

## LILITH'S KILLING PASSION

Before the beginning,  
God conceived two children,  
Adam and Lilith,  
Brother and sister,  
Husband and wife.  
Adam and Lilith conceived.  
Not a child, but a question.  
Who was to be dominant?  
God, their remiss father, descended.  
"Lilith, take the submissive position!"  
"I will not."  
"Then you are banished from this fruitful land!"  
And so, Lilith was transported  
and possessed of a demon serpent, and doomed to everlasting life.

Katrina's mother arrived home in a state of complete exhaustion, as always, and sank slowly, like cold syrup, into the chair that had become the negative of her. Its ghostlike pink roses had been rubbed by her body to near extinction, their entwined, thorny stems enveloping her possessively. The freedom of the day had ended, and the nightly rituals were now to begin. Katrina brought the tea, while her sister, Rebecca, gently removed their mother's small shoes.

"Oh, these superfluous appendages," Katrina's mother snarled, referring to the bony and motionless feet she set gently upon the thorny ottoman, as if they were two valuable china tea cups that belonged to another, as if they had been mistakenly attached to the ends of her legs by some confused and inept creator.

"You look exquisite today, Katrina. The color in your cheeks is vibrant, and your black eyes dance."

Katrina did not mind playing the wife. For when her mother was the husband, she treated Katrina like a queen.

"Thank you, Mother," said Katrina.

"I must be the luckiest woman in the world to have such an exquisite daughter."

"Are you ready for dinner now, Mother?"

As they ate at the massive cherry dining table, the crystal chandelier throwing its light futilely around the cavernous and gloomy mahogany-paneled room, Katrina's mother savored every morsel, systematically complimenting Katrina's culinary talents and correcting Rebecca's table manners. Katrina prayed that she would remain the wife tonight.

Katrina's father had left when she was eight. He had left her pregnant mother, in a palatial home, with luxurious surroundings, with no money, with no income. Since her father had played no meaningful part in her life, his absence would have gone unnoticed by Katrina but for the fact that her mother had to go to work, something she had never done. Katrina's mother's hands had never before been dirtied.

Once when Katrina inquired about her mother's job, she snapped back in a violent whisper, "What I do in that revolting place is of no significance whatsoever, and we will never again speak of it in this household! All you need to know is that I put food on our table and a roof over our heads!"

From then on, the subject of Katrina's mother's job was never spoken of. It remained, however, a puzzlement to Katrina, for each day her mother dressed as if she were going to an executive dinner for a large corporation in which she was a major stockholder, not to work in a glove factory. And tonight, ten years later, Katrina's mother sat at the opposite end of the long table clad in one of her old, but classic and elegant dresses.

Most of her mother's beautiful clothes and jewelry had been gifts from Katrina's father. Every morning as Katrina checked to see that the seams in her mother's stockings were straight, she would have to hear the details of the presentation of whatever gift her mother might be donning that day. Her mother's most treasured gift was the valuable and irreplaceable double-stranded pearl necklace that Katrina's conception had brought about. Her mother had been so saddened to find out that she was pregnant, so afraid, so afraid she would never again be beautiful, never again be lithe, that Katrina's father had rushed right out and come home shortly with the pearls. When he gently clasped them around his wife's long, sleek neck, she felt renewed, replenished. "And it was at that very moment, that very instant, that I began to look

forward to seeing you, Katrina, to seeing what you would look like." That was always her closing line.

Katrina's favorite of her mother's gifts was the one Rebecca's conception had inspired. The final one. The deep, deep, near-black, burgundy velvet cloak. Floating and huge, weighty, to warmly wrap a mother and child. Katrina's mother deplored it. Had never put it on. But kept it. On the back of her monumental standing mirror, it hung. Grown limp. Untouched. A memorial. A reminder. Forbidden fruit.

For as long as Katrina could remember, Rebecca had known her mother did not love her. From the time she could crawl, Rebecca had instinctively moved from her mother. As she grew older, Rebecca became tough and rugged. Hard as a rock. A loner. A champion tree-climber, bicycle rider, and savior of betrayed animals. Battered and bruised from head to toe. Dirty within minutes after bathing. Loud and laughing. All these characteristics made Rebecca even more undesirable to her mother, who admittedly detested filthy, noisy children.

Katrina was, in every real sense of the word, Rebecca's mother. It was she who comforted Rebecca, who doctored her skins and scrapes, who combed her hair and clipped her nails, who sat beside her when she had bad dreams, who held a cool cloth to her face and neck when she had a fever, who monitored her schoolwork and raved over her improvements, who let her cry and dried her tears.

"I'll have just a bit more of that casserole, Katrina. You are the only cook I've ever known that could make a casserole that did not simply taste like mush."

"Thank you, Mother," Katrina said as she took the casserole dish to the other end of the table and served her mother slowly, awaiting the gentle touch of her mother's hand upon hers, meaning 'enough'. Katrina crossed back to her end of the table watching as Rebecca struggled to keep from making noise with her silverware.

As Katrina had grown older, she was obliged to become the husband more often. Katrina could rarely determine what had inspired the role change, but thankfully, had learned to recognize it quickly and not make any mistakes.

