

**LILYANNA**  
by Lisa Goldstein

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*“Asimov’s bought my first story, ‘Ever After’ (December 1984). I’d already published two novels by then, and I was beginning to think I was going to be one of those authors who could only write novels. Since then, of course, I’ve given you almost all of my short stories. Best wishes on your thirtieth birthday.”—Lisa Goldstein*

**Lisa Goldstein has published eleven novels, the most recent being *The Alchemist’s Door* from Tor Books. She has spent the last four years as Isabel Glass, and has written two books under this name; the latest is *The Divided Crown*. Her novel *The Red Magician* won the American Book Award for Best Paperback. Her novels and short stories have been finalists for the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards. She has worked as a proofreader, library aide, bookseller, and reviewer, and she lives in Oakland, California, with her husband and their cute dog Spark. Her website, which includes pictures of Spark, is [www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein](http://www.brazenhussies.net/goldstein).**

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Sometimes after the library closes I walk through the dim rooms, savoring the quiet. I put books back in order, and straighten the displays, and take down the outdated fliers on the community bulletin board. Then I put on my coat, turn out the last light, and go home.

Today the disorder the patrons had left was worse than usual, books scattered on tables and counters and across the floor. The days when libraries were havens of silence, the only sounds a muffled cough and a scratch of a pen on paper, are long gone, I’m afraid. People talk and laugh as if they’re at a ball game, or answer their cell phones, or call out to one another when they see a book they recognize. Around three-thirty the after-schoolers come in, looking for something to do until their parents get off work and pick them up. Mostly they gossip, or sit at the computers and play games; occasionally one of them will read something, but it’s usually a comic book.

I picked up the books and stacked them into piles. It’s a small library I work in, in a small town down the peninsula from San Francisco, just two rooms for adult fiction and nonfiction and two for the juvenile sections. The clean-up took only a few minutes. Then I put the books into the bin to be checked in the next day, in case a patron had checked them out and forgotten them.

A piece of paper fluttered out from one of them and fell to the floor. I picked it up and turned it over. It was a photograph, black and white, a picture of a woman. She looked like a movie star, with the sort of beauty they used to have when they all

looked like kings and queens, distant and regal. Perhaps she really had been a star, but if so I didn't recognize her.

I studied her a while longer. Her hair was light brown, and her wide-set eyes could have been the same color, though the black and white of the photograph made it hard to tell; they could just as easily have been gray. Her mouth was that bow shape that had been popular generations ago; it looked dark in the photograph, and I thought she might have been wearing red lipstick.

None of this explains why I thought her beautiful, though. It was something impossible to define, a matter of the curve of a cheekbone, the straight line of a forehead. A few millimeters one way or the other and she would have looked different, entirely ordinary.

The actress she reminded me of most was Greta Garbo. I went over to the movie section (791.43) and took down a book on her, but I saw I'd been wrong; they were not very much alike. But both seemed luminous somehow, as if a light shone from inside them.

I learned from the book that Garbo had not said "I want to be alone," the quote everyone attributes to her, but "I want to be left alone," which makes more sense. Librarians, I sometimes think, know a great deal of useless trivia about a great variety of subjects.

I wished I had thought to check which book the photograph had come from, but there were too many in the bin now to make a guess. I pattered around some more, then went to my cubbyhole of an office, just behind the circulation area, and put the photo in a desk drawer. I straightened the plastic sign that said "Harris Kent, Librarian" and checked the empty rooms again—there was no one waiting for me at home, after all—and caught a later bus home.

We were busy as usual the next day. I stayed in my office, doing paperwork and ordering books, coming out when the library aides needed help. I saw the Crossword Puzzle Guy, there in the mid-morning as always—he Xeroxes the puzzle from the *New York Times*, fills it in in ink, and leaves it behind him on the front table. After he left, a high school student came in, obviously truant. He'd been here a few times before, and had even asked me for help finding information about anoles, which turned out to be a kind of lizard. I'd shown him how to use the encyclopedia (*what* do they teach them in schools these days?), and later he graduated to the Internet. If he kept skipping school I'd have to talk to him or his parents or guardian, but for now I left him alone; he was probably learning more here than in his classroom.

