

The Recital Abby Scheer

Perspiration left its residue beneath her skin-tight Under Armour. After checking the time, Erica approached the last few blocks of her morning run. Quads burning with fatigue, her feet kept pace with Korn's Twisted Transistor. Oblivious to the El Camino pulling up next to her, she increased her speed. As her shoes became damp from the melting snow, Erica prayed her numb feet would survive her few last strides.

A lonely, life, where no one understands you, but don't give up, because the music do, music do, music do... The bang of a stalled engine overpowered her iPod. Through her peripheral vision, she could see a thin man driving the beat up, burgundy Chevy. Understanding his intent to flag her down, Erica debated whether to stop or pretend not to notice. Feeling like a Good Samaritan she stopped and removed her ear buds.

"Excuse me, Miss, could you tell me the location of the Festival of Lights? They aren't in Clyde's Park like usual."

"Yeah, the town board moved it. They - "

"Excuse me?" He strained to shout.

"I said they moved it." Erica elevated her voice but the man just shook his head. He stepped out of the car and walked toward her. Cigarette smoke invaded the crisp air. "I said they moved it. The town board wanted more space for the Nativity display. I'm pretty sure it's at Springfield Diamond, on 56th and -."

Without warning, bony hands grabbed Erica, and a cloth of chloroform took her consciousness.

Erica woke to a baritone voice singing, The Twelve Days of Christmas. Her mind fought its way from fog as the voice concluded with deep vibrato. As her mind cleared, Erica tried to comprehend her situation. Her bound wrists and feet made movement nearly impossible, and the heavy blindfold left her trapped in darkness. Footsteps descended the stairs. A nicotine cloud floated towards her, and she remembered the face of her captor.

"Good morning, my love. You are even more glorious in darkness. You may not know me, but I most certainly know you." Alert with trepidation, Erica strained to hear what her eyes couldn't see. "Do you know what today is, most special of days?"

"Who the hell are you? Where am I? Untie me!"

"The first day of Christmas of course. Most believe the first day precedes the Christ Child's birth, but it in fact begins the day after. Did you enjoy the lovely Christmas carol playing for you this morning?"

As he released a slow smile, she struggled against the ropes, feeling the coarse fibers splinter in her wrists. Erica became even more determined to unbind herself in the silence. Her screams met no reply, and her fears found passage through her tears.

"You get to reap the rewards of my love for twelve memorable days. And the final day, Epiphany, shall be the culmination of my love for you. But today you get the first gift, and the joy of our first day together."

"You're some kind of religious freak. I don't believe in any of this church shit. I have no freaking idea what Epiphany is. No way can you keep me here twelve days. My family will come looking for me."

The delicate flapping of wings contrasted with the man's raspy breathing. "My first gift is, of course, this beautiful partridge. I wish you could see the beauty of the bird." Deft fingers untied the coarse rope from her wrists with ease. As the knots at her wrists were loosened, Erica's mind immediately began forming an escape plan. In the end instinct won.

Her freed fist met his flesh.

Erica ripped off her blindfold. "Fuck," was her only response to the shiny metal rings locking her ankles together.

Holding his bloody nose in one hand, he grabbed her arm with the other. "You stupid girl. You can't escape me. It is God's will."

His deep laugh echoed as he rebound Erica's wrists. He placed the trembling bird into her tied hands, and she could feel its beauty, its pain. Anger and fear vibrated from bird to girl, binding them to one another.

The following morning he gave her two turtledoves in tandem with two verses of song. Her hands were kept bound. She couldn't understand his sick enjoyment of them leaving their waste in her hands. After he left, she tried to use her legs and feet as leverage to break the metallic binds. It wasn't until Erica felt the cool metal meet flesh wounds that she stopped.

The third morning his song had an irritated pitch. Every word was punctured with the clucking of the French hens. "Stupid birds won't be quiet. We will cleanse them of their sin."

"How can you cleanse a bird? They don't have a soul."

He ignored her, and forced her knees to clench the hen as he held it above.

