

UNBORN POTENTIAL
Z. Sharon Glantz
[Tarot card: The Empress]

Mindy bit her lip as she did her morning ablutions. She was a week late. Could it be? No. Not now. Not by him.

Mindy spent her day consciously distracting herself from what her body might or might not be doing. She immersed herself in study in between classes. She ate lunch with fellow students who argued over academic politics or shared gossip. The two were interchangeable as far as Mindy could see. So caught up in their rhetoric, for almost an hour, she successfully buried the possibility that threatened to turn her life into a living hell. Mindy's gifts at denial were impeccable. Keeping a secret from other people was a snap, let alone keeping one from herself. But this was different. This secret made her nauseous.

At home after her last class, she studied as she ate a frozen dinner. It tasted like cardboard, but Mindy didn't notice. Actually, she did, but not enough to consider taking the time to cook real food. If she performed mundane tasks, she might start thinking, and for the moment, thinking was dangerous.

The undercurrent of loathing was topped with excitement as she dressed for work. She loved her job at the Comic Shop, a nightly comedy showcase for comedian and talk-show host wannabe's. Never in her life had she been surrounded by so many men -- attractive, intelligent and entertaining men. Mindy worked the box office, a tiny closet off the bar. The closet walls were peeling, the floor was soft, and it smelled like last week's booze. However, the flock of comedians who nervously awaited the chance

to make an audience wet their pants with laughter turned it into a haven. When Mindy wasn't taking money and stamping hands, the flock would use her to warm up or joke the anxiety out of their impatience. She separated them into three categories: those who flirted with her, those who tried out their new material, and those with whom she could talk. Any and all interactions were fun, although the latter was few and far between.

Mindy had grown up in a household of women. Her father left when she was six, leaving she and her two sisters with Mama. Mindy was the middle daughter. She'd always been shy and timid. Her sisters often didn't include her in their activities. Like Cinderella, she mused. In high school, she had only a few friends. Neither she nor her few friends had any idea how to talk to boys, let alone date them. College wasn't much different except that Mindy didn't have any friends. There were classmates with whom she ate lunch, but when the quarter ended, so did her relationships with them. For the most part, Mindy kept to herself. She tried to befriend her roommate with whom she shared an apartment, but Laura was usually too busy chasing men.

Mindy set up the box office the way she liked it. The Comic Shop was casual about these things, but Mindy wasn't. She felt the butterflies take to flight in her stomach just before she saw him.

"Hi, Kid," Dale said, smiling his winning smile.

Mindy returned his smile with one of her own until she noticed the sweet young thing buried under his right arm. The thing giggled. At first Mindy thought she was laughing at her, but the giggles sounded too nervous to be offensive. Dale leaned down, pecked Mindy's cheek and walked away. Mindy's heart sunk to her stomach, smothering the happy butterflies. The knowledge she'd been trying to repress

blossomed in her consciousness and with it, a rage Mindy hadn't remembered feeling since living at home where she suffered the taunts of her sisters.

Looking out over the laughing crowd, she sought distraction. Bernie was doing his routine. He had to be one of the funniest comedians at the Shop. The audience warmed to him. It was as though he reached into their individual hearts and spoke only to them. Even Mindy was taken by him. How could someone so humorous be so anti-social? she asked herself for the hundredth time.

The night was long and lonely, as if everyone knew her secret and avoided her. After Bernie's performance, the other comedians couldn't hold her attention. She watched a fly crawl across the window and lost all sense of her surroundings until one of the waitresses suggested it was time to go home. Mindy cried herself to sleep.

She awoke to the knowledge that she had no classes. This was unusual for a weekday, but Mindy was too busy with worrying to think about it. She decided she would either have to find something dangerous to distract her or go to Student Health and confirm her worst fears. She opted for Student Health. The stress of the unknown was dangerous enough.

"Take three days to think about it," the doctor told her after listing the options available to her. As soon as she got home, Mindy called the first clinic on the list and made an appointment to get the abortion.

Mindy had no idea how she got to work that night. She only knew she was there. Again, the comedians avoided her like the plague. Mindy lost track of time as she dog paddled around the edges of a sea of despair.

