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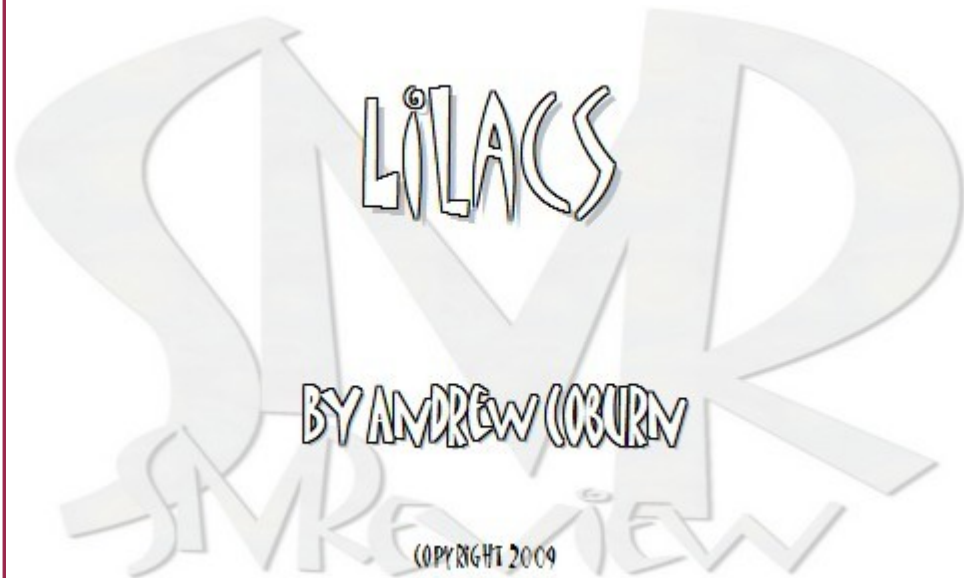
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"Do you like the chocolates, Mamie? Each has a cherry inside."

Grinning, Mamie cleans her fingers on her dress. A pretty dress with zigzags, cusps, and leaflike things which, against the tall starkness of the room, are like scratches and bites. Still grinning, she drops her hands between her knees and cups the caps. Her cheeks bulge with chocolates.

"Maybe that's enough now, Mamie--all right?"

Shrewdly she looks elsewhere, as if she couldn't care less, but before I can lid the box she plunges into it and turns a fistful of chocolates into mud. Then she stuffs her mouth.

"Mamie, please!"

A slap would fix her--the nurses probably do that--but with one's grandmother one cleans her face with a tissue. It's better to ignore the constant silliness of her smile but to keep in mind that the lame blue of her eyes have crayoned mine--that, despite the mental gulf, our bodies keep their ties. We are in a windowless, yellow-washed room that, with bare table, chair, and bed, is Hopperesque. There is no door, at least none she can open.

Our front porch has a broken window with bits of road and lilac reflected in slivers of pane and with wood rimming it like old skin. My great-grandmother, Grammie Marlowe, asks about Mamie and begins to weep. Resting behind the screen in the door, her hair white and wavy with a permanent, her eyes empty except for the wet, she stands an inch under five feet. Despite a French-Canadian ancestry with a bit of Indian blood, she claims Englishness. Grampie Marlowe, who emigrated from a London slum when he was eighteen, is deceased.

"Thank God," she says. "He doesn't need to bear the pain anymore. It's all on me now."

I don't remember my great-grandfather, but I know he built the house we live in and planted the lilacs that shot up around it. In the last photograph we have of him, his wasted body bundled in a deck chair, a faint smile of protest leaks down his chin. Grammie Marlowe, claiming illness of her own, had thought it best he spend his remaining month of life on the hospital porch rather than on his own.

"How was Mamie's color?" she asks, pressing against the screen.

"All right. She ate all the chocolates."

"You should've made her save some. But then the nurses would've eaten--" At that moment a dark blue Chevrolet, dragging a tail of dust, pulls up at the curb. In the instant Grampie Marlowe disappears, but her voice sticks in specks of itself on the screen. "Tell him your mother's not home, d'you hear?"

Grampie Nadel never leaves his car, so he had no idea who is in the house and who isn't. Still, he can always smell a lie, and usually I'm the one who has to tell it. Sitting patiently, his bald head almost pumpkin-size, he waits for someone to approach him. Grammie Marlowe won't allow him to step foot on the grass, much less inside the house.

