

Kimberlina

by Steven Gowin



*Behold, we count them happy which endure.
Ye have heard of the patience of Job,
and have seen the end of the Lord;
that the Lord is very pitiful,
and of tender mercy. -- James 5:11*

Butterflies

My Mom did put my eyeball out, by accident, I s'pose. Slipped whilst she was drunk and just poked me with that table knife... only bled a little. They say I got me a huntchedback too, but it ain't really all that huntched. Just that them protective kids is mean and never seen no real one and calls me huntchedback anyway.

My name is Kimberlina Lee LeBlanc; I ain't naught but four and a half year old. I used to live down there in Wasco with my mom and one of them cowboys. Sometimes my mom took me down to Beggarsfield to them cowboy rodeos. They got them purty horses, and them mean old bulls. Them cowboys just ride em all buckin' away. It goes blurry when you watch em, flyin' around and losin' they hats and all. I just only got the one good eyeball, but I seen something all right; I seen them cowboys got talents.

Real hot here sometimes. And yet we get them butterflies. They fly up out on the highway, and my Mom is swearvin' the car around, but you can't miss em, and purty soon you're lookin' through a bunch of little yellow stars on the wintshield. I tell my momma, "Ain't that purty?" And she says, "You are denst Kimberlina. You shut up you Kimberlina, and sit back down in your chair." She trys to smack me, but she can't reach.

Mustachios

Somebody calls the chile protectives on mamma. And they make her put me in one of them programs to keep an eyeball on me. We got the snack in the morning though... graham crackers and that bad milk from that old stinky dairy out there by the Beggarsfield Road. I know where'd it come from though, and I don't touch it, but them other protection kids just lap it up and get them creamy mustachios a drinkin' it.

My mom got mustachios too. She says she's goin' to the doctor up in Merced and take care of it. And I say, "Momma how they gonna get them itty bitty hairs outen there?" and she says, "I shoulda got you outen there Kimberlina... whilst I had a chance. You get to bed now." She pops me one, and I get to bed, and then some of them cowboys come on over to drink that hootch with her.

Sometimes at the chile protection, we get the visitors who do the good works. The rose queen with that sparkly crownd come by one day all right. Them flower farmers give her that crownd; she's queen of em all, I guess, but she's naught but a chile of sixteen hersef. She ain't a Christiant or anything like that, though, just real real nice. She finds out that the protectives been teachin' me my a b c, and I ain't supposed to, but I been readin' them books too. And she says, "Kimberlina, you are a purty smart girl, but your mamma should comb your hair and keep you home before you come out thisaway any more."

But I go out wherst I want and when I want. Momma don't care. I go when the air's warm but none of that dust in it, and them flowers bloom and that good smell's everywhere. I bet that queen comes on out like that too and just capers out there amongst them roses like a

butterfly. Them protectives tell me I'm a lucky little girl to be livin' out here in this wonnerful country. It's just about what you'd expect, but I suppose it's right.

Prison Guards

Them crimbinals just keep on comin'. They got them big vans that bring em out here, and the sheriffs just dump em oft. We got the prisont out there right off the Beggarsfield road out by them rose crops on the one side and them milk cows on the other. On them hot days when the wind's blowin' down from Mendota a little, them crimbinals got that rotten dairy smell that'd turn your stomach.

That bad milk is real bad, but after them butterflies turns to stars, and the flowers come, them roses' smells is just as good as that dairy is bad. When my mom starts goin' with them prisont guards, one of em tells me he gusses it don't matter if it's rotten milk or roses; them crimbinals can't get away one way or the other, and both them smells'll drive you bughouse.

My mom says that them guards say if you can speak English you got you job out at that prisont. I say, "I speak English all right," and "Can I get me a job as a prisont guard? I wanna get me my eyeball looked after of up there in Merced." And my mom says did I forget, "You popeyed huntchedback nasty girl," and she bops me one again.

Carnies

When the flowers is all gone and them pommey grantis ripen up, out there East of town, is when them carnies starts back from the summer shows. They got a big parkin' lot and a bunch of them trailer houses over there East. And when they come, they just park their junk any old whichet way and go on into the taverns and don't come back out but a few days later.

Them prisont guards knows most of em because they all been up to jail one time or ruther. Guards hate carnies and carnies hate coppers. Sometimes they fight. One of em fights the other at my mamma's Airstream, and the sheriffs come out. That's about when them protectives stop off and get me and take me on up there around Mendota and put me with them old ones.