Every so often I opened my drawer and took out the photograph. Looking at it made me feel as if I were turning on a light in a dark room, as if something were being made clear, illuminated.

I've always liked photographs, the way they're the same each time you look at

them, predictable, even comforting. So much else goes by so quickly, changes even before you've had a chance to notice it.

Once when I studied the photograph I saw something new: the woman looked a bit like someone I'd dated in college. Nina had had the same breathtaking beauty, and she, too, had seemed set apart by it, a visitor from some other, better, realm. I'd never understood why she'd gone out with me. I wear glasses, my hair is the dull color of meatloaf, and I'm tall and skinny—though at least, I used to think, Nina and I were the same height.

Usually the thought of her brought back a confusion of feelings, love and loss and regret, but this time the mysterious woman crowded out everything else. Who was she? Where had she come from? What had happened to her?

I went to lunch, came back. The mob of kids came in after school, talking noisily. Some of them towed bookbags on wheels; you have to wonder about the amount of homework they get. Fortunately the children's librarian deals with them; only rarely does she call me for help.

The time slid toward closing. The patrons headed toward the doors, and I turned off some of the lights. A woman dashed in; she knew what she wanted, she said, it would just take a minute. I knew this type of patron of old, and sure enough she was still standing in front of the fiction shelves when we closed. I sent the aides and the children's librarian home and talked to her a bit about the bestseller list; then it turned out that she didn't have a library card and I had to process one for her.

It was ten minutes after closing when I finally shut down the computer and made my rounds through the empty rooms. My footsteps echoed back to me, muffled by the rows of books; when I accidentally dropped a pen the sound lingered for a while, suspended in the silence. This was the way libraries used to sound, I thought, like nothing else in the world.

I picked up books from when they had been left (or thrown—one of them lay open on its back, looking disturbingly helpless, like a dead body). As I carried them to the bin a scrap of paper fell out and drifted to the floor.

I grabbed it on its way down. It was a ticket stub, an old one, pre-printed instead of spat out from a computer. It had been torn in half; the part I held read "Para" and, on the next line, "Thea."

That sparked a vague memory. I put the books down and went to the local history section (979.46). I found it in the third book I checked: a brief history of the Paramount theater in Oakland. The place had been a movie palace from 1931 to 1970, though it had had to shut down once during the Depression. I studied the angular gold and green lights of the main entrance, the statues of golden women marching toward a great gold fountain, and as I did so a strange notion took hold of me: that the woman in the photograph had held this ticket, had gone to this performance.

It was crazy, delusional. And yet the idea wouldn't leave me. I saw her striding through the front door in a short jacket and a long slim skirt, a mannish hat with a feather on her head, looking up at her companion from under the brim. At the intermission she took out a cigarette and went to the women's lounge (amazingly, according to the book, women were not allowed to smoke in public then) and discussed the movie with the other smokers. If my guess was right and she was an actress, perhaps she would have known something about the stars. The other women might even have recognized her, might have listened intently as she gossiped about the leading man.

I re-shelved the history and went back to the pile of books I'd collected earlier. This time I'd seen the one the ticket had come from, and I checked the title; it was *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*. The books themselves weren't relevant, then, just the messages they contained.

I put the ticket in my drawer, together with the photograph, and left. When I got home I made dinner and then settled down with a book I'd checked out. The quiet at the end of the day was welcome, but even as I read I was aware that it wasn't the same as the hushed silence of the library. It didn't have the weight of history behind it, the great edifice built of kings and explorers, poets and philosophers, books about carpentry and cat care and trains and when to plant dahlias, all the knowledge and wisdom of the world.

The next day crept by slowly. I was eager to be left alone (like Garbo) and see if the books would yield up something new. I kept seeing vague glimmers out of the corner of my eye, a blur of white like the sway of a skirt or the turning of a page, but when I looked there would be nothing there. Finally everyone left; I shut the door behind them and turned the sign to Closed.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" someone said behind me.

