



This is a collection of short stories that explore the human condition. The emotional uprisings, the wretchedness of loss and the hope for a better way is found in all hearts of all people. Life teaches and awareness comes unexpectedly in day to day living and in life altering moments.

Becoming Human: Short Story Collection


By Elizabeth Cart

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A watercolor illustration of a young woman's face, focusing on her eyes and freckles. The style is soft and painterly, with visible brushstrokes and a blend of colors like pinks, purples, and blues. The woman has light skin with numerous small brown freckles and striking blue eyes. Her hair is dark and slightly messy. The background of the entire cover is a textured wash of light purple and blue.

ELIZABETH CART

Becoming Human

SHORT STORY
COLLECTION

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Table of Contents

I Did Not Take Your Chair	1
Eight Degrees of Separation	7
A Yearning for the Sense of Something Deep.....	11
Dressed to Impress.....	28
Time Is Not Linear.....	32
Integration of the Contraries	35
Unseen Miracles.....	43
Best Friends on the Farm	47
Dark Night	54
A Handful of Patience.....	58
Street Watcher.....	64
Wishing and Hoping	67
The Truth of Who We Are.....	77
In Earnest Love	81
Shimmer of Motes.....	87
Daubing.....	105
A Poem Without Words.....	109
La Belgique.....	112
I Love You, Goodbye	119
Becoming Human	129

Integration of the Contraries

Vanessa stood proudly at the helm of her garden. Every row like vintage pearls, blossoming petals of rich green. It took an act of Congress to convince Richard. And two-thirds majority vote to have the soil dump-trucked in. A piece of her saved Christmas money shoved into the dirty pockets of her Spanish-speaking gardener kept her from unnecessary backaches. After all, pulling weeds rated down there with scrubbing toilets.

A vegetable garden was a switching of the tracks for Vanessa. She needed to know and feel there was more to life than computers, accounting, and weekly stats. Richard worked at what he loved; didn't she deserve to have that chance? Well, at least *she* believed it.

Inside, the oven was humming and the fragrance of buttery quiche floated through the air, beckoning her guests from across three rooms. She could see the outline of moving bodies through the blue and yellow stained-glass window. Vanessa strolled across the rooms, open architecture lending the vast welcome. The two girls were dancing a sort of hip-hop gyration when she opened the front door. Old farts that had no business throwing their bodies around like that.

"Vaaaaanessssssssa! Hey, girl!"

"Looking good!" they sang in unison.

"Finally!" Vanessa exhaled.

"Whaddya mean, finally? We were stuck on that rotten freeway for over an hour while some patrol van dragged a mattress out of the fast lane," Natalie was the first to quip.

They walked in with noses sniffing and blowing ooh's and aah's.

Kaya was the first to hug and give cheeky kisses. "Your cooking, Vanessa. Oh my gosh!"

Natalie was already at the counter stealing some stuffed vegetable.

Kaya looked at the plate with humbled expressions. Then up at Vanessa as if she were the Madonna.

“You stuffed endive with cream cheese, capers, lox, onion, and tomato,” Kaya murmured prayerfully.

“I did. Here. Start with the margaritas.”

Both girls were shaking their heads in wonderment, while sipping the salty slush.

Vanessa was smiling and content, watching her friends gush over the food.

Kaya was the Earth Mother who now was in complete joy over Vanessa’s garden project. She poked and prodded until Vanessa gave in to her deepest desire. Richard was the obstacle, but Kaya forged on and helped with the persuasion.

“Am I still the splintery thorn in his side?” she asked between gulps.

“Of course. That’s precisely why he is out golfing today.”

“Thank You, Lord, for the small miracles of golf,” added Natalie.

Vanessa piped in, “And for the blessed gatherings of the females so we can chop our men into little pieces and spit them out.”

The girls laughed into their drinks, choking and gurgling.

Vanessa pulled out the quiche and gave it centerpiece glory, then transplanted a bowl of fresh tomatoes garnished with basil and arugula from the garden on the dressed table. A basket of croissants and a small bowl of exotic olives sat waiting to be devoured. It was a meal for three queens.

“Do you think they really appreciate what we do?” Natalie shoved a mouthful in.

“No.” Two heads swayed back and forth.

Vanessa was glassy-eyed from her second drink. “I mean, could they pull this little meal off after doing four loads of laundry, and doing the fourteen things on the list?”

“What list? My David forgets the list and he brings home twenty things we don’t need.” Kaya was in rare form.

“That cost,” Vanessa said.

“Yup,” they nodded.

