

Providence

by Edna Wilson

The image on the television screen faded, but his face remained in Lucy's mind. Heart thumping, she knew she had to see this man. Knew she had to prove, if only to herself, that her feelings transcended the medium and were real, not just fantasy.

It had started like any other 'crush' on a movie star. One episode of the new television series had really captured her imagination. She was 40 years old and a car accident three years ago had left her widowed, scarred physically and emotionally. Unable to pick up the threads of her administrative job, she had stayed at home, looking after her young daughter.

She hated the house - couldn't keep it tidy no matter how she tried. She hated housework - could always think of something better to do, like visiting friends, shopping or sitting down to knit. Yet, all of this just led to more and more frustration. It would build inside her, like a volcano and when the eruption came it was terrifying. She would bang doors, rip newspapers, slam books, kick cushions, throw food, toys, anything. And scream. It always, but always, ended in tears and the feeling of utter hopelessness.

The time had come to get on with her life. Make-up and longer hair hid most of the scars on her face and the healing process had numbed her sorrow. She was ready to take on something - but what? Her frustration began to permeate her dreams. Always dreams about getting lost - struggling to get somewhere. Riding a cycle along country lanes; driving a car through a town; walking endless corridors in a hotel. She was so familiar with them she would tell herself, in her dream, not to be so silly as she knew the way - she had been there many times before. But the ending was always the same. She always got lost!

Eventually, she tried a number of part time jobs that fitted in with Amy's school times. They were all right as jobs; Christmas help at a local video store and bench work with a small engineering firm. But this was not it. This was not what she was meant to do. But what was she meant to do? Which way should she turn?

One Friday, on the spur of the moment, she gave in her notice at the engineering firm. Everyone was surprised, including Lucy, but she had just had enough. She was restless and could not concentrate on anything.

That same evening, at home she sat down and with a magazine in one hand, idly switched on the television and scanned the channels for anything of interest to watch. It was then she suddenly sat up straight, eyes wide, as she saw for the first time, that face, she knew instantly, she would never forget. Standing in front of the screen, she was suspended in time, completely enraptured by what she saw enacted there.

The series was an American import and was becoming very popular. This man was one of its co-stars but Lucy had never heard of him before. Week by week she watched the storyline progress and built up a video library of all the episodes. These she played back over and over again, every day, at every possible moment. She was getting - no had got - totally infatuated.

Gradually, over the next few months, Lucy built up a fact-file on her new hero; photographs and interviews from various magazines she just found in newsagents without really trying. Yes, that was odd, because the more she looked, the less she found. It felt like panning for gold. She sifted away for weeks on end and then, unexpectedly, found a nugget - just a little gem of information about the show, or about him, that kept up the spirits, kept the dream alive until she found the next little bit.

Over Christmas, she was thrilled to find a TV channel was showing one of his feature films. A second

film she managed to acquire from a video exchange club and a friend copied a third film for her. She was now, almost, totally up to date with everything there was to know about him. But she desperately needed to talk about her feelings which were running high. This man, this image on her TV screen, was tearing her apart. Tentatively, she picked up the 'phone and rang an old school friend, Natalie, whom she hadn't seen for ages.

Their friendship was solidly based and could stand the test of lengthy separations, but even so, Natalie was surprised to get Lucy's call.

After the usual pleasantries and finding out that Natalie had been in hospital and had befriended a stray dog, Lucy broached the subject of her obsession.

"Natalie, it's lovely to catch up on old times but I really need to talk to you about something utterly stupid. Something I'm going through that I know should never happen."

"Go on, I'm intrigued."

"This isn't easy for me, because normally I'm so sensible and down to earth ..."

"Yes, I know all that - so who's the man?"

After initial hesitation, born of embarrassment, it all came out in one long rush.

"I've fallen head over heels in love with someone on the television. Now, just how dumb can you get? And don't say it's a 'crush' because I've been there, remember, we were teenagers together? All those pictures of Robert Horton and Dale Robertson, Cliff Richard and Guy Mitchell. These feelings that I have now are nothing like I have ever experienced in my life. Nothing like my 'love' for Napoleon Solo - remember The Man from UNCLE? Yes, of course you do. Nothing like my feelings for my first real lover. Nothing like the feelings I had for my husband, even. This man makes me quiver. He turns me inside out and upside down and how I can be drawn to him, without ever actually having seen him, I will never understand."

There was silence from the other end of the 'phone and Lucy steeled herself for verbal retribution. She was amazed by Natalie's reply.

"I don't think you are stupid at all. You are drawn, inexplicably to a kindred spirit . Who knows why, or how these things happen? They just do. I mean, at the moment, I am going through this awful obsession for Gary Cooper and he's been dead for 30 years, so I can thoroughly understand what you are going through."

"But mine isn't obsession. Oh, I keep telling myself it must be. Pure fanaticism. But deep down, I know there is more to this. I if only I could see him - just see him, once - I would know. But what is the chance of that when he's half a world away. I could never afford to go chasing all over America after him, even if I wanted to. No, he would have to come over here and virtually fall into my lap."

