

Diary of a Lost Girl

by Kathryn Kulpa

Bethany did not believe in support groups. She did not believe in the twelve steps. The Spanish Steps, the Thirty-Nine Steps. Marlene Dietrich scorned psychoanalysis, she had read that once. Good luck and good cheekbones could get you through anything. Grit your teeth. Thoroughbreds don't cry. And yet here Bethany was at the meeting. Dressed in black, a spy.

A woman with dark wiry hair was talking, late 30's, cigarette hands, cigarette voice, maybe an actress, surely New York. Bethany watched her, deciding which parts of her were fake. The hair, definitely; this woman had gone gray early. The speed of her speech, the nervous smoker's motions of her hands meant a metabolism that burned its way forward. At fifty she would have the face of an old woman. Bethany had studied faces all her life, looking for signs, and she knew how to spot all forms of cheating: the green contact lenses on brown eyes, the straight hair tormented into curl, the nose hammered into symmetry.

"And then the doctor said to me, 'What a shame. You would have had a perfect, healthy son.' "

Bethany heard sighs of outrage, murmurs of disbelief. She ignored the other women, kept her eyes on the dark-haired one.

"Did you think he was retarded?" said Bethany. "Is that why you didn't want him?"

The woman whipped around in her chair.

"Bethany, that is out of line. We're here to support, not judge."

"I think Bethany could be projecting her own unresolved guilt onto this situation. The guilt society wants us to internalize--"

Bethany stood up. "My name isn't Bethany," she said. "It's Carmen." She walked away, short steps but quick ones, steps that fit a girl six inches shorter than her. She walked away from the meeting.

I could tell you that everything in her life had brought her to that moment, Bethany wrote in her notebook.

But of course, not everything had.

I could tell you what she did year by year.

I could tell you her name, but that is harder. Her name is Bethany but Bethany is not her real name. Her real name is Carol Anne, Sara Jane, Laura Jean. Her name is Bethany White, but her soul is black. Displacement. Diaspora. What has been consumed?

She has no name. But I can tell you what she did year by year.

Carmen Conetti, nineteen years old, in sophomore year acting class, doing her monologue about the abortion: her grandmother's face painted howling on the ceiling, her mother dying of cancer in Hartford forty miles away.

No one said anything in class. That night at dinner Bethany heard girls talking about Carmen contemptuously, fiercely.

"If she was that far gone . . . didn't she ever hear of general anesthesia?"

"God, I'd hate to be Catholic."

Carmen had dark uncombable hair and too many clothes. They foamed out of her drawers, clogged the bottom of her closet. Bethany spent long nights in Carmen's room, smoking black clove cigarettes.

"It wasn't like being punished," said Carmen. "I had to feel the pain. I had to give that much of myself. I couldn't let them do it all for me so I could pretend it never happened."

Carmen had not been to church since her mother's funeral. Her child would have been two in August, she said. Bethany said nothing about herself. She and Carmen read the sex advice columns in *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

Bethany describes herself. A girl made out of words. She is "she." She thinks of herself in the third person. She dreams in narrative form. Sometimes she is an actor in her dreams but more

often she is only a spectator. She has been told that some people dream in black and white. Does she believe this? Her dreams are color, technicolor.

She has heard of people who never dream. She doesn't know if she believes in them. She would be afraid to meet them. It would be like meeting someone without words. She is afraid to meet a person without words. She, made of words herself, would be absorbed, would disappear.

Bethany in September, the last one at the pool. She has a hat and a bottle of fizzy water and two magazines and a notebook. *Cruelty*, she writes in her notebook, *unreasonable cruelty*. A drop of water falls on the page and makes the ink bloom.

Carmen was in Los Angeles now, working with a theater group on the top floor of a cheese factory and waitressing in a restaurant filled with nude male statues. Bethany was at the Ponquapaug Country Club in Cos Cob, Connecticut.

Once I dreamed that Bobby Kennedy was my father. My mother worked for his campaign, a young idealist. She watched the funeral on TV, Ethel in black, the children standing at the grave. She watched with her arms crossed over her stomach. Her eyes were dry.

Bethany had never dreamed this, never thought of it until now, stretched out on the faded air mattress beside the swimming pool. Even with her sunglasses on it was too bright. She looked again at Carmen's letter.

