

Senior-Citizen Discount

by **Patrick Dobson**

Lucy liked bad music, had a dog everyone but she could smell, and owned her own fixer-upper in an up-and-coming neighborhood south of the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus. Narcissism and/or alcoholism marked former husbands with whom she had bad marriages and no children. She'd had three different last names other than her maiden name.

Lucy had a penchant for celebrity and had spent much of her youth as a rock-n-roll band groupie. She stayed more than one night in jail for various petty crimes, not the least of which was a disturbing-the-peace charge where she'd thrown a shot glass through the street window of The Gate, a third-rate tavern in Northeast Kansas City that convicts and steelworkers from the nearby mill frequented.

By the time I met Lucy, she'd tended bar and cocktail-waitressed at numerous lounges of low repute all around Kansas City. But she'd gone on a self-improvement binge and put herself through nursing school. Along with nursing at a large hospital, she worked a succession of bar jobs, each better than the last. She'd climbed up out of smoky no-name taverns to the rooftop of the Ritz and was making \$400 a night serving drinks to out-of-town corporate executives and wealthy adulterers hiding in the dark corners of the bar—after her shifts at the hospital. Her fellow employees at the hotel and the hospital admired her strong will and devil-may-care attitude work and life.

I fell for Lucy the first time we both stepped on the hotel service elevator to the rooftop bar and restaurant. She was getting ready for a shift and straightened her skirt and showed me her teeth. “Anything in them?” she asked. My eyes wandered from her teeth. I had a close look at her fake-blond hair. I saw an anger, vulnerability, and sadness beneath the makeup she used to hide her age that tugged at my heart and stoked visceral desire. She'd been around, something I found deeply attractive.

I told her no.

“I’m Lucy,” she said. She stretched up to her full height, which was a couple inches over my five-foot-ten. “I’ve seen you around. You’re the guy who takes care of the furniture, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“Patrick,” I said. “I repair and refinish all the antique and reproduction furniture here at the hotel.”

“You do a helluva job,” she said. “It’s about as fancy as a place gets. How much are these things worth?”

“Sometimes tens of thousands of dollars. I have a book with the insurance-replacement values in them.”

“Must make fabulous reading,” she said as she stepped off the elevator into the rooftop kitchen.

She turned and smiled and waved. She made her way around the large standing refrigerators and between the stainless-steel prep tables. “Maybe I’ll see you sometime,” she said.

I was thirty and dumb and just sober after nineteen years of hard drinking. I’d been drinking seriously before my teens—sneaking from my parent’s stash and sopping up leftovers from parties. It got worse from there. Having missed the lessons sober people get out of their teens and young adulthood, I fumbled when it came to relationships with women. But her savage beauty and age did things to my insides. I discovered through the hotel grapevine—a vibrant avenue of falsehood and truth—that she was forty-four years old. I had a thing for older women. My heart melted.

After I met Lucy on the elevator, I moved my attention to the rooftop furniture, refinishing sideboards and armoires that years, hands, and banquets had ravaged. During my days, I wheeled them down to my basement workroom in the engineering department and stripped off the finishes and made them look almost new. I’d wait until the staff was starting to head up to the restaurant for the night shift to return the pieces, hoping to see Lucy again.

Around the same time, she started showing up to work early to take dinner in the employee lunchroom, where I’d see her on my coffee breaks. One day, I made an

excuse to eat late and sit at her table. We made small talk and learned a few things about each other. Over the course of a couple of months, she told me of her humble beginnings and how she'd come to work at the Ritz.

"You get sick of feeling dirty all the time," she said. "I mean, bar sitters only hold your interest so long, you know. After a couple of years, you've heard all the stories. The money was all right but hardly anything that would keep a person like me in a mortgage. Renovating a house costs money, you know. The hospital pays well, but since I don't have a family you can speak of, just a daughter who's twenty-two now, the Ritz fills in my free time and gives me enough to make me comfortable.

"Plus, I own a little land on the Klamath River in northern California, just five acres, but it's mountainside and backs up to the national forest. I want to build a place up there where I can retire. I have a pile I've put away. The house here will be worth something when I get done fixing it up. Altogether, I figure I have a couple of years on my feet before I can get out of here and find a job at a little hospital or clinic up there in the wilderness."

