

## The Sight of Love

Once upon a time, there was a beloved princess, her name was Lucinda. Lucinda was heralded as the most beautiful woman that has ever been conceived. All of the people of the land, from the cold easterners to the enlightened westerners, travelled far and wide to get a single glimpse of her. Some even called her "The One and Only", or "The Chosen One". Regardless of whom you asked, every single person regarded Lucinda as the unattainable standard that was longed for.

One day, there was a poison in the air that threatened to consume people's ability to breathe: ominous, it invisibly endangered the land and brought fear to the hearts of men. The passage of time did not ameliorate the circumstances, but rather infected more and more people, who met their ultimate demise. Whatever misfortune occurred, it was laid to the feet of the illness: the failing of the crops, the drying of the rivers, the intensity of the sun... "The Curse", was what the simple folk called it. Regardless of your predisposition to fairytales and superstitions, struggle placated all individual lives like a pest. There was a darkness that possessed the minds within its range and rendered people distrustful, selfish, and paranoid.

However, there was always one joyous component in everyone's life: Lucinda. Wherever she passed, smiles broke the pitch-black auras, tears of joy replaced the ones of pain, and life crept its way into the carcasses, resuscitating the mentally demised. Amongst all those who cherished Lucinda's splendor, Charles was the only one possessed by it. He was consumed by his desire and plotted to be the only beneficiary of her grandeur.

On one of Lucinda's rounds through the village, she heard a man wailing in the distance. Hurriedly, she ran towards the sound and found a man weeping in the corner of an alley. "Dear sir, what ails you so?" Princess Lucinda asked, concern filling her voice. "My daughter... She is at home with a broken leg. She has been waiting to see you, for a whole two months now, and her spirits are low. I am afraid she will never be the same." Charles spoke with agony, his voice trembling "Please, Lucinda, I beg you! I have heard that you are so gracious, I implore that you come: it would be a blessing if you do! Do not deny me, I need you..." Princess Lucinda sensed the urgency and accompanied the man to his abode.

As Charles and Lucinda were passing through the streets, smiling faces dotted the road like a white shirt bearing the aftermath of a shattered glass of red wine. "What is your name?" asked Lucinda. "Charles, my dear. Thank you for coming, I truly appreciate it, do not leave my side, that would be lurid, I know you are better than such." Charles chuckled hesitantly. Lucinda peered at him, but her pure heart didn't allow her to see the trap he was setting. Charles had a gnarled face and his eyes were squinted so tight that she wondered how any light passed through them. His lips part into something resembling a smile, yet only his upper gums were showing. He looked completely docile, yet his demeanor showed a wild animal deeply buried within, desperately awaiting its chance to surface. Yet, Lucinda was oblivious to that fact, and she was already as good as tucked away. A young man emerged from the crowd and strode towards her and Charles "Princess Lucinda!", the young man gleamed and made a flourishing bow. "May you bless me with your presence? I would die to accompany you to your next destination." The young man was handsome in his own right, but paled in comparison to Lucinda, nay he looked withered next to her. "Of course..." "Not!" interrupted Charles, rubbing his hands viciously. "Please Princess, we do not have time for such *fools!* My daughter needs you. Do not abandon me now, I am counting on you, stop teasing me..." Lucinda sighed "Very well. May I join you after I leave Charles'

abode?" "I will wait for you till dusk, at this very spot. After that, I must go help my mother.", the young man waited expectantly. "I will be here shortly, you shall not wait that long." Lucinda smiled and deeply looked into the young man's eyes, just a split second longer than proper. The young man returned the smile knowingly and bowed even deeper than before. With that, the young man was left behind and disappeared as they turned a corner.

They finally arrived at Charles' home. It was practically a bunker: most of it was underground and never remained in the shadow. "Please follow me." Charles held the door open expectantly, one hand pointing inward. "What is your daughter's name?" Lucinda asked sweetly. "Ugh, Lucindany. Yes, in your honor, of course." Charles spoke hurriedly as he closed the door behind them. There was very little sunlight entering the house and Charles took her by the hand. "Please follow me downstairs, her room is just to the left." She followed him down the steps, unknowing, like a recently deceased guided by Gabriel straight into the abyss. The black swallowed them as they descended further. "Right here, mistress." He opened the door, yet she could not see what lay beyond it. "Luci... Ooh!" she screamed as she was violently pushed through the door and fell hard to the floor.

