

Gabe

by Laura McCollough Moss

-1-

Gabe shoved the carbide engraver through the hammer loop of his baggy jeans and stepped back to examine his work.

"There you go, Trudy," he said quietly. He gently blew the dust from the rose-colored marble and buffed it with a soft cloth.

"Gertrude Jane Sherman," read Matt as he walked in with two steaming cups of Tim Horton's coffee. He set them down and wiped his red, runny nose on his sleeve. "The dove turned out real nice."

"Thanks. I wasn't sure about it- her husband wanted it flying instead of in silhouette like I usually do." He pulled his safety goggles down around his neck and freed his ponytail from beneath the strap in back. "I used the teardrop tip. Let me have that Timmy Ho's, Man. It smells great!"

"Four sugars and two creams, just the way you like it." Matt took a pair of thick leather gloves from their hook on the peg-boarded wall. "I'm going out and move some of that stuff around to make room for Marty to pull in."

"Let's hope he makes it this morning," Gabe sipped his coffee and picked at the exposed stuffing on the arm of the ratty old chair he sat in. He looked doubtfully out the grimy window at the steadily falling snow. "We've got four orders due next week and I'm low on rock."

They heard a burst of static, followed by their mother's gravelly voice. "Good morning, Boys," Tanya called through the baby monitor. Bought at a yard sale a few summers ago, it worked well as their communication device; sometimes too well. Matt smirked and rolled his eyes at Gabe.

"Mother Dear!" Gabe shouted toward the speaker. "Have you prepared a farmer's breakfast for us?"

"Like hell," Tanya coughed. "Tom Sherman's stopping over around eleven. He wants to see the headstone and put his deposit down. You got it ready?"

“Just about,” Gabe stood and snapped his goggles into place, good-naturedly bucking his teeth and giving the monitor the finger. Matt burst out laughing.

“Cut the crap, Gabe,” his mother snapped. “Don't make me come out there!”

He picked up the Sherman obituary and a wax pencil. “You know I'm playing with you, Ma. I just have the dates to put on and it's done. Let me get going and I'll have it finished on time.”

“Get moving, and help your little brother! I see poor Mattie out there working his tail off. Your truck'll be here any minute.”

Gabe flipped the switch on the air compressor to drown out the bitching and returned to the immortalization of Mrs. Sherman. He had just enough time to transcribe her lifespan before the backup warning of the delivery van announced its arrival. Matt lifted the overhead door and waved Marty in closer as the shop filled with exhaust fumes.

“I love the smell of Exxon in the morning!” Gabe yelled, pulling a wheeled steel ramp up to the back of the truck.

Marty cut the engine and stepped out, pulling a stocking cap over his thick, unruly mop of hair. He was six-six or so with a ruddy complexion and a teddy-bear smile. Tossing Matt the van keys, Marty grabbed Gabe in a man-hug and punched his shoulder.

“Holy shit Dude! It took me two-and-a-half hours to get up here. Route six is a friggin' mess! I almost turned around in Kane. I think I only made it because I had so much weight in the back end; I don't know how the hell I'm getting back.”

Matt had the truck open and was struggling to get the first wood-framed slab of granite onto a dolly. “You can stay here and sleep with Tanya tonight,” he teased. “She'd love that!” Their mother's attraction to the stone hauler was a running joke. Gabe fished a Trojan from his back pocket and threw it at Marty.

“You're an asshole!” Marty laughed, wrestling Gabe to the dirt floor.

“You got that right,” Tanya said from the doorway that connected the shop to the house. Her shoulder-length gray hair was freshly

brushed back, and she wore blush and a newer flannel shirt. She picked the condom up off the floor and pressed it into Gabe's hand, winking shamelessly at Marty. "You know he needs Magnums, anyway!"

The unflappable Marty rose from his knees and put an arm around Tanya. "You know it, Baby," he chuckled. He pulled an invoice from his coat pocket and handed it to her.

"I worried about you all morning, Sweetheart. Out there driving in this blizzard! Come on up front to the office and we'll settle up." She ushered him into the house. "I'm going to make you some pancakes."

Matt shot Gabe a look of disbelief, shaking his head as the two of them finished unloading the truck.

-2-

Bob Sherman blew his nose noisily into the paper towel Gabe offered him.

"It's perfect," he cried. "You captured just what I had in mind for my Trudy; that's her right there."

"I'm glad you like it, Sir," Gabe replied awkwardly, equally uncomfortable with tears and praise. He took the check the man held out to him without looking him in the eye.

"That's payment in full, plus an extra ten percent for getting it done so quickly," Mr. Sherman cleared his throat, regaining his composure. "You really are an artist, young man. You do a wonderful job."

They shook hands and Gabe watched him go, backing his late-model Buick carefully out between the piles of snow on either side of the driveway. Something about the empty passenger seat and the BOBNTRU license plate put a big lump in Gabe's throat.

"Damn!" he said to himself, wondering for the millionth time what he was doing in such a sad line of work. Break time, he decided, grabbing his stash box and locking himself into the freezing cold bathroom to smoke a joint.

He emerged thirty minutes later, sufficiently anesthetized to face Tanya waiting with her hand out for the check.

"Stoned again, I see," she muttered as he brushed past her.

"He gave me two hundred extra," Gabe challenged. "That's mine."

"Yeah, well, the gas bill came today. It's over four hundred. I'm going to need every penny you can bring in this month."

Gabe grabbed a crowbar and thrust it angrily into the joint of a wood frame, jerking it free from his next project. "We had a deal, Tonya," he couldn't look at her. "Any extra goes toward my tuition at Herky's. I told you I need twenty-two hundred by February fifteenth. "

"I never agreed to that," she said, bending to pick the pieces of splintered pine off the floor. "You're our engraver here. What happens to the business if you quit on us? I don't think you realize how lucky you are. Most young guys would give anything to have an opportunity like this in the family. You want to piss it away to be a scratcher!"

Countless contentious conversations on this subject were the reason Gabe swallowed Tums like candy at the age of twenty-four. He yanked the check from his chained wallet and slapped it into his mother's hand.

"Easy there, Mister," Tonya warned, zipping the Community Bank deposit bag closed. "I've got to run out and get this into our account or we'll bounce the check I gave Marty this morning. Then I'll be at Buccola's having new brakes put on the van. The inspection's due next week and it won't pass without them." She patted her chest pocket for the ever-present Virginia Slims and lighter before pulling on an old men's parka and forcing the door open through the ten-inch accumulation of snow. "Better run the snow blower," she shouted back.

-3-

Chloe stood and wiped her mouth with the sleeve of Gabe's army surplus coat, staring blankly at the steaming vomit on the uneven slate sidewalk. She was just a block away from Wright's Stone Memorials, but made her way slowly on leaden, frozen feet in

cheap sneakers. This was not good. He was going to be pissed with her and she was in no mood for it; coming as she was from an epic fight with her mother. Knocked up at twenty-two! Old enough to know better. She turned the corner on Niagara and saw the smoke of the woodstove curling from the chimney of his workshop; felt the warmth of him and quickened her steps. He opened the door and stood smiling, watching her jog up the driveway.

“How's my baby today?” Meaning her, of course.

“Hey, hey, what's the matter?” He held her close and reached under her clothes, gently rubbing the image of the Archangel Gabriel that he had carved onto her back. Chloe smelled like bacon and cherry Chap Stick and puke. “You sick?”

“Nah,” she half-whispered as she tucked Gabe's hair behind his ears. “Just preggo.”

