

Confessions of the Unknown Lovers

“She told me that she loved me.”

“Yeah, so? What’s so uncommon about that?” Stanley said, paying more attention to the recently delivered coffee on the table, that which warranted the addition of sugar and cream.

“And I told her that I loved her back.” Raul admitted.

“Wait, what?” Stanley responded, halting his interaction with the coffee. “That’s not part of the deal. There’s no talking. Why are you talking? Who told you to talk?”

“Yeah, I know, I just felt it. You know, like it was real.” Raul, one word at a time, inched towards the revelation of which he was aiming to eventually disclose, or at least expose for further examination.

“Yeah, well, cut it out. She’s gonna know it’s not me. Our voices are nothing alike. Do you think that she noticed?” Stanley asked, more than perturbed with the possible skew from what was supposed to be an airtight arrangement. He tried to read the menu, but was now too distracted to think. He began to wipe his brow and fidget, a clear result of the morning’s combination of news and brews.

“No, not at all. She told me that she loved me too, remember?” Raul responded, not aware of his initial error.

“Yeah, I remember, she said that she loved you and you said it back.” Stanley tried to focus on his fingers as they shook, spilling the contents of little yellow packets all around his mug when he suddenly paused and looked up. “Wait, what do

you mean she said that she loved you *too*? I thought she said that she loved you and you said it back? You mean you said it first? You said that you loved her and then she said it *back* to you?"

Raul, a suave and handsome man, dark and just right, was stunned at how careless he had already been in this, a conversation he had practiced several times since the incident occurred. Now, he was the one fidgeting and squirming in his seat. The truth was supposed to reveal itself slowly, delicately, like it had been there all along. Instead, it took one step and collapsed face first on the hard cement. His lack of a verbal response confirmed Stanley's inquiry.

"Why would you say it first? That's the golden rule of our arrangement. NO SPEAKING!" Stanley threw a few of the yellow and pink packets of sweetener in Raul's face, knowing that, what was supposed to be a routine meeting had turned into what could possibly be the beginning of the end of his forty year marriage.

"I didn't say it loud. I'm sure she just thought it was you?" Raul spoke, an attempt to blanket the atomic release of a poisonous truth. Stanley just looked up and made a face of disbelief as he knew the implausibility of such an option.

"Raul, you speak with a young and crisp voice. Yours is deep, like I imagine the voice of God. I'm an old man. You can hear the near expiration in my voice. There's no way she heard your voice and thought it was mine. The only thing we have in common is that your height and build, your overall physique is similar to the one I've enjoyed nearly all my life. Remember? That's the whole point." Stanley spoke with an increasing frustration, seeing the strings of his life snap one at a time in his mind.

Raul just sat there, realizing that the conversation had now traveled down an alternate path and that the opportunity to explain how the love he felt was real, that there was more to it than what Stanley was concerned about, was long gone. So he just remained still, waiting for the indication to be dismissed. Finally, after more than a few minutes, Stanley pulled out the weekly wad of cash and began to place it on the table. However, before removing his fingers from the money, Stanley picked it up once more, removed half the stack, placed it in his front pocket and gave the rest to Raul.

“You’ll get the rest when I know all is clear.”

Raul didn’t say a word.

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“He told me that he loved me.” Danielle pronounced, somewhat shy and blushing, urgently though, as Lucy hadn’t even put her purse down or taken off her sunglasses yet.

“Yeah? That’s sweet. Strange, but sweet. But, you mean that he said he loved *me*, right?” Lucy, having recently become preoccupied with trying to appear younger to any passerby within sight, eventually sat down and scooted her chair in closer and opened the small brown bag that contained her still warm cranberry muffin.

“Oh, yes. You’re right.” Danielle’s 14-hour buzz was immediately killed. But, in her hesitation to release such a truth, Lucy understood that there was more to Danielle’s confession.

“Is there more? You seem like there’s something on your mind.” Lucy asked, ripping off chunks of her breakfast, licking her fingers in between.

“I said it back to him.” Danielle admitted, afraid yet relieved.

“You spoke?” Lucy asked condescendingly, as if Danielle was not only her employee but her responsibility as well.

“Sorry.” Danielle responded, her mouse like voice peeped across the table and immediately crawled back.

