

Two Snapshots of A Drowning Girl

by M. F. Sullivan

Let us spend some time with Linus Everson, shall we? It will be our only opportunity to do so, and our only chance to have a moment away from Susan. Certain things, she would say, are better left private. Linus would understand that. He was a very private man, himself. He had to be. This was 1971, after all, and homosexuality was still far from acceptable. Far from legal, too, at least in most of the United States. At least insomuch as 'sodomy' was legal code for 'homosexuality'. Linus couldn't imagine a husband and wife incarcerated for experimentation.

It wasn't fair, really. He practically did have a husband. Barry Mayweather had been living with him for fifteen years now. He'd even met Augusta when she was alive, right at the tail end of her education with Linus, who was then a private instructor only. Much like Linus, much like anyone who knew her, Barry had been bowled over by Augusta's glamor, her ethereal demureness and feminine charm. The Everson-Mayweather household loved Augusta so much they wanted to put her in their pockets and dress her up in little doll clothes. Just a precious woman. It had been such a tragedy, what had happened, and even moreso what had happened to little Susie's father seven years after, but Linus would be lying if he claimed he hadn't been excited when Julius Vasko, twin brother of late Augusta, contacted him to ask if he was still—a-hem—'friends' with that pianist, Mr. Mayweather.

Why yes he was, and of course they'd love to have Susie coming by for lessons. She'd been a terrifically skittish little street cat at first, going through her first lesson with barely a word. That had been expected after all she'd been through. Her father's final bruises were still fading at that first lesson, and his death most certainly hadn't begun to. But each time she came by, she opened up more

and more, and soon she was a little ray of sunshine in the house, Susie Vasko. You'd never seen a little girl with such sass. It was just fantastic. When she was mad she'd pop her hip and stick her hand on it, and give this great look that made you feel looked down upon by first a seven-year-old, then an eight-year-old, and now, suddenly, a twelve-year-old. It was wild to think all these years had passed already, to think she was already in his choir class.

The Vasko family of Chicago was notorious in the educational circuit for their successful family and firm belief that a child's proclivities should be nurtured as soon as they revealed themselves, no matter what they were, no matter how absurd the dream seemed. There had been Julius and Augusta, the twins, psychiatrist and opera singer. There were their cousins, Natalia and Nan, an astronomer and an architect. And now, there was Ada, Vera, and, of course, Susie. Linus had only met the first two once or twice at Susie's piano or ballet recitals, the latter of which Vera was also a part of. Ada, as he understood from other teachers at the school, had a brain for math and science, and was probably going to go into a field similar to her father's. Vera wrote stories and little articles and mimeographed her own family newspapers, according to Susie, who seemed to find this amusing some days and annoying others, depending, of course, on the content of the articles.

But what Linus loved about Susie was how in tune she was to music, how delightfully expressive and genuine she was. Her schedule was quite regimental from what he understood, but that was evidently by her design. She was insistent that she learn everything about music she possibly could: not just piano, but soon she extracted singing lessons from Linus, and soon after she had begged Julius to put her in ballet. She wanted to be the music, and everyone around her wanted to nurture that, in part because it was incredible to see her and remember how Augusta had once been that way, and because everyone felt panic at that, felt desperate to keep her from that same fate.

All that was initially why Linus had been set on making Susie his girl for the jazz club. She had the perfect alto voice, which was only

surprising in that her mother had been a first soprano. But it was just fine by him, and getting Susie listening to Nina Simone, he was sure, would be a perfect way to get her interested in jazz club.

A little bit of time, a week, in fact, passed between the day Linus loaned Susie The High Priestess of Soul and the day she appeared in his office a few minutes after he sat down to lunch, her thin arms once again clutching the sleeve to her chest. He grinned up at her as she lingered on the threshold of the office, an unsteady smile on her face.

“Oh, Susie-Q! How did you like Nina?”

“I loved her. Do you have any more?”

“Not here,” Linus said, accepting the record from her and setting it aside, “but I can bring you Nina Simone Sings The Blues tomorrow as long as you promise to audition for jazz club.”

Susie's smile seemed to falter, and Linus thought at the time it was because he was badgering her—which, he was, but he could hardly help it. “Yeah, of course I am. And I'm going to get the part, too.”

