

Romance, Crime, Good Food: The Kathleen Valentine Sampler

by Kathleen Valentine

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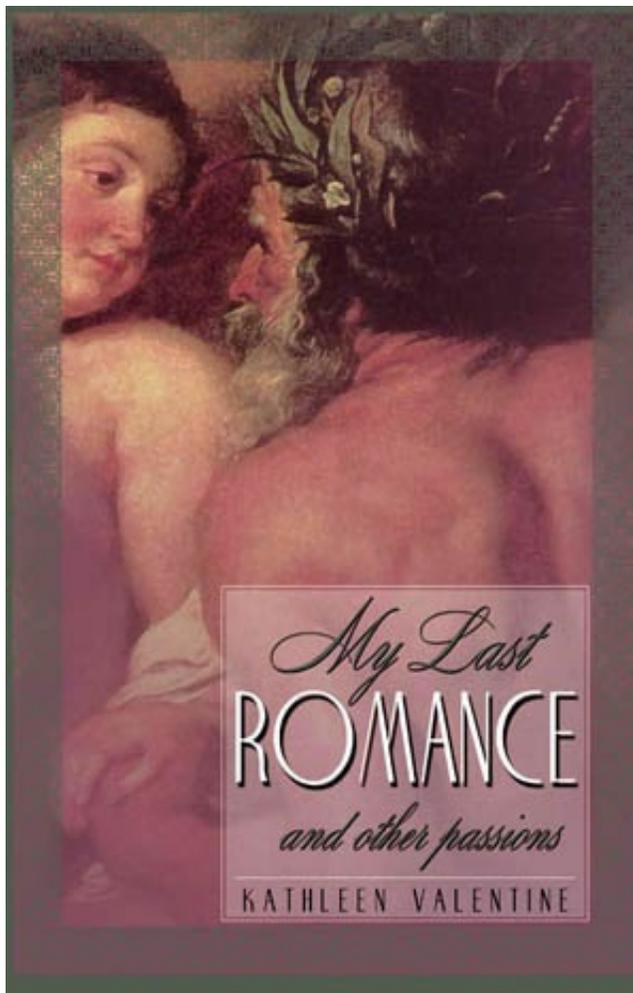
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My Last
ROMANCE
and other passions
KATHLEEN VALENTINE

TWO STORIES FROM MY LAST ROMANCE AND OTHER PASSIONS

***My Last Romance and other passions** is a collection of eight short stories each about the wonder of finding love. These stories feature lovers of all ages, in all sorts of circumstances – young lovers, married lovers, older lovers, murderous lovers. Each story is a “little jewel” (Amazon reviewer) sure to make you laugh, weep, and be amazed at the many variations of the human heart.*

***Flynnie and Babe** - Whenever Babe needed a shoulder to cry on Flynnie's was right there. It took her long enough to realized that Flynnie was right there, too.*

***Danse Avec Moi** - Beverly loves her sophisticated husband for his elegance and charm. She sees a whole new side of him when he takes her back to his bayou home and teaches her how to dance.*

FLYNNIE AND BABE

The clouds over the mainland are low and dark. The thin strip of sky that shows between them and the sparkle of lights along the shore is coral and shimmering—that usually means lightning. They must be getting one heck of a storm. I'd say it's headed this way. The air has that ozone smell that means storm-coming. The gulls are screeching, soaring across the channel in swirling clouds. The lower they fly, the more scared they are. From up here on Flynnie's bluff they appear to be coming straight at me.

There's something sad and dreamy about all those gold lights twinkling away over there. I don't want to be there—I love life on this island. But they make me wonder if I'm missing anything. It's like standing outside on the sidewalk and watching through a window at people dancing. I don't like dancing but they look like they are so happy. I wonder if I've missed something.

Autumn is definitely here. The flowers in Flynnie's garden look worn out except for the climbing roses that twine over the picket fence. The heads of the sunflowers droop all the way down as though they were put up before a firing squad. Maybe there was a coup in the garden today and the sunflowers lost. Flynnie's garden is like a party in the summer—snapdragons and hollyhocks, Japanese lanterns and columbines, moss roses and lilies of the valley peeping out between the marigolds. Fat yellow bumblebees, droopy with pollen, drone lazily between blossoms. The hummingbirds dart nervously in and out of clematis. Flynnie takes a lot of pride in his garden. As many people come up here to look at the garden as come to stuff themselves with his fat, juicy clams, spicy french fries, and crunchy onion rings.

Flynnie's was the first place I ate at when I moved here all those years ago. During the winter Flynnie's is filled with the artists and locals who live here year round but when the tourist season is in full swing the artists stay away. Flynnie's Clam Shack is one of the island's main attractions. When the tourist ferries arrive and all those determined-looking folks armed with backpacks, water bottles, digital cameras, camcorders, and Chamber of Commerce maps, fill the streets it seems every map has Flynnie's circled on it.

It won't be long now until the tourist boats only run on weekends—and after Christmas not at all. Then all of us will get out our fleece or down jackets and tramp the headlands looking for renewed inspiration to paint. We'll paint all day and gather at Flynnie's in the evenings to drink and eat and congratulate ourselves for being the lucky ones who get to stay.

The candy pink and white striped umbrellas over the tables on the deck are flapping with increased fury. There's a storm coming alright. I run around the deck cranking them down. Where the hell is Flynnie? The inside lights are on but I can't see him.

"Flynnie!!!" I love this place. It is plain and open with plank floors, wooden tables and chairs, ceiling fans and big, double-hung windows which I begin slamming shut. The wind is getting steadier now and paper-lined straw baskets bearing the remains of clam dinners skid across the tables and topple to the floor. Before the first abandoned clam lands, Mad Max comes bounding out of nowhere to snarf it up. As I close the windows a few more baskets go flying and Max occupies himself roaming the wasteland of the floor in search of fallen goodies. That dog loves clams and makes sure Flynnie's floors are always clean. Flynnie says Max is the offspring of a female chow he once had who mated with a vacuum cleaner.

"Flynnie!!!" I gather up the baskets, dump the remains in a trash barrel and stack them at the end of the service bay.

"That you, Babe?" Flynnie's voice comes down the stairs from his upstairs apartment—a slightly smaller and much cosier version of this room.

"Yeah. Want me to come up?"

"Right down," he hollers drowning me out.

I plop on a tall wooden stool by the bar. Two or three nearly empty beer mugs sit on paper coasters among a litter of peanut shells.

"Max," I call, "beer!" And, doing it just as Flynnie has taught me, I toss the remaining beer from one mug with a snap of the wrist. Max bounds across the floor and, with an experienced leap, catches the beer in his open mouth. Max has been known to catch as much as four ounces right out of the air without spilling a drop.

"What happened now?" Flynnie asks trotting down the stairs, "Your knight in shining armor turn in his white stallion for a skateboard." He grins and the gleam of his white teeth against his dark face makes me smile. It's a good thing for Flynnie that he has that grin because the rest of him is kind of cartoon-like. His gray-streaked, sandy hair sticks straight up and his beard radiates out around his face making him look like a cross between an Aztec Sun God and a Kodiak bear. His eyes are buried under bushy, pale eyebrows. They disappear completely when he laughs. Flynnie's age is a mystery to everyone. He claims to be really old and there's nothing to tip you off one way or the other. His skin has been tanned to leather since I've known him and it doesn't get lighter in the winter. His voice is sort of raspy, like he's getting a cold, and his hands are huge with bulging veins and knobby knuckles. They're kind of scary looking—like they've spent more than a little time wrapped around somebody's throat. He's wearing a blue chambray shirt with the neck open and sleeves rolled above his elbows. The veins on his arms stand out thick and hard. The sturdy, dark legs below his khaki shorts are so bowed you could sail a Frisbee between them.

"Men suck, Flynnie," I tell him. Flynnie knows more about my personal life than anyone.

"I know, Babe." He lays his ever-present journal on the bar and draws us each a draft. "We're bastards."

"Don't say that!" I hate it when he agrees with me. "That's just so damn easy for you guys. You say 'hey, what did you expect, I'm an asshole' like that's some kind of an excuse."

He refills a basket with peanuts from under the bar and pushes it toward me. "Well, it is an excuse. A lousy excuse but an excuse all the same."

"Flynnie, this guy worked harder to get me to fall for him than any guy I've ever met. I tried so hard not to make the same mistake I made the last time but look what happened!"

He comes around the bar and sits on the stool next to me. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "He's going back to his wife."

"Yeah? Sounds like you got a better deal than she did."

I kick the toe of my sandal against the bar. "That doesn't help, Flynnie."

He sighs. "No, I don't suppose it does."

"Why did he do it, Flynnie?" I promised myself I wouldn't cry again but I can feel my throat tightening. "Why would he chase me like he did and then turn around and do this? I don't get it. What's wrong with me."

Flynnie gives me a hard look. "You know better than to ask that. There's nothing wrong with you. You're smart, you're pretty, you're a good artist, you've got those big knockers." He gives me a Flynnie wink—at least that's what I think it is when his invisible eye twitches back in his head like that.

"Let me tell you something, being pretty and having big knockers isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"No?" He sips his beer. "I don't think very many people—male or female—would agree with you on that. I see how the guys in here look at you when you come around. There are a lot of women who would love to have guys look at them like that."

I glance at myself in the mirror behind the bar and then look away fast. That's the thing I can't ever explain to Flynnie—I don't know what in the heck it is he sees when he looks at me but I sure don't see it. "You know what, Flynnie, that's just bullshit."

"It is not bullshit. There are girls half your age in town who wish they got the attention you do."

I stare at him. "So what? So what if guys look at my boobs and my whatever else they look at. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean they love me or even like me. It just means I have big boobs. Big deal. It's not like they've done me any good!"

Flynnie laughs and claps his hand over his mouth to avoid spitting beer.

"I'm serious." Now I'm pissed. "I've had these monsters since I was fifteen. I've been hauling them around for almost twenty-five years now and all they've done is make my life miserable. And now they're starting to go south! Why the hell would anyone want this?"

Flynnie is smiling. He swivels his chair toward me and reaches out one of those big, scary-looking hands to brush my hair back from my face. "I never thought of it that way," he says quietly.

"Well, why would you?" I pull back and then instantly regret it. His hand falls back in his lap.

"I'm sorry," I lower my voice and look up at him. His expression is inscrutable. "I didn't mean to be gross."

He shakes his head. "You weren't gross."

"I just want to be happy. All my life I've dreamed about having a nice guy and a nice home and maybe some kids. What's so wrong about that?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, Babe, it's just not right for everyone." He turns back to his beer. "Being married and having kids is for people who don't want to do anything else."

"Why aren't you married?" As long as I've known Flynnie we've never talked about that.

He sips his beer. "I have been. I'm just no good at it."

"Really?" Flynnie married is hard to imagine.

"Well, let me rephrase that. I'm real good at getting married. I'm just no good at staying married."

I stare at him. "You've been married more than once?"

He smiles slowly and holds up three fingers.

"You're kidding me?"

"Why?"

"But... no kids?"

"No. No kids—none of the marriages lasted very long."

"What happened?"

He shrugs. "For what it's worth they all left me. Not the other way around."

"I can't believe you. You're such a nice guy. I can't imagine anyone leaving you."

"You know Suze Crawley that works at the post office?"

"Sure, of course." Suze is a big, energetic woman who wears long, flowered skirts with Birkenstocks, has a thick braid down her back, and grows herbs in the sunny windows of the tiny post office building on Center Street. All the letters that arrive around the world from our town smell like Suze's thyme and coriander.

"She was my second wife." He reaches over the counter and fills his beer mug from the tap. "Ready for another?"

I let him fill my mug while I try to imagine him and Suze together. Funny thing is, I can. Easily.

"Flynnie, I think you and Suze would be good together."

He nods. "I thought so too."

"But?"

He shrugs. "She said I was too romantic. Lots of women like that idea in theory but they find it hard to live with."

"Because you write poetry?"

That's one of the more enigmatic things about Flynnie. He is forever sending off poems to these obscure little magazines with odd names and getting back checks for minuscule amounts. When the published piece finally arrives in the mail he mounts the page with his poem next to the magazine cover on tan cardboard. He frames it and hangs it on the wall of the stairway leading to his apartment. He says he is waiting for the day when the check covers the cost of the frame—then he'll consider himself a success. I glance up at the wall across the darkening room. There must be thirty or more poems there.

"Naw," he says. "She always liked my poems. She thought I'd be a great poet someday." He frowns at his beer letting his mind drift. "No. I'm not sure what it was, really. She said being my Muse was too hard. To tell the truth, I never knew what she meant by that. Suze is a beautiful woman. I didn't think I ever expected anything more from her than letting me love her for that."

I study him trying to figure out if he is being serious. I like Suze. She's always friendly and nice but "beautiful"?

"How long ago was that?"

