



LUCELLI'S DAUGHTER

By

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Dipping his finger into the sperm pooled in her navel, he traced the outline of a small heart between her bare breasts. She looked at him and shook her head in silent warning. In the melting light of the candles circled about her bedroom, he couldn't tell if her brown eyes—the kind that don't get caught in headlights but were as round as the stout bucks his father and younger brother hunted in the Catskills—were glad to see him again. He'd come and gone as he pleased. She never argued.

She leaned down and pushed away his hand, kissing him and not minding the taste of pot on his breath. "Tell me again." She was bored. The plasma screen on her bedroom wall was on mute. The scene was from some HBO show about a lesbian with a three-legged dog that was blind in one eye.

He wanted more of her, right then, all the time, beyond the time they had tonight.

“It happened years ago.” The stories circulated around town she had gone crazy from all the secrets her husband made her keep. Some thought they were *all true*, others just the whispers of a frustrated village contemptuously sniping at its most beautiful woman. Regardless, the mystique was intoxicating, like a morning’s sun slicing through the fog embracing it.

“So?” She was curious about why he hadn’t told her about it years ago when they first met. His ambivalence years ago shaded it like a secret kiss between brother and sister. “I mean, it is kind of strange what happened, don’t you think?”

Something from the past whistled like a train in the distant night, on the horizon.

He laughed. His hair was wet from the sex. He didn’t like the way she was quiet during her orgasms. Her father wasn’t home. Her room smelled like cranberries and Tampax.

“It was strange how the notes just *stopped*.”

As a child, he walked the same route home every day from school: down Sunset Boulevard until he reached Hill Street then north until he reached Washington Lane. While she was stroking her fingers through his hair, the rings feeling cool against his scalp, he could remember the sound of the Gustavson’s dog barking as he walked by or the rhythmical bell of the Good Humor ice cream truck driven by Nate Montrose, whose father had been a slave. The pavement smelled of summer and he always carried around a baseball in the back pocket of his Wrangler’s.

“Were you scared when you read the first one?” she asked. He was teasing her, not because it felt good but because he didn’t trust her. She was young and could not hold water. “I mean, coming from the window of Cotter House?” The only thing she actually knew about Cotter House was from the stories she’d heard around the parlor.

He liked that about her – the lack of foundation to his heart, really just tethers of sex.

Cotter House stood at the intersection of Sunset and Hill. As Sunset ended, you could see the large wings of the old three-story mansion looming ahead on the corner of hill like a giant traffic guard inviting children into a busy intersection. It was the town's oldest building and during the five years his family resided along the shores of the Hudson home to mentally ill patients some wealthy residents refused to part with. The community only threw out its trash.

"It almost hit me in the head." It was November when the first note, in the form of a paper airplane thrown from an open window of Cotter House, missed taking out his left eye by one step along the cracked sidewalk outside the home. "When it flew by I was thinking about kissing Karen Meyer on the bus ride home from a band concert. I mean, I never actually *kissed* her, but wanted to."

She leaned down and kissed him. "Go on."

He didn't like that: she would actually think one of her kisses would replace the Holy Grail of a twelve year old boy. Fifteen years later he could still see Karen the last year at school before his family moved south to Georgia. The jeans and peasant blouse could have belonged to any other girl in the junior high class but it was the dangle of the sandal as she would ponder a test question in Mr. Labuda's sixth period math class that would break his heart forever.

"I told you. I don't want to talk about it again." He had made a rule after his father died: saying something to someone *once* was good enough. If they didn't bother to remember it wasn't going to be his fault. When he played his father in chess the one and only time the game lasted forty minutes. He thought he was doing fine when his father pulled some Bobby Fischer move that cornered his queen and his hopes. When he lost, toppling his king, his father slapped him, knocking his glasses off and onto the board, scattering the remaining pieces.

The memory of his father pissed him off, thinking about his last words.

