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Life According to Lubka

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

I did lunch with Lisa. I hadn't seen her in months and she said she had some big news to tell me. I was hoping she'd split up from that humorless dyke she's been with forever but no, *au contraire*, Lisa and Toni are going to be mommies.

They've used this agency in Knightsbridge, really, really exclusive. You can say what eye colour you prefer, stuff like that, and they guarantee the donor is high-end, not some jerk-off on welfare. They're getting twins, one of each. I'd have expected them to order two girls, considering how Toni feels about guys, but I guess it'll be different if the boy's made from a Lisa egg. And Toni'll make sure he doesn't grow up oppressing women. Twins, though. That's not going to do her figure any good. Such as it is.

She's four months along now so they're picking out the nursery drapes and everything. That sounds like it could be fun. You can buy some really neat stuff for kids. I could do it if I wanted. It'd take some thinking about though. A baby is a very big decision. And an expense. I read this report that it costs 300,000 dollars to raise a kid, and that's probably if you go for the Economy Plan. That's probably if you get a stroller with, like, wooden wheels. I could do a lot with that kind of money. I could get a time-share on St Barth.

Two hours I sat there listening to all this stuff about spinals and soy baby formula, *and* I picked up the check, and she never asked me a damned thing about what's going on in *my*

life. She never even mentioned my new neck. I've noticed this happens when people get pregnant. They become completely self-obsessed.

So we're coming out of the Wolseley and I run into Hunt Madson.

'Buzz, Buzz,' he says, 'You are looking fly! Are you ready for the Urbies? Ready to do or die?'

Comet and Starburst both have bands up for Best Industrial Album at the Urban Musical Awards. I have Spam Javelins, he has Banana Bubbles.

I said, 'Give it up, Hunt. This year it's ours.'

'Not a chance,' he says. 'Better start practising your Cheerful Loser face. See you in Seattle. You staying at the Waterfront?'

Then he says, 'By the way, I heard a whisper on the street you might not be going home empty-handed. You got any information you'd care to share?'

I thought he must mean Best Extreme Metal. We've got Mach 10 nominated although frankly they're the underdogs, but he says, 'No. I mean Lifetime Achievement. Course, there's a lot of talk this time of year. It could be a red herring. A lot of people think Ed Rix should get it before he goes tits up. He's on oxygen now, you know? Carries a tank when he goes out. It's such a tragedy. But you also got to say, it'd be nice for an award like that to go to somebody at Comet. You know? Before you all die of old age? They put any of those stair chairs in your building yet?'

Hunt Madson is such a butt hole. Still. Lifetime Achievement.

I didn't go back to the office. I had a couple of new bands to see later and anyway I wasn't in a going-to-the-office

kind of mood. I got a shoulder rub and an express facial, picked up a prescription from Dr G. Then I hit Rubber Queen where I found this eat-your-heart-out, single spaghetti strap, watermelon red, mid-calf, tube dress. I already got a Hector Munro cropped pants suit, kind of hibiscus shot with tangerine, but I find you need at least two outfits for the Urbies. You wake up the day of the awards, there's no telling who you'll feel like being.

I get home and the cleaning girl's sitting with a duster in her hand watching *Oprah,* so she's fired, and there's another whiney message from Felix on the machine.

'Hi. It's me. I wondered if it'd be okay to pick up the rest of my stuff, maybe Sunday? Only I need my old trainers.'

He should have thought about that before he walked out. A guy decides he's leaving, so be it, but he'd better plan ahead a little, he'd better have his bag packed. Otherwise he's liable to find that the sneakers he left under *my* bed and the ten-buck sucker-dart crossbow and that pathetic so-called CD collection have all gone down the jolly old chute.

A&R asked me to look at two bands they thought might be worth signing so around nine I go all the way out to Acton to take a look at Party Susan and the gig's been cancelled. Somebody's time of the month, probably. Girl bands are more trouble than they're worth. So then I got a cab down to Brixton to check out the Understains. Three more bozos who wear their baseball caps sideways but they made an interesting sound. Kind of dubstep with a lot of bass. Worth a second look at any rate. We might be able to do something with them.

I didn't get home till two and of course I'm still up, up,

up. That's the thing about night work. Sometimes lately the Mebaral doesn't even touch me. Plus I'm wound up about Felix. I mean, we were a good combo. He was uber-cute without any distracting extras, like opinions. That's how I like them. I do the choosing around here. I'm the one with the money and the address book. I took him to places – I mean, without me he wouldn't have been allowed in to hand round the canapes. Then I'm gone for three weeks, shopping for Japanese bands, and when I get back he announces he's been thinking. Beginner's luck. He's decided he's got age difference issues. The fucking ingrate. I notice he waited till I bought him the diamond ear stud before he started thinking.

