

## Eternity

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It was a girl. But wasn't it always?

She was beautiful and she knew it of course, because when you have that glow, that deep and enduring beauty, how can you not know? When she laughed the men around her laughed, and when she cried their hearts broke in turn. With a gesture she could have anything.

The only child of a wealthy family, yet still aware of the world of grief and poverty and struggle just outside her marble gates, she knew what it was to be special. She knew just how special she was.

She was fifteen when I saw her that night, and I fell in love. I saw desire haunting the eyes of the men around me, the guilty and irresistible urge to watch her body as she moved across the floor. Her gown clung to her skin more out of goodwill than any structural integrity, her slender shape flowing within it. I could almost hear the blood shifting within the men nearest me; I think one man passed out, but it was hard to tell -- he was an ancient pale shadow to begin with, propped up on the couch.

It wasn't until a month later that I was finally able to talk with her. Her life was filled with school and friends and shopping, parties at night and studious diversions during the day. Weekends were marathons of drinking (so young!) and dancing and concerts, where she flirted and laughed and played with the trail of quickly beating hearts that worshipped her every move. Of them all, my heart beat the loudest.

But who was I to catch the attention of this girl? I felt no guilt over her age, as so many of the men in that room did -- age is just a passing thing. I am no great wonder, the world does not quake at my feet nor do the heavens sunder open at my word. I have a modest gift or two, as do all. I have my humor, born of suffering perhaps, and of the long years that I drag behind me like chains; and I have what I hope is a certain rugged charm.

There is one world, at least, where it is easy to find an introduction, and where the mind, not the body, is the key player in the game. After some careful searching and with a stroke of good luck that I will certainly pay for later, I found a few internet rooms where she was known to visit under the pseudonym "Luna".

So I became a regular therein, using the name "Venusian", which amused me for various reasons, and I quickly became a fixture and a friend to these people in the ephemeral world of the internet. It's not hard. A facade of easy familiarity and a reasonable friendliness, some amusing dialog, transforms a stranger into a trusted friend in very little time. And what a place that was! The arrogant, the pathetic, the lonely -- and some honestly interesting people who were there for their own private reasons -- passed through those rooms and left their conversational marks.

Before long, Venusian was able to meet Luna in a forum devoted to the discussion of upcoming and recently attended musical events. And, this being the town that it was, there was always an upcoming event.

"Good Morning, Luna!"

"Mmmm, good morning Venusian. Do I know you?"

"Oh, I should be so lucky! No, I'm just a friendly voice here in the void."

"Oh. Okay."

Not an auspicious beginning, perhaps, but we do what we can, and even this little bit raised my spirits. I am overly kind in my rendition of the conversation, which if shown more literally would look like:

"Venusian666: gm Luna!!1"

"Luna\_69x: mmm, gm v do I know u?"

"Venusian666: Oh I should be so lucky! Nonono I'm just a friendly voice her ein the void <grin>"

"Luna\_69x: o, k, :)"

Reality, as you can see, lacks a certain grace and is best not referred to again. What is important are not the actual bits and bytes that passed between us, but the resonance they created in our minds, the directions they took us in our imaginations.

Over a period of weeks I learned that Luna, who had the rather more mundane name of Britney (poor thing), loved the predictably lightweight and cheerful variety of music once known as bubble-gum pop. It might still be, I don't know.

Fortunately for my ears, she was also open to new musical experiences, and fortunately for my plans, one such experience was coming to town. This was a hot new band, so hot that the tickets had evaporated like the morning mist before the ticket office had barely opened. I was one of the lucky few... though as they say, luck comes to the well prepared.

It was a short conversation that led to my date with Luna (who I prefer to call Luna, not Britney; Luna, my night moth, my luminous one...). We made a simple arrangement to meet away from parental approbation and came up with a plausible alibi. And so it was just a few days before her sixteenth birthday, that traditional time of sexual flowering and

social exploration, that could and should be so sweet; it was at this time that we would physically meet for the first time.

