

TIME TO GO HOME, CINDERELLA BALENTIMES

Gabby arranged her oversized bright yellow beach towel with blue stripes to match the picture she drew with her crayons before her trip to the beach with Rex. The view in her picture faced the ocean, showing her back and sunlight on her skin. That would be her yellow crayon. Her sun-bleached blond hair was a mix of a white crayon and an orange one parted down the middle with the pigtails Rex would tie with blue bows. She colored in blue polka dots on her one-piece bright yellow swim suit. The only problem was that when Rex finally arrived to pick her up he made her wear the white aloha shirt he gave her as a present when he stepped down onto the runaway for his R & R from “Veetnaam, no thank you, ma’am,” as Rex liked to say.

“I don’t want no bitchin’ from Cindy about sunburn,” Rex told her. So the actual way she pictured herself with Rex didn’t exactly match the picture she had in her head which left her majorly hacked off at Rex for the first few minutes she sat beside him on her towel. What good did it do her to have such a cute outfit if she had to cover most of it with a dumb old white shirt? She decided not to grouch about it. Too much grouching overall back at the trailer. She just wanted her afternoon to be like the picture she drew with waves as blue as her crayon. She didn’t want Rex to be more grumpy and stupid than he already was.

She leaned back on her hands and felt the breeze off the water. Rex hadn’t taken his sunglasses off since he picked her up.

Her crayons were inside a blue beach bag with a bright yellow face of the sun smiling out at her. This would keep her crayons from getting melty and sandy and her lemon drops from getting gooey. She carefully took out

the brown paper sack of balentimes, as she pronounced the word, and set them by her right hip. From time to time, she touched the bag to help her picture the balentimes she and Rex bought to give to the other kids in her grade school class back in Kansas City. She didn't know what excited her most: being with Rex again all by herself, or thinking about the grinning faces of her friends in Kansas City when they opened their balentimes and found a lollypop taped to the back of them. Also, Rex and her mother, Cindy, and Cindy's boyfriend, Pete, were going to have pizza and ice cream for supper when Cindy got back from visiting her friend, Lily, who lived further down the beach and worked with Cindy at a thrift store. Cindy visited Lily almost every day during Rex's R & R.

It sure was going to be a swvellvish day. "Swvellvish," was a Pete word that Cindy taught her and she kept it in her brain because Pete thought it up.

They were staying at Pete's trailer outside San Diego although it really wasn't really Pete's trailer. It was his old aunt's trailer. "Old Aunt Charlie Horse" he called her because she gimped. Old Aunt Charlie Horse let Pete stay there during his time off from his job at the merchant marine. Pete let Cindy use it during Rex's R & R. He got himself a motel room down the street. That sure was nice of him, Cindy said. Pete was Rex's old high school buddy. Pete didn't get drafted like Rex did. He traveled to California to join the merchant marine. Rex only had two days of R & R left. Then he would be gone again for quite a while. Maybe six more months.

What none of them told Gabby was that Rex was not really on R & R. His tour in Vietnam was over and he had been mailed his honorable discharge two months earlier. The R & R story was agreed to by Cindy, Rex and Pete, to keep her from knowing that Cindy had moved to San Diego to

be with Pete a few months after Rex shipped out to Vietnam. They thought she was too young to know. Rex didn't like it but he finally agreed to keep the peace. He was finished with Cindy anyway for carrying on with Pete. He discovered they hooked up after he left for advanced infantry training. He didn't want to start a ruckus. The two had argued for months about Rex wanting to go to Canada to avoid the draft. They argued about it too long. In the meantime Rex was drafted and they came for him. Cindy soon filed papers for divorce. They were in between.

“No need to pout, Cinderella,” Rex kept telling her as he sat beside her on the beach. “You and I will be together again one of these days.”

“Why do you call me, Cinderella, Rex?”

“After Cindy, I ‘spose. You’re a spittin’ image.”

That made Gabby feel a bit better about Rex leaving in two days. She reached into her bag and unwrapped a lemon drop. It tasted just fine. It filled her mouth with a clean, clear lemon taste.

“Yup,” she said. “And Cindy will always be my mommy and you will always be my daddy. Right?”

“Right.”

Rex never said too much except in an answer to a question. He didn't laugh very much either. He sat still with tight lips. Especially after he was sent to Vietnam. That was one day Gabby would always remember. Cindy cried and cried. That day Cindy was wearing her long hippy dress and leather sandals and beads and her hair washed and brushed long and hanging down her back and over her shoulders.

Gabby knew she was going to cry on the way to the airport in a couple of days when Rex had to go back. She just knew she would. “Try not to,

dammit, Gabby,” Cindy told her. But Gabby probably would not be able to stop herself from bawling about Rex having to leave.

