

# Lucy, In Her Splendor

By Charles Coleman Finlay

\* \* \* \*

Charles coleman Finlay lives in Columbus, Ohio, and he is the administrator for the Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror.

His first story, “Footnotes”, a series of footnotes to an article about a future disaster, appeared in the August 2001 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, where he has since become a regular contributor.

In 2003, he was a finalist for the Nebula, Hugo, Sidewise and John W. Campbell Awards. His fiction has appeared in *Year’s Best Science Fiction Volume 20* (a.k.a. *The Mammoth Book of Best New SF #16*) edited by Gardner Dozois, and *Year’s Best Fantasy #4*, edited by David Hartwell.

“‘Lucy, In Her Splendor’ was inspired by my vacations on Kelleys Island in Lake Erie,” Finlay reveals. “When I wrote it, I didn’t realize that one of my friends, who owns a bed-and-breakfast there, was nicknamed ‘Lucy’. Fortunately, she enjoyed the story and took the ribbing she got in good spirit.”

\* \* \* \*

When they were done, they sat in the plastic lawn chairs by the lake and listened in the dark to waves lapping the sharp white boulders mounded along the shore.

The first moth came fluttering from the direction of the pumphouse. It slapped into Lucy’s cheek almost accidentally and startled them both. She raised her hand against it and the moth settled on one white-tipped nail. As she flicked her fingertip, it lifted into the air and hurtled back at her face.

A second and a third moth followed seconds later, followed in time by others until a tiny halo of insects swirled around her short platinum-blond hair.

“Could be worse,” Martin said, trying to wave them off. “Could be mosquitoes.”

She smiled at him, shifted her chair closer, and leaned against his shoulder.

“God, Lucy, you’re hot,” he said.

She laughed, a little sadly, making a warm vibration that resonated in his chest. “I’m glad you still think so.”

“No,” he said. “Are you sure you haven’t turned into a bug lamp? I swear you’re hot enough to zap those bugs to ashes.”

“You—”

She lifted her hand to slap him, but he caught it and folded her fingers within his own. Her skin was dry, caked with grit. He gave it a little squeeze and looked around, but rows of trees blocked the view of their neighbors. More bugs flew at Lucy’s head.

Her voice trembled. “I’m really sick, aren’t I?”

“It’s just a fever. That’s all it is.” He placed her hand in his lap, and tried to wave the bugs away. One of the moth’s wings buzzed harshly while the stones tapped against each other in the susurra-tion of the waves. “Let’s go inside.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” she whispered.

Without saying anything to reassure her, he helped her to her feet, propping her up as they strolled back to the house. When they passed the hand-carved sign that read crow’s nest bed & breakfast, little limestone island, he flipped the board.

### **SORRY, NO VACANCY.**

Lucy’s fever burned all night. Martin sat on the edge of the bed, feeding her tablets of aspirin and ice chips.

A single moth had followed them inside the house, tickling Lucy out of her rest until Martin turned on the lamp and the tiny creature flew to rest, panting, on the white shade. He smashed it, leaving a smear of grey dust and wings.

Walking over to the gable window, he gazed out of their attic apartment at the lake. All their life’s savings were encompassed by these few acres of land, bounded on one end by the stone jetty covered with zebra-mussel shells and on the other by the apple tree with the bench swing. When insects began collecting at the screen, he stepped away.

Lucy shuddered in her sleep, sucking air through her mouth. Martin bent over and slipped his tongue - briefly - between her teeth. He expected the sour-sweet taste of sickness, but it wasn’t there.

That only made it worse.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning, Martin pattered in the kitchen even though they had no guests, making himself a cappuccino and sitting at the dining-room table beside the double-hung windows facing the lake. An ore carrier moved sluggishly away from the island, heading past Put-in Bay for the Ohio shore.

A tall, silver-haired man in gold pants and shirt - their neighbor, Bill - walked along the shore with a little girl about four or five years old. Martin's heart began to skip. He set his cup down so fast that it splashed, and ran through the screened-in porch, the door clapping shut behind him.

Sunrise glinted off the water. Martin shielded his eyes with his hand as he walked barefoot over the dew-damp grass. "Hey, neighbor!"

