

Keep it quiet or whisper it softly

My dearest reader, it is only fair that you understand that I have approximate knowledge of many things. The things I tell you are not reliable but they are completely true. The secrets I impart are incredibly honest, possible lies. My name now is Thirty-six, but at one point in my life, I know that people called me Lucy, and that I once belonged to a family you could find in the phonebook under the name Paxton. I no longer believe this to be the case.

My world is a very small one. There are six walls, and I am sure that one of these walls is a ceiling and another is a floor. However, I have long since lost the ability to decipher which is which so I rely on the certain truth that there are simply six walls. The clothing I wear is both inconvenient and prohibiting as my jacket is open in the back and my sleeves are made of one continuous loop that restricts and encases my arms. I miss the use of my hands, but at times I find it entertaining to pace around my small room, as if I am in deep thought with my arms behind my back as I imagine Sherlock Holmes would do. I am grateful for the pillowy material that encompasses my living quarters as arms are crucial for balance and therefore tripping is now a common event in my life. Yet how is it that I am addressing you, if I have no hands with which to write this? It is all thanks to the little voices. The voices will sometimes address me through a box protruding from one of the walls, and on occasion the voices will enter my room. I

suppose each voice is attached to a body but I cannot remember what it was like to decipher one body from the next. I find the voices are made up of amiable qualities. Whenever they enter my room they give me liquid that encourages peace and positive endorphins, takes away the pain in my stomach, which I assume is hunger, and offer small words or kind thoughts. 'Good morning' is my favorite phrase they give me, and on excellent days I will attempt to give it back. We have a simplistic relationship as I cause no trouble for them and they in turn cause no trouble for me.

I have no understanding of time, but to the best of my knowledge, it was recent that a new voice addressed me. It came from the box and taught me about a method known as therapeutic writing. The voice suggested that I speak out loud and allow my thoughts to be recorded by a listener. Perhaps, they think, the more I dig into my mind, the more aware and like my old self I will become. It is a beautiful thought and I am open to trying new things.

They say it is best to start at the beginning. Personally, I find 'beginning' to be a relative and useless word, but for the sake of this experiment I will comply and start with the first thing I know.

I know that I was once a person. A person just like you or like someone you passed by on the street. I had a mother and a father who loved me deeply and I lived in a small red house with a blue mailbox and a picket fence that needed repainting every year. Until the age of eleven I grew up in a secluded town in West Virginia. It was a

place where trees were as common as clouds, and there was a gumball machine on the corner of every street. The only oddity was the town law that forbade any resident from entering the forest that brushed the outskirts. But other than that minor detail it was a charming town and I used to take great pleasure in the fact that I was the envy of every little girl within it. Perhaps, given how I ended up, you find that hard to believe. But dear reader that part is true. I was envied because I was the sole best friend of Valentine Bardue. The sweetheart of the town who lived in the magnificent white manor with red roses at the top of the hill. Valentine was a year younger than I, and all the more enchanting. At the age of ten she had champagne blonde hair, just long enough to skim her small shoulders, doe eyes the color of melted chocolate, and ivory skin so pale it looked like cooled glass. She had the town and everyone in it in the palm of her little hand. A girl so charming she could convince a crook to repent, and a priest to sin. The world was her play thing and there was not a person who wished to object.

However, they say that a person can only grow through hardship. I do not pretend to know who they are and I don't always agree with what they say, but my feelings on them is a matter for another time. For if they are right about the growth of a person then I can tell you that Valentine's personality grew in a twisted way as hardship was a thing she would never know.

In hindsight I am aware of the sad fact that I was Valentine's personal audience, and not her friend. Whereas normal individuals would crave other humans for support or love; Valentine craved only someone to watch her every move and marvel at what she

could get away with. Shallow? Maybe. But then again I was shallow enough to indulge her simply because I enjoyed the status I achieved.

