

--Hug Me Daddy--
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HUG ME DADDY

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Lee Gresco watched hypnotized as the things of the night faded into dim form in his headlights, existed for a few seconds and disappeared into blackness behind the car. The night was chilly and nearly pitch black. He hadn't seen another car for fifteen miles and even the farmhouses were blacked and lifeless. The moon and the stars were absent from the sky. All that existed in the universe was the trail of yellow dashes and whatever dark and brooding shapes his headlights defined in the curves ahead.

He cranked down his window irritably, hoping the cool night air might keep him awake. A slight drizzle came in but failed to arouse him from his ennui. Gresco had a lot to drink during dinner and that had helped for a while. But now the fuzz of the alcohol was slipping away and being replaced with the pounding of a sick hangover. He always got drunk when women dumped him, it seemed like the right thing to do.

Despite the narrow, winding curves, Gresco felt himself nodding off at the wheel now and again.

He had already pumped himself full of coffee but that hadn't even made a dent in the tiredness and depression. What a stupid, lousy evening it was.

In his mind, Gresco could see the whole thing again; his most recent in a long line of mistresses, crying again, just like they all did before her. "Shit," he said to himself, "she's just another bitch. I'll get another one easy."

But he still felt lousy inside, same as all the other times too. For some reason Gresco always felt like he was the jerk but he didn't know why, it was always the women who screwed him over.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop rerunning the whole scene in his mind over and over again. Sometimes he mumbled things they said to each other out loud, trying to say them better than he had the first time or trying to remember her tone of voice. "If you loved me, you'd marry me." Gresco sneered in a shrill falsetto. "Goddamn," he thought, "they're never satisfied, no matter how much you buy for them, no matter how many fancy trips you take them on, all they ever want is that goddamned ring." He threw his cigarette out the window and immediately lit another one.

Unconsciously his eyes searched in the mirror to find the glowing tip of the discarded butt in the blackness behind the car but it wasn't there. In the rear view mirror, everything was dark. Out the front and the sides were only looming shapes with only the barest demarcation between shapes, horizon and sky.

Ahead in the darkness, almost just out of range of his headlights, something made it's bid for existence in the headlight mist. It looked like a person, Gresco slowed just a little--it was.

First Gresco overshot the hitch-hiker and he got a vague impression that it was a woman. Mostly out of curiosity he slowed then stopped and backed up towards it/her. "Probably had some car trouble or something," he thought. He smiled just a little bit inside himself, "Maybe I'll get something tonight after all," but that thought wasn't as appealing tonight as usual so his mind added "At least I'll have someone to talk to for a while."

The car wavered a bit to and fro along the side of the road as he backed up towards the figure. His eyes and his head hurt badly, especially with his neck strained to look over his shoulder. He stopped and reached across the passenger seat to open the door.

"Hi," he said as she got in, "car trouble?"

"Nope," she answered, looking fixedly at him. She reached over and flipped off the radio like she owned the car, not him.

She was young, probably 18. She wasn't really very pretty, he decided but attractive enough. "I wouldn't mind if she wanted to pay for the ride," he said to himself, wanting but failing to pretend that the earlier part of the night had never happened. "Women sure can be bitches but they got us by the

balls," he thought and smiled faintly at her, trying to look sexy.

Her reaction to his once over was anything but encouraging, she just kept staring at him without invitation in her eyes, only a vague malice. She sat there with her legs primly crossed and with a little half smile on her face. Her hair was stringy with rain, her leather bomber jacket worn and not much protection. Her jeans were filthy, she looked like she should stink to high heaven but she didn't. Gresco offered her a cigarette which she took. She inhaled deeply like she hadn't smoked in a long, long time, exhaled and kept vaguely smiling at Gresco through the smoke. The air coming through his open window seemed suddenly chillier. "Cold night," he said, rolling up the glass.

"Yeah," she replied.

Gresco turned off the inside light and edged the car back onto the highway. He thought about her face for a second or two. She looked familiar--not like she was someone he knew--but like she reminded him of somebody. Once they were back on the highway, the girl turned her gaze out towards the road too. He couldn't see it, but Gresco could still feel that half smile.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Just for a ride," she answered softly, "...wherever you're going."

If I screw her, he thought, I better wear a rubber. "Hey, you aren't a runaway are you?" he asked suddenly, "I don't want to be drivin' a runaway."

"No, I'm not a runaway," she said with a choked off giggle. The chortle was all the more horrible because it was the last kind of sound Gresco could imagine coming out of her. "Actually my parents sort of ran away from me--sort of." She turned her eyes back towards him again and he could feel her gaze picking through the darkness. Between the hangover and the weather, everything had the feel of a bad dream. Gresco was getting sickly warm. He rolled down the window again.

"Sorry to hear it," he said, "you live around here?"

"Nope."

"Well, where you from?"

"No place, I just travel around a lot."

They rode on in silence for a while but Gresco's curiosity was up. It gave him something to think about besides his hangover. He tried a different tack. "Sure is a cold night to be out hitchhiking," he said.

"I got my reasons. I been looking for someone." she answered flatly.

"Whose that?" he asked, regretting it immediately.

