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Luci and Lujean's

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LuJean is at her station preparing for a shave. “Preston” is the name that has come off the computer, a new patron, a walk-in, got in just before closing, and he’s reclining in her chair. The computer says he’s a radiologist. A shave usually doesn’t come for months, and this guy, Preston, wants one right off the bat, wants to know why he was greeted by someone who introduces herself by one name and prefers to be called another. LuJean takes water from a tea pot, whips lather to a head in her mug and brushes it on.

Preston was greeted by Gilda at the computer when he came in. Her Christian name is Gilda, and that’s how she introduces herself. But if she catches you in the eye or detects something in your aura, she’ll tell you why she prefers Luci. “Gilda” is now a family heirloom, her mother’s best friend, and she likes that, having a name with some consequence. “Gilda is my godmother’s name.” Her diction is perfect, wafts off her tongue like a fragrant aria when she says it—sounds theistic. But Luci is a name she has chosen for herself.
“I suppose it’s a bit curious,” LuJean says. She’s thinking now of the mnemonic she has down for telling people why Gilda prefers to be called Luci. Right eye squinting, her head cocked to the left slightly and looking up, she chases the words down. She stops lathering Preston’s jaw. It comes bobbing up like a cork. “Luci comes from ‘Silent Lucidity,’” she says. That’s the white lettering at the top of the window tinting on Gilda’s windshield. A decal. “She has that painted on her car,” LuJean says.

“On her car? It says that?” Preston says.

Her truck, some call it a truck—Gilda prefers “outfit”—is loud. She drives a big, black, ranch-suspensioned Chevy Blazer. Double wiper blades. Oversized knobby balloon tires. “Silent Lucidity” it says coming at you, higher off the ground than it should be. You can be at the Frosty Top on the north side or at the mortuary on the south side and when she makes a turn onto Main you see it.

“On her outfit? It says that on her car?” he says.

Gilda returns from loading towels into the washing machine. She’s heard the conversation. Salons have a resonant quality. You could cut a record at LuJean’s, acoustics are that good. “Yes,” Gilda answers, “that’s what it says,” neither angry nor interested. Just confirming facts.

LuJean is at Preston’s neck. Her left hand, thumb and index finger, are a capital C against his skin, holding it taut while her right hand removes the shadow. She knows a man’s jaw. Normally you keep the same line when you approach the mandibular fossa from below—follow the natural bone structure and keep even pressure on the blade. She ignores the crowded capillaries at the jaw line and finishes each stroke with a bold wrist flourish. She slides down Preston’s chin like a child playing on a banister.

“You do nice work,” he says, getting up to pay. “I’ve been looking for a place like this. Good to know you can still get pampered.”

“Three dollars,” LuJean says, keying the exchange into the computer.

“I’m in town twice a week to look at x-rays over at the clinic. Stop by if you ever break anything,” he says. He flashes a grin and leaves a five dollar bill on the counter. He’s out the door
walking the two blocks to the clinic, puzzled about Gilda’s outfit and how hair grows into split ends. He’s a radiologist; he knows bones will knit. But hair?

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VaLois Crimshaw is in early for her manicure. At the computer she keys her name in and with the mouse selects Luci as her stylist. She likes the technology.

“May I hang your coat up, Valois?” Gilda says. “Get you a cup of coffee?”

“Yes. Thank you, Luci. Cream, no sugar please.” Gilda is at the coffeemaker before VaLois answers. This manicure has been going on for six years. Tuesday mornings. Eight o’clock. VaLois talks about her husband and his work while Gilda pushes her cuticles back. VaLois has found her way to the table when Gilda brings her the coffee.

Gilda pulls VaLois’s left hand to the folded towel armrest and starts the conversation. “Anything new with you and Jimmy?” she says as she starts stripping the old polish.

“Oh no, nothing to speak of, except maybe our new little problem.”

“Problem?”

“Well, me and Jimmy, we want to put a deck with a jacuzzi in back of the house.”

“Vino, Vivaldi, and hot bubbly water. Can’t be a problem with that, VaLois.”

“You know what savers we are, Luci. ‘Pay cash for everything’ is what Jimmy tells me. But we don’t have that kind of money saved up.”