"Good morning, Marty," Bill replied. He gestured at the little girl. "This here's our granddaughter, Kelsey. Say hi, darling."

The little girl looked up at Martin. Panic flashed across her eyes, and she spun away from him to look at the lake.

"Hi, Kelsey," Martin said. He noticed the cappuccino running down his arm, and absent-mindedly lifted his wrist to his mouth to lick it off.

Bill shrugged. "Kids, huh. Folks don't teach 'em any manners these days." He pointed to the pumphouse, a squat slab of concrete that sat on the edge of the lake. "When did you block that up?"

"Oh." The farmhouse was over a hundred years old. Before the island built its water supply, the farmers pumped it in directly from the lake. "A couple days ago."

"I thought you were going to turn it into a sauna."

"That's still the plan. But one of our guests was poking around in it after he came back from the winery. Fell and cut his head. Pretty big gash. He didn't need stitches, but we figured—"

"Liability?"

"Yeah."

"That's a shame, people not being responsible." Bill looked up to the porch. "Say, where are your guests? Isn't it about breakfast time?"

"We had to cancel all our reservations," Martin said. He watched Kelsey closely. She poked around the rocks, searching for a way into the pumphouse. "Lucy's been sick."

“Gosh, I’m sorry to hear that. What’s wrong?”

“She came down with this fever—”

“Hey, there she is.”

Martin turned. Lucy stood outlined in the attic window. The glass caught the sun, casting it in such a way that she was surrounded by a corona of jagged, golden light.

Bill waved to the attic window and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Get well soon, Lucy!”

She returned the greeting.

“You have an awful pretty wife there,” Bill said.

Martin frowned. “Some days she’s more awful than—”

Kelsey pounded on the side of the pumphouse with a rock. Martin hurried toward her, hand outstretched, stepping carefully in his bare feet across the stones. “Hey, Kelsey, come here. I want to show you something neat.”

The little girl looked to her grandfather, who nodded permission.

“Shhh.” Martin pressed his forefinger to his lips. With exaggerated tiptoeing, he led her onto their other neighbor’s property. It was a small cabin, seldom used. Its lake pump had been more modern, an eight-foot cube of concrete that jutted out from the shore like a single tooth in a child’s mouth. Algae-slick boulders, driftwood branches, and other debris heaped around it.

The two inched slowly out on the slab until they reached the edge and saw the snakes - a dozen or more of them, ranging in length from one to three feet. Their scales glistened black as they sunned themselves on the rocks.

Kelsey gasped and clung to Martin’s leg, pressing her face against his thigh and peeking out. Martin wrapped his hand around the top of her head and pointed out to the water, where a new snake sinuated across the rippled surface toward the shore. It lifted its nose, turning it like a submarine periscope.

Bill crept up behind them and stomped his foot on the concrete, chuckling as they jumped. The snakes immediately disappeared among the rocks and driftbrush. The snake in the water dived beneath the surface.

Kelsey lifted her head. “Grampa!”

Martin straightened, letting her go. “They’re harmless,” he said. “Lake Erie water snakes. Endangered.”

Bill wrapped his arms around his granddaughter. “Just ‘cause they’re endangered don’t mean they’re not dangerous. Tigers are endangered too, but they’re still dangerous.”

Martin smiled and stepped off the slab. “You come back any time you want to see my snakes now, Kelsey.”

They said goodbye to one another. Martin watched until they were off the property, then went inside and watched out the window to be sure they didn’t come back.

\* \* \* \*

The setting sun sheened off the windshield, causing Martin to slow the car as he passed the black-clad teenagers strolling down the road, trading cigarettes. A pink-haired boy sneered at Martin and Lucy, shaping his hand into a claw and gouging at them. The other kids laughed.

“Are you sure you feel well enough to do this?” Martin asked Lucy.

She ran her fingertips over her face to smooth the skin. “It’s been long enough. We have to get back to normal some time. And I do feel better.”

“Good.” Martin pulled into the lot of the Limestone Island Winery, tires crunching on the gravel. He jumped out and opened the door for her.