It occurred to me too late that there may have been a number of assumptions that, in a perfect world, I might have clarified before our meeting. She arrived early; or perhaps I was just a wee bit late, hoping to catch sight of her first, to see her as she stood alone in the privacy of the crowd, exposed to the world without artifice and without pretension. I placed my fingers on her arm and she started, looking at me with an expression of shock.

"Luna?" I spoke her name.

"YOU are Venusian?"

I winced. The emphasis on *you* was almost more than I could bear, a dagger to my heart.

"I'm sorry, but aren't you a bit *old* to be asking me out?" Her face slid into a distant mask of contemptuous politeness. A chasm opened between us, a gulf as vast as the blackness between the stars and just as cold.

"Ahh, yes, I'm sorry. I am a bit older. I guess it must be a bit of a startle." I watched her eyes.

"A bit? You could be my father. My *grandfather*." Her eyes slid down my body, lingered a moment on my hands, and then shot back up to my eyes. "I think I should go now."

I nodded. There was little else I could do.

She turned away and stepped into the crowd.

"Wait." I squeezed past a gaggle of teenagers on their way to doing teen things, and put a hand on her shoulder. It tensed under my fingers. "Here. Take these. Remember me

kindly someday." I handed her the two tickets and watched as she disappeared into the crowd.



When she got home that night I was there in her room, waiting. I felt that I could best make my case away from the crush of humanity, in person, in actual private as it were. She came home very late but I was not bored waiting. I had spent most of my evening walking off my frustration and lamenting my own stupidity, so I was, in fact, kept waiting for only about an hour. It was a delightful wait as I browsed her life; her bookshelf, her music, her albums of photos and journaled memories. I had half an urge to look into her computer to see if she kept logs of our online conversations, to perhaps see who else she talked to, but the urge passed. I didn't have the heart to break her password. No matter. Another day.

I could hear her come into the house, heard the murmur of conversation and acknowledgment as she made her way through the family spaces and down the hall. Her presence rippled through the whisper of the television in the family room, the clink of ice and rustle of newspaper, the domestic sounds of a Saturday winding down and readying itself for the holy day to follow. Water, clattering, footsteps, click, the door opened and click, the light blinded me briefly and then she screamed. Silly girl! I'm only here to talk, I was supposed to get a word in first, to calm her, but now she's ruined that idea.

Dazzled and caught unprepared, I was frozen in a moment of contemplation between following her and fleeing. Curtains fluttered in the night breeze and I felt the cold air caress me, calling me.

My foot was on the sill of the window when the shotgun exploded behind me, spraying my heart across the back yard, and exploded again, driving the contents of my skull shimmering into the night.



I sensed a bustle of activity rise and fall around me, was only slightly aware of the tears and explanations, the flashing lights in red and blue, and then the phosphorescent brilliance of the photoflash before it was all eclipsed by the black of a body bag. A short drive and I was dumped without ceremony into a refrigerated cell deep in the heart of the city.

That seemed as good a time as any to wake up.

How could this have gone so wrong? How could I have lost my touch so easily in such a short time? Maybe I was decaying after all, maybe time was leaving too heavy a touch upon me. Or perhaps I had just become too much a fool, had forgotten too much. The weight of depression settled over me.

I didn't return to the chat rooms and Venusian disappeared from the internet. I never did tell her my true name.



Time is fleeting and four years passed as I went about my duties. I enjoyed them well enough, I suppose, but there was a taste of dust, a graying of color, and a diminishment of joy across these years. So I sought out Luna and I found her easily enough. She was engaged now, to some fuckwit with money, an easy-talking idiot, a parasite upon the world and proud of it, as he followed in the deeply rutted tracks of tradition laid down before him by the blood of his ancestors while doing nothing of merit himself. Of course there was no way that he would have Luna.

He had taken her heart out on loan perhaps, and his body had explored hers, no doubt, bringing some idle pleasure to them both, but he could not possibly fulfill her destiny. He had no inkling of how special she was, or of the depths of her spirit, the height of her beauty. He was blinded by his own greed and vanity. At best she would be an idle decoration on his arm, until she withered, a flower plucked and left to die.

