

"Lucky Little Rich Girl"

a short story

by Iago Faustus

The death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world...

– Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846)

And how many would speed up the process of extinction once euthanasia was decriminalized and offered in humane and even enjoyable ways?

– Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010)

Foreword

This is a short story inspired by a work of visual art done by a creator who publishes under the name ZapperZero. You can see this work, under the title *Vaporizing Orgasm*, for yourself at <https://www.deviantart.com/zapperzero/art/Vaporizing-Orgasm-815122805>. A nude young woman, on what appears to me to be a rocky beach, is being struck by a beam of bright green energy under the power of which her body is disintegrating. Rather than evincing distress, she is in the throes of ecstasy. The text accompanying the picture assures us that "She thoroughly enjoyed the process right up to the very end." The story that follows is my imagination's answers to questions such as who is this young woman? How did she come to be in this strange situation? And why is she enjoying the process so thoroughly? Wanting to answer those questions is just who I am. Rarely if ever do I encounter an image of erotic power without wanting a story behind how what the image depicts came about. Therein lies a key part of the joy of looking at naughty pictures. I do by no means wish to suggest that my story is the one ZapperZero had in mind when creating this image or that it is a story ZapperZero endorses, and I

further do not mean to suggest that it is the best or only story behind the image. It is only my story, and perhaps not my only story at that. If you look at this image and have your own story, I urge you to write it yourself, and, if you feel comfortable doing so, publish it. (Or simply savor it in private, if you prefer.) Art spurring on more art is one of the rare genuinely good things in the human condition.

Enough of that, now. On to the story.

The Story

Say what you will about Laura Brontesion, she sure knew what to do with herself.

Laura was the only *acknowledged* offspring of multi-billionaire technology mogul Tompkins Brontesion, his daughter by his first trophy wife. She was educated at an ancient girls-only boarding school in upstate New York and then at an even-more-ancient college nestled in the purple mountains of Western Massachusetts. Though less well-known than, say, Harvard, Laura's rustic undergraduate *alma mater* was about as hard to get into as its better-known rival on the other end of the state. To be sure, it was *slightly* easier to get in if your father had donated a building to it in your application year, as Tompkins Brontesion had. Laura would major in art history and spend her summers on archaeological digs in Anatolia. After four years in the hills, she would graduate *magna cum laude*. Unfortunately, her father's private jet had been sabotaged by Luddite activists, and on its return flight from Laura's graduation it went out of control and slammed into the side of Mount Greylock, instantly killing Tompkins Brontesion, his prospective *fourth* trophy wife, and its entire crew.

Laura's mother had died of a mysterious cancer a year before Laura had been sent away to boarding school, so she was now an orphan. An extremely rich orphan. An extremely rich and *gorgeous* orphan, for the gods, in one of their frequent reminders to humanity of the unfairness of life, had arranged for Laura to grow up into a genuine smokeshow. The combination of rich and beautiful

and orphaned made a narrative too powerful for social media hounds and digital *paparazzi* to stay away from. Laura must have been a frustrating subject for them, for, in spite of all the temptations that must have existed to do otherwise, she had managed to lead a life of remarkable probity. There were no underage nude pictures and no squalid sex video (at least none that ever came to light). No drug-fueled benders. No tawdry affairs with her professors. The hounds did not go off the trail though, and Laura soon found herself an involuntary celebrity from Manhattan to Mumbai. She did her best to protect her privacy and, when that proved impossible, to be gracious to the infatuated and the curious. In her after-college years, Laura tried on a few quasi-careers, designing dresses and writing a children's book. No one was much surprised by her doing these things, as they were the sort of activities rich girls often do to give their lives a patina of social utility.

On her twenty-fifth birthday, the trust which had held the bulk of the late Tompkins Brontesion's assets came, under the terms of its establishing instrument, into Laura's control. She was really extremely rich now. Rolling the dice, the producers of the women's daytime talk show *Erika!* managed to extend an invitation to Laura through her legal counsel to appear on the show and talk about her new situation. Much to everyone's surprise, she accepted, subject only to the condition that the interview not be scripted in advance. The *Erika!* people, just possibly showing a deficiency of imagination, agreed to this apparently boilerplate term. *Erika!*, unusually for television in this day and age, is broadcast live, and this is a significant part of its popularity. There's always a little *frisson* associated with the show, because anything *might* happen, and thanks to live transmission and streaming, *you* might get to see it. (In reality, there is a standard seven-second broadcast delay so that the producers can put a stop to the worst things that might happen.) Laura was to appear on a show promoted as "An Interview with the World's Most Eligible Bachelorette." It would turn out to be the highest-rated episode of *Erika!* ever produced, and that is even before things got strange.