I jumped. It was only the children's librarian, Amy, coming out of the back. I muttered something about a dinner meeting, and she shrugged and left.

I was actually trembling as I walked through the library, picking up books and rifling through their pages, turning them upside down and shaking them to dislodge any stray pieces of paper. My heart pounded so loudly I could hear it in the silence. I made myself go slower, straightening each pile of books carefully and setting them gently in the bin.

Amy and I had gone out for a drink once. Afterward she had invited me to her house. I had felt awkward, filled with trepidation; I hadn't known what she wanted, hadn't known what I wanted for that matter. It was one of those moments where a life could change in an instant, some decision made that could never be taken back.

I needn't have worried. She lived with her three children, two dogs, and a parrot, who shouted "Abandon all hope!" when we walked through the door. Her ex-husband, I soon discovered, lived over the garage and had been taking care of the

kids, only two of which were his. One of the dogs was recovering from some complex surgery and wore that collar that looks like a giant Elizabethan ruff. He had fixed ideas about how big he was, ideas that did not include the collar, and kept bumping into things. Perhaps it was only in memory that he bumped into me more than anything else.

The ex-husband made his living from entering contests, and Amy's walls were stacked with computer games and lifetime supplies of hair product; he had run out of space to store them all. As we sat on her couch, trying to talk over children's demands and the parrot's squawking, a postal truck pulled up, setting off a round of barking from the dogs, and disgorged more boxes.

I noticed for the first time that evening that she was quite pretty—though perhaps cute might be a better word, with her frizzy blond hair, snub nose, and freckles. And I had never realized how short she was; she barely came up to my shoulders.

She turned out to be an interesting woman, too, more thoughtful than I would have expected from her surroundings. "Sometimes I feel like I'm walking down a long hallway, and doors are closing all around me," she said. "There are so many things I wanted to do, things I thought I'd get around to when I was older. Like go to exotic places and write books about them, and learn how to sail, and speak Spanish, and make pottery ... And have kids, of course, but it's the kids that are keeping me from all the rest of it. You can't do everything, I guess is what I'm saying. Do you know what I mean?"

I didn't, not really. She had her hands full, more than full; she seemed to be doing enough for several people already.

"Well, but you're still young, younger than I am," I said. "There's still time for all that." But she looked at me as if my answer had disappointed her.

I never went back. I'm not sure why, really. All the time I was with her I kept thinking about Nina, the way she used to stride forward on those long legs, the way she always seemed to know where she was going, even when she was lost. And Amy's life looked too confusing, there were too many things to take in at once.

I finished making the rounds of the library. There had been no messages from the books, not a scrap of paper to be found. I cursed myself for an idiot. I had built up something out of nothing, a ludicrous fantasy. I felt a mad urge to take every book off the shelf and shake them until they gave up their secrets. Instead I took a last look at the photograph and headed for the door.

I caught the glimmer of white again, but this time it did not go away when I looked directly at it. It was a pearl someone had dropped. As I bent to pick it up I remembered the photograph, the pearl earrings the woman wore.

I'd memorized the photograph by this time, of course, but I went back to my

office to look at it one more time. The earrings shone white as a shell, nacreous and pale.

No, it was ridiculous. Someone had dropped the damn thing; that was all. Despite my protests, though, I put the pearl in my drawer along with the photograph and the ticket stub.

The next evening, as I went through my usual routine, I swung between hope and something very like despair. I told myself not to expect much, either a maddeningly vague clue or nothing at all. What I found was a piece of paper partly covered in writing. I read a few lines, then had to sit at a table to stop my heart from pounding.

“Dear Selwyn—” it said.

“It’s not like you to be so horrible. What I said was a joke, of course. I don’t give a fig for your work, and I’m sure Edith doesn’t either. And what you told us was hardly damning—unless, as you said, your boss should come to hear about it. And there’s no reason he should, not if you’re as careful as you say you are.