She hated being the husband. Those were the times when her mother changed into

something obscurely menacing. Unfathomable to Katrina. Unpredictable. Untamed. A pacing lioness in a cage. Wild. Insatiable. Copper-colored hair billowing around her shoulders, down her back, flipping like fanned flames as she swiftly turned, head first, body slinking involuntarily behind, mouth shrieking. "Why do you do this to me? Why must you torture me?" Katrina kept silent. Response worsened matters. "Don't think you can hold your power over me! Don't think you can possess me! I WILL NOT BE POSSESSED!"

Katrina's mother often slapped her. And on nights when she was peculiarly disturbed and unrestrained, afterward Katrina would find Rebecca in her closet huddling, her hard, bony little body having become that soft and vulnerable one that only Katrina knew.

Most of the time when Katrina was the husband, her mother became this strange animal, circling the bedroom, making ominous sounds and unintelligible conversation, and eventually collapsing from fatigue. But there were times when Katrina was the husband, that her mother's distress took a more puzzling course. Gentle and charming. Seductive. The temptress. Katrina decidedly preferred the animal mother, although she knew better how to assuage the yearning mother. Those nights had become more frequent, and Katrina grew to dread them intensely. She would rather be slapped repeatedly than endure those strange evenings. She never voiced this, however, as there was no doubt that it would make her mother want them even more. Her mother savagely needed them.

The three of them remained silent throughout the remainder of the meal, except for the occasional clink of silverware and nearly inaudible disapproving groan from somewhere inside Katrina's mother.

Then suddenly she stood up and announced, "I'm retiring early this evening, Katrina. Exhaustion has literally possessed me. Goodnight, Rebecca."

Katrina closed her eyes in preference to watching her mother walk out of the room. "I'll be in shortly, Mother." She prayed, to whoever would listen, that her hunch was only paranoia.

Like two robots, Rebecca cleared the table, and Katrina prepared the tea tray. Rebecca never once complained about having to clean the kitchen after dinner. Grateful that it was she who had to be the one, and not her sweet Rebecca, she took the tray into her mother's room.

"How do you like my new dress?" Katrina's mother asked coyly when Katrina walked into the room.

"Oh, it's so lovely," Katrina answered as she set the tray on the nightstand. Katrina had learned over the years how to walk without a sound, how to set down a teacup without so much as the slightest clink, even how to keep the tea silent as it filled the cups she so detested.

Her mother moved sinuously to the heavy mahogany-framed mirror standing alone in the dead center of the room. Its ornamental cloak hung from the back with shoulders hung from the corners, the velvet like coagulated blood falling down the sides. "Do you really think it becomes me?"

"Oh, yes, Mother. Very much so."

"Katrina, you know you must call me Lilith tonight." She whirled around and faced Katrina with a glorious smile. "Which part, Dear, do you think becomes me most?" She twirled and stopped to check the mirror.

Katrina knew well what her mother wanted to hear. "The way the neckline cuts across your white throat is uncommonly captivating, and the way the fabric clings like skin to your breasts and hips is indeed sensual."

Katrina's mother's walk was more of a slide. She moved through the room as if there was not a bone in her lean body, returning to the mirror frequently, smiling mysteriously at the image she saw there. As always.

"Undo me, Darling," she finally said. Katrina unzipped her dress, which Lilith let slide slowly off her shoulders and down her body to the floor. Katrina knelt down to take the dress as her mother daintily stepped from its center, the slip and bra breaking the relentless silence with a tiny click on the dark cherry floor. Leaning forward, back straight, head back, her mother unhooked her garters, watching in the mirror as Katrina slipped the silk stockings carefully down. Never taking her eyes off what she saw in the mirror, Lilith un-clicked her garter belt as Katrina moved the satin stool underneath her mother's now naked and flat bottom. Katrina methodically applied lanolin to Lilith's neck and shoulders and upper arms. Then Katrina did her entire back and legs and massaged the warm lotion into the tiny fragile bones of her feet. At certain times of the year, Katrina's mother's skin was very dry and flaked away day after day.

Soothed, Lilith smiled as she slithered into the bed and lay flat on her back. Katrina warmed the lotion in her hands and sat on the bed next to Lilith, whose eyes were now closed, waiting patiently. Katrina started at the neck and slowly moved down to the breasts, still firm and youthful. Certainly never once nursed by a child. She didn't dare end the breast massage too soon or would have to start all over. Lilith moaned lightly to herself with the suggestion of a smile. Katrina's hands moved down to the belly, which was tender and had to be massaged very carefully. Katrina suspects it is only a matter of time before this ritual goes further. It will likely be when she turns 18. Her mother's adherence to societal rules has always puzzled Katrina. It is so at odds with everything else her mother is. Katrina suspects a change when she turns 18 in a few months and is considered an adult. She dreads it with all her being.

When Rebecca started kindergarten, Katrina had gone back to school. She had been studying and testing at home through special permission from the school board. She became an obsessive reader and traveled the world through others' skins and minds. Even though she had missed four years, she was not far behind her classmates academically, but socially, she was an outcast. Katrina's mother had never allowed anyone to visit Katrina nor allowed Katrina any freedom. Rebecca had to be cared for. So said her mother.

Katrina's mother had taught her religiously of the insignificance of men. Every lecture on men concluded with the same declaration. "Never forget, Katrina, that fertilization is a man's net worth." From what she had seen, Katrina had no reason to disbelieve her mother in that conclusion. Until she met Durant.

