

An Unlikely Rapture

by Andrew Bowen

I like to stop at a gas station every three hours to let him pee and get a snack.

He takes the crinkled five dollar bill from my hand. "Want anything?" His fingertips brush against my palm. They are rough and callous because he plays guitar. I grin. He kisses my cheek. "Hope I'm in there somewhere."

I shake out of the daydream. "Sorry. You go ahead. I'm fine."

Ear-length locks of auburn hair bounce as he jogs toward the station. He stops between the gas pumps and looks both ways.

I tilt my face and rest my cheek against my palm. I imagine his body rising out of the Mexican surf. A sigh tumbles off my lips. "Only a few more hours..."

He walks into the station and disappears behind the newspaper stand.

I take a folded sheet of paper from my purse and unfurl the page. It's a copy of *Annabel Lee*. He had handed me the poem, claiming it as his own. After class that day, we had a chat about plagiarism.

"I tried to write one, Mrs. Foster, but when I read *Annabel Lee* it said everything I wanted to, only better."

I crossed my arms. "Michael, you can't take what belongs to someone else."

He looked down and licked his lips. "Sometimes, you can't help but want what others have."

"What do you mean?" I leaned over and tried to find his eyes.

His chest filled with air. "I love you." He lifted his face. His blue eyes met mine.

I backed against my desk. My framed wedding photo fell on its face.

Michael slams the car door. "Here," he says and hands me a short stem red rose.

I take the rose. "Where'd you—"

"Careful!" He reaches for my hand. "There's thorns."

"Odd..." I wince and peek under a leaf on the stem. "They usually take these off."

Michael smirks. "Wasn't for sale." He juggles a green apple in his left hand.

I nudge his shoulder. "You stole it?" The apple lands in his lap.

"Found the bush growing beside the building where the bathroom is."

"Weird place for a rose bush to grow." I pluck a few of the lower leaves and thorns and insert the stem into a half full water bottle in the cup holder. "Perfect."

Michael winks. "Now we just need curtains."

I smirk and shift the gear into drive. "Ready?"

He salutes, picks up the apple and bites into its green flesh.

We cross into Texas two hours later. Michael turns up the AC, then reaches into the backseat.

I look at the rearview mirror. "What are you looking for?"

Michael pulls his acoustic guitar from the backseat floorboard and settles it in his lap. "Gonna serenade you," he says and plucks the strings. "Can't go to Mexico and not be serenaded, *mi mujer bonita*."

I smile and shake my head. "Don't."

He strums the guitar and squints as he makes up Spanish-sounding words to a revolving mariachi rhythm.

"You won't get too far if all you know in Spanish is 'my pretty woman.'"

"Oh I dunno," he lifts my hand to his lips. "I've done all right with you."

Chills begin on my hand where his cool lips meet my skin and ripple through me. I try to focus on the road and cock my eyebrow. "Not bad for a 15-year-old."

"Touché, Mrs. Foster."

The chills evaporate and leave me still. "Don't call me that anymore."

Michael releases my hand. "Sorry."

I reach over and run my fingers through his hair. His face droops and he watches his hand pluck the strings one at a time.

"I didn't mean to—we're starting over, together. We don't need our pasts to bog us down."

His fingers slide slowly up and down the mahogany fret board. The twang of each note hangs like a lonely cloud drifting through a deep blue sky.

He stops playing. "Do you miss him?"

I roll in my lips. "I miss who we were—when we first got married."

"What changed?" The strums continue.

I shrug. "People change, Michael. When they get married, I don't know; the mystery and excitement can slip away if you aren't careful." I change lanes. The broken white lines shoot by us at a steady 70 mph. My vision fixes on the expanse ahead and my awareness numbs. "We just coasted along."

"Think that will happen to us?"

"What?"

He twists to put the guitar in the back seat. "All the sneaking around, the running...when we finally chill."

I feel his gaze and close my eyes for a moment. Images of my wedding flash by so fast I barely recognize myself or Travis. I reach over and grasp his hand. "No sweetie. We'll be different. True love always triumphs."

We spend the next few hours silent. The closer we come to the border, the hotter the fire in my chest burns.

A green sign comes into view. MEXICO: 20 MILES.

Michael squeezes my hand. "We're almost there. I'll bet Mom and Dad are freaking out by now."

"Wait...you told them you were camping with August, right?" I glance at him and shake his hand. "Michael?"

He stares out at the road. His eyes glisten and he blinks. "I might have left a note."

I release his hand. "You left a note?" Blood drains from my face. I feel lightheaded.

"A poem." He looks at me with wide eyes. "It's just a little 'screw you,' okay? No big deal."

