

Between Then & Now

by: Karen Rowe, Gander – Senior Division Short Fiction

Now

As the sun streamed into the living room windows, turning everything a delicate shade of burnished gold, Astrid Farmer sat, white-knuckled, next to the broad picture window. There was a draft coming in, prickling at her skin as she mindlessly picked at her cuticles, trying not to think about how much she had to pee. Her eyes were glued to the boy outside. He was almost ten and lying on the grass with a comic. A graphic novel, she reminded herself. That's what he wanted to call them. He'd never liked them before. He'd been a rough-and-tumble boy, catching frogs and bugs and pushing around dirt with sticks. He'd been loud, been boisterous; anything but studious. She'd struggled to get him to sit still long enough to learn to read. But now he read his graphic novels, and he built endless Lego sets in his room, and he asked permission to have a cookie now and then. She hoped he'd get cold and come in soon so she could lock the doors and run to the bathroom.

Then

Rowan had been acting up all day; he'd slept poorly and demanded to spend half the night in his parents' bed, and then on the floor, and then under their bed. He demanded to be allowed to watch cartoons early. He'd only wanted the sugary cereal Astrid kept as a treat. He didn't want anything else. He was bouncing off the walls, eager, straining like a sled dog just before a race. She let him go outside to run around because she had errands to run and birthday gifts to buy and he had to come too. The idea of bringing him around the mall in his heightened state made her tense. She was grinding her teeth – her dentist had noticed and

suggested she ask her doctor for some relaxation techniques. The doctor had suggested an aquarium or a machine that made ocean noises, but Mark had just laughed and brushed off the idea.

She got her shower quickly and got dressed without care, throwing on high-waisted jeans and a sweatshirt with a woodland scene printed on the front. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and didn't even bother checking the result in the mirror. She had too much to think about, too much to do, and Rowan was banging open the door and stomping through the kitchen, bored of whatever game he'd invented to amuse himself. The twenty minutes it took her to shower and dress would be the only peace she'd get.

Mark wanted another kid, but Astrid couldn't fathom it. The idea of two Rowans climbing over the furniture and demanding time she did not have to give was exhausting. Just the idea of it. The reality would be...so much worse, she thought. When she had been pregnant with Rowan, she had pictured being busy and tired, but not all the time. Rowan was like a leech, holding on and sucking everything out of her so he could grow bigger and smarter and faster. Even the idea of a girl, which had once appealed to her with ideas of pink ruffles and dolls and tea parties now brought on images of screaming fits and tantrums and sibling fights that ended in wailing and tears. She was timing sex now, trying to count the days in her cycle, putting Mark off when she thought she might get pregnant.

As Rowan stomped through his room, pulling clothes out of his drawers, Astrid took a breath and thought about the next September, when he would be in school for half the day. The idea of a peaceful morning or quiet afternoon where she could sit down and watch a soap, or do laundry or dishes without interruption seemed like the only thing that got her through most days. Then, maybe, she could consider giving Mark the second child he talked about.

In between

Astrid could smell herself. The bedclothes were rank, her nightdress was worse, and her scalp was itchy from days of unwashed hair. She tried to remember how long it had been since she'd actually put her feet to the thick carpet floor for anything other than the bathroom. Two days, she decided. No, three. If it was Saturday, then it was three. Her stomach had stopped grumbling a long time ago.

All her clothes hung on her now. The liaison wanted her to dress nicely, but she couldn't be bothered to buy anything new. That would require leaving the house, and leaving the house just wasn't possible. Leaving required getting up, showering, brushing teeth, brushing hair, taking the pills, drinking something quick to take the edge off. No, leaving was not an option. She'd lost twenty pounds or so. Twenty pounds in a month and a half. Six weeks. Six weeks, two days, and four hours. Four hours and eleven...twelve...thirteen minutes.

She counted more minutes, watching the red numbers on the bedside clock flick and change, watching time pass and doing nothing about it. Her life was actually ebbing away, caught in an undertow, and she could not bring herself to care. The thought of years of this, a lifetime of it, was unbearable. She thought in small capsules of time. An hour here, an hour there. Even an hour was too much. She slept.

