

# Peace and Love from the Middle of Nowhere

*by* TygerLily

Miles from anywhere that mattered, he stood by the side of the road staring at the two-lane highway that outlined the edge of suburbia like a cement fence. Steam rose from the hood of his car as he sat on the ground and waited for the other shoe to drop.

If you took the time to notice, which didn't happen to him often, you would see a man, tall and thin; with a hairline receding into an Eddie Munster widows peak. This, of course, accentuated his thin nose and lips. On the day in question, he fit his paper pushing persona to a tee, in his charcoal suit, white heavy starched shirt, and the loafers that were too scuffed to wear outside but too comfortable to discard. He was gangly and often slouched to avoid attention. In school, they used to call him the Jolly Green Giant for laughs, though his mother called him Fletcher.

That afternoon found Fletcher covered in sweat, his suit soiled from his brief attempt at auto mechanics. The glasses he wore repeatedly slid to the tip of his nose, the beard he decided to grow on a whim was making his chin itch, and all he could think about was scotch. But, he wasn't the scotch type, scotch was her drink. Frustrated, Fletcher gave his tie a yank, and ripped a seam in the process. She had given it to him as a token of friendship (and because her favorite musician had painted its pattern). It was now ruined and that seemed appropriate.

*They met at work, her first day as a temp filling in for Susan who had to leave for "personal reasons" (Which meant that when Susan returned she would be Simon). Fletcher was immediately drawn to her wild curly mahogany hair. The color made her green eyes attack innocent bystanders. The only thing he could think to say was, "Do*

*you believe in miracles?” Luckily, she laughed and introduced herself.*

*Her mother named her Pascal-Beatrix. Beatrix, a family name handed down to her in honor of her great-great aunt, a woman who lost her right index finger when her horse Buford ate it mistaking it for the carrot it was helping to hold. Pascal-Beatrix, Callie for short, loved yoga, and jazz, lost her first tooth when she kissed a window on the city bus, turned her little blue Ford in for a mountain bike, never paid more than 10 dollars for clothes, and Fletcher had recurring dreams of getting his fingers lost in her hair on rainy Sunday mornings.*

The day was hotter than usual; the temperature peaked at a record high. That day, desperate, he decided to drive faster than normal. He was never much for breaking the limit, five miles over was enough, but he needed to erase that message on the their answering machine. He pictured the little red light blinking (blinking simultaneously with the sharp pain behind his right eye) as his wife Gretchen's “handsomely manicured” finger pressed play. (The adjective handsomely is important. That would matter to her.) Now the only thought racing through his mind was why the code for the answering machine constantly slipped his mind.

Gretchen always left work at 5:30, always. So, he would leave early that day and take every shortcut he knew, getting home fifteen minutes before her...at best. Fletcher would then erase the tape and it would be over, for a while anyway. But, he didn't think about that old car, or the hot day until steam clouded his view.

*Callie showed him that sex could be fun, not just an obligatory 15-minute weekly appointment. She made him feel young. She introduced him to the pleasures of poetry readings, stealing mugs from the local coffee house, sex in the park and weed. She introduced him to the man he wanted to be.*

Dust swirled in front of his face like miniature tornadoes desperately clinging to his lips and the sweat on his cheeks. He was afraid to look at his watch, but the sun's position in the western sky suggested to him it was almost six. It was no use, he would get home and his wife would know. He missed his chance to save himself.

So, he stood there squinting against the sun's glare on the hood of his station wagon. It's funny, that wasn't the car he wanted, the Volvo was her choice. Gretchen wanted a safe and reliable car ready made for a large family and a Great Dane named Bronwyn. Ten years later, he was stuck with it while she drove the Civic, a gift of apology for his unexpected sterility.