Gabby had the whole day planned. In the bag she had also packed Scotch Tape for the lollypops, a ballpoint pen and white envelopes to address to the kids waiting back there at her crappy brick school in Kansas City. She had not yet been told about Cindy’s plan to stay in San Diego and live with Pete in the trailer. She would tell Gabby after Rex left. Gabby didn’t like her school in Kansas City anyway. She complained about the grime under the toilet rims, pukey and splattered walls and peewee on the floor. She grinned when she pictured how her friends would be so happy and jumping around, getting their balemtime. A balentime from Gabriel Michelle and a lollypop. That was the only good part to look forward to.

“Howdy Doody Dandy,” Pete laughed at hearing about the lollypops. “But kiddo, don’t tape on the lollipops until you get back to KC lest they melt.” Gabby’s goal was to write the names of her classmates on both the white envelope and on the back of the ballentimes. Maybe add a little note on the back of some of them.

Here’s what she would do. Line them up from A to Z. *No, stop that right now*, she thought, because that would leave out Juliet, her favorite, her hugs and nice kisses on her cheek first thing when she walked into the school every morning. She held her hand when they skipped to the playground and lined up for lunch. Juliet would be the first balemtime she would write on and she would get a grape lollypop. And what about her boyfriend, Rickie? He smelled good. His breath was not garbagey like Toby’s who was always breathing his bad breath into her nosal. “Nosal” was another Pete word. It was strange to be in the trailer, sleeping on the couch, with Pete and Cindy in the bed at the other end of the trailing. But

Pete was fun and made she and Cindy laugh a lot.

Such a big job, to line up her balentimes and get them in the right envelopes.

“Rex?” she asked.

“What?”

Now, since the war, Rex was hard to pull an answer from, Cindy told her. He sat on his towel beside her on the beach. His large sunglasses pretty much hid his face. He had muscled arms and a bulge in his crotch. Gabby noticed it. Strong black hair on his head.

Cindy said often, “Rex sure has a full head of hair. That’s one good point.”

Pete wore a crewcut. She could see the skin on the top of his head through his hair.

“Rex, it’s about my balentimes. I have fourteen balentimes. I want to give each friend of mine a balentime and a lollypop. One left over for me. I don’t know how I should do them. Who first, who last?” Gabby pursed her lips. She said, “Actually, I’d like to give Rickie two lollypops and Harriet none. What’s your take on it.”

“There’s no such thing as first or last. Five O, Five O, is my take on it. If it were me, I’d be sure to give Harriet a lollypop. You don’t want anyone to go bare.”

Gabby thought long about it.

“Okay. Yup. Now I will begin to write my name on my balentimes. I will just pick them out of my sack and think of the face of the kid that I want to give a balentime to.”

”Sounds like a good plan of action to me, Gabby,” Rex said.

“Rex, how come you don’t talk much anymore or tickle me.”

Rex looked at the ocean through his big black sunglasses. He was silent a long time.

“You still there, Rex? Cindy says sometimes you’re not still there.”

“I’m thinkin’ is all.”

“I think too but I say stuff about what I’m thinking.”

Rex looked at Gabby.

“Cindy don’t know the half of it. I’m just busy thinkin’.”

“That sure is a lot of thinking. That’s how I’d put it.”

“Thinkin’ is all,” Rex said, looking at the ocean.

“Pete told Cindy your head is broken.”

“Could be possible.”

“Killing those gooks.”

“I don’t know. They shouldn’t be talking behind my back anyways.”

“Pete makes us laugh.”

“He makes me laugh too. He’s a good buddy.”

“Rex, you know those thongs you sent me?”

“Yup.”

“I liked them but...”

“You didn’t like them.”

“No, I did, Rex. I really did. It’s only that the kids in my homeroom laughed at me. They said they were made out of tires.”

“They are. Michelin tires.”

“Ha! Ha! Rex. You sent me thongs made out of tires!”

Rex didn’t flinch.

“That’s what the Vietnamese make them out of. They make good sandals. I thought you could do show and tell with them.”

“From Veetnaam, I told them. Well, they laughed at me and I told them to stick it up their ass.”

“Proud of you for standin’ up for yourself. Though probably not a good idea to talk as such in a classroom setting.”

“Cindy was proud of me. I told Pete. He was proud of me too.”

“For sure.”

“Rex, do you think whales have minds? Pete told me they have minds. They *commune-you-cate* of sorts to each other.”

“All animals do. Like people do, so they say.”

“What do you think whales think about?”

“About their lives. About supper. About their girl friends and buddies.”

“Do you know that for sure? I’m mean, have you ever had a talk with a whale?”

“Nope. I have not. I’ve just seen them jump out of the ocean.”

“Pete says they talk under water.”

“Pete would know. He’s aboard ship a lot.”

“Pete knows a lot more than you do.”

“Probably. A lots of people do.”

Rex looked aside.

Gabby asked, “Is this going to be a grouchy day?”

“No way. We’re going to have fun. Tonight too.”

Rex shifted on his towel, arms around his shins.

“Cindy says, ‘you’re out of it.’ Pete is worried about you. Because you don’t talk much anymore.”

“Pete doesn’t know from up either. Let Pete be worried about Pete. Let Cindy be worried about Cindy. They don’t know from up. I know what I’ve done and what I haven’t done.”