And Mark? Where was Mark? She didn't need to ask. He was in Rowan's room, drunk. He never looked at her in the eye and it made her feel like a ghost. But this was life now, stumbling through minutes, dragging through hours. This is what it would be forever.

Now

The smell of baked bread permeated the house. Astrid tidied nervously, always wanting things just so. It was the least she could do, really. Keep everything nice for him. He

was very neat and clean, this boy. She didn't think much on how he'd become like that, how he'd changed from the black-fingered, sticky mess she'd known. It had just happened over the years, maybe. There were a lot of reasons why he'd be so different. Age, and circumstance and...

"I'm done reading this one," Astrid turned on a dime and tried not to gasp. He had just snuck into the house and surprised her while she turned the houseplants. She took her eyes off him for just a second to swipe some dead leaves into her hand and he'd come in unnoticed.

Nodding, she locked the back door and excused herself to go to the bathroom. She nearly jogged, desperate, fumbling with the lock on the door and sitting down with a deep breath and a feeling of deep relief.

Then

"I want an ice cream!" Rowan's voice was getting louder, and impossibly shrill. Astrid nodded and tightened her grip on his soft little hand, ignoring his nails as they sliced into the back of hers. She just pulled him along, darting through the crowds, trying to get through the mall in once piece. She knew him well enough to know the pattern. Soon he would collapse. He would go limp and fall to the ground and just wail, everyone watching, judging, pointing. People would rolls their eyes. They would say things like, "Oh thank God I don't have kids," or "my children wouldn't dare behave so badly". She would become Astrid Farmer, the horrible mother.

She would give in then, to shut him up. "Ice cream, no problem," she would say, which only meant he'd remember that and they'd go through the whole routine again another time, every time.

Astrid searched her purse without looking for the list she'd pulled off the fridge. She needed to get a birthday present for her father, pick up Mark's suit from the dry cleaners,

Apparently the longevity on a story like theirs was six months. After six months, even the most dedicated of follower, the most stalwart volunteer went back to their own lives and forgot about Mark and Astrid and moved onto to other, better things. Less depressing things and certainly less miserable people.

They fought a lot now, all resentment and blame, drunken fights and drug-fueled misanthropy. Mark went out in the late afternoons, or he didn't come home from work, and Astrid didn't care. She had, in the beginning, worried, because being worried was a constant state for her. She was always one or two clicks off full-on panic. But after awhile, she didn't feel much of anything. She didn't care.

Astrid's brother seemed to enjoy informing her that Mark was going downtown to the bars and giving false names and pretending not to be "That Guy" or playing up the fact that he was, depending on the situation. Len told her he knew Mark was sleeping around, fucking university girls, never sober. Len was guessing, but Astrid was pretty sure her brother was guessing right.

But who, exactly, would blame him? Not the cops. Astrid knew this for certain because two months in, Mark had been picked up driving erratically, trying to get home drunk. The cops helped him into their car, called the tow truck and brought him home. Nothing more was said. He didn't even get a warning. The cops just gave sympathetic head nods and helped Astrid plunk him onto the couch. A special case, obviously, one of them said, adding, "Take care, ma'am."

She couldn't take care of anything, even if she'd wanted to.

Now

There was too much quiet in the house, Astrid decided. She put on the radio, switching the channel to some mindless talk news, where they were discussing all the stories of the day so inanely it just became background noise. She made a sandwich, careful to put in cheese and lettuce because deli meat alone wouldn't do. She put on a tin of tomato soup, too, wondering how long she could keep this up, this image of maternal perfection, before she'd crack and fail.

The boy didn't refuse the food, he took it with a smile and even said "thank-you". It was almost a test: he'd never liked tomato anything, and certainly would never accept anything as stupid as lettuce in his mouth. Astrid watched him eat, picking at her own meal, never having got the hang of proper eating habits after so many years of eating just to stay upright.

"Can I maybe watch TV after I eat?" he asked. Astrid nodded. And that was lunch.

Then

Face sticky from fudge ice cream and little legs pumping in the air, Rowan was having none of shoe shopping. The saleslady kept trying to measure his foot, but he squirmed away, slithering to the floor like a little boy-shaped waterfall. Giving up, she tried to put shoes on his feet, but he rolled onto his back and started kicking and helicoptering his legs about.

