

The Personal Diary of Miss Lulu Swallow

Night Film Teaser

by

Marisha Pessl

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Absolutely Confidential

Ink-stained Evidence Tag Attached to Journal

Reads:

Cold Case File 2231 – 243 XMF
FOUND JOURNAL, OWNER UNKNOWN
Crowthorpe Falls Police Dept.

Attached Note:

To Whom It May Concern at the Crowthorpe Falls Police Department:

My fourteen-year-old son came across this diary buried along a hiking trail just north of New York Route 30. Given the nature of the contents, I'm sure you'll understand my reasons for wanting to remain anonymous. I do hope you'll take it upon yourselves to investigate the matter.

Your neighbor in Cranberry Lake, N.Y.

Miss Swallow Diary Entries

January 2, 1978

How do you know if you'll love someone forever? That it will stand the test of time? Tonight Artie took me to dinner at Trader Vic's and I finally summoned the courage to break the news, that I'd thought it over and decided to take the part in the Cordova film after all.

I tried to assure him it would be good for me, a break away before the craziness of the wedding. I assured him his mother—a.k.a. The Harpy (didn't use this term of endearment, natch)—was handling all the arrangements and now that I've been fitted for the dress and chosen the flowers and the cake, there's very little I need to do.

Needless to say, Artie became angry. His face turned bright red and he told me that he expected me to give up being an actress once we were married, that a doctor's wife shouldn't do such things or spend time with such unsavory Hollywood characters and immoral lowlifes.

Thankfully, because Artie's spent the last ten years in medical school and the hospital, the name Cordova means nothing to him. He hasn't seen any of the films, not **Figures** or even **Distortion**, and I wasn't about to enlighten him—or he'd never let me go.

He told me then I couldn't go away for two months because I couldn't leave him and I couldn't leave Mother. I said he was so busy at the hospital he'd hardly know I was gone. And Mother was being looked after very well at Maple Grove. She's lost inside her brain now anyway. She doesn't know me, can't tell if I come or go. Both of us became so heated arguing, I accidentally knocked my glass of wine off the table, sending it smashing to the floor. The entire restaurant went silent and stared at us.

It wasn't until Artie dropped me off at home that I told him I was leaving the very next day to make the film. He began to cry. It alarmed me because I'd never seen Artie cry, not even after he operated on that little Mexican boy and he died. When I told him he was being crazy, that we were getting married April 5 at the Bel-Air Country Club, come hell or high water, that he had nothing to be sad about, he looked at me for a long time and said: "I just have a feeling I'm never going to see you again."

I hugged him and said there was no need to go zappy: I am dying to be Mrs. Artie Coltsworth. Even though I do hem and haw and wonder, I know in my heart this is true. I will be Mrs. Coltsworth, wife of a radiologist. I just want to do this one last thing before, that's all.

One film.

Artie said, "All right. Take care of yourself, Bunny," and drove away.

I have to admit, when I saw his car rounding the bend where there's that little funny palm tree bent over like it's looking for a lost earring, I wondered—I worried—if maybe he was right, that I never would see him again.

But then he made the left onto North La Brea, the muffler of his car purring into the hot night, and I went inside to finish packing.

January 3, 1978

Don't have much time to write, but I'm here! I'm at The Peak!

I haven't yet met The Man himself, but I've met all the other actors. It seems we've been assembled here like players from the far reaches of the world, coming to live here for a

spell without the slightest understanding about what we're appearing in or who is playing whom or what exactly is happening. But that's all part of the excitement. All the information we've gotten is from his assistant, Inez, who was there to greet me at the Albany airport. I honestly think she's a bit of a turkey. She scowls and barely reaches my elbow, with stiff black hair and big combat boots and round thick legs heavy as drainpipes.