Natalie was swooning over the food. “Don’t get me started. They have selective memory. I call it a form of men-in-gitis.” Laughter.

Kaya turned to Vanessa. “So is Richard helping with the garden?”

“Under duress. He is beginning to see how we can save a few bucks and eat healthier. I am hoping for a grow light this fall so I can start my own seedlings. I’ve been reading.”

“Atta girl. Smart patootie, that you are. Why does it take so long to prove that our ideas are more long-lasting, lucrative, and cost effective?” Kaya asked.

“Only thing I know is that it hones patience. But it’s a long journey into the night to get there,” Natalie said.

And so, the conversation went until it landed on a subject that was dear to their hearts.

Natalie spoke up first after swallowing.

“You, the food diva should be in charge of the catering,” she said, pointing a wagging finger at Vanessa.

“Hey,” Vanessa said. “What do you mean? I am a guest, the mother-to-be’s guest of honor.”

Natalie rocked her head back in forth in confident stride. “Yeah, and I’m the mother-to-be’s mother-in-law. And people like us do not cook when we are in the spotlight.”

“Well, you two classy ladies will have to fork it out to somebody. This is the big deal and don’t look at me, because I don’t cook,” chirped Kaya.

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “We know that. I’m thinking about Party Girl. They make all the good stuff in town.”

“What town? Not my town,” added Natalie.

Vanessa went on. “In town, I mean over the hill on the eastside.”

“Will they set up and manage it?” asked Natalie.

“Oh sure, for a cost. That’s what we have to talk about.” Vanessa stared at her now.

“Here it comes,” quipped Kaya.

Vanessa wrote the figures on a napkin and expected the wide eyes. “How many did you say you want to invite?”

They bantered back and forth and whimsically smiled in between. Maria, Vanessa’s daughter, had married Natalie’s son, Danny. The first baby shower was in a matter of months.

Kaya mused out loud. “Seems it was just yesterday that my Tina was fitted for a bridesmaid dress.”

“Whatta wedding,” Vanessa said shaking her head. “Well, I’m glad the baby news followed. I thought they would take their time.”

“They knew the clock was ticking. *Our* clock,” Natalie said. Laughter. “Kids are marrying later and later. No more big families anymore. Onesies and twosies.”

Vanessa walked to the kitchen and threw open a drawer, snatching the party list.

“Let’s talk numbers.”

After some particle of agreement, Kaya, the mediator, offered a reminder. “I hope you have talked about the issue of who can be around whom.”

“Be specific,” said Natalie.

“Okay, let’s start with Natalie. You have your husband’s ex-wife, who is also the friend of someone we all know and both expect to be there.” Kaya went on. “Think.”

“Ooooooooooh no. I don’t want that woman near us.” Natalie was shaking her head at Vanessa.

“Hey, we have to make certain sacrifices. She will dish out for at least a hundred-dollar gift at Baby Gap,” Vanessa said smugly.

Natalie was getting red in the face. “Well, I don’t like it. She never invited me to her son’s bar mitzvah.”

“Nat, please. Suck it up. This is for our grand baby.” Vanessa was raising an eyebrow.

“So, you want me to have a depressing day by having a normal conversation with that swine?” Natalie was poking hard.

“Girls, girls. This is getting petty and small. Just make a decision here. It’s not like we have Colin Cowell designing this affair.” Kaya was writing while shaking her head.

Natalie put on her menopausal pout. The dark clouds floated in.

“Shall we call Maria for a consult, or are we going to finish this without an argument?” Vanessa said shortly.

“Noooooooo. It shouldn’t be on your daughter’s head,” Natalie retorted.

Kaya put the pencil down. “Good. Let’s start all over.”

The baby shower was held at Vanessa’s with white organza draped around the windows and billowing from the ceiling. Flower petals adorned the banquet table surrounded by exquisite food. The theme of a Royal High Tea in honor of her Majesty, the soon-to-be-born, diva, Princess Victoria, was magical.

All seemed like they were floating on air, drunk from the cocktails and giddy from stacking the presents. Then Janine walked in.

Natalie put on the growling face.

“Stop it!” Vanessa whispered in her ear.

While Natalie was fixing herself another drink, Janine found her spotlight.

Vanessa offered Janine an air kiss and a fake hug. “Looking good Janine!”

Janine strutted around the clusters, waving her polished acrylics and flipping her long hair behind her shoulder. She was an unhealthy ad on the commercial network with all the accessories. Kaya steered her away from any suspecting crowd of whisperers and found her an assigned seat at a round table. Natalie ogled Janine’s small waist and tight hips from the kitchen pass-through. Vanessa walked towards Natalie and felt the chill.

