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# The Other Lucian

by Kate McCorkle

Lucian stood before the child's painting—an image of swirled gold, fuchsia, lapis, cobalt, and midnight—that triggered something in his gut and made him think of the night when he was five, and the winds were fierce, and a massive oak branch fell on top of their car. The family was awakened in terror by a nighttime pounding at the door. A policeman patrolling the neighborhood was alerting them to the damage; his justice-strength headlights lit up the whole scene.

Lucian remembered not the spiderweb of damage to the car's windshield or his father's cursing (both of which he was sure must have occurred), but the red sun rising behind the silhouetted oak, which was now transformed into something foreign with one of its biggest branches at peace on the Pontiac. Lucian remembered the light, the snapping magenta and burning yellow, the thin line of cobalt—so like Aunt Marie's eyelids—and darkness retreating. It appeared as if the newly severed oak was percolating light from below ground, dispersing it through its remaining bronchial branches—the earth itself banishing night.

The kid's picture hung behind a simple glass plate in an ordinary hallway, flanked by standard drawings stretching in either direction. It was different. The light. It pulled Lucian in. It was his name. In the bottom right-hand corner, he incredulously made out his own name. Lucian. Except it wasn't him. This was Lucian Robinson of 8-A. He was Lucian Bellarmine of Overbrook. His right index finger moved to touch the name when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Sir? Sir? Please don't touch the children's art. They worked very hard on it. You'll be able to see it next week when the kids bring their work home."

The woman gave a hurried smile before clicking down the hall.

Lucian shoved his hands in his pants pockets. He probably should find Haley, but he couldn't leave the painting. Not yet. He compromised by stepping back, interrogating it from the other side of the hall. No one else was named Lucian. No one. There was movement in the painting too; the strokes evoked a cresting wave of light.

Too soon, Haley waved him into her classroom down the hall. It was her first year as a lead teacher, and she wanted to show off her sixth grade homeroom, dazzle him along with the real parents at the Open House. Married less than three years, they were nowhere near having kids at the school. Haley presented him a Dixie cup of lemonade when he ambled into the room. It was decorated with the flags of the world and an enormous periodic table.

"Did you know there's a kid named Lucian here?" he asked. "I've never met another Lucian before. Hey, maybe my name's going viral," he laughed, looking for Haley's response as she bustled among the desks. "Do you know this other Lucian? He's an eighth grader, and he made this—"

“That’s nice, hon,” Haley interrupted, handing him a stack of pastel papers. “Listen. I could really use your help getting these flyers onto all the desks. The last group was a bunch of savages. One dad rolled his eyes at my cups and poured lemonade into his own water bottle! And they took all the flyers about clubs, which I guess is good, but now I have to pass out more and there’s only five minutes before the next group and I couldn’t find you anywhere. What do you think of the flags? Too ethnic? I wanted to be inclusive, but...”



Lucian passed out the flyers as Haley continued. She was so enthusiastic about her class. He wanted to find out about this other Lucian, though, the one behind the glass, the double who had summoned his nearly forgotten flaming tree.

“It’s just that he painted this really cool picture. I mean, I think I could do better. I hope I could do better, if I had the same materials. The gold was kind of metallic and uh...”

Haley gave him a withering look. “Really? You’re getting competitive with an eighth grader?”

“No,” Lucian started, “It’s just—never mind.” The next wave of parents poured in, and he either couldn’t or wouldn’t explain to Haley about that glorious moment when the world revealed itself to him as a slippered five-year-old.

\* \* \*

Driving home from the Open House, Lucian listened as Haley unwound the evening: “...was clearly a parent, but the man with her was so much older, I didn’t know if he was the child’s father, or maybe a second marriage or...Who brings their kid to a parents-only open house?...took all Kathleen’s tape...too many donuts...”