"Each feather represents a sin. You must pluck out every indiscretion from their bodies."

Erica's hands shook as she tortured the hen with her rhythm of pain. "I need something to put all these feathers in."

"Just discard them on the floor. They will serve as reminders that sin is all-encompassing; you can't escape it."

"I can."

"No one can, not even Jesus Christ, himself."

"Fuck him."

He slapped her. Erica had no mode of retaliation. She plucked with more vigor, with more anger. Her fingers revealed the cool, rough texture of the hen's bare skin, and she could feel its ugliness. The stray feathers mixed with the purple feces and urine to create a viscosity in the air that was barely breathable.

Even through the thickness, three French hens cried in nakedness, two turtledoves cooed in chorus, and a partridge sang in melancholy.

A few miles away, in the suburbs, Erica's mother brushed olive oil over the raw, dimpled skin of a chicken. Strained voices of the local police and her husband's terse speech continued in the adjacent room. It had been nearly four days, and no one had seen or heard anything. Endless nights of searches and phone calls had only created empty hope. Erica's school picture was on the local evening news, and plastered around the area. Just a few steps beyond her captor's door was a sheet of printer paper with Erica's smiling face.

The fourth day was without poultry or a songbird. "I think you will especially love your gift today. Unfortunately, I must do this." Following the rip of duct tape, she knew today's gift would be different.

"We are going to spread the Christmas joy beyond these walls. But I can't have you interrupting the verses, so I must take this preventative measure." He muted her with the sticky tape. "I'm sorry, love, but I must."

He began dialing and Erica was clueless until her mother's familiar "hello" sounded through the speakerphone. On perfect pitch, he began to sing, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me, a partridge in a pear tree."

"Who is this?" her mother asked.

He hung up.

He dialed again, and Erica's mother answered.

"On the second day of Christmas my true love sent to me: two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree." Click.

He hit speed dial. Her mother picked up on the second ring. Erica screamed through the duct tape, not quite loud enough to reach the speakers. He began to sing.

"Who are you? Is this a prank call?"

After finishing the chorus he cut the call.

On the fourth call her mother became annoyed, no longer finding novelty in the Christmas carol. "On the fourth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me: four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree." The last few words of the song phased out.

"Whoever you are, I do like your voice, but God, four times? It's a little too much."

"Don't say the Lord's name in vain. She cannot escape, no one can escape Him." He left her mother with confusion and the dead buzz of a dial tone.

"I think she rather enjoyed that." He smiled. With the utmost of care, he peeled the tape from her lips. Her tears seemed to dissolve some of the adhesive, and he removed the tool of silence without pain.

"Why are you doing this? Let me go." Erica could feel defeat creeping upon her. Self-righteousness is often more dangerous, and less forgiving than greed. His words had a sense of finality, of no escape.

"I cannot. It is God's will. When he says it's time, it shall be done." Convinced of his own faith, his voice held a confidence that Erica believed to be untouchable. He left her in a world of darkness, penetrated only by the song of a partridge, chorus of turtledoves, clucking of French hens, and buzzing of a dial tone.

The next morning he presented her with five gold rings. "Such a gift was given to the Christ Child by the Magi from the East. They brought Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh; all very precious. Today, I simply give these rings of gold, as a token of my love for you." In a ceremonial fashion, he slid the five rings onto Erica's frail fingers. Even though she was blindfolded, Erica recognized the plastic seams of vending machine jewelry. He concluded by grazing her knuckles with soft kisses, and leading them in prayer.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy Catholic Church; The communion of saints; The forgiveness of sins; The resurrection of the body; And the life everlasting.

Amen.

For the next two mornings, loud, drawn-out, honking noises alluded to the traffic within the wire cage. The smaller fowl were forced to surrender to six geese and

seven swans. Aggressive necks and beaks attacked inferior wings and interrupted peaceful melodies. The geese and swans began their war for food and territory.

