

Love Song by Timothy Sturis

Wilha left her writer's group at Powell's Books early that night. There was too much on her mind and she was having a hard time focusing. As she stepped out into the chilly October night she pulled her long woolen jacket tight around her slender body. Standing on the street corner, she thought about Calei and wondered where she could be right now. With her nose curled up she shook her head and tried to clear the worry from her mind. It wasn't easy. She was desperate to find answers. So much so that she was even considering going into Ozone to talk to Jakob. She really didn't feel like dealing with him unless there were no other options though. Instead, she decided to cross the street and head down the block to Umbra Penumbra.

The coffee house was in a renovated bar and the high, small windows let in sparse amounts of light, making it a popular hangout for local Goths. As she walked down the block, she passed an old man sitting at one of the outside tables, passing a bit of a muffin to a scruffy mutt crouching at his feet, a dirty bandanna tied around its neck. Ignoring them, she walked up the step into the murky interior. The coffee counter ran along the back wall forming an L-shape with the case of pastries just to her left. She didn't recognize the young girl with the Manic Panic purple hair behind the counter but a quick scan of the tables that fanned out across the room revealed someone she did know. Seated at a table in the back corner was Pauley Moon, his long hair draped over his face like a shroud, parted just enough to let his burning eyes peer out. Wilha and Calei had first met Pauley at Future Dreams, the comic shop he worked at part time to make ends meet. At first Wilha had found him a little intimidating with his hulking physique and a gaze that seemed to cut through the darkness into something distant and unholy. But Calei had struck up a conversation with him to discover that he was actually quite friendly and had a great sense of humor. Over time he'd told them the story of his time on the road with the metal band Revelations back in the 80s. He'd ended up getting fired from the band and losing everything due to a really shitty contract that he had been too high to even read before signing. With nothing to fall back on, he came home to Portland and had to live with his parents while he struggled to get back on his feet. She approached his table and caught his attention with a wave of her hand.

"Hey Pauley. Have you seen Calei around lately?" She felt tiny standing next to him. Even seated, he was nearly at eye level with her and that was with her platform boots boosting her up a few inches. She could only imagine how small she would feel barefoot, cut down to her natural five foot height. It also didn't help that he was simply massive. Seeing them side by side was like those pictures of a gorilla playing with a kitten. He raised his head and swept the hair from his left eye.

"Naw. Everything okay?"

“Yeah...actually I don't know. She's been gone a couple days and didn't say a word. I'm getting nervous.” She began to fidget and rock back and forth on the balls of her feet, a nervous habit that she'd had since she was a kid. Pauley just stared at her for a second before saying a word, the silence practically making her vibrate with anxiety.

“Last time I heard from her was a few days ago. She called the shop looking for Jonesy but he wasn't working, I gave her his home number and that was it.” Wilha started to panic a little bit. Jonesy worked at Future Dreams with Pauley but was better known in the scene as a small time drug dealer, mostly slinging pills and weed.

“Jonesy? What did she want with him?”

“She didn't say.”

“Shit! Do you know where Jonesy is right now?” Despite her best efforts, she felt panic creep into her voice.

“Last I heard he was going out with Petra and her crew tonight. They invited me but I can't stand that royal court bullshit they have going on.”

“Alright. I gotta go if I want to catch them before they head out. Thanks, Pauley.”

“No worries.” He let the hair fall back into his face as he hunkered back down into his seat.