"What's that black funk oozing from your person?" Mindy blinked away the tears that threatened to overflow. "I'm Bernie," he said, peering through his thick glasses and extending his hand. "It's all right. I don't bite." Mindy grasped his hand more firmly than she had anticipated. "Easy, girl."

"Sorry," she muttered. Bernie seemed to glow with the same magical warmth he had on stage. He wasn't at all handsome. His small eyes were magnified behind thick glasses and his face was too small for his head. However, his presence overcame his physical idiosyncrasies.

"For what?"

"What?" Mindy was lost.

"For what are you sorry?" Mindy couldn't speak. Nor could she stop the tears that flooded down her cheeks. "Mindy's taking her break," Bernie told one of the waitresses.

"I'll cover."

Bernie helped Mindy's heaving and gasping body extricate itself from the closet and led it into the chilly night. He circled her with the warmth of his arms. Mindy couldn't pull away. All she could do was cry. The pain she'd harbored so well had come unanchored, bursting through to the surface. Self-consciousness suddenly moved her away from Bernie's comforting embrace.

"Sorry," she said, wiping her nose with her shirt sleeve.

"And that would be for...?" For some reason this made Mindy laugh. "There's life in you yet." Mindy's laughter reverted back into weeping. Holding her close, Bernie led her around the block and up the hill from the Comic Shop. He stopped and faced her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

"What's going on?" he asked warmly.

"I'm pregnant," Mindy confessed. There. She said it. Relief washed over her.

"Married?" he asked. She shook her head. "Possibility of marriage?" She shook it again. "Supportive family?" She accompanied her shake of head with a whimper. "I'm sorry."

"And that would be for...?" Mindy tried to lighten the darkness that shadowed her ability to function. Bernie snickered and hugged her again. Mindy liked his smell.

"You're very ill and you have to go home immediately," he said.

"No, I'm not. I'm pregnant."

"You're too sick to finish your shift."

"Oh." Mindy liked Bernie.

"I'll take care of it for you, not to worry. Meanwhile, I want to take you somewhere I think will help you feel better." In an easy silence, they walked higher up into the hills overlooking the Sunset Strip. Each estate was surrounded by a fence. Bernie stopped outside the fence of a large mansion that was brightly lit. Percussive music made the mansion seem to vibrate and bounce. As Bernie opened the gate, four dogs yipping playfully charged towards them. Mindy had never owned a dog. She cringed like a cat.

"Not to worry," Bernie remarked, "they're friendly." As he opened the giant door to the mansion, the music grew louder. Drummers of every shape and color played drums of every shape and color. The polyrhythms infiltrated her psyche and eased away Mindy's anxiety.

The interior of the mansion was nothing like what Mindy had imagined. She felt like she walked into a magical forest. Trees reached up to a high ceiling and bushes of blooming rhododendrons hid the walls. She even thought she could hear birds.

"Do you live here?" she asked Bernie in between gasps of awe.

"Sometimes. Come. I want you to meet someone."

A large naked woman with long brown hair emerged from the growth. She held a kitten in her hands. Mindy tried not to stare at the woman's nakedness, but her Wilendorf shape was so beautiful she couldn't help it. The layers of fat fell like a perfectly draped gown, juggling with joy with every movement. She was in no way self-conscious, scratching herself in places Mindy was too embarrassed to scratch in the privacy of her own bathroom, let alone at a party. The naked woman didn't seem to care who saw her do what. Mindy tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh for fear she would offend the woman. The woman initiated a laugh of her own and the three of them laughed together.

"This is Mindy," Bernie announced.

The woman carefully placed the kitten on the floor. But it wasn't a floor. It was soft clover, and the kitten took off, chasing a fly. Mindy tried to reconcile her thinking with what she saw. There was something very strange about this mansion.

"Welcome to life, Mindy." The woman seemed amused by Mindy's confusion. "It's okay, Mindy. Life will continue whether or not you choose to bring it forth."

Before Mindy could respond, people dressed in brightly colored clothing emerged from behind the foliage. The woman disappeared as these friendly folk engaged Mindy in conversation. Later Mindy couldn't recall the content of these exchanges, but she was

all to aware of her sense of belonging with each contact. Periodically the naked woman lightly touched Mindy's shoulder in passing.

