

## LADY OF THE MUD

The balloon lady sat in the mud on the side of the road, entangled in strings and dead balloons, swearing to herself. "Damn smart ass kids, tried to run me over with their car, lucky I ain't dead, I ever see that purple hot rod again, I'm gonna get me some kids. How'm I gonna eat, ain't got no balloons to sell. My only coat just had two small holes in it, now it's ruined, ain't no amount of water gonna take out this much mud. Look bad enough now, could stand on a corner downtown and beg."

The balloon lady grabbed on to the lamp post, pulled herself up out of the slippery mud, then looked at her feet. "That mud done gone clean through the newspaper I wrapped on my shoes. Only had a few good things, now they's ruined. Damn kids!"

The balloon lady had mud on her face, and in her tangled gray hair, but she didn't notice. It was the mud on her things that mattered. She walked the two miles to her small clapboard house. Only had it, because she had a husband once. On her front porch that was falling down, she stopped to kick off her mud caked shoes, and entered the house with her mud caked socks.

She stopped in her front room to talk to the parrot hanging by its feet in an old wrought iron cage. "How's my baby? Did ya miss Mama? You hungry? Got birdseed, ain't got nothin' else, but got birdseed. Guess you and me will eat together tonight. Ain't killed you, guess it cain't kill me."

The balloon lady went out to the kitchen to get supper. A hodgepodge of dishes filled the sink and the counter tops. A handleless coffee cup from Mr. Marche's trash can, a yellow plate with two large chips out of it from Maude Clover's trash, a large red vase with a crack half way down from the Mizbie's trash, and various other odd pieces from other neighbor's. She knew who had the good trash. Gilgulan's only had garbage.

She rinsed the old coffee out of the handleless cup, and filled it with birdseed. She took a glass with a broken lip off the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, rinsed it out, filled it with hot water, and dipped a dried up tea bag in the glass. She shuffled back to the front room leaving pieces of dried mud in the lint covered rug.

"Mama's got your supper, Patrick. Now don't get greedy, Mama's got to eat too."

The balloon lady sat in an old green chair with the stuffings coming out, courtesy of the Mizbie's trash. The chair sat her well enough. She set her glass on a crate beside the chair, and scooped up some birdseed in her hand from the cup. "Well Patrick, here goes, cain't be much different from cereal." The balloon lady filled her mouth with the seed. Her toothless gum gnawed at the seed, but she swallowed more than she chewed.

"Patrick, you cain have your birdseed, I'd sooner eat Gilgulan's garbage."

She reached for her tea to rinse down the rest of the seed.

Knock! Knock!

The balloon lady looked up, startled. "Nobody ever knocks on my door," she mumbled, as she pushed herself out of the chair.

She opened the door cautiously. The door pushed into her face, almost knocking her over.

It was "them damn kids." The tall one wore cowboy boots and tight black jeans, his long blond hair hanging to his shoulders in greasy strings. The other one was short, with a sleeveless black T-shirt pulled tight over his protruding belly.

Where was the third one?

"Look Maury," said the short one, "I'll be damned if it ain't the balloon lady. She ain't washed the mud off yet. From the looks of the place, didn't think anybody lived here. Wonder what's taking Daryl so long with the beer. Hey Maury, we can have some fun, we got us a helpless victim."

"Yeah, Earl, may be a good night after all. What ya want to do to her first, tie her up and tickle her feet, or cut off her hair. Don't look like much hair."

A skinny boy with no hair, long legs, and a short waist entered the room loudly. "I got the beer, we're gonna get shit-faced. Hey, it's the balloon lady. We gonna have fun?"

"Yeah, Daryl," said Maury, "we ain't decided on the tickling, or the haircut."

"You done the haircut on me last night. I ain't been that drunk in I don't know how long."

The balloon lady backed further into the room. "You sure you boys don't want some coffee first, I cain fix you some, no bother."

"What," said Earl, "with beer, you got to be kiddin' lady. Don't want to neutralize the effect."

"Earl ain't got no manners," said Maury, "sure we'll take some lady. Got all night to get drunk and have fun."

"To hell with manners," said Daryl, "let's do something to the lady first."