The opening theme music plays and out comes Erika Sidewinder, eponymous hostess of *Erika!*, "Today on our program we have a very special guest. The heiress to Brontesion technology fortune, fashion designer, and author, all at the age of 25, which she just turned. And she's unmarried guys!" Laughter from the audience. "And gals." More laughter. "Let's everyone give a warm *Erika!* welcome to Miss Laura Brontesion!"

Laura enters, wearing a tasteful bespoke spring ensemble that would cost the average *Erika!*-viewing household four-months' take-home pay. The audience applauds. She smiles and waves, then sits in a comfy chair that Erika points out to her. Erika sits down and the applause stops.

"So, Laura," begins Erika, "thank you for coming on the show today."

"You're very welcome, Erika."

The audience, which is more used to hearing the phrase "no problem" as a response in this context sits rather quietly.

"How are you doing today?"

"About as well as can be expected."

"Well, given how well things have been going for you for the last few years, things for you today must be going *very* well indeed."

Laughter from the audience. Laura smiles politely.

Erika starts in on a question. "I understand you've just recently gained full control of your late father's estate."

"That's right, yes."

"So do you intend now to take an active role in managing his companies?"

"No. We already have excellent people running those companies and I don't think anyone would benefit from my sticking my hand in."

"And that whoosh you hear, ladies and gentlemen," said Erika making a gesture, "is the sound of simultaneous sighs of relief from C-suites all over Silicon Valley."

Laughter from the audience. Laura smiles politely again.

Erika continues, "So do you think you'll focus on your literary career instead?"

Laura raises an eyebrow. "Literary career?"

"Can I get a close-up on this?" The camera makes a close-up of a book that Erika is now holding. It's a children's book, with the title *The Loneliest Honeybee*. "Your children's book has spent close to 30 weeks near the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for children's literature...."

"May I tell you something about that book?" asks Laura.

"Why, certainly. I'm sure we'd all love to hear it."

"I wrote that book and illustrated it and then sent drafts to twelve separate literary agents. But I did so under a made-up name. Every one of them rejected it within two weeks, most only formally polite and with a few suggesting that I consider an alternate career, preferably one having nothing to do with either books or children. Then I sent it to twelve *different* literary agents. It was the exact same draft as before, except this time I did so under my *own* name. And this *second* set of twelve agents just about ate each other alive trying to be the one to represent it. It was published within months, critics have fawned over it, and millions of copies have sold. It might end up being translated into as many as thirty languages. Actual experts on children's literature have remained unconvinced of its merit, but who listens to *them*?"

"That's a story we can all take inspiration from, Laura!" says Erika. "Don't listen to the haters, never give up, keep pursuing your dreams!"

Enthusiastic applause from the audience.

"Or perhaps we should draw a moral from the words of Jesus," Laura replies. "For he that hath, to him shall be given; and for he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath."

Few in the audience have much of an idea as to how Jesus got worked into this conversation, but they sure do like religion, so there's more applause.

There is just a hint of sourness in her voice as Laura notes, "There are many deserving artists and writers who hath not."

"And I am sure they will find great inspiration in your example," Erika replies. "Perhaps we could also discuss your work as a designer. I have to say they were really wowed in Milan by your tortoiseshell tent dress."

Brief cut on the show to a model wearing the dress parading on a fashion-show runway. It certainly is...interesting. Then cut back to the live show.

"Yes, that. Can I make a confession about that dress? You all like confessions on this show, right?"

"Darling, you should feel free to tell me anything you want. We're not here to judge."

"Well, all right, then. It wasn't me that designed that dress."

Gasps in the audience. Erika leans forward, all motherly concern, "What do you mean, Laura, that you didn't design that dress"?