The cage scraped along the cement floor from the shifting forces contained inside. The racket maintained a minority status to the staunch air, which was crowded with the musk of feathers dampened in their own waste. An over-ripened perfume clung to the wisps of feathers that hovered, but Erica's nose had become numb to the spice of mold and fungi. The sound of metal collapsing on itself reached the floor above, and he came down to see the cage tipped on its side. All the animals were attempting flight; the small atmosphere inside was a battlefield.

The cage was bent, and nearly bursting at the joints. "We are going to have a lesson about how the Lord allows mortals the breath of life." He lured one of the swans from the cage and found control around its neck. "We are given life because God grants it. It is a gift. He can give, as well as take." He forced Erica's tied hands to grasp the totem of the swan's neck.

"Squeeze, until I say stop."

"No."

"Do it, or I kill all of them."

She slowly tightened her grip. Even without her sight, Erica knew the point of no return for the animal in her hands. A sense of power crept from her hands to her mind. The swan's struggle became languid, and she released her hands in fear.

He smiled, and she understood the powerful feeling of giving and taking life, of playing God. Both empowered and terrified, she feared her likeness to him. By the end of the evening, six swans mourned their loss, six geese laid eggs, three French hens huddled for warmth, two turtledoves cooed in chorus, and a partridge sang in melancholy.

On the eighth day, Erica was relieved there was no cow for her to milk. He removed her blindfold, and made her promise to be good if he unbound her hands. She promised. Erica didn't have the physical strength to commit an act of violence. Her diet consisted of honey and saltines. God was supposed to provide her with the rest. He hadn't. For her eighth gift, she wasn't playing the role of milk maid, but of Mary Magdalene.

"She was the woman of compromised status that washed Jesus' feet with her hair; a very dutiful servant. You are honored with the same task. We are using milk instead of the perfume originally used on Christ. I wouldn't want to claim equal status with God. Relish this duty."

"I'm not a servant or a whore."

"Perhaps, but you will do as your master demands."

"And if I don't?"

"We still have twelve, long-necked beauties awaiting their fate."

She let down the greasy knot on the top of her head. Her dirty, brown locks fell to the middle of her back and she looked at the grimy basin of milk. She watched him peel off one green sock, then a blue. His toenails were compulsively cut straight across, but had a strange yellow tint. His feet had a molted appearance; deep brown irregular regions stained his translucent skin.

Erica kneeled and lowered her hair to his feet. She swirled her locks and draped the milk around his ankles, slowly spilling the liquid down the green veins of his feet. Droplets caught on the tiny hairs of his toes. She tried to shield her hands with her hair, and protect herself from the disease growing in their crevices. She continued her circular, languid rhythm as she demonstrated her servitude. Her back began to ache,

and her knees fell numb against the cold cement. His toes began to wrinkle in the white liquid, and he demanded that she bless each of his feet with a kiss.

On the ninth day she understood surrender.

He began to unbind her feet, her hands, and continued to unknot her binds. He helped her stand. Erica hadn't been upright for days, maybe even a week. Her poor circulation made the idea of weight bearing impossible. "I can't. My legs hurt. I can barely feel them."

"Don't worry. You can lean on me for support." Erica cringed, and her knees buckled. His thin arms supported her weight, and his stench was unavoidable.

"I really can't. Don't make me."

"I said I would support you."

"No."

"But I haven't even told you the nature of the gift."

"Just let me go, I - " Erica was forced to cling to the flannel shirt that covered his thin frame.

"Instead of nine ladies dancing, I have come up with an appropriate substitution. I will give my lady nine dances. I hope you enjoy my music selection."

As his words sunk in, Erica's stomach rumbled with hunger and repulsion. He leaned her against the wall for support as he fiddled with the music player. Frank Sinatra's voice attempted to fill the room with holiday cheer. Erica found herself embraced by cheap cigarettes and mothballs.

"Do you hear what I hear?..." His voice, rich with beauty, overshadowed the cassette player. Seeing only darkness, Erica felt each caress along her spine with disgusting clarity. Scuffling out of synch, he whispered perverted words of love. The sleazy warmth of his breath invaded her left ear as his hands inched farther down with each passing minute. "Your body is so beautiful, so full of life. See how we fit so perfectly?"