“But you *can’t* speak. There’s no speaking. Why would you speak? I mean, it’s not like he asked you a question. It’s not like there aren’t other ways to show him that you, that *I* love him back. Why did you feel the need to speak?” Lucy interrogated Danielle somewhat chaotically.

“Sorry.” She murmured again.

“Did he react? Did he say anything else? Did he know you weren’t me?” Lucy continued, now ripping the muffin apart and throwing a few of the edible pieces at Danielle.

“No. Not at all.” Danielle covered her face. “In fact, the love we made from that point on was the sweetest and most passionate that it’s ever been since you hired me.” Danielle wanted to focus on this part, the positive part, the part that both meant something to her, yet confused her at the same time.

The two women sat there, silently. One, the elder, was shaking, afraid that her behavior would reveal her true age to those within proximity; the other, the younger, sat still, awaiting her penance. Despite the obvious age difference, they seemed almost twins, same height, same shape. From a certain distance, they

looked like before and after models for newly designed aging cream. However, in their intimate space, Lucy's desperation swallowed the sweetness that dribbled out of Danielle's being.

"Well, I'll let you know if Stanley says anything tonight. If he's quiet, then I'll use you again next Sunday. If he's at all wise, you'll never hear from me again." Lucy tossed a few folded bills in Danielle's direction and, with haste, stood up, placed her sunglasses back upon her face, and vanished.

Danielle spoke not.

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When Stanley returned home from what Lucy assumed to be his Monday afternoon golf game, he tiptoed through the living room, his silence an utter failure at camouflaging his anxiety. Fortunately for him, Lucy also stood silently in the kitchen, preparing his post-golf martini, dry and lifeless, terrified of their inevitable interaction. Both assumed that at some point during the night before, the other had heard the voice of a stranger; a stranger who was hired to make love to the other. Words were spoken and voices were revealed, yet neither were actually in the room. They were both on edge until certainty returned into their midst.

What that certainty looked like, however, was nothing either could imagine.

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Just two months earlier, Stanley and Lucy had traveled to Miami for their fortieth wedding anniversary. The two had spent nearly their entire lives living in

states like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois and had rarely traveled south of the Mason-Dixon. In fact, once Stanley retired from the phone company, the couple moved back to their hometown having found a small house just a few miles away from where they had first met. Their friends and family laughed when they imagined the couple hitting the beaches and boulevards of a city filled with fashion and youth, but they toasted to their health and love anyways. As Stanley and Lucy soaked in the sun, the samba and the energy, Lucy couldn't help but notice Stanley's wandering eyes. On more than a few occasions, she'd trace his line of vision to the well-kept and healthy backsides of the women twenty and thirty years younger than she. Her heart fell, not because she worried that her husband longed for another woman, but because she knew that the glory days of her own body had passed. In the winter months of the north, driving to and dining in dimly lit restaurants, the wandering eye was well rested and rarely utilized. However, here in Miami, the obvious exposed itself immediately as Lucy could tell that, what she once was had become no longer, and the beach beauties had suddenly reminded her husband of such a truth. Lucy sat with this realization all the way home and concocted a plan, to be put in motion immediately.

Purely out of love and a shy embarrassment, Lucy wanted to ensure her husband's satisfaction long after she was able to do the satisfying, or so she convinced herself.

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It's not that Stanley didn't love his wife any more; in fact, he would argue emphatically that it was the exact opposite. Stanley and Lucy met as lovers. It was the first relationship they had ever had with each other. They were not friends first. They were not acquaintances or colleagues or even members of the same graduating class first. They met as lovers, only lovers. At the age of 20, Stanley, an aspiring amateur poet, while grabbing lunch at Bruno's Diner, was dared by a group of his friends to walk up to the girl at the counter and "rescue" her from this mundane world with a bit of prose and a kiss. Stanley, never one to turn down a daring challenge, good or bad, did exactly that. He walked up to the brown haired girl with curls who twisted on her stool and he whispered two short lines of verbal pedals from the lyricist's garden in which he frolicked.

*Pronounce your name for me
So that I may release my agony*

She looked up at him, he at her, and they kissed. While Stanley's friends waited anxiously for his return so that they could congratulate him on the completed challenge, Lucy gave him another, a different challenge, one that was conveyed with the gravity of eternity. *Be this for me always*, her soul pronounced.