He didn't even have the sense to be afraid when it came time for him to meet his own destiny. Afterwards, I left his television on and him in his chair, a glass of whiskey still near his hand. His eyes stared, unseeing, as the babbling box tried to sell him products he would never again need.

I had learned some manners in the previous years so I left the house, though I didn't go far. Luna came home a few minutes later. Before she got very far into her home I knocked on the front door. I was a perfect gentleman, hair tidy and wearing a casual suit, not too formal, not sloppy. I had even selected colors that would go well with hers.

She answered the door looking a bit distracted, her mind still occupied with the drive home, or perhaps flipping through ideas for the article she was editing, who knows? She brushed her hair away from her face and my heart melted in desire for her. I smiled my best smile, my teeth shining, and I swear that a sparkle danced off my eye as her radiance filled my world, as her rose perfume carried me away in rapture. I found my voice before the moment stretched into idiocy, "Hello Luna."

She stared at me. "Do I know you?"

"No, not really. I am just a friendly voice... I knew you once, briefly, and I was in the area so I thought I would come by to say 'hi'."

She stared, realization coming over her slowly, a recognition lost in the depths of childhood memory, and her eyes went wide as she slammed the door in my face. The latches clicked and I heard footsteps recede into the depths.

I was polite. I'm sure of it. Are manners entirely lost in this world?

I opened the door, though I fear the frame suffered from the exertion of holding shut. Splinters dangled from the dead-bolts as I stepped into the room. A scream ripped the silence, and another. Ahhh. The television room. I followed the sound of sobbing, my voice drifting ahead, gentle and soothing.

"Luna, I can explain. This all makes sense, really, and nothing is as it seems. Just let me talk to you! I must talk to you!"

I opened my mouth to express my feelings, the truths that I understood and must share with her. I stepped through the doorway into the now familiar sound of exploding violence.

"My name is not Luna, you fucking creep we killed you what are you doing here you're dead you fucking ... "

I couldn't hear the trailing end of her diatribe, as my ears were busy decorating the liquor cabinet while my precious fluids leaked out into the carpet. I had not captured Luna's heart yet. This would take more thinking.

Coldness splashed down on my body, a heady tingling spiciness to it, a prime scotch I think. And then the vodka. I knew what would come next. A pity, really... I'm sure they would have gotten the blood stains out eventually.

As the fire consumed my flesh, savory odors of barbecue filled the room and Luna sobbed incoherently outside.

Eventually there were sirens in the distance, but they were not for me to hear.



When I woke again it was in a place much less pleasant than a refrigerated cabinet, and it was not so easy for me to leave and find my way back to Luna.

Time passes differently here.

When I once again stepped beneath the cool clouds, much time had passed. Luna would be forty soon. I wondered how she had lived her life? I had missed so much. My heart ached at the thought of it.

I stepped into the street full of hope and optimism. Maturity would have strengthened her beauty, experience tempered her spirit. She who was once a glittery sequin of youth would have grown into a radiant star of the heavens.

But first I had to establish myself in the world again, which would take time. I had to make myself presentable. I found a well appointed house nearby, within which were the clothes I needed, and a physical form that could wear them. I put them on, feeling the new flesh and the luxurious sense of silk and cotton against it.

The simple joys are the best. An erection, the wet blinking of an eyelid, the sliding of tongue across lips. Swallowing. Breathing. The nearly silent pulse of blood through veins. People forget about these things.

I don't.

Every cell of this body danced for me, each one a complex organism in its own right, yet subservient to a higher power. As it should be. As we all are.

I had to leave this house. Unfortunate, because the owner had excellent taste in art and sculpture. He even had a new piece by Jessica Joslin -- I've often admired her work -- and some reproductions of other classics. Very nice. But my will has a certain resilience and the friends of this household would no longer recognize the body I wore, and would raise a fuss if I stayed.



