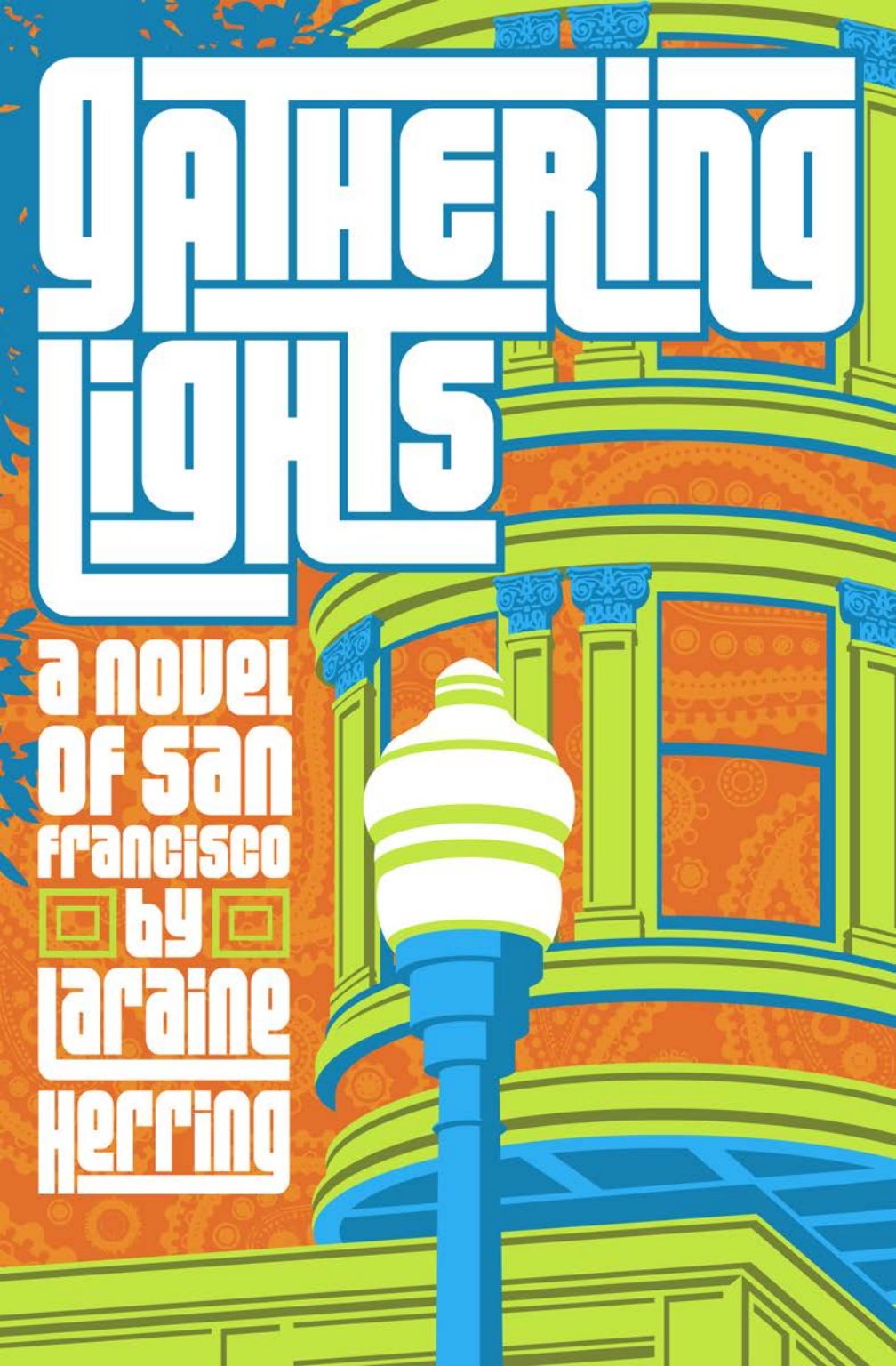


GATHERING LIGHTS

A stylized, graphic illustration of a building facade. The building features curved balconies with green railings and blue decorative elements. A large, white street lamp with green horizontal stripes and a blue pole is positioned in the foreground. The background is a vibrant orange with a repeating pattern of small, circular motifs. The overall style is bold and modern.

a novel
of San
Francisco

by

Laraine
Herring



GATHERING LIGHTS

A NOVEL OF
SAN FRANCISCO



LARAINÉ HERRING

ALSO BY LARAINÉ HERRING

Into the Garden of Gethsemane, Georgia

Ghost Swamp Blues: A Novel

The Writing Warrior: Discovering the Courage to Free Your True Voice

Writing Begins with the Breath: Embodying Your Authentic Voice

Lost Fathers: How Women Can Heal from Adolescent Father Loss

Monsoons: A Collection of Writing

GATHERING LIGHTS

©2013 Laraine Herring. All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or used in any form,
or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

First published September 2013

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013945138

ISBN: 978-0-9852607-7-4

Author photo by MH Ramona Swift, ©2013

Cover by Mike Iverson

Presented by The Concentrium

Phoenix, Arizona USA

www.theconcentrium.com

for Keith

*It is an odd thing, but everyone who disappears
is said to be seen in San Francisco.*

*It must be a delightful city, and possess all
the attractions of the next world.*

- Oscar Wilde

market, 2238 N. 31st Str.