Lucinda awoke chained to a chair, unable to do more than rattle her fetters. A flickering torch showed Charles' face half enveloped by shadow "Aw, finally you awake. I almost worried I knocked you out for good. That would have been horrible, I would not let you do this to me now, I need you..." She looked at him, horrified. It was the first time someone had ever betrayed her: her naiveite shattered beyond repair. Lucinda begged Charles "Please, you must let me go. I need to bring peace to the land, otherwise, there will be nothing but despair.". "What about *my* despair?!" Charles rose from the chair. "You always give yourself to everyone without any depth. All you let us see is your beauty: tantalizing and unattainable. You are nothing but lore that we can witness, but never enjoy. You are nothing but the sweet smell of roses filling the air, without ever giving me your water to drink. Agony! Pure agony is all you have ever given me!". Lucinda looked at him shocked, unable to respond, she wept silently. Charles stroked her hair, tenderly "Please do not cry. If you only knew how much I already have. I wept enough for both of us, believe me!". Lucinda looked up at him and smiled "Now that you have had me in your presence and watched me slumber in chains, have I satisfied your desire? Have I quenched your thirst for the unattainable?". "No..." he answered "For your mother has seen you sleep many nights. I need to have an untainted and pure enjoyment, one that is only for me...". He looked at her, his eyes distraught, welled with tears and filled with pain. "Very well, I shall let you smell one whiff of my neck. No one has ever done such a thing, I assure you!" Lucinda resigned and turned her head. Charles considered for many minutes without giving an answer "No..." he said "The fragrance of your neck would kill me the instance I would be exposed to it. How could I enjoy something so potent that it will destroy me? Please, I cannot continue like this!". "As you say..." Lucinda closed her eyes and spoke "I will give you all my hair. You may consume them one by one, and each strand will prolong your life by one year. After that, my hair shall never grow again, and you shall be, and are, the only one to have such a treasure. This gift cannot lead to your demise and it will fill you with my essence. Please accept this, dear Charles, for I have nothing more valuable to give freely." Charles looked at her, shocked "How can I ever enjoy your beauty again?!" Alas, you fool!" Lucinda spoke loudly, drowning out Charles' choking protests "First you claim that my unattainable beauty anguishes you, then you desire to see it?! Make up your mind and decide for yourself what you desire, but know that this is the only thing that I will offer. This is the treasure that will quench your thirst, yet not deplete me of what makes you treasure me in the first place. If you take anything more, know that with it, you will take my spirit too!". Charles stared,

stunned, for he had never seen such fervor and resolution in her. He nodded slowly "Very well, I will pull out each strand by its roots and consume them to my hearts content. I will accept such a gift and count my blessings for your generosity."

Throughout the night, Charles pulled out each strand by its roots and placed them in a chest. With each 'pluck' Lucinda screamed and lost a tiny part of herself in the process. Once the arduous deed was done, it was already well into the next day. Exhausted and bald, Lucinda fell into a deep slumber and did not awake for several days. On a foggy morning, Lucinda awoke in the middle of a hog's pen to the smell of dung and livestock. Filled with agony, yet bereft of hair, she made her way to the palace. There were no smiles to greet her as she passed the streets: there was no happiness that spread with her presence. The only glances that went her way, were ones of disgust and apathy: one woman even spat on the ground as she passed. Lucinda's heart sunk and she was exposed, for the first time, to what her absence causes. So, she hurried home and locked herself in her room for several days. Desperately, her mother was looking for a way to restore her daughter's state. but could not find one. Much time passed and the land grew more barren, the people more spiteful, and the vileness engulfed everyone's mind like a layer of rancid oil on top of pure water.

One day, a witch came to Lucinda and asked her for the cause of the misfortunate transformation. Lucinda, after only short consideration, recounted the entire story in detail and silently shed her tears while doing so. The witch listened attentively and even took notes in her book. "Very well, I can help you in your predicament. However, you must bring me three things: First, you must bring me one strand of your hair that you had lost, second, I will need the eyes of one who truly loves you, and finally, you must suffer a wound that cannot heal and that will open you to whatever I must do to restore you."

With that, Lucinda went out of her home to bring the witch the required objects. She passed through the city, with the same results as her return from Charles' home. However, the people and the land were worse than they had ever been, and she knew that she must act swiftly to save what she could, before it was beyond redemption. In her haste, she bumped into a strong man "Excuse me..." she stopped herself from finishing the sentence. "Do not worry... my dear one." His hesitation was ever so slight, that an untrained ear might not have heard it. Lucinda looked at him in awe, it was the same man who wished to accompany her so many months ago. He stood there, firm as a root. He has come to the square every day, in hopes of encountering Lucinda and ask her once more for an accompaniment. "Do you still wish to follow me wherever I go?" Lucinda inquired, hope tinged with desperation filling her voice. The young man considered, watching her warily. Then, his eyes opened wide and he immediately bowed, his forehead close to the ground. "My fair lady! My dear Princess Lucinda! How could I have ever missed your perfection and mistaken you for someone else! My heart aches and I am determined to do whatever I must to atone for my horrid insensibility!". Lucinda considered "Very well, go to Charles' home, in which you will find a golden chest. It will contain all of my hair. However, only bring me one strand and do not take any for yourself. Once you have done that, I will consider any trespassing of my honor to be void.". The young man laughed "If that is all it takes, I shall have your favor in no time!" and with that, he ran around the corner, out of sight yet again.