He shrugs. "Ten years, maybe. It always took me more time to get over a woman than I actually spent with her. Figure that out."

"Did you write a poem about her?"

"Every poem I wrote was about her—well, while I was with her. It was like that with all of them..." His voice trails off as a wall of rain crackles against the windows. The lights dim for a moment and thunder rolls in. Mad Max whimpers and crawls across the floor to cower under Flynnie's bar stool.

"Come on, Max," Flynnie coos sliding off the barstool and hunkering down to stroke the shaking dog. "Don't be scared. I'm here." Max huddles against him as a brilliant flash of lightning floods the room. Through the windows I can see the waves churning up in the channel.

"Damn. Danny Choate and I were going to go diving for lobsters in the morning. Now the floor will be too murky." He stands up and walks to the window as the lights flicker out but then blink back on. "I'd say business is closed for this night—we'll be losing power soon." He turns to me. "Want to come upstairs and I'll fix us some supper?"

"Sure." I stack the dishwasher then wipe down the bar and the tables as Flynnie cashes out and locks up. I watch him out of the corner of my eye. Flynnie the poet. Flynnie the husband of three women. Flynnie the guy who thought Suze Crawley was beautiful and wanted only to love her for that.

As we climb the stairs a loud crack of thunder sends Max flying up the steps past us knocking me backwards.

"What a noble beast," Flynnie laughs as he catches me and sets me back on my feet. "There's nothing to fear when Max is on guard. Dog-butt stew, Max!" he hollers up the steps but Max is long gone—under the bed for sure. "I'm going to cook up a batch of dog butt stew!"

Sometimes Flynnie and Max remind me of an old married couple.

Upstairs the rain hammers the roof sounding wild and wonderful. Flynnie lights a few lamps and pops in a CD of Celtic music. The violins, flutes and bodhrans, underscored by pelting rain, fill the big open room. I love this space. It always reminds me of an attic belonging to some whimsical grandmother in a fairy tale. The beamed ceiling slants down to a few feet above the floor and the room is crowded with peculiar treasures—pirate's chests supporting oil lamps and piles of books, old sofas covered in patchwork quilts, a wooden cigar-store Indian guards the alcove that serves as a bedroom. An enormous balsa wood and rice paper airplane hangs from the apex of the ceiling. A fire smolders in the pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room and Flynnie's still-warm coffee cup rests on the arm of his home-made

couch. Flynnie built this place himself, including most of the furniture in it. The foundation is the remains of an old barn—stone stalls and tack rooms where his woodshop is now. But from the first floor on up every board was put in place by Flynnie's big hands.

"Make yourself at home?" Flynnie mumbles, his head in the refrigerator. "You don't mind lobster, do you? I can make an omelet."

"Flynnie, for most people lobster is a treat. We don't live on it all summer."

"Most people don't go diving every few days."

"Yeah." I pick up the yellow legal pad by the sofa. He is working on a poem. "Lobster-diving isn't a popular sport in Kentucky."

"No wonder you left it." He assembles the ingredients for his masterpiece on the counter. Everything Flynnie has ever cooked for me was delicious. "Why do people live in places like that?"

The power goes out just as we are sitting down to eat. Flynnie fires up the oil lamps and the soft flickering glow makes the room even cosier.

"One of these days, I'm going to rig up a way to run the CD player on lamp oil," he says but the rain is hammering the roof so hard we wouldn't hear it anyway.

We clear the dishes away in silence, the rain isn't letting up and it makes conversation more like a shouting match.

As I stack the plates in the drying rack the little bird in the cuckoo clock cuckoos eleven.

"Are you staying?" he asks not looking at me.

"I guess so."

He nods and gets me a clean white t-shirt from his dresser. "Here, you get first turn in the bathroom."

While Flynnie splashes around in his bathroom, I snuggle down in his comfortable bed and stare up at the rain pelting the skylight above. This is how it is with Flynnie and me. I get my feelings hurt, or have a bad day, or just feel lonely, so I climb Flynnie's bluff and he makes everything alright. He comforts me and bolsters my ego. He makes me dinner and invites me to spend the night. We crawl into his warm bed, chat for awhile and then drift off to sleep. Deep in the night a foghorn blows, Max barks in his sleep, or a ship's bell clangs in the channel. Sleepily we move into each others' arms. That's when the real enchantment starts for then Flynnie is at his best.

We do not speak. We pretend this is all happening in a dream. Flynnie makes love to me so sweetly, so deeply, so caressingly that I am reduced to the tender, beautiful, lovable girl that he seems to see me as but which I can never accept. When finally the first pink of dawn grows out of the far horizon I sleep the best sleeps of my life.

It is always the same. When I wake there is coffee on the stove and hot muffins on the table with a note saying "gone fishing" or "diving with Danny" or "business on the mainland", followed by "hope your day is wonderful." And the next time we see each other we act as though nothing has happened.

Flynnie carries an oil lamp to the bed and when he is snuggled in beside me, blows it out and puts it on the floor. He slides his arm under my head and says, "Sweet dreams."

"Flynnie," I say, "do you love me?"

There is a long silence filled with rain and distant fog horns.

"Yes," he says. "I do."

"Why haven't you ever said that to me before?"

He rolls onto his side and traces my cheekbones with his fingertips. "Good question," he says finally. "I guess because I know that you're still looking for Mr. Wonderful and I ain't him." He sighs. "And I'm tired of getting my heart broken."

"Oh, Flynnie." I kiss his fingertip and move closer to him.

He leans over and kisses me softly. "Go to sleep, Babe."

"No," I whisper. "I don't want to keep pretending nothing happens when we're together. I don't want to wake up in an empty bed tomorrow."

He is quiet for a long time. "When you pretend something doesn't happen, it makes it easier when it stops happening."

He is lying very still not touching me. I push back the quilt and touch his face with my fingertips drawing them along the plane of his hard, lined cheeks and down through the prickle of his beard.

"You're a beautiful man, Flynnie," I whisper. I slip my arms around him kissing his mouth softly. "You're the most beautiful man I know."

The sound he makes is strange—half a laugh, half a sob.

"I'm going to make everything alright," I tell him, snuggling close, sliding my leg between his thick, bowed legs. "I'm going to make sure you never get up and leave me again."

In the darkness I feel his smile.

From [My Last Romance and other passions](#) available in paperback or e-book.

DANSE AVEC MOI

Jean-Luc has powerful arms. He is not a large man but every bit of him is steely and intense. Just now his arm around my waist crushes me against him and the pressure of his thighs against mine are determined and single-minded. I gasp for breath and he tilts his head back to look at me with those ice blue eyes. He whips me around effortlessly and smiles. I am not a small woman but when he holds me like this I am a child, a rag doll, a puppet on the strings of his private rhythms.

His face is inches above mine and I can smell the intoxicating fragrance of him—a mixture of pine boughs and leather, wine and fresh air. He looks as though he is going to kiss me. It is a maddening habit of his that he will let his mouth come so close to mine that I burn for its touch—then he pulls back and looks at me teasing. The one thing he knows—more than any truth on this earth—is how much I yearn for him.

He tightens his grip on me and turns again, carrying me with him. He throws back his head and laughs with the turn. It is so hot here. He doesn't seem to notice the heat but I am not accustomed to these steamy tropic-like nights. I find the air thick and suffocating.

The music stops. My feet return to the ground. He steadies me then guides me to the open door. Outside lanterns hang in the giant pin oak trees creating dozens of little moons orbited by thousands of tiny night creatures.

Old women sit on the porch fanning themselves with dried palmetto leaves, chattering in the exotic staccato of this beguiling music they speak. I have only heard this language since coming here with Jean-Luc. Now that I am his wife he can bring me with him to visit his family and the people he has loved all his life. During all the years we lived together in the Northern city that is our home his rare trips home were solitary ones. Whether his family knew that he shared his life and his bed with a woman I did not know but now that we wear matching rings I am welcome among them. To me this is an unimaginable world.

When he walked into my office and my life years ago I could not have envisioned this elegant, reserved man with his portfolio of sophisticated illustrations and softly accented voice in this remote and torrid swamp land.

In the shadows of the night he takes my face in his hands and kisses me as no one else in the world can kiss me. His kisses stir rivers in me that I never knew I possessed before him.

"Ah, Bebe," he whispers brushing aside my hair and letting his breath cool my ear. "You are so exquisite." And he kisses me breathless.

The old women stop rocking and there is tittering. Jean-Luc releases me saying he will get us wine. I lean back against the wall gulping sweet night air and he strides along the porch flirting with the old women in the odd music of their language. They laugh and slap his legs and backside with their fans. I watch his solid, compact body in fine white shirt and tan trousers until he disappears into the room filled with heat and light and laughter. No one from our world, from the publishing house where I spend my days surrounded by technology and academics, from the design studio where he creates as ably with PC and stylus as with pen and ink, would imagine him in this environment.

"It's my parent's fiftieth wedding anniversary next month," he said one morning as we sat over our Sunday breakfast of café au lait, brioche and apricots. "I think that would be a nice time for them to meet you."

Light streamed through the clerestory windows of our loft. Music from the CD player was slow and dreamy. I love our Sunday mornings together—filled with music, good food, laziness and lovemaking. We are still newlyweds though we have been together a long time.

"How wonderful," I said. "How long will we be gone?"

"A week maybe. We can fly down for the party and spend a few days with them and then I'll show you New Orleans. You'll love New Orleans."

In his soft drawl the words New Orleans sounded like a mirage of pastel light and carnival music. New Orleans, I knew, was his destination on the few occasions when he went "home". The prospect of going there together excited me.

"Yes," I said. "Can we eat in sidewalk cafés and go to jazz clubs?"

"We can hardly avoid it," he said smiling.

"Can we stay in the French Quarter?"

Jean-Luc has the most rapturously beautiful smile. It captured my heart the first time I saw it and has never lost its hold on me. He is a stern-looking man normally. Focused and not inclined toward nonsense. But when he smiles his light blue eyes sparkle and his teeth gleam, the long dimples that bracket his mouth soften his stern face and shatter the illusion of severity.

"We will do everything, Bebe, I promise."

From the air the Mississippi Delta looks like a great white scallop shell opening into the tropical blue of the Gulf of Mexico. Jean-Luc wears the headphones of his iPod. From his relaxed expression you would think he is listening to music but I know better. My husband is an ambitious man with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge. Right now he is listening to audio books—masterpieces of world literature. The seat belt light flashes on and he removes the headphones and leans forward to kiss my shoulder.

"Look," I whisper pointing out the window. I always sit by the window when we fly because I love the mysteries below. He tucks the iPod into place beside his laptop and closes the leather case filled with pens and brushes and books and drawing pads. His illustrations are exquisitely rendered and he works on them obsessively. He says they are his children and he cannot bear to be away from them for even a day.

On the ground he shoulders the garment bags and I carry the large box wrapped with golden paper and gold ribbons. It contains the carrickmacrosse tablecloth I chose for his parents. It is an elegant gift—one any mother would adore. The first thing I notice when we step from the body of the plane is the heat—heavy, intense and penetrating—a feeling I soon learn to dread.

At the car rental desk he thumbs through the plastic cards in his wallet and selects the all-purpose platinum one. The girl behind the desk is coffee-colored and beautiful. She looks at him in an open way that I find disturbing but he appears not to notice.

It is one of the great enigmas of our relationship that we find each other so alluring. Despite his thinning hair and hard features I find him utterly devastating and the fact that he finds my lush curves so enticing awes me. After a life time of diets I have finally stopped trying to change my body thanks to his adoration of it.

It never occurred to me that his family would live anywhere in Louisiana other than New Orleans. When we head northwest out of the city he tells me that it will be a three hour drive. I am astonished. My refined husband bears no resemblance to a small town boy. After we travel through an endless sea of open grain fields and enter the dense, moss-covered swamplands I am speechless.

The population of his town is less than that of the building I work in. The houses are small, wooden and neat with large, continually occupied front porches. The trees are mammoth. Their branches extend across entire yards, propped up here and there by metal poles. The people are like Jean-Luc, compact, dark and handsome. They treat us like celebrities. His parents cannot do enough for us. We are given the only room in the house with an air conditioning unit—one which Jean-Luc bought for them years earlier but which they never use. It is a blessing for me.

Watching my husband here is fascinating. I feel I do not know him as he chats in this curious, lovely language. He introduces me as "ma femme Beverly" to women who clap their hands together and kiss my cheeks. To men who catch me round the waist, twirl me around and pronounce me something that I do not understand but which makes Jean-Luc laugh.

He laughs a lot here. He sits on the porches with his feet on railings drinking wine and, when he remembers my handicap, translating the conversation for me. He goes fishing early in the morning and returns slightly drunk bearing lines of the ugliest looking fish I have ever seen. He takes me to the only clothing shop in town and buys me dresses of soft, gossamer-light cotton in luscious colors—deep rose, violet and seafoam green. They drift over my body making me look wanton and voluptuous. He presents me with a pair of gold hoop earrings big enough to wear as bracelets.