Mindy sat on a soft wooden bench that smelled like the wood had just been cut, contented and full as if she'd just eaten a large satisfying meal.

"Do you want the child?" The question jolted Mindy out of her reverie. Anxiety threatened to overcome her calm. The naked woman sat down next to her. "If you don't, not to worry. Life will always find a way to live. Such a mystery is life, don't you think? How did it all begin? No one knows. No one alive will ever know."

"Do you know?" Mindy asked.

"How could I? I'm still very much alive. But I also don't really care to know. I enjoy living in wonder."

"I'm scared."

"I know, child. That's because you are alone. It's not natural. Life attracts life and if life doesn't connect with life, it withers and dies."

Mindy sighed a deep sigh. With her exhale tears emerged. The naked woman gently stroked her back. "So much grief you carry for such a sweet young thing," she said.

"Are you all right?" The voice was Bernie's. Mindy raised her head and peaked out of the box office closet at Bernie.

"No," she remarked, aching to return to her dream and the woman and the mansion with its living interior. What a wonderful dream.

"I'm Bernie," he said kindly.

"Mindy," she whispered, trying desperately to wipe the grief from her face.

"Mindy's going on break," he told a passing waitress as he led Mindy out of her closet. The waitress nodded and rushed off. Bernie walked her to a bench down the street from the Comic Shop. "It's Dale, isn't it. He's not good for you. He's not good for any woman."

"I'm pregnant," she confessed easily as if she'd already told him. Her dream seemed so real even now.

"Keeping it?" Mindy shook her head. "Got anyone to help you with this?" Mindy thought about Mama and her sisters. If they knew, they'd hide her until the baby was born and the child would become their pet project. Mindy would have to live under Mama's control and that of her sisters until the child was fully grown. She'd probably have little say about her baby -- Mama and her sisters were experts on everything except maintaining relationships other than with one another. Mindy would lose all the freedom she'd finally gained by going away to school.

Just like in her dream, Bernie walked her up the hill to a large mansion. He opened the gate, and the same dogs came yipping.

"I'll get the Empress," Bernie said.

"Who?"

"My mother."

The interior only slightly resembled her dream. The walls were tall and white, the large plants neatly trimmed. Mindy looked at the large paintings in the entrance halls. The paintings depicted the environment of her dream. Mindy smiled and continued her inventory of the entrance hall. Noise from the next room sounded like a party was in progress.

"Mindy, is it?" She was the large Wilendorf woman of her dream draped in yards of green silk.

"Yes, 'mam."

"Bernie tells me you need help."

"That's okay." Mindy looked down ashamed.

"He says you fucked up." This startled Mindy into looking at the woman. "You're not the first, dear."

"I should be getting back to work."

"No need. Someone put too many waitresses on shift," she said eyeing Bernie. "Forgive me. I'm Ms. Gloria Oxtan, proprietor of the Comic Shop. I understand you're studying at the university?"

"I'm majoring in English," Mindy responded automatically while her mind raced through everything she'd ever heard about the infamous Ms. Oxtan.

"English? That should assure you a lucrative future," she sneered. Bernie gave her a look and she continued earnestly: "Your mother must be proud of you, dear." Mindy could see where he got his warm smile.

"She wanted me to be a nun." Mindy wasn't sure why she admitted this to these two total strangers.

"Your mother must have seen something I don't. I'm not afraid to tell you, I think you'd make an extremely poor penguin. Join us, won't you." The woman's departure was so abrupt, Mindy couldn't move.

"She'll do good by you, my mother. As long as you do exactly what she says. Come on in and meet everyone."

As in her dream, Mindy found herself happily engaged in conversations with brightly adorned people.

"Having fun?" Bernie asked.

"Yes. It's such a lively crowd." The word "lively" sparked the memory of her condition and along with it, panic.

"You're welcome to visit any time," Bernie tried to reassure her.

Ms. Oxton said appearing beside her. "Breathe, Mindy. You'll break through to the other side of this."

"I don't know."

"Come visit until you do. And don't go through the procedure and healing process alone. We'll find you the help you need, I promise."

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Mindy asked, uncertain of what was expected of her.

"Why not? Life attracts life. Do you need to have a reason to live? Of course not. You simply are. Which is also the case for everyone else on the planet so we might as well help one another."

