

Win Place Show

By Liz Crowe

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Dedication

This Louisville-centric novel is dedicated to my college best friend, sorority sister, and superhero, Melissa Long Shuter.
Go Cards!

Wednesday

Whoever claimed that you can't go home again...is a god damned insightful genius, and I would like to buy them a beer.

The irony that she had this particular epiphany lying on her back with her legs splayed, having hot wax applied to her lady parts, for the express purpose of said home-going trip, wasn't lost on Lucille Granger.

"So, what do you have planned for the rest of the day," her overly chatty crotch-waxing genius asked as she divested Lucy of another strip of pubic hair.

"Not much." She winced, trying to keep the loud yelp of pain inside her head. She was amused by the woman's ability to talk about anything—up to and including politics—while up close and personal with labia majora.

She subjected herself to this bit of throwback grooming every five weeks on the nose. Again, why? She wasn't sure other than to re-establish the fact that she knew exactly what she'd be doing this first weekend of May, and with whom, even though it was a seriously bad idea.

She sighed and stared up at the florescent light fixture, which had been helpfully covered over with a serene photo of a forest, complete with babbling creek and a blue sky. Not unlike the one that was the view she had at the dentist during a root canal. Lucy wondered who sold these things and how they marketed them.

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"So I can't imagine how they think turning that nice park by the library into a parking garage is anyone's version of a good idea."

Lucy blinked, confused by the statement until she realized she'd been drifting, not paying attention to Bonnie the wax tech's valiant attempts to chat through this super-awkward moment. Lucy bit her lip when the wax was ripped from a particularly delicate area. But she knew it could've been much worse. She'd learned her lesson with less talented aestheticians and had sought out someone who was practiced in the art of the hard wax, not the kind that you spread on and used paper to rip off. That was a recipe for wounds. And she had been wounded, once. So she'd done some research and found this place. Home of the over-botoxed yet amazingly good at the task hard-wax artisans.

"Are you all packed?"

She blinked again, confused once more. She was doing that a lot lately. Going outside the moment to muse about something else while someone was talking right at her, not to mention grooming her hirsute nether regions.

"I'm not," she admitted, sighing with relief at the brief break from the torture. "I don't even want to go this year."

"You say that every year. Okay, over you go."

Lucy shifted on the narrow bed and flipped over, going up on her hands and knees and clasping her hands together in preparation for the final indignity. She always recalled a scene from the show about plastic surgeons that had been popular in the late nineties at this precise moment of the grooming regimen. She'd stumbled across it one night, bored and surfing streaming networks, and binged the shit out of it. It was awful yet somehow fantastic at the same time.

"Okay, all done."

Lucy flipped back over so the waxer could swab some sort of antibacterial goo onto her now hairless skin, one hand behind her head, pondering the babbling brook image above her.

"How does it look?" the woman asked.

"Like I'm trying not to be a normal grown woman with pubic hair?"

"Yeah. That about covers it."

"Then it's good," Lucy said with a grin.

"Very funny," Bonnie said, pulling off thin gloves. Her phone was buzzing away in her purse as she

paid, gave a twenty-five percent tip, then scheduled her next session on the leg-spreading torture table.

"Have fun at the Derby," Lucy heard Bonnie call out as she exited the door.

She didn't have the energy to reply.

A few hours later, she was wrapping up some work for one of the English professors at the university she'd attended and never left when she realized that she hadn't checked her phone. It was probably one of the many donate or volunteer sorts of messages she'd been getting lately since it was a major election year. She always meant to do the whole text STOP thing in reply but hadn't bothered to yet.

She dug the device out from under a pile of file folders she'd been repurposing for the summer semester and opened it as she sipped the last of her cold brew coffee. It was as she'd suspected. Several of those really urgent texts from non-numbers. But this time, scattered amongst them were two from actual people.

One she only half read, other than to register that her mother had purchased a bunch of new dresses and three new hats for her for the weekend. Her gaze skipped over the rest of the words, then she closed it, promising herself that she'd answer later.

The other text made her suck in a breath while trying to finish off the last of the too-sugary caffeinated drink at the same time, which resulted in a split second where her entire, brief life flashed before her eyes. A hand smacked between her shoulder blades, sending a horrifying arc of liquid from her mouth across the desk. But at least she could breathe again.