She asked over the months what my story was. I told her quite honestly that I'd been drunk most of my life and had sobered up a couple of years before. I had gone to grad school in Wyoming and had a three-year-old whose mom I never married. All I ever wanted to be, I told her, was a writer.

"Now that's interesting," she said. "A scholar who fixes expensive furniture and wants to be a writer. Keep your mind to it and you'll make it someday."

We came to have a standing date at the employee lunchroom every Friday. She worked Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays at the hospital. She caught up on her rest and read detective novels until time to go work on Fridays and Saturday nights in the bar. She worked in the restaurant on Sunday during brunch.

I became fond of Lucy, her drive and determination. I was scared to ask her out, unsure of myself and still getting over the relationship I'd had with my daughter's mom. For a couple of years, my main concerns had been single-fatherhood and child support. I was broke nearly all the time. Some weekends when I was to spend with my daughter Sydney, I filched food from the employee lunchroom for our dinners on Saturdays and Sundays.

My mates in the engineering department noticed Lucy and I spent time together in the lunchroom. The hotel was like a little village that way. Rumor spread through the hallways and rooms, through the departments and offices like rivulets running to a river. While everyone didn't exactly know everyone's business, everyone got a taste for what was going on here and there. Most of us knew, for instance, that the GM was having an affair with the front-desk manager. She, on the other hand, was carrying on with the concierge, who was also close—very, very close—with the day waiter in the lobby bar.

One of my coworkers was a stout mechanic by the name of Bruce. He hated me for reasons I'd never understand, though it appeared he didn't like the way I directed my own job and kept my own hours. He approached me one day at my workbench. I was repairing a glass end table a guest had broken by sitting on it.

"So, you and the nurse lady's getting along just fine, I hear." He stood across the workbench from me, the fluorescent fixture above lighting his body but leaving his head in darkness.

"You mean Lucy?" I said, looking up from the joint I was gluing.

"You know she sleeps around a lot."

"I didn't know that," I said. "That's kind of her business, isn't it?"

"You just ought to know what you're into, kid."

"Don't call me kid," I said.

"She's way out of your league, anyway," he said. "You know she hangs out with all the big-wigs that come to the hotel, and you know we got a lot of them. What's she want with you?"

"Nothing," I said. "We have lunch once in a while."

"Yeah, my ass," he said. "You got a thing for old ladies?"

"Old ladies?"

"She's elderly, man. What're you after? The senior-citizens' discount at the movies?"

I finally asked Lucy out as fall began to throw its chill over Kansas City's streets. We had just finished eating on Friday and she was headed up to her shift in the bar. My day was about to end and I was going to pick up Sydney that night. I stopped her at the service elevator. No one was around. She gave me a deep kiss. "I wondered when you

were going to ask," she said. "I was getting sick of waiting and was going to do it myself if you didn't make a move soon."

We went to a movie the following Thursday night. She started holding my hand about halfway through the picture. That night, I stayed over at her house and had to get up early to make it home to change before my shift. I rushed through coffee and headed out the door.

I felt light and good. Something special had happened and I felt like my life was turning around. At least now, in my single-fatherhood, I had something to look forward to besides weekends with my daughter Sydney. Possibilities opened up for me. I began to think of taking a long walk across the country. I needed adventure. I wanted to test my legs in my new, sober life. I needed something to write about.

Before long, Lucy and I had become the talk of the hotel. Wherever I went about my business hauling furniture about the public spaces, I'd hear people talk behind my back. It wasn't mean or spiteful, just whispers. "He's with Lucy now," I heard a houseman say to one of his mates one afternoon. "Apparently, they're pretty hot and heavy."

A banquet server, a tall, broad shouldered Palestinian by the name of Simon, caught me in the foyer of the main lobby one day. "Say, man, you're going with that tall woman in the bar, aren't you?"

"Yeah, you can say we're dating."

"Lucky," he said, and slapped me on the back. "She's real good lookin' for an old lady."

"She's not old, Simon. She's forty-four."

"That's a lot older than you. You got a mommy thing, don't you?"

"I suppose I do."

Meanwhile, Lucy and I spent many nights together. Her busy schedule limited our time together to Thursday nights. We went to the movies and watched more on the VCR. We ate out at late-night diners. We cooked dinner at her house. I even coaxed her into walking the dog, which got us out into the neighborhood after dark. We made love every chance we could.

