

Luc

by L. Lee Lowe

Her wrinkles came into focus, the sort of old woman's face photographed for coffee tables and art galleries and corporate boardrooms, for prize juries and grant selection committees, and Luc searched his formidable memory for an exact match. Over the long, tedious gung ho of human history there was not much which proved unique, but he couldn't remember having encountered her before.

'What do you want?' he asked. Then, fully conscious, and conscious too of the incongruity, 'Have you got a mirror?'

She'd found herself a chair, stackable moulded plastic which made it difficult to slouch, but she didn't look like a woman who slouched. Placing a bookmark in her paperback, she reached for a leather satchel no woman would carry at her age. While she rootled round, he noticed a book trolley at the foot of the empty bed next to his.

'I get it. You're one of those do-gooders who have too much time on their hands.' And from the look of it, too much money. He understood clothes, having once worked for a Milan designer. Her trousers hadn't been plucked from some high street sales rack. His fingers itched to confirm his guess: a fine wool, perhaps even Vicuña. Some silk? He liked to be right.

She handed him a slim silver case engraved with the initials WWW. Their eyes met, hers expressing amusement. 'Time is the one thing I don't have much of any more.'

'Then don't waste it here.'

'I can't persuade you to borrow a book? We've several of the latest self-help manuals. Quite motivational.'

Upper class, with a taste for irony. Ignoring her barb, he released the catch on her mirror and studied his features. The same ones which had confronted him for the last eighteen months. So he hadn't succeeded then. He wondered who had found him.

'A touch of vanity is a healthy sign. Unfortunately it's too warm to wear a turtleneck till those marks round your neck fade.'

'I'm not vain!'

She returned her mirror to her bag, then regarded him levelly. The very old and the very young share the disconcerting ability to test your nerve. 'You're young, you're good-looking, you're obviously bright and well-educated. There are better ways than this to deal with your problems.'

'You think I tried to kill myself? Sorry to disappoint you. I'm not into self-harm. Not that it's any of your business.'

'Autoerotic asphyxiation, then?' Her glint was back. 'You're a gasper?'

How the devil did she know the street slang? The book she'd tucked away had been a chaste copy of Scott's *Last Expedition*, the original version of which he'd read at the time to find out what the furore was about. During the three frigid years of that foolhardy venture did any of those men even masturbate? By all accounts Scott had been the epitome of English rectitude: 'But we have been to the Pole and we shall die like gentlemen.' Stiff upper lip instead of stiff . . .? Luc's lips tweaked. He had a liking for puerile puns.

She mistook his near smile for an invitation to further intimacy. It was bad enough that this culture and this age encouraged franking off, but the old bats were the worst of all. Their restraint decreased in inverse proportion to their incontinence, as though longevity exempted them from the customary rules of behaviour. He could teach them a thing or two about longevity.

'You don't have the look of someone whose only friends are on Facebook. I'll be happy to make a phone call for you.'

'Pass me my chart.'

After a quick glance, he tossed it onto the foot of the bed, swung his legs over the side, and gave his attention to the IV. He made quick work of removing the cannula while his visitor looked on, more curious than alarmed. A mental health assessment didn't particularly worry him, but he'd rather not bother.

'What about family?' she asked.

'Look, you can stay here while I strip and get dressed, *I* don't mind, or you can go and find some other patient to bedevil.'

'You seem familiar with medical procedure. You're not a doctor, by any chance?'

Irritated now by her doggedness, he threw off the blanket and got to his feet with his hospital gown flapping indecently. To his chagrin he stumbled, and she was up and had him by the arm before he could fall.

'I don't embarrass easily,' she said tartly.

He had seen Martha Graham dance when her face was already a ruin, and seen her again when she could only watch from the wings while others danced her dances. A dancer carries her bearing to the grave. A dancer is comfortable with nudity. A dancer moves with the suppleness of water, yet even the slenderest of mountain streams, emerging from nowhere—cool, moon-silvered, nameless—will, in time, wear away a fastness. His dizziness subsiding, he shook off her support.

'In case you're curious, my name is—'

'I'm not.'

'—Lily,' she said as though he hadn't spoken, and he revised his view of her background. Teaching unruly kids had been in there somewhere.

'What about all those Ws?'

'*Wilhelmina* has always reminded me of boiled cabbage.'

He found himself beginning to smile and crossed the room, skirting her trolley. His clothes were neatly folded in the cupboard. He shook them out, and with his back to her, held them up to his nose. They'd been laundered.

