

So Help Me God

1.

Phone rings. My cousin Andrea answers.

It's a pelting-rain weekday evening last April, just past 7 P.M. and dark as midnight.

Without so much as glancing toward me, Andrea picks up the receiver as if she's in her own home and not mine, shifting her infant daughter onto her left hip in a way that makes you think of a migrant farmwife in a classic Walker Evans photograph of the 1930s.

Phone rings! I will wish I'd snatched the receiver from her hand, slammed it down before any words were exchanged.

But Andrea is answering in her wishing-to-be-surprised high school voice, not taking time to squint at the caller ID my husband, a St. Lawrence County law enforcement officer, has had installed for precisely these evenings when he's on the night shift and his young wife is alone in this house in the country except for the accident of Andrea dropping by with the baby and interfering with my life.

"Yes? Who is this?"

My teasing with Pitman is never so inspired or easy as his with me; it's like wrestling with Pitman on our bed: I'm a scrawny ninety-seven pounds, half his size. The voice responds quick, as if alarmed, "Hang on now, baby. What authorities?" and I hear *baby*—this has got to be Pitman: *baby* in his mouth and it's like he has touched me between the legs and any ice-scrim that has built up between us begins to melt rapidly. I'm saying, my voice rising, "He knows who! So he'd better stop playing games," and the voice says in mock alarm, or maybe genuine alarm, "What authorities? Sheriff? Police?" and I say, "Pitman, damn! Stop this," but the voice persists, "Is this 'Pitman' armed and dangerous at all times, baby?" and there's something about this question, a strangeness of diction. The sick sensation washes over me—*This isn't Pitman*—and my throat shuts up, and the voice continues to tease, husky and breathy in my ear, "Fuck Pitman, baby—what are you wearing?" and I slam down the receiver.

Andrea takes my hands, says they are like ice.

"Oh, Lucretia! Wasn't it Pitman? I thought for sure it was."

Andrea thinks that I should report the call and I tell her yes, I will tell Pitman and he can report it. He's a law enforcement officer; he will know best how to proceed.

Things you do when you're crazy in love, you'll look back upon with astonishment. Maybe a kind of pride. Thinking, *That could not have been me; I am not that person.*

When I married Pitman, my daddy disowned me. Daddy had come to believe that Pitman had cast some sort of spell over me. I was not his daughter any longer. I had not been his daughter for some time.

My father was a stubborn man, but I was stubborn, too.

Eighteen when I married Lucas Pitman, old enough to be legally married in New York State, but not old enough to be coldly discarded by my father whom I loved. I'd come to believe that I hated Daddy and this was so, but I loved Daddy, too. I would never forgive him!

My mother disapproved of Pitman, of course. But knew better than to forbid me marrying him. She'd seen how Pitman had worked his way under my skin, cast his "spell" over me. She'd known long before Daddy had. Back when I was fourteen, in fact. Skinny pale-blond girl with sly eyes given to believe that, because she's conceded to be the smartest student in the sophomore class at Au Sable High, she can't mess up her life like any trailer-trash Adirondack girl.

I never did get pregnant, though. Pitman saw to that.

Luke Pitman was the youngest deputy in the St. Lawrence County sheriff's department when we first met: twenty-three. He'd been hired out of the police academy at Potsdam and before that he'd served in the navy. There were Pitmans scattered through the county, most of them with reputations. To have a "reputation" means nothing good except when it's made clear what the reputation is for: integrity, honesty, business ethics, and Christian morals. For instance, Everett Rayburn, my father, had a reputation in St. Lawrence County and beyond as an "honest" contractor and builder. Everett Rayburn was "reliable" — "good-as-his-word" — "decent." Only the well-to-do could afford to hire him and in turn Daddy could afford to hire only the best carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers. Daddy wasn't an architect, but he'd designed our house, which was the most impressive in Au Sable Forks, a split-level "contemporary-traditional" on

oblivious of other vehicles even when they passed close to me. I'd had a thought that here was a little blond princess needed a shaking-up for once.

I just didn't get it was a joke. The way Pitman grilled me, asking my name, my daddy's name and what did my daddy do for a living, what was my address and telephone number. These facts he seemed to be taking down on a notepad. (He was.) I was straddling my bike by the roadside trying not to cry, staring at Pitman who so captivated my attention it was like the earth had opened up; I was slipping and falling inside. Pitman must've seen my knobby knees shaking, but he kept on his interrogation with no mercy.

Daddy would say Pitman had cast a spell on his only daughter; when Daddy was being nasty he'd call it a sex spell and I concede that this was so: Pitman's power over girls and women was sexual, but it was more than only this, I swear. For there was this Pitman-soul you saw in the man's eyes when he was in one of his moods, or you felt in the heat of his skin—a soul that was pure flame, a weird wild happiness like electricity coursing through him. Just to touch it was dangerous, but you had to touch!

Can't take your eyes off him—he's beautiful.

"Well, now. 'Lucretia Rayburn.' Seeing as how you are a minor, maybe I won't run you into headquarters. Maybe just a ticket."