“I’ll be at the Pearl on Tuesday night, as always. I hope I’ll see you there. I never have as much fun without you—none of the others have your spirit and generosity.

“Lilyanna”

I thought a hundred things all at once. That now I knew her name. That her handwriting was bold and a bit old-fashioned, with more flourishes than someone would use today, especially in her headlong dashes. That she had written on creamy linen paper; she could afford luxuries, perhaps, or she cared about how she looked.

Most of all I wondered what it meant. What terrible thing did Selwyn do at work? Who was Edith, and who were the others? It was one of those frustrating stories that don’t make sense if you come in in the middle, and it was dreadful to think that I might never know the answers.

There was a date at the top; I hadn’t seen it in my rush to read the letter. October 12, 1938. I tried to remember the date today, and realized with growing amazement that it was also October the 12th.

All my doubts disappeared. I was meant to find this letter, and to find it now. In fact—and suddenly the notion seemed as clear to me as if it was written on the piece of paper I held—I could find her, Lilyanna, meet her at the Pearl on Tuesday. The only problem, of course, was that I had no idea where the place could be.

I went to the circulation desk, too much in a hurry even to go to my office, and turned on the computer. I searched for “Pearl” together with various cities around the Bay Area and got nothing but gibberish. There were, I was surprised to see, a few hits for “Lilyanna,” but the people mentioned were all too old or too

young or in another country. So much for my thought that she might be a movie star.

A man tapped at the glass on the door; he'd seen me and thought the library was still open, despite the Closed sign and the dim lights. I ignored him. He knocked harder, and I waved him off impatiently. Finally he dumped his books in the outside bin and strode off, no doubt writing an irate letter to the library board in his head.

I turned back to the computer. It was Friday now; I had a few days yet to track her down. I clicked on another link for Lilyanna and found an office-worker's diary. But she was far too young, and Lilyanna would never work in an office.

Suddenly I realized just how old she had to be. If she was twenty in 1938, say, she would be nearly ninety today. Probably she was dead.

But of course I wasn't thinking of her as old. In my mind she was still the woman in the photograph, luminous, mysterious. What did that mean? Was she haunting me, haunting the library?

I got off the computer, stood up and stretched, and went through the library shutting off the lights. As I headed toward the front door I saw the swirl of white again, and I turned quickly. It took on shape, moving slowly in the shadows. The unfurling of a skirt, the turn of a pale leg...

The library seemed colder now, the shadows in the distant corners blacker. I stood still, my skin clammy. No, I was imagining the chill, the darkness—why would she want to frighten me? I groped for a light switch and turned it on, and she frayed into nothingness and disappeared.

I was trembling now. I went into my office and grabbed the photograph, the ticket, and the pearl. Then I left, locking the door firmly behind me.

Outside the moon shone from behind the clouds, but otherwise the street was dark. I walked quickly toward the bus stop, toward light and people. I got home very late; only then, when I looked at my bedside clock, did I realize that I'd been on the computer for hours.

In the morning the fear from last night seemed unreal. Lilyanna needed me; she had sought me out for some task she had left unfinished in life. She was remote in the picture, yes, and as regal as an effigy on a tomb, but she would never harm me.

What had prompted me to turn on the light again, to make her vanish like that? I could have seen her whole, talked to her, found out what she wanted at last.

I dressed and went to my computer. It sometimes seems odd to me that someone who distrusts change as much as I do should take to the Internet, but in fact I like it a great deal. It's like a library in many ways, a library built out of an infinity of knowledge. A library of the air.

As the morning waned, though, I began to think the whole thing was

impossible. How could I guess what the word “pearl” meant to Lilyanna and her friends? In desperation I left the main thoroughfares of the search engines and headed down dirt roads and dim alleyways, sites tended by obsessives interested in movies or jewelry or the thirties.