"Don't."

"How can I not enjoy you? Touch is one of the most vital senses. I hope you've at least learned that by now. Sight can be so superficial. Hearts can be conveyed so easily with touch."

Bing Crosby began singing White Christmas. Song after song was drawn out with his invading hands. Vomit tumbled inside her stomach. Erica wished she could force it out, to end her misery. As she attempted distance, he only clung to her more forcibly.

"Don't pull away love. Savor our moment of closeness."

Nat King Cole closed the gift with The First Noel. The two frail bodies shuffled with no sense of rhythm. The smell of bird waste mingled with cigarette smoke. He pulled tighter as she struggled for freedom. To her, the singing of the final words seemed an impossibility; to him they were a fleeting moment.

"I believe it was not I who gave the gift today. These dances were a gift to me. Such beauty in closeness; only God can give such wonders to man and woman." Erica could sense his face leaning toward her blindfold. She tried to pull away. His lips met the sensitive skin of her neck, sending panic through her body. He lingered a moment, and Erica hoped he didn't seek more. He paused as she hoped.

She was released.

He left her to the support of the wall, and bound her arms and legs. Erica had never been so glad to feel the concrete brick behind her. As her hair dripped milk, six

swans mourned their loss, six geese watched over eggs, three French Hens hovered together, turtledoves cooed in chorus, and a partridge sang in melancholy.

Days ten and eleven were reprieves. She simply had to withstand the milk curdling in her hair, and two terribly prepared sermons. The first evolved around the Ten Commandments, from Moses' deliverance to their deeper meanings. Erica found small comforts in his exuberance in these religious laws. You shall not steal. You shall not covet. You shall not murder.

You shall not murder. This reassured her.

The second sermon was about King David, son of Jesse. Erica recognized the scripture about David killing the giant Goliath, but everything else was foreign. She found herself finding truth in the stories; partially believing.

"David was a musician; the flute and pipe were his specialties. He is responsible for the Book of Psalms in the New Testament. It is the most eloquently written collection of songs and poems. The Psalms are my own personal source of inspiration; my motivation to repent. In Psalm 40, my favorite, David perfectly composes words to encourage Believers."

I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.

"Fear creates trust, don't you see that?" His voice began to trail off. "I hope that these past few days have demonstrated my trust and fear... I am a faithful pupil of You."

"What?"

He snapped back into reality. "Tomorrow is the twelfth and final day of Christmas. 'Tis the Eve of Epiphany, my love. I will uncover your eyes, and you can truly see the beauty of the gifts I've given you. Tomorrow is the end and the beginning."

Familiar footsteps made their way down the stairs and in her direction. His smoky aura approached her. Only her hands were unbound. Expecting to regain her fifth sense, he simply told her to extend her hands.

"Why?"

"For your gift of course." Erica flashed back to the first day.

"I thought I got to see my gifts today. Aren't you going to unblindfold me?"

"You will see soon enough."

Feathers scraped her fingers with struggle. Erica tried to comfort the terrified bird with false strength. His breath attacked her nose as guttural scripture escaped his tongue. The partridge found solace in song, and continued its battle for freedom. His words of communion mingled with the bird's voice, and the two became one. Erica simply held the partridge in darkness, and waited. Skeletal hands grasped the bird through hers. He continued to cantillate scripture as Erica wondered whether it was prayer or condemnation.

"—do this in remembrance of me."

Screeching and quick movement led to calm. Limpness and warm liquid deadened the silent room. A trickle of blood ran down their hands, as the life held within drained. Erica didn't need her eyes to see what her hands held. Hunger, blood, and fear hit her with vertigo. The fatigue of her body spun inside her head. She

wanted to release the scream simmering inside her, but trapped it, hoping for another day. Repulsion and nausea washed over her. Erica's tennis shoes absorbed the fresh puddle of sin and pain. Her eyes were opened, and for the first time she prayed.