Once he arrived to Charles' bunker, he scoped the outside area to find a way in: there was none but the front door. As he approached the building, he heard a cry of pure sorrow. The world must have truly ended for this wretched soul. Charles' scream was followed by a loud 'SNAP', then by a subsequent 'thump'. The young man frantically attempted to open the door, but to no avail. He grabbed the closest

rock and threw it through one of the windows. He then broke open the rest of the window and climbed into the house turned underground bunker. Shocked, the young man vigorously searched to find the origin of the cries. He then saw, to his horror, Charles laying sprawled on the ground with a noose around his neck and a chair tipped over next to him. The rope must have snapped on his suicide attempt. As the young man got closer, he could see that Charles was completely pale, and had vicious scars on his neck and wrists, as if a ferocious beast was clawing its way through his skin from the inside.

"Please..." Charles panted from exhaustion "Please release me from my agony!" Charles grabbed the young man's collar with surprising force and vigor, as if awakened from a terrifying nightmare. "I cannot continue to live with my guilt, but no matter how much I try and in what way, I simply cannot bring my own demise upon myself!" The young man regarded Charles in utter shock "How is this possible, the mere blood loss has left you like a corpse, simply undead... Not alive though!". The young man knelt down to inspect Charles' wounds, the cuts were relatively fresh, there were new wounds over the half-healed ones and his old scars ripped open from the noose around his neck. "What have you done?! What curse has been laid on you?" the young man looked into Charles' eyes, deeper into his soul than he wanted to. The young man was swallowed by Charles' emptiness that resided behind his mask of a living corpse: dead in all but flesh. "I have taken all of Lucinda's hair. She said that I may consume the hair and that each strand will fill me with her essence and prolong my life by one year. However, each strand that I consumed only left me longing for more and before I knew it, I ate them all. Whenever I ingested one of the strands, I was overwhelmed and for a brief moment, everything in this world seemed right, all the wrongs disappeared, and whatever anguish filled my heart before was erased by the endless fervor and love that radiates from this angel's heart. Yet, after the thousands of strands that I have eaten, none remain, and I have become virtually immortal. I long to be liberated from my sins! Truly, it has become clear to me now that Lucinda knew that I would become such a wretch of a man, even more than I was before, because for each strand that entered my body, a small part of my spirit was replaced by a void. Now, there is more void than man and a longer lifespan in agony than any wretch can endure." The young man's heart was conflicted with pure hatred and pity. Charles was the man who has left Lucinda in her current state and caused so many people to despair, and yet, this man was trapped in a hell so hot that the scorch itself burns his mind asunder. "I will not help you!" said the young man with fire in his eyes and fuel in his voice "But I will help Lucinda. I will gut you like a pig and remove the strands from your insides. Once I have removed all the hair, you should revert back to a mortal wretch and die. I will then take one of those strands back to Lucinda, as that is the mission that brought me here to begin with. Do you object?". Charles regarded him, in both terror and ecstasy, "I will accept such torture under one condition. Leave one strand in my body and take me to Lucinda, so that I may die in peace. Then, I can rest for eternity with her beauty as the last image that I will recall repeatedly until even eternity itself runs its course.". "Very well..." said the young man, "now prepare yourself for the agony. I will be as gentle as I can, but understand that there is nothing I can do to ease the pain of gutting you alive.". "Do not worry about such trivialities, just get on with it!".

