



A Girl on the Ground

By Jennifer Gillespie



Louise's mother called the grocery store "the market." Like there was a striped awning flapping in the wind and neat little stands of ripe apples and iceberg lettuce. Shelves stacked with tightly closed jars of shrunken peppers, olives, even caviar. Tin boxes of imported mints and animal crackers and a cheery old rosy-cheeked man ringing you up on an antique cash register that crisply *dinged* with each purchase.

Louise grimaced at her mother's idealistic choice of words. *Market* for grocery store, *cinema* for movie theater, *professors* for Louise's high-school teachers. Louise could see her now, all curled up on the darkroom floor, perfecting the role of eloquent, saintly drama queen. After collapsing tearfully onto the carpet, along with several bottles of spilled sepia tone and sheets of negatives, she had sent Louise to buy Tampax and garbage bags. Hardly the stuff you would find at the charming local market.

Louise walked toward the garishly lit supermarket, its bright orange discount posters Scotch-taped to the windows and a blind, homeless man playing a version of David Cassidy's "I Think I Love You" on his miniature Casio keyboard. Louise reached into her warm pocket and dropped a dime into the man's Styrofoam cup sitting next to his tapping boot toe.

Her mother would have taken a picture of the man. She carried her camera with her everywhere. If it were not nearly impossible, Louise believed her mother would take a picture of herself taking pictures. Instead she used Louise as a model for the photographs she hung in her gallery downtown. Louise was not beautiful like Naomi or Christy or any of those stork-legged, puffy-lipped models. She was a bit plump, her black hair was thin and limp, and she had large dark eyes that seemed to say both "Stay away" and "Come near," or so her mother said.

Earlier that day Louise's mother had taken her to a nearby country town to take pictures. She made her wear her wedding dress, a hippie lace frock that let the autumn wind brush its chilly fingers over Louise's skin. Louise didn't mind wearing this kind of garb on the side of the dirt road until several trucks began to pass. Toothless old ruddy-faced men leaned out the sides of their pickup trucks and whistled. Louise's mother's gray curly hair shook with fury as she told Louise to ignore them. She snapped a few pictures of the unmannerly observers with her camera.

They walked to a deserted farmhouse, overgrown with ivy and spider

webs. The grass was tall and came up to Louise's shoulders. Her mother clicked at each move Louise made and kept saying "Beautiful!" and "Lick your lips, darling." Louise was about to lick her lips when she suddenly felt no more ground beneath her feet. Her right leg had plummeted into some sort of hole you can only find in the countryside.

Louise screamed and began cursing at her mother. "Damn, Mom! You've led me all over God's creation, and now look what you've done! My leg, my leg!" Her leg was tightly lodged in the hollowed ground. Louise's mother stopped taking pictures and rushed over. She pulled Louise's leg out of the hole, hush-hushing Louise's howls and obscenities.

Louise's leg was covered in dirt and blood. She limped back to their beat-up station wagon without speaking to her mother. "Louisy, honey, we'll go get some bandages. I'm so sorry," her mother pleaded. Louise looked back at her, still standing by the hole. Her gray hair was haloed by the early fall light, and her sundress quivered in the breeze.

They drove to a nearby Tasty-Freeze, and the nice, fat lady behind the counter gave them Band-Aids and free cups of Rainbow Ice. Louise still didn't speak to her mother as she slurped her frozen ice on the car ride home. When they reached a stoplight, Louise's mother took out her camera and captured Louise slurping and scowling. "My poor beautiful Louise," she crooned as they exited onto Highway 55, the sky beginning to turn evening orange and a V of squawking geese gliding across its tawny surface.

Louise loved her mother then, when she loved Louise for just being Louise, and when she was not in one of her states. Tonight, though, after Louise came home from her job at the art supply store, her mother had comfortably fallen into a state without even warning Louise.

It was the usual walk-in-and-find-Mom-crying-uncontrollably scenario. Louise could only rub her mother's back and ask what was wrong. "Your father, your father," her mother wailed. "He's not giving us any more money. I have to shut down the gallery, and I have to get another job. We have to sell the house, we don't have enough money to send you to college . . ."

Louise kept rubbing her mother's back and hush-hushing her like her mother had done to her today in the country, but inside she wanted to pound her fist against the wall and scream. No more money. Such

horrific, prophetic words. *If I don't go to college, Louise thought over and over again, how will I get out of this town? How will I get out of this town?*

Her father, who was tall, tan, and slick, lived in New Mexico with his pert young wife, Gina. He left them when Louise was twelve, the day before the seventh- and eighth-grade Father-Daughter Dance.