She grabbed my suitcases and without so much as a hello, said, "You're shorter than you appeared in the **Fantasy Island** pilot. You've also gained weight. Let's hope Mr. Cordova doesn't mind." Obviously I didn't care to respond. She drove me to the estate in a dented old white van and didn't say two words to me, her mind seemingly quite occupied by something else.

The house is stupendous. It looks like a lost palace where princes once lived, a bit tattered on the outside but rich inside with tapestries and swords and moose heads and portraits of stiff men with dark eyes, polished staircases with banisters that you could slide down for days. I wandered into a library and saw, rather impossibly, there was a first edition of my favorite fantasy book from when I was a girl, **The Mysterious World of Bartho Lore**. Hidden behind a royal banner, I found some words crudely chiseled into the stone wall: **Memento mori**.

I recalled them from Latin class: **Remember that you will die**.

The sheer splendor of this estate makes me think Artie and I should go to Italy for our honeymoon. I tried calling him from the airport but there was no answer. I left a message telling him I loved him more than anything and I'd be back by his side in two months, ready to marry him, which in the grand scheme of married life is no time at all!

I have to dress and go downstairs for a welcome dinner in about five minutes, but really quickly: it's quite the shooting party Cordova has assembled here, with all sorts of interesting people who arrived today along with me. At least fifteen of us have come to stay—two who appear to be Italian and don't speak any English, a Moroccan who wears a turban, another man who walks with a cane and has a thick gray beard. There is also a priest, who is handsome and silent as a sequoia tree, and only reclines on chairs looking around as if he's expecting something at any moment—expecting **what**, I don't know.

But there's been no sign of The Man himself.
Cordova.

He remains a mystery more than ever. When I asked if anyone had seen him, I was told he might join us for dinner. "Or he might not." I **did** hear from one of the other actors—Ray Quinn Jr., who is British and just graduated from the Royal Academy ooh la la (good for him)—that we'd be getting our assigned parts and find all about the film, which appears to be called **Thumbscrew** (whatever that means?), tomorrow.

I'm so very thrilled to be here with these exotic people in this spectacular house. I don't think I'll sleep tonight.

January 11, 1978

There was an incident. Oh, God. It was awful. I don't know what to make of it. I'm sick. I don't even want to write it all down. But I should, I have to. I must try and make sense of it.

Where to begin? I haven't written in ages. I haven't had the chance. After a series of elaborate dinners and even a formal dance with a live orchestra, there was still no sign of Cordova—The Man. Gallo only tersely informed us, "He's working in his office putting some finishing touches on the script."

Then, three nights ago, Gallo assembled all fifteen of us in the winter garden. As a mute servant served us port and sherry, the odious woman finally gave us information on the characters we are playing in the film, which is indeed called **Thumbscrew**. I was over the moon and quite shocked to learn that I am the LEAD of the ENTIRE film!!! I'll be playing Emily Jackson, a young newlywed, and my husband is Brad, played by Ray Quinn Jr. (who is a total stone fox!!!). Over the course of the film, Emily comes to suspect that her new husband is the perpetrator of horrific murders plaguing the remote Vermont town where they live. Once a month, a young boy, age eight, is found dead in the snow in the woods, cruelly murdered.

We were then all handed a detailed production schedule and I learned I wasn't needed for shooting for DAYS, not until the twelfth of January. Gallo then told us—looking specifically at me, I noticed—that if we weren't needed on set (somewhere else on the property) we were free to "amuse" ourselves in any way we liked, to make ourselves "at home."

I took this to mean I was free to wander the estate as I pleased.

The next morning, after an elaborate breakfast alone—no sign of any of the other actors—I decided to explore the mansion. I found an old servants' staircase that is quite narrow and twists up through the rear of the house. I wandered the bedrooms on the third floor, most filled with strange figurines and a musty sealed smell that made me think no one had set foot there for quite a while.

I had just entered a seating area off another guest room, when I noticed a discernible crack in the brick around the fireplace. I took hold of the mantel, yanked back, and sure enough—the entire thing opened up into a door. It led into a narrow wooden passage, barely wider than my own shoulders.

