

Great Expectations

by Susan Musgrave

I'm watching *I Love Lucy* when the lady from the pottery shop phones. Someone has stopped to ask directions to my house. A poetry fan, she says—he has copies of my books he'd like me to sign. He's come all the way from Toronto. By bicycle.

I know the type. My fans nearly always ride bicycles. He'll have a ponytail and high ideals. My fans never arrive in limousines to take me to the Deep Cove Chalet for elegant meals. He won't have had a decent bite since he raided the dumpster behind Safeway on his way through Chilliwack two days ago. "Tell him where I live," I say, resignedly.

The nerve, I think. Don't people realize that writers have to *work*? I switch off the TV and put on a scratchy recording of Dylan Thomas reading *Under Milk Wood*—probably what he expects to catch me listening to at this hour—then head into the bathroom.

I have exactly three minutes, the time it takes to peddle from the pottery shop, to transform. It's a big effort, having an image to live up to. I've been described as a tormented sea with "Medusa-like hair" who explores sexuality at the primal level of bone hurt; I hate disappointing people. I scrub the Clay and Ginseng Texturizing Mask off my face and borrow my husband's deodorant.

Within me is supposed to beat, according to the Montreal Gazette, a heart that welcomes flooding darkness in which to brew special magic. I don't feel like welcoming anything this morning—I stayed up last night making Rice Krispies squares—but my fan has arrived and is padlocking his bicycle, which isn't necessary on this part of the peninsula. He's obviously the insecure type who'll need more than just "Best Wishes" scribbled in my books. I slip out of my husband's pyjamas and sift through the laundry basket for some passable clothes.

Dylan Thomas is rhapsodizing in Dolby; I choose the kind of book that only a poet who "writes of the possibilities inherent in human relationships, and the shadowy forces that can so easily destroy them," would read for pleasure—*The Executioner's Song*—and have it open at the page where Gary Gilmore says, "Let's do it," as my fan knocks. He is wearing a little sticker that says BE NICE TO ME I GAVE BLOOD TODAY and he looks as if he's going to faint when he reads my T-shirt, which says I EAT 'EM RAW, a gift from the opening of a friend's oyster bar. Hurriedly I throw a fringed shawl over my shoulders while my fan apologizes. He is sorry for arriving so unexpectedly, but he was "in the area anyway."

"It's no problem," I say. He is fairly handsome, and I am forgiving by nature.

He takes off his rucksack, which is full of my slim, out-of-print volumes. My poetry, he says, is what has helped him cope ever since his girlfriend married his best friend two months ago in Orillia. "My mother used to read your poetry, too," he adds. "In fact, she was reading one of your books the night she took the overdose."

"Please," I say to him, "come in."

I can see I'm not going to have to make any effort at all. I make tea instead while he empties his rucksack on the table. He asks me to inscribe *Grave-Dirt* to his youngest brother: "For Billy. I hope you recover." I'm supposed to have "extraordinary perceptual powers," so I dare not ask from what.

In another of my books he keeps a clipping from a Toronto newspaper where I am called the "*enfant terrible* of Canadian letters." I tell him that when I hit forty they'll have to start dropping the enfant part, but he looks at me and doesn't laugh.

"I wrote a poem for you after I read that article," he said. "Would you like me to perform it for you? It's called 'Death of a Poet.'"

He's followed me into the kitchen, and he's breathing unevenly. I'd asked my husband to stay near the house and chop some wood so he would have the splitting ax handy if my fan turned out to be one of those psychotic persons. My husband, however, thinks I am indestructible. He has abandoned me and gone to the beach.

Death of a poet. I've never been less thrilled by the idea of performance poetry. I survey my weaponry—one rusty SOS pad and an aerosol can of Mr. Muscle oven cleaner. I don't want to die and give some critic the chance to say, "She asked for it, in her poetry."

But my fan turns out to have asthma, and the dagger I imagined is a poem after all, nothing deadly. He reads, his voice quivering: a young poet sees how futile life is, and takes his own life on a mountain peak near Orillia. As far as I know there aren't any peaks near Orillia, but the poem is so sincere I become genuinely concerned about the young man's future and invite him to stay for lunch. It's the least I can do for one who has journeyed so far, and by bicycle.

"You're nothing like I expected you to be," he says, studying my face as I give him strong tea and a generous serving of Rice Krispies squares. No doubt he thinks those dark circles under my eyes are from staying up all night wrestling demons.

"Oh? What did you expect me to be like?" I ask, running my fingers through my Medusa-like hair.

"Like most people I've met," he says. "Sort of ordinary."