

A LUSCIOUS EPIPHANY

by

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His hips rocked rhythmically in the most sensationally seductive saunter I've ever had the joy to witness. Faded Levis cupped his backside so that each deliberate step revealed no doubt that the currency in his right pocket nestled in a money clip rather than a wallet. Once I spotted him, everything else faded to black.

The man was gorgeous. Okay...the man's *backside* was gorgeous. I really couldn't testify to anything else at that point. I willed him to turn around and confirm my suspicion that the front side of him was gorgeous, too. But no such luck. Mr. Luscious Levis weaved his way among the Saturday afternoon St. Augustine grocery shoppers with the grace of a man confident in his being and comfortable with every level of himself.

Well, he was safe from me. I had solemnly vowed thirteen years earlier, when my son's father left me for another woman on my thirty-ninth birthday—the real one—to live my life free from the rigors of relationships with sexy men. And I'd disciplined myself to stick to that. Of course, for the last several years, my life was also free from the rigors of relationships with geeky men. And sloppy men. And old men, young men, tall men, short men. You name it, man-wise, and my life was free from it.

But I was okay with that. For the past thirteen years, I'd worked hard to establish a successful consulting business—MTM Communications—to facilitate the creation of long-term

strategic plans, executive transition plans, and other such valuable visionary designs, in the country's major corporations. I was usually hired by board chairs since most executives fling themselves from tree to tree on a daily basis, only emerging for a total forest view when forced to do so.

I used my initials, for Molly Thomas Monroe, as a conscious marketing ploy, in hopes that when potential clients saw my company's name they would recognize it. Of course, the name they would recognize was the original MTM—Mary Tyler Moore—but I reasoned that by the time they figured that out, I'd already have a proposal in their hands. It seemed like a good idea at the time but I'm not sure what real difference it made. Building my clientele had consumed my total focus seven days a week from the time of my divorce and on and my travel schedule was so tight, I'd spent relatively little time in my beloved Boston. Fortunately, my son Jeremy had graduated from Vanderbilt and begun working for IBM two years after I started my business, so his formative years hadn't suffered from a lack of maternal nurturing.

Quite the contrary, actually. Through the years, we'd nurtured each other. Jeremy's father and I were young when he was born—I was only nineteen—so we grew up together.

Well...Jeremy and I grew up together. His father, Doug, hadn't joined us. The last I heard, Doug still lived in the brain of a twenty-six-year-old ladies' man who was stuck in the body of a fifty-three-year-old balding Baby Boomer.

I wondered about the age of Mr. Luscious Levis.

Not that it mattered.

He wasn't my type. I mean, I liked tall men and he was certainly tall—six feet three inches or so was my guess. And he easily stood a head above the majority of shoppers among the retirement crowd shuffling down the aisles—most of them white-haired, many of them bent with age. It had been my experience when my job took me to Florida cities like Orlando,

Tampa, and Tallahassee that the myth of Florida as a retirement destination was just that—a myth. High rise office buildings bulged with plenty of day-to-day workers, most of them decades away from daily rounds of golf. But in St. Augustine, a city famous for its antiquities, the claim-to-fame of “The Oldest City in America” appeared to describe its residents as well—all of whom seemed to be present in this particular store, clogging the path between Mr. Luscious Levis and me.

It was May 2008 and I was in St. Augustine for a long-overdue reunion with my son. We hadn’t seen each other in more than three years and my hug bucket was beyond empty. He had just returned to the States from a three-year assignment as a Marketing Rep in Vietnam. Yes, Vietnam. Chills had racked my body when he told me where he was going. My mental view planted him in a rice paddy with a gun pointed at this head.

“That was forty years ago, Mom,” he had said, concern flooding his glacier blue eyes. Heart of glacier, I’d always told him—the bluest part of the iceberg. Then he hugged me, resting his chin on the top of my head which reached five feet, six inches from the floor if I stretched. “It’s not like that any more,” he added.

We’d had dinner together at my condo in Boston two weeks before he left and he had done everything in his power to reassure me. “It’s a great opportunity. Trade agreements between Vietnam and the United States opened up years ago after the twenty-something-year moratorium following the war. American companies have been flocking over there. And guess what? I’ll be there to sell them IBM mainframes.”

He’d been so proud. And confident. And excited.

And...as it turned out...right.