"Crap," she muttered, sucking in life-giving air, wondering if she'd ever recover from the embarrassment. Taking a few minutes to reassure her brain that it was no longer deprived of oxygen gave her extra time to ignore the fact of the other text.

"You all right, Lucy?"

She looked up at Dr. Vaughn, the department chair. The woman was peering at her through tiny round glasses, her watery brown eyes concerned but calm. She was the type of person unfazed by almost everything, from frantic freshmen who'd missed essay deadlines to nonchalant yet equally terrified grad students seeking thesis advice. Which was why Lucy had jumped at the chance to work for her while finishing up her Doctoral thesis. Even after getting the thing done, defended, and dusted, she stayed on, unable or perhaps unwilling to do anything else.

"Yes, thanks, Dr. V." She patted her chest. "Tried to do too much at once."

"Did you get bad news?" She pointed to Lucy's phone, which had a light splatter of coughed-up cold coffee on its screen.

She wiped it off with her sweater sleeve. It was the first Wednesday of May, but also, it was Michigan, so the weather couldn't be counted on to do much more than feel like mid-March. Hence she was still dressed in a wool skirt, tights, boots, and had on the ratty sweater she kept hanging on her chair as it had cooled considerably once the sun no longer angled through their bank of windows.

“No, not exactly,” she said, staring down at the words that had caused her to practically asphyxiate. “I don’t know. Maybe. Blast from the past, and one I don’t want, is a better description.”

“Is said blast of the man-shaped variety?” Dr. V. pushed her glasses up her nose and squinted at the phone’s screen when Lucy handed it to her. They had that sort of relationship—all up in each other’s personal business for the hours they were together in the office. Dr. Henrietta Vaughn was one of perhaps three people in the universe who knew how much Lucy hated going home at Derby time but also how important it was to her family, which meant she had to go. The list that included the lady who’d waxed her crotch a few hours earlier.

Lucy closed her eyes, waiting for her to figure out the answer for herself. She’d already memorized the message. It was etched onto her retinas, searing her brain, and setting off an inappropriate symphony in her libido.

Hey Luce, it’s Nate. Checking in on your ETA. Your mother has said that I’m to be your date for her new Thurby fundraising brunch. What say you, pal? Will I see you out tonight? Our usual?

“Seems innocuous to me,” Dr. V. said, handing the phone back.

“My mother has been trying to fix me up with Nathaniel Clark Hawthorne the Third our entire lives.”

“What a fabulous name. I must write that down.” She patted the pockets of her own version of the ratty sweater for a pen.

Lucy handed her a sticky note on autopilot. Dr. V. collected things like fabulous names and random descriptions of food or cars based on how they sounded, writing them down and sticking them all over her desk and bookshelves. She jotted down Nate’s name then looked up, waiting for the rest of the story.

Lucy sighed and pressed her forehead to the desk. She could smell coffee and the distinct underlayment of books, pens, papers, and printer ink. “It’s what you might call ‘complicated.’” She bonked her head on the pile of folders a few times. But Dr. V. simply waited for her to finish.

“Okay. Fine,” Lucy relented. “We met in elementary school when his family moved into a new neighborhood that had been built on some of my family’s old farmland. I caught him sneaking into our pool one day, and we were inseparable after that. We rode bikes and horses, swam, played video games, baseball, soccer.”

She took a breath. This was deep background, known only to her, her sister, and her best friend from high school. But she figured she might as well spill it to someone else. She needed the outlet if she was going to justify her no-doubt upcoming bad behavior choices this weekend.

Maybe she'd talk herself out of it. Probably not. "Go on," Dr. V. encouraged. "We attended middle school together, but I was

destined for the same, all-female Catholic high school that my mother attended. And he was bound for one of the boy's schools across town. We hung out through the end of eighth grade, more on the sly since I was morphing from tomboy into introverted book nerd while he was...well, he was going in a different direction."

Lucy fiddled with some papers on her desk, embarrassed all over again.

"Some of my best friends are nerdish introverts who love books. Including you." Dr. V. put her elbows on her knees, her chin on her knuckles. "Give me more."