Stepping out into the night again, Wilha headed south through the labyrinth of office towers that comprised the heart of downtown Portland. She knew that Petra, Gulliver, and their entourage were somewhere in the middle of that labyrinth and she was pretty sure she knew where to find them. As she walked she couldn't help but worry. Not many people knew about it, but a few years into their relationship, Calei had developed a nasty drug habit. Some friends introduced her to speed at a club one night and she got hooked on the feeling of power and confidence it gave her. Over time she began to use more and more and eventually had to start taking downers just so she could level out enough to sleep and eat. It broke Wilha's heart to see the woman she loved strung out but she was determined not to lose her to the drugs. With the help of Calei's grandmother, they got Calei into a rehab program and helped her get clean. It had been five years and she had been drug-free ever since, a real straight edge. The experience had been so life-altering for her that she had even changed the spelling of her name from Kayleigh to Calei to signify the start of a new life. Still, Wilha couldn't forget how it felt to have Calei slipping away from her into the abyss of addiction. She wasn't sure she was strong enough to help save her again but she hoped she wouldn't have to find out. As she reached the corner of Broadway and Morrison she pulled herself back to reality and rushed across the street against the traffic signal.

In front of her was the great brick amphitheater that was Pioneer Courthouse Square. This was the usual meeting place for Petra and her royal court before a night of clubbing. On the far side of the square, below the steps that formed the arena-like seating, she could see local street kids congregating along the wrought iron fence of the old courthouse. Punks, junkies and rivetheads all mingled together; some in search of a hit others just looking for a meal or a friend.

As she walked briskly along the west side of the square she felt a wave of relief to see Petra and Gulliver leaning against the pillars by the light rail tracks. **Petra and Gulliver were the “Pied Pipers of Portland,”** always drawing a string of black-clad babybats behind them like creepy little possums trailing behind their mother. Tonight was no exception to the rule. Two little stringy-haired gothlings lingered in the general vicinity, hoping to absorb some of the sinister glamour from their “hosts”. **It wasn’t difficult** to see the appeal. Petra and Gulliver were practically the royal family of the Portland Goth scene and they knew it, always carrying themselves with aristocratic grace. Both were tall and slender, their bodies usually draped in black velvet or bound up in leather and vinyl. **Petra’s make-up** was always perfect and her wild mop of ringlets was so intensely dark that it practically absorbed light. Gulliver wore his hair in wine-colored dreadlocks that perched in a bundle on top of his head like a spider, exposing the shaved sides of his skull. While she was always glad to see them neither Petra nor Gulliver, nor their scraggly little tag-alongs for that matter, were the ones she had hoped to find here.

“Hey Petra, Gulliver.” They looked up at Wilha as she approached and smiled, slight as it was, to see her. She wanted to ask about Wilha, but she understood that there was a certain play of manners that Petra and Gulliver expected from their friends. **If she didn’t follow the unwritten rules of the game** they would become insufferable and waste even more time.

“Wilha, where have you been hiding?” Gulliver asked in a sultry, resonate baritone that always sent shivers up Wilha’s spine.

“I’ve been around.”

“Haven’t we all, baby.” Mischief glimmered in Petra’s eyes as she cast a coy glance to Gulliver.

“Have you seen Calei?” Wilha’s eyes strayed from Petra and lingered on the Umbrella Man statue behind her as she lost her patience and blurted out the question.

“What? Trouble at home for the little lovebirds?” Gulliver gave a lopsided smirk to Wilha until Petra drove an elbow into his ribs. **“What the hell was that for?!”**

“Show a little tact, you beast. ‘Fraid not, honey. She hasn’t been around the usual places.” Petra’s voice had the seductive and languorous tone of a queen upon her throne.

“What about Jonesy?”

“That mongrel? He was supposed to be our driver tonight but he called and cancelled. Frankly I don’t know why we even keep hanging out with him. He’s so unreliable.”

“Did he say why he cancelled?”

“He’s out of town or something. Really, what could be more important than a night on the town with us?”

“Damn it!” Wilha immediately regretted her outburst when she saw the look of distaste on Petra’s face. **“Sorry, it’s just Calei hasn’t been home for a few days. She took off without a word**

and I'd heard Jonesy was the last person to talk to her. Now he's out of town and I've hit a dead end. Shit! I've called everyone I can think of and no one knows anything."

"Well, what about that brother of hers. Jakob, right?"

"Jakob and I don't really talk." Her voice trailed off into nothing.

