

The Thread · *Monica Raymond*

LUCIEN MET an old high school friend in a gay bar. The friend is a hot shit television producer now, Lucien is an out-of-work academic, and Lucien's lover, who has the frail face of a calculating cherub, is an actor. "Twenty thousand dollars for an hour script," Lucien says. "Seriously, Monny, I'd like to work in television." Fourteen years ago, when Lucien was too squeamish to even be straight, and ran to the priest to confess every self-abuse, the man who is now the television producer wanted him. "He says I put him through hell," Lucien says with relish. "I didn't like him. He was dumb. Shrewd, but dumb. He wants me. He said I was one of the most influential people in his life. He said . . . I let him kiss me. He's obviously a much more experienced fellow than I am." "Are you attracted to him?" I ask. "Well, there are exciting kisses and not so exciting kisses. This was an exciting kiss."

Lucien tells me this over breakfast, the blank eggs staring up at us, their splashy yolks. In the park, even nature seems worldly, the wild cherry knobbly and shameless. The piles of leaves like dried-up roses in pot-pourri, and darting out of them, single, yellow ginkgoes, the parasols. Sixteen years ago we walked in threes to the park to draw them, every day a different species, and later—was it among the pin oak red oak elm or maple—we laughed uncontrollably at the old ladies complaining about their feet, their livers. Serious we were supposed to be and demure, little girls drawing the leaves over and over with our hard pencils and erasing until the paper wore thin. With Wendy and now Wendy uses words like dialectical objective scientific petit bourgeois, I am petit bourgeois, although she doesn't say so to me. I am not nostalgic. When I was in high school I was more elegiac than I am now, I wrote stories about young girls who had to put away childish things, I believed puberty was death. Now I believe things open and open, sometimes there is a feeling like destiny if you can get the edge of the thread. Only what am I to make of time? They are all there—the cycles and the spreading time like water, the heaping crush of revolution and the closed corridor of time, the underground safe I grew up with. It is November, I am twenty-seven, and I need to know—is this early or late?

I am living in a kind of stopped time this week because, for reasons too complicated to explain, I agreed not to see or speak to a woman I love for two weeks. Or perhaps this is putting it badly, maybe “love” confuses the issue. When I think of telling you how I feel about this woman, I think of this—there is a deep crevice in her skull, like the line where the lobes come together on a peach or apricot, and one of the lobes swells slightly above it. The skull itself is covered with crinkly brown hair. It is not that I feel particularly dear about this crevice, actually I don’t, it makes me uneasy, like the sight or idea of any head wound. Using it as evidence that she is something other than ordinarily human, I can frighten myself with it. The last time I saw her, we were sitting in the kitchen of the house she was moving to. I was fasting and she was frightened, the dense pasty yellow of the walls seemed to zap into me like a tab in a slot. I stroked her head then, I ran my fingers along the cleft and the bulging hemisphere to one side of it, tenderly, feeling the strangeness, the strangeness of my tenderness.

The television producer is taking accordion lessons from Lucien’s roommate, a rawboned woman singer. “He wanted me to sit there, *watch* him take the lessons. I said ‘I’m not going to do that, it sounds boring.’ He said ‘But you’re the reason I’m taking them!’ I said ‘Now you know learning an instrument is very difficult, it takes a lot of concentration, you wouldn’t want distraction.’ ‘But I want you to, I want you to. You know I’d do *anything* you want, anything you want. . . .’” Lucien mimics him fiercely. “He had quite a little tantrum there.” “Did you say anything?” “I didn’t. But suppose the next time I were to say ‘I’d like a friend to have a part in the next television pilot?’ I think it could be arranged. Oh, I know, Monny,” he says, admonishing himself as if he were me. “I should be careful, I get too caught up in these things. He wants to play with me awhile, have me as a toy. Why shouldn’t I play back a little, if I want to?”

Sometimes I lose the thread, then I don’t know what comes next. My friend Louise thinks she is the Virgin Mary, I saw her face today among the leaves, her high white forehead as if it were wrapped in gauze. In the bookstore a woman talked about looking for fossils, chipping and chipping away at rock, she said, without thinking of anything except finding

something wonderful. A possible question—how many times can you pick up the thread and put it down again? Another question—are the times when the thread's lost part of the thread? A possible example—this pair of men's black leather shoes on a waist-high wall in the middle of the empty park, looking as if someone had just stepped out of them.

I had a theory about time, that it pours like honey, so the points that are far apart on the original strand lap over and touch one another. It turned out I couldn't say any more about the theory than this. I was talking to the woman I care for, the one I had promised not to call, the woman with the cleft in her skull. We were eating hamburgers and drinking water because we did not have enough money to pay for drinks, and she said "What's wonderful is that human beings have conversations like this." She didn't understand the metaphor of the honey, so I did a demonstration with the ketchup in one of those aluminum ashtrays stained with the specks of old butts.

Last night I wanted to call this woman terribly, terribly, and I had lost her number. I had scribbled it on an envelope in a panic. She had just moved. So I had to live up to the agreement after all. This is a funny story, in a way.

Lucien kisses me goodbye, he puts his tongue in my mouth, a tongue like footed pajamas or rice pudding. "We'll have to get married someday. When I'm thirty-three." "How old will I be?" "Thirty-one." "I have this fantasy," I say, "that when I'm thirty-three I'll be living on this women's commune and go off and seek the father of my child." "Then you'll have to do it twice," he says. "You'll have to be the mother of mine." There were more children in this story once, in the earlier drafts. There was Louise's little boy dreamily flinging his toast on the floor, and the son of the bookstore lady, picking up fossils along the surface of the ground.

When they said the trees were turning, I imagined the trunks rotating slowly as if an invisible motor moved a turntable under them, like trees on a music box, holding their branches out to the sun. It was forbidden to take the leaves from off of the trees, you had to find one from among

those that had already fallen on the ground. Wendy and I laughing at the women so black and white with skulls the grey pink of monkey lips under their furls of white hair, the horned lumps of their shoes, the tubular glint of the wheelchairs, and when we turned around, the teacher, usually so severe, was laughing too. We had to draw the ginkgo in hard pencil so it would not blur, over and over, the veins, the thin lines.

It is November, I am down by the water. Yellow flowers like thistles grow out of the concrete of the bank. On a metal box by the shore, a pair of men's khaki pants and a cotton T-shirt, balled up, as if he had just stepped out of them. The woman I love has another lover. Last night I was desperately unhappy. If you see me like that again, remind me that it changes. The masts of the boats make strings in the water. The gulls make a ripple like a forceps as they swim.