By this time most of the blood had drained out of my face, my lips must have been stark white. Trembling, and fighting tears. I was so grateful, Pitman was taking pity on me. But before I could thank him, he asks, as if the thought had only just occurred to him, how old is that bicycle, where had it been

and how much did it cost? "Looks like a pretty expensive bicycle, Lucretia. One of them 'mountain bikes.' You got the bill of sale for that bike, girl, to prove it ain't stolen property?"

I did just about break down, at this. Had to say I didn't have my bill of sale but my father might have it, at home. I want to go home? Pitman shakes his head gravely, saying he has no choice but to "confiscate" the bike and run me into headquarters after all—"See, they got to take your prints, Lucretia Rayburn, and run 'em into the computer. See if they match up with known felons. For all I know, you ain't even 'Lucretia Rayburn,' you're just impersonating her." And I'm stammering, No please, officer, please. But Pitman has climbed out of the cruiser to loom above me, frowning and severe seeming. He's six foot two or three, a hard-muscled youngish man in a uniform made of a silvery-blue material and I'm seeing that he's wearing a gold-glinting badge and a leather belt and holster and in the holster there's a gun, and a roaring comes up in my ears like I'm going to faint. Pitman takes my arm, not hard, but firm, and Pitman leads me around to the passenger's side of the cruiser, sits me down in the seat like I was a little girl and not this skinny-leggy girl of fourteen with a glamor ponytail halfway down her back. He notes the sparkly green toenail polish but refrains from comment. Takes from his belt a pair of metal handcuffs that are these adult-sized cuffs and says, still not cracking a smile, "Got to cuff you, Lucretia. It's for your own protection, too." By this time I'm sick with shame. I can't think how this nightmare will end. Pitman takes my arms that are covered in goose pimples from fear of him, gently draws them behind my back, and slips on

We had our honeymoon house. A rented winterized bungalow outside town. Pitman whistled, painting the outside robin's-egg blue that dried a brighter and sharper color than the paint sample indicated, and I made a mess painting the rooms inside: pale yellow, ivory. The little bedroom was hardly big enough for our jangly brass bed we'd bought at a farm sale. This bed for one oversized man and one undersized girl, I took pride outfitting with the nicest sheets, goose feather pillows, and a beautiful old handmade quilt in purple and lavender. This bed Pitman and I would end up in, or on, more times a day than just nighttime.

Only a coincidence: our honeymoon house was close by the Hunter Road. In the foothills east of Au Sable Forks, Mt. Hammer in the distance. Our bedroom overlooked a branch of the Au Sable Creek, which sounded like rushing wind when the water level was high and like a faint teasing trickle by late summer when the water level was low. Our house was exactly 2.6 miles from my parents' house in town.

Some months after we came to live here, Pitman was assigned to a new shift. Later hours, farther away. Now he and his partner patrolled little crossroads mountain towns like Malvern, North Fork, Chapprondale, Stony Point, and Star Lake. From his miffed attitude I had to conclude that Pitman wasn't happy with this assignment, but he'd only joke: "That's where a cop can expect to get it. Up in the hills."

It's cruel for a law enforcement officer to joke in this way with his wife, but that was Pitman for you. Seeing tears in my eyes, he'd turn repentant, brushing them away with his big thumbs and kissing me hard on the mouth. Saying, "Never mind, baby. Nobody's gonna get *me*."

This seemed likely. Pitman was fearless. But Pitman was also shrewd and knew to watch his back.

This night. It was a turn, I'd come to see later.

Pitman came home late from his night shift smelling of beer, fell into our bed only partly undressed, hugging me so tight my ribs were in danger of cracking. He hadn't wakened me from any actual sleep but I was pretending. Pitman disliked me to be waiting up for him and worrying, so I had a way of feigning sleep, even with the bedside lamp and the TV on. In those early months I was grateful my husband came home at all, wasn't shot down or run off the highway by some maniac, I'd forgive him anything, or almost.

Pitman hid his hot face in my neck. Said, shuddering like a horse tormented by flies: "This thing over in Star Lake, baby. It's ugly."

Star Lake. Pitman's old hometown. He had family there he kept his distance from. There'd been a murder/suicide in a cabin above Star Lake, detectives from the sheriff's office were investigating. Not from Pitman but from other sources I knew that a Star Lake man had strangled his wife and killed himself with some kind of firearm. I had not heard that any Pitmans were involved and was hoping this was so. Pitman had many blood relatives with names not known to me, including some living on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation.

I had learned not to press Pitman on certain matters having to do with his job or any of his personal life, in fact. He'd promised he would always tell me what I was required to know. He would not upset me with the things he saw that upset him or things a woman would not wish to know. Law

This was a long speech for Pitman. He was drunker than he'd seemed at first, and very tired. I knew not to let on any unhappiness I felt, for that would offend Pitman who deemed himself my protector. I only laughed now, pulling his hands more firmly away from my throat, and leaned up awkwardly to kiss him.

"Mmmm, Pitman, come to bed. We both need to sleep."

I helped Pitman pull off more of his clothes. He was big and floppy like a fish. By the time I leaned over to switch out the lamp, Pitman was asleep and snoring.

It was that night the thought came to me for the first time: *It's a garrot I am in.*

2.

