

ID# 5

John Grassby

Ann Larsen - "Long Gone"

Honorable Mention award



You'll notice there are no people or animals wandering around. There are also no motorcycles, parked cars, junk cars, rusty farm implements, or litter, perhaps hinting at my compulsive (but not obsessive) inclinations. My beater ride is in the shop awaiting only my ability to pay for recent repairs. No smoke comes from the chimney even though the lack of green indicates a season other than summer. The deferred maintenance and no nearby neighbors suggest that the owner, or tenant, or possibly squatter, likes to keep his distance from others, and cares little about them, much less about what they think.

That says little that is not obvious. Like so much in life, it's what's hidden, undisclosed, unspoken, that's the most important, interesting, telling.

My landlady is an old witch who hates me but—any more, I'm thankful for the little things—hates everyone else even more. She lives in another state, never comes to inspect her property, and doesn't press me for the pittance in rent we agreed to over the phone, back when I still had one. I suppose my long past-due rent makes me a squatter of sorts, but it would cost her several times more to hire a local lawyer—none of whom are very competent or very honest—to give me the boot than she'd ever net after legal fees. As a former attorney, I know about such conundrums. As a current denizen of another world altogether, I also know about bloodless turnips. At least I haven't burned the place down or let anyone else do so either. It sits on forty

acres which she could sell, except she's insulted the only two real estate agents within a hundred miles so badly they'll never speak to her again. Besides, the hard-scrabble acreage and its borderline well couldn't support a single cow, and we're too far from civilization to qualify as a yuppie ranchette. We're also close to an Indian reservation and young braves speeding by after spending too many hours in the saloon just across from the reservation constitute a clear and present danger to all unwise enough to venture outside any time after lunch.

Five years ago, my law practice was booming, I'd just made partner, and my second novel had been published to rave reviews. Within a month, it had become a best-seller. My love and I had just returned from two weeks of heaven in the Caribbean paid for by the publisher, and I was cruising on my third novel. Life was sweet. What could possibly go wrong?

Within the year, sales had peaked, then dropped precipitously, my law firm failed for reasons I could do nothing about, and my writing ground to a full stop. Concurrently, my lady developed an absurdly rare neurological disorder stumping even the Mayo Clinic. She'd been an accomplished artist showing in galleries in New York, Santa Fe and Los Angeles. Within weeks, she could no longer hold a pencil, much less wield a brush, and had plunged into deep depression. I was not far behind.

A year later, at a "celebration of her life" in an ancient adobe church in neighboring Taos, one of her countless friends, and owner of one of the galleries carrying her work, said her art brilliantly expressed her abiding love for people, animals, and the natural, spirit, and even cosmic worlds that transcended anything the gallery owner had ever experienced, or felt she ever would again.

Another quoted Emerson: When you were born you were crying and everyone else was smiling. You have lived your life so that, here at the end, you are the one smiling, with everyone else crying.”

Hours before she passed, she demanded—maybe the only demand she ever really made of me—that I get over her, find another, and move on. I’ve tried; God knows I’ve tried. I just can’t get there from here. Possibly mañana?

I’m spending more and more time at this, my little run-down retreat deep in the high desert, my Yellow Palace, my one remaining home. Every sunrise, I start writing. Every evening, before sunset, or earlier if the electricity has again been turned off, I wrap it up. Some days I’m pleased with my work. Most days I’m not. All days I yearn for her gentle critiques. Occasionally, they come to me—I know not from where or how—and are so perfect I’m in tears until, hours later, I collapse into fitful sleep.