“Well, Rex, what have you done and what haven’t you done?”

“You don’t ask a soldier that kind of question.”

Then Rex had a major laugh.

“You silly girl. You ask too many questions.”

“Pete says asking questions is a good thing.”

“Maybe yes; maybe no. Now and then is okay. Some things we tend to keep to ourselves.”

Rex was, Gabby thought, when she was in college a many years later when she was thinking about becoming a pediatrician or a country doctor, the figure of a perfectly formed man. She thought Rex was so handsome that Gabby would always hold him up as a marble sculpture of a man with large sunglasses, standing tall, chest out, stomach in. When she traveled to Florence, Italy with some friends she would envision Rex as The David. He was that beautiful in her outlook.

Gabby turned back to her work. She felt so glorified to be sitting next to Rex she might have peed her swimsuit. He was gone so much. She decided to wait to pee in the ocean. That way her swimsuit wouldn’t get messed up.

“Now, here is what I will do,” she said. “I will not go by the ABC’s as I have made up in my plans. I will do Juliet first, and then I will do Rickie. Harriet will be last but I will still give her a lollipop. Rex, I have them all lined up in my head.”

Rex didn’t flinch.

“Hey, Rex,” she smiled at him, “my head is not broken yet, is it, like your brain?”

“No, Cinderella. You have a fine brain.”

“Rex, do you love me? I mean, do you think of me when you are gone.”

“I sure do, Gabby. All the time.”

“Do you love Cindy and Pete?”

Rex thought a minute.

“I love them both in different ways.”

“Good. That’s a good start for making my balentimes.”

Gabby became very busy. She sorted and resorted her balentimes, stacked them up neatly beside her on her right side for she was a right-handed person.

“Rex,” she said. “I surely could use some of that lemonade.”

“Okay.”

Rex reached into the cooler Pete loaned them. He poured the lemonade Cindy mixed from a frozen can into a large Bell jar, and popped himself a beer. Then, he poured the beer into the sand and lit a cigarette.

“Here’s your lemonade, Cinderella,” he smiled to her, handing the jar over carefully.

“Rex,” she said. “I’m wondering here and now about Josie.”

“What’s up with Josie?”

“Well, she makes me feel like shit.”

“How so?”

“Calls me ‘shorty’. Says my hair droops and I have a sad mouth.”

“You do not. Basically, to hell with her.”

“There you go. Saying a curse word.”

“Sorry. A man shouldn’t say those words in front of a little kid.”

“Pete says fuck all the time. Sometimes Cindy does too.”

“They should not. I should not.”

“I guess it’s the war. That’s what Cindy says about you. She says you act like a hard ass but deep down you’re really just a softie.”

Rex looked out at the ocean and sighed. He lit another cigarette, drew the smoke through his mouth and exhaled it in plumes through his nose.

“Rex, I like it when you smoke. Smells good to me.”

“I like it too. Sometimes that’s all I got.”

“Pete and Cindy. Now what they toke stinks like the hay and poop in the petting zoo.”

“Some folks like it. Me, I don’t. They shouldn’t be smoking that junk in front of you.”

Gabby shuffled and reshuffled her balentimes.

“Let me say this,” Rex said. “If you want to get those valentines written on so that you can show them to me before I leave, you might want to hurry it up and stop yackin’.”

“Don’t push me, Rex.”

“Okay.”

“I’m just flusterated about who goes first.”

“I’m not going to get into your business.”

“Okay, Rex. Just be an asshole about it.”

“Gabriel Michelle, I wish you wouldn’t talk like ‘et.”

“Ha! Ha! Rex. Cindy says you’re just a hillbilly from Missouri. Ha! Ha!”

“Hey, little girl, one thing I will not stand for. That you make fun of your daddy.”

“Look Rex. How would this be for Carlina,” Gabby said, holding up a balentines with a cupid on it. “Wouldn’t this be a perfect balemtime for her.”

“I guess I wouldn’t know.”

He inhaled a big drag on his smoke.

“Now, Rex,” she said, “I wouldn’t necessarily give you a high mark for that one. Can’t you give me some idea?” she asked. “I mean, who am I to know? Cindy says I don’t know much of anything.”

“True, no doubt. But you’ll get it all figured out some day.”

“Rex, how come you and Cindy and Pete can cuss and I can’t.”

“Because we are stupid and you are not. You are too smart to cuss.”

“Well, all I know is, you guys say ‘fuck’ all the time. You don’t need to worry about me. I know all about fucking. Cindy and Pete... Hey, this is a terrific balentime for Terry Tunes.”

“What’s the tunes about?”

“Oh, you know Terry. She just sings and dances all the times.”

“Good for her. Well, I be damned if she does.”

“Well, there you again. Cussing. You know the truth, Rex. You should have bought me more balemtime. I simply ain’t got enough to go around.”

“Well, I can afford another packet. They don’t cost that much.”

“Well, why didn’t you do that in the first place? That’s what Cindy says.”

“Gabby, how in the heck would I know how many valentines you would need. You think I’m a mind reader?”