"Well, you know how Calei is, kitten. She's a big girl. Sometimes she just goes off for a while but she always comes back in one piece." Petra waved the matter off lazily with an aristocratic flick of her wrist.

"I know, but I figured she would have left a note or something for me. So I wouldn't worry."

"Well, stop worrying. We're going to see Sylvia's Ghost at La Luna tonight. You're coming with us, yes? It'll take your mind off everything."

"Thanks, but I've got stuff to work on. I gotta go. See you around." Wilha turned to leave.

"Ta ta, honey. If we see Calei we'll let her know how much she has you worried. Guilt can do great things for your sex life. Right, Gully?" Gulliver squirmed a little bit and blushed under his make-up. Normally the idea of Gulliver blushing would have made Wilha crack a smile, but she had too much on her mind tonight.

Despite the cold, she decided to walk home. It was only about a mile and it would give her some time to think. With gloved fingers, she fumbled open the beat-up She-Ra lunchbox she used as a purse and pulled out a pack of Marlboro menthols. Flipping the top open, she awkwardly pulled a cigarette out and lit it with the Betty Page Zippo she got from Calei for her birthday last year. As she put her stuff back, she looked at the lunchbox, little bits of rust showing where the paint had flaked away over the years, and smiled a little bit. It amused her to think about the mall stores selling cheap plastic knock-off lunchboxes as "retro" for \$20, when she got this one for \$2.95 at K-Mart back in the third grade. This box was the real deal and saw a whole lot of PB&J and Capri-Sun. Of course, that was before it got stuck in the attic after she told her mom that "big girls don't carry lunchboxes." Years later, Wilha and Calei were in the attic looking at all the sundry crap from Wilha's childhood. That was when Calei found the old She-Ra lunchbox and fell in love with it, telling Wilha how cool of a purse it would make. Suddenly, after all these years, she saw her third grade lunch box in a completely new light and had carried it ever since. It wasn't until Calei came into her life that she found the simple joys of childish things. She had that effect on people. Everyone who knew Calei saw some kind of wonder in how she loved weird little things like that lunchbox...or Wilha, for that matter.

"Damn it!" No matter what she did, she couldn't stop worrying about Calei. It had been three days. One morning Wilha got up and went to her job as manager of London Underground, an alternative clothing store on Broadway, but when she came home that night Calei was gone. It wasn't so strange though since her work as a freelance graphic designer kept her running around. And she could be a bit flaky at times. She was horrible about taking phone messages and could

never remember where she left anything. And she usually forgot to leave notes when she was going out for a while. Wilha had come to accept a lot of Calei's bad habits so it wasn't until the next day that she started to get worried. Even at her flakiest, Calei almost always remembered to call if she was going to be gone overnight. Wilha had made some phone calls to their friends in the hopes Calei was hanging out somewhere to clear her mind. Sometimes she needed to do that during a big job to keep her perspective fresh. No one had seen her. Wilha tossed and turned all night and when she finally crawled out of bed in the morning she had a nagging feeling that something was wrong. She'd thought about calling the police but Calei had been busted for possession back when she was still getting high. The cops had been pretty rough on her, calling her a "freak" and a "dyke" while she was in custody. Wilha suspected it was even worse than that but Calei got real quiet when talking about it so she never pushed her. Whatever happened, she was terrified of putting Calei through it again. Still, she was going to have to call the cops if Calei didn't turn up soon.

She looked up and realized that she was in front of Ozone. Well, it was time to suck it up and swallow her pride. She had to talk to Jakob whether she liked it or not. For as long as they had known each other, Jakob had been a complete asshole to Wilha. He had never been comfortable with Calei's sexuality and took it out on Wilha, like she had waved a magic wand and turned his sister into a lesbian. Wilha didn't really give a damn what he thought about them though. He was just another grunge rock slacker trying to do as little as possible until the "big break" when his band was discovered. Wilha was always the first to point out that a band has to get gigs before they can get discovered. And it certainly would help if they didn't play crappy bubble-gum punk and call it innovative, high energy alt-rock.

