

Forever Fifteen

A Novel

Virtualventures

KIMBERLY STEELE

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Forever Fifteen: A Novel

By Kimberly Steele

Second Edition

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This book is dedicated to strong-willed, independent women everywhere.

To my loving husband Rodney, who is truly a dream come true. To my loving parents and brothers, and my Aunts, Gail and Barb. To Breanna for believing in this project at every step. And finally, my special thanks to the Queenie music fans around the world.

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FOREWORD

Forever Fifteen was born of a dream I had in 2002, a dream that was part nightmare. I never intended it to be anything but a short story, for I had never completed even the shortest of stories unless forced to in grammar school. But once I started, Forever Fifteen seemed to fly out of me like a bat out of Hell, virtually writing itself. It was finished by the end of that year, each character having asserted itself pronouncedly in my imagination.

Forever Fifteen's characters can be seen proliferating in any affluent suburb near you: the middle class family struggling to survive in a uber-posh neighborhood while supporting three kids, the listless sixteen year old gifted student who decides Nazi fashion is "cool" for a week, the over-involved Ivy League bound kid next door, and the remodeling-obsessed ice queen sadly more interested in keeping up with the Joneses than with loving her own family.

My concept of the reluctant vampire sprung from a rabid obsession with medieval history, especially the pre-Renaissance era of the Black Plague. To recreate the era, I deliberately tried to avoid creating a thinly disguised bodice ripper where an "empowered" woman mouthed off to prospective suitors in jerkins and tights, in other words, a typical romance novel. Bold women certainly existed in the Middle Ages--Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is

evidence of this--but meek women were probably the norm, good Christian family ladies who wanted nothing more than to serve God and have children. This is where my character, Lucia, is coming from.

The modern parts of the book were inspired by my worldview of high school as pure, unadulterated Hell. I did not have to dig deep in my imagination to create the status-obsessed suburban environment of Lucy's modern milieu. I enjoyed depicting the dichotomy of the peace and safety of the suburbs while also showing its dark side in the form of high school villain Katy Pfister, who, by the way, never gets her comeuppance like some of the other characters do.

I hope that you can find an escape in Forever Fifteen. It remains a bizarre idea to me that Lucy Alberti could ever become so detailed or so real, but I'm certainly glad to have made her acquaintance. Enjoy.

Kimberly Steele

Naperville, Illinois

The characters, events, and places depicted in Forever Fifteen are purely figments of the author's entertaining, overactive imagination.

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LUCY GETS A DETENTION

"Lucy and John! I'll see you both in detention this afternoon in two-oh-four," snapped Sara Darnell, Lincoln High School's only female Physical Science teacher. She had asked to borrow his pencil out of dire necessity. Ms. Sara Darnell was a sprightly, svelte twenty-five year old who was known for serving detentions at meter maid frequency, if only to be taken marginally more seriously by the predominantly male Lincoln High Science Department.

Lucy clutched the pencil in defeat. Detention would mean coming home late, which spelled distraction and trouble on the night of a kill.

At least the sun would not be as bright, which was a welcome reprieve from the mercilessly bright early summer days which had invigorated every man, woman, and child in the suburbs but were wearing Lucy down into acute fatigue, along with her hunger.

Her target was a fifty-four year old man who lived with his mother, an obese neighborhood woman, a widow named Dawn Plote. Both had lived rather quietly until a scandal had opened up a can of worms for the son, allegations of child abduction, reported sightings of a white van around nearby elementary schools.

Lucy had passed the house once on the sidewalk, on a rare day when he was shoveling snow. She could smell the sweet girl child he had buried in the garage in autumn,

even under the frozen ground. Raymond Plote would only be missed by his mother.

Detention was merry for the other detainees.

The season was ripe for mating, she thought to herself bitterly. Even in her own sorry skin-and-bones state of wraithlike pallor and gray under eye circles she was drawing unwanted attention from would-be admirers.

It was hard to gain weight when you hated to eat.

During detention she orchestrated Ray Plote's murder. If he stayed in the basement apartment as was his usual habit, she would have no problem. If he decided to watch television upstairs with his mother, she would probably retire before he did, but she was a light sleeper. Lucy did not want to have to kill the mother, as she hated more than anything to kill women, no matter what their sins. So if they decided to watch television, there would be problems getting him out of the house, she would have to strangle him with piano wire, there was possibly of a struggle. If Ray left the house, it would be easy. She would lure him, as he was an easily tempted child predator who could even more easily be turned into prey.

The larger problem at hand was drugging her foster sister, Shari, into a deep sleep. She hated tricking Shari, whose joy for life was the only thing that made her naive enough to fall for laced iced tea or hot cocoa, depending on the season. Sweet sixteen year old Shari, who never once figured out the morning sleep hangovers she suffered monthly. Lucy slept in the same room as Shari, only ten feet away. It was comforting to have her there, snoring gently. Her acrid rose perfume oil that hung in the air that smelled like a head shop, her V.C. Andrews novels, her collection of old teddy bears, Paddington

minus his yellow hat, a yellowing white bear won in a carnival with one eye missing. Shari was to be protected, to be dissuaded from driving in cars with older boys at night, to be steered away from dope and beer and certain friends who had no plans to work or to go to college.

The Becks were the best foster family that she had ever had. The mother, Cathy Beck, was as patient and as charitable of an individual that Lucy had ever known, a big kindly Polish-American woman with the heart of an angel. Her foster father, Larry, was the hard working son-of-a-bitch type with a disdain for suits. His job as a painter was wearing him down acutely as he aged. His fatigue was tacitly understood within the family; it was a phenomenon which everyone acknowledged as related to the trades. He was a good foster dad that had never so much as leered at her, not even once. She had had to do away with many a leering foster father since she had started frequenting foster homes in the middle of the century.

Lost in thought, Lucy barely heard Mrs. Darnell's voice dismiss the group of ten miscreants when detention finally concluded at 4:35. She closed the book that she had been pretending to read and gathered her black umbrella and her backpack, a childish accoutrement she despised. She treaded down the hall swiftly but stopped abruptly when she heard a voice in back of her.

"Lucy, wait up."

She whirled around by instinct, frightening the boy who she had borrowed the pencil from. John. Had he been trying to get her attention before that day, or did he simply want his silly pencil returned?

"I'm John . . . you walking home?"

She paused, stunned. "Want your pencil back?" She asked him warily, squinting.

"Yes, uh, no." He said with a question in his voice, a question that revealed that he was intimidated, and not only that, but he had it bad. She felt scrawny, lanky, badly dressed in a baggy black T-shirt, sweaty, not at all beautiful; not even pretty. The odds were astounding and yet he had it bad.

Teenage boys never change, she thought to herself. He was so horny that he could probably make love to a tree. Funny how all but the most cunning and promiscuous teenage girls never caught on, not in 1400, certainly not now.

"Um, I was wondering if you wanted to join our study team for the Physics Class Final?" He said.

Nothing like the direct approach, she thought.

"Oh, that's okay, I do better if I study alone."

He paused in awkward silence as they walked outside the red double doors. He returned, "Can I walk you home then?"

She was completely taken aback and did her best not to show it.

"I guess so."

He had caught her in a moment of weakness; the hunger had made her emotional! She felt a terrible warmth surge from her loins. Her hormones were raging stupidly. The boy was bright and inquisitive as he was subtle. She had underestimated his animal ability to sense weakness.

"Carry your books for you?" He asked. Such pretty manners, she thought. Some doting parent had taught him well.

"No thanks." She could have handled ten times the weight, and hoisted him on her back and carried him too. She was strong, not unlike a pack mule or a camel; she thought to herself and smirked. He caught the smirk. He was staring at her, openly gaping. What was his problem, she thought to herself. Did he like freaks? She opened her black umbrella, her giant sun deflector. He said nothing, even though it was not raining. The silence grew unbearable, so she asked, "What is your surname, John?"

"My surname? You mean my last name?"

"Yes."

"It's Diedermayer."

He perked up, ready to make conversation.

"How old are you?"

He looked at her engagingly. "I'm sixteen, I'm a junior like you. My birthday was on May first."

"May Day. My goodness gracious. Happy Birthday, then." She replied.

"Thanks. I get my driver's license tomorrow. I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me--you seem kind of shy--but I figured maybe I could still talk you into joining our study group, it goes all year . . . "

That again. Such an obvious ruse, but the boys and girls would defend their pride to the bitter end, the facade of study groups during rutting season. His light brown hair was almost crew cut short. He looked like a French boy soldier she had once glimpsed marching towards his death in one of the battles they would later call the Hundred Years War.

His face was aquiline but sweet, the years had not yet taken the blush from his cheeks and his lips were similarly rubefacient. His build was medium, he would never

tower over his peers, yet his shoulders were broadening, betrayed by an undeveloped set of pectoral muscles underneath his button-down shirt that she could tell frustrated him.

They conversed, or more or less she interviewed him. He was content to talk about himself, though in the back of his clever mind he already suspected that she was not offering any details about her life. He talked about his driver's license, how he would soon inherit his older brother's BMW. He was an active member of the Football Team, Forensics, Math Team, Hockey, and occasionally Baseball. Naturally he was a member of the National Honor Society and a straight A student on the Honor Roll. His father and mother were a lawyer and a doctor, respectively. He was way out of her league and it was downright odd that he had obliged himself to talk to her, let alone walk her home.

She kept him talking all the way to the doorstep of the Beck's home, a small 1970s brown split-level in the old part of town. She sensed he might try and wane on her doorstep.

"It's getting late John. Shouldn't you be getting home?"

"It's not far." he replied, though it was obvious that he was lying. "May I come in?" His bravado was increasing.

"Actually, John, I really must get going." She thought of her kill. "I've got some chores to do and I usually cook dinner on weeknights."

He looked crestfallen. Neither would she allow herself to feel guilty nor would she allow him to find a way into the house. At any moment, Cathy Beck could arrive home and see them, then he would be eating dinner with

them, almost whether he liked it or not.

"Hey, don't be a stranger, Lucy. I wanted to talk to you before when you first came to live here two years ago, but I never did." She was surprised that he had noticed her existence as early as her arrival at the Beck house.

"Thanks for walking me home." She opened the front door with her keys, stepping inside. He had barely said, "Anytime," before she shut the door rather rudely in his face.

Thankfully only the children were home, so there was no one to take active notice that she had been accompanied on her way home from school.

She stole the opportunity to peer at his departing figure from the closed curtains of the front room window, his shoulders slumped forward, his posture and his ego slightly deflated. He would be off her case just as soon as his fever for her broke and he found a lover, and she imagined he must have plenty of girls from ritzy families lining up to choose from. She watched for five minutes until he completely disappeared over Pine Crest, past the yellow fire hydrant and the dented stop sign. She shook her head.

She liked to cook even though normal food was not nourishing to her. She liked to do it for Cathy Beck, so that she could relax after waitressing all day at the Big Apple with a homemade meal. She enjoyed preparing the evening meals, the smells of potatoes roasting in the oven, the stink of onions in the pan, the crackle of chicken frying. Most of all she enjoyed the gentle gratitude of her foster family members, even the teasing

of Mike, her foster brother, who liked to play food critic to give her a hard time.

The family always managed to make it home for supper, even though it was a dying custom. Supper was spaghetti and Italian sausage that night. It was everyone's favorite meal.

"I saw you walking down the street with someone, Lucy. Who walked you home?" Mike asked her, his voice tinged with jealousy, as she passed the garlic bread. Lucy sighed.

Cathy's eyebrows perked up. She was the consummate mother, even when extremely tired, she missed nothing.

Lucy replied to Mike, "Nobody."

"Um, liar liar pants on fire." Mike retorted churlishly.

Cathy threw Mike a look. "Mike, don't call Lucy a liar."

"Well, if you must know, John Diermayer from Science Class walked me home. I spent this afternoon in detention." Lucy said.

"Really." Shari drawled as she looked up from her dissected sausage. Larry kept digging heartily into his spaghetti, not intrigued in the slightest.

"What did you do?" Mike asked.

"Borrowed a pencil." Lucy replied sardonically.

"You should go out with him. He's nice." added Shari.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Shari. I'm not interested in him." Lucy replied.

Mike seemed visibly happier at her remark. He had been formally adopted by the Becks at the age of twelve. He was now a sophomore at Lincoln, Lucy a Junior, and Shari a Senior. He had had a crush on Lucy since she had arrived, he seemed to find her attractive both for and

despite her strangeness. She had remained patently unavailable to him. Assessing him as harmless, she had remained friendly, albeit aloof.

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THE UNTIMELY DEMISE OF RAY PLOTE

Later that night after the dishes were washed and the garbage taken out, Lucy and the Beck's natural daughter retired to their shared bedroom. Shari draped herself lazily upon her unmade bed. Her straight strawberry blonde hair was exactly Cathy's. She had Cathy's predisposition to overweight and her hips were solid and thick under her jeans. Hips tended to be the bane of Shari's existence as she tried diet after diet to get rid of them. Her soft brown eyes, inherited from Larry, warmed an already pretty face. She was the type that people of every age gravitated to, naturally affable and kind to everyone.

"Ever thought about letting me do something with your hair?"

Not needing an answer, Shari got up and whipped out a vented brush from an overstuffed drawer.

"God, it's too curly for a brush. You don't want to look like Bozo." Shari wanted to own her own hair salon as her mother Cathy had always wanted to.

Lucy replied, "My hair has a mind of its own. It's of no use."

They talked until midnight most nights. Tonight Lucy doled out outré physiological theories of boys and their overactive hormones. Shari laughed hysterically and was promptly shushed by Larry from the next room. As usual, Lucy traced over parts of her experiences in her confidences with Shari, skipping lightly over her own

story as a pebble would over a lake.

Shari regaled Lucy with soap operatic tales of boy-girl intrigues at the high school, then spoke of her aspirations for the future.

"Do you think you'll ever get married, Lucy?"

Lucy shifted uncomfortably as she pulled her makeshift nightgown—an old T-shirt—over her head.

"Uh, I think I might, Shari. I don't know."

"I think twenty-nine would be a good age," Shari replied, "plus I'm going to have two kids, Jared if it's a boy and Bethany Crystal if it's a girl." She also wanted two dogs, a golden Labrador retriever and a cocker spaniel.

Lucy went downstairs to prepare the hot cocoa that would be the last hot drink of the season, ruefully spiking the liquid with Nytol, just one tablet dissolved in a little warm water. She added extra chocolate powder to disguise the bitterness of the pill. She brought the cups of cocoa back to the bedroom.

"Did you girls finish your homework?" Cathy's head appeared in the open door.

"Didn't have any," replied Shari.

"Finished mine in Study Hall." Lucy replied.

"Has that John asked you for a date?" Cathy added.

"No . . . I'm not sure I'd go out with him anyway."

"Oh, come on!" Shari exclaimed, putting her cocoa down and burying her face in a fat white pillow.

"Why not?" Cathy continued, "Shari is allowed to date, Lucy, and so are you. As long as Larry and I meet the boy first, he can take you out."

"All right." Lucy said. "But nothing is going to happen." She tried not to stare at Shari who had resumed

sipping the drugged cocoa.

"Good night, girls."

"Good night, Mom." Shari said. Lucy simply added her own good night, even though a significant part of her wanted to call Cathy mother, she refrained.

By 12:30 a.m. Shari was snoring, the pill having worked its magic. Lucy changed into her Goodwill jeans and sweatshirt, plastering her hair down with an elastic band and securing it under a tight hood. She packed her backpack with a change of clothes, some rags, and her old length of piano wire.

She slipped out the window, jumping to the ground from the second story with very little sound. The next door neighbor's dog, chained outside, let out a single bark, but was silent as soon as she turned in that direction, instinctively afraid. She ran through the backyards of Pinecrest subdivision, piano wire and a slim jim tucked into her pantyhose. It was a gorgeous May evening, the air redolent with the soapy purple scents of hyacinth and lilac.

Ray Plote was most certainly feeling restless, what if he had left the house for the evening? She needed to eat.

He was in the house with his mother. They were bickering, she could tell by the way the mother threw her fat arms into the air and paced restlessly about the tiny clapboard house. Ray did not pace, he just stood. He was a large oafish man, a man that seemed deceptively harmless, and some thought him slightly retarded.

After an hour of waiting, she slammed her bedroom door and he returned to his basement. Lucy entered the house by picking the back door lock with the slim jim. She slipped silently inside the door as he went inside a

putrid little bathroom to urinate. She donned her gloves. She crept behind the open door and pounced on him when he came out of the bathroom, knocking him onto the floor with a loud thud. She hoped desperately that Mrs. Plote was sleeping or deaf.

She quickly strangled him with the piano wire as he looked at her, his lips open as if to scream, but his larynx had been intentionally sliced. His obtuse hands punched and jabbed at her uselessly, then he throttled her neck with the last of his strength. It was of no use, she let him do it as she could not be strangled. His last actions were futile.

His energy began to slip away and she sank her teeth into his fat carotid artery below the piano wire, which had drawn blood from his neck. Her mouth was an effective tourniquet. She drank and drank until his body was a lifeless husk, as light as a mannequin, virtually hollow of all but the fluid in his bones.

It was a sickening process, and the sucking sound was sure to wake up Ray's mother. Lucy heard a stir, but if Dawn Plote were to arise and come into the room, it could only mean two murders tonight.

When she was done she checked the patio door and carried his body into the garage, burying his remains next to the ten year old girl he had raped and killed last autumn, whose bones were starting to show in small areas where the maggots had feasted. She wondered who the girl might belong to as she patted dirt over the shallow grave. She could still smell the now familiar scent of him on the girl's body in the makeshift grave. It had been intensified and corrupted by time, as if to add insult to injury. There were probably others buried around the

house, she had seen a suspicious working refrigerator in the back of the garage mess, but she wasn't about to check it out.

She placed the freezer back on top of Ray Plote's old hiding place, now his permanent resting place. If and when Ray was ever found, she would be long gone and they would be unable to explain what had happened to him. She took a few of his things before she scanned the area. He had been very easy or she had been very lucky. She took some shirts, underwear, shoes, a duffel bag, and his wallet to make it look like he had gone a-traveling. She pocketed the sum total of his ready cash, about forty-eight dollars. She would take the items with her; bury the items and her bloodstained clothes in one of the many sinkholes in the huge landfill/garbage dump on the south side of town. She did not forge a note. Ray Plote would not leave a written explanation.

No one would ever know what happened to him.
Hopefully.

She felt much better. His brute strength surged through her veins, she could feel his energy in her heart, his life force stolen like candy from a baby. She no longer felt sick or dizzy, her muscles returned to a relaxed, supple state.

She climbed back into the window an hour before sunrise. She could not risk going in the door, lest she run into Larry or Cathy drinking a nocturnal glass of milk or Mike raiding the refrigerator for snacks. It was not the type of household where one could come and go at all hours, for this she was glad. She slipped into bed and struggled to stay awake until she heard Cathy and Larry

stirring.

It was dawn: Cathy would soon be off to the restaurant and Larry off to paint a house. She showered after she heard the door shut and the cars pull out of the driveway. Full as she was of him, it felt good to shower her kill out of her hair.

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A MARRIAGE, PART ONE

School was winding down. Even the teachers were getting restless, the seniors gnawing hard at the bit as graduation teased. Public school. She had never dreamed of such decadence, never imagined that young people could be so happy and healthy. The girls had such freedom, a wonderful chance afforded to them to go out in the wide world before making babies, it was nothing like the world she had come of age in.

Had it not been for the Plague, she might have had her own babies. She was betrothed to Gianfrancesco Iovelli at the age of nine.

She could still remember his face, the perpetually wet lips that turned down at the sides, his drooping Roman eyes.

He was twenty-nine at the time, practically an old man. His noble Florentine roots went back a thousand years, to the days of grand Rome herself. Hers were less noble, yet stately.

Her father, Bartolomeo, was a well-respected member of the Arte di Calimala: the Wool Makers Guild in Mantua. His reputation was slightly tainted by his marriage to her mother, an exotic blue-eyed raven-haired beauty, a Gypsy doll with a clandestine heritage. Her father was an astute businessman and a hard worker, but also handsome in the face which had aided partly his ascension to the Guild. His hair was thick and brown and his skin was fair. His chin was angular and his lips were

small, his mouth tiny and refined.

Lucy thought he was the most handsome man in the entire world. Until the age of five she adored him. It was at the age of five, when it became clear that she would not be followed by a brother, that he became more distant towards her and stopped adoring her. She wanted his attention, but so did everyone else. His high brow was what caused all the ladies in town to covet him, it radiated intelligence but also something more primal.

Despite him, it was the beauty that she had inherited from her mother they had used to gain the betrothal, and it had not been easy. Father had traveled to Florence to the Mercato Nuovo, staying away for a half year at a time paying court to the house of the silk merchant Iovelli, which was patronized by none other than the Medicis.

Her mother informed her of the betrothal on the first painful day of her menarche, shortly after her eleventh birthday. The arrangement had been made by the town matchmaker, a frightening old oak of a man. Mother had met with him two years before to begin the process of finding a match.

Her family had hosted a feast in his honor for which they had taken weeks to prepare: with braised capons and lobster sausages and all sorts of delicious spiced stews her mother had made from secret recipes. Mother had forced Lucy to memorize the ingredients of the stews, fairly beating them into her, spanking her backside when she rebelled. The preparations to meet him were immense, roses were planted everywhere, white and drooping with honeyed fragrance.

It was a shame that they had made such a fuss, she thought as he arrived. He did not leave much of an

impression. She could hardly remember his face except for his brown hair, thick lips, and narrow dark eyes. She remembered him as a dull figure, a big man with a belly that was already showing fat under his fine scarlet clothes. She had felt very uncomfortable around him, grotesque. She had gladly lowered her eyes as she had been instructed to in front of the fine ladies and lords, as she was more interested in their clothing and fripperies than their faces. It was rude and disrespectful to raise her eyes to him, her mother had warned.

She felt that she became more familiar with the floor during the time that he stayed than with any particular person. Now she was to be married to him and it horrified her. She loved her mother Marina more than any other thing in the world and could not bear to speak to her for a fortnight after being told her fate. She was to be handed over with her dowry of three thousand Florins, plus her pet bird, six chickens, her mother's fine linens, a small book of poetry. Her mother tried to soothe her with tales of romance and love, of all the fineries that she would enjoy in the Palazzo, but all Lucia could do was cry until her cheeks twitched and her forehead ached. For her mother to betray her seemed inevitable, but the betrayal seemed worse than her fate.

She had been so young then.

Her mother was a goddess to her all through her youth, the mysterious ruler of all things beautiful and wonderful and lunar, her eyes that glistened spectral blue, as if she had the knowledge and the magic to raise the very dead. How she had coveted her mother's beauty and sought to emulate it, if only to please her.

Even as a child she observed how men were haunted

by the presence of her mother. She could still remember herself at age five, staring knives and daggers at the men who came into the small yarn shop, under pretense of business but really just to leer. She guarded her mother, or at least she had liked to think so. She was her mother's child, fair of face, doted upon and spoiled by her attentions.

One day her mother swept into the bedroom of the family townhouse, sweeping across the floor with a bundle in her arms. It was a boy baby cooing in swaddling clothes, a baby who had just been born to the butcher's servant across the alley, the maid Isobella who trailed behind, beaming.

"Look at how fair he is! The Lord has blessed Isobella with a fine son. Come and see him, Lucia."

Obediently, Lucia rose from her seated position on the bed and approached the baby and the mother in wonderment. He was beautiful and perfect, his blue eyes smiling at her. Marina gently passed the swaddled infant to his mother, who sat down on the bed proudly to nurse the baby, extracting a fat breast from her heavy gown.

Lucy was charmed; how peaceful the baby looked. He was a wonderful little creature with a perfect tiny face, mottled pink cheeks, and eyes brighter than May.

"Has your heart melted, Lucia? Can you see the purposefulness of your future?" Marina asked.

Lucia watched in fascination as Isobella nodded at her, only three years older than she, nursing her son with a contented smile upon her face.

When he had finishing feeding and burping, Isobella asked her, "Would you like to hold him?"

Lucia nodded yes eagerly. The baby was placed in her

lap. She could feel his warm little body trying to snuggle into her, trying to wriggle loose of his swaddling cloth. Now the baby's bright May eyes peered up at her intently. He gurgled as if trying to communicate. Then his tiny bow mouth opened into an adoring smile.

"Oh! He's wonderful! Isobella, you are truly blessed!" She said as she held the baby.

She changed her mind that day, as her mother Marina had predicted. The house became joyous again with the talk of babies and wedding festivities. Her mother brewed potions to scent her hair, sweet balms of anise for her lips and hands, told her wonderful secrets, some decidedly un-Christian.

She went to market every day to fetch the daily bread and more herbs for more medicines and potions, plus treats for the apprentices made of honey and almond paste. She was carefree. She loved the market, the horses trotting about, the bishops forced to be on the same road with old washer-women, the fools begging for a Florin or a ducat.

As the wedding neared, she bought some finer things: a veal roast for supper, a single pearl for the dowry.

Gifts came from Florence: rubies and emeralds, a beautiful statue of Santa Maria for their garden grotto, a gorgeous silk tapestry of a hunting scene that alone made the price of her dowry look paltry.

A message was dispatched from Florence that she was to again receive her future husband. When Gianfrancesco came to call this time, she was excited and ready.

She sat with him in the courtyard after serving him

spiced wine. He seemed happy with her, finding her proper and seemly.

He cupped her small hands in the bowl of his large ones and reassured her in the kindest manner, saying, “You will have the finest life that Florence has to offer. My family’s Palazzo is not as grand as the Palazzo Vecchio, but it is a wonderful place that you will adore, I promise. Lucia, you will come to love me and all the blessings of the Lord that marriage brings.”

He then slipped a diamond ring on her finger. Guiltily, she felt very little for him, and yet she wondered what he would be like. Her curiosity was insatiable, her dreams filled with happy speculation over what hair color her babies would inherit.

Her father became much less distant towards his only daughter in the days that followed. She had gained respect all about town with news of her fine marriage, and her reputation as a beauty was expanding.

Her father had smiles ready for her, he seemed to be truly happy with her for the first time since her infancy. She wished she could steal his smiles and keep them in a box, they had always been so precious. He even hugged her a few times, something he had never done. She thought of the smiles she would gather when she brought forth his first grandson.

The wedding day came shortly after she turned fourteen. It was a perfect windless spring day, a Sunday.

They were wed in Florence, in the grandest cathedral she had ever seen, the Santa Maria del Fiore. He had been baptized there. Thankfully, he seemed pleased the moment he saw her face, which her mother had made her wash for weeks with the pulp of apples, orange water, and

extract of borage among other things. It was the beginning of June.

Cool and sunny, it seemed that God himself smiled upon that day, the sunbeams streaming through the magnificent arches dustily as the priest murmured in soporific Latin.

She had never seen so much food in her life as she saw at her own wedding feast. The smells of skewered fennel, roast chicken, and broiled pheasant saturated the air, and she could smell other wonderful aromas about them.

An entire forest's array of meats was served in courses brought out to the table. Meat pies with sweet crust were stuffed with macaroni, steaks of pork and beef were pounded thin and grilled rare, capons had been marinated in plum wine and cinnamon, and veal sausages stewed in cream were served over fine noodles: all the dishes that he loved were present. Beautiful sculptures of sugar and almond paste decorated the long tables, delicate replicas of flowers and miniature animals, even a small Palazzo sculpted from cakes graced the table. The wine was sweetened with cinnamon and cloves and rare edible flowers, which her father had instructed her not to drink excessively of. He smiled grandly; she could feel the radiance of his approval from across the wedding table.

Her new husband was pleased to watch the astonished look on her face as tray after tray appeared on the grand table, each better than the next.

Fruit trees had been brought all the way from India so their product could be laden on the wedding table, fruits with exotic shapes and haunting flavors ended the meal, cleansing the palate. He beamed as she whispered to

him that she had seen a table so fine or tasted such wonders.

For the first time that day, she was finally able to look into his face. Gianfrancesco was not ugly, in fact, perhaps he was rather handsome after all. And the way he and the other men looked at her!

The desire was plain on their faces, so many noblemen reduced to their simplest elements! They looked at her sideways, they looked at her backside, scanning her blue eyes and even looking right into her face.

A boy no older than she, Gianfrancesco's cousin, whispered what he would like to do to her when she stole into the hallways near the women's chambers to fix herself. She should have slapped him but she was in shock at her own thoughts of lust that arose. She ran from the knave into the women's quarters.

Gianfrancesco took her that night gently, for which she was glad. He barely shook the rose petals from her hair. It was neither good nor bad. She acted as her mother had taught her to. Her mother had prepared her for everything.

There was a little pain, but it wasn't anything. Afterward he stole out of the room with the bloodstained sheet to boast her virginity to his brothers and father, which only truly mattered because she was beautiful, her mother had said. It was shameful, but again, her mother had prepared her for it.

Her parents left two weeks later, the weather still fine. Her new husband had paid for a cadre of escorts back to Mantua.

The Iovellis were very rich, from what she could tell. They were true noblemen, men of the court.

She had always considered herself a simple wool maker's daughter, but she began to realize that by marrying Gianfrancesco she had unwittingly gained entrance to a separate world.

The Palazzo was unlike anything she had ever known. She slept in a bedroom clad in linens and skins, walked down hallways bedecked in the most gay and colorful frescos. Under her feet lay intricate mosaics, and each warm hall was festooned in tapestries. A corner could hold the promise of a shelf of dainty crystals, volcanic ices of rainbow colors, or figurines of saints sculpted from horn and bone reenacting their martyrdoms on delicate miniature wooden stages. She had time in the afternoons to do crewelwork and embroidery, no longer occupied by the constant spinning of wool.

And the food! She and Marina had done most of the cooking at home. It was not that the servants could not, they simply preferred to. At the Palazzo, the cook's cook had a team of servants under him.

They feasted every day and ate all sorts of fresh foods grown in the expansive gardens teeming with vegetables and fruits. She loved to walk through the gardens, graced with columns that loomed overhead. The gardens were tidy and geometric, each avenue with a different purpose: flowers for cutting, herbs, brightly colored vegetables.

Even on cool days the gardens were colorful and bright, with orange trees emanating sweetness and bumblebees drunkenly weaving from flower to flower.

She loved Florence, wandering the huge markets which bustled day and night. Art was everywhere, underfoot in the form of mosaics, overhead in the form of architecture. Even the basest objects sold in the

roadside shops were beautiful in some way. The entire city seemed to exist for beauty and art alone.

It was a grand life.

Virtualventures

THE ARRIVAL OF THE BLACK DEATH

He loved her many times, especially in the first month. She knew she was pregnant when she missed her period in the first weeks of August that year. Lightheaded, she threw up in the courtyard of the Palazzo as servants crowded her in alarm. She had never been so happy to vomit.

Dreams of adorable infants danced through her head as she cradled blankets in her arms. She practiced swaddling on a doll, pretending to pat the head of her imaginary infant boy.

Her personal maidservant, the first she had ever had in her life, was joyful for her. Her girl, Clarice, was ten and just as pretty as a silver bell. Clarice was from Lombardy, fair-haired and light skinned. Clarice loved babies as much as Lucia did and chattered about them day and night. She kissed Lucia's cheeks and patted her growing belly upon rising, to which her new husband disapproved, but Lucia loved the attention and adoration.

News was sent back home, and in October, Marina traveled to Florence to live with her daughter again. Lucia had never been so happy, so content. Marina doted over her pregnant daughter, adorned in fine brocades, reassuring her that it was certain to be either a baby boy or a girl of such great beauty she would eclipse them both.

A fine doctor from the Arte de Medici e Speziali was commissioned directly from Rome to oversee her care.

His duties were to make certain that she was eating right and not exposing herself to foul odors and cold drafts.

Rumor in the Palazzo had it that her new doctor was a powerful archbishop from the south who conducted most of his dealings in secret. Lucia dismissed the rumors, as it was not likely an archbishop would renege on his duties to become her personal doctor.

Her mother did not seem to like the new doctor at all, shunning him with a near superstitious dread. Lucia liked the doctor though, and he seemed to be very fond of her too. His name was Sebastianus.

Sebastianus claimed to have met her back in Mantua after the betrothal. She did not remember him, but he said that he had introduced himself to her when she was visiting the butcher's family.

He relayed many details of the location and the beautiful rivers of her home, a subject she never tired of. His advice was mostly practical. He seemed like a very intelligent doctor and not at all like a snooty archbishop. Her husband had a great deal of respect for Sebastian as well.

Her husband was prouder of her every day. As her belly swelled, so did he. She seemed to grow more beautiful to him and not the opposite.

Winter came: rainy, damp, and savage. Winds returned, the gardens withered, and roses would not bloom. Clarice rubbed her belly, singing songs to the unborn baby. Marina had retired to bed, drinking wine slowly, sleeping when she was not drinking.

The winter of 1348 seemed to last an eternity, but the Pestilence struck in one day.

Her beloved mother Marina was the first in the house to catch it, the first to die. It took Marina in three days. The swellings appeared under her arms and a general panic spread through the Palazzo.

Sebastianus gave Marina tonics and barred Lucia from touching her mother, who yelled in her Gypsy tongue at Lucia to stay away, save the baby. Lucy paced outside of the stone bricked room until her mother began to scream. She wormed her way past Sebastian, glanced at her mother's blackened face, her obscenely naked body bulging with yellow and black buboes under the arms and in the groin that oozed stinking fluid. It was as if the Devil himself had raped and defiled her mother. She cursed Satan and screamed at the heavens, praying to Mary frantically.

Sebastian physically restrained her as she hit and scratched at him, trying to touch her mother who went swiftly into her death throes. She flailed against the doctor's grip but after what seemed an eternity of kicking and flailing, amazingly, he had not seemed weakened in the slightest by her resistance. She relented out of exhaustion, yet he would not let her near Marina, his embrace tightening.

Sebastianus began performing Marina's last rites. The priest normally assigned the duty in the Iovelli family had fled days before from the chapel.

The buboes broke and God took Lucia's mother. Lucy vomited onto the floor at the sight of her mother dying, the black spots expanding across her corpse.

She cried for hours but would not scream as her mother was packed into a marble coffin. She needed to protect the baby. She worried for her father in Mantua,

hoping that he was still alive.

Her girl Clarice was next, dying within a single day, blood leaking from her pretty brown eyes like an image of the Blessed Virgin.

The Plague raced through the city and the Palazzo, consuming it like fire. Bodies were piled high in the streets, Sebastian went on rounds and would come back late at night, reporting horrors and robberies, death that came within hours, not days.

Gianfrancesco became agitated. He seemed safe from the sickness, having been surrounded by the dying, he had witnessed the carnage up close and yet his health still prevailed. Sebastian, too, seemed to be immune, even though cats, dogs, and beasts of the suffered just as the humans did: blackening and dying, their eyes rolling, their bodies covered with bald buboes.

Lucia confined herself to her quarters, wondering when they would flee to the country as so many other houses had done. She took to listening through closed doors.

She heard Gianfrancesco arguing with Sebastianus. They bickered frequently now as Gianfrancesco protested the prices of things like funeral candles and poultices to comfort the dying.

“You would be wise to loosen your purse-strings, Gianfrancesco. There will be a world that exists after this Pestilence, and for you, it will mean the wealth from those you extend your current generosity to. You will survive, mark my words. You will also become a very rich man, though I wish that the circumstances had been different.”

Gianfrancesco's father and all of his three brothers had perished. Gianfrancesco found himself to be his family's sole remaining male heir.

"So you'd best open your coffers. Mark yourself as a charitable man and you'll be rewarded here and in Heaven." Sebastian said, though she swore she detected the slightest hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"But we only aid the beccamorti by giving them our business! I refuse to pay exorbitant prices for wood coffins and burial for lesser servants who could just as easily be dragged into the pit! Let the dead bury the dead!"

"You fool! It is the gross lack of sanitation you speak of that has brought us to this very end. If you had any idea what depths people have sunken to as you reside safely in this high fortress, you would search your soul to find the mote of charity left there. Fathers are abandoning their own children at the first sign of fever or buboes, Gianfrancesco! Priests have abandoned their churches. The idiots are marching through the streets in processions from town to town, whipping their own backs until they are covered in blood, spreading the bloody Pestilence wherever they go! The dead pile in the streets like timber. The stench is everywhere. You would be alarmed of how sulphurous it is, how sickeningly sweet. The danger you put yourself in by remaining here astounds me."

She pressed her ear to the door.

"Stop! Stop telling me these things at once! We should stay in the Palazzo! I must protect my ancestral home!" Gianfrancesco exclaimed.

"Contrarily, you are sitting on a sepulcher of death! It

is only a matter of time before the Pestilence strikes here again, Gianfrancesco. The Reaper is not sated yet. He will return, and you shall be awaiting his arrival!”

When her own underarms and groin turned pink, then blue, then black, she confined herself to bed. The fever came. Sebastian was gone and another doctor came to bleed her, to rid her of the black humors that were causing the plague. Her husband sat in a chair beside her bed, his head in his hands. Sebastian returned to find her blood dripping into the crucible. He threw the doctor out of the Palazzo on his rear, sending him to the insane plague-infested streets.

She went into premature labor.

Sebastian administered bitter tonics to her, fluids she could not taste with her swollen tongue. Her body went into spasm.

She kept trying to shut her legs, to stop the baby from coming out. To stop her, Sebastian slapped her face and nearly dislocated her jaw. Gianfrancesco ran from the room, tearing at his hair.

The baby boy was delivered in a sea of black blood, born dead and blue, and strangled by plague. He was followed by a great pile of black organs, hers, her female parts. Her tears dissipated as she began to convulse, completely devoid of any spare fluid.

She fell into a deep delirium, whispering hoarsely to her dead mother, cursing God in Heaven, cursing her doctor, cursing herself as apparitions of devils and demons pulled at her with yellow ochre hands. In and out of consciousness she sailed, hearing voices from memory that she could not distinguish from reality. When she awoke, her husband held her hand as

Sebastianus urged her to drink weak wine. He did not explain what had happened to her. He did not have to.

“You are a miracle! God spares few from the Pestilence.”

Sebastian exclaimed as her husband nodded his head slowly. She looked at her flattened belly. She felt sickeningly empty.

When she looked into their eyes, her despair put her beyond tears. She told her husband that she wished her nothing more than her own death.

More than half the city perished. The beautiful city that she had been awed by and even grown to love had been abandoned. Tombs were desecrated, beautiful statues toppled, and the colorful shops that she had been enchanted by along the canal had been closed or burned.

Horrors abounded in every passageway as each turn could bring a vision of a poor woman running from her screaming plague-infested son or a bloated corpse of a rich man whose mouth lolled open, showing gaps where someone had pried out a few golden teeth.

She thought of Sebastian who often returned from the charnel house that the outside world had become. He was braver than her husband, who paced and cowered in the corners of the once-sunny Palazzo. She chastised herself for thinking of her husband and lord as being weak. Instead, her husband was probably wise. Who could guarantee a safer existence outside Florence?

That Sebastian seemed to have a weird immunity to the Pestilence was a trait that went unquestioned, unanswered. Sebastian, as doctor, was constantly around the sick and the dying.

The curtains and tapestries had appeared over the windows before Marina had died, growing moldy from the dampness and the oils of lavender, clove, and clary sage soaking them. They stank, and she hated how they blocked the sunlight. The summer arrived, speeding the Plague and with it the famine in the streets.

Her husband finally relented. He suggested they take the remains of the household to his country estate, where he could at least hunt through the winter to provide them venison and grouse. Most of the horses were dead, all but three stallions and two mares left among what was once a thriving stable. The priceless things were gathered, the belongings packed.

As they left Florence, dying men and women still scabbled through the streets, screams emanating from the rows of houses, beggars running up to the horses, sick children in their arms, their eyes bleeding, their noses running, begging to join them in their journey out. It was exactly as Sebastian had foreseen. She would be haunted by the visions of their mad faces in her dreams for the next hundred years.

< 5 >

LUCY MAKES A FRIEND

English class was a sleepy affair, made sleepier by the fact that the school year was drawing to a close. The teacher droned on and on about the mournful funerary love of Romeo and Juliet, a tale she had long since tired of. The students passed Juicy Fruit sticks and notes back and forth, bartering various forms of social currency.

She felt a semi-sharp object being gently impressed into her back. She ignored it until it repeated itself. The teacher turned towards the blackboard to inscribe the names of Capulet and Montague.

Lucy turned and faced the strawberry blonde behind her, gesturing rapidly with a folded origami triangle, evidently the newest form of note. She took the piece of paper and unfolded it in the safety of her lap. It said:

Got news for you about J.D. Want to walk home today?

Lucy slipped the paper into her English textbook. When the bell rang, she lagged behind as was her habit.

The note-passer lagged behind with her.

"Hey, I'm Michelle."

"Hi, I'm Lucy Albert."

Michelle smiled, "I know who you are." Lucy noticed Michelle's heavy pile of books, some of which were from the school library.

"Those look heavy. Would you like me to take one for you?"

"Nah." Michelle said.

Lucy sized up the girl. Petite build, like herself. A

large nose. Skin astonishingly clear except for a spray of blackheads on each side of her nose. She was young and bright, little to no make-up except for lip-gloss, long, straight, glossy reddish blonde hair slightly past her shoulders. Very intelligent, by the looks of the books she was carrying. A lovely, fetching girl.

"So what is up with you and John Dierdmayer? Is he, like, after you?"

She looked at Michelle quizzically.

"I don't think so." Lucy replied meekly.

"Well, I hear that you totally slammed the door in his face after he walked you home! Did you know he lives clear on the other side of town and walked three miles home after you slammed him?"

"No . . . I had no idea."

Lucy lied. She was perfectly aware that the boy had gotten some sort of bug in his craw over her despite her sloppy, strange appearance. Somehow her walk home with him had been transmogrified into a melodramatic rejection, a slamming.

"He still likes you, I believe."