WANTED: Fiddle playing
sky diving hippie chick. Pls
come home. No questions
asked. 537-4464 anytime.

CARTOONISTS--Anim

REMMY X

No one has been by to steal the Street's sign in many years. It used to get stolen every few days, but back then nobody needed a sign to tell them they had arrived in the middle of it all. We knew where we were and the ones who came to gawk at us by the carload did too. Once I ran alongside a tourist bus holding up a mirror. Nobody on the bus got the joke, but I had a belly-jiggling long laugh about that for some time, even though I'd forgotten to wear gloves and the sides of the mirror cut into my hands.

I am running out of food for my Street. I didn't realize how much it required to keep living. I stay here to tend it. I keep my stoop clean, brush the cobwebs from the shadows. I make offerings every day of my poems and my newspaper, the *Hasbbury Daily Times*. When dusk comes and I'm on my way home with my dog Shep and my typewriter, I toss change to the ones who now line the streets where I used to huddle, a shroud of gray blankets and reaching fingers. I guard my post at the corner of Haight and Ashbury so I can always be watching, always be holding the strings together for all of us who walked on her streets, from the wingtipped to the sandaled to those whose bare feet are bruised and bloodied.

The Haight is a hungry ghost, she is. Her belly never fills up. It's always growling, rumbling, taking more than you have. It's indiscriminate.

GATHERING LIGHTS

A wild animal. No matter how long you've been putting food out for her, no matter how long you give her shelter in your heart and hearth, one day she's going to consume you. When you let a wild thing into your home, only the biggest fool of all gets upset when she takes what she wants.

- X out.

2007

“Turn there. That’s the hotel.” Frank Connor meticulously folded his San Francisco street map and placed it on his lap. He gazed out the passenger side window at the cacophony of Union Square. “I told you we shouldn’t have taken the car. This is the most car unfriendly city in the world.”

Helen Connor clicked her fingernails against the steering wheel, the glare from the band of diamonds on her wedding ring finger slicing her vision. “How else could we have gotten here, Frank? You’re afraid to fly. Did you want us to walk?”

She’d missed the light. Honks from angry drivers startled her. The wash of pedestrians had entered the intersection even before the light changed. If she hit one, at least they’d have something to talk about on the trip. He could tell her how she never paid attention. She could tell him how he never wanted to go anywhere. She could speak, in that low, monotone voice he deplored, and tell him how she used to have fire. Used to have desire. And how all of its current breathtaking absence was due to him. He could tell her that she never knew the right things to say to him after his nightmares, the right way to touch him, the right way to brew his tea. He could speak, in that low, monotone voice she deplored, and tell her that he had made a mistake seventeen years ago. That he had been afraid no one else would come along. She

would nod and say yes, she had thought the same thing, and hadn't it been a pity. They would part then, melancholy smiles on their lips, and dance into the dark.

But of course, they will not say any of these things to each other, because that is not what they do, Frank and Helen, not the way they have structured their relationship, not the way they have determined that things are supposed to work, not at all the way they have managed to stay together for seventeen years, four months and three days. Frank would know how many hours and minutes. Helen would not be sure whether it had been twenty or ten years. Or maybe fifteen. Years run so smoothly together.

The light changed again. She inched the nose of their paid-for Prius into the street, then slammed on the brakes, almost causing an accident. The red BMW behind her honked.

"Did you see that?" asked Helen.

Frank readjusted his seatbelt. "What?"

"That girl."

The BMW honked louder.

"You have to move, Helen," said Frank.

"She just came out of nowhere."

"There are hundreds of people."

Helen craned her neck to look out the back window. Where did she go? Tourists in summer coats and scarves milled around the corners. The Don't Walk sign flashed an angry orange. The girl with the dirty blonde hair and wild eyes was nowhere.

"You didn't see anyone?" she asked. "She leapt right in front of us."

"I see lots of people. This is a big city."

The BMW crowded against her tail, then began to inch around her into oncoming traffic.

"You've got to move," said Frank.

She released the brake, almost scraping against the BMW. The driver, wearing aviator glasses and a blue blazer, flipped her off and

sped away.

She gripped the wheel and turned right into the valet parking lot for the Hotel Gladmore, a Travelocity deal at only \$135 a night, conveniently located on the edge of Union Square. Perfect for a weekend getaway, claimed four out of five travelers.

“There’s no complimentary parking?” asked Frank. Or maybe Helen only imagined Frank said that. It would be something he would say. She’s going to complain about having to give her keys to a stranger, thought Frank.

“What?” he said.

“I didn’t say anything,” she said.

“Oh.”

They piled their luggage on the brass luggage cart and handed a ten to the bellhop. She had over packed. He had under packed. One would think that between the two of them, they would have had enough.

