

LOVE IS NOT THE ONLY THING

by Dennis Hiatt

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Luckily, my father tracked me down and took me to his parents. Because my father had to go to Europe to shoot a film and my grandparents were afraid my mother might swoop in at any moment, I was made to play out of sight in the basement most of the time. However, I was let out in the morning for breakfast. I guess they thought mother wasn't an early riser. My grandfather, who was advanced in years and going senile, would greet me every morning with, "My, who do we have visting us today?"

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thirteen, I was physically very adult and mother and I and my four half sisters lived in an eighteen room house on Telegraph Hill. There were nine phones, and mother had no job. I told everyone one I was sixteen and looked for work everyday. Daddy was in a rich phase, and I think he must have paid the rent, but we lived on food stamps and mother cried every night to God for help. Daddy was in love with a woman who worked on Sutter Street. He hired an airplane to skywrite her name, and then hired a man in a bear costume to roller skate to where she worked with a case of good champagne.

At twenty-six, I'm now fairly normal, but I lie more than I like. For instance, this morning I'd just finished breakfast and was having coffee with my lover, Marlow. I was reading the obituaries like I do every morning, because I'm a radiation tech for a major hospital. (When you get cancer, I'm the cheerful woman in white who blasts you with X-Rays hoping to kill The Bad Cells.) I read the obies every morning to see who we lost that night. (Actually everyone in the department reads them. It's considered poor form to be behind on who's gone.) This morning no one who's with us had died, but I see my mother has passed away.

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I shrug. " By the time they get to me...I save about half of them."

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cloud passes over his delicate face again. "What about lung cancer?"

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"Oh...gee...oh...Really?" She blinked, and backed toward the door.

I shrugged. " Her name's Miram Kay Lincoln. Check the obies."

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This woman was one of my favorite patients, and I was fairly sure I wouldn't be able to save her. I smiled bravely. "Now don't you worry about me Mrs. Washington. You just get well so I can get all that free legal advice you promised." Mrs. Washington became a lawyer late in life and was very proud of it.

But she missed her cue to smile and said, "Wendy, you come here and let me hold your hand." I did and damned if we both don't cry. Sandy watched us from the door and she looked sicker than Mrs. Washington.

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I started to weep and she kicked my foot out of the way and slammed the door. I stood there crying and screaming for them to open the door for ten minutes. They didn't so I took a cab home and went straight to bed. I had lied only six times that day, and it didn't seem very important.

Marlow woke me up at six AM with a cup of espresso and a wane smile. He was very still; and in the half light and shadows of our bedroom, he seemed very feminine and bird-like. After I had a sip, he lit a cigarette and handed it to me. We shared it and he told me how his night went. Marlow's a photographer for the Chronical. He spent most of his night listening to the police band radio. Last night they found the body of a young black hooker cut up so bad the paper couldn't use the photos. The tiny cup shook in my hand. He knew my past, so he must have thought he knew why I was shaking. In my best little girl "daddy-I-love-you voice", I told him a story that while true was also a lie. It began:
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When I was a very little girl--I was five--my mother and a black gentleman she was incarcerated with broke out of a mental institution and kidnapped me. Mother and her friend whisked me to a small farm town in Nebraska that was all black. In a week they were off again leaving me with his family.

Though they were very, very poor, they took care of me as best they could. The children juggled and did handstands to entertain me, and the older girls sang me songs. But as I said, they were very, very poor, and when I'd been there six months, they began to talk of turning me over to an orphanage.

Luckily, my father tracked me down and took me to his parents. Because my father had to go to Europe to shoot a film and my grandparents were afraid my mother might swoop in at any moment, I was made to play out of sight in the basement most of the time. However, I was let out in the morning for breakfast. I guess they thought mother wasn't an early riser. My grandfather, who was advanced in years and going senile, would greet me every morning with, "My, who do we have visting us today?"

Young as I was, I knew it wasn't normal to forget someone overnight.