"It was designed by a young man I know – don't look for him, you won't find him. He's a student at a top-end fashion academy, and his teachers and peers do think very well of him. I made a specific request of him: design and license to me a dress, but not just any dress. Make it a deliberately ugly and uncomfortable dress, not high fashion but a parody of high fashion. And so he went and did. He did it very well. In return, I paid him a commission that will effectively retire his heavy student debt and allow him to get a good start in life. I meanwhile submitted the dress to the fashion show under my own name. And since that name is 'Brontesion' everyone thinks it's brilliant."

Murmurs in the audience, which Erika interrupts, "But Laura, this could end your career in fashion! It's a profession defined by honor and integrity!"

"Good. There's no way I should have one. I would only crowd out the deserving."

Awws from the audience, seemingly a mixture of sadness and disapproval.

"Oh, Laura," says Erika, oozing compassion. "That's such a depressing way to think."

"Truth doesn't care whether it's depressing or not. The fact is that my choice for the future amounts to either 'do things,' in which case I am usurping a place in society that should be occupied by someone who is actually good at and dedicated to doing those things, or 'don't do things,' in which case I am just a parasite."

More *awws* from the audience.

"Honey, I think maybe you've been working too hard. Maybe you need some time off. Maybe you need to find that wonderful man – or woman! – out there who will put some joy into your life and make all these gloomy thoughts go away."

"I can see your point, but with respect to that, the questions arise: Do they love me? Or is it all the money that they love? Or my looks?"

"Well, I wouldn't say anything against your looks."

There are a few appreciative yells and whistles from the audience. Erika has to turn to the audience and admonish them. "Now let's be respectful of our guest."

"Looks fade, Erika. And my money is not who I am. People think great wealth is great fortune, but in fact it can be more of a burden than anything else. Because I'm so rich, I cannot truly succeed because I cannot fail."

"Well, I understand that, and that's wise. You're seeing a therapist, aren't you?"

"No. I do, however, have a plan for dealing with my predicament."

"And what is that?"

"I have come to believe that the only thing that will work for me is complete renunciation."

"Oh, a *spiritual* response to the problem," Erika leans forward. She's loving this. The sort of people who make up her audience *love* "spiritual" things, so this turn in the conversation will be great for ratings. "Are you considering prayer? Meditation?"

"Not those, no."

"Following a spiritual leader? Even joining a religious order?"

"Become a nun? Like Sally Field?" There is scattered laughter from elderly members of the audience who remember *The Flying Nun*. "No, not that either."

"So, what then do you mean by 'complete renunciation?'"

Laura takes a deep breath and holds it for a second before making her announcement. "One month from today, I am going to have myself disintegrated. I am inviting the entire world to watch it on a live Internet feed."

It's pretty safe to say that no one associated with *Erika!* understands just what was going on at this moment. The producers have their seven-second delay, but they are watching for fairly banal and common forms of bad broadcast behavior like a woman's showing off a nipple, or someone's using the N-word or the F-bomb or attempting to punch a member of the studio audience. To have the world's richest young woman proclaim her intention of self-annihilation in front of a global audience is something so far outside this repertoire of responses that they simply can't react fast enough. The audience sits, for its part, silent and confused. And Erika Sidewinder, always the smooth professional, skates right past what Laura has actually said.

"*Disintegrated?* Is that some new kind of therapy?"

Now everyone is pinned, fascinated by what was going to happen next to react. Whatever Laura has to say, she's going to be saying it on a live feed to millions.

"No. I mean it literally. There is a piece of technology called the Slow Crealyzing Ray. If you expose yourself to one for more than about half a minute, you will vaporize into your component atoms. That's what I am going to do to myself. I hope you all will watch."

"Well," says Erika. "I think now is a good time for a break." Strict force of broadcast habit here takes over, just like the training of a soldier takes over at the moment when he is most in mortal peril. Turning to the camera with a broad smile, Erika proclaims, "*Erika!* will be right back after these messages."

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One scarcely needs to say that *Erika!* was not back after those messages. Studio security escorted Laura out of the studio, where they encountered Laura's personal security, who were much bigger and meaner than they and took charge of her without even the pretense of a confrontation. Laura's personal security practically carried her off, leveling any media hounds or *paparazzi* who were in the way. They deposited her in a waiting car and squealed off. For the next month, Laura's whereabouts would become a complete mystery to all but a select few.

