

# GABRIEL

She had lived there, in her fourth floor apartment on the near north side of the city, for nearly three years. It was an uneventful three years from the outside; Gabriel liked it that way. She just wanted to live her life: go to work, see her new friends, have a place to herself.

But looking a bit closer, it was easy to see what a wonderful life she had. Her apartment was impeccable, with Greek statues and glass vases lining the hallways, modern oil paintings lining her walls. She was working at her career for a little under two years and she had received two hefty promotions. She served on the board of directors for the headquarters of a national domestic abuse clinic and single-handedly managed to increase annual dona-

tions in her city by 45%, as well as drastically increase the volunteer base for their hotline numbers. She managed a boyfriend, a man who was willing to put up with her running around, working overtime for her job, visiting clinics. A man who loved and respected her for her drive. Not bad for a woman almost twenty-five.

Yes, life seemed good for Gabriel, she would dine in fine restaurants, visit the operas and musicals travelling through the city. And she had only been in the city for three years.

Eric would wonder what her past was like when he'd hit a nerve with her and she would charge off to work, not talking to him for days. She had only lived in the city for three years, and he knew nothing about her life before then. In the back of his mind, he always thought she was **hiding something from him**, keeping a little secret, and sometimes everything Gabriel said made him believe this secret was real. She told him her parents lived on the other side of the country, and even though they dated for almost two years there never was talk about visiting them. She never received calls from her old friends. There were no old photographs.



This would get to Eric sometimes; it would fester inside of him when he sat down and thought about it, all alone, in his apartment, wondering when she would be finished with work. And then he'd see her again, and all of his problems would disappear, and he'd feel like he was in love.

One morning he was sitting at her breakfast table, reading her paper, waiting so they could drive to work. "Hey, they finally got that mob-king guy with some charges they think will stick."

Gabriel minded her business, put her make-up on in the bathroom mirror, hair-sprayed her short, curly brown hair.

"Hey, Gabriel, get a load of this quote," Eric shouted down the hallway to her from his seat. He could just barely see her shadow through the open door to the bathroom. "'My client is totally innocent of any charges against him. It is the defense's opinion that Mr. Luccio was framed, given to the police by the organized crime rings in this city as a decoy,' said Jack Huntington, defense lawyer for the case. 'Furthermore, the evidence is circumstantial, and weak.' What a joke. I hope this guy doesn't get away with all he's done. You know, if I—"

Gabriel stopped hearing his voice when she heard that name. She had heard Luccio over and over again in the news, but Jack. **She didn't expect this. Not now.** It had been so long since she heard that name.

But not long enough. Her hands gripped the edge of the ceramic sink, gripping tighter and tighter until she began to **scratch the wood paneling under the sink.** Her head hung down, the ends of her hair falling around her face. He lived outside of the city, nearly two hours. **Now he was here,** maybe ten minutes away from her home, less than a mile away from where she worked, where she was about to go to.

**She couldn't let go** of the edge of the sink. Eric stopped reading aloud and was already to the sports section, and in the back of her mind Gabriel was wondering **how she could hurt herself** so she wouldn't have to go to work. She would be late already, she had been standing there for over ten minutes.

**Hurt herself? What was she thinking?** And she began to regain her senses. She finally picked her head up and looked in the mirror. She wasn't the woman from then, she had to say to herself as she sneered at her reflection. But all she could see was long, blonde straight hair, a golden glow from the sun, from the days where she didn't work as often as she did, when she had a different life.

She had to pull on her hair to remind herself that it was short. **She pulled it until she almost cried.** Then she stopped, straightened her jacket, took a deep breath and walked out the bathroom door.

Eric started to worry. As they car-pooled together to work, Gabriel sat in the passenger seat, right hand **clutching the door handle**, left hand grabbing her briefcase, holding it with a fierce, ferocious grip. But it was a grip that said **she was scared**, scared of losing that briefcase, or her favorite teddy bear from the other kids at school, or her life from a robber in an alley. If nothing else, Eric knew **she felt fear**. And he didn't know why.

