

Pied-de-Poule- Story 3 in the Album Cover Series

Marie lived above Pied-de-Poule, a bar on the outskirts of a forgotten dust town named Bard. There had once been a gold mine here but that was so long ago and then they mined coal but after a monstrous cave in the coal company thought fracking was a more lucrative bet and put the whole town out of work. Now Pied-de-Poule had become a hangout for alcoholics or folks who were hungry for Poutine (french fries covered in cheese curds).

Marie had won the bar in a poker game in Montreal, from a bitter war vet who seemed none to sad to lose it- he wanted to move to Florida and she needed a steady job.

The first time she unlocked the thick, heavy wooden front door it was like the echo of ages ran out on the heels of a squealing rat...the thing was so freaked out it hit her ankle dazed and confused and took off down the deserted street. The stench of rot, smoke, old urinal cakes and Pinesol was less then welcoming BUT it was her's and it was also the only game in town. Besides a pawn shop, a barber and a run down looking convenience store she was it for the night life. She wrestled up some kids from the Kwick Mart, who were smoking one cigarette among the three of them...

"Wanna buy a carton, come help me clean and I'll give you a twenty and a six pack." Marie offered.

They looked at each other and looked at Marie and dragged their raggedy asses down to the bar, they opened the doors and the windows wide and a sweet breeze helped to sweep away the dust of neglect and soon the bleach and the sunflowers picked from the backlot lent a refreshing scent of renewal to everything.

Marie polished the bar with some Old English "to bring out wood's natural beauty," and cover up the sweaty glass stains and cigarette burns. Her dog Porterhouse plunked by door welcoming our first visitor. The bar was decently stocked and she switched the soda guns splurging for real Coke instead of Royal Crown Cola.

She dished out the beer, cash and cig's to her cleaning crew and sent them off with the message, "bands welcome, tell your friends to come in and play for 20\$."

Skinny Pimples replied, "thanks Marie, for giving us a chance...for giving us a chance." He was just ready to walk out when he turned around and asked, "how good do you have to be?" He inquired quite seriously, pushing back his oily brown hair then rubbing his stubbly chin.

"Good enough not to get boo'ed off stage." Marie smiled back, brushing the cobwebs off of her ponytail. She too had the look of a woman who'd been cleaning all day.

Skinny Pimple's nodded positively as if to make a mental note of this and slapped Mr. Stocking Cap Bucktooth, they did a high five.

Marie added, "classic rock, OK....nothing too hard," She nodded. They agreed and scurried off to get their drink on and Marie returned to the bar.

She jumped a little when she saw a man bellied up to the bar in preacher's attire.

"Can I help you?" She asked slowly, making my way around the bar, by the register. He was wearing a pearl colored tie, against eggshell button down shirt, tucked into some well worn dress pants, his hair was brill creamed into a 50's style slick back that made this look kind of creepy.

He smiled, his fake teeth too big for his mouth. "I just *come* by to greet the new owner- a lady *bartenderess*...that's new. Some people don't think this is a very lady like environment for a woman."

"Some people think a lot of things," She paused pouring herself a cup of coffee and one for Creepy.

"Thanks," he nodded, tapping the mug with his index finger.

"I won it in a poker game..." she signed deeply, and exhaled, "needed a job, it's really that simple...sir..."

He nodded and gave me the once over, trying to figure out how he was going to direct this conversation. "Oh, well... I'm Joseph Kendall, minister up at the First Congregational up on the hill."

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand, it was damp and his hand shake weak.

"You know the bar and the church is where people commiserate the most, if you need me you know where to find me and services are 8 a.m. and 11a.m. every Sunday and one at 5pm on Wednesday." He got up without touching his coffee, "hope to see you sometime."

"You too," Marie answered back but he was out the door.

He wasn't terrible just not real warm and fuzzy. Just because she didn't like him didn't mean he wasn't a good man.

It wasn't hard to get a crowd at Pied-de-Poule. People had nowhere to go and we had bands and booze and Trivia Challenge on Thursday's with the grand prize being free food or drinks.

People wanted to escape and blame...that's what she heard the most of while listening to the liquor talk. A person can never escape if they stay the victim... troubles will always be the warden, she had explained this more then once to an unhappy soul. Being a victim makes a person easy prey and life gets blurry, hard to see what really matters...being a victim, makes you desperate, wanting the bad guy to make it right is like trying to get water from a dry well... just ain't gonna happen.

If a person escapes... to wherever, well there they are, isn't that the old saying. That's why it didn't bother her to be in this run down bar in this slow poke town, because people are people and she had her own way of ministering to them. Also she had a computer, the world could come to her if I need it or she could get in her car and go somewhere.

She was serving up Poutine to a bunch of dart players when a very well heeled man made his presence known on this particular Friday night. He was pressed, his nails filed and glossy, hair dark and thick with an expertly tailored cut and his shiny new shoes matched his polished silver Mercedes sedan...and he took the stage and made these poor people promises...promises he never intended to keep. He was so charming, men took off their caps and ladies applied lip gloss and pulled their skirts down to a respectable level. He laid big money on my bar...and for Marie... it felt like an omen of trouble to come.