It *had* been a great opportunity for him. When his three years ended, he was offered an IBM Regional Manager position for the state of Florida and, avid golfer that he was, he bought a

condo in World Golf Village just north of St. Augustine. He'd been there for six months before we were able to make plans to get together. I'd had a lot of contracts booked and he'd been learning a new job and a new territory. So we finally agreed to get together the second week in May to celebrate his thirty-third birthday. He got us tickets to some golf tournament close by—PTC or CTP or TPC or something or other like that. I didn't follow golf, but I loved the thought of being there with him.

I had flown into Jacksonville in the morning, four hours earlier than my original plan. A less expensive flight had opened up and I'd pounced on it. Jeremy had a couple of Saturday morning meetings to take care of, so we'd agreed that I would rent a car rather than wait for him at the airport. My reservation was for a Toyota Camry, but by the time I got to the Hertz counter the Camrys were gone.

I didn't care—I simply needed transportation. I was ready to sign the agreement for a Ford Focus when a swaying palm tree caught my attention. As I admired the landscape through the Hertz counter window and tried to picture my Boston condo with palm trees surrounding it, a car drove by.

A convertible.

An idea wormed its way into my head.

A deliciously wicked idea.

Well, maybe it wouldn't have been considered wicked for most people, but for me—Ms. By-The-Book, Totally-Scheduled, Thoroughly Disciplined, Practical Pragmatist—on any given day the thought of renting a convertible was as foreign to me as the land from which my son had just returned. And definitely wicked.

But today, the idea was intoxicating. Wonderfully intoxicating.

To my utter amazement, twenty minutes later I hit I-95 at the wheel of a fire-engine-red

Pontiac convertible. Not the larger G6 model—the sporty little Solstice. It was totally out of character.

And fun. I'd wondered at the time what Jeremy would think and could hardly wait to see his face.

Wandering the aisles of the grocery store an hour later, I wondered how Mr. Luscious Levis would look settled into the passenger seat. I scanned the space ahead of me to make certain he was still in my sights. He was.

Luscious—I figured I had followed him long enough by then to address him by his first name—was just three shoppers and a stock boy ahead of me. I toyed with the idea of violating the unspoken grocery cart code and maneuvering around the other shoppers to pull up right behind him...

But he simply wasn't that important.

Still, I kept his back—okay, his backside—in my line of vision. I allowed myself time, while I waited for the glut of people in front of me to thin, to inspect him—for the first time—above his waist.

He had longish wavy dark hair streaked with gray. Not white, like most of those around him or even streaked with white—just beautifully highlighted with soft silver. It covered his neck and curled over the collar of a black leather jacket.

A black leather jacket?! It seemed really out of place for Florida in May, I thought, but it definitely added to his eye-candy appeal since it emphasized his broad shoulders and then triangled down to his waist.

He intrigued me and, again, I wondered how old he was.

Not, of course, that gray hair is an age give-away. Take me, for example. As a teenager, my hair was so black it shone almost blue in sunlight. But I ran screaming to my mother with

my first silver strand when I was sixteen. “It’s the rotten luck of the genes, Molly,” she said. “Look at your dad’s hair.” Even then my father’s hair was more salt than pepper and my grandmother was snow white by the time she was fifty. I began dying my hair in my early twenties and every three weeks or so, I restored it to its unnatural color—Ginger, 47R. I chose red—auburn once the salon process finished—to draw attention to my hazel-colored eyes, deepened to emerald, recently, through the miracle of tinted contact lenses.

Yes, yes, I had remained a slave to vanity, regardless of the fact that I had relinquished my participation in romantic relationships.

But it really made no difference to me that Luscious oozed hunk vibes. I was immune to sexy men. Even the ones who emanated such blatant sensuality.

I heard the soft whir of a motor, but before I could investigate, a white hot pain exploded in my left heel. I shifted my weight to my right foot and focused all my concentration on not swearing. Out loud, anyway.

As I bent to massage the sore spot, the wire basket of a motorized shopping cart—the source of my injury—smashed into my shoulder and caused me to fall against a red-haired woman who was trying to herd two little boys away from the candy section. She, in an apparent attempt to support herself, reached for the cane of an elderly gentleman who, in turn, grabbed the closest shelf to keep himself from falling and, in the process, swept an entire display of dried navy beans to the floor.

The flimsy plastic bags burst on impact.

