

### In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts 3

#### You Wouldn't Believe My Story.

Serena, a tall Native woman with long, black hair and a world weary expression on her thin face, has come into my office and bluntly states "You wouldn't believe my story. Everything I'm saying to you is true. Can you believe that?" My first thought is "what can you tell me that I haven't heard down here before?" Later, after I hear her out, I feel humbled. Truly, she knew. Here is a piece of her story. Serena's story starts with her grandmother. She was sixty-five. She raised her from when her mother delivered her and left the hospital right away. The social worker had to phone her grandmother and tell her that if she didn't come and sign papers, Serena would be put into a foster home. Throughout the entire discussion that follows Serena's voice is grief-stricken, choked and weepy. Her tears stop flowing only intermittently.

"Then she raised my daughter from a year old." Serena stammers out. "I had her when I was only fifteen, and she is now fourteen." Serena surely feels her own childhood in this repeat of history. Her own mother was only sixteen when she abandoned her newborn. She lives now in the same Hastings hotel where Serena lives.

"My grandmother gave me a perfect home. She raised me, my brother and my sister, and my first cousins. Actually we all grew up like brothers and sisters." Serena's statement that she had a perfect home becomes devastatingly clear as she continues her narrative. She had never met her mother, until after her grandmother died and she went looking. Her pain is so intense and apart from the movement of her right hand as she dabs her eyes, Serena sits motionless. The sunlight streaming in the office through the window behind her, leaves her face in obscurity. "I had my daughter when I was fifteen. He was my auntie's boyfriend, whatever. He was molesting me and if I said anything, he vowed to beat my auntie."

In the brief silence that follows, I recollect how ever since Serena first came into my office I had passed her off as a manipulator. She came for drugs to help her through most every situation she was ever in. In my eyes, Serena was reduced to an addict who inconvenienced me by wanting more drugs. I didn't perceive that she was a human being suffering unimaginable pain, soothing it, easing it in the only way she knew how.

Serena slowly continues her story, and I now listen with a new respect. "I was fifteen years old when I came down her to Hastings. I had five hundred dollars in my pocket that I'd saved for food until I caught up with my mom. It took me a week to find her and she stuck a needle in my arm. The four hundred dollars were gone in four hours." Then after a very long silent pause she continued, "and then she sold me to a big man in the next room."

The molestation began when Serena was seven years old and persisted until she gave birth to her child, at fifteen. She often hid her brother and sister in the basement with four or five bottles of baby food. They were still in diapers. When asked who she hid them from, she blurted out "My grandfather," and when I asked if her grandmother could not have protected her, she stated flatly "she couldn't, she was drinking too much. She started drinking every morning and continued all day. She finally quit when my daughter was born. Years later, my brother Caleb was killed-beaten and drowned by three cousins after a drinking bout."

So this was the perfect home Serena grew up in, under the care of a grandmother who, no doubt, loved her grandchild but was unable to protect her from the males in her house, or from the abuse of alcohol. Serena now wants a relationship with her mother but admits, "The only time she won't walk past me without even seeing me is if I have money or drugs in my pocket. That hurts me so much."

So now Serena is in my office asking, yet again for a prescription for yet another anti depressant that will only serve to deaden the pain she lives with each and every moment of each and every day. I hand her the prescription and search in my heart to find compassionate words, words that may help soothe the anguish Serena bears in hers. I stammer through the usual platitudes of "you will feel better tomorrow," or "I know it's very difficult, there ought to be a lot more support." And here is where I'm humbled by my feebleness in helping this person. Humbled that I had the arrogance to believe I'd seen and heard it all. You can never see and hear it all because, for all their sordid similarities, each story in the Downtown Eastside unfolded in the particular existence of a unique human being. Each one needs to be heard, witnessed and acknowledged anew, every time it's told. And I am especially humbled because I dared to judge her. But who am I to judge her for being driven to the belief that only through drugs will she find respite from her torments?

Next month *"There's Got to Be Some light"*