They walked up the steps. The winery sat on the waterfront, within walking distance of the docks. The terrace faced the lake so that was where the tourists gathered. A Jimmy Buffet song started over the speakers, an impromptu singalong shaking the walls as Lucy and Martin went into the pub.

Martin traded nods with a few locals watching the TVs and waved to the fortyish woman behind the bar. She wore a tight T-shirt, logoed with a bottle of Two Worms Tequila, a picture of a lemon, and the slogan suck this.

She waved back as Lucy and Martin took their usual booth in the corner. Then she yelled something into the kitchen, threw the towel over her shoulder, and came to join them.

“God, Lucy,” she said, sliding in across the booth. “You’re *radiant*. You look wonderful. You sure you’ve been sick?”

\* \* \* \*

The enthusiastic chorus of “Wasting away again” came through the wall from the terrace outside.

“Hi, Kate,” Martin said above the singing.

“I don’t look nearly as wonderful as you,” Lucy answered, smiling. “Is that a new perm?”

Kate struck a pose, vamping the hairdo for them. “What do you think, Marty?”

“Looks terrific.”

Kate’s daughter, Maya, a high-school senior, stepped to the kitchen door, looked around, and then carried over a bottle of red wine and three glasses. “Thanks, honey,” Kate said. “Now don’t serve anyone else. Make Mike do it.”

“He hates coming out of the kitchen, Mom.”

Kate wagged her finger. “I’m not kidding.” As Maya stepped away, Kate snapped the towel at her butt. She twisted around, frowning. Martin winked at her.

“Now don’t go making eyes at my daughter, Mr Marty Van Wyk,” Kate said, threatening him with the towel.

“Here, give me the bottle,” he said. “I’ll open it.”

“What happened to Christie and Boyko?” Lucy asked, looking around. All summer long, Christie had waited tables while Boyko worked the kitchen.

Kate curled her lip dramatically. “The Vulgarians?”

“Bulgarians,” Martin corrected.

“You ever notice the way they pawed each other all the time?” Kate asked.

Lucy leaned her head on Martin’s shoulder. “They’re in love with each other. It’s very sweet.”

“It was out of control.”

The cork popped out of the bottle. Martin poured the dark red liquid into their three glasses. He slid the first one over to Kate. “Why are you talking about them in the past tense?”

“Didn’t you hear? Hristina” - Kate pronounced it with the accent - “and Boyko disappeared two weeks ago. Not a word -we were worried! But then someone saw them over at Sandusky Pointe, running the roller coasters at the park. They said the pay was better over there, and they had some other job at night. They’re trying to make as much as they can before their green cards expire and they have to go home.”

Lucy sipped her wine.

“Everybody disappeared at once,” Kate said. “First it was those two, then you, then Pitr. We all suspected—” She dropped her voice and lifted her eyebrows. “—Foul play.”

Martin swallowed his wine the wrong way and coughed. Pitr was Czech, from some small town with a castle south of Brno; he came over through the same agency that hired the other foreign workers. “Pitr?” he rasped. “He go over to the mainland too?”

“Probably.” Kate leaned forward, elbows on the table, eyes glittering. “Say, did he ever come out to your place to fill that hole of yours?”

Lucy pressed her leg against Martin’s. “He wasn’t interested in doing any yardwork.”

“Who’s talking about yardwork?” Kate laughed. “Pitr’s not interested in *any* work, but he’s still good for business. God, he’s gorgeous! Every woman who came in here wanted him.”

Lucy put a hand against her throat. “He has such a lovely, full mouth,” she said, just above a whisper.

“Uh-huh,” added Kate, who overheard. “And what was his mouth full of? I bet Marty knows.” She glanced down at his crotch and winked at him.

“If I did,” Martin said, “I certainly wouldn’t tell you.”

“Oh, pooh! You two are no fun tonight.”

Martin dipped his finger in his wine and pressed it against Lucy’s forehead. The droplets sizzled. “We’re just tired,” he said. “And Lucy’s not quite as well as we thought.”

\* \* \* \*

They left the winery, sitting at the island’s only traffic light just outside the

parking lot. A tiny beetle of some sort, attracted to Lucy, buzzed around the inside of the dark car.