Astrid was bone tired. Shattered. She no longer cared if she got him shoes, and she didn't care if they fit. She was still trying to shake off the humiliation of the previous hour, Rowan's corpse act and the interested stares of mall shoppers who looked from Astrid to her son over and over, full of judgement and harsh critique at her inability to parent a small child.

Of course she'd caved and gotten the ice cream, her mind desperate for the peace and quiet of the five minutes it would take her son to scarf down the cone. She saw one lady frown and shake her head ever so slightly when she'd given in, and Astrid almost said, "Here, you take him and see if you can do better." She almost said it out loud because she was honestly wishing someone would take him so that they could see it wasn't her, it was this boy, this child, this tiny little brute she'd given birth to.

The sugar kicked in almost immediately, and Rowan's energy was filling him like a balloon. His eyes darted, he babbled incessantly, he had no patience to sit down and have his feet measured. Eventually, Astrid apologized to the saleslady and left the store, child in tow. She would return the shirt and go home – but only because they could use the thirty dollars. Her father's gift would have to wait.

In between

Even with a gun pointed to her head, Astrid couldn't say when Mark had actually moved out. He would go for days on end, and then come back, spend a few days muttering about the state of the house, about the mold in the un-run dishwasher, about the miles of clothes everywhere, about how the house was dark and dank and smelly.

Once a week, Astrid's mother showed up and tried to get a handle on things. She'd pull her daughter out of bed and sit her in the bathtub, sponging her down and pulling a comb through wet hair. She cleared out the kitchen enough to make a few large meals, portion them out and freeze them. The meals in the freezer, untouched, would get rotated out.

Occasionally her father came to do small repairs. The toilet wouldn't stop running, so he fixed it. He painted the front door. He mowed the lawn. Their visits never coincided with Mark's short home-stays. They always found Astrid alone.

Len tried tough love. He tried yelling and he tried bullying and he tried putting his foot down and saying, "Alright, Astrid. It's been two years now, just fucking do something, would you?"

When Mark left for good, Astrid woke up from a Valium fog and realized all his things were gone. And then her father got her a lawyer, and there were papers to sign and she was divorced. And that was it. And she didn't care.

Then it was more drinking and less cleaning and more sleeping and the plumber. She had fucked the plumber, like in a porno. It was the day after her mother's visit, so she was mostly clean and so was the house and when the plumber came to fix something her father hadn't been able to, he'd flirted and she'd let him fuck her on the kitchen table. It didn't matter, she didn't care, and she couldn't remember anything about him. He could have been old, fat, and bald with rough, black hands. He could've been young and skinny and apologetic. She had thought, perhaps, it would make her feel something. Anything. Even disgust, maybe. But it didn't. It barely registered.

Now

Astrid didn't know what to do while the TV was on. She cleaned the kitchen, scrubbing down the counters three times before feeling satisfied. Cartoons blared from the other room, but the commercials were always muted. The silence puffed out into every room of the house and made her feel like she'd gone deaf.

She checked the bedrooms, but they were impeccably clean. He kept his room straight. He wasn't very good at making his bed, but he did it every morning. She would get up before him to make breakfast, and he would get up immediately when his alarm went. No coaxing, no bribing, no 'five more minutes'. He would get a wash and get dressed, stuffing

his pyjamas under his pillow. The radio was always on while they ate, because otherwise there would be some sort of need for conversation, and Astrid had no idea what to say.

With nothing left to do, Astrid sat on the couch, staring at the back of his head. His hair was darker than it had been when he was younger. His head was almost perfectly shaped. She watched his shoulders rise and fall with his breathing. He never turned to look back at her.

Then

“I can give you store credit,” the woman told Astrid. She couldn’t find the receipt her mother had given her for the shirt. The contents of her purse were spilled out over the counter, but it wasn’t among the keys, pens, gum, wet-wipes, or first-aid kit. Rowan was hiding inside one of the round racks, lost in a game of his own imagining, thankfully quiet.

Astrid sighed, “Sure, great.”

“You can look around for something if you want and I can do a straight exchange if that’s easier? If there’s a price difference, I’ll give you the cash for it.” It was clear this woman was being nice because Astrid looked like misery.