What is supposed to stay hushed has a way of being heard again and again, sometimes in soft whispers but usually in the loudest. When Mamie was a girl Grampie Nadel came to the house courting and in short order coaxed her under the lilac bushes. He was blond then, not bald, and Mamie was as pretty as a China doll. Right away he started bragging around town but soon could have bitten his tongue off, for later he had to marry Mamie so that my mother could come along in respectable fashion.

I shuffle down the walk and peep into the car. The bare head turns, the face spits out a smile like a worm of toothpaste, and I mumble, "Mom's not home. Hi, Grampie."

He doesn't swallow the lie and instead taps the horn twice, his signal, his demand. Moments later my mother slips out of the side door, hurries to the car, and sits in it with him. They don't talk about anything, but they try. Next door Celia Kidd moves the curtain on her pantry window, which is wide-open. She doesn't like to miss anything and seldom does. Glimpsing her, Grampie Nadel thumbs his nose. He thumbs his nose at me and at Grammie Marlowe, who is back behind the screen, and at all the lilac bushes in view, which is a shot at my great-grandfather, who once threatened him. When he drives away he leaves Celia Kidd furious, my great-grandmother mumbling, my mother squeezing her hands, and my great-grandfather turning in his grave.

As a girl Mamie had played piano, and after she married Grampie Nadel she gave lessons to support herself, for he never did. Her madness dribbled out of her aloneness, an ever-deepening pool of purple, which Grampie Nadel left her in to sink or swim. He had more women than fingers and a greed for things. Mamie, whose insides were as delicate as tea cups, had a hysterectomy, which made Grampie Nadel hate her beyond reason, as if she had maimed herself to spite him. He tortured her by driving back and forth in front of the house with his current woman friend. If Mamie lowered the shades, he blasted the horn. Barely school-age then, my mother watched Mamie pound the piano till the sound of it and of the horn outside flooded the house. In fits of wildness, she bloodied her fingers on the keys and then on where she was most useless by tearing hair from it. Finally Grammie had her committed. "I know where I am," she said. "I'm in the China house."

She never left the China house except once, and Grampie Nadel never went near it, nor did he ever contribute a dime toward her keep, which came out of Grampie Marlowe's pocket while he was alive and then out of the State's. For a long time Grampie Nadel disappeared and then began showing up again in front of the house to talk with my mother, to see what kind of kid she had (me). He still had women, but they had turned as pumpkin-like as he, and he never had them with him in the car.

The smoke of a cigarette lies across the parlor like a birch branch, and my mother tries to bat it away as Grammie Marlowe enters the room. At once they begin to bicker about Grampie Nadel. "I won't have him here," Grammie Marlowe says. "Not even parked outside. Do you

hear?"

"He's my father!" my mother says and wrings her hands as I've seen Mamie do, except Mamie takes her fingers and twists them as if wrapping candy kisses.

"He's nothing," Grammie Marlowe snaps. "He's never given you so much as a pair of shoes, and he killed your mother same as if he did it with a knife."

Lying belly-down on the Oriental rug near their talk, I try to visualize Mamie's

world and can't. All I know is that it contains nothing definite, only shapes and

sounds and sometimes no sounds. Mamie told me this with her eyes when she thought I wasn't looking. Strangely I wasn't.

For Mamie there's neither cure nor hope. She's a kind of Alice shut up

with swelling sizes from which there's no waking. She's been in the rabbit hole for more than twenty years now and all told she'll spend forty there. Two years from now Grammie Marlowe will pass away in her sleep, but Mamie will croak with her chin pressed against her feet. Instead of a burial, they'll stuff her into a teapot.

After Grammie Marlowe's death my mother makes my father clear away the forest of lilacs, so that all four sides of the house gleam like brushed teeth. With the State's permission we bring Mamie home for a weekend. Quiet, almost lucid, she wears her madhouse smile like an amulet. On her own volition she moves to the piano and sits before it, almost as if she had never left it. My mother bites a cigarette while my father nervously prods my shoulder as a warning to keep quiet. Our eyes reach toward the back of Mamie's shaved neck, which resembles a celery stalk. She breaks wind.

With a hot glance my mother burns the smile off my face. My father, sinking deep into an upholstered chair, peels a newspaper. Mamie has swiveled around on the piano stool and with her hands on her knees stares vacantly at the front window. Slowly, almost magically, her face freezes with horror. The window is six panes high. From its top a shade dangles like a loose eyelid and its bottom lip is chunky with potted plants. In Mamie's world, as in dreams, reality is a frightening thing.