And we dance. Every night there is a party. Everyone goes—children, old people, teenagers and long-married couples. The food is surpassed in quantity only by its quality. The music is lively filled with guitars, violins and accordions. My husband does not miss a dance. I have never danced with him before except for a polite waltz at some company function. I watch his face and the laugh lines I never noticed before are deep and beautiful. He holds me tightly when we dance, carrying me with him. There is such joy in him. I cannot stop looking at him—at the way he moves and talks and laughs amid these people. He flirts with all the women and banter with all the men. He is proud to bring me among them. He caresses my face when he talks to me, holds me close against him as we walk together as he would never do in the city. He kisses me often. Everyone looks at us and smiles but he only looks at me.

After the parties he brings me home to his parents house and makes love to me so slowly, lingeringly, taking half the night. He has become a man I scarcely glimpsed before.

Tomorrow we leave for New Orleans. I will be more at ease in a city, a place more familiar to me but I fear to lose this man who captivates me so. This morning he woke me early and took me down to the bayou. In a wooden boat we rowed out into the gray mists rising through veils of Spanish moss sweeping the still waters. He made love to me as soft coral light infused the pale morning haze and brown pelicans watched from tree branches.

I am wearing the rose-colored dress tonight. Because it pleases him so. I sit on the porch rail as I wait watching flashes of heat lightning in the distance, wondering if I could ever be part of this world. I feel the brush of his thigh as he steps over the rail and straddles it behind me. He snuggles me tightly against him lifting a glass of wine to my lips.

"*Très adorable*, Bebe," he whispers in my ear. He brushes aside my hair and kisses my neck.

"I love you, Jean-Luc," I say turning.

He kisses the wine from my lips and says, "*J'taime*, Bebe." His hands caress my hips and thighs. I melt from the heat of my love and the night, longing for this dreamworld to claim us both.

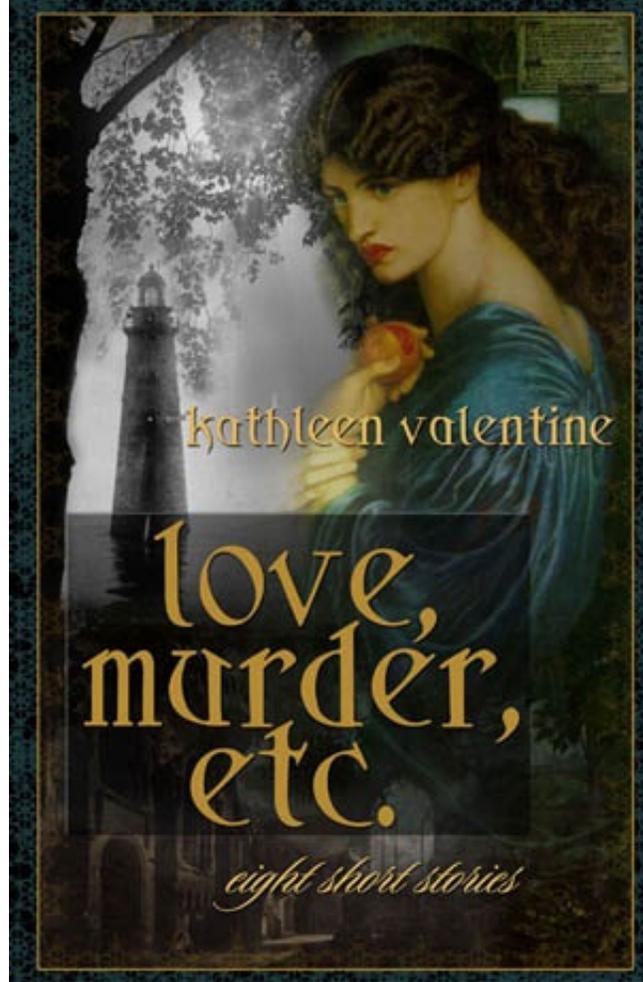
Inside the music begins again. I turn to him hungry for his mouth. He pulls away, stands and takes my hands.

"*Danse avec moi*, Bebe."

"What would you rather do?" I gasp. "Dance or make love?"

He laughs and pulls me to my feet. "*Ce qui est la différence?*" he asks.

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kathleen valentine

love,
murder,
etc.

eight short stories

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love, murder, etc. is a collection of eight stories – four about love, and four about murder. Currently it is only available in e-format.

Home-made Pie and Sausage (crime/horror): Sometimes the most ordinary things in life can turn out to be the most horrifying - especially if you're the sheriff of a small town who didn't pay attention when he should have.

Mardi Gras Was Over (love): He arrived on a Harley one dark night and swept her off to Mardi Gras -- then off her feet. Now a lot of years have passed and there are things a mother doesn't want her daughter to know.

HOME-MADE PIE AND SAUSAGE

Cletus Wilkes has a smooshed up, squashy kind of face that looks like someone punched him real hard up under the chin making his whole face sort of scrunch up and jut out. If that's what happened it happened a long time ago cause now he's got so many chins a punch would just sort of bounce off. Right now his chins are wobbling as he chews and a fine sheen of grease pools up on one chin before slowly sliding down to the next one finally dripping lazily onto the big paper napkin tucked into his collar to protect the light tan of his uniform shirt.

"Damnation, honey, I believe you make a better smoked sausage than your old man done," he says grinning at me as he licks a slick of ketchup off his thick, rubbery lips.

"There's still two more in the pan, Chief Wilkes," I tell him smiling. "No sense in them going to waste."

"Well...", he pretends to think about this even though I know good and well he's been eying them all along.

"An empty frying pan means a sunny day tomorrow."

He laughs and his belly rattles the dishes on the counter. "Well, I'll just eat them as a community service then," he says. "Effie Parnell likes to hang her wash out on Thursdays and gets damn cranky if the sun ain't shining."

I carry his plate back into the kitchen. The bell on the back of the door jingles and two city hunters in neon orange caps and camouflage jackets head for the beer coolers.

"So, what's Old Bruno think about this being a cyber-café now?" He raises his voice so I can hear him even though I'm not ten feet away and the kitchen door is standing wide open. He pronounces the word "ka-FEE".

I pretend to think about it as I spoon the sausages onto his plate and add another scoop of baked beans.

"I don't think Pa has any idea what the internet is," I say putting the plate down in front of him. "He just knows it makes money and that's good enough for him."

As though on cue I see the hunters settle into the folding metal chairs at the two work stations tucked between the camping supplies and the display of sweatshirts, baseball caps, coffee mugs, and other junk with the words Pine Creek Gorge, Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon on them. I glance at the clock but those two have been in here before and never argue when I tell them what they owe for on-line time.

"How's the old reprobate doin, anyway?" Cletus says spearing the sausage with his fork sending a spray of hot grease in my direction. I jump back.

"Not good." I grab a dishrag and wipe the counter around his plate. "He hasn't been downstairs in weeks now. I keep telling him he should see a doctor but you know him."

Cletus laughs while he chews, his cheeks puffing out like a blowfish. "I sure do. All Bruno's problems can be found in one place - the bottom of a rum bottle."

"You could go up and see him," I offer. "Might do him some good to talk to someone besides me." Like that's gonna happen. The last thing Cletus Wilkes is likely to do is haul his fat ass up two flights of steps to the rooms above the store.

"Some other time," he says. "You tell him I was askin after him though."

"Excuse me."

One of the hunters is leaning over the counter. He has a pair of iridescent orange sunglasses on a Philadelphia Eagles lanyard around his neck.

"Sign out front says you dress out deer here."

"That's right," I walk to the end of the counter just glad to be away from Cletus's slurping sounds for a minute. He sounds like a pack of coyotes on a dead cow. "You fellas get lucky?"

"One guy in our group, so far, what's it going to cost him to have you take care of it?"

"Depends," I retrieve a price list from under the counter. "We can just dress it out for you or cut it up and package it or..." I explain the different cuts of roasts, chops, and steaks plus our sausage making and smokehouse options.

"Says here you can store the meat, too."

"Yeah, we have a big walk-in freezer downstairs. Some folks don't have room for a whole deer at home."

"Can I take this with me?" He indicates the brochure.

"Sure." I smile at him. The men that come in here from the city never give me a second glance, they like their women to have some body on them, and that's just fine with me.

"You ain't cuttin up them deer by yourself, are ya?" Cletus asks.

"Nope. I used to but I got Porky Heinz coming in whenever I need him to do the skinning and butchering. He was working at the IGA up there in Binghamton till his mama got sick and he come home to look after her. He's a pretty good butcher."

Cletus nods. "Good thinkin. You got your hands full runnin this place now that Old Bruno's taken to his bed." He looks around. "Place looks real good, I have to say."

"Yeah. Business is growing. We got a lot a hunters up from Philly and Baltimore this year. City boys tryin to have an 'authentic' wilderness experience." I laugh, I heard about that on the talk radio last week. I like listening to the talk radio while I work in the big kitchen in the basement where Porky cuts up deer for the city fellas and I make the sausages and pies we sell.

"Glad to see you doin so well," Cletus shovels beans into his big mouth. "I used to worry about you and Old Bruno bein stuck out here so far in the woods alone but it looks like you're doin jest fine."

Lying sack of shit, I think but I just smile.

"Sorry to bother you again."

I look up. The hunter is back. "No bother."

"Do you have any 7mm cartridges? Remington Magnum"

"I'll look." I know damn well we don't but these city guys think we're a bunch of hicks if I don't at least make an attempt.

"What you huntin with?" Cletus asks as I enter the storeroom.

"It's a custom-built," the hunter tells him, "bolt-action."

"Got one a them built-in range finders in the scope?"

"Yes."

I can hear Cletus snort all the way in the closet. "Figgers."

"Sorry," I tell the hunter. "All I have is 30.06." I hold up a box.

"Naw, that's okay. I think I've got enough for now. Do you have any pies left?"

"Just Dutch apple and lemon meringue. I'll have fresh ones tomorrow."

He nods. "Wrap up an apple for me."

As I'm boxing the pie, Cletus eyes it with disdain. "Don't tell me I'm too late for a piece a your mincemeat pie today?"

I give him a smile. "I keep the mincemeat in the kitchen. It's just for my favorite regulars. Too much work to make it for everybody."

Cletus looks genuinely relieved. "Your momma made the best homemade mincemeat pies I ever had in my life. She musta passed her pie-making genes on to you."

"You fellas just like the mincemeat because of all the booze in it," I tell him as I finish tying the string on the pie box. "Mamma used a good amount of suet in her mincemeat. It helps marry all them spices. I've got plenty of suet."

"Well, if Porky's makin deer sausage I reckon he's butcherin some pigs, too."

I keep my back to him. "Something like that."

"I can't hardly b'lieve you can cook like she done. You was just a little kid when she passed on."

"I was ten," I tell him trying to keep the edge out of my voice. Ten years old and forty miles from civilization with a drunken father, not that any of that concerned you, Chief of Police Cletus Wilkes.

Cletus shakes his head, "It's a wonder you was old enough to remember."

"I started helping her when I was old enough to stand," I say. Somebody had to, I think. "Pa had me stuffing sausages when I was big enough to reach the grinder. I made them sausages you're eating now."

"Well, they're fine. It's a wonder you have the time to run this store and do all the cookin and still take care a your old man. Harry Jenkins says he and the missus drive out here every Sunday after services just so's they can have some of your mincemeat pie."

The Reverend Harry Jenkins is the pastor of the Baptist Church my folks belonged to, not that I can remember ever going there except on Christmas and, after Momma died, not even then.

"Yeah, him and Barty Hollaway used to come out to play pinochle with Pa. Whitey Pringle, too. I made Reverend Jenkins take them each a couple pounds of sausage and a pie just this past Sunday."

"Ain't you a sweetheart!" Cletus chuckles. "I 'member some of those card games. I filled in often enough. You was always lurkin around - skinny kid with those big, wide eyes a yours..." He widens his eyes and mugs for me. I look away to hide my disgust. "Bringin us sandwiches and pie. You was so obligin."

Like I had a choice. I carry the box over to the counter by the cash register. The hunters are both looking at the same PC monitor laughing at some Flash movie one got in his email. Snow falls like glitter through the lights in the parking lot. Only four o'clock and it's dark outside. Winter is closing in.

"Looks like more snow," Cletus says, cutting the last sausage into small pieces as though it will be the last sausage he ever eats and he wants to make it last.

"Never know what will happen during a long winter." I turn my back to him and start refilling the coffee-maker. I normally get half a dozen fellows in around supper time and, when the days are short, supper time comes early.