"Why aren't you going?" her best friend Cassie had asked her over the phone. Cassie wasn't her best friend anymore; she was a pom-pom and had dyed her red hair blonde. It looked like her head had been dipped in flame. She ate fat-free yogurt and giggled loudly with the other pom-poms at lunch while Louise sat by herself and read or doodled the sea of shining, twitching faces.

"My father's moving to the desert," Louise had told her in a bragging voice. She was painting her toenails red, like Cassie's hair before the bleach. Cassie had told her boys liked it when you painted your toenails. Louise didn't get why, since she wore socks and shoes every day to school, but she did it anyway, thinking maybe the boys could tell who painted their toenails and who didn't.

"The desert? You mean like the one we learned about in geography, the Sarah Desert?" Cassie asked.

Louise didn't know. Was the Sarah Desert in New Mexico? "Yeah, the Sarah Desert. He's going to bring me back vials of white sand and cow skulls, like in Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings."

"Who's that?" Cassie asked.

Louise inwardly groaned. While the other seventh-graders spent their weekends going to the mall or intramural volleyball games, Louise stayed at home and read about the painter Georgia O'Keeffe in a book she found in her parents' bedroom. She loved to open up to the page with the bright red poppy painting and bring her face close to it, pretending she could smell

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it. She wished poppies grew in her backyard so she could lie in them whenever she wanted and fall asleep like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Nobody," Louise answered her after a while. She tried to think up more impressive things to tell Cassie. "My father is going to take me to the Times Square

New Year's Eve party when I'm old enough. The one with the big silver ball and Dick Clark. I bet your dad isn't taking you to that."

"No, I guess not," Cassie had replied softly. Louise had felt bad about lying to Cassie, but she wanted to make her think her dad loved her just as much as Cassie's did, who took her fishing and came to her stupid dance recitals.

The only time Louise could remember feeling close to her father was at Disney World five years ago, when they rode atop a big gray elephant together at Jungle Village. Louise was so afraid she would fall off, but feeling her father's strong arms around her, she knew nothing could go wrong. But could anything ever go wrong at Disney World? Whenever she thought of those two glorious weeks, Louise remembered a feeling of sugarcoated perfection, like she was a royal princess with two loving parents and a big shopping bag full of Mickey Mouse paraphernalia. A genuine fairy-tale vision.

Garbage bags, Louise remembered after she grabbed a box of Tampax. She began to scan the aisles for any sign of Hefty Cinch Sacks. It was nine o'clock, too late to be grocery shopping. Louise passed a teenage couple hauling their little love children around, buying diapers and Jell-O and six-packs. The father looked to be around a fresh-scrubbed eighteen, but his voice sounded cracked and aged as he scolded his toddler son for putting Cap'n Crunch in the cart.

At the Conch Graveyard

Wandering the beach in the gloom
With the companionship of the moon
The tides ebbing beneath my tendons
Singing lullabies to the infant night
Whispering wishes to the burning stars.
Here lies the conch graveyard
Where we touch the hollows of our dreams
Within the cooling sands.
Listening to the surges and the sighs
That accumulate in my billowing skirt
Understanding the cries that arise
With the flow of restless tides,
We bow and pray to the seashells
Lying shattered in the shadows of their gravestones.
Rest in peace.

—Courtney Mandryk,
Eleventh grade, State College Area High School,
State College, Pennsylvania

The mother popped her gum and continuously glanced from a copy of *People* magazine to the shelves and then back to her baby, tucked in the front of the cart along with the beer. She broke the cycle suddenly by glaring at Louise for a split second. Her eyes seemed hollow; the only light in them was from the fluorescent bulbs reflecting off the pupils. *You will never know this hell*, she seemed to say with those eyes. She muttered something indecipherable and then returned to her trance-like head rotation as Louise moved ahead.

I don't want to be here, Louise thought. The icy stare of the young mother, the harsh lights revealing her under-eye circles and pale cheeks, the Muzak Michael Bolton song floating above her head. *I have to get out of here*. She was about to step up to the checkout line when she remembered garbage bags.