I tried a support group like that once, wrote Carmen, they're all the same, touchy-feely-seventies you've got to LOVE yourself bullshit. They won't tell you that YOU ARE ALONE.

I dreamed my mother was in the Manson Family, wrote Bethany. A reform school runaway out of a Linda Blair movie. A rich man's mistress. A Times Square prostitute with a club foot . . .

Did people have club feet in the 1960s? Bethany wasn't sure. She stared at her stomach in the bathing suit, flat and white.

The baby is left in a wicker laundry basket on the doorstep of a white house with blue shutters. This happens because its mother has seen too many cartoons. Fourteen and anemic, kept out of school, watching Mighty Mouse and Our Gang reruns in a trailer when she is not having sex with her father or two brothers, such a person sees babies left in baskets on television all the time. She thinks that is how it is done.

The trailer is in the deep South. The baby is in Connecticut. This doesn't matter. Something can explain it.

Film Scene: Luisa in the Bakery. Luisa through the window--it's raining. 1920s, early 30s? Cloche hat. Shabby but chic. She comes inside--diffused light. At the counter. (Man behind counter--hard-faced. Focus on hands--handling of money. Commerce. All is commodity.) We see jam tarts, braided loaves of bread, strudel, plum-cake. Luisa's face: she is hungry. Cut to her hands, opening purse (below counter): two coins.

Luisa: Coffee.

She sits at a table, reads newspaper (Situations Wanted? Help Wanted Female? In German.) Deep background: we can see (waist level view) a man at counter buying something. He comes to her table with plate and coffee cup: May I sit here? She nods yes. He is 45 (?), dark hair (partially grey), American, business suit. A look of power--not physical power. The power of money.

They talk about--? He asks her if she is a student at the university. She says yes--a student. Keeps looking at his plate--raspberry tart.

Man: This is linzertorte.

Luisa: It looks very good.

Man: Would you like to try a bite?

He cuts a piece with his fork, holds it to her mouth; she shakes her head, laughs. But he is watching her face; he brings the fork to her mouth; the cake touches her lips (close-up). And her mouth opens; she takes the food from his fork.

Quick cut: we see him smiling--triumphant. Luisa's face is blank, a mask reflecting his desire. Or concealing something else.

Those good old days of Bethany and Carmen writing papers in the Miss Bee diner early in the morning. For relief they would make up disgusting Mad Libs.

2 Kinds of Men

There are two kinds of men (verb, gerund) *manipulating* around. There are those who wear (clothing) *garter belts* on their (part of body) *pancreas*, and those who prefer to don (clothing) *continence pants* on their (part of body) *testicles*. There are men who (verb) *ejaculate* the women they (verb) *fox-trot* with, and those who simply (verb) *perambulate* at high noon. Plain and simple, some men are (adj.) *effeminate*, and some are just plain (adj.) *putrescent*.

They used to make fun of a billboard on Route 9, PREGNANT? ALONE? CONFUSED? CALL 1-800-325-BABY. Bethany actually called it once. It was a recording. All their "life options counselors" were busy.

The woman in the house with blue shutters opens the door. "It is not a cat!" she says.

"What is it?" asks her husband.

"It's a baby."

"That's not funny, Margaret," the husband says.

The wife picks the baby up. Crouched behind a suffocating lilac tree a woman in the last stages of alcohol poisoning is watching. There is a long red tunnel down the side of her face where a man burned her with a curling iron. This will not happen to her daughter.

Beth Emily Bianco in Cos Cob, Connecticut.

"Wait your turn, Beth!"

"It is my turn."

"Oh, shut up, Bethie. You act like you're not adopted."

"I'm not. You can ask my parents."

"Oh sure. They're not even your parents. Everyone knows that."

"My mother said they found her on the back porch. Like a stray cat or something."

"She looks like a stray cat. *Meow!*"

That boy in civics class, the day they learned that *America is a nation of immigrants*, and everyone had to say what they were.

"My mother is Italian and my father is Irish."

"My mother is English and my father is French."

The boy said, "My mother was Chinese and my father was Japanese and I'm all mixed up!" He pulled his eyes in different directions and everybody laughed.

Beth excused herself to go to the bathroom.

My mother was an heiress and my father was a prince. My mother was a hooker and my father was a pimp.

My mother is a shadow and my father is a ghost.

And I am

And I am

"My mother said they found her in a garbage can."