"My father." she said.

"No shit. You find him yet?"

"Unh-huh."

"Hey, you ever talk more than one word at a time?"

"Unh-huh, when I need to."

Gresco gave an exasperated sigh, he should have stayed home tonight. He rolled up the window again--It seemed like darkness was seeping in with the cold. He didn't give a damn about her and her father but he wanted something to talk about.

"So how'd it go? He recognize you?"

"Not yet," she said. The headlights of a truck lit up the cabin for a few seconds and Gresco saw that she was still smiling with that horrible combination of malign contentment. Somehow the truck brought relief by reminding him that there were other human beings in the world. "But then," she continued, "I only just met him."

"Well, where'd you find him?" he said, regretting that question too. Somehow he knew what her answer was going to be.

"Right here," she said quietly, looking straight at him. It took a second for that to make its way through his mind's nausea but suddenly, Gresco felt wide awake. "Better get rid of this one fast," he said to himself, "or she's going to scream rape."

Gresco kept his eyes on the road. He didn't dare look at her for fear it would send her off into some world of her own. He didn't have much experience with crazies but he knew that this was just about the last thing he needed tonight.

"Look lady, I don't know what your problem is but the only kid I got is a boy and he's back home. And don't give me no shit about some lady I fucked and left. Maybe I've been with a lot of women in my time but I always made sure they were clean when I left them, I made sure of that." He cocked his head and looked at her out of the corner of his eye, trying to look more confident than he felt about what he was saying.

"Yes, you did, didn't you--daddy" The last word was spoken with so much force it made him jump.

"What the fuck's your problem?" he yelled back, working hard to keep his voice from cracking. "What makes you think I'm your father"

She didn't answer for a few minutes, just kept looking at him. "My name's Miriam," she said at last, "Miriam Esterhall Gresco, at least that's what it should have been."

It took a second for that to sink in, then Gresco's eyes opened wide--now he knew who she looked like. Good ol' Lisa Esterhall from so many years ago. Gresco turned on the cabin light and looked at his rider. It had been almost twenty years since he had seen Lisa so he couldn't be sure--but he thought he could see a resemblance.

Gresco stared at her in silence for what seemed like a long time to him. He tried to remember Lisa. He tried to picture her in his mind but he couldn't. He could remember something here and something there but somehow he couldn't put it all together into one image. He remembered that she was probably the only one of his 'playmates' that he had ever cared anything about. Poor old Lisa, poor old dumb Lisa. She wasn't very bright but she was real sweet he remembered.

"You named me that you know. You named me that even before I was born." she said as she reached across the steering wheel to turn off the cabin light. "Keep your eyes on the road honeypop, you don't want to get yourself killed now, do you?"

Gresco, who had been drifting onto the shoulder, righted the course of the car.

He ran back in his mind, trying to remember if he had left Lisa pregnant. He remembered he had knocked her up but they had that taken care of, privately. She wanted to keep the baby, that's why he dropped her. He already had a son at home by that time and the last thing he needed was to be paying for two kids. Gresco was getting that weird feeling he got sometimes in his nightmares, driving down some endless road, going nowhere but unable to stop. Suddenly he knew he was all right, that he was only having another one of his nightmares. Everything would be all right in a little while when he woke up.

It was that same empty feeling of not being able to escape, of driving on forever and ever. Now he knew where the face came from, It wasn't Lisa Esterhall's face, but the same face that haunted his nightmares, that one nightmare that kept coming back again and again. "Everything will be all right when I wake up," he thought to himself, "There's nothing to be..."

"Just keep your eyes on the fucking road and slow down." she yelled in his ear. She had grabbed the wheel to turn the car back onto the roadway. In a quieter, flatter voice she said, "Maybe I'm going to let you kill yourself someday but I want the pleasure of your company for a little while yet. All in the interest of fair play you understand." She was smiling, he could tell in the darkness.

Gresco slammed on the brakes, skidded into the other lane then back into his own before coming to a complete stop. "Get the fuck out of my car." he yelled, his voice cracking. "Just get the fuck out."

"Keep driving, daddy" she said, dripping with putrid sweetness. She reached over and grabbed his right wrist while the hand still convulsively clutched the wheel. Gresco's arm went cold at the touch. The word 'daddy' hung in air after she said it. Gresco could almost see it there between them, dripping and melting like honey.

Gresco obeyed. "Lisa never had a baby." he stammered after a moment. "I know, I was there when they...ah...they took care of that."

She remained silent.

"The doctors," he said, "they can't keep such a little baby alive. It was only a few months, it couldn't have...and I thought I saw..." he trailed off, not wanting to finish that thought.

"That's right, you saw me when they pulled me out. That really was my little, dead, twisted body. They burned my body on my birthday! Some welcome into the world, hunh?"

"You named me," she repeated, "before I was ever born. I remember you talking to me, you and Lisa used to tell me all the nice things you were going to do for me. Then you had me pulled out and burned in a fucking garbage incinerator."

He stared out the windshield, he couldn't look at the girl anymore. "But Jeff was on the way too, at the time," he said. "its just a nightmare," he told himself, "she's not really here." But he couldn't stop. "I couldn't afford to raise two families at the same time. I couldn't divorce Anne to marry your mother... What kind of future could I have given you?"