Frantically she began scanning the aisles again, but there was no sign that said garbage bags. Louise's breath shortened, her stomach tightened; she wanted to lie down on the canary yellow and beige checkered tiles and fall asleep to the lilting Muzak, wanted to let the employees sweep her away into a dustpan just like a candy wrapper or a bit of dust. *I am a bit of dust*, Louise thought. *No*, she corrected herself as she swerved around to check the aisles of the store for the third time. *I will not fall down. I will find the garbage bags. I will not make a scene. I am not my mother . . .*

"Louise?" She jolted around to face the voice, which belonged to her ex-boyfriend, Cecil. She should have remembered he worked here; when they were dating, she would meet him in the dairy section to make out. Sometimes he would swipe a carton of chocolate milk and they would gulp it down between kisses in the parking lot on the trunk of his car. Louise thought he would have been fired by now for stealing and necking with a strange girl during his shift.

She didn't answer him, only stared back in wonderment. She had not been prepared to run into Cecil. He had been calling her and leaving her little e-mail messages all week, but she had not returned any of his attempts to "become friends." After their falling out last month, Cecil had sworn to Louise that they would always be friends. But Louise didn't want to be friends; she found it hard to picture two people who had seen each other practically half-naked participating in platonic activities like gossiping, baking cookies, or playing racquetball, which is what Cecil was always asking Louise to do now.

Louise was still silent. She had forgotten about the box of Tampax shaking in her trembling hands. She



didn't know why she was trembling; Cecil didn't make her nervous. That was mostly why she liked him in the first place. She finally said, "Garbage bags. I've looked up and down every aisle and I can't seem to . . ." Suddenly the Muzak grew louder, and she focused in on Cecil's zit strategically placed between his eyebrows. He looked like an Indian guru or a snake charmer. He kept looking at her cautiously, as if she was going to cry.

She began to cry. It wasn't one of those outright wailing banshee cries like her mother, more like a little lost lamb cry. "Oh, God," she whimpered through her sobs. "I don't know why I'm crying. I'm sorry, Cecil." She started to turn away, but Cecil grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Louise, are you OK? Do you want to talk?" Cecil sounded sincere like he always did. Louise felt like she was never sincere, and that was a little bit why she dumped him. He was always genuinely concerned, even if she had only nicked her knee shaving in the bathtub while talking to him on the phone. "Are you OK?" he would ask. "Do you need me to come over with some antiseptic? Apply some pressure to the wound, Lulu." Louise would always feel like she had to mother him like he mothered her, but the ability to do so constantly eluded her.

"I'm fine, I'm fine, Cecil," Louise finally said. She rubbed frantically at her face to remove the dripping mascara, but in the concave mirror she saw herself, a sad-eyed raccoon. "Could you just maybe show me where the garbage bags are?"

Cecil had sort of a loony half-smile on his face, like he couldn't believe Louise was asking *him* of all people to do such an honorable thing. He leaned back on one of his army boots. "Louise, I can show you where the garbage sacks are. And because I'm such a nice guy, your groceries are on me tonight. And after that, I'm gonna take you out to eat."

Louise wanted to laugh in his face. It was as if he was a little puppy trying to soothe her with sloppy licks and wagging tail, and once she gave in to his comfort, he would want to play with her and be played with. In a puppy's world, everything that was wrong before became fine in a millisecond, with just a tongue bath or a pat on the head from your master. But free groceries *did* sound good at the moment. "Cecil, that's very kind of you. I'm not very hungry, though. I think I just want to go home."

"Listen, Louise," Cecil said. The look on his face seemed to resemble that of a motivational speaker,

his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth slightly curled. "It is Friday night and you are grocery shopping, for God's sake. Now, I get off work in 10 minutes, and I wouldn't mind hanging out with you."

But I don't want to "hang out" with you, Cecil, Louise thought. *I want to drive around all night, never go home, listen to my depressing Leonard Cohen tape, and be by myself.* But how could she reject Cecil? He was buying her groceries. The least she could do was hang out with him and do the Friday-night teenage-rebellion scene, which was usually located at a crummy little coffee shop downtown or a McDonald's parking lot.

"I guess that would be OK. As long as we don't have to hang out with your friends." Cecil's friends were all skateboarders who used the word *dude* religiously, listened to pounding, indiscernible punk music,

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and hated anyone who didn't like it.