Lucy felt her face go hot, but at the same time raised her eyebrows, relaying a tacit acknowledgement of her own distressed appearance. Michelle was too polite to put it into words.

"I'll meet you at your locker after school."

Michelle met her at her locker, right on schedule, carrying a backpack so overstuffed it was its own conversation piece.

"What's in there?" Lucy asked.

Her own pack was so light that she left it in the locker.

No homework. No umbrella either, the sky was delightfully overcast. Michelle listed the items in her pack.

"Well, my Advanced Trig book weighs about two tons, then there is my Poli-Sci book, which is smaller but kind of fat, I've got a speech to write for a meet next week, so I've got a Trapper Keeper just for speeches, you know."

"Would you like me to carry some of the books? I have nothing to bring home today."

"No, but can you carry my lunch bag? Where is yours?" Michelle asked.

"I don't eat lunch. I have a big breakfast." It was a lie: Lucy ate one forced meal a day, supper.

"Oh. A big breakfast is healthier anyway, so they say. So, why did you slam the door in John Diermayer's face?"

Lucy did not look at her, but cocked her head skyward.

"I wasn't aware that I had rejected him, or so harshly. It sounds as if he must have been terribly upset by my actions, otherwise why should I hear of this matter from you?"

Michelle shrugged.

"Are you aware that every girl in Princeton Hills would kill for a chance at him? I think it's simple. Go for it. He's a cutie. Obviously he is still interested. I'd go for it."

Lucy felt the familiar warmth surge upward from her crotch.

"Why don't we wait and see what he does?" Lucy looked at Michelle readily, her back swinging ever so

slightly from side to side as they trudged down the skinny sidewalk.

Michelle tossed her hair like a young colt flicking its tail.

"Junior prom is in two and a half weeks. Did you realize?"

Lucy's mouth twisted into a half-smile that she could not help.

"I've never been to any of Lincoln's dances. Besides, I don't think he's going to ask, if that is what you are getting at. Who are you going with?"

"Nobody. But I'm thinking of asking Josh Durkin."

Lucy scanned her memories for a face to match the name Josh Durkin.

"Drives a red Jeep?"

"Uh-huh. That would be him." Michelle replied.

"He's good-looking."

Michelle agreed, staring into the clouds.

"Yes, he's hot, drives a great car, parents are loaded, and, of course, as you say, good-looking." Michelle sighed.

"But you are so beautiful. I am sure he would go with you."

"If only it worked that way! Oh, it's just not fair. He'll never ask because I'm not in with those people, you know? Well, I guess John Diedermyer might have some connection, but, I certainly don't. I can't just go up to Josh and ask him out, even though I fantasize about doing just that all the time. So he goes out with girls from his group instead of me. Maybe it's his loss. Some of the popular girls that Josh dates are so damn ugly!"

Lucy smiled and glanced at Michelle. "Really? Like

who?”

“Corinne Carver, for one. Woof! What a dog. Her face is shaped funny, real long and skinny, and she has no chin.”

Lucy’s eyebrows knitted, trying to remember an unfortunate chinless girl running around the school.

Seeing Lucy’s puzzlement, Michelle continued:

“She looks like a turtle, but no one ever says anything because Corinne is rich, naturally blonde, and popular. People are afraid of her that no one has ever dared to make fun of her. Her parents have more money than God.”

Lucy chuckled at the sacrilegious comment, though it was a very old one.

“Mean as an old mule, too. She makes catty comments about you to her friends if you are within hearing distance—that’s her thing—then if you are brave enough to confront her, she just denies it all and laughs at you. No one is safe. Some people say that she’s partially responsible for Lindsey Daltrey’s suicide. I guess she used to pick on her for being big and fat. Her parents *totally* look the other way. Bought her a nose job for her sixteenth birthday along with a car, I forget what model, but it was a nice car, a Mercedes convertible. Speaking of mean, you watch out for Kate Bitchster.”

“Kate who?” Lucy asked.

“Katy Pfister.” Michelle replied. “She’s proclaimed herself queen of the school. She’s big, about 5’10”. Her hair is like, white blonde, but trust me, it’s not her natural color. Narrow little beady brown eyes, and she’s got big eyebrows like dead caterpillars. She’s a cheerleader, of course, but they say she has always been a second tier

cheerleader because she's kind of big and hefty. She's hated me for no apparent reason ever since Fourth Grade. I think I asked if I could eat lunch with her and Trisha Deere one day and she said there was no room at the table. They were sitting alone, Lucy. Another thing: she dated John Diedermayer once and she dumped him, she's been psychotic over him ever since."

"He dated her?"

"Yeah, for all of three months last year. His first date, he was a late bloomer for a Popular. They sucked face and felt each other up, or something. She dumped him because she claimed she didn't want him to go any farther. I didn't get it, why she put on the innocent act. Reverse psychology or something, it's like she was trying to draw him nearer by pushing him away."

Lucy spoke up, "We used to call that 'playing the coquette'."

Michelle continued on as if uninterrupted.

"Because I know for a fact that she was having sex with Gary Rothko during homecoming Freshman year and she let him pork her up the ass."

"With a condom, I hope."

"Uh . . . no! Anything to be a Popular, remember? Bitchster wasn't a virgin then, I heard she hasn't been since she was twelve!"

Lucy piped in, "Well, girls used to get married at twelve. It wasn't long ago that a girl went straight from the farm to her husband, just as soon as her period came and she could make babies. The practice has been common for thousands of years."

Michelle mulled over Lucy's words thoughtfully.

"You know what? You're right. My Great Grandma

LeFevre had fourteen children, and my Papa said that she started at the age of thirteen. Still, Katy Pfister is a grumpy whore who would open her legs for half the football team if given a chance. You'd think with as much dick as she gets that she'd cheer up."

Lucy snickered.

"You are so sweet, Lucy. What's that short for, Lucille?"

"It is short for Lucia."

"Oh, that is pretty. What nationality are you?"

"Italian." Lucy replied.

"With a last name like Albert?" Michelle responded.

"It has been Americanized from 'Alberti'. It had been her father's surname, and it had sounded far more innocuous and American than Iovelli.

"Cool." Michelle replied, and directed the subject back towards boys.

"If you could go to Junior Prom, forget that, Senior Prom, with anybody in the whole school, who would you go with?" Michelle asked.

Lucy was silent.

"Well, to tell you the truth, John Diermayer." Now it was Michelle's turn to laugh.

Lucy blushed from toes to forehead, feeling her pace accelerate.

Before Michelle could go on, Lucy interjected,

"You must have quite a course-load with all those heavy books. Are you already thinking about college?"

Michelle nodded yes as they waited for a car to pass before crossing the street.

"I want to graduate early and move out to California and go to Stanford. I've already got some college credits

from my gifted courses."

"Wow." Lucy replied, truly amazed. Michelle was only a junior, the same year as herself. "You're a shoo in."

"There's only one problem." Michelle said dejectedly.

"What's that?" Lucy asked.

"My parents." Michelle's shoulders sank, feeling the weight of the pack.

"Don't they want you to go to Stanford?"

"They think it is too much money." Michelle said in a bitter voice.

"What about scholarships?"

"Can't get 'em if your parents are rich. Not enough of them to make a difference. Loans will just ruin my life because I need so many of them. My parents refuse to pay for my college."

"If they're rich, can't they help even a little?"

"Nope." Michelle was becoming upset, and her voice took on a tone of sarcasm. "Why should they care that I want to go to college when they are so busy interviewing architects about adding on to our house, making it bigger?"

Lucy looked at her, concerned.

"Is there something desperately wrong with your house?"

"There is *nothing* wrong with our house. Papa doesn't even care, but he just goes along with whatever my Mom says. My Mom is hell bent on having the biggest, most beautiful house in the neighborhood, my college education be damned. For that matter, my future be damned."

Lucy winced. Her mind turned to her own future, the endless trickle of years. She imagined herself on a barren

plain, post-Apocalypse, convulsing, waiting to die with the cockroach. She almost laughed, but repressed her smile lest it seem cruel.

"You know what I like about guys, certain guys?"

Lucy looked in her direction again. "No, what?" She said.

"The way they smell," said Michelle.

"Some of them don't smell so good." Lucy grinned, thinking of the dark gamey odors she had smelled emanating from a few of the less hygienic boys in school. But all normal humans smelled wonderful to her, even dirty ones.

"Some of them do smell good, though. Especially when they wear cologne. Ever smelled Eternity for Men? I think I smelled it on Josh once." Michelle drifted into a reverie. "Or I know another one who wears cologne. The musician. He's really hot. Oh, what's his name? It's on the tip of my tongue. Wait a second." The strain in her face was visible as she tried to remember.

"Martin Chen!" Michelle shouted his name in an outburst, like an invocation. "Do you know him?"

Lucy replied, "No, I haven't met him. I don't know anyone."

"He's utterly, completely hot. Kind of knows it, too. His mom was a famous model. Plus he's a genius. Too bad he's not interested in any girl who's not a musician." Michelle sighed. "Do you play an instrument?"

"I play the fiddle sometimes."

"Oh, neat. I don't play anything. I can't even carry a tune with a bucket. You have to come over to my house. There's a bunch of us are going to meet at the movies tonight to see that new movie Poltergeist. I think John

will be there. Can you come?" Michelle asked expectantly.

"Today's Friday, isn't it?" Lucy remembered.

"All day." Michelle said sassily.

Friday was not a big dinner night at the Beck house. Usually it was fish sticks and reheated noodles. "I'll have to call and tell Cathy. I'm sure she'll let me go, though." Lucy said.

They turned the corner that joined Michelle's street to her own. The houses loomed progressively larger as one strode up the block, growing from ranch to two-story, from squat 1950's modern to stately 1890's palace. Michelle's home was one of the smaller palaces, made solidly of red brick with charming black shutters and window boxes full of drooping violets.

Michelle walked up the concrete porch steps, gesturing to Lucy to do the same. She opened the door with a neon colored key. The latch came with a weak click. The door opened, and a slightly overweight pretty blonde, an older, wiser version of Michelle, came into view.

"Mom! You're home early!" Michelle exclaimed.

Diane replied, "Is there something wrong with that, Michelle? This is my house too, you know."

"No, it's just a surprise. Mom, this is Lucy Albert from school. Can she stay for dinner?" Michelle asked, almost begging.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Lucy." Diane Vorsack chirped with the grin of a Cheshire Cat, extending her right hand in greeting.

"Nice to meet you." Lucy shook her hand. It was dry, as if she had powdered it.

"Yes, she may stay for dinner if it is all right with her

parents." Diane chirped once again, ever-musical. She receded into the entryway, opening her palm and gesturing as if there were an imaginary red carpet rolled out for visitors. Lucy stepped inside.

The Vorsack house bore the stamp of Diane in every visible spot. Puffy blue curtains dressed every oak-stained window. The walls were pristine white and unmarked except for two sconces and a rather colorless Monet poster that had been framed in an expensive oak surround. Oriental rugs adorned the sea of shiny hardwood floors, kept polished with an eye for detail that bordered on Japanese.

Michelle walked towards the sloping Victorian stairs. Lucy followed her.

"Shoes!!" Michelle's mother cried.

Michelle looked at Lucy's feet, still in the ugly brown loafers she had worn since last year.

"Could you take off your shoes?" Michelle asked. Lucy looked down, noticing that Michelle had left her shoes in the entryway. "Hardwood floors."

Lucy obliged her, walking back to the entryway and slipping off the loafers.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Michelle's mother replied from the front room in her sing-song tone.

The two went upstairs to Michelle's bedroom.

"Do you mind if I call Cathy and Larry from here? I want to leave a message that I'll be out tonight." Lucy said as they ascended the steps.

"Sure, but you'll have to call from my Mom and Dad's room. I don't have a phone in my room." Michelle said ruefully. Michelle opened the door to her the master

bedroom. The smell of laundry detergent was noticeable, the bed sheets very tightly stretched across the bed, tucked in on three sides. Lucy tried not to notice the starched smell, overpowering and powdery.

"What's your number?" Michelle asked Lucy.

"483-4492." Michelle dialed and handed the phone to Lucy. Cathy answered the phone.

"Cathy says she'll let me stay out past midnight. She says to be home by one AM."

Michelle took the phone from her and called three different girls, finally arranging a ride to the movie theater on the east side of town. She was very excited.

"The movie's not 'til eight o'clock, so we have plenty of time to get ready. Would you like to borrow some of my clothes? I think we're about the same size." It was Michelle's kind way of implying that Lucy's loose black T-shirt and baggy dungarees were unflattering.

They went into Michelle's tiny bedroom, bare except for a dresser, a closet, and a miniscule single bed that resembled her own at the Becks.

"Sure, I'd love to borrow some clothes for the night."

Michelle opened a dresser drawer and picked out an outfit for Lucy to wear, a tight pair of white jeans and a scoop-neck t-shirt in a faded peach color, the tight kind that had become all the rage since Daisy Duke had first appeared on television. Lucy complied, slipping the tight jeans over her white underwear. She felt conscious of her nipples becoming visibly erect under the tight t-shirt and wished that she owned a thicker brassiere. Michelle looked her up and down, liking the results of her efforts.

"You look great!"

"Thanks." Lucy fought to resist the compulsion to

fold her arms over her chest.

Michelle looked at their reflections in the wall mirror.

“I’m so glad my Mom’s letting me go out tonight. I was grounded for the last two weeks.”

“For what?” Lucy asked.

“She found my collection of witchcraft books under my bed and threw them away.” Michelle’s voice lowered to a whisper. She looked at Lucy guiltily, wondering if she would be betrayed.

“What’s wrong with having witchcraft books? Is she afraid that the Princeton Hill villagers will burn you at stake?” Lucy asked sarcastically.

Michelle smiled.

“No, she just worries that I’ll go Satanic and start chomping the heads off of bats and mice or something. Now she drags me to Mass twice a week, and I have to be in the Church Youth Group on Tuesday nights where we study the Bible and play sports games with each other. Those I don’t mind, though, the games.”

“But I can’t help but notice from your bookshelf that you read all sorts of horror and science fiction.” Lucy looked at the small shelf which was jammed with thick paperbacks by every major horror novelist of the twentieth century. She even had books by H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe.

“How are those books any different from the witchcraft books?”

“I dunno. I guess those books are okay because they are fiction. She’d prefer that I read classic literature, of course, but she only reads paperback romance novels, so she can’t exactly complain.” Michelle said.

Dinner was served at 5:30. The atmosphere was

strained and deathly quiet at the dining room table. Eric Vorsack still toiled at work.

Michelle ate fast, and Lucy followed her lead, shoveling mashed potatoes and salmon down her gullet in a passionless frenzy. Michelle helped her mother clear the table and Lucy thanked her for the meal.

Diane, more than a little envious of the girls' youthful excitement, set Michelle's curfew at 10:30. Michelle moaned and whined, and Diane resigned herself to 11:00.

"But not a minute late or you are grounded for a week!"

The two girls returned upstairs where Michelle carefully groomed Lucy's curls, carefully pushing them into waves. She changed into a halter top and a pair of tight jeans herself, and let Lucy brush her long, glossy hair as they talked about mascara, schoolwork, and boys.

Lucy savored the normalcy of the scene.

The doorbell tinkled and Michelle grabbed her purse and rushed down the creaky wooden stairs. Lucy followed. Michelle answered the door. Outside stood a stocky, combat boot-clad girl of seventeen with a teased mass of spiky bottle-black hair. Acne sprayed her cheeks in a fine red spatter where it intermingled with brown freckles.

"Hi Missy, have you met Lucy Albert?" Lucy contrived a smile.

"Stop smiling, you're scaring me." The thick girl with the blue-black hair spat. Lucy's grin faded. Lucy looked at her with a small measure of pity. Missy looked like a troll with lipstick on. Plain, wide-mouthed, freckled, and ugly, she was an instantly jealous creature, her saving grace that she took no pains to mask her extreme dislike

of petite, pretty girls. Michelle was no exception to the pretty girl rule, but Michelle could be bartered with as she constantly crossed paths with many of the most attractive boys in school.

“A little touchy this evening, aren’t we, Missy?” Michelle chided her friend. “Lighten up. Lucy’s cool.”

“Sorry.” Missy grunted in neither Lucy’s nor Michelle’s direction.

The car ride to the new movie theater, a multiplex, was brief and harrowing. Lucy sat in the back seat as the trio sped through intersections in the old sedan. Michelle and Missy chatted vigorously in the front seat, oblivious to both the world and other cars on the road. As they careened into a parking space, Lucy clung to the upholstery so as not to be thrown against the front seats.

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THE FRIDAY NIGHT SHOW

The air was chill and the sky overcast and misting.

The trio of girls approached the newly laid cement curb, where throngs of young girls in pink lip-gloss fanned and preened like peacocks as rich boys circled round, revving the engines of their father's red cars. Their colorful displays seemed to repel the dreariness of the sky as each group savored its long awaited moment, its weekend arrival in front of the opposite sex.

A group of ten began emerging outside the ticket area. Michelle briskly made introductions and then joined the fray of conversations. Lucy felt a finger tap her on the bra strap as she observed Michelle chatting with yet another passing group of people.

"How's it going, Lucy?" She turned. It was John Dierdmayer, who had been transformed into a young scholar with a large pair of wire-rimmed eyeglasses on. His eyes glowed beneath the glasses and his blue button-down shirt was reflected in the lenses. She could not help but swoon a little.

"Just fine, John. Thank you for walking me home the other day." She said, looking beside him at a taller boy who appeared to be bored. John introduced the tall boy.

"This is my best friend, Mark." Mark was tall and skinny, a mop of brown hair over a pillar of freckles. His baggy shorts sagged over knobby knees that tapered into decrepit Reebok sneakers.

"Hi Mark."

She greeted him as he scanned her from head to toe, absorbing the lines of her figure as he was doing systematically with every other female in the parking lot.

"Hi." He mumbled, his eyes on her breasts.

The ticket line filtered slowly into the glass doors, growing louder and more boisterous by the minute.

"Can I get your ticket?" He asked her as she approached the vendor.

"No, but thank you." She handed the ticket seller, a boy that looked to be all of eighteen years old, murder money that she had stolen from Dawn Plote's dead son, five dollars.

"You look nice, Lucy." He said to her after he bought his own ticket.

"Thank you. You look very handsome." She replied to him, looking into his blue eyes.

He blushed furiously, it was not what he had expected to hear. The crowd began to separate as it fell into the theater. Lucy spotted Michelle and Missy, who were in the middle of the theater talking to a group of boys, one of which appeared to be the widely coveted Josh Durkin.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?" He asked as he followed her.

"Of course not. Please sit with me."

She knew he was blushing in the dark.

"Do you know a Josh Durkin? Michelle would like to go to Junior Prom with him. Does he have a girlfriend?" She entered the middle row of the cinema, folding down a red velveteen seat. He pulled down a chair to her left.

"No, I think he just broke up with someone. Do you want me to say anything to him?"

As she suspected, John was connected to everybody.

"You might mention her, but don't mention the Prom."

"Okay." He said. "Do you want a snack?"

"No thanks." She said, feeling the salmon sitting idly in her belly.

"I'd like some popcorn. Save my seat." He rose and departed.

Michelle waved to her, then flitted over to where she was sitting.

"I told you he likes you!" She whispered hotly into Lucy's ear.

"Thanks for lending me the clothes." She whispered back. Michelle winked at her and left to join the gathering of seats in the center of the theater.

By the time John returned with popcorn and a large Coke, the theater had filled up with high-school kids. The noise was raucous. He sat down beside her just as the room became darker. Ludicrously loud sounds streamed from the array of speakers. Gone were the old days where an old maid banged on an upright piano above a roaring crowd, this sound was loud enough to be heard outside the building, she thought to herself as her eardrums throbbed.

The only thing that was louder to her was the beating of his heart. Surely his calculated desire to sit near her meant that his attention had surely been brought from its normal diversions into her realm. He was a shy boy outwardly but she knew him better in his thoughts, in which perhaps she had already taken upon the role of lover.

His physical body was predictably paralyzed with shyness and fear of rejection, barely soothed with a series

of blatantly direct requests and compliments. She also knew that he was the type who would not make a single physical overture until she pushed the correct buttons.

The movie droned on, the sounds becoming manageable except for the frequent high-pitched screams of young girls when a poltergeist manifestation would leap out of a shadow. He munched his popcorn steadily, periodically offering it to her, but not his Coke, as that would be too bold, a saliva exchange.

The popcorn dwindled to a half a bucket, his heart settled into its normal routine.

He tired of his popcorn and placed it under his seat.

Moments later, the movie began its gory climax, bass vibrating the seats with great bombast. She spotted her opportunity. She leaned forward in her chair, as if petrified in fear by the scary story. She could feel teenage girls from all corners of the room tensing, preparing to shriek. As the movie reached its predictable apex, she clutched his right knee in a careful imitation of fear. Girls screamed in chorus. His heart hammered in his chest. She knew blood was rushing to his face and other places as well. She moved her hand off of his knee, deliberately slow. He stole his chance and thrust his hand towards hers. He held her hand in his, cupped together like a pair of shells for the rest of the hour.

The moviegoers exited the cinema in the customary daze that resulted from two hours of sensory bombardment. Lucy's ears were singing. John was acutely focused upon her now, just as she had wanted him to be.

Michelle caught up with them, immediately sensing that Lucy would not be returning home early, and joined

Missy with the rest of the crowd that emptied into the parking lot. She gave her a wink when John had turned to ask Mark if Lucy could ride home with them.

John sat pensively in the back of his best friend's mother's minivan, piloted by his best friend Mark. He was unable to possess Lucy's hand as he had in the cinema, separated by the annoying chasm between the van's plush seats.

"What did you think of *Poltergeist*, John?" She tried to engage him in conversation as Mark's music blared from the van's stereo system.

"Oh, the movie? It was okay. I knew it would be good because all Spielberg movies are good. I can see the whole thing was just a set-up for sequels, though." He said. Their small talk continued. He found himself growing hoarse yelling over the music, but it also situated him to lean towards her to put his hand on her ear to aid her hearing.

His bravado waxed and he asked her to what would be her first date in nearly twenty years. She was asked to meet him after his game Saturday afternoon. She paused.

"I'll have to ask Cathy, you know my foster mother? I have not been asked on a date before." She opened her eyes widely, as to better appear unworldly and unscathed. Lucy did not suspect the date would be an issue, considering Cathy's rather liberal attitude towards dating in general.

She was delivered home by 11:30pm. She found her foster father and Mike still awake, playing high stakes UNO at the dimly lit kitchen table.

"Where have you been, young lady?" Mike crooned, a large grin on his fat Irish face.

"Seeing a movie, a scary movie called 'Poltergeist'." She said. "Why weren't you there?" She asked Mike. It had been a big event for teens across town.

Larry inserted, "You should have called. We got your message, but you never stay out this late. We were worried." His brown eyes were tired and full of concern.

"I'm sorry, Larry." She said. "Shouldn't you be in bed? You go into work at 5:30, I thought."

"Not this Saturday, sweetie. Got the day off." Larry got up from his chair and trudged to the refrigerator, pouring himself a glass of milk from the never-ending supply of two percent. He took some Oreos from the bottomless supply that stocked the cookie jar. "Yep. I'm heading for bed. Glad you're home safe."

"I'm sorry I didn't call. May I go on a date tomorrow night with John Diedermyer?" She did not look at Mike, who she knew would be wounded.

"Awww, sounds like puppy love to me. It's fine with me if it's fine with Cathy, darlin'. She's the boss. G'night, kids." He took his milk and cookies to bed.

"He's had a crush on you for a while. He's going to ask you to Prom. Better get a dress." She looked at Mike. He was nearly wincing.

"Oh my word, Mike. How is it that everyone is aware of these things except me?" She said.

"Word gets round. If he puts any smooth moves on you, Luce, you just tell old Mike here and I'll kick his ass!" Mike declared, not entirely joking.

"Thanks, Mike. I don't think . . ."

"Nah, he's probably a cool guy, seems laid back enough." She rose to leave the kitchen.

"Lucy?" He called her as she turned.

"Yes?"

"No one says 'Oh my word' anymore. Only old librarians and Shirley Temples say that. What part of 1902 is it that you grew up in?" He poked fun at her, clearly infatuated.

She smiled and started for the stairs without reply.

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THE MANOR, 1349

They moved to the country manor in the autumn of 1349, when plague was still raging through the city. They moved fast.

She was alarmed at how little her husband Gianfrancesco packed for the trip, leaving behind his best scarlet and black lucco, which he wore for every business and political meeting. It had been part of her wedding trousseau, a gift from her family to his. This at once thrilled her and worried her. Was the situation so desperate that he could not pack his best things?

She had packed lightly, not wanting to weigh down the carriage they would travel in. Already she missed all of her fine things, her linens and leather bound books. Was he planning on spending more time with her once in the country?

The streets choked with beggars and the dying. She breathed into a cloth soaked in rose oil as Sebastian had prescribed, but the smell of roses mixed obscenely with the smell of death and decay, causing her to retch. She chose to hold her nose.

Oddly, Sebastian chose to be charioteer. Gianfrancesco had been talked into the arrangement only because the drivers that had handled the job for generations were sick or dead.

The trip took a full day. They bounced without merriment over bumpy Roman roads, and by the time they arrived she was extremely nauseous. As they

approached the manor, she was permitted to peep her head outside the chariot's front window. It was a bizarre sight, a miniature manor, replicated fully, walled in gray limestone. It began to rain, a cold sweat of precipitation that was more sickly than refreshing. The rain smelled of the Tyrrhenian Sea, which lay only a few paces beyond the manor's white sea-soaked walls.

She hated the manor. Its walled heaved with black mildew and sea-salt. It was decrepit and too large.

At the Palazzo she had been confined to her own sunny windowed quarters most of the time, but she had the entire run of the inside of the manor. For a few days she was fascinated by the place, exploring the moldy rooms, the weird treasures hiding in forgotten trousseaus.

Her husband had caught her leaning over a precipice into the ruins of the oubliette, and had punished her by flogging her back with a switch. She had felt deserving of the punishment, as he had been mainly concerned that she would be killed by accidentally falling into the pit, but it was a terrible insult. He no longer made love to her, as there was no point. She knew that babies came from the womb; her womb had fallen out with her baby. She suspected that he would take a mistress just as soon as they returned to Florence. She further suspected that he might find a servant to dally with in the meantime, if he had not already. They did not spend most days together. He did not spend more time with her. Most of the time, he was hunting and he returned at night.

The only occasional presence other than a skeleton crew of servants was Sebastianus, who occasionally joined Gianfrancesco in the hunt for stag, rabbit, or quail, and then went away for another fortnight. She looked

forward to when Sebastian visited. Suddenly she became worthy of attention again and her husband teased her and joked with her as Sebastian openly admired her beauty, teasing her and patting her shoulders, pulling off her headscarf. Her husband quickly joined the fray, making her giggle and laugh. Then they would leave and she would go back to being alone.

Winter came at the manor. Spiders came out of their hiding places to commune in windows, industriously spinning their own designs over the stained glass. The moisture from the sea was constant, and she spent countless hours staring at the sea from the west tower, the rise and fall of waves. She observed the tides, amazed by how high the water could rise, almost touching the tops of the cliffs. At other times, it would seem that the sea itself had gone away.

That her husband was not touching her anymore grew to be like a disease, something to be cured. She tried gentle words with him, beguiling perfumes, even slipped aphrodisiac tisanes into his soup. He just seemed to have no interest, consumed with the hunt or his newfound friend, Sebastianus, who supposedly would enable him to expand his political ties to Rome. One night, she drew close to him in bed, trying to warm herself by embracing his back. Her linen gown was soft against the heavy skins. The fire still burned brightly. He had never liked to be hugged, but she wondered if his corporeal needs would be made apparent by human touch.

"You're so strong." She cooed into his ear, stroking his chest hair.

He rolled onto his belly, freeing himself from her hands, pushing her away.

"Why will you not touch me?" She cried out, sitting up, her head in her hands.

"Shhh! He rolled onto his back again, raising himself in alarm. "The servants will hear you!"

"I don't care! Why do you?" She cried. "A man who does not touch his wife, who ignores his wife, what kind of man is he? I am not sick any more. I have healed and I am still your wife!" She looked at him desperately, his eyes illuminated by firelight.

"I don't want to hurt you." He said flaccidly. "You underestimate your own sickness, and the ill humors that struck you may strike again." His tone was weak and conciliatory.

"Was I not strong enough when you flogged me for leaning over the oubliette? Who tells you these things? The physician, Sebastianus? Am I not sovereign enough to judge what is happening to my own body?" She demanded.

He looked distant, irritated.

"You cannot know how frustrated I have become. We shall never have an heir, you and I! My family is crumbling; all of my brothers are dead. And now you are acting the cuckold, because I do not wish to waste my seed in your barren womb?"

She was too devastated to answer him. He got up brusquely.

"Where are you going?" She cried. He gave her silence in return. He left the room, presumably to sleep elsewhere, but the only other room with a fire was the servant's quarters. She cried and sobbed in fits. She rose to the fire to stoke it. She heard the ocean in the distance, waves crashing on the beach, high tide.

He was not present during the night the next morning, or the next, or the next. She had slept badly at first in a long chair next to the fire waiting for him to return, but caught on after that. A fortnight passed, then a month. The washerwoman reported that she had seen a man one day riding out for an early morning hunt, but was unsure of his identity. The cook tried to ply her with spiced meat and fish soup. She refused to eat.

Thinking of Mantua, she wandered to the courtyard. It was filled with sopping lichens and green benches too slimy to sit upon. She slipped past the servants, her soft roe-skin shoes unheard on the old stone. She entered the front hall, formerly magnificent, now faded and dusty, the old wood table waiting for guests who would never come. Milky sunlight spilled on the floor. The bridge was open. She looked around her. There was no one to be seen in the great hall. The cold air gave her gooseflesh under her red brocade dress as she slipped outside. The salt air was fresher than the stale air in the manor. She breathed deeply.

Once outside, she ran towards the playground, and the grotto, a miniature limestone version of the manor, which was in itself a miniature of a fortress. Gianfrancesco had told her about it, how he had played in it as a child with his brothers. It was a haunted place. She gaped at its keep, at least ten feet tall, a frightening gray coffin turned upright. It probably had its own repulsive oubliette in the bottom, where tiny princesses could fall and break their necks. She could see over a waist high stone wall into the miniature courtyard, complete with benches only a small child could sit upon, one which had been broken in half, its two pieces left unjoined on the sandy ground. She ran

past it with melancholic dread towards the slope that led to the ocean.

She stumbled through a thorny copse, her slippers sliding on patches of sand that gave way to rock.

The winter had turned sea and sky to a wet gray. The freezing water lapped around her ankles as she ran along its edge, marveling at the thousands of tiny white spiral shells the tide had brought in. Clear water gave away to gray as she waded deeper, feeling her slippers on rock. The water was cold but she waded deeper. A piece of seaweed touched her hand, tender and green. Tears began to stream from her cheeks. Her hair touched water, becoming like the seaweed in its velvet slickness. The freezing water reached her chin and she felt the heat of her body dispersing, creating a disappearing patch of warmth as her limbs froze. A rock gave way to deep water. When she slipped off of it her head started to bob, filled with air. She opened her mouth and inhaled water. She could feel her body rebel against her actions, convulsing, so she forced herself to think of her mother in Heaven, her mother's beautiful face, the sun dancing across the rivers of her home. She felt her chest trying to float up, but the blessed undertow, the dreaded reason why she was warned to never bathe in the ocean, sucked her feet down, putting the decision where it belonged, into the hands of God.

She saw her mother, her pale face, a woman in a white robe, calling to her from a sun drenched balcony. Her father was holding her waist, smiling. She tried to scream, "I'm coming to you, Mama!" But no sound would come from her mouth. She could not run, her limbs were frozen. She felt herself falling, her bile rising in her

throat, the cold wind spinning around her like vertigo.

She was finally dead, going to Hell. Then blackness.

She woke up choking and belching water. Sebastian's arms were about her, his fists pumping her stomach as she coughed forth saltwater from her belly and lungs. She had never felt so cold, she felt even colder than she had in the water. Her teeth were chattering so hard that she had to clench them for fear of biting off her own tongue. She moaned, having failed in her mission to find her mother and her God. Gianfrancesco stumbled belatedly onto the beach, his feet padding wet sand.

Virtualventures

A FIRST DATE WITH JOHN DIEDERMAYER

The weekend began for her with that luxury of all luxuries, sleep. She awoke at 11:12 am, her foster sister snoring in the bed across the room. She donned her fuzzy slippers and traipsed downstairs, the welcoming smell of coffee beckoning her, the sound of Looney Toons music barely audible from the television set. Saturday mornings at the Beck house were routine, coffee, newspaper, bagels, and Looney Toons in no particular order. She kissed Cathy's soft cheek as she entered the warm kitchen.

"Good morning, Lucy". Cathy chimed. "Would you like some orange juice?" Larry had already been working outside for an hour, Mike at his side, dragging grass clippings to the compost pile.

"Sure." Cathy poured her a glass.

"Is it okay if I go on a date tonight?" Lucy asked Cathy. Cathy's eyes widened, her cheeks expanding to a smile.

"Of course it is okay. Who's the lucky boy, Lucy?"

Lucy looked at her slippered feet. "His name is John Diedermaier. He's a nice boy, a good student." She said, bashful. "I'm going to his baseball game, he's pitching for Lincoln, and then I believe he is taking me to dinner." Cathy beamed.

"Great!" I'll drive you. When is the game?"

She did her best to overhaul her own appearance for

the greater part of an hour, blotting lips, fluffing the brush over her face. It was difficult to get right. She washed her face twice after making smudgy eyeshadow and lipstick errors. Shari would know what to do, but Shari was out with her friend Lisa. There was also the daunting task of getting dressed. Lucy dug out an old light gray cotton miniskirt that had shrunk on Shari in the wash. It hit her just above the knee. She slipped on white thin-soled tennis shoes with no socks, her ankles exposed as Shari had once suggested they be worn. She slipped on a white clingy imitation silk tee-shirt, a sexy number that Shari had bought on super-sale at the Limited. Lucy pinned her hair off her neck and hoped it would make her to look decidedly older. It worked.

She looked in the glass over and over as she checked for lint and makeup streaks. She felt terribly modern, even sporty as the magazines declared you should be.

She was dropped off at 2:30 at Whitefield Park, a huge extravagantly lit field in the new part of town. The game lasted until 7:13. Lincoln lost to Glenbrook South miserably, the score eight to two. He had done his best, pitching with determined fury that resulted in two outs. She met him by the dugout after the game. The evening was warm and inviting, one meant to be spent outdoors.

"Thanks for coming." He panted, wiping sweat off of his brow with a towel. His glasses were gone. "I'm gonna hit the showers while I'm here, do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

"Not at all. I'll wait here." She sat down on a nearby bench. The sun was setting in spectacular multicolored streams beyond Whitefield Park. She was glad not to be baking in it anymore, or feeling the fiberglass splinters

invading her rear end from sitting on the bleachers.

He reappeared in street clothes, his cropped hair not even damp from the shower, fresh-faced and sweet-smelling. She felt pride sashay into her thoughts.

"Are you hungry at all?" He asked her.

"No, not really." She was never hungry for human food.

"I'm not hungry either, I'm still worked up from that game. God, we suck." He commented heartily, wiping the sweat from his brow with his hand. She chuckled.

He replied, "Want to go sit down somewhere?"

"Sure." She said, and they walked down the pebble stone path designed for joggers and bikers. It wound around a small manufactured lake. They sat on a wooden bench that overlooked the less aromatic part of the lake, deeper and not as frequented by geese. The sun lingered, finally dropping beyond the dark canopy of pine trees at the edge of the park. Their chit-chat stopped when they reached the bench. She found the silence comforting, as old people often do. He was disquieted. Sensing his discomfort, she stood up and brushed lint off of the hem of her gray miniskirt. She could tell that he probably wanted to kiss her, but she did not act upon the opportunity.

"I could eat now." She fibbed.

"Where would you like to go?"

"Burger King okay?"

"Are you sure you don't want to go to some place fancier?" He was surprised. All human food tasted equally dead and loathsome to her, whether it was prime steak or cheap hamburger. It had not tasted good since 1350.

She returned, "I like Burger King."

"Okay, Burger King it is then. You're easy to please."

They returned to his BMW. She felt very cool as he opened the door for her, as if she should have chic sunglasses and stiletto heels on, dark red lipstick. He took her to Burger King, still amused by her taste in food. The smell assaulted them even before they entered the restaurant, greasy and savory. He greeted the corpulent boy at the register, whose tag read, "MY NAME IS Jason" with familiarity. John knew everybody, it seemed. He addressed the boy as Jay. He introduced her as his "friend" Lucy.

She could not help devouring him a little with her eyes across the Burger King booth, handsome shoulders visibly solid underneath his ridiculous polo shirt, his eyes all sweetness and light. She mentally reprimanded herself to alter her own visage so as not to appear depraved. He devoured her with his eyes too, his shyness not able to disguise his furtive glances at the curvy outline of her breast against the imitation silk, his memory still exquisitely tortured by her movements in the miniskirt.

She munched her bland Whopper as he wolfed three in a row, stuffing his mouth with half a dozen French fries at a time. She longed to enjoy human food as he did. No one ate with as much passionate gusto as a teenager could. Perhaps that was the reason why she enjoyed preparing suppers at the Becks.

In mid-bite, she heard a car door slam that was recognizable. It was Missy and Michelle in her grandmother's old Buick. Another car followed, a rusty Cadillac sedan full of kids. She peered into the darkness.

"Michelle's here with a rather large cadre of friends."

She commented as more doors slammed.

"Uh-oh." He returned, seeing the group surge towards Burger King's doors. Michelle bypassed the ordering counter and surfed directly to their table.

"Hey, you dudes!" The word dude coming from Michelle's mouth suited her just about as well as the word "gnarly" suited Winston Churchill. She patted John's head with her palm, its surface appealingly fuzzy. She hugged Lucy, who had finished eating.

"So, guess who just asked me to the Junior Prom?" Lucy's eyes widened.

"Josh Durkin?" Lucy whispered loudly.

"Yep." Michelle announced proudly, crossing her arms across her chest jovially, all eyes fixed upon her.

"So John, are you two lovebirds going to the Junior Prom or what?" He paused, smirking.

"Oh . . . come . . . on." Michelle's eyes leveled on him dramatically. "Do not tell me that you have not asked her yet, fool, or I will be forced to dump the rest of that soda over your head."

He piped up. "Okay, all right, no better time than the present. Lucy, would you like to be my date for the silly little dance they call the Junior Prom?"

There was a pregnant pause as she digested the information. Michelle's eyes widened. The tension was palpable. Finally Lucy replied.

"Yes, I'd love to go."

Michelle raised her hand in a gesture of High Five.

"High Five, Lucy!" Michelle exclaimed.

Lucy looked about confusedly. It was something you were supposed to return, so she raced through all the television shows that she had watched over the years. As

Michelle kept her hand raised expectantly, Lucy raised her own and spread her fingers apart in a gesture that she had once seen on the show Star Trek, Spock's sign for "Live Long and Prosper." She tended to watch television very infrequently. Michelle burst into laughter, followed by John, who almost spit up his cola.

"Ohmigod Lucy, you are so uncool." Michelle laughed. Lucy felt herself go very red in the cheeks and lowered her hand rather slowly. John laughed even harder, his eyes misting over. It gave her joy to see them laughing, even though she was unsure of what she had done wrong.

"Let's get out of here." Said John as he piled the papery remnants of their meal onto the tray. "See ya later, Michelle." He said, as he threw his trash into the can on the way out.

"Bye, Michelle." She waved.

He insisted once again on opening the car door for her. She felt flattered. Most of the boys did not possess the manners that he did. He drove her to the Beck house, pulling up behind Cathy's red Nissan.

"I had a good time tonight." He said to her as he threw the gear into Park. He leaned forward to better drink her in.

"So did I."

He leaned at a steeper pitch. It was clear that he meant to kiss her before she exited the car. She could feel his breath on her skin, every hair on her arms and neck raised in response. She moved forward almost indiscernibly, a millimeter.

He pressed his lips to her with a much greater force than she had anticipated. His arms released from his

sides, he lifted them around her in a light embrace. She kissed him with a closed mouth, not as recklessly as she was tempted to do. After a long fifteen seconds, she pulled her head back into the seat, looking at his face from the close angle, his nose huge and out of perspective, his eyes like round blue pearls. He was beautiful despite the odd angle. She tried not to pant, not to reveal herself, and she began to shake.

“Are you cold?” He asked her, cocking his head to one side like a puppy, so close that the heat of his words warmed her cheek. She longed to allow him to kiss her again, to touch her again.

“No, I’m fine. I really must leave you now. My, um, my curfew . . .” She fought to keep her teeth from chattering.

“Are you free tomorrow? Should I call?” He asked.

“You may call anytime.”

She opened the car door for herself. He jumped out of his own side once again and ran around the car to open hers in another theatrical display of chivalry. She bussed his cheek with her small lips as he stood by the open door, and exited alone towards the sleeping house.

She was shaking violently when she entered the side door of the house. She shuddered with relief as it seemed that Mike and Shari were still out and about. Her sensitive ears could hear her foster mother snoring in front of the television. She crept into the living room and turned off the set, adjusting Cathy’s blanket which had fallen to the carpeted floor.

Walking into the bedroom, she quickly shed the miniskirt and sweater, folding them without ceremony. She studied her form in the full length mirror, assessed

her body as one would that of a prize calf, trying to see it through his eyes, through the eyes of desire.

Everything had stayed the same during the centuries. The same teardrop bust, the same long waist, the same thick legs. The same overly curly pubic hair, which she now saw was trying to protrude from the sides of her bikini underwear. The same pale white buttocks, the same freckles in the same unchanging patterns on her collarbone that all of her mother's potions had never been able to erase. She could still feel his psychic presence all around her, and she knew he was thinking of her. The thought made her exquisitely happy. The psychic vibration of him thickened the air of the room as if he were already inside. She crawled into her small bed, dizzy with the thoughts of him, of kissing him.