He laughed and winked. “I wouldn't be surprised.”

With a grin that was all dimples, yet somehow odd—lacking, maybe—Susie perched upon the stool on the other side of his desk and spun from side to side, one leg kicking. After a moment, without looking up, she asked, “Do you like me, Mr. Everson?”

“Of course I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't trust you with one of my records.”

“But you like-like boys, right? Like Mr. Mayweather.” And though Linus presented a somewhat startled expression at her very blunt question, she smiled just a little and glanced at him. “I think it's nice. You and Mr. Mayweather are the nicest couple I've ever known, and I—

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything at all.”

After she had examined his face for a moment with an unnervingly placid expression upon her own, Linus considered how she seemed ten years older than she had the last time she'd been in

his office, even older than she had been when he'd seen her a few moments on Friday while Barry gave her piano lessons. It was like she hadn't slept in days. What could possibly keep a little girl up at night like a grown woman made anxious by life? She opened her mouth, then shut it with a frown and swiveled away to stare through the glass, out across the empty music room.

"That thing people do—you know, sex. That's—people do that because they love each other, right? Sex is out of love? That's what everybody says, right?"

Keep it together, Linus. There have been worse conversations in your life. He cleared his throat and tried not to seem as awkward as he felt, a childless queer man suddenly confronted by the world's most endearing girl's sudden interest in the birds and the bees. This was important. It was the least he could do, since she trusted him so much. "Well, uh— I mean, of course. People, uh— they love each other, and after they decide they love each other enough, they show it through— sex, like you said."

"So, is all sex out of love? Like, husband and wife type love?"

A curious darkness began to roll over Linus' mind, and after a moment's pause, he quietly said, "No, Susie. Not all."

"What is the rest of it out of?"

"These are pretty heavy questions for a little girl."

As Linus crossed his arms and leaned back against his desk, thinking how to phrase it, Susie cast him the urgent look of a drowning victim looking at the lifeguard. "Please. I just want to understand— people."

Sighing, Linus removed his spectacles and said, "You're not going to run home and tell your uncle that your music teaching is filling your head with weird notions, are you? Well— honestly, people like to have sex because it feels good. Because it's good to feel close to another human being, even if you don't want to marry them."

"But can it be a bad thing, sometimes?"

Refraining from an immediate answer, Linus instead observed Susie for a few, intense seconds, then reached across the desk to touch her hand. "Are you all right, Susie?"

Susie also refrained from immediate answer. Slowly, as if to avoid offense, she slipped her hand away from his touch, then distracted herself with the nearest crate of records, lowering her head to flip through them. "I'm just curious."

Very carefully, Linus replaced his glasses and watched her. Watched how carefully held-together her face was, how constrained her movements were, as if she were trying to hide in plain sight. Linus thought about Augusta, and how strange her relationship had been with her brother, and found that suddenly he was very, very worried. "Yes, honey. Sometimes, sex can be a bad thing. Sometimes it can hurt people."

Without looking up, Susie nodded, and drew out *In The Court Of The Crimson King*. "This looks interesting. May I borrow this one, Mr. Everson?"

"—Of course you can. Of course."

A cheesy grin dimpled her cheeks. "Thank you, Mr. Everson, and thank you for explaining that to me. I'm sorry, I didn't know who else to ask."

"That's...that's all right, Susie. I want you to know that you can come talk to me for anything." He let a second of silence pass in which he leaned forward, his eyes locked with hers. "Anything at all."

Still grinning, Susie leaned across the desk, kissed his cheek, and skipped off, calling, "See you at the audition tomorrow!"

Like a flash, she and the record were gone. After a moment of sitting in tomblike silence, Linus rose, removed *The High Priestess of Soul* from its sleeve, dropped the needle on it, slid his glasses from his nose again, and rubbed his forehead with the palm which held them.

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One fine afternoon a few months after her husband's death, Susan awoke in the porcelain tub of her gigantic, empty house with: two champagne bottles, one only half-empty; a Xanax bottle, completely empty; and a loaded gun, which was most startling, because she did not own a gun that was not one of Lewis' wretched antiques, now

sitting in his musty old bedroom under a five-inch layer of dust.