"No, Louise, it will be just you and me," Cecil said as he led Louise to the garbage bags. He picked up a twelve-pack and twirled it around in his hands triumphantly. *Oh, my knight in shining apron,* Louise thought to herself. "So, what do you say?" Cecil pressed on. Although being around Cecil was both uncomfortable and forced on her part, she felt a need to *not* be alone contrasting with her desire to be alone. Besides, it was better than returning to her mother, who by now was probably chain-smoking and bawling to another divorced girlfriend on the phone. "Whatever," she responded as she followed him to the checkout line.

Cecil kept asking Louise if his car smelled. "Does it smell? Are you sure?" he asked her periodically. Louise shook her head again and again. She could only smell the greasy scent of the town's million fast-food restaurants lingering in the cool night air. Cecil's loud music was booming, and the passengers in the nearby cars sneered at the noise. They rode in perfect silence, except for his inquiries about the car's scent from time to time and the singer's scratchy voice belting out indecipherable lyrics.

Louise hugged her knees and rested her chin on



the caps, staring straight ahead. She could feel Cecil looking at her, but wasn't in the mood to play the you-look-at-me-then-I-look-away game. Besides, she really had no interest in Cecil anymore. She found him almost too young for her. She quickly glanced over at him, his hands gripping the steering wheel, his head jerking to the music, and his hair all mussed up into gelled spikes. *What am I doing here?* Louise thought, and considered jumping out at the next stoplight.

"So where do you wanna go?" Cecil asked Louise as they turned onto McGovern Street. "The guys are probably at Mr. Ted's looking for girls. I guess you wouldn't want to hook up with them." Louise inwardly groaned and breathed heavily on the window, drawing cross-eyed happy faces that strangely resembled Cecil.

"I don't know. Why don't you surprise me?" *That wasn't flirting, was it?* Louise cautiously thought. She guessed it must have been because Cecil started howling like a wild dog.

"I like surprises! And I know just where I'm gonna take you." He grinned widely at Louise and she smirked back at him, hoping the surprise destination was an isolated field where she could strangle Cecil without being noticed.

They drove for a while and soon came to the outskirts of town, where there were only solitary fields and abandoned farmhouses. *Wow*, Louise thought, *he read my mind*. But in the middle of the fields was an old cemetery with thick iron gates and looming pine trees. Cecil parked on the road leading to the ceme-

tery, jumped out of the car, and opened Louise's door. "Voilà!" he said. "I proudly present my favorite place."

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tery, jumped out of the car, and opened Louise's door. "Voilà!" he said. "I proudly present my favorite place."

"Charming," Louise retorted as she climbed out of his car. Now she really wished she hadn't given in to her feeling of loneliness back at the grocery store. Being lonely was better than cavorting around in a cemetery with her lunatic ex-boyfriend. "Cecil, what are we doing here?"

"I want to show you all the cool graves. And there's a killer mausoleum in here," he said as he walked up the path to the gates. The bars were wide

enough for him to squeeze inside. He outstretched his hand. "Coming, madame?" Louise rolled her eyes. "Cecil, I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but I'm really not in the mood for some kind of spook show. Please, can we go back to the car?"

"But, Louise . . . let me just show you this one grave. You'll love it." He outstretched his hand further. Louise wondered how far it would stretch, if it were like Inspector Gadget's arms that extended for miles and miles. If she stood as far away as possible, Cecil would probably keep outstretching that hand from behind those gates, desperately trying to reach her.

"Fine," Louise muttered as she eased herself inside the gates. She followed Cecil through the dark, silent cemetery. For some reason, the thought of the dead bodies under her didn't scare her. It wasn't as if their souls still hovered beneath the ground. *Only bodies*, she reminded herself.

"Look, Louise! She looks like you," Cecil declared, as he pointed to an angel carved out of stone. She had a long flowing robe and downcast eyes, wings that were chipped at both tips. She looked a little uneasy, like she was going to fall over from her pedestal at any second.

"That's what you wanted to show me?" Louise questioned him, a little too coldly. She watched as Cecil's happy expression dwindled into a vulnerable, hurt visage. "I mean," she said, shaking her head, "I like it. It's nice, Cecil."

Cecil didn't say anything for a long time. He sat down on the stone bench and sat as still as the statues surrounding him. Louise didn't want to sit down beside him so she kept standing, shivering in her long-sleeved T-shirt and thin cotton skirt. "I wish I'd brought a jacket," she said aloud, hoping maybe Cecil would at least offer his coat. But he continued to sit, staring intently at his feet.

