

**2<sup>nd</sup> Place - *LOOKING FOR JESÚS*  
by Jasmine Belenger**

Small giggling children chased each other around the fountain while a group of longhaired men pounded on conga drums. Although it was only May, the whisper of summer had drawn the West County folks out to stroll the town plaza in Sebastopol, California. Small puffy clouds dotted the baby blue sky and the pink dogwood trees were in full bloom. It was an idyllic setting.

As I sat soaking in the sun and chasing winter from my bones, I became mesmerized watching lithe young women dance seductively to the rhythmic beat of the drums. Scantly dressed, their rounded bellies peeked out from under their shirts, reveling in the first kiss of the sun. They celebrated their youthfulness with reckless abandon. I fell into a trance-like mood on a nearby bench, basking in the sparkle of the day. I wondered if my son, Robert, was still here if he would also be one of the romping youngsters. It had been 12 years since I'd last seen him. I imagined the dotted outlines of his energy sitting on the fountain's edge. In my mind's eye I filled in his image and saw him singing and bare-chested in the sun.

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Sitting here in this peaceful Mecca I tried to keep my vagrant thoughts from compiling lists of things that I needed to do. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a pretty dark-haired Mexican woman in her thirties approaching. She carried a large placard with a face of a teenaged boy on it. His picture was framed with crosses. The boy on the poster grinned and his eyes were large and sultry. What a handsome young man, I thought. Under the photo her sign said, has anyone seen my son? Jesús Lopez was last seen July 1st 2003. As she got closer, I saw the desperate look in her eyes. It stuck such a tender nerve within me. An avalanche of painful memories of my own missing teen-age son, thundered down.

The distraught mother walked by my bench mechanically. She circled the plaza while holding her sign high. As she walked, her eyes darted anxiously through the crowd. Passerbys' glanced at her poster and then quickly averted their eyes from her haunted stare. I vacillated about whether or not to approach her. It had been many years since I had seen my own son. Finally, I

ventured over to talk to her. I listened to her speak about her teenager and the circumstances of his disappearance for a while before I mentioned my own plight.

"Jesús has been missing for two years," she began. "His friends found his car by the side of a country road. He was moving into his first apartment and was so excited about it. The car was still full of all his belongings. I believe he is still alive. Jesús wouldn't leave his family willingly and there is no one that would want to hurt him," the distressed mother said. "The sheriff's department isn't interested in investigating beyond the initial report. They told me they thought his disappearance was drug-related. I know that Jesús smoked pot and maybe sold a little to his friends. He was a good boy, though, and his family loves him very much."

Although her voice sounded so flat and rehearsed, I felt saturated with her emotional energy.

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I looked deep into her eyes and saw my own fractured reflection. Our auras locked in a shared bond of sorrow. All my senses prickled and told me that something serious had happened to Jesús. Sadly enough, I've also learned from experience that if you are poor or come from a minority group and if there is any hint of drug use, which includes marijuana, you are classified as low priority on the investigation scale. This lack of police concern changes, it seems, if you are famous or have oodles of money.

The woman, whose name was Estrella, sat down on the bench and poured out the rest of her story about her son. From the gesturing of her long slender fingers and the way her eyes took on a dreamy glow, I felt the intensity of her love for her boy. She seemed grateful to have someone to listen to her until the subject of death poked its shadowed head in and sent us spiraling into opposing realities.

"I have a teen-aged son who is missing too," I finally shared with her.

Estrella cringed when I told her. She barraged me with questions. "How long has your boy been missing? When was the last time you saw him? What do you think happened to him?"

"I believe my son, Robert, was murdered about eleven years ago. His body, however, has never been recovered."

Her voice sounded almost angry. "How do you know for sure that he is dead?"

I told her of the fateful night that I saw the vision of my son's spirit saying goodbye and of the psychic reading that confirmed it. Her large eyes suddenly narrowed and grew suspicious. I felt like soon she would be making the sign of the cross over me.

Surely, that late-night apparition was the work of the devil, according to her Christian beliefs.

She averted her eyes and her lower lip trembled.

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"Well, I don't believe my son is dead and I haven't seen any spirits visiting," she said, crisply. "Jesus is still alive! Maybe he hit his head and has amnesia." Estella was grasping for a miracle.

This sounded all too familiar, *déjà vu*. Amnesia is the disorder that mothers of missing children often pray for. I've had many a fantasy of my amnesic son wandering the world. One year, I imagined Robert was living in Mexico with a beautiful woman and a new baby. He could have lost his memory but retained his charm with the ladies, I thought. In the second year of his disappearance, I had a vivid dream that he was living in Italy.

His dark skin blended in with the locals and the conk he must have received on his head had magically made him able to speak Italian. Robert loved to travel when he was young and was an active spirit. Perhaps he was hiking high in the hills of the Andes. I was willing to sacrifice never seeing him again if somewhere on this planet he could still be loved and laughing under the same luminous moon as I.