The suite was indeed grand; the hotel positioned at the edge of Union Square and the Stockton Street Tunnel entrance to Chinatown. They were high enough in the hotel so they could see the top of the flagship Macy’s and imagine the ferries leaving for Sausalito in the fog of early evening. They had both thought it wise to curb expenses on this trip, their last in whatever stage of their marriage they currently occupied. They had thought, well, if we can work it out, we’ll be in a lovely place, and well, if we don’t, we’ll be in a lovely place and have some money left over for the legal fees. It had made sense in Phoenix when they planned the trip, but now that they were here, neither one felt it was money well spent. The Travelocity travel gnome had assured them they would never roam alone and had provided additional trip ideas with a City Pass and a Red Line Cruise voucher.

Helen sat on the bed and ran her fingers over the sage green bedspread. She couldn’t shake the girl’s eyes from her skin. There had been someone. “It’s a king,” she said. “Plenty of room to stretch out.”

He was lining his toiletries up on the marble countertop. Razor,

Gillette. Shaving cream, Mennen. Deodorant, Arrid. Extra dry. He hated being wet. Travel toothbrush. Toothpaste, Crest Tartar control. Floss, mint waxed. He needed to claim his section of the countertop before Helen spread out her vast assortment of gels, sprays, mousses, brushes and lipsticks. She never left enough room for even his meager needs. Helen watched him lining up the toiletries like he was playing with action figures. He'll put them on the right side of the sink next to the outlet so she won't be able to use her flat iron without moving them.

"There's an honor bar," she said. "Want something?"

"Nah." He moved his razor a sixteenth of an inch to the left. "If you want something to drink, we can go down to the bar." He thought the relative darkness of the bar, even at only 4:00 in the afternoon, would make it easier to sit with her, make it easier not to memorize all the lines on her face, the way her smile turned up first on the right side of her mouth before she erupted into the laughter that still, even now, made him think of hand bells. He should think of the things he would miss about her when they went their separate ways. That will help him be less angry. That will help him wish her well. She'd been leaving him, he realized, since the first day they met.

"You want to go to a bar? In the afternoon?" They would be those two people who sit in the dark next to each other not talking. Better, Helen felt, to sit in their suite not talking than to display their distance to the entire city. He was afraid she'd make a scene. Afraid she'd cry, even though she'd assured him that she was done with that. Afraid she'd surprise herself and cling to him. He'd already told her how much he hated when she touched him in public. He'd told her that on more than one occasion, lying every time. He never wanted her, she realized, not even on the day they met.

"OK," she said. "Let's go to the bar."

Frank had not expected this. She knew that and watched him inhale quickly. "OK then."

She had not expected that, but smiled, she hoped, without revealing her surprise.

The bartender was setting up for happy hour. The décor was 1920s chic, with the modern conveniences of wi-fi and 2 for 1s in seemingly bottomless ebony tinted glasses. The burgundy velvet wallpaper reminded Helen of a sofa her aunt had kept covered with plastic in the never-used parlor of her ancient house. Frank thought of thrift stores and people trying too hard. Even at 2 for 1, San Francisco drink prices shocked Frank. He bought in bulk. Boxed wine. 108 rolls of two-ply toilet paper. He had to. Helen would spend the necessities budget on non-essentials, items such as organic turmeric powder and mineral make up. Helen and Frank never did agree on a definition of essentials. Maybe they could talk about that in the dark—Frank with a glass of dry chardonnay, Helen with a glass of deep berry Merlot. Maybe that was where they went wrong first.

Frank tipped his glass toward Helen's. The lips dinged as they met. "To San Francisco," he said.

"To San Francisco," she said, and when they drank it was together in the manufactured dark, both watching the gloved intertwined fingers of the happier couples coming in from the late summer cold, shoulders touching, hips touching, even through multi-colored layers of clothes.

They both refused the offer of a second drink. Helen knew the bar was getting too crowded for Frank. The kids were all attached to multiple electronic devices, texting with a thumb faster than she could dial her phone. She wasn't old. Not yet. Old was other people. Old was people's mothers and grandmothers. She was turning forty tomorrow. Not old. Beginning.

She'd been pretending she hadn't noticed how many of her friends' mothers and grandmothers were dying. She'd been pretending she

hadn't noticed no one carded her anymore in the grocery store. She made a joke once to the checkout clerk—a safety-pinned girl with purple hair. “I used to get carded all the time,” she'd said. The safety-pinned girl looked at her as if nothing could be more impossible to believe. She remembered reading Joseph Campbell's thoughts on midlife crises when she was in college. Something about middle age occurring when you get to the top of the ladder only to realize it was up against the wrong wall. She remembered vehemently declaring she would never climb the wrong ladder. She would be aware. She would not let her life slip away.

The fingers of Frank's right hand still curled loosely around the empty glass. He was gazing at something a few inches past her face. He had crow's feet too, she thought, and his hair was creeping down from his head onto his back. Rather than cause her to turn away, her jaw softened. She saw him as she might see an animal, vulnerable and alone. Now was as good a time as any. If they had the conversation now, perhaps they could both enjoy the weekend. It had always been the unspoken things that separated them most.

