

“Late-Night Luke”

Derek was in jail and Luke was doing it—the thing they had come up with as teenagers, when they were bored out of their minds in Latin class junior year.

Both had needed money and both had liked to help people. Derek’s problem was that he didn’t like to help himself much—Luke eventually learned to. That’s why he was teaching history to eighth graders at the age of twenty-nine and Derek was serving a ten year sentence in Cranston House of Corrections (ACI) for armed robbery.

For Luke, money was a factor, sure. Being Late-Night Luke two nights a week was tiring work. Especially after five consecutive days of dealing with pre-adolescents who (for the most part) didn’t do their homework, would rather sleep than watch a movie on the holocaust and would rather try and sneak a peek at one of their female peers backsides as they got up to go to bathroom than produce a halfway decent response to an essay question about the consequences of Pearl Harbor.

Putting money aside, Luke did it for the same reason he first hatched the idea more than a decade before: he liked to help people. Some of the best friends he had—besides his wife—he’d made on those night trips through Providence, delivering burgers and fries to people who spent their weekend nights in and around Kennedy Plaza. Of course, a great number of his customers didn’t have much, but this wasn’t the rule. There were plenty of people who stood on the corner of Exchange and Broadway to buy a quick snack from Late-Night Luke who had plenty. They just wanted a good burger at a fair price, which was what Luke promised and delivered.

He’d been doing it for almost six years when the 2012-2013 school year was drawing to a close. He and his wife would be celebrating their fifth anniversary in August and Derek would be out of Cranston in December.

Patty was well beyond worrying about her husband on his late-night, weekend adventures—though she had worried severely for quite some time. Still, she always preferred he give her a call when his run was halfway through—at about eight o'clock—and then again when he was on his way back home for the night. Because of this, Patty was never in bed before eleven on Friday and Saturday nights. Partly due to the fact that she was afraid of falling asleep before her husband called for the second time, but mostly it was because she wanted to stay awake until he crawled into bed beside her. Just because she had gotten past her stage of worrying about her husband when he was out on his second job didn't mean that she didn't still miss him.

Her only other rule was that the two of them had to eat dinner together before he started his run. So that's what they were doing on the night of May 13, 2013. Luke was telling her about his day and Patty was using her eyes to capture everything she could about her husband before he left for the night. She was hardly touching her food and Luke was hardly taking a second to breathe, between all the talking and eating. Patty loved when he went off like this.

"The kid," he said, wiping around his mouth as he talked. "I'll tell you Patty. You know I love my students. Don't you?"

"Of course honey. I don't think anyone has ever doubted that. Especially not me."

He used the two or three seconds Patty spent responding to pile another forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. The steak was medium-rare just the way he liked it and he was trying to save the majority of that for last.

"Right. But this one kid, my god, his name is Kevin Thomas. Seriously Patty, have I told you about this kid before?" She nods her head and almost takes a bite of her food since he's stopped, but then he continues. "Something about him. I've had kids fail before, of course. It's middle school, of course I have. But this kid Kevin, he just makes it his job to sabotage the class

in any way that he can think of. I've talked to him after class. Met with him and the guidance counselor. Gotten his parents involved. And nothing's changed. I had to kick him out of class today and tell him not to come back. Now, he has to go sit in the principal's office during my class every day and he's going to fail."

Finally he stopped to take another breath and Patty smiled as she watched him attack his mashed potatoes again and then shoot a look at his watch as if Noah's ark was coming by and he didn't want to miss it. Though the late-night operation technically ran on his schedule, he had a routine and he liked to stick as close to it as possible, for the customers.

"I'll tell you Patty. He's going to fail my class and, according to his guidance counselor, it's going to keep him back a year. That'll fuck his whole life up unless he gets a grip on it. On his way out of class today he flipped me off and told me to suck a goat. I honestly tried to pretend it didn't even happen. There's gotta be something going on with him that makes him act like this." He shook his head and wiped his mouth again. The clock on the wall read: fifteen of six. "I just wish there was more I could do."