“Oh, that was so awful,” she said, trying to chase it away.

Martin reached up and flicked the overhead light on. The beetle flew to it, rested a second, then buzzed back at Lucy. “We’ve got a little money left. Enough to get away somewhere.”

“No, we can’t.”

“Let’s go over to the mainland, then. See if we can find a doctor—”

“No! I’ll get better.”

Martin could see the light getting ready to change, but he waited while a couple of trucks full of quarry workers sped through the intersection and parked across the street in front of the Ice Cellar, a rougher bar where locals hung out.

“I suppose it has to get better,” he said, turning on to the road that led to the other side of the island and their house.

Lucy swatted at the beetle. “It can’t get worse.”

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Lucy was too weak from the fever to rise from bed. Martin sat in the easy chair by the bed and popped the tape into the VCR. He turned the sound off so he wouldn’t disturb her, and hit the play button.

Despite what Kate thought, Martin only liked to watch. He had been hiding in the closet under the stairs the day that Lucy invited Pitr over to do the yardwork.

The peephole made the picture hazy around the edges. Lucy stepped into the room - the “special” guest bedroom, next to the closet stairs - shook off her robe, and turned around right in front of the camera. Performing for it. Underneath she wore only a black corset, black stockings, high heels. She had rings on her thumbs and fingers, bracelets on her arms.

She looked as gorgeous as Martin had ever seen her, ten years younger than her actual age, tunelessly beautiful.

The second figure stepped into view from the left. Pitr. Prettier than Kate’s description. Scrumptious. “To die for,” Lucy had said. And Martin had agreed. Dark skin, all muscle, pale blond hair, and lips so full they looked as though they would burst like bubbles if you touched them.



Lucy touched Pitr's lips. First with her fingernails. Then with her mouth, as her hands began to undress him. Still performing.

Martin hit pause on the tape. When he closed his eyes, he could still hear their sounds come through the walls. He could still smell the candles that Lucy had burned.

Blankets rustled, a foot bumped against the wall. Lucy tossed, mumbling in her delirium. He stroked her leg once.

Scooting forward to the edge of his seat, he hit the forward button. On the tape, Lucy straddled Pitr, her favorite position, but he grabbed her arms and flipped her over, forcing himself on top of her, roaring as he bulled away between her legs. Neither she nor Martin minded the roughness. Martin had parted his bathrobe and taken his cock in hand by then, watching everything on the little camcorder screen - it was an old camera, one they had used for years.

Lucy, still performing, bit into Pitr's dark, hairless chest.

Martin liked to see her hurt the other men. But this time something went beyond the normal rough play. Grabbing her arms and pinning them above her head, Pitr slammed into her so hard that she clamped her teeth down, twisting her head as if possessed, until the skin tore. Martin, so intent on his own desire, realized it only when he saw the blood trickling from her mouth.

He had sat there, then, in the closet, still holding himself loosely, frozen with the thought of viruses; they'd been exposed before and escaped okay—

Pitr pounded away until he groaned and pulled away. Lucy rolled over on her side, spitting out the blood, scrubbing her mouth with the sheets. Pitr stepped back from the bed, out of view of the camera, and spoke to her in some language that didn't sound like Czech *to* Martin, but something far older, harsher. He slammed the closet door.

Martin snatched up the remote and hit pause.

A full-length mirror hung on the closet door. When Pitr stepped in front of it, there was no sign of his bare flesh, only a vague, indefinite mist.

Rewind, play, pause. Again. Martin watched it over and over, frame by frame, but there was never anything there but the mist. Finally he clicked forward.

Pitr stepped away from the mirror. Lucy leaned back, bare-breasted chest heaving like that of a B-movie diva. Pitr grew to the height of the room, cackling at her, wiping blood from *the* wound on his chest with clawed fingers and anointing

her like a priest at a baptism. She screamed.

Blankets rustled. “What are you doing?” Lucy asked in a weak, sleepy voice.

“Nothing,” Martin said. He hit the eject button. Yanking the tape out of the cassette, he piled it at his feet until the reels were empty. Then he carried it downstairs and burned it all in the fireplace.