After a few months, I fell into a kind of comfort with the relationship. This wasn't love. We were very different people. She liked clubs and enjoyed nightlife after her shifts at the rooftop bar. I preferred to stay home. She read different books than I did. Our talk revolved mostly around the hotel and movies, and even then, we liked different kinds of films. She really fell for blockbusters and chick flicks. I was more a classic-movie kind of guy. I drifted toward art-house flicks and complicated stories. The domestic aspect of our affair satisfied me. I liked the lovemaking and laying around and watching movies I never would have looked at on my own. Nights with her gave me time to think. My thought of walking across the country moved to determination.

But Lucy wanted more from me than I was willing to give. I liked sitting around the house. I wanted quiet and domestic. I loved the walks and breezy conversation. But things were changing. I was becoming more my own person, less willing to go along with whatever happened to me. I wanted to steer my future. I'd fallen in for Lucy and our relationship had become convenient.

She seemed to go along with the program. At least, I thought so. I was content, why shouldn't she? We went for a walk one night in Loose Park in the early spring. There was still a chill in the air. The trees had just begun to bud and you could smell the green. While we were walking, she said she wanted to take me to a concert.

"I just love the Eagles," she said. "They're touring for the first time in fourteen years. It's called the 'Hell Freezes Over Tour.' They once said they'd get together again when hell freezes over. The tickets are \$110 each and I'm buying yours."

"That's too much money for a concert. I can't let you spend that."

"Why not? I'm flush. I'm buying."

I was stuck. I hated the Eagles and always had, even in my high school years when they were all the rage among my classmates. Moreover, I thought it obscene to spend \$110 for a ticket to any concert.

"I have a conscience thing about spending that much money on a concert," I said.

"But I'm buying. You won't have to spend a dime.

"Besides the money, Lucy, I hate the Eagles."

“You’ve got to be joking. They’re one of the greatest rock bands ever. Everyone likes the Eagles.”

“Maybe everyone you know likes the Eagles, but I don’t.”

“Come on. You are joking, aren’t you?”

“I’m not joking and you’re not spending \$110 on a ticket for me. I would have a terrible time.”

“I can’t believe it. You have to like the Eagles.”

“I don’t have to, Lucy, and I don’t.”

“You have to, they’re great.”

“Listen, I’m not going to that concert with you.”

This went on for some time. I’d never had a fight with a girlfriend before. Previously, whenever things turned sour with someone I dated, I left and didn’t look back. Things were different now that I was sober. I was trying to be a good guy and stick with something. Our relationship had turned into a routine, which I didn’t mind. I could have kept it up for a long time.

The conversation turned into a shouting match in the middle of the empty park. She accused me of only wanting to be with her for the sex. I retorted that there was more than that, that I liked her for more than her body. She kept at it and wouldn’t let it go. I became resentful. I told her I hated the way her dog made her whole house smell like a dirty kennel. She shouted that I was a bum who didn’t know how to have a social life and that maybe I should start drinking again. It would make me more interesting. She made sport of the kinds of movies I liked and said I was a snob.

She became so angry with me that we left the park and drove home in silence.

“If this is the way you’re going to be . . .” she said when we arrived at her house.

“What do you mean? Standing up when I don’t want to do something?”

“You could at least do it for me, goddammit.”

“But I don’t want to do it for you or anyone else,” I said.

“Well, that’s it,” she said as she climbed out of the car. “You can just forget about us then. Don’t call anymore. I’ll see you when I see you.”

“Fine,” I said as I slammed her door for her and sped away.

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I saw her occasionally in the hotel hallways and service elevators over the next couple of months and she was cordial. Within weeks, we started to talk like old friends. Before I knew it, we were again sitting down together for coffee on Friday afternoons.

We fell into routine almost right away. I'd show up at her house on Thursday, we'd make love, order in a pizza, and watch movies. I'd go home and not see her for another week.

In the meantime, I started to notice a woman who worked in the HR Department. Kristi wasn't as tall as Lucy but was as slender and fit. She was pretty in a severe sort of way with sharp, angular features and bleach-blond hair. Her face twitched with a nervous tic that interested me. She, too, was older than me but only by five years. We began to have coffee in the lunchroom during the day, before Lucy came to work. Lucy saw me talking to Kristi in the way I had once talked to her. I went to Lucy's less often. Soon, weeks went by between our visits.