I slipped inside, realizing as I moved it was a secret passageway, probably used by the servants. A network of corridors appeared to run through the house, much like hundreds of constricted veins winding through the tissues of a body. As I walked along it I realized in horror there were even intermittent peepholes through which one could spy on the occupants going about their lives in the rooms, dressing and undressing, even taking baths. Naturally I was quite shocked, but also, I'll admit, intrigued.

I had a funny idea: I could find Cordova's room. I figured he had to have finally made an appearance with the actors on the first day of shooting, but it would nevertheless be incredible to see where the director slept, maybe even watch him come home—see who he was and what he looked like once and for all.

I don't know how long I wandered that shriveled vein inside the walls. But suddenly I began to feel quite sick, claustrophobic, and exhausted, being in such tight quarters. I saw no one in any of the rooms I was spying on. One after another—empty. The only light was coming from those peepholes but as the sun started to set, I realized I was going to be left entirely in the dark. I wanted to go eat something, perhaps resume my secret exploration the next day when I had a better layout of the place, an understanding of where everyone was staying.

But when I fumbled my way back to the door by which I'd entered—I couldn't get it open. It had been locked or had somehow become jammed. No matter how hard I kicked and pounded, it didn't budge. I screamed, but no one heard me. Only silence. When I peered out the peephole I could see silvery moonlight in the room, the curtains dancing in the breeze. Someone had opened the window, because I swear on Mother's life it had not been open before.

And so I remained inside, slept in there—trapped inside the wall for two days. That's right. TWO DAYS!!! No one came looking for me. No one heard my crying. I couldn't find the way downstairs to the kitchen, where surely all of the servants or the other actors were at dinner. I fumbled around and I wept and even peed on myself trying to find a room with occupants, but the house is too vast. I crawled and climbed in circles, passing the same red bedroom again and again. I couldn't get out for the life of me. I was imprisoned inside the walls like a termite.

TWO DAYS.

I did fall asleep, hoping I was dreaming, only to wake up still inside that shrunken passageway with those tiny portholes looking out into a colored world, the rooms empty.

I began to wonder if this was how it felt to be dead, to be a ghost, looking at the living world through those tiny peepholes of color and life, where no one can see you and no one knows you're there. You're alone.

Finally, I'd managed to claw my way in a new direction, up another flight of narrow stairs, so tight I had to go sideways, as if I were a bit of thread inserting myself through the eye of a needle. I'd come to the tower bedroom of that gorgeous priest, who had said, when some of the actors questioned him about his identity, that he wasn't an actor at all, but a family friend with a church in the nearby town. He was in the room, very casually taking off his clerical clothes, piece by piece, as if about to take a bath. I was about to start pounding so he might hear me, when there was a single knock and the bedroom door opened very slowly. After a pause, someone entered wearing a black robe.

I think it was a man. But I'm not even sure. The figure moved out of sight. I couldn't see the person's body or face. Yet what the two of them did next—I can't even write it.

I couldn't see much. They moved out of sight. But I could hear it. Paintings crashed to the floor. Sheets and pillows exploded with feathers. Curtains were pulled down. There were guttural cries that didn't sound human. When they finished, the whole room was destroyed. I was too stricken to move.

As quickly as the figure in the robe arrived, he—or she—left, and the priest, entirely naked, stepped into sight to lock the door. He looked quite exhausted, even beaten, and, after a moment of recovery, he sat down in a chair, lighting a cigarette. It was my only chance.

I began to pound on the wall, yelling at the top of my lungs. **Help me. Help, please.**

He didn't hear me at first. But then he rose and though he was initially confused, opening the door, staring down the hallway, probably wondering if I were a poltergeist or a mad voice in his head—finally he understood that I was inside the walls. After much searching he found the trap door in his own room, a bookshelf, and with rather violent poundings using a fire poker, he managed to unlock it. Sobbing, I flew past him without a word down the staircase and across the many hallways and landings until I was back in my room.

