

LIMBO

(Tarot Card: The Hanged Man)

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Had she known that circumstances beyond her control were about to thrust her into the unknown, she might not have been so cheerful. Luci, short for Lucinda, grew up in a generic tract home in the heart of Orange County, neighboring Los Angeles. Her parents both worked hard to support a lifestyle of comfort, safety and anonymity. They had left the poverty of their youth in East LA far behind them. All that they retained of their Latino culture was their name. Acceptance meant more to them than heritage.

Luci's friends may have noticed her skin was a few shades darker, but accepted her as one of their own. She liked entertaining her friends at her house. Her parents had decorated their subdivision in the usual subdued tones, except for brightly colored flowers they periodically received from relatives Luci had never met. She had asked her parents about them once when she was 12. Her parents skipped over the subject as if these were people best avoided.

Luci shopped at the mall and collected stuffed animals. The only Spanish she knew she learned in school. She and her parents regularly attended the neighborhood Catholic church along with many of the families who lived in their neighborhood. Luci and her friends would sit in the back and leave as soon as the service ended.

Luci saw herself as an All-American girl. Someday, she'd go to college and study to run her father's business. His company manufactured linoleum tile. Due to his business savvy, it had grown so quickly, his mother went back to school to learn how to handle the financial aspects. Luci loved to go with them to the factory and observe her

parents busy at work. However, she rarely talked to any of their employees except for Mr. Aspic, her father's assistant.

Luci was 15 the day a drunk driver turned her father's new Subaru into a lump of useless metal. The police said her parents died quickly, but Luci kept getting images of her parents trapped and suffering.

At first, Luci was confident she would continue living in the house on her own. She certainly had practice at taking care of herself. Her parents' hours at work had forced her to learn how to cook and manage her homework. She wasn't the best student, but she worked hard and maintained a B- average.

Luci met some of her mysterious relatives for the first time at her parents' funeral. Their thick accents prevented her from understanding half of what they said. To Luci, they seemed strange and overly ethnic. She didn't know how to talk to them.

Following the funeral, she came home to new cooking smells and unfamiliar music. Her relatives went out of their way to make themselves and everyone else comfortable. Her parents' friends often looked as uncomfortable as she felt. Yet a small part of her was attracted to their liveliness.

"As soon as the house is sold, you will come live with me," her Aunt Marina announced as they prepared fresh tortillas, a large pot of beans and delicacies Luci didn't recognize.

"But I want to stay here," she demanded. "My friends live here."

"You'll make new friends, no?"

Luci spent the rest of the day in her room, trying to shut out the sounds and smells of the strangers who had taken over her house and soon would take over her

life. She contemplated running away, but she didn't know where to go. Her friends visited her upstairs, but she could tell they were anxious to leave. She asked Susan if she could move in with them, but she could see Susan no longer looked at her the same way. Whether it was the discomfort of death or the alienness of the visiting relatives, Luci had become a stranger both to her friends and to herself.

The following day, all her relatives except Aunt Marina left to return to Glen Ellen, a small town in Northern California, where they all lived. Luci begged her aunt to stay with her in the only home she'd ever known, but Aunt Marina was adamant.

"What about my father's business?" Luci asked as though that alone would make Aunt Marina stay.

"It's all taken care of, Lucinda. My brother your father, left a very detailed will. The monies from the sale of this house will pay for your schooling. Then if you want to move back to run the company, you can. Until then that Mr. Aspic will manage it without you."

Luci hoped the house would never sell. She continued going to school and coming home to her aunt. It surprised Luci how the smells of Aunt Marina's cooking changed from strange to comforting as they got to know each other. Her aunt told her stories of her youth, how Luci's grandparents had escaped the horrors of Nicaragua to start a new life in America. Aunt Marina was very proud of her brother's success, but Luci sensed anger beneath her aunt's words.

Luci's friends no longer visited her at home. At church, they sat away from she and her aunt. When she visited her friends homes, she found herself spending time with their Latina maids, asking them questions about their lives. However, like her

friends, these women were nice to her, but kept their distance. In her growing isolation, Luci sought out her aunt's company more and more.

The house sold a few weeks before summer vacation. Instead of hanging out with her friends at the all, Luci would spent the summer packing and moving. Because she felt as though she'd already left her own life, Luci felt her excitement grow at the idea of moving. Aunt Marina was right. She'd make new friends in her new home.

Luci cringed when her relatives showed up in old trucks and vans in which they loaded all that her home contained. She couldn't remember who was who. They were kind and friendly, but they talked just a little to loud and spoke a Spanish she couldn't follow. Shyly, her friends said careless good byes. Luci and Aunt Marina drove off in her mother's BMW.

The driving part was pleasant. Luci liked letting her mind wander. When the caravan stopped at rest stops, Luci quickly took care of her business and otherwise, stayed n the cool quiet enclosure of the car.

