This World Of Light And Darkness

Linda Morganstein*
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We get everything at the Kit Kat Club. We get our regulars and we get the tourists. We have salesmen up from New Jersey. We have cops dropping in off-duty. We get busboys and doctors, jockeys from the track and nice married men from Monroe. We even get a few of God’s representatives. Coming in with their chins pointing at the floor and shame in their eyes. Coming in looking over their shoulders. These guys like to belt down a few then explain to me how we’re all the same in God’s eyes. So what else is new? Don’t come in here with your shame and doubts and tell me about God’s eyes.

If he has eyes, they watch in amazement.
That’s what I’d say if these men would listen. But most people are a lot better at talking than listening. And I’m easy to talk to. Something about a naked woman in a public place.

Tina ain’t my real name, but whoever heard of an erotic dancer named Katy? Besides, I don’t look like a Katy. I’m half-Cuban, half-Irish. Somehow the Irish side didn’t show up too good. I came out looking mostly Cuban except for my blue eyes which is a shame considering my Cuban daddy took off before I was born. My old lady wound up strolling this little brown-skinned kid in her Irish neighborhood in Queens, her being pale as they come and red-haired. The neighbors watching from their stoops, fanning themselves with rolled-up newspapers and shaking their heads.

My dad was my old mom’s one big mistake and I was the reminder. She tried to love me. But it was a strain and I got out as soon as I could. The old lady and I have our problems My career doesn’t help, but damned if I’ll spend my life typing memos to try and squeeze love from a stone. Besides, I like what I do. It’s not like I’m a star, but I got a following.

The Kit Kat Club is no Rockefeller Center, I can tell you. But with Mrs. Katz being the owner it ain’t no Swizzlestick Lounge either. Over at that place,
with Harry Pezzo running the show, there’s things going on I wouldn’t describe and I’m not shy. They have laws against that kind of stuff, but hell will freeze over before you see a raid on the Swizzlestick. That’s not how things work up here in the Catskills. Harry Pezzo’s sister’s husband Benny is Chief of Police in Old Falls. Does that tell you anything?

Underneath, Mrs. Katz has a pretty good heart. She treats us girls okay. Besides if she tries anything fishy she has to deal with Carol Lee, our manager, who just happens to be hell on wheels. Nobody likes to deal with Carol Lee so everything usually works out fine with Mrs. Katz and us girls.

When I first started, the managers were just stooges for the owners. No protection. You pretty much did what the club owner wanted and if you didn’t—out. Now we’ve got one or two good managers around. Like Carol Lee. And it’s a damned good thing for us oldtimers.

I been dancing for seventeen years, can you believe it? Some tell me I still got the body of a twenty-five year old. Sure. Under the right lights.

But I ain’t bad for thirty-five. I take care of myself. I’m a type that ages well. Small and tight. Nice round butt. Small high tits—too small some say. So what, I say. I make up for it with the way I move. I say, if they like big, let ‘em wait for the next act. We got some that overflow where I trickle and damned if they can pull in a crowd the way I can when I’m moving the way I move. It’s a talent I was born with, an energy like dripping molasses, thick and smooth. I ain’t ashamed. It’s a natural gift.

There are some places a long time ago where I could of been part of the religion. I could of been dancing in some temple and the people would have wonder in their eyes.

I remember when I was starting out. I couldn’t of been more than eighteen and lied about my age—hardly anybody ever checked back then. I came up here to the Catskills following some boy whose name was Bobby. Now
Bobby knew a guy whose girlfriend was a dancer. I swear I never did anything like that before, but Bobby, he convinced me about the money you could make and we needed it what with the way he gambled.

I was so nervous in the beginning my nipples would wrinkle up like prunes and I could barely follow a beat, so I was throwing off my clothes as fast as I could until I was almost naked and that seemed to be enough to make most of them happy, because I had a nice young body and, you know, I think they loved it that I was so scared.

Once when I was starting out I had some jerk spit at me. Then, on top of it, he threw a sweaty twenty-dollar bill at my crotch. Bum.