"Mother likes having people around, especially if they can also become one of her pet projects," Bernie said as if in explanation.

Mindy slept well that night relieved that help was at hand even if Ms. Oxton resembled Mama. Maybe the help would be Bernie. She tried with all her might to avoid fantasies of she and Bernie raising the baby at the mansion. Bernie had mentioned indirectly that he wasn't ready to be a father and besides, Mindy was used to her fantasies not finding a place in reality. At the same time, she was too shy and ashamed

to ask him for help. All she needed was someone to take her to the clinic and bring her home again. She'd manage the rest of it herself. Laura would fuss over her in short bursts before getting on with the important task of living her own life. Soon, she told herself, soon I'll come right out and ask him. She called the doctor's office and postponed her abortion. Another few weeks, that's all the time you can afford unless you decide to go to term, her doctor warned her.

Each night after work, she wandered up to the mansion. She and Bernie had become quite inseparable. Sometimes they'd play with the dogs. Mindy was getting used to them. Other times, Bernie would pull her aside and try out his new material. Ms. Oxton was amused. Mindy could also see concern in her eyes, although whether it was for her or for Bernie or for the two of them together, she couldn't say.

"I'll go with you," Bernie said to her one night as they sat on the terrace overlooking Hollywood. Mindy felt her body relax. She hadn't realized how much tension she was carrying.

"You don't have to do that," she lied.

"I want to," he countered.

The procedure itself was relatively painless and it only took a few hours. When Bernie brought her home, Laura was fixing herself lunch. She kept her distance. Bernie wasn't her type. He tucked Mindy into bed, and she immediately fell into a light sleep.

In her dream, she went back to the forested mansion. A naked Ms. Oxton greeted her and led her to a large mirror. Mindy stared at her reflection but for once, she didn't cringe at what she saw.

"You still have life within you," Ms. Oxton's voice chimed.

"No, I don't. I just had it sucked out of me. I murdered the life within me," she heard herself whine.

Ms. Oxtan laughed. Mindy felt herself become exceedingly small. "Stop it, Mindy."

"Stop what?"

"Stop the slow death."

Before Mindy could ask Ms. Oxtan what she meant, the scene shifted. She was in her mother's bedroom. Her sisters were playing dress-up, putting make-up on each other.

"Stop, you'll get in trouble," Mindy said. Her sisters ignored her. "Stop it, stop it, stop it," she yelled.

"They're only dressing up their future," Ms. Oxtan said.

"But Mama will be mad," Mindy whined.

"So what?" many voices said, creating polyrhythms with their overlaps and contrasting intonations.

"Break it," Ms. Oxtan commanded, indicating the mirror.

"Can't," Mindy replied.

"Break through it now." Mindy pounded on the mirror. "Break through, Mindy, or you'll spend the rest of your life letting Mama and your sisters condition your life. You deserve your own life, don't you Mindy? Or are you so malleable you'd let everyone else shape you?"

Malleable, my ass, raged Mindy. A surge of adrenaline blasted through her circulatory system as she threw her entire body against the mirror. The sound of it shattering woke her up.

"Are you okay?" Laura asked. She stood in the doorway.

"What the hell are you doing here? This is my room not yours." Mindy demanded with power in her voice.

"You screamed out in your sleep. I thought something was wrong. Sorry." Laura tried to appease her usually passive and soft-spoken roomie.

"Where's Bernie?"

"Who?"

"The guy who took me to the clinic."

"I didn't know you were sick."

"The abortion. He took me to get an abortion."

"What?"

"I told you all about it."

"Mindy, you told me about Dale, but you never said anything about getting pregnant. In fact, since our periods have been coming at the same time, I just got back from the store for some tampons."

Mindy inventoried her body as she got out of bed. Her breasts were enlarged and sore, she felt a slow cramp in her gut and her head ached. In the bathroom, she noticed she'd spotted her underwear. "I'm bleeding, thank god." But if she hadn't been pregnant, what had she been doing these last few weeks? Before fear could overtake her, memory flooded her consciousness. She recalled taking two midterms, writing a paper,

working every night, coming home to an empty apartment and generally avoiding contact with anyone else. How sad.

"I think I'm going crazy, Laura."