It took a few days for investigative reporters to dig out and inform the public about the Slow Crealyzing Ray. It had originally been created as part of a US Army research program on portable directed energy weapons. The concept behind it was to generate a hybrid of different kinds of radiation in a single narrow beam. The radiation would catalyze reactions that released energy already present in human tissue, principally through the hydrolysis of intracellular adenosine triphosphate, limiting the energy requirements for the beam itself. Sufficient contact with the ray would produce a self-sustaining chain reaction with devastating results, causing disintegration of all contiguous tissue into simple gases (mostly molecular oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide) and a few cupfuls of metals and salts.

Notwithstanding this spectacular outcome, the ray was a failure as a weapon for two reasons. First, the Slow Crealyzing Ray genuinely was slow. For at least the first fifteen seconds or so of

contact, the beam's only effect on its target was to generate a warm tingling sensation without creating significant tissue damage, and which interval would provide the target with ample warning time to evade the beam or get under cover. Second, it generated a version of the "phaser problem" known to savvier fans of *Star Trek*, in that the ray manifested itself as a bright yellow-green beam. Having a weapon that creates what is in effect a giant illuminated arrow pointing back to the exact location of its operator is not a good thing on a battlefield. These technical problems proved unsolvable, and although a few prototypes of the Slow Crealyzing Ray were assembled and delivered to the Army, the program was shelved.

The Army, apparently distracted by other activities, managed to lose some of these prototypes. Perhaps unsurprisingly some fell into the hands of bad actors who subsequently used them in attacks on human beings. Or, more specifically, attacks on *women*. In most of the attacks women managed to escape significant harm by the simple expedient of running away from their attackers, but in several that have been well-documented (by mobile phone video and the accounts of witnesses), the women attacked did not attempt to evade the ray. Instead, they appeared to choose to remain in place, absorbing its energies as its induced chain reaction ignited and completely disintegrated them. More disturbingly still, these women while in the disintegration process produced vocalizations – gasps and moans and even verbal strings of the "oh yes...oh yes...oh yes" variety characteristic of orgasm.

The Army had spent a significant amount of taxpayer money developing a powerful and lethal sex toy. It was all very embarrassing.

National security officials had managed for some time to suppress public knowledge of the Slow Crealyzing Ray, encouraging or arm-twisting local law enforcement to treat the attacks as mere pranks in the case they were unsuccessful or as unusual missing person cases when they were successful. Witnesses, family members of the women involved, and journalists who attempted to bring matters to light were dismissed as cranks or conspiracy theorists or, in a few cases, dealt with using

more stringent means. But the mention of a disintegration process in as public a forum as *Erika!* created too much interest in the matter to keep the threads from being connected. Senior Department of Defense officials were compelled to admit before a congressional committee that there was indeed a disintegration weapon in existence and that it might have been used against American women in the past. The prototypes had been made for the Army program by a contractor named Brindisi Defense Systems, which just happened to have been founded by one Tompkins Brontesion and was now majority-owned by his daughter.

They also noted that at least one of the prototypes had not been recovered and might still be in working condition.

The world was very much in a general uproar after Laura's announcement. The Pope, speaking through a Vatican official, condemned the "objective evil" of Laura's apparent endorsement of suicide and called on Catholics worldwide to pray for her soul while working to contain any negative outcomes her announcement would have. The global mental health profession likewise went into overdrive, and there was much discussion of suicide prevention methods, hotlines, and so forth. Professional ethicists as represented by the Goldwater Rule were pushed to their limits by the pressure to respond to public speculation about the form of mental illness Laura must be suffering from for her to have said what she said. Civil commitment proceedings were considered in a variety of jurisdictions, but, in the absence of any evidence that Laura was located in those jurisdictions, as well as the ferocious pressure (real and threatened) brought by her own high-priced legal representatives, these proceedings did not get terribly far. Editorial writers and pundits all over the planet had a moralizing, thumb-sucking field day while online social networks went up in firestorms of abuse, trolling, hatred, and recriminations.