And as if the Felix thing isn't enough I've got this Lifetime Achievement story going round and round in my head. Like, I always thought of it as an award for the walking dead. Ed Rix definitely has to be a candidate, but Spinks got it one year and I think he's still around.

It'd be so great to get something like that. All those sad people back home, used to call me names, used to forget to invite me to their sleepovers. That'd show them. Not that they'll be up to speed on the business I'm in, but if I get Lifetime Achievement the news'll be like, everywhere. Even losers who never made it out of Pittsburgh'll get to hear about that. Then they'll realise their error. Lifetime Achievement is like getting your footprint outside of Grauman's Theatre.

Anyhow, I have all this shit going on and I can't sleep. So I try a Tylox and a Jack D and then I'm just starting to relax and the goddam birds start up. Five-thirty in the a.m. I mean what's that about? This is the Docklands. This is the city. You

don't pony up half a million for a sub-penthouse in a prime urban development to get birdsong. If you want Nature and stuff you buy a place in Vermont.

I guess I managed about three hours, then I woke up with such a tension headache I couldn't even stand the noise of the juicer. Mornings like that the only thing to do is take things nice and steady. So I get in to the office around one and when the Muffin Top sees me she actually exhibits a couple of vital signs.

'Yesterday,' she said, 'after you went out to lunch and didn't come back, somebody called.'

I'm kind of between interns right now. Candidates for an opportunity like that, to work for an industry legend, you'd expect to get the pick of the bunch, but it's surprisingly hard to get the right guy. You don't want a total doormat, obviously, but then you don't want somebody who's going to have a nervous breakdown just because you occasionally throw a phone at them. We're in a high-pressure business here. So until I find young Mr Right I'm relying on the front office to field my calls. It's no wonder I'm stressed.

There's a nameless temp who mainly goes out for the coffee orders. There's the Muffin Top, who claims she's doing No Carbs and yet every time I see her she has her fist in a bag of candy. And then there's Mal. He's been with us a couple of months now. He looks about fifteen, weighs around ninety-five, wears Buddy Holly glasses and deeply uncool zippered knitwear. He does call me Ms Wexler, however. I like that.

The Muffin Top, though. I'd dearly love to know who hired her. I've asked many times but nobody ever owns up.

So, somebody called for me. Yesterday. In the p.m.

I said, 'Is this a quiz show? How many guesses do I get?'

She said, 'It was a woman.'

I said, 'And of course you put her through to my voicemail?'

'No,' she said. 'She didn't want me to. She said she didn't like talking to machines.'

Aha. A vital clue.

She said, 'Anyway, I wasn't even sure it was you she wanted. She asked for Beryl Wexler.'

Got it. A female, who is pathetically phobic about technology and who refuses to respect certain life choices I have made. Well, given that Mom's been out in Ridgelawn cemetery fourteen years now there's only one woman that could be.

The Muffin Top said, 'Is that your real name then? Beryl?'

A stupid smirk on her dumb ass face.

I said, 'No. But if this person calls back I'll speak to her. And by the way, fruit chews are carbs.'

There were some okay names around in '61 when I was born. Mom and Dad went to the movies, they even read *Time* magazine. They could have named me Jackie or Marilyn, or something unusual invented with Scrabble tiles, but no, not my folks. I guess they said, 'Seeing we've been blessed with another little daughter after so long a time, seeing she's come along and queered things just when we were free to go polka dancing every night and not need a babysitter, let's choose carefully and saddle her with the ugliest name we can come up with. Beryl Eunice Ermengild Wexler.

I'm just sitting thinking we might have some kind of situ-

ation developing back home for Dorothy to call me, and my phone rings. It's Dave Corcoran.

'Buzz, dear,' he says. 'A minute of your precious, if you'd be so kind.'

CHAPTER TWO

I don't like going up to Dave's corner kingdom. You have to walk past the water cooler and all those open doors. Everyone knows where you're going. It makes you feel like you're reporting to the principal's office.

He was playing with his stress balls.

'Pull up a pew,' he says. 'I tried to catch you yesterday but nobody seemed to know where you were.'

I said, 'I was in a lot of places yesterday. Tell you who I saw. Hunt Madson. He asked me if I'd heard anything, a rumour?'

'What?' he said, 'What'd Madson say?'

Really kind of jumped on me, like he'd heard something too.

I said, 'Just some whisper he heard about the Urbies, about a Lifetime Achievement Award. Someone at Comet?'

'Really,' he says. 'No, I didn't hear that. That'd be nice.'

He's trying not to smile, I can tell. I've known Dave too long for him to fool me. Which gets me thinking, maybe it's not me. Maybe it's him. The Urban Music Panel has been known to get things wrong. Every year they find new ways to goof. Well, if Dave Corcoran gets Lifetime Achievement I'll quit. I mean, that would be *so* not right. The only smart thing Dave ever did was to listen to me once in a while.