Hesitantly, Wilha stepped into the record shop and looked around. The hazy air was heavy with the fragrance of jasmine and "Love Song" by The Cure was playing overhead. She took a moment to enjoy the song and compose herself as Jakob rang up a skinhead for a couple of ska CD's. As the skinhead left, Jakob looked up from the register and saw her standing there.

"What do you need, Morticia?" he jibed at her.

Aside from you to come up with an original insult? She kept that thought to herself. She needed to be as civil as possible. "Have you seen or heard from Calei?"

"Did she come to her senses and finally dump your creepy ass?" Despite her best efforts at self-control she felt the familiar pressure of anger building in her head.

"Look, douchebag. She's been gone for three days now. She didn't leave a note or call or anything and I'm worried about her. Do you know where she is?"

Jakob got serious. "I haven't talked to her since, like, last week or something. Did you two have a fight?"

"No, things were going fine. I left for work Wednesday and she was home working on some sketches. When I got home she was gone."

He got a concerned look on his face and leaned in close, lowering his voice to a whisper. “You don’t think she’s using again, do you?” He was one of the only people besides Wilha who knew about Calei’s drug problems.

“No. I would know if she was.” He seemed to take her word at face value and relaxed slightly but she wasn’t so sure if she believed herself.

“Well, you know her. She just does this sometimes. She’s kind of a wanderer. Has been since she was a kid. When she shows up, let me know though.” His face betrayed a sense of compassion and anxiety that she knew he would never willing admit to in a million years.

“Okay, but just make sure you do the same.”

“Yeah, yeah. Now, either get out or buy something. I’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah, you keep on holding that counter down, champ.”

Wilha turned to leave but still caught Jakob extending a middle finger in her direction. The night air felt even colder than before so she pulled her hood up, taking care to tuck her glossy black pigtails inside and smooth out her bangs. She went to get another cigarette and there was only one left, the lucky. She really hoped it could actually bring her some luck so she made a silent wish that Calei was okay as she lit up and threw the now empty pack into a trash can. It was about fifteen minutes before she reached 21st Avenue and turned off, heading up 21st toward the apartment on Johnson Street that she shared with Calei. As she walked the chorus from “Love Song” came into her head.

*However far away
I will always love you
However long I stay
I will always love you
Whatever words I say*

I will always love you

She couldn’t help thinking about Calei again and it took her back to when they first met, almost ten years ago. Wilha had been fifteen, Calei sixteen and both were sophomores in high school. Wilha went to Forest Grove High out in the ‘burbs and Calei’s grandmother sent her to St. Mary’s Catholic in Beaverton. It was where Calei’s mother had gone when she was a girl and it meant a lot to her grandmother that Calei go there too. She’d always had a hard time saying no to her grandmother, who’d raised her and Jakob after their parents died, so she suffered through four years of “Catholic-induced ignorance,” as she was fond of calling it.

One Saturday night Wilha and some of her Goth friends were invited to a party just a few blocks from St. Mary’s. It was a bunch of faux-intellectuals talking philosophy for dummies and trying to impress all the little Goth girls who didn’t know Faust from a faucet and swallowed their bullshit like they swallowed anything else, as if it was the most delicious thing in the world. But Wilha saw through their crap and they wisely avoided her. She was proud of the fact that she was

better read than most of these idiots and had, unlike many of the other girls here, more purpose in life than to be a sperm receptacle for mentally deficient predators. As she was about to grab her friends and leave she saw her: a beautiful, black-clad goddess. Her heart skipped a beat and she **thought she might have a heart attack if she didn't look away, yet she couldn't help herself.** Her goddess wore black jeans, a form-fitting velvet blouse and a thrift store suit jacket with a PiL button on the lapel. With her make-up and hair, **Wilha couldn't help but feel that Death had** stepped off the pages of *Sandman* and that Neil Gaiman was hiding in the rafters pulling the strings on his wondrous creation. But this girl, this goddess, was real. Wilha had to meet her.