I broke for lunch. Sun came through the kitchen window, and I began to wonder about my own obsessiveness. What was Lilyanna to me, after all? Why was I wasting all this time on someone I had never met? I sat in my kitchen, in the warmth and light, eating a chicken sandwich I’d made out of leftovers, and my mind strayed to other things: Nina, of course, and work I’d left unfinished at the library, and the book I was reading. Then the tattered clouds returned, shrouding the sun, and I went back to Lilyanna and the Pearl.

On Sunday I visited a few of the places I’d seen on the Internet, restaurants and bars and businesses with the word “pearl” in their names. I had no car, which had never seemed like a hardship before; I enjoyed taking the bus to work. But I soon found out that many of the routes were slower than my usual bus, and that the Bay Area Rapid Transit line didn’t run anywhere near where I wanted to go. I planned to go to Oakland first, because of the connection with the Paramount, but as time passed I realized that just the places in Oakland would take the whole day.

The first three sites I tried had not even existed in the thirties. I continued on, growing discouraged as I saw business after business dating from the eighties or nineties.

It was near midnight when I finally quit and headed for home. The streets were cold and silent; I heard nothing but my own footsteps. Every so often a car drove by, its lights glowing out of the darkness and then passing on. My bus stop was dark as well, the street lamp next to it burned out.

A pale shape came toward me out of the shadows. I jumped back, but it was only a man in a white T-shirt, strange clothing for such a cold night. He was saying something, but I was filled with such a mixture of terror and excitement I could barely hear him. “What?” I said.

“Very few buses this late on Sunday,” he said. He seemed unconcerned, and as I came closer and could smell him I realized that he had been drinking for a while. “Take a half hour for the next one.”

It proved to be over an hour. I felt nervous standing near someone so unpredictable, but he did not make any more sudden moves. The town I lived in was so small, and I was usually indoors so early, that I had forgotten how to deal with people like him, had lost whatever edge I’d once had.

It was after midnight when I finally got home and went to bed. I could not sleep, though; when I closed my eyes I saw wisps of white gathering in the darkness, and I would come awake, my heart pounding.



On Mondays the people who work in the library always ask each other how their weekends were. I don't know why they continue to ask me, since my days off are horribly dull; I usually spend them gardening or reading or listening to music. Today they joked about how tired I looked, what a wild weekend I must have had. Amy said nothing, but I saw her eyes on me a few times, as if she wanted to ask me a question. To be honest, I wouldn't have known how to answer her; anything I said would have sounded crazy. Would have been crazy, for all I knew.

I worked on the circulation desk that day, giving each returned book a surreptitious shake before putting it away, trying not to scowl at the patrons when they asked for information or directions. But there was nothing in any of the books, not even the scraps of torn paper people use for bookmarks. I kept glancing at my watch, willing the time to pass; I was almost certain that I would find the next clue only after everyone had gone home.

Finally the library closed, and I locked the door and made my usual rounds. For a long time I found nothing, and I grew more and more discouraged as I went on. Then one of the books surrendered a piece of paper: a napkin with an address printed at the bottom. In the blank space someone had drawn a row of beads, curving upward like a smile. A pearl necklace.

The place was in Oakland; I'd been right about that, at least. There was no zip code, of course; they hadn't existed in 1938. I hurried to the computer and looked up the address, then linked to a site that showed me which bus to take.

Something glimmered near the history shelves, as pale as snow. I turned, and in that moment I saw her plain, a woman made of pearl and paper, coalescing out of the darkness. A cold wind came up, bringing the smell of old books.

I could feel her need, her desire to be avenged. I took a step toward her, trying to ignore the thrill of terror that ran through my veins. She vanished slowly, like mist.

Thoughts of her intruded as I tried to sleep that night. What had Selwyn done? Perhaps he had joined the Communist Party, like a lot of people in the thirties. Or maybe he had embezzled money; it was the Depression, after all, and he needed to pay for all those theater tickets and drinks at the Pearl. Hadn't Lilyanna said she liked his generosity?

I had a dark thought then. Had she blackmailed him? You could certainly read the note that way, as Lilyanna asking for money. "Unless your boss should come to hear about it," she'd said. And "if you're as careful as you say you are."