One rainy Saturday, when Katrina's mother was particularly exhausted and out of cigarettes, she sent Katrina to the service station not far from their home. Katrina did not mind. In fact, she looked for any opportunity to walk, especially in the rain. She held her face to the puffy gray sky with an open mouth and felt each cool drop magically appear on her face and tongue, the sensation thrilling, her skin shivering, her soul warm.

When she arrived at the station, there appeared to be no one there. Katrina heard a man humming, a song she did not know, and went into the garage and saw the body of a man partially protruding from underneath a car. Only his lower body was visible. Katrina knew this was a man she had not seen. It suddenly occurred to her that this was the first man she had ever truly looked

at. He did not hear her come in, so she was able to study him at length. The garage was sweltering, and the man's pants were soaked with sweat, his boots black with grease. To her surprise, this did not disgust Katrina. His lower body tensed when his upper body strained with his work. In a flash, he whirled out and caught her off guard, her presence surprising him as well. In a single motion, he was standing and wiping his hands with a dirty rag, the filthy T-shirt caressing his biceps and rippled abdomen, his face smudged with black, the face of a god. Katrina blushed her first blush. After a moment, he spoke, his low voice smooth, soft, round. "My apologies. I didn't hear you come in. Can I be of service?"

"Yes, thank you. I need a package of L & Ms."

"Pardon me for saying so, but you seem young for smoking."

"No, actually, I'm not. I'm eighteen."

The man brushed by her to get the cigarettes, almost touching her. Katrina had never been that close to a man. She didn't move. The man called to her from inside. Katrina walked in. He smiled. She had no idea a man could smile a smile like that. The wide white curve that opened in his sunburned and dirty face wrapped around her with the comfort and softness of a velvet cloak. They stood motionless for what could have been an eternity. Or a moment. In slow motion, he handed her the cigarettes. She reached out to take them. He did not release them. Although their hands did not touch, the charge between them was palpable, demanding. Katrina lingered until it became unbearable. She pulled the package from him and stiffly backed toward the door.

"My name's Durant. May I ask yours?"

"Katrina."

"Katrina," he spoke gently, slowly. "A pleasure."

She eased out the door and fled home with the rain beating against her face and bare arms and legs.

"What in heaven's name took you so long, Katrina? I thought perhaps you had deserted me," Katrina's mother whined. Katrina lit her mother's cigarette. "Oh, Mother, you know I would never leave you." Katrina hoped desperately that she would not have to be the husband now. She so wanted to go look at herself in the mirror. Her mother's foul mood suddenly flipped.

"Katrina, my darling, you are soaking wet. Come, let me dry your hair. Rebecca, bring your dear mother a towel, please."

Katrina's mother did not seem to mind that Katrina was soaked from head to toe. She was so relieved she would not have to play the husband that Katrina didn't object to the toweling of her hair and allowed herself to pretend that she was a little girl, something she could not remember ever having been. Her mother left the room. For the first time, Katrina studied the full length of herself in her mother's mirror, the size eight feet that so appalled her mother, the long and muscular legs, the narrow hips and hard buttocks that protruded too far, the slim rib cage and the broad square shoulders, the angular face and jet hair, all distinctive features, all features of her father. Katrina knew at once why Durant looked at her the way he did. She remembered that she had not paid him for the cigarettes. Then looking again at the tall, handsome woman in the mirror, she realized it was unimportant. Katrina stared at the image of her mother in the mirror beyond her.

"What on earth are you doing, Katrina?"

Katrina said nothing but kept looking in the mirror as her mother moved in close behind.

"So, what do you think of yourself, Katrina?"

"I think I am beautiful—like you, Mother."

"My darling, you mistake magnetism for beauty. You are not beautiful, Katrina, dear. But you are stunning, almost as stunning as your mother." Her mother's laughter trickled out like marbles from a leather bag and filled the room. "Here, darling, slip off those wet clothes. I've brought these dry things for you." Her mother sits on the pink brocade stool. Katrina had not been naked in front of her mother since she was Rebecca's age. She reached out for the clothes. "Dear one, there's no reason for you to leave the room. You came from my own body. We are like one. Plus, you need to brush your mother's hair. It's in dire need of your touch."

Katrina wanted to object but thought better of it knowing it would delay going to her room and dreaming of Durant. As Katrina removed the wet clothes, her mother stared, smiling at first. It was deeply uncomfortable and seemed to take forever to dress her damp body. But Katrina was

determined not to cause a row. While she fetched the sterling silver and ivory-handled brush, Katrina's mother stood and waited in front of the mirror. Katrina slid the stool behind her to sit and pulled the pins from her mother's painstakingly wound-up hair, letting it fall from bondage over her shoulders and down her back. Methodically, Katrina began her effort to tame the unruly mass of newly-freed hair, trying not to inflict the pain that inevitably accompanies freedom.

Rebecca came in shyly. "Can I watch, Kat?"

