

Catch The Air

By Sara Davis

Nina had never been so grateful for the harsh, vacuum drone of the motel room's cheap window air-conditioning unit, grinding hard in the background. Planted squarely in a crooked rectangle and maguuyvered to stay put with a flimsy bicycle chain and rusted padlock. She reached out blindly, to feel for the sticky familiar of a wall that had been doused repeatedly with layer upon layer of crusted, tacky wallpaper. Each husky page stuck to the page before it. Condensation from the drip of countless units that had been propped in the same crooked hole, each one ejaculating their share of liquid lime refrigerant down these walls; much like tears spilled for lovers, or families, or cheaters or addicts. For the faggot parolee next door, for the cracked-out "dancer" who lived in the room down the hall. Or the Samoan family that left their shoes outside their front door every night. Sometimes she could tell where she was just by smell. Her olfactory guiding her, preventing her from freaking out before she could remember where she was or what she'd been doing the past few days. But in this moment, the sweat teemed down her face, and the more rapidly her heart pumped, the faster all of the "give-a-shit" seemed to leave her body.

Girl-hate. So much different than other kinds of hate. Scalding fury in liquid form poured viscous from her splotched red, cheeks on this particular Saturday night. It splattered thick, like molasses, swirling lethargic into blood that streamed down the olive of his exposed left cheekbone. Still, as she held the old PacBell phone cockeyed above her head, she knew she'd hit him again. Harder. In that moment, she embraced the role of the predator and with absolute pleasure she smashed his face again and again. Tilting her chin and flicking her own salty lips, fast with her now forked tongue, she wiped clumps of clotted, tangled auburn hair from her forehead with the rough of her right forearm and felt the toxicity of what they had become, reaching out to every nerve in her body. The tingle was electrifying. A live wire sparked to water, her body jerked jagged, like a loose flame searching for oxygen to feed her carefully manicured rage. She knew of one other way to capture that same sensation. She reached deep in his pants pocket, knowing exactly what she was looking for. Her hands searched blindly for the familiar warm plastic and she felt the answer in response to her eager, fidgeting digits. When she yanked it out of his pocket, she spied the pretty coral colored rock and her pupils dilated with enthusiasm. A small yet perfectly round rock, sat stiff in the pile of mostly cloudy pink and yellow shake, neatly confined within the travel-sized

plastic baggie decorated with mini plumped red lips, the subtle signature of an arrogant dealer. She had learned, from him, to judge good crank by its color, for the most part...although some of the dirtier stuff could be surprisingly effective as well. The TV behind her touted the Fight of the Millennium between De La Hoya and Trinidad. There'd be a lot of pissed off half breeds drinking forties in their recliner's that night.

She crushed the rock first with a makeup compact, then with her driver's license. Years later, and only long after she felt safe enough to remember, she would occasionally wonder what microscopic remnants of the potent powder might still be trapped in the plastic that had been her only formal identification for so long. She could usually read the letters that pulled together to form her given name. Sometimes she would run a finger over the print hoping to absorb some psychic sense of who the letters indicated she was, N-I-N-A. Tonight, however, the anticipation was almost debilitating. Her hands were clammy and her slender, pale fingers began to shake; her photo became a rapid, wobbly mess as she chopped and swept powder, repeating the same motions until she had sculpted herself a barcode of lines that would've done Escher proud. Licking the edges of her license clean, she laughed out loud, just a little, when she wondered what some of her old friends might be doing in those same moments. Some of them would've been tucking their shiny little kids into their perfectly made beds, and others would've been drowning their demons in a dirty martini before they made their way to church the next morning in their shiny, plastic minivans.

With the familiar flick of her wrist and her trusty ID she returned to the moment, soon enough she'd be too high to care about all that superficial bullshit. With the same awkward grace of a teenage boy who was about to reach inside a girl's bra for the very first time, she bit down with her mouth and ripped a bic pen apart with her hands. Pulling the plastic tube over the ball point with her teeth, she spit at the floor. Her hands were heavy. Slippery, like they'd been dipped in lard. With the second or third frantic pull, she destroyed the pen and kept only the white plastic tube between her thumb and forefinger. She shivered in the memory of how sexy she had learned to feel when she snorted a good line of dope. Readjusting her peripheral vision; her eyes darted to his body laid out neatly on the floor, then across the room to the door that connected their room with the room next to them. She was certain that the decades-old door kept just as many secrets out as in. Should the Queer or any of his voyeuristic visitors want to take a gander, she was sure that door offered a peepshow view of the less than jerk-off material that had unfolded over the past hour. She listened for movement, and only briefly hesitated. The air conditioner kicked on again as she picked her first line on the mirror; the third row from the left, and inhaled fiercely.