So, the young man sharpened his knife and butchered Charles like the swine that he is. Indeed, Charles did not even flinch, that is how much his agony of his sins outweighed the pain of his flesh! Through the night, the young man tediously removed each strand of hair from every digestive organ in Charles' body, until only one remained. He then burned all of the hairs that he removed, wrapped an oversized cloth around Charles and made his way to Lucinda. Charles had lost all of his blood, which made him so pale that he was almost indistinguishable from the cloth: the cloth did not even redden, for there was no

blood to be shed. The only living organism left in Charles was Lucinda's hair. Once they have made their way to Lucinda, they were immediately admitted to join her and entered her chambers. Charles burst into tears the second his eyes met her being and asked for her forgiveness. Nay, he begged for it! Lucinda regarded him in pure terror, as Charles removed his cloth and showed her everything there was to see: inside and out! "Look what hell I am willing to subjugate myself to, for the mere glimpse of your beauty! The fragrance of your eminence is so intoxicating that it can relinquish every pain in my mind and body, regardless of the condition I am in. However, I ask you for one last wish, that I truly do not deserve to have granted. Please, forgive me!" Charles' words were hard to understand through his gritted teeth and irregular breathing, but Lucinda understood. "I forgive you. For what you have suffered, no man, regardless of how destitute he is, should ever endure! Only for that, nothing more and nothing less." Lucinda spoke with a voice that was angelically sweet, yet tinged with a hint of regret. "If I had only withheld such a treasure from you! I should have known that it would consume you like a roaring fire that burns a single leaf of a tree to a crisp!". With that, the young man reached into Charles' gut and pulled out the last strand. Charles immediately collapsed into a heap with a smile on his face. The physical manifestation of a contradiction so strong and evident has never existed before.

The young man covered Charles' body and gave the strand to Lucinda. "I burned the rest, so that I am not tempted to keep any for myself. Not even Charles' state is enough to deter me from knowing your essence! However, your desire is, and so I burned them without regret and hesitation." The young man's lips were dry and chapped from the long hours of work without any pause or water. Lucinda held the strand and was in deep thought. Each second that passed brought her one step closer to a conclusion the young man could not anticipate. "What is on your mind? Whatever it may be, I will make it true without hesitation!" the young man's speech stung Lucinda more than he could have imagined. "It is exactly that, that I fear. I cannot tell you what I need. Leave me at once!" as Lucinda turned her head, tears flung to the side and each drop weighed on the young man's heart like a mountain. "Very well, if that is all I can do, I will gladly leave and count myself lucky that there is anything at all that you ask of me!". With that, the young man disappeared around the corner, as he has done twice before.

Many years have passed, and the conditions within the kingdom worsened. Even when everything was so rotten that one could not conceive of a worse state, it deteriorated further, nonetheless. The children died at birth, the mothers wept over their dead husbands, the land was barren, the rivers were dried, and the land has become as destitute as Charles himself! At long last, the young man made his way back to Lucinda, determined to restore her, despite her last wish of him. As he approached her abode, a gnarled old woman approached him. "Halt young man!" she said to him. "Kindly hurry with your request, I am on an important mission." The young man regarded the old hag. Her face was wrinkled and flakey, her teeth were crooked and stained, yet her eyes twinkled knowingly, and he knew that he should not be deceived by her fragile appearance. "I will tell you what your dear Lucinda needs..." At that, the young man came to his senses and intensely implored the stranger. "Kindly tell me! I have waited years to know what it was, for she never told me.". The old woman opened her mouth, then closed it. "What?!" the young man almost cried from frustration, the answer so close, yet in the possession of this stranger, whose intentions he could not know. "You must gouge your own eyes out and give them to her. You must do it before you see her, for she will not allow you to do so if she sees you. If you want to save her, you must listen to my instructions." The young man considered "What is the purpose of such an act, how would that help her in the slightest?". The witch regarded him with piercing eyes "Many years ago, Lucinda had lost her innocence and fell prey to the whims and wishes of

a man who ruined her. As such, she must be restored by the purity in her heart and of her former self. Only by giving her back what she lost, and by opening her heart, can I restore what this land needs and yearns for.” The young man regarded her and trusted that she was speaking the truth: that seems to be every desperate man’s ultimate fate. “Very well...” the young man said, his voice firm, “I will do it under one condition. If this does not work as you promise, I am free to take your eyes and replace them with mine.” The witch did not hesitate “You may not make this a bargain. Either you sacrifice yourself for the one you love, or you abandon whatever hope of salvation you have!”. The young man nodded, took his knife with which he gutted Charles and popped his first eye out of its sockets. Agony ran through his body and he bit down a scream. He bit down so hard that blood started to flow out of his mouth. He was on the verge of fainting, but the old woman held him steady and clasped her hand around his knife gripping hand, tightening his grasp. Then, she guided his hand to his other eye and removed her hand. The young man pierced daggers at the knife in his hand, then he determinedly gouged his other eye too. The witch helped him stop the bleeding and said, “I will guide you to your mistress now.” The young man followed her, completely disoriented and at the whim of this stranger. His true love for Lucinda radiated from him like a lantern in the pitch blackness of the night. Once they have reached Lucinda, she immediately began to scream. “Have I not told you to leave me be?! Is this how you obey the one you love?”. The young man loosened the tightness in his jaw, and with a hoarse voice answered, “I do not obey you, sun of my life! I serve you!” a smile touched his face as he finished. With that, Lucinda cried more sorrowfully than before, her heart could not bare to see such pain inflicted. It did not help that this was truly the evidence of what she suspected, that the love he felt for her was as strong as the one she felt for him.