"Your Pa sure is lucky to have you. Don't know what he'd do being sick and all way out here in the middle of nowhere. I'm real glad you worked things out with him. I recall a few years back you wasn't too happy here."

I grit my teeth and control my breathing. I was fucking miserable, I want to scream at him. I was beaten and abused and used like a whore and you fat fucks just brought him more booze and played cards and pretended not to see anything. I take a deep breath.

Not any more.

"Well, all that's changed now," I say to the coffeemaker. "I turned eighteen and can sign the checks and keep the store running. If Pa kicks the bucket over the winter I'll just stick him down in the meat locker until Spring."

Cletus almost chokes himself laughing. "You do that. You got room for two-hundred and seventy pounds of useless meat down there?"

I turn around. "Yes, I do."

A bewildered look flashes across his face. "You know," he says gravely. "Your father always loved you."

Right. Every chance he got till he was too fat to find his dick.

"I know," I say. "Only thing I worry about is that he'll get up in the middle of the night and try to go hunting again. He hasn't done that in some time and I always found him and brought him back but if he were to go out when I was sleeping, well, who knows what could happen?"

He studies me a minute. "We got SUVs now and cell phones down to the station. If anything happens all you gotta do is call." I watch the cluelessness muddle up his dumb look. Cletus has cultivated that for so long it has settled in permanently.

"We'll be fine. Frankly, I think this is going to be a real good winter," I lighten my tone of voice. "Hunters are already starting to bring in deer to be processed and I've got a lot of plans for the store here. I might start having some of the ladies in town bake pies for me and Porky comes in when I need him. But don't worry..." I give him my best smile and this time it's for real. "I'll still make sausages and mincemeat pies with my own hands just for Pa's special friends."

Cletus grins happily. "You're a good girl, honey. Still takin care of us and all."

"Glad to," I say. I put my hands on the counter, lean forward and fix him with a reassuring smile. "I put aside a whole shelf full of meat downstairs that I'm keeping special just for you boys."

About two hundred and seventy pounds of it.

"You ready for that mincemeat pie?" I tease. "With a nice scoop of ice cream on it?"

Cletus claps his big, fleshy hands together and rubs them vigorously. "You bet, honey, you bet."

I go to the kitchen and take out the very special mincemeat pie I keep on hand. I keep it in a separate compartment next to my very special home-made sausage.

"The secret to making mincemeat," I tell him as I scoop vanilla ice cream onto it, "is to make sure the suet you use has been soaked in liquor for a good long time."

MARDI GRAS WAS OVER

My husband and our daughter are fighting again. This latest installment of the fight has been going on for three days but they have engaged in an ongoing battle since she was old enough to have an opinion. Our daughter has many opinions.

I concentrate on chopping onions and slicing tomatoes for the salad. The table is set, Byron, our three year old, is in his booster chair wearing a bib. Camille, who is eight and Mommy's Little Helper, is carefully folding the napkins at the dining room table and keeping a nervous eye on the combatants. Ten-year-old Marcus has vanished.

"You're afraid of being alive!" Maya screams, her hands on her narrow hips, and all the outrage of her thirteen years of life burning in her bright cheeks.

"You are so boring!"

My husband, his face also red, stares at her. He has never understood his first-born child. "What does that have to do with anything?" he asks. Only I can hear the hurt in his voice.

"You're jealous," Maya spits. "I'm young and you're old and you've never done one interesting thing in your whole stupid life so you don't want me to have fun either." We've heard this complaint before. It is her favorite explanation for why her father and I are so impossible to get along with. She is young, we are old. She wants to have fun, we are stuffy old bores who stand in her way.

My husband turns his back and walks out of the room.

"Maybe so," he says, "but you're still not going to Mardi Gras with your friends." I hear the front door slam. He will be outside on the porch trying to calm down, sneaking one of the cigarettes he is supposed to have quit but which I know are still hidden on a rafter under the porch roof. My husband cannot bear these fights. He will be upset for hours but neither will he change his mind.

"Mo-o-o-m!" Maya pleads.

"You heard your father," I say keeping my eyes on the tomatoes.

"YOU went to Mardi Gras!" she says.

"I was eighteen," I say. "Not thirteen." Maya flings herself into a chair. "That was like a million years ago! It's different now! Girls are more mature at thirteen than they were back then."

"You act like this and then you tell me you are more mature?" I turn and stare at her. She is huddled on the chair in the corner by the door, slender arms and legs crossed, fury and outrage clouding her lovely face where the cuteness of the child she once was is transforming daily into the beauty of the woman she will one day be.

"Listen, my darling daughter, you are not going to New Orleans with a bunch of girls I don't care whose older sister will be going along. You are too young and that is that."

"I HATE you!" she screams again, "You're both old and boring and stupid." She runs out of the room, caroms down the hallway, and slams the bathroom door.

"She's just mean, Mommy," Camille says watching me with her big, worried eyes. Eyes made too wary by too many scenes like this. "Don't listen to her."

"It's okay, my angel," I tell her cupping her soft little chin in my hand and bending down to kiss her silken cheeks, "she's just being a teenager. She'll grow out of it."

"I hope I'm never like that," Camille says.

I sigh. "I was like that too when I was her age," I say. And I was.

My mother still tells me that she was too easy on me. Even after all these years, and four grandchildren whom she dearly loves, she never misses an opportunity to tell me I was too wild. She still dredges up what might have happened. How lucky I was not to end up in a gutter somewhere. When I complain to her about Maya's temperamental behavior she laughs and says, "It's the fulfillment of The Mother's Curse: Someday I hope you have a child who acts just like you do."

"I was a lot older," I respond.

"You were always too big for your britches," she claims.

I was eighteen when I ran away. She's never let me forget that. It was a typical South Carolina winter, dark and cold and raining. I had graduated from high school the June before but had to wait a year to enter college because I hadn't completed my applications on time. I was waiting tables in a downtown diner by day, looking for trouble by night, and driving my parents crazy. I didn't think I could hang on until it was time to leave for college. All my friends were gone and I wanted to be too. I wanted adventure but it was adventure that found me. It arrived on a bitterly cold January afternoon riding a gleaming black and silver Harley-Davidson.

He was big, tall and broad, and he walked with the easy confidence of someone accustomed to being in control. When he unzipped his black leather jacket the first thing I noticed was the promise of tattoos beneath his shirt's open neck. When he took off his helmet the first thing I noticed was a face that had starred in my wildest dreams, only better.

"What would you like?" I asked pouring coffee as he settled onto a stool at the counter.

He grinned at me. White, white, white. Beautiful. Eyes like pools of melted caramel. Thick, long hair the color of the coffee that streamed into his cup.

"Steak," he said, "rare. Home-fries. Pie."

"Is that it?" I asked my heart hammering against the front of my uniform.

"You," he added. "I'm on my way to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. You should come with me."

Okay," I said.

His name was Caleb. He didn't say where he was from but I loved his voice, soft and gently accented. He was back from the Persian Gulf. He had an Army buddy in New Orleans and no plans beyond that. He stayed for a week and we spent every free minute together. He would pick me up at the diner after work on his Harley and we drove out past the high school, through the salt grass marshes to the beach. He brought beer and Marlboros. He didn't do drugs, he said. He liked to ride. Riding was his high.

For a week he drove me mad with hot kisses and cool gazes. We made love everywhere, in the dunes, in the alley behind the diner, in his hotel room, on the porch of my house, on the Harley. Tattoos covered his arms and chest. He was ten years older than I was but I didn't care. My parents forbade me to see him but that made him all the more alluring. The other waitresses in the diner drooled over him. "He's dangerous," Emmy said. "You better watch yourself."

"He'll probably break your heart," Sandy Mae said, "and leave you pregnant." Every warning anyone issued made him all the more enticing.

It was less than a week to Mardi Gras. If we were going to make it to New Orleans in time we had to hurry.

"Come on," he said biting my neck, running his hands up my thighs under the skirt of my uniform as he backed me into a corner behind the men's room door in the diner. "Come on. Meet me at the ballfield tonight at eight. You don't need anything. We'll ride all night." There was a tattoo of a grizzly bear rearing up, claws and fangs bared on the bulging bicep of his left arm. I licked the curve of the bear's back and he grabbed my hair in his fist, pulled my head up so he could cover my mouth

with his, thrust his tongue down my throat, nail me to the wall with the relentless heat of his pelvis.

"Come ON," he said. "What's stopping you?" So I went.

The craziness of Mardi Gras was nothing compared to the craziness in my heart. His buddy lived in the French Quarter and we could crash there. I don't know how many people were staying there and it didn't matter. We never slept. For days we never slept. We danced and we drank and we ate and had sex everywhere ---in the apartment, in the courtyard, in the alleys behind St. Louis Cathedral, under floats, in the backs of restaurants. Everything was brilliant and loud and wet and hot, so hot. So very hot.

When it was over we got on the bike and sped down to Venice where we crawled into his sleeping bag and slept on the beach for days. "Where to next?" I asked one morning as we lay in the dunes listening to the waves of the Gulf of Mexico pounding the beach.

He smiled at me. "You're not tired of me yet?"

"No! How could I be?"

He laughed. "Want to go to Mexico?" he said.

How can a mother tell her daughter about such things? There are secrets formed in the heart of a woman when she gives herself to a man like Caleb. There are mysteries and insanities, tumult and intensity. You want it to last forever, you want to fly out of time and never look back. You are afraid to breathe or to remember or to let your mind be anywhere but right here, right now, right where nothing can change a single moment. These are not things a daughter can comprehend. These are not things a mother can afford to reveal.

We spent Spring island-hopping down the coast --- Galveston, Matagorda, Padre Island, into Mexico and around the Yucatan. There were beaches covered with the glittering silver of jellyfish stranded after a lightning storm and jungles full of the screech of birds. Parrots streaked blue and crimson through the rainforest as we made love on beds of ferns amid orchids as large as my desire, fragrant as my love.

In June we crossed to Cozumel just before the full moon so we could watch the giant sea turtles come ashore to nest. We explored Mayan ruins and slept on the beach at Punta Chiqueros in the same sleeping bag that had been our shared home for half a year. "It's time I should be taking you back," he said one night as the moon flooded the beach with blue light and the waves rolled in studded with stars.

"No!" I said. "No. I can't go back." He smiled.

"Let's keep driving," I begged. "Let's go to South America. I want to go to Peru. Don't make me go back." He rolled on top of me for the thousandth time and buried his face in my hair that was now wild as a gypsy's.

"We still have time," he whispered, caressing me, moving into me.

"Have you ever heard of Machu Piccu? It's this wonderful ruin. I read about it in school. Let's go there."

Caleb laughed again and I knew we wouldn't. That night for the first time in all the months together I cried.

The next day we crossed back to the mainland and he turned the Harley north. I rode behind him, arms wrapped around his waist, face buried in his neck breathing the wild, delicious maleness that was all the world I thought I would ever need. Every day we rode. Every night we slept joined together. Don't let it end, I prayed. Don't let it end. I stayed awake and watched the moonlight on that dark feral face that seemed so strange and remote and yet so deliciously familiar.

"What will become of us?" I whispered into his shoulder as we rode.

He didn't answer.

"What will become of us, Caleb?" I whispered as he made love to me in states that were closer and closer to home.

"What becomes of anyone?" he asked.

When we crossed the state line into South Carolina I pressed my face into the curve of his neck where the tattoo of the dragon's wing merged with the dark hair and thought I would die.

Now, I sprinkle croutons over the salad and sigh. These are not things a mother wants her daughter to know.

My husband comes back into the kitchen as Marcus arrives from wherever he has been hiding.

"Maya's locked herself in the bathroom," Marcus announces, "and I have to pee!"

"Use our bathroom," my husband says. He is still sad. He puts his arms around me and nuzzles his face into my neck.

"We should have stayed on that beach in Punta Chiqueros," he says into my ear.

"Dad!" Camille screams from the dining room, "Byron is feeding meatballs to the dog!"

"We made Maya on that beach in Punta Chiqueros," I tell him.

He sighs again. "We should have stayed in Veracruz. Gotten visas. Opened a taco stand."

"DADDY-Y!" Camille screams again. "The dog is on the table. She's eating the spaghetti." Caleb releases me and goes to rescue our dinner.

"We should have stayed at Mardi Gras," he says over his shoulder.

"Mardi Gras was over," I tell him.

From [love, murder, etc.](#) available in eformat (coming in print).



FRY BACON. ADD ONIONS

THE
Valentine
Family & Friends
COOKBOOK

five generations of good eating



compiled by
Kathleen Valentine
with commentary



TWO ESSAYS AND EIGHT RECIPES FROM [FRY BACON. ADD ONIONS](#)

This combination memoir and family cookbook combines 30 blog posts with nearly 400 recipes collected from family and friends. Growing up in a “mostly Pennsylvania Dutch” family Kathleen Valentine collected and recorded recipes from grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, cousins, friends, etc. Essays topics include making sauerkraut and soltz (a German pickled meat loaf), toasting marshmallows and catching fireflies, the old-country Christmas traditions of making stollen and visits from Belsnickle, old world ghost stories, their grandmother's quilts, and more.

