

T h e G u a r d i a n

[By Patrick Menard]

The sun shone happily upon the field. Stretching in all directions, it was blanketed by bright, swaying flowers. A girl's braided brown hair swirled in the breeze, the only disruption to the flowers' flowing pattern. She was taking graceful strides through the daisies and dandelions, arms outstretched as if flying.

She attempted a pirouette, but fell awkwardly onto a bed of moss instead. "Hey! That wasn't fair!" She pouted, addressing no one in particular. Crawling to her feet, she brushed off her dress. "Ugh. Now I've got to wash this later." She looked up and covered her face to shield it from the sun.

An object in the distance caught her attention. She hadn't seen it before because of the sun's glare. "What," she asked, "is that?" Continuing on ahead, she skipped through a patch of forget-me-nots, her eyes straining to make out something more than just a black dot.

After walking about a mile, she found herself quite near the object in question. The "black dot" was in reality an old country chapel. Though it was practically in shambles, it had a certain beauty to it. Nature had nearly reclaimed it: moss coated every inch of decaying wood, and flowers sprouted from the roof and windowsills. A tarnished silver cross protruded from the roof's peak.

A few more steps, and the girl was at the entrance, from which the door had fallen years before. Upon stepping inside, her vision embraced a set of mossy pews and an ornately carved stone altar. The scene was bathed with light which flooded the interior from holes in the chapel's roof. She stepped forward, approaching the altar in awe.

She'd never seen so captivating and picturesque an image before in her life! The altar's crumbling stone had been sculpted into a raging sea on either side, while the middle depicted a stream of people led by an old, robed man. "Moses! This is the parting of the Red Sea!" She exclaimed. The man had his hands raised, holding his staff to the sky. Above him, a dove with a twig in its mouth crowned the center of the masterpiece. The caption read: "God the almighty, Jesus the savior, and the Holy Ghost will guide you. Behold the four winds, for they will open the way to

heaven.”

“The four winds will open the way to heaven huh? That’s weird: I’ve never heard that one before.” The girl gazed questioningly at the inscription. Outside a bird began to sing. Several others joined in, and then the sound of flapping wings filled the small room. Startled, the girl gave a muffled shriek as they flew by, and ducked down with one arm over her face. When the birds had flown away through a hole in the roof, she peeked over her arm and stood up again. The room seemed slightly darker.

Noticing a door behind the altar, she approached it with interest. She extended her hand to the doorknob when a shadow suddenly filled the room. Looking up, she realized a cloud had passed over the sun. She grabbed hold of the knob and turned it. A gust of wind blew out of nowhere, and the door promptly flew open revealing a pitch-black chamber.

The girl screamed, and leapt back, but then the rain came, and it came in fast. Suddenly frightened, she didn’t know what to do: Go outside and get drenched in bitterly cold rain, or take shelter in a dark and menacing inner room of the chapel. A bolt of lightning decided for her, and she plunged herself into the consuming darkness. The wind immediately blew the door shut behind her, and the cacophony of the outside world became a dull murmur.

The blackness was absolute: even the sound of the girl’s breathing seemed to be lost in the abyss. “Ok. Calm down. It’s just a little dark. Do I still have those matches?” She dug into her pocket and withdrew a matchbox. “Ok. So now I’ll just light this....” She chose a match and struck it on the box; it didn’t light.

“I’ll light this,” she repeated, striking it again to no avail, “and then,” strike, “I will,” strike, “be able,” strike, “to see.” The match snapped.

“Oh fine!”

She took out another match to try again. Strike, strike, strike again, and then the second match followed suit.

“Ugh! Damnit! Why won’t they light?” She said, panicked.

Strike: a light finally burst forth from the tip of the match. A relieved smile started to form on the girl’s face, but it immediately froze in a look of horrified surprise. The girl found herself face-to-face with an angelic figure, though everything about it gave off an aura anything but heavenly.

Its face was like a mask with a smile engraved across it. Blue eyes with thin pupils shone a little too brightly just above where a nose should have been. Great wings burst forth from its back and extended, as if imbedded in the fractured concrete walls, around the perimeter of the room. “Welcome to purgatory.” Its voice intoned.

The girl screamed and dropped her match, which promptly sputtered and flickered out. A blinding flash suddenly swept through the room, and hundreds of candles ignited and cast a sharp red glow about the room. At the same moment the figure’s wingtips fluttered across the door and locked together. “I’ve been waiting for you, Agatha.” It smiled.

Agatha collapsed, whimpering, to the cracked stone floor. The beauty of the outside world had been lost in a hellish cell. “Wha... uh... Who are you?”

“I’m your guardian angel.” the creature said, the smile turning a hue closer to sadistic. “Congratulations: You’ve lived a good life. Too bad it’s over.”

“But,” Agatha stammered, “but I’m not dead! I just...”

“You just walked to your final destination,” the creature cut in.

Agatha’s eyes were open wide in shock and confusion. The creature turned its head to look at the wall, its smile growing.

A sound which had escaped Agatha’s notice before suddenly grew louder. She looked at the wall just in time to see the cracks shoot across its surface. There was a moment in which time froze, then, the wall shattered. A deafening roar enveloped the room as huge sections of concrete were sucked into the body of the tornado. Agatha’s screams were inaudible above tumult. The last thing she saw was

a block a solid rock being driven toward her paralyzed figure. As her limp body was carried away with the crumbling roof, her “guardian angel” smiled after. “Goodbye, Agatha.” Its smile was as wide as its face would allow.

Later that day, a search party went out looking for her once the storm had past. After several hours of searching, one of them called to the others. The man was standing in a patch of forget-me-nots that had somehow survived in the path of the tornado. Large blocks of stone were scattered about, but the man was looking at something peculiar. One block of stone had had a tarnished silver crucifix imbedded in it, and there was an inscription on the stone. It read: “Behold the four winds, for they will open the way to heaven.”

“What in God’s name is this?” The man asked.

“That’s goodbye.” a voice replied.