

Falling Off the World

When Gerald Davies was twenty-seven years old, he fell off the world. That was exactly the way he explained it to me. At the time, I was tied to a chair in the back of the bookstore and sure I was going to die. He had first slapped me to shut me up when I fell into a crying jag over the sight of my grandmother struggling against the tight binding at her wrists. I cried because she begged him to let me go. “She’s only seventeen,” Jane had whispered. Then someone jiggled the front door, and I took a breath to scream. With one swipe of the large paw he made of his hand, he broke my nose and made my ears ring.

That defiant part of me I just can’t control licked at the blood that ran from my nose into my mouth from the unshielded smack, and when I could catch my breath, I asked, “What are you going to do? Rape and kill us?” I think I shocked him because he began to mutter as he ransacked the office for valuables and found the cash waiting for deposit from the previous day.

My grandmother rattled off the combination for the safe in a desperate voice. She said that money was immaterial. He growled that she was right if you had money. He used my grandmother’s old poetry festival bag to gather money, jewelry and odd books that he picked up and considered.

That consideration gave me hope. I ended the sniffling silence that grew after my rape and murder query with a snotty comment, “If you’re going to take books, don’t bother with that new Clancy—it’s drivel. And put back the Dan Brown—it isn’t worth weighing you down.”

Gerald was a huge, burly black man with nervous fingers. He had a truly nappy head of hair more like froth, and one gold tooth in a mouth of uneven gaps with yellowed ones ground down to tree stumps. Bloodshot with broken vessels, his eyes rolled bulbous, red and nearly yellow trying to escape the sockets. He had enough muscle and fat to make me sorry I hadn't called the police when I found him sleeping in the little bistro at the back of our place last Saturday night. When he finally roused, he had been slow to move, eyed me with belligerence, but he left when I stood with my hands on my hips and ordered him out. He'd menaced the big bay window muttering and glaring inside for thirty more minutes. One of our customers had approached him on the street with a card from Beans and Bread and an offered to walk him there. I'd watched him toss his head from side to side like a rabid dog and begin the lumber toward the alley. Then I had pushed him out of my mind.

That next Saturday morning, I had come in early to work on a window display, so I let myself in with a key and locked up behind myself. I had called for my grandmother, walked to the office to dump my purse and found Gerald tying her to a chair from the bistro. I backed up into his extended leg, and he caught me without any more fuss than a wrenched arm.

Glaring at him, I noticed my grandmother's alarmed eyes in my periphery. She was probably praying that my brother Rob would fail to burst in next as she stared at handgun in Gerald's jacket pocket he hadn't brandished overcoming two, silly women. She was probably praying every loved one in her power away. I was wondering what would happen when one of the regulars saw that the store was

closed, yet Jane's old car was parked down the street. Someone would bang on the front door; someone would call my brother or grandfather. She watched my temper build as he put his rough hands on me and tilted my face up to his, so he could give me a deep, mean look. My back was stiff waiting for further violence from this mad dog of a beggar. He tried to focus on my narrowed eyes, but his fingers shook when he was distracted by the blood and snot on my face. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them wide as if to try to focus. He shook his great head again and let me go so hard I nearly tipped backward in the chair.

We'd been robbed before but never menaced or attacked. One trembling kid had waved a gun around but had taken all the hard candies at the front counter with the till. Later we found out that he hadn't even had bullets in the revolver, but he had eaten half the stash of candy. With the food kitchen two blocks away, the presence of the homeless, on cold day in particular, was commonplace. I knew some of these bundles of cast off clothing, collected treasures and long, rambling fragments of stories or excuses over free cups of coffee in the bistro. The staff hated it, but my grandmother resisted posting signs or barring entrance to any customer. "Even the poor read!" she might caution in her bright voice.

During the tense silence between us, I could hear my grandmother silently urging me to stay calm while the big man ransacked the office. Gerald finished his bag for the getaway with an odd collection of books including ridiculously heavy copies of the Norton Anthology of British Literature Part One and Two. That got my attention because we were studying British literature in school, and I found it a

bore. "You like all that dead white guy stuff?" By that time the blood had nearly stopped flowing from my nose, but a throbbing had started in my lips.

