

Gwennet Henry  
gwennethenry@gmail.com  
404-552-4192

NEVER LOOK BACK

by  
Gwennet Henry

The preacher was about to begin his sermon when three-year-old Stephanie pulled at her mother's sleeve. Christine leaned down to hear what the child had to say and out of the corner of her eye, she saw him, a man wearing a black suit nestled in between the parishioners of Bethel Baptist church. She recognized him immediately and it felt like her heart stopped beating for a second. Christine shot back around and her mind exploded with thoughts. What was he doing here? Was he coming back to her? Please God, let him be coming back.

Everything changed and she didn't quite know how to fix her face now, or how to position herself in the seat, or how to breathe. The preacher was at the height of his delivery, but Christine didn't hear the sermon. She had been missing her husband from the time he stormed out of the marriage two years before, disappointed and swearing he wouldn't come back until she had changed her lifestyle.

After the service, Christine shook hands and hugged the necks of the saints, as was her custom since she started attending a month ago. But nowhere in the crowd did she find her husband Bruce. It was just as well, with what I must do later, she thought. Bruce will never believe me. He will never believe she was forced to do it.

"One last trick!" Joey had demanded. "One last trick and maybe I'll let you go."

The words of her pimp burned in her memory. "You do this or you'll be pulling that little girl of yours out of a river," he had said, yanking her hair so tight her head hurt for two days afterwards.

She knew what she was going to do. She wasn't gonna let her child get hurt, nor she wasn't gonna live like this forever. As soon as she made it home from taking little Stephanie to Mother Bertha's house for the night, she went into operation. She put on her leather skirt, fishnet stockings, and stilettos. She looked down at herself and shook her head in disgust and grabbed her trench coat out of the closet to cover herself. Joey would be there as soon as he realized she didn't show up to meet the "John." She got a pair of scissors out of Stephanie's book-bag and slipped it into her pocket. And then, she sat and waited for Joey to come.

The knock at the door made her jump. Clutching the scissors in her pocket and on a silent count of three, she opened the door.

Christine took a deep breath and a small step back. "Bruce," she said, almost in a reverent tone.

Bruce stood at the door holding a cute baby chair in his hand for Stephanie. He took one long look at Christine, ending with her shoes. He put the chair down, turned back around and started to walk away.

"Bruce wait!" Christine said, running behind him. "You don't understand. Joey threatened to hurt Steph..."

"I don't want to hear it Christine," Bruce said holding up his hand to stop her from finishing the sentence. "I know the drill!" He answered in a low, harsh tone, and he was gone.

Christine was crying after Bruce left. It was like a cold empty breeze had filled the spot where he had stood. But, She had to complete her mission. Christine went to the kitchen to get a glass of water to help herself calm down, but she grabbed a block of cheese that was sitting on the counter and reached for the big kitchen knife beside it. She began chopping the cheese into lopsided cubes. How many times can a heart break? She asked herself.

"How many times can a heart break? How many times one heart break?" She was almost screaming now, emphasizing each word with a slash to the cheese, tears falling down passed her chin.

She continued to chop the cheese and cry until she heard footsteps coming back towards her apartment. She slammed the knife down and bolted towards the door.

"Bruce?" She called out.

Leaving the kitchen, she bumped into Joey who came marching into the apartment like he owned it. She hadn't realized she had left the front door opened.

"Hey, was that your husband I passed in the hall? He didn't look very loving. I told you he didn't want you," he said laughing. "Nobody wants you, except me."

He touched her cheek. Christine slapped his hand off. He responded with a hard back-handed slap across her face that knocked her down to the floor. She tasted blood.

"Now who told you that you could be late," he said grabbing her around the neck. "My client is waiting and I had to come and get you. Nobody gets in between me and my money!"

Christine tried to get up and run. But Joey grabbed her around the neck.

"Joey wait, no, no, Joey wait!" Christine cried as Joey drug her across the floor, moving in a backward motion. She tried to grab the scissors, but she couldn't breathe.

Joey kept dragging her until he lost his footing on Stephanie's baby chair behind him. He stumbled and fell. Christine landed on top of him now. She pulled the scissors out of her pocket.

"What, you gonna kill me now? You don't have the guts, stupid. He scolded her. Is that what you're going to use? You can't kill a grown man with a little scissors."

He laughed, and for a minute, Christine looked at the scissors in her and felt shame. She couldn't even do this right.

Joey slowly began to take the scissors out of Christine's hand.

"You know, you should tell Stephanie not to leave her stupid toys around. I almost killed myself on that thing."

Something happened when Christine heard Stephanie's name come out of Joey's mouth. It was like a big turbulent bump that changes the trajectory of a flight. It went straight through her. What right did he have to defile her sweet daughter's name in his filthy mouth. He, who threatened to drown her baby if she didn't do what he wanted. He had no right!

"No right, no right!" She screamed at him.

"What?" He threw her off of him and tried to get up.

Christine pounced on him with a strength she was unaware of; a determination and a sense of worth that seemed like it was generated from her deepest family roots. She knocked him against the wall. He struggled to regain his footing, but she continued to pummeled him with blows, scratching his face. Joey grabbed Christine's hands and rolled over pinning her down to the floor. He slapped her face hard two times. The third time she caught his hand in her teeth biting as hard as she could. He yelled out in pain releasing his grip on her and held his hand. She crawled into the kitchen on her hands and knees, and she felt for the big kitchen knife on the counter. She snatched it down and pointed it at him.

"Put the knife down Christine," Joey said. You don't want to do this. What's a little spat between friends?

C'mon, Christine, we can work this out..., we always work things out. Think about Stephanie," he pleaded.

He had said her baby's name again and her blood began to boil. She could see the terror in his eyes. It gave her more courage to be still, to wait.

"You're right Joey," she said standing now, still holding the knife. She dropped her hand and began to cry.

Joey took a deep breath and walked closer towards her. He took the knife and laid it back on the counter.

"I can read you like a book," he said as he turned and popped a cube of cheese in his mouth, then another... and another. "You're pathetic.

Christine watched his mouth's movements as he talked and chewed without hearing the words, and her tears stopped flowing. She watched as he turned away from her to get another cube of cheese, and she grabbed the knife before he could stop her and jabbed it deep into his belly.

"You're right," she said, looking him in the eyes. You can't kill a grown man with a little scissors, but you can do it real good with a kitchen knife."

He cursed her as the look of disbelief and fear in his eyes intensified. Christine watched him as he tried to reach out and grab her. She moved out of his reach and watched him stumble and fall to the floor. She walked over to him and pulled the knife out of his stomach and watched the life flow out of him, the poison that held her prisoner for three years. Every drop testified to her freedom.

She slid down to the floor in front of him and watched Joey take his final breath.

The room began to turn slowly around her in a merry-go-round. In the distance she heard music that completely filled her head and soul. She closed her eyes and allowed it to blanket her, taking her back to when she was eight years old at the World's Fair. Around, around she went, singing and swinging in the wind. She heard her name being called in between sounds of radios and beeps and buzzes. It sounded like it was coming from a deep tunnel but getting closer with each call, and she felt her face form in a smile.

Finally, her eyes fluttered open. She saw Bruce's face in between a haze of policemen. He was standing over her. He bent down with his arms outstretched and took the knife from Christine's hands.

"You came back," she said and collapsed in his arms.

THE END