

Broken Night

by Joe Tripician

Maybe I'm the type of girl who needs a problem, a terrifying complication just to feel real and alive. There was a time when feeling real and alive meant flirting with death. A period of time at once exhilarating and foolish and full of promise and painful self-reflection. But by then, it was all too late. Too sad. Too far gone.

I never thought of myself as provocative. Sometimes alluring, maybe tempting, but not truly promiscuous and never vicious. So it was with some surprise when I caught myself seriously considering Lucy's plan. Could I really seduce and rob a total stranger -- just on a dare?

Let me back up a bit. The first time I saw Lucy she stood facing me from the bar. Her eyes lassoing me like a speed-freaking rodeo cowboy. I grabbed Robbie and pulled him along to meet her, letting his hands deliberately rub against my boobs, feeling less like Princess Slut -- his nickname for me -- than a hunted prey irresistibly drawn to its hunter.

Her hair was a black shock of shag, and her lips were an evil ripe valentine any model would kill for. Lucy was the kind of sadist only a childhood of abuse could nurture. But at that time I mistook her quick wit and sideways snarl as the most cutting edge of fashion.

Speaking with her was like that escalating dizzying ascent you feel right before the drugs kick in. And with Lucy it didn't matter which drugs, because each trip was some form of bait and switch.

She invited us to her gallery show temporarily housed in a storefront of a Spanish Harlem tenement. Silver spray-painted calf skulls hung Calder-like from the sprinkler pipes. The walls were draped in thick black velvet, and a row of strong pin lights aimed on each skull turning them into sullen stars. The sick scent of industrial insecticide completed the atmosphere of precious and cherished death. It was a dream date soon to turn nightmare.

Lucy was finishing an unfiltered cigarette on an ivory holder. "Damien Hirst is so fucking hateful, and not just because of his success, although that's a big part of it."

Robbie and I smiled, nodded knowingly, our faces shallow pools of empathy. Lucy had a certain raw sweetness about her. She tilted her head, assured that this canted view of the world was correct, proud of her hard-won cynicism. She always looked you directly in the eyes. She treated us like her equals.

"Banksy, on the opposite side of the awesome-wretched scale, can do no wrong. His lyrical wallowing brings a transcendent depth to depravity. Sublime is his work, anointed his name."

Lucy knew the most important members of the alternerati, though some might call them the depraverati. If she had any enemies -- and I can't imagine that she didn't -- they never appeared, perhaps too frightened or intimidated by her force field that shielded the ratty gallery.

We heard stories about her past, and that night her performance reinforced those stories.

Her soliloquy of how her father repeatedly raped her from age 9 to 13 was harrowing. She called it empowering. "Like Nietzsche I learned that what doesn't kill me not only makes me stronger, it makes me dangerous and beautiful."

We turned to Fred, an old childhood friend of Lucy's, asked him how much of this onslaught was true. "All of it -- and that's not half of it..." His voice trailed off, a steam engine out of steam, as he crawled into a corner, and sucked on the straw of his Johnny Walker.

Lucy showed an interest in my writing, introduced me to her literary agent who repped her latest book "Wonders of the Death Orgy." And she got an actual advance for it. Depravity pays. I hungered for the kind of recognition she attracted.

She complimented Robbie's work on porn entrepreneur Sasha Mann's latest app, "Super Pussy," the one where you gain points by rubbing an animated clit until you win passage to her hidden G-spot.

100 points can be traded in for either 10 minutes of web cam sex, or gifted to Sasha's charity: "Home for At Risk Adult Film Retirees."

The next we knew, we're invited guests on all-night binges, with Lucy as our generous hostess, plying us with booze, popcorn, drugs and live music performed by her and her live-in "primary" boyfriend, James.

"Enjoying yourselves?" she asked as we snorted some X off the bald head of a retro-punk midget.

"Most certainly," we replied.

She shrugged, tilted her head. "I can show you a better time."

It's hard to define what attracted us to Lucy: her defiant aesthetic of transgression, the contagious joy of her risky behavior, the smell of her pheromones. Whatever it was, we followed, and soon found us willing performers in an improvised but very real psychodrama staged for the camera.

A collection of street waifs was always hanging around Lucy, like a swarm of gnats feasting on surreptitious blood bites. Damaged beings all. One pale kid, no more than 15, rail-thin, was a new addition to her runaway collection. Timmy's home life mirrored Lucy's so closely I'd had thought she would have felt protective, a post-Goth motherly instinct would have kicked in, or at least some pale form of empathy.