Traditional family recipes include schmarn, panhaas, moultaasha, a variety of sausage recipes, hassempfeffer, and liver dumplings, a wide variety of pickles and relishes, as well as keuchels (a type of fried dough), apple dumplings, and rhubarb crisps and pies. Contemporary recipes from the younger generations of the Valentine family expand the collection with everything from dips and cocktails to chowders, cakes and cookies. Among the more popular recipes first featured on Valentine's blog are three maple syrup pies, an apricot-apple crisp with maple cream, caramel peachy-pear pandowdy, a honey & white peach pie, and her own Pennsylvania Dutch hot and sour soup.

This sample includes essays on Dandelion Salad and Telling Stories as well as eight recipes.

April 21, 2009 – Dandelion Salad

It rained last night and this morning it is misty and damp and the birds in the cemetery behind my house are singing away. I woke up this morning thinking about Gram Werner and her dandelion salad. On days like this, when that first flush of bright green appears on the tree branches and the dry brown grass of winter begins to glow with new life, Gram would say, "It's almost time for dandelion salad."

It wouldn't be long until, on any sunny day that you stopped by her house, you would find her sitting in the lawn somewhere with a bucket and a screwdriver prying little dandelions free from the earth. She especially loved them when they were new and tender. And she prized the little buttons that were the first budding of the flowers.

It amazes me now to remember how rich her yard was. There were apple trees that became so loaded with apples in the fall that she would prop the branches up with wooden clothesline poles. There was a pear tree that was unreliable but when it did bear fruit they were the most delicious pears --- small but flushed with red and so juicy and sweet. There was a white lattice arbor over the basement door that was loaded down with Concord grapes each fall. There were patches of chives and everywhere you looked, tucked into corners and along hedges, were bright clumps of rhubarb. One of the rituals of leaving home to live elsewhere was when Gram would bring you a clump of rhubarb, roots intact and wrapped in plastic, and all bundled in newspaper.

"Now, here," she'd say, "this is the rhubarb Pop carried with him from the Old Country. Plant it when you get home and you can make rhubarb pie every summer." I planted clumps of rhubarb in a number of new locations. Last time I looked there was a thick, healthy clump of Great-Grandpop's rhubarb growing under a hedge in Marblehead.

So anyway, Gram would fill her bucket and wash the precious dandelions well under the spigot that was surrounded by lilies of the valley. She'd take them into her big blue kitchen and this is how she made her salad.

First she would hard-boil 3 or 4 eggs and boil up 5-6 little thin-skinned potatoes. Then she'd take out a heavy, cast iron skillet and fry up 5 or 6 strips of bacon. While that was frying she'd put the greens, with their little button buds, in a huge bowl and add the eggs and potatoes sliced up. She'd chop up a couple onions and add salt, pepper and a good sized spoon of sugar and toss the whole thing together.

When the bacon was done she'd remove it to paper towels to drain and drain off about half of the fat (which she kept for other secret purposes). Then she'd put the skillet back over the flame until the fat was sputtering hot. Now, for a kid watching her, this was the fun part. "Stand back," she'd say. And she'd pour apple cider vinegar into the hot fat and a great, hissing, eye-stinging cloud of steam would rise up out of the pan with the most wonderful crackling and snapping sound.

And with the vinegar still steaming she'd pour it over the greens! It was so cool, I always thought. She'd crumple on the bacon. Then we'd carry the bowl to the table and she'd give everyone a big "soup plate" to fill from the bowl and devour with nothing more than some home-made rye bread to round out the meal.

"That'll get the winter out of your bones," she'd say. And we'd "eat ourselves full", as she liked to say.

Dandelion Salad was an event and for years after I was grown and lived "away", if I was home in the spring, I'd go by Gram's to see if we could have dandelion salad together. Once when we were in college, Jack called me from Alfred University, where he was in school. "Hey," he said, "tell me what all goes in dandelion salad, I picked a bucketful today." And I could hear him writing it down as I told him step-by-step.

So it is Spring and I am remembering Gram, and Jack, and dandelion salad. I hope wherever they are they can have a bowl of it together. And I'll have to go out and check out the dandelion situation in the cemetery. It's almost time.

August 9, 2004 - Tell Me A Story

This is a true story.

It happened 30 years ago, when I lived in the Allegheny Highlands of Pennsylvania and loved to hike and camp. We were at a campsite designated as "primitive" in one of Pennsylvania's many state parks. "Primitive" means "in the woods, no amenities. If something goes wrong, deal with it."

"We" were my longtime camping pal, Patty, her two boys, my youngest sister, Beth, who was nine at the time, and a new friend, Karen, who had grown up in Chicago and thought sleeping on the ground was high adventure.

We spent the day swimming in a quiet, beautiful river sheltered by hemlocks. Now, as evening fell as softly as apple blossoms on a May breeze, Patty gathered the kids to clean them up while I, the chronically designated camp cook, whipped up a skillet full of barbecued beef and beans with pancakes made from the batter left from breakfast.

I was just hefting the cast iron skillets, those same skillets I had laboriously hauled from campsite to campsite for years, steaming and succulent smelling, onto the log that served as a table when I saw Patty stop dead still. Her eyes grew huge.

"Oh ... nuts."

That isn't an exact quote, but you get my drift.

Before I could turn to look behind me, a large, glossy black head sunk into one of the pans I was holding, and the black bear that the head was attached to bumped meaningfully against my left side. Before I could surrender the pan and slip away, a second bear came around my right side and dug into the pancakes. In seconds it was sharing its dinner with a third. I was trapped in the midst.

I tell this story because it is one of those incidents that happens in a person's life that is a lot more fun to tell and re-tell than it is to experience.

Recently, while giving a speech at a business seminar, I told a story that happened when I lived in Houston and worked at Enron Corp. The good thing about having worked at Enron is that you have material for life.

Afterwards, people told me how much they loved the story, and I started thinking about the pleasure of sharing stories. With all the sophisticated entertainment available today, there is much to be said for the sheer joy of listening to a fellow human tell a story.

It is one of the most ancient forms of community. Our earliest ancestors, weary from a day of mastodon hunting on the veldt, gathered around the fires as the meat roasted and shared themselves by sharing their days' experiences.

"Everything grew suddenly quiet," they might have said, "I could smell the danger in the air."

"Once upon a time," they later said. And everyone pulled their chairs together to listen.

"Back when I first met your grandfather"

"I remember when I was a boy"

Thus begins a form of intimacy, a way of opening our lives and inviting another in. Those are the stories that will linger in the mind and touch the generations to

come more than the latest episode of any television show ever can.

We owe it to the future of the world to turn to another and say, "Did I ever tell you about the time ...?"

That day in the Allegheny Highlands the bears ate every bit of our dinner. I managed to squeeze out from among them and get far enough away to watch with amazement as they moved from the detritus of that dinner to whatever provisions we had stashed for the week. They ate their fill and moved on. We packed up and did the same.

My sister Beth has three children of her own now and she tells them the story, "Long ago, when I was little, Aunt Kathy took me camping" And they fix their big eyes on her and hang on her every word.

"Tell it again, mommy," they say.

And, of course, she does.

From [Fry Bacon. Add Onions](#), available in paperback or eformat

--RECIPES--

My Sauerkraut Soup

My mother absolutely loved this. The last few times I made it I added a couple cups of frozen peas just before adding the sauerkraut. Nice addition!

Boil 1 plump chicken in 6 cups water. Remove chicken to cool and set aside 1 cup of the broth. Add:

½ c. each chopped celery & carrot

1 cup chopped onion

4 chicken bouillon cubes

Simmer until tender.

Reduce heat and stir in 1½ cup whipping cream. Bring to a gentle simmer. Cut chicken into bite-sized pieces and add to soup. In small saucepan melt ¼ cup butter and stir in ¼ cup flour to make a roux. Blend in reserved liquid. Heat until thick, add to soup while whisking. Add in 2 cups rinsed sauerkraut. Heat through. Add salt and pepper.

Liver Dumplings

I know it sounds strange but they are absolutely delicious! Gram often made them with a commercial onion soup mix for the broth which is fine. They are extra delicious if you make a batch of Mom's Egg Noodles to serve with them.

Combine:

1 lb. ground calves liver

1 stack of saltine crackers, crushed

1 egg

1 small onion, minced

1 tsp. salt

juice of one lemon (optional)

Bring the onion or a beef broth to a rolling boil. Drop the liver mixture in by the tablespoonful. Boil about 20 minutes or until the dumplings float to the top and are done on both sides. Ladle the broth and dumplings into a soup plate and serve with noodles.

Great-Aunt Mary's Hot German Potato Salad

This is the recipe that Mom uses. There is a funny story that goes with this. Mom was always making huge pans of this to take to parties, picnics, Lisa's wedding, or any occasion that warranted this treat. She had this huge square pan that held a ton of it and she would put it in the oven for 3 hours. One Sunday morning she wanted to go to Mass so she put the potatoes in the oven and left a note on the stove that said "Please stir the potatoes in an hour" for whoever was around. When she got home from church she checked her potatoes and was shocked to see the pan full of what looked like mashed potatoes. Turns out she should have said WHO should stir the potatoes because EVERYBODY — Dad, Jack, Wayne, Anne, me, probably Lisa, Chris, Matt and Beth, too had ALL stirred the potatoes. Oh well, it still tasted good.

In a large roasting pan put ½ peck of sliced and peeled potatoes and 1 large sweet onion peeled (more to taste). Sprinkle with ½ pound of sliced bacon pieces.

Mix together ½ cup sugar, 2 tbsp. salt, 1½ cup vinegar, and 2 to 3 cups of water. Pour over the potatoes and sprinkle them with dried or fresh parsley. Stir well and place in a 350° oven for 3 hours. Stir once every hour. For the last half hour you can top with a pound of sliced wieners. Feeds a crowd!

Mom's Home-made Bread

My mother was the best bread-maker I ever met. Her bread was absolutely delicious and she made it all the time. One of my fondest memories is coming home from school on a cold winter afternoon and smelling that delicious, warm, yeasty smell of fresh-baked bread. The following is exactly the way Mom wrote the recipe down for me:

Boil a small potato until mushy and add liquid to make one quart. Make a well in a basin of white flour, add part whole wheat flour if desired. Add ½ c. sugar, ¼ c. salt, 1 Household yeast cake,

½ to ¾ cup shortening. Mix together until well-kneaded. Let rise, mix down, let rise again. Put in loaf pans.

That's where her directions stop. Kneading bread is a pleasurable experience. You really have to get into it and go to work but as the dough becomes thoroughly kneaded it becomes smooth and glossy and doesn't cling to your fingers or the bowl.

When I make bread the way Mom taught me I start with about 10 cups of flour. I tend to use unbleached flour and at least half whole-wheat which gives a denser, chewier bread than Mom's. When the potato is soft, blend it well into the water and add enough cold water to make a quart — you want the water to be warm but not hot or it will kill the little yeasties. I also "proof" my yeast which Mom never did. Crumble the yeast cake or use two packs of dry yeast in a cup of warm water to which a tablespoon of flour and of sugar has been added. When it begins to bubble and foam it is "proofed". Add to flour along with the other ingredients.

Dough should always be kneaded with love and happiness — it makes better bread. When you are satisfied that the dough is well-kneaded and it has a smooth, glossy finish, place it in the bowl, cover with a clean dish towel and set aside to raise. Mom's bread used to raise so high it sometimes came over the sides of the bowl. Knead the dough again — this makes the texture fine and helps eliminate big air bubbles. Divide the dough into sections. You can put it in greased loaf pans, shape it into round or long shapes, or pinch pieces the size of golf balls off and tuck them into a round cake pan to make buns. Let rise again.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and bake until it is golden brown and sounds hollow when tapped. Remove to cooling racks. Mom always greased the tops of her loaves with a little shortening. Actually that was my job as a kid.

Great-grandmother Woelfel's Schmarn

This is really not a bread. "Schmarn" means pancake and Gram remembers her mother making these for breakfast. Wayne was always very partial to them. I am copying it her exactly as Gram Werner wrote it.

Mix 1 c. flour, 1 tsp. salt, 1½ c. milk a little at a time till smooth. Then add 5 eggs and beat with the rest of the milk. You can add more milk, dough should be very runny. Heat a "non-stick" frying pan with 2 tbsp. shortening added. Let pan get very hot then pour in the dough. Let cook a few minutes, then with a pancake turner, keep turning and sort of chopping up till edges are brown and sort of fringed and baked through. Makes 4 servings. Good with syrup.