"Despite what you say, Lucy, I get the distinct feeling you will meet this man - you will somehow make it happen."

"Oh, it's all so impossible, so hopeless. Know what I think I will do - write a short story based upon the series. I've one or two ideas that might work and I really fancy having a go. At least it will keep me out of mischief."

"Okay then, have a go. I think writing about him - perhaps even writing about your feelings for him will help. It will either get him out of your system or, hopefully, get you thinking straight again. You will let me read the finished article, won't you?"

"Hah, if I ever do it. Yes, of course I will."

Two weeks later the story was finished. It had been easy to write. The plot had caused no difficulties and Lucy found writing for established characters no problem at all. Everything flowed and it seemed the proper thing to be doing. Lucy suddenly knew her feelings for this man would never die. She also knew which path her life was going to go down. She was going to try her hand at writing short stories

and whether anything ever became of it, as a career, she didn't really care. Her visionary hero had been her inspiration; the catalyst drawing together all her loose ends - all her frustration, all her dreams. One day, she knew in her heart she would certainly meet him but until then, he had given her peace of mind; given her life the direction it lacked and filled the future with possibilities. Perhaps that was more than enough.

It wasn't, of course - enough that is.

Being Lucy, if she was involved in something, then she had to go into it in great detail.

As far as her writing was concerned, she decided to enroll with a correspondence school to learn, hopefully, how to improve her technique, what editors were looking for, how to market her work, etc. It wouldn't matter if she never sold anything - that wasn't the object, although it would be a nice bonus. No, it was giving her something to do, something to occupy her mind and keep away the depression.

Now that the TV series was off the screen for a while, she fell back to watching her videoed episodes. She was sorry she had not seen the series from the beginning, as there was a lot missing from her 'library'. However, she was kept happy by finding the odd American publication carrying an article, photographs or interview. Her first frenzied opinions of this actor were cemented. He certainly did seem to be a really nice guy. Then one day, she bought a magazine that carried the shattering news that the series had been axed in America, amid great consternation from its thousands of fans.

Lucy was devastated. Apart from writing to her local television station to confirm that the third series of yet unscheduled episodes would eventually be shown, she didn't know what else to do. She didn't know anyone else who was a fan of the show, so she vented all her feelings upon Natalie.

Poor Natalie, trying to find out as much as she could about Gary Cooper and having to put up with all Lucy's ravings. Still, as Natalie pointed out, it was only the series that was dead - not Lucy's heart-throb. He was still alive and living on the same planet, looking at the same moon. Yes, thought Lucy - that was a consolation.

Then one day, a Friday again, she was looking through the programme guide when a letter on the viewers page caught her eye. There was a newly formed fan club for her favourite show and also a Helpers Network. Lucy couldn't believe it and wrote off for membership immediately.

Over the next six months, the change in Lucy's life was unbelievable.

The flow of information about the show and her favourite man was never ending. She received information sheets, photographs, tapes, videos, addresses in America of all the influential people who could be pressurised into bringing the series back - or TV movies - or a feature film, maybe. And addresses of people all around the world, let alone around the UK who shared her love of the series - her admiration for its star.

The flow of love that this programme generated was channelled by these two organisations to reach all its followers. Lucy's life was changed - forever. She now felt part of a family - was part of a worldwide family, of caring, loving people.

The next communication she received from Wyn Howard at the Helpers Network contained news of a convention that was being organised - the first British Convention - and no, this could not be true - her hero had said yes, he would be there, along with three more of the show's major stars.

Lucy was walking on air - Natalie had been right - at last she was going to see him.

Lucy had always been interested in astrology and recently had taken to dabbling with the Tarot cards.

All her horoscope predictions for the new year pointed towards something creative - her writing - and as far as the tarot cards were concerned, she could not understand the consistency she was getting from her readings. Every time she laid down the cards they showed creative success following domestic upheaval, and a man - a man who would act as her inspiration, a catalyst. Not being an expert on the interpretation of the cards, or their interaction with one another, Lucy thought she would seek the advice of an expert to see if he would come up with the same conclusions.

As Richard Dhabo sat down next to her he asked Lucy to shuffle the pack and as he began to lay the cards, face downwards on the table, he suddenly stopped and looked at her.

"I get the distinct feeling here, that you want to start something new - a business may be?"

"Well, you are right - but not a business."

Lucy was reticent to tell him too much. She wanted him to tell her.

Having finished laying down the cards, Richard Dhabo turned them, face upwards - and gasped.

"Never have I seen such a prodigious lay. Everything here is for the taking and creativity shows up very dearly. You want to create something?"

"Yes."

"Writing - you want to write?"

"Yes, I do."

"From the look of these cards, it would seem that success will be yours. But you will have to put in a lot of ground work first - and then just sit back and let life take its inevitable course. And, you will be travelling south to meet someone."

How does he know that? thought Lucy, thinking about the convention to be held in the Midlands.

"There is someone, someone younger than you. Yes?"

"Yes, that's right."

This man was six years her junior.

"A child?"

"No."