He was happy she was content with her job and its little dramas and that she liked her colleagues, for the most part, and was engaged with her students. He didn’t know if teaching sixth grade was her forever job—*did people even have those anymore?*—but right now, she was happy. Lucian himself did not see his job as a systems analyst as a forever job, but he was respected, and it paid the bills. That was more than a lot of his friends had. He always figured he would do well, then move on to something else; he just wasn’t sure what that something else looked

like. Probably not bursts of magenta and cobalt. Probably not an electric fuchsia current running through his life.

He didn't pursue his conversation with Haley about this other Lucian. She was too caught up in the Open House. He was already thinking maybe this boy's parents wouldn't be as into the painting; maybe Haley could offer to buy it from them, if she could find the kid. If Lucian owned it and could always behold the echo of that morning, maybe it would reveal—what? Something important. Something good.

\*\*\*

They are almost home, and Lucian is grateful he has so much. His heart is swelling. Can't Haley see? She must be able to see it, if she knows him at all. *Please tell me you know me. You are so beautiful—even the dead tooth that embarrasses you. We get to go home. I get to make life good for you. Safe and warm and, no, not easy. But together. Together is better than alone. I'll make bacon in the morning so you know. Can I pause this now and hold it? In this moment everything is good; everything is well-met.*

Haley stabs the radio button. "I can't listen to this garbage." A moment later, "God, I'm tired."

Lucian looks at her, the shadow of longing banished by her words. She never saw the other look, the swelling heart that threatened to overflow. She saw him too slow at the radio, dull reflexes.

It's easier, sometimes, to love her when he's thinking about her. Easier than when he's confronted by the reality. Funny that he loves a dead tooth yet cringes at her words. Why can't he cherish both?

He recalls two halves, parallel slashes of fuchsia from the other Lucian's painting, the paint heavier and thicker on one stroke, lighter and faded on the other. If he had this painting, wonderful things would happen.

\* \* \*

Upstairs, the smell of coffee and bacon wakes Haley. If she knows Lucian, the pancakes are probably on the griddle. There are likely some scrambled eggs too. She groans, annoyed. Lucian knows she's trying to lose weight. She was talking about it last night. *He never listens. Or, if he does, maybe he just doesn't care. Pancakes and bacon. Really?* Resigned to the day, Haley gets in the shower.

Downstairs, as Lucian maneuvers through his morning, he can't shake the painting from his head. *Is it a sign? Of what?* Bubbles form in the cream-colored liquid; he flips the pancakes on the griddle. If the picture didn't have his name on it, would he still be thinking about it? *Yes*, he reasoned. He noticed his name after realizing it was an image of the tree and the light. The signature cemented it, though. He slides the pancakes onto a plate. Grease snaps in the pan. The bacon is nearly ready. He lets a few slices blacken; Haley prefers it almost burnt. *The colors—at what point does pink become red become purple become black?*

Haley's footsteps are on the stairs. Lucian pours her coffee and hands her the mug

as she enters the kitchen.

“Good morning,” he says and kisses her.

Haley mumbles her assent and sits at the table.

Lucian piles pancakes, eggs, and bacon onto a plate, and he slides it in front of Haley, who grunts in acknowledgement.

“You sleep okay?” he asks, setting his own plate down. “That was a lot last night. All those people. And then a full day today. I don’t know how you do it.”

Haley shrugs. “It’s my job.”

“Yeah, but it’s more like a calling or something. To be able to—to put yourself out there like that.” He lets Haley sip her coffee. He had wanted her to start eating, but she’s slow to lift her fork. She only has a few minutes before she has to leave.

“So, I was thinking,” he resumes. “You know that painting? I think you, I mean, I think it would be okay to make an offer on it. To buy it. I think a kid would think that selling a painting is pretty awesome.”

Haley lowers her mug. “What are you talking about?”

“The painting. The one from last night.” Lucian wants to say the one of the tree and sky, but it wasn’t really of the tree and sky. If he told her the one with the tree and the sky, she would think he was crazy. “It was signed ‘Lucian,’ remember?”

“Oh, oh yeah.” Haley pushes her plate away. “You’re still on that? Lucian. It’s a kid’s art project. He probably did it with poster paint. What’s going to happen when we have kids? Are you going to want to frame every scribble and smear they make?”