Lorna—I thought of her as old back then, now I’m her age—held me in the dressing room backstage and whispered, “Some of them are real nobodies.”

Okay. I have known in my life what it feels like to be a nobody. But give me a break. No spitting.

Lorna was my first friend. She had this interesting smell, like burnt toast. I think it was the perm in her hair. Lorna wasn’t pretty, even back then. She had the biggest hands and feet and a hooked nose too. She was a makeup expert though and I tell you mostly nobody cared about her features because Lorna is the warmest human being on earth and it made you feel good to watch her dance. Even the nobodies must have felt it because I never seen a soul spit or throw money at Lorna.

Lorna, she said: “You look out at them and, honey, you can practically see right through them they’re so much nobodies. Look out at a sea of ghosts, sweetie.” Then she stroked my cheek. I remember how it felt to this day. Her face got serious. “Every once in awhile you’ll see a solid one smiling up at you. Someone real, God know’s how he got here. You just nod at that one so he knows you know and be grateful.”

To watch Lorna dance—I almost can’t describe it. Not
so pretty, I have to admit. Moved okay, a big, bulky body grinding back and forth, big at the hips, kind of loose at the thighs. But here's where the magic was—in her warmth. All the rest becomes so much bull. Lorna, she had a special spirit. To get a hug from her was special, believe me.

Later I came to find out Lorna preferred girls, if you know what I mean. I sure don't care, she never tried anything funny with me, only that hug. I liked that. With that burnt toast smell. I wanted to crawl onto her lap. I have always been this way. Some part of me needs this bad enough so that my eyes shut to trouble.


When I left my two little girls with my old mom, she gave them those names. Mary and Donna. I decided on Daphne and Opal, which is how I think of them.

I grew up in one of those row houses that's attached on both sides to other houses, so you can hear your neighbors when their toilet flushes or somebody's crying. When the kid pulls the cat's tail, when someone dies. Like you're living with radio you can't shut off and these people you didn't choose are with you through the walls day and night. We had this big shot cop living next door on the right. We had Lieutenant Casey.

The Caseys had a sticker on the glass of their front door that said N.Y.P.D. and we had less robberies on my block than the next one over. My old mom always said it was nice to be able to leave the windows open on those summer nights when you prayed for some kind of breeze and to know if someone crawled in Officer Casey next door would hear us scream for help through the wall.

Lieutenant Casey. Officer Casey, with his hair almost
pinky-white and his pale eyes and so tall and big, like a big bear, a big blond bear. At first he only held me on his lap and stroked my cheeks.

“You’re not like all the other girls, Katy.” I was still Katy then. “You have a fire inside.”

I felt it growing up, but I didn’t know it showed. So it must have been our secret, Officer Casey’s and mine. When I started over to the Casey’s it felt like forever I’d been waiting, holding, so dry and quiet, like a dead thing. I got sent over for errands. Mrs. Casey lived upstairs in bed. Nobody ever saw Mrs. Casey, but you knew she was there. You could hear her moan from the cancer that was eating her up. Their house smelled like vomit.

Lt. Casey held me on his lap and stroked my hair. Pots banged next door in my mother’s kitchen. The sounds of my mother’s T.V. came through the walls. Days of Our Lives. Password. Mr. Clean.

There was hardly any sound where me and Officer Casey were, everything was in whispers. Like it was made up.

Oh man. I thought when they asked me who did it—if I told—I would go to jail. I never worried about Hell, but I was afraid of jail.

He told me stories sometimes about the bad ones they dragged to the station, about the leaking cold cells with creeping bugs. He told this like stories, in a hushed, whispery voice. He told me there were a lot of crooked cops, cops with problems. He warned me to keep away from the bad kids at school. He held me, put his hands on me, and said he couldn’t stand the thought of me in jail.