"We're supposed to keep this whole thing secret. No one would understand. You agreed, remember?" I sigh and look out my window at the desert around us. "Did you say where you were going?"

No answer. I look back at him. He folds his arms.

I pound the steering wheel. "Answer me!"

"No!"

I lean back and wipe sweat from my forehead. Traffic thickens. My nerves crackle and pop. I look all around until he comes into view again.

"Michael?"

He stares at the cars in front of us.

My shoulders deflate. "I'm sorry, sweetie." I rub his thigh. "We're so close, see? I just got scared, that's all." Tension leaves his jaw muscles. I smile. "Forgive me?"

A few seconds pass. His shoulders rise and he exhales. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

Anger pulls my smile into a frown. "What?"

Michael turns and stretches his hand toward the traffic. "What if we get caught?"

"We won't." I look ahead. My grip tightens around the steering wheel.

"But what if?"

"Look. We prepared for this." I glance at him, "You're camping with August," and then point my thumb to my chest. "I'm at a conference in Maryland. Everything's fine."

Michael slouches and picks at the calluses on his fingertips.

"Listen. You're the one who came up to me that day, remember? I didn't ask to fall in love with you. Everything was normal until you came into my life."

He looks at me. I turn away. His gaze pulls on mine. "Normal?" He sighs. The breath shivers as he speaks. "What about your marriage? You said you weren't happy—that it was growing cold."

"It was but—"

He glides his fingertips along the peach fuzz on my arm. "Remember that time we skipped school? I set Poe to music...we made love for the first time?" The wake of his touch leaves me shivering. "If you wanted normal, then we shouldn't be doing this."

I take a tissue from my purse and wipe my eyes. Black smudges of mascara streak across the white tissue like oil slicks. "You're such a heartbreaker," I sniff as a grin stretches across my mouth.

He looks down at the apple core on his lap.

"So..." I tuck the tissue into my purse. "I'm in if you are." Traffic moves us closer to the Customs booth. I nod at the border. "We can still turn around if you aren't sure. We can just forget—" my throat cramps. "Sweetie, I love you. But if you don't—"

He looks up at me, cups my face in his hands and pulls my lips to his.

My insides flutter as he pulls away.

I lick my lips. They taste like his sour green apple. "Alright," I exhale slowly. "Here we go."

Michael sits up straight and pushes hair away from his eyes.

"We'll be fine. Just let me do the talking. Got your passport?"

He hands it to me. I take out mine. We come to a crawl as vehicles filter through the Customs slots.

After 30 minutes, we approach the booth.

The attendant asks for our passports. "Business or pleasure?"

I smile. "Vacation."

He leans over and takes a look at Michael. A breeze grazes my sweaty neck; Michael probably just saluted the man. My nerves sizzle as the leather on the steering wheel crackles under my grip.

"Stay put for a second." The man turns.

I stare ahead. The sign reads, WELCOME TO MEXICO! one hundred yards ahead of us. I tap my feet against the floorboard.

Michael touches my lap. "Everything cool?"

“Tell me you didn't just salute him.”

He doesn't answer and takes his hand from my lap.

I shake my head. “Forget it. Just sit back.” Sweat condenses along my hairline.

The officer comes back without our passports and lays them in my hand. “Have a good trip.”

The passports feel heavier than they should.

Michael strains his voice. “We did it!”

I bring my hand inside the car and settle against the seat. My eyes fix ahead of us on the Virginia license plate as it slowly moves away. “Virginia is for lovers,” it says. Travis' face, fresh and young on our wedding day, flashes over my eyes.

“Valerie?”

Someone honks their horn behind us. I shake my head, put on a smile and shift into gear. “Yeah, we did it.” The car moves forward.

The shadow of the looming customs gate lifts from the car. The last few yards of American sunlight glistens off the glass of the cars around us. Michael is talking, like a rambling teenage girl, about everything we've done...are going to do. He touches my hair. I glance at him and smile. The motion of traffic pulls us closer, like the last few feet of climb on a roller coaster you aren't too sure about. We cross the border and I quiver. I can no longer smell my own sweat or the bland, scentless dust of the desert. Now its the tinge of peppers and gasoline. Michael weaves his body to the Latin music now polluting the air. Everyone is dancing, smiling, drinking and glowing. My body and thoughts are ridged, stuck, for some reason, on a fight Travis and I had over something I can't remember three weeks before today.

I glance at the rearview mirror. A sea of vehicles honk and lurch forward. There's nowhere to turn around. The weight of what I've just done settles on my shoulders and suddenly, I feel like the only one out of tune.