She could’ve just taken the store credit, but her mother would probably be happier knowing she’d gotten a shirt out of it. Seeing Rowan’s head poking out between floral dresses, she glanced around the store, the idea of taking a moment to do something for herself making her feel a little lightheaded.

Rowan followed her, shooting her with lasers from his little fingers, talking to her about the aliens and the robots who were coming to get them. Astrid ignored him, fingering the clothes on the rack, glancing at price tags and wondering if she could get two cheaper items for the price of the shirt.

She grabbed a different top and a pair of slacks and brought Rowan into the change room with her. She sat him on the stool and, for awhile, he amused himself in the mirror. He made faces and pulled at his eyelids while Astrid tried to change quickly, knowing the peace would be short-lived.

As soon as she was stripped to her underwear, Rowan slid to the floor and squirmed out under the door. "Rowan! Rowan! Get back here!" Astrid was half into the slacks, and she fell back against the mirror.

She pulled off the new clothes, hearing the saleslady cry, "Come back here, young man!" and had the door open before she was fully dressed in her own faded jeans and t-shirt.

The saleslady said, "He ran out!" and Astrid left her purse and the dry cleaning and ran out of the store and into the throng of shoppers.

In between

Support groups suck, Astrid thought. She had thought that for more than a year but kept going back to the room in the lower level of the hospital, kept avoiding the crappy coffee and kept pocketing packets of sugar for no reason at all.

This had been her mother's idea. Her mother's idea and the psychiatrist's. It would help, he'd said, to talk to people who'd suffered loss, who'd suffered the same sort of grief.

Only it wasn't the same sort of grief, because none of these people had gone through what she'd gone through. There were nine of them in the group, and the majority had lost their kids to various forms of juvenile cancer. One had died shortly after birth from some rare disease, and one kid had been run down by a snow plow. Their kids were all dead and had headstones or urns. They looked at Astrid like she was an alien and she felt like one.

Then there was the one for alcoholics. She didn't think she was an alcoholic, but everyone else did. This meant that all those steps didn't really work for her because she

didn't think she had a problem in the first place. But she'd stopped drinking anyway, just to shut them up.

She worked intermittently. There was a lot of money in an account which she'd lived off of for almost four years. She worked now and then when she was having a good period. And then, inevitably, the dark days would come and she'd have to quit because leaving the house was an impossibility. Her mother would get her to the support group, though, and Astrid would sit and listen to eight people talk about their dead babies and their loss and how their lives had become all about hospital visits and not knowing how to talk to their friends whose babies weren't dead.

Astrid felt sorry for them, but she couldn't relate.

Now

Relief came in the late afternoon when her parents showed up unexpectedly. They did that now. They never called and they had their own keys. The house was immediately filled with chatter and noise. Astrid's mother always brought something with her: A gift, a new comic, sweets, or clothes, like she thought Astrid wasn't providing or something.

"How're you doing, kiddo?" her father would ask, and no one in the room would know if he was talking to the boy or to his daughter.

He asked that exact question, but this time he got an answer. "I finished the book you gave me! I really liked it. It only took me three days to read the whole thing."

Astrid sat, watching, silent, while her parents filled the afternoon and made it pass quickly. She asked them to stay for supper, and heard the begging in her voice. It was almost like normal when they stayed. Her mother was so much better at all this. She had just accepted everything and gone along with it. Astrid wondered often if it was a generational thing.

They had pasta and Len came over, bringing a pie from the grocery store. Like Astrid, Len was cagey whenever he first came into the house, but then he settled and was loud and full of smiles. “Did Mark call lately?” he asked.

Astrid told him he had, that he called at weird hours, always too early or too late, like he couldn’t figure out the time difference. Len rolled his eyes when Astrid told him about Mark’s new job, his new girlfriend, and his new house with the double garage. “He’s coming down in a month, he says,” she told her brother, but neither of them believed it.

It was bedtime when everyone left, and it went with its usual unfamiliar smoothness, no arguments, no pleading, with a stiff hug and a drink of water. Astrid sank into her own bed, early as usual, not wanting to stay awake longer than was necessary. The moments just before sleep were the moments she felt she could relax. She took off the panic and the shame and the guilt with her day clothes and slipped into blissful unconsciousness.