"Oh Lucas," Patty said. She was the only one who ever called him that, in his entire life. But she'd called him it from the start and he loved it. "There are some things that you just can't do anything about. It sounds like you've tried everything you can." She grabbed his hand across the table. He dropped his fork and brought his other hand into the embrace as well. "You know kids that age—some of them anyway. They just have to be given space. I'm sure he'll work it out."

"Yeah well I hope so." After another minute or two they let go of each other's hands. Luke shoveled down the rest of his food and Patty began to make some headway into her meal. Usually she was left with a bit of work to do after Luke had gone. She never minded because

while she finished eating she was almost able to pretend that he was still there, sitting right on the other side of the table.

“I’ve got to get going Pat,” Luke said, standing up and putting his plate in the sink. “Call you in a bit, call you when it’s time to sit.” He always said this before leaving. And Patty replied with something similar to her usual response.

“You do too much Lucas.” She grabbed his face in her hands as he leaned down to kiss her. She kissed him back and said it again. “You do far too much, you know that?”

He winked and pulled out before she could say anything else. Both of them knowing that she was the only one who could get him to abandon his duties as Late-Night Luke. “I love you.” He blew her a kiss over his shoulder on his way out the door. She caught it and stuffed it down the front of her shirt. Even though he didn’t physically see her do it, he knew she did it. She’d done the same thing with ever one of his air kisses for the past five years.

As she lay in bed later that night, waiting for her husband’s second call, Patty would begin to wish that she hadn’t changed out of her outfit she’d worn at dinner—that she hadn’t haphazardly discarded her husband’s special air kiss—because though she couldn’t know it yet, it’d be the last one she’d ever receive.

“She’d probably throw me out on the street if I did that.”

It was John. Talking to Luke as he ordered his burger and fries. He liked it all caked in ketchup. Luke knew this without even asking. He’d been serving him almost every Friday night for more than three years.

“Oh c’mon,” Luke said, squeezing the last out of a bottle of Heinz ketchup and retrieving another out of a small box on the floor. He was in the back of his oversized van—the one that

said LATE-NIGHT LUKE in big bold letter on both sides. The sliding door was open and John was leaning against the front passenger door, smoking a cigarette. Luke was working inside while he talked. "She can't kick you out. You're too good looking."

John laughed, dropped his cigarette, and pressed it into the cement with the toe of his shoe. Luke checked his watch while he applied a fresh coat of ketchup to the top of John's burger. Then he covered the fries. It was almost nine, he had to be leaving soon. He still had two more stops to make before the end of his run.

"If you do end up out on street though," Luke said, winking. "You can ride around with me on the weekend nights. Maybe I'd even let you sleep in the van." Both of them laughed now and Luke handed over a greasy meal to his friend. "It'd probably cost you though."

"You're one sick bastard," John said, handing Luke a five in exchange for the food. The total for the burger and fries was only four, but almost everyone tipped him. Especially those he'd become friendly with over the years. "Sick indeed." John rapped the side of the van with his fist and backed away. "I know you gotta be going. You've heard enough of my bitching for one night."

"Round two tomorrow?" Luke asked, climbing out of the van, closing the door and walking around to the front.

"Can't. Going to the movies with Kara and the kids. Some new film Jesse and Mark have been dying to see is premiering at Providence Place."

"See, how could she leave a sweet guy like you to fend for himself with the pigeons?"

"Women work in mysterious ways Luke. You don't need me to tell you this." Luke laughed and John took a fat bite out of his burger. "You're still the master," he said, holding it up and wiping a drop of ketchup off his face with his arm.

Luke smiled. “Get off my van you chump. Hungry mouths to feed.” He appreciated the comment and John knew it. That’s half the reason John said it—the other half being that it was true. “See you in a week.”