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Two little dolls. Two perfect identical white dolls, straight blond hair, pinky-blond all over like their father. The old lady’s face lit up when she
saw them. In them she saw no traces of my Cuban
dad. Or me. When I first came up here I dreamed
about those two every night, but it stopped after
awhile. I call on their birthday and for Christmas,
but I don’t go down. The old lady made me promise.
She says don’t send things, so I don’t. Not even a
card. No letters. I ask her on the phone, how are
they, and she says fine. I wonder what she tells
them. I wonder what they know about me. It’s not
like I’m ashamed, because I already told you, I’m
not. I don’t know why I promised to keep away. But I
agreed, so what the hell. What did I know then.

It’s Friday afternoon. Some of us are hanging
out at the Club. We don’t have to be here for hours,
but we come anyway. Drink coffee, you know. Carol
Lee is trying to negotiate a new contract with Mrs.
Katz. You ever see King Kong Meets Godzilla? Carol
Lee thinks we should have health care. Mrs. Katz
thinks we should be grateful we have a salary. Mrs.
Katz and Carol Lee could be doing this in the
backroom where Mrs. Katz keeps the books, has a
desk filled with papers. But no one spends much
time in there, including Mrs. Katz.

Now I don’t mean this in a bad way, but Carol Lee is
a dyke, excuse my language. With her hair short and slick,
jacket cut man-style, smoking skinny brown cigarettes. Thick
glasses. But when she takes them off to clean the lens, you
can see she has very pretty eyes. She’s not tall but
she seems like she is ‘til you get right up next to
her or you see her next to someone else. She and
Lorna were together for about a hundred years.
What a couple they made. Lorna so tall and big-
featured, her overcooked hair. Carol Lee little but
standing so straight and tough. Then Lorna left for
the West Coast to find herself after taking some
kind of therapy group where she was always
restless afterwards. Now Carol Lee lives with a
broken heart because she says there’s no one else in the world like Lorna and she’s probably right.

The truth is we’re all hoping Lorna decides to come back. When her letters come in the mail, we all bunch together at the bar and Carol Lee reads them out loud with this choked voice, even the intimate parts. Carol Lee isn’t much of one for secrets. We are worried, though. The letters used to come every week. Now they don’t come so much anymore and we don’t understand the changes Lorna says she’s having. We have decided she is not being very specific.

"HEALTH CARE?" Mrs. Katz screams. "What am I? IBM? Bell Telephone? Is this a Fortune 500 company here?"

“You only pay half,” Carol Lee says. You can see she’s starting out gentle. So later on she can look back and say to herself, at least I started out calm and collected.

At this moment some guy at the end of the bar is shaking his fist, trying to get another beer. Mrs. Katz waves her arm at him. Can’t he see she’s busy? Finally Brigitte gets tired of all the waving, jumps off her stool, gets a Bud from the cooler and slides it across the bar. This does not escape the eyes of Mrs. Katz.

“Make sure you get a dollar,” she tells Brigitte.
Brigitte gets a five and makes change.

“Am I a monster?” Mrs. Katz says. “Or am I a reasonable owner? Do I pay the best in the Catskills? Do I try any funny business? Why don’t you go over to the Swizzlestick and torture Harry Pezzo?”

“I wouldn’t step my foot into that hellhole!” Carol Lee cries.

(Carol Lee sees the dancers at the Swizzlestick like souls in hell. Their manager is no better than a pimp. Carol Lee mourns for those
girls, I swear it.)

"You see?" Mrs. Katz screams back. "You won't go in there and me, a reasonable owner, you torture!"

"Some of these girls are not spring chickens anymore," Carol Lee says.

"Speak for yourself!" Brigitte pipes in, but Candy nudges her and she shuts up quick.

"I pay almost as good as some of these lousy hotels," Mrs. Katz says. "And those women are Real Dancers."

"Selma," Carol Lee croons, "Do you have health care?"

"None of your business!"

"What about Shirley and your lovely grandson Arnie?"

Mrs. Katz glares, temporarily at a loss for words.

"Candy," Carol Lee asks, "Don't you have a new little grandson?"