It started with matches. A match box is a simple rectangle with a cleverly designed lid, and within the box hides a little row of wooden men crowned with red caps. Valentine revealed her prize one day while hiding behind a boulder during lunch hour in preschool. I still remember her grin. From ear to ear, like the Cheshire Cat, she beamed, and I swear in that moment each of her teeth was sharp and pointed. She had discovered the matches the night before whilst snooping through the drawers of her father's dresser. I had never felt pride as strong as the moment when she allowed me to strike one of the precious fellows against the boulder. The flame was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. But when the light crawled down the length of the match and bit at my fingers I realized how terrible a beauty it was. I should have heeded my conscience that day when I pondered confessing to the teacher what item we had in our possession. But Valentine had this power over me. It wasn't physical or threatening, and she always gave me the opportunity to make my own choice. But it was just that. The way she gave you the option was almost a spell in and of itself. Whenever she revealed to me her twisted plans she would finish by saying, "keep it quiet or whisper it softly". Almost as if it was a chant. She gave me full reign to make my own decisions, and that power alone kept me following her footsteps.

The smell of burning hair has a distinct aroma. I use the word aroma because within the first few moments of the burn the smoke reminds me of firewood crackling in the winter. However, the moments that follow are ugly and foul like rotting eggs.

My job had been to distract Martha Keys with small talk. A simple task and I had thought nothing of it. I remember in horrible detail the way her little nose sniffed and how her eyes and mouth began to widen simultaneously whilst I was in the middle of a sentence. I never saw Valentine do it but I know she did from the way Martha's mousy brown hair began to curl and crisp at the ends before spreading like wildfire through her wiry mane. Martha Keys was carried away on a stretcher and she never came back to school, and neither did I for a week. My mother explained that the school wanted me to take time off to heal after witnessing such a tragic event. But after being carted around to several child psychologists and receiving wayward glances from school staff I realized the true reason. They all blamed me for Martha's tragedy. They all believed that I had lit the match that fueled the fire. And why wouldn't they? I had burn marks on my fingers and the matchbox in my pocket. Yes all of that was because of the match I struck against the boulder, but that didn't mean anything. Valentine's influence was impenetrable, and therefore I was wholeheartedly guilty of a crime I barely took part in.

For a long time after the incident, Valentine's crazy plans were subdued, and foolishly I even began to believe that her thirst for adrenaline wouldn't return. There were still the pranks. Each time she would seek me out and hold both of my hands almost lovingly in hers as she captured my eyes with her wild gaze. With childlike

breathless excitement she would explain in detail the plan, and never fail to end with her words. She would watch me steadily and carefully say, "Lucy. Now that you know, you must keep it quiet or whisper it softly." I never told a soul.

From that point forward the plans were several levels less macabre. We would spend afternoons writing love letters in Valentine's beautiful cursive, full of twirls and loops, and giggle until we were in stitches after kissing the scented paper with my mother's scarlet lipstick. Valentine had a careful way of choosing the mailboxes we delivered them to, and I never objected.

My mother and father once sat me down after an unusually long and silent dinner. I could see out of the corner of my eye the letters being crushed in my father's strong fist as he scowled and my mother scolded. She explained quite tearfully that my foolish pranks had broken up married couples, and several of her friends from book club were getting divorces. Valentine had chosen her victims well, but all I could think about was how funny it was that the letters had ended up back where they had started and how it was a shame that Father was crushing the beautiful things.

Then there were the simpler pranks. Sometimes we would untie the dogs outside of the sheriff's office and watch them wreak havoc on the town's trash cans. Or the one where Valentine would direct me in collecting the porcelain garden gnomes from each neighbor's yard. She believed they were the most hideous of creatures, and that they were the reincarnations of evil doers frozen for eternity as cheap ugly lawn ornaments.

At her direction we set them up behind the tires of cars and watched as the owners backed up over them until they shattered. Valentine would crouch beside me snickering and whisper each time, "goodbye Bill", or whatever name she gave the gnome. I never laughed. I especially didn't find it funny when it became a routine year after year for my parents to sit me down after dinner and tiredly reprimand me for my actions. Valentine never received a lick of punishment as no one ever believed she did a thing wrong. I should have told my parents before the pranks what she was planning, but it was her enchanting way of saying, "Lucy, you must keep it quiet or whisper it softly." The fact that she gave me permission to turn her in somehow kept me each time from doing so.

It was when I turned eleven, and she was ten, that Valentine suddenly became bored. The pranks were not satisfying, the town's misery did not appease her, and my own pain warranted barely more than a yawn in her world. I loved her more than anything I had ever known. But that was nothing compared to how I had come to resent her.