Amazingly, it took five years to find Luna. She had changed her name completely. First by marrying a reasonably nice fellow, an engineer, a man of practical value and of some intellect, which gave her the last name of Martin. At the same time she adopted her middle name of Jenna, which was not so horrific as 'Britney,' so I approved of this change at least. It showed some depth, some growth. An elegant name. Jenna. Jenna Martin.

I had no complaint against her husband, not really, though of course he was not worthy. Few were. I wasn't even sure that I was.

I needed to find a time when I could meet Luna, now Jenna, in private in public.

That proved to be more difficult than it used to be. She was a busy woman, with an important job at the magazine, and social activities that took her here and there on weekends. She was diligent about visiting her gym in the mornings, but male visitors were discouraged within those halls.

As people age, though, they fall into habits and patterns, comfortable routines that carry them smoothly from moment to moment without undue thought. Do people even realize that living this way causes them to lose so much of their life? How can you consider yourself to be alive when you coast from gym to work to beer to TV to bed to work, each day the same, unaware of the passing tick of the clock? When you are eager for the weekend, you lose sight of the week itself and so spend five days in the tomb of your own habits.

But no matter.

She had developed habits, and it would seem that the first Saturday of each month was a time for shopping and lunch and gossip with her best friend. They met at a nearby café, always the same, and then went on from there.

It was easy enough to ensure that her friend did not get far that day. Cars are such temperamental devices. Of course, there was still the gamble of the cell phone and dates cancelled, but I'm a patient man, I could always try again. As many times as necessary.

Who was it who said that the third time is charmed? A wise person.

Jenna met a friend, a visitor, at the appointed time, just not the friend she expected. I think she recognized me immediately. Time had mellowed her nerves, or perhaps simply the lack of a shotgun kept her from that familiar response.

She spoke first. "Hello. I know you, don't I?"

I sat in the chair next to hers. "Hello Jenna. Yes, in a way you do know me."

"How is Kitty?"

Kitty, so that was her friend's name. "She's fine, though her car has seen better days. I see you've finally married."

A flicker of worry passed over her eyes as they darted around the room.

"Don't worry, he's fine too. I have no grievance with anyone you know. I just need to talk to you."

"Who are you?"

"Just a friendly..."

"... voice in the void. Yes. I remember."

I nodded. "I love you Jenna."

"No you don't. You don't even know me. You aren't even real. What are you?"

I shrugged. "It's complicated, but I can explain. Later, though, there will be plenty of time later."

"Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

I was a bit startled since I had never noticed her smoking before, but then my mind wasn't usually focused on such things. "Ummm, sure? I didn't know you smoked, though."

She reached into her purse.

"Jenna, Luna, you have been the moon in my heaven since I first saw you. Time in this life has been kind to you, and I'm glad that we finally have this chance to talk." I put my hand on her shoulder as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes. No, that's not right.

She pressed the box under my arm, against the ribs in my left armpit, and my world spasmed and flickered.

"Actually, I don't smoke. Leave me alone."

I fell off the chair and it tipped over with a clatter while I thumped and shuddered on the ground. I could still see and hear but my body refused commands. Painful spasms rippled through me. I heard the scrape of her chair on the floor, the clack of her feet walking away. All I could think of was the warm strength of her shoulder under the rayon, the flow of her muscles as she reached into the bag. She was so beautiful, so graceful, so poised. My desire for her burned inside of me, slowly eating away at me, a red ember burning my black soul into grey ash.

I gasped a bit, felt the bite of air in tensed passages; experimentally, I curled into fetal position, which helped a bit. Soon I was able to straighten and put my feet beneath me, though I was still a bit unsteady.

I rose up into a blue wall that resolved into the broad chest of a uniformed security guard, with one of his simian brethren standing nearby.

"Wait! Jenna, please!"

I stepped through the uniformed wall but was slowed by its deliberate meaty graspings and I lost her in the crowd. I unclenched my fist and saw in it a bloody blue cloth. A tear fell from my eye and its outline blurred. It seemed that wherever I went there was screaming and blood and death, and this day was no exception. I walked through the chaos, thinking.