It looked quite different from how I'd left it. All of the windows had been opened. The bed was turned down. Emily Jackson's wardrobe was also neatly laid out for me—a red wool sweater, bell-bottom jeans, a pair of platform sandals.

There was a note from Inez Gallo folded beside it.

I haven't left my room since. I'm absolutely starving but I can't imagine going down there to dinner, facing everyone. How could no one have noticed my absence? Trapped in a wall like a disgusting rabid rodent for two days. I really thought I might die or go crazy in there, screaming, forgotten, my mind withering away like a raisin, just like Mother's.

I'm going to leave The Peak first thing tomorrow.

Oh, God, I really must get out of here. I hate this place. But first I must get some sleep.

My Dear Miss Swallow,

Here you'll find your wardrobe for Day 4 of Production for **Thumbscrew**. Please report to the main foyer at 4 A.M. sharp, where you'll be promptly transported to the set and presented with the day's dialogue.

Don't be late.

I. Gallo

January 13, 1978

Jeepers. It's been almost forty-eight hours since I last wrote and—what has happened!

For one thing, I'm still here. Still at The Peak.

Yesterday was my first day of shooting **Thumbscrew**. We did only one wide shot, the scene close to the end of the film when I run outside carrying my husband's briefcase because I'm convinced there's very important evidence locked inside and I must break it open. It will tell me once and for all if my husband is guilty of these horrific acts, these child murders where every boy is found naked in a snowdrift with his throat slit.

We did fifty-six takes—56!—one after the other without breaks, Inez telling me to run out of the house in a million different ways (I didn't realize there were that many ways to run)—a house that is just an exterior built on a soundstage. The lights were so bright I couldn't see the director sitting beyond the crew in the darkness on the crane, staring down at me. All I could make out was a hulking dark figure wearing glasses, the lenses reflecting every now and then like an animal was there crouched in the rafters staring down at me.

I knew it had to be Cordova.

When we finished I went back to my dressing room. There was a knock on my door. A tall black-haired man was standing there wearing black spectacles.

"Don't want to disturb you," he said, smiling. "I only want to say what I hope."

It was Cordova, of course. What to say? C has quite a winning and warm way about him. As if there's a little more heat around him than any other person. I asked what he meant and he said he would be very happy if I decided to let myself fall, "let go of the rope"—of life, he seemed to mean—and just start sliding down it so fast it burned the insides of my hands.

As he said this, he picked up my right hand and very tenderly opened it, finger by finger, exposing the palm, inspecting its bare pinkness—and kissed it. It felt outrageous, as if he'd just kissed me in the most intimate spot in the world. Then he left.

That night, I woke up to find someone entering my bedroom. I'd locked the door, of course, but someone had the key. I saw in horror that it was my husband, Brad—Ray Quinn Jr. He told me he didn't want to scare me, only to talk in private, if that was okay.

I told him that was some come-on, but he sat down on the chair and I could tell he was very upset and a little drunk. He started to talk about this house and the circumstances in which we found ourselves, being invited here. He said he had serious reservations about Cordova, he didn't trust him, there was something deeply wrong. Brad confided in me that after the first day of shooting, when he still hadn't met Cordova, he felt this entire operation was for the birds. He decided to call his agent and get the hell out of here. But the phone in his room had no dial tone. The ones downstairs did, but they only rang interminably, even when he was calling numbers on the outside—his wife in London, his agent's apartment in New York—that he knew had answering machines. They never clicked on. He couldn't get through to anyone.

After everyone had gone to bed, around 2 A.M., Brad left the house, running down the driveway, which was quite long, winding on and on through the forest in the pitch dark. After walking what felt like two miles he encountered the massive wrought-iron gate. But the gate was chained shut. When he tried to climb over the fencing, he was nearly electrocuted.