The funny thing about it was, aside from the abominable knot in her neck from the steep claw foot tub, she felt perfectly fine. That was Xanax for you, though. Something about the drug always leveled out bad hangovers when taken with alcohol, at least, it seemed to when she took most of a bottle, which, she struggled to remember, must have been about 14mg in total. Slowly, carefully, Susan climbed out of the tub and padded towards the mirror. She only made it a few steps before agony stabbed through her foot, jagged and hot. Her eyes squeezed shut, nostrils flared, Susan lifted her right foot, looked, and found it was full of glass. So was quite a lot of the floor, big, angry chunks mixed in with butts of at least a pack of cigarettes, which would explain the ache in her throat.

With a heavy sigh of disdain for the absent Susan of last night, she whipped a towel from the rack and lazily swept the glass aside to clear a path. Finished, she limped before the mirror, took stock of her haggard reflection, and realized she still held the handgun. Granted, she also recognized how scrumptious a sight she was in black lingerie with a handgun and hangover hair, but that thought was fleeting. Now was no time for ego. Delicately, she placed it upon the marble counter.

What had happened? She hadn't killed someone, had she? That possibility didn't strike her as likely. She thought very hard about all the people she'd like to kill, and at the end of the day that list was actually quite short. Just one name, one name from Chicago, states and miles and ages away.

But the more she tried to think about the 'why' of it, the more she realized she was getting ahead of herself. The 'how' might reveal the 'why'. So: how? Who did she know? Where had she gone yesterday?

Perched upon the bathroom counter, Susan started from yesterday morning. She'd gotten up like normal, taken her drugs like normal. Even did a bit of tidying. What a good, productive girl she'd been—but ah, there it was, a phone call sometime around noon from a bar hook-up, inviting her to a party. And, though she normally didn't extend one-night associations past their expiration date, it had

been quite awhile since she'd attended a party that wasn't full of suits and class. So she had agreed, cheerfully selected her skankiest dress (that leopard print number with the elbow-length sleeves and the skirt cut like a seventies call girl), bought some liquor, and hit the road.

Things fell apart about twenty minutes into the party, which was hosted at the kind of house populated by former students who still wished they were students, calling themselves artists when really all they were doing was methamphetamine. And, really, it was quite fun, slumming like that. She managed to fit right in, which unnerved her in retrospect—did that indicate she was a people-person, or secretly low-class?

There was a big blur of faces and unremembered names, stories and idiot antics, people trashing the place once it was packed, throwing garbage on the floor and doing hard drugs everywhere. She remembered offers of free coke, and turning it down because she was more into depressants at the time. Then there was more Xanax, maybe hers or somebody else's, and that was where the memories lost all clarity.

Flickers of the night: smoking and talking out back in a cramped patio space, shouting at the neighbors. Going with someone to pick up more liquor. Being with that same person in a motel two hours later, talking to a third person, who showed Susan a briefcase of very lovely armaments which had all more or less looked the same to her, as she was not a 'gun person'. Then the record skipped her back to the party house, and somebody had set fire to a couch on the front porch, and Susan and some strangers tore laughing down the street.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up. That certainly wasn't much context. What was most surprising was that she had gone to a liquor store and then a motel room with a male stranger and not only managed to not be raped, but walked away a gun owner only missing about \$100 from the wallet now lying on the counter near to her. Her wrists limp, mouth drooping into a pout of confusion, she leafed through her remaining bills, her cards, her yet-

un-budgeted receipts, and it was all there. She must have really haggled the hell out of that salesman. A hundred bucks for an unregistered weapon seemed like a pretty good deal, though in all fairness it was a market she knew nothing about. How had she even gotten home? She hadn't paid for a cab.

Sighing, with the gun's handle carefully pinched between her thumb and forefinger, Susan slid from the counter and opened the bathroom door with a sigh of relief to find her bedroom in no more disarray than she'd recently been in the custom of keeping it. She was still so tired. Some water and maybe a few hours in a real bed would set her straight, and then...

But her thoughts drifted off as she placed the gun in the drawer of her night stand, because as she did, she noticed a letter on that very same stand. A letter which she had written, which looked like it had been wet at one point and dried overnight, which was addressed to 'Whoever Finds Me'.