\* \* \* \*

Martin stood at the kitchen counter, making soup for Lucy, when he saw the rat outside on the rocks. It crawled all around the pumphouse, trying to scale the sides. Martin went out to the screened-in porch to watch it.

Finally the rat fell exhausted, lethargic.

Martin went out and picked up a large flat rock from the herb garden beside the foundation. He crept slowly out to the pump-house, expecting the rat to bolt away at any minute. But it crouched there, on the concrete base, facing the blank wall. Martin slammed down the rock.

There was a wet crunch as it connected with the concrete pad; blood squirted out one side.

A ferocious tapping, faint but unmistakable, came from inside the pumphouse. Martin cupped his hands to the stone.

“Shut up, Pitr!” he shouted.

Then he went back inside.

\* \* \* \*

It was late afternoon before Martin gathered the courage to find a pair of gloves and a shovel. He went back to the pumphouse and tossed the bloody stone among the other boulders piled up where the waves licked the shore. Then he buried the rat. He covered the bloodstain on the concrete with dirt, and scuffed it in as well as he could with his deck shoes.

When he was done, he cupped his hands to the stone. “How do I make her well again, Pitr?” He leaned his ear to the concrete to hear the answer.

“Let me to come out and I will tell you,” the voice croaked, so faint that Martin could barely make it out. “She is burning, with the fire. Only I can help her.”

“Fuck you, Pitr.”

“I am come out and you can do that do.” Laughter. Or choking. Martin rather hoped it was choking. “You want young again, Martin?” the voice cracked through the stone. “I can give you the young again.”

“Yeah, you and Viagra. Go to hell, Pitr.”

Something hard pounded on the inside wall. “You cannot keep me here. You cannot run far enough. When I—”

Martin lifted his ear from the concrete and heard nothing except the sound of the waves and the cries of a few gulls.

The sky was the color of faded jeans. Jet contrails seamed the blue, taking other people to some point far away. Martin walked wearily back to the house.

\* \* \* \*

Lucy sat up in bed. The blankets were shoved against the foot-board, but she was wrapped in a kimono. The glow inside her lit it up like a Japanese lantern.

“You upset him,” she said, her voice cold.

Martin grabbed his wallet from the dresser, and started changing his clothes. “You know, he was already pissed. Something about being hit on the head while you were su—”

“No, I mean it.” Her cold voice shattered with panic like ice in the sun. “He’s going to hurt me, Martin. You promised you wouldn’t let him hurt me.”

“He’s not going to hurt you.” He pulled on clean pants.

“Where are you going?”

“Into town for a drink.”

She grabbed the lamp on the bedside table and shoved it onto the floor. The base cracked. “Are you going to go see Kate? Are you going to go *fuck* Kate? Is that it, Martin?”

“I don’t even like Kate,” he said softly. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, then pushed her gently onto the bed. “If it makes you any happier, I’ll go to the Ice Cellar. Won’t even see her.”

“I’m sorry, Martin. I didn’t mean that. It’s just—”

“I know.” Rising, he took their bank-deposit bag from its hiding place and emptied the cash into his pocket. Then he took the rest of their bills and did the same.

She clutched at his sleeve. “You’re running away! Omigod, Martin. You’re going to catch the ferry and leave me. You can’t do that.”

“I just need time to think,” he said.

He pried her fingers loose and left the house before he lost his nerve.

\* \* \* \*

It was after midnight before Martin returned, driving down the long dirt driveway through the woods to their house. He was drunk. Two other trucks followed his.

Lucy waited for him on the porch, in the papa-san chair, sitting directly under the one bright light.

The trucks pulled up and parked beside him. Martin lifted the case of beer off the front seat and carried it over to the picnic table. “I’m going to go get some ice to keep this cold, guys,” he shouted over his shoulder, staggering to the porch.

Doors slammed in the dark. “Ain’t gonna last that long,” a harsh voice said. A can popped open. The others laughed.

Lucy rose and pressed herself against the screen. Insects pinged against it, trying to reach her. Bats screeched through the air, feasting.

“Is that really you, Martin? Who are those men?”