"Of course, Beck. I'd like that." Rebecca sat on the floor next to them, clutching her knobby knees to her little girl chest. Katrina kissed her sister lovingly on the head and touched her cheek. Years ago, Katrina had made a pact with her mother. That she would take care of Rebecca's every need if her mother did not intrude in their relationship. It had taken a month to convince her mother that she had, by leaps and bounds, received the effortless end of the pact. The most extraordinary part for Katrina was that her mother had honored it with very few minor slip-ups.

"Katrina, please. I hadn't intended to sit here all night, while you and Rebecca become fatuous." Katrina's eyes apologized to her sister, as she returned to her task. Preening, her mother continued, "Actually, when you think about it, it's quite extraordinary that at forty years of age I still do not have a single gray hair."

Katrina knew otherwise and sneaked a conspiratorial grin to her sister, who muffled a laugh into her knees, as their mother became mesmerized by the image in the mirror. The sisters had many such opportunities to carry on unspoken conversations, their mother so often enthralled by her own presence, her own thoughts, by something within her requiring undivided attention.

Much to Katrina's dismay, her mother was not a chain smoker. After days of anxious anticipation, Katrina decided to try smoking, to help finish off her mother's L & Ms. Immediately, Katrina realized that she would never become a smoker. She flushed three cigarettes down the toilet, leaving only one for the evening. When her mother arrived home and Rebecca had removed the shoes from her feet, Katrina offered her mother a drink and a cigarette. She accepted. Graciously, of course.

"Oh dear, Mother, that's your last cigarette."

"Don't worry, Darling. I don't need any more tonight. I just need to have dinner and rest. I

am taken over by exhaustion, utterly invaded."

"But, Mother, won't you need one in the morning?" Katrina let her anxiousness slip out. At once, she realized her mistake. She should have flushed them all down the toilet.

"Have you forgotten that tomorrow is Saturday, Katrina? I won't be needing any first thing." Katrina's mother's look pierced her. "Are you trying to get out of the house, Katrina? Why don't you just say so if you want to leave?" Her smile was mischievous. "You seem to forget that I was once a young woman. Like yourself."

Katrina had heard this before and knew that under no circumstances should she respond affirmatively. The one time Katrina had been invited to a party, her mother had become ill the preceding day. Katrina had nursed her mother diligently in hopes that she would recover quickly; she so wanted to go to the party. But naturally, her mother got worse. Just before Katrina was to leave for the party, her mother had a coughing fit, one of those that sounded as if her body was host to something nonhuman, and Katrina had said that perhaps she should not go to the party. Katrina's mother claimed that she was young once and had known what it was like to want something fiercely and insisted that Katrina go if she truly wanted to go to a party filled with silly and ridiculous people. Katrina admitted that she wanted to go more than anything. She longed for the silly and ridiculous. The thing inside her mother then surged up with such a vengeance that Katrina thought surely this time it would escape. But no. It stayed with her. Her mother fainted and remained unconscious until the time the party was to end. If Rebecca had not been there, alone, with what appeared to be a dead body, Katrina might have gone. She had to nurse her mother for the entire weekend. By Sunday evening, her mother had fully returned.

"Dinner is ready to serve, Mother."

"Thank you, Darling. I am such a fortunate parent to have such a devoted daughter." That night, Katrina's mother went early to her bedroom, Katrina following for their nightly ritual. After she had readied her mother for bed, Katrina fetched the silver tea tray that Rebecca had prepared, complete with the Sunday china tea set and sterling candlesticks. She placed it on the bedside table next to her mother's Bible, opened as always to Genesis. Another of the unspoken subjects in this house was the Bible. Katrina's mother had never attended church, and she never

did anything that might be even remotely considered spiritual, except on occasion she would speak aloud to her 'Father.' Katrina assumed she meant God. But she did not want to know. Katrina removed the tea bags from their china tea cups, watching their diminishing dripping until they no longer held any liquid, any significant substance. She had grown to despise tea, but her mother had announced with the finality of an order that it was not polite to force someone to drink alone. Katrina added milk from the creamer and two spoons of sugar from the sugar dish. All these things had to be done with her mother watching. They sipped in silence.

After the tea bags cooled, Katrina carefully flattened and placed them on her mother's thin, almost transparent, eyelids. It was really so easy to make her happy, Katrina told herself. She began to massage her mother's tiny feet, pale, white, translucent like fine china, feet diminutive to the point of being almost nonexistent, feet so fragile that it was a wonder they did not break.

Katrina's mother's mouth moved. The rest of her was as still as frozen water. "What would I ever do without you, Katrina? I cannot imagine a world without you. And Rebecca certainly could not. Why, Rebecca could never live without her precious 'Kat.'" Katrina's mother spit out the name, as if it had slashed her tongue in two. Katrina said nothing as she automatically began to massage the second foot. She tried not to think. When her mother spoke of Rebecca, it made Katrina's chest ache. She had watched her mother's resentment for Rebecca grow from the time Rebecca was growing inside her.

Katrina had known from that first astonished and delighted feel of Rebecca moving inside her mother that it would be she who loved Rebecca. And Rebecca who loved her. In every way she could think of, Katrina had tried to make her mother happy about the coming baby. It was the first happiness Katrina could remember. When it was time for Rebecca to come, Katrina watched the hideous contortions of her mother's face, heard the agonized screams of her mouth, and feared that something bestial would come out of her. The doctor arrived just in time. From the other room, Katrina heard the small cry, frightened and needing. The doctor called Katrina in and plopped Rebecca into her arms while he injected her mother and soothed and cleaned her. The tiny cries ceased as Katrina wrapped the exquisite little red and wrinkled person in a blanket and inside the robe with her. Katrina smiled through tears at her already hungry little sister. She went into the kitchen for the bottle she had earlier prepared. Katrina felt as if her own baby had come.