Sleep did not come easily, but eventually her mind stopped its chattering and she fell into a deep slumber.

A MARRIAGE, PART II

She dreamt of the inn they had stopped at after her suicide attempt, the flea-ridden hostel her husband had angrily toted her to after the incident at the country house. They were on their way back home, or so she had thought. She had fallen asleep on the wooden bed, uncaring of lice or bedbugs. Her depression since the “accident” had possessed her, she no longer cared how she looked as her beauty helped her not.

Her husband was drinking in the tavern with the other guests. She could hear the raucous laughter and bad music below. She fell asleep instantaneously, fatigued from weeks of exhaustion.

When she awoke she felt as if she were adrift on a soft cloud through a golden sky. The sounds of the seashore infiltrated her dreams as she floated in heavenly bliss of sleep. Her belly was being touched, she felt her thighs caressed softly. She flushed with desire and happiness, her husband had returned to her and all would be aright. The response of her body was enough that she lazily opened her eyes. A hazy face appeared through the fog of sleep, pale and thin and looming. She recognized the face but could not quite place it. She drifted back into the welcoming arms of sleep, feeling herself surrounded in silk.

When she awoke from a pleasant dream an hour later, she was shocked to find herself restrained in a bed that was not hers and not the inn’s. The looming face was

over her own once again, and arms as strong as iron bars held her down. Her eyelids fluttered with recognition, and she cried out softly.

“Sebastianus? Where did my husband go?”

He smiled at her gently, patronizingly, as he prevented her from movement or escape. She felt his erection against her naked thigh. Shocked and appalled, she brought her left knee up fast, ramming his testicles swiftly. He screamed in pain, doubling over with a howl as she stumbled out of the bed.

She ran towards the arched stone door, her mouth forming an “O” of surprise as she realized that she was in the high turret of an ocean side castle. Her head snapped back as he grabbed her by the hair. His arm closed in around her middle and she was caught. She thrashed and screamed as he wrestled her back towards the bed.

She felt sharp animal teeth pierce her above her shoulder. The poison from the teeth radiated from her shoulder and paralyzed her limbs. The unpleasant oily chill of fever overtook her body, and she watched in horror as Sebastian carried her to his bed on his shoulder like a sack of flour. She wondered abjectly whether he intended to rape her before she was dead. The white haze of poison clouded her eyes. She could not feel her own body. He lowered her neck before her, and she noticed a bizarre urge to bite him rising from her mind like an itch. She would rend him limb from limb like a fiend if only she could move.

His arm entered the round window of the white haze of her vision, his wrist spouting blood in currents, dripping on the stone floor. He pressed the bloody wrist into her mouth, and she though she could not feel it or

control it, she knew she was being made to swallow. She fell into another slumber, one which was more like a blackout. When she awoke, she felt sick, her mouth still salty with blood.

The room was dark and dusty. She bolted awake in the large bed which was awash in a sea of silks, furs, and red curtains. She parted the curtains to find him standing there.

She mewed weakly, “Sebastian? What have you done? Where is Gianfrancesco? Did you kill him?”

He crossed his arms. “Nothing so base.”

She propped herself up on the massive oaken post of the bed, feeling the paralysis tingle her legs as it left them ever so slowly. She looked into his eyes, truly noticing their gray color for the first time.

“You may not leave.” He said, uncrossing his arms. Her stomach growled, and she clutched at it in reaction, haphazardly observing that the gown had been changed to silk.

“You will have to eat soon,” he said cryptically.

He sat down beside her and stroked her hair.

“You no longer belong to Gianfrancesco. You are my wife now and you belong to me.”

She brought her knees up to her chest, and rocked back and forth like a small child. He put his arms around her in a circular embrace. Her anger parlayed with her confusion, as she realized that the new marriage was about as optional as the first one and her hunger was growing inside her like a weed.

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AT HOME, 1982

Lucy woke up the next morning with Shari's slow sonorous breathing only a few feet away. The day was unseasonably humid and dark, a thick fog having descended over manicured lawns. She dressed quickly, pulling on white jeans and a red tee shirt. She slipped down the perfunctory flight of stairs, short because of the home's split-level style. Every inch of the house felt safe to her, small and welcoming. It was free of leering men, unthinkable punishments, and human evil.

She entered the kitchen. Mike was draped over the laminate kitchen counter, on the phone as usual.

"Hold on, she's right here." He handed her the phone reluctantly, barely masking his mild disgust.

"Hello?" She asked as she cradled the phone by her ear. She felt the thrill race through her body.

"Hi Lucy . . . It's John. How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, unaware of all events except for the voice on the other line. It was if the world had blinked out for a moment.

"Can you come out tonight?"

"Um, sure, I guess."

"Pick you up at 4:00? My parents would like to invite you to my house for dinner."

"Sounds good." She said, frozen to the floor where she stood.

"See you."

"Okay. Thanks. Goodbye."

She hung up the phone. Mike was drinking a cup of black coffee.

“You certainly got him in the bag.” Mike said, with unsubtle jealousy.

Eyebrows knitting, she looked towards the ground a few feet away from him, guiltily.

“He seems like such a nice boy.”

“He seems like such a nice boy.” Mike parroted in a nasal tone. Mike dismissed her with a wave, and she left the room, knowing she could not say anything to please him she swiftly left the room. She galloped up the small stairs, hearing that Shari had finally risen. Her foster father had been outside for most of the morning, working on trimming the maple trees and mowing the lawn. Cathy stood in the bedroom hallway in her faded blue bathrobe.

“Morning, Mom.” Shari brushed by her mother in the hallway, who grunted.

“When did you get home last night, Lucy?” Cathy interrogated through a yawn.

“Round midnight, I think.” Lucy replied, slightly miffed that Mike’s and Shari’s curfews remained free of scrutiny.

“You left the TV on when you fell asleep in the living room, so I turned it off.”

“Thanks, honey.” Cathy ruffled Lucy’s curly hair.

“Is it okay if I go to the Junior Prom with John Diedermaier?” She asked Cathy in a low voice.

“Of course it is okay!” Cathy’s voice rose in volume and in pitch. Shari’s head poked out of the bathroom where she had been preoccupied with preparations for her morning shower.

“Lucy’s going to Prom with John Diedermayer?” Cathy nodded emphatically. Lucy looked at the stains on the threadbare carpeting to distract herself, embarrassed to her core. She had never even brought a friend home in her time at the Becks, let alone been asked on dates.

“Do you know that boy very well, Shar?” Cathy Beck yelled in the general direction of the lavatory.

“Yeah, everybody knows him Mom. He’s nice.” She yelled back.

“He wants me to have dinner at his parent’s house tonight,” still looking at a series of spots on the carpeting.

“Great!” Cathy squealed. Cathy reached out and touched Lucy’s chin with her two fingers, gently commanding her attention. “He’s got good taste, you know. I knew it was only a matter of time before the boys started paying attention to you, Lucy.” Lucy shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant.

“Thanks, Cathy.”

She put on a short dress that was sky blue, with thick straps about the shoulders. It was a castoff of Shari’s from her brief obsession with sewing. Lucy arranged her hair as Michelle had taught her instead of combing it out. The day was so darkly overcast that she had to turn on the small white porcelain lamp that sat upon the makeup crowded vanity. The room was intimate and wonderful to her with its shadows now cast over the girlish menagerie of stuffed animals. She felt like Snow White in a secret forest house populated by dwarves. She painted on the Root Beer Lip Smackers lip gloss that Shari had bought her last Christmas and rouged her cheeks as she had long ago as she once had for Sebastian.

A SEDUCTION, PART ONE

Sebastian had loved to kiss her for hours. He would make her rub her lips with waxes and other ointments, precursors of lipsticks.

But in the early days of her abduction, she did not allow him to touch her. A few seasons went by where he initiated her into the disgusting rituals of killing and eating human beings, a dark time where she pined for a rescuer who never arrived.

She had refused to eat human beings when she had first learned her fate. She had told him, point blank, that since the Church had neither annulled the first marriage nor sanctified the second one, she was not his wife.

He had reacted by laughing at her, informing her coolly that she was naïve in many things.

“I am one who controls most of the Church, dear.”

When he brought home papers from Florence verifying that she had been declared dead having committed suicide the fateful day at the manor, she could barely believe Gianfrancesco’s signature at the bottom of the page.

She went into shock. How could he have betrayed her so cruelly? How could he lie and claim her as dead? Sebastian studied her carefully as she refused to cry and became like a pillar of stone. He watched her constantly, trapped her in corners and slept with his arms locking her like a human cage.

He brought home her first “meal”, a man who he

claimed was a highwayman who had raped several women and was destined for the hangman's noose. She wanted to scream, but there was no one to scream for. She feasted reluctantly, partly out of wonder at the new function of her often elongated canines. She limited herself to eating once a fortnight, until she discovered that she could go without comfortably for a month. She fell into another depression, refusing to touch Sebastian or call him husband when he demanded it. He might call her wife, but she refused to give him his wedding night.

He had almost forced himself upon her one night after a particularly bloody raid of a thatched cottage. They were bathing in the stream. She had become unashamed of her nudity, altogether unfocused on her appearance. Her hair had become so matted that Sebastian had sheared it off, which made her the very mirage of a nubile young boy. He had grabbed her in the stream, embracing her naked body tightly, running his hands over her breasts and clutching her buttocks. She stood there limply and did not act to resist him. He had reacted by pushing her away, disgust and frustration on his face. She fell with a plop onto her rear end in the mud and sat dumbly like a statue, water eddying around her.

She was consumed by misery and hate. Oddly, he was seldom angry with her as Gianfrancesco would have been. He seemed to possess infinite reserves of patience when she refused him or purposely tried to bait and anger him, but his patience only made him seem more sinister. His face was much handsomer than Gianfrancesco's, his lips thinner, his brow much more noble and wise. His nose was large but also fine and angular, tapering to a point at the end like a nobleman's. His jawline was

masculine and severe, only tempered by the soft hazy color of his eyes. When he was concentrating, deep shadows formed under his gray eyes. Some days, his eyes were green. This happened after he ate. With his black and gray hair, his gray-green eyes were a striking contrast and he looked even younger, as if he had been frozen at age thirty-three. Reluctantly she found him beguiling after he had eaten. Even in her hatred, she began to realize that Sebastian's intelligence was much greater than Gianfrancesco's. She had trouble outwitting him as he seemed to predict her words before he said them. Sebastian knew a dozen languages and could speak them fluently, plus he had an aptitude for numbers that Gianfrancesco did not. It was no wonder Gianfrancesco had looked up to Sebastian so, the doctor's nature radiated masterfulness and dominance. It was easy to imagine great power in such a man. He had been frozen in time at age forty-two. His hair had begun to gray, his belly had just begun to round. His legs were fine and strong, he told her that he had been a warrior in ancient times, to which she snorted in disgust. His arms were naturally big and his chest was covered with a smattering of soft hairs.

She began to want to lay her head down on his chest but absolutely denied herself. Day after day she pounded him with curses, saying that her mother looked down on him from Heaven and sent a curse, to which he laughed.

"Your mother was a Gypsy. She hid behind a mirage of piety, just as I do. There is no Heaven for your mother. She was not a Christian woman."

This made her even angrier, so she stopped speaking to him for a week. She tested the limits to see how far

she could go, often running away for the day, causing him to fret and pace. She delighted in frustrating him. She became more assertive, more defiant. She refused to sleep in the same room with him one night, kicking him in the shins. After that night she made it a habit. She refused to accept her fate, but what is it that she could do about it? Night after night she invented alternatives. There was a maiden aunt who lived in the North who might let her live there for a few weeks until she disappeared. But escape to where? She thought of the ships that sailed from the peninsulas to hot deserts where spices were traded. She romanticized, imagining a life on the High Seas. She could stow away, go to a place where there were no people to eat and end her life. But how long would she last, withering away to a desiccated pile of skin and bone? Round and round she would go. She thought of using her new brute strength to kidnap and ransom Gianfrancesco. But who would pay the ransom? There was no one left in his family. His father and his four brothers had perished, leaving him to collect all of their spoils and various kingdoms.

It was Sebastian's fault for slapping her face and letting the baby out. If she could have held it in, perhaps the Virgin Mary would have sent her a miracle as reward for her strength. God would have taken mercy on her baby, seeing that she had already had too much pain and that he had taken her beloved mother. He would have sent the Virgin Mary to heal the baby. Instead, God had sent her Sebastianus, a man who had sold his soul to the Devil to gain eternal life, or perhaps he was even the Devil himself.

“Why won't you sleep in my bed tonight, Lucia, where

it's warm?" He asked her one night, teasing but mournful, as she stood in her bedroom doorway in a long white gown. She glared at him with satisfaction. She had finally managed to start breaking him down.

"Because I hate you!" She spat.

"Why do you hate me again, my love?" He seemed to brighten, feeding upon the intensity of her emotion.

"I hate you because you are the Devil! Rot in Hell!" She was shocked at her own accusation, how she had savored the words. She had never said anything so horrible to anyone in her life.

"I'm not the Devil." He replied lightly and stepped towards her. She thought of how tired she was, how exhausted, how hungry. She thought of how much she wanted to eat the foods she had once feasted on that now smelled as innocuous as spring flowers. They smelled good, but they no longer smelled like food. She began to weep in long, aching sobs. He embraced her like her father once had.

"Now, there, there." She batted his arms and slapped him, angrily twisting from his grasp. She let out a wail.

"I'll never be happy again! I hate you! But most of all, what you have made me! A flesh-eating demon cannibal, just like you! I should be dead, dead and lying at the bottom of the sea . . . Why didn't I die? Why does God hate me so? Why does He not want me? I didn't die because I'm weak, because I am cursed! I hate this poisoned world! But most of all . . . I hate myself!" She collapsed to the floor, sobbing. He backed away from her. She cried as he watched, frozen to the ground.

"My heart, my dove, I only want to heal you. Have you not tired of sadness and pain?"

She thought she could hear tears in his voice but would not look at him. Very quietly, he added, “Oh Lucia, I’m sorry.” He left her where she was, crying in the doorway.

She did not remember how many seasons it took before she relented, how much time before she decided to toy with his affections. She had very few clear memories before a particular day in the library, when they had finished one of her first reading lessons. He had mentioned teaching her how to read Latin one day when she had wandered into the library. She had become neutral towards him and he had used the lesson to try to advance himself. Her hair had begun to grow back, it now swept to her shoulders. She had begun to care about her appearance again, looking into the glass he gave her, a thing nearly priceless that was bordered in intricate golden filigree and rubies.

She had started wearing the dresses he bought for her, the white and blue shift he said, “brings out the color in your eyes”. She found herself trying on the baubles he brought home, placing the silver rings upon her slim fingers, knowing that he would take up her hand and kiss it. Seeing her improved mood, he had offered the Latin reading lesson strategically, knowing it would surprise her that he considered her capable.

Little did he know that she had begged her parents as a youngster to get her a language tutor. They had refused. For all her begging she had been given the choice to go into the nunnery and “learn how to read scrolls with the rest of God’s Spinsters” by her father, but had quickly lost interest when presented with the idea of bearing babies.

She was putting a manuscript away, gingerly locking its heavy tooled cover, but it was a huge, awkward tome. She caught her finger in the lock and had to ask him to help pry it out. Sebastian had fetched tallow, which she angrily ordered him not to use, as she suspected its origin was not animal but human. She had slapped him away with her free hand and the finger was released suddenly, sending her careening to the floor.

She bounced onto her bottom. He laughed at her heartily, and she laughed too as she had not for a year. He lifted her from the floor. She turned to face him and he kissed her. He tasted like cinders and ash, but not of smoke. His tongue was hot. His kisses drew deeper, he started unlacing her dress. She had become much healthier, and she did not recoil when he kissed her bare neck as it elicited good feelings from all of the regions of her body. She slipped her hand between them and grasped his erection. His eyes squeezed shut in ecstasy; he let out a sigh. She let go of him and stood up, straightening herself.

“My child, I do not wish . . .” She took his hand, interrupting him. She pulled, he rose to his feet. She led him up the long hall solemnly. She entered the last room, his bedroom. She pulled him towards the bed. A cool gray light illuminated small portions of the stone floor. She sat herself upon the bed. He stood before her.

“Take off your tunic.” She commanded him in a low tone. He obeyed, letting the garment fall to the floor. She unlaced his pants and slid them down his hips, examining him as he stood before her naked. She looked directly at his face, his perpetually graying hair, his hawkish nose, his long cheekbones.

She stared at his crazily erect penis, mentally comparing it to Gianfrancesco's. Gianfrancesco's had curved differently and was darker. Coolly and gingerly, she kissed it as it stood at its hard angle from his body. He stood completely still as she moved her tongue up and down its shaft. He moved her dress from her shoulders and off her torso. He was consumed with desire. She slid the dress off, naked underneath.

She leaned back as he climbed on top of her and kissed her mouth again. He guided himself between her legs. Her mind invoked her husband, who she imagined lying dead in a ditch somewhere, tortured and killed by brigands or perhaps eaten by creatures like herself, a fate he actually deserved. He pumped as she raised her legs obediently. She began to feel odd sensations while peering busily at his shoulder and profile. His gray eyes were closed, his persimmon-colored lips open and panting. Sebastian was physically beautiful, she reflected.

His movements became quicker, and she made grinding motions with her hips that began to please her as well. His orgasm was quick, spasmodic. His body went limp, and as he withdrew she ironically found herself at the doorway for the first time in her life of being truly aroused. She was surprised and stared at him when he did not immediately leave the bed as Gianfrancesco always did, but instead rested on his elbows.

"We shall try again later."

"Try what?" She asked, coolly assessing his lithe hips.

"We will try and make you happy, my dear, so that you may learn that lovemaking is perhaps a little more than your idea of a woman's duty."

She looked at him quizzically and shrugged.

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A SECOND DATE WITH JOHN DIEDERMAYER

“Ding dong.” Mike knocked on the thin core door that sealed her and Shari’s bedroom from the outside world. “Ding-dong-Diedermayer is here, Lucy.”

Her reverie broke, and she found herself still in front of the looking glass, a barrette hanging loosely from her hair. She removed it. She turned and looked at the red LED of the alarm clock that read 3:55. “Punctual.” She commented, only to herself.

True to her nature, Cathy had already offered John snacks and drinks of water twice by the time Lucy bounded down the stairs at 3:58.

Cathy commented, “You look very nice, Lucy. You two have a good time.”

In the car, John was wound up. “My mom is making duck. Do you like duck?”

“Sure.” She replied vaguely.

“Too greasy for me.” He said. “You do look really nice.”

She grinned. “Thanks, so do you.” He was dressed in his uniform of a Polo shirt and twill pants. She found it rather funny that he always wore the shirt fastidiously tucked in and never wore the ensemble without a stiff brown leather belt. She fought a compulsive urge to yank his shirt free.

The house was invisible from the road, and yet enormous once within view. The entrance of the house

was grand, and upon entering she was immediately greeted by John's mother, a tall, thin woman quite a few years older than Cathy Beck.

"Mom, this is the girl I asked to Prom, Lucy."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Lucy."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor Diedermayer." The two women shook hands.

"Please call me Carol."

John's father, Thomas, strode into the front hall at that moment in his golf clothes. He was a handsome man, and Lucy could see the strong resemblance of John to him.

"Well, hello there." He shook her diminutive hand. "So you're the one my son has been talking about. Enchanted."

She blushed deeply. "Thank you."

John gave her a tour of the expansive house, which had a pool in the backyard and gorgeous gardens that she could tell that Carol Diedermayer did not have a great deal to do with.

"And here's where John creates his crazy experiments. Tell Lucy about the time you were nine years old and blew up the house, John." John's father said, barely masking his pride as he showed Lucy into the small room where John had a several pieces of dismantled electronic equipment wired to each other and dozens of model planes on shelves across every wall.

"I didn't blow up the house. Just my room." John said to Lucy.

"What were you trying to do?" Lucy asked.

"I was trying to design a personal hovercraft. I saw an

ad in the back of a comic book that advertised instructions on how to create your own hovercraft, right between the page of Sea Monkeys and the order form for stuff like Whoopee cushions and plastic barf. Now that I recall, it probably wasn't the best source for engineering plans."

"Oh my goodness."

John's father added, "I came home to find Carolyn in a panic and fire trucks outside my son's bedroom. It wasn't pretty."

"The thing was supposed to be solar powered. I completed it according to the directions, you see, and it was a beautiful machine, a triangle sort of, with a steering column I built out of an old wheelbarrow and a hubcap. The one problem was that it didn't fly. I had done my research on jet propulsion and I figured that I could build a simple engine for it. I wouldn't even have to use very much gasoline . . . but then I made the mistake of testing it indoors."

She gasped.

"We banished his experiments to here in the basement from then on. My son is going to build a spaceship to Mars someday right in this room." His father said. "He's quite the inventor."

"It's wonderful. Did you make all of these planes?" She asked.

John looked at his feet bashfully. His father spoke for him. "Yes, he made them all. They're fairly intricate little things. He figures them out, though. Don't ask me how. I'd ruin the things if I so much as touched one. He gets his brains from Carolyn."

"Oh no he doesn't." Carolyn shushed him modestly.

“They’re amazing.” Lucy said, marveling at the intricate cockpit of a model helicopter.

John picked it up and put it in her hands. “Let me show you something. Hold the chopper away from you, like this.” He extended his hand.

She obeyed, extending her arm. She looked at him as he fingered a small switch on the side of the helicopter’s door. The blades on the top spun faster and faster. The helicopter lifted from her hand and hovered in the air. She backed away, amazed as the thing buzzed loudly in the center of the room. He had grabbed a tiny remote control and flew the thing around the table, landing it there and turning it off. The wings stopped.

“Amazing.” Lucy said. “I can’t believe it. You made that thing?”

“From a kit.” He said.

“Unbelievable.”

Lucy found dinner was very pleasant as John’s parents were easy to chat with. The conversation turned towards the subject of the Diedermaier’s many European vacations.

John’s father piped up, bored with the conversation, and asked, “Where do you get your blue eyes, Lucy? What nationality are you?”

“I’m mostly Italian, but I get my blue eyes from my mother, who was Gypsy.”

A shade of concern darkened Carol Diedermaier’s face. “What happened to your parents, Lucy? Is it all right if I ask?”

Lucy looked at her with a soft gaze. “Oh, it is okay. They are long gone. I was orphaned a long time ago.”

John broke in, “Wow, Lucy, I didn’t know that you

were orphaned. I'm sorry." An awkward moment of silence followed. "I didn't know you were half-Gypsy either." He stated.

John's father added cheerfully, "So, do you play any violin?"

She balked at the stereotype, but admitted, "Yes, I play violin."

"Wonderful! You can teach my son. He's terrible!"

"Dad!"

Lucy smiled at John. His mother smiled in return, an act that brightened her thin face.

"Lucy, you have to play for us after dinner, oh please."

Lucy hesitated. "I'm very shy, and I would like to opt out if you don't mind."

"Don't be shy, Lucy." His father interjected. "There isn't any way you could be worse than John." John tried to direct the topic away from him.

"Why aren't you in Orchestra, Lucy?"

"I just . . . don't have time."

Dessert was served. Lucy acted the part of savoring the end of the meal, but it was difficult. The rich, heavy food sat in her stomach like so many soft pebbles. John's father brought down a violin from a high closet shelf.

"It does nothing but sit there." He complained, handing it, case and all, to Lucy. "I suppose you could at least tune it for us if you know how to play." Resigned, she rosined the bow and tightened the loose strings.

"Please play something for us," Carol asked, her eyes aglow. The small Diedermyer clan was a captive audience. She touched bow to strings, playing a fifth.

"What would you like to hear? Some J.S. Bach?" They unanimously said yes. She launched into a stuffy Partita

and played it too fast. They clapped wildly afterward.

“You’re great, Lucy! I had no idea you were so great!” John exclaimed. She could feel her face turning beet red.

“Could you play ‘Fiddler on the Roof?’” father Thomas pleaded. “Carolyn loves ‘Fiddler on the Roof.’”

She played “If I Were a Rich Man,” adding syrupy trills and flourishes at every phrase. They were delighted. She played “Happy Birthday” for John, after which they plied her with a dozen requests. She declined and finished with a few of her favorite excerpts from Scheherazade.

She stole a few glances at John as she stood and played the pieces. He would stare at her intensely when he was certain his parents were not looking in his direction. She wanted to return his gaze but focused intently on a spot next to and above the brick fireplace, as her music teachers had always taught her to do instead of looking directly at the audience.

When she finished her last cadence, Carolyn and Thomas begged her to play encores. She turned them down and gently placed the violin back in its red fake fur lined chamber. It had felt wonderful to pick up the fiddle again. John’s parents were won over.

“We’ve never known anyone who can play like you, Lucy. You are marvelous!” Carolyn Dierdmayer exclaimed. “You must play for us again sometime.” John’s father added.

John finally wrested her away from the company of his parents, insisting that he wanted to take a walk in the park before it was completely dark. They walked past his old jungle gym set to a hilly park that dwelled sleepily beyond his house. The sun shined weakly through brief pinpricks

in the thick cloud cover, the weather was brewing a storm.

“Will they worry about you getting caught in a storm?” She asked him as she viewed black clouds floating in different directions.

“I’m a big boy, you know.” He retorted smartly, looking at her with mischief.

“You certainly are.” She replied.

“Oh my God! You sounded like my Grandma just now! How did you do that?” He asked, shocked.

“Beats me.” She said, embarrassed.

They sat down in a covered pavilion that housed a grimy picnic table and a dingy fire pit. Thunder rumbled behind the manicured hills. Rain started to pummel the roof of the pavilion, which coalesced into sheets and rumbled to the cement below.

“Me and my bright ideas.” He stated. She looked about, watching a massive green storm cloud building in the west. “We’re in for it. You aren’t afraid of thunder, are you?” He asked.

“Actually, I am, it is terribly stupid.” She distantly remembered moments in childhood spent in phobic trance, when her father had told her God was punishing sinners in Hell. John moved closer to her, getting up from his roost by one bench, he joined her at the bench where she sat. She shivered, more due to his presence than the changing weather. He put an arm around her. Awkwardly, he closed his eyes and fumbled for a kiss. She twisted to meet him and folded into his embrace. She moaned as his lips caressed her neck, almost to where the dress met her shoulder. Rain pounded the tin roof, and waterfalls obscured the pavilion into its own private

chamber. His hand traveled below her loose neckline, and he cupped her round breast in his hand. He whispered in her ear.

“I want you so much, Lucy. Do you want me, too?”

“Yes,” she whispered foolishly, in the throes of rapture. The rainstorm, short-lived, began to subside. John eased off. She breathed deeply, and he breathed sympathetically. He kissed her again. To her horror she realized that she had nearly forgotten how to kiss after a years-long dry spell, and she could detect drool on her own chin and John’s cheek. Even he was not oblivious to it, and after about two minutes of awkward French kissing, he pulled away.

“That’s not working so well for you, is it?” She looked at him sheepishly, bringing a Kleenex out of her pocket to wipe away the excess.

“It’s my fault.” She replied.

“Have you ever kissed a guy before?” She rolled the tissue into a ball in her lap and stared at it. She did not answer him, as she did not know what to say. He drew her closer.

“Thought so.” He put his hands on her shoulders and lowered her onto the flat surface of the picnic bench. He propped himself up on one arm, kissing her passionately. She felt her skills make a belated return.

He drove her home that night, kissing her again and again at stoplights. She wished that the drive would never end, but it was only three miles after all. He returned her to her door at a decent hour, well before 10:00. She thought gleefully of the dress she would get to wear for the Ball (Prom?) and could not wait to tell her foster family about how excited she was.

She did not notice the police car sitting near the Beck house until they were pulling into the driveway. No lights were flashing, and a single squad car was not a cause for alert, as sometimes the Becks allowed squads to use their drive to watch for speeders and other reckless drivers. But when she saw the car, her body filled with dread, for it gave her a bad feeling.

“I hope nothing is wrong.” He commented, seeing the car in the drive. She tried to be casual.

“It might be a policeman borrowing the driveway and looking out for speeders.”

“Oh, okay. Let me walk you to the door.” He ran around his car and opened the door for her as she desperately tried to view out of the corner of her eye the man sitting silently in the squad car. He kissed her at the door.

“Goodnight. See you in Science Class.”

“Thanks for the nice evening, John.” She replied weakly. He ran back to his car, glancing only once at the man in the car.

As she had dreaded, the police officer in the car was politely waiting for John to depart, and exited the squad as soon as John turned at the Pine Crest stop sign. It was a gracious gesture, she thought, as he trudged to the Beck’s humble doorstep in his stiff blue polyester uniform. He rang the doorbell, even though she had already cracked the door for him.

“Lucy? Ms. Lucy Albert?”

“Yes, sir?” She replied, opening the door as Cathy rose from the couch and Larry stirred from his bed. “You’re wanted for questioning, miss. We are investigating the murder of a couple who were

sponsoring a foster child several years ago in Joliet and we need your help. Are these folks your current foster parents?”

“Yes.” She answered solemnly. Cathy Beck was outraged.

“I demand to know what is going on right now! How dare you come here telling MY child that she has to answer YOUR questions! This little girl has never done anything wrong in the two and a half years she has lived with us!”

Larry came down the stairs, rubbing his eyes.

“What the hell is going on here, Officer?” He grumbled. The policeman raised his voice, slightly agitated.

“We’re here to take your foster daughter down to the station to ask her a few questions sir. She has not been accused of any crime. We just want to ask her a few questions about an old murder case.” He looked at Lucy.

“Is that okay with you? To go down to the station with him?”

“I’ll go with him, Larry. It is no problem.” She replied.

She was ushered into the back of the squad car. The young officer sat in front, his hat perfectly straight. She knew it was to be a long night, and her stomach turned with the knowledge that Cathy and Larry Beck would be waiting to pick her up after the questioning, which meant they would be up all night despite the fact they both had jobs to go to in the morning. She read the policeman’s rueful glance when she caught his reflection in his rearview mirror. She detected that the young officer’s shoulders tensed whenever she moved in the back of his

car. He was wary of her, which meant that perhaps they had found one or many of the bodies that she thought she had hidden so well.

She had always wondered when they would start being able to trace her kills, with their expanding systems of criminal databases and computers, and now it was starting to happen. She killed every month, twelve a year, and was for all intents and purposes a serial killer of middle aged men. It could not go on much longer, her luck. There were too many kills, too many unsolved files in too many cabinets. They were sure to catch up with her. It was only a matter of time. She would have to move on to a more lawless country soon, Mexico, Columbia, then cross the sea where she could eventually return to the chaos of Eastern Europe and the Russias. She would flee to the wild fastnesses, the places where there were no overarching systems of any use, where she could blend with the unstable populace and kill in relative peace.

She dreaded living off the land again, like an animal, as she had done for dozens of years at a stretch. It was something that Sebastian had refused to do, a lifestyle that he placed himself above. As a man, Sebastian had always held enough power to live in luxury. Time after time he reminded her of how powerless she would be without him, how unkind the world was towards single women. He had informed her that to leave him would be a choice to live a life of meager subsistence. He had, for the most part, been correct. She did not have the power of men. It amazed her that women in the United States could own property as easily as they did nowadays. She longed to own something lasting, anything, but knew her wishes to be stupid.

The officer showed her into the sleepy suburban police station, a hub of inactivity on Sunday night except for herself and a slightly drunk woman who had been brought in for DUI. They took her fingerprints sitting at the gray metal desk of Officer Nolte, the virile young buck who had brought her in. She tried to appear as if she had never been questioned before. A kind but hard looking female officer named Rose took her into a room and sat her down at a small wooden table.

“Lucy Albert. Did you ever go by any other names, ma’am?”

“Yes. I used to go by the name Lucy Iovelli, which was my natural father’s surname.”

“Did you ever formally change your name to Albert, Lucy?”

“No, I did not.”

“Let me tell you the reason you are here. We are investigating the missing person case of Sheila and Mark McCloskey, who disappeared seventeen years ago, before you were born. So let me assure you now that we are not accusing you of a crime. We are asking you questions today because Sheila and Mark McCloskey had a foster child who we assume was probably your natural mother. This foster child’s name was Mary Lucia Iovelli, and we have photographic documents of a woman who looks exactly like you, dear.”

She replied with a rehearsed answer, “I was told that my real mother died the day I was born. My birth certificate was destroyed when the county building it was housed in burned down. The one I have is a duplicate.” She had forged birth certificates dating back to before anyone in the building had been born. “She has never

once contacted me.” On the inside she felt her muscles loosen with relief. They thought that she was her own mother.

“We suspect that Mary is alive, and we think she will try to contact you if she ever tracks you down. We want to come to the station if this happens, okay? For your own good. It is possible she is dangerous, and the police are looking into several cold murder cases where she may have been involved. Promise me that you’ll contact the police if she ever calls you on the phone, or worse, shows up at your school.”

“I promise. Can I please go home now?”

“Honey, I promise you can go soon, but you have to fill out some paperwork before you go.”

A bureaucratic three hours later, the paperwork was finished. Cathy Beck was terribly upset and was on the verge of exploding. Larry Beck did his best to the flares of her temper from rising. The trio finally arrived home at 3:48 in the morning, and she saw lights that indicated the awareness of some of the nosier Beck neighbors. There would be no way of keeping her police questioning a secret from the entire neighborhood.

She rehearsed the story of her forlorn long lost mother in her head, what she would say to the theory-mongers. Now, more than ever, it was time to start running. It was time to leave America. She felt a lump rise in her throat, for she had come to love living in America. It had been her home for hundreds of years. In Larry’s old Cadillac sedan, she sat in the backseat as Larry drove and Cathy sat beside him.

“Thank you.” She said to them, raising her head to speak, her voice unsteady.

“For what, kiddo?” Larry turned his head slightly to one side. His kind eyes were puffy with fatigue.

“Thank you both for treating me for all the world like I was your child.” She replied.

It was time to disappear, no more Becks, no more Spaghetti Nights, no more afternoon kisses in the park with John Diedermyer. She decided to leave after Prom. She should leave sooner, but she just could not bear missing the event. She would buy a Greyhound ticket to New Orleans, make a kill or two, then travel into Texas and seduce some wandering man into taking her to Mexico, feast upon him once they got there. She missed them already. She hoped that Shari would not be too brokenhearted about her disappearance. She forced herself not to think of John.

Virtualventures

THE ISLAND CASTLE AT HERCULIS

Life with Sebastian was often trying, yet he grew on her far more than Gianfrancesco ever had. He had more time for her. After the day in the library, he constantly demonstrated his affections; Gianfrancesco had never done that. She warmed to him fast, her anger was much harder to carry than the pleasant everyday neutrality of affection.

They lived in a castle, the same place she had been turned in. He had attained the residence by his political ascension to the Duke of Herculis. The title had formerly been held by Gianfrancesco's brother, Alessia, now dead of plague. Herculis was a port city on the Tyrrhenian Sea not far from where the manor had been. Herculis was surrounded by an archipelago, which local chroniclers had claimed was teeming with mermaids. The island castle at Port Herculis had been part of the trade off, all to be kept as quiet as the circumstances of her second marriage and her "suicide".

The castle stood on the main island which connected to the mainland by a foreboding stone and wooden bridge. The area was sparsely populated. Once a thriving town before the Pestilence, most of the buildings and the piers had been destroyed or burned. No one had the resources or the inclination to rebuild them. They lived alone, mainly inhabiting the castle's upper floors. It was drafty and cold most of the time, but she found that she was not nearly as sensitive to the cold as long as he was

there to warm her up. She spent many days in the castle alone as he busied himself with his alchemy, or traveled to Florence to visit his remaining political connections. When he returned, it was always the same. She would be in the library, her favorite place, or on the bench by the colored glass window with her embroidery. She could hear him from the lower floor as he locked the gates and drew up the wooden part of the bridge.

“Where is my beautiful wife?” He bellowed from the downstairs. She would look up, shake her head, and then go back to her reading or crewelwork. “Where is she?” He would yell even louder until she was sure that people in faraway fishing boats could probably hear him.

She would then hear his feet pounding up the steps and he would burst into whatever room she was sitting in and say, “There she is! My wife! Hiding her beauty from the world!” He would then run to her, grab her book or embroidery and unceremoniously toss them to the floor. He always followed by showering her with kisses, embracing her tightly as she squirmed and giggled. He cherished her.

“You would have been treated differently in the Old World, the one where I came from.”

“How do you mean, differently, Sebastian?”

“Truly beautiful women are exceedingly rare and they always have been, Lucia. Most women of great physical beauty are flawed, and their flaw is that they are dense with no ability to perceive or retain true knowledge. Others are smart but fall prey to emotional damage, the female lunar instinct of cunning that goes awry. You are different, Lucia, undamaged even after what you have been through, still pure of heart.

Long ago, in Greece and in Egypt, a woman of your intelligence and beauty would have been elevated as soon as she became an adult. It was a different world.” He said wistfully.

“Would they make her Queen?” She asked innocently.

“No, a Queen was at once a political pawn and a social laborer, just as they are today. Queens and Kings, as always, were made to be manipulated. Those with true power were the Oracles.”

“They would make someone into an Oracle? What’s that?” She asked.

He watched her, savoring her curious attention.

“An Oracle is a predictor of the future. She is a magician sought by all. She has power over men’s fates in more ways than one.”

“I don’t have power over men’s fates. I could not become an Oracle.” She scoffed.

“An Oracle is a vampire, of course. She must be beautiful, but beauty is only the beginning. She must have the capability to learn magic, to learn the enchantments that add to her power. Then she begins to have visions of what is forbidden to all mortals: knowledge of the future.”

“Does she have to sell her soul to the Devil?” Lucy asked, feeling stupid.

“No, Lucy, because Satan does not exist. I’m sorry to disappoint you. You are your own Heaven and your own Hell, Lucy. You don’t have to live forever to understand that. She kissed him on the bridge of his nose.

“It’s too bad. You’d make a good Devil.”

“I know.” He said with a laugh.

He was a delightful teacher. He taught her how to read and write in Latin and Greek, often rewarding her for her efforts with a flower or a trinket. He wrote poems to her beauty that he recited from a seemingly infinite memory. He was full of fabulous stories, not just tales of his own past in Rome but wonderful fables from the mysterious Orient and the ancient Greeks, old jokes and yarns that only he remembered.

He taught her theories about mathematics and science that he invented, theories that were the latest in scientific discovery and that the Church would have considered heretical in nature. But she no longer obsessed over heresy, no longer did she feel cursed by God. His science was a shared secret between them and she felt special to be trusted with them. She learned quickly, absorbing all she could as quickly as possible as her adoration grew for him. She began to miss him when he was gone during the day and cherish the quiet times he spent only with her.

Little by little, she stopped hating him. It was a betrayal of God and her former family, but all in all was much easier. Part of her even believed that her mother would have wanted her to stop feeling guilty and to be happy. As she learned more and more of his knowledge, she began to realize how much faith and trust he invested in her. She had never understood how much knowledge had been kept from her because she was a woman and even began to doubt the methods of the Church, something she never would have dared before. She realized that no man had ever placed a mantle of respect upon her as Sebastian did; respect for more than just her pretty face and her now lost ability to bear children.

When he took her out, he was proud of her. His attitude was as different from Gianfrancesco's as night was from day. He boasted of her ability to learn to men who were a stone's throw from having the power of the pope himself. She felt privileged above other women at parties, where she was on display as all the duchesses and queens looked upon her with envy as he was so clearly entranced by her in every way.

Their lovemaking became a whole new realm for her as he was experienced as he was subtle. She learned that she could orgasm four or five times in a day as they toyed with each other and slept entire days afterward without feeling a single pang of guilt.

One day she awoke and he was cavorting about underneath the covers.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing." He said mischievously. He grabbed her legs and threw the covers from the bed.

"You're mad, Sebastianus."

"Of course I am." He replied, and put his face in between her legs.

"Stop! Don't put your face there. That is an evil place!" She cried.

"Is that so? Who says?" He demanded, his eyebrows arching as he looked at her with puerile glee.

"The Holy Ghost! The Pope! My mother!" She squealed.

"Did they ever try it for themselves?" He wrestled his chin between her thighs as she tried to squeeze her legs shut upon his ears. "Please stop fighting me. It is of no use."

She relented. She felt very awkward as she stared at

the top of his ashen hair. She found herself looking sheepishly around the bedroom when a sudden tingle of electricity moved from her groin, fanning out from her belly. The pleasure intensified quickly, it was as much control as she dared to lose as she heard herself calling his name with all her breath.

In between naps she increasingly found herself gazing at him, his large nose, his eyes circled in silvery plum shadows, his thin lips parted as he slept baring a rim of perfect teeth. She stared at him and thought the words, “My husband, my husband.”

He awoke.

“My wife.” He whispered with reverence. She cocked her head. Had she said the words aloud? He pulled her close and she nuzzled her head on his chest. And for many years, that was the way it was.

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**THE UNTIMELY DEMISE OF JOSEPH R.
ROSSETTO, 1979**

Her popularity skyrocketed in the two weeks leading to Prom. Teenagers buzzed about her newly discovered talent for the violin in the same sentences as they gossiped about her torrid police scandal and a lost mother who remained in the deep shadows of murder mystery.

Michelle was on her like a fly, asking her questions about her past foster homes she did her best to avoid, pretending to be swamped every night with sudden reams of homework and unable to be reached by phone. But Michelle's heart seemed to grow fonder to the subject proportionally to Lucy's avoidance of it.

"So, just how many foster homes were you in before the coming to live here?"

"You don't want to hear about all of that, Michelle."

"Who says I don't? Didn't you used to live in Arkansas?"

"Alabama. A town called Foster. They were terrible, horrible people."

