

## *Joseph Eastburn*

### **The Flower Truck**

He was big and that was all that was required. A theater friend had asked Harlow to appear in a dance piece at a local auditorium. The characters were as follows: a man (himself) with cigar—implying age and janitorial status—pushing a large cardboard box back and forth on a stage behind a little girl roller-skating, and a slightly full-figured dancer doing elaborate, almost awkward, ballet movements—all to a languid Erik Satie nocturne.

Harlow saw the dancer walk in the door of the gymnasium wearing a floor-length, olive army coat. She was bubbly, her laugh infectious, but for some reason she seemed tense around Harlow, especially when she took her coat off and stood on the open stage in her dance costume. She wore a skintight, black leotard that vanished into green tights. But all shyness evaporated when she started to move to the music.

Her face was soft and plump. As she danced, her blue eyes jumped around the room, not alighting on anything. Thick, saffron hair—wild and uncombed—flew straight out from her body as she twirled, then floated down onto her shoulders when she stopped to breathe.

He remembered now her name was Lucinda. Lucy for short.

The second night's rehearsal Harlow tried to talk to Lucy on a break, standing beside a vending machine, gushing about the choreography and what good dancer she was, but she just acted shy and stared straight ahead as if she hadn't heard him. The rest of the rehearsal, he felt unmoored. When she was gathering up her gear, he again tried to engage her, describing the Satie music as haunting, even languorous, and then, as she started to walk away, searching for words, he said, half to himself, "anemic"—but was referring to something else. At the door she turned at a safe distance and really stared at him. She looked puzzled and a little frightened.

Then she walked away.

He watched her pull out in a flower truck, puzzling over a vision of the lonely room he was renting and decided to follow her. He didn't know why. He turned the radio on and pursued her taillights, turning the steering wheel in an aimless fashion with his wrist, letting only a corner of his mind focus on what he was actually doing—following a young woman he didn't know.

She drove over the mountain that loomed between Black River and the farming community of Welton. Once Harlow had ridden with his father on this twisting road as it worked its way around a vast floor of humus—miles of black dirt that stretched across the valley. It was like he was still sitting beside his father as the flower truck accelerated down the steep side of the mountain. Harlow saw moonlight hit needles of water spraying the crops at the edge of a field. He could never quite understand how his mind could be in one place, years ago, while his body was actually in the present, following Lucy, and driving too fast. All taking place under a pale glow of the moon. Her brake lights caused him to slow down.

Lucy pulled her truck off the county road in front of a long, flat series of barns and garages. He pulled the other way, across the road, into the driveway of a well-lit, large, white colonial house. He rolled down the window and smelled the black dirt. It was pungent. He reasoned that if he kept one part of his mind in the past, his brain would allow him to do whatever it was he was doing. The truth is, he didn't know what would happen next so he sat there looking at her across the road in his rearview mirror.

Out of the flower truck poked a leg draped in the army coat. Lucy unlocked a garage door, swaying her head idly. After hopping back in the truck, she gunned the engine and pulled the vehicle inside. In her headlights Harlow could see inner walls lined with mirrored cases of flowers arrangements, orchids, red and white roses, baskets of flowers stacked on tables for the next day: all of it double-reflected back through his rearview.

Her headlights died. The garage door slammed. Harlow thought he heard her voice singing: the sound jumped off the garage in the stillness. He could make out the crunch of her footsteps on the gravel. When she came out from under the eave, her outline bloomed green and she stood on the other side of the road, moonlight hitting her hair. To Harlow, even in the mirror, her hair seemed to emit its own light. She stopped and waited as a white car hurtled by. In that moment she saw him, or so he guessed when her frame stiffened. Lucy walked toward the car. A puzzled expression crossed her face.

He opened his car door and stood up without saying a word, just looking at her. The pace of her footsteps slowed, and she stopped in the middle of the road, frowning. Nothing was said for a few seconds. The surprise in her features turned to apprehension.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry,” Harlow said. “I...followed you.”

“Why?”

“No reason. It was something to do.” He shrugged. “I like the way you dance.”

“You like the way I dance.” Her tone sardonic.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that at rehearsal?”

“I tried to.”

“You drove over the mountain to sit here in the dark and watch me?” There was a steely resolve in the way she chose the words but mostly she seemed scared.

He shrugged again. “You want me to leave?”

Just then the sound of an approaching vehicle intensified: a wall of sound coming from all directions. The right side of Lucy’s body was suddenly side-lit by headlamps, her face drenched in a wall of light. She froze.