The Sensation was jarring. First, up the orbit of her tiny pink nostril before reaching her sinuses then clumsily down her throat as she gagged on the chunky burn that she had grown so accustomed to anticipating. Closing her eyes and leaning her head back she felt her blood heat up as the perfect peach powder made its way through her system like a favorite, fuzzy blanket. She felt oddly calm. Powerful, even. She looked for signs of movement from him and, except for the occasional rise of his chest and gurgle from his throat, she saw nothing. Perched inside the romance of their quiet little moment, she allowed herself to travel back to a night he had been especially cruel. A maneuver she was familiar with, but still so desperate for. Any affection was good affection to her, even if it meant being humiliated. Even if it meant he would describe every detail of what he'd done to the girl before her, while he simultaneously reminded her how lucky she was to have someone like him, anyone really, paying attention to her. She would cry, and he would finish. He got off on that shit.

They had met in the Navy. A military girl, she was tough, and didn't need a map to find her way around a man. He had visited her, late one night, so long ago. She wasn't interested in him. And then, suddenly, she was. Insatiably Scorpio, the pursuit got the best of her. Always spot-on when it came to being her own worst enemy, he'd engaged her and she'd responded. Mimicking his every move, he was indeed, a snake charmer. He'd been doing this much longer than she had and, he was much better at it. It wasn't long before her teasing had become admiration, while he maintained his cleverly disguised degradation.

She descended further into desperation as she craved his constant attention and Nina lost herself completely on a birthday evening, outside of a porn theater on a busy street, smashed against the steamy backseat pleather of a used Toyota in a backlit SoCal parking lot. He had never looked as pleased with himself as he did that night, under the blurry parking lights she'd mistaken for stars.

The burn was always the best part. She supposed she had always been a masochist. Any average sociopath would've spotted her from a million miles away, she was such a joke. Bright neon signs seemed to hover around her, parading her low self-esteem, general distrust and garden variety daddy issues in various vibrant colors. By the time he'd gotten to her he devoured her like a meal of heartless, godless, soulless flesh on tasty bone.

The phone sat still, stoic at the end of the bed, guarding the faded paisley print on the blanket below. The headset, still cradled and smudged with bloody brush-like strokes, waited patiently. She traced the cord from the receiver to the wall with her eyes and saw the socket was empty; the plastic faceplate

dangled, a cracked corner resting awkwardly on carpet that felt more like turf and resembled the Windex blue shade of airplane toilet water. She was sure the roaches were moving in stealth units beneath the carpet. If you stared long enough you could actually see the carpet move in slow, purposeful waves as the cockroach army carried out its mission below. Just one more bump, she thought.

You might've expected that he'd quickly come to life then, when she wasn't looking or blinked. Like he might abruptly appear from behind her to strangle or stab her, or maybe something flashier, like Psycho or cheap like, Prom night. But the only thing that happened was a deflated "pop" from the slimy bubble of pink snot that had been pooling below his nostrils. Laughter escaped and she rushed to cover her mouth. Afraid any noise she made was a thousand times louder than it really was, she sucked her breath in hard.

The once cute, sometimes too apologetic mid-western girl who had bailed out on her good Christian upbringing for greener pastures, had fused into a dirty cliché; a victim of her own wanderlust. A parochial need to punish herself, had led her straight to the devil himself. It was almost a self-fulfilling prophecy and if everyone could see her now, they'd all point and whisper.

Sleeping with the devil, she'd developed a high threshold for pain. Sometimes, he bled too. She had picked enough skin from beneath her nails to know that. And he was always cruel. She had longed for a profound love, wished hard for it. She recalled a quote that read "taunt the Devil and he will come." It was appropriate, and she told him as much as she straddled his chest and stabbed her pointy knees into his arms. Her tiny frame, still flexible in her low rise, painted on jeans, and the caramel color of her tank top matched to near perfection, the pouted lips she was chewing between her teeth. With her weight on his chest, he began to groan, a little louder this time, through the swollen mess that had been his perfect face a couple of hours ago; his skin resembled the bumpy skin of raw chicken. Even if he had been able to talk, he wouldn't be able to spit any lethal amounts of venom. He looked like a meal to her, when she looked down. Not human anymore, much more the likes of lukewarm cafeteria lunch. Like gravy the color of dried mustard mingling with fake red gelatin and slopped over the small, white sections of a shoddy Styrofoam plate.