"What was wrong with them?" Michelle asked timidly.

"Drugs, mainly. Joe, my foster dad, was a heroin and booze addict. I don't know why he was allowed into the system in the first place, but he had two kids of his own. Horribly skinny he was, and short too. Rumors had it he had been a looker in his youth, all long hair and chiseled muscles, but those days were long gone. He looked like an animated skeleton that someone had hung a smelly

brown beard upon. My foster mother, Janine, wasn't much fatter. It was no wonder, there was no money to buy food for the house. That wasn't even the worst thing. He liked to be near me, he liked to be near any female, especially a young female. He loved to sneak up and stand ten feet or so behind you and just . . . stare. He knew it was unnerving, he did it to everyone, even his own kin. He got off on it. Then, if you weren't looking, he'd get five feet closer. You get the idea.

I'm not sure if Janine cared. She had other boyfriends and hung out at Foster's only bar most of the time. He had this thing for his twin daughters. He had been abusing them for a long time when I arrived. He also had Janine's daughter, Traci, who he just couldn't leave alone after she reached puberty, when she grew a small set of underdeveloped breasts. She got pregnant . . . and miscarried.

She only weighed about 100 pounds and she was about 5'9", much taller than you and I. Meanwhile, she doesn't realize she's pregnant and he's still after her, day after day. She didn't realize she was until one day she has horrible cramps and she screams for me while she is on the toilet, and then she screams for her mother."

"Ugh! That poor girl! What a horrible guy! Did he?"

"Yeah, it was his."

"Touch you I mean?"

She looked around. The street was deserted, no pedestrian school-goers walked immediately in front or behind them.

"He tried it. I kicked the living shit out of him."

Michelle looked at her friend in suspicious awe.

"How?"

“The other person makes the mistake of going to sleep.” Her eyes glinted, macabre.

“No way!” Michelle cried, and also looked around for pedestrian listeners.

“I can get very angry. When I am angry, I can get very mean.”

“But how did you defend yourself? Was he so high on drugs that he couldn’t fight back or something?” Michelle asked.

“No, it was simple. I waited until he was asleep and then I tied him up with some duct tape and some old rope he had in the shed. I bound him up good and tight, stuffed his mouth with a length of rope, taped it shut. I got a rusty bolt cutter. Then I threw a bucket of dirty water on his face and said, ‘Listen, asshole, let’s get one thing straight. As long as I live here, you stop fucking the children and you stop trying to fuck me. And guess what? I don’t sleep much, if you haven’t noticed. You have to sleep, Joe, and I don’t, and that is a very bad situation for you. Because every mistake you make, for every new mishap, Joe, I take a finger. When you don’t have any fingers left, I take a toe. When you don’t have any toes left, I take your precious little cock.’ He screamed at me through the rope and tape, it was no use. I could see his little animal brain churning away, inventing plans for me, formulating his revenge. It just made me mad to the boiling point.”

Michelle gasped. Her eyes were wide and bright. “Then what did you do?”

Lucy’s eyes leveled with her. “I cut off his right hand pinky with his own rusty bolt cutter. Then, as he was trying to bite through the rope, I told him, ‘That’s for

Traci, motherfucker.’ Then I kicked him until he was black and blue.” She did not add that he vomited and that she had to loosen the tape to keep him from drowning. The evil in his eyes towards her was explosive. Michelle looked like she was about to throw up herself.

“I’m sorry I told you that, Michelle.”

“No, that’s okay. I guess . . . you did what you had to do. Did the other girls thank you?”

“Not really. Traci was the most grateful, because he stopped his sexual advances. In that sense, my strategy worked. But the twins were so fucked over at that point they were zombies. They stopped talking, except to each other. I think he got sick of us and he disappeared not one week later.”

Lucy omitted the part where she “disappeared” him.

“What happened then?” Michelle asked fearfully.

“The twins were left with his sister, Cris. She was a schizophrenic, got locked up later in some sort of state mental ward. The twins weren’t far behind, they got put into the psych ward too. They found out Cris had some sort of criminal past, more child abuse stuff of course. Ran in the family. Traci moved out to L.A., probably tried to become a hooker, I don’t know. I hope that she is okay. I came to the Beck’s house. I have been waiting a long time for a family like them. They are very good people, you know.”

“Yeah, they seem so nice.” Michelle replied, still haunted by the image of her friend brutally amputating a man’s finger.

“It’s funny, the way a good house feels. Just by walking in you can tell if it is a good house or a bad house. There are certain smells, certain tinges to the air. I could always

tell right away whether my new foster home was going to be good or bad. It's an instinct." Lucy said. She could not say to Michelle that the Vorsack house had more than just a little tinge of "bad".

"Do all foster kids have the instinct?" Michelle asked naively.

"Sure, I guess so. But that instinct is severely dampened most of the time."

"Severely dampened? By what?"

"By hope."

"Oh. That is so awful." Michelle looked away.

"No, I must have had hope lurking somewhere too. I hoped for a family like the Becks and I waded through the system until I got them, so maybe life isn't so damn hopeless after all."

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AN AFFAIR TO FORGET, 1965

“What was your real Mom like?” Michelle asked when they were walking to school the next day.

“My Mom was a good lady. She and I were very close. She wasn’t well-liked really, I think people were jealous of her. She was very pretty.”

“I heard she was wanted for a murder. There was a photo of her that looked exactly like you.” Michelle replied.

“How did you hear that?” Lucy’s brows knitted.

“Shari told me.” Michelle replied.

“Oh. Of course. They don’t know who did it, actually. My mother died the day I was born; that’s what they tell me. There was a couple who disappeared.” Lucy added, growing weary.

“Sheila and Mark McCloskey?” Michelle asked.

“I think that’s the right name.” Lucy felt herself grow feverish inside. She had killed the McCloskeys after they had witnessed her making a kill. The way it had happened was stupid, absurd. She still kicked herself for it. Why would Shari tell Michelle or anyone outside the family a name? Why would Michelle ask?

In 1965, Sheila McCloskey loved to watch two subjects in particular with binoculars: birds and neighbors. It was just as easy to pretend she was watching one when she was actually watching the other.

Sheila was a stout woman, her bosoms huge, her face

wide and square. She never had been much of a looker, but she had stopped worrying about such things long ago. Her hair, once red, faded to a thin gray that she kept cut into a practical short bob. White Sears special-order orthopedic shoes, polyester pants, and cotton print blouses were her usual weekend attire. During the week, her uniform was the blue and white scrubs of a nurse, the job she had suffered at for twenty-seven years. For what she lacked in appearance, Sheila compensated in gossip. Gossip was the driving force in Sheila's existence. Despite her busy work schedule, Sheila had always been a social person, a talker, a joiner of neighborhood groups, a town council member, a PTA worker, and a thrower of neighborhood coffee klatches. Without Sheila, the denizens of the neighborhood might forget they had the ability to communicate with each other. Her time and effort was justly rewarded, because the hard cold facts she knew about neighborhood intrigues were better than fictional soap operas.

Sheila knew that the Eat & Shop on the corner of 53rd and Oleson was a flimsy front for an all-in-the-family whorehouse. She saw the Chamberlain girls getting into a plethora of different cars (with barely a stitch on) with young men who seemed unnaturally excited about their first "dates". She had called the police on them anonymously. It gave her great satisfaction to hear that Madame Chamberlain had spent a night in the county jail, even if the nocturnal activities picked right up again after two weeks.

She had exposed the real story behind Peters tragedy, that dark, handsome Chuck had killed himself by leaving the car running in the garage, not from a "heart attack" as

claimed the party line. Chuck had did himself in because Chuck was a flaming homosexual. She had seen for herself right up in the bedroom window with her binoculars when Joanie was gone shopping one night, right with her own eyes. Chuck was parading around with Joanie's brassiere and underpants on, with the kids in the very next room! It was hard to look into Chuck's eyes when she invited the couple over for dinner after witnessing Chuck's little episode. Homosexuals weren't looked too kindly upon in their exclusive suburban neighborhood, not even dashing handsome ones. From the sounds of it, he was better off dead. Sheila had dropped glaring hints that she knew, which Chuck tacitly acknowledged with a lowered gaze.

Mercifully, the Peters had moved to Rhode Island about six months after the tragedy. Everybody breathed a collective sigh of relief in the neighborhood, no one wanted to see how those kids would grow up.

Sheila's own waif of a husband had objected to her airing the truth, he had even gotten the nerve to bring up the word divorce. It was the only time she had ever hit him, punched him right in the stomach like one of his favorite Three Stooges episodes. That had shut him up for a while. There was no keeping Sheila from the truth, and it was better that anyone who lived under her roof knew it. Sheila McCloskey was the real neighborhood watch.

The McCloskeys had picked Lucy from a bunch of children languishing at the Illinois Christian Home for Children. She had not gone by the name Lucy during those years but instead had called herself "Mary Lucia Iovelli".

Sheila needed an early riser: a girl around the house to help cook and clean and walk the dog. With the extra seventy-five pounds she had put after birthing her final son, Steven, her knees weren't in good shape to be running up and down stairs all day. Mary Lucia was branded "the earliest riser and the best at keeping up with her chores" by the formidable Sisters at the orphanage.

The McCloskeys had only boys, two that were off in the Service and one that was full grown and had moved down South. Sheila's boys hadn't been much help when they were around the house, anyway, they were more partial to lolling around on couches and running around with their girls. She never forced the issue, it was their father's job.

Lucy was a hard worker and a good cook and because of those traits she and Sheila had gotten along most of the time. It was her job to keep the house as neat as a pin, up to the high standard that Sheila expected, being a nurse.

She noticed right away that Sheila was a two-sided coin. When Sheila was in a good mood, one almost enjoyed her. The both of them puttering about the tidy two-story house, Lucy would serve them both steaming cups of tea in the front parlor.

When Sheila was in a bad mood, she berated her new foster daughter for streaks on the windows, dust on the figurines, for crooked bed sheet corners, and floors that had not been waxed properly. Sheila was often a terror to her husband Mark, who seemed afraid of her. She forbade him to escape to his workshop in the basement during those times, denying him his one and only hobby. They weren't very chummy with one another but Sheila

didn't expect much from a foster daughter as long as she worked hard, very hard, to earn her keep.

Mark stayed away from Lucy, which was just as Sheila liked it. He seemed to stay away from her because she was so cold and formal towards him, addressing him as Mister McCloskey as if she were an Irish maid. Lucy didn't seem like a teenage girl at all to Sheila and she knew it. Perhaps that was why Sheila began to observe Lucy, because both of them were poignantly aware of Lucy's otherness.

In truth, Sheila never saw Lucy murder anyone at all, she only saw the blood. Lucy had tried for years to find a way of not getting blood all over herself when she made a kill. Guns were impossible. They poisoned the system with lead and exploded half the time on the other side. Knives were worse, especially when you were stabbed back and left traces of your own blood at the crime scene. She had even tried a needle and a catheter on a victim once, but had found that the process was so frustrating and slow that she barely gained any sustenance and had done the worst thing imaginable: wasted a kill.

She had been careless. She had been going with a twenty-two year old man named Julian Rimbauer in secret. Julian had been working his way through college at a factory and was close to graduation. He first met her when he had caught her smoking behind the Joliet Laudr-O-Matic one cool overcast day in late August.

"Young lady! Are you sure you're of legal age to be smoking those cigarettes?"

"No, I'm not of legal age. Please don't tell anyone, mister. I'll get in trouble."

"Your secret is safe with me, sweetheart, as long as

you'll lend your new friend Julian here a smoke."

She gave him a Marboro which he lit with a Zippo with an American flag on it. She stared at him. He looked just like John Wayne in a cowboy movie, his eyes narrow and squinting, except his hair was long, unruly, and jet black. He was almost frightening in silhouette, his hair uncontrollable under the best of circumstances, but that changed when you saw his face. From his pale skin and inky hair color it was apparent that his ancestry was half-Hispanic and half-European, perhaps French. He was tall, nearly six feet, and from his stature it was clear that he spent some spare time working on his physique. He had dungarees on and a blue work shirt. Visible underneath his collar were some metal tags. He was completely, devastatingly handsome.

"Are you in the Service?" She asked him.

"No, those are my brother's dog tags. He died in the war." He took them out and showed her. They were inscribed with the name

RIMBAUER, EMILIO J.
PRIVATE FIRST CLASS

"Oh my gosh, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry yourself. What's your name?" He asked in return.

"Mary Lucia."

"Pretty name. A pretty name for a pretty girl."

She saw him there the next week at the same time. It was obvious that he had waited for her.

"So, since when does a grown man have to sneak behind the Laundromat to smoke a cigarette?" She asked

him.

“Just seems like a nice place to get away to, especially since it seems to attract pretty girls.” He replied.

“Where are they?” She looked around.

“Very funny.” He said. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.” She said. “I go to private school right now. My foster mother, Sheila, insists that I go to St. Cecilia’s even though it is far too much money. How old are you?” She asked.

“Twenty-two. Far too old to ask you on your first date.” He said.

“Yes, but I act older than I look.” She said with a smile.

“So how about this Friday?” He asked.

“I’d have to sneak out after everyone was asleep. There is no other way. Sheila wouldn’t allow me to date a boy even if he was only fifteen—I mean sixteen, like I am, you see.”

He smiled at her. “I’ll be here at one in the morning. Meet me.” Surprisingly she did show up to meet him that night, arriving at exactly 1:16 a.m. behind the Laundromat. She saw marks in the dirt where he had been pacing.

“I didn’t think you’d come.” He said.

“You doubted me?” She joked.

“I doubted my luck, at least.” He replied. “Where would you like to go? Are you hungry?”

“No. I guess we could go for a ride. Do you have a car?” She asked.

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” He said.

They drove around town that night in his Buick convertible. She thought about just asking him to take

her to his place and get it over with, but she reconsidered and decided to attempt to get to know him better. It was plain that a man of his age could only be interested for one reason alone, yet she felt compelled to at know him a little before the main event. He was half-German and half-Cuban she found out, and he was originally from Florida where his relatives and sister still remained. In her usual style, she interviewed him for his life and was pleased that he liked nothing more than to talk about himself.

Weeks hurled past, weeks that turned into months. He was an odd one, especially for a young man. He often wanted only to drive with her in the car, both of them staring at the scenery in silence for hours. Other times, the Buick was host to intense make-out sessions that lasted until the sun rose. One post-midnight meeting, she could stand it no longer. She had to have him, her body was going crazy for the want of sex. She decided that she would try to push whatever resolve he had in the car to see where it would lead. They began the evening like usual, driving down highways and byways. He saw that she was tense.

“What’s wrong?” He asked as she shifted awkwardly.

“Nothing.” She played with her hair.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Just fine.” She shifted again.

“Did I do something wrong?” He asked.

“Not at all. Could you pull over?” She asked.

“Sure, are you sure you’re okay?” He exited off the highway onto a quiet road and pulled over.

“Julian, I don’t know how to put this. I’m too young

for this to sound right . . .” She said as the car stopped.

“Oh no, you’re breaking up with me, aren’t you?”

“No Julian. I hope you won’t think less of me, you’ve treated me so well.”

He held his breath as she reached over the stick shift and touched his face. His five o’clock shadow was bristly against her fingers. She tipped his mouth towards her own and kissed him. He quickly responded to her kiss and grasped her to him, kissing her deeply.

He pushed her back forcefully into her seat with his lips, his body automatically responding to her kiss. She moaned as his hands explored her body, fingers crushing against her panties under her skirt. She wished that he would go further as she performed fellatio upon him. He never seemed to take full advantage while they were in his mammoth automobile. She wondered what the problem was, why the buildup?

She wanted to go to his apartment that evening but stayed herself. After all, if one could wait twenty years or more in between bouts of lovemaking, one could certainly wait a few more days. Generations had been born and died in between the times she had gotten laid. She had noticed a twenty year pattern emerging, and funny how opportunity seemed to strike just when she was getting truly anxious.

Things got hot and heavy in the car the next night, and he peeled off her skirt and top to reveal her underwear.

“Mary, you are so sexy.” He panted.

She felt his crotch through his jeans. He was as hard as a rock. He could have her in the car but she preferred a more private setting. She put her clothes back on,

lipstick smeared all over her face. She felt sticky and ashamed when he dropped her off a block away from the McCloskey house as she had requested.

It was in this state that Mark McCloskey caught her.

He was waiting in the outer hall as she tiptoed in.

“Mary!” He whispered loudly. “Where have you been! If Sheila finds out, she’ll kill you!”

She summoned a few tears to elicit sympathy from him.

“I’m sorry Mister McCloskey! I was out seeing my boyfriend!”

He stared at her concernedly.

“You have a boyfriend! That’s fine by me, it’s your business, but you’d better stop sneaking around because Sheila’s got eyes in the back of her head!” He heard Sheila utter a loud percussive blast of a snore from the master bedroom. “Believe me, I know. Better get back now! You be careful.” He admonished.

“Thanks, Mister McCloskey.” She said, and ducked back into her room.

The next weekend arrived and she made her decision. She could no longer wait. His hands were exploring her once again in the car.

“Julian, please, let’s go to your place.” She said.

He unlocked himself from her embrace.

“You’re not a virgin, are you?” It was as much an accusation as a question.

“No, I’m not a virgin. But I’m not a slut either, if that’s what you think.” She felt humiliated. Why did he care?

“I could never marry a girl who’s not a virgin.” He stated matter-of-factly.

“Julian, I don’t want to get married!” She blinked in

disbelief as she saw how hurt he was by her reply. Marriage was a taboo subject between them. Most subjects of any depth were taboo between them, especially when they were in his convertible.

“I didn’t ask you to get married. I just like you, Mary, and we’ve had a lot of fun. I hate to see you spoil yourself with guys like me.” He crossed his arms.

She could not help herself. She confronted him with his own double-standard.

“Are you a virgin, Julian? With your handsome face and powerful body, you mean to tell me that you haven’t dipped your wick?”

He started to get angry, “But it’s not the same for guys as it is for girls!”

“So you have tasted the forbidden fruit, haven’t you? You’re no different than any male.” She taunted. “Not like it’s your fault if you wake up one day and decide you hanker for a nice piece of ass, a ten-minute tumble. All men are bloody fucking hypocrites.” She shook her head.

With an open hand, he slapped her face. She held her hand to the place where he had slapped her. She recoiled. She saw his face change, how he regretted.

“I’m sorry! Mary! Are you hurt?”

“No. Not at all.” Inwardly, she laughed at the idea of him trying to beat on her, flailing, his arms akimbo.

His lovely black eyes softened until they became like languid as the night sky.

“You are the type that I want to marry someday, you’ve got a beautiful body, such pretty eyes . . .”

“You want my body? It’s yours for the taking.” She stated boldly.

He drove to his apartment, a second floor studio he

was renting above a bakery. The stairs were outside but they had been covered with a thin plastic roof. He got out of the car and lifted her from the convertible before she could open the door. He carried her in his arms up the steps, like a bride on her honeymoon.

He pushed her to his bed, little more than a cot, and pulled off her clothes. She pawed at him, her hunger for his body making her dizzy with anticipation. He kissed her neck, moving down to her breasts, trying to consume her with passion. She reeled in excitement, she unzipped his pants while kissing him, trying not to let herself stop touching him as she unclothed him. Her hands wove through his black hair, luxuriating in its thickness. She shuddered as his naked body pressed against her. A familiar ache of wanting made itself more insistent in her belly.

She wanted him so badly it hurt. She nibbled at his neck gently, sweetly, as her hand tracing his chest. He stabbed into her with brute force. She cried out in pain, then in pleasure as he thrust himself into her. Stars appeared in the periphery of her vision. She orgasmed quickly, then was thrilled to feel it happen again twice more as he slowed his pace. His eyes were narrow with desire like a panther's as he grinned at seeing her visibly satisfied. His hot juices coursed into her in quick bursts. When he was done she kissed his cheek tenderly.

His face was downcast. She wondered if he was already tired of her, if he would rudely push her away as one would a prostitute. Nevertheless, relief washed over her, her body rejoicing in the afterglow of twenty years of tension released. The release was so great that she felt tears spring from her eyes. Tears flowed in rivulets down

her cheeks and she began to cry.

“Mary! What’s going on! Why are you crying?!” He commanded an answer in a worried and slightly irritated tone.

His voice propelled her to cry even harder, so hard that she began to laugh behind her tears.

“Don’t worry, Julian. I’m okay. I must have been very wound up. I don’t know what has come over me.” She patted his arm and wiped her tears away.

“Was I that bad?” He asked. She was surprised at his modesty.

“No, you weren’t bad in the slightest. You were very good.”

“Mary, please don’t cry. I’m sorry to hurt your feelings. I don’t care if you’re not a virgin, that’s not how I really am. I know you’re young but I think I, no, I know that I love you.”

“No, don’t say that.”

“I love you with all my heart from the first day I saw you. When I carried you up here like a bride, that is the way I wanted us to be, Mary Lucia. I don’t think of you as a kid. Honestly, I never did. I want you to be my wife.”

Her elation teetered in mid-air for a second, then began to flutter down around her like a badly-built house of cards.

“But Julian, we don’t even know each other!” She exclaimed.

His mouth was sensuous but his eyes became frenetic.

“I want to know who you are. I get the feeling that you are special, so alone, so beautiful that I must get to the bottom of you if it takes my whole life. It just feels

right! You know it does! Don't say no. We'll run away together, we'll elope. Do you have family that I should ask?"

"Oh, Julian! No, my family is dead, lost. I like you very much, I haven't known you enough to love you, no matter how worthy you are of love. How can you say such things? You're too young to be married, and realize this: you're not ready."

"How would you know I'm not ready? I'm older than you, remember? Sometimes you act so worldly, as if you'd seen it all. At times I swear I've never met a more jaded fifteen-year-old, and your lie about being sixteen didn't get by me for one second, believe it. At other times you seem so innocent that it breaks my heart, when you look at me like I'm your Prince Charming and you are depending on me to take you away to my castle in a world that doesn't exist! I can take you away from this place. I can be that man, the one I know you want." He looked at her pleadingly.

"Julian, please wait. Just . . . take it slow. You say you love me and want to marry, but those are strong, potent words, words meant to last a lifetime. Why don't you wait and see if you do truly love me, then I can believe you? Then I know I am worth waiting for."

He smiled, and she felt love for him in that moment as the smile lit up his ebony eyes, eyes whose blackness seemed unfathomable. For a moment she thought of saying yes, and then filled with shame. She looked down at him and was amazed to see him erect again, amazed at the incredible virility that he possessed. She felt her own body stir, ready for more.

It didn't take long. Sheila found out. Sheila, a normally sound sleeper, woke one night to find both her husband and her foster daughter had snuck from their beds, and this infuriated her. As much as it killed her, she kept her mouth shut. It was the blood she found that cemented her decision that her foster daughter was a criminal.

Sheila decided to do a little laundry one day, clothes that were in Lucy's hamper, a dirty clothes bin that Lucy had insisted that she have for herself separate from the family one.

"Girls of sixteen do not need their own laundry hampers." Sheila scolded, but Lucy had invented a dozen reasons why she had to have her own hamper until finally Sheila got tired of it and relented.

It was the blouse that gave Lucy away. It was an old-fashioned peasant blouse, white, square necked, and trimmed with lace. Sheila plucked it out of Lucy's hamper with some of Lucy's panties and brassieres, figuring that she'd help out because she was doing a load of whites anyway. The blouse dried nicely, it would only need a touch of starch and a little ironing. Then Sheila noticed the stains. Each arm of the blouse had the faintest of rings around the elbow, a stain that looked familiar. The stain was blood, but this was a stain that resulted from being up one's elbows in blood! She smiled a nurse's knowing smile. All RNs were familiar with blood stains. It could only mean one thing—that her foster daughter was both a whore and a murderer!

When Sheila confronted her about it, it was five in the morning. Lucy had snuck in the back door by the kitchen and Sheila was ready for her, standing between the stove

and the refrigerator. Sheila pounded the kitchen table, causing the bell jar with the silk flowers to tip over and roll to the floor.

“Where have you been, young lady? I know your kind, I know you sneak out every night! How long do you think it could go on? You little murdering slut! Whore! I found you out, found your blouse! Evidence! How many of your johns have you killed why you have lived at my house? Huh? They’re going to put you away for a long time, honey. You’ll never see the light of day as long as you live.”

Lucy knew exactly which blouse Sheila had found. It was the one that she had sworn she’d throw out, if only Julian had not liked it so much.

“Why don’t you wear your white blouse more often? It is the prettiest shirt you own. So soft.” He would say every time she wore it. No amount of scrubbing could remove the stains, the blood of an unknown man she had stolen from the scene of a car accident, a stupid drunk with no license who had wrapped his Chevy truck around a very large oak tree. He had bled everywhere, but she had struck when the opportunity was ripe.

The stairs creaked as Mark rushed down them. He had heard everything.

“She’s been up to no good, Sheila. There’s hardly a night she doesn’t sneak out of the house.” He cried traitorously.

“Shut up, you little faggot.” Sheila snarled. “You’ve been sneaking out just as often as Mary Lucia. Just as soon as I deal with this little tramp, I’m going to divorce you and take every penny that you’ve ever made, including your pension and your measly inheritance from

your dishrag of a father!”

Something in the little man’s mind snapped.

Lucy saw it happen as if in slow motion. His diminutive hand flew out from behind his back like a wounded bird. A small handgun bobbed at the end of it, aimed at Sheila.

“You’ll do no such thing, Sheila. From now on, you’re going to listen to me for a change. I’ve had it, Sheila. I’m leaving you, and you can’t stop me. Don’t try. I’ll kill you, Sheila, and I’ll kill her too.” He waved the gun at Lucy who stepped back.

Sheila bellowed, a great wail of a sound from deep in her belly, flinging her tremendous weight towards him. The gun flew from his hand, clacking on the floor.

He wriggled underneath her heaving body, pinned like an insect. Sheila grabbed the gun and laughed hysterically, brandishing the weapon and baying like a bear.

“You forgot to take the safety off! You idiot! You can’t do anything right!” His other hand wormed out of the folds of Sheila’s enormous body. He stabbed a kitchen knife between her ribs. She was still laughing for about five stabs when she finally that she was bleeding all over her brand new linoleum floor.

Lucy jammed her foot down onto Mark McCloskey’s forehead. An audible crack sounded in the kitchen and Mark slumped backwards, unconscious. Sheila was finishing her laughter as Lucy brought an elbow down on the back of her head, expertly snapping the vertebra that connected Sheila’s head to her shoulders. Her head dangled unnaturally for an instant, unleashed from its moorings, then sank to join her husband’s on the floor.

Lucy drank them as the first rays of watery sunlight seeped through the mullioned windows, then put their husks in the claw-footed bathtub. She cleaned everything, wiped every surface, mopped and scrubbed every last drop of blood. By the time she was done, the bodies in the bathtub were gathering flies. A neighbor stopped by as the day wore on, causing her to duck and cover as he rang the doorbell over and over.

She went about the gory business of disposing of the bodies, cutting them up with a large butcher knife and packing the light dry pieces of their bloodless remains in a double ply garbage bag, pieces that looked like overcooked, ruined meat. The sun was setting when she carried the metal garbage can to the curb with their remains in it, where they sat underneath the stale chocolate cake that Sheila had thrown away and a pile of mildewy lettuce.

She packed her things, then ran a mile to Julian's apartment. His car was there. She flew up the covered stairs and knocked upon his door.

There was no answer.

She rapped again, louder. "Hold on." His voice sounded muffled and heavy, as if he had gone to bed. But it was only six-thirty. He came to the door and as he opened it a crack, she pushed herself inside urgently.

"Julian! I was worried that . . ." She trailed off as the smell hit her nose. It was an intimate smell, the unmistakable scent of him and another woman.

She heard the shower running and looked at his floor. A woman's shoe lay on the threadbare carpeting.

"Fuck you, Julian Rimbauer." She said under her breath.

“But Mary Lucia, it isn’t what it looks like! She’s an old friend, there’s nothing serious going on!”

Without a word, she about-faced and flew down his steps, running fast, jumping four steps at a time. She heard his voice screaming her name into the twilight as she fled, his cries trailing like banners, weaving through the breeze that had begun to gently stir the dew on the ground. She ran down alleyways and between buildings, faster than an Olympian, until she could hear his voice no more.

Virtualventures

LUCY GOES TO PROM

She ended up sewing her own dress for Prom out of sateen and tulle leftover from Shari's sewing days. It was a fetching gown that stretched tightly in a cream colored swath over her breasts and expanded to a full skirt with a petticoat. Hours were spent in preparation for the event. Shari tried a dozen new makeups on her, and Cathy spritzed her with her best perfume, Chanel Number Five. She looked and felt like a fairy princess.

He arrived at 6:29 sharp on the night of the Junior Prom. A series of photographs were taken of them: her on the stairs, the couple of them on the stairs, the couple of them in the kitchen, him pinning a red rose corsage with great care and acute sexual frustration. At the Diedermyer house, they were videotaped with the latest addition to the family, a Sony camcorder. The dance itself was anticlimactic, with teenagers trying their best to look the part of adult sophisticates on the dance floor.

"Who decorated the school like this?" She asked, peering up at the multicolored banners that hung everywhere. The theme was a masquerade. It resembled Mardi Gras, and she thought disdainfully of New Orleans.

"Prom committee does this, silly. They do a good job, huh?" He smiled at her. "You are beautiful, Lucy."

She smiled at him. "Do you like my dress?"

"Yes, the dress is beautiful, but you are much more beautiful than any dress."

She smiled wider. “Thank you.”

John introduced her to couple after couple, a dizzying array of new people that she could not catalogue in her memory quickly enough. She was enchanted by the beauty of the other girls, who were magically transformed into fairies and elves by makeup into seemingly unfamiliar yet glamorous new people.

They slow danced to a Bon Jovi ballad. Hugging him in the beautiful dress in front of the teenagers was strangely soothing to her. She could smell his cologne underneath his collar, or perhaps his aftershave. She could feel his penis pressing against her, half-erect under the starched black tuxedo pants.

After the dance, they went to a party. John’s best friend’s parents were to be out of town again, he reported. They arrived at the party shortly after 10:00pm. The huge, newly remodeled brick house was crammed full of people reeking of beer, vodka, and tequila. The place pulsed with music too loud to converse above. He yelled to her, asking her if she wished to have a drink with him, which she refused. He helped himself to a beer, then a vodka and tonic, then two rum and Cokes. Meanwhile, she was spirited away from John and bombarded by half-familiar people who attempted to chat with her above the roar of the crowd. A very familiar face emerged from a crowd at the impromptu bar on the kitchen island. It was her foster brother Mike, on his way to the bathroom. His red hair marked him, cut short into a round shape that had the texture of a Brillo pad.

“Hey sis!” He cried drunkenly. “Get you a cold one?”

“No thanks.” She yelled. When he returned from peeing, he sat down with her.

“You look fantastic!” He said, sitting down next to her on the sectional sofa, his black tee shirt and blue jeans in stark contrast to her cream colored princess gown. His attraction for her was now written plainly on his freckled face, revealed by the many drinks he had imbibed.

“He just wants to get laid, you know.” Mike blurted, his voice swallowed by the throb of loud music.

“Who?” She asked.

“John. Your boyfriend. He just wants to get laid.” She looked at him, pleading, miserable in her fancy gown.

“I know.”

She acted calm, but could not help being offended. Mike was showing his territorial instincts, brought out by the fact that he was drunk. As for Mike’s observations on John’s desires to get laid, it was the pot calling the kettle black. She did not want to feel such negative emotion towards any member of her foster family.

“I’ve gotta go.” She said. “I should make sure that he doesn’t try to drive himself home.” She departed from the couch and went upstairs to find John.

She found him reclined, watching television in a small guest room hidden in a back wing of the massive house.

“John?”

He turned around in the recliner.

“Lucy! You found me! I was just about to sleep some of those rum and Cokes off like the pig I am.” He was slightly tipsy. “This party must be so boring for you. I’ll drive you home once my buzz goes away.” He moved himself from the recliner to the couch and patted a cushion.

“Come sit with me, beautiful.” He leaned to kiss her

and she returned his kiss, which she drew out, savored, and tried to memorize.

Upon leaning back, he commented, "You look so sad. Why do you look so sad?" She opened her eyes wider and stifled her emotions.

"I don't know." She said bitterly. "No reason."

"Have I done something wrong? Should I take you home?"

"No. I'm fine." She leaned forward for another kiss, which he responded to. He grew more ardent, sliding her breasts out of the strapless bodice of her gown.

"Excuse me a moment." He got up and went to the guest room door and locked it. She covered herself with her arms. He returned, sitting on the floor beside the couch adoring her and stroking her bare arms.

"Now you look happy." He said, running his fingers lightly over one pink nipple.

"I am happy." She said, studying his face, which seemed to lose its childishness a little more with each day. He climbed on top of her, pressing her into the couch cushions, the gown billowing around them like a cotton candy parachute.

"I want to make love for the first time tonight." He stated, trying to maintain his calm.

She snapped out of her blissful state and looked at him squarely in the eyes.

"Then you need to find someone else." She replied. She wasn't sure of herself when she said it. She wanted him, she needed sex, but the two ideas had not formed an equation where a concrete result could be deduced. The rejection caught him like a slap in the face. He recoiled from the sting.

“I thought you wanted me—you told me so when we kissed in the park!” He cried. She softened her tone and scrambled for the right words.

“I do want you. But I don’t want to . . . ruin you.”

He sat for a moment, absorbing.

“Ruin me? For what? Posterity? How could you ruin me, Lucy? What on earth are you talking about?”

He got up and began to pace the room. She was suddenly very aware of the room, the television still blaring, and the chill in the air. She silently willed him to stop his pacing, to calm down. He paced faster, stomping around.

“Why are you so distant? Why all the mystery? What are you, a narc? Double-oh-seven or something?”

She steeled herself, refusing to react.

“I like you very much John. I will always think of you with fondness, no matter what.” She pulled her dress back over her breasts, glad for the elastic that she had sewn in.

“Ruin me? Think of me with fondness? Are you dying of cancer or something?” He demanded.

“I wish.” She said. He squinted and a disgusted look came over him.

“That’s suicidal bullshit, Lucy. Why don’t you just tell me what is going on with you! Why the police questioned you! Why they’re looking for your mother? I’ll understand! Just tell me and I swear to God Lucy I’ll understand.” She exhaled through her mouth and could not bring her eyes to meet his.

“No, John, you won’t understand.”

He stalked around the room. She shuddered; the room was unfamiliar and unwelcoming.

“TRY ME!” He yelled, his voice booming into the cacophony beyond the walls. She drew her naked arms around herself.

“I refuse. This is not what I want. I can’t tell anyone certain things about my life. I want to but I cannot! Please accept that!” She yelled. His face turned a dark crimson. He was not used to not getting his way.

Like a petulant child he snapped.

“Just forget it, Lucy! Keep your secrets to yourself!” He stomped out, slamming the heavily paneled oak door.

She felt herself shaking again. She hated being angry, the uselessness of it all, the frustration. It made her hungry. She gathered her black purse, a pointless thing made of cardboard covered in sateen and bejeweled with an assortment of rhinestones. She descended down the stairs of the house, sidestepping the refuse from binge-drinking teenagers that was strewn everywhere. Several people were passed out on the sectional sofa, and muffled noises emanated from other rooms indicating that the party’s embers were still smoldering, but John was nowhere to be seen. She got to the driveway and was semi-surprised to see that his car was gone.

She traveled through back yards and quiet side streets on her way home, careful to avoid the main thoroughfares, fraught as they were with people in cars who would recognize her person or notice her dress. As she hoisted her skirts near her waist, she thought ruefully of the last time she had worn such an elaborate gown, sometime near 1910 when petticoats were still considered hip everyday garb. Her gown was minimalist compared to those concoctions of boning and lace of long ago, she reflected, but that did not stop it from getting caught on

brambles and twigs.

The sun was rising, illuminating the trees in black as if they were drawn in ink. The sky beyond was a surreal color of pink that reminded her of the windows she had once been entranced by at the castle chapel, their leaden lines depicting old religious stories and sufferings.

By the time she arrived at the Beck's doorstep, the morning was risen. Larry would be up soon. She entered quietly and padded up to her shared bedroom. Shari was snoring soundly. A sound sleeper, she was not roused by the creaky openings and closings of drawers as Lucy packed a single duffle bag with underwear and soap that was pilfered from a multipack of Zest in the Beck's downstairs bathroom.

Seven hundred forty-two dollars and eighty-one cents, the sum total of her money in the world that she hid in a filigreed cigar box shelved behind her schoolbooks. Scissors with which to cut her hair, just in case. Piano wire, stained with black rust from the horrible deeds she had committed. She looked at the suitcase sadly and stashed it underneath her bed. She would have to leave very soon.

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OWNER OF A LONELY HEART

School wrapped for the season: days grew longer. The air became hot and swollen with June humidity.

She did not speak to John in the week of school left after the Prom. The rumor mills churned with the news that he harbored for her no ill will, but was simply too busy in his life to have a girlfriend that wasn't "serious".

Miraculously, her schoolmates were so upswept in their own summer planning that they had no time to interrogate her. Michelle found herself drowning in finals, and Lucy walked home alone the last week in obscurity and peace. She bought her Greyhound ticket one steamy afternoon when school let out at eleven thirty A.M. It cost her seventy-seven dollars.

Larry fell off the truck the Wednesday night before she planned on leaving. She meant to leave anyway, or so she would tell herself later.

He had fallen off when trying to tie down his aluminum paint ladder. He broke his arms in two places and several bones in his right hand. He was in great pain and it meant that he would be in casts for twelve weeks. Doctors constantly admonished and offered weak consolation that most would have been hurt much worse from the type of fall he took. Quickly a battle ensued as Larry tried to squeeze workman's compensation from his employer. Cathy got a second job as a receptionist. Even Shari's graduation party was put off until later in the summer when they could afford it.

They came out and said it: Lucy was needed at home to cook and clean. She auditioned and got a summer job teaching violin at the Mozart summer music camp for children, catching the luckiest of breaks. It took her only two towns away, near the Arby's where Mike worked. She got home every night in time to cook supper and it was good money. She placed her kills near the Senewac City jail that summer, burying the remains in the forest preserves outlying Greene County.

John spent the first weeks of summer backpacking in Europe, and she heard occasional news from Michelle of his whereabouts. He had been back for two weeks during some pleasant weather in July. The evenings were dulcet and soft. Husbands and wives, young lovers, and mothers with strollers thronged in the streets, all savoring the fine cool weather. The phone did not ring. She asked the inevitable question, the one she knew Michelle was waiting to field like a quarterback anticipating the pass.

"Does he ever ask about me?" She asked, feeling like a cuckolded old maid. Michelle's eyes darted around, she refused to look straight at Lucy. By this action, Lucy already knew what the answer was.

"No, not that I know of," Michelle replied, her still eyes not meeting Lucy's. "I'm sorry."

True summer descended like a sticky fever upon August's arrival, bringing with it miasmas of humidity that seemed to hang from the trees like mucus. The temperature soared to one hundred degrees, sickeningly hot.

She made a double kill mid-month in a trailer park, a forty year old man and his seventeen year old wife, finding out too late that she was seven weeks pregnant.

The living conditions of her kills were often so sordid that she would spend hours washing them off of her, and August brought her to the Greene River once again, scrubbing the stink from her hair with Ivory Liquid Dishwashing Detergent. She thought of leaving the Beck house less and less these days, though the suitcase remained packed underneath her creaky bed.

It was so easy to forget the imminent threats of being discovered during times of peace. She thought of an old abandoned barn that she could inhabit further downriver, but shrugged off the idea in disdain.

The winters were terrible in cold climates, and she often had been driven to dig herself large underground pits where she waited it out like a mole in the cold months. She hated living like that. It reminded her viscerally of her subhuman status, stripped away of the pretenses of art, intellect, and nicety. And if she was ever found living in the area like that, homeless, John could somehow find out. She could not bear the shame of it.

She had almost chosen to prostitute herself rather than live in that animal state once, but had found a warm cave in Kentucky just as situations had grown truly desperate.

It hadn't even been called Kentucky back then when the Shawnee still hunted deer over mossy hills and the smoke from their fires could still inspire terror. It was a "territory" back then, and many a Frenchman and a Redskin both had been devoured in those caves.

It was a beautiful place that she had found, a round cave by a small stream. The hills surrounded her cave home protectively. The place was pockmarked with window-like holes everywhere—people were always

falling into them and breaking bones--it was for these lookouts why she had chosen it. It was very much like a real house, with one central stalagmite that looked like a column and a waterfall that served when she wanted to bathe. There were perches inside where she could crouch and labyrinths underneath where she could hide. She often found herself absorbed by watching the tall grass undulate from the cave's central doorway as solitary hunters prowled for buffalo and stag on the plain. It had been very peaceful in the little cave for countless years. She had made a bed for herself out of wood and furs. She bathed frequently with ash and lye soap stolen from traders.

The cave had always been considered an evil place by the braves and for the most part they left her alone. She raided their settlements in shifts, staggering her kills from tribe to tribe, indiscriminating of their petty politics. She was not altogether surprised when she found a deer, gutted of its entrails and strung with a garland of flowers, on the cave's doorstep one humid summer morning. A sacrifice. She knew she was a monster and so did they. In the north they called her Manitou, in the south, Pabothkew. She learned that they had granted her the attributes of an earth elemental goddess, and they considered her as necessary as the wolf, as if she had a role to play in the natural order.

She thought of them as fools, but had been sorry to see them go. They had been so considerate of the earth they had touched that they barely left a footprint.

Senior year started with a whimper. She was able to forego an October kill thanks to the trailer-park double

murder in late August. The bodies had been found in the river without their heads, which were busy decomposing in a ravine. Because of the woman's pregnant status, a panic had spread in the county that a serial murderer was afoot, but she had made sure to copy the crimes of a famous serial killer that she had read about in the paper to cover herself and mislay blame.