"Someone just a little younger? A man?"

"Yes."

A puzzled look then came over Richard's face. "This doesn't fit," he muttered. "Do you happen to know what astrological star sign this man was born under?"

"Yes - he's Aries."

With that, he suddenly leaped out of his seat and clapped his hands in great excitement. "Of course, it fits," he cried. "It all fits. Look," and he pointed to the card in the centre of the lay - the card that pulled all the other cards together - the card that ruled all others.

It was the picture card 'The Chariot'.

"This card," he explained, "Shows the Chariot of life, pulled by one white horse - success - and one black horse - problems along the way. But the important point, is that it is driven by the God, Aries. This man has been your inspiration - the catalyst pulling all your life together - and he will continue to influence your life, even more strongly in the coming years. Does that make sense?"

"It most certainly does," admitted Lucy, barely being able to take it all in.

It seemed as though her life was suddenly mapped out in front of her. All her hopes and dreams confirmed. If only they would come true.

They had to come true. If the TV programme had taught her one thing, it was that anything is possible.

Arriving at the convention with Natalie, on a hot Friday afternoon, Lucy was rather nervous, but Wyn Howard was there to greet them.

"Oh, it's so lovely to put a face to the voice on the 'phone. It really is so good to see you at last."

"Hello, Wyn, Lovely to meet you as well," and Lucy and Wyn hugged each other like long lost friends. "May I introduce, Natalie."

"Hello, Natalie," beamed Wyn. "It's great to see both of you. You had better go and register, at the desk over there and I'll see you later, okay?"

Lucy wanted to ask a question but was hesitant to do so.

Moving away, Wyn guessed what it was and burst out laughing.

Chuckling over her shoulder, she shouted back - "Don't worry, Lucy - he'll be here tomorrow," and disappeared into the lift.

After they registered and unpacked, Lucy and Natalie mingled with the other guests, looked in on the dealer's tables and wandered round the art and craft display.

Later, at the dance that night, they threw themselves into the atmosphere of this convention. The atmosphere so totally alien to their life styles - but both were determined to enjoy every minute.

Everyone was so friendly and chatty and some people had travelled from Holland and Germany as well as a handful from America.

One of the Americans, Harry Oaks, took an instant liking to Lucy and danced with her at every opportunity. He was one of a handful of men, at this gathering of mainly female fans, but he was an artist and found lots of material from the show to sketch and paint - lots of interesting scenes and definitely lots of interesting faces. He was just another person whose life had been inexplicably changed by this captivating show.

By the time the dance had broken up and Lucy and Natalie had wound their weary way up to their bedroom, Lucy knew that something was definitely developing between herself and Harry.

Natalie too, had noticed the way he looked at her and promised not to play gooseberry for the rest of the weekend - besides, she was getting on very nicely thank you with a computer programmer from Dagenham - yes, really!

Lucy was so excited - she would never sleep tonight, what with Harry and the prospect of seeing HIM tomorrow.

Yes, only for HIM, she wouldn't be here at all.

It certainly did seem like providence.

Yes, thought Lucy, - *providence. That is when something, has to be.*

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And now, at last, but as inevitable as the earth revolves around the sun, Lucy stands across the small dance floor from the man she has admired and loved from afar for so long.

Oh, he's so gorgeous. I don't think my legs will get me across there, she thinks.

But she begins to walk forward, and Wyn is saying, "May I introduce, Lucy Munro."

His hand is outstretched in greeting and as she takes hold of it, his grip so firm but friendly, she raises her head and sees his flashing smile. She looks up into his beautiful blue eyes - and is lost in the knowledge that her original feelings were real - and not just fantasy.

There is a definite chemistry between them - an ambience, an understanding. Not love - she doesn't want that anyway. She feels comfortable in his presence and knows the Tarot cards had been right. He would bring the best out in her and continue to inspire her life.

And, who knows, maybe she would find happiness with Harry. If that did happen it would just be one

more thing she had to thank him for.

Lucy is now certain and willing to tell the whole world, that, if you wish hard enough, all your dreams can, and do, come true.

* * *

This has been my story, in as much as the essence is concerned. Some names, places and personal details have been changed or embellished (to protect the innocent!)

At the time of writing I am waiting, none too patiently to hear whether he will actually attend the Birmingham Convention. If he does not, then my final scenario will have to be put 'on hold'.

Maybe, then, one day, I will meet him, outside a stage door, somewhere, signing autographs amid a crowd of other adoring fans, but I will meet him. I will shake his hand, receive his flashing smile and look up into those beautiful blue eyes. I will. One day it will happen.

My thanks must go to everyone connected with the making of Republic Pictures Beauty and the Beast.

And my special thanks go to the man around whom this strange little tale has been woven.

My thanks for enduring all the adulation (which in my case can never evolve, as I am happily married - he'll be glad to know!)

My thanks for his art and talent which are greatly appreciated.

My thanks for his continued inspiration without which I would write nothing. (Do I hear someone say, good?)

And finally, my thanks to him, for just being himself.

For just being - Mr Ron Perlman.