Gerald frowned at me, "Do you talk like that all the time? You are an obnoxious little girl, aren't you? I thought you just used that tone with homeless people who fall asleep in your place." He shamed me to the core. He was furious again, "Yes, your majesty, I like that old literature. Like you, I find the newer authors, what were you saying to your friend last week? 'Sweet but vacuous like marshmallows' was it? You are such a princess. I have a degree in that dead white guy lit, for your information. I got that before I fell off the world."

I settled hard, young eyes on the big man and sneered, "Fell off the world? Explain please."

Drawing up to his true giant's height, Gerald Davies looked like he wanted to rattle me in the cage of the chair where he had tied me, but he grinned. He sat down in my grandmother's desk chair and fingered part two of the Norton. "Okay, princess, here is the story of how I fell off the world." He looked into the book like it was written in there and ruffled the onion-skin pages gently.

I cautioned, "The name is Kate and my grandmother is Jane." Somewhere I remembered reading that you should get on a first name basis with a kidnapper. You needed to make yourself human and valuable.

"Okay, Princess Kate. I didn't always live here in the hellhole of not belonging. I loved a woman and fathered a child. I had a job at a school cleaning classrooms, and I attended college. . ." He talked for an hour straight.

After the hour, my grandmother was crying again, but Gerald Davies cut the plastic ties that bound us and let me clean up at the sink. He walked with me to the food kitchen and shelter a few blocks away. He held onto my hand like the huge, dumb animal he was not. Before I tried to explain my injuries or his trembling presence, he asked the priest on duty to call the police. He turned himself in and asked me to forgive him. I did. Later when I looked in the mirror after my nose healed with a permanent bump in the bridge, I thought I looked better.

With the help of my grandmother and the baffled lawyer we hired, I fought everyone including my parents to keep that man out of jail. He signed himself into a halfway house with my grandmother's help, and we took him there after the public defender arranged bail. When he finished the program, he came to work for us. Gerald Davies never forgot that he had once fallen off the world, and he had needed an old woman, a book of dead white man lit and a little girl with a big mouth to climb back onto the surface of the planet.

Years later, back in the bookstore again where every pinnacle moment of my life pushed me toward my own fall, Gerald would look at me closely and gesture toward a man I loved. He'd come in to avoid my eye but wander the rows of books looking for a way to approach me. Between us stood the gulf of three months of silence; deep anguish filled me every time I thought of him.

Gerald pulled on his lip and disturbed the bristly goatee he was twisting. "Kate." His voice touched rough sadness. Then he stood taller and closer to whisper a warning, "That man whom you love, that man . . ." he looked toward the giant man with the black, glistening hair, a statue's profile who hulked over the top of each

shelf and caught my eye. Gerald touched my sleeve to get my full attention; he never touched me after the day he struck me, tied me, told me the truth and then held my hand.

My eyes met his, yet I wanted to flinch with some of the residual fear I have of violence. "That day I told you about falling off the world, that day I came and tied you up." I nodded. "I came to rob the store that day, but I would never have hurt Miss Jane. No one would dare hurt Miss Jane." Again he touched his lip and then tugged on his short beard. "Kate, I fully intended to hurt you because of your hard eyes and your smart mouth. I wanted was to beat you, then I thought about rape, so I opened the Norton, and the pages calmed me down. I fully intended to put my hands on you after I told you about my life."

I must have sucked in a tremendous breath because he hurried on, "I'm not telling you now to upset you. If you hadn't been such a brave, tough girl, you might have died that day. I would probably have died that day, but that little rude bitch still inside you helped me to live. But Kate, take heed. It makes you hard to love."

He gestured toward Andros, "That man whom you love? He wants to hurt you just as much as I did. Some women just bring it out of a man, and sweetheart? You do." Gerald nodded and closed his papery eyelids to erase the sight of my shock.

I turned and escaped both of these men who wanted to love and to hurt me. I was the raging beast on the sidewalk muttering about edges and violence and love. When the two men I loved most met in the aisle to clash over their dueling tendencies, I had limped away and fallen off the world.