“Don’t ever fucking quit!” he croaked, his voice eaten up and degenerated from liquid codeine. Two months later his father died from colon cancer. He only received five thousand in the will; he blew it on Julie in Cabo for the weekend and woke up with a pair of coconuts Superglued to his crotch.

It was at the funeral he met Lucelli’s daughter. She was in a black Valentino dress that made her look older, like her sister Ijelda. Now he looked at her bare feet, curled down around one of his legs as they lay listening to Bob Dylan sing on the soundtrack to *The Soprano’s*. She had a tattoo of a crouching tiger on the bridge of her right foot.

“You don’t talk about *anything*. You tell me things like my cousin patches leaks in the cellars of ladies over on Council Bluffs Heights. Enough caulk and the drips stop searching for cracks to crawl through.” She patted his head like a mother would a precocious child. “Stop talking in your sleep about it.”

He had drifted off on her, the tightness of her stomach a hypnotic pillow that smelled of Ivory soap and patchouli as it trembled itself to stillness. He could see the piece of blue paper in his hands, folded meticulous and sharp, the nose of the airplane bent from where it tore into the pavement. He picked it up, looking over his shoulder at Cotter House, seeing an open window on the second floor. An old white curtain danced in and out with the breeze, teasing his eyes with the hint of a shadow standing back beyond the missing screen, shadows dissolving in and out from the blowing leaves of tall maples. He could see some lettering on the wing tip. Unfolding the airplane, he read the notation inside: *The madness in here is driving me insane. Please help.*

The memory of wetting his pants on the run home stained anew as her arms swayed him awake. He was calling out in his sleep for his brother, the only one home. He was calling out to

an empty house, to the end of his dream, to her waking face in the candlelight. Now she wanted to know why.

“I’m not giving you nightmares,” he swore, sitting up and reaching for his pack of Marlboro’s on her bedside table. There was a library card sitting underneath her cell phone. He couldn’t remember the last book he read.

“I live above a funeral parlor. Nobody’s throwing stones at my window at night.” She liked the way he tamped the cigarette against his Harley Davidson lighter. “She’s one of the richest ladies in town. No one knows how old she really is. They say Barrister Edwards comes by to notarize a new will every night before she says her prayers and goes to sleep.”

“And I won’t come in your mouth again.” The cigarette tasted good. He was hungry but didn’t want to ask her to go downstairs for some food. “Listen. I’m not going to complicate any more shadows. End of story.”

She bounced up on her knees, swinging her mane of black hair around and whipping it behind her shoulders. “Promises, promises. I bet you’re in her will.”

“Tell you what,” he told Lucelli’s daughter. “If I am, I’ll pull my hog up outside one night and toss a brick through your window. That should get the old man’s attention.” Lucelli’s day job was not planting the dearly departed.

“He liked you better when you weren’t in the business of breaking my heart.” She leaned forward and begged a puff of the Marlboro. He declined. When she pouted he got up and pulled on his Diesel jeans and t-shirt. “Something I said?”

“Told you,” he lied again. “I got to meet Gummo over at the Mag Bar. He’s got the two grand from this weekend’s football pool. That’s half your allowance this week, little girl.” She

slapped his ass as he buckled his belt. “Call me in the morning on your way to school. Maybe the bus driver will have a lollipop for you.”

As the night air cooled him off, he cut across Ravena Way and down a back alley that shunted out into Sunset Boulevard near the school. The Gustafson’s *For Sale* sign was still on the lawn. In the darkness he could see the yellow eyes of Cotter House in the distance. When he got to the corner, he stopped at the bench next to the *New York Times* machine and pulled the piece of paper from inside his jacket pocket. He reached back in, took out the pen, and used the cold metal desktop of the machine to pen the note.

He folded it and looked both ways before crossing the street. As he moved in front of Cotter House and along the sidewalk, he looked up at her second story. It was open and the light was off. He stepped up beside the maple and took aim, waiting for a slight wind to dissolve into stillness. The airplane launched from his fingers. He watched the note confessing he was in love with her daughter glide into the night and into her window.