The months that followed September spiraled downward. Without the protection of John's star power, certain denizens of the school found new reserves of energy and turned their attention to her, especially Kate Pfister, a bleach blonde with a face that was a plain sort of pretty who had once dated John.

Michelle had warned her of the girl, calling her "Bitchster". Michelle had played the informer when John resumed his relationship with Katy at the beginning of the school year by taking Katy to Homecoming. Kate was in two classes with Lucy: second period gym and fourth period American History. They had been informally introduced during floor hockey, when Katy had sent a puck flying into Lucy's face. Lucy had caught it when it was a millimeter away from hitting her teeth.

"GOOD CATCH, ALBERT!" A husky girl had bayed as she witnessed the puck's abrupt flight.

Katy had sneered at her for a moment, their eyes locking. Lucy studied Katy for the rest of the game. Katy oozed money from every pore of her being. She wore the most expensive athletic shoes money could buy in a fashionable black color with neon green laces. Her body was perpetually tanned, despite the approach of winter. Her hips were wide and her athletic legs supported a very large rear end, which she flaunted by

wearing her gym shorts two sizes too small. Oppositely, she wore her gym shirt oversized so that she could tuck it into the tight shorts, creating a mushroom effect that was de rigeur among the popular crowd who had invented it. Her formerly brown hair was dyed a white shade of blonde. Her hair was the one part of her that did not exude the air of wealth. The bleach had ruined it, with yellow-orange streaks invading the frizzy white that cascaded in wavy tendrils coated with greasy hairspray. Her hair was held back in a filigreed barrette. Katy's face was vapid and undistinguishable from a crowd, but pretty in an abstract sense, like the face of a baby doll.

Lucy found that her former anonymity as well as her popularity in the school was completely reversed. Girls who had envied her former position as John's amour passed no opportunity to utter cryptic remarks as she sat in Study Hall, walked down hallways, or rinsed her hands in the bathroom. When the word "FREAK" appeared scratched in the persimmon colored paint on her locker, she knew that in some fragile young woman's mind a war had escalated from imaginary to physical. She tolerated spitballs in her curly hair and had to buy a new backpack when hers was stolen. She found pieces of it on the blacktop near the green dumpster, amazingly small pieces considering the fabric's original heft.

Mike offered twice to beat John up, but Lucy talked him out of it much to his disappointment. She would have been amazed if John was even aware of any one of the incidents.

But it wasn't the harassment that bothered her.

Seeing John in Chemistry was the worst. He did not look at her directly, though she fantasized that she could

feel his stares from the back of the class on occasion. He never said hello, as if it had become a personal taboo for him. She did not try to approach him. After class his routine was unchanged. He and his friends (he had at least two per class, even in Trigonometry) would make their exits as quickly as possible.

Every time he left a room, she chastised herself bitterly for her own profound weakness. There was a Greyhound bus that she was overdue to ride. She was always the last person to exit after the crowds had stampeded, trailing slowly behind them like dust.

Virtualventures

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THE HIGH PRICE OF FAME

Michelle became a constant in those weeks, basking in the shame-ridden celebrity that had been created around Lucy. Lucy did her best to avoid talking about it, but the subject was beguiling, as it almost always brought news about him from the grapevine within which Michelle was intravenously entwined. Michelle began to shadow her at school.

First period was the time to be without her, as she was consumed with some before-school activity as Lucy barely made it to her first class in time for the bell. Third period was Art, where they sat side by side at a table and carved linoleum for block prints together.

Michelle had charitably taken to sitting with Lucy during Lunch Period, where she assumed a station at the outer edges of the Cafeteria, the crowd diffusing in concentric orbits, the middle tables reserved for only the most prestigious castes.

Michelle would arrive daily with a two to ten minute brief on her own dating status, her nightly dreams, grades, new family developments. She would then partially recall the items that she had heard about him, presenting each at the angle that was the most likely to inflict pain.

Michelle pulled a Kleenex out of a Pocket Pack and blew her nose. It was red and chapped.

“Are you sick, Michelle? Maybe you should have stayed home.” Lucy said with concern. Michelle’s eyes were red and bloodshot. Her normally shiny hair was

stringy and flat.

“Maybe I should have stayed home.” Michelle gave a pained expression. “I can’t. I’ve got too much work. I can’t afford to get behind. God, I hate these stupid ear infections! Have you ever had one?” Michelle asked.

“Not really.” Lucy said. “I’ve never been prone to them.” Did the Black Death count as an ear infection?

“You should be thankful. They are horrible. I get the worst headaches. My sinuses are so swollen up right now. It feels like I’ve got a snake of mucus stuffing my entire throat, just one big solid rope.” She sniffled.

“You poor thing.” Lucy put the back of her hand to Michelle’s forehead. “You’re burning up. You should go home today and get some rest. Soup would help you feel better, soup and hot tea.” Lucy rubbed Michelle on the shoulder.

Michelle looked at her pathetically.

“I might go home, I don’t know. The day is already half over. Did you know you’re very maternal? Damn, you’re more maternal than my Mom. I told her I was sick today and she told me to get over myself.” Michelle said. “Anyway, enough about that. I heard John was talking about you again from Jenny McIntyre.” Michelle’s tone changed from miserable to conspiratorial.

“Was he really?” She asked, waiting on baited breath.

“He broke up with Katy Pfister last night on the phone, from what I hear.” Michelle said.

“But I’ve heard that he’s broken up with her three times in the past. They always get back together.” Lucy replied sadly.

Michelle elaborated, “Things haven’t been going too well for them, true. But here’s what is different this time.

I think he heard about the backpack and the spitballs finally. Jeez! It was about time. Does that boy live in some sort of personal cave? Like, I think he might even be thinking about asking you out again! That is what I think. Don't take my word for it though. I wouldn't recommend doing anything. But I did hear something else from Leah Goldblum . . ."

"What did you hear?" Lucy felt herself unwillingly compelled to hang on Michelle's every word.

"Um, I really shouldn't tell you this, but he said . . . like, well, um, you're kind of looking just a little bit homely lately." Michelle paused awkwardly and pulled out a new Kleenex for her runny nose.

"Homely?"

"Well, yeah, that's what he said. Why did you go back to your old look? Don't take it personally, Lucy, but sometimes you look like you are trying to dress 'poor' or something. You can borrow any of my outfits anytime, you know. Sweatshirts and sweatpants were in for a while but they're out now. God, Lucy, that's the stuff people wear to Phys. Ed."

Lucy's eyes smiled and a weary closed lipped smile arose on her face. She replied, "I don't care to draw attention to myself, Michelle. You must have figured that out by now."

Michelle answered quickly. "But have you ever thought that you might be attracting negative attention to yourself by looking like you do? Like I said, don't take it personally."

Lucy retorted, "Well, I'm not going to make the yearbook anytime soon dressed like this, am I."

Michelle looked puzzled. "But why, Lucy? Who is it

that you are trying to hide from? John?”

Lucy closed her eyes in earnest.

“Michelle, the only reason I ever started to behave or dress differently was to please that boy. I wanted John to be proud to be seen with me.”

Michelle looked at her more inquisitively.

“Lucy, that is so sad.”

“Yes, it is.”

One Friday, as she was sitting in the fifth row two seats left of center in Sixth Period Study Hall, a dull hard object thudded against the back of her head. It was obviously pitched well, hitting her head at a good thirty-five miles per hour. She felt the whack from about six feet away, kitty corner.

“Holy shit!”

Giggling and snickering was amplified by asbestos tiles and reverberated by metal desks. Lucy did not move, but instead stared straight forward, her eyes focused on the desk where the presiding teacher on duty was supposed to be. The Law was around the corner and down the narrow hall, puffing a Virginia Slims Menthol in frantic sips, teetering uncomfortably out of an emergency exit door.

“Oh my God, what if she’s dead?” More giggling. Lucy could feel blood welling underneath a bump half swelling and already half-healing on her scalp.

“Ohmigod, Katy, you fucking killed her!” A trio of girls sniggered. She listened, her suspicions confirmed. The Bitchster strikes again. Lucy sat paralyzed, as still as Tiger Lily on the death raft.

Teacher returned, and with her the casual sense of

order. It was only when Study Hall was over that Lucy turned her head. On the floor, underneath the sixth row desks, was an ashtray with a small black dot of blood on its blunt round corner. Lucy snatched it up and put it in her pack. If anyone noticed, he did not report the event.

The showers of Second Period Physical Education class became another front on the battleground. Lucy stopped showering after Katy, affectionately known to her comrades as “Pfister”, organized a clothes stealing campaign targeting herself and the on occasion the unfortunate Margaret Zhang, a girl fresh off the boat from Peking, China. Occasionally she would be missing a sock or a bra, so she took to storing those things in her gym locker. She took a shower after a particularly harsh volleyball debacle only to find that her locker had been picked and her outfit of the day, gray sweatpants and a shapeless pink sweater, were gone. Even Lucy’s bra and panties, the ubiquitous polyester underwire and matching cotton bikini briefs from Kmart, were gone. Lucy asked Michelle if “Pfister” kept the bras and panties of misfits for their trophy value, or perhaps sold them on the black market to perverted old men. Michelle laughed, saying that she could only guess.

Lucy waited for the next Phys. Ed. Period trying desperately to cover her nudity with a dingy hand towel she had found lying on the floor in a corner. She approached a soft-looking bespectacled girl she had seen once in the halls and noticed for her haunted look. She asked the girl to fetch Mr. Hobson, the Phys. Ed. Teacher. The girl stupidly ran for the teacher leaving her still without clothing. Other girls gathered around like sheep. Returning in moments, Mr. Hobson was not

amused by the situation, which handled wrongly, could lose him his job. He yelled at the girls for neglected to hand Lucy a pair of shorts or a sweater while they stood around in shock.

An extra pair of gym clothes materialized within fractions of a second. Socks and shoes were harder to find, and she ended up wearing men's athletic tube socks and a pair of dust caked flip-flops that had sat forlornly in Locker 49 since 1978.

Though Lucy refused to personally implicate her, Mr. Hobson ordered Katy Pfister suspended for a full week in retribution for the pranks on Margaret Zhang and Lucy Albert. He was always one step ahead of the curve, and he had found the right girls would always rat on a ringleader when their own academic records or passage to top rated colleges were at stake.

“Let's go outside.” Michelle said.

They joined the rabble of aspiring James Deans in torn jeans and bomber jackets and girls with Clairol black hair smoking clove cigarettes. The air was pungent and leaden. The autumn rain had made every surface tacky, the wet seats of painted red picnic tables were avoided. Even the most sullen and withdrawn were sensitive to the penetrating nastiness of the fog.

Michelle took out a Marlboro Light 100 from a secret stash on the inside of her pink neoprene jacket. She lit the cigarette with a tiny Kelly green drugstore lighter.

“Didn't you just get over an ear infection not two weeks ago? You're asking for another one. Besides, those things are deadly.” Lucy observed, watching her friend.

“Want one?” Michelle deadpanned.

“Sure.”

Michelle extracted another cigarette from her jacket and handed Lucy the lighter.

Lucy inhaled deeply. “When did you start?” She said between puffs.

“About two years ago. My Mom and Dad were on the brink of divorce, what else is new, they still are. I wish they would just get it over with. Anyway, I only smoke occasionally. If my Mom found out, she’d kill me.” Michelle said. Lucy could smell that Michelle was the body type that easily became cancerous, and fast. Ovarian cancer. It was an easy one to smell early on, Sebastian had taught her: anything reproductive.

“You should quit.” Lucy stated.

“So should you.” Michelle fired back merrily. “You know, my mom caught me smoking once with Missy. She grounded me for three weeks! I couldn’t even talk on the phone! She still has issues with Missy. Let’s face it, she hates Missy’s guts. Hell, my mom hates everyone, don’t take this personally, but she doesn’t like you very much and she isn’t shy about letting me know.”

“Why? What did Missy ever do to piss her off? What did I do?” Lucy asked, growing defensive.

“She thinks that Missy is trying to turn me into a punk or a Goth. Missy is into the witchcraft stuff, Wicca, nothing bad or anything. She doesn’t like you because she says the Beck’s are not ‘our kind of people’ which is her code for them not being rich enough. Sorry. She’s a snob. My mom doesn’t realize that I’ve got my own style. You don’t have to have a lot of money to have your own style.”

“But Michelle, compared to most of the world, you

have a lot of money. Compared to most of America, you're rich." Lucy said, thinking of the Becks who worked around the clock just to keep a tiny house in the same neighborhood.

Michelle shrugged her off. "What I mean is . . . I am totally like this on my own. I am always reinventing myself with new styles. One day I can be a Gothic chick, and the next day I'll be Hitler Youth."

"Excuse me? You are Hitler Youth?" Lucy replied, astounded.

"It is just a look." Michelle shrugged.

"Have you no understanding of your own advanced history classes? You want to look like a brainwashed Nazi anti-Semite?" Lucy became angry, her nostrils flaring.

"No, no, no. Get the pole out of your ass. I mean my cut-offs and boots. It's kind of the World War II thing." She replied.

"You're an idiot and your attitude is repugnant." Lucy cried, drawing attention from the somber crowd. "You should try thinking during your History classes instead of blindly memorizing the textbooks to gain your A plusses."

"Well, fuck you too. I don't have to take this shit." Michelle stubbed out her cigarette with her foot and sauntered back to the cafeteria. Members of the crowd looked over their shoulders and stared at her through the smoky haze.

Lucy stared out to the busy streets beyond. She thought of the suitcase, the seventy-seven dollars for a Greyhound ticket that had expired. She still could not muster the strength to leave.

“Homely.” Lucy grumbled as she trotted through the formaldehyde stench of Biology Lab.

On Friday Michelle found Lucy while waiting in line by the soda machine.

“Are we cool?” Michelle asked her.

“It’s fine, Michelle.” Lucy said, watching people mechanically pump quarters into the till. She noticed an odd new gleam in Michelle’s eyes, a focus she had not noticed before.

“No, Lucy, it isn’t fine and I am sorry. I was being stupid. I thought about how insensitive my behavior was and even though I don’t think that I was being anti-Semitic on purpose, I can see how dumb I was being. We are doing a unit on World War II in American History right now, so maybe I am getting a little wrapped up in the unit or something, I dunno. Forgive me?” She pleaded.

“It’s okay, Michelle.” Lucy answered, disturbed at how rehearsed the apology sounded.

“Oh good. I’m so glad you’re not angry.” She breathed relief.

“So what is John up to today?” Lucy asked with a weary smile.

With thinly veiled glee, Michelle described a rumor she had heard about John at a recent party. Lucy was surprised to hear that any party could happen on a week night, but the parents of the house in question were the rich absentee type.

“There was a keg, hash, LSD, pot, you know, the usual.” Michelle relayed the information as if she had been there, though she had not. “John went into one of

the bedrooms Katy Pfister for over two hours, and I think he finally lost his virginity.”

“They’re back together again?” Lucy felt her heart sink into the pit of her stomach.

Michelle blinked rapidly and Lucy could hear her heart speeding up.

“Oh I most definitely think so. I see them hanging out in the halls together all the time. She’s obsessed with him, you know, totally obsessed.” Michelle reported.

Lucy felt her eyes misting up, turning traitor. She swallowed hard.

“Oh, Michelle, I’m such a miserable fool.”

“No you’re not.” Michelle patted Lucy’s shoulder reassuringly. “It would be easier if Katy would just lay off. I hope she falls off the face of the planet. Good riddance.”

“To bad rubbish.” Lucy finished Michelle’s sentence and steeled her resolve, drawing herself up to a straighter posture. “I think she is the perpetrator behind several attacks, not just the clothes stealing.”

“Yeah, I think she hates you, hon.” Michelle stared at Lucy briefly.

“Oh . . . dear.” Lucy put her hand to her heart and pulled one of her kinky curls straight.

“Ohmigod! You totally sounded like my grandmother just now!” Michelle exclaimed.

“I get that a lot.”

THE WINDS OF NOVEMBER

The Thanksgiving season brought a fierce wind that relentlessly whipped around the brick corners of the school. It plucked shingles from the school building, threatening to shake them all loose one by one like rotting teeth. Lucy found solace in the lack of sunshine, but the November cold was over the top, even for Illinois.

She stared out of the paned glass window, watching the trees being blown bare by the gale force. The clouds were nearly black with rain, threatening to spill sleet in daggers and torrents. She worried for Cathy, working double shifts at the nearby family restaurant to help make ends meet. Cathy, who still thought Lucy would be off to trade school or community college like her plans for her other two children and was putting money away “in secret” for their college funds.

Mercifully, John had been sick for two of the three days of Thanksgiving week, giving her reprieve from both his presence and the machinations of Katy Pfister, who was always less active on days when he was not around.

She wondered when her tormentors would simply lose interest now that Katy had been discovered and suspended. Lucy had just begun to invoke a solace where John was concerned, doing her best to shelve him as not so special after all. Her sadness was manageable only because she was so familiar with its phases, because she could observe its moods remotely, like an astronomer studying the moon.

The halls emptied with special urgency as teens rushed forth into heated cars and buses to make the mad dash home before the coming storm. She lingered over donning her winter coat, buttoning each toggle and placket, double knotting her long scarf. There was no point in rushing into the long walk home. She did not bother with the backpack despite its due tomorrow status. It mattered not whether she flunked the year as she would soon be gone. The books would be soaked and ruined in the rain anyway through the thin skin of the pack.

The sidewalk resonated with the pounding of cold rain by the time she left the building. Water sprung from the corners of the school roof, turning it into a gigantic fountain. Water soaked her through in five minutes. It ran in rivulets down her face, penetrating her hood and the thick quilting of her coat. Cars rushed by on the street, swerving into the middle of the two lane road to avoid the knee-deep puddles forming around sewer grates. She was slowed down by the icy wind that punctuated itself in screams around houses and trees. It would be an ice storm by midnight if it did not let up.

She found herself mildly entertained by staring at the houses through the rain as she walked home, all cast in a gray blurry film noir gauze of rain. The brown house, almost exactly the same as the Beck's, turned black as pitch in the gloom. A white house that she often found charming loomed gray and ashen, its gardens shorn for the coming winter. She laughed as the deluge seemed to grow worse with every step. The sky periodically pummeled her with hail pellets as she would pass through the deserted intersections. Rain changed to hail, then

sleet, then snow.

She returned home to the Beck house soaked and soggy. Mike and Shari sat at the kitchen table eating potato chips.

“Poor Lucy!” Cathy exclaimed as she rushed in the door, umbrella sheathed. “I looked for you on the way home from The Big Apple, where were you?”

Lucy smiled. Cathy had not even noticed that she herself was wet and trailing water everywhere.

Mike chimed in. “Yeah, where the hell were you? My friends would have driven you home when I came home if I could have found you.”

“I was late. I took the usual way home. It must have been impossible to see me through that much rain.” She replied.

“Your teeth are chattering! I’ll make you some hot chocolate!” Cathy cried.

“No thanks, Cathy. Maybe later. I’ll feel fine as soon as I get out of my wet clothes.” Lucy tried to ignore her awareness that Mike’s ears had perked up.

She went to the basement and shed her sodden coat and scarf, tossing them into her favorite modern appliance, the electric dryer. She found a clean sweatshirt and soft pajama pants, glad to trade the wet for the dry.

She padded up the stairs to the bedroom, finding that her sheets had been changed with a fresh pillow case to welcome her weary head. She could have kissed Cathy. She crawled underneath the soft white sheets, reclining and pulling the blankets up to her chin. The fragrance of dryer sheets lay upon her like the snow that now drifted peacefully outside. She rested for a half hour in heaven on earth, feeling herself drift in and out of sleep.

The ringing doorbell jarred her from her stupor. She bolted upright as she heard footsteps rumble towards the door, cursing UPS for being so damn persistent in such foul weather.

Someone bounded up the stairs, which groaned from the strain, unmistakably Mike. He knocked on the doorframe.

“Mike, what’s going on?” She sat up, groggily rubbing her eyes.

“How’d you know it was me?” He looked conspiratorially into the room for hidden informants.

“Very big steps, moves fast.” Her words were slurred with sleep.

“John’s here.” He said.

“What? She replied, still hazy. “Mike, that’s not even remotely funny.”

“Check for yourself in the driveway. He’s got flowers.” He declared.

She got out of bed, her eyes still half-closed, and stood slack jawed. She imagined descending the stairs, hearing Mike’s uproarious laughter as she peeked around a vacant corner with a lump in her throat. It was a hoax, it was the only thing possible, until she heard Cathy say, “Let me hold those for you. She’s right upstairs.”

Lucy walked out of her bedroom door following Mike down the tiny hall. John turned toward the short staircase as she alit upon the first creaky step.

“Hi.” He said as Cathy took his coat and alternately handed him back his bouquet of red roses. Lucy treaded down two steps, stunned. “How are you?” He asked, realizing she was unnerved by the very sound of his voice.

“I’m fine,” she said softly.

He followed, “Um, is it okay if we talk in private for a few minutes somewhere?”

Cathy was quick to reply. “It’s okay Lucy. You two can talk in Lucy and Shar’s room for a few minutes.”

John approached Lucy, handing the bouquet to her.

“These are for you.”

She looked down at the flowers, still in shock, and gently laid them over her arm like a Miss America candidate practicing a crowning ceremony at a pajama party. Cathy sighed. “Thank you.” Lucy said, leading him upstairs behind her.

“Please forgive me, Lucy.” He closed the door partially behind himself. She sat on the edge of the bed overwhelmed, the roses cradled in her arms. She looked at the white ankle socks on her feet and was reminded simultaneously of her pajama outfit and the suitcase that still lay underneath the bed.

“Oh dear, I’m not dressed.” He sat down on her left side and put his hand on her knee, gesturing with his other hand. He gently took the roses from her and laid them on the pillow.

“Lucy, do you forgive me?”

She looked at him in earnest. “John, of course I forgive you if it is what you need from me. I am so amazed to see you here.”

He quickened, “I never slept with Kate Pfister, you know, and when I confronted her about all the pranks that she and her idiot friends had pulled she denied it all. When I realized that she was a liar and a mean bitch I broke it off with her for good. She got hysterical. I told her it was the end. Unbelievable the pranks that she pulled—you should have told me! I told her to leave you

the hell alone or she would be dealing with me next, I dropped a hint about telling her parents about her in detail. She won't be a problem from now on."

She looked at him quizzically. "John, you were never bound to me, you don't owe me anything. You must know that."

"Oh, Lucy, I never have stopped thinking about you since the first day I walked you home. This was the worst summer that I ever had in my life, Europe and all, and I can't tell you how many times I drove by that Violin Camp hoping to catch a look at you, praying that there wasn't some horny violin guy waiting to ask you out."

She smiled at the thought.

"There wasn't." She replied.

"I want to make you happy, Lucy. I don't care if you never tell me any of your secrets. I won't even ask. Whatever you need to do, it is your business. I don't want you to be sad." He said. She rested her head upon his shoulder.

"You fill me with happiness, John." She said. He pulled on her shoulder, bringing her mouth to his in a kiss. Her back arched and she felt herself instinctively sinking into him.

The house was eerily silent, which alerted her to the idea that someone might be listening. She pulled away from him, placing her fingers on his lips for a moment.

"We should get out of here." She said. He kissed her fingers and grinned.

"I'll get dressed." She said. He stood up and she ushered him out of the small room.

A chill rain thrummed against the sides of John's car, having slowed from deluge to steady patter, the snow was

dissolved where it lay.

He turned the wheel carefully as he touched her neck with the other, threading her soft curls in between his slim fingers. He turned onto the long road leading to MacDowell Elementary School and pulled over in the empty lot overlooking the miniscule baseball diamond. He turned to her and pinned her against the headrest with his kisses. She sensed his acute frustration as he unzipped her raincoat while trying to kiss her. She responded as he slipped his hands under her sweater. He uttered her name and his excitement grew when he did not feel a bra. She was the first to hear another car approaching from the street, an odd occurrence in an elementary school lot that had been abandoned for the weekend.

She whispered, "Another car is coming," as lights approached their car.

"Damn". He said. "Where should we go?"

Knowing that they would be dogged wherever they went, she volunteered, "Let's go to the Big Apple. My foster mom works there as a second job." She said.

They sat in the windowed booth at the restaurant across from each other.

"As a second job?"

"Right about five months ago when Larry fell off the truck and we stopped seeing each other, Cathy took a second job. Mike and Shari got jobs as well. It was the only way to make the monthly bills." The suitcase loomed in her memory, making its presence felt once again.

His expression became pained. "I am sorry for the way I acted, Lucy. When I heard about Larry I was going

to call you, I was, but, well, there is no excuse, is there? I acted like I was afraid of you, afraid that I liked you, so I ignored you like a coward.”

“It is ironic that you say that, John, for it is I who am afraid of you.” She replied.

“Who, me? I scare you?” He asked.

“You’ll get me to allude to it, but you’d have to torture me to admit it.” She said.

“You could tell me but you’d have to kill me?” He asked with a sardonic grin on his face.

“That’s what we narcs have to do.” She said.

His smile faded. “Who did you live with before the Becks? I hear things.”

“I have been through dozens of foster parents, John. My natural parents both died a very long time ago and I have been on my own for a great deal of my existence. My last foster father in Alabama before the Becks was a heavy drug abuser. There was a girlfriend who was mentally ill. He disappeared and she was finally convicted for past child abuse, but because she was diagnosed as schizophrenic they put her in a state mental ward instead of jail. He disappeared after getting my foster sister Traci pregnant. They were horrible people. At least one of them was caught and put away.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“Before that it was six months with the Monroes who had five other children besides me, three of them under the age of five. Mr. Monroe would go to work and Mrs. Monroe would lock the whole group of us in the basement, every day. This was in Tennessee. I had special ways of getting out of the basement without them noticing, and often I could smuggle a child or two out for

the day and they were never the wiser. They would forget to feed them as well so I spent a lot of time shoplifting in grocery stores and sifting through garbage behind restaurants. There was a lot of that, John, a great deal of hunger. Gina, the eleven year old, just couldn't take it and she ran away. She turned up dead after about eight weeks and it broke my heart. She was too delicate, too fragile to survive out there. The other four, Ryan, Jakie, Starra, and Gina's sister Laura got placed in other foster homes after that, scattered to the four winds."

"Some people should not be allowed to be foster parents."

"Change that to most, at least from my experience. Before the Monroes I was placed with a single woman, Leslie Cavendish. Just me and another girl named Krista who turned eighteen and left right about when I got there. This was in Texas. She was good to me for the two years I stayed with her, she had a nice apartment in Galveston. She taught me how to crochet and cross stitch. Nice lady. She succumbed to cancer of the breast at age forty-three, it was slow and wasting. I did what I could to comfort her but she died in terrible pain. I still have a cross stitch she made for me of a little fairy sitting on a daffodil. I miss her a lot." It was sitting in her suitcase in the same pocket as the expired bus tickets.

"Lucy, that's horrible. I didn't know that you had it that bad," said John. What about your real mother? Wasn't she also a foster child? Michelle told me that she was suspected of murder, some people named McFerrin, McDougal . . ."

"McCloskey."

"Yes, I believe that was the name. Michelle said that

she had researched the case, even went to the library in the town where it happened and looked it up in the local paper there.”

Lucy grew hot. “Why would she do that? Why does she care? That’s a waste of her time.”

John looked at her sympathetically. “I guess I’m not the only one who wonders about your past. Michelle said that the case had been closed for lack of evidence. She said that your mother was only fifteen when she went to live with them. Both McCloskeys disappeared on the same night, without a single trace. Michelle said the police bungled the investigation, though.”

She breathed an inner sigh of relief. The investigators should have thought to check inside the garbage can.

He continued thoughtfully.

“Michelle said that your mom was a suspect because she ran away, visited some boyfriends of hers and then ran off into the night. Was he your natural father? Did you know him?”

“No, I didn’t. I was always told my mother died the day I was born.” She lied. “What else did Michelle say?”

“She said that the guy was all broken up about it, that he had another woman on the side or something. She didn’t know anything more about your mom.”

“Oh.” Lucy said, mentally resolving to get to the Joliet Library as soon as possible to see the records Michelle had unburied.

“He was no help to the police, just babbled on about how he was going to marry your Mom and how he was in love with her, that they he had lost his true love, Michelle insisted on repeating that to me, ‘He lost his true love.’ Total bullshit, if you ask me.”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” She nodded in the affirmative.

“So she must have had you fairly young, right?” Lucy nodded again.

“Who took care of you after she died?”

“My father. His name was Bartolomeo di Alberti. He died when I was . . . uh . . . when I was five.” She wondered how much history she could reinvent before losing track of her own lies.

“That’s a weird name. So your name must be Americanized? What country? It sounds Spanish.” He said.

“It’s not. It’s Italian.”

“Are you originally from Italy?” He asked.

“I was born there.” She said.

“So your father brought you here to live in the States?” John asked.

She felt terrible lying to him. It was easy enough to lie to anyone else. “Yes.” She said.

“Was it terrible for you after he died?”

“Don’t worry yourself about it John. I have always managed to survive, haven’t I?” She was eager to stop talking about her parents. “But I still think of my old foster brothers and sisters.” She had not seen or heard from a single one of them since. “Maybe someday I can look them up again, just to see how they are doing.” She said.

“Did your foster dads ever try to molest you?”

“Of course they did, John. I fought. There are pretty much three types, those that accept, and those who run away, and those who fight. I fight.” She said dryly.

“Good, I’m so glad, Lucy.” John said.

“Fighting goes with loads of its own baggage, John. It

invariably leads to trouble.” She changed the subject abruptly. “John, did those roses cost a fortune?”

“Like I’m going to tell you!”

“Oh, John, they were so pretty, but they must have cost an arm and a leg, and you should be saving for college.”

He smiled at the naiveté of her suggestion.

“Lucy, my brother is home and I borrowed the cash from him. He was amused. My parents would have given me the money, so that is exactly why I didn’t ask them. Jesus! They just wouldn’t let up about you after you played the violin for them. They were actually pissed at me that I quote broke up with you unquote.”

The corners of her lips rose along with her eyebrows.

“Really?”

“Would not let it go. You don’t understand, Lucy, they just aren’t like that. Not about girls that I date. When I told them I was going to your house today, my dad told me to either ask for lessons or bring my violin to give to you permanently since I was not ever going to use it. Sensitive, aren’t they?”

She chuckled. “Must be hard to find a decent violin teacher these days.”

“How the hell did you learn to play like that?”

“Lots of practice, John.”

She had had so much time to learn the violin that she often thought to herself that she ought to be much more skilled at it. She had first picked up the fiddle back when it was still called a viol, that was how long she had been at it. She had even played in an opera by Verdi once, but had to dress as a boy to do it.

“I don’t know how, but I always manage to find a

fiddle if there is one around.”

She picked at her sandwich idly.

“I’ve been playing since I was five, Lucy! You’re just more talented than I am.” He said, sucking down some Pepsi.

“No I’m not, John. I just never had anything else fun to do. Playing became a way of escape. Besides, you have so many talents, you build things . . .”

“You should try out for the town orchestra.”

“No.”

“The school orchestra?”

“Nope.”

“Come on! Why not?”

“So I can spend more time with you, of course.”

“Oh, gimme a break, Lucy.”

“John, maybe I don’t want to try out for orchestra right now because my heart isn’t in it. Right now my heart is occupied . . . with you.”

His shoulders relaxed.

“More coffee, hon?”

She held her hand over the cup. “No thanks.”

They left the restaurant just as the rain slowed to a dull trickle, the fury of the storm exhausted, having left mirror puddles in its wake.

He kissed her once inside the car. She pulled his shirt from its tucked belted state and snaked her hands around his waist. His pale and boyish waist was nearly as slim as her own. He pushed her small hand into his jeans. She fondled his penis which was stiff and straining against his pants.

“When can we be alone together?” She asked him, never loosening her grip.

“Uh, my parents are going skiing in Colorado after New Year’s.” She massaged him. “Oh, please.” He threw his head back.

“Am I hurting you?” She asked.

“No.” He writhed. She removed the belt and drew down his zipper. She drew his penis out of the strange little vent in his boxer shorts.

“Oh, Lucy.” His eyes were squeezed shut. She put her mouth on him. He took about five minutes. When he came in her mouth, he was shocked when she swallowed his ejaculate. She withdrew her mouth and patted his penis dry with the bottom of his shirttails.

He took over, doing his best to rearrange his overly sensitive member back into his pants.

“Lucy, you . . . didn’t have to . . .”

“I wanted to, John.”

“I feel so guilty.”

Her urge to drink deeply of his blood was growing insane, ignited by what he had already donated. She felt her canines growing.

“Uh, can you get me a soda or something?” She said, shielding her exposed teeth with her hand. “I’m thirsty.”

“Sure, anything you want . . . we’ll stop by the Amoco on Maple.”

“Thank you.” She turned away. She had to exert tremendous energy not to sniff the air for his blood.

“Is Coke okay?” He asked as he pulled into the gas station.

“Fine.” She said through a closed mouth. He jumped out of the car. At last, she breathed. She looked in the rear-view mirror. Her canines had receded, but were still

prominent.

He returned to the car, Cokes in hand. He gave her one of the sweaty red cans. She opened it and imbibed. It was the last thing she felt like drinking.

“How are you feeling?” She asked.

“Great.” He drank. “You’re . . . good at that.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Why?”

“If I were bad at it, you would be on your way to the hospital by now.”

He chuckled, wincing at the thought.

“Just remember, I have to make this up to you.”

She laughed. “Okay. But for now, I’d like to turn in, if you don’t mind.”

They returned to the Beck house and he walked her to the front door. No police officers or lurking storms were anywhere in sight. Blue haze had settled beyond the black silhouettes of trees, graduating to the deep violet that began the night sky. She had not noticed such beauty in many years, and it almost caused her to weep. His arms slipped around her waist as they were on the doorstep and he kissed her lips sweetly. She savored the sweetness of his lips, all of his great youth and passion and longed for his innocence, his complete lack of the knowledge of terrible things.

“Thank you,” he said, “for letting me back.” She put her wrists upon his shoulders, feeling him surge with the pride of his own masculinity as she touched him.

“These are the times that would make me glad to live forever, if only they lasted.” She said as she rested her head against his chest, eyes unfocused on the fading sky. He looked half at her and half at the sky.

“True love is forever, isn’t it?” It was something a child would say, a phrase she had seen scratched on bathroom walls and maple trees, but it made her sad. She answered him with another kiss, long and deep. She dreaded leaving him for the night, but separated herself finally.

“Have to go now.” She fumbled with her keys and opened the front door.

“See you at school tomorrow.” He said.

“Oh, yes, that’s right, we go to school.” She shook her head, snapping out of her reverie.

“Of course we go to school. At least until we graduate. You’re such a strange girl.” He smiled at her. She winked at him as he shut the door.

She watched as his headlights flooded the driveway and many minutes after his car was gone. She so wanted to keep her memory of him fresh, so wanted to memorize his kisses and to conjure his embrace someday when he was mere dust in the ground. She cursed the treachery of memory, its frailty and spottiness. All that she had ever loved were gone, except Sebastian.

HISTORY OF AN ABDUCTION

She had not seen him for hundreds of years. Did he track her? She was unaware if he did. Even her memories of he who had frequented her life for the longest period of years were worn and fading. It was as if her finite human brain could only store a limit of information, details like hair color and fingernail shape easily jettisoned to make room for the nuances of a grin or the emotion of a shoulder blade. She wished to view Sebastian again if only to reaffirm that there was a human being whose appearance remained unaltered by the vagaries of time and memory.

She had in her suitcase a small scrapbook, only a few pages, what little information she had gathered on him through the years. She had a political cartoon from 1785 that showed a tall man in a cape, a caricature of a French politico that looked suspiciously like him. The next page was a drawing that she had made in pen and ink of his face, or what she had remembered of it. She had found a couple of articles about him over the years, blurbs about the opening of a theater that mentioned him. She even hit the jackpot in 1952 when she found a photograph in a London issue of Vogue. It was a society column about the richest men in the world and their lavish parties. There he was, standing with a group of men who she presumed to be the other richest men in the world. She had found two copies of the magazine and carefully cut out both photos.

How long had she been married to Sebastian? It was in 1352 that she had truly started thinking of him as husband. The bliss had lasted one hundred and forty years, far more than an entire mortal lifetime. She had once reconciled in her mind that she was happy as long as she had him.

In their happiest times, he was the most faithful and devoted of husbands. Little by little Sebastian gave to her the story of how she came to be abducted.

“I first saw you crossing the river Arno, after a spring rain had spoiled the day for everyone except the ducks. I was visiting the royal family, as they sought me for a tutor for their sons over the summer. I was happy to oblige them, I had grown sick of the heat of the south and all the miserable sun. You were with your mother, the two of you huddled like thieves, laughing at the silly women who tried to shield themselves from rain by cowering under empty baskets and shawls. She was quite a beauty, all in white, and I can still see how much you resemble her. You truly are your mother’s, Lucia. You wore a blue dress with your hair unbound, and never had I seen a maid so glorious with eyes so blue or a smile so bright. I tried to get across the terrace and onto the bridge to introduce myself, but the crowds did not part and I lost you. I spent agonizing weeks wandering Mantua in search of you, finally arriving at the idea of asking someone who you were. I asked several shopkeepers the same question:

‘Do you know the blue-eyed maid with the curly brown hair? She has a mother who is fair with the same eyes.’

I received strange looks from them. I was reduced to

a fool, for there were many pretty women from all walks of life in that teeming city. It was a young girl who overheard me when I was on my third shopkeeper who answered my question. She tugged at my coat and said,

‘I know of the blue-eyed maid. Her name is Lucia, she works in the Alberti Yarn Shop, across from Florestano the Butcher!’

I happily rewarded her with a shiny new Florin and sent her off. She was correct, and when I went directly to the street she had named, there you were, walking into the Butcher Shop.

I followed you in. I loitered in the shop as you chatted with the butcher’s girl. I learned of your betrothal, gleaned all the information I could simply by eavesdropping. Having no more patience, I drew you aside to give you a compliment on your radiant beauty. You thanked me tersely, then, barely noticing my existence you went right back to your conversation! I was somewhat crushed but my spirits were lifted when the butcher revealed who your husband-to-be was. Gianfrancesco was a contact of mine, I had allied myself to his father before him, and unbeknownst to anyone, to his Great-great-granduncle during the time of Crusades. I knew where I would go next: Florence.

I quickly ingratiated myself to Gianfrancesco, playing on his insecurities, drawing from his need for more and more power. I promised to put him in touch with some people in Rome, an idea which he warmed to. In exchange, I simply asked to serve as the Family Physician.

I was already established as Physician when your wedding day arrived. How I envied Gianfrancesco on his wedding night, how I writhed in agony just thinking

about his intimacies with you! Then you became pregnant, and there he was, posturing and gloating like the rest of the family, my divinations of a boy in your womb pronounced. I have never been wrong about the sex of an unborn child. You were content, and I came to thrive on your happiness. When I examined you for ‘ill humors’ I longed to run my hands over your entire body, to touch your face, to caress you in the places that would give you pleasure. It took all my self control not to let my hands wander.

Your mother arrived, and she knew me for what I was, she whispered to me curses against werewolves and vampires when I was alone in a room with her. I warned her not to say a word, for it would mean the death of everyone in the Palazzo, including you. It seemed that within an instant the Pestilence struck, and she begged me on her deathbed to shelter you and her grandson for the rest of your lives, as she could see that even though I was a ‘demon fiend’ and ‘minor devil’ that I loved you. She didn’t trust Gianfrancesco, you know, she called him a ‘bad husband’.”

He looked satisfied to report that Marina had decried Gianfrancesco.

“I did everything I could to save your baby, Lucia, I have the medical knowledge to cure almost anything, but the Pestilence struck you too fast. I had not the time to formulate the decoctions that would have saved him—they take weeks to create and must come from your own blood! You were perilously close to death, and had I not watched you constantly for the week you were unconscious they would have buried you alive!

Gianfrancesco was ready to give up after two days,

ready to throw you in the plague cart! Of course he had no use for you after bearing witness to the loss of your womanly organs. I stubbornly insisted that we wait, and you woke up. Even though you cursed your own existence, I had not been so joyous in a thousand years!

Finally, he took the family and remaining servants away to the Manor. I followed, taking up hunting so that way I could track you, to make sure you would become well again. It was easy to discern Gianfrancesco's mood. He confided to me that he felt trapped in his marriage, that he was being ruined by fate.

We were hunting and were separated from the rest of the hunters, so I said, "There are ways for a man to escape his wife where no one is harmed." He was intrigued. I told him that I would help stage your kidnapping. I would be the kidnapper, of course, but we would forge ransom notes and exchange monies so that it appeared you were taken by brigands or plotters against the Iovelli family. If you recall, Gianfrancesco's second cousin had been ransomed by a family they had feuded with for hundreds of years. We already had a place to mislay blame. We were to ransom you, then we would fake your death, play as if the kidnappers had executed you.

'But what will happen to Lucia? Are we to kill her?'

'Of course not.' I said. 'We needn't murder Lucia. I will take her away and make her serve me as my wife. She can be of use to me yet.' I said.

'What if she does not agree? Could she reveal us, damage us amongst our peers? Are you certain that we should not kill her?' He asked.

'Murder is serious business, Gianfrancesco. Your family has not sullied itself by dabbling in it, at least not

from what I know, so now is not the time to begin. Besides, she will do no such thing. I will see to it as I will be appointed careful watch over her. You will be free to remarry, of course. I would suggest looking to the Hapsburger family for a young Princess, a family that has proven itself time and time again with powerful sons.'

You were to be kidnapped from the Manor in early July, but you took matters into your own hands in March. You could not have aided and assisted us more effectively by trying to drown yourself in the sea. We quickly drew up the documentation and made living arrangements for you and I. Gianfrancesco never suspected that I had my own reasons for wanting you for my wife. He was ready to seed his legacy, and you were a pawn to be moved out of the way."