*He met Gretchen during their freshman year in high school. They shared the same birthday which, to her, was a sign of destiny. In her bedroom, late at night, she would sneak in to her parents' room and raid her mother's jewelry box to find her grandmother's engagement ring. She would pretend it was from Fletcher. In the years that followed, Gretchen would tear apart every bridal magazine she saw looking for the perfect dress, the perfect bridesmaid's gowns, and the ideal flowers. When he told her of his plans to go to the Sunshine State for college, she told him that she was late and with that news they were quickly married by a justice of the peace. Fletcher accepted admission to the state college and, soon after, she 'miscarried'. (Fletcher was reminded of that miscarriage while he sat in the leather chair and listened to the doctor tell him that he had no good swimmers. He would never have the backbone to bring that up.)*

*She had their future planned right up to their 50th anniversary. He would get a great job in their Midwestern town and buy them a large house where they would host every family holiday. Everyone would think that they were the perfect couple. Her family and friends would look at them and know she had achieved the American dream. They would be the Jones'.*

An hour later, in the car parked next to his, a cell phone played the first few bars of "*Brass in Pocket*" by The Pretenders. His car had cooled, but Fletcher could not bring himself to go home. He drove only two miles to the nearest gas station. Still confused about what to do, he sat in the drivers seat, ate a microwave burrito, drank root beer and looked at the \$0.65 cent 'wish you were here' postcard that sat on the passenger's seat.

"I don't care what they said; I don't need tips that bad... That's bullshit and she knows it.", said the oddly round featured woman in the neighboring car. "Well what, does she really think anyone would be stupid enough to do that in front of the cameras?"

*He wanted to study Philosophy and move to California to surf and pontificate with an old beach Buddha. He had his chance at 18, but did the responsible thing upon hearing her news of their unexpected addition.*

"Who?", she continued. "God he's annoying! Does he have to be fucking funny all the fucking time? I don't get what Sasha sees in him."

Fletcher tried to ignore the endless one-sided gossip. After five minutes her boyfriend returned to the car and they then sped off, crushing a plastic pop bottle in the process.

*Things really fell apart when his head hit the corporate ceiling and he couldn't make the money she wanted. (Strike one.) With his low sperm count he couldn't give her the baby she dreamt of, the one she needed to make her life complete. (Strike two.) To Gretchen, Fletcher stopped being a man and instead became a burden. (You get the picture.*

Thinking through his options, Fletcher stared at the bright orange neon sale sign. Cheap cigarettes must be very important to people these days. Thoughts of his wife and the break in her daily routine played in his head like a bad B movie. He pictured her sitting in the

living room corner, waiting for him to return. Always one for drama, the room would be dark with one light (conveniently located over her shoulder) that she would turn on the moment he dropped his keys on the side table.

He listened to the beeping of a delivery truck nearby while he watched the couple drive away in his rearview mirror. In the reflection, he could see the passing downtown bus stop to unload its passengers. Fletcher tossed the remainder of his burrito on to the floor and quickly rolled up the windows. His idea wasn't brilliant, but it was something to do. He got out, pocketed the keys, and walked to the nearest outbound stop.

Approaching, he saw her watching him with a skeptical gaze. She was a visual shock to the senses. Clutching to the end of middle age, her over tanned frame was drenched in pink from her eye shadow to her sneakers.

"Hi" she said, forcing him to socialize before he was ready. His occasional experience with public transportation led him to institute the policy of not speaking to 'bus people' because you never knew what they would say, (and it's always difficult to rid yourself of them once they latch on to you). He sat down to wait out the fifteen minutes intending to stare toward the direction his bus would arrive, like good bus people do.

"My friend is getting shock treatments today," she said. Her voice briefly trailed with a whisper, "God bless his soul." This lack of discretion amazed him. It was this statement, used to initiate conversation, which caused him to wonder if she'd had an experience similar to her friend.

"It was supposed to be cooler today," She said. "My son has a master's degree in Theology. He gave his first sermon last weekend. There was a rainbow over the capitol building yesterday. Did you see it? It had the reds and lavenders. It was nice. I had a dream about my sister Brenda's mother-in-law; she's not doing very well. In the dream, they told me she died. I used to sell make up and in the dream an Avon lady gave me some blush but it was soft and it got smushed because it's liquid. Isn't that funny?", she said laughing

lightly and looking at him, waiting for him to confirm that it was in fact funny. Instead, in his only comment to her, he made the mistake of wondering aloud if the dream had meaning.

"Maybe the mother-in-law is dead." He said.

"I don't think she's dead!" she said with obvious concern, now worried that her dream had been something other than humorous.

She stared at him as if waiting for something. For that moment, he suspected she was hearing someone else. She was definitely cruising on her own highway. Instead of reassuring her, he pointed to the approaching bus and rose, thankful for the distraction. Upon boarding, he walked through the curtain of Aqua Net that hovered over the bus driver's head. He paid a dollar for the pleasure and headed to the backseat.

