

Monsters of Abiding Grace

by [Samantha Henderson](#)

Three days after the foothills started to burn the power failed, and this time they knew it wasn't a temporary outage, or even the typical hiatus until the light flickered on and the wires hummed with the faint crackle no one had ever noticed until it was gone.

This time it was finished.

They stopped gathering and began packing, and there was the anticipation of things new and uncharted, although all had been mapped and measured and asphalt-paved years and years before. That was from another lifetime.

As for the fires in the hills, by now the dry grass was burned off and you saw only a sullen orange glow by night. The air was full of gritty ash and you just had to get used to coughing, and smuts on the windows, and that feeling, somewhere between pain and a tickle, deep in your lungs.

Days of smoke made Marcella's eyes water, but when she closed them tight against the gritty air she saw the boy again, the Feral boy, and the intent way he looked at her. And the feeling of his skull cracking under the rock in her hand, more brittle than it should have felt. And the sight behind him of people fighting on the grass of her once well-trimmed lawn, the sky orange behind them, fake, like cut-outs in a shoebox diorama the kids would never make again.

It is all unmade.

It belled in her head, monotone and persistent. All they'd leave was scars on the landscape that would grow over soon enough. A giant hand had wiped the board and they stood on the edge of an undiscovered country, false and real as children exploring the Amazon in their back yard, finding elephants in a sham Brazil and diamonds in earth that never spawned such.

This was why, she supposed — elephants and diamonds — that despite the raw desperation that underlined every careful, calculated action there was a holiday air, the anticipation of Christmas tomorrow, the start of a road trip that promised every earthly delight in each garish billboard, although no child now would ever experience that joyous-queasy feeling of summer backseat travel, with roadside ice cream and cheap motels with sand in the carpets and shells piled in the plastic, complementary ice bucket.

She didn't risk opening the freezer compartment: *don't stand there letting the cold air out*. She knew what was in there, anyway. Everybody knew exactly what food they had. And how many rolls of toilet paper, paper towels, handi-wipes, bandages, bottles of Neosporin. Like Kanga, they counted and recounted and folded everything neatly away.

This was what was in the freezer: a pile of Lean Cuisine; a container of ice cream, a bag of frozen peas. Likewise a bag of mixed berries. Also, a box of blintzes that she'd bought with an eye towards a fancy brunch (fancy brunch! as if!) two years ago, mixed vegetables, and a lonely stick of butter. Hot dogs, and some cheap strip steaks. Antiquated ice, melting now. It wasn't humming anymore; it was dead, like most of the world.

All unmade.

The strap of the bag bit into her shoulder again. Automatically she shifted it, the jar inside heavy against her thigh.

The sound of children reciting in the family room was a soft drone. Rosa was putting them through the times tables: the younger ones struggling to remember, the older ones bored and reciting automatically. Snip wasn't there. This time of day he was probably in the tree house with a shotgun. There were armed men at either side of the street as well, but the tree house was perched high and gave a clear view down Sunnyside, where the Ferals were most likely to approach.

Was it easier, then, to shoot them, instead of...

She should ask one of the men. She should ask Snip, or Preacher, or...

Eight eights are sixty-four. Nine eights are seventy-two. Marcella's Sarah and Benjamin sat carefully apart, while Carrie and the Mendoza twins leaned against Rosa's capacious legs. Every child capable of lifting a gun knew how to fire it. How had she come to live in such a world?

That was easy. She didn't die.

If she'd shot the boy, would she still see his face, feel the eggshell-crunch of his skull? Was it easier, from so far away?

When Angelita died, Rosa turned entirely inside herself while the women washed and wrapped the little body and the men, wearing plastic garbage bags like ponchos, took it three blocks away to bury. When it was obvious quick burials were necessary and they were the authorities, they found an empty lot, grass grown wild between the hulks of quiet homes that sat liked beached ships with their lawns run amuck. For a while they put round river rocks at the head of each makeshift grave. But there were too many, and although there were only twenty or so grave markers there were hundreds underneath.