While all this noise was going on, certain quiet and civilized but nonetheless urgent negotiations were being conducted in air-conditioned conference rooms between Laura's lawyers and a Network That Shall Be Nameless ("NTSBN"). Would NTSBN be willing to cover Laura Brontesion's final hour?

By this point in the controversy, it would surely become the most-watched event in the history of motion-picture media. Intense internal discussions were carried on before management decided that while there would be some blowback, the overall publicity would be immensely profitable for the network. The matter was then referred internally to a corporate ethicist, who pretty much lost her mind at the prospect of even treating the Event (as it had come to be called) as something coverable. She was quietly transferred to another branch of the company, and another ethicist substituted in her place. *This* ethicist issued an opinion that while it would be morally depraved to cover Laura's last act as a form of "entertainment," it would be entirely acceptable to cover it as "news." The vaporization of the world's most eligible bachelorette, after all, is very clearly news, and NTSBN very much had an obligation to cover the news. This ethicist was promoted and transferred to the company's main office.

Laura's lawyers and the NTSBN suits drew up a contract. The head suit signed a pair of copies. The next day one of the pair was returned to NTSBN's legal department with Laura Brontesion's signature. The Event was on.

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It is an early evening, and a golden sun hangs just above the calm blue waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. A dirty little ferry chugs its way toward an ancient stone pier a few kilometers west of Kyrenia. The ferry slows, stops, and moors at the end of the pier. A single passenger disembarks to the well-wishes of the ferry crew. She is hatless and barefoot and wears only a cheap-looking one-piece bathing suit. In her right hand she carries a US passport. Notwithstanding her strangely informal condition, she is very beautiful.

A few meters down the pier, an olive-skinned man in a suit has set up a podium, on the front of which are printed the words DOUANE/CUSTOMS/GÜMRÜK/TEΛΩNEIAKH.

The woman stops a meter or so short of the podium. "Good evening, officer."

"Good evening, madam," he replies. "May I see your passport, please?"

The woman hands the document over. The customs officer inspects it, glancing for a moment from the identity picture to the face of the woman before him and then back. He thinks for a moment about how this woman is beautiful even in her passport photograph, and then puts the thought out of his mind.

"Laura Brienne Brontesion," he reads, "this is you?"

"Yes."

"You have no luggage?"

"I had a small suitcase with a change of clothes and some personal effects with me when I left Taşucu this morning, but I threw it overboard at about the mid-point of the passage. I must imagine that it now rests on the bottom of the Mediterranean, along with so much other history."

"And is the purpose of your visit business or pleasure, Ms. Brontesion?"

She smiles. "In so many ways that is a difficult question, officer, but I would say on balance pleasure."

"And will you be staying long?"

"Oh, no. Not long at all. You might even say that I am in transit."

The customs officer sighs slightly, makes his mind think about how good it will be for him to go home to his wife and children after this business is done. Then he pulls out a self-inking stamp from a shelf inside the podium. He stamps Laura's passport with a thirty-day tourist visa and hands it back to her.

"Welcome to the Republic of Northern Cyprus, Ms. Brontesion."

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, for those of you who might not know it, is an enclave on the northern half of that eastern Mediterranean island. It exists on territory carved out after a Turkish invasion in 1974, which itself followed a period of intercommunal violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The Republic of Turkey recognizes the Republic as a sovereign state. Everyone else

regards it as territory under Turkish military occupation. Such global lack of recognition creates a situation in which the local government, generally starved for funds, might easily be persuaded by the availability of a few billion dollars in "loans" for "environmentally sustainable economic development" to allow a lunatic American heiress to do what she wants on one of their beaches for an evening.

Laura walks down the rest of the pier, at the end of which she is greeted by the Director, who is supposedly covering a "news" story. He has already summoned his crew and is looking rather nervous.

"That ferry was a bit late," he notes. "I thought we would lose our light."

The Director is referring, of course, to the golden hour before sunset, a time beloved by cinematographers for its unique qualities. And, indeed, at this moment everything on this beach does seem to be suffused with a sort of golden warmth. A perfect time to shoot, but one that will not last.