She cared for Rebecca day and night, holding her nearly constantly. Katrina couldn't remember her mother ever having fed Rebecca a bottle. Or even having held her.

Soon her mother fell asleep. Katrina removed the dried-up tea bags from the eyelids and spread the shimmery satin sheet over the lower half. She took the tea tray into the kitchen, and for some reason she did not understand, Katrina squeezed the tea bags in her hand until they burst.

That night Katrina could not sleep. She checked to see that Rebecca was sleeping peacefully. She often had nightmares. Katrina did not have to concern herself with her mother, who slept like a cadaver. She quietly went out into the blackness of the night. The warm air enfolded her body through the thin cotton gown. Only a tiny sliver of moon was not lit. Barefoot, she stepped into the cool grass and sat down cross-legged, so sensitized that she could feel each blade of grass on the backs of her naked thighs. To her amazement, there was even more light with her eyes closed, and in that world, he appeared again to her.

In the morning Katrina awoke smiling. When she went in with the coffee, she discovered her mother in a rare good humor. "Katrina, Love, your mother should learn to listen to her wise daughter."

"Shall I go for cigarettes, Mother?" Katrina smiled.

"Yes, Darling, would you? Your dear mother would be eternally grateful."

"Of course, Mother."

The sunshine burned down ruthlessly that morning. And for the first time, Katrina loved it. She did not hurry but treasured each step to the station. She saw the sky. The sky, a blue sky. A blue Katrina thought existed only in children's storybooks. No cloud dared mar its pure and perfect blue. Katrina wondered how something so beautiful, so present, so concrete as that blue did not actually exist. She felt as if she could reach up and touch it. In her soul, Katrina knew he would be there. It was early. The town would not be awake, and he would, no doubt, be alone. This time, he was not underneath a car but leaning over into an engine compartment. And again, only his lower body was visible, the reverse side of it, the side she had not seen before. Katrina

wondered whether she would recognize him if she saw his face first. He heard her footstep and turned. He smiled that smile. He sighed a slow sigh.

"I thought you would never return, Katrina."

"My mother smokes very little."

"So they weren't for you."

"I never said I smoked. I only said I was old enough to."

They openly perused one another. He looked exactly as he did the first moment she saw him. Katrina was aware that she was different. She saw that he also knew. He moved toward the cigarettes, never taking his eyes off her.

"L & Ms, right?"

"Yes, thank you. I forgot to pay you before."

"Yes. I waited and waited, hoping you would come back. But you didn't."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

He held the package out to her. Katrina took it with the tips of her fingers, as if to touch him would weld them permanently together. He let her pull the cigarettes from his hand. She dropped the correct change for both packages into his still extended hand. They gazed at each other in intense silence. An invisible rope bound them.

After a full minute, he said, "May I call on you sometime?"

An image of her mother came involuntarily into Katrina's mind. "No," she answered emphatically, but she did not move. Slowly, he moved to her until she could feel the warmth radiating from him. In slow motion, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and gently pulled her to him. Her heart began to pound. What Katrina was experiencing was incomprehensible to her. She had had no idea. As they stood there, his arms tightened, hard around her. She did not want him to let her go.

"Please, Katrina."

"No—my mother would be devastated." He released her and looked inquiringly into her eyes. She saw his question, but said nothing.

"Then meet me tonight under the railroad trestle at midnight."

Katrina felt his warm hands squeeze her upper arms. She yearned to hold them in her own,

but she pulled free and forced herself to go.

"Katrina, how can it take half an eternity to purchase a package of cigarettes? What could possibly be so enthralling at that disgustingly filthy service station? It's as if you forget I am lying here having a nicotine fit. And where in tarnation is Rebecca Elizabeth? I have been calling for her since you left! I need my lanolin! My hands are beginning to scale!" Katrina's mother was becoming unnerved.

Katrina knew how to calm her. "No, Mother, your hands are lovely. See, they look younger than mine." She held her mother's flimsy hand next to her own large, strong one. "And they are so much more delicate and graceful."

Katrina's mother studied their hands. "Yes, Dear, you're right. They're not so bad. Not so bad at all." She took Katrina's hand in both of hers and placed it between her breasts. "Do you feel my heart pounding, Katrina? I think there may be something terribly wrong with me."

"No, Mother, there could never be anything wrong with you."

"I do hope not. I couldn't bear to become a burden to you, Katrina."

Katrina said nothing but left to call for Rebecca. She knew Rebecca would be within earshot. "Rebecca!" Katrina yelled out the back door, "I'm back!" Katrina knew her mother would be irritated. She detested people yelling outside. But Katrina had an important decision to make, and she could not take time to search out Rebecca's hiding place. Rebecca would be disappointed. Being found by Katrina had always been Rebecca's favorite game.