"Such an ugly story! Those people."

My mother spoke with repugnance, disdain. "Those people" referred to people who got themselves killed, written up in local papers. People of a kind the Rayburns didn't know.

I was in my mother's kitchen reading the *Au Sable Weekly*. For some reason our paper hadn't been delivered. On the front page was an article about the murder/suicide in Star Lake, fifteen miles to the east. The name was Burdock not Pitman. I resolved that I would not make inquiries whether the two might be related. It was my reasoning that mountain towns like Star Lake are so small and remote, inhabitants are likely to be related to one another more frequently than they are elsewhere. If Pitman was related to the wife murderer/suicide Amos Burdock, it wouldn't be helpful for me to know.

"I didn't actually finish reading it." Mom sat across from

me, pushing a plate of something in my direction. It is a mother's destiny always to seduce with home-baked cookies reminiscent of someone's lost childhood, but I would not eat; I would save my appetite for my own mealtimes with Pitman. "I suppose Pitman knows all about it. Is he investigating?"

No mention of a garrot in the article. Only just the coroner ruled death of the female victim, the wife, by strangulation. The garrot was secret information, evidently. Known to only a few individuals.

"Pitman isn't a detective, Mom. You know that. So, no."

Strangle, revive. Strangle, revive. The way Pitman had teased me on the Hunter Road. Scaring me, then seeming to relent. Then scaring me again. Really scaring me. And then relenting.

Best keep it a secret between us, Lucretia.

Daddy's favorite music is opera. His favorite opera, *Don Giovanni*, which I came to know by heart, listening to it all my life. Daddy also took us to any production of any Shakespeare play within a fifty-mile radius and each summer for years to the Shakespeare Festival over in Stratford, Ontario.

For Daddy, *Don Giovanni* and Shakespeare were rewards for the time he spent in the world "out there." Dealing with men, customers and employees. Dealing with building materials. Making money. Pitman seemed to think a lot of money. *Your old man's a millionaire, baby. Why you're so stuck up. Hell, you got a right.*

When I'd wanted to rile Daddy up I would say the world isn't Mozart and Shakespeare, the world is country-and-western music. The world is cable TV, Wal-Mart, *People* magazine. I knew that I was right; Daddy's face would redden.

in silver and handle he was obsessive about keeping polished the way, at our house, my mom kept the good silverware polished, this was the firearm Pitman kept loaded and ready at all times, in case of intruders, break-ins. He'd showed me where the rifle was positioned on the closet shelf, how I was to take it up and hold it, how I was to shift the safety off in any time of danger, but I was nervous, backing off, laughing, and fluttering my hands. No, no! Anybody was going to protect me, it had to be my husband.

At our kitchen table while I prepared a sizzling frying-pan meal, Pitman would drink Coors and listen to Neil Young, sometimes Dee Dee Ramone, turned up high, as he dismantled, cleaned, and oiled his long-barreled police service revolver with the tenderness you'd hope to see in a man bathing an infant. Pitman interpreted my fear of firearms as respect for him, and he liked that. Of all things, Pitman required respect. The Pitmans and their numerous kin were not generally respected. They were feared and scorned in about equal measure. Pitman wished to be feared and respected in equal measure. Sure, he liked to laugh and have a good time, but respect was more important. He knew of my father's disdain for fishing, hunting, guns of any kind, and had a way of alluding to "your esteemed father, Mr. Everett, who pays other guys to do his shooting for him" that was startling to me, like for an instant Pitman's brain was sliced open and you could see the shrewdness inside, the class hatred, the anger. The next instant it was gone. Pitman liked to tease-taunt me in a way that was like sex, the prelude to sex. Telling me of the times he'd had to use his weapon. Drew his gun and aimed it as he'd been trained and called out a warning—"Put your hands where I can see them! Put your hands where I can

see them! Come forward slowly! Come forward slowly!"—but he'd had no choice except to fire. Since being sworn in as a deputy sheriff he'd had to shoot and kill two men, and had wounded others. Not always alone but with his partner, neighbors. It was rare for a law enforcement officer to use his weapon alone. Did he have any regrets? Hell no. He'd never been reprimanded for excessive force. The shootings had been investigated and cleared. On one occasion, Pitman was credited with saving the life of another deputy. He'd received citations. He never dreamed about these actual shootings, but he dreamed about shooting. A lot.

Pitman smiled his slow easy smile, telling me this. I felt my breath come short.

It was a requirement of the St. Lawrence County sheriff that deputies were required to fire no less than two bullets at their target if they fired one.

"Why is that? What if you change your mind?"

"You don't."

"But, if you've made a mistake . . ."

"You don't make a mistake."

"A deputy never makes a mistake?"

Pitman laughed at me. Those days, I never knew if I was pretending to be shocked by him or truly was shocked. I saw that steely light come into his eyes. He leaned over and drew the revolver barrel along the side of my thigh, slowly. In a way that made me know he was quoting somebody he revered, he said: "A forty-five is not an equal opportunity employer."

The last time Pitman took me dancing.

This hillbilly tavern out on Hammer Lake. We'd been married about three years. We'd go out with other couples, the