She spun her wedding band on her finger. “Frank.”

His gaze settled on her sparkling finger. “Let's go for a walk,” he said.

“A walk?” Helen resisted the urge to shout.

“It'll be nice. See some of the city.”

The softness she had felt for him dissipated. He was resisting even what he wants. He wants her to be the one who starts the conversation, but he can't even let her finish a sentence.

“I'd like to ride the trolley,” he said.

“Really?” Helen wondered about getting another drink. She could drink two more so Frank wouldn't feel like he was wasting money. She tingled thinking of the effects of three deep berry Merlots in the afternoon.

“Yeah.” His fingers were still curled around the empty glass. “Didn't

I ever tell you I have kind of a thing for trolleys?”

“No. You never did.”

“Meant to.”

Helen caught the bartender’s eye, but Frank had already stood, wrapped his brown scarf around his neck, and held out his hand to her. “We’ll have to wait in line, you know,” she said. “It’s still summer. Everyone wants to ride the trolley.”

“That’s OK.”

“But you hate being perceived as a tourist,” she said.

Frank thought it would be nice for them to be perceived as one of the happy tourist couples for one more night. He had known Helen was watching him in the bar. He felt her pity, and he knew she was about to speak about a divorce. He really was fond of her, and the idea of her not being with him in the hotel room frightened him. He knew he clung too tightly. He knew he didn’t love her, at least not in the storybook way couples are supposed to love each other, but he was practical. If nothing else he knew that love is more about staying than going, and even if she no longer (did she ever?) caused his heart to dance, a man could be much worse off. Maybe they just needed to adjust their expectations. Maybe they carried too much weight on their shoulders about what marriage should be. Neither of them had good role models. Neither of them knew how to be with anyone else. Maybe they could hold hands, like the kids in the Gap commercials, and dance off together in red and blue matching T-shirts.

“I just thought it would be nice,” he said. He took her hand, which had gone chilly. “Let’s just go get in line.”

“Fine.” She pulled her purse over her shoulder, grabbed her pashmina wrap, and unhooked her fingers from his.

“Do you want to go get your camera?” he asked.

Helen stopped walking. When would he have seen her put it in her weekend bag? It had been an afterthought to pack. She’d so long been out of the habit of carrying one around with her, and now that

everything had gone digital, she felt even farther away from the photographer-hobbyist she had thought she was going to be. The last time she'd snapped any shots she was reminded of the one and only time she tried to ice skate. She'd just turned twelve and wanted to slip onto the ice like the skaters she'd seen on Saturday afternoon television. She'd thought she could just slide one blade and then the other out into the rink and become light. Instead, her ankles twisted inward and she fell before she made it away from the wall. Photography had once felt like she'd thought ice skating should. But not the last time. The last time she wobbled. Unfocused. Images cropped in crazy ways. The camera, which had at one time felt like a part of her body, had become as unnatural as that thin blade on her skates.

"I just thought you might see something interesting," Frank continued. "It *is* San Francisco."

"I saw that wild girl in the intersection."

"Right."

"I didn't bring it," she said. "My camera."

"Oh. My mistake."

It wasn't even six in the evening. The line for the Powell Street Cable Car was stretched around the block. Helen pretended to look at the trays of silver earrings for sale at the street vendors near the MUNI entrance. She held up a pair of dripped silver ones with tiger's eye beads at the end. "What do you think?"

"Ten dollars," said the Asian man, wrapped in a blue parka. "Two for eighteen."

Helen nodded at him. "Frank?"

"I don't think they're you."

Helen took the offered hand mirror from the man in the blue parka. The earrings were longer than what she usually wore. Shinier.

"Very nice," said the man. "I have others too. Turquoise? You like jade? I have lots of jade."

"I think just these. Thank you." She pulled a ten from her wallet.

“No bag, thanks. I’ll wear them.”

Frank touched the tiger’s eye beads at the end of the silver stream. His lips turned slightly lower. “The beads are pretty.”

“I don’t mean that I didn’t actually bring the camera on the trip.”

“Oh.”

“I meant that I didn’t actually bring it out of the hotel with us.”

“OK.”

“OK,” she said.

“So do you want to go get it?”

“Right now?”

“Sure. I’ll go stand in line.”

Before Helen could reply, Frank had turned away and begun maneuvering around the city map hawkers, doomsday preachers, and Union Square shoppers. She turned her head quickly, enjoying the slight slap of the silver against her cheek. When had she last worn anything showy? If you could even call these showy. In her teenage years, she’d fully embraced all things eighties. She wore pointed shoulder pads, four colors of eye shadow, huge plastic bangle earrings with matching plastic bracelets, pegged pants and granny boots with kitten heels. She’d lived long enough that the eighties were back in style—what did they call it—retro chic—something like that. Maybe she should pick up some neon pink bangles from a thrift shop while they were in town.

Why does he want her to have a camera all of a sudden? It was just a little camera, one of the cheapies from the drugstore. She still wasn’t very good at downloading the pictures to her computer, and she missed not touching the film, not watching the images begin to dance alive underneath the liquids of the darkroom. Digital was too quick—you could see right away if you got the shot you wanted. It seemed like that prevented a person from really looking.