He thinks we're prisoners. He became very distressed telling me all of this. Is this some kind of nightmare? We both agreed to get to the bottom of it in the morning, but not to let on to anyone—not any of the other actors and especially not Inez Gallo, who watches everyone like a hawk. He and I will be coconspirators. We're in this together. We're Brad and Emily Jackson, after all.

Newlyweds who are madly in love. Ha ha.

What happened next, I'm sick over. It was my loneliness left over from crawling through the mansion's walls like a slug. We dozed off just as the sun was coming up and when I woke Brad was sleeping soundly next to me. He is so decent I found myself cuddling against him, and then he opened his eyes, kissing me. Then he ripped my nightgown clean off, holding me tight in his arms. For a second when we were making love, I wondered if that had been his aim all along in coming to my room, that his fear of being imprisoned here at The Peak was just a calculated ruse to get me to trust him, to need him.

Dearest Artie, forgive me. I love you so. I never should have left you. When I woke up at 3:30 A.M. to make my call time downstairs, Brad, my husband—Ray Quinn Jr., the actor—was gone, as if he'd never been here in the first place.

In the meantime, I have to see if he's right, God help us. Can we leave this place?

January 29, 1978

Things are so different since I wrote last that I can hardly imagine my mindset before, being such a child. Needless to say, I have settled into a routine here. We all have—working alongside The Man.

C.

I should describe him. But how do you describe a feeling you've never felt or read about? What you attempt to capture in words has more to do with the limitations of your senses and experience, even the rudimentary quality of the English language, than anything essential about that vast thing you're trying to capture. Cordova is beyond anything I've ever encountered. He has taken me under his wing. Mr. Cordova has told me, staring into me, that I am turning into an extraordinary woman. **My cherished swallow**—what he calls me. Being near him gives me electricity but simultaneously a feeling of being totally unrequited, of wanting SO MUCH more, as if the only way to be satisfied would be if he cut into me and devoured me whole—funny as that sounds.

He's calling me now. I have to

February 16, 1978

I don't know what's happening. I can't. I'm not myself. They have been manipulating me. My husband, Brad. Maybe even the other actors are in on it, too. And C. It's the way they look at me—as if they all know something I don't.

What? What is it?

I have to get inside the walls again, to find out. No, I have to get out of here. Go for help. Get back to Artie. He must be trying to find me.

He must be wondering where I am.

For one thing, these child murders are all over the news. Open up any newspaper and they're there, the crime scene, the fat-faced police who don't know anything and ask the dumbest questions, this snow, this endless snow covering everything like a layer of fat, making me feel as if I've been blindfolded with a white cloth, hiding everything from view.

February 19, 1978

Oh, my God, oh, God.

You won't believe—it's really happening. If something happens to me—I need to hide this journal somewhere, get it outside to the public, stash it somewhere, bury it in a safe place, just in case. Just in case I'm never found. It's the only record of the truth, of what's here, an honest testament—oh, what can I even say about what just happened to me?

Brad and I sleep separately now. I suspect it's because the murders are taking away his sex drive. Because he's responsible, I know this now. We were shooting in the kitchen the other day and I saw, in bright light, encrusting his thumbnail, something reddish brown. It was blood.

I decided to find out where he was sleeping. The remote bedroom where Inez Gallo secretly stowed him away. In the library, buried on one of the back shelves in a leatherbound box labeled Lord and Lady Sludeley—care of their attorney in England—I found ancient blueprints of the estate, which I took back to my bedroom and hid under my mattress. After memorizing how to reach his room, I entered the walls again. I made sure to keep the door propped open. If anyone locked it after me, trying to seal me inside, hoping to

bury me alive in the walls—they'd have no idea where I was, because I'd be too stealthy, moving like a centipede.