There was also a time, early on, where they entered the houses where people had died, to bury the dead and salvage what they could. But there were too many, and everyone remaining was busy with the business of survival, and the sweet smell of decay got to be too much. Houses fell into disrepair, more and more, and if survivors came to live there the disposal of the dead was their concern.

They were sure Rosa was going to die, too. She wouldn't eat, coiled up on Angelita's little bed that was much too small for her. The women brought her soup and cookies; the men left her to decide.

And then one day she emerged from the bedroom, shaky but cheerful, thinner but not by much, and quietly declared that even though the schools were closed, the children needed teaching and she would be the one to do it. They let her. It was a relief to let her.

If who you are is what you have given of yourself to others, everybody was diminished because most everyone was dead. But that was only what they assumed. It was maddening, the not knowing. Maybe on the other side of the country, the other side of the world, everything went on as normal. Perhaps they weren't even worth saving: fenced off while everyone else was about their business of birthdays and dinners out and mocha lattes. Maybe on the other side of the world there were still crows and chickens and everything didn't smell of death.

Marcella didn't understand how Rosa couldn't brood, could function so cheerfully with her daughter dead and cold and rotting in a field three streets over. How she could give herself up to a kind of joy when she taught.

Marcella only had love and anger left. Oz lied when he said he'd stay with her forever, because he was one of the first wave to die in a hospital in that week when everyone who was sick died between Wednesday and Friday. He didn't even wait to fight it out, as so many did afterwards, dying at home because the hospitals were about the worst places you could be. Fucking coward.

She hated herself for thinking that, suspended between love and anger, glassy-thin and ready to break.

Nine nines are eighty-one.

Betsy Kasperov cleared her throat on the front porch, typically careful to maintain the formalities, a thin shell that let them pretend they weren't gibbering primates. Marcella stepped carefully across the room of reciting children. Rosa glanced up.

Marcella shut the screen door behind her. In addition to the ash in the air, there were more flies than ever.

Betsy smiled. Marcella didn't trust smiles anymore.

"Have you made up your mind? Because there's room. There's plenty of room. But we'd like to be ready by dawn. So if you've packed..."

Packed. She had, a little.

Betsy leaned forward. "You are coming, aren't you?"

Choice. Choice was still important. No one would go who didn't want to go.

Choice was why she could carry a shabby canvas bag slung at her side and no one would question her. Choice was why Betsy could keep her fingernails carefully manicured and no one would say a thing.

Choice was a valuable pretense.

But Marcella saw the speculative glance Betsy flashed Sarah and Benjamin though the screen door. Children were also valuable. Too valuable to leave behind. Marcella knew basic biology as well as anyone else. Reduce a species' population sufficiently and there would not be enough left to maintain a viable gene pool. And there was no way to know how many were left.

Marcella made herself smile, tight lips over tight teeth. "Yes. Yes, we'll come."

Betsy relaxed visibly. *She didn't look forward to fighting me over the children*, thought Marcella. She didn't blame Betsy. They'd all fought.

Ladders leaned against the roofs, and rocks were lined up on the shingles. Last time a Feral kid came up the ladder after her she hit the side of his head with a chunk of granite. He stared at her, startled, blood streaming down the side of his face. She made herself look him in the eyes, then swung again and smashed his skull. It crumpled like the shell of a hard-boiled egg.

His body thumped on lawn, and the absurd clatter of the ladder followed. She had to wait for Sidney Kasperov to come and prop it up again. He didn't say anything when he helped her down, and she was grateful.

Afterwards the men dumped the Ferals' bodies — there were five, the others had run away — four streets over, where there was a drainage ditch.

Michael Tang was the only Neighbor killed that time — along with Bradley, the mostly-Shepherd mutt that was Benjamin's birthday present two years before. Some Feral had pinned him into the lawn with pick-mattock. The women washed Michael's body and the men buried it in the yard of the house the Tangs claimed when they came (was it the Bronskys' house? She couldn't remember), with Bradley at his feet.