I bounced between mother and father most of my childhood. Daddy made films, and mother alternately got religion or heroin. When I was twelve, daddy drug me through France filming MY DEAD CAT. (unreleased thank God!). At thirteen, I was physically very adult and mother and I and my four half sisters lived in an eighteen room house on

Telegraph Hill. There were nine phones, and mother had no job. I told everyone one I was sixteen and looked for work everyday. Daddy was in a rich phase, and I think he must have paid the rent, but we lived on food stamps and mother cried every night to God for help. Daddy was in love with a woman who worked on Sutter Street. He hired an airplane to skywrite her name, and then hired a man in a bear costume to roller skate to where she worked with a case of good champagne.

At twenty-six, I'm now fairly normal, but I lie more than I like. For instance, this morning I'd just finished breakfast and was having coffee with my lover, Marlow. I was reading the obituaries like I do every morning, because I'm a radiation tech for a major hospital. (When you get cancer, I'm the cheerful woman in white who blasts you with X-Rays hoping to kill The Bad Cells.) I read the obies every morning to see who we lost that night. (Actually everyone in the department reads them. It's considered poor form to be behind on who's gone.) This morning no one who's with us had died, but I see my mother has passed away.

Something must have shown on my face because Marlow asked, "Are you okay, Wendy?" He rested his handmade coffee cup on the Formica table top as if ready to take my hand.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I've got a lot of uterus and ovarian cancer this morning. It's fairly complex work and I'll be at a dead run until noon."

Marlow shook his beautiful head of hair (I love long hair on men.), took my hand, but instead of his normal sympathy, he gets a quizzical look on his face and asked, "Say, how many of those women will make it?"

I shrug. " By the time they get to me...I save about half of them."

His soft brown eyes brighten. "That's not so bad." The cloud passes over his delicate face again. "What about lung cancer?"

I shake my head. "Eighteen months from diagnosis."

"Oh." He lets his fingers slip away; we light up cigarettes and slyly look guilty as the devil at each other.

See it wasn't really a lie, but still I put it on my Daily Lie Scoreboard. I'm trying to taper off lying. I used to be quite the Little Lie Beast. Now, I'm not so bad. Yesterday, I counted twenty-eight lies. Today I'd made it until after breakfast before the first lie. Perhaps, I allow myself to hope, I might be truthful until noon or even later.

Riding BART to work, I wonder what I should feel about mother. I haven't spoken to her in four years. I could tell I felt a bit sad for the Half Sisters. The oldest, Fredella, was nineteen (last month I saw her working in a Burger King and talked with her for a minute) and the youngest, Samala, had just turned fifteen and needed braces. Their father Basil Gordon Lincoln, the black gentleman, had been gone quite a long time.

I'd punched in and was headed down the main hall in E wing with an arm full case histories, when I decided that I had to help the Half Sisters stay together, even if that meant saying good-bye to Marlow and moving in with them.

We will see if this is a lie.

As I passed the first floor nurses' station, Joan Carver, a fortyish, raw-boned hillbilly woman, flagged me down. "Wendy darling?" she said, looking like she'd just discovered she needed my professional services.

"Yes?" I veered into whispering range.

"Remember that sweet little hooker from LA who used to joke about using chemo therapy for birth control?"

I nodded. "The woman with that great tattoo on her tush?"

"Yeah." Joan lowered her voice to a really venomous whisper. "Well Honey, it's back and she's back and yesterday afternoon The Life Saver, 'cause she was running late, got

sloppy and fried the kid's spine."

"Holy Shit!" I spat. "Did they fire her?"

Joan looked me in the eye and shook her head real slow. "Smitt went to bat for her, and you know that ol' boy is slicker than a minnows' peter."

Sick, we both shook our heads and Joan sneered. "I reckon he told Dr. Raymond, it could have happened to anybody."

"Damn..." I hoisted up the folders to shield my breasts. "I've got to run, Joan." She nodded and turned back to a report.

The Life Saver was Sandy Warner. She didn't get the nick name because she was good, nor was it intended ironically. She wasn't all that bad either. Dr. "Slime Ball" Smitt had gifted Sandy with it because the Life Saver's candy motto was, "The candy with a hole in it."