Who was it told him Hardcore Emo was going to be the

big trend in '89? Who was it told him we had to get ourselves a boy band? Hellfire, I didn't only launch Backdoor Boyz. I *found* them for him, I groomed them. There's nobody to touch me in this business, everybody says so. Angry Belgians, Not the Andrews Sisters, Lime Twist. Those were all *my* babies. Lifetime Achievement for Dave Corcoran? It totally cannot be.

He said, 'I haven't heard anything, I swear. But I'm sure if anybody at Comet is going to be so honoured we'll soon hear about it.'

He didn't know how much notice they give people for an award like Lifetime.

He said, 'What's up? You worried you won't have time to write your acceptance speech? Worried about what you'll wear?'

I said, 'I never worry about what to wear. I always look fabulous.'

He said, 'You do, Buzz, you do. Knockout. Now listen, I've got something to run by you. Something that's not your usual territory but I think it has your name on it. It's a World Music band.'

I sat, waited. World Music is the Mojave Desert of Comet Audio. It's Ulan fucking Bator. I don't even know which floor their office is on and I have no interest in finding out. Besides, I never return Dave's first serve.

He said, 'We've got a group coming over. We signed them last year and they're something rather special. The Gorni Grannies. Bulgarian ladies of a certain age. Their first album's just out and they're booked to do a promotional tour. Five UK venues with a show called Balkanalia – that's with an exclamation mark – then ten days in the States. But their

Artist Rep's in quarantine. Holly. She picked up something nasty in Mozambique.'

He pushes a CD across the desk. *Singing the Harvest.*

I said, 'Not me, Dave. I do cutting edge not cutting corn. Plus, I don't go on the road unless it's something very, very special.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'And this is. Would I waste your time on any old? Music-wise these ladies are off the screen, you never heard anything like it. Plus, they've never been out of Bulgaria. They're tour virgins. As far as I can make out, they don't even have a manager. Well, there's some relative of one of them kept calling Holly about security, but basically they're on their own. They need taking care of, giving a bit of direction. All those bands you did it for, way back. You had the magic touch. And don't tell me you don't miss the thrill of the road. I know I do.'

I said, 'Then you take them.'

'Buzz, Buzz,' he says, 'they're old ladies. They need a woman out there with them.'

There's a girl in Finance who's into that folksy shit. I heard her talking about this guy she's dating, plays traffic cone in some band, everything recycled, banjos made from old broiler pans and stuff. I told Dave, he should give it to her. Call it an interesting career development opportunity.

He said, 'It's not like this is completely new ground. You did a terrific job with those Bhangra Boys. I mean, who'd have thought?'

Well the Bhangra Boys were hip-hop. These are crones.

I said, 'Look at them. And this is when they've made an effort for a photo shoot. These women are older than God.'

He said, 'Not all of them. There's one of them is only forty. Remind me, Buzz, how old are you?'

Bastard. I look great and he knows it. With this new neck I'm thirty-five.

He said, 'You may not know this but World Music is our fastest growing division. We've almost doubled our list in the past twelve months. Have you thought about it?'

I said, 'Thought about what?'

'Changing markets, changing times. I know you like to be where the action is.'

I said, 'I *am* where the action is.'

They're lined up for the photo, arms linked, all wearing long skirts and aprons and those babushka scarves tied around their heads. No bras. Not many teeth. And they're all smiling. I mean, who *smiles* on an album cover? But it's one of those dumb things, you look at the picture and you can't help but smile back. Radical.

He said, 'I see the flicker of a smile. Is that a Yes?'

Then he shows me the itinerary. King's Lynn, Stoke-on-Trent, Burnley. I never heard of those places. Chicago though, that's okay. Reno's fine. LA is great. But Pittsburgh? Of all the places on my travel no-no list, year upon year, welded into the Number One spot. And brought to mind twice in one day too? Uh-oh. That's not good. That really spooks me.

I said, 'Why Pittsburgh?'

'Search me,' he said. 'But I'm sure there's a good reason. World Music has its hotspots. Maybe Pittsburgh's one of them. Holly knows what she's doing. And you'll note that you finish the U.S. leg in Mendocino, California. Convenient for a quick hop up to Seattle for the Urbies. I'll bet it's only a couple of hours.'

It'd be fun to be back in LA. It must be three years.

I said, 'This is a one-off, right? If I do this you're not going

to land me with a bunch of Berbers that play camel bells? No Solomon Island nose-flutes?'

He laughed.

He said, 'It'll be more like a holiday than a band tour. Just think. No groupies sneaking in, hiding under the beds. No broken toilet bowls. And remember what I said. World Music is the Next Big Thing.'

Well actually, Grime Beat is going to be the next big thing. Evil Marsupial are going to be the next big thing, but what does Corcoran know. I see things coming practically before they even started down the turnpike. I have this extra sense, like horses know when there's going to be an earth tremor. It's a gift.

