

Cooperman

by Sturla Grey

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For Les Plesko

Here it was, the girl was coming into town finally, after all the calls and emails. Gerber hated email, he really did, but the times demanded it. He tried to answer her emails in less than twenty words, no matter what. It was just better to talk on the phone if you had something to say. The morning had started out sunny and tranquil in Florence, Oregon, and then went suddenly bleak just after lunch, as it often did in October. By the time he got in the gold Crown Victoria and headed over to Eugene to collect the girl at the airport, the sky had turned downright torrid. Rain was rolling across the pavement in sheets. Lofty pines threw a solid black outline against the darkening sky and seethed in waves with the blasting wind. Gerber contemplated this scene for a good two minutes from behind the wheel. If he was a poetical guy he might've come up with: it reminded him of Godzilla, those black throbbing pines revolting against the thundery sky made an outline of a dragon's back. It looked to him like a great rearing head, screaming at the sky in defiance.

Reluctantly he turned the engine over and the radio lit up with Lawrence Welk. He kept this station on as background for his thoughts as they unwound in the cockpit of the car after a day of work at the office. He had gone around and watered all the rhododendrons with a bright pink watering can before he quit the day, his secretary praising him for doing the chore she'd forgotten for two weeks. Carla. Always praising people, giving a figurative high-five to any person who was in her presence for more than fifteen minutes. For a minute in the glowering and dying afternoon light Gerber considered that unflagging positivity she had. Living alone in a trailer off the main road, all her kids gone out of Oregon

now. Gerber wondered what she was so damn happy about all the time. He placed his thumb inside the waistline of his suit pants and ran it along the perimeter, letting the growing flap of fat fall down inside the fastening, and readjusting himself.

There were a number of reasons email and the internet, perse, were not Gerber's thing. The internet had brought him Lily, whose real name was Bian Sang: hidden, mysterious one of upper class stature. Gerber mused again how Lily had not had the upper class stature when she came from the village south of Ban Ho, the sixth child of a cilantro farmer. Now it was everything, buy this and buy that and let's move to a bigger house, the triple Fleetwood mobile home overlooking the dunes didn't charm her anymore like it did on the website before they were married and she immigrated. That was the one time Gerber had gone to Asia, to meet Lily in Vietnam. The internet gave information but it also opened up cans of worms in all sorts of ways Gerber did not like. He constantly considered his retirement; how it would become a far off event now that a larger house was in demand. Now Lily wanted to get pregnant, a thing Gerber had told her straight off right there on the internet he did not want. Still serving him, Lily had recently fallen into a calmly sullen mood where Gerber had to ask her for dinner and had to inquire after clean clothes rather than everything being ready for him as she had trained him to expect. Gerber replayed the turning her over and pressing her arms gently apart when he wanted sex. She was no longer ardent, her body limp out of disappointment when he plied her. Just then with the darling undertones and violins of *The Wonderful World of the Young* caressing his hairy ear canal, Gerber suddenly got in touch with the reality that he would be a father if Lily was going to stay. *A father at this age*. His mind reeled considering this. He respected how her quiet fortitude wore him down without him ever realizing it until now. He thought of Wayne Cooperman, his client, the California girl's father, over there on Outer Drive, nestled alone in his bed getting ready to die. There was an incentive for bending to Lily's dream, but the lead up took a

lot of years, getting to the point where your kid would be there by your deathbed to see you off. It all cost money, for years and years, you had to spend money.

Gerber put the car in drive and quietly headed out in the downpour toward Eugene. When the girl had called from Los Angeles to inquire about Cooperman she said she didn't care about any money. She told Gerber that Cooperman had never given her any, had never paid a dime of child support to her mother, long since dead of an alcoholic heartbreak from the dissolution. She just didn't want to be guilty of not seeing him off when he died. Her name was Becky, the only daughter. Cooperman spoke of her with acid in his breath, an ingrate her called her, a bad mother and a bad daughter, just bad all around. Gerber was still waiting to find all this out for himself. His attorney brain always played devil's advocate, he rarely believed on face value what anyone told him. One thing was, she had never asked about Cooperman's will, had not even hinted at it. And Gerber knew she had no money and was raising a child by herself; the child had autism. Gerber had to send her the plane ticket to come up when Cooperman stopped being ambulatory. Cooperman's seventh wife had long been sent packing and the girl was the only one willing to take leave from her life and see after the old man.

The plane was lurching with heart-sickening drops and catching on pockets of jagged air on its decent. Becky had fallen dead asleep soon after take-off from L.A. and was jerked back from another realm of black and silent unconsciousness when the flight attendant tapped her to fasten her seatbelt. The guy across the aisle from her was bleak white, hands wrapped around the arm rests in a terrified fervor. She'd made a private vow to never fly solo until her child was old enough to live on her own, but the rule had to be bent because of Wayne. She hadn't seen her father for twelve years - the exact amount of age as her child. Wayne had flattened her with scorn for getting pregnant "out of wedlock" and Becky just jettisoned right there the whole thing about trying to have a father

in her life just because a person was supposed to have a family. Fuck the family, right then she just went it alone, and had taken to the solitary rule of that lifestyle, with no one to tell her what do to do.