Lucian looks away. How can he explain—

“I just don’t get it,” Haley says, picking up her fork. “I don’t get why you’re so hopped up that some kid who shares your name did an art assignment.”

She cuts her cold pancakes and begins to eat. Lucian pushes his plate of half-eaten food away. Maple syrup forms starry night swirls around spires of thin bacon strips; pancake pieces anchor the foreground. The only thing missing is the actual light—

“Anyway. Breakfast is good. I mean, I need to lose some weight, and this probably isn’t helping. But, it’s good. The bacon is real good.”

Lucian admires his cypress trees of bacon, his rocky landscape of pancake, his spiraling, animated cosmos of syrup, the perfect circular world of his plate, before scraping it into the trash can.

How can he ever explain things to Haley?

\* \* \*

The painting takes up residence in Lucian’s head. He closes his eyes and sees bursts of cobalt, streaks of turquoise and lapis seeping through pores. For a while, he could recall exactly how the painting appeared—he knew, for example, there was no silver anywhere. And, when silver first appeared in his mind, he banished it, commanding, *there is no silver here*. Eventually, though, silver penetrated. *Was that because the real morning had silver? Was it metal from the Pontiac? Once*

silver entered, Lucian couldn't dislodge it. The brushstrokes seemed to pulse and vibrate too. That was new. Lucian knew the movement couldn't possibly be real. Colors are fixed. Gold and lapis are on opposite sides of the rectangle. So how could they dance?

Lucian began to welcome the headaches created by pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes. At first, when he closed his eyes too long, there were hints of color: rings of amber, hurts of violet. Perhaps the ring was his iris, inverted somehow. Then other colors from the painting began to permeate. Golden butterscotch, a lurid green, more rings—once azure. He pressed on his eyes to block out the light, to intensify the colors. He gave himself little headaches. There had to be something more, something bigger. With these colors, with that oak branch, blood vessels and capillaries—what did it all mean? A bigger picture was moving into shape; Lucian had to discern his place. What was his beat in this pulsing thing?

\* \* \*

As weeks passed, Haley began to worry Lucian was under too much stress at work, or perhaps he was suffering from migraines; he was continually rubbing his eyes. She bought more organic food and cut processed snacks and anything with Red 40 from their diet. In the past, she could always fix whatever was unsettling him, but something had happened recently, like he was immune to her. He was there, yet not there. Haley hoped it wasn't a brain tumor and scheduled a checkup with his GP.

Lucian had been so attentive when they were dating, Haley recalled fondly as she pushed her eggs across her plate. He had made her breakfast again—eggs today, not the full lumberjack special—before leaving on some errand. It had become routine.

When she was Haley Woodstock, she casually mentioned that she'd never been to a drive-in movie, so that weekend Lucian surprised her with a trip deep into New Jersey to see *Ghostbusters* on a large outdoor screen. He wouldn't tell her where they were going, but presented her with wrapped clues every ten miles: popcorn, Jujubes, jet-puffed marshmallows. He listened when she talked about teaching. He seemed engrossed when she told him Aiden was illiterate or how Dom threatened to bring his stepdad's gun to school. He even brought her coffee when she was swamped with work.

Lately, though, he rarely asked about her kids. There were no more surprise trips, no little adventures. He was always off volunteering somewhere. It started slowly, Haley recalled, as she stabbed her eggs. An occasional Saturday morning, the rare weeknight. Recently, though, it had morphed into something more. Every weekend he was gone sorting clothes, making meatballs, or painting something. It's not like there wasn't stuff to do at home. She wondered if a baby would change things.

Haley cleaned and dried her plate, returned it to the cabinet. There was no evidence she ate. *Maybe this is just marriage*, Haley thought. *Maybe marriage*

*eventually becomes two people living together who don't necessarily want to kill each other.* She refilled her coffee and settled into her work.