Virtualventures

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THANKSGIVING

She padded softly up the old stairs, exhausted and elated. Cathy appeared in her bathrobe. Feigning an air of casualness, Lucy asked the obvious.

“Is Larry already in bed?” Cathy nodded yes.

“So, how’d it go?”

Lucy sighed. “Great, Cathy. He’s just . . . wonderful.”

Cathy hugged her. “Oh goody.” She said, rubbing Lucy’s back. “He’d better treat you right this time or I’ll pulverize him, you hear?” Lucy gave in to the hug.

“Okay.”

She was in the bedroom by eleven. It was an unspoken curfew in the Beck house on week nights. Shari entered the room in a damp towel, fresh from the shower.

“Hand me the Jergens lotion, will you? How’d it go with John?” She asked.

“It was great, Shari!” She replied the stars still in her eyes.

“So tell me what happened, all of it! I saw roses!” Shari exclaimed.

“Um, he took me to the Big Apple.”

“Very romantic.” Shari replied sarcastically.

“Diedermayer’s a kiss-ass.” Mike’s head butted in the door.

Shari squealed, clutching her towel around her.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in bed, pervert?”

“Yes sir.” He ducked out.

“Before you tell me the whole story,” she emphasized the penultimate word, “just let me do something for you. You can test it out on us this Thanksgiving Sunday. If you don’t like it, I won’t be mad, I promise.”

“You want to change my look, yes?” Lucy peered at her.

“Yeah,” Shari nodded enthusiastically.

“It is in your hands from now on, Shar. I am yours for the making over.” Lucy said.

Shari’s eyes widened, “You mean it?”

“I’m all yours, head to toe.”

Shari immediately commenced a strip search of her own closet, tossing on the bed a pair of tight jeans and an even tighter sweater. She then opened Lucy’s meager closet and plucked out a pair of heeled boots usually reserved for weddings and funerals.

“That’s what you’re going to wear.” She declared.

“You don’t waste any time.”

“You need help, Luce.” She said.

“Okay.” She replied weakly.

Thanksgiving Day morning, Shari woke Lucy a half an hour before the sounding of the alarm. “Do you mind if I tweeze your eyebrows?” Shari asked her.

“No, that’s fine.” Lucy sat patiently as she was improved. Shari proceeded to paint, brush, dust, slather, and blot Lucy’s face with makeup.

“Much better.” Shari remarked as she gestured to Lucy’s reflection in the mirror. Lucy looked at her reflection with a measure of awe.

“I look older.”

“Is that bad?” A shade of concern deepened on Shari’s face.

“No, it’s very good. I’ve always wanted to look older.” Lucy relied. She turned her head to each side. “Wow. My appearance is genuinely altered for the better. I feel beautiful.”

“You should have let me do this for you a long time ago. You look like a movie star.” Shari said.

“Thanks to you.”

John stopped by in his car to visit Lucy during the Beck’s Thanksgiving all-day dinner and football marathon. The house was full of aunts, uncles, and cousins meandering about, stuffed until their seams and zippers were bursting. Lucy had baked the apple and pumpkin pies, carefully molding the flour crusts and adding extra teaspoonfuls of allspice and cinnamon while no one looked. The house was redolent with the smells of cinnamon baking and the stuffed turkey and marinated pork roast. Cathy and Shari toiled over boiling pots of potatoes, candied sweet potatoes with orange rind, corn casserole, and almond green beans. Mike was already on dishwasher duty when John rang the doorbell. Mike answered the door while still toweling his hands dry.

“Hey, John.” Mike said as he opened the door.

“Hey, Mike.” John greeted him.

“Come on in. Hope you ate light before you got here.” Mike said. He turned. “Looooo-ceeeeee!!” He yelled, sounding like Desi Arnaz.

Cathy rushed out from the kitchen, all smiles, with Lucy behind her.

“John! Welcome! Happy Thanksgiving!” Cathy cried, ushering him deeper into the house.

“Mrs. Beck, it smells wonderful in here. Lucy? Come

on out.” John peered at her as she went to him.

“Hi John. I’m glad you could come. Happy Thanksgiving.” She said.

“Call me Cathy, John.” Cathy insisted.

After dessert was finished, John took Lucy for a ride in his car. The air was crisp and dry. The streets were deserted as they drove past familiar sites.

“I don’t think I’ve ever eaten that much in my entire life, Lucy, and that’s saying something. You guys don’t fool around, that was one big Thanksgiving dinner.” He said to her.

“It’s a nice holiday. We have so much to be thankful for.”

“Who cooked it all?” He asked.

“Larry buys the meat, makes the stuffing. Shari and Cathy make all the trimmings, the casseroles, vegetables, and potatoes. I made the pies.” She said.

“Those were good. I had two slices. Wow. You’re all such good cooks. I’ve never had a homemade Thanksgiving meal like that. We always go out to dinner on holidays. Twice we hired caterers. I never realized how fabulous all those homemade dishes were.” He said.

“The Beck family has the cooking gene. They’re all wonderful cooks. Even Mike can make a pretty tasty hamburger.” She said with love for them. “I’ll tell them how much you enjoyed dinner, it would give me great pleasure to tell them that.” She smiled at him broadly and kissed his cheek.

They chatted pleasantly as he drove around the neighborhood for a half an hour, then stopped by the Diedermyer house. She met his older brother and played another short violin recital, much to the delight of

John's immediate family.

As they kissed goodbye, she hoped that he felt the same reluctance to part. The idea of leaving for Mexico had become unbearable, as he was so easy to like and perhaps even easier to love. She dared not say the word aloud, not even to herself. Already she knew that she was overstaying her welcome. Ever since the young police officer had arrived on her doorstep the clock had started ticking faster. The fact that she stayed on and risked being discovered so foolishly was a testament to something, but what?

Lucy's new form elicited stares and comments from acquaintances before even walking through the doors of Lincoln High School. Her pat answer to all inquiries was, "I let my sister Shari make me over," while she kept from staring at her own reflection in the shiny shoes past her bare knees.

Groups of boys took to ogling her as she walked frenetically from class to class. Girls erupted in waves of whispering as soon as she passed them by. Even her own history teacher, Mr. DeSoto, seemed to notice her thoroughly. His glances were hard to disguise as he scanned her periodically during class. She had maintained a B in each subject except History, which she occasionally felt compelled to strive for A's in, considering she had lived through most of it.

Lucy sat in back of Jane Lenihan, who never spoke to her. Jane was a smoldering auburn-haired Irish beauty who seldom spoke to anyone. The elusive Jane tapped her on the shoulder after class.

"You look nice today, Lucy."

"Thank you, Jane. It means so much from one as

beautiful as you.” Jane was taken aback by Lucy’s weird candor.

“I’m not that beautiful.” She said.

“But you’re wrong.” Lucy replied.

“If you say so, Lucy. Are you doing okay in that shirt? You seem uncomfortable.”

“I can’t seem to get out of chairs without flashing my brassiere to the whole of Creation. My sister made me over, you know.”

Lucy made fast friends with Jane Lenihan that day. She spoke with many other high schoolers while reveling in her new popularity. She had not anticipated such a response from her classmates, but knew to be drawing them with her self-consciousness as if they were bees to pollen.

John did not see her until the last period. They shared one class, Advanced Geometry. He hugged her when he saw her in the hallway. His hug became an embrace. He stood back and held her shoulders.

“You look great, Lucy.”

“It’s Shari’s work. She made me over.” Lucy replied.

“Very sexy.” He said.

He walked her home. The day was sunny and pleasant, devoid of chill winds. “I remember when you walked me home. It was the day I borrowed a pencil; the day we first spoke to one another. Now I know that you don’t live as close to the Beck house as you once pretended.” She said to him as they walked past houses down the block.

He returned, “Lucy, you knew I didn’t live anywhere near you?”

“I was aware. You’re a piss-poor liar, John. It’s

endearing.”

“Tell me more.” His walk became a jovial saunter.

“You remind me of a little blue stone I had once.” She said, ignoring the absurdity of her own statement.

“Why? Do you think I’m a stoner?” He asked.

“No. I found a blue stone on the beach once. It was a precious thing, a beautiful cabochon—do you know what that is?”

“What’s a cabochon?”

“It’s a precious jewel that doesn’t have facets yet. I found it on the beach, just sitting there nestled inside a piece of driftwood. It was the size of my palm. It had a tiny flaw, most bizarre. A mosquito had been trapped inside and was perfectly preserved for thousands of years.”

She had found it on a gray beach along the shores of California in the year 1804. She had adored the stupid thing, and kept it in her pocket for about ten years. She remembered possessing it during the Gold Rush. At night she would turn it in her fingers like a rosary bead. Its smooth surface soothed her nerves. It seemed to encapsulate the mosquito like a little piece of moonlight, it was talismanic to her. She could have traded it for gold nuggets and lived like a queen for a few weeks, but she did not. One day it was gone. She had lost it. Perhaps it had been pick-pocketed or jostled from her dress in a hunt. She searched for it for many days that stretched into weeks before she gave up.

“So am I the jewel or the bug inside?” He smiled.

“Both.” She said wistfully.

MICHELLE'S STORY

The week at school was mostly uneventful save Michelle's enthusiasm and constant ploys for attention. Lucy had been ignoring her, not purposefully, but noticeably.

"When did you look up my mother's records at the Joliet library, Michelle?" Lucy asked, trying not to incriminate herself by sounding confrontational.

"Oh, that. I didn't go out of my way or anything." Lucy could tell that Michelle was lying by the way her pupils reacted, no longer following the sunlight.

"You could have told me about it, Michelle. I would have liked to know." Lucy blinked from the winter sunlight and reached behind herself to yank at her hood.

"I'm sorry. I love to research, not just for school. Your past is so much more interesting than most people! I never told you this, but I researched you in part just so I could tell John. I have always had a secret crush on him, to be honest with you. I'm not mad that he has eyes for you instead of me, not mad at all. But I wanted to find out more, partly so I could share it with him. I figured it would hurt your feelings if you knew I still talked to him, so I kept my mouth shut."

Lucy wanted badly to believe her. Michelle seemed so innocent and sweet. Perhaps she did love research for its own sake, she was certainly gifted enough.

"Have you told anybody else?" Lucy asked.

"I tell my Mom everything. Had to. She drove me."

Michelle said. Lucy tried not to make her cringe noticeable. Diane Vorsack was a disaster waiting for a place to happen, with a heartily established dislike for the Beck clan.

“I thought you weren’t getting along so well with your mother these days.”

“I’m not. It’s just hard to keep things from her. I get along with my Mom sometimes, Lucy. We’re closer than you think.”

“It is hard to be distant from your own mother.” Lucy reflected. “A girl needs her mother most exactly when she thinks she doesn’t.”

“My Mom complains that she’s tired all the time. Sometimes I think she’s tired of us.”

“You and your father?” Lucy asked.

“Yeah, but I have two brothers. Haven’t I ever told you about them?” Michelle asked.

“No, you didn’t. I spied a small picture of them in your house, though. Sorry to be so nosy. The tall, blond boys, right?”

“That’s them. Jordan and Josiah. They’re in grad school and they both live in New York. I never see them, they never even call. Both Jordan and Josiah stopped speaking to my Mom and Dad seven years ago! I don’t know why they couldn’t try and contact me.” Michelle said.

“Do you know why they are estranged?” Lucy asked.

“I don’t know. It has something to do with the fact that my Mom had them when she was only seventeen. She never even graduated high school, and that has been a thorn in her side ever since. She wanted to go to Cornell University to study Anthropology, that was her

dream. Getting pregnant in high school ended that dream for her. She married my Dad in a small ceremony down at City Hall. It was nothing like the big church wedding she wanted, but nothing could shame her greater than to have a child out of wedlock. So she married him. The twins were a hard delivery, a C-Section. So was I, in fact. My Mom's stomach has a lot of bad scars that make it look all ropy and weird. She's so embarrassed about it that she only wears one-piece swimsuits when she tans outside. She despises one-piece swimsuits, she calls them 'old hag bathing dresses' no matter how low-cut they are. All of us were fussy, colicky babies from what she tells me. Constantly sick with the croup or diaper rash. I still get sinus infections with fever all the time, she says it has been that way since I was a baby. Since she was only seventeen when she had them, she didn't deal with it very well. She used to lock Jordan and Josiah in the closet when they were toddlers. I guess they were bad all the time. She said there was no other way to get them to stop their constant screaming. I spent my fair share of time in the closet. Once I banged on the door so hard I split it in two. I was pretty strong for a four-year old! She was so mad that she spanked me with a belt until my butt was raw and bleeding. I couldn't sit down for a week!"

"Oh, how terrible for you. Why would your mother be so impatient?" Lucy speculated.

"She has always worked very long hours as a real estate agent. Basically, I was raised in daycare. When other kids got sick at school, they always had Moms who would rescue them within minutes. They got to go home and eat Campbell's Chicken Soup. I had to stay in school no matter how sick I was. My Mom and Dad were always

at work. How I envied those kids whose Moms picked them up when they got hurt or sick! I fainted in Gym Class when they made me climb the rope. I had nosebleeds that day and I got halfway up the rope before I fell off. Luckily, Mrs. Sorvelli caught me! In Fourth Grade, I broke my arm because I tripped on a metal doorway. Of course I tripped right when I went to school at seven in the morning, so I sat in the Nurse's office for six hours until my Dad got off work! It hurt, too, and they aren't allowed to give children painkillers. I was bawling so hard that the Nurse took pity on me and slipped me two Children's Tylenol. I finally got my own set of house keys when I turned eleven."

Lucy looked at Michelle sympathetically.

"My Mom never gets a good night's sleep. She says that everyone in the house makes too much noise, my Dad snores, and that when the house is empty, the traffic noise is nearly deafening. If you noticed, our house is fairly close to the road." Michelle said.

"Has she ever thought of buying a pair of foam earplugs?" Lucy asked. Michelle looked at Lucy knowingly.

"My Mom makes more money than my Dad, a lot more. Even if she has to work two jobs to do it. He's a salesman for AT and T, but he's never made a lot of money. He's a quiet person, and he says that quiet people should never become salesmen. My Mom inherited our house from our Grandma, otherwise they never could have afforded it, not even twenty years ago. They fight over money all of the time. The only thing they don't fight over is the addition. My Dad doesn't want it necessarily, but he realizes that if he doesn't give my

Mom this one it's divorce for sure. As for me, if they don't at least help a little with college I'm leaving and I'm never coming back. Sometimes I think I'll miss them and I start to cry, but I'm ready to have a life of my own. I'm sick of this town and I can't wait to get out. I've been waiting all my life to get out of this town."

Lucy considered the irony that Michelle had spent seventeen years waiting to escape the suburban existence she had always longed to live.

Virtualventures

A SEDUCTION, 1983

Christmas season came and went, and with it Christmas Break. Lucy was filled with happiness, it was her third Christmas at the Becks. Larry and Cathy always went to great lengths to make the holiday season very special, getting a real tree from American Sale every year even though it was an extravagance. She and John were able to see each other many times and spent long romantic winter afternoons together. Sadly, the Christmas break came to an end. They reluctantly went back to school the Thursday after New Year's Day.

"Guess who I'm going out with?" Michelle asked her one day at lunch.

"I don't know . . . Who is it?"

"Your brother Mike!" Michelle chirruped, sounding uncannily like her mother Diane.

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not kidding at all. He asked me out two days ago and I thought, hell, why not?" Michelle answered.

"It's just that he doesn't seem like your type." Lucy commented, dismayed.

"Yeah, I know. But he is kind of cute. He's got a past as dark as yours, did you know that?"

Lucy was aware of the many circles of Hell that Mike had passed through before getting lucky and being adopted by the Becks. They didn't talk about it much, but Mike had been through some eerily similar foster homes in Florida, the where he was born. The Becks as a

family didn't talk or ruminate over Mike's or Lucy's past much. They simply understood there was a greater need to get over the past than to talk about it. Mike had suffered severe depression in his first years with the Becks, but had grown to think of them as his natural family to the degree that his past seemed like a distant memory.

"Michelle, I cannot give you my blessing. I don't think you and Mike are right for each other. It's a mismatch."

"Give me your blessing? I didn't ask for it. It's not like we're getting married." Michelle said, tossing her glossy ponytail defiantly.

"I'm being honest with you. I give you the plain, unadulterated truth. Mike is a simple guy, but he'll see through any act of yours. He has a heart that is easily broken." Lucy replied.

"What a hypocrite you are. You lie about your past all the time and you know it. You can pull it over on everybody else, Lucy, but not on me." Michelle spat.

"Please, Michelle, let's not fight." Lucy said, already exhausted by her friend. "You can date whomever you wish. I just thought perhaps a different boy was in store for you. A boy like John's dashing friend David Mitchell, someone who shares your love of academics. As for my past, Michelle, and Michael's, it is a book of woeful chapters better left unread."

"How old-fashioned of you, Lucy. I think you're wrong. I have plenty in common with Mike." It was clear by Michelle's tone that she was unconvinced of her own truths. Michelle was sounding alarm bells everywhere in Lucy's brain, but Lucy felt the pull of a

greater inertia, the urge to stay put so strong that to deny it was to deny the existence of gravity.

Lucy went hunting on a Thursday night. She killed a man who was squatting outside of a freezing brick shanty on the southern edge of Chicago as he waited for his dealer. She used his own gun against him, a method that was occasionally cleaner than slitting throats when she got it right. His body had been maimed many times. She looked upon it with pity as she drank his diabetic blood and saw that several of his fingers were missing. The winters were bitter here, they could have just as easily been frozen off. She threw the bags of marijuana and a tiny bag of white powder he had in the sewer, unfortunately they were his only worldly possessions. Eating him while he was at the end of a heroin binge left her sleepy and dazed. When she came to school on Friday, she almost tripped twice going up the stairs. She felt her forehead repeatedly break out in a light sweat. John caught her in the hall around third period.

“Lucy, are you feeling all right?” He asked concernedly.

She answered weakly, “I’m fine, John. Perhaps I ate something spoiled for breakfast.” Or someone, she thought with disgust.

He kissed her cheek. “Feel better.” He said as they parted company. The effects of the heroin wore off slowly. John found Lucy after his Advanced Geometry class.

“Where were you?” He inquired, rubbing her shoulders.

“In the bathroom.” She answered. “Mr. Cahill gave me a hall pass.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

She could feel a parade of ants dotting her skin. She did not twitch.

“Just fine.” She smiled.

“My parents left for Vail on a plane this morning. Skiing trip.” The ants seemed to salute in attention.

“We can be alone?” She inquired.

“Yeah. Can you come over?”

“I think so.” She replied.

She was tempted to touch him in the car as they drove to the empty house, but she refrained for fear of causing a car accident. Once inside, he looked around, worried that his parents would suddenly cancel their trip and return home. His fears were allayed once he checked the answering machine to hear their analog voices reporting their arrival at the Colorado airport. He looked at her guiltily.

“Show me around your house, John. I didn’t see everything last time.” She instructed him.

“Okay.” He replied cheerfully.

“Well, you’ve seen the kitchen and the dining room, but did I show you the basement?” He asked.

“Just your Science room with the planes.” She replied.

“Come on.” He said. The subterranean level of the Diedermyer house was fully bedecked with every luxury known to mankind. Its cavernous expanses equaled the upstairs of the house. Lucy marveled at the billiards table and the sauna. “We’ll have to watch a movie down here.” There was a home theater with a screen that raised and lowered.

“Your house is so huge.” Lucy commented.

“My dad is into this stuff.” He rolled his eyes, trying

to conceal pride. “Want to see the upstairs?”

“Sure.”

The bedrooms of John’s house were the size of an entire floor at the Becks.

“My brother’s room when he comes home.” John gestured. A spacious suite of rooms down the hall John described as “my parents love den” with a grimace as Lucy smiled. It was she who felt guilty as he showed her their bedroom, smelling her perfume, ingesting their psychic leftovers.

“Let’s go.” She said.

His room was last at the end of one winding corner. He had deliberately saved it for last. He had a blue overstuffed couch, his own television, even a computer with its own desk.

“Want to see the computer?” He asked eagerly.

“Yes, but maybe later.” She replied gently. “Can we watch television?” She asked.

“Um, okay.” He replied. In each pause she could sense his growing trepidation. She decided not to ask him outright if he wished to make love to her. It would be too mortifying.

She propped a pillow against his padded headboard and sat herself into a stiff upright position, legs expertly crossed. She had worn a long skirt that morning, and a roomier sweater that was slightly easier to handle than Shari’s low cut numbers. He picked up the remote and sat himself to her right. He flipped the television on.

“Stop me if there is anything you want to watch.” She stopped him at a Bill Cosby HBO special. He needed to laugh, but only she laughed as he chuckled weakly. He was almost paralyzed with nervousness and desire. She

picked up the remote, usurping it of its dividing status between their bodies. She turned the television off. He looked at her, his eyes filled with excited terror and astonishment at her move.

She uncrossed her legs and lowered herself, carefully and slowly, until she lay supine. She closed her eyes as if asleep, her hands folded neatly on her abdomen. She felt the bedsprings coil as he moved from his seated position, entranced. He touched her breast as if he was testing the waters of a cold lake. Her back arched slightly in response. She kept her eyes closed. He kissed her lightly on the lips. She opened her eyes. He lowered himself on to her. He rested on one elbow.

“You’re so unbelievably beautiful, Lucy.” He looked into her pale blue eyes. Her body rose up to meet his in a cat-like stretch and she smiled.

He embraced her fully. She kissed his neck and licked him there. The taste of his sweat was intoxicating, like sweet brandy, like blood. His hands reached under her skirt. She helped him take it off. Her small round breasts were vulnerable under her mostly nonfunctional Kmart bikini bra. He unhooked it from the front clasp. It slid off flimsily. He stared at her breasts while he touched them. She pulled him by his tee shirt, pulling his mouth to her nipple. He moaned in excitement as his lips wrapped around the peak of her right breast. “In all fairness,” she thought to herself as she coaxed his mouth toward her left nipple. She pulled at his tee shirt again, wishing to feel his naked chest upon hers. Agreeably he helped her take the shirt off. Delight surged through her as her breasts, shoulders, and belly touched his naked flesh all at once. It had been a very long time.

Her skirt had ridden almost to her hips. He was still thickly clad in jeans. She let him take off her skirt as she ritualistically removed his jeans along with his boxers. She could tell it was new territory for him and he might lose the nerve to take them off himself, without the aid of drink. She touched his erect penis and delicately curled her fingers around it, moving her hand back and forth slowly and gently.

His eyes were closed. He suckled at her shoulder blade as he slid her panties down. She shook them off of one foot. He was very aware of her placing his penis between her legs. As he felt the threshold of soft wetness he froze and said,

“Lucy, are you sure?”

She whispered, “Yes,” and guided the top of his penis into her vagina. He thrust into her slowly at first, astonished at the natural amount of resistance and unexpected friction which nearly drove him to come instantaneously. Only after he had pushed himself completely inside was the friction lessened. She moaned as he buried himself completely to the hilt. His slightest move caused her infinite pleasure. She felt his whole mind sounding in ecstasy. He raised her to a sitting position. She could see that he was curious, so she sat upon him and they rocked back and forth.

He slid out of her. She climbed on top of him and straddled him, reinserting his penis inside her. He went more easily this time. She rode him gently. He grew even harder. Her orgasm began as an insistent throb. She looked at him as he thrust deeply, his face contorted with pleasure as he watched her riding him. She came with such force that she feared he might be pushed out from

the contractions, which did not happen. He watched her orgasm come to life and he could hold back no longer. He pulsed and thrust as he released himself into her body.

She brought her face to his chest, turning her head sideways so he would not notice her elongated canines.

“I’m still inside you.” He said, his voice tinged with worry. “What if you get pregnant?” His worry came to a quick fruition.

“Not possible.” She whispered.

“What?” He replied. “How so?”

“I should have shared these things with you earlier, my sweet heart. I’m sorry.” He receded from her. She rolled to one side.

“I’ll get a towel.” He sprang to action. She admired his backside as he fetched a blue towel from his bathroom.

“You should probably wash all of that stuff off of yourself.” She said.

“I’m covered.” He said.

He returned, blue towel in hand. She was nestled under his bedspread. She wedged the towel between her legs. He smiled.

“You’re so cute.” He said. She lifted the sheet and gestured for him to join her. He crawled underneath the covers with her. She took a deep breath. He rolled on top of her, pinning her with his arms and forming a tented cage.

“What’s going on with you?” John asked inquisitively, looking down at her abdomen.

“Yes. When I was younger, I was very sick with a deadly flu. I almost died from this flu. The flu attacked my reproductive organs and caused me to expel my

female parts. My uterus and my ovaries are gone.”

“That’s horrible!” He gasped.

She had omitted that the flu had been called the Black Death and that it was a dead child that had been inside that womb, so many hundreds of years ago.

“Oh Christ! How old were you?”

“Just—well, I was young.”

“Were you sexually abused? Was it a miscarriage?”

“No.” She said. “Shit happens, John.”

“Did it hurt when we did it?” His voice rose, inflamed with worry. It melted her heart.

“Did it seem like I was in pain to you?” She smirked.

“How could it not have hurt?” His analytical side started putting in overtime. She sensed a pelvic exam coming on. She took the initiative and guided his fingers inside her and bore down.

“That is where my cervix should be.”

He could feel a small bump where he knew a cavity of smooth flesh should reside. The bump was coarse and didn’t feel right. His subconscious sensed the unnaturalness of it and recoiled. His mind was filled briefly with psychic images of a charnel house that danced like a spider in his head. She saw his eyes glaze over.

“So it’s like you’re a dead end?” He asked innocently.

“Exactly.” She replied.

A CITY IN GREECE, 589 B.C.

She ran away after she had divined that Gianfrancesco had remarried. Sebastian had known it was coming, but he could not avoid sleeping as easily as she could. She had fled back to Florence quite intent on slitting the new bride's throat. Murder had become nothing to her. She had already killed more than she wanted to count, yet she had counted them still. When she arrived at the Palazzo, not a single sentry was aware of her presence. She stared down at them from a high window, peering down at their moonlit faces in the bed heavy with furs, the same bed where she had given birth to Gianfrancesco's dead son.

His new wife's face was sweet and angelic with hair the color of flax, her belly already visibly large beneath a roe skin pelt. He was snoring stupidly. She watched them sleep for what seemed hours from the high window until her body grew colder than the stone sill she perched upon. As she sat the bride actually woke up, sat up, and looked frightfully around the room.

"She's sensitive soul, far too sensitive to be married to an ass like Gianfrancesco." Lucy coolly marveled as she studied the girl's face, belly swollen from pregnancy. She was radiant. Lucy's guts ached with jealousy and bitterness, building in a knot that twisted in her stomach, rag-like. Yet she could not bring herself to hate the girl, or even Gianfrancesco, the one who would have sent her to her death more than once. It would have been better had he succeeded in murdering her, she thought.

Succeeded where she had not. She left them and went back to Sebastian, never uttering a word about her visit. But he knew.

Sebastian taught Lucy how to read and write in all the languages, two skills that she would find indispensable for dealing with the boredom over the centuries. He taught her about crowds, which men were the vilest, how to locate and dispose society's garbage.

"See that man?" Sebastian would tap her on the shoulder on a crowded alleyway and say, "See how he lingers too long when he touches that little child? The glow in his eyes? That is lustful intent, my dear." There was never any shortage of bad men to eat, especially with pestilence and superstition to cover their tracks. Sebastian was a marvelous investigator, a fiery intellect, and a great seducer of both men and women. He had studied alchemy and astronomy, was a capable painter, and even wrote music. The lonely widows of robber barons found him irresistible and he was the guest of many a fine table. Priests and princes sought his knowledge of languages and philosophy and wantonly tried to throw themselves into his bed. He was an old, skilled vampire.

Lucy thought of herself as belonging to Sebastian whether she liked it or not. She loved for him to regale her with the stories of his past, the days of ancient Greece. More often than not he refused to reveal specifics of his own past in Greece and Rome, choosing to relate fables and stories of an impersonal nature. Occasionally he revealed tidbits about his past after a good kill.

"The city of Athens was more glorious than any city

ever before it and no city has ever rivaled it since. You could walk the city streets and with every blink you could take in a new sight of beauty so great that your heart would weep for it. Even the light was different in Athens, soft and golden, sweet as the morning dew blessed by Athena herself. People were not slaves to their gods as they are now, oppressed and unhappy, chained to their mortality and suffering so that they may one day enter an imaginary Heaven.

Athens was heaven on earth, and those who inhabited it knew it was so, and savored it. Knowledge was sacred in Athens, knowledge and his twin, Art. All who lived there aspired to be something greater, all who lived there had hope, even the slaves! Oh, Lucia, if you could have seen the Parthenon, or attended the plays at the Athaneum, you would know why I loved it there. Intelligence was the currency in Athens, and anyone who displayed great knowledge ascended to the top, no matter what his former circumstances.

The highest form of knowledge was magic: the priesthood. I had already won wars and sailed ships to distant lands by the time I was thirty. I proved myself early as an athlete, skills I retained long after my return home. I acted in plays, I studied philosophy, mathematics, and science. You realize that all science originated from Greece, Lucy? The last skill I sought was to become a master of magic. I wished to control the weather, to possess infinite wealth, and to understand the substances of the earth. But most of all, I wanted to love. I wanted the magic of love.

She came to me in a dream. I had dreamt of the olive grove beyond the courtyard I had once been fascinated

with as a boy. I had not seen the courtyard in many years and I was happy to dream of those times. The trees were graceful and brown, arching and fanning their golden leaves as if to shower with coins the pink-gold sky.

Beyond was an avenue of tall poplars that rose like columns, disappearing into undulating hills that were black with sleeping houses and fertile soil. The air was sweet with the smoky perfume of myrrh, hazy and dense with incense. That is I saw her. She danced with two others. They were the three most beautiful women I had ever seen. Their soft, voluptuous bodies wove among each other to the faint notes of a lyre. Each was draped in transparent silk, dancing, beckoning to me, teasing me. But one was clearly the goddess among them, her face hidden, her body seeming to call out to me to possess it at once.

When I awoke I followed my instinct to Athena's temple. She was the High Priestess. To even presume a lustful thought about her was to ask for one's own death. Her favor was sought beyond all women's favors. She was beauty, the key of magic, the teacher of spells, the predictor of wars, and the gate of the future. Contests were held every year, the type of which depended on her caprice. To win the contest meant you would be chosen to apprentice in magic as a priest under her tutelage. To lose was death, quickly and mercilessly delivered. If she wanted men to battle beasts in combat, a festival arose for them to battle for her. She pitted aspirants against each other in any way imaginable, with tests of science, math, and sometimes will alone. Very few survived her trials. I was one of the few.

I drew upon every skill I had ever learned in battle in

her tournaments. I fought ten lions at once. I was given no sword and shield and forced into the ring with a dozen armored warriors with full weaponry. I barely prevailed sometimes, but in the end, my wits were faster than their steel. I was forced to lay on a bed of nails for three days. If you can imagine it, I survived it. My will never faltered. It was my destiny to have her.

I saw her face and it was the face that had been hidden from me in dreams, a face very much like yours, Lucia. It was a face that matched her body, so pure and beautiful that any man would have killed for her. I loved her so much. Much to my amazement, as soon as I was in her presence I forgot about my magic and thought only of love. What a fool I was to separate the two in my mind.”

“Is she the one who made you into a vampire?”

“Yes. Her name was Rhea.”

virtualventures

MEETING MARTIN CHEN

She tried out for the Lincoln High orchestra on a whim. Michelle had begged her to do it. Lucy auditioned on a borrowed violin. She was practicing with them on that very day, and displaced a rather mediocre boy violinist who claimed “to be better at the viola anyway” as first chair. The program was to include a Bach cantata, her favorite piece from Rimsky-Korsakov’s Scheherazade, and for the first time ever, a student composition, a Concerto, by a precociously talented fellow student named Martin Chen. Lucy loved orchestras, the bittersweet tinge of rosin dust that hung in the air, the way that the sun shone through filthy windows illuminating the marimbas with a storybook light.

Lucy stood in front of the piano. Mr. Brown gave four counts and she delivered her first a cappella violin solo.

“Do you see what I was talking about, Strings?” No one is going to want to hear a note from you until you have tone like . . . what’s your name again?” He asked. She replied softly.

“Lucy Albert, sir.”

“Say that again, Lucy, so that the rest of them hear it.”

“Lucy Albert, sir.” She barked.

The class laughed, a few putting their hands to their foreheads in a military salute to mock her. Lucy stood relieved that she had not messed up the solo. She was too wrapped up in the sheer joy of playing again; it had

been intimate, masturbatory. Her senses were prickled when she felt a new pair of eyes upon her.

By the intense look of him, she guessed that she had just encountered for the first time the boy genius Martin Chen. It was his tall stance and his pale skin that drew him out of the crowd. He looked just as Julian had the night she had first met him outside the Joliet Laundromat. His hair flew out from the sides of his head like black bats from a belfry, it was unruly and long. She was instinctively aware of him as she had been of Julian. It did not take a mind reader to glean that she had suddenly gained the boy's obsessive attention. She mentally resolved to do her best to avoid personal encounters with him in that instant.

Within a single week, Lucy's popularity soared, mostly because of her now publicly acknowledged relationship with John Diedermyer. She could not help but admit that she liked being smiled at and addressed in the hallways by hordes of friendly faces. The comments on the makeover lessened but were replaced by long admiring glances by boys who had never before given her the time of day. It felt wonderful and golden to bask in the sunlight of their approval, even if their approval was fickle and dangerous. Fame of any sort was folly and she knew better. She had been warned time and time again by Sebastian that fame would mean the end of her freedom, being hounded in to the next lifetime by vampire and power seekers.

John was ecstatic to hear that she had made the coveted first chair position in Orchestra. He had not joined Orchestra in favor of Basketball.

“Even Katy Pfister can't touch you now.” Michelle

remarked with admiration as they walked out of the school together. Lucy sighed, finding it odd to switch roles as she had over the past weeks. “I’ve heard some even more entertaining news from the Orchestra grapevine too. You’re never going to believe this, by the way.” Michelle squinted conspiratorially.

“Believe what, Michelle?” Lucy asked.

“Don’t tell anyone I told you this.” Michelle spoke solemnly, “but Martin Chen thinks you are very, very hot. You know Martin, right? He’s that beautiful half-Chinese boy that skipped a grade and has an I.Q. of like, one seventy-five or something?”

She looked at Michelle with worry. “But why now? Don’t boys know that I am involved with John right now?”

“That’s not the way it works, Lucy. You get one, you get them all. It’s exactly how it went down with me and Josh Durbin. Then Mike came along.” Michelle adjusted her heavy pack.

“What is going on between you two?” Lucy asked.

“We’ve made out but we haven’t had sex. I think we will soon, though.” Michelle smiled at Lucy.

“Well, make sure you use something.” Lucy said.

“Is that all you have to say?” Michelle challenged her.

“Tell me more about this Martin Chen.” Lucy implored.

“Well, he’s really smart. A lot of girls have had it in for him but he must be picky or something because he didn’t go to Junior Prom even though I know he got asked. His Dad is an electrical engineer at the same place as my dad works and his mom used to be a model, I’m not kidding. I know of a couple of times where he has

traveled to China or something for music competitions and I believe he won a couple. He's a catch, Lucy. It's too bad that you can't date two guys at once."

"Not worth the trouble." She replied.

"How would you know?" Michelle's interest was piqued.

"I wouldn't. I just suppose it isn't worth the trouble." She said.

Martin managed to catch her after class the next day. She always dawdled, so it was easy.

"Lucy." She looked around for the voice around the Orchestra room, fumbling around with her books. He walked in her direction.

"That's Um . . . Hey." He stuttered.

She looked at him confusedly, his black hair glinting under the dim lights. He was Julian five years younger, the spitting image.

"You did a great job on my concerto today." She could practically hear the self-deprecating thoughts racing across his mind, the failed hours of rehearsed lines. She tried not to blush.

"Thank you, Martin," she replied graciously.

"Who's your violin teacher?" He asked.

"I'm mostly self-taught." Her answer was terse.

"Sorry to be so terribly rude, Martin. I've got to run to get to my Study Hall. If I'm late again I'll have to serve another detention!" She excused herself, hoping it was not too obvious she was running away. She could read that Martin had a crush on her and was perhaps even going to try and challenge John as he was the bold sort. She hoped to turn him off with the mention of Study Halls and detentions, as there were no such animals in

Martin's world of high pressure academics. It was rumored that was one of the children who didn't even take a Lunch period, his schedule was so overloaded. She saw how overworked he was. His shadowy eyes revealed two things: that he was oversensitive in his extreme intelligence and that he suffered an acute insomnia. She guessed that he probably slept all of three hours a night at most. It gave him plenty of time to obsess over his random crushes, which worried her. She was gathering quite a crowd in her newfound popularity, and the phenomenon was so apparent she could almost form her own harem of young boys.

"Just like old times," she thought sardonically.

Virtualventures

SEBASTIAN TAKES A LOVER

Sebastian had brought the first one home around 1503. At first she thought that the woman was just a servant. All houses of means had not only a maid but usually a whole staff of servants. They had always gone without because of their secret lifestyle. But the first one was brought home, and it was the beginning of the end.

They had been married for well over one hundred years. They had moved from the castle Herculis when people had finally started repopulating the surrounding town in 1425. They had shared almost seventy five wonderful years there in nearly utter seclusion before it came time to move on. They traveled to distant places, had an apartment in Constantinople and a villa in Paris.

When they started getting on each other's nerves, she blamed herself at first. Slowly and ruefully she realized why marriage was so idealized among her generations of those before her. Because their human lives were so short, the happily married had no time to get sick of one another.

Sebastian began to maintain a harem. Women and men had always flocked to him, covetous of his knowledge, his riches, and if all else failed, his carnal expertise. In beginning of their marriage Sebastian had maintained a strict monogamy, never upsetting the matrimonial routine. Now he courted with "servants" which he often killed afterward. He never felt any need to explain himself. When at first she had realized that he

had conducted a sexual affair with a local well-known Florentine courtesan she called him out, accusing him of exposing her to an array of diseases.

“As I have explained many a time, Lucia, the maladies of the blood and flesh do not afflict us. She may have any number of wasting diseases, but they cannot survive in our bodies.” He would follow with a long discourse on biology, uninvited.

They could no longer stay in one place. Instead, they lived a Bohemian existence, moving from patron to patron, city to city. She complained of the crowded cities, dismayed that the people were repopulating them like rabbits. She had come to despise those who were fertile out of pure jealousy, but could not admit it to herself. The houses they flitted to and from were glutted with hangers-on, servant/mistresses, and errant prostitutes. He encouraged her to join him in his debauchery. He would pick a random member of the ever-shifting household for the sake of example.

“Take Giacomo for a lover, Lucia. He wants you so, he is still a virgin. He reminds me of a slave I once had in Rome with those sullen dark eyes and that wistful pout. He only stays here for you, hoping in vain. You can enjoy him and then drink him up. Such a beautiful boy he is, but his intelligence is marginal.”

She glared at Sebastian over the drawing table where she was sketching in chalk, then over at the fifteen year old boy who was asleep in a disheveled pile of rushes in the corner. But she no longer felt Giacomo’s age, even if she looked it. She felt like a dried-up old woman. When she finally did take her own lover, it was not with a member of the household staff.

She romanced a dark-haired farmer a few times, having long since forgotten his name. The farmer was a widow who was slightly famous around town for his prize cows and slightly more famous for his good looks. She would often steal away to tryst with him in the orchard, even now she felt her loins grow warm with the memory of his ardor. The farmer had become obsessed with her and asked her to marry. Sebastian became furious and would have killed the man had he not been drafted into battle within the week. She never knew what became of her farmer after that.

Sebastian's land holdings were enormous, reaching across the Alps. Their houses became a refuge of ill repute, the source of rumor and intrigue in the highest echelons of society. The Church refrained from investigation only because so many of its high-standing members were among the most frequent guests, and because of a heady dose of Sebastian's influence.

She came to befriend the female mistresses, some who were even so audacious as to bring their children into the house. She came to spend hours with the bastard children that the women brought, dressing and feeding the tiny ones, inventing games for the older ones. She grew attached to a pair of twins, a boy named Fritz and a girl named Anna, belonging to an auburn-haired Viennese prostitute named Clotilde. Sebastian took the prostitute and others into his bed, having rediscovered the joy of orgy, she would often not see him for several days at a time.

She tended the twins while the Clotilde was in Sebastian's private chambers, a place she gave a wide berth. When the twins had first come to live in the

house, they were thin and bony, their tiny mouths crying for food. Clotilde's stunning green eyes were reflected in the gazes of the tender young children, but their faces had been hollow and sunken, their hair matted, and their clothing in bad need of repair. For a time they were very difficult. Soon they came to treat Lucy almost as mother, pulling hard at her brown curls and laughing delightedly as they sprang back into their spiral shape. She came to adore them. She loved to dress the Fritz and Anna in outfits that she stitched from discarded velvet dresses. She hunted the markets for bread and treats so they could feast during the day. Soon, they fattened up, their cheeks rosy and their hair shining. Neither their mother nor Sebastian noticed, as certain members of the house had taken to avoiding each other.

Nevertheless, one day Sebastian looked at her and said, "Your smile today is delightful, my Lucia. You're a far cry from your usual gloomy self these days." She found herself trying to remember all the old tunes her mother had taught her, as they were bright as little stars. Fritz sang for her sometimes, for Fritz could sing even before he was able to form words. Anna made things for her. She came to her one day and pulled on her apron.

"Here, dis is for you."

Anna handed her a bracelet she had made out of string and macaroni. Lucy wore it every day from then on.

After the twins were past the toddling age, Clotilde finally caught on when the children cleaved to Lucia's breast when it was time to leave for a fortnight abroad.