Beth at her cousin's birthday party, playing kickball in the street. She ran to get a drink from the garden hose and stopped by the back screen door.

"Those little skimpy shorts. And bouncing around like 'Ooh, look what I've got, come and get me!'"

I don't think she does it deliberately. It's just the body growing up before the mind does."

"She knows exactly what she's doing. I hate to think of what Margaret's going to go through in the next few years. They're into sex at 14 and 15 now."

"I'm sure Margaret's--"

"Oh, I don't blame Margaret, I'm sure Margaret does her best, but blood will tell . . ."

Beth ran back to the front yard. "Come on, it's still five to zero," said Jimmy.

"I'm tired. I don't feel like playing any more," Beth said. She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"My mother said they found her in a bathroom at the airport."
"No, it was a bus station."

In her last year of high school, working in the maternity store, Beth sold two pink cotton sleepers to a woman who was about to have twins. "You have such beautiful hair," the woman said. "I keep trying to get that color in my children. My husband's hair is bright red and mine's blonde and I keep thinking, if we could just combine them. But all our sons are either towhead or carrot top."

Beth imagined the woman like a Palomino, breeding each year in the hope of hitting the right color combination.

"Does your mother have that shade?"

"No," said Beth.

"Your father."

"No," she said. Her cheeks began to burn. Invention, glorious, lifted her away. "My grandmother did," said Beth. "I look like her. My grandparents owned an estate in Ireland. They raised horses. One of their stallions ran in the Grand National."

"How wonderful," said the woman.

Beth in the hairdresser's chair. Mr. Carl holds her hair up, 27 inches, he says, regretful, are you sure you want that much taken off?

"Shoulder length, something unobtrusive," said Beth. She saw Mr. Carl's puzzled eyes; girls did not ask to be unobtrusive. "I mean simple, easy to take care of. I'm on the swim team," she invented. "I have to pin my hair up before every event and then I have to wash it and it takes too long to dry."

Mr. Carl gave her a shoulder-length bob. He said it would be easy to take care of. He told her she should use a special shampoo and

conditioner so the chlorine in the pool water wouldn't dry her hair. She bought all the products he showed to her.

"When do you want to come in for a trim, Siobhan?" he asked her. She had told him that was her name. She was named for her Irish grandmother, she said.

What she looks like now. She keeps pictures of herself in her room to remind herself what she looks like or should look like, but the faces in the pictures are all different, like the faces she sees in the mirror. There is the pale cold Easter-lily face with the Oriental eyes and the Sissy Spacek one, virginal and blank, and the bad girl one on the steps of her dorm with a cigarette and some boy's leather jacket. She believes that all these girls existed at some moment in time, but they have nothing to do with her. She decides her real self lives in her arms. Terrible arms with coppery-gold freckles and brass-colored hairs and white undersides of tubercular thin skin and bright blue veins. Such arms belong to the children of the poor in inbred pockets of Appalachia, people disenfranchised by the Tennessee Valley Administration and sent to work in knitting mills.

The baby has outgrown the basket. She is one year old. The husband and wife dress her in white pinafores with eyelet lace, pink dresses, lace bonnets. She can walk without falling and knows sixteen words. The wife writes down all the baby's words in a book with a red cover.

"Doggie," the baby says.

"Yes, see doggie! Now say Mama. Say Mama."

"Bunny," the baby says.

"Mama. Say Mama."

Beth had a high school boyfriend. He wanted to be Woody Allen. But she could not be Diane Keaton for him. She was busty and did not look good in vests.

*My love is like a glass of buttermilk
So voluptuous*

and fuzzy eyed

is a poem Beth's high school boyfriend wrote for her.

What does it mean, she asked him.

Like you, he said, its meaning comes from its lack of meaning.

Once she took a personality test. The questions were:

--Do you have evil spirits in your head, telling you what to do?

--Have you ever been disappointed in love?

--Do you have difficulty holding your urine?

She asked the man what her personality was. He said her answers revealed she was mildly depressed.

She lost faith in personality tests.

She knew how to wear hats. Most women didn't. It was her one talent. *Mysterious me*. She was a woman with something to hide, Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*. Her chameleonlike face, under hat brims.

Bethany had a college boyfriend. But he did not write poems to her, and was not content with cinematic kisses that faded and cut to the next scene.

What are you afraid of? he asked her once.