Candy nods. Doesn't say nothing. She knows better.

"Doesn't your daughter live at home with you? Wants to go back to high school?"

Candy nods yes.

"What would you do if the baby got sick?"

Candy shrugs.

"It would be pretty bad, wouldn't it? Since you don't know about the father..."

"Enough!" Mrs. Katz screams. "Am I responsible for how people run their lives?"

Carol Lee sighs. "Still, if little Arnie were hurt, if Shirley got ill—"

"Enough! Enough!" Mrs. Katz gestures at the papers on the bar. "I'll have my accountant look at them. He probably won't approve it."

Carol Lee quickly stacks up the papers and hands them over.

Mrs. Katz shakes her head. "What a nudge! What a
terror! No wonder Lorna ran away to the West."

Dead silence. Everyone's staring at the bar counter. Even Mrs. Katz knows she's gone too far. She rattles the papers and stalks off to her office where she never goes leaving the rest of us under a mourning cloud for our lost Lorna.

It's June. I'm counting the days. Two more days and my girls will be seventeen. Two more days and they will be almost how old I was when they came to me. My two little Gemini twins. My jewels. I wonder what they look like in person. I have pictures that the old mom sent, but it's not the same. I want to see the way their mouths move when they talk, to hear how their voices rise when they get excited, to smell their skin. Oh well.

I'll call in two days. I'll plead again with the old mom. About how they'll be eighteen soon and let them decide. Let them know the truth. She'll be silent on the other end like she always is when I bring this up. How much can be said with no words. I hear her disgust in the quiet and not one goddamn thing I say will ever take that away. I can't go back on my word. I promised. Stupid kid! What did I know?

I don't know. Maybe some part of me believes the old mom. Maybe some part of me doesn't want my perfect jewels infected with darkness.

In the meantime, we have received exciting news. Lorna is coming to visit! We have gotten a postcard. Carol Lee came running into the Club, all out of breath. That woman should know better, what with smoking those little brown cigarettes nonstop, not to run like that. We are not sure of the exact day because the ink has run on the card where it was rained on or something. We think it's soon, according to what we can read. We have read it over and over and think it's sometime next week, according to what we can read. It came from
somewhere in Texas and has a cowboy standing next to a jack rabbit as tall as a man.

I am dancing today but I am not in the mood. One more day and I will make my birthday call. And then there’s Lorna. I have so much to think about, I am just going through the motions and that’s fine. The body knows what to do. It’s been at it long enough, God knows. Tonight it is all ghosts out there.

I am taking off a stocking, nice and slow. I am un-snapping a garter and running a hand down my leg while the music pounds out through the curtain. I am rocking my pelvis and making a list of what I got to do tomorrow. Shopping—eggs, detergent, new bags for the vacuum. Laundry, I’ve put it off too long. I want to get things done. I want to have it all done and be free for when Lorna shows up. I run my open palm down my chest, over my breasts, lightly near my belly button, down near my cunt. I must remember to get quarters before I leave tonight. For the washing machine and the dryer at the laundromat. The change machine is broken.

My fingers are shaking as I dial. Silly. But I am excited and nervous. Seventeen years old. My babies. What kind of party are they having? I didn’t have no party. Not enough friends to make up a decent one. It wasn’t ‘til I came up here that I stopped being so shy. Except for with Officer Casey. I do not want to think of Officer Casey on this occasion. I put him out of my mind.

"Momma?"
"Yes."
"It’s Katy."
"Yes, I know."
"How are they?"
"They’re out shopping for their birthday."
"But how are they?"
"Fine. Just fine."
"How's your heart, Momma?"
"Not too bad. I take my pills. And you?"
"I'm okay."
"That's good."
I am thinking about how to bring up that old topic. About them being eighteen soon. My old mom starts talking to fill up the void.

"So many are getting sick in the neighborhood. Cancer, heart attacks. Poor Commander Casey next door, he had to retire just when he got his own station. I am going to start sending Donna over to run errands for him, to help him."

