

DEVINE LIGHT

Pat O'Brien looked at the page he was reading and saw the word "book" then lost his sight. He had been blind five years when he met Lucille, the crazy woman with the two kids. It's only fair to say Pat lost part of his eyesight as a kid, playing football. He got use to being partially sighted - being completely blind made him angry. He threw chairs that got in his way - broke dishes and tore-up all his books, leaving the shreds in the middle of the floor for years. He drank until he smelled like he drank, with fire and passion.

"nother scotch up Jerry," he'd shout at the bar tender tapping his white cane on the counter.

When Lucille saw him sitting next to her she was fascinated by the scars and fresh wounds scattered across Pat's forehead.

"Hey you gotta light?" Lucille asked in her high, tight little voice. "Na-O!" Pat barked figuring she was something he couldn't afford or couldn't perform for. Then he turned his back and talked to his booky who sat on the next stool.

"Put fifty on Divine Light in the sixth and..."

Lucille didn't understand why Pat would be rude to her.

"Guess your one of those men who don't like women. Well, it's okay -"

"No no no!" Pat retorted "I don't hate women. Why should they be the only ones? I hate everybody."

"I was a straight A student in high school and I..." Lucille rambled while trying to follow Pat home. "So what!" He snapped and wondered why he was so angry at this poor girl who hadn't harmed him in anyway. He had a dog named Viking who threatened to bite Lucille when she came too close. "I understand guide dogs are gentle animals. He must be like your guardian angel."

"Yes, I guess he is." Pat said softening for some reason.

It was after Pat won on Divine Light and got a new apartment in the Mission district that Lucille moved in with her two terribly neglected children - Two muppets with matted blond hair. The type childless white couples wanted - only, these children were defective with asthma, and what not, so wealthy white people probably wouldn't want them, not really. They were surprisingly ordinary for having been nearly abandoned. They quarreled, laughed at cartoons on TV. loved potato chips and coke and cried when sleepily. They got along well with Viking although he did seem to cause them to cough more.

Lucille left the light off when she and Pat made love so their experience could be the same - one of touching, smelling, tasting and more. She knew the odd scars on his forehead were from running into doors. Pat loved the feel of her body - not a body men pined over or that women envied. Oh no, this was a

warm comfortable body that was wide at the hips and small at the shoulders and who's large soft belly invited his own belly into a cozy embrace.

When they put the children in school Pat realized the time had come to name their relationship. He was so much older, really, he could be the children's grandfather. Should he say he was married to Lucille? If he married her they would lose some of their benefits. Would someone find out how they were living and turn them in for child neglect? It all depressed him. Maybe it would be better for the children. Maybe a rich couple would take them and give them everything they could ever want. He imagined them being led away in fancy little coats.

He lay in bed listening to the children wheeze and cough.

Viking laid on his side and snored through his vicious looking canines. Lucille was not sleeping next to him. He could hear her pacing in the kitchen. Her bare feet slapped the hard floor.

He could hear her mumble and giggle. Oh, he knew she was crazy. He'd heard the gossip and pitiful remarks at the bar. "Poor thing tried to kill 'er self three or four times now...her babies come from two different men...I have an idea who the little boys father is... they should 'a sterilized 'er and kept 'er locked up...she sleeps with anything with pants on.

He loved the talk and listened with complete interest to this wonderfully different woman. She was certainly not your usual barfly or even a wholesome high-school girl. He loved imagining her life. As a teen-ager she ran away from her home in the east to live in San Francisco. She left one of those ideal families who wiped her nose and kept clean sheets on her bed.

She hitch-hiked here and there, even when she was pregnant, even when she had two babies. He was a sloppy old blind man with no teeth. Lucille gave his false teeth to her kids. The uppers to the girl and the lowers to the boy. They made great toys. And Pat didn't feel so guilty for not wearing them.

He grew fond of these semi-orphans as the weeks and months rolled into school years. But he noticed Lucille ignoring them more and more. They would follow her around with their wee voices, "Mommie Mommie would you - can I Mommie I want this - I want that".

He found himself answering them and caring for them just like he thought she should be. "What sad little faces they must have" he thought out loud. He bought cans of food and instant food, like oatmeal, at the store. The kids would look at the pictures on the package. But that didn't always work out. One time they bought some packages with pictures of sandwiches on the cover that turned out to be sandwich bags and not sandwiches at all. They all had a good laugh over that one. All except Lucille who hung in the air gloomily.

Pat reached out in his darkness to touch Lucille and felt her head? He wasn't sure so he took both hands and felt - one side of her head was shaven the other a tangled mess. She had an unpleasant odor. The children complained about how their mother stank and how their little friends refused to go in the apartment. So they roamed the streets with other tots and stole candy

from Ma and Pa stores. Then at night they slept in one another's arms and wheezed and coughed each into the others face.

Pat enrolled the tots in school claiming to be their maternal grandfather. They took real easy to calling him grandpa. They'd say it over and over like it was something magic and called their mother, Lucille.

Lucille gave every penny of her welfare check to the winos who hung out on Mission Street. They were pleased and some even caressed her hand and called her a saint. Pat used his Blind Aid Check for the same month on Divine Light in the 3rd and lost every penny leaving the four of them with near nothing to live on. They squeezed through to the next check. Pat was remorseful and thought of sending the children begging with him. Lucille sold her body in sleazy bars and kept the money for liquor.