Sitting in her regular chair, she cleared space for grading. Lucian's papers were on the table too. He never used to leave things spread all over. This was her space—her spiral-bound grade book open flat within arm's reach. Although Haley tracked grades on the school's computer system, she felt she couldn't be a real teacher without the actual book. She enjoyed using a red pen, noting the neat numbers rising in their orderly columns. Each entry added another soldier to the phalanx, another fortification against—against what, exactly? Haley wasn't sure, but she did relish keeping track, keeping score.

A surprising amount of paper fell to the floor when she shoved Lucian's things aside. Haley prodded the detritus with her foot: It looked like every nonprofit in the region was there. Most had photos of people enjoying fresh food or drinking milk. She stooped to reorganize the papers, her irritation mounting with every pamphlet.

What was going on? A terminal illness might explain Lucian's crazy behavior, but no, Dr. Gupta said he was physically healthy. Of course. His health was never an issue. Haley clutched the papers with the intention of tossing them, when a smiling child—a boy—with large brown eyes caught her attention. His pencil was poised on his paper; behind him, a classroom blurred into the background. Children's Relief was stamped in a crayon-like font over his head.

How ambiguous. Haley regarded the image. She taught kids. Wasn't she children's relief? What did that idea even mean coming from an organization? Did they use money to buy school supplies? Provide hot meals? New toys and winter coats? She was on her feet with two dozen thirteen-year-olds. She was on the front lines: educating, inspiring, deterring cell phone usage. These young minds had been entrusted to her—wasn't she children's relief? Why would Lucian want to help them?

Where was he anyway? He hadn't told her—out the door before she woke up. Probably off volunteering at one of these places. She chucked the pamphlets to the floor. Haley looked away from the brown-eyed boy. She missed Lucian.

\* \* \*

It wasn't until the following Saturday that Lucian and Haley had a spare moment together.

"So why exactly are you going into Camden?" she asked over coffee.

"Neighborhood cleanup," Lucian replied as he retrieved a bowl. "Clearing trash from abandoned lots, replacing broken light bulbs, that kind of thing. Want to come?"

"Why can't the people who live there do that? It doesn't cost money to pick up trash. Why do you have to do it?"

"Well," Lucian said, pouring milk into the bowl, "we hope to get the neighbors involved. That would be ideal. You don't want to just come in as an outsider and

do something and then leave. You hope that by—”

“But why are you going to clean their trash?” Haley interrupted. “Why are you spending your Saturday in some lot in Camden dealing with other peoples’ garbage and exposing yourself to God knows what—”

“Haley,” Lucian said, sitting at the table, “It’s fine. Camden is not exploding with violence at all hours. Why don’t you come?”

Haley rolled her eyes, then stared at the microwave.

“I thought you were going to fix the banister today,” she blurted. “I thought maybe you could come with me while I tried on jeans.”

“I can still fix the banister,” Lucian said, getting up and placing his bowl in the sink. “You really want me there while you try on jeans? I thought you hated that.”

Haley turned away, bottom lip protruding.

“Hey, I’ll fix the banister as soon as I get back, ‘kay?” Lucian located his keys. “You sure you don’t want to come? You don’t need to shower before.”

“I have things to do around the house. I have responsibilities,” Haley stated.

Lucian kissed her forehead and left through the front door, not bothering to close it. Her mug in hand, Haley walked through the living room and slammed the front door, spilling her coffee in the process. After returning to the kitchen for a towel, then back to the living room to mop the spill, she didn’t want to bother with the kitchen again. Lucian hadn’t made breakfast that morning.

\* \* \*

Their third wedding anniversary next week was a deadline. *Whatever this was with Lucian had to be resolved by then*, Haley decided. She was stewing, but if he never recognized it, she would have to do something drastic. She would have to show him how good and thoughtful and important she was. She would remind him that he needed her.

She didn’t think anything was planned for the day. Haley laughed. Lucian would probably volunteer them to work in some soup kitchen for their anniversary. Imagine—soup for your anniversary dinner. Haley wondered what Lucian would appreciate. A hairnet? A donation in his name to the Salvation Army? No, she would have to do something big, something really big. This was their marriage, after all. Haley would show him what that meant, even though he probably wanted them working in some abandoned lot in Camden.