Becky pretty much ceased the willingness to put up with downsides from a prospective mate after that. She'd had the years of experiences that amounted to putting up with a lot of B.S. in order to get sex that was only better than satisfactory every fifth time you did it. She'd had the wealthy composer who stopped sex all together to focus on his predilection for hookers. The attorney, who never really had bullshit to put out but who was boring as all hell. His greatest idea of an adventure would be the back nine at Griffith Park. That one could not understand her crying over the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, in G, which he attributed to "that time of the month". And, her little girl's father simply didn't want to know her once he knocked her up, and didn't want to pay. A piece of artful bullshit in and of itself. Becky would see his photo albums on facebook from time to time. A lot of motorcycles and sixteen-year-old Asian go-go girls in scanty black spandex and black eyeliner. Cooperman often told her she'd missed her prime and ought to have married a rich man when she was still pretty. But Becky Cooperman had a lot of well-off male suitors up to a point. Like groundhog day she'd find herself laying in bed next to the "boyfriend" looking at his sleeping back in silence, wanting some nameless thing he'd never give her — could never give her — no one could. This truth was what brought her to rest so resignedly in isolation.

So now here it was, Wayne Cooperman was going to die and he was starkly alone. The past year had brought Becky two page long, double-sided, hand-typed letters from Wayne, mostly detailing for paragraphs what a piece of shit the latest wife had become, they were always liars, the wives. He would often go on as though he was talking straight to the child Becky had, saying he promised to take her to Disneyland, shopping, throw her a birthday party. None

of these things ever happened. Becky did not answer, and she hardly could get through a page of the letters without either becoming glazed over by his repetitive prattle about the novel he was going to write or being affronted by some kind of insult he would surreptitiously hurl at her from within the dizzying lines. The barb would pierce her, give her a start, and then she would crumple the paper and throw it away. Gerber actually called her this time and said Wayne was deteriorating, no longer walking, and badly disoriented.

Becky saw a slight tinge of color come back to the man's face across the aisle as the plane touched down on flooded runway and came safely to a stop. The plane waited for priority to enter a gate. Becky thought of home, the child was working day and night lately on an entrance exam the kids had to take to get into a good private school. Becky and her girl had toured them all, from all-girl uniformed to co-ed uniformed, to progressive, to ivy-league prep. The child was set on attending the best ivy-league prep school in Los Angeles. Becky felt it her duty to make sure the girl got in. So she put all their money, even food money, into tutors to ensure the girl would make a high score. Becky accidentally laughed loud thinking of how some people would ask her, whenever they saw her out alone, where was the child. Her common reply was "Home in the closet on her leash with a bowl of water and saltines." Then the people would look into her, half-thinking she wasn't kidding. She fancied herself mad just then, the man sitting next to her looked over when the laugh came out and he saw she was not talking to anyone.

The hard part was the child's fear of the other kids and inability to socialize commensurate with pre-adolescent dictates. The eyes never quite focused on the person who was talking to her, the thoughts in her blonde head racing around not unlike feral cats, from one thing to another and then back to the original thing again. The girl longed to be with people and have friends, but it

was hard to make connections. Becky's child looked normal to an untrained eye - then the mannerisms would give her away.

It did not take a psychologist to tell Becky she was working things out inside herself, some deeply gauged wound left by her dead mother and cantankerous father. Becky just hated that Freudian excuse-making. By putting all she had into the child, somehow it could set aside all the crushing loss inside Becky's worm eaten soul. All her life no one had thrown her a birthday party, so she took out payday loans at a 179% interest rate to pay for large elaborate gatherings where the entire class would be invited for the girl's birthday parties. Becky took joy in this exercise, an inexplicable kind that would permeate her for days afterwards and lift her spirits above the grind of every day trodding. She also savored buying the girl good clothes. If it was time to get her clothes and there was no money, Becky shoplifted. The girl was dressed impeccably, Becky had cutting edge taste in girl's clothing. So there was the giving of everything to her girl that Becky herself had never had; care and attention like one mattered. It gave medicine to the deep cuts in Becky, brought her fleeting intervals of peace.

Becky waited until the passengers had all passed through the aisle to get her bag from the overhead. Reaching up she felt a stab from under the bandage on her chest where a biopsy had been taken the day before. Becky was suddenly reminded - she had not done with life what she had always planned to do. The backs of her hands on the handles of her bag were dry and wrinkled, her fingernails brittle. Her stomach dropped as her mind fell upon the reality of the empty checking account sitting out there in the cloud and all the payments due, the dental work for the kid, insurance unpaid on the car you could not live without in Los Angeles. Unconsciously she shook her head at her own weakness in coming out to see Wayne when things were in shambles at home. Guilt had beat resolve in the cosmic game of rock paper scissors.