We, the real people of the hospital, didn't use the tag and Sandy wasn't promiscuous. She was a shallow, suburban cheerleader, bleached blonde type who acts like the closest she'd come to musing her hair was dry humping a young lawyer. Sandy is a condescending shit to other techs and most of the orderlies and nurses. She is also, despite her lack of promiscuousness, like Joan says, "Tighter with Smitt than a flea's asshole stretched over a cannon ball." No one I knew liked Sandy, but we still treated her like she was human.

Speak of his imps and the Devil will appear. I turned the corner to X-Ray and ran into Dr. Smitt. I nodded because he was my boss and Smitt barked. "Say Hot and Juicy, (A joke on the Wendys Hamburger commercial.) what do you call a blonde who's dyed her hair brunette?" He's a big, white, polar bear of a man, and he knows I hate him. He is also brilliant in his field and no one, but no one, will ever file a sexual harassment suit against him, because if he moved on, our cure rate would drop by a third.

I shrugged. I had heard the joke, but I didn't count

this as a lie.

"Artificial Intelligence!" He grinned and snorted, well pleased with himself.

I made a sour smile. I am what you'd call a statuesque Mediterranean beauty and Smitt is dying to get in my pants. He quit snorting and I said. "If you don't mind Doctor, I have a busy morning."

He dismissed me with an airy, "Sure kid." But I could tell the idiot really thought I'd liked the joke and was kind of hurt. Perhaps he thought he was offering an ode to my dark skin. For my part, I didn't feel too bad about not telling him to fuck off. Four years ago I would have pulled a mother and batted my heavy eyelashes cooing. "Oh Doctor, that's mean."

On the ward, I was working rooms 707 to 713, and I was too busy to think about how I should feel about mother. Sandy was working 703 to 706 and when I bumped into her, I avoid her eyes. I had to work through my break and Sandy brought me a cup of coffee. It was the first time she'd done anything you'd call nice for me, and I thanked her tersely. She was all sunshine and big hair, and when I don't roll over and play happy puppy, she patted her big hair, and said. "Come on Wendy, anyone can make a mistake." When I didn't take my eyes off the chart, she added, kind of pissy, "It's not like she was Miss America or anything. I mean," she turned a pale shade of pink, "you don't have to act like your mother just died, you know she is going to die anyway."

I am dumb struck that even Sandy would say this in front of a patient. I looked her in the eye and dropped the coffee cup in a garbage can. "My mother died yesterday." While this is true it was also a lie and that made three.

"Oh...gee...oh...Really?" She blinked, and backed toward the door.

I shrugged. " Her name's Miram Kay Lincoln. Check the obies."

My patient, a really nice middle-aged black woman, lifted her head from the pillow and said, "Honey, are you alright?"

This woman was one of my favorite patients, and I was fairly sure I wouldn't be able to save her. I smiled bravely. "Now don't you worry about me Mrs. Washington. You just get well so I can get all that free legal advice you promised." Mrs. Washington became a lawyer late in life and was very proud of it.

But she missed her cue to smile and said, "Wendy, you come here and let me hold your hand." I did and damned if we both don't cry. Sandy watched us from the door and she looked sicker than Mrs. Washington.

On my lunch break I grabbed a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. Sandy was sitting with Dr. Smitt. He was grinning like a polar bear squatting by a hole in the ice waiting for a seal. She looked like she's been crying--hard. Randy "Boo-Boo" Jones, a black male nurse from NICU, whispered in my ear.

"The way I hear it is that Carver was making the rounds, getting up a collection for our little friend with the tattoo, and she asked The Life Saver if she wanted to kick in something besides X-Rays."

I whispered back. "Boo-Boo, don't be a shit head. Her name is Sandy."

"Not any more." He said in a low voice that was so cold it could cut to the bone, all the time looking with dead eyes at Sandy like she was the white world in micro-comic-cosm.

I paid for my coffee and headed for a pay phone.

Samala answers on the third ring. When she heard it was me, she started to cry. She said that I never loved Mother, and I should not come to the funeral. When she got that out, she started sobbing. I told her Love is not the only thing. I asked her how they planned on getting by. She just sobed louder. I told Samala to put Fredella on the phone, but she

choked out that Fredella was at the funeral parlor. I asked if Moria or Latona were home. After what seemed like forever, Latona, the seventeen-year-old came on the line.