He tried to ask her. She said she was tired, but tense, an important meeting and a pounding headache. **He knew it was more.** She almost shook as she sat in that car, and she began to rock back and forth, forward and back, ever so slightly, **the way a mother rocks her child to calm her down.** It made Eric tense, too. And scared.

Work was a blur, a blur of nothingness. There was no meeting, the workload was light for a Friday. But at least the headache was there, that wasn't a lie. **She hated lying**, especially to Eric. But she had no choice, especially now, with

Jack lurking somewhere in the streets out there, winning his cases, **wondering if his wife is dead or not.**

She never wanted him to know the answer.

Eric called her a little after four. “Just wanted to check if we were still going to dinner tonight. I made the reservations at the new Southwestern place, you said you wanted to go there. Sound good?”

Gabriel mustered up the strength to respond, and only came up with, “Sure.”

“Do you still have the headache, honey? Do you want to just rent a movie or two and curl up on the couch tonight? Whatever you want to do is fine, just let me know.”

She knew at this point he was doing all he could to make her feel better. **She didn't want to put him through this.** He shouldn't have to deal with her like this. She searches for her second wind. “No, Eric, dinner would be fine. We can go straight from work to save the drive. Thanks, too. You really have a knack for making my days better.”

Eric smiled at the end of the line. And Gabriel could feel it.

They got off the phone, she finished her work, turned off her computer, started walking toward the elevator when it finally occurred to her: Jack might be there. **She can't go.** Even if he's not there, she could see him on the street, driving there. **She just couldn't go.**

She pressed the button for the elevator. And he could just as easily see me walking out of work, getting in Eric's car, she thought. I have to stop thinking like this. **This is ludicrous.** And he won't be there, he won't see me, because, well,

the chances are so thin, and Hell, it's a big city. I have to try to relax.

But she couldn't. And there was no reason she should have.

At the restaurant, they sat on the upper level, near one of the large Roman columns decorated with ivy. She kept looking around one of the columns, because a man three tables away looked like Jack. It wasn't, but she still had to stare.

The meal was delicious, the presentation was impeccable. She was finally starting to relax. The



check arrived at the table right as the place began to get crowded, so Gabriel went to the washroom to freshen up before they left. She walked through the restaurant, feeling comfortable and confident again. She even attracted a smile from a man at another table.

**She walked with confidence and poise.** And she loved life again.

She walked into the bathroom, straight to the mirror, checking her hair, her lip stick. She looked strong, not how she looked when she was married. She closed her purse, turned around and headed out the door.

**That's when she saw him.**

There he was, Jack, standing right there, waiting for a table. He had three other men with him, all in dark suits. She didn't know if they were mob members or firm associates. Or private eyes he hired to find her. Dear God, she thought, **what could she do now?** She can't get to the table, he'll see her

for sure. She can't stare at him, it'll only draw attention to herself.

And then she thinks: "Wait. All I've seen is the back of him. It might not even be him." She took a breath. "It's probably not even him," she thought, "and I've sat here worrying about it."

Still, she couldn't reassure herself. She took a few steps back and waited for him to turn around.

A minute passed, **or was it a century?**, and finally he started to turn, just as they were about to be led to their table. She saw his profile, just a glimpse of his face. It was him, it was Jack, it was **the monster** she knew from all those years, the man who made her lose any ounce of **innocence or femininity** she ever had. She saw how his chin sloped into his neck, the **curve of his nose**, how he combed his hair back, and she knew it was him.

By the washrooms, she stared at him while he took one step away from her, closer to the dining room. Then she felt a strong, pulling hand grip her shoulder. Her hair slapped her in the face as she turned around. Her eyes were saucers.

"The check is paid for. Let's go," Eric said as he took her jacket from her arm and held it up for her. She slid her arms through the sleeves, Eric pulling the coat over her shoulders. She stared blankly. He guided her out the doors.