And what could she have told him? She was afraid of being a girl of back seats, back rooms, back doors . . . Bethany told him nothing. She left him. A new school, no forwarding address, unlisted phone. Erasure. You can disappear off the face of the earth, and Bethany does: the only way she knows to say goodbye.

Bethany remembered a boy she said no to. On her first night in college, on a mattress in his room, under a snarling poster of Johnny Rotten. "Calm down," the boy said. "I'm not going to rape you." She pulled her top down and slid to the farthest corner of the mattress. "You know I hate it when women pull this shit. You give off signals like you want sex and then you won't admit it."

"I didn't come here to have sex," said Beth.

"Then what'd you come here for?"

"To hear that Smiths tape. You said it was only out as an import." The tape had been playing all along, she realized, and she had missed all but the end of this song. Something about being miserable.

Biology was destiny, and Beth knew then what her destiny was. She gave off signals. She sent chemical messages of promiscuity into the ether. That was why those two old men at the shopping mall used to come into the maternity store when she worked there nights and ask her to go out to the lake with them. "I don't have my bathing suit," she would say.

"Who needs bathing suits!"

None of the other girls who worked there ever saw those men in the store. Only her.

She escaped her destiny for a while. She transferred to a small women's college in Massachusetts, where she became known as the girl with the toy oven in her room with the picture of Sylvia Plath inside. It was a real oven. You could bake little flat cakes in it.

She stopped writing Beth on her papers and signed everything Bethany. She liked the tortured sound of the syllables, the way it rhymed with Gethsemane. Her friends liked that, too. They were all in love with tortured musicians, 22-year-old geniuses who hanged themselves after making one perfect album. The musicians generally lived in England. It was safer that way.

Bethany felt that she should be more tortured than she was. She envied friends who successfully fell prey to vices she could never quite master, girls lost and beautiful in smeared black eyeshadow and red lipstick. She bought long French cigarettes tipped with gold and smoked them at parties, trying to make her hands quick, bony, nervous, but she forgot to smoke them when she was alone. She disliked the taste of beer. Marijuana put her to sleep. She tried cocaine once, but didn't feel anything. She decided she was immune. She was immune to poison ivy.

In her letter Carmen made a list of her boyfriends and rated them with stars. *Mine would be a short list*, Bethany wrote back. *Only two boyfriends--two and a half, really, but I don't count the half.*

Although, of course, he had put her where she was.

If I could slide myself under a microscope and read my life! wrote Bethany. *If I could know what I am.*

If she could know what she is. Once Bethany met a girl who claimed she could see into people's true selves. How would you describe me, said Bethany.

You're a very good person, the girl said.

But was being good only an absence of doing evil? She didn't drown kittens or push old ladies in wheelchairs down steps, but wasn't that only because it didn't profit her to do so?

Is that why you didn't want him? She remembered how the dark-haired woman in the abortion group had turned to stare. Shock had made her face corded, ancient.

Once Bethany had a second chance. It was May, a time for second chances, and Bethany was visiting NYU, where she might go to graduate school in the fall. She stayed in student housing with two Resident Assistants she thought of as the Wendies, although only one of them was named that. In the afternoon she wandered in the Village, bought a black fedora and a moss green jacket too big for her. She shopped in old clothing stores, wanting what had belonged to someone else.

They went to a party that night at the graduate center apartments. Bethany on the roof, in a big black sweater and black jeans, nothing tainted, nothing brought from home. She knew no one there and she was glad. She could create herself. She could be someone. There was one minute, breathless from the stairs where the elevator stopped at the 16th floor, when she knew that the world would have given itself to her, if she had known how to ask.

Bethany looked at a graduate student. She looked at him once. Tall, with rimless glasses, he would be bald in ten years: probably an English major. Bethany looked at him once because she only had to

look at him once, and he was looking back, he was walking over to her. She had the power of nothingness tonight.

Bethany sat at the edge of the roof, spilling a plastic cup of beer into the street. The English major had gone to get her another one, and she watched what was left of this one fall, imagined it dropping as manna from heaven into the grateful mouth of some street wino. But she didn't see it hit the ground. It was too dark and too far away. She was cheating, it was the third beer she had thrown away, but she would drink all of the next one. The English major thought she was brilliant, so ironic, so wild. There was a precedent for her, postpunk cynical girls who wrote articles on flare pants and Louise Brooks for free weeklies. Girls who made short experimental films that were played, sometimes, in clubs. These girls drank Rolling Rocks with abandon, and fell asleep with their eyeliner on.