As she entered their small, dark bedroom, Katrina realized that she was seeing it for the first time. She allowed her eyes to relish it. Looking at Rebecca's tussled bed, Katrina smiled as she imagined her bony and forever skinned-up sister sweetly sleeping huddled amidst the soft zoo of stuffed animals. There were many bedrooms in the house, but the sisters had chosen to stay together in spite of their mother's agitated and constant complaints about it. One of only a handful of victories, thus far. Slowly, Katrina knelt down beside her own bed and spread her chest and bare arms across the cool coverlet. Katrina closed her eyes. She knew there was nothing on earth she could do to stop herself from going to the railroad trestle.

Katrina brushed the day's play from Rebecca's golden hair and doctored her scraped knees. Katrina smiled to herself. Rebecca had had scraped knees since the day she learned to walk.

Katrina carried her piggyback to bed. Rebecca was getting heavy. Soon Katrina would have to stop carrying her.

"Why didn't you come find me today, Kat?"

"I was busy today. You know how Mother can be."

"I hate Mother! I wish you were my mother."

Katrina was surprised by Rebecca's more vehement than usual burst of anger. "Don't worry, Beck. You will always, no matter what, be with me."

"I know, Kat. I love you."

"I love you, Beck."

"More than anything?"

"More than anything."

"In the whole world?"

"In the whole world." Katrina kissed her sister and tucked the covers around her.

lanky body, placing each of the adored animals in its assigned sleeping niche on the outskirts of Rebecca's bed, each doomed to be flung into the floor by restless tossing and turning, and each retrieved come morning with profuse hugs and kisses and apologies.

When Katrina went into her mother's bedroom, she appeared to be already asleep, her Bible laid out on her chest, the worn pages of Genesis spread wide. Katrina turned to go.

"Katrina." Her mother spoke without opening her eyes. Katrina brought in the tray of tea and began. She so hoped her mother wouldn't talk tonight. She wanted to escape into her own mind. "Where were you for so long this morning?" the mouth spoke. It was as if a corpse was speaking.

Katrina's instincts told her to lie, "I took the long way back, Mother. It was such a lovely day."

"It was ninety-five degrees, Katrina. The sun bore down like some Satanic practical joke." Katrina's mother's eyes opened. "I know, Katrina, how you despise sunshine." Her voice growled low.

"I think I'm beginning to like sunshine, Mother."

"Oh, Father, give me strength." Katrina placed the tea bags on the table. "You weary me, Katrina."

"Sleep, Mother."

"Goodnight, Father."

Her mother was asleep, before Katrina got to the second foot.

After waiting two interminable hours, Katrina stepped out the door at exactly midnight. The trestle was not far. The moon was full and cast its shadows serenely about. The night had become a monochromatic moon painting. Colors Katrina saw every day were transformed by the silver-blue coating of the moon's brush. But Katrina suspected it was she who was transformed. When she arrived at the trestle, there was nature's silence, filled only with the music of the night creatures. A shadow lay down in front of her, an intricate matrix of lines creating a calming symmetrical pattern. An unnatural sound startled her, in that instant before realization comes.

"Durant?"

"Katrina." He approached and, without hesitation, took her in his arms. "You are the most entrancing and beautiful woman ever created. I have thought about you every minute since that moment I first saw you."

Katrina was silent. She did not understand why she trusted this man. Katrina had not known she would ever be capable of trusting a man. She accepted that she could no more refuse this man than the ocean tide can refuse the moon. He buried his face in her neck, inhaled deeply, and exhaled very slowly, his breath warming her to the marrow. Katrina was more excited and more relaxed than she had ever been in her entire life. Knowing nothing about lovemaking did not concern her in the least. She had devoured many a love scene from all over the world. Durant removed his clothes. Then hers. She had never seen a naked man. He looked like a marble god, the moonlight glistening off his hard edges. The hotness of his skin touching hers compelled Katrina in a way she had never dreamed possible. She was grateful that at last she did not have to think or make any decision, that she did not have to play any game, that she did not have to be anything other than herself, that her body was taking control. And on the warm earth, their blue-hot, silvered bodies merged, waxing and waning again and again to the eyes of the moon in the glorious peak of her cycle.

The following morning, Katrina's mother was debilitated. Katrina wanted to scream when she heard her mother's call. She had so hoped this would be one of her late mornings. Katrina felt as if her body had been drained of its contents and filled up again with a warm, luminous fluid.

"Katrina, love," the faint voice urged as Katrina made her way down the long hallway. The day would be tedious. But the night would be hers. "Katrina, you look ghastly! Didn't you sleep well, sweetheart?"

"No, Mother, I hardly slept a wink." Katrina could not keep herself from smiling. "Coffee will be up soon."

"You know how to make a woman feel loved, Katrina."

All day, Katrina walked as if she was moving through soft, thick, but giving air— air that caressed her, comforted her, carried her carefree through the day. Her mother slept in the afternoon, and Katrina was able to lounge in a hot bath.

Before midnight, Katrina became doubtful. How could a second night match the first? The untainted memory of that night was essential to her. The second night was no less extraordinary. Nor the third. Nor the fourth. Nor any thereafter.

Katrina's mother had decided that her palpitations were due to smoking, and at that very moment, she quit. She had been periodically missing work because of her misbehaving heart, and on one of those occasions, Katrina brazenly broached one of their taboo subjects.