Now, some forty years later, Stanley has become cautious in making certain that Lucy always enjoys the eagerly provided love that satisfied her in those early moments. And, most recently, during an anniversary trip to Miami, as they walked behind young love, he couldn't help but notice all of the young hard bodied men similar to how he once was, flaunting their unwrinkled skin and tight chests in plain view for all the world to see. He was nostalgically jealous, knowing that, these men

had what his wife deserved. That young poet who had swept her off of her feet had aged into a spectacle of no resemblance to his own glory days. He decided then and there that he'd make certain that the physical intimacy that Lucy would share in would be of the highest caliber, like it once was and should always be. To Stanley, nothing terrified him more than his wife ever having to make love to someone, *something* that did not resemble that young poet's kiss.

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As lovers, they never spoke. They never allowed the light to enter, to invade their space. They were just two lovers. They danced. The only senses they allowed for were those of touch and smell, *and taste*. As the rivers of the Earth flow and tickle the valleys of the land, so did their fingertips move about each other's skin.

Stanley was very clear about this when he hired and trained his stand-in.

So was Lucy.

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"Raul, what's on your mind?" Eddie, Raul's closest friend and the drummer for their band asked as they waited for the rest of the musicians to show up.

"I'm in love. I think." Raul responded, staring at his opened trumpet case, forgetting where he was or what he was doing. The two of them, in their mid-thirties, were musicians and figured the rest out as they went along.

"That's great, my man. Who with?" Eddie responded, tapping his snare rapidly as he tightened the sound.

"I don't know." Raul responded, a half smile decorated his face.

"Don't tell me. The old lady?" Eddie, the only person on the planet Raul would ever confide in regarding his recent employment. "How'd that happen?"

"It's weird, you know. I don't think it's her. We've never spoken. I've never actually seen her. I only know what she feels like and how she smells, I guess. But, I'm telling you, it's not the dude's wife. I'm positive. We told each other that we loved each other, but it didn't feel like we were saying it as *them*."

"And what makes you think you're in love?" Eddie asked, knowing very well what his friend was getting at.

"She moves as if I'm the only one she's ever made love to."

* * *

For over forty years, Stanley and Lucy, each time as giddy as the first, have always stood on opposite sides of the bedroom and smiled at each other. They are fully clothed. Two lamps, one by the bedroom door and one by the door to the adjoining bathroom, remain lit while Stanley and Lucy each stand with their hands tucked under the lampshades, awaiting the signal to turn them off. They blow each other a kiss, turn the lights out, strip and tiptoe towards the bed, each time meeting under the sheets. As they've gotten older, intimacy has occurred less and less often. Eventually, they've made it their Sunday evening ritual. They both know it and they never have to speak about it.

Exploiting such a routine was actually quite simple once all of the pieces fell into place.

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“Anything on your mind, Dear?” Lucy asks Stanley as she hands him his drink, raspberry rum and pineapple juice. On this Sunday afternoon, both are timid and anxious, watching the clock.

“No. Nothing? Why? Something on *your* mind?” Stanley responds, a bit suspicious of the drink. He sneaks a whiff before tasting it.

“Oh, no, not me. How’s Jack doing?” Lucy wants nothing to do with the question being reversed back to her. The tangled truth is too trapped to unravel delicately. Giving him the new drink, clearly not one he would ever choose, was all she could think of to spark a new conversation, one she did not want to have.

“He’s fine. He says that Maggie says to say ‘Hello’.” Stanley sips slowly. These go nowhere conversations have occurred, as if rehearsed, for seven straight days. No information has been transacted. Only suspicion and concern. While both are dying inside to know just exactly how much the other may know, neither will ever, *ever* speak directly of their distress.

“Oh, that’s nice. I should give her a call.”

“What’s in this?” Stanley asks.

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Danielle lies there, naked, in the pitch-black bedroom she’s never seen in the light, tucked beneath the clean sheets that Lucy had just stretched across the mattress a few hours earlier, waiting for the other body. She had beaten her

counterpart to the middle of the bed by eight seconds. Long enough to doubt he would come at all. Long enough to consider leaving herself. Long enough to imagine his touch and scent. Long enough to squint through the dark in an attempt to see his face. Long enough to fidget and wiggle her toes. Long enough to feel too hot under the sheets. Long enough to regret every decision of her life that has lead to this moment. Long enough to die from anticipation. Long enough to feel secure in the love she has shared with the stranger, whom she desperately wanted to be anyone other than Lucy's husband.