Haley had no defined plan for a grand gesture. Grading worksheets, though, circling the top of a paper because of a forgotten name, she had a genius idea. Why hadn’t she thought of it sooner? *The painting. That damn Lucian painting.* The kids’ art was still in the hallway because it covered plaster holes. Haley stood, scattering stacks of grading. She hustled for the car keys before remembering it was Saturday. The school would be closed. Her disappointment was washed away by a giggle. *The painting would be perfect.*

Haley could barely contain herself the days leading up to their anniversary.

She talked with the art teacher on Monday before work and had the student's permission the following morning. She even gave him twenty dollars. Haley didn't actually give it to him; she put the bill in an envelope and gave it to his homeroom teacher in the lounge. She thought it was pricy for a kid's fingerpaint smears, but cheap compared to cufflinks or an engraved flask.

The school let her keep the frame too. It wasn't great, but at least she didn't need to add that to her list of errands. Blankets in the trunk of her car protected and hid the painting; she wrapped it gingerly in a down duvet cover and nestled it among knit afghans. Once home, Haley enveloped it in bubble wrap before slipping it into an oversized Christmas bag. She placed the bag on the couch and waited for Lucian to get home from work.

\* \* \*

Haley pounced as the door opened.

"Happy anniversary!" she kissed Lucian.

"What? This is nice," he smiled.

"I have something for you. Come here," she said as she pulled him the few steps toward the couch. Haley backed off and watched, eyes glowing. She saw Lucian see the large gift bag. He looked at the bag, then at her.

"For me?"

Haley nodded.

"I have something for you, too. Just let me go get it—"

"No," Haley nearly yelled. "Open this. I mean, I can wait. Just open this."

Lucian cocked his head, then reached toward the bag. "It's not a puppy, is it?"

"Just open it!"

He parted the tissue paper and extracted a large bubble-wrapped rectangle.

"Careful," Haley offered.

Lucian sat with the package, delicately undoing layers of packaging. Haley was hopping from foot to foot, clutching her camera. She hovered beside Lucian, then backed away. When he had finally unspooled the wrapping and held the painting aloft, she was beside him, no longer hopping, but gazing intently into his eyes.

As the final layer of bubble wrap fell away, Lucian sucked in his breath. He was holding the painting, his painting, the other Lucian's uncanny recollection of dawn breaking through a shattered tree. It was restored to him.

Funny, he hadn't noticed before how sloppy some of the brushstrokes really were. A stray bristle was trapped in an upward sweep of yellow. Yellow, not gold. The colors were more primary than he remembered. And the starbursts of silver—no, those had never been there. He turned the painting over, inspected the back.

He was not as grateful as Haley expected him to be.

"What? This is the painting, isn't it?" she asked. "That's your name on the bottom—"

your alias' name."

Haley couldn't read Lucian's face. He wasn't upset, but he wasn't awestruck either. The smallest bit of contempt bit into her when she realized he looked stupid.

"Don't you like it?" She sat beside him so she could see the painting too. She still didn't understand why these smudges were so important.

"It's—" Lucian began, "I can't believe you did this for me. Thank you, Haley." Holding the painting in front of him with two hands, he leaned over to kiss her. "No, this is really something. I'm surprised you remembered. Thank you."

"So, where should we hang it?" Haley stood. "I have the hammer and level and a picture hook," she said, reaching under the couch where she'd hidden the tools.

Holding the picture at arm's length, Lucian stood and pivoted around the room like a sprinkler, imagining it on each wall. "Maybe the kitchen?" he suggested. He did the same circle pivot in there before suggesting the upstairs hallway and heading for the steps. Haley was holding the hammer when he came down without the painting.

"Where is it?" she asked. "Where do you want it hung?"

"I'll think about that for a while," Lucian answered. "I want to make sure it's in the right spot. I don't want to just hammer holes in the wall wherever."