It seemed significant to Marcella that this embarrassed no one. It seemed they'd all joined hands and jumped an invisible line into some archaic state where one buried dogs at the feet of warriors. Where the woman prepared the bodies of the dead and men buried them, and when the Wolfes' garden hose gave pure clean water every day at four in the afternoon it seemed like magic instead of someone, somewhere, desperately faithful to the idea of infrastructure.

"What about the rabbit?"

"What?" Marcella blinked back to herself, the porch, the hum of the children, her neighbor (she couldn't even remember for now if Betsy had lived two doors down for years or was one of those who came After), the pretense that women could go on making cookies out of frozen dough for all the kids in the back yard for ever and ever. The rabbit?

Ah. Mrs. Bun. Lop died, early on, like the crows — perhaps it was the virus, perhaps simply old age. Mrs. B lived on, fat and sassy.

"It's a pity she's been spayed," said Betsy. "Otherwise you could take her and we could probably find a male and breed them. Meat and fur. But as it is..."

Yes. Sterile. Useless. Good only for meat and fur herself, although they weren't that desperate yet. What price the life of a sterile rabbit? Don't get confused, Betsy, and eat the children and take the rabbit...

"I suppose you could...I mean, you wouldn't want her to starve to death. Cruel."

"I'll let her go. She can eat grass." Marcella's voice was brusque. She'd have to remember that, remember to let Mrs. B go, after...before she...

"Oh!" Betsy's arms were folded; she flinched back into herself. "Of course."

Eleven twelves are one hundred thirty-two.

Marcella put one hand behind her, against the wooden solidity of the doorframe. The sun had passed its nadir and was turning red behind the smoke. She forced herself into cheeriness. "Betsy, I thought...I've got a fridge full of melting hot dogs and steaks, and I bet a bunch of others do too. Come on over and we'll grill it, all of it, before dark, and we'll have a party. Before the broadcast."

Betsy tilted her head, considering. "It might be nice. Sid and some of the boys found a few more gas cans and they went a few blocks towards Vermont to fill them up. If we-all can pack in time..."

"Everyone can get done packing — have to by dark. Like a going-away party. Probably not going to have a party again soon."

"No. That's true enough."

Salvageable food was running out, and gasoline, and although the gangs of Ferals were fewer and fewer those that remained were increasingly vicious, if that was possible. In a matter of days a feeling became a thought became a suggestion became a determination, grim as anyone's fictional Puritan ancestors. They would gather; they would migrate. They would pour the carefully-hoarded gas into SUVs and minivans and pack them full of food and children and drive east. Find a farm and learn again to till the earth, to raise animals.

Exodus. No one had the courage to say it, yet. But that's what Marcella called it.

What made a handful of suburbanites think they could become farmers overnight?

We'll learn, they said. We're not stupid. We can read books. And we have to try.

And those who lived beyond the foothills, were they dead? If they were alive would they tolerate a gaggle of intruders?

We'll get along. And if we can't, we'll go further. We have to try.

Try, try again.

Marcella sweetened her voice. "And I have ice cream left." She turned so that Rosa and the children could hear her. "Enough for all of us to have some. And I can make berry sauce."

The children — Sarah and Benjamin and Carrie and the rest sat up, and even Betsy's eyes widened at the idea.

"It is a good thought. I'll let Sid and the boys know."

Marcella shouldered back into the house. Rosa was rising to her feet, moving gracefully despite her bulk.

"Go tell everyone," she told the scattering children. "Make sure everyone knows to come here tonight. That's nice of you, Marcie." Rose smiled in her slow, warm way that always broke Marcella's heart, because it reminded her of joy. "A good thing, to come together before."

"Sarah and Benjamin, see that you pack first," said Marcella.

For a long time whenever she spoke to her children she had to stop herself from touching them, a shoulder or an arm. After a while the impulse stopped and Marcella wondered if she even loved them anymore — if love had anything to do with this driving, desperate hope to all stay alive at any cost.

"You can tell Preacher," said Rosa, in the doorway. "He's standing sentry at the east today. Wouldn't want to leave him out."