There'd been a time when he wouldn't wash— his clothes, his arse—and sported dreds for their verminous leverage, challenging himself to overcome the distaste of ever more fastidious bedmates. He could be charming, he could be sulky, he could be forceful; it was rare that he failed at anything, but eventually he tired of the sport (and the smell), the way he tired of most pursuits. By nature, he was rather finicky. *By nature* . . . Still, he'd taken the

necessary precautions before hanging himself. He had no intention of enquiring whether he'd shat his pants.

They'd given him an antidepressant, not a particularly potent one, but it made it easier to be brutal. 'I reckon you need it spelled out. The old are swarming over us like roaches. The old are a drain on society. The old disgust me. Particularly withered old hags with a nose longer than my cock. So shove off.' He made for the bathroom, timing his exit line for maximum impact. 'Euthanasia ought to be obligatory.' He shut the door behind him. * * *

She was gone when he came out of the bathroom. He scanned the anonymous surfaces of the room, unaccountably hoping for a slip of paper, a business card, even one of her idiot books. But he didn't do disappointment. Anyone who gave up that easily was not worth knowing. Few people were. Fewer and fewer.

The rattling of a cart in the corridor sounded more like lunch than a nurse's rounds, but a brisk white uniform could be counted on to appear when least welcome. He opened the drawer on the bedside locker in search of his wallet, which he'd been careful to pocket for just such a situation. Identity was cheap, cheap enough to discard like so much plastic. He laid his out on the tray in front of him, the details of which had inevitably been recorded by the EMT, by the police, by the A&E nurse, by the cleaning lady for chrissake. Who blogged and tweeted her every speck of dirt. In the right mood, he could laugh about today's frenzy of confession, as if spilling your guts made you somebody. One day, he thought, there'd be no people at all, just banks of DNA circuitry trying to convince each other they were real. Which they might very well be—at least as real as an array of plastic.

For a while they'd look for Lucas Swart—a hurried search of his flat, a couple of questions in his building, maybe an indifferent scroll through his bank statements—till other, newer disappearances nudged his into an inactive file. With no one to plead tearfully for his return, or stir up public outrage, who would bother? Not that he craved his fifteen minutes of fame. Fifteen minutes of oblivion would do.

Voices approached, and he swept the bits of his identity together and thrust them under his pillow. On a ward no one ever knocked. He was ready to tout out a nice little phobia towards hospital gowns, even had a name for it: *arachibutyrophobia*, which had required some practice not to stick to the roof of his mouth. He mouthed it a few times, arranging his expression suitably, wry earnestness with just a touch of sheepishness worked best. When the voices receded, he continued to stare at the door, scuffed, stoic, inescapably mute, while through the open door of memory came whitecaps of frothy, mindless cheer, tentacles of stinging rebuke. He remembered everything—*everything*, sunlight glistening on a lazy sea, a bloated corpse, gullish shrieks. To look down on your own rank flesh had lost its thrill long before the Crucifixion. He used to believe there had to be someone else like him. If there were, that person didn't want to be found. Out-of-body stories made good reading for the gullible. And as for near-death experiences . . .

Yeah, he remembered everything—everything except the one thing he desperately longed to remember. What had he done to deserve this punishment? It must have been truly awful; on a scale of one to ten, somewhere around apocalypse.

Unable to resist leaving a joker behind, he wrapped a five-pound note around his library card and set it down on the tray; the rest he slipped back into his wallet to discard later on. There'd be questions and someone would remember the book lady. She was quick. She would get it. He bet she was a decent bridge player.

The confidence he summoned like a handmaiden escorted him down the stairs (less frequented), past the main desk (crowded), through the automatic doors (working smoothly), across the forecourt (ghastly uplifting sculpture), and onto the street. Halfway down the next block, a car pulled up alongside him and the driver hooted. He glanced at the smart little red Audi and increased his pace, but the car edged forward, the driver hooting again. He stopped.

'Get in,' Lily said through the open window.

'What do you want *now*?'

'Have you got a better offer? Get in already. It's a no-stopping zone.'

'You're too old to be driving.'

'This car practically drives itself.' At the lift of his eyebrows, admittedly theatrical, she added, 'Don't tell me you're afraid of a fatal accident.'

He got in. A *master* bridge player, he amended to himself as she swung out into the flow of traffic, rewarding the angry hoot behind her with a jaunty wave and the sort of regal smile which invited assassination.