A letter she read very quietly, standing very still.

It was hard to make out, but she didn't want to read it twice. Numb, Susan crumpled the note in her fist, dropped it into the waste basket near the night stand, and lowered herself into her bed.

Perhaps it was time to admit she had gotten a little out of control. Last night was just a symptom, a troublingly close call pointing to a real problem. But what problem? Why would she get it into her head, drugged or not, to do such a thing? Maybe it would have been less disturbing had she already owned the handgun, but she had gone out of her way several hours to a motel with two complete strangers in order to purchase one.

Where had things gone so wrong? Her hand flattened against her forehead. She was fine, wasn't she? Hadn't she been fine? She'd been so excited when Lewis died, after all, and his family had given her quite a lot of attitude, but it had been so satisfying as the executor read, "And to Susan, my beloved widow, who brought me so much joy at the cost of much of her own, I bequeath the remainder of my fortune upon the fulfillment of my previously-requested charitable donations. I am sorry that I asked you for your freedom,

Susan: may my money give you that, and more.”

That feeling. That feeling. Like being hit by a train full of confetti and sparklers. This was not what she had expected. Maybe several hundred thousand. She had tried to remember the amounts he had requested donated to cancer research and education and remembered it being about fifty percent of his total fortune. But it was a very large fortune. And when she'd thought about how much fifty percent still was, even after inheritance taxes, she became so faint she almost didn't hear the attorney read, “And because the rest of you will surely be upset by this, I remind you: you have money of your own, and you were not there for me in the final years of my life as she has been. None of you may have ever approved of our marriage, but if not for Susan, I might have died alone.”

With a snort, his surviving daughter, some trashy blonde a few years older than Susan, muttered, “It's a shame God can't give you a few moments to write up your will once you've died. If only He were a bureaucrat.”

But Susan hadn't even been able to acknowledge how pathetic such a lamentation was, because she had already been spending her money.

And what had it gotten her? Nothing to show so far. A freshened wardrobe. The sort of furniture she'd always wanted for the living room. Oodles of drugs. Acting lessons. A handgun, apparently. But what was all that? Nothing. What had she been doing with herself?

There were three problems as she saw it: she now had more money than she'd ever dreamed of in her life, she had less supervision and outside care than she'd ever had, and, frankly, she was bored. She was bored of one-night stands and downer drugs. At this rate she was going to end up a junky if she didn't qualify as one already. She needed company. Stimulation. What she needed was someone to provide her with the kind of assurance she could never seem to provide herself: that she was lovable.

And then, for the first time in maybe five years, she thought of The Baby. How old was he now—fifteen? Sixteen? He must have been. Whenever she tried to figure the number she had to do math,

had to struggle to remember that the awful year had been 1975, and this awful year she found herself in now was 1990. So fifteen, then.

What did he look like? What did he sound like when he spoke, said, 'I love you'? What did he look like when he slept? What classes did he take in school? What did he want to be when he grew up?

Had she managed to grow up, yet? Maybe not, certainly not if she was so openly craving validation. But she couldn't help it. It was as if she couldn't remember what it was like to not be lonely. Maybe she had never not been lonely. That was a disturbing thought, a disturbing thought which made her feel the presence of the handgun, and so she dismissed it. In its wake, she lay there, hot and angry, having caught herself in a moment of emotion. Why should she need validation from anyone? Why should she build relationships out of anything but necessity? People would come and go no matter what she did, so it was only sensible to take an approach of practicality.

But The Baby might resolve her boredom. Not only would it be an amusing venture to get to know him, but perhaps it would provide her an opportunity for further entertainment. That Chicago name wafted through her mind. Oh, sure, she could hire a private detective to find her Uncle's new address, show up by herself. But it just wouldn't have the 'oomph'. The very real Sword of Damocles presented by the presence of his walking sin. She wanted her Uncle to suffer, and she had few doubts that, if The Baby was any son of hers, he'd give her all the help she needed.

So, it was settled. She would find a private detective, find The Baby, and see what happened next. But, first things first: to close those curtains, and cut the sunshine, and sulk in the cool velvet dark.

