

## The Boy

By Uma Anyar

The boy visibly relaxed in his father's arms. It was as if, some long held shudder escaped from his soul, his head sagged onto the grizzled man's shoulder. His face close enough that he could feel the boy's breathe on his neck. It was the only moist air in the permanently parched landscape.

It had been years since the child trusted him sufficiently to sleep in his presence. Lord knows he had done enough to deserve the boy's mistrust. But now, he was determined to change all that. Maybe, if he tried hard enough he could right the wrongs of the past. The boy was angry but he had a forgiving nature, just like his mother who lay in a coffin in her sister's front parlor. She had been a pretty woman whose damaged nature had attracted every loser she encountered. They sniffed her out like mangy dogs. They danced with her, kissed her and used her to empty their desires, their needs, their hates on a small cot in the storage shed behind the New Moon Bar and Grill.

In due course, death stepped in, her final dance partner.

She had been a good mother, she loved the boy, any one could see that. Secretly, he had envied the child. Why couldn't she throw a few scraps of affection his way? He would have tolerated the cheating if only; she slept with him sometimes, cared for him even temporarily. He knew he wasn't enough, insufficient in some way he could not fathom. Her neediness felt like an endless road, a well without a bottom. He was helpless with fury, called her names; names men degrade women with and slapped her harder then he meant to. On the last day they fought he shoved her through the bedroom door. She let out a pained scream when her wrist, scrawny as a dry tree branch, snapped and silenced everything for a moment.

She had fallen down but she hadn't crumbled. She raised herself up off the dirty floor, her cotton dress torn, one breast exposed. He hated her but still wanted her. She saw this in his eyes, in his clenched fists. "Do it! She screamed, finish the job! Fuck me or kill me! You coward."

He slammed the door and drove off into the ridiculous yawning sunset. Past a string of 'for sale' signs and abandoned farms, their fields riveted with forlorn furrows, wind blown to the bone. Feeble tears streamed down his dusty face.

The boy saw it, heard it all from his bed behind the thin wall. The covers pulled over his head useless, hopeless, against the raging storm in the kitchen.

Now, he was back to see her calm in the coffin, that spiteful look of satisfaction on her still lovely lips. She had won the battle by escaping life. He was alone, alone with the boy who could be his son, a boy who had her eyes, her hair, a boy who needed a father.

He bent down and kissed his wife's cold cheek. Now she was gone, she had never really been there in the first place. He started to leave then turned toward where the boy sat straight and still, waiting for what came next.