"I have but one thing left to do," says Laura. She walks over to a fire pit on the beach where the Director's crew had been grilling spiced kebabs. (Film crews are hungry guys, mostly.) "I'm not going anywhere again, so I won't need this." She tosses her passport on the coals. Its pages flare with flame, curl, and dissolve into ash. The beautiful photograph blackens and disappears.

"Now you can roll," says Laura.

The Director gives some hand signals. Laura is being filmed by a Steadicam operator. The other members of the small crew carefully keep out of the shot.

"So we are here," narrates the Director, "streaming live from a location that I am not allowed to divulge. We didn't know if it would happen, but this is Laura Brontesion, who has come here with the avowed purpose of having herself disintegrated. Some guys working for her showed up earlier with a disintegrator gun, and it apparently works – they tested it in front of our eyes with a goat to prove that it was no hoax. So, Ms. Brontesion, here you are, and you have your plans. Can you explain to our audience again why you, one of the richest women in the world, want to have yourself disintegrated?"

"I think I've explained that well enough already. But I do need to quibble with one of your claims. I am not one of the richest women in the world."

"What do you mean, Ms. Brontesion?"

"Over the past month I have been working with my attorneys to inventory everything I own, every last asset, and I mean *everything*. Every house, every villa, every work of art, every security, every car, every boat, every aircraft, every piece of land, every piece of intellectual property, every household object, every license, every potential future income stream, every last dime in every last account to my name, *all of it* has been placed in an irrevocable charitable trust for liquidation and subsequent donation to Oxfam International. I shall leave no estate. Since dumping my suitcase and burning my passport, I have exactly *one* thing that I can be said to own, and that's the swimsuit I'm wearing right now. Do you like it? I bought it at a store called, what was it, "Wall-mart?" In any event, I am now about to get rid of even that, and..."

"Cut!" says the Director.

"It was my understanding that this is a live stream and there aren't supposed to be any 'cuts'," says Laura, indignant.

"Ms. Brontesion, this is a respectable news program. We can't have you doing this *nude*."

"Read the contract. Paragraph 17 says that 'Choice of wardrobe for the Event shall be at the absolute and sole discretion of BRONTESION.' That's me. I am choosing for my wardrobe my own lovely bare skin, which I think ought to be suitable for any occasion. You might also wish to note, Mr. Director, that the contract contains a *very substantial* liquidated damages clause for any breach on your part. While I would be happy to see another substantial chunk of money go to the hungry of the world, your corporate masters might take a less charitable view."

"But..."

"Naked I came into this world and naked I shall go out of it."

The Director now has a deer-in-the-headlights look. "Sixty seconds," he pleads. Laura stares at him coldly.

The Director pulls out a mobile phone. There is hasty dialing of numbers. Ring, ring, and then someone in Los Angeles, in one of those posh suites high above Wilshire Boulevard, picks up. A hasty string of muttered words from the Director. Then a few seconds of silence as the wheels of executive decision-making spin. Then an uttered command. Hang up.

The Director, now practically soaked in sweat, relays that "We can go ahead without the swimsuit. Roll."

(And at this moment, or perhaps a few seconds after, there is an inflection point in the history of technology. Every major social network crashes catastrophically as each one simultaneously receives the equivalent of hundreds of millions of posts, all of which are equivalent to OMG SHE'S GONNA DO IT NEKKID!!!1!!!1!!!. It will be weeks before they all recover. Sadly, since 1974, the rules for the awarding of Nobel Prizes, including that for Peace, do not permit a posthumous award to Laura for this accomplishment.)

Laura doesn't get naked immediately. Instead she asks, "Is Marie Wyst here?"

Marie Wyst is duly summoned. She is a young production assistant, nerdy and nervous looking. Laura addresses her.

"You're Marie, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please don't call me ma'am. Call me Laura. I understand that you're a production assistant here, but want to make movies of your own someday."

"That's right, m...Laura. I went to film school at USC. I've written several screenplays. I'm trying to get experience by being a PA here."

"Well, Marie, I have something for you."

And it's at this point that Laura pulls the straps of the swimsuit off her shoulders, lowers it to the sand, and steps out of it, gloriously naked. One almost expects the crew to begin barking and howling, but they are professionals, after all. Laura hands the swimsuit to Marie.