"Fuck that, fuck them. Look at the future you did give me. My first memories were watching them burn babies. I didn't know what was going on then, I didn't know one of them was me because I didn't feel anything..."

"You were already dead?" Gresco said timidly.

"Dead?, do I look dead? Dead is when you're gone. I'm still here and I'm going to stay until I finish with you."

Gresco still kept trying to wake himself up but it wouldn't work. No matter how hard he shook his head, he still kept waking back to the same thing.

"You weren't even a baby yet...How could we have known...?"

Miriam howled. She howled so long, so loud and so shrill that Gresco thought the windows would shatter or he would die if she didn't stop. He threw his hands to his ears and tried to yell over her voice. Tears dribbled down his cheeks and he closed his eyes to hold them back and try to block out this monster.

Miriam stopped howling as suddenly as she started. She grabbed the wheel again and Gresco became aware of the air horn of a truck. Miriam lurched the car back into its own lane then she gave Gresco a backhand slap across the face. It felt to him like his face was melting and bubbling and boiling at the touch of her slap. It hurt so much his scream of pain came out as a gurgle. "Keep your fucking eyes on the road." she said simply, calmly, with loathing.

"You should have known, you should have known" she said with an edge of madness in her voice. "You should have known, you even named me before you killed me." she screamed.

"After I was 'born'," she put a snide emphasis on the word, "I remember lying on the floor screaming and screaming and screaming." Her face was turned towards him, his was staring wildly out the windshield at the blackness. "But nobody would pick me up. They didn't even know I was there, they couldn't even hear me scream.

"I grew up at that apartment building. I tried to imitate the sounds everybody around me made and I learned how to talk but it never did any good, nobody could ever hear me. there was nobody else around like me, not even any other dead babies.

"Sometimes it was fun playing tricks on those baby killers, making the baby corpses move when they thought the babies were dead. I made one of those bastards throw a corpse all the way across the room to try and kill it but it wouldn't stop moving because I kept moving it.

"But that didn't matter because I didn't hate them. They had no reason to love me so I didn't expect it. It was you and my 'dear mommy' that I hated. It was you who really killed me, who denied me everything that should have been mine.

"I left there and started wandering around, looking for some way to find out where you and my mother lived. I didn't know until much later that my parents were not even married, that I was the bastard daughter of a slut and a whorer."

"Don't talk about your mother like that. It wasn't like that at all." Gresco said, trying to sound tough and in control of the situation but it came out in a squeak.

"I don't give a shit what you thought it was like. You killed me and I hate you. My hatred is the only thing you haven't taken away from me."

"God, you don't know how sorry I am. God if I had...only known..." Gresco said gushing out the first line, nearly choking on the second. "If I had know what a lovely young woman you've turned out to be I wouldn't ..."

"What the hell does that have to do with anything? Maybe this is what I might have been but now I'm nothing but a bunch of burnt baby parts. If I had been ugly and deformed, you would still have be my father, you still should have loved me, you still should have let me fucking live." She was crying herself now, uncontrollably. She said nothing for a few moments.

"Finally," she said, "I found out about you and my mother. I don't know how but someone or something told me. By God, my cause must be just or no one would have told me. I tracked Lisa down and I stalked her. I stalked her for a year and I haunted her and I tormented her. I made her tell me your name. She wouldn't tell me at first, the stupid idiot, nineteen years after, she said she still loved you. But I promised to go away if she would tell me your name and she finally did... but I never went away. I haunted that bitch until she finally killed herself. Out like a real trooper she went. She took sleeping pills because she was afraid of pain.

"She saw me everywhere, in her mirror, in her dreams. Every time she turned around, I was standing behind her, watching her. I didn't say anything, it was her own fucking guilt which killed her--just like it will be your guilt that kills you." Miriam wasn't crying anymore, she was smiling her awful smile again.

"And while she was still alive, dangling from the end of that nice little rope of suicide pills, I set her nice little house on fire so she could know what its like to be all burnt up. Now we're going to find out how well you're put together by unravelling you little bit by little bit. Now that I've found you daddy, I'm never going to let you go, my dear loving father. C'mon daddy, hug me, hug your little girl."

Gresco saw his chance in the headlight mists. As she reached over to throw her arms around his neck, he swerved the car into a long, low stone fence. He felt her ice cold arms around his throat and he smelled burning flesh but he didn't know if it was hers or his own. Then he heard her laugh hideously and whisper into his ear "It's not going to be that easy, dear."

He awoke in the hospital and looked up from the bed into the shallow eyes of a county deputy. "Man," said the deputy, "you're lucky to be alive, you should have seen the mess you made outta your car. Doctor says your gonna be just fine though. Some woman called in your accident, prob'ly saved your life but we don't know who she is."

Behind the officer, Gresco saw Miriam gaily wave her fingers in greeting. "Get her out of here" yelled Gresco, pointing wildly at the girl despite the excruciating pain in his chest.

"Get who out of here?" asked the perplexed deputy looking where Gresco pointed.