I got up and studied the photo again. No, I couldn't believe it—no one who looked like that could stoop to blackmail.

I set out all I had of Lilyanna: the photo, the pearl, the note, the napkin. For the first time I noticed a stain at the corner of the napkin, a small spot of red. Was it

blood? No, of course not. It was much more likely to be food, or lipstick.

But I couldn't stop thinking about the two of them, what they had done. Had Selwyn grown tired of her demands for money and finally killed her? Or had she killed him? Either would explain her urgency, and the fear I sometimes felt in her presence. Her story was darker than I had supposed.

When I got to work the next day I put the photograph on my desk before I did anything else. I couldn't stop staring at it, drawn over and over again to that pale face, those imperious eyes.

The sun came out in the afternoon, that strange California weather that refuses to relinquish summer, even in October. It relaxed me for a moment, and when Amy knocked at my office I looked up, glad of the distraction. I was not so relaxed, though, to forget the picture, and I eased it under a magazine as she stepped inside.

"Are you busy?" she asked.

"No, no," I said. "What is it?"

"A kid just asked me for *The Lying Bitch and Her Wardrobe*," she said.

I laughed. "What did you say?"

"Well, I took him to the C.S. Lewis section, but that wasn't the book he wanted. I think he was expecting something else."

We talked for a while about the odd requests we had gotten (*The Four Horsemen of the Acropolis*, *Color Me Purple*), and I asked her how the dog was, and we discussed library business. When she left I realized with a start that an hour had passed, and that I had barely thought of Lilyanna. How could I have forgotten her? I felt horrified, guilty. I felt like a knight who had been sent out on a quest by his lady-love and who had strayed from the path, diverted by pleasures of the flesh or good company.

But my fear was growing, fear of what I might find, and of Lilyanna, too. I was out of my depth, had stumbled into a quarrel not my own. What if she had murdered someone, what then?

I started to shiver. But I was sweating too; my palms were damp with it. What had I gotten myself into? Who was Lilyanna to come into my life like this? She had snared me with a photograph, beguiled me with trinkets—with the dead past, things that never changed. She had seen how steadfast I would be, that *I* would never change. Amy's doors had never closed for me; they had never been opened.

I welcomed the anger; it drove out the terror I felt. Perhaps I wouldn't go to the Pearl that night. Why should I be the one to revenge her? I had my own life to live, after all.

One of the aides came through, shouting that the library would close in fifteen minutes. The hell with it, I thought. I stood, my heart pounding, and went to the children's section. My fear rose again and I pushed it away, tried to ignore it.

I waited until Amy finished helping a kid with her homework; then I said, "Would you like to go to dinner with me tonight?"

She looked surprised, and a bit wary. "All right," she said.

The room grew colder. The children fell silent for once, as if they felt it too. A blur of white moved in the corner and took on shape.

Amy was saying something, and I forced myself to pay attention. "Oh, wait. Don's going to be late tonight—I have to feed the kids."

"I could meet you when you're done. How about seven?"

"That would be good."

Lilyanna turned toward me, her face filled with sorrow. She faded slowly and disappeared.

"Seven, then," I said, and went back to the circulation area.

The aides folded up the newspapers, straightened the chairs, and went home. The last patron left; then Amy came out from the children's area, and I held the door open for her, smiling.

What would I do until seven? I locked the door and walked through the empty rooms, shutting off lights as I went. I could feel Lilyanna's absence throughout the library. I picked up a pile of books, brought them back to the bin.

I felt as if I had been living in a lurid nightmare the past few days, and that I had finally woken up. Lilyanna had seduced me with beauty and mystery, but in the end I had chosen life over death. I would never find out who Selwyn was, what had happened between him and Lilyanna, and I knew I would always wonder about it, but at the moment it seemed a small loss.

I turned out the last light and headed toward the door. A shape flew at me out of the darkness, white as a shroud, its mouth red as blood. I ran for the door, but it was locked. I fumbled for my keys.

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