My mother suddenly has an idea which results in my father hauling a trunk full of clothes down from the attic and opening it in front of Mamie. "See, Mama," my mother says, sifting through dresses, scarves, and frilly blouses, "these were all the pretty things you used to wear--remember?" In an instant Mamie slams the trunk shut, but a stocking hangs out like a tongue. In the next instant Mamie rips it out by the roots.

As if to punish her, we leave her alone, filing into the kitchen where the strong afternoon sun sets fire to the floor. "She'll be all right," my father says. "Just give her time to come around."

"She's beyond us," my mother says in a voice so dry that I ache with a sudden thirst. We both ache, and my mother draws two tumblers from the cupboard.

"Me, too," my father says, watching water rumble from the faucet like a loose rope.

Refreshed, but still hot, unsettled, my mother turns on the fan whose butterfly wings whirl furiously, chopping off all other sound. The whirring seems to suck the three of us into a vacuum, so that our noses touch and stick. It is only sheer force of will that my mother raises her hand and pure luck that the blades don't scatter her fingers. She plucks the metal bud that

kills the motor. Immediately, in unison, we sense the next-room emptiness, which then screams at us. My mother gasps. Through the window we see Mamie in the yard, her fingers ripping cloth.

Outdoors my father approaches her from one angle, I from another. She stands alone on the grass, tilted a bit in the wind like a scarecrow with its rags blowing. Then she bolts. For a fifty-seven-year-old woman she is remarkably fast and sprints through Celia Kidd's yard. Boys younger than I and men older than my father appear from nowhere to join the chase and revel in the sight. Cornered against the boards of an abandoned sawmill, she stands flabby and grayish-pink, as naked as a jaybird. My father, pulling his shirt off, ties it around her as best he can.

"Where's my mama?" she says.

My father explains that Grammie Marlowe is dead.

"I'll wait," she says. So we drag her.

In the house my mother calms Mamie with new clothes and herself with a tumbler of Four Roses. My father is unstrung and seats himself at the kitchen table; I lay my head on it, falling asleep at once. In a dream Mamie has a hook for a hand and tries to slash me. Dodging, weaving between the slashes, I beg for my life. Instead my own hands become hooks and I use them both against Mamie's one--but the struggle is useless. In painless ecstasy, stripped of a sin which I never had understanding of, I watch flesh peel off me in long loving slices. Eagerly, as Mamie raises her hook for a final slash, I open my mouth like a fish.

It's as if I'm still dreaming when, after supper, with all of us slumped on the front porch, the sound of Grampie Nadel's horn punctures the twilit air. My father, shooing away a mosquito, says, "Oh God, no!"

My mother, a little tipsy, lets out a sharp laugh. "Why not? She's his guilt as well as ours."

"She's none of ours," my father says quickly.

"Don't I wish," my mother says and watches the stuttering smile that comes over Mamie, who's already on her feet and heading down the path.

"Stop her!"

"Not for a million dollars," my mother says.

Mamie leans into the car, but we don't hear her say anything. We don't hear anything from Grampie Nadel either.

"Maybe he doesn't recognize her," my father says, and the three of us follow Mamie's route to the car, where Grampie Nadel sits frozen behind the wheel with such a queer expression on his face that we aren't sure if he is going to laugh, cry, or mess his pants.

"You poor dear," Mamie says, her eyes on his bare bean, and in trying to stroke it

nearly pushes much of herself through the open window. Aghast, Grampie Nadel tries to dodge her touch, but her fingers reach his scalp, the scene fantasy billowing into crime.

"Get this frigging nut away from me!" he screams, and in the next instant Mamie's nails shred

skin as from a peach.

My father grabs one shapeless leg, I the other, and together we yank Mamie from the car. Behind us, my mother drops to the ground, into a puddle of hysterics. Pebbles fly at us like shrapnel as Grampie Nadel speeds away, and gradually a heavy cloud of grit encases us.

"Get up," my father says, offering a hand.

My mother rises slowly on her own and says, "I'll never see him again."

"Good riddance," my father says. He's had enough. Too much. "And we're taking her back now," he says, shooting a look at Mamie, who's cleaning her claws on her dress.

I walk away and wander through the yard. Celia Kidd pushes the curtain from her pantry window and says something. I thumb my nose. The sky is a watercolor red with big billowy clouds torn around the edges and moving about like sea animals. In the air is the scent of lilacs, even though there are none.

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Andrew Coburn is author of 13 novels, 3 made into French movies, two subtitled into Italian and German. His work has been translated into 14 languages.