I decided to go to where Jenna was going -- her home -- and wait for her there. My devotion to her knows no bounds, has no limits. I am patient. She would eventually have to let me have my say, she would see the truth of my words and the sincerity of my spirit.

A clatter and a shout disturbed my thoughts but I paid little notice to it. Before I got very far from the café, the creatures in blue managed to overwhelm me with their guns and their muscle and sweat and blood. My new suit was torn and ruined and my new body was broken and leaking. The flesh is so inconvenient, but I held it together a while longer and waited.

After some waiting, I discovered that breaking arm shackles only serves to break my own arms and earns nothing but grief, so I painfully waited some more.

Resting in the white hospital room, uncomfortably wrapped in cold steel, I slowly healed and grew strong again. During this span they discovered that the money and identity I carried belonged to a murdered man. The gears of justice began to grind me in their teeth.

Nothing more than a nuisance, though leaving this body meant returning to the start, and much time would pass before I could return again.



Jenna was nearly seventy now and her husband had since died and left her very comfortable in terms of physical wealth. When I found her, I found her in a fortress of her own making. A beautiful house, each decoration obscuring steel barriers and hiding electronic eyes, alarms and wires, her home transformed into a living watching thing, a guardian and protector.

She no longer worked at a job, and she no longer went out except in large groups. She welcomed visitors into her home, though, and had many friends and an active, if careful, life.

I saw her sometimes, when she went out, and even in her old age she was filled with unsurpassed grace and beauty. Even now the young men watched as she passed. They sense her strength, and they felt their guilt, now in the other direction. She could be their grandmother! And yet they watched as she passed.

I made no attempt at subtlety but simply rang her doorbell one afternoon. A speaker awoke and asked me, in tones of iron wrapped in silk, "Who are you?"

I looked up into the camera and smiled. "A friend."

"You are not welcome here. Please go away."

I paused a moment, but before I could plead my case, she spoke again.

"Please." The pain in her voice struck at my heart. I never meant to cause her pain, to be a torment. I felt hot tears in my eyes.

"I'm sorry, I really am, but I can't. I can't leave you. I love you."

The speaker clicked off.

I opened the door, but the process damaged my body. The door was unusually strong. No matter.

Trailing tears of blood I found my way across the entry. I knew that I would have only a few minutes to explain myself, to help her understand, before the house was buried in a swarm of angry blue uniforms.

I smelled a hint of rose in the air, and the smell of Jenna herself, carried through the subtle ventilation. My body responded, a rush of blood in my ears, the tingling of my need.

I climbed the stairs to where I knew she was waiting for me. Another door was broken and another bone.

She was sitting in the middle of the room, shotgun in hand. I stopped in the doorway, my good left arm outstretched, palm up in supplication.

"Wait, please, don't kill me yet! I have to talk to you. I love you, I've always loved you, I will always love you... you have to understand."

The first shot blew my left hand into tatters of meat and bone, and the second pierced my broken heart as I fell forward into the room.

I pulled myself to my knees, weeping. "Please, let me finish..."

She pumped the gun again, recharging it with fresh death, and turned it on herself. Without a word, she died.

"No!"

I knelt there for a while, heart unmoving, listening to the decay creep through my borrowed brain, feeling the death of this body's cells, its nerves and muscles. The chemical engines ground to a halt as the community of the body failed. Blood gushed and then trickled and then congealed.

She sat in the chair, silent, gun tightly gripped in death. Sunlight speared into the room from a high window, glittered off the blood and scattered bone.

I left my body and it fell into the puddle of its own making.

A terrible nuisance, death.

I returned from whence I came and begin working my way back. Back to a new place.

It's harder to find someone who is not among the living, but it's not impossible. And Jenna and I are linked, you know. I love her. I have always loved her. I will always love her.

She tried to escape me into life, once, but I found her there.

I will find her again, in death.

And we will be together.

For eternity.