Frank had taken his place at the back of the line, which peaked in front of the Walgreens. His sunglasses were on, though there was

no need. Frank didn't actually care about the camera. He adjusted his scarf, still amazed that one could need a scarf in August, and let his gaze scan the crowd. Behind his Ray-Bans, he imagined he looked confident, like someone who was unconcerned about waiting in a tourist line by himself. He imagined the younger ladies in line found him attractive in that older-guy way. What would it be like to try and date again? Would he even try? Everyone looked really young, except for everyone else who looked really old. He was neither.

He'd lost sight of Helen. The line inched forward. He didn't relish cramming his body onto a cable car with sixty other people with cameras and children. Just do this, he told himself. Just do one normal thing. One thing like everyone else does when they come to San Francisco. Helen could snap a picture of him hanging on to a safety strap and he could look at it long after they were no longer together. He didn't care about the camera, but he cared, surprisingly, intensely, about documenting this trip. He cared about Helen being occupied enough so that she wouldn't pierce him with the announcement she was leaving him when he was unprepared. She'd been dangerously close at the bar, but that wasn't the right time. It was too soon into the trip. Why was he trying to prolong the inevitable? He didn't want to be married to her anymore, but the idea of being without her made him feel like a boy again, like he felt after his brother Benjamin died. Not an I-can-do-anything boy way. More of an I-don't-know-who-I-am-anymore way.

He'd been unprepared for the thoughts of Benjamin that had wormed their way into his head once he and Helen booked the hotel for the trip. What did Benjamin and divorce have in common? Maybe his brother wanted him to give the marriage another chance. Maybe he wanted him to do something unexpected, unplanned for once in his life—take the risks that Benjamin had never been able to. Were love and familiarity compatible with each other? Perhaps they were essential. He was getting colder in the deepening twilight. What strange

summer weather in this city of possibilities.

Helen thought she'd take a few shots of the hotel room—Frank's meticulously arranged toiletries, the ocean that was the king-sized bed, the broken strap on her polka-dotted weekend bag. She didn't want to ride the cable car. Up one side of the street and down the other. That felt too familiar. A route she'd been taking her whole life. Even the two-inch thick mauve carpet felt unreal. Or un-hers. Rather than connote luxury, the carpet seemed ostentatious. It put forth too much effort to be classy. If she'd had a digital camera she could have deleted all the shots except the one of Frank's toiletries—his chess pieces lined up on the white, but not too white, sink. That would be the snapshot of their marriage.

She waited for the elevator, an ancient one with a metal gate that rattled in its shaft, on the same two-inch plush mauve carpet. Her marriage was going to end in mauve, she thought, a tinted sepia retrospective flashing in her mind. She could take multiple shots of Frank's toiletries, removing one with each shot until none were left and send it to an on-line photo competition. Too cheesy a concept for even a fourth grader, but just because it was cheesy doesn't mean it wasn't true.

HER

The wild one did not know if she had the strength yet to materialize. She'd been trying for years, succeeding only in revealing an ankle or a dirty braid or a finger. Sometimes she released a scent, the patchouli and sandalwood she'd worn ever since leaving Georgia in 1967. She had a very distinct memory of the smell of iron and a touch on the bridge of her nose from someone who still held breath. She heard music, oh, did she hear music, and she could still dance to it, still feel it inside her, the wail of longing from Janis Joplin, the shrieking of Hendrix's guitar, the Mamas and the Papas' belly soul. She had boundaries, edges, borders she was not supposed to crash, though she flung her smoky form at them over and over again, hoping for a rift. She could not catch sight of herself in a mirror so in her mind she constructed a shape like a string, thin and two-dimensional, anchored somehow to a spool. She had no discernible hands, but she could move things; no distinct feet yet she could walk. What remained as full of electrical impulses as before was her heart, which though she could no longer hear or feel beating, she nonetheless knew was there.

She missed things. Finger painting. The feel of her teeth on her tongue. Toenails and fingernails. Furry animals, especially squirrels. Water, which she could see but no longer touch or drink or smell. Dirt between her toes. The warmth of someone's skin pressed to hers. She

was so terribly cold. She missed chewing, the dissolving of chocolate against her throat, the flesh of hamburger in her teeth. She did not sleep, so she did not wake. She did not laugh, so she did not cry, and she did not know one year from the next except by the changes in cars and music. The people, it seemed to her, if she was even a she anymore, remained much the same.

If she had woken that morning, she would have known what was approaching. But since she could not sleep, she did not wake, she only knew with an urgency previously un-experienced, she had to try again to be seen.

2007

Helen Connor had never believed in the spirit world, but that didn't mean she didn't experience it. When her mother died, and young Helen had lain in her rigamortifying arms for three days, she had seen more than her fair share of what she didn't understand, and now, as she stepped ever closer to the hotel's window, she still didn't believe what was clearly beckoning her.