Lucy hesitated. Dr. Vaughn gave her a hard stare. Lucy blew out a breath and continued. Why not?

She might as well spill this story. It might help her convince herself to skip the annual spring homecoming weekend. "So by the time we were about to graduate from eighth grade and head our separate ways, school-wise, Nate was well-established as a super cute boy with big green eyes and strawberry blond hair who played sports. Your typical popular almost-teenager."

She shrugged. "I knew he was smart, loved to read, and had a soft spot for animals. But that was a side only I saw, since he had to be this tough jock—jerk, I guess—in order to maintain his emerging reputation. It broke my poor, virginal heart, because I was over half in love with him by then. Ugh. I sound like such a loser."

"No, you sound normal. What happened?"

"Once we started high school, I only saw him every now and then, usually with some pretty girl, especially once he started driving. Have I mentioned that his family is on its third generation owning a distillery? They make a bourbon you'd know if you drank the stuff."

"Ooh! I do. Spill it. Which one is it?"

"Trifecta," Lucy said, naming the distillery that made some of the most popular bourbon whiskey in the U.S. "Nate is president of the company and business manager, since his father retired three years ago. His brother Harrison is the Master Distiller." She sighed and leaned back in her chair, bombarded by memories. "They're pretty famous these days. Nate and Harrison made a bunch of changes, including adding a small plate restaurant. Plus, I think they're distilling gin now in addition to brown liquor."

You know damn well since you follow news of the Trifecta Distilling Company like any good stan.

Lucy shook her head to dispel the annoying inner nag.

“I know that one. It’s excellent. This sounds like the plot of a classic to me,” Dr. V. said, rubbing her hands together.

She would know. Her specialty was the romance genre, specifically the earliest examples, which, her scholarly publications proposed, led to today’s obsession with tropes that began in Ancient Greece.

“Star-crossed lovers of two noble houses and all that. A precursor of enemies to lovers.” Dr. V. looked as if she’d hit the jackpot.

But Lucy wasn’t in the mood for having her crappy love life analyzed by an expert with regard to how it would fit into a novel. “We aren’t... Never mind. I should go. If I leave now, I’ll be ho—I’ll be there by supper time.” She stacked the empty file folders and wiped the spit coffee off of everything.

“No, no, I’m sorry. I promise I won’t—”

“Do the thing?” Lucy smiled at her friend and mentor as she stuffed her empty lunch bag into a leather case and hoisted the bag’s strap over her head.

“Right,” she said, leaning forward. “I won’t do the thing. Tell me more?”

Lucy glanced at her phone. It was almost noon, and she was starving, not to mention she still needed to pack and wanted to be pointed toward Louisville by two if possible. “Okay, long story short, Nate needed help passing an AP English class so his mother contacted mine and...” She held up both hands in a there-you-have-it gesture.

“He acted one way when he was around me, at my house or at the library working on his papers and making me talk about my favorite books by way of worming his way even further into my poor teenager’s heart. But he’d turn into someone else entirely when he was around his gaggle of bros...and girls who’d not given me a second look since the fourth grade. Not that our paths crossed that often anymore since we went to different schools. But plenty of the girls at mine were obsessed with him, too. With good reason, I suppose. He worked summers at his family’s distillery, hauling barrels around and what not, plus working out with whatever sports team he was on at the moment.”

“And...? There must have been some sort of inciting incident.” Dr. V. was practically clapping her hands and giggling with delight.

“You’re doing the thing again,” Lucy warned. “So I’m tempted not to tell you anymore.”

“Sorry.” Dr. V. made as if to zip her lips together and toss away an invisible key.

Lucy tugged an elastic band off her wrist and pulled her hair back into a messy pony-bun, stalling. She wasn’t sure she wanted to describe what happened next to anyone, including the woman she’d told pretty much everything else.

“He kissed me a couple of times when we were supposed to be working on his essays, which made my infatuation worse. But the third time...”