“Where is the strand?” the witch asked, “Give me the strand now! Time is of the essence!”. Lucinda immediately understood. If she did not want to waste the young man’s sacrifice, she must act immediately. Without further ado, she leapt to her feet, ran to her chest by the foot of her bed, and flung it open. A single, bloody strand was in there. She pinched it with her fingers and gave it to the witch. The witch then fed the strand through a needle and sowed the two eyes together, the hair barely holding. The witch then said “You must take one of the eyes in your mouth, as I will take the other. We will bite down at the same time, snap the hair holding the eyes in place, and swallow them whole. Do you understand me?”. Lucinda immediately wretched and shook her head, “I cannot do such a terrible thing!”. Vomit dripped from Lucinda’s mouth, yet her dignity remained intact! The witch scolded her “You must! Otherwise you will never be restored, and this man will not be the only one to lose what little hope is left.”. With that, Lucinda pulled herself up and regarded the young man. With great shame, she realized that she had never asked him for his name. She cried more painfully than she did before, the shame, inconceivable in its strength, threatened to sweep her away like dust in a whirlwind. With that, the witch knew that the time had come, before anything further could be said or done, she flung Lucinda’s mouth open, shoved one of the eyes in her mouth, pressed her own lips onto Lucinda’s, breathed her own life into the spell, and snapped the hair. Both of them swallowed their respective load and barely held it down, gagging in the process. Lucinda fell to the ground and immediately lost consciousness. The witch, knowing that the young man is completely ignorant of his surroundings, guided him with her voice, “Come here you fool! I must give you something.” The man fumbled his way to the hag “What is it? Is Lucinda alright?” the young man’s voice finally trembled, for her wellbeing is the only one he cares about. “Yes, and no. The pain that she has felt for neglecting you and not knowing your name will haunt her forever. For her to know that you have loved and served her without limits, without her ever asking your name, has created a gap that can never be filled. She will carry this shame

with her wherever she goes, like a blemish in her eye: you will see it, whenever you meet her gaze. Yet, she has been restored and the land, and its people, can rest assured that what they lost so long ago shall not be lost again. At least, not as long as you stay by her side and love her as you have until now, to the end of your days." With that, the witch grabbed his hands and said, "I will not live beyond this day, you are not the only one who sacrificed himself. Though you may have done it for love, I did it out of self-preservation. I am close to my end and need a new host to live off. Take my eyes and thrust them in your sockets. I will stay with you, see through you, until you shall die. Then, when you have been buried and your body starts to decompose, the eyes will turn into maggots and feed off of your brain to grow like a chick inside an egg. Once your skull is completely hollowed, they will emerge and fight each other, the victor eating the loser. The maggot will then dig its way to the surface, just to burry itself by the riverbank and lay there for one hundred years. Then, finally, I shall emerge out of the dirt and find myself again as I am now, only fifty years younger. It is not an existence I envy, yet it is better than the void thereof." The young man did not know whether to laugh or shudder, for such an outrageous lifecycle cannot be anything other than the horrid creation conjured by a creator who is both sadistic and nonsensical. "As you wish, I will become your host a thousand times over, if it means that I may gaze upon Lucinda for the rest of my life.". With that, the young man took the witch's eyes for his own and laid next to Lucinda until the morning sun awoke them both.

As Lucinda awoke, the young man could immediately see that her essence had finally been restored. Her hair already started to grow out of her skull, like sprouting plants in the soil after a long winter. "Oh, my dear lover. How could I have neglected you so! Please, if you can even bare to tell me, what is your name? For I want to name you before I marry you!" Lucinda pleaded at the verge of tears. "My name... How trivial a matter it is, for I am nothing without you to begin with. But if you wish to know it, it is Jameson.". Lucinda laughed, so deeply that Jameson joined her. The tears that rolled were out of pure joy. On the same day, they married and the whole kingdom rejoiced with them. Their children grew to be the most competent, adored, and beautiful people that have ever lived. When Jameson finally met his end, he was buried and his body became the nourishment for the witch, as predicted. Once the witch was born, she wrote the chronicles of Lucinda and Jameson, through the eyes that she herself used for observation. For generation and without end, the legend has been told and retold. A piece of our beloved Lucinda and Jameson lives on with each new witch that is reborn, to this very day.