"Just leave them with me for now, Clotilde. They will be safe. They are used to me, they only cry because they have become so used to being here."

Clotilde was no fool. It was clear by the look on her face that she decided to leave the house immediately.

“How dare you? You are trying to kidnap my babies!” Clotilde demanded.

“Who do you think cares for your children as you dally with my husband, Clotilde?” Lucy asked.

“No one asks you to care for them. This is your choice. And it is your own fault that your husband dallies with me.” Lucy had not touched Sebastian or made love to him in years. “He says you are frigid, Madame.”

Lucy became livid with rage. The prostitute’s attack was predictable, typical. A creature of convenience, she could have cared less if her children were carried away by drunkards on the street. Clotilde announced that she would not be back and she was taking Fritz and Anna forever. Lucy felt her heart splinter in her breast. Fritz and Anna had been her wards for over two years! Sebastian stood in the corner, laughing silently at the fighting women.

“Please, stay a while longer.” Lucy begged. “I can teach them so many things! Music, Latin, mathematics! Please do not take my Anna and Fritz away!” It was of no use. Clotilde pried Fritz from Lucy’s left leg where he was clinging. Anna was more difficult. Sebastian howled with laughter, doubling over. Clotilde flew into a rage, crying,

“How dare you lay claim to my children! I am their mother! This is a Godless house!” She accused.

Sebastian snorted, “If it isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black!”

“Your house is host to the lowest forms of life, those without morals! I will no longer allow my children to live

in such a house. And the rumors! You two are fiends, ghouls, murdering wolves!”

“You don’t care about Fritz and Anna! You only care for yourself!” Lucy screamed, her words falling on deaf ears. Little Anna screamed and thrashed as she was torn from Lucy’s skirts. Fritz flailed against his mother wildly, crying generous tears. Clotilde rushed out of the house, carrying her boy and tugging her girl by the ear. Lucy collapsed to the floor in a sob. Sebastian drew over to her and lifted her chin from her chest. She kicked him in the shin, trying to knock him off his feet. He grabbed her hair viciously and whispered loudly into her tear-streaked face.

“There, there, now. Your pets are gone. Sniveling brats, little fatherless bastards, you should breathe a sigh of relief. A lesson learned. Good riddance.”

She spat in his face.

“Go from me, husband!” With a flourish he brought her arms behind her and her body was slammed to the floor.

“So you still think of me as husband, even though we have long since tired of each other. Well, my dear, it is time you stopped wallowing in your sorrows like a common wretch. There will be no more children in this house, not ever! And if anyone ever tries bringing children into our house again, I shall kill the lot of them.”

Tears flowed down her face.

“But Sebastian! I need them!”

He smiled, not a smile of comfort, but a smile of terrible menace. She felt her heartbeat accelerate until it was pounding her chest.

His hand fell lightly to her chest where her heart was

beating, almost tenderly. She lay very still and closed her eyes, hear tears gliding off of her ears, causing them to itch. His fingers slipped under the collar of her linen shift and he tore it open with a swipe.

“Now I’ll have what I want from you, wife.” He said cruelly as she gazed at him in fear.

He took her there on the cold, dirty floor, his nails digging into her back, his teeth sinking into her breasts. She fought him at first, screaming at him, but he did not relent. She gave up as he finished, spending himself in her mouth.

Sated, he rolled off her body and retired to his quarters. She did not have to investigate that his door was locked.

Later that night, after she had cleaned herself and changed her clothes, he returned. His eyes were bright with the hunt.

“I have a special surprise for you, Lucia.” He brought out the twins. She screamed as she saw that their throats had been ripped out and their dead eyes bulged with horror as their heads lolled from mere strings of sinew and flesh.

“I ate their mother first. Look what you have brought upon your pets. But death is better for them, since they’re orphans now!” He screamed.

She brought her hands up to her head and ripped out two long chunks of her hair, pulling out shreds of scalp. She clasped her hands over her mouth in a silent scream.

“No! No no no no no no no!” She ran towards them, her arms outstretched, but he blocked her.

“Leave them!” He yelled. She backed away from him.

“What have you done?”

“It is your own fault, Lucia. They are not your children, they never were. But they were old enough to start remembering you as mother, and we cannot have that. We must always move on. They may love us, but they love us as the slave loves his captor, not as equals. They are our food, Lucia, nothing more.”

She had no way of retaliating, so she made a decision. She stopped eating. When it came time to eat once again, she hid out on the beach, a remote fastness beyond the city walls, a swampy morass that everyone avoided. She had never fasted before as a vampire, and a horrible twisting pain emerged in her gut, shaking her legs with muscle cramps. Her head ached with a hollow pain. She crouched beneath a stump, her extremities twitching as the sun set orange and blue beyond the lace of iron-black trees. The last thing that she remembered was her eyes crossing as she tried to focus upon the crunch of leaves as she lay heaving upon them, dampening them further with the outpouring of her sweat as it leaked from her clothing.

She awoke and found herself home amid a pile of three bodies, one of which she recognized as a former denizen of the household. There was a man, a boy, and a woman. She had eaten them. Their faces had bite marks that were hers. Their faces were masks of abject horror, sunken and shriveled, their cheekbones protruding. Sebastian crouched on the floor with a single dead victim, a young highwayman.

“My dear, you have learned the hard way what happens when you do not eat. You should have known better, you cannot die, so your body and your instinct will

take over as your mind departs. When I found you, you were almost completely insane. Today you shall promise me that you will pull no more of these stunts. I have had enough of your hysterical behavior. You will stop at once.”

She was cowed by the three dead faces that seemed to scream at her to restore order by any means possible, even if it meant forgetting the children of the whore and all the events that had led to her unfortunate situation. They left the castle that day for another, packing with them the leftovers of the troupe that followed them from place to place, never asking about the occasional disappearance of one of its unlucky members.

Virtualventures

REVELATION IN THE CORNFIELD

“This is my favorite thing.” John traced his finger over the meeting point of her breast and her ribcage as they lay naked on his unmade bed. She nuzzled his chest and he breathed deeply of the scent of her Finesse conditioner. She wrapped a leg around him. He had been hard since they had taken their clothes off. Watching her strip had been delicious for him, and a part of him enjoyed her self-consciousness acutely.

He initiated sex with her, lightly fingering her clitoris as an invitation. He drove it into her missionary style, and though he was worried about hurting her, he could not stop himself from thrusting into her deeply. She writhed in ecstasy as she wrapped her legs around his waist, then raised her knees to his shoulders. She gripped his buttocks as she climaxed. She licked his neck, which put him over the top. He gripped one of her pert nipples with his fingers as he came inside her. It was explosive and gratifying.

Sorrow lay in the back of his mind as he withdrew, but he put it aside. It felt too good. He could think about it later.

“Did you come?” He asked with concern, holding his penis. She was nearly too giddy still to answer him.

“Yes I did.” She turned herself to one side and propped her head in her hand.

They showered together. It was a unique experience for her to wash him. He seemed so clean anyway, his fair

skin, his light brown hair, there almost seemed to be no point. His head bent down, intent on kissing her underneath the showerhead. Water poured into her eyes, nose, and mouth in a torrent from which she had to turn and wheeze. It made her laugh, which in turn made him laugh. He turned the water off and handed her a towel.

She felt the need to get dressed, sensing that his parents would be home soon.

“John, we should be getting out of here.”

“You mean you’re going to run away with me?” He asked in semi-seriousness.

“No, I mean that we should assemble ourselves in case your parents arrive home.”

“God, Lucy, you’re always so serious! I was only joking!” She pulled her underwear on and fiddled with the legs of her tight jeans.

“I’d run away with you in a heartbeat.” She said, searching for her brassiere under his bed.

“I’ve got it.” He found her bra beneath his pillow and handed it to her.

“Maybe we could swing a scholarship to Boston College for you, you know, with your violin and all. I’ve already been accepted to a couple of schools out east. We could go to University together.” He said happily. Her head rose. She looked at him mournfully.

“What, you don’t think that you can afford it? Lucy, with your musical talent, you’ll get a full ride.”

“There is so much I have not told you, John.” She said quietly.

His eyebrows arched, knotting in the middle.

“Like what, Lucy?” She saw the panic threaten to overtake him.

“Please, get dressed.” She implored him. He pulled on his pants, his yellow shirt with the ridiculous horse logo, his brown socks, and shoes. He donned his winter coat. She threw him his car keys.

“I love you, you know.” He said to her with as much casualness as he could muster.

“As I love you.” She solemnly replied.

They did not speak until he had driven past town limits and were on the highway.

“I’m not going to college, John.” He did not look at her. He was angry.

“Who the hell are you, Lucy?”

“Promise me you will never tell anyone.”

“What?” He asked, confused.

“Promise.”

“Okay.” He replied.

“I’m a vampire.”

He glanced over at her cockeyed, and then returned his gaze to the road. A silence ensued.

“I truly am a vampire, John.” She said.

“Lucy, this isn’t funny anymore. Stop it.”

“Please get off at the next exit.” She commanded.

“Why?” He inquired.

“Just do it.”

“All right.” He frowned.

They turned off at Glen Grove, a sleepy town of less than two hundred. She directed him to an old part of the highway, a featureless stretch of old farmhouses capped in snow, with the occasional working silo. White was scattered across the long stretches of pine trees and corn fields.

“What do you want to go out here for, Lucy?” He

asked.

“I want to show you something. Pull over there.” She gestured to an abandoned farmhouse down a long stretch of icy dirt road. Huge trees obscured the view of it.

Nervously he pulled alongside the dilapidated once-white farmhouse. The sun was setting, casting long dreary shadows across deformed apple trees. The stretch of red dirt disappeared into a stretch of trees like Van Gogh’s painting.

“Get out of the car.” She demanded. He looked at her, hurt. He stood outside of the car, bewildered, as she walked up to the BMW’s front bumper. She proceeded to lift the front end of the car five feet from the ground with one hand. He stood transfixed. She gently placed the car back upon the ground. It creaked slightly.

“Do you believe me now?” She asked.

“So you are extremely strong. Sometimes when adrenaline rushes through a body . . .”

She spotted a beer bottle and picked it up from the ground.

“What are you doing?” He cried. She held it by the neck and broke the end of the bottle on the hard dirt.

“Stop!” He ran towards her. She pushed him gently on the chest. He fell backwards on his butt, the wind knocked out of him. She dragged the broken bottle across her carotid artery, creating an inch-deep gash upon her throat. He yelled but he had no breath to support his own voice. She saw his lips yell, “Stop.”

She came closer. The wound lay open for five seconds, and then closed neatly as if it had been stitched by invisible hands.

John stared palely. He was speechless. She stood

there, broken bottle still in hand. Blackness was beginning to consume the cornfield. He shuddered.

“I’m not going to kill you, John.” She said and began to pace the hard dirt. “I just wanted you to see that the time will come when I must leave you, and the time is coming soon.”

“Do you drink blood?” He stood up.

“Yes.” She replied.

“Do you want some of mine?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead.” He dared, his nostrils flaring.

“That’s not . . . Oh, John. When I drink blood, I . . . I just don’t know where to start. I’m six hundred and forty-eight years old, John! I should have never seduced a young boy, let alone expected him to keep my secrets for me. This whole affair is truly my fault.”

“Who seduced whom?” He asked impetuously.

She shook her head, almost breaking a smile. “I don’t know, John. But it is my fault.”

He ruminated for a minute.

“Why can’t you tell people that you are what you are? Why all the secrecy?”

She looked beyond the farmhouse. The sun was all but gone now, the horizon a deep shade of purple.

“I’d never have a day of peace again, John. I would be chased by every curious party on this planet, by vampire-seekers, by witch-hunters, by researchers, you name it.” She said.

“Oh.” He uttered thoughtfully. “Are there others like you?”

“Yes.”

“Where?” He asked.

“Some in Europe, a few down south, none here. Maybe others that I do not know about.”

“Lucy, my disbelief remains in suspension. Those were great tricks that you pulled with the car and the glass, but why shouldn’t I believe that this has all been an elaborate hoax?” He asked.

She walked back to the car. He followed. “I don’t know how to prove myself to you, John. I should have gotten out of here months ago!” She opened the passenger side and reclined in the bucket seat. He entered the driver’s side, not inserting the keys in the ignition.

“But where are you going? Lucy, you’re safe here. I’ll protect you!” He cried.

“You are so inherently gallant, John, so pure of heart. You are my Sir Galahad, so faithful and true that it is a wonder you exist. I knew that even with your scientific mind, you believe! I knew you would believe! I will likely flee south to Louisiana and make my passage into Mexico. From there I plan to travel until I reach Columbia—but any lawless country will do. I seek chaos, but not out of choice.”

“If you’re a vampire, how can you run around in the daytime?”

“There are many myths about us. I cannot turn into a bat. I can withstand sunlight. I have taken bullets and lived, and even a silver one wouldn’t do much.”

“You can’t be killed?” He asked.

“I’d have to be blown up into a thousand pieces. Do you know the story of Orpheus? He was a musician who followed his damned wife into Hell to bring her back? He was one of us, I believe. I believe so because the

stories say his head was cut off by a tribe of witches and yet it still remained alive for many years after his decapitation.” She said.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that story. Can you kill yourself?” He asked quietly.

“I’ve thought about it.” She replied. He reached over and took her hand. She exhaled, feeling the tension drain from her shoulders and arms.

“How did you become a vampire, then?” He asked.

“I was turned against my will by a very evil man, a vampire named Sebastianus. He turned me so that he could have a companion in his loneliness. Vampires are very lonely creatures, John. I am no exception.”

“Against your will?” He asked.

“Yes, John. I hate what I am. I have always hated it. I hate what I have to do to survive.”

“You have to kill people.”

“Yes. I take more than their blood, John. I take their life. And if I don’t, I go mad . . . like rabies.” He stroked her hand gently. He did not think of her as a killer, he could barely conceive it.

“Have you killed recently?” He was curious, scared.

“Yes. About two weeks ago. The longest I can go is about three months, but I try and eat once a month. I try to execute people with records, bad men, child molesters, criminals, lowlifes. Sometimes I take innocent lives. Just because I attempt to seek the worst of men to kill, it doesn’t make it right. I was raised in the Church . . .”

“In the Middle Ages, from what you’re telling me.”

“I was turned shortly after the Pestilence, the plague that they call the Black Death.”

“The Bubonic Plague?” He asked. “What year was

that, about 1350?" He asked in wonderment. She told him the story of her parents, her marriage to Iovelli, the loss of her baby, the kidnapping after the miscarriage. It was a great weight from her shoulders to confide in another human being, and she suspected he did truly believe her.

"Promise me that you'll never tell another living soul, John." She gazed at him.

"I promise, Lucy."

"We should go back." She said fretfully. "It's very late."

"I want you to turn me." He looked at her, his eyes illuminated by the glow of the dashboard.

"I'd sooner condemn you to Hell."

"Then condemn me to Hell." He replied.

She wanted to turn him. Perhaps he truly meant it – perhaps there was a force within him that could withstand the hardships of existing past a mortal lifetime. It tore her apart. A mate? A brother-lover to tromp about the world with?

"I cannot." She said mournfully.

"Why not?" He asked. She was silent.

"Why not?" He repeated, demanding. Answering him was agonizing.

"You're . . . too young to be of any use."

"How?" He asked.

"I'm six hundred and forty-eight, John, but guess how old I look? Fifteen. That is the age when Sebastianus took me for his bride. Teenagers don't have any power, not of any sort, not in your world, not in the old world. How am I supposed to rent an apartment when I cannot legally buy cigarettes? I couldn't use you. I would be too

busy protecting you. I would have twice the problems that I have currently. Even now, my problems begin to catch up with me; they will discover me soon.”

“Who will?”

“The police! The families of the people I’ve killed! I’m guilty!”

“How old do I have to be?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“To be of use to you.” He said.

She was shocked. She had never expected John capable of saying such things, of thinking such macabre ideas.

“I murder people, John. I am a murderer.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

She paused. She looked at him gravely and squinted.

“Mid-thirties.”

“I’ll wait, then.”

“Wait? For what?” She replied. “I’m a ghoul! So you can become a ghoul? You should settle down, John, get married, have children. I would love to think of how beautiful your children will be!”

“I want to be with you.” He said flatly.

“John, that is what you say now. I am your first, of course you feel strongly. You are infatuated. For the young, immortality must seem promising, even wonderful! The grass is always greener on the other side.”

“Yes, Lucy, but you could make the same statement looking in the mirror.”

He pulled up at the Beck’s doorstep at 1:48. She was pensive and thoughtful. Her lover surely did not

understand the implications of what he had asked for and his lust blinded him to the realities of existence even now. She had not chosen her life, but she was foggy on whether or not it was right to deny others the right to join her in her suffering.

“When are you going away?” He asked. “I can tell you are thinking about it.” She peered at him through the semi-blackness.

“Soon enough, John. I’ll try to stay as long as I can.”

“You said you loved me – did you mean it?” He said.

“I meant it.”

Lights went on inside the house on the upper level. She reached for the door handle. He sprung out of the driver’s side and ran to her door. He swung it open and then used his body to pin her against her seat. He kissed her ardently. She did not resist him, she could not.

“I love you.” He said.

“Just think about what you are asking, John, please. This too shall pass. It has been a big night. Make no promises on a night where I have burdened you with such awful knowledge.”

“Isn’t it enough that I love you? Turn me now. We’ll find a way to survive.”

“No.” She said. “Love should be enough, John, but it never is. It never is.”

RHEA AND THE ORACLE

She went inside the house, thinking of Sebastian, worrying. She had not seen him in two and a half centuries. She sensed that he was looking for her. She felt him sometimes at night as he called to her in her dreams. Or did he? Perhaps he had found another. Nowadays, from the looks of it, people were lining up to become vampires. He had always warned her explicitly about turning others into vampires. He had been thrilled at her attitude about the subject, which was simply not to turn others into vampires. He warned her that it drove most men mad and that the process for choosing another to become a vampire was lengthy and protracted with good reason.

She had found the mausoleum underneath a broken monument. It seemed older than Rome, and the stone covering it gave resistance. She was certain he would hear, sleeping in the nearby castle. She heard the rats scattering across the stone as dirt fell into the crypt. The smell that emanated from the opening was abominable. Sulphurous poisons assaulted her nostrils as she threw the stone to one side of its resting place.

A small voice greeted her, hissing. She found Rhea trapped under a rock, her skeletal head exposed.

“Who are you?” She asked innocently. There was no answer, just grunting, so she repeated the question in Latin, then in Greek, to which Rhea responded.

“Sebastianus. Where is Sebastianus? I am Rhea.”

“You are his first wife!” The pieces fell together for her instantly.

“He took my arms and legs!”

She lifted the rock from Rhea’s torso. The stench was cheese-like and unbearable and Lucy dry-heaved. Rhea writhed and scuttled about like a crab. She was nude and horribly maimed.

“What has he done? “What shall I do . . . Oh, God!”

Rhea sniffed the air through two gaping nostrils that had eroded through her onion skin flesh.

“An Oracle you are! Sebastian never told me he’d made one!” Rhea screamed a scream that was part horror and part laughter.

“What do you mean?” Lucy asked.

“Child! An Oracle is a woman who has had her womb poisoned out of her, a eunuch. She is a fortune-teller and a vessel for man’s pleasure.”

“But I lost my baby and my womb when I caught the Pestilence in 1348! Sebastian said that he couldn’t stop the Pestilence in time to save my infant!”

“Nonsense! He is a powerful vampire. He can cure all diseases of the flesh as I taught him. He gave you a poison.”

“It cannot be!”

“It is in the grimoires. Look in the small hide-bound book that he keeps in his boot. It is always on his person. Do you know of what I speak?”

“I do, I do!” She said.

“In it lies the secret poison he used to turn you into an Oracle.”

“Oh, no, please, no!” She reeled in shock and started

to back away from the open crypt. Rhea became alarmed that she was about to leave.

“Get me someone, Oracle. A live man. I’m starving. But leave me here in my home, child, I will disintegrate if I am exposed. Bring me clothing, I beg of you. Bring me food, a man, hurry!”

She placed the stone back over the crypt to hide the evidence of what she had uncovered. That night, she hunted the alleyways of the old town. She found an old drunk wandering the streets. He might have been a complete innocent, she did not know and did not bother to find out. She broke a cobblestone over his head and he was out.

She brought the unconscious man down. Rhea commanded her.

“Now replace the stone, my child. I do not wish for you to see me feed.” Obediently, Lucy placed the stone upon the mausoleum. She heard the sounds of Rhea scuttling about, and then feeding, brutally. She had never heard anything so unholy. She fled.

Days later, Sebastian found her by the lake, sobbing. Ice had begun to form in the shallows. She thought she had hidden well from him. It was as if he could smell it on her.

“So you found Rhea, I see.”

“Bastard! What have you done to her?!”

“You have unleashed a horror upon the universe by freeing her. You are not unlike Pandora.”

“Why did you keep her all of these years? What good can it do?”

“She created me, Lucia. She is my only family.”

“Your family?”

“She was my first wife, and because she turned me, she was like a mother to me.” He intoned. “She was the High Priestess who turned me in Greece, before Rome. She was my first love.”

“What you have done to her is disgusting.” Lucy spat.

“Perhaps. It was not so uncommon back in the Hebrides for men to take several wives and additional lovers. Greece was a different place. I cut off her limbs so that she would not escape. I hope that you did not permit her to feed?”

“But I did! I did!” She sobbed.

“And you brought her a man, I presume.” He seemed bored.

“As she asked!”

“It is already too late.”

Lucy and Sebastian returned to the mausoleum. Strange gurgle-like noises emanated from the crypt. Lucy cried out, “There is a baby in the crypt! She has taken an infant!”

Sebastian struck her across the jaw, sending her flying backwards.

“You stupid bitch.” He snarled. “It is Rhea’s infant. She has already given birth, thanks to your generosity.”

“But how? It has only been a few days!”

“She’s not even here.” He fumed. “She is likely somewhere on the road or perhaps in town, finding victims.”

“She can barely move! You took her limbs!”

“You provided her with new ones, my dear.”

“The man?”

“Yes. All she needed to do was to have a body. We vampires have awesome powers of regeneration, given adequate donors.” He said. “Now step aside, I have some business to attend to.” He threw the stone protecting the crypt to one side. The inside was empty except for an infant, which from a distance looked utterly normal. Then she saw the bodies piled in the corner. Several men and women were piled there like wood, dead, horribly gored. The baby crawled towards them, seeking their blood. She saw its depraved eyes, but worse were the glittering teeth as it smiled. They were sharp and dripping with black blood.

Sebastian leapt down into the crypt. He strangled the infant, which slipped out of his hands and screamed. Lucy clasped her hands over her ears as it screamed. It was not human and yet very human, a high pitched wail of hunger that rattled her skull.

Sebastian grabbed the infant once again by the chest and it wailed into the air, exposing its rows of shark like teeth. The baby did not strike at Sebastian. It wailed at Lucy, chubby arms reaching towards her, pleading. Sebastian grabbed a rock from a corner and bashed in its skull. Black blood and white bone flew into the corners of the crypt, slathering the dead faces of the corpses left piled in the corner. She was ashamed of herself for the simple gladness she felt wash over her as the infant’s screams ended.

Lucy crouched by the side of the grave, her head in her hands, rocking back and forth. Sebastian rose from the tomb. Gashes on his arms were already beginning to heal and disappear.

“We must go.” He said while grabbing her hands and

jerking her to her feet like a puppet, callously. “Rhea will return soon.” She glared at him balefully. They returned to the castle, neither of them speaking.

“I rue the day I ever met you, Sebastianus.” She cried once they were in the great room.

“There is no time for that.” He grabbed a sword from the wall of arms. It was ten feet long, a relic. She took hand cannon and began to arm it.

“What do you think you are doing?” He asked.

“I’m going to kill your weakness for you.”

They returned to the crypt. The infant’s body, now missing its pulverized head, was still twitching among the blood-soaked ruins of corpses. They did not have to wait long. Her bald head had swollen on her shoulders, puffy with fresh blood that ringed her mouth. She loped forward on unnaturally long legs and arms that swung loosely. Her naked body was an abomination of caked filth and sagging tubes for breasts. Her eyes were insane with rage, crusted with yellow and green, only beginning to heal from her long sojourn underground. She came back with two women, one in each arm, which she threw down like sticks as she alit onto the stone causeway. One woman hit the ground running, Sebastian ran after her. The other lay unconscious in a heap.

Lucy aimed the firearm at Rhea’s chest. Seconds went by, and the cannon fired just as Rhea descended upon Lucy. Particles of bullet were embedded in Rhea’s large arm as she swung across the stones in her donated legs.

She rose and attacked Lucy, kicking her with the grafted leg that was too big for her body. Lucy was sent reeling into a stone wall, which she hit with a great thud.

Rhea sprang, teeth flashing. Lucy sprinted to one side to avoid the crash and grabbed at Rhea's solitary patch of yellow hair, which ripped out loosely in one decayed piece like strands of rotten corn silk. Rhea spun round and sank her teeth into Lucy's arm. Lucy howled as tooth met bone, her arm clamped in the trap of Rhea's huge canines. Lucy kicked her side, then her wounded leg, dislodging her. She screamed at Sebastian.

"Do something!"

But he laid by his prey, half-watching the fight, gorging on the woman he had caught that had been meant for Rhea and her child.

Rhea laughed and lunged for the broadsword that Sebastian had carelessly left lying on the ground.

Her long arms handled the sword with a memorized ease and grace. Lucy grabbed the hand cannon, stuffing it with powder, nearly missing a swing of the sword meant for her neck. She kicked both of her legs with the force of a bull, sending a blow into Rhea's borrowed legs. Her heels made contact with Rhea's knees and hobbled her with a crack. Rhea went down, screeching and clawing at the air for the sword, which clanked heavily on the ground. Lucy grabbed its handle, her broken bones mending inside her causing her to wince in pain. Shakily, she rose with the sword and drove it through Rhea's heart.

"Take her limbs again." Sebastian instructed, looking up from his meal.

Standing over the pierced Rhea, Lucy bayed, a long cry that was half-scream and half-howl. She picked up the hand cannon. She aimed directly at Rhea's head.

"Why destroy me, child? There are so many secrets I

could tell you.” Rhea whispered.

She positioned it over her arm, placing the firing end in Rhea’s mouth. She pulled the trigger. Rhea’s head exploded into a spray of blood, brain, and bone.

Sebastian looked up and stood. He glanced at the ruins of his High Priestess.

“Let’s go home.” He said. She blew on the hand cannon and grabbed her bag of gunpowder. She reloaded.

“I should kill you.” She said.

“You wouldn’t.”

She rested the firing end of the cannon against her own temple.

“No!”

“Don’t try and stop me. So this is why I was chosen, because of the babies. The babies that the woman—your wife—refused to stop creating. So you took my womb away, you took my baby! So I could be a monster! Because she was a monster! We are monsters!”

He grabbed the top of the cannon away from her face. It fell to the ground and smoked ominously. He embraced her small body in his arms, kissing her forehead over and over.

“Shhh.” He said. They cleaned up the mess as best they could and she went home with him docilely. He spent the evening telling her stories of Greece as she sat in front of a roaring fire.

“She wasn’t sane, my wife. She was beautiful once, Lucia. She was an Egyptian, from the magical times. There were more of us back then, and we weren’t seen as ghouls, in fact, in Greece and the time before we were worshipped as gods.

I found out that she was crazy shortly after I had ascended to priest of the Temple. Her loneliness was consuming, Lucia. She had always loved babies, like you! We ran away to the Barbarians, back then, the land of the barbarian North. How I could have been such a fool I'll never know. She did not care that vampire children are abominations. Her mind left her. She was always so fertile that she could even impregnate herself using the semen from a corpse, which she did, as you found out. As you know my seed is infertile with all women, they are no more than cattle, but it was not so with my Rhea. I always thought that I could find and destroy all of her children, but there was no keeping up with it. Babies produced of vampire women are the real monsters, Lucia.

They are born idiots, incurably insane. They incubate and grow at phenomenal speed, their hunger is ten-thousand times what our greatest hunger could ever be. They are more base than the animals and cannot be suffered to live, do you understand?" She nodded.

"What is an Oracle, Sebastian?"

"I've told you a dozen times. She is a woman chosen in youth for her beauty and her intelligence. She is chosen to learn magic."

"How does she become an Oracle, Sebastian? What is the recipe?" She asked, no longer playing innocent.

"So, Rhea must have known you for what you are. But you could have just as easily lost your womb in the Pestilence, and your life."

"But I didn't lose it that way, did I?" She grew hysterical.

"No, I administered poisons to you according to the ancient tradition. But in doing so, I most likely saved

your life. You were dying and your baby along with you.”

“How could you!” She exclaimed. “I knew I should have died!” She went fast into a state of shock. A creeping numbness invaded her. The well of tears in her eyes was dry. Part of her felt like laughing insanely at how badly she had been duped.

“Why just take her limbs? Why not poison her, like me?”

“Because, if you remember, she turned me into a vampire. There is no poison that would affect her. Taking her limbs was the only thing I could do short of killing her.” He said. “Do you see why you cannot survive in the world without me? The world is full of mundane things, Lucia, but it is also full of terrible things. Do you see why I have hidden the terrible things from you? I chose you because you are my perfect mate. I chose you for your strength, your cunning, your intelligence, your great beauty . . .”

“For my infertility.” She murmured.

“To be my eternal love.”

She let him make love to her that night. He caressed her tenderly, with no trace of the Sebastian who had previously knocked her off her feet with a slap across the mouth. He was tender with her as he had not been in years. He laid her on their old bed and kissed her from head to toe. Then he entered her passionately, riding her with exquisite precision. She let him have it all, as it was, after all, for the last time. She left for good after he fell asleep. That night she found a ship bound to sail for the heathen nation called America. It was 1582.

MICHELLE INVITES LUCY TO A PARTY

The dress rehearsal for the concert was set up for Thursday, a week before the performance. All students were to report at six o'clock for the rehearsal in full penguin attire. Boys were ordered to wear white button-down shirts and pleated black trousers. Girls were instructed to wear white button down shirts and full length black skirts.

She tried not to notice how much attention Martin Chen had been paying her, but he had been bold enough to speak to her the other day. She could see that she was now the exclusive object of the boy's attention. Her relationship with John had made her the object of desire for scores of teenage boys who had dared not previously think of her in such a way. Martin said "Hi" to her in the halls every day now, a sure sign of trouble. He was brooding over her, she could sense it, and the shadowy circles around his lovely dark eyes bespoke a terrible ongoing insomnia. She hoped that he would at long last remember his young male pride. She remained on guard.

"How are you, Lucy?" Martin ran to catch her in the crowded hall.

"Okay, I guess."

"Ready for the performance next Friday?" Martin asked.

"I believe so."

"Did Michelle call to invite you to the Vorsack's dinner party afterward?" He asked.

“No, I think she’s out sick with a throat infection.”

“My parents and the Vorsack’s would like you to stop by the Vorsack’s dinner party to celebrate the concert.” He said.

“I’ll try to stop by.”

“I’m so glad you’ll go. My mother really wants to meet you. She used to play violin, you know.”

“Have you been getting enough sleep lately, Martin?”

He almost tripped. “How did you know I haven’t been getting any sleep --?”

“Oops, that’s my class. I’ll see you Seventh Period!” She said, quickly ducking into the English Room.

Michelle stopped by the Beck’s after school that day. Cathy and Larry were working late, and Mike and Shari had begun jobs themselves, Mike delivering pizza and Shari working at Victoria’s Secret.

“Come on in, Michelle.” Lucy welcomed her. “Are you looking for Mike? He’s working.”

“No, I wanted to talk to you, Lucy, to invite you to a dinner party.” Michelle replied.

“Okay. Let’s go up to my room.” Lucy said.

Michelle spoke to Lucy about the dinner party after the concert. Something seemed awry. Her eyes still had the fevered glow of sickness, yet she seemed in perfect health.

“Please stop by. I think that you might break Martin’s heart if you don’t.” Michelle joked.

“Does he know that I am involved with someone?”

“Of course he knows. Just let him down easy, Lucy.”

“Maybe I should stay away.” Lucy said.

“No!” Michelle said too eagerly. “Please come by. You only live a block away!”

“I’ll do my best.” Lucy replied.

“How have you been lately, Lucy? You’ve been such a stranger. I hardly see you anymore.” Michelle said.

“But you’re dating Mike now, and I’m dating John. Boys keep you busy, don’t they?” Lucy said in a light tone.

“Mike’s an idiot and we both know it, Lucy! I can’t stand him!”

“Did you two have a fight? Are you breaking up?” Lucy said worriedly.

“Don’t you get it, Lucy? I’ve always thought he was an idiot.” Michelle said, a cruel inflection lowering her voice.

“Then why go out with him, Michelle? Why belabor yourself?” Lucy questioned. There was something very wrong.

“Because you used to be my friend, Lucy, and now I don’t get to see you anymore unless I can get into your house. You ignore me! That’s not a good way to treat your only friend.” Michelle said.

“Michelle, don’t do this. We can be friends again. I’ve had a lot on my mind. John has made me so happy, I’ve been losing myself in him. It’s not fair to you. You should break up with Mike if you don’t like him. He’ll survive. Don’t take revenge on him because I’ve wronged you.”

Michelle started to sob.

“I’m sorry Lucy! I’m sorry to Mike too! You were right, we’re a mismatch! I just don’t want to be lonely!” Lucy hugged Michelle.

“Please don’t be sad. I have always been lonely. I know how bad it feels. You’re a good friend. I’m glad

you came over.”

As Lucy got up to fetch Michelle a box of tissue, her mind spun wildly. There was still something very wrong with Michelle that was not resolved by her revelation about her true feelings about Mike. Lucy thought of a song that she had not been able to get out of her head since the Fifties. Crocodile Tears.

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IN BED

John drove her home after school nearly every day. He picked her up outside her last period Ceramics class. She had narrowly escaped Martin in Orchestra class, who had been wrapped up discussing a new piece of his with Mr. Brown.

When John's parents weren't home, they made love in his bedroom. When they were home, the pair headed for the Big Apple or the warmth of the Beck's family table.

John's demeanor shifted. When they made love, he seemed to shift into the realm of possessiveness. He would take her with great force. Once or twice she commented upon it, but she knew that it was resultant of his fear of her impending departure. He was even a little jealous of Sebastian.

"You haven't seen him in three hundred years?" He asked.

"Not since 1582 when I left him and came to America."

"Do you still love him?"

"Just the opposite." She said with a tone of defiance.

"Do you think he's still around?" She paused thoughtfully.

"Yes, I believe he is. He is probably very wealthy. Sebastian was always a man who felt the need to surround himself with the trappings of the finer life."

"Do you think he'll come after you?"

"Why would he do that? It has been three hundred

years. I doubt I hold any interest for him anymore. For now, I fear there is something worse, something more present.”

“What?” He asked.

“I don’t know, John, but I think there is something going on with Michelle. She confided in me yesterday. She said that she couldn’t stand Mike. She said that she dated him to be closer to me.” Lucy said as he fondled her breasts absentmindedly.

“Gross. She said that? To be closer to you?”

“I think she is plotting something, though I cannot guess what. You are aware that Martin Chen has a crush on me; I think the whole school is painfully aware, but he’s harmless.” John took his hand away.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” He said jealously.

“It is Michelle, John. She is very bright. I think she might be up to something. Heaven forbid. I’m going to that stupid party at the Vorsack’s to get to the bottom of it.”

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” He accused.

“Sooner or later, John, it will come to that.”

“Why can’t you take me with you?” He begged.

“I don’t take any prisoners, John! You do not want this life!”

“Yes I do! I am an adult. I can decide for myself.” He stood up with his legs parted in an inverted “V”, puffing up, trying to make himself look bigger.

“You’re just a boy! You grow moody and spellbound, John, and the next moment you are ecstatic. My heart cannot take it. Know that I love you, that I will always love you.”

“Then I’ll wait for you. I’ll wait my whole life!” He cried.

“Why waste yourself, John?”

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THE CONCERT

Martin Chen showed up early for the pre-concert warm-up at 5:00. He knew she would be there, practicing alone in 118. His breath grew shallower as he approached the room, conscious of the loudness of his hallway-reverberated footfalls. With each step his heartbeat increased exponentially. She was retuning, fifths spilling from the sliver of light underneath the door like milk.

He knocked at the door. Lucy felt the hairs on her neck rise. It was Martin, she could hear his heart beat. She hesitated in answering the door, her violin still crooked underneath her chin. Martin's crush. It reminded her of one of the old tales her mother Marina had told her about a sculptor named Farhat. She could almost smell her mother's attar of white roses and lemon verbena with the memory of the story. Farhat who was stranded on a desolate roadside until one fateful day he passed the traveling caravan of the beautiful princess Anoush.

"Such was Anoush's beauty that with one glimpse Farhat decided that he would spend his life building a castle to match her loveliness." Marina would drawl, Lucy invoking her mother's face as the image of the beautiful but cruel princess Anoush.

"She saw the castle and was delighted, so she told Farhat that if he built another one, a better one, that they would be married. He built her the most beautiful castle

in the world in the desert, carving fountains where real water ran and gardens in a place where no plant had ever bloomed.”

Lucy would always press her face into her mother’s skirts when she heard the ending, no matter how many times she heard it.

“Anoush lied to him! She told him he was a fool as she was already married to a rich Sultan. So he dashed himself from the highest turret of the castle he had made to the rocks below!”

“Lucy, open the door, it’s me, Martin.”

Lucy appeared and appraised him briefly, nonchalantly. He felt her observance and warmed to it.

“Are you going to the Vorsack’s for dinner tonight?”

“Yes, I think I’ll stop by.” She felt his heart warming the small room like a radiator. “You’ll be there, right?” She asked, hearing his breathing audibly jump. She could smell the savory tinge of his sweat in the air. It was hard to resist.

“Yeah. You know what? I’m going to make a surprise announcement at the concert tonight, but I wanted to give you the heads up . . . I’ve just finished my first symphony!” He said proudly.

“Wow, congratulations, Martin.”

“It still needs to be tightened up, but . . .”

“Martin, it’s a monumental achievement for any composer.” He looked at her intensely, his dark eyes deepened with sleeplessness. Her skin prickled. Don’t say anything, she thought to herself, say nothing more, Martin.

“I wrote it for you.”

She felt a mixture of embarrassment, humiliation, and pride well up in her cheeks, flushing them.

“Martin, I don’t know what to say. You are too kind.” She said, knowing that his kindness was certainly not the primary motivation for his magnum opus. Her head was downcast as she studied the museum-like exhibits of various dusts on the resilient tile flooring. He reached for her chin and lifted it up. She recoiled.

“Lucy, where is your callous? All violinists have calluses on their necks and hands from playing.”

“I don’t know. I have weird skin.” She tried to sound convincing as she looked away hotly. He impetuously grasped a hold of her hand, looking for a callous. Shame and electricity coursed through her veins, flowing directly from him in a flash flood.

“Martin, you realize that I’m dating someone, don’t you?” She knew his reply before he uttered it.

“Sure, but it’s not like you’re married, you know.” She wanted to feast upon him badly, his passion, his youthfulness. His blood would be sweet with it.

“I’d give anything to kiss your neck.” He said bravely. She shrank from him as he gripped her hand more forcibly. The door popped open with a sigh. There stood John and Mr. Brown.

She pulled her hand away quickly. John said nothing. She could tell that he was furious in that instant. Mr. Brown broke the silence.

“Are we interrupting anything?”

“No!” Martin jumped slightly. He blurted, “I was just telling Lucy that I have finished an important work . . . my first symphony!” Brown’s eyebrows rose skeptically.

“Well, well, Martin. I did not know that you had even

started writing a symphony.” The two congregated instantly.

She stuffed her violin in its case and rushed into the hallway towards John, who stood outside of 118 with his arms crossed.

“Oh, John, please!”

“You are already leaving me. Am I so forgettable?” He strode down the hall as she ran to catch up with him past lockers someone had painted an abysmal shade of gray blue.

“He means nothing!” She whispered loudly.

“You let him touch you!” John whispered back.

“No, he grabbed my hand. I was trying to get away from him!”

“Martin’s going to be at the Vorsack’s house tonight! He’ll be waiting for you!”

“John, it’s Michelle, like I told you, she’s . . .” The doors at the other end of the hall opened. An early bird clarinetist burst through in a long black skirt, swishing like a bell. They exchanged greetings with the clarinetist.

“Let’s go in here.” Lucy yanked him into the hidden door to Room 109, a door to the backstage that looked like the entrance to a broom closet. Red velvet curtains rustled under dim lights as the door shut with a heavy snap.

“Hey,” he said, his eyes slowly adjusting to the soft blackness.

“John, I’m so hungry.” She leaned against the back wall of the place, sinking slowly.

“Can you take any from me?”

“No, I won’t do that. I must feed tonight, John! I will kill tonight! A person, John!”

“Who will it be?”

“There are a couple of prisons around Senewac and Kane County, some bars, some homeless shelters. It doesn’t mean that these men deserve to die for whatever they have done, John. They are their mother’s sons.” She glanced into his blue eyes wearily.

“What about blood banks? Have you ever tried them?”

“I don’t just take blood, John. I take the life out of men. I have tried taking a little blood from various donors. It does not work, I still suffer madness. It is the same with animals. I wish that it worked.”

“How much longer can you stay here?”

“I was hoping to graduate this time. Maybe half a year, counting this summer. You might even tire of me by then, you know.” The corners of her mouth rose in a weak smile and she gave him a wink. He embraced her, kissing her cheek, then her neck. He guided her hand to his crotch, which had already grown in size. His scent was like sweet perfume in her state, like the sweet smell of infants. She moaned as she touched him. She felt her canines grow, the hunger consuming her.

“Want to see my fangs?” She asked. He pulled away.

“Sure.” He said curiously. She flared her upper lip, baring her canines which had extended by half an inch.

“Cool.” He said admiringly.