“There’s the problem,” Gilda says, not looking up, her concentration still on VaLois’s hand. She’s removed the polish from the left and starts on the right. She’s quick. No reason not to be. All a patron knows is that they want a nail that lasts and looks natural. It’s up to the stylist to decide on tips, wraps, freeform sculpting, or a liquid and powder system. Though she’s had them her whole life, VaLois can’t tell you a thing about her own hands—couldn’t pick them out of a line-up. She had a nicely curved nail plate and a bit of length, so sculptured nails give her all the strength she needs. “Why not try credit?” Gilda says.
“That’s just what I was thinking! But I’m not sure. We’ve never done this before. I mean, other than the mortgage. I was hoping you might be able to . . . to . . . tell us, Luci.” Gilda knows this means they want a revelation. They want to know from God if it’s going to work out. Seems like a petty thing to bother God over, but Gilda has the gift and it is for helping other people. She doesn’t mind. “Can you speak it for us, Luci?”

Gilda is pulling dead cuticle into the finger bowl with a nail brush when the request comes. Before she answers, she pats the hand dry and applies moisturizing cream, starting at the first knuckle and moving up the forearm, massaging in a circular motion with her thumbs—all the way up the elbow and down to the fingertips. She milks toxins out of each finger. She finishes, wipes her hands dry, and shuts her eyes against the immediate environment.

People here know Gilda has the gift of tongues. She was raised Pentecostal but slipped into the twice-a-year Protestant mode. No zealot. But nearly nine years ago now, she was weeding her garden and saw a snake. A simple, pest-controlling, innocuous garden snake. This was a sign. God wanted her back. Gilda never misses Monitor Radio, and that same day they aired a program on the snake-handling religious sects of the West Virginia Allegheny Mountains. Two signs. Same day. This was what God wanted. Radio confirmed it. She understood the need for pain and repentance—even faith. But snakes! She let her head clear a little and realized that what God wanted her to do was speak in tongues. That is what he had meant.

Gilda closes her eyes and looks up: “¿Dónde está el aeropuerto? ¿Qué hora es? ¿Cómo puedo encontrar el correo? Mústrame el supermercado,” she says.

VaLois is holding tight to the sides of her chair. The supernatural always gives her goose bumps, but she loves it. Gilda opens her eyes, looks drained.

“What does it mean, Luci?” VaLois’s face looks like this at only one other time: when she opens Publisher’s Clearing House envelopes.

“God wants you to get credit. You will have an application in your mailbox today from CHOICE Visa. They’re offering 6.9% interest to new card holders.” Gilda keeps a post office box and
always picks up her mail at 7:00 a.m. She saw the postal workers stuffing the card applications into everyone's box an hour earlier.

"Really, Luci! We get the deck! That's what he wants for us?" Valois doesn't even wait for a seal coat on her nails. She pumps hand lotion for herself and gets up to pay. Luci helps her on with her coat. They hug and Valois leaves a four dollar tip.

** **

Gerald Numan walks in as Valois leaves. Here for a shave, and he wants LuJean. He stops at the computer to enter his name, choose a service and a stylist. This time Gerald can't work the machine. "It's locked up," he says. LuJean is at the strap with her razor giving it a few licks.

Gilda walks by and says, "Control, Alt, Delete."

"Hold down the Control, Alt, and Delete keys at the same time," LuJean says. "You need to reboot the computer. It's hung."

"Someday all these computers are going to form a union," Gerald says. "They'll tell us how and when they'll work and what they're to be paid. They'll go on strike and cripple us all." This salon is an outbuilding—a converted butcher shop. And still you key your name into an Intel-based, Pentium-chip computer, 32 megabytes of random access memory, a gigabyte hard drive. Two people and they need IBM and Bill Gates to let patrons choose a stylist, to say: LuJean or Luci. Gerald keys his name in with two fingers when the computer comes back on. He tells himself that if LuJean didn't give the best shave in town, if she didn't give the only shave in town, he'd go elsewhere.

LuJean walks flimsy over prospects of stealing the shadow off a man, better than a post-sauna, naked cold roll in the snow. Patrons always seem satisfied, like they've just participated in hygiene, when they leave, but LuJean's the benefactor. She fondles a man's jaw with a pearl-handled, double-honed edge, hollow ground, stainless steel, straight-edge razor—both blades on the same side so if she cuts you once, you'll bleed twice. Going and coming. Hemorrhage tension like Big Daddy's taught you a lesson and wants a nod, like the Messiah's come. When she started out, she couldn't buy produce within a seventy-five mile radius. Store managers banned her. She wanted to practice on produce, cut the
fuzz back. They had her face up on posters: "KEEP THIS WOMAN AWAY FROM THE PEACHES."