Harlow jumped out into the road, grabbed her arm, and yanked her toward the side of the road as a feed truck flew by, pelting them with dust and gravel. Lucy’s hair was swept up into the air. He didn’t realize that she was in his arms until he felt the bones of his forearms against her back.

He could still hear the feed truck rattling away from them on the road, moonlight spilling down as they both wiped sand out of their mouths, amazed at how dangerous it was just standing on a country road at night. She stepped away from him.

“You have to leave.”

He nodded. “I think you’re right.” He got in the driver’s seat without a word, started up the car, and carefully backed out into the road and drove back over the mountain.

\* \* \*

The next night, after rehearsal, he ended up following her over the mountain again. Through the rear windows of her truck, he saw the silhouette of Lucy’s hair glancing from the side mirror to the rearview, back and forth—one time she even turned around and stared. Again, as she pulled the flower truck into the garage, he pulled his own car into her driveway and waited. Again, watching her in the mirror.

When she crossed the road this time, no feed truck was bearing down on her. The night was still. He could hear a chorus of crickets ring in his ears. Again he stood out of his car without saying anything as she approached. The moon was behind a

cloud. She seemed to be lit from some other source. Her eyes held an eerie heat, but she wore a severe expression on her face. He could see the color of her eyes but her mouth was unsmiling. He looked up into the sky with despair.

“All right, I’ll leave.”

He got in the driver’s seat and started digging for the key. She walked alongside the car and stopped at his window. She stared at him a long time, her face blank. He thought she was trying to determine if he was dangerous or not. Still unsmiling, she leaned inside the car and placed her mouth against his. Her lips stayed there. She broke the kiss and placed her cheek against his. An eternity passed through that increment of time. She whispered, “Park across the road.”

She pushed away from him and took off running up the driveway toward the colonial house, her army coat flapping open like wings. She reached the top step of the porch and turned, heaving. He had the sensation her feet were not touching the wooden planks. He was still sitting there, stunned. She poked the night air with her finger, pointing to where he should park. He backed the car out and drove it across the road and parked against the garages. When he got out of the car, she was still standing there, still as a statue, looking in his direction. He crossed the road, now walking toward her. She ran into the house, slamming the door.

Her hair flew backwards as she rushed inside past a series of windows. He watched her run through the living room, past a maple piano, past a couch and chairs that he could see from a distance had brocade slipcovers. He started running. As he reached the porch, through the glass he saw a giant, brown and red braided rug in front of the hearth. She ran up the stairs and Harlow saw her body blink inside several stairway windows as she climbed.

He thought he heard her footsteps running down a second floor hallway. In the silence that followed, he imagined she had reached her room. He stepped back off the porch to look at the front of the house, and stood below what he thought might be her second floor windows. He flinched when she stepped in front of the glass. She threw off her officer’s coat, and began slowly taking her clothes off, hands appearing even slower now, almost in slow motion. Down on the grass, Harlow’s breath caught in his throat. He could vaguely see a white blouse float over her head. As he walked closer to the house, he tripped but immediately

jumped to his feet, astonished, watching as she undressed until she stood there naked in the darkness—staring out the window at him. Or so he thought. Was his fevered brain conjuring this? She pressed her naked body against the glass, white skin flattened against panes that he guessed must be ice-cold in the dark. He imagined the cold glass stinging her with such intensity that she might scream. He stared upward, shaking his head in a kind of wonder, trying to see her—when she moved away from the window.

His mind must have been playing tricks on him. She couldn't have taken off her clothes in the dark and pressed her body against the window. He started to climb a trellis nailed to a corner post that supported an arbor at the end of the porch, then the arbor itself because it was stronger. When he pulled himself up on top of the porch, the tin gutter clanged. His heart raced with excitement and dread. He had to inch his body up the angle of the asphalt shingles but the pitch was too steep. He grabbed the snow cleats for purchase; finally he reached the window frame. His fingernails rubbed the chipped paint along the sash, looking for an opening. The window was locked.

He tapped gently on the glass with a fingernail. The pane was thin and vibrated, the tap echoing inside and out. There was no answer. He began to think he might be tapping on her parents' window. Suddenly a white form blazed inside the window. He jumped. It was a ghostly, otherworldly image, a corporeal body separating—across the imperfections of old window glass—then converging to form a person, like a woman under water.

A hand pressed against the glass: a delicate hand. He pressed his own mirror hand-image onto the cold surface. Her arm was visible, the rest of her body disappearing into a pool of blackness inside her room. The hand slowly, breathlessly, ascended the glass and unlatched the window. She pried the window up slightly from the inside. From the outside, he got his fingers under the wood and yanked, but it was stuck—swollen from the rains. Now, he got both sets of fingers underneath, shifted his weight, and forced it up. The window jumped abruptly, a scraping sound that walloped the silence, echoing across the fields.