“You ain’t. Cindy says you’re just a crazy bastard.”

“Maybe.”

Gabby sat back on her hands and smelled the ocean again and the strong smoke coming from Rex's cigarette. She liked sitting next to Rex. He had a good aura about him, Cindy said. He smelled good, shower or no shower, a strong smell from under his pits. She liked it. Patchouli, sorta.

"Rex, are we going to move back to Missouri, I mean, when you get out of the military?"

"I sure as hell hope not."

"Well, what's going to happen to us? I mean to you being my daddy and Cindy being my mommy."

"I 'spose that's up to Cindy."

"How come that's not up to you?"

"There are many things you don't know yet."

"I know lots of stuff, Rex. I know all my ABCs and my additions and subtractions and two times two. I am way ahead of my class. Even Missus Farley said I was pert near perfect as a grade schooler. I put my ear against the door when she was talking to Cindy not long ago."

Gabby turned to Rex forcefully and shook her finger.

"So there! Don't you put a heavy load on me."

Rex remained immobile. He pointed his sunglasses at the blue waters.

"Okay."

Rex stood up.

"Gabby," he said. "I want you to look afar. Look in that direction."

He pointed at about two o'clock.

"Water's all I see," Gabby said, mixing her balem times.

"Way out there is a tiny spot."

"I don't see a damn thing."

“Well, there is an island out there. It has beaches you would like. Sugar sand. Warm and soft to the foot. Also, high up is the mist. The trees are real green. Egrets sit upon the branches and turn their long necks round and round. I want to go up there and live in a yurt.”

“A yurt. What the fuck is a yurt!”

“Gabriel Michelle. Stop that line of talk.”

“Yurt! Holy moly. Yurty gurdy. Ha! Ha! Hurty, hurty.”

“No kidding,” Rex frowned. “All it is, little girl, is, it’s like a tent. Some look from afar like a cupcake.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Who ever thought of living in a cupcake. You must be nuts, Rex.”

“I did not say – I did not – that a yurt is a cupcake. I said from afar it looks like a cupcake. Get it?”

“I think I’m going to give Margo this one,” Gabby said, holding a balemtimes up to the sun.

Rex ignored her, stood, and took three steps forward towards the ocean.

“You see, in a yurt out there, away from everything, you can have a half a mind. Some people even put in fireplaces and you could read a book. You could just wander around in the cool mist and think a spell. You could do that, Gabby. Nobody could mess with your brain. Not the army or nobody. Nobody could hurt you or plan your life. You could read books about philosophy and such.”

“You sure think a lot, Rex. I don’t like to read books. Too much hard work. Take me to a movie is all I ask for or watch a TV deal. Cindy thinks you think too damn much.”

Rex gave her a crabby look with tightened lips.

“How you doing on them valentines?”

Gabby huffed.

“Rex, I’ve gotten four done and I’ve got ten more. Except I’m saving one for me. Pete says you got to give your own self a balemtimes. And one for Teddy.”

“You never said anything about Teddy.”

“Rex, you are so far gone. You gave me Teddy for Christmas last year. The big guy. Pink on his nose.”

“Okay. I forgot his name. Yet, you’ve got a while to go before Valentine’s Day.”

“Well, shit. We’ve got to take you back to the airport after tomorrow, and Pete’s got to get aboard ship, and by the time Cindy and I drive back to Kansas City, I’ll be up all night writing on these stupid fucking balemtimes.”

“Gabby, come on. Button your lip, honey. I’m going to have to soap down your mouth. You can’t going around saying that word. It will get you in trouble.”

“Don’t you dare soap down my mouth, you brute. I’ll call the abuse hot line.”

“Gabby, come on. Don’t lets us fight. We haven’t even been swimming yet.”

Gabby folded her arms across her chest.

“We need to have a talk,” she said.

“Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

“About me having a Merry Christmas for a change. About what you will give me for Christmas.”

“What ever happened to Santa Claus?”

Gabby stuck out her tongue at him and pouted.

“Rex, I’ve been telling you since kindergarten. I want a puppy. Please. Just a goddamn little dog is all it would be. A warm little thing, a girl dog who would love me and only me. Cuddly. And lick my face.”

“Dogs are a lot work. They need to be fed. They need to be potty trained. They crap all over the yard. They need to go for walks. You can’t be yanking dogs every which way. They would be like draftees.”

“I already know about that. Cindy told me about you getting drafted.”

“Look,” Rex said. “Christmas is a longways off. Why don’t we do the valentines first, get that out of the way, and then work on Christmas. Maybe after Thanksgiving.”

“Because you guys always forget. You forgot my birthday.”

“Gabby, I did not – did not – forget, I was....”

“I know, I know. You had to go off to the war.”

“I did not. I was taken off to a war. You get that. You get that straight. I did not ask to be in the army. I got drafted. They made me do all that stuff.”

“Then you went ahead and reupped.”

“Do know how to explain ‘et.’”

“Rex, I’m not going to argue with you about it.”