Pat called his one and only relative, a cousin who lived in the San Fernando valley and ask him for money. The cousin didn't have a lot of money - had a used car lot. "I wouldn't mind sending money to you" Pat, but I'll be damned if I'll support anyone's little brats."

Even though the cousin complained he still sent \$20.00. "I better be careful," Pat laughed, "he probably is printing these in his basement."

"Is he our uncle?" The little boy asked.

"Ha! That's great! why I bet he'd just love to be your uncle. Come on now lets walk Viking."

Lucille walked along the path on Golden Gate bridge taking her clothes off one by one. The sun was setting and a blue mist floated through the cables. People walked by or rode by on bikes and barely noticed the woman with her hair cut funny walking along removing her clothes and singing, "Glory, Glory Hallaluya...Glory..." She was completely naked when a police car pulled up next to her. An officer of the law wrapped his jacket around her and the next thing she knew she was in the psych ward at General Hospital.

Pat came every day to see her, leaving the tots to watch TV. and drink sodas until he came back. They didn't seem to miss Lucille although when they ask about her once it seemed more out of curiosity than any feelings of loss.

One dark evening Pat went to see his beloved. The air was thick with fog. Viking bit someone who stepped on him in the bus. The driver made Pat get off the bus and he had to find his way to the hospital.

Lucille was not in her usual place in the ward. Someone told him to sit on a hard bench and wait. The sounds of many feet past him stirred the air. Strange voice echoed on either side. Voices passing and passing. Different smells different sounds. He wanted to weep but his sightless eyes rolled around without tears. Salty rivers of water pressed through his pores. What did they do with her? Did they go and let her kill herself? He longed to be with her again like when they were

first together. To curl up in a warm embrace. He was convinced she was the first woman he loved since his own mother. And she died 50 years before when he was only seven years old. He hated the orphanage and those homes and nameless groups of people. If only he could put his arms around Lucille right now.

"Right this way, Mr. O'Brian." A voice said then forced him down a long corridor. Will people ever learn how to walk with someone who is blind? You don't push them or pull them and they are rarely deaf so you don't have to shout.

Someone took Pat's hand and introduced himself as Lucille's doctor. He ask Pat to sit down. "She's very sick, Mr. O'Brien" He said softly holding Pat's shoulder. Viking growled. "Shut-up gawdam it!" Pat shouted then ask the doctor, "What's wrong with Lucille?"

"She has a brain tumor -here up from the nap of the neck" He pressed the back of Pat's head.

She was heavily sedated when he got to her bedside. He held her hand and asked, "are we alone?" She answered "yes" in a bare whisper. He leaned over her and rubbed her head that was shaved, and felt for lumps. Maybe they lied. "Why did they shave your head?" he asked. "I asked them to," she replied in her fading voice. He grabbed her up in his arms and squeezed her.

She died peacefully in her sleep as his mother had. He was with Lucille when she died. Shortly before she died she told him, "I thought I was crazy. Thank god it's something else." It warned Pat to know she had a sense of humor.

After she died he sat for hours on end resting his chin on he palm of his hand. He thought only of the good times they had together. How she read to him and listened with him to talking books. They studied astrology together. He knew all the planets and how people fit into the cosmos.

There was a knock on the door. It was some lady from social services. She wanted to know if the children were all right.

She searched each room of the apartment. The kitchen with its millions of cockroaches crawling over the dishes speeding across walls laying dead on their backs in the sink lying eggs everywhere. The toilet had not been flushed and the sheets on the children's beds were gray. A large black and white TV. was at the foot of the mattress. On the floor were many broken toys. The children smiled at the lady and asked her if she was going to marry grandpa. Then they coughed and wheezed.

"No, it's not a cold" Pat said "they have asthma"

"That's a shame" the woman said. Then she told Pat that she knew he wasn't the real grandfather and she would have to take the children into custody now that their mother died. "Yes, I understand," he said.

They were standing in his room now, that was filled with the bed he and Lucille had slept on. "I can't possibly give these kids what they need," he admitted. She seemed satisfied and left repeating that it was a shame they had asthma and that he should gather up their things and she would come for them in the morning.

Pat O'Brien, who remembered seeing the word "book" as the last thing he ever saw also remembered the last time he saw his mother's face. He remembered the feel of Lucille the last time he held her. And now he had to tell these tots that they would have to live with strangers. He told them they would learn to love the new people they would be sent to. He told them they couldn't steal candy anymore and would have to learn to keep their rooms clean and do homework, then the new people would like them.

They cried. They pulled at his pant legs then threw themselves on the floor as though they were too weak with grief to stand. They promised to be good if only they could please stay with him. Pat felt their cheeks, wet with tears, with his large dry hands. Pat left with the kids in the dead of night carrying only bare necessities and arriving on his cousin's door step the next day. The cousin was upset, "why didn't you let the welfare people take them. What are you going to do? I can't help you!"

But, it wasn't long before the cousin could be heard bragging about Pat's grand kids. After a while no body's kids could possibly measure up.

Pat O'Brien changed his name to Gypsy Pat, had one ear pierced and told fortunes to help raise money for the kids. The boy grew-up and told fortunes and bet on horses. The girl moved to San Francisco in search the true meaning of life and lived in a multi-racial commune that ate only vegetables and wore long green robes.