

SUCCESS IS FORGETTING

The sound she made, a gulping gasp, went off like a bomb above the table, and she dropped the newspaper. Eight years ago, they were lovers; six years ago, he became famous; somewhere in there, Stephanie Lilien resigned herself — not to failure, no, but to reality — and went to work in a law firm. Now here was Gershom Sklar (although the caption read *G. Hitchcock Scholar*), on the front page, and the headline above him read, DIRECTOR CHARGED.

Stephanie, retrieving her paper, folded it into neat quarters and propped the most relevant part against her breakfast plate. The face that made her gasp grazed the sticky remains of her waffle. With sightless hand she found her coffee cup, and with blind eyes she drank. From over the fence she could hear the screams and cries of unseen children, the blast and swirl of mariachi and a single, sobbing lyric (*recuerdo ... recuerdo*), and as she read she also heard the humming of fat bees drawn to the dusty shrimp plant by her steps. Stephanie put down her cup, and looked once more upon the photograph of the accused.

He was a lamb; he was a goat. His features melted and reformed, from peaceful innocent to leering satyr. His hooded eyes (their gentle gaze); sardonic mouth (his morning kiss); emphatic nose and largish ears (good phallic indicators) remained locked in self-conflict, perversity v. sweetness. His closecropped, curling hair lay like a shorn poll on his skull; the shipwreck beard still supplemented the lush mustache. The thin line that concerns us here exists between not love and hate, but love and envy. The photograph showed him in tennis whites, a silly affectation, for he did not play. A sweater hung knotted around his neck.

He was charming, and depraved. Half-lamb, half-goat: a sacrificial animal.

“Get lost,” said Stephanie, to her front page, and as if in combative response a shock wave of lust and tenderness exploded from beneath her fingertips, up through her arms and shoulders, straight to the heart of course, surging from there to the brain and to all parts below, so that poor Stephanie looked down to see her very toes curled tight. Explosions, on the set and of the tragically fatal persuasion, landed Hitchcock Scholar on the front page in the first place.

“Hitch says he didn’t. They say he did. Your job will be, go through the documents and try to pin him down. You could spend hours with the guy.”

Allan Engelberg, her boss, rolled his eyes over this last; gregarious in private, he disliked meeting clients face to face. Across an ocean of dark desk, Stephanie tapped her ballpoint tip against the spread newspaper, leaving a trail of faint blue freckles across the bridge of the emphatic nose.

“I used to date him,” she said. “It was years ago.”

Stephanie knew what she looked like, to her boss, to most people. Fading hair, shadowed eyes, slumping posture in flat shoes: a cosmetic fixer. Nds nu paint, yr TLC!

“Dated Hitchcock Scholar—you? Stephanie—where the hell did you meet him?”

“He was Gershom Sklar back then. We went to film school together.”

“You went to film school?”

“It’s on my resume. We talked about it when you hired me, remember?”

“That was—what, years ago. Feels like you’ve always been here. I honestly don’t remember, where did you go? USC? UCLA?”

Stephanie twisted her ballpoint, making the tongue-tip show, then not show; then it crept

out again. “I went to night school. So did he. Offramp University — you know, they advertise — ”

“Hitchcock Scholar? Went to Offramp?” Allan in a hearty baritone started chanting the radio jingle. “No hard classes, no tough test—just show up, we’ll do the rest!” And here I thought he went to Harvard, at the least. You know, he makes these kind of *literary* movies—“

Stephanie stood up. “Funny coincidence. So where is what I’m bringing to this meeting?”

“Policies, riders, attachments, here you go.” Allan kicked a brimming cardboard box out from behind a corner of his desk. “Bev Hermitage, tomorrow, ten. Listen, Steph — I understand, this may be — can I say it? Sensitive?” Allan’s generous, shiny face shrank to a pucker with that word. “Ugh, I hate that PC crap. But if you don’t want to, because, as you say, you at one point — God, I have a hard time believing this, although I know, Steph, you don’t lie—used to date the man — I can ask Brian or Jessica, I can take them off their cases. Be a shame, though. You really are good with the documents.”

“I’ll do it.” Clasp ing her hands behind her back, she looked down on her rotund, sweating boss with what she hoped was cheerful equanimity. Through the uncurtained window behind Allan’s chair, she could see the vile green mansard of the Hermitage Hotel, not quite in Beverly Hills despite its name. Before that travesty of Continental style went up, seven businesses shared a strip mall on the site, and Stephanie remembered as she did not want to do a dinner knee-to-knee with Gershom Sklar in one of them, Yoel’s Falafel Palace, during which she confessed, much to her date’s amusement, that in 1910 her grandfather dropped the *thal* from his last name.

“Ancient history. Years ago. I doubt he’ll even remember me.”

“You could be right.” Allan peered inside an envelope. “You can imagine how many people someone like him meets every year. No offense, Stephanie.”