Rex had to laugh. It was his line. The one he used with Cindy. He wanted to go to Canada, but she didn’t have the nerve. He told Cindy:

“I’m not going to argue with you about it. I think we should have gone to Canada. You wanted me to get me to stay here and hide out. Damn you, now I’m drafted. I’m not going to jail or be a fugitive the rest of my life.”

He turned to Gabby. “Hey, that’s what *I’m* supposed to say.”

“Well, I said it and you didn’t.”

She gave him the evil eye.

“Well, are we still going to watch a picture show? Are we still going to have a pizza with Cindy and Pete? Are you going to take me to have an ice cream cone. Are you mad at me?”

Rex took off his sunglasses. It was the first time that day she saw his eyes. He looked straightforward into Gabby’s eyes. His eyes made her shiver and feel creepy. They cut right into her and she felt afraid.

“You bet we are. Now, Gabby, let us go for a swim. I see your cheeks are getting red. Christmas is a while away. We’ll handle it as the time comes near. You can take off your shirt now. Let’s hop into that ocean.”

Rex lifted Gabby by her tiny slender fingers. He helped her pull off her white shirt. She felt as light to him as a Missouri bluebird; her legs straight as a stork’s. She patted her stack of ballentimes and put her bag on top of them so the wind wouldn’t fling them to and fro. Cindy told her something about the wind. It had a mind of its own. If you didn’t pay attention, the wind would blow your ballentimes all over the place and fill your envelopes with sand. It might be hard to catch them and put them back in the bag. With her shirt off, she showed Rex her cute yellow outfit with blue polka dots.

“I’ll race you, Rex,” Gabby said, laughing and dashing wildly into the shallow foam. Rex did his best to catch her but could not. She was fleet afoot. The water felt cold and pulled on his calves as he stepped in. They dove at the same time, shocked at first by the cold water.

“Gabby, you tickle me,” Rex said, breathing hard when they first bobbed to the surface. “You just take all. You take the cake.”

“About cake. I’d like a vanilla one for my birthday you ain’t coming for” Gabby said, taking in the salt air. “No doubt. I agree totally.”

Gabby was a natural swimmer. Rex admired how fearless she was even in the ocean.

“Rex, do you love me?” she asked seriously, bobbing in the waves.

She then paddled in a circle, around and around.

“Of course I do, Gabby,” Rex said. One day in her teenage years sitting by a pond Gabby recalled her thought at the time was that Rex was to choking back tears. But it just could have easily been the ocean splashing and running down his face.

“Well,” she asked and then dove and resurfaced as dolphins do. “Why do you look mad all the time? Why do you just sit outside on the bench by the trailer all the time and smoke and don’t say much.” She was treading water. “Rex,” she said in short breaths, “it’s sorta like you’re still gone. You ain’t around. You ain’t come home, yet. Sorta. Cindy says you bring a hard ass attitude to everything. But you’re really a softie...She said you re-upped for the money and the doctor insurance.”

Rex dove. The water there was waist high. The sun illuminated the sand. He could see colorful little fish coming and going. He swam with both arms fully extended stroking from his chest. For that moment, he felt free. Then his brain came back and he thought not to leave Gabby alone. She didn’t deserve for him to swim on until his lungs filled up with salt water and he drowned himself. He needed not to set a bad example.

He popped into the air as a whale would.

“Rex,” Gabby asked. “Are we still going to have pizza tonight.”

“Yes, maam.”

“Don’t you maam me,” Gabby scolded, mocking Cindy, and laughed until the salt water of the ocean caught in her throat and made her choke.

Rex dove to her side and held her high, his feet standing firmly in the sand while she coughed up. He slung her over his shoulder, pounded her back and let her chuck the water out.

“You okay, kiddo?”

“Not rarely,” she gasped in a hoarse voice.

He shook her, her chin down on his back. When her gasping slowed he slid her slowly back into the water, turned her over, held her flat on her back as he would an infant and kept her afloat on the surface of the ocean.

“Rex?”

“What, Gabby?”

She teared up.

“Why can’t we just go ahead and go back to Missouri? Back to Kansas Shitty, M + O. Why can’t we just go back there and have snow again at Christmas?”

“If I did ‘et, I’d be put in jail.”

“Ain’t the army just a bunch of mean mofo’s?”

“Gabby, no. Don’t talk like ‘et.”

“Well, fuck a duck, Rex. Cindy cries all the time and she’s got herself a pile of bills for the gas and lights and where are you? That’s what she says.”

“Gabby, I did not choose to be drafted. I wanted take Cindy and you to Canada.”

“Oh, Rex, you’re an idiot. Cindy says so.” Her breath back, she dove, stroked over the same gleaming sand on the ocean floor Rex had and let the ocean bring her to the surface.

“Rex, I heard Pete and Cindy talking. They said you probably killed gooks over there. Did you kill gooks, Rex? I mean, did you...”

“Gabby, I told you, you don’t ask soldiers a question like ‘et. You just don’t.”

“I’m sorry, Rex.”

