

**The First Two Pages of “Loves Me Like a Rock” by Cheryl A. Head**  
From *Paranoia Blues: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Songs of Paul Simon*  
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An Essay by Cheryl A. Head

Paul Simon songs were part of the soundtrack of my early teen years in Detroit. Even as Motown rhythms punctuated daily life, any music lover (and I am one) could appreciate the Simon & Garfunkel collaborations that proliferated the playlists of those days. It was called radio.

Part of Simon’s genius is his massive curiosity as a creative. His songs dabbled with forms and cultural influences with the fluidity of a jazz improvisation. World music, reggae, folk, rock, R&B. He tried them all, and when I heard the gospel patterns and infectious background vocals of the Dixie Hummingbirds on “Loves Me Like a Rock,” it became a fast favorite.

For the *Paranoia Blues* project I listened to “Loves Me Like a Rock” on repeat—hearing beyond the catchy cadence and echoing lyrics for the marrow of the song. The rock imagery dominates, of course, but also the themes of family relationships, religion, the passage of time, and politics. I play with all these ideas in my short story.

I’m a mom so I gravitate to the song’s reverie on the mother and child bond. It’s the first human connection each of us will have, and Simon wraps this relationship in religious metaphor. “She loves me like the rock of ages,” the lyric

says, and the boy evokes his mother’s teachings about consecration, the devil, and temptation.

Families can be rock-solid spaces of constancy, strength, and protection where we weather the storms of life. But like communities and countries, families can also become institutions where we hunker in beliefs and legacies that no longer serve us. These are ideas I explore in this short story.

Which brings me to the song’s flirtation with politics. The lyric “And if I was President” made me consider the current dynamics of the U.S. The divisiveness. The tension, for some, around a perceived loss of tradition, sense of place, and identity. That verse also tempted me to have fun with allusions to our current First Family, and I’ve scattered a few of those Easter eggs throughout the story. There’s no satisfaction to the reader in disclosing their hiding place, but I must reveal that one is Scranton, Pennsylvania (Joe Biden’s birthplace) because setting is critical to this story.

Cities like Scranton, former boom towns with closed factories and mines that loom as large as extinct dinosaurs, were once the lifeblood of the U.S.’s manufacturing dominance. They pulsed with economic vitality that built our reputation as a democracy. One could arrive from Ellis Island to these industrial meccas and then forge a path to middle class stature. Now these towns are icons of a past glory.

My short story is an acknowledgement of those twentieth-century American towns where identity was inextricably bound to family, tradition, and work. And a reminder that erosion—even of things that seem solid as a rock—is inevitable. It requires fortitude and faith to imagine the American Dream in a different way: still full of hopes and ideals, but propagated by the energy, enterprise, and creativity of young people and new citizens, who are diverse and increasingly hungry for their own piece of the rock.

### **The First Two Pages of “Love’s Me Like a Rock”**

Katie opened the drapes and looked out at Mrs. Garrick’s pear tree. All the fruit had fallen weeks ago, and squirrels collected the shriveled nubs for their winter’s bounty.

She examined her graying reflection in the window. Winter was coming fast, bringing too many memories of those final days—a year ago—when Walter’s chest had rattled with noxious fluids.

She made the bed, showered, checked the hamper for laundry, then mindlessly moved to the kitchen and turned on the radio. President Reagan was making one of his homey speeches. Walter couldn’t abide the man: he was too anti-union.

She rummaged the freezer, put a roast in the sink, then—realizing the folly of her actions—slumped into a kitchen chair. She splayed her fingers on the Formica table and stared at her gold wedding band with its discreet diamond.

When the blare of video-game music started upstairs, Katie checked her watch. Joey was running late for school. Her eldest, David, was married and living in Pittsburgh, and Valerie had recently gotten her own place across town. So now it was just Katie and Joey at home, and the last few months had been rocky between them.

She ascended the steps to his bedroom and knocked. They’d had arguments about his privacy, and she *tried* to honor her son’s wishes about his space. (Walter would have never stood for it. “You’ll

have privacy when you have your own house,” he told the kids. “In *this* house, doors get locked when *I* lock them.”)

The music grew louder, and Katie tried the knob. When it didn't turn, her tentative rapping escalated to pounding.

“Joey!” she shouted.

The music stopped, but there was still no reply.

“Joseph Robin Castle, if I have to break through this door, *you'll* pay for a new one!”

Joey was in his skivvies and a tee when he peered out—his hair disheveled, a smattering of hair on his chin, a joystick in his hand. He had been their surprise baby. Ten years younger than his sister, he was handsome, with the broad shoulders and hazel eyes of her grandfather.

“What is it, Ma?” he asked, guarding the door's narrow breach.

“Aren't you late?”

“There's no school today.”

“What do you mean, no school? I didn't know anything about that.”

Joey shrugged.

“Well, if you're home today, you can help me change out the storm windows.”

“I have to go out later.”

“Out where?”

“Just out.”

Katie used her ample hips to push past her son into his bedroom, which was in the same unkempt state as his hair.

“Joey, look at this room. Where are your schoolbooks?”

When he shrugged again and sat at the foot of his bed and resumed manipulating the joystick, Katie was fed up.

“Put down that damn game and pay attention. If you don't keep up your grades, you won't make it to State like your brother and sister.”

“College is a waste of time. Dave can't even afford to buy a house, and he drives that dumb Ford. Valerie has to work most of her summer break just to save enough to go on vacation. Nope, college isn't for me. I'm going to be a businessman.”

“A businessman?” Katie scanned the bedroom. She spotted a new TV, and sneakers she hadn't seen before. The *E.T.* movie poster had been replaced with one for *Scarface*. “Joey, what's this after-school job you're doing?”

“I told you. I work for a guy who details cars.”

“What exactly is that?”

Joey rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t understand, Ma. Look, I gotta finish this game and get ready to go.”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you. You’re always sullen. You never eat dinner at home anymore, and you haven’t been to Mass in weeks.”

“Church is for losers.”

Katie’s knees wobbled. “That’s blasphemy,” she shouted fingering the gold cross at her neck. She wanted to strike her son. Instead, she planted herself in front of his TV blocking his view. “Who’ve you been listening to?”

“Somebody who knows only suckers waste their time on college, or the mines.”

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Cheryl Head writes the award-winning Charlie Mack Motown Mysteries whose female PI protagonist is queer and black. Cheryl is an Anthony Nominee, a two-time Lambda Literary Award Finalist, a three-time Next Generation Indie Book Award Finalist, and Winner of the Golden Crown Literary Society’s Ann Bannon Popular Choice award. Cheryl’s books are included in the Detroit Public Library’s African American Book List and the Special Collections of the State of Michigan Library. She is Vice Chair of the Bouchercon Board of Directors.