Danielle only accepted the offer after Lucy had stood up for her at the hair salon. Danielle's boss had never liked her and had always treated her so poorly. And, just two months ago, with a full customer audience, she was belittled for irrelevant errors. Lucy, a regular customer, heroically stood up for her, placed her arm around the young woman's shoulder and steered her outside towards her car. While repeating over and over how thankful she was and insisting that she'd be alright, Danielle's gratitude was interrupted by Lucy's sudden sobbing. These two strangers, who sat inches apart, were now bonded by salvation and tears.

"Ma'am? What is it? What is it? Is something wrong?" Danielle asked, bending her head low to see Lucy's face.

Lucy picked her head up, removed her sunglasses, wiped her tears and looked up at Danielle and asked,

"How tall are you?"

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“Lucy?” Raul whispered, his words reaching Danielle’s ears almost immediately. His breathe beating his words.

“Yes?” Danielle responded, also whispering, imitating Lucy’s voice, as it would sound as a whisper.

“How much do you love me?” Raul asked, breaking the rules he’d been reminded of repeatedly just seven days ago. Danielle kissed him, hard, their teeth clanged together. He squeezed the breath out of her lungs. She too was instructed not to speak, and only respond in other ways.

“Tell me.” He insisted.

“As much as there is to love.” Danielle confessed, still in a whisper.

“Say this to me again. In the morning, when I awake.” Raul requested. He smiled, though in the dark, no one could see, and they continued with their assignment.

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“Miss Lucy, I have to tell you something though?” Danielle spoke softly and urgently as Lucy shoved her out the front door, glaring at her with daggers for even thinking of speaking aloud in their home.

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The waitress brought Stanley his coffee, as usual, but today, Raul, wanted nothing, except only to see if his plan had hatched. And, by virtue of Stanley sitting

across from him without having stabbed him in the throat with a fork yet, Raul felt more and more elated as the moments passed.

“How’d it go last night? Any talking?” Stanley, himself choking on the anticipation of this particular Monday morning meeting, was dying to get to this part.

“No sir. Not at all. Nothing.” Raul smiled, he flagged the waitress.

“You sure? Anything weird? Anything out of the ordinary?” Stanley dug.

“No. How about you? Did she say anything ‘out of the ordinary’ to you?” Raul was beaming, like the ball had just left his fingertips and he knew it was going in. He could feel it.

“No. She’s been more quiet than usual. Made me a fruity drink, but hasn’t actually *said* anything lately. Nothing worth remembering or that would make me think that she was wise to us.” Swish. Raul ordered pancakes, scrambled eggs, home fries, orange juice and a bagel with cream cheese. “What’s with all the food?” Stanley asked.

Raul didn’t say another word.

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Danielle arrived early to the coffee shop and spent twenty minutes ripping apart the straw wrapper that was no longer identifiable to the keenest of eyes. She was terrified, yet anxious for it to all be over with. Lucy walked in and stomped straight toward her.

“Well, did he say anything?” Lucy bothered not to concern herself with her sunglasses, her purse, or the volume of her voice.

“Yes, that’s what I was trying to tell you last night when you shoved me out the door.”

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Again, on a Monday afternoon, Lucy carried Stanley’s drink to him, back to the usual dry martini, while he sat on the couch, in his normal position, playing with the television remote, and she spoke,

“I love you as much as there is to love.”

“What?” Stanley responded. The old poet had let go of his youth in more ways than he ever imagined possible. In the morning years of his life, these words would have been immediately responded to with a verbal gesture of love and beauty, passion and lyrics. Today, it was responded to with, ‘What?’ And, while it should have broken his wife’s heart that the poetic trembles of her husband’s being had diminished, in this moment, she was in an altogether different bind.

“I said, ‘I love you as much as there is to love.’” Her heart stopped.

“That’s lovely dear. Thank you.” Stanley responded, making little notice of the panic that smothered his wife.

Lucy sat down next to her husband, not wanting to make a scene but feeling forced to, she picked up the remote control, powered down the television set, and placed her hand upon his,

“Are you upset that I forgot to say it to you this morning?” Lucy spoke softly with great hesitance as she took the first step towards potentially turning herself in.