Suddenly he said softly, "I come here when I want to be alone." His spikes of hair were beginning to droop. Louise remembered how she used to be able to make them stand straight up again if she ran her hands through them.

"Then maybe I shouldn't have come with you. Maybe I wrecked your solitude," Louise replied. She waited for him to respond and, when he didn't, threw her head back and looked up to the sky. There was an airplane whizzing up above, very slowly, like an ancient, dying firefly.

Cecil stood up from the bench and awkwardly



paced around Louise. Finally he began to speak in a low, shaky voice, quite different from his sure and steady tone back at the grocery store. "Louise, I just don't understand you. You come into the store and start crying in front of me, and I try to be nice by taking you out. I mean, God," he paused and grabbed his spikes with his hands frustratedly, "what do you do these days, Louise? I never see you at school or on the weekends. Ever since we broke up, you've become this disappearing act. What's going on with you?"

Louise continued to stare up at the sky and the airplane. It hadn't even crossed over two pine trees yet. She hadn't looked Cecil in the eye once during

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his speech, but she could imagine his eyes wild and rushing with angry turbulence. But when she looked over at him, she saw his eyes were wet with tears, weeping. "Cecil, come on," she said as she put a hand on his back. "Don't cry because I'm so screwed up. It has nothing to do with you." She breathed in deeply and tried to steady Cecil's trembling shoulder. "You don't have to worry about me anymore. I don't need anyone to take care of me."

Cecil turned his head to the sky and the plane Louise had been watching. His eyes brimmed over with tears that were beginning to trickle down his cheekbones. "You do need someone, Louise. Everyone does. I don't like you being alone."

Louise backed away from Cecil. Alone? She *was* alone. She had never really thought about how alone she was. Of course, there was her mother . . . there were a few friends she could stomach . . . but other than that, she was stranded, her own little desert island. The closest she had ever come to not being alone was with Cecil, and she gradually found herself preferring being alone to being with him. What was wrong with her? She decided to throw together an excuse made up of the truth and lies. "Cecil, I am alone. But not to the point of lunacy. I'm working a lot . . . trying to keep up my grades. My mom . . . she's a bit crazy these days. She's afraid we're not going to get any more money from my dad because he . . . well, he's a real asshole. You already know that."

Cecil nodded shakily. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'd kill

him if I could, what he did to you and your mom."

"No, Cecil, I don't want you to kill him. I just . . . I just need to be by myself. It's not that I don't appreciate you trying to help . . . but that's just the way I am right now. Who knows? Maybe in a month or two I'll be able to go out and have a social life without wanting to go home and curl up in bed." Louise rubbed her hands together. The night had become colder. She almost yearned for Cecil as a boyfriend again so he could hold her to keep her warm.

Louise noticed Cecil was staring at her intently, not with caution, but with a sort of maddening, lusty expression. *Oh, great*, Louise thought. *Now he's going to try to make a move.*

"Louise," he said softly.

"You're beautiful. You know that, don't you?"

Louise shook her head and bit her lip. "I'm not beautiful. I'm strange-looking. And afraid. I'm really afraid." She didn't know why she had said that. Sometimes sharp, jagged

pieces of herself poured into her words when she didn't want them to. She almost expected blood to be in her mouth when she said things like that.

"What are you so afraid of?" Cecil asked gently. He was so in love with her. Louise prayed to God he would find some other girl to take care of soon. "Tell me, Louise. What is it?"

Louise waited for the plane to pass over three more trees. She waited for the howling wind to die down. She waited for a lonely car to pass. Cecil asked again. "What is it?"

"I'm afraid of being empty. Like an expensive pitcher that never gets filled, that sits up on a shelf all its life and never gets used. People pass by, and say 'Isn't that nice,' but never fill it or drink from it." She paused as she tried to see if Cecil understood. She didn't expect him to, but she went on anyway. "I'm afraid of my mother going crazy. Of never getting out of this crappy town. I'm afraid of silence, silence that's only broken by ambulance sirens and dogs barking and breaking glass."

Louise looked down. The ground, bedded with dirt and crushed leaves, looked soft and welcoming. She sank down to it and watched Cecil's shadowed, puzzled face above her, his overcoat flapping like a sail, his hands curled into tight fists.

She watched the plane in its languidness, the stars, the trees. For the first time in a long time, she felt peace seep through her. It quickly disappeared when she realized how cold the ground really was. ★