“It’s okay, Gabby. It’s one of those things that come up from time to time. A question any kid your age will ask.”

Gabby dove again. When her head bobbed up and her breathing got close to normal, Rex lifted her up from under her arms.

“Rex, I got sand in my swimsuit. All the way in. Up my back crack too. And I forgot. I have to pee.”

“Honey, take off your swimsuit in the water, shake it around and then slip it back on. That’s what Cindy does. Then do your business.”

“You will not lookee-lookee.”

“Why would I?”

“Cindy says men are nasty.”

“So are women but let’s don’t argue about it. Just shake your bikini out. The ocean will take care of the rest of it. Shake it out, then slip it back on. The sand will be washed away.”

“Okay, Rex, if you say so.”

“I say so. It’s a matter of experience.”

Rex swam out an arm or two away from Gabby’s direction.

“Rex, got my swimsuit off. I’m letting loose too. I peed my little heart out. As you told me I could do.”

“The ocean will accept whatever we give it.”

Gabby turned her suit inside out, shook it up and down in the water and wiggled back into it.

“Gabby, we got to go home now,” Rex said. “Cindy and Pete will be there. They’ll be waiting and worried if we don’t show up. I told them four-thirty. I’m estimating by looking at those sparkles on the water it’s pretty near that time of day.”

Gabby leapt out of the water like a flying fish, threw her arms around Rex’s neck and wrapped her legs around his middle.

“Oh, daddy,” she more than likely cried and bawled. “I don’t want to go back to that stinky trailer. It smells of toke and such. I just want to be with you. Can’t we just run away? Go back to Missouri. Cindy shakes me. She makes me eat seaweed and celery and oatmeal and all kinds of stuff that tastes like rotten eggs and cement. Couldn’t I have just Wheaties or a scrambled egg like you cook with a little bacon and a grilled toomater and cinnerman toast. I don’t like seaweed, daddy, or grass and leaves and such. Pete smells like a stinkin’ dog. He’s got those snake tattoos on his arms and an octopus on his back. And I don’t want to live in some stupid cupcake. I just want to be with you and live in a regular house in Missouri. I don’t care about hairy Krishna and Mary Wanda. No, daddy, no. Don’t make me.”

He moved back towards her. They floated a while longer, holding one another. Rex had no words for it. Finally, he said:

“It’s time to go home now, Cinderella balentimes.”

“No daddy, no. I don’t want you ever, ever to leave me. Won’t you come back to Cindy and me? Will you even send me a Christmas present? Don’t go back to Veetnaam, Daddy. You will get blown up over there in that jungle with those crazy gooks shooting at you and the bugs will eat you out of house and home. I want you and Cindy to be my daddy and mommy and have a puppy to be my girl friend, daddy, and lick my face.”

She was silent a moment, then said:

“Daddy, are there monkeys over there in the jungle? I’m meaning cute little chimpies.”

Rex sighed.

“I never saw such. Just lots of those bugs I told you of. Daddy long leggers as tall as your knee. Water bugs as long as your hand to your elbow. And if you ain’t careful, red ants that will fall out of trees and sting you. That’s why we wear towels around our necks.”

“Ha! Ha! Daddy wears a towel around his neck. What color, Daddy?”

“Green.”

“Green? You must look like a toad. Spotty hat and all. As you showed me. Ha! Ha! Rex looks like a toad.”

“Possibly. I sometimes feel as such.”

“Daddy, let’s cut the crap. Will you come back to me? And Cindy?”

“I will do my very best to get back to you when I get discharged. There will be bills to pay. But now we have to go ashore and police up the area.”

“Goddammit, daddy, anyways,” she spit with salty sea foam, smashing her fist into the curling of the waves.

Rex decided to give up. Gabby and her mother, Cindy, Pete, all the men in his platoon, the VC and North Vietnamese, had just worn him slick.

They drifted inward to the beach, stood up and slogged into the sand. They dried their hands. Rex handed the valentines to Gabby. She slid them carefully into her bag. He grabbed the cooler, slung the beach towels Pete loaned them over his shoulder and led her by the hand to the beach parking lot. He lifted her into the cab of Pete’s pickup.

“Well, Rex,” Gabby said. “At least I’ll get some ice cream out of this deal.”

On the way back to the trailer park, Rex couldn’t think of a thing to say. He thought this, he thought that, but no words came. All the words he thought to say sounded silly and false.

Gabby knelt on the seat and looked out the window.

“Hey, Rex. Lookee here. We got us three white cowbirds. Right there on the bushes, wagging around.”

“I can’t look. I have to drive. But I’m happy for you to see such a sight.”

“Rex, they sure have such long rubbery necks. I don’t see how they get along. I am worried that their necks will break in two.”

“Me, I’d like to twist my neck like they do and see all the ways backwards and in every direction.”

Gabby sighed.

“I hope Rickie and Juliet like their balemtimes.”

“I bet they will since you signed them with a note.”

“Do you think they will? I so want them to like my balemtimes and be my friends.”