He noticed the look on Haley's face.

"I love it," he said. He kissed her forehead and embraced her. "It's wonderful. Thank you."

The hammer was pointless now, but she held it anyway. They stood in the kitchen like that for a moment until Lucian snapped to attention. "Your present!" he sang. "I almost forgot!"

He trotted to the closet and, reaching far behind winter coats, came out with a large rectangular cardboard box. "It's not wrapped," he explained as he shoved it in her hands. "Sorry."

The box was sturdy, with an embossed seal on top. She placed it on the kitchen counter, opened the hinged lid, and moved cream tissue paper aside. A strong-smelling leather tote was nestled inside. She removed the tan satchel gently from its tissue cocoon, ran her fingers over the leather, over the single gold buckle, then slung it over her shoulder.

"This is beautiful," she sighed.

"Leather's for the third anniversary," he explained. "I thought you might like it for work."

Haley inhaled deeply. "It smells new," she purred. "So, are we going out for dinner tonight or what?"

"Yeah, we can," Lucian answered. "If you want to."

Haley nodded. "Just let me grab my bag."

\* \* \*

Lucian thought Haley was beautiful, even though she made disgruntled noises during the drive about not doing her hair. They were hungry and left the house quickly. They went to the closest place—the shopping center pizzeria. Haley sat across from him, and as she talked and sipped her drink, Lucian admired her unruly brown hair, her smile, the way her bracelets jingled on her wrist as she spoke.

Haley probably would have preferred a restaurant that required reservations for their anniversary. He had the suspicion she was settling, but no, the smiles seemed genuine. There was the dead tooth peeking at him. Haley seemed okay with a drink that had a lid and a straw and gloppy pizza on paper plates. She was laughing and talking about some girl in class who gave an awful presentation on crop circles. Lucian reached past the jar of peppers to touch her hand.

The painting had been nice. He had underestimated her—he should give her more credit. He would have to hang it somewhere. He didn't want to now, though. A few months ago, when he first saw it, that might have been different.

When Haley was in the bathroom, Lucian pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to conjure the magical rings of light. Nothing came. Maybe the pizzeria was too bright. *She gave me what I wanted, Lucian thought, noting the irony. I need something else, though, and it's not the picture. It was never the painting. I've been trying to recreate this connection all over the city, but it's not there either. The earth itself created light—and I serve corn, sort jackets, and replace broken light bulbs. What I do is less than a shadow. But it's here, over these greasy paper plates.*

Lucian looked at their plates, wadded napkins, and empty cups. He collected the trash on one tray. The plate on top was splotted with grease and tomato. A lone pepperoni sun was presiding—ah, but here was Haley from the bathroom. Check paid, trash gone, time to go.

As they took the bend on Overbrook two blocks from home, Lucian applied his foot to the brake. The road dipped down from a hill, and as they descended the other side, a lone oak appeared. It was black against a changing sky. Muted indigo, a velvety periwinkle, and a pale, blushing memory of pink pressed down on a rim of gold just barely visible on the horizon: the colors of sleepy dreams cloaking the light.

Lucian saw not the oak's innumerable branches and leaves. In the twilight, he saw the tree inverted, its roots upended—hairy roots sucking water and nutrients from the heavens. There is a symmetry above and below the landline that divides far-reaching branches and roots, splitting, growing, crackling like nerve endings,

snapping with secret messages, firing at will. Past and future stretch away from the center, the sturdy present trunk, like an axon tethering runaway forces, its only purpose to transmit the hopscotching code. How little we truly see. Lucian reached his right hand to cup Haley's left. He was filled with love for her in this moment, this radical axon of a here, now.

She glanced at their hands, then at him, questioning, "Hmm?"

"Did you notice that tree we just passed?" He jerked his head to the side. "The way the sun was setting behind it was amazing. I can loop around so you can see it..."

"Sure. That would be nice," Haley smiled and straightened in her seat slightly. "I think you have a better view than me."