Try. We have to try. Try made her want to slap everybody. As if trying was worth it, when all hope was gone. They'd struggle a few generations, perhaps, before petering out, aware of the futility of this so-sacred *try*. Her way was better, although she knew she'd never convince them of that.

She was glad she didn't have to.

Years ago, in *National Geographic*, Marcella saw pictures of a Neanderthal burial: the man, his limbs tucked together, flowers buried with him, and tools. It was when the idea of Neanderthals burying their dead, of treasuring them, seemed revolutionary. At one point, when she was pregnant with Benjamin, she found herself weeping over an account of an archeological dig — a child, carefully wrapped in furs, with his toys beside him. She marveled at the clinical coldness of that statement, *carefully wrapped in furs*, for who could not imagine the wrapping, the child in the crook of one's arm as one carried him, placed him in the hole, pillowed the head, and then the worst, covering him with rocks or dirt.

At least I won't have to bury them.

She was in the back yard, loading the grills with coal that should be saved against the future. But word had spread and people liked the idea of a gathering, and others were bringing meat that would otherwise spoil. She'd already lit one grill and an iron pot sat just above the coals, a mess of mashed, thawed berries starting to bubble inside. Every once in a while she'd taste it and add a handful of sugar. The white

grains would sit a few seconds stark against the purple before they dissolved.

I don't have to save the sugar. And it needs to be sweet...

The jam jar in the bag slapped against her leg. She took it out. The white powder inside shifted heavy against the clear glass.

There was a rustle and a *thump* and she looked up to see Mrs. B staring at her from the mesh of her hutch. The rabbit twitched her nose and thumped again.

Marcella put the jar away, feeling the weight pull at the soreness of her shoulder that she barely even registered anymore, and grabbed a handful of carrot tops in passing: the last from the last of the carrots.

She opened the latch and put the greenery inside. She'd run out of pellets a while ago, but the rabbit seemed to like the leavings from the garden. She had grown thinner in the past weeks.

Marcella stroked Mrs. B's ears as she grazed. Somewhere children were playing, and a peal of laughter rose to a shriek. She paused, and came to herself when Mrs. B nipped her.

"Stop that," she said, closed the latch.

The rabbit watched her walk away, twitching its nose.

The meat sizzled on the grills and others brought thawed bread, and butter, and chips that weren't stale yet, and last season's oranges. Everyone was tired, with that naive satisfaction that came from a productive day's work. Even Marcella had packed, and seen that the kids packed, and loaded her gear and supplies into the back of the Kasperov's SUV, as if she'd leave tomorrow. As if anyone would.

For now they ate their fill, and talked together, and as the sun went down they gathered in her living room around a transistor radio and waited for Amazing Steve.

It was surprising how long the power lasted, how long the water ran, although sometimes it reeked so much of chlorine it was undrinkable and had to be left out in pots and bowls for a day or so, and sometimes it was brown and rusty. Sometimes the taps were dry, and then would sputter indignantly into life. Marcella had a vision of a few surviving souls, grim and determined in the bowels of the power plants, fighting to keep things normal. But their small heroics, whatever they might be, would never be known and the faucet only spat out a muddy, foul-smelling stream the day the power stopped, and then there was no more.

Even as regular broadcasts, TV and radio, faded one by one into static, Amazing Steve went on the air almost every day, near enough to five o'clock as no matter. They didn't know if he'd been a reporter — his voice wasn't familiar. Maybe he was an engineer, seizing his chance for an audience. The Neighbors listened to him whenever they could.

You never knew what Amazing Steve would come up with. At first he broadcast whatever news he could, sometimes reading from newspapers issued just before all such printing stopped. Sometimes he read messages from one person to another, although the intended recipients were long dead. One or twice he seemed to go a little mad, but they listened to him anyway, huddled together, listening to him cursing in the darkness.

Tonight he was reading nonsense verse:

"On the coast of Coromandel, where the early pumpkins blow, in the middle of the woods, lived the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo. Two old chairs and half a candle - "

"I've got a sauce cooking for the ice cream," said Marcella. "I'll let you know when it's ready."