His uncle abused him repeatedly for 2 1/2 years, until Timmy hopped a Greyhound to NYC and started turning tricks in Port Authority. Where Timmy saw Lucy as a friend and mentor, I soon witnessed a sick power play of compounding abuse and perverse sadism.

"Was it a .45 or a .22?"

Lucy's bare foot rested plaintively on Timmy's thigh. She was asking him about the gun his uncle used to sodomize him. As she dragged on her cigarette, its smoke rising like some anonymous call to heaven, the room buzzed with an erotic premonition of violence. My skin itched with excitement.

Lucy's erstwhile paramour, the goateed soft-spoken James, aimed his video camera at Timmy, like a weapon ready to fire. The camera

was just another one of Lucy's victims, forced to record with unblinking detachment the terror that unfolded.

"Did he aim it like this?" Lucy had pulled out her own .45 pistol, was pointing it at Timmy's crotch. But her easy going smile and comforting manner made it all seem like a friendly parlor game.

Lucy moved closer. Her free hand caressed Timmy's bulge. She waved the gun like an orchestra conductor, beckoning him to remove his pants.

I turned to Robbie, opened my mouth to speak. Perhaps I was going to ask him to intercede, to stop the horror we knew was coming. Maybe I wanted him to pull us both out of there. To run for the cops, or to home, or the next train out of town. But he lifted his hand in a quick quiet gesture, and I knew we would stay and silently watch Lucy abuse this teenage runaway. We were willing and complicit, as if we were the ones ramming the gun up his anal canal, reenacting his worst living nightmare for our twisted amusement.

"You don't think any of that was real, do you?" Lucy laughed afterwards. It was as sudden as a slap, as inviting as a hug. Simultaneously condescending and fraternal -- like we were in on it all along.

She cradled Timmy, gently caressed his fallen face. A post-punk Madonna and Child posed in a pitiless Pietá.

"He needed some real therapy. It thickened his blood, toughened his skin. He's one of us now."

Lucy continued petting Timmy as she turned to me and began my interrogation.

"You liked what you saw, Gabby?"

I shook my head. "It was revolting," I said, my words catching in my throat.

"Your fascination must have topped your revulsion. 'Cause you're still here."

She walked over to Robbie, sat on his lap, stuck her hands between his legs, felt his arousal.

"Robbie seems to like it."

She deep kissed him, then stood up. "What happened to you back home, Gabby?"

She was now walking toward me. Her eyes never left my gaze. "How were you abused? How often? By whom?"

She touched my shoulders, my arms, beckoned me to stand.

She took my hands, elevating them until they hovered inches from her body.

"Show me where they touched you."

She knew how to open you. How to locate that most painful place and expose it to the searing light. She pulled out your hidden secrets and hung them up in her own personal gallery for public display.

I unfolded. I revealed it all: my permanent hatred for my father, my deep lust for him, the fear that consumed me each time I thought of my desires, and the shame that invaded me when I thought of who I was.

From the corner of my eye I saw James and his camera in hand, filming every second of our reenactment.

Robbie receded into the background. An extra waiting for his on-set call.

"This can empower you." Lucy was cradling me afterwards, petting my hand that now held her .45. "Good things can come from this."

The gun felt like an alien appendage.

"We all come from families of abuse."

It began to envelop my hand.

"They are microcosms of a fascist society."

I no longer felt its weight.

"It mirrors the global power structure."

Its metal became my skin.

"We are all being abused by the fathers: politicians, bureaucrats, the media, the military, corporations -- all run by men."

My finger became its trigger.

"Men run the world. They rape the world. And they are trashing the world."

I would write violence with it. Books of rage. A library of revenge.

"We women must arm ourselves, use our weapons. Fight back. Take over."

I was ready.

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The surfaces in the hotel lobby reflected a dull glow. Anonymous business guests floated through the fog, their faces taut with purpose and secret schemes.

I wore a thigh-high leather skirt, open-toed stilettos, and a white men's dress shirt unbuttoned to full cleavage. My hair tightly tied in a bun. Princess Slut was now Corporate Slut.

He was mid-fifties, five-nine, pushing 180. A flat-nosed, silver-templed corporate-expensed upper-management finance tool. I was a creative executive for a famine relief organization. He shorted food supplies. We completed each other.