Something sparkled above his head and she spotted a tooth on the floor. Her face lingered directly over his as she reached out. He opened his one good eyelid, sluggish and deliberately and she lowered her mouth to the ear that wasn't mangled to moan her intent. She blew the remaining lines off the mirror over his face and watched the dust settle leisurely into his wounds. They sizzled as the burn set in.

Grabbing the baggie, she forced his mouth open with her free hand. She poured the remaining dope into his mouth and rubbed fiercely at his meaty, raw gums. She scrubbed his gums hard enough to wash away every dirty word that had ever crossed his lips, every freak-of-nature thought that had crept across the blood brain barrier. She scoured until her own fingers were skinned, her blood mingling with his, and sucked her finger clean with pride when she had finished. A thousand years might've passed as she hissed at him, before she'd realized the remaining sun had slinked away, and she could finally feel stealth within their dark. Her quiet meditation disturbed only by the stuttered sounds rising through the sizzling slop of creamy, saliva filled foam slipping from his mouth, she thought of the way Alka-Seltzer looks when you first drop it into water, all the hissing and fizzing; pomp and circumstance for pain relief. Rolling her eyes with disgust when he coughed, she couldn't care any less. Like a shot of good Vodka, the devastation was cleansing and with almost no thought, she came down hard to his cheekbone again. The phone skidded off of the puree that she'd made of his face and she fumbled and fell on top of him. Clumsy girl. So close, she smelled him; Lagerfeld. Then pennies, as the loud, coppery stink of his blood overpowered the vaguely masculine scent of the cologne he'd applied earlier that day. Then, more gurgling from him and she was thoughtful enough to try and listen. Her eyes blinked staccato-like and she clenched her jaw hard to filter out the ringing in her ears. Squinting, as if it would improve her hearing, she felt her heart pounding like a bad Sheila E song playing through her chest but couldn't decipher a word. The whole scene was pathetic yet, satisfying all in one big bite. Grimacing, she choked back bile as she pulled away from his chest.

She remembered the tooth. And as she stood holding it above him, she felt vindicated, somehow, by the shiny white, wet carcass that seemed to be giving off just enough light to outline the mess that would've been her on the ground. Before she would leave him there, she methodically glued every piece of her shattered disposition to a single molar. Before she would leave him on that rotten floor, she'd bury the entire chaos of their Bonnie and Clyde existence into the pulp of his once pretty boy face, in that shitty excuse for a room that she had been forced to call home, she would tattoo her pain to him with thick black ink.

Like a dancer, she turned to leave and flicked the molar backwards over her shoulder. "Mama had a baby and its head popped off"-- It bounced once, behind her. Facing her future, she twisted the knob to leave. The paper thin door clicked shut with the quiet of dropped change. Although she was certain the noise could be heard a world away, not a soul nearby heard a thing. She paused, briefly to recall the lousy slump of garbage she'd forced to the floor, speck of the man he would never be. His true curse exposed,

she had simply stood and watched as he decayed in front of her. Maybe it was her storybook ending.

She didn't really know if he'd live or die, although she was certain he'd outlast us all, like the roaches marching under cover of the padding beneath the carpet. Later, she would tell herself that the cucarachas had carried him away with them, the way it happens in those made-for-cable horror flicks, back to their hideout, where they nursed him back to health and he'd emerge with a new face after they'd eaten the face she destroyed. She knew this could never be true, but the corner of her mouth twitched up anyway.

Snapped back into the moment by the sound of a car backfiring somewhere, she became invisible. Turned high on her toes, and ran. She moved so fast you could see the amber glow of fire beneath her singing feet, so fast that the streetlights pixilated into screaming fluorescent streaks of white and green and red and yellow. An acid illusion, she was moving at the speed of light, tension level set to regret. Giggling for no reason, she peddled her feet hard and fast and chased the wind, the way she had when she was a little girl, long after Grampa had taught her to ride two wheels on a banana yellow bike, long before it wasn't safe to ride alone. She'd ride fast until she found the right hill, the perfect slope at the perfect angle at the perfect speed, a slingshot to her next life. And when she was a mile away or a city away, maybe further, she'd close her brown eyes to the Sun and stretch her arms long, palms up, to catch the air.

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