She heard the San Francisco jokes in her head as she stretched the heavy drapes open as far as she could. The sidewalk below was smooth white. It could be soft, she thought, like sand. The jokes they would make wouldn't be true. She hadn't taken anything illegal into her body. She hadn't been reading Ferlinghetti for too many hours, followed by a nightcap of Hunter S. Thompson and Kerouac. She had simply hoped she and her soon-to-be-ex-husband would be able to state the Decision in a decidedly civil manner with a glass of Merlot in the ornate lobby, or in the line waiting for the cable car, or maybe in the Stockton Street Tunnel on a jaunt to Chinatown. She hadn't known the Stockton Street Tunnel existed until they arrived here and she squinted into its green fluorescence and almost-remembered having been here before. She stood now framed by the dusty olive floor-to-ceiling drapery and thought she would just put one foot in front of the other and walk quickly through the window toward the girl. They would land together,

giggling, on the white sand.

“Helen, there is no girl,” said her soon-to-be-ex-husband Frank when he returned to the room after wondering why she hadn’t joined him in the cable car line. “There is no girl.”

But what did he know? He didn’t believe in anything, had never supported her in anything, had only ever once spoken to her after one of her dreams in such a way that conveyed anything besides pity.

Helen was curled on the floor in a knot, not unlike the knot she was found in by a neighbor who had come to check on why her mother hadn’t been to work in the past three days. The mauve carpet was as dusty as the drapes, which were beginning to remind her of the kudzu green of Georgia. Funny, what the mind remembers as it’s about to snap. She hoped that wherever it went off to would be a pleasant place. She wouldn’t mind a few sunflowers or a bluebird or two. She had always been partial to bluebirds.

Would Frank be with her in the new place of her mind? The sun stabbed the center of her forehead and the intensity of it kept her from following the break she was certain her mind was making.

Frank tapped his foot beside her head, and even in this moment, the last moment of her sanity, he couldn’t find it within him to touch her. This was not from lack of kindness or compassion. It was simply from lack of ability. She had long ago stopped expecting or judging him for it. She had not, however, stopped wishing for it. “I’ve called for help,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she said to the carpet mites and his tapping foot. “I just need to rest.”

“The light probably just caught something strange in the Tunnel and bounced it back. The windows are dirty. You know how that can make things look odd.”

“I’m fine.”

“Someone will be here soon.”

“Someone is already here.”

He looked around the room. "Where?"

No where, she said inside herself, in that place he never heard.

Sirens wailed, but they were not for her. There was no need. So many others here with needs. So many needs. She unrolled from her knot and touched her left forearm. She felt hot, like she had a fever, but that was not possible. Nothing had ever seemed so clear before. Someone in the throes of a fever would not be so certain that she was about to go mad and that she was about to divorce her husband and that there was indeed a girl just on the other side of the window who looked just like—she was less sure here—like someone she did used to know, maybe back in Georgia, a playmate, or a school friend, only she couldn't remember having any playmates, especially after her mother had died and she returned to school a very different girl than when she had last been there. Even the muddy girl with the orange braids and missing teeth who had been willing to talk to her before turned her back when she walked by.

Locked in the arms of her mother.

Locked in the arms of her mother.

Locked in the arms of her mother.

That's what the newspapers had said. Her daughter, Helen, was found by a neighbor locked in the arms of her mother.

"I never seen anything like it in all my days," said the neighbor, Claire Williams. "That little girl was curled right up in her dead ma-ma's arms and those arms got the rig'mortis and she couldn't get out anymore. When I got there, she was sleeping, just like the Madonna and Child, only there were flies and a stink I'll never get out of my brain."

That's what the newspapers had said, so that's what Helen became. Locked in the arms of her mother.

"Like she was an animal in the zoo," the neighbor lady had said when the police arrived. "That little girl was just penned up in that cage of arms."

A knock, more of a pounding really, on the hotel door.

"I'm fine, Frank," she said, sitting up fully.

"Someone is here now," he said.

When he let the paramedics in, the man with thick black hair pulled back in a ponytail and reflective sunglasses perched on top of his head, placed an oxygen mask over her nose and mouth. The other one, a woman with an unfortunate mole between her right eye and her nose, wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her left bicep. "Just breathe regular, darlin'," she said.

Helen had been breathing regular. She started to wonder what it meant to actually breathe irregularly, but then she was sidetracked again by the thought that she was losing her mind, and these two people in uniforms were not going to rescue her, but were going to escort her to a new place. That thought must have made her breathe irregularly, because the man with the ponytail placed his hand on her shoulder. "It's OK."

Frank stood away from the three of them. His foot had not stopped tapping.

"Ever notice how the sounds of the car engines change when they enter the Tunnel?" asked Helen. "It's like the Tunnel wraps them in one of those puffy vests. The kind that don't look good on anybody."

The mole-lady laughed. "You're fine." She ripped off the blood pressure cuff. "120 over 80. You drink enough water today? It's dry here today, even though we're right by the water."

"That is a strange phenomenon, isn't it?" said Frank. The paramedics looked over at him. Had he been there all along?