*It happened at the Riverside Coffee Shop. He cradled his espresso while he watched Callie stir the whipped cream into her mocha. 'Remember that time with the whipped cream?' he thought to himself as pictures of that night flashed in his mind like a slide show.*

*"I've met someone." she smiled. "He's wonderful; we have so much in common." He stared at her in disbelief. "Well, things between us couldn't go on forever, you have a wife..." How could she do this to him? "His name is Xander and we're going to bike to Oregon and then head south for Burning Man, and then who knows..." How could she do this?*

*They sat there, as she gushed on happily about her upcoming camping trip. He glazed over and let the numbness shut him down.*

Emerging from his daydream, he realized he knew that side of town, though he could not remember why. He pulled the cord for the next stop. Preparing to exit, Fletcher saw him. The elderly man must have slipped into the seat next to him while he was staring out the window. He wore a rainbow wig, giant neon green sunglasses, a button-down cowboy shirt and a Zigzag stuck to his lower lip. He nodded and smiled as his greeting. As Fletcher got up to leave, the man whispered, "Have a Godly day."

Fletcher suddenly recognized that corner. He had been there with Callie. During happier days the couple shared an occasional evening at a pub nearby. Back when he believed in movie love. As Fletcher turned the corner the biting stench of stale beer and garbage bins traveled from the alley wafting overhead. Aside from the cloud of smoke that greeted him, entering the pub was like walking into 1973. The place hadn't bothered to acknowledge the passing of time. Its walls were covered with red shag carpet and had paper party lights hanging from the ceiling. There was an old black and white television that hung in the back corner competing for space with Sinatra on the jukebox. The owner kept her place on a barstool in darkness underneath the TV set, her cigarette tip glowing brightly with each drag. He entered unnoticed by the patrons deep in conversation.

"Listen, I've apologized enough for one day." A man's voice shouted from the hallway payphone. "If you can't accept it then I have nothing else to say right now. I'll be there when I get there."

Fletcher made his way to one of the neon lime green barstools. He was close, but not too close to the others. Tiring of his dilemma, he ordered a scotch and soda on the rocks, content watching the wall. The TV blared during Sinatra's momentary silence. "On the next IN-DEPTH, we'll hear the story of Luther Mardock, presumed dead for seventeen years until located last summer in Connecticut, Mardock was found working as a janitor at Martin Elementary...."

"I could do that. I could leave like that guy."

"Sure Joe, but nobody'd miss you." A few of the patrons laughed.

Joe, a regular, had a peculiar squeak to his voice, sounding as though he never completed puberty. He wore sunglasses everywhere because he lost his regular pair and didn't want to spend the money to replace them. Unfortunately this meant that depending on the lighting in the room, he would often walk into anything lower than waist level. He continued, "Yeah, I could leave."

"MmmHmm.", the bartender responded.

"It doesn't matter if I go or not. None of this is really happening anyway."

“Oh, here we go!” Someone shouted from a nearby booth.

Fletcher could hear the owner giggle, cackle really, as she took another drag.

“You’re not here. Hell, I’m not here. This place doesn’t even exist!” He turned looking at Fletcher. “You ever wonder why there are so many alien sightings? It’s because some poor alien shumck got into an accident or something and we’re all in this little dude’s coma induced dream!” he said, now pacing and flailing his arms like a circus clown. “He’s probably starting to recover, you know? He’s getting out of it and he’s remembering shit. Once he wakes up, that’s it for us, we’ll disappear! Are you ready for that day? The end is truly nigh people!”

“Okay, you’re cut off.”, the bartender said.

“Oh fuck off man! I’m just enlightened!” Dejected, the patron returned to his seat at the end of the bar. “You’ll see.” He muttered.

Fletcher returned his attention to the old black and white. The talk show host he had a crush on was interviewing the flavor of the month. He began rifling through his wallet looking for enough cash to pay his tab when he found an unfortunate surprise. His hand shook as he held the photo. Callie was so beautiful that day, her hair blowing, arms around her knees. She was laughing. Perhaps at some thing he said, maybe that joke about the train. She always loved that one. That was such a great day.

Everyone turned when the door opened. A hefty man, walking straight out of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, entered the bar with a rucksack over his shoulder and a small thesaurus in his hand.

“Hey Mike!” The bartender belted out a jovial greeting. “How ya been?”