Then

She’d answered the same questions over and over. Went through the day, went through the hours and minutes as best she could, trying to hide her helplessness, trying to cover over how bad she was, how much she’d actually wanted that old lady to take Rowan off her hands. She had to hide that part because now he was gone. She’d decided to take a minute for herself and her whole life had changed. It had shattered. Nothing would be the same. Nothing would ever be the same. How many people would tell her that in the next few days? Before every press conference, before every public plea, before every search that turned up nothing, people would remind her that nothing would ever be the same again. Like she didn’t know.

Mark hadn’t looked her in the eyes since the minute he showed up, sweating and panicked, at the mall. The police were there with mall security and the managers. They’d put

her in a back room, painted a dull grey-blue, and they'd given her coffee which was cold and made her nauseous. They'd searched everywhere; every store, every hallway, every bit of the parking lot.

Now they were reviewing security footage. Astrid paced the room and peeked out into the hallway while Mark sat, staring blankly into space, not still really believing what everyone was telling him.

Astrid could see the television screen through a crack in the opposite door. She saw the front of the store she'd been in as they fast-forwarded through the day. She saw her own image, Rowan being pulled along behind her as they entered, and moments later, she saw her boy run out, legs pumping like pistons. She could almost hear his giggling – the sound he always made when he was doing wrong and knew it. A minute later, she could see herself rush out, look both ways, and make the wrong choice – he'd gone left and she'd gone right. Then another image came up – there was a woman in a long coat, face obscured, and she was walking out of the mall with a little boy. Astrid knew that would be the last time she'd see her child.

And Then

It was six-thirty in the evening when Astrid picked up the phone, finally. It had been ringing for the better part of a half hour with some unknown number, and she never bothered to answer. Whoever it was hadn't left a message. She gave a very terse, "Hello?" and hoped it was someone trying to sell her something so that she could tell them off.

"Astrid Farmer?" the woman on the end of the line had one of those cultivated, calm voices. She said something else, but the doorbell rang, and Astrid told the woman to hang on.

Two police officers were at the door. Astrid's chest felt like it was closing in on itself. It was finally here, she thought – the day they'd tell her they'd finally found Rowan's body.

She could stop pretending to understand the people in her support group. She'd finally have a dead child. Not one that was presumed to be that way. She wasn't at all surprised by the relief she felt.

But that's not what they said. They didn't look grave. They looked like they'd drawn the big prize. They looked like words were bursting to come out of their mouths. The younger cop had obviously won the draw – her eyes were a sparkling, crystalline blue when she said, “Ms. Farmer, we found Rowan. He's fine. He's just fine.”

Now

Astrid couldn't sleep. She got up and checked and re-checked the doors and windows. She looked in on Rowan, watched him sleep, tried to see her boy in this boy and failed utterly, just like every night. She stood in his doorway and wondered about the life he'd had for almost five years. He never spoke about it. He talked a little to the child psychologist, but never to her. He was always polite. Always remote. Like they had taught him what to do and he was just doing it because he had no clue how to be her son.

The woman had been mentally ill, they'd said. She'd had several miscarriages. She wasn't right in the head. She had seen him wandering the mall alone and had just scooped him up, offering him an adventure and he agreed to go. She had kept him no more than four hours away, raised him with her husband. They'd been very religious. He hadn't been sexually abused.

He had been conditioned somehow, though. Astrid knew that much. He'd been a rambunctious child, willful and horrible. Now he was courteous, thoughtful, quiet...she imagined they were strict. She imagined they beat him. They had named him Gabriel, like the archangel. He didn't answer to Rowan now.

She was afraid all the time; fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing, fearful that it was a mistake, fearful that this child wasn't hers at all, fearful that he was. The thought consumed her. She felt no connection to him, felt nothing at all. She'd made a show of fawning over him when social services was looking, but if she'd had a dozen children to pick out of a lineup, she wouldn't have chosen this boy as her son. But here he was. He never addressed her directly. He avoided calling her mom. He had told the child psychologist that his mother was dead, that she'd gone to sleep and never woken up again.

Watching the boy in his bed, she knew they were stuck with each other. The boy who'd become someone else, and the mother who'd never really wanted him back.