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Princess Jim. Silas Sawyer. Moby Prynne; or, The Scarlet Whale. With these three films, G. Hitchcock Scholar reinvented that hoary genre, the Great Book costume drama. He did it by deconstructing classic fictions until their parts, like plastic blocks, were small and interchangeable—and then *recombining* them, transgressing freely in the process, pissing on the monuments and munching sacred cows for lunch, until the ideas, concepts, characters emerged clad in each others' clothes, speaking each others' dialogue, marching or stumbling or drifting toward fates never intended by their creators. Thus, a New England single mother goes to sea, digresses freely, has a tattooed sidekick, and gets off some funny lines (from the trailer: “You mean the sperm is in its *forehead?*”) before she is accused of witchcraft; a lugubrious Midwestern adolescent, somber and churchgoing, adopts a small girl whom he finds in a cave and names Indian Jo; and a disgraced gay sailor in the South Pacific discovers he is the bastard son of sea captain Marlow and a murderous French dressmaker. Purists gnashed teeth, but the movies made money. That tragic blowup on the set, the fault of Hitchcock Scholar's underlings but the responsibility, in legal terms, of the ex-Sklar himself, represented to Stephanie in her professional capacity just the first blow that the jealous and incapable invariably rain on the successful.

In her professional capacity: the very words brought peace, the kind of incongruous peace found among comrades at war. Stephanie considered that she went to work each day for the army of a small, beleaguered, democratic country. Uniforms and etiquette were mostly not in evidence, and all ranks lunched alike on the same greasy takeout, scarfed in haste on crowded desks. Like draftees and reservists, her colleagues griped and cursed their lot and did the job: untangling mines in the mountains of evidence, destroying the other side's fortifications in the

form of motion and precedent, testing interrogation methods on unlucky captives who, if they survived, might one day be classed as witnesses. Not once did they delude themselves as to a higher purpose than survival, defined here as more business, more work, and more money, in proportional allotments naturally. As she ascended in the elevator to Hitchcock Scholar's hotel room, Stephanie wished that she had in her possession a framed photograph, a snapshot of the folks at work — her colleagues, pals, her surrogate family as television has taught us to think — that she might whip from her purse at this most stressful moment, and hug, talismanic, to her heart.

She cursed herself, and cursed her fate, and knocked, and the door opened.

He had let her in without a sound, his lips losing their color as he mouthed the syllables of her name. He looked, not at her, but at her rolling briefcase, thumping into the room a few steps behind her. In a hoarser voice than she remembered, Hitchcock Scholar said, "The Furies."

"It's the Furies," he repeated. "For eight years I have lived in pure dread of this moment."

"That's funny, me too." With a great thunk, Stephanie shoved home her briefcase handle. "But guess what, I'm the paralegal, and I'm here to talk to you about this case."

"And I had a feeling, too." He was ignoring her, addressing the wall or a nonexistent audience. "Intense impending sense of doom. And now—" He fell, a cozy heap, into a chair, and waved an open palm at her as if to demonstrate his unarmed state, "Who walks from nowhere, next door to nothing, back into my lawsodden life? The one. The only. Stephanie Lilien."

She took the matching, opposite chair. "I work for Allan Engelberg," she said. "Didn't he tell you?"

His plaintive bleats ceased, and he shook his head. As one line of a song, long unheard,

can trigger instant, intact memory of every chord and verse, Stephanie caught the tune of Hitchcock Scholar's small movements, his sighs and adjustments, and found she could interpret them. In the smoothing of the beard hairs underneath the lower lip, in the thrumming of two fingers on the temples — phrases in a language she had not known she remembered — he struck her as perplexed, internally abuzz, and quite concerned with some enormity, an elephant perhaps, or a gorilla, in the room. Some entity visible only to him.

“I'm sorry, Stephanie,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“The paralegal—it's all my fault. I've often wondered, how could I face you? What would I say? I never thought I'd see you, quite—like this. God!”

He stood, and walked with his old head-down bounce to the table, where she had fanned out a handful of folders. He pressed his hands, palms down, upon her files as if he thought he could compact them to dust. He wore no rings; he had always suffered from eczema.

“You don't want to make eye contact,” he said. “I don't blame you. Stephanie, I tried to find you, but you cut out that very week, nobody saw you, nobody knew where you went. Stephanie, I thought I'd hear from you, I thought when ‘Princess Jim’ came out you'd call me up all pissed off. Stephanie, I'm sorry, but there's only one route I can travel right now. What'll it be? What will it take? One hundred thousand do the job?”

She looked at him then. She read the desperation in his arching eyebrows, the guilt twisting his lips, the cunning lurking in the corners of his mustache, the fear of the knife in his green and gold eyes. He lay, metaphorically bound, on her altar.

“I'm sorry.” His voice shook a little. “I'm sorry, and I take that back. Two hundred fifty thousand, for your promise—no more paralegal, Stephanie. I'll write it up right now, I've got a

checkbook in that drawer.”

He waved both hands at a nightstand, next to a distant bed, and Stephanie leaned forward.

“Are you offering me money, Gersh? For what?”