I get back downstairs and the Muffin Top is counting coins, tongue sticking out, heavy breathing.

She said, 'Would you like to give something? It's for flowers for Holly. She's in the Hospital for Topical Diseases.'

'Tropical,' Mal says. 'It's tropical diseases.'

'Now you've made me lose count.'

I said, 'I need something on Bulgaria.'

I get the dead fish look.

'Bulgaria is a country.'

She said, 'You going on holiday?'

I said, 'We have artists coming in from Bulgaria. Holly's artists as a matter of fact. Call World Music, get me anything that might be useful.'

She said, 'I haven't got time to do it now. I've got to organise these flowers and take the card round for everybody to sign. I can't be expected to do everything.'

And Mal says very quietly, 'Or even *anything*.'

He says, 'I'll do Bulgaria if you like, Ms Wexler. Actually, I've been to Bulgaria.'

And lo, the clouds parted, angel choirs sang and the front office was bathed in a golden light. Little Mal has been to Bulgaria, on vacation.

I said, 'Where is it, exactly?'

He said, 'You keep going straight till you get to Romania, then it's first right. If you get to Greece you've overshot.'

The Muffin Top said, 'Are the clubs any good?'

He said, 'I don't know. I was bird-watching.'

She said, 'What do you mean?'

He said, 'Which bit didn't you understand, "bird" or "watching"?'

The Muffin Top says, 'You mean like an old anorak? You mean hiding in the grass with a magnifying glass, like an old perv?'

'Yes,' he said, 'or even with high-powered binoculars. I look at their legs and their breasts. And their beaks. I'm a beak man, really.'

She said, 'You're weird.'

I said, 'Why Bulgaria? Can't you watch birds in, like, Hyde Park?'

He said, 'Not if you want to see a pygmy cormorant. Not if you're hoping to see a masked shrike.'

Just this once I think the Muffin Top may be right.

I said, 'Well I'm not going to Bulgaria. Bulgaria is coming to me. I just need bottom line. For instance, what do they eat?'

Kebabs, he reckons. Kebabs are okay. Any time I get the deeply urgent late night munchies I order me two doners on pitta with hot sauce, hold the salad.

He said, 'Yogurt's very big there too.'

Yogurt I can handle. As long as they won't expect like, chicken's feet or goat brains. Artists can be very temperamental, especially just before a show. When Tartan Fairies were playing Helsinki their bass guitarist had a conniption fit because he'd ordered crunchy peanut butter and they sent smooth. Put his fist through a mirror. We realised afterwards he'd forgotten to take his beta-blocker but still, it was a useful lesson to me.

With performers the little things can make all the difference.

I said, 'What about bathrooms? Will they know how to flush a john?

He says it depends. The hotels he stayed in had all mod cons but out in the wilds he saw a lot of squatters.

He said, 'I can also tell you off the top of my head Bulgaria's into Round One of the UEFA Cup. But you probably don't need to know that.'

I called Corcoran.

I said, 'I've found the perfect minder for your singing Grannies. He's right here in the building. Mal.'

He said, 'Who?'

I said, 'Mal. He's in the front office. Little skinny kid but he's got a great attitude, and he knows everything about Bulgaria.'

He said, 'Buzz, *you* are doing the Grannies. These ladies are special. We're not sending them out with some kid, and they don't need an expert on Bulgaria. They need somebody they can relate to. They need somebody to show them the ropes. Why are you trying to offload this? I thought we had a deal.'

I said, 'A *deal* suggests we both get something out of this. Right now I see zero benefit to me.'

I hear one of Dave's big sighs

He said, 'I'd have thought you'd be glad to take a little time out, slow down for a few weeks. This is a business that can burn a person up and you've kept up the pace longer than most.'

The age thing again.

I said, 'Hauling a bunch of old ladies half way round the world isn't time out. A sun lounger in Martinique is time out.'

He said, 'You've had rather a lot of sickies this year and we shouldn't ignore the warning signs. Let's not forget what happened to Luke.'

Well, Luke was plain crazy. He was out of control. He'd buy stuff any old place. I mean, you have to have a hundred per cent reliable supplier. With me, if it didn't come from Dr G, I won't touch it. And I have not had 'rather a lot of sickies'. I've had flu three times and a migraine attack in Amsterdam, which was hardly my fault. That bottle of schnapps was off. Kind of oxidised or something.

It's about four-thirty and the Muffin Top splutters back to life.

She said, 'It's that woman again, asking for Beryl Wexler. Her name's Mrs Luft.'

Mrs Luft. My sister, Dorothy.

'Beryl,' she said, 'is that you? I must say you're not the easiest person to track down. Now we really have to talk. It's about our father.'

Oh yes. Our father, who art in Troy Hill.