For positioning a man's face during a shave, a chin in her palm is more at home than a gear shift under a trucker's. Standing on the left side tilting the head to the right, right side tilting the head to the left, palming his chin for placement. She tilts Gerald's head back to get at his neck—always watching growth patterns to prevent ingrowing hairs. Most men grow facial hair like the nap in cheap carpet—sometimes in circles. Gerald's would be some hybrid of 70s shag and 80s burber. LuJean hawks for follicles under a chin like Michelangelo reverenced the grain in marble. If something goes wrong, this is where it will happen.

Four minutes from the time he sits down, Gerald is fishing through his trousers for three dollars for the shave and four bits tip.

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On Monday Preston is back in the chair. This time it's Luci and Manicure he chooses on the computer. His hands have had work before. A renaissance man. But he fidgets. He's a seven-year-old on a sugar high when you're at his collar trying to square off the neckline, when he's sat too long.

"Something bothering you today, Preston?"

"Life is good. Bené bené bené." He's got something to say, but it won't come until he's been lubed, got to work it out of him today.

Gilda rests his hands in the finger bowl and shuts her eyes. Like you've reached down to pinch her, she lashes up, hair in a fan, eyes concentric as silver dollars, sensitive, in tune, and looking past Preston's pupils, past the retina, syncing up with the optic nerve. "La cocina está en mi abuelita. ¿Sigame al doctor? Las aves bailan en la carretera al tragar piedras. Lo siento señor, no hay credito."

"You speak Spanish."

"It's God's word. This is his message for you."

"The kitchen is in your grandmother?"

"Maybe not that part. What else did I say?"

"Follow me to the doctor's office; birds dance on the highway swallowing gravel; I'm sorry, sir, we don't take credit.' That's what God wants me to know. You're sure."

"I didn't ask for this gift. It's part of the service."
MICHAEL SMITH

“Well, thanks, Luci. Very kind of you. I’d like square edges and a medium buff. Careful around the left index finger. It’s prone to hangnails.”

His first visit to LuJean’s Preston was smitten. There was something to be gained here. And maybe not. Maybe it’s just the shave LuJean deals out. ‘Birds dance on the highway swallowing gravel.’ Is there supposed to be something existential in that—symbolism, hidden meaning? God spoke to him in college, ‘heal bones’ is what the man had said, and that’s what he does, end of story. Who is she . . . Ms. Delphi Oracle Cosmetologist 1989? Dispatching communiques from God like fortune cookies. Get your nails buffed and your palms read $12.95—come in before noon and have your transgressions waxed, no extra charge.

“So what’s it like over at the clinic, Preston? Do you operate often?” Gilda says.

“Never. I look at pictures. You break something, something takes your picture, and I tell you what it is you broke.” He’s never lost a patient. Never really had a patient. He sweeps into town in his Cessna, makes a diagnosis into a microcassette recorder, and then leaves—does it for eleven rural communities, never meets the person behind the x-ray, money flows, never on call, no blood. No hair. He gets a clean shot at the bone. Sure he needs to be precise, but 80 percent of his $380,000 a year could be done by a technician. Insurance companies make him what he is. His degrees followed by his signature—just to seal out litigation.

“That sounds pretty technical. Did you have to go to school for a long time?”

“Eighteen years beyond high school.”

“That’s a lot to learn. You must be dedicated.”

“I do my job.” Preston pays Gilda and doesn’t leave a tip. Walking back to the clinic he rubs his knuckles unconsciously and kicks pieces of gravel with pleasure. “Es un buen dia, ¿no?” he says grinning.

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Wayne and Maxine Metzger come in together at 10:00 a.m., usually Maxine to get her hair combed out and set, Wayne to get a shave or trim, but today they are in for full treatment, Maxine a perm with LuJean and Wayne a cut and
manicure with Gilda. LuJean does love to shave a man, but a permanent wave is science transcending beauty. She understands the math. What she really likes is having an attentive patron in the chair—she'll tell them the treatment takes its name from the idea of rearranging covalent bonds and reforming them "permanently." It's about breaking down disulfate, sulfur-to-sulfur bonds, rearranging and then fixing them hard into the desired aesthetic position.

"Are we going with the usual cut today, Wayne, or do I get to go crazy?" says Gilda.

"I really wish we could, Luci. I'm sorry I'm not much of a canvas for your creative outlet. Maybe you can go nuts at the nail table."

"Virility . . . remember what they say. Your's is not thinker's baldness, Mr. Metzger."

"You're flirting with me again, Luci."