She asked him if they could stop at a club on the way home and have a drink or two. They found a little bar, and she instantly ordered drinks. They sat for over an hour in the dark club listening to the jazz band. It looked to Eric like she was trying to **lose herself** in the darkness, in the **anonymity** of the crowded lounge. It worried him more. And still she didn't relax.

And she drove on the expressway back from dinner, Eric in the seat next to her. He had noticed she had been tense today, more than she had ever been; whenever he asked her why she brushed her symptoms off as nothing.

The radio blared in the car, the car soaring down the four lanes of open, slick, raw power, and she heard the dee-jay recap the evening news. **A man died in a car accident**, he said, and it was the lawyer defending the famed mob leader. And then the radio announced his name.

And she didn't even have to hear it.

Time stopped for a moment when the name was spread, **Jack**, Jack Huntington, **like a disease**, over the air waves. Jack, Jack the name crept into her car, she couldn't escape it, like contaminated water it **infiltrated all of her body** and she instantly felt drugged. **Time stood still in a horrific silence for Gabriel**. Hearing that midnight talk show host talk about the tragedy of his death, she began to reduce speed, without intention. She didn't notice until brights were flashing in her rear view mirror, cars were speeding around her, horns were honking. She was going 30 miles per hour.

She quickly regained herself, turned off the radio, and threw her foot on the accelerator. Eric sat silent. They had a long drive home ahead of them from the club, and he knew if he only sat silent that she would eventually talk.

While still in the car, ten minutes later, she began to tell him about Andrea.

"Three years ago, when I moved to the city, my name wasn't Gabriel. It was **Andrea**.

"Seven years ago, I was a different person. I was a lot more **shy, inse-**

**cure**, an eighteen year old in college, not knowing what I wanted to study. I didn't know what my future was, and I didn't want to have to **go through my life alone**. My freshman year I met a man in the law school program at school. He asked me out as soon as he met me. I was thrilled.

“For the longest time I couldn't believe that another man, especially one who had the potential for being so successful, was actually interested in me. He was **older**, he was **charming**. Everyone loved him. I followed him around constantly, wherever he wanted me to go.

“He met my parents right away. **They adored him**, a man with a future, he was so charming. They pushed the idea of marrying him. I didn't see it happening for a while, but I felt safe with him.

“And every once in a while, after a date, or a party, we'd get alone and **he'd start to yell at me**, about the way I acted with him, or what I said in public, or that **the way I looked was wrong**, or something. And every once in a while he would **hit me**. And whenever it happened I thought that **I should have looked better**, or I shouldn't have acted the way I did. This man was **too good for me**. And I had to do everything in my power to make him happy.

“Less than eight months after we met, he asked me to marry him. **I accepted.**

“We were married two years after we met; it was a beautiful ceremony, tons of flowers, tons of gifts—and I was turning a junior in college. My future was



set for me. I couldn't believe it.

“And as soon as we were married, which was right when he started at the firm, he got **more and more violent**. And instead of thinking that it was my fault, I started thinking that it was because he was so stressed, that **he had so much work to do**, that sometimes he just **took it out on me**. I was no one's fault. Besides, if he was going to climb to the top, he needed a wife that was perfect for all of his appearances. **I had to be perfect for him**. Take care of the house and go to school full time.

“Money wasn't a problem for us, he had a trust fund from his parents and made good money at the firm, so I could go to school. But he started to hate the idea that **I was going to college in marketing instead of being his wife full time**. But that was one thing I wasn't going to do for him, stop going to school.

“He'd get more and more angry about it the longer we were married. After the first year he'd hit me at least once a week. I was physically **sick half of my life** then, sick from being worried about how to make him not hurt me, sick from trying to figure out how to **cover up the bruises**.

“I'd try to talk to him about it, but the few times I ever had the courage to bring it up, **he'd beat me. He'd just beat me**, say a few words. Apologize the next morning, think everything was better. I couldn't take it.

“I threatened with divorce. When I did that I had to go to the hospital with a **broken arm**. I had to tell the doctors that I fell down the stairs.