The graduate student returned with more beer and some woman from the Semiotics department who had to meet her. "She's great," the graduate student was saying. "Tell Nisha about that town you're from, Bethany, Corn Cob, Connecticut . . ."

He had women friends. Bethany was reassured by that; there could be no danger. Bethany took a long swallow from her cup and told more stories about Cos Cob.

The graduate student said the roof was not the highest roof; there was another level of the building, a music room. He played piano, he said. They ran up the fire escape together, into a dark room. "Are you planning to rape me?" Bethany said.

"I hadn't thought about it."

"Why not?" Bethany said.

His arms were around her, his tongue in her mouth. She heard a noise and looked over his shoulder, her eyes now used to the dark, saw a couple across the room, two shapes on the floor. She tried to step away, to breathe, but his hands were tight against her back.

"Let's go back," she said.

"Don't worry."

They sat on the stairs later, Beth crying into a rough brown paper towel from the 18th floor bathroom.

"I really thought you were more experienced," he said.

The Wendies came to take her home. She saw them look at each other after they looked at her and she knew she would never make films, never be a music critic, never go to graduate school. In their room she grabbed her robe and went to the shower, forgetting her shampoo and soap, not wanting to go back, using pieces of someone else's soap she found in the stall. Dirty soap, full of other people's diseases, this from a girl taught to exit public restrooms with a paper towel wrapped around the doorknob, to protect against germs: all she deserved.

Film Scene: Luisa and the Rich Man. Winter (snow through a window). A penthouse apartment. We see the man waiting, watching the door. Luisa enters in a fur coat and pillbox hat. She now is chic, no longer shabby-chic. A colorless little man behind her carrying packages: Chanel, Hermes, Henri Bendel. He puts them down, nods to the man and leaves.

Luisa: Your man followed me home from the stores . . .

Man: To help you with your packages.

Luisa: To watch me. To guard me. Your pet dogs go with me everywhere.

Man: To protect you.

He walks to her, puts his hand on her shoulder. The gesture looks benign in foreground but in background (gradual pullback) we see his shadow on the wall, dwarfing hers, imprisoning her.

Luisa: You've done everything you could to keep me from leaving you.

She takes off the coat and throws it on the floor. We can see that she is pregnant.

Her life as a bad joke. 48 days. And 46 (?) little chromosomes waiting to sneak up on her. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The

child is father of the man. 46 little chromosomes waiting to be a fish, a frog, a baby dog . . .

Another gypsy, another child without a name searching for a home in the world.

She will not let it happen again.

“I want you to take deep, slow breaths and relax, Carmen.”

It wouldn't hurt. Someone had told her going to the dentist was worse.

“I've given you a local anesthetic. You might feel some cramping or a kind of twinge. If you stay relaxed you shouldn't have any trouble.”

“Carmen? Carmen, you can hold my hand if you want.”

Like Lamaze. They were telling her how to breathe. But not to push. She didn't think she'd have to push.

Right now: An orderly in a state hospital is raping a retarded woman, a high school girl in a car is too drunk to feel the boy taking her virginity, a woman in prison watches her belly grow big, too late to stop it; she feels the man she killed laughing at her, knowing what he will leave behind. Go and buy a wicker basket. Go and find a front door.

“Will you be all right, Carmen? Do you have someone who can take you home?”

“My name isn't Carmen,” said Bethany.

“What is your name?”

Alternate Ending (Luisa). Snow against a brick wall. The apartment at night. We hear (do not see) the gun go off. We see him fall.

Luisa and the colorless little man, staring at each other. The gun is on the floor.

She takes her coat and leaves. The cage of the elevator door . . .

The doors open. Her face in light. She leaves through the front gate. No one stops her.

Bethany scratched out the page with Bobby Kennedy. She scratched out the woman with the burned face and the girl who watched cartoons.

What they did to that woman in the group almost never happens, wrote Bethany. They would never tell me if it was a boy or a girl. If it was anything yet.

I know she was a girl. I couldn't keep her but I will never give her away. I will never put her in a basket, I will never float her on the water, I will never leave her crying at someone's front door. She will never know or not know who she is. She will never hate me.

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