Wilha was no stranger to the thought of being with another girl and had toyed with those feelings over the past year. She had even fooled around with some of her friends. But she had never felt like this. It was as if she was standing on a turntable that had been suddenly cranked up to 78 rpm. She was spun out of control by a desire that drew her toward this mysterious girl while it froze her in place. Her limbs felt like they were being crushed to her body when she tried to move them so she was left paralyzed, staring longingly across the room. Suddenly this exquisite girl raised her head and their eyes met. The air crackled with an electrical charge that raised the downy hairs on the back of Wilha's neck and she knew in that moment that her dream girl had felt it too. The charge in the air magnetized them, pulling them together. The night flew by like a blur. **She left her friends at the party and slipped off with Calei. They ended up at Wilha's house and had to sneak in so her parents wouldn't catch them. That night was the first of many times** when they made love and it was one of the happiest nights of their lives. From then on they were almost inseparable, spending every free moment together. They saved up enough money in high school to move into a tiny apartment after graduation. Calei used her artistic skills to score some freelance graphic design gigs. Wilha worked part-time jobs, usually in clothing stores and coffee shops, while she struggled as a writer. **They'd done alright for themselves until Calei started** spinning out of control. She lost jobs and burned through what little savings they had buying drugs. She even sold her cute little VW Rabbit for next to nothing just to get high. If she **hadn't cleaned up when she did, they wouldn't have had anything left. Not even a roof over their heads.**

Wilha looked up at the marquee of Cinema 21 as she walked by. They were showing a revival of Andy Warhol's *Blood for Dracula*, one of Calei's favorite movies. She wondered if she could be inside right now, watching Udo Kier lap virginal blood from the floor like a depraved animal. Probably not. Calei had confessed to her that, during the lucid period when she decided to go into rehab, she had felt like Kier's version of Dracula. **She'd said it was like the world had** changed around her while she was strung out and she felt old and defeated, just like Dracula. But unlike Dracula, she had hope and someone to fight for her. As Wilha thought about it, she felt herself start to shake a little bit as she fought back the tears that began to form in her eyes. She rounded the corner and stopped at the steps to the Marcella Apartments where they'd had their

little nest for the past eight years, looking up to the fourth floor to see if there were any lights on at home. Pitch black.

She pulled her keys out of her box and opened the front door. Their apartment, an unassuming one bedroom, was on the fourth floor and it was a walk-up. Slowly, she trudged her way up the steps until she reached the door to their apartment. She stood there for a second, listening for any sound of occupancy, hoping Calei might actually be inside. Nothing. Her key turned sluggishly in the lock as she let herself in. Inside, the apartment was dark and, for just a moment, the shadows painted the illusion that Calei was there. With the flip of the light switch, she chased the illusion away and set her lunch box purse down on the coffee table. The light on the phone was flashing, one new message. She hit the button and went to grab a bottle of water from the fridge as it played. Great. Just another hang up, the fifth one this week.

Now she definitely needed a cigarette, but she was out. She thought about going out to get a fresh pack, but her feet were throbbing in her platform boots. *Well, if I take my boots off it will never happen. So it's now or never,* she thought as she set her water bottle on the counter and **grabbed her box. More than anything, she just didn't want to be alone in their empty apartment.** It was too much for her to bear right now. She locked up and made her way back downstairs cursing every aching step. As she stepped out onto the sidewalk she could hear the sounds pouring out from the local bars as people burned through their paychecks on a Friday night.