Contracts were signed, old homes were torn down and a new city was built...with a company store, a pretty new private school and state of the art subsidized housing. Everyone was given a job and a card for food and people looked cleaner and hopeful. So why, after the bar closed and the lights were low and not a peep could be heard on the street, did the voices in her head tell her something was wrong.

It was about 3 a.m. and she had locked up the bar and taking Porterhouse for a walk. He was a big old Bloodhound with bad hips and stinky breath but he was as faithful as a pup can be and a good protector. The back lot of the bar was just weeds and gravel with a dumpster and a picnic bench for the smokers. She sat down and watched Porterhouse poke around...the breeze was sweet and cool, she noticed the sunflowers weeping to one side in the dark. She could feel a presence behind her, and suddenly Porterhouse sprung to life, he went to yowl and then even

more suddenly it was like he had bee's in his ears, rubbing his head to the ground whimpering. She hopped up and went to him...trying to calm the poor dog.

"You can come out now," she said into the darkness, "I know you are there." Her voice was as firm as his was calm.

"I wasn't hiding." It was the Charmer.

"You always have just the right things to say, don't you." Marie replied.

He walked out of the shadows, his car lights now detectable from the side of the building.

"Why don't you like me?" He asked with a big shit eating grin. "I've done nothing but bring life to this town and still you treat me like a pariah." He had a glint of anger in his shiny eyes.

She let the quiet settle all around them and Porterhouse leaned on her leg like his life depended on it. But she'd met the Charmer before- *he just didn't know her*. He was a scary guy because he was completely void of conscience. People were just targets, and cogs in a wheel to him and in his mind he was just a dealer in this game...a game he'd played in a thousand towns for a thousand years, over and over. He could always walk away, he belonged nowhere.

She had one up on him, he didn't know his life was on repeat and she did. He began his pitch again, "...arn't you lonely? A well educated woman in a town full of simple people...don't you want more then to serve drinks and live paycheck to paycheck. It's so dull." He was so sure of himself, she kind of admired the fact that he probably had never known self doubt.

He was playing all the angles...money, sex...religion would be next.

"You seem to have a complicated relationship with God," he said like it was a fact.

"Not at all," she responded, with complete assurance, "in fact it's really very simple. God is my friend...my father," she looked up at those bright twinkling stars that had brought her here, "he's good to me and always there. Very simple." I took a sip from my sweaty glass of formerly iced tea, now just sweetened watery dredges.

Now he sat down on the picnic table, she was standing, he was letting her feel superior as he looked out into the vast sky of twinkling stars. He was investigating her.

"I don't see you going to church." He was offhanded in his comment as he pulled his car keys out and hit the locks, turning the lights out. It was very dark.

"Are you there? Do you even live in this town...you don't right?"

It was all cat and mouse. Which one was which was the deeper question.

"Listen Mr. for what it's worth I'm just not buying what you're selling. It doesn't matter really...but I think you are not the solution. People used to come to towns in the wild west selling medicine that never cured a physical malady...once the hope in a jar runs out you are just left with an empty jar. These chemical creations that are being made in your plants...are the future poison but I can't stop you."

He didn't like this, not because of the facts but because she knew the truth. Her knowledge didn't take a incredible intelligence- she was just perceptive.

"It's late, she said walking over to him and patting him on the shoulder. You should go."

He rose slowly and there was a part of her that should be afraid... but she wasn't at all. He wasn't going to shut her down, he wasn't going to murder her...but she knew he kind of hated her, the funny thing is, he didn't know why.

"I'll give you this big guy," she said softly, in the language of a breeze to a falling leaf right before it hits the ground, "you are like a bullet being shot out of a gun and you don't even know what you are killing."

He was so still, it was if he didn't exist and she turned her back on him and walked up my stairs to her little apartment, that she owned, made of wood from trees with nails of steel and

a bed of coils and cotton...surrounded by dusty books and vinyl record albums with veggies from her garden. A relic. She turned off the lights and light a candle and he pulled out of her drive way...he wouldn't be back, not here at Pied de Poule.

She looked at the factory schedule sitting on her kitchen table, it helped her conducts her special events at the bar. The candle light exotically danced over its surface in smoky gyrations. She noticed all the factory's mandatory meetings were Sunday at 8:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. (for the late riser, it explained with a smily face drawn next to it), "*those assholes*," she said aloud, to no one. Nice of the factory to give them Wednesday night for Church services...but The Preacher Mr. Kendall had explained to her, "...the 5 o'clock was just for shift workers back in the day, best attended services Sunday morning, people like to get their fix early and out of the way," he had laughed when he told Marie this more then six months back, before the factory came to save them all...she wondered what The Preacher thought now. Maybe she'd pay him a visit...