When they pulled up to her aunt's mobile home in the soft rolling hills of Glen Ellen, all but one vehicle continued along the dirt road.

"Where are they going?" Luci asked.

"Home. I gave them the furniture. All we need is in Robert's van."

"But that stuff belongs to me."

"You can visit your stuff whenever you like."

Luci's heart sunk further as they entered the two bedroom tin can she would call home. Unlike the simple tidiness of her house, every surface in her aunt's tiny home was covered by brightly woven fabric and wax from cheap candles. On top of these

surfaces stood clay figurines and other knickknacks. This is the tackiest of the tacky, Luci said to herself.

At least Luci's room was empty except for a twin bed and an old chest of drawers. Luci unpacked her stuffed animals first. They practically took over the small room. Maybe it was time to consider getting rid of a few of them.

"Where's the TV?" she asked her aunt who hummed as she unpacked her tattered suitcase. Her aunt's room was smaller than hers. The top of the chest drawers contained Catholic icons and objects which had no meaning to Luci.

"There is no TV," Aunt Marina answered irritably.

Luci lay down on her bed and wept until she fell asleep. She woke to the smells she'd associated with her aunt. Unhappy that she wasn't dreaming, she dragged herself into the kitchen.

"Yo tengo much hambre," Aunt Marina said, spooning out two plates of food. "Y tu?"

"Ya, whatever."

"The circus is in town, Lucinda. We will go after dinner."

"Barnum & Bailey is here?"

"No, no chicita. It's not so big. There will be children there your age."

Luci dressed in black and with a glance, challenged Aunt Marina to dispute her choice. Her aunt sighed as they left the mobile home.

They walked down the dirt road. As they climbed an easy slope, the sky brightened and Luci could hear that mariachi music her relatives loved so well.

Looking down from the crest of the slope, the small valley vibrated with life. They walked beneath a brightly lit arch that said, "WELCOME TO LAZLO's MYSTICAL FANTASYLAND". Luci didn't want to be interested, but curiosity built inroads into her indifference.

"Here's \$20. I'll meet you at 10 o'clock under the arch, yes? You will have fun, Lucinda. You don't have to be afraid. You'll be all right."

Luci gave her aunt a defiant look before immersing herself into the crowd. Many people packed into the small space surrounded by tents. She liked the way the crowd led her around, making decisions of destination for her. The crowd stopped her before a colorful man on a small stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, step right up
I have here the original, prototypal patent placebo
Care-all heal-all elixir of life handed down to me
from generations of necromancer mystics
through my sainted gypsy Grandmother
-- given directly to me.
Would you like to know
what the serpent whispered to Eve in the Garden?
Step a little closer.
That's right.
Would you like to be
smarter, more successful, healthier, more vigorous?
Ladies and gentlemen,

for a mere \$10

you can be the owner of a bottle

of the original fountain of life"

Luci snickered at the people who purchased small vials of violet liquid.

"A gift," said the colorful man, appearing at her side. He was younger than she thought and spoke with an accent she couldn't identify. "I'm Romany," he said, presenting her with one of the vials. "No charge."

Luci took the vial doubtfully. She'd never taken drugs before and wasn't about to start. "It isn't a drug, it's an elixir." Luci didn't like the way the colorful man seemed to read her thoughts. It's just a trick, she said to herself. "But a very good trick," the colorful man said with a smirk. "Do you know what a placebo is?" Before she could answer that any idiot knew what a placebo was, the man continued. "A placebo is a fake, a fraud, a con, a lie. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?" Her voice spoke before she could stop it.

"Unless you believe." Before she could respond, the colorful man disappeared into the crowd. She tried following him but he was gone for good. She found herself in the middle of dancing bodies, moving to the mariachi music. The strangeness overwhelmed her and instead of opening her mouth to scream, she downed the violet liquid. Her toes tingled with warmth. The tingling made her feet twitch to the music. As the warm tingling moved up her body, she found herself dancing.

Two men held a stick and dancers arched the bodies backward underneath it. She laughed. The limbo was a silly dance, she thought to herself. However, the dancers thrust her forward. She knew she'd never make it so she bent forward under

the stick. Three girls her age circled around her holding hands. They whistled and laughed. She wanted them to let her in into the circle, but they continued to surround her. Their circling made Luci dizzy and she tripped over her own feet, falling to the ground. She expected the girls to help her up but they leaned down and tickled her instead. She writhed helplessly on the ground. When the music ended, she stood up. The girls were gone. She fought against the crowd to find some place to breath. Leaning against the fortune teller's little tent, she stared at the stars until tears blurred her vision.

"Come in, come in. You vil sit." Luci could hear the fortune teller greet a new customer. Her accent sounded like that of the colorful man's. You can't get more trite than a gypsy fortune teller, she mused.

"Gracias." It was Aunt Marina's voice.

"I vil look into crystal ball, read a few cards and tell you what vil be."

Luci knew she shouldn't listen. It was rude and Aunt Marina would be mad. But she couldn't help herself.