Beans rocketed up, bounced back down and shot up again, pelting all of us shoppers as if we were caught in the cross-fire of a million pea shooters. In the midst of the commotion, Granny Gray-hair, whose motorized cart set the whole scene in motion, careened around me, almost plowing down one of Red-haired Lady’s sons, and crunched and bumped her way—

ATV-style—over the small mountain of beans that had come to rest in the middle of the aisle.

Never, of course, acknowledging her mess. Nor offering an apology.

I helped Old Mr. Cane Man regain his balance and then searched the chaos for Luscious, secure in my belief that he'd be right there in the middle of it ready to help and that, finally, I would see his beautiful face.

Or at least the face I imagined to be beautiful.

But again, no such luck. He strolled along at the far end of the aisle, obviously oblivious to the tumult around him, and added a long baguette to his cart. I made a mental note to pick up one of those, myself, when I reached the end of the aisle, since I planned to cook Jeremy's favorite barbecue chicken spaghetti later than night.

Unfortunately, as Luscious's hips rounded the turn past the soda display, my eyes didn't leave them in time to make it to his face.

I slowly picked my way through the still-spinning beans that rolled like ball bearings once they got under the shoes. Red-haired Lady's boys shrieked with laughter and slid down the aisle, riding the beans like miniature wheels. They pushed each other, taking turns falling and at one point, took two older boys down with them. Fortunately, Old Mr. Cane Man had left the aisle safely with the help of a straw-haired pimply-faced teenager wearing the green apron that designated him as a store employee.

I finally reached the end of the aisle, got my baguette, added two six-packs of Caffeine-Free Diet Coke—double unleaded, Jeremy called it—and headed for the cash register. But I remembered the scallions I needed as garnish for my spaghetti meal. So I turned down the next aisle instead, surprisingly open compared to the one I'd just left.

And there was Luscious.

I'd almost forgotten him.

Okay—no I hadn't. But the sight of him—even after only a few seconds of not seeing him—had such an impact on my lungs that my breath emerged in short little bursts.

Impact. That was a good word to describe him. He definitely had visual impact.

But... he was simply Not. My. Type.

My type or not, I totally forgot about the scallions and simply stood there, unable to do anything but ogle.

Well, almost anything. I did a great job of causing a backup at the entrance to the beer aisle—a pretty popular place on the Saturday afternoon before a major golf tournament in Florida.

Luscious picked up two cartons of St. Pauli Girl. My heart bumped hard, magnifying the stress my body already experienced from the short little breaths my lungs had dictated. St. Pauli Girl was my favorite. Well technically, white wine was my favorite—San Sebastian table wine made right here in St. Augustine, actually. I'd fallen in love with it from the first bottle Jeremy sent me after he toured the winery.

But on the rare occasion that I drank beer, St. Pauli Girl was my first choice.

Ten feet in front of me, Luscious reached for some Bugles on the top shelf, the sleeve of his leather jacket leaving his wrist to reveal fine black hair peeking out from the cuffs.

I loved hairy men.

And I used to love Bugles. I would dab cream cheese on the larger, horn end of the crunchy corn snack so it resembled a miniature ice cream cone and then pop the whole thing in my mouth. Of course, that was twenty years ago before I became disciplined about cholesterol and weight.

Apparently, Luscious harbored neither of those worries. I caught a glimpse of Double Stuff Oreos in his cart—my favorite cookies in the whole world. I closed my eyes and

remembered how much fun my teeth and tongue used to have with them—first the crunchy chocolate and then the creamy icing. Life just didn't get much better than a bag of Bugles followed by Oreos for dessert.

The long dormant rebel in me reared its ugly head and it recognized the fact that I'd sacrificed many of my former favorite things in order to live a disciplined, ordered life.

And it was appalled at the lengths to which I had gone to do so.

As I looked longingly at Luscious's shopping cart, even I was no longer certain it had been a good trade. And if I hadn't, I decided, become so darned rigid, it would have been great fun to spend time with him for his junk food habits alone.

I passed my reflection in a frozen foods door and stole a sideways glance. I still wore my hair long and had recently begun sweeping it up, as it was currently, in a ponytail. My Executive Assistant, Liz, a twenty-two-year-old intern from Boston College, had outfitted me before the trip to make certain that I was dressed appropriately at the golf tournament.

"You have to look the part, Molly," she said. "That tournament will be very fertile ground for snagging a rich, retired silver fox."

"And just as fertile ground to snag some deadbeat, black-hearted gigolo," the cynic in me had responded.