I freeze. My heart freezes.
My Opal. My shining star. Do not go over. I am frozen inside, like a glacier. My heart feels near stopped. I cannot say it. This proves what I have feared all along. This proves the darkness inside me. My mouth opens and nothing comes out. I am holding the phone like a weapon I am afraid to use. I hang up surrounded in this darkness. He wouldn’t. Not his own daughter.

Lorna arrives on Tuesday. A number of us are sitting at the bar. We’ve been kind of waiting for days. You know, where the conversation falls off and you can hear the clock ticking. The postcard of the man and the giant jack rabbit is taped to the cash register. I am worried about Carol Lee’s blood pressure. If you listen close, she seems to wheeze when she breathes. The first thing is the sound of Lorna’s laugh before she can be seen coming through the opening door.

We have heard stories of what happens to you in California, but none of us have ever really believed it. We all know this is Lorna, but just barely. She is wearing clothes like from Vogue and has no perm. She looks like someone from television, with a tan, like someone who would never drop by to a place like this. Not on purpose.
And she ain’t alone. With her is this beautiful woman like some kind of television personality or something.

She comes over and starts hugging us. First Mrs. Katz, then Brigitte, then Candy. When it’s my turn, she takes my shoulders and looks into my eyes. She is smiling and searching my face. I don’t know what she sees but inside it feels like confusion and something hurts. I don’t have to tell you she don’t smell like burnt toast anymore. But oh that hug is still so warm. It is still Lorna, but for some reason this hurts even more.

Carol Lee is last. They face each other and Carol Lee won’t get off her bar stool. Carol Lee’s face is something else again. It is doing an impression of itself. Carol Lee’s face is tough and brave. Lorna reaches out and strokes her cheek and we are all holding our breath, maybe afraid that Carol Lee’s face will crack.

“Oh, come on,” Lorna urges. She takes Carol Lee and bunches her into her arms and Carol Lee is like a little kid, kind of half-hugging and half-squirming. Lorna’s friend from California is hanging back. That look on her face. I know she thinks we can’t see it. Her name is Christine.

Lorna and Christine stay for maybe two hours but it feels like days. They sit at a table facing the bar and we sit turned around on our stools facing them. Lorna tells us about going to school and getting a real job but I can’t repeat any of it because I don’t think any of us really listened.

When you perform as long as we have, you can sense all the shades of what’s going on. This Christine would not normally give us the time of day. She is sitting there like she is at the side show in a circus. She smiles in the right places, but she is a ghost, at least to us. This day you can smell the cool stale beer smell of a bar in the daytime and it doesn’t smell very good.

Lorna, you can tell she’s happy. She has a pleading in her eyes, she wants us to show we see
it. We would like to, Lorna, but we can't. You have not meant to, but you have made us feel freakish and left behind.

I have been living in darkness for a number of days. I have not danced. I called in sick. At night I lie in bed and feel afraid.

I am afraid for Carol Lee. Her health is not good. I know Lorna will still send her letters but Carol Lee will not read them aloud to us anymore. We can only hope someone like Lorna comes around again for our Carol Lee but we know the chances aren't too good. Still, you never know.

It is evening and I have been sitting at the phone for what feels like a lifetime. I am at the telephone and I am dialing. It rings a long time, time enough for me to hang up and I almost do.

"Hello?"

"This is Katy."

There is a long pause.

"Katy. From next-door," he says. "How are you Katy?"

There is no time. No time for phony words. No time for cheap talk.

"Listen, old man. If you touch either of my girls, I will know. Leave them alone. I'm warning you. Leave them alone."

"I don't know what you're—"

I hang up. I have said all I have in me to say. I know where I fit in in this world. I have put in my two cents for my babies and now it will go on, whatever. I will live with the hope that I struck fear in his heart. I have done all that I can do. All that is in me to do. God knows, I am not perfect. We live in this world of light and darkness and who am I to say don't make no mistakes.

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