"Mother, I think it is time I went to work. I'll be eighteen and graduating in a month. And you're not well, Mother."

Her mother began to cough and cry simultaneously, shrieking between coughs.

"Katrina Eve, you know I will not hear of that! You will stay here and care for Rebecca just as you have always done!"

"But she is at school all day, Mother. I could—"

"Katrina, stop! I refuse to hear this! Why must you do this to me? Do you think I am incapable of caring for you?" She was seething now and pacing.

"Mother, lie down. You'll only make yourself worse."

"Haven't I worked hard enough?" she howled. "Haven't I brought home enough? Is there anything, anything that you have needed or wanted that you did not have?" Katrina began to think of what she needed and wanted and did not have. Her mother slapped her just as Rebecca walked in from school. She had surprising strength for a frail, sick woman. "Answer me!" Katrina's mother raged. She was about to slap Katrina again when Rebecca lurched forward, threw her school books on the floor, and shoved her mother onto the bed. The shock caused Katrina's mother to regain composure. Katrina's hand muffled the scream about to burst from Rebecca's mouth as she wrapped her other arm tightly around the fierce little body.

"Oh, my. Katrina, my darling, come here to your mother. Let's not talk of these unpleasantries ever again."

Katrina did not move. "No, Mother."

Katrina's mother's eyes glared at Rebecca until she tore out of Katrina's arms and out of the room. Katrina followed, leaving her mother to her torturous self-loathing.

Katrina's midnight rendezvous became her lifeblood. She became nocturnal, one of the night creatures. Durant called her his black panther. She worshipped him. Every lean muscle. Every niche. His strong scent. His thick, slick hair. The way he mystically possessed and freed her at once. She dreamt of merging with him and floating down to unexplored depths where they could kiss the luminescent ocean floor, of flying with him to a place beyond the moon where they could gather stars from an unknown galaxy.

Again and again, he begged her to come to his brother's house. "They will love you," he told her. "I've told them all about you. They tease me and say that you're just my fantasy. And I say they're right." He kissed her all over, every hill and valley of her. There was no part of her that he feared. But she would not go to his brother's. She was afraid the night magic would be broken. "Katrina, you must know how much I love you. I adore you. I want our lives to be shared. I want to be near you every second of every day. I want to be able to touch you at any moment. I have great plans, Katrina. I won't always be a mechanic. I have nearly enough money saved to go back to college. And when I'm an architect, you'll be proud to walk beside me. You can go too, Katrina! You can go to college! If I work another six months and you work, we can save enough

for us both."

Katrina put her fingertips to his mouth. The thought of college had never occurred to her. But now it did. She thanked him with her lips.

Rebecca flew into their bedroom. "Come quick, Kat! Something's happened to Mother!"

Katrina's mother had shed her clothes and was curled up in the middle of her bed. Playing dead.

"Mother, are you all right?"

"Leave, Rebecca." Her mother ordered in a low, rattling tone that came from somewhere deep within, from somewhere beyond her. Katrina knew her mother was not sick. Rebecca looked at Katrina, who nodded her approval. When Rebecca closed the door, the voice began. The eyes remained closed. "I was up in the night, Katrina. You were not in your bed."

Katrina did not answer. On the floor were the scattered pages of Genesis, scratched with black ink and scrawled violently with the word, "LIES." After a strained silence, her mother slithered off the bed and began to undulate around the room, her naked body gathering momentum. Katrina had not seen her mother like this. Nothing of her mother was present.

The screech that slashed the silence was hardly human. "WHERE WERE YOU!"

"Mother, I refuse to tell you if you do not calm yourself."

With monumental effort, Katrina's mother forced herself to regain a modicum of composure and return to the bed.

Katrina was uncertain of how to begin. She decided to try truth. "Mother, I have fallen in love."

Her mother's countenance became hideous and froze. Her eyes were two skinny black slits that opened to nothingness. What little blood she had was sucked from her face. Her body appeared to be in rigor mortis.

"Please, Mother. I know you must remember what it was like for you and Father." Her mother recoiled ever so slightly. "He is very kind and gentle. And quite handsome. I know you will be fond of him, Mother."

Her mother's upper lip quivered and retracted, exposing long teeth. The mouth hissed out a sound barely intelligible, "Do not ever, I repeat, do not ever bring it into this house. I do not want

to lay eyes on the slimy animal with whom you have been groveling in the night.”

"Mother, not every man is an animal." Katrina noticed that she was crying in her mother's presence. That had never happened. "I know you would feel differently if you would only see him," she pleaded.

Katrina's mother slid off the bed with the quickness of a striking serpent and spit, "I SHALL NEVER SEE THE SNAKE!" Abruptly, she fell onto the bed, depleted for the moment of her venom.

Katrina became resolved to the necessity that as long as she lived with her mother, there could be no one else. She knew she had to leave. And get Rebecca far away from her.

A meek voice from the bed spoke, "Katrina, Darling, do not do this to me. How could you do this to your own mother?"

"I won't desert you, Mother." Katrina lied. "I'll just go out at night, Mother. And Rebecca will be here with you when I'm not."

"Rebecca! Rebecca! All you think about is Rebecca! She is incapable of soothing me, and you know it!"