I accepted an invite for a private drink in his room. As we emerged from the elevator, Robbie trailing behind us, I pictured Lucy, me, James and Robbie in the future: a female-led guerrilla army, reclaiming our natural superior position, revenging rape, setting new standards for violent crime, building a nest egg.

As the tool opened the door Robbie stuck a gun in his ribs.

"Easy, big boy," I heard myself speak, my gunhand aimed at his crotch.

Robbie said, "Step slowly into the room."

I closed the door behind us. Robbie's gun now firmly in the man's back. "Hand her your wallet. Nice and slow."

I took it. Grabbed several C-notes, pulled his credit cards and ID.

We took the elevator back down to the lobby, made a visit to the ATM. After we forced the tool to withdraw his limit, James joined us with his camera to play the video where Mr. Corporate Expense Account gropes his hand up my skirt at the hotel bar.

I leaned into the sweating businessman, ran my tongue around his ear, whispered, "If you don't want your wife to see this, you'll keep quiet and away from the cops."

We skipped out and headed over to Lucy's loft for an after-assault party. A bald man in a raincoat was slinking out the front door when we arrived. He had his head down, like he was searching for a subterranean escape route. Must have been one of Lucy's clients.

Her space was homey, her dominatrix gear taking up the front area, the metal rack held numerous whips. Behind the drywall were the living quarters, done in New Orleans bordello: beaded curtains, oriental throw rugs, marble ashtrays, blood red walls. Burgundy velvet drapes partially hid the view of an impounded car lot below.

I wanted to keep going, mark this as the start of an unstoppable crime spree.

Lucy said it was time to party.

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The night broke for us around 3am. I don't remember how Robbie and I arrived at the Upper East Side, but we met a middle-aged couple at a bar and they took us to their swanky apartment. They turned out to be drug dealers. Lucy spoken of this exact couple earlier: how they were skating her high-end clients, how badly she wanted them out of the game. I guess she told us where they hung out and we ventured there at her bidding.

The seduction part was easy enough. I felt proud and powerful and beyond the gates of societal morality, that vestigial organ, completely irrelevant for future evolution, useless for daily survival. An invention by the white, moneyed patriarch to control, subjugate and use us.

We both fired two shots each into their heads as they lay sleeping. We got dressed, and then cabbed it back to Lucy's, feeling triumphant, certain we'd be welcomed as heroes.

"You did what you did on your own initiative, sister." It was the first time I saw her truly scared and royally pissed. She stood beside James, her hand on his shoulder, his hand on a gun that was aimed at us. Within seconds she had recovered her attitude. "I thank you, Gabby, but I never told you or asked you to off them."

I was certain she was testing me, feeling out my loyalty to her, my commitment to the cause. I said, "You can't make a revolution with clean hands, Lucy."

"Thank you, Joseph Stalin," she said, then spat at me. "You're just fooling yourself. That confidence and hipness you think you've earned is just masking your self-hatred and low self-esteem. Because deep down you think that you really deserved it."

"What?"

"Yeah, you really deserved what daddy did to you. You're the guilty one. The willing victim. You made him do it. He sensed your fuck-me vibes. You are guilty, so deservedly guilty, for your passive acceptance made his power and your rape possible. Completely, unequivocally guilty. Enjoy it, scum."

My gut was aching. It spread up my throat and into my head. In that swirling brine of detritus, thoughts and sounds and desires and fears revolved and spun: revolutionary slogans, love vows, lies, and broken promises -- homeless orphans all.

At the center stood Lucy.

"Now get the fuck out of my home, you dizzy cunts."

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In Lucy I thought I had found a new tribe, a comrade who would exalt me into that most acclaimed of all art forms: criminal acts of transcendent violence. We thought we'd build a following.

Instead, the only fame we won was the audience we so actively avoided.

None of our newfound "friends" ever showed up at the trial. Lucy's client, the bald man, was the city's DA, so she escaped scot-free. Robbie and I weren't so lucky.

I'm part of a gang now, the Bitches of Women's Cellblock 16. We trade tampons for cigs, and cigs for shivs. We're the coolest 'cause we're the most ruthless. We don't give a fuck.

Robbie is doing time at the Lompoc Federal Correctional Facility. He's now protected by his cellmate Billy Ray. It's not so bad a life. At least he's got the attention he always wanted.