"I see much grief and sadness."

"Si. My brother and his wife died a few months ago."

"Yes. And they leave you a child."

"My niece, Lucinda. She thinks she is adult, but she is a child. I worry for her. Her parents -- I mean no disrespect -- but--"

"They did not teach Lucinda from where she come."

"I'm from LA," Luci grumbled quietly.

"I'm afraid Lucinda hates us. She looks at us and sees strange people from a culture unlike her own who pick flowers to feed their families. Will she ever learn to accept us? to accept herself?"

"Do you see this card? It is the Hanged Man." Luci recalled the Tarot card of the man who hung upside down from the deck she perused at the bookstore in the mall. "She hangs at a crossroads between what has been and what will be."

"How can I help her?"

"You cannot. She must make the choice of moving out of indecision all by herself. Until then, she lives in limbo."

Luci bounced to her feet, her face red with rage and embarrassment. How could they just talk about me? she thought. And what choices do I have? She paced back and forth far enough from the tent to prevent the fortune teller's voice from reaching her.

"May I have this dance?" The colorful man smiled as brightly as his clothing.

"What dance would that be? the limbo?"

"If you insist."

Before she could object, the colorful man grabbed her hand and led her deeper into the dark forest. She tripped as she ran beside him, unable to retrieve her hand. Luci looked up long enough from her stumbling feet to see a low branch blocking their way. She dug her heels into the ground, leaning her body back with all her strength. Instead of stopping, the colorful man pivoted around her and forced her arched body forward under the branch. Limbo, she thought, and burst into laughter. The colorful man laughed with her. It had been a long time since she had laughed so hard. Before

she could take control of her outburst, the laughter turned into weeping. The colorful man held her as she cried loudly and without shame.

"No, Luci, you are not alone. You only feel that way."

"But I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere." So full of pain, Luci didn't stop to think how odd it was that the man knew her name.

"I know. And maybe you never vil."

"Some comfort you are," she snapped as she jerked away from his embrace. Rage was replaced by fear as she looked around.

"Are we lost?" The silence was eerie. Surely they hadn't run so far away from the music.

"Maybe," the colorful man answered. Something in his tone made Luci try to remember everything they'd taught her in school about self protection. How could she have been so stupid. She was in the middle of a dark forest with a strange man. Should she try and escape?

"I won't try anything, I promise." Luci knew she shouldn't believe him. "Believe what you want, Luci. Look up. It's a shooting star."

Luci knew she shouldn't take her eyes off this stranger, but she couldn't help herself. Looking up, she saw the star race across the sky. "Close your eyes and make a wish." Luci obeyed. Make this man go away, she wished. She opened her eyes. She was alone. She felt her body relax.

"Which way do I go?" she said out loud, anxiety coming out for an encore.

She made a few false starts in different directions, but fear brought her back to the low branch. She paced back and forth, unable to determine which way to go.

Finally, Luci sat on the ground and wept until she had no more tears to shed. Tired and defeated, she hummed to herself. She recognized the limbo melody. As she increased the volume, she increased her comfort zone. She danced before the low branch and on impulse, did the limbo, arching her body back and bouncing beneath the branch. She laughed. If I'm going to die in the middle of the forest, at least I'll die dancing the limbo, she said out loud. In her mind, the branch dipped lower until she arched back too far and fell to the ground. This made her laugh. She rolled on the ground as twigs tickled her, closing her eyes and writhing on the ground.

The applause shocked her out of her isolation and her eyes snapped open. The three girls leaned down to help her up. She was no longer in the forest, but back in the middle of the dancing crowd.

She let the girls help her up, but was too stunned to follow them as they disappeared into the crowd. She stood dumbfounded as the music started up again.

"You look lost," she heard the colorful man say.

"Yes, I am. But that's okay. What time is it?"

"Ten, I think," the man said.

"I've got to go," she said, squeezing herself through the crowd, heading for the arch. "Aunt Marina," she shouted, just before hugging her aunt with relief.

"I saw you dancing, Lucinda," her aunt said, responding warmly to the hug. "Did you have a good time?"

"I don't know, I think so," Luci said uneasily. Memories of the evening came in spurts. Before she could follow the thread of her concern to a conclusion, she stuffed her hands deep into her pockets and retrieved the vial of violet liquid the colorful man

had given her. I thought I drank this, she thought. In her other hand she pulled out a \$10 bill and presented both hands to her aunt.

"For me? How sweet. But you didn't buy yourself anything." Luci tried unsuccessfully to clear the chaos from her mind. "Keep the money, Lucinda. The circus will be here all week. Wouldn't you like to come back tomorrow night?"

"I don't know," Luci responded. "Maybe."

"You can decide later. It's been a long day and I'm very tired.

"Me too."

On the way home, Luci let her murky memory of the evening dance its own dance. Nothing had changed, but something was different.

Limbo, she thought. What a silly dance.