Mole-lady continued. "Lots of folks come here and don't think about water. Not so hot usually, so you don't notice. That's one thing that'll get a person quicker than just about anything else. Not enough water. Don't let our crazy August cold make you think you don't need to drink."

Mr. Ponytail was going to remove the oxygen mask, but she stopped him. She wanted him close by for a little longer. He smelled of loam.

She suddenly wanted to eat him.

He removed the oxygen mask anyway. "What's your name, pretty lady?"

"Helen."

"That was my mother's name," he said.

Mole-lady snapped her bag shut. Her clipboard was open. "Last name?"

"Connor."

"Address?"

As Mole-lady filled out the form, *deja vu* overtook Helen again. The whisper of the draperies. Frank's tapping foot. Where had she felt that before? The place was on the edge of her tongue, the lip of her mind, but not enough-there.

Frank handed over his insurance card. They both signed releases. They weren't going to take her away after all, and she was somewhat disappointed. Somewhat concerned that now that they were going to let her remain here at the Hotel Gladmore next to the Stockton Street Tunnel, she would have to somehow make sense of the girl on the other side of the window all on her own. She was not up to that at all and was about to say so, when Frank opened the door to escort the paramedics out. He didn't replace the chain lock. She was still on the floor, though now her legs were straight out in front of her, and she didn't smell Mr. Ponytail's earth-scent anymore.

"I will keep you on my insurance," he said, though they hadn't yet had the official *We Are Getting Divorced* conversation. "I'm going to go walk into Chinatown. I'll bring back some moo goo gai pan." And he was gone without touching her, and she knew in that moment that he did love her, as much as his broken little-boy heart was capable of, and that this leaving was the moment. He would not be back, not with moo goo gai pan, not with kung pao chicken, not with egg drop soup. He would not be back, and he had left as graciously as he was capable of, and Helen resolved to forgive him as graciously as she could; after

all, he saved her the trouble of being the one to take action. For the first time in their fragile seventeen-year marriage he made the first move.

Thin fog had arrived, and with it, a moon. Helen thought it would be a fine time for a walk. And maybe that second glass of Merlot. After all, the paramedics said she was fine.

She remembered to take her key since she knew Frank would not be waiting for her, asleep hugging the left side of the mattress. His suitcase stood in the closet; everything still packed except for the toiletries in formation in the bathroom. Maybe he would be back for them. She also took a tiny bottle of vodka from the honor bar because she remembered that the room reservations were under Frank's VISA card. Sweater. Scarf. Room key. Vodka. It didn't take as much as she'd thought to have enough.

Past Life Reasserts Itself

A Hashbury Daily Times Exclusive Scoop from Remy X

A forty-year-old woman visiting from Phoenix, Arizona, almost jumped to her death from the seventh floor of the Hotel Gladmore in the tourist-heavy Union Square area of San Francisco. The woman said she was pulled back from the window by her past life. When authorities arrived after her husband returned from sight-seeing and found her collapsed on the floor, no sign of another occupant, past or future, was found. The woman was left in the care of her husband.

The Hotel Gladmore is at the corner of Stockton and Pine, just on the edge of the Stockton Street Tunnel into Chinatown. Frequent hauntings have been claimed by past residents of the hotel, but to date, nothing has been proven. There's the usual jabberings of the homeless or the lost, but this woman belied the expected appearance of a haunting-sighter. And perhaps that is why the authorities were called and responded. Or perhaps it was just a slow Friday afternoon in San Francisco on this 40th anniversary of our Summer of Love.

Sometimes, the city opens itself up, and sometimes it remains closed. There have been those who claim the city holds many time periods in its grip and all it takes is a glitch, ala the Matrix, (really great flick, by the way—the first one, not so much the other two) to skew someone out of their current location. This reporter makes no guarantee as to the accuracy of these claims; only not to report them would be unprofessional, since there were indeed so unusually many on this most auspicious day.

Remy X: Hashbury Daily Times

REMMY X

Oh man, I saw her tonight. I hadn't seen her in a long time, and I know if I tell anyone I saw her again, they're going to make me go back into that place I can't even name anymore I've pushed it so far out of my brain-house. I was doing my usual. Sitting in front of Ben and Jerry's on Haight and Ashbury so all the tourists would see me. My Remington's up on a plastic TV table, and I have a stack of real paper next to it. My sign: *You pick subject. You pick price. I write poem.* Sometimes I make a hundred bucks or so. It's fun to watch the kids who never seen anything like my old typewriter. They look at it like it's a fossil someone pulled out of the earth. One of them even jumped back a little when I typed. The noise, he said. How do you take the noise?

When I'm not making poems, I'm a journalist. I'm the unofficial self-designated reporter for Hashbury. I have a dog, Shep, sits with me under my plastic TV table. Sometimes people give him some food, but not usually me. They don't usually want to pay for a poem either, at any price. I should write an article about why that is one day. Except if I did, I'd have to figure out why that is and I don't know as I could come up with a headlining-type reason. For me, poetry makes my blood pump.