I pretended to study the chicken nugget boxes on the other side of the freezer door but in reality I gave my reflected image the once-over. The woman who stared back at me in Liz's khaki Capri pants and leopard print short sleeve button down shirt appeared to be a tailored, no-nonsense type who was comfortable in her own skin. Except, that is, for the extra five pounds of Shrimp Scaloppini and Beef Wellington from last week's business dinners in Atlanta that stubbornly refused to leave her hips and thighs.

But, all in all, she didn't look bad for her age.

I hated that!

That saying had *always* ticked me off.

I'd never wanted to be "not bad for my age." I'd always wanted to be fantastic for my age. For any age. And I knew it was possible. How did I know that women over fifty could still look fantastic? Two words—Tina Turner. At seventy, she was a timeless beauty.

That's what I'd always sought. Timeless Beauty.

But what I saw reflected in the glass freezer door was Holding-Its-Own Cuteness.

"May I help you find something, Ma'am?" a voice said at my knees.

It was the first time I had noticed the crouching teenager—the same straw-haired pimply-faced teenager who had helped Old Mr. Cane Man to safety. He was adding frozen pizzas to the bottom shelves of the freezer right next to mine.

"You sure can," I said. "Direct me to Good Witch Glinda so she can zap five pounds from my thighs and all these little crow's feet from my face."

I truly had not intended to say that out loud.

I left the bewildered teenager to complete his task and continued down the aisle. Luscious reached the end and turned the corner again. I remembered the scallions, set a grocery cart speed record to the vegetable section, and grabbed the first bunch I touched. I added them—noticeably wilted—to my cart, and then wheeled the width of the store, cautiously peering down each aisle.

He was gone.

And so was my enthusiasm for shopping. My whole mood had changed—dimmed despite the bright Florida sunshine just outside.

I couldn't reconcile my disappointment in not finding him. He wasn't my type, for goodness sake. And I'd never even seen what he looked like—well, not his face, anyway. Still,

a little cloud darkened my spirit as I made the final trek to the checkout counter.

“It serves you right,” a voice in my head admonished. “You should have found a way to speak to him.”

And then another voice spoke up.

“Leave her alone. He wasn’t her type.”

My imagination flew to the cartoons of my youth when Mickey Mouse, in the throes of decision-making, vacillated between the advice of a little White Angel Mickey on one shoulder and the counter argument of a little Black Devil Mickey on the other and I almost laughed out loud. In my later years, of course, I recognized Mickey’s shoulder pals as the classic struggle between the Yin and Yang of human emotion.

But at the time, I just sided with the angel.

“Now how would she know that, hmmm?” the little Devil hissed. “She didn’t give him a chance.”

“Chance had nothing to do with it,” the Angel huffed. “She doesn’t take chances in her life. Everything centers around planning and discipline.”

“Borrriinnng!” the little Devil responded.

I allowed them to argue, ignoring them as best I could, through grocery bagging and paying. I picked up the three plastic bags, and turned.

Just in time to see the glass door slide closed behind his silver streaked hair and perfect backside. My heart thumped up and hit the bottom of my throat.

I leapt toward the door only to be immediately jerked backward in the midst of a reverberating crash.

“What the hell?!” I hadn’t intended to say that out loud, either.

“Let me help you, Ma’am.” It was my little friend, the straw-haired pimply-faced

teenager. Boy that kid sure got around.

“What the hell?!” I said again. Yeah—this time I said it on purpose

“The handle of your bag caught on this display, Ma’am.” The teenager’s tone was cordial in that customer-is-always-right manner.

But his face glowed bright red all the way past his ears.

My heels and ankles, bare to the world in my new Louis Vuitton sandals, registered a new sensation.

Slightly wet, definitely sticky.

In horror, I looked down to a mound of mangled cupcakes splattered on the floor—and the ends of my shoes—white icing side down, of course. I feared for my two hundred twenty-five dollar investment but quickly verified that it was salvageable.

The grocery floor, on the other hand.... Multi-colored sprinkles bled into the whole mess and resembled flower power psychedelics à la the hippie generation from the sixties. Two little girls, quietly standing beside their mother at the Customer Service counter, transformed before my eyes into howling monsters as they dove for the crumbled confections. By the time their mother caught up with them, red and blue splotches replaced the former pink of their lips and fistfuls of cake crumbs filled their mouths, overflowing onto their apple green tank tops. Thick white icing covered their little hands and, as soon as she reached them, their mother’s black shorts as well.