"Can't help it."

"He was hotter than fresh buns in a Dutch oven when he had hair, weren't you, Babykins," Maxine pumps in. All the way from senior year eighteen years ago these two have gone everywhere, hands clasped, grabbing each other. You see them in the grocery. At the filling station. He gets the door for her to the ladies' room. Handholding has yielded nine children for Sugarlumps and Babykins. Food and Drug Administration has these two on retainer for testing new birth control methods. They shack them up, provide champagne, and ask for the data. If love blossoms, the FDA starts a $20,000 trust fund.

LuJean says, "We're going to start you out with a treatment of Mane 'n Tail, Maxine." LuJean got the treatment from Clive Eggert who raises Appaloosas. What did he feed them, she wanted to know. Alfalfa. Mane 'n Tail 'what make 'em look so good, he said, and sent a bottle for LuJean to try. She substituted hair for coat and followed the directions. Not rinsing the conditioner out completely is her idea. Patrons love it. The Metzgers are checking with the FDA on patent procedures for her.

It's quite dynamic when the Metzgers come in for service. You've got husband and wife sitting ten feet apart with women at their heads working the hair. The Metzgers speak to each other, to
the stylists, stylists speak to each other, to the Metzgers, conversations crisscross and dissect.

At the end of the waiting process, the double helix proteins in Maxine Metzger's hair have been softened, moved, and locked into a new confirmation of wavy beauty. Having styled with blowdryer and brush in one hand, shaping comb in the other, LuJean delicately moves the hand mirror around the back of Maxine's head. Toothy with pride and framing Maxine into the large mirror she says, "This is what happens when you have your disulfide bonds broken, Maxine."

"You're magic, honey. I love you," Maxine says.

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It's been a week when Preston walks in waving a folded newspaper. He throws a copy of the New York Times next to the computer and impatiently keys in his name and chooses LuJean and Shave. LuJean's got him in the chair and tries to put a towel around his neck, but Preston is here to talk. He unfolds the paper in his lap to B8, The Environment. There's one article with annotation, large areas of text bracketed, phrases underlined, handwriting in the margins, photos of fish and a biologist: "Clues Found to Puzzling Single-Sex Fish." "This has got to stop," Preston says.

"What's got to stop?"

"Birth without sex. Listen to this:

For the female fish, the need has always been clear and compelling. If she is to complete her bizarre reproductive cycle of cloning her eggs into a brood of offspring all female replicas of herself she must have a male fish's sperm. And she needs his sperm, not for its genetic content, as most would-be mothers do, but to serve as a simple chemical trigger that sets her embryos growing."

Preston has underlined "a simple chemical trigger" and hits it pretty hard, with exaggerated emphasis when he reads the phrase.

"What kind of fish," LuJean says.

"What kind?"

"Yes, what kind?"
“Doesn’t matter what kind. How can a fish live and progenerate if there is no sex? Plants can do this, simple sponges. But these are animals with full functioning dynamic systems.”

“Did you read Jason and the Argonauts?”

“Homer?” Preston crosses his legs in the chair.

“Aeschylus, I think. They visited a matronly island where only men felt the pain of childbirth.”

“The men had children?”

“No, the women had the children; the men just felt the pain. I think the women were called Amazons.”

“That’s the name of these fish!”

“Read more.”

Researchers from the University of Texas at Austin, studying a classic case of an interaction between members of an all-female species and the males they seduce, have cracked the mystery of what’s in it for the guy. They have learned that when the male fish called sailfin mollies mate with females of a related but gynogenetic species called Amazon mollies, the males become much more attractive to the females of their own species. The Amazon mollies look enough like female sailfin mollies to convince the female sailfins that when they see the male sailfins courting and mating with an Amazon, what they are witnessing is a purely sailfin affair. And nothing, it seems, is sexier to a female sailfin than a sexually successful male.

“You sure these are fish?”

“That’s my point. That’s the danger. This shouldn’t happen in nature, and if it does, we’ve got no right putting it in print.”

“Are you upset that the females can have babies without sex, or that the females are attracted to males who cheat?”

“This is going to get around. We’ll have an epidemic. Virility as currency.”

“Is it the no sex or the way women choose men?”

“How can a fish come into this world with genes from only one parent? It will have inferior parts. It will never have sex. If
a fish wasn’t born of sex, it never lived. It was never conceived. Men and women don’t need each other, or if they do need each other it’s just to get more sex, or more offspring, but not the product of sex. Never sex and offspring together. Where’s the rub?”