Great-Aunt Mary Dippold's Keuchels

Keuchels (KEE-kulls) are wonderful things! They are puffy, round pieces of fried dough which are thick and chewy around the edges and thin and crunchy in the middle. Great-aunt Mary Dippold was Gram Werner's older sister and the most beautiful woman. She had round pink cheeks and snowy hair and she always reminded me of Mrs. Santa Claus. She lived across the street from the German Church in St. Marys and made the best keuchels. A proper keuchel should be about the size of a luncheon plate and be a lovely, golden brown color. The old Germans in St. Marys say they get their quaint shape because they are shaped by pulling them over your knee.

Mix well:

1 qt. milk

1 c. sugar

1 stick margarine or butter

Dissolve a yeast cake in ½ c. warm water.

Knead together 8 c. flour and 6 eggs. Add the yeast and the milk mixture. Knead well. Cover and let raise.

Pinch off pieces by the handful and shape into round, flat shapes that are thicker toward the edge and flat toward the middle. Drop into a fryer of hot oil and fry until golden and floating. Drain well and sprinkle with powdered sugar. Gram liked to serve them warm with jam in the center.

Mom's Date & Nut Cake with Broiled On Topping

For years I asked for this for my birthday cake. Not a traditional birthday cake but I didn't care. This and rhubarb pie are my very favorite birthday treats.

Combine:

1 cup chopped dates

1 cup boiling water

1 tsp. baking soda

Let stand until cool. Meanwhile cream together: ½ cup butter, 1 cup sugar, 1 egg, 1½ cup flour, ¼ tsp. salt, 1 cup walnuts, 1 tsp. vanilla

Add to date mixture and pour into a prepared cake pan. Bake at 350° until top is set and does not respond to touch.

Broiled on Topping:

Blend 2 tbsps brown sugar, 2 tbsps cream,

5 tbsps margarine and ½ tsp. vanilla. Spread on finished cake and place under broiler until it sizzles. Sprinkle with coconut.

Rhubarb Crisp

I just took a batch of this out of the oven one night when Lisa stopped by for a visit. She had a dish of it and said it was delicious then went about her way. About three hours later she turned up on my doorstep again and said, "I've been thinking about that rhubarb crisp..." So, naturally, we both had some more.

Chop cleaned rhubarb into ½" pieces and toss with cornstarch to lightly coat. Place in casserole dish to within 1½" of the top. Add 2 c. sugar, ½ c. flour, and several pats of butter. Crumble together 1 c. dry oatmeal, 1 stick butter, ½ c. brown sugar, ½ tsp. salt.

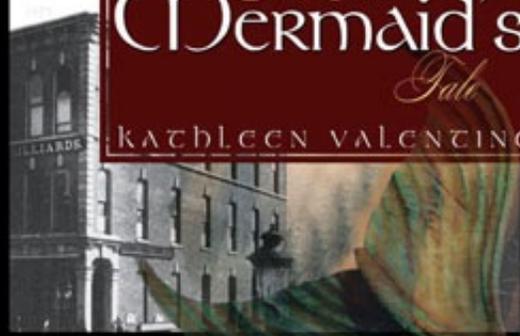
Crumble over the top of the rhubarb and bake at 350° for 1 hour. Apples may be added if there is not enough rhubarb.

This same recipe can be used with fresh peaches or fresh cherries. Reduce sugar to 1¼ cups.

From [Fry Bacon. Add Onions](#), available in paperback or eformat

1923	Leeward	Steamer	Small	U.S.A.
1925	Angler	Fish Tug	Small	Canada
1924	Harriet Garrison	Bridge	Small	U.S.A.
1924	Adam Schuman	Scow	Foremast	U.S.A.
1924	Cymonid	Steamer	Small	U.S.A.
1925	Smith	Tug	Small	Canada
1931	Walter Miller	Fish Tug	Small	U.S.A.
1932	J.J. Boland Jr.	Freighter	Small	U.S.A.
1934	David Foster	Steamship	Small	U.S.A.
1934	Adolph Hall	Steamer	Small	U.S.A.
1937	American Belle	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1937	Billy Hodge	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1937	American Jewel	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1938	Harry Young	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1939	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1940	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
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1996	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1997	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1998	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
1999	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.
2000	Edwin Paul	Scow	Small	U.S.A.

The Old
Mermaid's
Tale
 KATHLEEN VALENTINE



CHAPTER 11 FROM [THE OLD MERMAID'S TALE](#)

Set in the early 1960s, The Old Mermaid's Tale is a classical romance, coming-of-age story set against the background of Great Lakes sea legends and lore. Clair Wagner is a romantic young woman growing up on an Ohio farm who dreams of meeting a handsome sailor "with the constellations of the Northern Seas in his eyes." She plans to achieve this by attending college in Port Presque Isle where she is as enraptured by the stories about shipwrecks and folklore as she is by the new men – three of whom will change her life in completely different ways.

The Old Mermaid's Tale has garnered high praise from readers and writers:

At the end of THE OLD MERMAID'S TALE I bowed my head in wonder at what Kathleen Valentine has accomplished, a novel that is a treasure-house of the Great Lakes maritime history and lore. But more importantly, a magnificent story of obsession and redemption, of finding one's destiny, then finding one's way home. Here is an old-fashioned story that transports us and educates us as epic novels do, a story that reminds us of the power of unconditional love, and of the miracle and brevity of our human existence. - Kiana Davenport, author of Shark Dialogues and Cannibal Nights, Pacific Island Stories

Kathleen Valentine is a very gifted writer. She captures the prosaic as well as the heavenly but it is in the heavenly - in the sheer beauty of her sometimes astonishingly lush prose - that I was swept off my feet. Every great story leaves the reader with an indelible impression. Kathleen Valentine's "The Old Mermaid's Tale" left me feeling simply "wonderful," as if I had been rendered nearly senseless by an over indulgence of fine chocolate, heady wine, hot therapeutic waters, and the sweet caresses of an understanding and satisfying lover. - Maureen Gill, author of January Moon

The novel is written in an often breathless style, with carefully crafted scenes and dramatic flourishes as befitting the historical romance novel genre. The author is to be congratulated on a book that will entertain women and some men with a rip roaring romantic read. - Barry Yelton, author of Scarecrow in Gray

Clair Wagner and her best friend Rosalie Tiernan are college sophomores about to go back to their homes for Christmas. Both of them have wished for the lovers of their dreams – Clair longs for a handsome seaman, Rosie wants an Italian dreamboat. The night before they are scheduled to leave for the holidays they go in to town for a farewell dinner in Rosie's favorite Italian restaurant. But before they get to the restaurant they encounter two young men, Pio and Dante Romeo, whose aunt and uncle own the restaurant. They are on their way to a party at their brother Tony's house and invite the girls to go with them.

-11-

ZIA REGINA INSISTED ON WRAPPING UP the platter of antipasti for us to take and Zio Leo filled a brown paper shopping bag with bottles of wine. "Tell Antonio I'll add it to his tab."

"Now, be careful, Dante." Zia Regina fluttered around us like a mother sending her daughters off on a date. "Don't go acting *come uno sciocco*."

Dante took the platter and Pio hefted the bag of wine. "*Molto grazie*." He leaned forward and kissed his aunt and then his uncle on the right cheek then the left then back on the right again in the European fashion that sent a shiver through me.

"It's around the corner." Pio walked beside me as we retraced our steps back up to Eighth Street and then turned down Plum which took us into an old-fashioned neighborhood lined with two-story brick and shingle bungalows most of which were aglow with Christmas lights and large illuminated Nativity scenes. "My brother and his wife live in the next block. You'll like them—Angela loves a house full of people."

We could hear music and laughter all the way out in the street as we approached. "See that?" Dante said pointing to a long red and silver car gleaming at the curb. "That's mine. Automatic transmission with a Thunderjet engine and an Edelbrock 4-barrel carb. Is she slick or what?"

"Ohhhh," Rosie sounded genuinely excited, "very slick."

Pio snorted. "So slick it'll look super wrapped around a tree."

"Eat your heart out," Dante laughed and we walked down the sidewalk to the brightly lit and crowded house.

Tony Romeo, the eldest of the three, shared his brothers' romantic good looks. He was somewhat larger than Dante but not as big as Pio and sported a handsome mustache much like the one his Uncle Leo wore.

"Girls?" he said in astonishment as we were introduced. "You two *sciocchi* have girls? *Mama mia*, it's a Christmas miracle. Angela, my two brothers brought girls!"

"Don't listen to Tony," Angela Romeo said coming to greet us, wiping her hands on a large Christmas patterned apron that bulged over a pregnant belly. She was nearly as tall as her husband and beautiful with a wide, welcoming smile.

"Pio," she said taking the platter from Dante, "go get the girls some wine."

The house was packed with people—most of them variations on the dark-haired, dark-eyed good looks of the Romeos but here and there I spotted faces that showed no Mediterranean background. Rosie fit right in chattering in Italian in no time but I wasn't quite as comfortable. Conversation was loud and quick against a background of blaring music—Elvis Presley singing Christmas carols.

Pio handed me a glass of wine and leaned down to shout, "Come on, I'll introduce you to my sister before she leaves."

Unlike her brothers, Giovanna Romeo was tiny with delicate features. She had a habit of bouncing up on her toes when she talked and the high, rather squeaky, voice of an excitable mouse.

"Merry Christmas, Clair," she exclaimed taking my hands. "Wow, I wish I could stay and talk to you but my boyfriend is coming to get me. His brother owns a tavern down on Canal Street and he's having a Christmas party there tonight."

A tavern down on Canal Street! The words ricocheted through my brain. Giovanna's boyfriend's brother owns a tavern down on Canal Street? This was getting better and better.

"That sounds great," I shouted back. "I hope you have a wonderful time."

"Gia," Tony Romeo shouted above the crowd. "Mario's here."

She giggled and bounced up and down. "I hate to run but make Pio bring you to Mama's house for Christmas."

"I can't," I said. "I'm going back to Ohio tomorrow to be with my family."

"Oh," she said with a disarming pout, "you don't live here?"

"No, I go to college at Chesterton."

"Chesterton?" She smiled at Pio. "My brother's taste is improving."

She left but Pio was a most gracious host, introducing me to far more people than I could remember. Every now and then I saw Dante and Rosie through the shifting crowd. She was glowing. There was no doubt she was falling in love and having the time of her life.

"So, Clair," Tony Romeo slung a big arm around his brother's shoulder and winked at me. "What's a cute girl like you doing with a homely bastard like this?"

"Watch the mouth," Pio said and Tony gave him a stunned look that clearly said 'you're kidding, right?'

I shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess." Pio beamed at that.

"Clair's gonna join the crew. When we get our boat she's going to be first mate."

"Not a chance," Tony laughed. "Women and boats don't go together. We might be crazy but we aren't dumb enough to take a woman on board."

"Crazy is right." Another dark-haired young man joined us. He wasn't as handsome as the Romeo brothers but he wasn't bad. "You clowns are going to lose your shirts and wind up working for me like Dante."

"This is my brother-in-law," Pio said, "Costas is married to our sister Rafaella. He has a crappy little painting company with our idiota brother."

I shook his hand. "Dante is proud of the car he's been able to buy working for you," I said.

"At least one of these pig-headed Romeo's has some sense. These two think they're going to buy a boat and make some money."

"We are gonna buy a boat," Tony said. "It's a beauty, too. A one piece welded steel tug built over in Dover at Gamble in the forties. It's been completely re-outfitted and converted to diesel. Nice little trawler. There's still plenty of perch and walleyes out there waiting for some decent fishermen to catch them."

"Yeah," Pio added, "the lake's a long ways from being fished out. We've been bringing in white bass and perch. More guys are bringing in herring all the time, you have to know to go where the fish are. That's why me and Tony and Mario are the men for the job, we can stay out and work the nets like most of these guys that call themselves fishermen have never seen."

"Did you know," Tony transferred his arm from Pio's shoulders to mine, "that when the first pioneers came to Lake Erie the fish were so plentiful they couldn't even row boats because of all the fish? They used to get their women to scoop them up in baskets and they'd load them on wagons and throw them in their fields to fertilize the crops."

I laughed. "I can't imagine that."

"It's true," Pio added knocking Tony's arm away from my shoulders and wrapping his around my waist. "The Indians mostly didn't catch fish. They were afraid of the lake."

I looked into his mysterious black eyes. They were so dark it was hard to know what was going on behind them but I was having a delicious time trying to imagine. "Afraid of the lake?"

"Yup." Another of their friends joined us. "The Iroquois thought a demon lived in the depths of the lake and they wouldn't even make camp near it."

"Yeah," Pio cut in. "They'd travel in parties out the peninsula because they thought the demon couldn't see them there and they'd set up seine nets and catch fish to take back to their villages to dry but they wouldn't go out on the Lake for anything."