With that he pulled back onto the road and disappeared around a corner, heading back towards Kennedy Plaza. His next stop was on Atwells Ave. and his final stop was in the heart of the plaza and it was usually where he did the most business. He snuck a glance at his watch as he drove—he was right on schedule. He’d already called Patty for the first time and she’d been taking a walk around the neighborhood but she was probably back home now, safe and sound. Luke’s thoughts drifted to her and what she might be doing at that very moment. Though he loved his second job, he often wished that he spent more time at home with his wife. This was one of those moments.

He shook off the thought as he drew closer to Atwells, the one stop he wasn’t particularly fond of making, but still did because there was usually a gathering of at least four or five people waiting for a late-night snack.

The lighted corner where he made his stop came into view. There were half-a-dozen people standing by the side of the road. Some of them were talking with one another but all of them turned as he pulled his van up along the curb. Their faces lit up, brighter than the overhead street light and Luke was again reminded why he did any of this in the first place. He thought once more of Patty and then reminded himself that it was Friday night—they’d get to spend the majority of the next day together.

Donny was there, waiting for his usual burger with no cheese. So was Lee. He liked the same thing.

Donny couldn't talk for long tonight. He had a woman waiting for him back at the house he said. He'd run out just to grab them some dinner, so Luke fixed Donny two burgers instead of his usual one and then bid his friend on his way—back home where Paula was waiting for him. “She’s gunna be the one,” Donny had told Luke, as he handed him a crisp ten dollar bill. Luke said he hoped that turned out to the case and Donny left, almost running with a burger in each hand.

Lee was homeless and Luke always found it hard to talk to him. Not because it was difficult to understand him or anything like that, but because Luke felt a crippling sense of empathy for the man each and every time he saw him.

Lee had been to Iraq—twice. The second time he hadn't been lucky enough to return home with all of his limbs. He was missing his right leg and he refused to try any of the new prosthetics. So he spent his days hobbling around with a pair of wooden crutches that he said used to belong to his father. Dad had been to Korea.

Though he never asked how Lee lost his leg, Luke assumed that it was probably an IED. That was—as far as he knew—how most of America's young men and women were losing limbs and lives overseas. It wasn't a definite, but Luke figured it was best to never draw attention to Lee's missing leg, so he went right on assuming that an IED had been the culprit. He may very well have been correct in his assumption.

Mostly he felt sorry for Lee because he knew there was nothing he could do for him—other than provide him with a good burger at a fair price on the weekends. There were others like him of course. Plenty. Hobbling around without a limb or two and with no job or even a sheltered place to lay their head at night. Luke made a point to try and look Lee straight in the eye whenever he came up to the van for his plain burger without cheese. He also made a point to

charge Lee far less than he normally did for his burgers. Fifty cents. He always told Lee that it was the veterans' rate, but really he didn't have a veterans rate—he just didn't want to give it to him for free because he correctly assumed that a man like Lee wouldn't take too kindly to charity. But in Luke's mind, free was his veterans' rate.

After he'd finished serving Lee, Donny, and all the others who'd been standing on the side of Atwells, Luke began packing some things up. He threw a few more burgers on one of the George Foreman grills in the back of his van and dropped another handful of fries into the frialator. Glancing at his watch he saw that it was approaching nine thirty. He usually tried to make it into Kennedy plaza around ten, so he was right on schedule.

Whistling to himself, his thoughts turned to his wife again. She was surely fighting the urge to snuggle up in bed by this point. She was probably watching a re-run of some sitcom on the TV. Maybe *Friends* or *Seinfeld* or *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Luke couldn't say for sure, it'd been so long since he'd been home at this time on a Friday night.

After a few moments his thoughts turned to his old friend Derek. He'd gone to visit him in Cranston House of Corrections at least once a month for the past nine years. Derek always told him that he didn't need to come, but both of them knew he did. Derek didn't have many other friends and his family have flown west shortly after he was incarcerated—leaving him completely on his own. Luke smiled to think that his longtime friend would finally be released into society come wintertime, but his smile faded when he thought of the percentage of inmates that became repeat offenders. Whenever he saw him, Derek repeatedly proclaimed that he wouldn't screw up again. Luke had a feeling though, that in many cases, it wasn't entirely within a person's control what they did and didn't do.