He climbed inside. He saw an outline melding into form, then swimming away. His eyes adjusted. The figure, sheathed in white, was standing on the bed, backed up against the wall. He knelt on the bed. It was an old, single frame bed, very soft, a fat, feather-tick blanket spread out on it. Lucy was standing against

the wall above her bed. She let her arms out to the side as the white sheet fell like a sheath of ice falling away. Her smell wafted toward him. He could hear her fast breathing.

He crept toward her. When he touched her ankle, her breath drew in sharply. As his palm began to climb her leg, her skin actually seemed to burn. She began to cry out, her voice ecstatic, shivering with emotion each time he touched her. They started giggling as he covered her mouth but she wouldn't stop. The same moon washed down. Her blue eyes seemed electrified. Her voice a musical instrument rising with each touch. Even her tiny chin climbed upward as her mouth opened. He wanted to look at her face as he moved above her then closed his eyes as she rolled over on top, straddling him.

Looming over him, she began to ride him like a horse, kneeling him hard in the ribs, posting up and down. At one point she grabbed something off the end table and shoved it in his mouth. He nearly choked before he realized it was a bridle. She was forcing a metal bit between his teeth.

\* \* \*

Harlow heard a gate slam in the distance. He opened one eye and noticed light pouring into Lucy's window. He looked up and saw their bodies entwined, covers twisted around them, her hair still wet from sweat and saliva. She looked like a drowned pup. He heard a car door slam. Something about the sound was familiar, which prompted him to crawl out of the warm covers naked and peer out her window. Across the road, a man with white hair was staring in the driver's window of his Chevy, which he'd parked against the garage to the flower shop. The man was wiping his brow. The sun had probably just nicked the horizon and it already looked hot outside, and yet Harlow was cold. He kept staring as he found his jeans on the floor and pulled them up over his bare butt. He studied the man checking his car's license plate. The man paused, thinking, then crossed the road and walked up the driveway to the house and up the steps. He disappeared under the front porch.

Harlow heard someone pull the screen door open when there was a sudden loud bang. A woman screamed. Harlow eased Lucy's bedroom door open and tip-toed down the hallway toward the top of the stairs where he could see down into the living room, but still be hidden in the shadows.

A woman was crying, both hands on the sleeve of a squat man's denim jacket as he dragged her across the room. The older

white-haired man appeared holding up both hands, trying to block his way. The younger man looked very strong, was balding, and had powerful arms and shoulders.

The white-haired man said, "Hold on now. What's up?"

The younger man's face was burning red. He stopped short in front of the older man, dazed, and violently shook his wife's hand off his sleeve. He strode around the older man, and Harlow heard determined steps across the porch and down the steps outside. The screen door slammed. The woman grabbed the older man's wrist.

"Lucy has a boy up in her room. They were at it all night like cats. Fred has just about gone out of his mind. He's going to get the ax."

"No shit."

"Do something, Willard. He's gonna' kill that boy."

"Maybe he'll just hobble him, the way he did that wolf. Kept 'em in a pen for about a year or so."

Harlow was not comprehending what he'd heard.

"Shut up, for God's sake, shut up!" the woman said. "I'm gonna' call the police." She rushed across the floor but ended up knocking the phone off the table. She got down on her knees and picked up the receiver with what looked like jittery fingers. She paused, breathing fast. "Should I call 911?"

The white-haired man scratched his head, turned, and headed up the stairs. Harlow ducked farther back in the hallway, heart racing. The man stopped on the first landing. "How did the boy get in?"

"I heard him climb up the trellis and across the roof of the porch."

"Must have been eager."

Harlow should have already been running, but his legs wouldn't move. His eyes were fixed on an expression of dread that crossed the woman's face as she stood up, both hands over her mouth, staring out the window. "Here he comes."

"Lock the door," Willard said. "And after that, lock the back door too."

"He'll skin us both alive!"

"If he doesn't have the sense to remember what he was like—then we'd better let him cool off."

The rest of what they said was garbled as Harlow ran down the hallway into Lucy's room and over to the window. Outside, the sun was farther up in the sky and he saw the stout man stride

away from a tool shed, gripping an ax horizontally in both hands.

Every sound was magnified. Harlow heard a deadbolt pushed through the front door jamb downstairs as the man with the ax must have clobbered on the porch. He shouted and started banging on the door.