“Did you want a shave?”

“This is debilitating. It’s threatening.”

“Threatening? These are fish, not your buddies, not your family. That’s a pretty big leap from little fish.”

“It says that the biggest factor in a female’s choice of partner is not the properties of the male himself, but who all the other females in the neighborhood are choosing. That’s not right.”

“These are fish.”

“Yes, but the piece concludes with a quote from a professor: ‘If you take a woman out for a drink, and you just happen to let her see a picture of an old girlfriend in your wallet, you can be sure that will immediately pique her interest and heighten the pursuit.’ This is a professor using science—and university research funds, no doubt—to manipulate women.”

“It’s a theory, a hypothesis. This isn’t news, Preston. Do you want a shave? I’ve got a ten o’clock this morning.”

“All right. Shave, please.”

LuJean lathers his face and hovers above him for three minutes brandishing the blade. The razor slides down his face like a toboggan waxed for an ice storm. The beard is dense, but the follicles come too easily, like evening ice droops beneath a defroster gently blowing warm, like snow burns landing on flesh, like so many blades of grass fall to each swoop of a mower’s winding—pores tight like porcelain, growth like velveteen.

Preston leaves quietly, walks back to the clinic stinging clean.

At the clinic there’s a note from Dr. Pickering—her husband is locked out of the house with ice cream getting warm in the car, can he watch the clinic, shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes. No problem. Get to play general practitioner. On the corner of the desk Preston sits down, one leg touching the ground, where Dr. Pickering’s assistant updates records. He shows Luci’s handiwork to her, bends his wrists down and splays his fingers out for her to see, and as soon as he’s done it, realizes that he’s done some-
thing horribly feminine. He should have balled his hands into fists, palms up, to show her. He pulls them back quickly, sneaks them into the pockets of his smock and, feigning interest, asks what she's working on.

“Updating records.”

“Have you ever seen a bird swallow gravel?”

“My finches need grit to digest their food.”

“You don’t see finches dancing on the highway here, do you?”

“We have pheasants.”

He lifts his leg back down to the floor and turns to the window to see a woman flying into the lot, half missing and bouncing over the curb, in a pick-up. He lurches forward and pulls himself back. “X-rays, x-rays can always wait. I’ve got time.”

Marge Eggert busts in with eyes aching to see Lazarus doing hand springs in the waiting room. “My husband’s been kicked by a horse. He’s not breathing.” With her pulling him by the hand, Preston moves out to the truck, his legs denying the urgency. In the bed he sees Clive Eggert purple as rhubarb. He climbs up and puts a stethoscope to his chest. There’s a faint pulse but no breathing. Then life stops too for Preston as he runs the litany of Hail Marys and good uses of a clean x-ray. What good are silver salts and radiation when a man’s lungs won’t rise and fall. How do I make him breathe? There’s still a pulse. Tracheotomy, CPR? I can’t see a thing. This isn’t my ballgame. If there’s a break, if there’s a fracture I could tell you. I’ve found hairline fractures on three-day-old, four-pound infants. Understand? Don’t talk to me about ability. I can see these things.

“Dr. Pickering’s at home. Have the woman inside call.”

And then he’s alone, sitting on the sidewall of the bed and looking down at a dying man who can’t be helped, not by an x-ray. Next day Preston stops by the salon just before closing. LuJean and Gilda are cleaning up after a long day. “Suppose you ladies have heard about Clive Eggert.”

“VaLois Crimshaw was in earlier. She said Clive was banged up pretty good by that horse,” Gilda says.

“Collapsed lung. He pulled through,” Preston says.
“You okay by it,” LuJean says, while cleaning red and brown and black strands of hair out of brushes.

“Shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, I guess so. It’s not often we have a fatality here,” Gilda says.

“Fatality? He pulled through.”

“He and Marge are good people. Too young to die, either one of them,” says LuJean.

“He didn’t die.”

“I was just saying . . . ,” LuJean says moving closer, sweeping hair into piles on the linoleum.

“But he didn’t die.”

“No, and we’re glad to have him with us,” LuJean says.

The curtains on LuJean’s salon, red hot chilies on the foreground, green bell peppers in the background, are drawn closed for the day’s business. Had they been chopping cabbage for kimchi today, she and Gilda would have cropped enough heads to fill a minefield of kimchi caches. LuJean likes Korean coleslaw, and this is how she learns new things. By making associations. You chop a head of cabbage—you trim a head of hair.