Katrina saw her mother's lethal substance replenishing, and acknowledged to herself that the attempt at truth had been a naively futile undertaking. "Whatever you wish, Mother," she lied. "I won't see him anymore. I'll be here always, Mother. With you."

"You lie! You are a liar! You will not be able to control your lustful self!" She screamed and was instantly somewhere else again. "THIS KILLING PASSION! IT WILL SUCK ME DRY!" Katrina's mother collapsed into her protective state of unconsciousness. Katrina sighed her thanks to God, or Satan, whoever was responsible, and went to comfort Rebecca. To be comforted by Rebecca.

Rebecca crouched in her nest of soft friends, her golden hair falling like rays of sunshine across her knees. The sight of Rebecca, no matter what had happened, always consoled Katrina. She made a place for herself among the comforting group and wrapped her sister's strong little body in her arms. "Don't worry, my sweet Rebecca. I will never leave without you. When I go, you will be with me. I promise you. And I don't think it will be too long from now."

Rebecca looked up. Her tear-covered face was radiant. "I knew you wouldn't leave me with her, Kat." She whispered and exhaled a shaky breath as she snuggled in under Katrina's protective arm.

For the first time, Katrina met Durant at the trestle in the sunlit day, while her mother was at work. She explained in great detail the disturbing puzzle at home. Durant insisted that she and Rebecca come live with him at his brother's house. Katrina told him that she could not leave now, while her mother was in such despair. Durant begged in vain. She told him it wouldn't be long and asked if he would wait for her. You know I'll wait. Forever, Katrina. But I'm afraid." Katrina did not ask him of what, because she knew it was because of what her mother might do. But in spite of her mother's mental illness, Katrina did not think she was truly dangerous. He held her as if he could not bear to let her go.

When Katrina walked into the house, she heard her mother's sobs from the bedroom. Again, she had come home from work early. Katrina winced. She dreaded the confrontation but thought it best to be done with it. When Katrina walked into the room, there was her mother kneeling on the bed. Katrina froze. Lying beside her was Rebecca. "Katrina!" her mother sobbed. "Oh, Father, help me, Father! Please, Father, let me be! Free me, Father, free me! Please free me, Father!" the voice trailed off into the blissful abyss of the insane.

Katrina could not move. Finally, her love for Rebecca gave her the strength to approach the bed. She was simultaneously consumed with hope and fear. The exquisite little face was at ease. Slowly, Katrina knelt beside her sister, her life, and took the small hand in hers. It was warm. Katrina laid her cheek gently on her sister's chest, the chest that held the treasure Katrina so loved, that held the heart that loved all small things, all things vulnerable, that held the heart that so loved Katrina, that no longer beat. Katrina felt something closing in around her body, something ominous, something that would surely crush her, and out of an instinctive need to survive, she allowed her mind to escape into a world beyond consciousness.

Eventually, hate possessed her being and summoned her back. Her sobs took over as she lifted Rebecca.

Lilith came back to the world of the living. "You'll be alone, Katrina! Just wait! HE WILL

LEAVE YOU!”

Katrina did not allow herself to hear. A void filled her. She wondered if this feeling in her is shock. Nothing was real. Rebecca seemed weightless as she carried her to their room and gently laid her in the midst of her comfort animals. She closed the door, locking out the torturous screams. She needed time before calling the police. She slid in next to Rebecca and lay with her in her arms until they both got cold. And she was certain Lilith had retreated into her underworld. Katrina found the poison in the kitchen and called the police. When they arrived, she told them that her mother had found Rebecca dead on the kitchen floor, that she must have poisoned herself. The policemen were kind, especially to Lilith. The silver-haired officer told her that he knew there was nothing like losing a child, particularly to suicide.

“Oh Officer, I’m deeply grateful for your kindness.” She touched his arm too long. He dared to lay his hand atop hers. With dark eyes filled with tears Lilith blinked up at him. Katrina thought she may vomit.

Lilith was bedridden and unable to attend the funeral. Katrina had made all the arrangements with Durant by her side, giving her the strength to stand. Promptly following the funeral, Katrina went home. She had packed only two suitcases. After she set up the tea tray perfectly, she gathered her resolve and took it into Lilith’s bedroom.

“Oh my Darling. You are nothing short of a miracle. I love you.” Those are words Katrina had never heard her speak. She poured one cup. “You are not joining me, Katrina?”

“No, Lilith. I am leaving. You will never see me again.”

As Katrina walked to the mirror without looking, she knew the animal inside Lilith was surging to the surface. The shrill voice shattered the stagnant air, "You can't leave me! YOU WILL KILL ME!"

“That is the plan, Lilith. You have killed the one I loved above all else in the world.”

“That is NOT TRUE. You know you love your mother above all else in the world!”

“You are not my mother. You are nothing.”

“That monster will leave you! You’ll be alone and desperate!” Her hissed words were barely intelligible. Lilith's whisper had become impotent. "You know I can't help myself, Katrina.

Father controls me. He makes me live on.”

Katrina took the velvet cloak and wrapped herself in it, its softness so unlike Rebecca and so like Rebecca. She admired herself in the mirror and turned to Lilith writhing on the bed. She smiled knowing the ‘suicidal’ poison would have its quiet effect in a matter of hours. Katrina left her with the killing blow. "I'm going to be a mother soon.”

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