"Wendy?" She asked.

"Yes, it's me."

"Go fuck yourself." She spat and hung up.

I stepped outside and had a cigarette with my lukewarm coffee. Several people looked at me like an angel in white shouldn't be sucking on a cancer stick. I ignored them; after all, I'm a dark angel.

After lunch, I was not real busy. I had a breast at one and two lungs at two thirty. I killed a little time by looking Mrs. Washington up. She was sick as was to be expected, but she seemed happy to see me. We chatted about law, and she told me some of her Public Defender stories. They were funny, and we laughed. As I was leaving Dr. Smitt lumbered in. Mrs. Washington smiled when he asked how she was feeling, and said. "Like the Supreme Court voided the sixth amendment."

I can tell from his face Smitt didn't know what the sixth amendment was. He grinned. "Well...I have days like that too, Mrs. Washington." He winked at me. "I'd bet even healthy old Wendy has her sixth amendment moments."

It was a dumb joke, but Mrs. Washington chuckled. Dr. Smitt and I leave. In the hall, he rested a paw on my shoulder. "Wendy, I'm really sorry to her about your mother." I looked away and shrugged and he enfolded me in a hug. It was a nice hug, not one that flattens my breasts to his chest. "If you need anything, anything at all, just give me a call. Okay?"

I backed away and met his eyes. "Save Mrs. Washington."

He shook his big head. His expression was like a boxer who has spent nine rounds being hammered on the ropes and wants desperately to kill his opponent. I know his angry mask covers genuine pain, and this was another reason we would

never file a suit on "Slime Ball" Smitt. "I'm trying," he said and turned, giving me his massive back as a dismissal.

Cutting across the parking lot, I ran into Joan. She was dressed in a jean dress with a beaded belt and black knee length boots with four inch heels. This must have been hillbilly chic or at least its kissing cousin. "Feel like hitt'n a honky-tonk, Wendy honey?"

I shook my head. "I'd love to, but I've got things that just can't be put off."

She shrugged, and said wearily. "Well, I reckon I need to get drunk and be somebody tonight."

I didn't know why, but I found myself blinking back tears. "Joan, you are somebody."

She snorted and disappeared into her little red, Toyota pick-up.

I stood shivering in my motorcycle jacket and watched Joan slam through the gears on her way out of the parking lot. For some reason, I had worn my punk clothes to work. Maybe it was because this was how the Half Sisters last saw me. I zipped the heavy jacket to the neck and ran up the concrete stairs that led to the street two at a time.

Waiting for the bus, I saw Sandy and Smitt drive out of the parking lot in his white Jaguar. I felt like puking.

The bus ride took forever, and yet it was over too quickly. I was four blocks from their house and the neighborhood had gone down hill. I fixed this I-know-where-I'm-going-and-it's-a-block-away look on my face, hoping I'd pass as a homegirl and strode to the house.

Fredella answered the door. Seeing it's me, her face clouded to cement. "The funeral's tomorrow at one o'clock. It's at Richmond's Chapel of the Dawn." She tried to close the door, but I had stuck my motorcycle boot in the way.

"How are the kids going to stay together, now that she's gone?" She hammered the door against my boot in answer. "Forget it F. They're steel-toed."

"What do you care?" Her eyes were red rimmed and she had her father's face with it's thick lips and broad squat nose. She was, even in her vast sorrow and ice-pick hate, a very beautiful woman.

"You can't support them by working at a Burger King." The door relaxed on my boot.

"I can get another job if I have too." Her eyes, mother's eyes, gave lie to her words.

I nodded. "Yes, you can whore like I did to make it through Radiology school."

The door slammed against my boot and Fredella hissed. "We may be just nigger half breeds to you and your goddamn famous father, bitch," She hammered the door for all it's worth. "But I'll burn in hell before we'll take your charity."

I started to weep and she kicked my foot out of the way and slammed the door. I stood there crying and screaming for them to open the door for ten minutes. They didn't so I took a cab home and went straight to bed. I had lied only six times that day, and it didn't seem very important.

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