"Join the club. I finally dumped Larry, so you'll be seeing a lot more of me."

"I'm sorry it didn't work out." Laura must be pretty unhappy to confide in me, Mindy thought. Another voice interrupted this thought: This is an opportunity. Grab it and run with it. "I've got tomorrow night off," Mindy said. "How about you and I go to the movies?"

"I'd like that. Maybe we'll even meet some nice-looking guys." Laura answered. "Speaking of nice-looking guys, naptime is over, girl. You'd better get hopping if you want to get to work on time." This was new. Laura was usually too preoccupied with her own schedule to pay attention to anyone else's.

Mindy dressed and barely got to the Comic Shop on time. Everything seemed normal. She'd finished setting up the closet when Dale breezed by. He nodded his head before rushing away as if whatever she had was contagious. The scum, she thought. She tried to retrieve memories of her night with him, but the images more resembled fantasy than reality. Did she really sleep with him? He was completely unforgettable. The scum, she reiterated to herself.

Bernie peered into the window. "Bernie, how are you?"

"Do I know you?"

"I'm Mindy."

"Nice to meet you."

"How's your mother, the Empress?"

"Excuse me?"

"I really like Ms. Oxton."

"I do too. But what does she have to do with my mother?"

"She isn't your mother?"

Bernie laughed. In a flash, images from her dream she mistook for memories melted in her mind and were replaced by real memories. She'd never said more than two words to this man. "I don't know what came over me. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"How about I explain it over coffee after I get off shift." Mindy had no idea how she had pushed past her unrelenting shyness, but it felt right. Her dreams may have been only dreams, but her comfort around Bernie hadn't changed a wit.

"Sure," he said, smiling a warm smile.

Thus began a very real friendship and romance. Even Laura was impressed. A few weeks into their burgeoning relationship, she told Bernie about her strange dream, and dream within a dream, and dream within a dream within a dream. He encouraged her to write it up as a short story. She even turned it in for her creative writing class. The instructor asked her to read it out loud. The old Mindy would have shyly refused. This new Mindy read without hesitation.

When Mindy went home for spring break, she brought Bernie. Mama and sisters were taken by him. Both her sisters tried extremely hard to charm him away from her. The way they flirted with him made Mindy uncomfortable.

"Stop it," she said.

"Stop what?" her older sister asked innocently, sipping her tea. Mama was in the kitchen washing dishes. She refused help from anyone. She could manage it all herself.

"Just stop it," Mindy said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," her younger sister said innocently, pouting for Bernie.

"Yes, you do."

"What if we do," her younger sister said, exchanging a look with her older sister.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it," Mindy yelled. She expected her sisters to continue their game of denial.

"Sorry, Mindy," her older sister sneered. "You never cared before."

"I do now."

Mama entered into the room and the conversation: "It's about time you stood up to your sisters, Mindy. I can't believe the way you let them walk all over you."

The tension was released from their exchange, and they talked with ease, an ease that reminded Mindy of the conversations she'd had at the mansion of her dreams. Bernie seemed more at ease as well. She could tell because he stopped performing and started talking. Her sisters seemed relieved to stop their performing as well. The joy of their sharing made her laugh.

"What's so funny?" her younger sister asked.

"I've missed you guys, even though you always treated me like shit when we were growing up."

"You make me proud, Mindy," said her Mama. Mindy hoped no one noticed her eyes bugging out.

When Mindy left her mother's house, she left her childhood behind her. At her apartment door, Bernie kissed her good night. His warmth infused her with joy. He went home, rightfully assuming she needed to debrief her home visit with Laura who had become her friend and confidant. Besides, school started the next day.

Laura and Mindy talked well into the night despite their agreement to get to bed early. Mindy wondered if the friendship they'd created would withstand Laura's next boyfriend. Laura was due for a new one.

Looking in the mirror just before going to bed, Mindy saw a new sparkle in her eye. She looked forward to returning to school with the same enthusiasm she had had for visits at the mansion. She could feel a combination of fear and excitement. This was the first time the butterflies in her stomach took to flight without her having the secret hots for some guy. This was something else. This was about the life she still had to live and those with whom she would share pieces of herself. "Life attracts life," she thought before falling into a short but satisfying sleep.