"What you're holding is the last thing that Laura Brontesion, who is about to become history's most notorious media star, ever wore. When the time comes when you're ready to make your first movie, put it up for auction. It will go a long way to funding your production. Maybe that and then some."

Laura then leans forward and whispers in Marie's ear "And if you want to get a really good price at auction make sure never to wash it."

A tear trickles down Marie's cheek, "I really don't know what to say...thank you?"

"Oh, don't cry," Laura says, flicking away Marie's tear with a knuckle. "Today is a good day for you, just as it is a good day for me."

"You think so?" asks Marie.

"A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth."

"Ecclesiastes," Marie recognizes, "Chapter 7, Verse 1."

"Yes," says Laura, smiling. "I wish we could talk longer, but I have an appointment."

Marie deferentially steps aside. Laura begins a walk down the beach. This is tricky for the Steadicam guy to video since he has to walk backwards in soft sand, but he manages.

"How do you feel at the moment, Ms. Brontesion?" the Director asks, off camera.

"All my senses feel heightened, especially the tactile ones. The knowledge that one is going to be annihilated in a few minutes unquestionably heightens one's sense of the here and the now. It's a wonderful feeling. It's as if I feel every grain of sand under my bare feet as I walk, the sea breeze in my hair, the sun on my skin. I feel keenly aware, as I usually do not, of the jiggle of my breasts and swivel

of my hips as I walk. I smell keenly the tang of the salt from the sea and – I have to confess this, guys – the musk of testosterone in the air."

There are a few coughs from the crew. "Don't you feel creeped out by the thought..." The Director couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. Laura finished it for him. "That guys, and gals too, all over the world, are masturbating to this scene?"

The Director manages an "Umm..."

"Let me address *that* directly by addressing *them* directly," Laura says. "Guys and gals of the world who might be jacking or jilling off to this, whether right now to the live feed or a hundred years from now to a video you've downloaded from the Internet Archive, let me just say that I'm glad you're enjoying this. *I'm* enjoying this, and the thought that I'm helping you to enjoy something makes me enjoy it even more. There is never enough pleasure in the world, and the thought that through my last act I am putting more pleasure into the world makes me profoundly happy. So stay busy and rub one out for Laura, won't you?"

There is silence from the crew at this, which must sound to them like a manifesto from an alien species. Fortunately for the stream it is not a long silence, as Laura has reached the place she has chosen to be. It is a rock on the beach, not too far from the current shoreline. She tries out a few positions near the rock for a few seconds, trying to find the one most comfortable for what is about to happen. After a few seconds, she finds a way to lounge comfortably. She asks a question, "Is there water at the base of this rock at high tide?"

"Yeah," comes a voice from someone on the crew. "About a meter deep."

"Good," Laura replies. "I want for my residual salts to be washed away in the sea."

Laura takes in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. Then she looks straight into the camera and says in a voice that is at once honeyed and commanding, "This is it. Vaporize me."

The Director points at a crew member who has a Slow Crealyzing Ray mounted on a tripod. He has been sighting in Laura for the last few seconds and his aim is true. The beam appears, spotted just above Laura's *mons pubis*.

"Mmm," says Laura.

Over the next few seconds, waves of greenish energy begin pulsing over Laura's lower abdomen and pubic area.

"Oooo," says Laura, pursing her lips.

The spot of pulsing energy spreads to her upper abdomen.

"It feels so good..."

The crew operating the Slow Crealyzing Ray turn off their machine. The reaction is now consuming Laura on its own. It spreads up to her breasts. Laura gives off a piercing yell and arches her back. "AAHH...HA...AAAH!" Then she yells "It feels wond..." But the reaction reaches up to her mouth and cuts off the possibility of further vocalizations. A woman-like form writhes in coils of green light for a few seconds, then there's a loud *POP!* and a hard gust outward of hot wind as the elemental gases that were the bulk of Laura's mass are released. The reaction has blown itself out, but the keen-eyed can see a sort of snow flurry descending to earth from where Laura had stood: little flakes of salt, calcium, sulfur, magnesium, red phosphorus, and tiny particles of trace elements too small to be seen, all that is left of Laura, precipitating downward.

At about 1 a.m. the tide comes in and covers the sand by the rock. The next morning, when it runs out again, even these few remains will have disappeared.