*"All right," said Maury, "we'll take a vote, the haircut, or the tickling."*

*"I like giving haircuts," said Earl, "let's make the lady bald."*

*The balloon lady watched them like a baseball player waiting to steal home.*

*"Nah!" said Daryl, "I'd rather tie the lady up and tickle her til she screams."*

*"Looks like it's up to me," said Maury, "lady would you rather have your hair cut or be tickled?"*

*The balloon lady looked into Maury's eyes, and said nothing. It didn't matter what she said, they'd do what they wanted to her, so why waste the energy.*

*"Lady, are you deaf?" said Maury. "I'm talking to you."*

*"You decide," said the balloon lady. "I ain't no good at making decisions."*

*"You heard the lady," said Maury, "she can't decide. Well, neither can I. So, we do both. One now, and one after the coffee. Daryl, go find some scissors."*

*The balloon lady moved to the couch and sat down.*

*"Hey, did I say you could sit lady?" said Maury.*

*The balloon lady stood up and looked into Maury's eyes again.*

*Daryl came back with some scissors, and handed them to Maury.*

*"Now lady, you can sit down," said Maury, "it's time for your haircut." Maury moved to the couch, the blades of the scissors pointing like the needle on a compass fixed on its direction.*

*"This is my house, take your beer and git out," said the balloon lady.*

*"Hey!" said Earl, "the lady's got fight. This is gonna be more fun than I thought. Shut up lady, there's three of us, and one of you. The odds are in our favor."*

*"Okay," said the balloon lady, "I'll make a deal. You cain cut my hair, if you'll let me git the coffee after."*

*"Okay," said Maury, "but you gotta fight us when we cut your hair, ain't no fun otherwise."*

*The balloon lady nodded in agreement.*

*Daryl and Earl moved onto the couch and held her down. She kicked and screamed, while Maury chopped her hair. She even bit him once.*

*"Daryl," said Maury, "go find a mirror, the balloon lady has got to see my beautiful haircut."*

*Earl continued to hold the balloon lady down. Maury cut a few more strands he thought he missed.*

*Daryl came back with a large piece of broken mirror.*

*Earl let go of the balloon lady, and grabbed the mirror. "See, lady, we got rid of your lice." He let her take one quick look, then set the jagged edge of the mirror against her neck. "Gonna draw some blood lady," he said. "But a bargain is a bargain, we'll let you get us some coffee first. We'll even be nice and drink it."*

*Maury helped the balloon lady up, and escorted her to the kitchen. "I'm gonna stand right here in the doorway," he said, "and drink my beer, and sometimes I'm gonna be watching you, but you won't know when. Oh, and I got sensitive ears lady, you touch that back door, I'll know it. Then I won't just mess you up, I'll kill you."*

*Earl went over to Patrick's cage. "Look boys, damn bird must be drunk, it's upside down."*

*"Let's have some fun," said Daryl, coming toward the cage. "Open the cage, let that bird fly around. We'll throw things at it, first one hits the bulls eye, gets to do what he wants to the bird."*

*Earl let Patrick out of his cage. Patrick wisely flew into the open basement and down the stairs.*

*"Damn," said Earl, "I ain't going down them stairs after that bird. He'd see us before we saw him. Hey lady! Hurry up with the coffee, you ain't left have you? We got your bird."*

*The balloon lady took her time in the kitchen. She wanted to make sure the coffee was just right. "Wouldn't want to make them damn kids angry," she thought. When the coffee was fixed to her liking, she moved to the kitchen doorway with some broken cups on a tarnished silver tray.*

*"Well, if that ain't elegant," said Maury, "the balloon lady has class. We, gentlemen, are in the presence of a lady. Note her elegant attire, socks just washed by us, a regal checkered robe, or is that supposed to be a dress? And to top it all off, haircut by Mr. Maury. Gentlemen raise your coffees to the lady, a toast to the Lady of the Mud."*

*The balloon lady said nothing. She watched them drink their coffees.*

*"Damn kids, told you I'd get you if I saw you again. Could have me some meat for months, but you wouldn't be no better than Patrick's birdseed. I'll take your money from your pockets, before I cut you up, you got to pay for them balloons. Take the arms to the Mizbie's trash, got to take some parts down to Mr. Marche's, Gilgulan's can have the worst parts. Ain't gonna have you damn kids messing up my place. Patrick and me likes our house how we likes it."*