She hurried the rest out of her mouth as if that would make it easier. “The third time he kissed me we were at my house, in the middle of a forbidden party he’d convinced me to throw since my parents were away on vacation. You can probably guess the rest.” She crossed her arms. “We were outside, away from the crowd. And we got caught by a couple of his jerkier friends, smooching on the back patio where he thought no one would see us. He told them he’d felt sorry for me, was doing me a favor, you know, paying attention to me because it was my house party or whatever. And of course, once the rest of his bros showed up with their passel of hotter-than-me girlfriends, someone called the cops on us.” Her face flushed hot. “Jesus, even thinking about it is making me talk and act like that long ago, heartsick teenager.”

“That’s terrible.” Dr. V. pulled the sticky note on which she’d written his name from the front of her sweater and tore it into tiny bits, then tossed them into the trash. “Farewell, Nathaniel, you dastardly young man.”

“There’s more, but I won’t bore you with it. And I really gotta go.”

Besides, I can’t admit to the rest of it since it makes me look and feel like the world’s most obsessed loser.

“You’d better fill me in, young lady. I live vicariously through you, you know.”

Lucy gave her a quick hug. “I know, Dr. V. I’ll be back in the office on Tuesday.”

“Have fun! Send me lots of photos. Especially of this man who seems to think he’s your ‘pal.’” She raised one dark eyebrow.

Lucy laughed. “That’s the ‘more’ I’ll tell you about another time.” She waved as she walked out the door of the English department and made her way down the wide steps to the front door.

She had a date with the Kentucky Derby yet again. Not to mention a standing date with a man she claimed, to anyone who would listen, to hate, her zinging excitement in anticipation of seeing him again tonight notwithstanding.

“Call Mom,” she said into the car interior once her phone connected with the audio system. She sat at a stoplight, waiting for her mother to answer, running her hands over the leather steering wheel. One thing she never went without, regardless of how light her bank account, was a good car. A side bonus of having a father who ran three giant car dealerships, two of which had been in the family for three generations.

“Of noble houses,” her mentor’s voice floated across her consciousness, making her snort with derision even as she smiled at the concept.

The Grangers had been horse people, and poor ones at that, until her father met and seduced her mother at a black tie event she'd attended with another man. Her father had been one of the servers but a handsome devil, if the old photos arranged all around the house were any indication. Her mother had come from a long line of wealthy car people who styled themselves as rich and influential philanthropists to counter the whole car salesman negativity.

Nate's family was as noble as anyone could be in Kentucky, with a fun backstory about great-great grandfather's backyard stills during prohibition. He'd concocted a stellar bourbon recipe and parlayed it into buying up a bunch of warehouse property after the Hatch Act was passed. They'd been early on the scene and were considered old blood in the bourbon world.

Nate and Harrison's grandfather became a multi-millionaire in his lifetime thanks to that recipe, along with a lot of savvy real estate investments. He'd set up trust funds for his grandsons, with the caveat that they could only access them when they turned twenty-one and entered the family business in some capacity. The history had seemed so...romantic, something that entranced her as a teenager and had given her fodder to tease him about later when they were kinda, sorta friends again. But definitely not with any benefits.

At least not until two years ago, this very weekend. She breathed a sigh of relief when her mother's voicemail picked up. "Hi, Mom. Got your message. I'll be in tonight around seven. But for the love of God, please stop trying to fix me up with Nate. You know I hate his stupid guts. I don't care how gentrified his family is or how much money they made selling their bourbon brand to some giant conglomerate. Love you. See you soon."

She hung up, headed home, packed her rudimentary bag, and tossed it into the backseat of the over-engineered German sedan. No need to bring a dress or shoes or a hat. All of that would already be purchased and waiting for her, times three or four depending on how many things she'd have to attend during this Derby weekend.

"This is the last time, I swear it." She looked in the rearview mirror, not knowing if she meant the going-home-for-Derby-weekend bit or what every last inch of her skin was already anticipating when it came to the usual meet-up tonight with Nate.

Right, the girl in the mirror responded in her head. Whatever you say.

"Oh shut up already," she muttered under her breath as she cranked up her latest audio book on the state-of-the-art speaker system. "Homeward bound," she said, pulling onto the interstate, ignoring all the calls she was getting from her mother and humming the tune to My Old Kentucky Home while feeling guilt over its racist lyrics.

Finally, she turned off the story and cranked the radio to her favorite alt rock station to crowd out the memories, not to mention the inappropriate, head-to-toe tingling excitement.

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