He ain't too bad, but she smells like Mentholadium all the time which is one of them old lady smells. When I get up there, she says, "I'll scrub the bee jesus out of you little girl," and by God, I have a purty good bath that day. I'm in that tub, and it smells like them flowers and nothing like that Mentholadium. And when that water gets the gray scum on it, that old gal drains it, and puts in fresh for me, and says, "Whyn't your mom clean you up and get you a patch over that eyeball, you evil chile?"

That night, the two of em is eatin' that nasty wet pink pullet for dinner. It got that bad old chicken smell, and squishes all around them plates. But they put a loud war show on the TV, so I don't hear the squishin' and them bones snappin'. I watch them Nazis, but I won't take one bite of that chicken. Then she sends me up to bed with one of them old smelly Bibles smells like a grave, and says, pray my prayers to him, the holy son of god all mighty.

Mingo

I guess I am up there with Mentholadium and The Load Jesus Christ in Mendota a week or two, when them protectives come around again and say my mamma can take me back now, so I go on home. The protectives just walk me up to the trailer and knock and scuttle away because they don't even want to see what's inside. Well my mom comes to the door, but she don't have much on. She runs back to the toilet and tells me she's comin' right back and meet Mingo.

Mingo got that real dark skin all right, but he ain't one of them illegals. He just been out there with the shows a lot all up and down the Valley, Why Reeka to Beggarsfield. He got his hair all long and slickered back in a shiny ponytail and them mirror sunglasses and a real stinky smoke. He got them black cowboy boots with the turquoise and red designs and them tight Wrangler jeans and his black leather vest on all greezy without no shirt. That's when I see them peacock birds on his chest and all them black lilies and roses up and down his arms, and them Hitler signs like on that channel up there in Mendota.

The next day I'm playin' down out there back at the fillin' station, and them prisont guards come by and say about what you'd expect,

“Kimberlina, your mamma still with that Mingo?” and, “He is on the pipe and bad to the bone, don't you know?” But I don't pay no attention. I like them tats and boots and sunglasses, and Mingo don't smack me or my momma much like he said he would.

Protectives

My mom's drunk most of the time now and kinda crazy too tryin' to clean up the trailer all the time but just makin' it worse. Says she's goin' with them carnies in the Spring, and she's out there all the time with them show rides and junk and them carnies and smokin' and drinkin' that old hootch and barbry quein' that cheap pig meat.

They got them migids from a strange land that ain't Mexico out there. I suppose they're carnies too, and they're drunk most of the time like them others. But they got their talents which I whist I had. They play them guitar songs all soft, and some of em sings too. Seems like they're real sad about their mammas and their country.

My mom is the pot callin' the kettle black. She says, “Stay away from them migids; they smoke like fiends, and they ain't clean.” But them little devils been fixin' me grilt cheese sammiches and tomatie soup. I smoked some of them black cigarettes they got, but my mom's Newports is better. She don't know if I steal em or not. She don't keep track of nothing now. She's real jumpy all the time but drunk too. She says, “Come here you stoopit chile,” but she ain't got strength to smack me hard now.

That's why them protectives start looking for me and her again, I reckon. I hear they been over to our old trailer a couple of times before they figure she's out here on carney trash rancho. “Come along Kimberlina,” they says, and that's when I head back up to Mendota and Mentholadium.

Jesus and James

They got another prisont up there, and most of them Mendotas work it. I see prisont guards all the time, and we got illegals out in the cotton too. But I like that cotton. Even out in them dusty fields, it's whiter than you might think, and after they treat it, I guess it's just as clean as snow.

Mendota got a queen in the Fall, and she got a silver crown
bigger than that one down in Wasco. She got a white ribbon sash,
“Mendota Cotton Queen,” and she got the bright teeth and red lips
and bee you tee ful white white hair. I bet she does all kinds of
talents like accordion and baton that I whist I could do.

She brings us some tadie chips and Mexican Cokes over there to
the Mendota protective, and she’s real kind to me and all them other
mean children. Then she come right up to me over to my desk with
my name on it. “I bet you’re a real nice little girl, Kimberlina,” says
she, and then she smiles and pats me right on my huntchedback,
“And you got a real pretty eye patch too.” But she’s a Christiant and
probably lyin’ I just know it.

Speakin’ of which, when I get home, Mentholadium says go on up
and read the Bible James 5:11, but she’s a fool, so I sneak on out
back. That old bare garden got one of them amand trees and a
cherry tree and a peach tree. Them peaches is little and dusty; I try
one though. And ugly as it is, it tastes real good. I’m smilin’ now and
feelin’ sleepy, and I guess it’s about what you’d expect. I take a nap
out there and have me a dream. I dreamt about them roses, I think.

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