“Just some guys who work, from the quarry,” he said, his tongue thick in his mouth. “I ran into them down at the Ice Cellar. They’re good guys. We had a few, a few beers.”

“What are they doing, Martin?”

“Shhh.” His forefinger smashed his lips. “They’re doing us a l’il favor.”

Lucy’s nostrils flared. Her mouth flattened out in a ruby “O” against the screen as she strained to see what they were doing. She took a step toward the door and sank to her knees, too weak to go any further.

A stocky, bearded man walked stiffly over to the porch. “Howdy, Missus Van Wyk,” he said, sounding a little more sober than Martin. “Your husband told us

'bout the problem with the water stagnating in the pumphouse, making you sick and alla that. Well, this ought to take care of it.”

“Can’t tell you how much I ‘predate this,” Martin said.

The man grinned and patted a wad of bills in his shirt pocket. “You already did. Just remember, it wasn’t us who did it.”

As he turned and walked away, Lucy whispered, “What are—”

“It’s self the fence,” Martin slurred.

The bats veered suddenly from their random feeding and began to swoop and shriek at the quarry men. Martin stepped over, blocked Lucy’s view. The bats flew with less purpose. The men finished their work and ran back towards their trucks a hundred and fifty feet away. One of them grabbed the beer.

Lucy scraped at the screen, making it sing, her face a mixture of anguish and hope. “He said we couldn’t kill him. He said he could turn into—”

One man shouted something as she spoke, then a second, then the explosion, a sharp blast that was mostly dark, not at all like the movies, followed by the pebbled drum of debris pattering on the lake.

Someone whistled, a note of appreciation.

“That ought about do it,” someone said, and the others laughed. They climbed back into their trucks and drove off into the night with their headlights off.

Martin and Lucy leaned against each other, not touching, the screen between them.

\* \* \* \*

Nursing a hangover, having hardly slept at all, Martin walked up and down the shore at the first hint of dawn, searching for bones or other pieces of Pitr. He thought the gulls might come for them, the way they sometimes came for dead fish. But the gulls stayed way offshore and he found nothing.

Bill came over at sunrise. The island’s sheriff and his only deputy arrived shortly after. Martin, prepared to confess every-thing, instead heard himself repeating the story about some guest injuring himself, with Bill corroborating. Telling them how they bricked-in the pumphouse to be safe. Speculating that maybe there was some kind of gas build-up or something.

The sheriff and his deputy seemed pretty skeptical about that last part. They

climbed all over the rocks, examining the pieces. The deputy waded down into the water's edge. The flat rock from the garden stood out among all the water-smoothed boulders. The deputy grabbed it, flipped it over. The rat's blood made a dark stain on the bottom.

Martin's heart stuck in his throat.

"Say, is Lucy feeling any better yet?" Bill asked.

"Her fever broke last night, after almost a week," Martin answered, his voice squeaking.

The deputy let go of the rock. It splashed into the water. "What's that? Mrs Van Wyk's been sick?"

Martin explained how sick she'd been, what a strain it had been on him, with no guests, not able to get out of the house. The sheriff and the deputy both liked Mrs Van Wyk, appreciated the volunteer work she did for the island's Chamber of Commerce.

The sheriff's radio squawked. Some tourist had woken up on his yacht this morning missing his wallet and wanted to report it stolen. The two men left their regards for Lucy and headed back into town.

The deputy's eyes stared at Martin from the rear-view mirror as the car pulled away.

\* \* \* \*

Lucy stood by the window, wearing a long dress, a sweater on top of that, with a blanket around her shoulders. A slight breeze ruffled the lace curtains, slowly twisting them. Martin pressed his hand to her forehead. Her temperature felt normal; the glow had dissipated.

"I destroyed the camera," he told her. "And all the other tapes. I patched up the hole beneath the stairs."

"I'll never be warm again, Martin."

"I'll keep you warm." He wrapped his arms around her.

She turned her back against his touch. "I'll never be beautiful again," she whispered.

"You're lovely." He fastened his lips on the rim of her ear. "You're perfect."

She jerked her head away from his mouth. Outside, a remnant of oily mist layered the surface of the lake, tiny wisps that coalesced, refusing to burn away in the morning sun.