“Okay, so she had more lipo done. She has the money,” said Vanessa quietly.

“Yeah, we know where the money came from.”

“Oh, come on, Nat. Two husbands after David keeps the alimony secure. It’s a game plan for a woman like her.”

Natalie slugged down the last of the drink. “If it weren’t for your aunt’s best friend, she wouldn’t be here at all.”

“Give it a rest, Nat. Let’s go hug our Maria.”

After the main course was served, Natalie stood up, felt woozy, caught herself, then swayed over to Janine. Vanessa stiffened.

Kaya spoke to her plate. “Oh boy.”

“Hi Janine. Good to see you,” Natalie spoke confidently.

Janine turned but couldn’t display a surprised look. Her eyebrows wouldn’t move. *Botox*.

“Well, I was wondering when you might say hello. Hello, Natalie.” Janine paused with that devilish smirk she always saved for the best of times. “Maria is glowing, isn’t she?”

They both stretched their necks in Maria’s direction, watching her giggle with her girlfriends. “Yes,” said Natalie. “She is one of those natural beauties who will never need any reconstructive surgery in her lifetime.”

Janine caught the slight and said, “That’s what we all think until the time arrives when we change our minds.”

Natalie jumped in, “Vanessa’s genes are rock solid.”

Janine touched her temples and added, “No one is anxious to grow old and show the lines, Natalie.”

“I actually may be one of those rare ones who doesn’t want to pretend I’m not aging,” remarked Natalie smugly.

Now the circle around the table focused on the conversation, offering their negative and positive opinions. When there was a lull in conversation, Natalie took the edge.

“Nick likes me just the way I am.”

The glowering began. Vanessa's aunt was sitting to the right of Janine and started waving her hands above Janine's head. *Don't start, Natalie!*

"Don't be so sure." The mumble came from Janine, as she stared around to the other seated women, and Natalie heard it just fine.

Before the warning bell rang, Kaya moved in quickly between the two women and distracted both of them with something Maria wanted to say to the group. Kaya took Natalie's arm and steered her to the safety zone.

From afar, the three girls saw the giggling from Janine's table, presuming Janine had taken lead in the conversation. It was a good thing it was time to open presents. Also, at that moment, Danny walked in, surprise, but no surprise, to kiss the bride and the mothers. And there was Janine, holding her arms out to make the show towards Danny. More growling from Natalie.

Vanessa was too busy organizing the gifts and getting the friends who offered to help write up the who's who and the what's what. She motioned towards Natalie to assist and it saved the day. No telling what explosion would occur from the implosions going on.

The shower was a huge success. Janine gave Maria what probably was a \$200 baby stroller that Natalie returned for cash because she had already bought one with a gift card three months ago. It was the last slap in the face that gave Natalie *some* satisfaction.

She went home that night exhausted with a headache from all the drinks and celebration and clean up. She crawled into bed while Nick was still awake and asked him the million-dollar question.

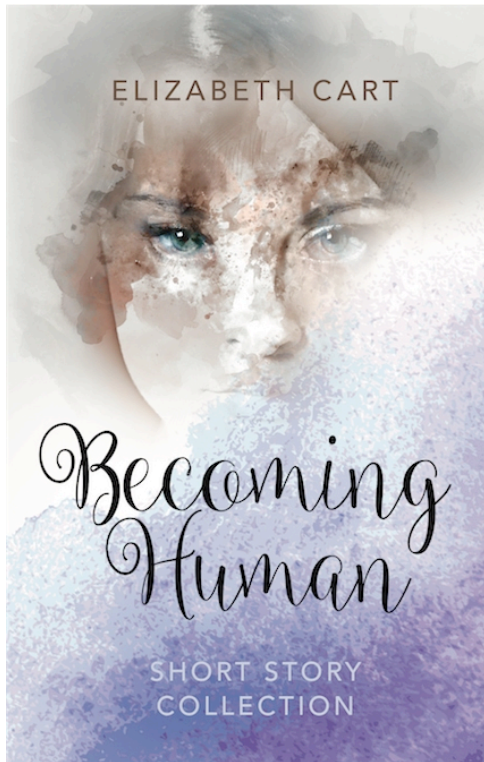
"Do you think I need any plastic work done on my body, on my face? Tell me the truth."

Nick turned to her and inspected her closely, comically turning her head with his hands and then rubbing her thickening waist and flabby thighs. "Nope. I love you just the way you are."

Elizabeth Cart

Natalie smiled alluringly. “I hoped so.”

The End



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