“I can’t guarantee it. But if I got a valentine from you I’d be happy about it.”

“Now Rex, you know damn good and well I ain’t giving you no balemtimes. I got fourteen, one extra, and that’s all I got to give.”

“Okay.”

They passed strip malls off the general road.

“Now, Rex,” she said. “Cindy says you should be nice to Pete. He’s helped us along.”

“I will.”

“I mean, sometimes you give him bad looks. But he takes me to the playground. He helps me climb upon the gym set. He and I play catch with beach balls. He bought me an ice cream cone the other day. He puts Cindy and I to bed.”

The pickup swerved. Rex immediately righted it.

“So, guess what?” she said.

“What?”

“When you go back to Veetnaam, Cindy and I have to go back to Missouri, and I’ll probably never, ever, see Pete again. He’ll go off someplace, Cindy says. And it’ll just be me and Cindy. And what do we have in Missouri but grandma. Bossy old Ruth Ann. That’s what Cindy says.”

“Honey, please mind your manners. She’s my mama. Not being nice to old people doesn’t help out on your tour.”

“What’s a tour anyways? That’s what you’re on, ain’t it?”

“I’m in jail. That’s what I am. A prisoner of the Federal Government. No better than a jailbird.”

“Rex, are you a criminal? Are you a killer? That’s what Cindy says. She says that’s why you’re gruff. What’s ‘gruff’ being like anyways?”

“I guess it means grouchy and cranky.”

“Grouchy is the way I get it. I used not to think so. I don’t think so now. I may sound like such. Oh, me,” Gabby sighed again, for lack of anything better to say. “What will become of us? That’s what Cindy says.”

When they drove into the trailer park, Pete was standing outside the door of Old Aunt Charlie Horse’s blue and gold trailer wearing a Groucho Marx Halloween nose and mustache.

“Pete! Pete!” Gabby shouted, jumping up and down on her knees on the seat of the pickup. For he was a funny guy. Always had a trick up his sleeve. That’s what Cindy said..

“Ha! Ha! Pete, you look funny,” Gabby shouted. “I know that’s you. Ha! Ha! Ha! I see your big ears sticking out there. That’s you, Pete. I know that’s you.”

Rex had not yet actually parked. Cindy was standing, leaning, in the doorway, smiling, so stunning she locked up Rex’s throat. Her newly washed and combed long hair hung like willow branches over her shoulders, only they were blond and a sight to see. Her breasts were halfway into the air hanging full into her crinkly blouse. Her brilliant blue eyes and happy mouth struck him like an AK-47 round, right there in the middle of his gut. What distracted him was Pete standing at the bottom of the three steps of the trailer. The truck slammed into the side of Pete’s 57 Chevy.

He didn’t mean to. He really didn’t, he told Gabby, but she didn’t believe him but couldn’t tell him so, her mouth was so goofed up, packed with ice, and stitched up. She vomited a lot from the medicine.

The police came. So did two ambulances. Rex had gunned the pickup, swung too wide and caught the front end of Pete’s 1957 Chevy. The Chevy smashed into the trailer and Cindy got knocked backwards. Pete dodged the whole mess by quickly jumping aside. Gabby was thrown off the seat directly into the windshield.

“I never meant to,” Rex told the two fat police officers with Hawaii Five-O sunglasses.

“Son, “Gabby would recall, the fat police officers said. “That’s why they call it an accident.”

Rex watched the doctor at the emergency room lace several large stitches across Gabby's chin up to her bottom lip. Two front teeth on her right side and a canine tooth were broken in half, two molars chipped into a slant. Her tongue bled all over her chin and outfit and fixing it took some fast work and lots of ice. Gabby got a drug they give kids for pain, a kind of morphine. Rex could not help but bawl like a little kid, Cindy would recall.

He spent about three days in Gabby's hospital room tending to Gabby. Sat by her day and night and read her stories while she was awake.

Ha! Ha! Gabby laughed to herself. "Rex can't read bery good," she thought for she could not speak because her tongue was too thick. "I can read better than he can," she hee-hawed in her brain.

He didn't say one goddamn thing to Pete and Cindy during this time, Gabby reported later to her grandmother back in Missouri. Rex's mom, Ruth Ann, was once a hippie herself before she got converted to Baptismals.

"God," she told Ruth Ann, "must have been a duffus. Here he goes ahead and makes the ground we stand on and then he gets us all stirred and we fight all the time. Well, I say to God, basically, fuck you."

"Gabrielle Michelle, God gave us thee moon, thee stars and thee sun. God made thee flowers bloom and have them to smell so sweet. It is not God who made this mess. After dinner who leaves their garbage in the sink."

"I don't give a shit," Gabby pouted, crossing her arms "I'll always be majorly pissed off."

"You may say such things here," Ruth Ann counseled. "Just do not say 'em in school. The social workers may come after us. Then we would be in deep shit."

Gabby sighed and said.

"Ruth Ann, what are we to do?" She teared up.