## “A long flight of stairs.

“When it was approaching two years of marriage with this man, I said to myself I couldn’t take it anymore. He told me over and over again that **he’d make me pay** if I tried to leave him, I’d be sorry, it would be the worst choice I could ever make. This man had power, too, he could hunt me down if I ran away, he could **emotionally and physically keep me trapped** in this marriage.

“So I did the only thing I thought I could do.

“I wrote a **suicide note**. ‘By the time you find my car, I’ll be dead.’ I took a few essentials, nothing that could say who I was. I cut my hair—I used to have **long, long hair** that I dyed blonde. I chopped it all off and dyed it dark. Then I drove out to a quarry off the interstate 20 miles away in the middle of the night, threw my driver’s license and credit cards into the passenger’s seat, put a brick on the accelerator, got out of the car and let it speed over the cliff. Everything was burned.

“So there I was, twenty-two years old, **with no future, with no identity**. My family, my friends, would all think I was dead in the morning. And for the first time in my life, I was **so alone**. God, I was so **scared**, but at the same time, it was the best feeling in the world. It felt good to not have my **long hair** brushing against my neck. It felt good to feel the cold of the three a.m. air against my cheeks, on my ears. It felt good to have no where to go, **other than away**. No one

was telling me where to go, what to do. **No one was hurting me.**

“I found my way two hours away to this city, came up with the name Gabriel from a soap opera playing in a clinic I went to to get some cold medication. I managed a job at the company I’m at now. Did volunteer work, rented a hole for an apartment. Projected a few of the right ideas to the right people in the company. **I got lucky.”**



She told him all of this before she told him that her husband’s name was Jack Huntington.

She brought him home, sat on the couch while he made coffee for her. He tried to sound calm, but the questions kept coming out of his mouth, one after another. Gabriel’s answers suddenly **streamed effortlessly** from her mouth, like a river, spilling over onto the floor, covering the living room with inches of water within their half hour of talk.

She felt the cool water of her words sliding around her ankles. And she felt relieved.

**Gabriel, Andrea,** was no longer Mrs. Jack Huntington.

Eric told her that she could have told him before. “I’d follow you anywhere. If I had to quit my job and run away with you I would.” It hurt him that she kept this from him for so long, but he knew he was the only person who knew her secret. He smiled.

There was a burden lifted, she felt, with Jack's death, the burden that she didn't have to **hide who she was** anymore. She didn't have to worry about public places, **COWER** when she felt his presence, following her, **haunting her**. It's over, she thought. She can walk out in the street now, and **scream, and run, and laugh**, and no one will come walking around the corner to **force her** back to her old life, to that little **private hell** that was named Andrea.

But sitting there, she knew there was still one thing she had to do.

She put down her coffee, got on her coat, told him this was something she must do. Gabriel got into her car, started to head away from the city. As she left, Eric asked where she was going. She knew she had done what she could for the last three years of her own life to save herself; now it was time to go back to the past, no matter what the consequences were.

He thought she was going back to her family. She was, in a way.

She drove into the town she had once known, saw the trees along the streets and remembered the way they looked every fall when the leaves turned colors. She remembered that one week every fall when the time was just right and each tree's leaves were different from the other trees. This is how she wanted to remember it.

And she drove past her old town, over an hour and a half away from the city, passing where her parents, her brother could still be living. She didn't know if she would ever bother to find them. Right now all she could do was drive to the next town, where her old friend used to live. Best friends from the age of three, Sharon and Andrea were inseparable, even though they fought to extremes. And as she drove toward Sharon's house, she knew she'd have to move quickly, **if her husband was still there**.

She double-checked in a phone book at a nearby gas station. And she turned two more corners and parked her car across the street. Would she recognize her? Would she believe she was there? That she was alive?

Gabriel saw one car in the driveway, not two; she went to the window, and looking in saw only Sharon. She stepped back. She took a long, deep breath. She was a **fugitive** turning herself in. She was a fugitive, asking people to **run with her**, running from something, yet running free. She knocked on the door.

Through the drapes she saw the charcoal shadow come up to the door. It creaked open. There they stood, looking at each other. For the first time in three and a half years.