"How do you know all this?" I was enjoying the competition for my attention. Having four pairs of appreciative eyes fixed on me was intoxicating.

"You should hear the old timers sometime, Clair," Tony said. "They tell some pretty damn wild stories about being caught out in the central basin during a muzzler and seeing an Iroquois war party appear out of the mist."

"I'd like that. I'm interested in old stories like that. Back home we call it 'yarn-spinning'."

"Well," Pio gave my waist a proprietary squeeze, "then I'll have to take you down to Walks-in-the-Water some night. You'll hear all the stories you want."

"What's Walks-in-the-Water?"

"Sal's tavern," the guy whose name I didn't know said.

"Sal Testaverde," Tony explained. "He's Mario's older brother—more like his father really. He has a tavern down on Canal Street by the docks. Lots of old timers hang out in there. Sal named it Walks-in-the-Water because that's what the Iroquois called the first steam ship when they saw it."

"Really?" I felt like I should pinch myself. It seemed that all the dreams that haunted me for years, and which I had abandoned out of frustration, were being summoned in to life. I looked up at Pio who was gazing down at me with something close to adoration in his beautiful eyes. I thought I could fall in love with him on the basis of this conversation alone.

"Yeah. You'll like Sal. He's a tough old buzzard. Sal used to work the lakers way back when. He walked away from one of the worst storms ever, came ashore and said he wasn't ever going back out for anything. He bought the Walks-in-the-Water and won't even talk about fishing. We'll go down there sometime with Mario and Gia."

"I can't wait." And I couldn't.

The combination of too much wine, too little food and the sheer intoxication of the conversation was beginning to disorient me. Pio was constantly at my side ready to fill my wine glass and make introductions. He seemed to be reveling in the attention of having a girl to introduce. I didn't mind at all.

"More wine?" he asked when I put my empty glass down.

"No," I was feeling a bit woozy. "Could you..."

"Just tell me." He placed a reassuring hand on my back.

"I think I could use a glass of water."

"Sure. Stay there."

I had no idea what time it was but a few people had left and the men were pushing back the living room furniture. Couples were beginning to dance. Dante and Rosie were the first ones on the floor. In a minute her head was snuggled into his shoulder and his arms were wound around her small waist as they swayed to Moon River. Even though Dante was not particularly large she looked delicate and fragile in his arms.

"So what's a nice Anglo-Saxon girl like you doing in a Roman den of iniquity?"

I turned around to face an equally Anglo-looking young man with a sweep of straight blond sun-streaked hair wearing a festive red and green argyle sweater over a white shirt and tie.

"Gary Peacock." He held out his hand. "I used to play baseball with Dante at St. Stanislaus Prep."

"Clair Wagner." I was trying to get control of my senses. "I never met these people before tonight."

"Yeah? How'd that happen? You and your friend don't look like the kind of girls I usually see at these parties."

I laughed. "You won't believe it. One minute I was safe in my dorm room at Chesterton and then the next thing you know I made a wish on a Christmas angel and Pio was picking me up off the sidewalk, literally."

"No kidding." He had a great grin. "Pio must be improving his technique. I've been to a few parties out at Chesterton. I'm at Hamilton but I live with my folks out by Girard."

The Hamilton School was an exclusive men's college a few blocks away run by Jesuit priests. I knew girls in the dorm who were dating Hamilton men.

"You don't look like a fisherman." He had a calm self-confidence that was charming and I liked the little laugh lines already beginning to be evident at the corner of his eyes.

He grinned. It was a great grin. "No thanks. These guys are crazy. Thank God Dante isn't following in the family business. I like him too much to want to think of him on the bottom of the Lake like his old man."

I must have registered shock because he reached out and put a steadying hand on my arm. "Geez, I'm sorry. You didn't know?"

"No." I was genuinely shaken. "I just met them."

"Yeah. It happened a few years ago. His boat disappeared in one of those Arctic fogs that roll down from the North Pole. A real tragedy. His boat and all four crew were lost. That's why I'm kind of surprised these two knuckleheads and their buddy Mario want to do the same thing."

"Mario? Giovanna's boyfriend?"

"Yeah." He started to let go of my arm but was hesitant. "You okay?"

"Yes. Too much wine. I'm not much of a drinker."

"Hey, get your hand off my girl." Pio loomed out of the crowd with my glass of water. He handed it to me and slipped a hand round my waist. He was smiling but it lacked sincerity. "Get your own girl."

"Why?" Gary said putting his hands into the pockets of his pleated trousers. "I'm having fun stealing yours."

"Beat it," Pio growled.

Gary laughed.

"Okay. Nice meeting you, Clair. Merry Christmas."

Pio looked down at me with a nervous expression.

"You all right?"

"Yes. You have to stop fretting over me."

The Drifters were on the recordplayer crooning *Save The Last Dance for Me*.

"Want to dance?"

I nodded.

I liked Gary Peacock but he didn't have midnight black eyes with sparkles like the lights of passing ships in them.

[The Old Mermaid's Tale](#) is available in paperback or eformat.

KATHLEEN VALENTINE

author of The Old Mermaid's Tale

EACH
ANGEL
BURNS



CHAPTER 20 FROM [EACH ANGEL BURNS](#)

Each Angel Burns is a gothic tale of romantic suspense with a unique perspective. The three main characters are entering their fifties and coming face-to-face with challenges, mysteries, and conflicts that will change the rest of their lives. Gabe is the good father, good husband, good friend, a skilled woodworker who has done the right by his wife, daughters, brother and grumpy old father all his life. Father Peter is Gabe's best friend from boyhood, a brilliant teacher, reliable friend, and devout man of God. Maggie is the gifted sculptor who has finally left her abusive husband and purchased an abandoned convent on the Maine coast where mysterious happenings have been rumored for years. Father Peter was once in love with Maggie but she left him to marry her wealthy but abusive husband. Now she is free and has hired Gabe to help restore the old convent. Winter is setting in, stories are whispered about a statue of the Angel Gabriel that has disappeared, and the bodies of murdered young women are washing up on the shores.

With her 2009 novel, Each Angel Burns, indie author Kathleen Valentine picks up where [Daphne] du Maurier left off, herself reviving and recreating the gothic genre by incorporating some classic mood elements (a labyrinthine abbey, a hero, an absolute evil villain, and a range of inexplicable disappearances) along with modern twists intended to keep the story current and accessible - a dingily ordinary mill town bar, an assortment of struggling middle-aged Everymen, and their modern and sometimes angst-ridden relationships with women and God... The main story and its offshoots come together because of Valentine's use of the Catholic religion - its traditions, teachings, and symbolism - as unifying image and theme. Marriages break up, new love takes its time, all kinds of commitment are questioned and tested; in the end evil is uncovered and vanquished, but not without some soul searching and sadness. All of this unfurls to the reader within the larger context of faith and its redemptive, healing properties. A masterful storyteller, Valentine gives the stories of all her characters their due time to develop until they resonate. Each Angel Burns is a book that has burned itself into memory. - Jane Ward, author of The Mosaic Artist

Maggie Marceau is a gifted sculptor who has just acquired an abandoned convent on the coast of Maine. It is her intention to renovate it and turn it into a sculpture studio and arts center but first she has to get away from her wealthy but cruel husband Sinclair. The convent once housed a statue of the Angel Gabriel which has mysteriously disappeared. As Maggie tries to find out more about it she unexpectedly encounters Father Peter Black, the man who loved her before he was a priest – but who she rejected to marry Sinclair.

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Now she sighed and opened a fresh sketch pad. She had new commissions thanks to the recent exhibition in Portsmouth. There was no time to wallow in reminiscences of the love she had for years treated as a fantasy—something dreamed or imagined. Farther up on the wall were a pair of photographs of the missing angel—the angel that had drawn them back into one another’s lives.

When she first began summering at the abbey, every trip into Moose Landing brought the same questions.

“So, how do you feel about living way out there? Don’t you ever get nervous? Do you know what they say about that place?”

She assured them that she had an excellent alarm system installed, which they already knew because Ethan Darling’s general store was Moose Landing’s information central. Nothing happened between Kittery and Biddeford that didn’t get discussed at Darling’s One Stop Shop. She listened politely to the stories they told her and asked questions which usually garnered more information than she needed.

But the biggest question was always, what happened to the angel? Where is it? Who took it? How did they manage that? Her intrigue grew with each visit.

In the spring of her third year of seasonal residence the first clue presented itself. She stopped for groceries at Darling’s expecting to see Ethan’s wife, a short apple-cheeked woman named April. In her place was a leathery old man with hair that stood straight up and a beard that fanned around his face giving him the look of a Kodiak bear.

“M’daughter-in-law had to drive up to Portland,” he told her before she asked, “name’s Homer Darling.” In typical Maine fashion, he pronounced his name “Hom-ah”. “I’m mindin things here till she gets back. You find that angel yet?”

She couldn’t suppress her laugh. “Sorry,” she said. “I’m working on it.”

“Prob’ly in one a them fancy houses down in Newport or Hyannisport. I figgah when the nuns got too old to notice what was goin on some enterprisin youngstahs helped themselves to it and then sold it for a bundle to some big shot collectah on the sly. Them poor old dames nevah even noticed.”

She smiled. “That’s certainly possible. Was it worth anything though? Most religious statuary isn’t particularly valuable. I’d be surprised if anyone would pay much for it.”

Homer regarded her with twinkling eyes buried in a nest of wrinkles as he sucked on a briar pipe sending clouds of Cherry Blend into the air.

“This’n was pretty valuable from what I heard. Some priest fellah come up here from Boston one time to take pictures of it and he told me if folks round here knew what a treasure it was they’d be standin in line to see it. He said there was anotheah one like it over there in Italy and it was real valuable.”

“Really?” She looked at him surprised. “Do you remember anything more that he said?”

Homer drew on his pipe filling the air with sweet smoke as he tried to remember. “I’ll have ta study on it a bit but I remembah he said they was three a them statues—y’know like in the Bible? Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. He said that he’d seen the Michael one ovah there in Florence, Italy and now he seen the Gabriel one here but he didn’t think he’d evah get to see the Raphael one cause of it bein in a private collection nobody was sure where.”

“That’s interesting. I always assumed it was a standard molded statue.” She stared at him sorting through her own memory of Florence for statues of the Archangel Michael. “Do you remember the priest’s name?”

Homer frowned. She knew he was enjoying her attention and doing his best to impress her with his knowledge. “Hnnmmm, that was proba’ly fifteen, twenty years ago, y’know, but he was a nice young fellah. I remembah he said he worked at that Boston College down there. I remembah that cause Cal Hurley’s one boy goes to school down there and I asked if he knew ‘im.” He puffed thoughtfully. “He didn’t.”

“Boston College,” she repeated storing the bit of information.

“Yep. He was an Irish fellah. I remembah that cause he had one a them real Irish-lookin faces with the big bushy blond eyebrows and eyes what disappear back in his head like. He said he was workin on a doctorate in art history. I remembah that much. He was a nice fellah. Took a lot of pictures. He come in here to buy more film. I couldn’t figgah out why anybody’d want to take that many pictures of something that don’t move but he seemed all excited.” He shook his head. “That’s about it, though. I remembah I felt real bad cause it wasn’t more’n a year after that when the thing gone missin and I thought that fellah would be real disappointed to know that.”

“I’m sure he was. Thank you, Mr. Darling, I’ll see if I can find him.”

He frowned at her. “You got that internet stuff out there to the abbey?”

She smiled. “Yes, I do.”

“Figuahed.” He finished ringing up her order and handed her the change. Then without another word he returned to reading his newspaper.

Back at the abbey she made herself a pot of tea and sat down at her laptop. If Boston College had a list of faculty members on their web site she just might be in luck.

The web site proved to be far more extensive than she had expected but after some investigation she clicked into the School of Arts & Sciences. There was a link for Faculty. She clicked and the list that rolled onto the page had over forty names listed under the letter “A” alone. It would take forever to narrow that down. But her curiosity was aroused and before long she had found her way into the Department of Fine Arts. This was better. Under Faculty were three links: Art History, Studio Arts, and Film Studies. She clicked on Art History. Ten names—all preceded by the word “Doctor”—scrolled onto her screen. Hopefully, the young Irish priest had attained his doctorate and stayed on the faculty. But the only Irish-sounding name was Dr. Maureen Doyle. Not a good bet.

Scrolling down a little farther she found the list for Part-Time Faculty. The third name looked promising, “Dr. Seamus Flynn, S.J., European Art of the 18th and 19th Century”. She clicked on his name and nothing happened. Rats, she thought, no email. Most of the other names were highlighted indicating a link to their email addresses but not Father Flynn. She jotted down his phone number and address.

Over the next weeks she thought about Father Flynn but never seemed to remember him at a time when a phone call would be appropriate. Sometimes now she wondered if her forgetfulness was some sort of plot on the part of the angel to get her to do what she ultimately did.