One day, Lucy stopped me at the service elevator where she had first asked me to look at her teeth.

"So, you're with the HR woman these days," she said. "I've heard you and her are going steady."

"It's nothing like that, Lucy."

"Sure, it is. I know you. You're on to the next good thing."

"I suppose you're right."

"Are you coming over this week?" she asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"Until you start sleeping with that woman, I want you to come over."

I had a first date with Kristi. She was a swimmer and liked basketball more than having a stimulating conversation or any conversation at all when her favorite teams and players were on television. She lived in an apartment that, coincidentally, a friend of mine had lived in years before. She had a cat, Scout, that more or less regulated Kristi's comings and goings when she wasn't at work.

At the time, I was getting ready for the long trip I'd been thinking about since soon after I started dating Lucy. I planned to walk to Helena, Montana, with a backpack

and sleeping bag and then canoe back to Kansas City on the Missouri River. The preparations were intense. I took on double shifts at the hotel, working the day in the engineering department and then changing into a banquet uniform at night. Between work and weekends with Sydney, I spent time with Lucy on Thursday nights and with evenings with Kristi on Friday.

The relationship with Lucy sputtered along for a few more months. Lovemaking. Pizza. Movies. I liked the way we didn't have to talk to each other. We spoke of mundane topics, as we really never had that much to say to each other anyway.

Soon, I did start sleeping with Kristi and stopped going to Lucy's. It wasn't long before I missed the routine I had with Lucy. Except for that one altercation, we never crossed words again. Kristi was a different story, a much different relationship. We rode bikes together and went camping. The bonds that held Kristi and me together grew stronger. Our relationship began to bud about the time it was time for me to leave for Montana on May 1, 1995. I'd spent about a year and a half with Lucy but now found myself as deeply infatuated with Kristi as I had once been with Lucy.

Still, on the way to Montana, on those lonely nights in town parks and in the backyards of people I met along the way, on couches in living rooms and in the woods of Wyoming, and during the solitary days on the river, I thought of Lucy, what she must have been up to, how she was pursuing her goal of one day retreating to her land on the Klamath River.

Kristi came to visit me once on my trip. She drove 350 miles to Lexington, Nebraska to stay with me overnight in a swampy hotel room on the outskirts of town. That night, she asked me about Lucy. We were laying in each other's arms on the bed. She wanted to know what my time with Lucy had been like.

"It was like an old coat," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"About the time it gets comfortable, you need a new one," I replied, realizing what I was saying and hoping that Kristi wouldn't get offended. She elbowed her way out of bed and stood in the center of the room. "But you keep the old coat around because it fits well and means something to you," I continued. "You've lived an important part of

your life in it. You can't throw it away. It sits in the closet until you find it again the next winter and you remember that part of your life again."

"So, you're saying I'm going to wear out on you someday too?"

"To tell you the truth, Kristi, you're nothing like an old coat."

"But I will be."

"Maybe someday," I said and paused. Who knew where we were going or what was going to happen to us. The 350 miles I'd walked toward Montana were already changing me. I was becoming a new person—more confident, more adventuresome. "But I don't see it happening anytime soon. After all, you thought enough to come all the way to Nebraska to see me. I've talked to you about every other day on the phone. You've given me encouragement when I needed it. Plus, we have things to talk about. Lucy and I never had much to talk about."

"You still think about Lucy?"

"When I'm not thinking of you, and I think about you most of the time."

"Well, you better get over this Lucy thing pretty damn soon."

To tell you the truth, twenty-three years later, I'm not sure I'm over the Lucy thing. When I remember that time, I think about Lucy and not Kristi. Sometimes I imagine Lucy in a log house on the banks of the Klamath. The wind sighs in the pines and the snow is just beginning. She's lit a fire in the wood stove and is sitting in her favorite chair next to an end table with a lamp, the only light in the otherwise dark room. The house smells faintly of old dog and pine resin. She would be seventy now.

Lucy sticks with me, this person I let into my interior and treated so shabbily. I'm not sure I'll ever get rid of that old coat. Though it was gone, thrown or given away, I remembered it. And Lucy wasn't an old coat. She did more for me in our time together than keep me warm. She was a catalyst, an agent of change, and in being so, became part of me. I wouldn't be who I am without Lucy. I've become a better man, in part, because of her. My memory of her makes me wish to become a better man still.



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