It’s all I know. It’s what I love. It’s all I have left.

“Ten an hour to start. No benefits, but it’s steady. Forty hours a week or more, if you’ve got the time.”

I nod again.

“I’ve got some paperwork in the truck,” he says, then stops when I shake my head.

“I’d rather not,” I say. “An old grandmother like me prefers cash.”

He looks past me to his workers digging at another palm, then back to me. I see him take in my chopped off hair, the lines the sun has sketched into my face and neck, and the slick red line of skin across my palm.

“Ok, Abuelita, long as you didn’t kill someone.” He smiles.

I plant my sun hat on my head, pulling it tight so the brim will shade the tip of my nose. I smile from my personal shade.

“At least not on purpose,” I say.

He laughs a big belly laugh, then fans himself with his clipboard.

“Tomorrow, seven sharp. I’ll get you the drawings. You set the priorities.”

We shake hands. I wince, and he tosses me a pair of gloves. I grab a fistful of soil and test it for moisture. It smells of the ocean, and sunlight, and fish.

I tuck the new gloves in my waistband and visit the harbormaster. By morning my skiff will be transformed into a dinghy, a fresh stripe of paint just below her gunwale and a paint-stenciled name that matches my rented sailboat will disguise it for now.

At dusk, a bartender squirts two shots of Cuervo Gold into a blender at a bar on the boardwalk. I hadn’t counted on Brandon getting sick and choking on the tequila and whatever else his stomach heaved up. I let out the rope to bring him down fast and steady, but he thrashed around, and I lost control. He gained momentum, and the rope ran through the pulley and across my palms. It didn’t stop until he hit the concrete floor, the net stretched tight against his skin and a four-and-a-half inch Jimmy Choo spike heel sunk deep in the middle of his chest.

The sky is red before night. From the cockpit I see whirlpools of surface-feeding fish. I let an ice cube melt in my palm, coating the burn. Yesterday I was the boss. Today I’m the little grandmother. Tomorrow, maybe I’m the mother Melissa forgives, the one who forced her to turn a nurturing eye on herself for once.

The tide tugs at my moorings, but I won’t escape to the sea. I’m anchored to the land as securely as these lines wrap the dock cleats. My roots run deep. My rhizomes, underground runners themselves, will take nourishment from the soil until they’re strong enough to surface once more.