Eugene, Oregon. The carpet and tile of the airport were all beige and the bucket chairs in the waiting area, avocado. At five in the

afternoon it was already pitch dark outside, pierced in spaces with street lamps through the tall panes of the airport windows. She saw Gerber standing there as she strode out of the gate into the waiting area. Brown gabardine suit, tan tie, hair combed back thin, gray, slick to the head, a bald pate. He did not look welcoming, he just stood there.

Gerber knew it was her right when she walked out, tall, blonde, faded Levi's boy's style jeans, one of those v-neck wool sweaters, all one color, that college boys wore. The hair was catchy. In his younger days he had a real thing for the blondes, like diving for treasure when they were naturally blonde down there. Cooperman's daughter looked ruddy and healthy, thin, the clothes were worn out. On her feet she had these canvas-looking hippie shoes. They exchanged one-word greetings. Becky was tired and reluctant to go to Cooperman. They turned together, Gerber did not offer to carry her bag, and left the terminal.

Becky was soaked with rain once she got situated on the front seat of the Crown Victoria and strapped in. The heat blasting from air vents on her lap came welcome. They sped along the highway with just the twenty-foot swath of headlights in front, the Lawrence Welk had now been replaced by Perry Como. Becky asked Gerber how Cooperman was.

"Not good. He's got to be moved to where they can watch him. Can't get up for the toilet anymore without help." Gerber answered.

Gerber smelled her citrusy flavor and her quiet. After several minutes of silence and the car getting pushed off to the shoulder of the oblique road by the bullying wind she asked a question.

"Is there a cheap motel in town where I might stay? "

"Park motel will be the closest thing." Gerber answered after a long pause.

They pulled in front of Cooperman's house, a moderate looking cape cod, two-story, landscaping threadbare. The motion sensor light came on from the porch like a prison yard search was starting. Becky reached back and grabbed the knapsack from the seat behind her, popped the door and stepped into the hot needles of the icy mean rain. She was relieved when Gerber cut off the engine and moved to come inside with her.

They knocked at the door and waited. Wind howled through them and whipped their bones. After too long a time Gerber offered: "There's a key hidden under the mat. He put it there in case he didn't hear anyone knocking." Gerber leant down and retrieved the key, unlocked the door and pushed it open. A waft of chilly air hit Becky in the face. The house was dark. A cat came plaintively wailing up at them from the darkness.

"Oh my god!" she gasped with the cat's sudden appearance at her feet. Gerber had a look on his face and was stone quiet. He stepped past Becky over the threshold into the dark, past the hallway and she saw the pool of light from a switch he threw come on.

Gerber: "You coming in?"

Becky smelled stale skin, old food, something powdery, dank air. She stepped inside.

She placed her knapsack in the entry way to the living room, saw Gerber step into the hallway and turn on another light. Suddenly Gerber came back in and Becky knew Cooperman was dead. Gerber was looking at her, then at the cat, then back again, not speaking.

"This cat hasn't been fed in awhile." Becky stepped toward the kitchen.

"You gonna come in and see?" Gerber asked. " He's gone."

“Yes, I will, in a minute.” She stepped into the kitchen, which had the look of an abandoned galley. Crumbs all over the floor, thick dust. Gerber had plenty of money to hire a cleaner. Becky shook her head as she stepped over the various drift on the floor and found a can of cat food in the cupboard - opened it up. She spooned out fragrant fish mixture and the cat purred along her leg, still crying out. She was thinking that the last dead body she'd seen was her mother's.

“You really had no love for the man, did you?” Gerber asked.

“And he had no love for me. I think you know that.” She set down a full can of food, swiped her hands on her jeans, and stepped toward Gerber.

There was a deep path, grimy, in the carpet, where Cooperman and presumably the now departed seventh wife had trod back and forth for years. Becky was struck deeply depressed, the opening gaped at her, she was thankful in that moment her child had never seen this desolation of the man who always promised Disneyland. Becky involuntarily remembered the one time Cooperman had come when scheduled for a court-ordered visitation and took her to the snow. She'd had to wear rain boots, she didn't have any snow boots. Ice got inside them and her feet froze. Cooperman had posed her next to a snowman and screamed at her to smile for a snapshot. She begged him afterward to take her home and he pinched her, hard — told her to shut up.

The room was bare. He lay, frozen on his back with eyes wide-open on the navy-blue bedspread. He was loosely wrapped in a dirty beige terry cloth bathrobe, his limbs protruding. The emaciation astounded Becky. It was done, finally. She felt the warmth of Gerber breathing behind her.

“Do you call the police?” she asked.

“911.” Gerber said.

Becky turned and looked at Gerber.

“You know he did not leave you or your child one thing.”

“I never thought he had.” She said.

Gerber pulled out his cell phone and hit the digits. He reported the details to an operator he knew on a first name basis and hung up.

“Are we waiting here?” Becky asked.

Gerber replied they didn't have to but it was probably a good idea.

“I am going to go now.” She told Gerber. “I need fare for a cab to get back to the airport.”

Gerber went in his billfold and pulled out a fifty. She picked up her bag and made him promise someone would take the cat to a good home, not the shelter. In the back seat of an old Chevy Caprice on the way back to the airport she laid her head down, she dreamed of nothing.