“So that’s the way it is.” She closed her mouth.

People had started filling the hall: instrumentalists, overly conscientious parents. She heard their feet and muffled voices.

“I must go.” She said. They walked back to 118 hand in hand. When they reached the door, he kissed her

again. She felt his tongue press into her mouth. He made it impossible not to respond, his arms tightening deliciously around hers. A few random students gawked at them in the hall.

“I love you, I always will.” She whispered to him. He beamed a little as she disappeared into the orchestra room, a cacophony of tuning instruments.

She could feel Martin’s eyes boring into her as she entered the room, her own personal Farhat. She resolved not to allow him or her hunger detract from the performance at hand, as it would be a special one, an evening to be remembered in the gray days to follow like a precious jewel.

Mr. Brown was not a blind man and had assiduously observed many a student soap opera over the years. She hoped fervently that Martin had not divulged his crush to Brown. Such revelations she hoped would be considered out of place and inappropriate. She wanted to be on with the show.

Nothing seemed to be amiss. Brown engaged in the usual browbeating and complaining he reserved for sections who came in late and soloists who left tempo behind like the leftovers of a Sunday picnic. But the orchestra had never had a finer hour, and everyone was aware of it. The infusion Martin’s and her talents had inspired many students to work much harder than they ever had previously as the season came to a head. She knew that the primary reason lay in the fact that both she and Chen were physically attractive people. Brown was no fool, and he understood the sudden onus of the other children to share the limelight. Brown had admitted to the orchestra that he had never seen a better dress

rehearsal in the twenty-three years he had been teaching at Lincoln. They were sounding more and more like Civic every day. He had hired not one but two engineers to record the event, subsidized entirely out of his own meager pocket.

The audience was made up of parents, teachers, and a few other curious folks from town, all sitting hushed in anticipatory silence as the school orchestra assembled onstage. John sat with his parents who arrived bubbling with excitement, bragging to everyone about Lucy's first performance for them exclusively. Michelle and her father sat in the audience, Diane having chosen to stay home to prepare dinner. The black clad students streamed slowly to their positions carrying their instruments like offerings to the pilgrimage. In the sixth center row sat an unexpected guest, his Classical Greek features stark in the yellow half light. Little did the audience know that two vampires were in their midst. Sebastian had come to visit his old friend and former wife.

As concertmaster, it was Lucy's duty to seat the orchestra as well as tune them. She calmed herself, breathing deeply. Sebastian spotted her among them instantly. He had not remembered her as looking so small. He did his best not to grin. She was lovely, painted like the porcelain doll he had always wanted her to be. Her brown curls were pulled tight in a severe chignon. Her white shirt was ridiculously utilitarian, but fitted in all the right places, he smirked. She was a swan among geese, trying to look plain and dowdy. He had been the one to dress her in the finest silks and brocades, and here she was, displayed for the world to see in

drugstore makeup and the uniform of an old schoolteacher. He would raise her up once again, ply her with silks and jewels again, all of the accoutrements of the new generation: the cars, the toys, the restaurants, and the prestige.

A hush descended across the audience as instruments tuned, creating small ladders of fifths that collapsed abruptly, snatches of solos that disappeared and reappeared like gags in a house of mirrors. Brown strode to center stage and Lucy quieted the instruments with a gesture. Brown gushed conservatively about the orchestra, letting the audience know about the recording engineers and how proud he was of Martin Chen.

Martin came to the stage from his section, his own violin in hand. He rambled in an unfortunate monotone, the result of his innate fear of public speaking. “I am excited to announce the premiere of my Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, to be played tonight featuring solos by our concertmaster, Lucy Albert.” She smiled artificially as she scanned the audience and located John. He waved to her. She did not see Sebastian turn towards the boy and his family, but every hair on the back of her neck stood up rigidly. She located her foster family. They sat in the front row. Shari smiled and Mike whispered to her. She barely heard a word that Martin or Brown said, until Martin’s voice chimed.

“I am excited to announce that I have recently completed my first symphony.” The audience clapped when cued by Brown, not sure of what to do. “I’d like to dedicate tonight’s performance to the person that helped inspire me to complete my first major work. Let’s have an advance round of applause for our concertmaster,

Lucy Albert!”

Lucy was horrified. She smiled mechanically at the audience, holding her violin limply, feeling the hot lights on her made-up face. The audience clapped more heartily. She hoped the lights would become hot enough to melt her into the floor. After much clapping, they started.

The Bach Cantata was played fairly well, Sebastian thought, for a lot of children. She had been carrying them, he assumed, but then again the school had some particularly talented kids among the usual ruffians. The horns were the worst, slipping in and out of tune and rushing the easy sections, fighting everyone else.

It was during Martin's Violin Concerto that she was extraordinary. Of course she had taken the boy as her lover, acting as his muse. The fair boy in the audience who had waved was yet another suitor. The solos were revealing, sensual and moody. She had always had a wonderful ear for phrasing, even back in the days of the viol. The work itself was refreshingly tonal, Sebastian observed. Even the horns were easing into the concept and the woodwinds in the second movement were particularly well-orchestrated. The piece, in three movements, was short enough anyway. He savored the last solo, the coda. He could see lust virtually dripping from the dark-haired boy's maw as she teased every last note from her shuddering violin, the devil in a black skirt. If they had any idea the concerts he had seen, they would have known the quality of her playing. But they did not know how good she was, how perfect she was. The whole place had come to life, the magic seeped out of the walls. He was disappointed when Intermission arrived.

Michelle intercepted John before he reached the backstage entrance.

“Hey John, how’s it going?”

“Hey Michelle.” He said flatly.

“Going to visit our little friend the vampire?”

“What?” He asked, incredulous.

“Hello? She’s like, your girlfriend, not mine.” She replied informally.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Michelle, I truly don’t.” The redness in his face betrayed him. “I’ve gotta go.” He closed the door of 109 in her face. Michelle stood perplexed.

He found Martin hovering around her, Brown off checking with the audio engineers.

“Lucy, I have to talk to you.” He glared at Martin. “In private.” She stepped into the curtains as Martin stared daggers.

“Lucy!” He whispered into her ear beneath a dusty curtain cloud. “Michelle knows!” Lucy stood in stunned silence for a moment, and then cursed.

“Shit!” John quickly countered,

“What are you going to do? She’s a motor-mouth, Lucy, of the worst kind. She’ll tell everyone soon, if only to gain herself some attention!” He cried under his breath.

“That cannot happen!” She replied, feeling her world start to disintegrate underneath her feet.

“Showtime!” Martin cried. The couple reappeared from behind the curtains, both visibly shaken. John exited quickly from the side of the stage and returned to where his mother and father sat.

“Is everything okay?” His mother touched his

shoulder gently, standing up.

“Yeah.” He said.

“How’s the star?” John’s father asked.

“She’s all right.” John replied. “A little nervous.” He played it cool, but he had seen it in her face. Everything was going to hell.

Sebastian sat smirking in amusement. He hoped he would get to see the two suitors face off over Lucy. He was alarmed when she returned to the stage and her eyes passed over him in the audience. He saw her eyes pass him and settle on a fleetingly pretty strawberry blond girl and her effeminate father. Lucy stared at the girl for a long ten seconds, and then looked away. She directed the orchestra to tune again.

The last piece was Scheherazade. Lucy’s solos were exquisite in their precision and expression. She seemed tense when not playing, he noted, more so than she had during the first two pieces. Perhaps the boys had already faced off and he had missed it, he thought sourly. His little doll.

The applause was uproarious at the end of the concert. Foolish compliments were tossed about like confetti. Mr. Brown, Lucy, and Martin Chen were at the center of the joyous horde. They were hailed as celebrities, the three of them. Sebastian dared not approach her. He was content to watch her accepting compliments and gaudy bouquets full of red roses, white carnations, and purple statice.

Her foster parents had attended the concert in their finest clothes, Cathy in a new JC Penney dress, Larry in a suit that was too small. She was amazed that at over six-hundred years old that she could miss her parents so bitterly. Cathy gave her a bear hug and patted her severe

hairdo.

“You’re our superstar!” Turning to her foster father, she was bear hugged again, squashing the white carnations.

“You did good!” She closed her eyes and rested in the moment, imagining a normal life where she would go to college, have babies with John, watch her children have children, live, and die as she had always wanted to. It was a simple wish. Her eyes threatened to leak tears, she blinked. Michelle was in sight, Lucy could hear her voice, high in the crowd, and saw her blond head bobbing among a sea of faces.

“You going to the Michelle’s place for dinner?” Mike asked Lucy after the bear hugs.

“Yes. I’ll walk over there once I change clothes.”

“You know she broke up with me, right?” Mike appeared to be on the verge of tears.

“Did she? I’m sorry, Mike.”

“She invited me to dinner anyway.” He said.

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.” Lucy said tenderly.

“No, I’d like to. If only to say goodbye. She’s very special.” He said.

“All right.” Lucy said. “We’ll go together.”

It was settled.

LUCY GOES TO DINNER

Mike and Lucy trudged over to the Vorsack's house. Mike was in his blue jeans and a tee-shirt, and Lucy, knowing that Mrs. Vorsack would staunchly disapprove of his attire, said nothing anyway. She had changed into dungarees herself and kept her hair as it was. Mrs. Vorsack would just have to live with it. The night was clear and moonlit, dazzling with even light blue shadows that shone into manicured lawns and pristine gardens.

Three cars were lined up in the driveway.

"The Chens must already be here." She commented. Mike knocked on the door.

They heard voices inside but stood for a full thirty seconds looking at each other. Lucy knocked again. Martin came to the door, looking radiant and relieved. Lucy entered and Mike followed.

"How are ya, buddy? Good job at the concert." Mike said as he vigorously shook Martin's hand. Martin proceeded to grab Lucy by the shoulders and air-kiss both of her cheeks teasingly.

"Hey you," he said affectionately. Three more people came to meet them at the door. Michelle greeted Mike with a smile. She then introduced them to Martin's parents. Lucy grabbed his shirtsleeve, whispering on tiptoe.

"Don't forget to take off your shoes." He looked down at his heavy Sears work boots as Mrs. Vorsack sauntered into the room, sporting her usual toothy thin-

lipped grin.

“Well, look who’s here! Welcome, Lucy, I heard the performance was spectacular. I’m so glad that Michelle’s invited Mike to dinner without telling me! Please make yourselves at home while I try and scrounge up some food so everyone can have dinner!” She sashayed back into the kitchen. Mike sat down, his body too large for the petite blue couch. Lucy sat beside him. He whispered in her ear.

“Should I leave? Sounds like she is running out of food.”

Lucy looked at him balefully and whispered back, “She has plenty of food, Mike, it’s okay.” Michelle streamed over to them as if on cue, her eyes not meeting Mike’s.

“What are you two whispering about?” She turned towards Martin. “Hola Marteen!” She exclaimed cheerfully. Lucy saw that perhaps she had been attracted to Martin all along.

“Hola, Michelle. Que pasa con ustedes?” He returned in bad Spanish. Lucy and Mike watched the exchange of high school Spanish with feigned interest. Lucy was summarily introduced to Martin’s parents. Saren Chen was a tall woman, thin and beautiful in a masculine way, Germanic. Lucy could see her striding down a Parisian catwalk quite easily. Kevin Chen, Martin’s father, was equally stately, his dark brown eyes bright with the fire of extreme intelligence. Lucy could see the resemblance of Martin to both of his parents as plain as day. She could tell that they too would find their legs jutting awkwardly from the petite furniture. Perhaps that was the reason that they both remained standing.

“You have a very talented son,” was her opening line.

Saren and Kevin lavished compliments upon her performance that made her blush as Martin looked at her adoringly, nodding in agreement. She was conscious the whole conversation of Michelle, trying to divine what the girl was planning to do.

Dinner consisted of three courses. It pained Lucy to see Mike eating so sparsely. She knew his appetite from many a homemade dinner and knew also that he had taken Bitch Vorsack’s comments to heart. She had tried to shift the subject of conversation away from herself and was even managing successfully until Chen the father addressed her.

“Who on earth did you study violin with?”

Michelle jumped in.

“You’re self-taught, aren’t you, Lucy?” She looked around the table, all eyes upon her.

“Yes, mostly. I studied violin with a teacher when I was younger,” she said.

“Was that before or after you became a vampire?” Michelle questioned her casually, as if it were an interview. Lucy cringed, her eyes widening. So Michelle’s plans were to out her in front of an audience.

“Excuse me?” Mike threw Michelle a strange look, bursting into a grin.

Michelle repeated herself brashly, “A vampire, silly. Before or after?”

Lucy paled. She had to think of something fast, or her reaction would start to make believers out of everyone. Diane Vorsack clicked her tongue in a “tsk”. It reverberated in the silence.

Lucy chose her words carefully. “Michelle, I think that you are the victim of an extremely overactive imagination. Have you been inhaling the fumes inside Missy’s car?” She had pushed the exact right button. The room seemed a vacuum. Mike chortled. Mr. Vorsack echoed him. The rest of the crowd followed suit with weak laughter.

“Don’t lie to everyone, Lucy! You know it’s the truth!” Michelle defended herself.

Martin’s eyes seemed about to pop out of his head. Mr. Vorsack rose from the table and departed for the bathroom, mumbling something about a Tylenol. Martin’s parents looked at each other in embarrassed, silent communication.

“That’s enough, Michelle!” Diane snapped in the ugly raised voice of the enforcer. “To your room!” Michelle covered, her face flushed with anger. She pulled her chair with a mild creak and marched towards the stair. She was still good at following orders.

The remainder of dinner was surreal and stilted. Martin scrutinized Lucy more closely, but Lucy could tell that Michelle’s credibility had been damaged as her stifled sobs were heard upstairs. The threadbare remainders of the dinner discussion hovered over the topics of obsessive fans of the science fiction and horror genres. Martin was the only person to directly address Lucy again, trying to reassure her that “real vampires melt in direct sunlight.”

Martin’s parents dragged their boy out by his ear immediately after dessert, claiming that they had a wedding to attend the next day. Lucy stole her last chance to observe Martin Chen, looking provocatively into his

eyes as the door was shut. He met her eyes with his fiery black gaze. From what she could tell, he truly had convinced himself that he was in love with her, but she knew that his ardor would fade eventually inasmuch as she knew John's would.

Diane Vorsack tried to disguise the fact that she was livid, her daughter's buffoonery having driven off the prestigious dinner guests before the after-dinner drinks could be served. Lucy could sense her mental resolution to nip Michelle's burgeoning obsession with the occult in the bud. Lucy could see Diane's clear dislike of her, the foster background she had come from, and the single mysterious episode with the police that had inflamed the gossips from all the corners of town. Many knew Diane's disdain for the Beck family as well, "who would take in any stray that arrived mewling at their doorstep."

Mike left shortly after Martin's parents. Lucy kissed him on the cheek.

"What's that for?" He said.

"For luck." She said to him. He waved a cordial goodbye. Knowing Diane's feelings towards her family, Lucy was inwardly shocked when Diane invited her to stay.

"No, stay, Lucy." Diane purred. "I made two fruit pies and now I have no one to eat them. Go up and get my daughter so we can have some homemade pie." Lucy's nagging worry raised its own status to full blown alarm.

Mr. Vorsack looked pale and pink. Diane suggested to him that he retire early, and he did so agreeably, half-knowing it to be an order. Lucy trudged upstairs behind

him and he put his hand on her shoulder and said, "I'm sorry about this evening." The hand lingered too long.

"It's okay. She's got a great imagination." Lucy replied, and brushed past him on the stair. She could feel his eyes surreptitiously scanning her backside. She rapped on Michelle's door loudly.

"Michelle, it's me, Lucy. Your Mom says to come downstairs for dessert." Michelle opened the door.

"Come in." She sniffled. Lucy entered the room. The small bed's hospital corners had been put into disarray by Michelle's crying fit. Michelle sat on her bed, which emanated scents of powdered laundry detergent and Sweet Honesty perfume.

"You haven't told a lot of people in school that I'm a vampire, have you?" Lucy asked Michelle in earnest.

"No, the only person I told before tonight was my mother and father. Neither of them believed me. But I proved it to them! Oh yeah, I told John, but I don't think he believes me either." Michelle's tone grew livelier and more excited.

"He knows." Lucy said, frowning.

"Have you turned him yet?" Michelle whispered hotly, trying not to raise the volume of her voice.

"Girls." Diane's voice resonated up the stairs. Lucy gestured to Michelle to follow her downstairs.

"You mustn't say anything more to your mother, Michelle." Lucy instructed. "If I am to turn you into a vampire, she cannot know." Michelle nodded in solemn agreement.

Diane spooned warm apple-rhubarb pie onto the girl's plates, topping each with scoops of ice cream. They sat down at the dining room table which seemed empty and

huge in the stark, white-walled room. Lucy ate without passion. Diane spoke first.

“Michelle, I don’t ever want to hear you mention the subject you mentioned at dinner again.” Michelle groaned and stopped eating dessert.

“Okay, Mom. I’m sorry I ruined dinner. I’m sorry Lucy.” She said in Lucy’s direction.

“So Lucy, I hear that you are quite the violin player. How long have you been playing?” Lucy breathed an internal sigh of relief. Diane seemed more interested in the prestige of her violin skills than in the more sordid subject of her vampirism. But she could see that Diane watched her more closely now, and in a cat-like way. The small predator subconsciously acknowledged the larger one.

“Can Lucy and I go out for a walk?” Michelle interrupted the violin conversation petulantly.

“Why do you need to go for a walk, Michelle?” Diane asked darkly.

“I feel fat! I already gained five pounds last week because I was stuck in bed with my ear infection. I’m turning into a big fat cow.”

“Fine. You can go for a walk with Lucy.” Diane gave permission quickly, evidently glad to get the girls out of the house.

The two girls put on shoes and started walking towards the north side of town. The tree-lined streets were silent except for the sporadic revving of glass packs down Church Avenue.

Lucy spoke once they had turned the corner.

“So, do you want to become a vampire?” Michelle was quietly delighted.

“Can you turn me into one?”

“Yes, I can turn you into one tonight. Isn’t that why we are out here?”

“Why did you deny you were a vampire? Why are you keeping it a secret?”

“I do not share the fact that I am a cannibal with the human race. You would do best not to admit to such things either after becoming a vampire. How did you discover I was a vampire in the first place?”

“I did some research for a few weeks after you got questioned by the police. I’m very resourceful, you know.”

“Yes, you have a sharp mind. You’ll need that. What were your findings?” Lucy asked.

“I found not one but two photos when I researched the death of the McCloskeys. One from 1966, a yearbook photo reprinted in a newspaper. It was you! It was exactly you, but it was probably the photo they thought it was your mother! I dug it up after combing the Reader’s Guide To Periodical Literature for like, six hours straight. The other photo was a picture from 1926 subtitled Lucia Iovelli where you were holding a violin at a music recital! Then I found another picture of you, but this time it was a painting. It was painted in the early seventeenth century by a minor artist named DuPre. The resemblance was amazing! And some man—he was good-looking—was in the background. Who was he?”

“Intriguing. The man was my husband. Perhaps you will meet him someday.” Lucy said as they walked nearer to the floodlit area of an expansive new subdivision where ground was still being broken.

“But that’s not all. I had a hunch. I looked up the

name Iovelli. I could tell it was Italian, you see. Then I cross-checked it with the name Alberti. I slaved over it, contacted half a dozen genealogy groups and came up with zilch. It was common name, so I was thrown off the scent. That is, until I investigated Iovelli-Alberti in the Fourteenth Century!”

They reached a part of the subdivision dubbed “The Treehouse”, a popular hangout for edgy teens who smoked joints in its foundation pits.

“Be careful,” Lucy cautioned Michelle as she sidestepped a two by four studded with upturned nails. “I’ll turn you here.” Lucy gestured to the Treehouse, which had been roofed and framed. She could feel Michelle’s nervousness leaching into her spine. “Are you sure you want to do this?” Lucy asked.

“Does it hurt?” Michelle asked.

“Not much. You might get faint, but you can fight it.” Lucy reassured. They walked across a moat of pea gravel that crunched like noisy cereal under their feet. Lucy led Michelle to the skeleton of the newly emerging two-story. Pale, flesh-colored light filtered in through the corners of the house. The scent of cloying pine dust filled the air as floodlights shone eerily through the jungle gym of new wood.

“Please have a seat.” Lucy gestured to the rough plywood floor. “Close your eyes.”

Michelle sat in a yogi’s posture on the cold plywood, her eyes closed as if meditating.

She did not see the metal pole swing toward the back of her skull, nor did she feel her own blood spoiling her light hair after the dull crack of metal broke her flesh. Lucy stared like an automaton at Michelle’s unconscious

body, revolted at her own actions to the point of shock. She cut a deep gash into her own arm with a steel screw, loosing drops of her own blood onto the floorboards. She pulled a few strands of her hair from her head to leave with Michelle's. It probably still wouldn't help.

Suddenly, she heard the crunch of new feet on the gravel. She ducked behind a pile of unused drywall.

“How have you been, my dear? Up to no good, I see.”

Virtualventures

REUNITED

Sebastian stood in an empty door frame, smiling.

She crept out of the shadows. He looked exactly as she had dreamed him, handsome, rigidly dressed in a black suit, his hair still half gray, his eyes green and flashing like a cat's.

"How did you find me?" She asked.

"I have my methods. You were delicious in concert, by the way." He walked from his door frame to stand nearer to her. She was mentally transported for an instant to the old castle in Herculis. Her momentary instinct was to run to him and be comforted, like the old times. She refrained.

"I don't have time for this. Go away!"

"Why kill this one, Lucia? She shall be missed. Besides, I thought you despised killing women."

"She wanted to become a vampire." Lucy replied. "I had to."

"Is that so wrong, to want to live forever?"

"It is wrong to if the price is murder." Lucy stated.

"If you say so, my pet. Now, let's get down to business."

Lucy looked at Michelle's pretty face, rendered corpse-like and frozen by unconsciousness. Blood dripped down one side of her forehead. Her mouth lolled open and drool seeped down one corner.

"I hate this!" Lucy accused him, pointing to the Michelle. "You know that I have always hated this!" She

looked down at Michelle's pitifully bloody head, her body barely hanging on to its breath.

"And yet you still live, Butterfly." Sebastian snorted. He scooped up Michelle's unconscious body. His car, a black Alfa Romeo, waited at the end of the subdivision.

"Put her in the trunk." She refused. Michelle was laid onto the back seat, her head cradled in Lucy's lap. Michelle moaned and Lucy, unable to help herself, stroked her hair. Sebastian traveled at seventy, eighty, then one-hundred down the freeway. Old farmhouses loomed as they whizzed by, left behind in the gray like mourners.

"Where are we going?" Lucy asked desperately as Michelle began to twitch with greater frequency.

"To Hell if we don't change our ways." Sebastian replied merrily, his eyes fixed on the road. Michelle awoke suddenly, violently. Her scream shook the windows of the sedan.

"Cut her throat!" Sebastian snapped. Lucy clapped a hand over Michelle's mouth and struck her neck with a swift blow to the carotid artery. The blood temporarily halted to her brain, Michelle slept peacefully again.

"If I cut her neck, you'll never get the stains out of your fancy car."

"Point taken." Sebastian drove on.

Sebastian slowed the car after they had traveled seventy miles into the countryside. She was faint from hunger, her head spinning into dizziness, the blood madness readying for battle. She felt anger at Sebastian, anger at the thrill that she felt in her loins upon seeing him, anger at herself for never having the courage to end her own life.

The madness crept around her like smoke under a door. The dizziness made the trees sickening, the smell of Michelle's perfume soapy and revolting. After what seemed like an eternity he turned right onto a dirt road that ended unceremoniously at a copse of leafless trees. He stopped short of a group of adolescent saplings and turned the ignition off. She exited solemnly, retrieving and carrying Michelle's unconscious figure into the forest like a reluctant bridegroom. Sebastian dug through the viscous layers of foul-smelling clay with a shovel, each successive insertion creating an obscene sucking noise that ate at her sanity.

Lucy propped Michelle against a thick, knobby tree stump. She examined Michelle's pale face. She was nearly dead.

"I am sorry that I have murdered you." Lucy said softly. Michelle's eyes opened, her body paralyzed. Her eyes were glassy and shining.

"Why do you kill me?" Michelle asked.

"For no other reason than you talk too much." Lucy embraced Michelle and pierced her neck with elongated canines, one hand clamped over Michelle's biting, screaming mouth. It took a long two minutes for Michelle to die, and she struggled hard before she was put down.

Sebastian observed coolly, savoring the outline of Lucy's feral figure hunching over Michelle's gradually diminishing body. Lucy finished Michelle off, leaving only a dry, unrecognizable husk.

She passed him silently as she dropped Michelle's dried corpse into the open clay pit awkwardly, like a discarded doll.

She peered up at him. He smiled tenderly. “My dear sweet Lucia.” He began. She interrupted.

“Take me back. I have unfinished business.”

“It would be my pleasure, madame.” He made a grand gesture towards the car, his smile broadening.

They parked a block away from Michelle’s house in the opposite direction of where the Beck’s lived. Lights were on and Michelle’s mother was up, occasionally pacing as Michelle and Lucy had been gone for over two hours. Lucy could see the anger in her silhouette, the punishments and the grounding being formulated for the now dead daughter. Diane did not hear the footsteps on her brick patio or the audible click of the back door lock being compromised. She saw Lucy darkening her doorstep and stood from the recliner.

“Lucy! Where is my daughter? Where have you . . .” Sebastian slipped the piano wire around her throat, silencing her immediately. She gurgled.

“Stupid cow.” He whispered to himself as her eyes bulged, arms flying furiously.

Lucy slipped upstairs silently. Mr. Vorsack sat alone at his computer in his pajamas. She entered the room in the shadows. He turned, expecting to see his wife. He was entranced as she walked towards him.

“Well, hello there.” He said to her, quite unsure of whether or not he was dreaming.

“Shhh.” She whispered. “Don’t let them know I’m here.” She caressed his cheek seductively with her left palm and he closed his eyes in dreamy anticipation. She brought Sebastian’s chloroformed rag up to his face with her right.

They walked two by two to the car, looking the part of

two weary spouses supporting their drunken mates after an all-night bender.

It was only when they had sped back into the country that Sebastian asked, “Why kill the parents of the girl? What did they ever do to you?”

“The girl had effectively gone public with my little vampire secret, Sebastian. I did not wish to be hounded by her family and a bunch of other scientific desperados for the rest of the millennia, did you?”

“Then come live with me again, it is safer.” He said.

“I can survive on my own.” She stated.

“Have you not missed me?” He inquired.

“To my chagrin, I have.”

“Then come back.” He commanded.

“Why?”

“I still love you.”

“So you think.” She said bitterly. He became angry. “So I see that you have become content with your hardscrabble existence, your week-to-week survival, your Martin Chen!”

“Who?”

“Your limp-wristed lover!”

“Um . . . okay.”

“I should have his head on a platter!” Sebastian exclaimed dramatically.

She closed her eyes, discerning the divinations he had been up to during her violin concert.

“Touch a hair on his head and you will insure that I will never make love to you again.”

He digested her statement as part threat and part promise. “You cannot give me ultimatums.” He replied.

“I mean it. You’ll never even see me again, for that

matter. Leave Martin Chen and his family alone.”

“Fine. At any rate, I can see that you’re not protecting him at all. It’s obvious you have eyes for someone else. Perhaps that other boy who visited you backstage at the concert.” He mumbled, driving on.

“Why come after me after all these years, Sebastianus? Haven’t you found any sycophants to convert, any nubile young nymphets to bring into the cannibal flock?”

“Why should I do that if there is still the chance of you?”

“What if there could be no chance of me? How do you know you can have me?”

“I see your game. You would rather live like the scum of the earth, in that little brown hovel you call a house, in bourgeois paradise.”

“I can’t go back to the Beck’s ever again. For your information, it was paradise there. At least for one moment, it was. For a short time they allowed me to share the warmth of their lives. They almost made me feel like they were mine. I will remember them, Sebastian, along with my mother and father, and all the others I came to love and lose.”

“Will you remember me?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Hah!” He threw his head back. “Always planning for death. Your life is like a funeral March. Sometimes I think you would have been much better off if you had been born in death-worshipping Egypt instead of in the Fourteenth Century.”

“What is it that I should plan for in life?”

“Life itself is glorious enough.” He said.

“Sometimes it is not bad.” She agreed.

They pulled up to the same spot where Michelle's and the young man's bodies were, already attracting dust and creeping bugs in the pit. They unloaded Michelle's sleeping parents who had been propped up in the back seat, necks craned against each other.

"Don't they look like a pair of young lovers sleeping off a tryst?" He observed.

"These two haven't been lovers for a long time." She replied dryly.

He took Diane out. Her thick body was heavy and massive. Sebastian drank deeply and quickly of her blood. She took Mr. Vorsack. He did not come out of his chloroform coma and sailed weakly to his death. She nursed at his neck as he peacefully slumbered through being killed. Even in death, Vorsack was not a man. The mummies were tossed into the collection.

He began shoveling dirt over the bodies. She gathered stones to place upon the makeshift grave.

"We're going to be found out someday. There will be no avoiding it." Lucy commented as the mud was smoothed around the grave site.

"Just hope that the ground doesn't shift and unearth them." He answered as they hauled huge remainders of stumps and ragged rocks to the grave to make it difficult to trespass upon. They were filthy after the burial. Her white shirt was mired with a central bloodstain, his pants caked with mud.

They found a river pool and disrobed together as they had for hundreds of years. She could tell that he was leering at her. She leaned over and kissed his cheek innocently. He groped her buttocks.

"I'm not in the mood right this instant." She growled.

“Curse that boy!” He chuckled and stomped the water.

A missing persons report was filed for Lucy within twenty-four hours of her disappearance. It took the relatives of the Vorsack family a few more days to file their own. Two separate search parties were formed to hike the areas near the Greene River as a panic spread over the town of Princeton Hills. Blood and hair was found at Lot forty-eight in the Hometown Oaks subdivision, leading police to suspect that Lucy Albert and Michelle Vorsack had been abducted, possibly raped. But no one could explain the disappearance of Michelle’s parents, nor could the police find a fingerprint or even a clothing fiber to trace what had happened to them. They were loath to admit to the public that the case would be closed in a few years for sheer lack of forensic evidence.

John knew better. He sat alone in his brother’s old car night after night that summer, staring blankly at the red sky beyond the abandoned farmhouse where she had once shown him her secrets. He waited for hours after dusk but she never arrived. People hounded him about the disappearances mercilessly for weeks after the concert, first the police, then the Becks, then people from school.

The pain in Cathy and Shari Beck’s faces upset him the most, but the posters with a close up of her face they had put all over town made his heart ache more. He knew she was out there, he could feel it. He also knew that she was the one responsible for the murders of Diane, Eric, and Michelle Vorsack on a single night. She had eaten them, murdered them routinely, and yet he loved her still. He hated himself a little for it.

His parents suggested that he go into therapy. He went to Harvard instead.

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EPILOGUE

She paced the Manhattan neighborhood, her backpack swinging, marveling at the austere buildings gleaming silver in their starkness. The sky was dripping a wet, slow rain that had forced the city's inhabitants into taxicabs and dingy cafeterias, the day wholly ruined for all except the insane schizophrenics and her.

She had found the location of his firm on the internet on a library computer, tracing him to this place in New York where he practiced criminal law. He was part of the firm Martyska, Seeberg, and Diedermayer. His number was unlisted and unpublished. It was dangerous for her to dare approaching him and she knew the tremendous risk she was taking, but a part of her demanded that he be found. She would just have to show up and hope for the best.

He left his office at 5:39 according to her watch. She had been sitting on the bench for two and a half hours, which was uneventful except for the homeless men who begged for change. In the rush of commuters he did not see her boarding his train. She was curious to know why he had boarded a dingy train instead of hailing a cab or his own private chauffeur like the others in expensive suits were doing. He had become an extremely handsome man, his hair having darkened and his shoulders having realized their full size. Businesswomen in pointy-toed shoes swooned coyly in his direction, tipping their noses over their glossy magazines to admire

him. She counted three on the way to the train and four more on the crowded car that would have gladly taken him to bed with not so much as a word. She kept her face downcast. She dared not look directly at him, her head obscured by a gray hoodie, she had the slumped appearance of an androgynous adolescent. She stole her glances sideways like the rest of the women.

He got off at Canal, and she exited behind the crowd. He was six blocks away from his home, a ten story building apparently made solely of glass. He disappeared into its thick doors like a magician's rabbit. She waited a few minutes, then greeted the burly doorman who stood as the building's lone sentry.

"Ciao." She had recognized the doorman as Sicilian immediately.

He brightened as she took off her hood. "Ciao, Fragolina." He greeted her.

"Buon Primomaggio." She said warmly.

The doorman replied, tipping his cap, "I don't speak much Italian these days, not since my mother died." He crossed himself and grinned. "Bless you, sweetheart. What brings you here?"

"I'm here to see my uncle. His name is John. He just walked in a few minutes ago."

"Oh, you mean Mr. Diermeyer, sweetheart? He just went in. I didn't know he had Italian relatives. I'll buzz him for you."

"Please don't let him know I'm here yet. Could you just let me in? I have a surprise for him." She pulled a small blue box out of the pocket of her hoodie. "It's his birthday."

"Sure thing, kid. You go cheer him up. He's been

lookin' a little down lately. Birthdays just ain't the same once you get old kiddo. You promise me you'll never grow old, you hear?"

"I promise." He smiled and buzzed her in to the glass doors, which opened by an unseen electronic hand. She traced him by his scent. It was easy to recognize, the one thing that had stayed the same over the years. He had made it even easier by walking up the steps instead of taking the elevator. She could smell him almost as strongly as she could the new paint on the fire escape walls, along with the wool suit and the weird polyester smell of his wet umbrella.

He lived on the seventh floor behind a winding set of hallways that towered over her in their grayness. Even the abstract paintings on the wall were gray.

She trailed him to his apartment and a black door that read 727 in solemn gold-tone lettering. She pushed. The door leaned inward. It was open.

She tiptoed into the entryway where some decorator had placed a live orchid upon a glassy ebony table. She heard the television blaring away. She shut the door behind her.

She spied him sitting on his armless black couch, his feet splayed as he stared at his television blankly. He had not bothered to take off his raincoat and his umbrella sat dripping on his modern ice cube of a table.

"Hello, John." She side-stepped into his living room from behind a square white column. His head turned sideways towards the noise, his brows scowling.

"What the hell . . ."

"John, do you remember me at all?"

"Lucy?!" He cried in disbelief.

“Yes!” She answered, feeling joy and fear well in her chest.

“You’re . . . still a kid!” He said. “You’re exactly as I remember you!”

“Forever fifteen, remember?” She stepped closer to him into the light of the television screen. He flipped the television off. His face fell.

“Why didn’t you come back? Lucy, I needed you to come back, just once. God, Lucy, what’s it been, how many years?”

“I’m so sorry, John.” She looked at her toes. “I knew that you waited at the farmhouse. I watched you wait at the farmhouse! But I couldn’t compromise your safety! You must have realized that!” She lowered her voice to a loud whisper.

“You killed them, didn’t you?” He said. She looked around the apartment for other people.

“There’s no one here except me.” He said.

“I murdered them, John. Killed is too kind a word.” She felt strange confessing herself to a criminal attorney.

“How did you find me?” He asked.

“I’ve been following you for many years. I hung around Harvard a little when you were there.”

“No shit.”

“Yes, shit.” She replied. “It’s your birthday today, May Day.”

“You remembered. Yeah, I’m thirty-seven.”

“Happy Birthday to you.” She took the blue box from her hoodie and held it towards him.

“Tiffany’s?” He looked at her comically.

“Just the box only. Open it.” She said.

He opened the box. Inside was the blue stone she had lost in the 1800's. She had found it in 1988, the year of the stock market crash. It had showed up at an auction at Sotheby's after someone had sold it. It had been easy to steal.

"You found the cabochon? After all these years?" He asked, incredulous.

"Someone must have found it and taken good care of it. It's an emerald." He examined the emerald in his hands and placed it carefully on the glass table.

"Thank you." He said. He leaned forward to embrace her. She stepped into his arms. They were familiar but more massive. She breathed deeply of the starch of his shirt.

"Don't you have a wife? Where are your children?" She asked.

He drew her to him with his hands upon her waist. He placed his chin upon the top of her head.

"You're getting too old to put things off, John. Women want a father young enough to keep up with the children as they get older." She admonished.

"Lucy, have you noticed that I don't even own a dog?" He spoke into her hair. He pulled her from him to kiss her on the mouth and paused, looking into her face. She stepped backwards.

"Yes, I see that. I followed you home on the train." She looked around the apartment again. It engulfed them in black, white, and gray. "Your home is very . . . mm. . . modern."

"You meant to say 'morbid'."

"Well, perhaps it is a bit depressing. You should have a dog." She replied, smiling awkwardly.

“I was beginning to think that I would never see you again, Lucy. I’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

“How are the Becks doing? Are they okay?”

He smiled.

“They’re all doing great. I go back about once a year. Cathy opened her beauty shop, you know. Shari managed it after graduating beauty school. It did so well that they sold it in the nineties. Larry was able to retire. They live in Arizona now, just as happy as ever from what I hear. Shari’s married and got two kids on her, a boy and a girl, twins, no less. God, how old are they now? They must be teenagers. Mike’s a fireman and he’s got kids too. I believe he’s divorced. He’s out in Phoenix last I heard.”

“I’m so glad. They were so good to me. I miss them so.” She appraised him. “Have you never met a suitable wife? What is wrong with getting married and having children as Mike and Shari have done? I should love to think . . .”

“Of how beautiful my children would be?” He finished her sentence. “I don’t want children, Lucy. I don’t want a family in the suburbs and Christmases at the Florida house and summers at the Hamptons. I don’t want to get old or to watch my kids get married or retire. Those are all nice things, but it’s not what I want. It’s my choice, Lucy. I want to be with you. I want you to turn me.” He said.

She looked down tassels of his shiny shoes with a scowl.

“You are certain of this.”

“I’ve been certain of it for years.”

“You will have to murder people and drink them up in order to live. Does this not disturb you?”

“Of course it disturbs me. I’m not a psycho.” He said.

“You will always have to run from normal people and normal life, John. Even your family. It would not be wise to ever see your family again if you do not wish them to come to harm. You will sever ties with your own kin?”

“Yes. My father died a year ago, by the way.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I realize I can’t see my mom or brother again. At least I can’t talk to them.”

“Above all, no one except I can know what you are. Anyone else who finds out must be killed, otherwise, you insure death or worse for us. In this state of knowledge you will be horribly, irrevocably, alone.”

“I know.” He replied solemnly, looking straight into her eyes.

He drew her to him and tipped her chin towards him. He kissed her deeply and hungrily. She felt surges of longing escape every corner of her flesh. It was painful to want him so much. She untucked his starched shirt, running her hands along his smooth torso and underneath his arms. He moaned.

He tugged at the overly large hooded sweatshirt, which she unzipped and let fall to the ground. He fondled her naked breasts with his fingers, then his mouth. He squatted and threw his arm around the backs of her knees. He carried her into his bedroom as she unfastened the tiny white buttons of his shirt. He threw her on the bed. He sucked at her neck, biting her hard, leaving red marks that disappeared as soon as he made them. She undid his zipper and pulled his shorts down his hips.

“I’ll ruin your suit.” She whispered as she pulled his

erection free of the elastic.

“I’ll buy a new one.” He whispered back as he pulled her pants and underwear off of her trembling legs. He lowered himself onto her and entered her slowly, an inch at a time. She cried out his name in ecstasy. His technique had gained much subtlety over the years. The boy she had loved was gone. She could not keep herself from reaching orgasm, and could barely contain the desire to claw him as she came and her canines expanded. She wrapped her legs about his hips as he raised himself upon straight arms, piercing her with his gaze as he thrust into her.

“Turn me.” His rhythm slowed to a grind. “Do it now.” He demanded as she opened her eyes and stopped moaning. She pulled him down by his lapels and arched her head readily towards his neck. She stabbed him with her canines. He winced from the wasp-like sting. She proffered her neck towards him.

“Now bite as hard as you can, John.” He bit, feeling the numb desire to maul her. Her blood spurted into his mouth and he drank. He felt his orgasm explode into her as his mouth was filled with bitter, metallic blood. He felt himself collapse heavily onto her naked body, still inside her. Dizziness overcame him like anesthetic and he slept.

He drifted in and out of consciousness. He was aware of trying to scream because he was paralyzed and his legs would not move. For hours he seemed to have pleasant dreams of open skies and airplanes, but then the dreams would disintegrate into fleshy charnel house nightmares where he could hear her calling to him through a fog. He saw his father, calling to him from an icy white tunnel, beckoning to him. He cried out but his father only waved

like an automaton until the apparition disappeared. He felt hands tugging at him, mysterious creatures with long fingers and sharp nails that pulled at his flesh. He was sickeningly aroused by their hands as he slipped in and out of consciousness.

He woke up with a start and the alarm clock read 4:46 P.M. A dull light shone through the open window blinds and softened the room with parchment yellowness. She was leaning over him and he smelled her like he had never smelled anyone before. She had a bittersweet fragrance, like dusty books and honeysuckle. It was the same smell that she had in his memory, but now it was definite, palpable, like a perfume. He reached for her and she stroked his head soothingly as his mother had done a few times when he had suffered bad fevers.

“How are you feeling?” She asked with grave concern in her voice.

“Not too bad. I can smell you. What happened? Did you turn me?”

“Yes, my love.”

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About the Author

Kimberly Steele grew up in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois and currently resides in Naperville, Illinois. She and her husband have no children and ten computers.

She is the creator of the free audiobook version of Forever Fifteen, thirty-four chapters available to stream, download, or podcast free of charge at the official website www.foreverfifteen.com.

Two sequels are planned for Forever Fifteen.

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