On my birthday she announced to me that as a present we were about to try something we had never done before. Such words coming from her had the ability to both instill fear and excitement in my soul. While the rest of the kids made their morning walks to school, we headed in the opposite direction. At the edge of town stood an eleven foot tall electric fence, created to keep the town out of the forest and the forest out of the town. It was rumored that bears double their average size prowled the area, resorting even to cannibalism when hunger grew too fierce. Long before I was born our

town forbade its inhabitants from entering the woods after a string of mysterious disappearances. A taboo topic amongst neighbors but I know from whisperings that once an entire class of children vanished while out on a field trip. My parents would change the topic whenever I asked questions or began a sentence with, “So, about the forest...”

But Valentine of course knew of a weak spot in the forest fence. I remember how she crouched beside it like a feral animal, pointing her index finger with pride, at the ditch created by rain water under the metal wiring. I held my breath as if diving under water, following her lead and army-crawled beneath the fence edge. The fingers of the broken wire ran through my tangled hair and pricked lightly at my back as I carefully made my way to the other side. A knot grew in the pit of my stomach when at last I stood small as an ant at the face of the forest, and it felt deep down as if I had sinned.

Valentine was overjoyed at our triumph in breaking the town’s number one rule. She would run through the trees pretending she was a gazelle, darting around trunks and over fallen logs. But the deeper we went, the worse I began to feel. The path back became foggy in my mind and each turn we took became as similar as the last. But it is only when you are absolutely lost that you can be absolutely found.

She was the one who discovered the hole. Big enough for a child to shimmy their way in but several times too small for anything larger to enter. In hindsight this moment



is akin to the one where the audience screams for the protagonist to run away and never look back, but there is a reason the protagonist never does. Curiosity is a killer.

I had never seen a look so wild on her face as the last moment I ever saw her. Her hair was tangled with dirt and leaves and the laugh that erupted from her throat was more of a gurgle than a giggle as she waved goodbye before crawling inside. She commanded me to watch for when her flashlight turned on and to then follow suit. I never saw the light, and I never followed after.

The rest of that day is a blur, and the years that follow that moment are no less blurry. I can recall my mother hugging me and weeping softly or receiving sympathetic glances from people I passed by on the street. News of Valentine's tragedy spread like the plague. It was all over the television as search parties scoured the forest for her. But I never told anyone the truth of what happened that day, and the regret that grew inside of me like a virus.

Now here I live in a mental hospital where people know me only as patient number thirty-six. I suppose the regret grew too strong for me to function anymore and I found my way here after attempts to injure myself. I can't remember if my mother ever visits me anymore or if she is allowed to. Most of the time I can't even remember that I'm here. I suppose this therapeutic writing was successful. But the worst part is the haze that surrounds the day she disappeared. The not knowing what really happened. I cannot remember having a dream that has not been a replay of that day. Every night I

dream a different version that feels truer and more gruesome than the last. As if my mind is trying to piece it back together. When people ask what happened I give them the latest version of what I've dreamt. I tell them I forced Valentine into the hole because I couldn't live my life with her anymore. Or I tell the one of where I gathered stones and blocked the entrance once she was out of sight, and sat there as she screamed for help. There was even one where I lit a branch on fire by the entrance and let smoke fill the tunnel and never breathed a word to anyone. But these dreams I tell people are several times more lies than truth. Do you want to know the real truth of what happened that day?

Deep down, beneath logic, is the true story of what occurred, and to finally let the regret release me I will tell you. The truth is that Valentine did turn her light on, and I did follow her inside. We crawled for hours and days with my face behind her feet, and we hummed as we went one step at a time. The truth is that we crawled out the other side of the hole and found a new world more magical and glorious than our own. A world full of beautiful things. The regret that haunts me is that after the discovery I left Valentine and crawled back through the hole to our own world to tell my family of what we had found. The regret that after doing so I could never find the entrance again. Valentine is well and alive somewhere deep in the heart of the forest and she lives the magical life that was meant for the two of us to share. Together forever as the best friends we were. That is the truth of why I am crazy. I gave up the one chance in a lifetime to experience something extraordinary. So now that you know the truth I suggest that you keep it quiet or whisper it softly.