He shook Lucy awake. "Your father has an ax."

She seemed frozen as she stared up into Harlow's eyes.

"What?"

"They locked the door, but he's pretty upset."

They could hear someone walking up the stairs. Harlow backed away from Lucy's bed. The white-haired man pushed open Lucy's door. He smiled and shook his head.

"Young man, I'm Willard Price, Lucy's grandfather."

"Hello."

"Hello, yourself. Normally I don't support this kind of thing, but we have an emergency. Lucy's daddy wants to kill you right about now. What do you say to that?"

"I'd rather not be killed."

"Very sensible."

"Maybe I could explain?"

"Fred's not in the listening mood, I'm afraid. Although, I am. What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry, I-I didn't mean any harm, honestly. It just kinda happened."

"Well, it sure did."

They could all hear more intense banging on the front door.

"I strongly suggest you leave the same way you came in, and you better do it right quick."

Lucy started crying. Harlow tried to wrestle a shirt over a bare shoulder, but could only get one arm in as he lurched toward the window.

"Do it now?" he asked.

Willard stayed calm. "When I give Lucy the signal, you go out the window, you hear? I don't care if you have to break a bone. Just get to that car, boy." He reached down and yanked Lucy up by a shoulder, as she wrapped a sheet around herself.

"Oh, Grandpa..."

"Hush, Lucy. Don't start your blubbing. Now, stand here."

He stepped out in the hall and positioned her against the jamb of bedroom door. "Tell me when the boy's in the window."

Harlow could hear screams and a violent pounding at the back door now as he yanked the window up, waiting. From the



white haired man's steps, he placed him somewhere down the hallway, maybe at the head of the stairs. He heard a woman's tremulous voice from downstairs. "Willard, he's going to break down the door."

"Just a minute."

Harlow crouched up under the open window frame. The sun was now on its journey to the top of the sky. He was told by a psychic once that he had Venus at mid-heaven, so in theory, everyone should love him. He looked back into the room. Lucy trembled in the hallway, tears streaming down her face, looking very small and young. She mouthed the words, "Good-bye," and turned away. "He's in the window, Grandpa!"

Harlow heard the white-haired man's voice. "Tell him to start down the arbor, then go lock yourself in the bathroom, you hear? Don't come out 'til I tell you." Then he yelled downstairs, "Open the back door, Ann."

Harlow climbed out the window, grabbed hold of the snow cleats, scraping his ankles as he slid down the asphalt shingles. He wrapped his feet around the arbor and the weight of his upper body nearly pulled the gutter off the porch roof. He climbed down the thick branch twisted around the post. He heard someone run down the upstairs hallway. He pictured Lucy hiding in the bathroom, and almost didn't look up, but he heard, "Pssst!" He looked up and she was crouching, wrapped in the sheet, terrified, staring down at him. He whispered, "Come with me."

As Lucy crawled out of the window, a shape loomed behind her. Harlow gasped as the muscular man grabbed for her but just missed seizing her hair.

Harlow stood barefoot in the grass, his arms raised in supplication. Lucy's body fell out of the sky into his arms and knocked him clean onto his back. His pant legs flew up into the air as they toppled over one another. The front door slammed open, and he saw the woman race out onto the porch, with the white haired man close behind her.

"He'll disinherit her!" she yelled.

"It's still my farm," muttered Willard.

Lucy was wrapped in the sheet, wearing nothing else. Harlow grabbed her arm and they ran down the driveway, the white sheet trailing behind her, flying back wildly like the robes of some goddess.

Harlow heard the man's boots clomping awkwardly on the pitched roof above the porch. He was cursing. The woman screamed for Lucy to come back. There was a loud grunt. Har-

low turned and saw the man heave the ax into the air where it whipped end-over-end high over the front lawn, cutting the air with a terrible sound. He was sure it was going to find the center of his back. It landed behind them and dug a square hunk of grass and flung it up in the air as Harlow and Lucy reached the road and ran toward the car.

Harlow looked back and saw the man sail off the roof of the porch. He landed at a bad angle and startled wailing. It looked like he'd broken his leg. Lucy slammed the passenger door and sat panting beside him. Harlow started the Chevy, but couldn't take his eyes off her face. Lucy looked twenty years older, as if this rupture with her family had aged her before his eyes. She sat Sphinx-like, staring straight ahead at the fields of black dirt. He froze for an instant, realizing he didn't know her, and there might not be a way to reach her, ever. Out of panic, he backed up and careened down the road, shooting gravel against the garages.

He could hear Lucy's white sheet dragging on the pavement.