I understood this woman and her fear all too well. "If you ever need to talk here's my phone number." I extended my card to her. She flinched and quickly stuck her hand into her pocket as if I were handing her poison candy. "Gracias, but I have a large family and a lot of friends that are already helping me. We are staging a vigil this weekend," Estrella said, reaching for her purse and her sign. She had obviously become uncomfortable talking to me.

I did not want to tell Estrella that someday her friends would probably tire of her grief and

slink away from the unanswered questions. They would go back to their own lives and children.

She would wander through countless dreamlands searching for another glimpse of her beloved child and awaken with her womb aching in the dark stillness of the night.

I lapsed into silence and gazed compassionately at her as my tears began to flow down my cheeks. It must have frightened her, she looked like a wild animal caught in a trap. Suddenly, she shot up from the bench as if it had turned to hot coals. "I.. I...I need to walk around with my sign," she stammered.

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"Well, I hope things work out well for you," I said. I was her worst fear, the future image of herself sitting on a bench and dreaming of a child that will never return, a poignant snapshot of grief suspended in her hall of time. For now, Estrella walks with her sign, anchoring her hope with her plea for help, anything to keep the howling wolves of sorrow at bay. Her new walking direction became a half circle, as she distanced herself from me. Our eyes would not meet again. My gaze could melt her faith. She was looking for Jesús but found a mother with pockets full of sorrow. Her hope was a candle, a light to fool the darkness, a shield of devotion to keep the truth out. Sadly, I could not offer her peace or comfort, just the raw sting of pain with my taboo mention of death as a possibility. I was the darkness opposing her light, the face beneath the mask of hope. Scratch beneath my surface and you would find despair.

The drumbeat in the plaza rose louder, thundering over the silent heartbreak of two mothering hearts. I turned back and enviously watched as the young continued to dance carefree in their pink-fleshed bodies. I traced Robert back into the picturesque scene and watched his energy form darting between the sunbeams of light and shadow.

"Hey Robert," I whispered over the din of the noisy fountain, "if you meet a lost boy named Jesús, please tell him his mother is searching for him and show him the way home."

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## **Honorable Mention - *Shamed toasters and a piano in the pickup* by Elizabeth Valentine**

"Toasters, Dad?" I asked, looking at the forlorn array on the metal patio table. There were eleven in all, of various makes and styles, none of the high-priced gourmet ilk, just honest toasters you'd find in the local K-Mart or the like. We were standing on the flagstone patio off Grandma's kitchen...well, Dad's for several years now, since Grandma had died.

"Mmm," replied Dad. Pressed further, he explained his system. Having tired of replacing the mundane necessities every year or two when they died, he decided after the latest toaster funeral to disinter one of the previous culprits and give it a second chance. I should mention here that discarded items of Dad's never actually left the property, as they usually do in other households, I believe. They were merely shuffled off into a closet or back room or unused corner or, in the case of the toasters, the back patio. Generally that was it in the way of relocating for the deceased item; decades later you could still pretty much rely on finding it still there, a little dustier, perhaps, but unmoved.

Not so, apparently, for the toasters. When the count had reached an even dozen, Dad decided enough was enough. The latest toaster carcass under his arm, he went out the double-door-and-airlock system that kept the cats from having any hope of escaping the gulag, and went out onto the patio. (Grandma having been a bird lover rather than a cat lover, she had forced Dad to drive around the neighborhood and scoop up loose cats and bring them home and imprison them, so they couldn't catch and kill any birds). Putting down the latest failure, he stared with deliberation at the assortment on the table. Then, choosing one he'd been rather pleased with in the past, he scooped it up and brought it back through the two doors, back to its place of former glory.

The plug was attached to the receptacle, the Wonder bread was opened and two slices removed and placed in the slots, and the lever was depressed. And in defiance of all laws of physics and common sense, the toaster set to doing what toasters do so well. It seemed as though this inanimate object had grown sentient and realized, with the desperate clinging to life that all living creatures exhibit, that this was an unprecedented opportunity to be grabbed and clutched at for all it was worth. And so it toasted up and performed magnificently. The bread rose majestically, golden in hue, sweetly caramelized in textbook evenness. Life was good.

But, as inevitably happens when one lives a lie, there came a time when this toaster realized that this had only been a brief, albeit glorious, reprieve. It really was a dead toaster and the only decent thing

to do was to act like one. And so it quietly re-died, and was taken out to the table of shame and set there to endure the elements. Dad chose a new candidate, and the process began anew.

By the time Dad and I were standing on the patio, the dance of the toasters had become part of the rhythm of life at Dad's. The disgraced toasters suffered through winter snows, Washington's famous humidity, and years of heavy summer rains. They baked in the heat that collected in the walled patio area. Autumn leaves piled over them until winter storms blew them away. And they waited, hoping, planning their performance for that wondrous moment when the current star might break a leg, and their moment to step up into the limelight would arrive.