“For one thing, smile to your teachers and to Mr. Hackett. Stay away from the authorities. They will put you into an orphanage. If your clothes smell like you have been toking, or if I have been toking, switch your tops. Put them in the washer before you wear them again.”

Mr. Hackett was the principal of her school. Ruth Ann said he was very tedious and a bully to boot.

“Wait until you are seventeen,” she said. “Then you can hitchhike to San Francisco. Live in thee Haight or thee Castro. Basically, fuck them all, thee long, thee short and thee tall. Be careful about thee pictures you draw. If they are too weird they will send you to a psychologist. Then we will be in trouble and you will not have your way.”

“My way or the highway. Correcto?”

“That’s the truth,” Ruth Ann said.

The thing that seemed to bother Rex the most in the emergency room was watching Gabby get her stitches. On the third day as the swelling was started to go down, she heard Rex asked the doctors: “One simple question,” It was about the scars she might have. He just wanted to know if the scars could be taken care of in the long run. The three doctors who sewed her up said, “Maybe.”

What threw Rex off most was the one young smarty pants doctor who said “It will take a number of surgeries. We don’t know how many. At best, you can expect a thin white scar across her chin and a portion of her lower lip. Perhaps science will come up with a better solution but let’s not put the cart before the horse. Might need to wait two or three years.”

All Gabby knew was that her mouth still looked slightly bent to the left side.

Cindy told Gabby that Rex, at that moment, went berserk, reached across the gurney, grabbed the young doctor by his white coat collars and shoved him into the wall he was standing in front of, scattering tubes and instruments in the same motion.

“You sorry little motherfucker,” Rex yelled. “The world’s a whole lot bigger n’ this shitty room. You don’t talk like ‘et in front of a little kid with a busted mouth.”

Gabby didn’t remember one other thing except for the brightness of the lights above and the hurt and throb of her face when the drugs wore off. The pain lasted a long, long time.

Rex was restrained by the other two doctors but he wrangled them off threw another one into the air and choked the other until he nearly kilt him. An alarm went off and security came right in, wrestled Rex down, handcuffed him and took him straight to the police station.

That was the last time Gabby saw Rex. Sure enough, he had to go to jail. Who knows whatever happened to Rex after that? He never got back in touch. Probably he was living in a stupid yurt that looked exactly like a cupcake or in the trees in one of the parks along the ocean. That was Cindy’s take on it. Else, why did he not come looking for her?

What the young doctor had done was make the mistake of telling Rex the absolute clinical truth. He gave Rex no comfort. He hinted that Gabby’s mouth would never look quite the same. It would always be crooked and scarred. Rex didn’t want to hear it. What would be of her sweet smile? Would her mouth always be crooked? Really? She would not look like Cindy anymore. Besides, the young doctor was a know-it- all, Cindy said, a smarty asshole who wagged his head as though he took some delight in telling Rex and her about Gabby’s condition much like a mechanic who

glorifies in telling a poor guy he needed to have a new transmission in his old Oldsmobile.

All's Gabby knew from that time on, for the rest of her life, was that her scar turned red in the sun. And what about Pete? How come he never answered any of Cindy's telephone calls? As for Cindy, she just got fatter and fatter and moved in with a bum named Carl. Gabby's first real job was scraping out ice cream into cones for little brats and their neurotic mothers and then as a waitress in a pizza joint. When she served the pizza, she learned to turn her head away, show some cleavage and slide the pizza across the table. As an occasional waitress in the dim light of a bar, nobody knew from up about her perplexed mouth. Brought her larger tips. Her studio apartment was a wreck and her landlord a jerk but at least she could sleep at night without the being slobbered over by Carl, trying to sneak a lookee lookee at her yummys after a shower in his small apartment. His hugs were just a way to try feel her up.

Gabby saved her tips and bought a small peppy dog. He was sunny and furry and not a girl but a softie anyways. When he did his thing, he seemed to leave his little mounds in the middle of the sidewalk. No, not Buddy as she named him, not on the grass. He just wasn't made to do his business on the grass. She carried a plastic bag from the Two- For-One and lifted Buddy's warm tiny output and purposely dropped it in the trash container outside the front door of the supermarket as a payback for their rotten produce. She put sunglasses on Buddie at night before bed and nuzzled him while he licked her face. You see, this way, she figured, she didn't have to look into the sadness of his old tiny eyes for his eyes looked old even as a puppy. This way, you see, she would get the best of all worlds and think of Cindy in Kansas City with a sloppy bellied bum, and Rex

squatting outside a building downtown or in a cupcake with vanilla frosting which was Rex's choice over Cindy's chocolate, and Pete out there aboard ship or heading for a retirement home for old sailors, or so Cindy said.

The glass slipper Rex kept telling her about when he read to her of Cinderella before bedtime never came due though she looked for it each and every day in the mail until she finally decided it wasn't ever going to show up. Once she finished medical school, she'd find herself a nicer apartment close to a children's hospital and find her a prince. A guy that looked like Rex.

Now as for Rex, that son-of-bitch, he never even sent her one – not one – goddamn balentimes.