I was also prepared this time, carrying both a flashlight and a fire poker so I could defend myself. By the time they noticed I was missing, that I'd entered the walls again, they wouldn't know where I'd entered or even where I was.

I'd be two steps ahead of them all.

They think I'm stupid.

I made my way to Brad's room. He wasn't there. I waited in the wall and when he finally returned after four in the morning he seemed agitated, breathing hard, possibly even frightened. There was no blood on him. He carried no weapon. He was pulling off his herringbone coat, when there was a knock on the door. It was Inez Gallo.

"Lulu has disappeared," she whispered.

"Again?"

"I know where she's gone."

"Where?"

And when Inez didn't answer, Brad turned around, squinting at his walls.

"Emily?" he called out.

They knew I was in there—watching them from the walls.

I ran away as fast as I could. I didn't care if I made noise. I scraped and scratched and shoved my way along inside the wall, ripping my dress and skin to shreds. I could feel reverberations of more people entering the passageways in the walls above me on some other floor, but I'd been studying the blueprints, so I knew exactly where to go. I'd given myself an escape—there was a door in the library that I'd pried open. To my relief, no one had discovered it. I exited, hurrying through the music room, the dining room, and into the kitchen, where in the dumbwaiter there was another access to the passages. I climbed back into the wall, racing up to the tower bedroom where, to my relief, the priest was sleeping soundly. I knocked on the door where he'd let me through that first time, startling him.

"Don't be alarmed, it's just me. Please don't tell the others. They're after me."

I can't really remember what I said, I was weeping. He must have taken pity, because he nodded and without a word he turned on a lamp, grabbed the Bible next to him, and ripped a page out.

"Take the underground tunnels," he whispered. He was drawing something. "To get to them, you have to get down to the boiler room in the basement. You'll find a door there, go through it, down a flight of wooden stairs into a tunnel. It'll be dark but follow it, eventually it'll lead you into a wide vestibule where there are thirteen doorways. Go through the one marked The Z."

He handed me the page. He'd drawn a rudimentary map.

"The Z?" I asked.

"It's the safest way out. That's what I've been told."

"Who told you?"

"People who understand this place."

"The Z."

"God bless you." And then he kissed my forehead, smiling that funny little smile of his.

There wasn't time to talk further. We could hear them coming. He whispered that he'd say he never saw me and switched out the light.

March 26, 1978

My dearest Lulu,

I trust this letter finds you well. I hope you'll forgive me for contacting your agent to get another address where I might reach you. I had no other way of getting in touch, and as you know the way we last parted was rather sudden. I visited your apartment today and was shocked when your landlord informed me that she'd actually seen you, that you in fact returned weeks ago "in fine spirits" to pack up your belongings and collect your mail before taking off again. The landlord said you had a plane to catch?

I'm left with no choice but to officially call off our engagement—what you have already done rather cruelly by your silence. Your decision to take off with no word, to have no communication with me for months—this goes, too, for the nurses at Maple Grove, who receive your monthly checks. But no personal greeting? Not a single inquiry after your poor mother's deteriorating health? This isn't the quality I hope to have in a wife.

I do wish you the best, Bunny. Oddly I will always love precisely what drove you away from me: your impetuous nature, your verve for living, your careless passion that flew in the face of all reason. I sincerely hope this film has been everything you hoped it would be, that you have found the kind of happiness that I was unable to give you.

Yours with love,
Artie

P.S. Please find enclosed the darling picture you gave me when we first met. It doesn't feel right to keep it.

Graphics to be Tucked inside the Journal Pages:

1. One page from the script of THUMBSCREW
2. A note to Lucy from Cordova?
3. The 1970s bikini photo of Lulu on the beach that Artie returns (scribbled on and defaced)**
4. The hand-drawn map of the tunnels that the priest scribbles on a Bible page for Lulu
5. A Polaroid of Lulu (from neck down only) from Wardrobe featuring her dressed as Emily Jackson (1978)**
6. Inez Gallo's note