Toasters were not the only item Dad owned in more than the usual number. When I flew back from my home in Australia to help avoid the razing of the house that the city was planning in response to the growing clutter and disrepair, I found eight upright pianos and a full-size grand piano. I remembered the grand from my childhood, when I would come the few blocks over to Grandma's house with Dad. My mother, a quiet soul, had been driven nearly mad by my father's refusal to play anything but finger exercises and scales, even though he had trained as a concert pianist and, but for the damage he'd caused by shooting himself in the finger with a starter's pistol at age ten, that would have been his career. Instead, he put in his two hours a day, without fail, until my mother put down her foot. So Dad took his unappreciated skills to Grandma's, where he was received with open arms, as was only to be expected, as mothers of sons so frequently feel that only they can appreciate the many talents their sons possess.

Now, years later, the grand had long been home to a family of raccoons, relatives perhaps of the raccoon who lived above the doorway into the library, which we always rapped on for luck as we passed through, provoking a flurry of irritated scratches. Or perhaps they were kin to the old raccoon who lived in the crawl space directly under Dad's bed, whose snoring was so loud and persistent that Dad was permanently sleep-deprived. No matter. The important thing is that they had found a home.

Unfortunately, their presence adversely affected the tone of the piano, and Dad was forced to use the other piano, a quite serviceable upright grand. Things went on in this fashion for several years, with the piano tuner coming at regular intervals to make sure the sound was perfect, and Dad working his way through increasingly complicated series of notes each afternoon, until disaster struck. The piano tuner, in a decidedly inconsiderate move, died. Dad was distraught and, in a few months, when the piano was due for retuning, he did the only sensible thing he could do under the circumstances: he bought another piano. This upright grand performed beautifully for quite a while until it, too, succumbed to the need for a bit of adjustment in the string area. And piano number four arrived.

In case you're wondering, yes, I did suggest to him that there might possibly have been another piano tuner in the nation's capital, but he dismissed the thought as nonsense, and went on with his own solution to the problem.

Now Dad was not a wasteful man with money, so he searched through thrift stores and the like for each new replacement. When number seven began to sound a bit suspicious, he set off for his usual haunts. By now, though, he'd pretty much denuded the racks of decent used upright grands. With increasing concern, he turned to the newspaper classifieds, where he was lucky enough to find what turned out to be quite a nice specimen in a nearby suburb. The people were very pleasant, and their strapping sons were able to carefully place the piano in the back of Dad's pickup. Dad drove home happily, only to realize that the problem with buying from a private buyer meant there were no delivery people to bring the piano into the house. But never one to give up easily, Dad just climbed into the bed of the pickup and did a Jack Nicholson. It was rather nice to play en plein air, and the neighbors were far enough away across the fields that he felt no need to worry about disturbing them. He actually came to enjoy his afternoon hiatus outside, and this was where I found him each day when I'd be working there cleaning up the place.

As I worked at picking up debris, I would put items worth saving in the back of the garage. One week, as there had been a stretch of several days without rain, Dad had moved the pickup under the trees so as to further enhance the experience. By now he was living in an apartment I'd rented for him temporarily while I did more extensive work inside, although he spent his days at the house. One evening that week, returning late from an evening out with friends, I decided to stop by the now-unoccupied property to make sure all was well before I went home to sleep. Rain was expected, and I wasn't sure all the windows were closed. I drove down the long, dark driveway, grabbed a flashlight, and headed towards the house.

"Elizabeth, is that you?" my father's voice came from the garage. "Dad? What are you doing out there?" I asked. "I'm in the pickup. Would you mind bringing me a blanket and a pillow from the house?" "Uh, why?" I asked. "Well, I've backed the pickup in here to keep the piano out of the rain that's coming, and it can't get all the way in because of the chairs you put back there, but it's okay because the piano's under cover. However, the truck doors have ended up exactly at the edge of the garage door, so they can't open. It's okay, though. If you'll just get me that blanket and pillow, I'll be fine until morning."

"Dad, you can't spend the night in the truck. Just pull forward, we'll get you out, and you can sleep inside like a sensible person."

"No, the piano will get wet."

"Dad!"

"All right. Look, if you climb up on the open window of the passenger side and throw me over this bit of rope here, I think I'll be able to get out the driver's-side window and you can help me down."

Did I mention I was dressed rather nicely, I felt, in some combination of linen and silk in a soft buttery-yellow hue, as well as quite a lovely pair of high-heeled shoes in the softest of fine leathers? It was also after midnight, though perhaps that's unimportant. But Dad was adamant, so I took the rope and up I climbed, a somewhat more difficult task than I had anticipated because of the tight quarters. Once in place, I tossed one end of the rope over the roof of the car, where Dad was able to grab it as it dangled. His exiting through the window made my climbing look positively graceful, but eventually we were both standing on our respective windowsills, holding either end of the short rope. There we stood for a couple of minutes, looking at each other, neither of us sure what the next move should be. But I managed to sidle onto the dusty hood of the truck and, from there, off the side over the tire, keeping a tight hold on Dad's balancing rope. He then mirrored my moves, somewhat more slowly, and managed to get down. I got in my car and headed off for home.

Dad, having missed dinner, went in to make toast.