He closed the top of the one George Foreman he still had running and checked on the fries, made sure the top to the frialator was on tight. When he turned back around to climb out the side of the van he immediately noticed that he was no longer alone.

“Holy shit!” He almost fell back right on top of the frialator he had just secured. “Kevin! You scared the living shit out of me.” Part of him was ashamed to be swearing in front of a student. The other part didn’t care. It was too scared to care and too confused as to why or how Kevin Thomas had wound up on the side of Atwells Ave., where Luke was preparing to finish his Friday night run.

Kevin was smiling and holding his hands behind his back. Luke started making his way out of the van and stopped when Kevin held up one of his hands like a traffic cop. “Just one second Mr. Lewis.” Luke cocked his head and thought about climbing out anyway but something in Kevin’s face told him this would have been a bad idea.

“Kevin,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re doing here. Did you come for something to eat because I’ve just packed up for now, but you could come with me to Kenned—”

“Shut up Mr. Lewis.”

Luke swallowed hard and really began to panic. What had Patty said about some students? *They just have to be given some space.* It seemed that Kevin had space now—too much of it. And though he couldn’t say precisely what he saw in his student’s face, Luke knew it wasn’t good. He felt like a small animal being pinned in the back of its cage by something bigger, something more ferocious. Outside the van Kevin was standing under a streetlight with both hands behind his back again. Luke strained his ears but couldn’t hear anything or anyone else nearby. He realized too that no one would think anything of someone standing beside a van marked: LATE-NIGHT LUKE.

“You’re ruining my life. You know that don’t you?”

“Kevin, I haven’t done anything that you haven’t forced me to do with the way you’ve been behaving.” Even though he was only thirteen Kevin looked like an adult, a scary adult like the kind Derek may have to deal with inside the Cranston House of Corrections.

“You and all the rest of them,” Kevin continued, as if Luke hadn’t even spoken. “And I’ll get them too, if they don’t stop me first. Mrs. Hansom, Ms. Lutz and especially that dumbass Principal Dolan.”

Luke was growing increasingly nervous by the second. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and open them in bed beside his wife. Or at the very least to be given the opportunity to talk to her on the phone one more time. He sensed that this encounter was coming to an end and he was extremely terrified by what he supposed that ending might be. “You don’t want to do this Kevin,” he said. It was all he could think of. He hated this—begging for his life. But the teacher in him was coming out and he thought that it may be his only chance. He was good with students, maybe he could get through to this one.

“Listen Kevin,” he said. Kevin didn’t tell him to shut up. “I have a friend—a good friend—and he’s made mistakes in his life that he regrets now more than anything. But his. . .” He didn’t know what to say next. His mouth was drying up and his brain felt like it was going to explode inside his head. He wanted to teach, but he wanted to live more than anything else. “But his are things that can be made up for. If you do what I think you want to do. There will be no going back. Do you understand?”

“Oh I understand Mr. Lewis. And I’ve accepted that.”

“Thirteen is too young to possibly accept something like that. You don’t know what you’re saying son.”

“Don’t call me that.” He spoke calmly, matter-of-factly.

“Kevin.” He was almost pleading now. His words were running out, his thoughts were running rampant. He thought of Derek, being released soon. He saw Patty in his mind, sitting on the couch beside her phone, laughing as Ray Barone did something that made Debra call him an idiot. “Kevin.”

But it was too late for talking—too late for teaching. Kevin pulled his hands out from behind his back and lifted the gun. Luke tried to speak again but couldn’t. So he just closed his eyes and tried to picture his wife one last time, tried to somehow say goodbye.

When he fired the shot rang out in the night like a gong inside a tunnel. And as Luke lay on the floor of his van, dying, the burgers continued to cook, the fries continued to bath in a tub of grease, and Kevin Thomas disappeared into the night.