She was about to turn away when something caught her eye. Down at the intersection, someone was crossing the street and, for a second, she thought it could be Calei. She waited until the stranger stepped into the next streetlight to be sure but, when she did, there was no mistaking her for anyone else. Wilha began to walk towards her as quickly as her aching feet would carry **her but she slowed as she got a closer look. Calei's clothes were dirty and clung unpleasantly to** her tall, slender frame. Her dishwater brown hair hung in loose, tangled curls around her face, which was smudged with small amounts of grime. Her head hung heavy on her shoulders like she **was too exhausted to hold it up. She hadn't looked this awful since...** Wilha felt her heart begin to break as she stood frozen on the sidewalk, not knowing if she could bring herself to find out the truth. Raising her head, Calei saw Wilha standing there and she shook off the weight of her exhaustion. A radiant smile spread across her face and beamed out her eyes. Wilha knew in that moment that her fears had been unjustified because Calei never could smile like that when she **strung out. Suddenly her own aching feet didn't matter as she ran the remaining distance between them and jumped up, throwing her arms around Calei's neck. She lost herself in Calei's arms for what seemed like hours before breaking away and punching her in the arm as hard as possible. Calei couldn't even get a word in before Wilha exploded into a tirade of epic proportions.**

“Where the hell have you been!? Why didn't you tell me where you were going!? You didn't call! Don't you know how worried I've been!? Why the hell were you calling Jonesy!? God, I don't know if I should kiss you or slap you!”

Calei stood there rubbing her arm and stared at her for a second as Wilha finally registered that Calei smelled like she had wrestled a skunk. She wriggled her nose in that Samantha from Bewitched way she always did when she smelled something unpleasant.

“Are you done? I’m tired, I’m hungry and I really want a shower.”

Wilha crossed her arms in a way that was more adorable than intimidating given her tiny stature. **“We can go in when I get some answers.”**

“Alright. Should I answer those questions in any particular order?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass with me. I’ve been worried to death about you. Where the hell have you been?”

“I needed some inspiration for the mural I’ve been working on. You know, the beach landscape. So I caught a ride out to Lincoln City with Jonesy. But that stupid cock went off to get high with some buddies and left me up shit creek. When I see him again I’m gonna kick his ass. Anyway, I’d forgotten my wallet and didn’t have money for a bus ticket. I tried calling collect but you were never home.”

“So all those blank messages on the machine were you?”

“Yeah. Stupid phone cut me off before I could leave a message. Thankfully I had a bunch of granola bars in my bag or I would have starved. I ended up having to hitchhike home, which is what took me so long.” Wilha suddenly felt pretty bad for yelling at her.

“Are you okay? No one tried anything, did they?”

“No, but there aren’t a lot of people willing to stop and pick up a hitchhiker these days. Whatever happened to trust and shit? I finally got a ride from some hippie douchebags so I guess I can’t say anything bad about hippies for at least a week.”

Wilha’s voice lowered and took on a sharper edge. **“You know I don’t like Jonesy...or what he does.”**

Calei’s face lit up with sudden realization. **“Wait. You didn’t think I was off getting strung out, did you?”** Wilha looked away and started rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, unsure how to answer. Without saying a word, Calei stepped forward and enveloped her in her arms. **“You know I gave that shit up for good. I would never let it get between us again.”** All the fear and tension of the past few days bled away as Calei spoke the words she was so desperate to hear. Wilha finally stopped fighting the tears she had been holding back as Calei held her and cooed reassuring words into her ear. Finally Wilha pulled herself away and pulled a handkerchief from her coat sleeve to wipe her nose.

“I’m really sorry I scared you. I’ll try not to be so flaky from now on. I worked so hard to keep you and I really don’t want to screw it up.”

“I love you the way you are.” Wilha stopped herself and thought about the past few days. **“Well, maybe a little less flaky would be good. By the way, why do you reek of skunk?”**

“That, my love, is a long story but it will need to wait until I’ve gotten a shower and a three day nap.”

“Fine. Whatever. Let’s go inside. I’ll make you some mac and cheese while you deskunk yourself.” As they made their way into the apartment building Wilha suddenly realized that she never got her cigarettes. *Oh well*, she thought, *Calei hates it when I smoke anyway. Maybe it’s time to quit.*