He was his own best actor: shot her a skewering glance, wiped pretend sweat off his forehead, turned away in a wide circle and at last brought the other chair, on wheels like Stephanie’s, right up to her, alongside her, and sat down. Their elbows touched.

He took her elbow, forearm, wrist. He turned her face toward him.

“Maybe,” he said, all lamb, “you’ve repressed it. Don’t you remember, Stephanie? What if I said to you — ‘The Diary of Helen K. Frank’?”

His would-be executioner, on some level at least, heard herself scream.

The deaf, dumb, and blind girl who outwits the Nazis—for a while, at least! Oh yes, she was funny funny funny, everyone was on the *floor*, oh that Stephanie, she is so *great*. And so irreverent. Too bad her wacky concepts won’t get made.

Stephanie at twenty-six arrived at that very conclusion. Film schmilch —she was wasting her life! On the morning after the last night she spent with Gershom Sklar, Stephanie rented a U-Haul, packed, disconnected her phone and utilities, signed lease papers on a bungalow fifteen miles away, and discarded her project — all her projects, in fact. The detritus of her directing career, two student shorts, barely filled a corner of the bright blue dumpster on Sepulveda.

She was moved by a torrent of disgust. All those people at the Offramp, their vanity, their politics of kiss-and-stab, their obsessions with the price tags and the brand names of success, their fawning uncritical worship of whoever was box-office king of the month — and they called themselves *artists*! The syllables curdled like vinegar inside her mouth. Gershom Sklar, for

example: oh, he was cute, sexy, and completely ineffectual. He thought her sick, weird parodies were funny (they were not — they were disgusting. She woke up completely ashamed of herself). He was going nowhere, just like the rest of them. All at once, she was sure, she could *see*.

Stephanie Lilien grew up that day. She put away — she *threw* away — childish things. The shots of Jack, the bong hits, the wearing black and sleeping till eleven — no! She would let her spikes grow out. She longed to try on business suits. She would dump the fantasy, the hopeless case, the waste of time she once called aspirations. It was morning in East Hollywood. Stephanie Lilien wanted a job.

“Those two shorts you made,” Hitchcock Scholar was saying, “don’t you remember? ‘Major Bovary’ — Emma joins the Salvation Army — but the ‘Diary’, oh God, the way that Helen had of telling Jews from Nazis —”

“No,” she said. “Don’t remind me.”

“Stephanie, what hole have you crawled into?”

He had let go of her. He was still dressed preppie-Anglo: a shetland sweater with no shirt, fat-waled black corduroys, loafers, no socks. He taught at USC these days, and also at UCLA. Avedon, Leibovitz, photographed him; and among the adjectives most often affixed to his phony name, none surpassed, in frequency, *original*.

Stephanie held her traitorous head. She remembered the day she grew up, as she still named her most decisive morning; she remembered the rage, the glee, the cleansed sensation after the dumpster — she had just forgotten what went in the dumpster, and why. She remembered Gershon Sklar, and snorted with predictable disgust as the media tracked his rise, as the critics praised his farces (none of which she saw, of course; she’d matured beyond that

nonsense). She repressed, not consciously, with no thought of self-preservation, with no thought of anything at all, the reason for her change of heart, and soul, and personality. She recalled nothing of "Helen K. Frank" — not even having the idea, which so repulsed her on that morning, making her wonder what worse self-hating moral degradation she might sink to for cheap laughs — not even, and especially not even, birthing the whole concept of hodgepodge mispairings, the product of her intellect G. Hitchcock Scholar stole and rode to hundred-mil receipts. Like the victim of an accident, Stephanie could not remember being in the car in the first place, let alone behind the wheel.

“I can’t take your money,” she told him.

“Why not?”

“I can’t take your money. I like my life.”

“That’s impossible. You’re depressed, you’re not on meds, you look like your own ghost, and you make — what? Fifty, sixty thou a year?”

“Thank you. You see, that’s why.”

“Why what?”

“Why I won’t take your money. What if it doesn’t bother me, that you’re rich and I’m not? What if I wanted it this way? What if I think I’ve done just fine?”

“Come on,” he said. “You can’t mean that. You’re just a — ”

“Success is forgetting. Failure is resentment. I forgot my ideas. I didn’t notice when you stole them. That means I haven’t spent one moment, not one, Gersh, envying you. I haven’t grudged you your success. I repressed the whole connection, smartest thing I could have done, and guess what, I’m proud of it. That’s my success.”

He caught her wrist again. “You’re pissed off. Don’t kid me. You have the right. I don’t.

Stephanie, I want to work with you, forget the two-fifty, I know that's an insult, I want to bring you in as A.D., screw the union, I'll finagle it somehow, listen, it's called 'The Turn of the Floss,' Stephanie, you understand – ”

For a moment the roof of the hotel blew off and up soared Stephanie, spinning as if in Chagall upside down, skirts tumbling over her head, knife in her hand. The goat, the lamb, lay trussed up on the altar. She longed to clutch him to her heart, and slit his throat.

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