She avoided their eyes as she left the room.

The berries were liquid now, roiling like lava. She reached into the bag, feeling the pull of the strap against the grove in her shoulder, the cool, smooth glass against her rough fingers.

Just as she pulled the jar out she looked up to meet Preacher's gaze.

Preacher came early on, alone, just at the point where everyone was beginning to realize that this was no temporary expedient, that things would never be as they were. He never gave his name and they called him Preacher for his grave demeanor, although he never said anything sanctimonious or, as far as she recalled, quoted the Bible. The name seemed to fit him and he answered it, and she noticed that more and more he was asked to say grace before the common meals. He always obliged with a slow short prayer, as if he was remembering something from long ago. He had said grace tonight, after Sid Kasparov asked him. He always waited to be asked.

Marcella never talked much to Preacher. But she found it brought her a certain peace to be around him.

Not now. She wanted him to go away.

She smiled at him weakly, gesturing with the jar.

"Powdered sugar," she said.

Before she could tuck it away again he had her by the wrist. She was too startled to resist. He held her with one hand and plucked the jar away with the other.

She could only stand sullenly, spoon in hand. She thought about hitting him with it. Bop, over the head. How funny, like a movie. She would be shrill, he'd be laconic and one day he'd kiss her hard and she'd fall in love.

"Plant killer? Insecticide?" He released her, retaining the jar. "Didn't take you for someone who'd get their kicks seeing everybody convulsing."

She drew a deep breath.

"Pills. I found them in a house a few streets over, back when we still went out to check for survivors and look for supplies. I went with the men that day — I don't know why. I was restless."

He nodded.

She went on. "A nice house, ranch, but nice. Solid. Beautiful rose garden, all overgrown. Inside, it had that sweet smell. Sidney said there was someone in the bedroom, but I stayed downstairs. I started to go through the kitchen cupboards, and I found them. Paper bags full. I found a gun in a drawer. I gave that to Sidney. I took the pills with a bunch of cans and he never noticed."

"A dealer. Want to bet most of his clients were his mom's bunco group? Nice suburban housewives who can't ever sleep."

Marcella rubbed her forehead with the heel of her hand.

"I just — and I was mad, too. All this crap, three streets over, and I don't know how long."

A smile quirked at the corner of his mouth. "Nice suburban housewives can be dangerous."

Anger, and the need to explain, sparked in her.

"It's going to be a disaster. They're all full of hope now. Excited. It's a big adventure for them. Tell me, what happens later, when everyone starts to starve, when they turn on each other? What happens when we have to watch our children die? What happens when Erika goes into labor?"

Preacher shrugged. "She lives or she dies. Like most every woman in the world."

"You know there's not enough of us left alive to make a go of it. We're dinosaurs. After a few generations we'll just peter out." She pointed at the house, where candles glowed in the windows. Twilight was coming quickly now.

"They're happy now. They're never going to be that happy again. Let them have their dream and fade away, unknowing."

He frowned. "It's not like we're all suddenly going to forget about things like electricity and motors and physics and basic hygiene. We're not starting from scratch, you know. Some doctors must be alive, and plumbers and chemists and nuclear plant operators. We're not all going to start wearing fur loincloths and dragging women about by their hair."

"This wasn't an accident. This was nothing natural. I think people made this. People like the Ferals. People capable of anything. And we all, *all* are like that."

She was crying now, and that made her angrier. "We pretend to be such good neighbors, to help each other survive. But you watch and see. They'll turn on each other at the end, when there's no hope left. You'll see."

"You're saying we're monsters."

She nodded, wiping her nose on her sleeve. "Monsters. Yes. If Lop lived?" She indicated Mrs. B in her hutch, still chewing on the carrot tops. "You think they wouldn't have fought over food? You think they wouldn't devour each other? We're just as monstrous. We're worse."

"They wouldn't devour each other, I think, if you let them go," he said, softly. "And if we're monsters we're monsters with a touch of grace. Doesn't that make it worth trying?"

She felt her face draw into a snarl. "No, it doesn't."