I wrote that little story about the crazy in Union Square at the Hotel Gladmore because my buddy Don—he used to be called Starburst back in the day—is on the official SFPD. He's not on that Union

Square tourist beat; he's off in the Tenderloin, but he still hears stuff and he drops by to share the cool info with me for my paper. Don and me, we were here then when it was all color and light and electric. He got yanked out by his parents and sent to Ohio for schooling around '69 or so. But he came back here to us anyway. I know it's because he remembers, and because he knew Ohio wouldn't ever give him anything even close to what this place give him, even when it takes every last soul-cell.

"Remmy," he says to me from time to time—that's what people call me, because of my typewriter. "Remmy. Don't you ever think about it all?"

And I scratch my dog's ears (he likes it better behind the right ear) and I nod. "I sure do, Don."

"Sometimes I feel like it was just day before yesterday. You and me. Elle."

I get surprised when he mentions Elle. We're not supposed to talk about her. It sends me back to that place in my brain-house I am not able to stay. He remembers.

"Sorry, Remmy." He touches my back. "Sorry."

I know he is, so I say OK. Don's my friend. He's just about the only one comes by to talk to me, actually me, and not the burned out hippie stuck in the sixties everybody else sees. Though for the record, I haven't had a drop of anything, a smoke of anything, since 1972. No one believes me, and that's all right. It's easier to be invisible if everyone thinks you're tripping. But man, I want to say sometimes to those folks who I know are just gawking at me and all up in my business judging me, man, don't you judge Remmy. You stuck somewhere too, rich boy. You just too damn blind to see it.

- X out.

2007

Helen hadn't figured herself to be a woman who would commit suicide, but all signs pointed to the fact that she didn't know herself as well as she thought she did. Mr. Ponytail and Mole-Lady didn't seem alarmed. They probably see things like that all the time. Crazy lady from out of town. Too much to drink. Not enough to drink. And then splat. It's over before anyone can ask anything. Even before she can ask anything of herself. Clean-up crew comes in and after a half an hour, no one is interrupted traveling into Macy's from North Beach in an Escalade.

The doorman who opened the door for her on the street level, which was street and not sand, wore a maroon and gold uniform with tassels on the shoulders. The Queen of Hearts mysteriously floated through her mind. "Can I hail you a cab, ma'am?"

She tightened her scarf, patted her room key snug in her jean pocket. "Thank you, but no."

He turned away from her to help another guest.

"I don't know where I'm going," she said.

He didn't hear her. He was talking to a woman who was simultaneously talking on her iPhone. "What did you say?" asked the woman.

"South of Market," said the doorman.

"He said *south* of Market," the woman said to her phone. She shook her head. Not one hair on her auburn head moved. "He says it's not

south of Market.”

The doorman put his hands up in the air. “It’s south of Market. If he doesn’t think it’s south of Market, what do you want me to tell you? It’s my job to tell you where it is. It’s your job to believe me. If you don’t believe me, then I can’t do my job.”

The woman had stopped talking, her iPhone held a few inches out from her head. “Can you hear what he’s saying?” she shouted. A produce truck rattled down Stockton. The number 30 bus knelt, sighing, inhaled and drove off again. The cab driver in front of the Hotel honked. The driver raised his arms. *You need me or what?* The doorman shrugged. “He says he can’t hear you!” said the woman to the doorman.

“It’s south of Market!” he shouted. “South. Other side. Away from here.”

“You don’t have to be such an ass,” she said, sliding the phone into her bag and stepping into the cab. The doorman opened his mouth, noticed Helen still standing on the single step leading into the hotel, and closed it. The cab drove away.

“I don’t know where I’m going,” Helen said, a little louder this time.

“Well then I sure as hell can’t tell you how to get there,” the doorman said. “I’m sorry.”

Helen smiled. He had delicious brown eyes. Like Mr. Ponytail. “That woman—she’s going—”

“South of Market.”

Helen let a little laugh leak. “Then I think I’ll stay north.”

He extended his polyester clad arm. “I’m Omar.”

“Helen.”

“Why is it you don’t know where you’re going?”

“I—well, I am looking for—I am—”

“You got good shoes on your feet, Helen?”

They both looked at the ground. Sensible brown Naturalizer walking shoes. “It appears so.”

“Then just start walking. You’ll get where you’re supposed to go.”

“That sounds very New Agey.”

“Do I look New Agey to you?” He smiled wide, his two canine teeth missing. “Ma’am, I live in Oakland.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t matter. Just head out there.”

Helen started to walk towards the Stockton Street Tunnel. “Maybe not there. It’ll be dark. The Tunnel gets dangerous.”

“You sound like my mother,” she said and her voice caught in her throat when she realized she’d said something she didn’t know for a fact was true.

“Then you’ve got to do what I tell you, right?” Omar was close enough to her she could smell the menthol on his uniform. “Go back that way. Turn right at Market. Stay on this side of the street, and then see where the city takes you.”

“Where are you sending me?”

“How should I know?”

“Well, why not turn left at Market?”

“Because you’ll end up in the Financial District, and it’s too late for there to be anything going on. Even the bagel places close up at five.”

“I’m hungry,” she said.

“Then you better get yourself something to eat before you set out walking.”