“No, not at all? Why? Should I be?” Stanley, spoke as if he were completely oblivious, though it was an act. He was caught off guard and wasn’t sure what to do now, so he just went with it.

“Well, you told me to tell you first thing this morning when we woke up, and I forgot. I’ve felt bad about it all day.” Lucy was actually telling the truth, as long as ‘all day’ could be defined as ‘since Danielle told her to’.

“I did? I mean, don’t worry about it.” Stanley was now caught. He was convinced this morning, based on Raul’s joy, that everything had gone smoothly and that there was nothing to worry about. Everything was back to normal. Apparently, there was more to it.

The couple of forty years just sat quietly and stared at each other for a while. As each of them wrestled with the how and when to reveal their unknowingly shared shame, they were distracted by each other’s eyes. By each other’s lips. By each other’s warmth. While each of them missed the other greatly, they had no idea the intensity of the reciprocating feelings.

“Do you remember how we met?” Lucy asked her husband, and he smiled.

“Of course I do.” He squared her shoulders to him and spoke, “*Pronounce your name for me, So that I may release my agony.*”

They kissed.

“*Be this for me always.*” She said as they embraced once more.

The two lovers held each other, she resting her head on his chest, loose and soft, very much unlike that of Raul's, though she would never know to make the comparison. His arm wrapped tightly around her shoulder and tickled the skin on her upper arm, it being much more wrinkled than that of Danielle's, though he had no reason to connect the two. In their shared space, each of them were transported back to the first few weeks of their love. And without saying a word, their bodies fell upon each other and they shared themselves with one another, on the couch, all through the evening.

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"Hey, I'm meeting Jack again tomorrow afternoon for a late lunch, so I'll be gone for a few hours during the day." Stanley spoke and waltzed through the room with an extra bit of spunk in his step. It was now Saturday, and he had one more hole to plug before it was all over.

"Oh, that's great. I'm actually meeting Maggie tomorrow as well. That's funny."

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The coffee shop where Danielle usually waited on Monday mornings was closed on Sunday afternoons, so she waited at the counter of Bruno's Diner, just across the street, and ripped their straw wrappers to shreds instead. With her back turned to the other afternoon diner patrons, she was terrified why Lucy wanted to meet her today, just a few hours before she was usually expected to be waiting

silently in their hallway for her cue to enter the stage. Two men, one older and one younger, of similar height and build passed behind her, and without seeing them, she suddenly felt comforted.

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Stanley sat opposite Raul, his back to the front entrance of the diner and Raul stared at him, confused and concerned with the unexpected Sunday afternoon meeting. Raul had big plans that were to occur in a matter of hours. He was ready for tonight, not for this afternoon.

“What do you mean you won’t be needing me any more? But I have to do it one more time. We agreed. It has to happen.” Raul reacted as if he had just received the worst news possible, which he had.

“Woh, hold on there guy. What’s the big deal? What are you talking about we agreed. There’s no contract. Are you in love with my wife or something? What’s going on? You said something to her last week, didn’t you?” Stanley’s light-hearted mood was gaining weight.

Raul sat there, stuck in his own situation. He was prepared for the truth to be revealed in a different way. His way. Not this way. While he paused, he looked up and saw an older woman walk in; she wore sunglasses and what looked to be an expensive purse dangled from her arm. He had no idea who this woman was, but when she sat down, her back towards him, the young woman waiting turned to look at her and inevitably faced Raul. He knew nothing of her face, or the color of her skin, but in a flash, the room went white and only the silhouette of her shadow

appeared before his eyes. He felt relieved. This relief was well timed considering that the next words out of Stanley's mouth were, "It was nice knowing you, here's an extra few hundred for your troubles."

At the same time Stanley stood up, the older woman at the counter with the purse and sunglasses stood up as well. She was roughly 30 feet closer to the door and by the time Stanley figured out the tip and dropped the bills on to the table and turned around, she was gone.

Raul was now alone, sitting in his corner booth, the entire diner his landscape. He peered again towards the counter and, again, the black silhouette of the young woman, now alone as well, flickered in his mind. Raul stood up and, as if he were hovering through the air, he glided over to her and interrupted her silence.

"Tell me how much you love me." He spoke.

"As much as there is to love." The younger woman responded.

She spun around once on her stool, returning back around with a smile. He grabbed her and they kissed, in full view of all who could see, and remained in this position well beyond the attention span of the other customers.

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