"One day, if you let yourself live, you'll forgive Oz, and the others that died."

"No, I won't."

He stared at her. She covered her mouth, eyes wide. Her fingers were rough against her lips. She could hear the berries bubbling in the pot.

"Are you going to tell them?" she whispered.

He considered, shaking the jar gently. "No."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go inside and listen to the radio, and eat whatever you give me," he said.

The berries bubbles again, and Marcella turned to the pot, stirring them while he watched.

"Why?" she said, finally.

"I'm in no position to tell you what to do."

"Why?" she said again, not moving.

He looked straight at her and she saw the ashes there, the burnt stalks of the grasses on the hill.

"I killed my wife before I came here. I killed her out of mercy, too. I have no rights here."

Marcella made herself look into his burnt eyes.

"I thought I'd found a safe place. I was wrong. They tied me up so I had to watch. Nicki..." His voice faltered and he turned his head for a moment, swallowing. When he went on, only the first word was a little choked.

"Nicki went, very quickly, too quickly for them. Holly...lasted. At the end they broke her neck — know what it sounds like — but she was still alive. And then they just laughed, and kicked me a few times, and left.

"It seemed like hours before I worked loose. They'd taken my gun, so I had to use my knife. I opened her jugular. Told her I loved her first. Don't know if she heard it."

He put the jar carefully on the wooden platform to one side of the grill, and tapped the lid.

"How do you know you haven't got a hundred-odd uppers here?"

She bit back a bark of laughter. "I took a couple one night. I couldn't sleep."

"And?"

"I slept. A long time."

Preacher stepped back and slapped his hands lightly against the dirty denim of his thighs.

"I'm done with deciding. You do it. I'm tired, Marcella. And right now I'm missing the broadcast, and I don't think I'm going to get a chance to read Edward Lear for a while, so if you'll excuse me..."

But he paused before turning away.

"Not everyone will have enough, you know. Not enough to..."

She let the missing word hang between them a moment. "The gas is still on. I checked. When they're asleep..."

He nodded once, looking at the ground. Marcella scraped the bottom of the pot. When she looked up he was gone.

It was going to be a bitch to clean the pot. And she was going to clean it, clean up everything. No one would come and find them all in a dirty house. After she'd laid them out and wiped up any messes, before

she dealt with herself, she'd have time...

She held the jar in her hand, turning it over and over while the power inside shifted like sand in an hourglass.

Marcella had to scrape at the last glutinous layer of ice cream to get it all, but in the end there was enough for everybody. The broadcast was over but everyone was still gathered in the living room with the guttering candles. The children were gathered around Rosa as always.

Rosa, Sarah, Benjamin, Erika, Betsy, Sid, Shinya, Allie. She treasured their names, turning them over and over in her head like polished stones. She walked among them, bring them bowls of sweet cream and purple fruit, and they ate from her hands, and Preacher smiled at her as she passed and took his bowl without a word.

Snip wouldn't come down from his post in the treehouse. She brought him a bowl, and he took it, politely as always.

"Can't you take a break, Snip?" she said, poised at the top of the tree house ladder.

"No, ma'am." When he said it that way, he seemed older than she first thought. He came a month ago, alone and limping, and wouldn't talk for days. He took sentry duty, night after night, unfailing. Even now his sharp haunted eyes searched the darkness beyond her. He might be at least eighteen, she realized — an army boy, perhaps, recruited straight out of high school.

"No ma'am, I'll do fine right here. Wouldn't want anything to happen before the journey."

She nodded and descended the ladder, knowing that even as he ate he'd be watching over them all, watching the darkness constantly for anything that could harm them. Like an angel. As she walked towards the house she heard Rosa singing a Spanish lullaby. She felt a weight like a child's head in the crook of her arm.

Morning: the street was quiet. No one stirred on the porches or walked down the sidewalks over the faded traces of children's chalk-games.

Something rustled in the hedges: a rabbit, thin and dirty grey, foraging. It ventured onto the browning lawn and ran, kicking its heels, and paused before a patch of ivy, nosing at the sweet green grass underneath.