

## Reclaiming Herself

By Andrea Villa

She wrote a letter. Her pack of Marlboro Lights has two cigarettes left. She is anxious walking around the house. She opens the refrigerator. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—"Not enough!" she thinks. She opens a beer and starts drinking. She cries and sobs. Her mind is a storm of memories. Her heart sinks in a river of depression.

She woke up from a nine-year nightmare that nearly killed her, but the flashbacks are a menace and the sadness in her life. Two hundred seventy seven days have passed since the last time she fled. Today is devastating for her. She battles against her remembrance, but it is impossible to forget. She is quiet--always lost in her thoughts. She is twenty nine years old and wears a teenage façade. Her long, black hair camouflages her past. Her gaze is hollow.

She cries and listens to rock and roll ballads. Music gives her comfort. She sings:

*I want to break free. I want to break free from your lies, you are so self-satisfied I don't need you. I've got to break free. God knows. God knows I want to break free.*

She hugs a pillow. She hears the sound of each of her heart beats. She buries her face in her pillow and starts screaming while it soaks up her tears and emotions. The beers are gone. It is 3:26 a.m. She falls asleep. Her world collapses. The next day her anxiety demands a new pack of Marlboro Lights. She runs to the corner gas station. She is at the counter and the cashier looks down at her and requests her ID.

She goes to the Los Angeles River. It is 2:10 p.m. The dark clouds announce that the rain is coming. An alley separates her house from the river. It is very wide and the water looks darker in the middle. The blackish current moves fast there. Its deepness is a mystery. She is under the bridge which is Florence Avenue. There is a concrete wall along the river three feet tall that prevents pedestrians from falling in. The shadow under the bridge is daring. Hundreds of cigarette butts and beer cans violently travel through the current.

She wrote a letter to her ex-husband. It expresses her hatred and releases the sad memories of him. She lets him know what she thinks and feels in her heart for him. He abused her physically and emotionally for nine years. He raped her once and tried to kill her four times. Her memory of him is vivid every time she unchains and unlocks her doors to leave her house.

She can neither see him, nor talk to him due to a restraining order. She struggles to find strength but thinks and focuses on what she will do if she sees him again. Anger will control her dollish fists in an effort to defend herself. A single bite will cut his fingers if he dares to hurt her again. A blast from her lungs will crumble the windows. The river triggers her emotions as never before. She is afraid to get into the river. She is afraid of him. She is determined to find the courage to face her inner fear.

She smokes six cigarettes in ten minutes. Her gaze is a bloody ocean. She stops staring at the river and walks towards the water. Uncertainty governs her. Her poise is a tremor. There is a race between each one of her heart beats. The current dictates her steps. She feels something like hundreds of ants moving all over her body. She walks through the water. The water penetrates her shoes. The chilly water cuts her skin like a razor blade from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. Her body becomes steel. She carries all those years by his side on her back. Each step becomes an accomplishment.

She wants to move forward and cross the disturbing current that blocks her way. She shakes. She walks towards the middle of the river and her knees sink under water. She is scared

and her heart pounds against her rib cage. She sees everything spinning around her. Her sight is blurry. The coldness of the water moves through her body. She pulls out her letter and his picture. She pretends that he is in front of her by looking at his picture. He is a hypocrite. He has an innocent face. It is his mask. She knows the kind of monster he truly is. She licks her pale lips constantly. Her eyes reflect agony. She feels something stuck in her throat when she reads the letter. Her voice breaks, "Why did you hate me so much when all I did was love you?" Her tears burn their way down to her lips. She tastes the salt. She feels an itching sensation on her face. She gasps for air and continues, "I gave you my heart, and you gave me rage and violence in return." Her heart accelerates more and more as she continues. She sobs, "Why did you rape me if you knew I was sexually abused when I was a child?" She yells, "I hate you! I hate you for destroying my life!" It takes her twenty minutes to get to the end of the letter. She is in the middle of a storm. She is a feather adrift in gravity. She sets the letter and picture on fire. The flames embrace her fingertips. The fire becomes a victim of the wind and dies. She survives once more. The lighter slips through her fingers and sinks into the water. She takes a deep breath.

She is free. She thinks the current took away the grudge and sorrow from her soul. The ashes from her heart fell on the water and the current took them away. She considers herself brave for defeating this ghost that haunted her life. She knows her fear is not gone and perhaps never will be. She has two sons and that ruins her escape from reality. Her sons love their father. She assumes they will always want to see him. She just hopes that he will never talk to her or harm her in any way.

A great deal of pain flowed away in the river. She thinks this is a giant step to reclaiming herself. Someday she will be able to forgive. She'd like to be the same way she was before she met him.