

## FRESH CUT FLOWERS

by Justin Patrick Moore

It wasn't that long ago that Lucien Kali Breverman turned thirteen. He was Klay to his friends because Lucien felt to uptown for him, even then. It was the same year he'd gone into seventh grade, leaving elementary behind, and wound up at Gimble High, two neighborhoods away in the spotty streets of West Forest. He used to walk to school, but now he had to take the bus.

This was something he seldom looked forward to. In a car it would only take fifteen minutes or less to get home and up into his room where he could pick up his drumsticks and pretend Johnny's face was the drum head, pretend Johnny was receiving a beating. Or boot up his Xbox to play Call of Duty and pretend it was Johnny who was the enemy. The problem was Johnny was always on the bus, and with all the stops, the trip took over an hour. Johnny was a sophomore and it was his second time being a sophomore. When Johnny was on the bus, it was never a smooth ride.

Klay's best friend Raelon had moved to a different neighborhood and rode a different route. The choice of who to sit with, just like at lunch, hung over him like a cloud of smoke and dust from one of the raging wildfires that had blanketed his city with smog over the summer. Sitting in the back was more fun, but it was also dangerous. That turf belonged to Johnny and his minions. School had just let out and Klay lingered on the back of the sidewalk waiting for the bus to fill up, hoping Johnny would get on first, so he could sit closer to the front. It was unfortunate that the front was the place where the droolers and other dweebs congregated, but the strategy had worked for him so far. He didn't see Johnny. Maybe he'd skipped school. The bus was filling up so he had to move, he had to get on. Then he felt a hard knock to his shoulder, as Johnny bumped into him on purpose from behind.

"Maybe we can sit together today, buddy, whaddya think of that?" Johnny said as he stood waiting for Klay to get on ahead of him.

Klay hesitated and Johnny pushed him in the back. "Go ahead, get on."

Klay was flushed, and huffed his way on to the bus, hoping to find someone to sit next to who was sympathetic. The bus driver hadn't once stepped in on Klay's behalf to stop Johnny's bullying, he never said a word to shut up the rowdiness in the back. The bus driver's long hair often concealed headphones. He didn't pay any attention to the kids, and barely paid attention to the road. He'd overheard his Grandpa Jason grumble to his Mom, who'd been discussing the situation after the second incident, and remembered him saying the driver was probably afraid of getting slapped with a lawsuit if he stepped in to reprimand the kids.

As Klay walked passed the driver, he crossed the rubicon into the netherworld that was the school bus. Three seats back an earth angel awaited him, a radiant girl he had never seen before.

"You mind if I sit here?" as he slid into the empty seat without waiting for a response.

“Sure. Be my guest,” she said.

“Would you do me a favor and switch seats, I need to sit by the window.”

“If you really have to.”

Johnny stood in the aisle and leaned over the girl to taunt Klay.

“Oh, so you don’t want to sit with me? I guess you’re going to have to hide behind this puny little girl. Well don’t worry, you’re gonna catch these hands again soon enough.” He slammed his right fist into the palm of his left.

“Well this ain’t the day, chief,” the girl said as she stood up. “Why don’t you go in the back derp, and shut your flapping face?”

She was a lean five foot three, but a chill seemed to emanate from her, and Klay new it wasn’t a blast from the AC; no such thing existed on this bus. Then he caught a whiff of what smelled liked mud, like cold sod on a day of heavy October rain.

A chorus of deep *ooohs* and laughter percolated around the seats, and someone said, “Come on now girl, you don’t want to trigger Johnny!”

But there was something in her iciness that caused him to zip his lip and slink down into the back where he did shut his trap.

“Thanks for that. I owe you one,” Klay said.

“Yes, you do. Care to make it up to me?”

“Sure,” he said, as he looked at her with care. “Did you just transfer here?”

“No... It seems like I’ve been going here forever.”

He smelled that scent of wet earth again though it hadn’t rained for days.

“Will you walk me home?” she asked.

He gave his ascent and asked “what’s your home room?”

“302, with Mr. Hagg.”

“Wait, I’m in 302. That’s Ms. Grundle.”

She just shrugged and didn’t say anything else. He tried to continue the conversation, but she wouldn’t speak. He felt grateful for what she’d done, and felt like his luck had turned, because she was a smashing beauty. Her style was half-preppie, half-punk, and her eyes were emerald green. Her strawberry blonde hair smelled like fresh cut roses. Yet the longer he sat next to her, the colder he got.

She didn't say anything else until they got to the stop at Lake Grove Cemetery.

"Let's go," she said and grabbed her bag off the floor.

She managed to get off before him, and when he stepped onto the sidewalk he thought she'd disappeared. He turned around, and on the second turn, she was there again. He for sure needed a nap when he got home. He was tired, or maybe going crazy like his friend Raelon always said.

In quietude she led him into the cemetery. Maybe she doesn't want to go home, he thought. Maybe she wants to give me kiss, or make out. He'd heard of kids doing that in the cemetery, and he hoped to join their ranks.

She took him along the winding paths, past the ponds and their geese, past the bone white mausoleums littered with orange maple leaves. She took him into a plot underneath a mighty oak as acorns crunched underneath his feet. No sound came from her.

"Thanks for bringing me home," she said and bent to give him a kiss. The wind picked up just then and she was wisped away, gone before his eyes.

He looked down at his feet, bewildered, and noticed the fresh cut roses on the gray marble gravestone.

Jenny Wailings

Born January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1981, Died October 13<sup>th</sup> 1997

Beloved Daughter, Granddaughter, Sister

He pulled out his phone and googled her name. She'd died in an accident while walking home along the train tracks after being bullied off the bus by the resident mean girl.

The next year and every year thereafter on October 13<sup>th</sup> Klay would bring her fresh cut flowers.