“Pretty good, waiting on the National, I’m on my way to LA to visit the old lady.”

“Oh yeah, Holly? How’s she doin?”

“Not bad.” His voice drifted off, as Fletcher turned his attention back to the television.



*Callie never wanted him to leave Gretchen. She'd made that very clear. He had everything he wanted until that day in at the coffee shop. Why couldn't it last, why did she refuse to want him the way he needed her? She was his freedom. She was his possibility, his new life. He tried so hard to keep her. He sent her flowers and gifts. He surprised her at her place hoping they could talk things over. Fletcher wanted her to see what he already knew. They shouldn't be apart. They were too good together. But, she was just having fun and now she was just having fun with Xander.*

*"But this would be real." She said. "He and I have so much in common. You have your wife and that's great...for you. Even if you did leave her I don't really want to commit myself to someone with a wife, ex or not."*

That jingle was playing on the TV. He had not been able to get it out of his head for days. "Get in the car and drive for miles and miles." That's what the woman with the raspy voice always sang in that car commercial. The commercial that made him want to own a convertible.

*"Hey Fletcher, I called her." Callie said, her voice stammering, "Well, I left her a message. I told her everything. It's for your own good; I can't take this anymore. It was supposed to be fun remember? You've lost it. I don't want to talk anymore," she sighed, "there's nothing else to say. We can't see each other anymore, I don't want to. You have to leave me alone. How many times do I have to say that? I'm with someone else now."*

"Hey!" Frank interrupted, "You know what would be great? People should glue all of their furniture down! They can just dust around it when they need to, it would be a real conversation piece."

"Uhm, yeah.", Jim and the bartender exchanged looks and shrugged shoulders. "So anyway, Jim, when do you head out?"

"Bout 30 minutes. I just have time for a quick one."

"Excuse me." This was the second interruption in their conversation so far.

“Yeah bud what can I get ya?”

“Can you tell me where that bus station is?” Fletcher asked.

“Sure. Go out the door, turn right and cross the street. It's two blocks down.” The bartender punctuated that last sentence with a wink.

“Thank you.” Fletcher smiled. “Would you mail this for me?” Fletcher asked.

“Sure thing guy.”, the bartender responded.

After Fletcher left, the bartender turned the postcard over. It read, “I'm sorry. Peace and love from the middle of nowhere, Fletcher.”

The station was a gray cement box. Much like a miniature prison complete with a pinball machine, vending for meals, and an attendant half asleep at the front desk. The place was full of chatter, people waiting as impatiently as Fletcher was though he did feel an overwhelming sense of relief surrounded by strangers.

*That day had been a successful one for Gretchen. She helped land a big account for the firm and, to celebrate, took the afternoon off to shop and have coffee with a friend. She was eager to rub Fletcher's face in the news. She knew it was petty but once it was established that she would have to work to help with finances, Gretchen made the decision that she would beat him. She would emasculate Fletcher like every girl who rejected him in high school. As she left the restaurant parking lot, Top 40 no repeat rock filled the Civic. Gretchen turned up the volume once Green Day began singing about paradise. Knowing there would be heavy rush hour traffic, she quickly chose an alternative route home.*

The bench hurt to sit on and the noise was aggravating. Unfortunately, Fletcher had twenty minutes to waste before he was on his way to freedom. Hungry, having missed dinner, the burrito not enough, he realized that vending treats would have to suffice, thankful for his weak spot for Ho Ho's.

*Distracted by parking lot traffic and the feedback from the connection of her answering machine and her wireless, Gretchen didn't see the BMW with the driver who'd had one too many martinis, ecstatic to find a place where happy hour began at 3:00. She didn't see him until he was in her peripheral.*

*"He's not going to stop." She whispered.*

Impatient, Fletcher paced in front of a woman snoring on one of the benches. He fidgeted wondering why it was taking so long, why couldn't he just get out of there before he lost his nerve. He had already ditched his wallet, watch, keys and cell (which had been ringing incessantly since 5:45) in a dumpster in the alley, and now he needed to go. How could he...

"Now boarding the westbound!", The driver's voice bouncing off the walls was music to Fletcher's ears.

*There was only one survivor in that two-car accident, one person, the proud owner of a mangled BMW, to hear the last words of the woman with the cell phone in hand. When asked to repeat what she said, he said simply, "You fucker."*