Sharon paused for what seemed a millennium. Her eyes turned to glass, to a pond glistening with the first rays of the morning sun.

“Andrea.” She could see her through the brown curls wrapping her face. Another long silence. Sharon’s voice started to break.

“You’re alive,” she said as she closed her eyes and started to smile. And Gabriel reached through the doorway, and the door closed as they held each other.

They sat down in the living room. In the joy, Sharon forgot about the bruises on her shoulder. Gabriel noticed them immediately.

They talked only briefly before Gabriel asked her. “Is Paul here?”

“No, he’s out playing cards. Should be out all night.”

**“Things are the same, aren’t they?”**

“Andi, they’re fine. **He’s just got his ways,**” and Sharon turned her head away, physically looking for something to change the subject. There was so much to

say, yet Sharon couldn't even speak.

And then Gabriel's speech came out, the one she rehearsed in her mind the entire car ride over. The speech she gave to herself for the years before this very moment. "Look, Sharon, I know what it's like, I can **see the signs**. I know you, and I know you'll **sit through this marriage**, like I would have, this unending cycle of trying to **cover the bruises** on your arms and **make excuses**—"

Sharon moved her arm over her shoulder. Her head started inching downward. She knew Andrea knew her too well, and she wouldn't be able to fight her words, even after all these years.

"I went through this. When Jack told me I'd never be able to leave him, that I'd be sorry if I did, that I'd pay for trying to divorce him, that's when I knew I couldn't take it anymore. **No man has a right to tell me—or you—what you can and can't do.** It hasn't gotten better, like you keep saying, has it? No. I know it hasn't. It never does.

"I know this sounds harsh, and it is. If I was willing to run away, run away so convincingly that my own family thought I was dead, then it had to be serious. Do you think I liked leaving you? My brother? Do you think this was easy?"

Gabriel paused, tried to lean back, take a deep breath, relax.

"No. It wasn't easy. But I had to do it, I had to get away from him, no matter what it took. In spending my life with him I was losing myself. I needed to find myself again."

They sat there for a moment, **a long moment**, while they both tried to **recover**.

“You don’t have to run away,” Gabriel said to her. “You don’t have to run away like I had to. But **he won’t change.** You do have to leave here. Let me help you.”

Within forty-five minutes Sharon had three bags of clothes packed and stuffed into Gabriel’s trunk. As Sharon went to get her last things, Gabriel thought of how Sharon called her “Andi” when she spoke. God, she hadn’t heard that in so long. And for a moment she couldn’t unravel the mystery and find out who she was.



Sharon came back to the car. Gabriel knew that Sharon would only stay with her until the divorce papers were filed and she could move on with her life. But for tonight they were together, the inseparable Sharon and Andi, spending the night, playing house, creating their own world where everything was exactly as they wanted.

And this was real life now, and they were still together, with a **whole new world to create.** They were both **free, and alive,** more alive than either of them had ever felt.

“I want you to meet Eric. He’s a good man,” Gabriel said.

And as they drove off to nowhere, to **a new life,** on the expressway, under the viaduct, passing the projects, the baseball stadium, heading their way

toward the traffic of downtown life, they remained silent, listened to the hum of the engine. For Gabriel, it wasn't the silence of enabling her oppressor; it wasn't the silence of hiding her past. It was her peace for having finally accepted herself, along with all of the **pain**, and not feeling the hurt.

Andrea. Gabriel.

The next morning, she didn't know which name she'd use, but she knew that someone died that night, not Jack, but someone inside of her. But it was also a rebirth. And so she drove.

"Gabriel" was in a self-titled chapbook (*1993 the chapbook **Gabriel** was released*), and it was also previously published in *art/life limited editions*, *poets2000.com*, *ilovepoetry.com*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, *poetryboard.com*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 8, 71, & 87, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, the chapbook ***Everything and Anything*** and in the book (***Woman***).

CHRISTINE, ON "GABRIEL"

All I can say is wow. This story is so moving. So many emotions went through me reading this. Thank you for sharing it.