In May, Sinclair called with the news that he would be in Boston on business and wanted her to come down to spend the weekend with him at the Park Plaza. She knew better than to refuse. In public they were elegant, glamorous and, oh, so enviable. In private he was as demanding, brutish, and demeaning as ever. She had learned long ago not to resist. Each intimate encounter was an exercise in endurance and her only consolation was that, with the passing of years, the encounters grew

farther and farther apart.

Sinclair left early Monday morning with no explanation where he was going, leaving her to check-out alone. He kissed her hard on the mouth and then bit her neck with a laugh.

"You might be an old broad," he said, "but you've still got a few worthwhile miles left on you."

Maggie said nothing. Even in his sixties he considered himself at the peak of his manhood. But he preferred youth and that was not changing as the age gap widened. She waited until he was gone to shower and pack.

As the plush bathroom filled with steam she examined herself in the mirror. There were a few bruises, nothing too terrible. He hadn't hit her in a long time but he was rough in his handling of her and black and blue marks were the detritus of his ardor. She showered, tied her hair back in a pony-tail—her head ached from three days of having it twisted up—and dressed in a long, slim violet silk skirt with a matching cashmere sweater. Fancier than she was used to wearing in Maine but she tossed the high heeled pumps he insisted on in her bag and slipped her naked feet into a pair of sandals. She'd survived again and was eager to get back to the abbey. She gathered up the pile of absurd lace undergarments he had purchased for her, she hated his taste in tawdry lingerie, and tossed them into the wastebasket. Let the maids have them, she never wanted to see them again. With luck she wouldn't have to see her husband again until she returned to New York in October.

The day was crystal blue with the fluorescent green of early May and growing warmer. She thought about spending some time in the city, maybe go to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. But her rural retreat was making cities increasingly unattractive to her. She longed for the sound of the waves and scent of country air. As she waited for her car to be brought up her thoughts turned to the abbey and then, quite suddenly, to the angel.

"How far is it to Boston College?"

The young woman at the desk typed something into the computer and, with a flourish, pushed Print. A colorful Map Quest page lurched out of the printer.

It was a beautiful campus. A gothic clock tower sparkled in the sunlight. Cherry blossom trees in full bloom were so thick and plentiful that the breeze sent swirls of pink clouds dancing across the lawns. She remembered Father Flynn's address as 313 Carney Hall. Following the heady scent of lilacs, she found her way to the O'Neill Library where students lounging on the plaza steps pointed her in the right direction.

She was just drunk enough on the lilacs, and her freedom from Sinclair, that the name on the door at the top of the stairs didn't register at first. Father Flynn's office was 313, so why was she standing transfixed in front of 303? She blinked her eyes but didn't seem able to move. Then she reread the brass plate below the number.

Peter Abelard Black, S.J., Ph.D., it read, *Classical Studies Department, Greek and Latin Language and Literature.*

Suddenly she was breathless and it wasn't the intoxication of lilacs that made her head spin. She placed her hand on the wall and took a deep breath.

"He won't be in for another hour."

"What?" She turned.

A girl with a mane of sleek, magenta-tipped hair, and carrying a stack of books, stood behind her.

"Are you looking for Father Black? Cause this is when he swims."

Maggie shook her head. "Excuse me?"

"Father Black," the girl repeated. "He swims down at the rec center every day at this time. If you need him you have to either go down there or wait about an hour."

"Father Black..." she whispered the girl's words and felt her entire body begin to tremble.

"Isn't that who you're looking for?"

"Actually," Maggie managed, "I'm looking for Father Flynn."

"Oh." The girl shrugged. "He's in. I just saw him." She pointed. "Down there on the left."

"Thank you." Maggie shook herself and turned in the direction the girl indicated. She took two steps then turned back.

"Miss?"

"Yeah?" The girl had started down the steps but stopped.

"What does Father Black look like?"

"Wicked hot." A broad smile spread across the girl's face. "You know, for an older guy."

"Tall and dark?" Maggie asked knowing what the answer would be.

"Extremely." She giggled. "If you're smart you'll go down to the pool and catch him in his swim trunks." She held a cupped hand a couple of inches in front of her groin. "Worth the walk."

Maggie nodded. "Thank you." She forced herself to continue down the hall trying to recall what the point was in her being there in the first place.

As soon as she looked at Father Seamus Flynn there was no doubt he was the man Homer Darling described. Father Flynn wasn't much older than she. And not quite as tall either. He had a thick, squat body and an open, friendly face with two enormous blond eyebrows overshadowing deep caves where she assumed his eyes were.

Over the bookcase to the left of his desk was a matted and framed photograph. She recognized the background immediately, the rough stone and wood of her chapel. The statue was startling.

"Giovanni Dupré," she breathed turning to him.

He beamed. "You know his work?"

"I lived in Florence when I was first married," she said.

"You've been to the Church of San Lorenzo, then?"

"Yes. His statue of St. Michael is a masterpiece."

"Please, sit down," he held a chair for her. "Most people never knew that he sculpted all three of the archangels. I came across references in letters he wrote when I was studying in Italy. I tracked the Raphael to a private collection in Greece. Maybe someday the world will get to see that one but, in my opinion, the Gabriel was his masterwork." He sighed. "Now we just have to find it."

Father Flynn loved classical sculpture. Talking to him was a pleasure of the sort that she had forgotten for years. She had loved the life of arts and education and having this taste of it was sufficiently exciting to make her nearly forget the office just a few feet farther down the hall.

"What I'm curious about," Maggie said studying the framed photo on the wall, "is how a Dupré wound up at an obscure convent in Maine."

"Ah," Father Flynn's eyes flashed, "that interested me too. I've done some research."

He had spent years seeking out remnants of a paper trail from which he concluded that a wealthy American benefactor had purchased the statue in Florence and, for reasons Father Flynn attributed solely to religious piety, had donated it to the convent.

"Look at the time. I get talking about that angel and I forget everything." He jumped up and pulled open a file cabinet drawer.

“Here.” He drew out two prints from a folder. “I want you to have these.” They were photographs of the statue—the one that hung framed on his wall and another angle with a close-up of the exquisitely sculpted face. “Sorry I have to run but I’ve got a class in five minutes. This is my card. You stay in touch. I want to know about anything you find out.”

And suddenly, in a whirlwind of activity she was in the hallway and Father Flynn was scurrying toward the men’s room.

Maggie took a deep breath and turned her whole body toward the stairs.

The door stood open.

Trembling she inched her way down the hall. She didn’t try to tell herself she was mistaken. She knew she wasn’t. She didn’t try to tell herself that he might not be there or that he might have a student with him. She knew he would be alone. She didn’t try to tell herself he wouldn’t remember her. A man never forgets the woman who broke his heart.

He stood with his back to her, outlined by the light from the window. He was just as tall, just as perfectly formed, just as flawless as she remembered him. She stood in the doorway and took a deep breath and he turned before she could say a word.

[Each Angel Burns](#) is available in paperback or eformat.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

–Novelettes–

The Crazy Old Lady In the Attic - Novelette (15k words) Psychological horror. – When Mattie returns to Beacon Hill, where she grew up, to take possession of the townhouse she inherited from her grandmother, some shocking discoveries await her. Faced with horrors she never imagined, she wonders what kind of monster raised her. (eBook only)

Ghosts of a Beach Town in Winter - Novelette (20k words) Psychological horror / suspense / ghost story – When Layla's professor husband has an opportunity to spend the winter at an old motel in a seaside amusement park resort, she reluctantly agrees to run the pub attached to it while he works on his book. The arcades, food stands, souvenir shops and tattoo parlors are boarded over for the winter but the bungalows tucked in the dunes are occupied by artists and transients looking for cheap rentals. She faces a long, cold, lonely winter but a bunch of old guys she calls The Geezers soon begin regaling her with stories about the “old days” and about an ill-fated romance between the beautiful wife of a Boston mob boss and The Great Hercules, a sideshow strongman. She is also fascinated by an elusive roustabout who flirts with her and shows her the secret spaces in an old beachfront ballroom. As winter gets darker and deeper Layla's husband is both struggling with his writing and becoming suspicious of her behavior. What Layla doesn't know is that nothing is what it seems and her options are growing fewer every day. (eBook only)

Home-made Pie and Sausage & Killing Julie Morris – Two shorts (6k words) Horror / suspense – Two short crime stories about revenge: *Home-made Pie and Sausage* (crime/horror): Sometimes the most ordinary things in life can turn out to be the most horrifying - especially if you're the sheriff of a small town who didn't pay attention when he should have. *Killing Julie Morris* (crime/murder) - Julie Morris was beautiful, rich, spoiled and used to getting her own way -- until she wanted the wrong man. This "chilling" story proves it's not a good idea to take people for granted. (eBook only, Both of these stories can also be found in the anthology, *love, murder, etc.: Eight Stories* by Kathleen Valentine.

Arthur's Story: A Love Story - Novelette (12k words): At the turn of the century 13 year old Arthur is left alone in New York City to fend for himself. His resourcefulness, industry, and good fortune contribute to creating a future -- but so does a mysterious "guardian angel". This tender, heartwarming story is suitable for Young Adults. (eBook only)

–Novels–

The Old Mermaid's Tale - Set against the background of the maritime and sea legends of the Great Lakes, *The Old Mermaid's Tale* weaves a love story of grand proportions - the story of Clair Wagner and the men she loves: Pio, a handsome young fisherman, Gary, the dashing son of a wealthy shipping family, and Baptiste, the mysterious Breton seafarer and musician she is fascinated by. This sweeping coming-of-age story pays homage to the importance of stories in our lives. (Paperback or eBook)

Each Angel Burns - The story of three people at crossroads in their lives: Peter, the amiable and brilliant Jesuit priest; Gabe, the good father, good husband, good craftsman, who is Peter's oldest friend; and Maggie, the elusive sculptor they both love. An abandoned convent on the coast of Maine, where rumors of mysterious events are whispered, is the setting for both murder and romance. A sophisticated love story of enduring friendship, of faith, of great evil and greater love --- and of how they culminate in a miracle. (Paperback or eBook)

Depraved Heart – (Scheduled for winter 2011) Syd Jupiter was one of the most impressive linebackers in the NFL and when he married the ballerina Rachel Silver their fans were enthralled. Five years later, convicted of the depraved heart murder of Rachel's twin brother, Raven, Syd begins a 25 year jail sentence. Fifteen years later Tempest Hobbs, an art historian from Salem, Massachusetts, who is also a “sensitive” is hired by Jupiter who has just been released from prison to archive the multi-million dollar art collection his teenage daughter has just inherited. To do this she will be spending the summer with Syd and his daughter in a crumbling mansion on an island in the North Atlantic. (Paperback or eBook)

–Short Story Collections–

My Last Romance and other passions- *My Last Romance and other passions* contains eight beautifully told little tales of lovers from a broad variety of lifestyles and ages. Valentine's powers of description and sensitive portraits are captivating. Each story is sensuous, and romantic in the most traditional sense of the word. This is a literary feast for those with a taste for both the romantic and literature of high quality. (Paperback or eBook)

love, murder, etc. - This collection of eight short stories includes four stories about love in various forms (Sailor's Valentine, The Mermaid Shawl, Mardi Gras Was Over, Arthur's Story) and four about murder (Home-made Pie and Sausage, Killing Julie Morris, Just An Old-Fashioned Murder, The View from the Lighthouse). All in Valentine's unique and sensually-rich tale-telling. (eBook only)

–Knitting Instruction–

The Mermaid Shawl and other beauties: Shawls, Cocoons & Wraps – This detailed instruction books teaches knitters how to make lace shawls in a variety of shapes and designs using their own creativity to make unique pieces of knitted art. (Full color paperback or eBook)

Knit Your Tail Off: Sumptuous Silk Bags – An instruction booklet with patterns for a variety of shoulder bags. Includes detailed instruction on entrelac and on knitting with silk fibers. (eBook only)

Knit Your Tail Off: The Pooling-On-Purpose-Project – An instruction booklet on working with hand-painted yarn detailing a technique to force colors to “pool” giving a unique and dramatic effect. (eBook only)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Valentine is the author of a collection of short stories *My Last Romance* and other passions, *Each Angel Burns* and *The Old Mermaid's Tale*, both novels. She has also written *The Mermaid Shawl & other Beauties: Shawls, Cocoons and Wraps*, a collection of her own lace knitting designs, which was the #2 selling book on lace knitting on Amazon.com for five months. She is the author of *Fry Bacon. Add Onions*, a cookbook/memoir of growing up Pennsylvania Dutch. Her blog at KathleenValentine.com has been read by thousands of readers since its beginning in July 2005.

She currently lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts, America's oldest seaport, and is writing another novel, *Depraved Heart*.