“I-I’m so sorry,” I said. Already the teenager was back on the floor, gathering and mopping the errant desserts. “I don’t know how that happened. I’m not sure...I mean I hate leaving you with this mess but...”

“We’ll take care of it, Ma’am. Don’t worry,” the teenager responded without looking up.

Embarrassed, I backed toward the door...the urgency to get the heck out of there and

glimpse Luscious for a final time dictating everything else. As I turned again, I smacked into the posterior of a rather large woman bent over two small children who were writhing on the floor in tears. *Good Heavens*, I thought. *Why are there so many children in this store in the oldest city in the country? And why the hell are they all in my way?*

I managed to stay upright and fortunately, she did as well, so I gathered what tiny shards of dignity I could muster and finally reached the fresh air of the sunny Florida afternoon. I resigned myself to the fact that I had totally missed any further chance to reward my eyes with a peek of Luscious's backside and put my bags in the passenger's side of my little red play toy. I still had almost two hours before Jeremy expected me since I'd never gotten around to telling him about my flight change. My plan, formed in the last thirty seconds—another uncharacteristic move—was to kill time at the Outlet Mall across the highway.

I pulled out of my space and waited patiently for the line of SUVs to turn on to the shopping center's main road.

And then I saw him.

On a motorcycle. A big Harley.

Wrap-around sunglasses hid most of his profile, but his silver streaked hair was clearly visible since the helmet that should have been protecting his head was strapped to the storage compartment behind his perfect backside, protecting a small insulated cooler instead.

Again, my throat tasted my heart.

But a motorcycle!

I hated motorcycles. I was afraid of them.

"How do you know?" my little black shoulder Devil piped up in my head. "You've never been on one. Follow him."

"She's not going to follow him! She doesn't do things like that," the little white shoulder

Angel retorted. “What are you thinking?”

At that moment a woman emerged from the shoe store adjacent to the grocery store I had just left. She carried a large bag emblazoned with the Nike symbol and the bright, bold orange words, “Just Do It.”

It was a slap in the face. A wake-up call.

I was fifty-two years old, single, a successful business woman, and sick to death of living my life dictated by calories, cholesterol and calendars.

My smile began slowly and then commandeered my whole face.

“Don’t even think it!” the little Angel warned.

“Get lost, Angel,” I said aloud. “The Devil and I are going to follow a man.”

It was my now-or-never moment in time. One of those rare occasions when one can actually grasp the life significance of an event as it happens. For the third time in two hours, I, Molly Monroe, was on the verge of an out-of-character experience.

The wide smile continued to dominate my face and the beautiful day swelled my heart. Life’s music played all around me and for the first time in years, I distinguished its delicate harmony, merging and then blending with its constant melody.

I drove the length of the shopping center and saw him open the door of a small bar. Pub, the sign read. O’Shaughnessy’s Irish Pub. I parked the car in the space next to his Harley and took a deep breath.

As I opened the door a simple truth skittered around the fringes of my brain and then slammed full force into the middle of it.

I understood it perfectly.

Luscious, my brain told me, wasn’t the issue. It didn’t matter whether I actually met him or not. The important point was that I had taken the first step to break out of my self-induced

shell; that regardless of what happened or didn't happen with Luscious, I was finally ready for a simpler, less rigid life.

"Good," my little Angel said. "Glad you figured that out. Now get back in the car and let's go to the Outlet Mall."

"Buzz off, you damn wimp," my little Devil and I snorted in unison.

"We've come this far," the Devil added, "and epiphany or not, we have to see it through."

"Right," I said, siding with the little Devil for the second time in five minutes.

Purposefully, I strode through the door of the Pub.

My eyes gradually adjusted. He sat at the bar next to an open stool.

Of course. It was karma.

Pure adrenaline...and prompting from my little Devil...propelled my legs forward, my face consumed with smiling.

I slid onto the stool next to his and settled myself. He didn't turn.

"What'll ya have, Miss?" the bartender asked in a fake Irish brogue.

"St. Pauli Girl," I answered, figuring that would get his attention. It did.

It was the moment I had waited for—thrown caution to the winds for. He turned toward me. And I'd been right. His face was beautiful and my eyes couldn't have been more thrilled to feast on it, absorb every curve of it. As he looked at me, light flooded his glacier blue eyes. Heart of glacier, actually, the bluest part of the iceberg.

He spoke one word. One bittersweet, bubble-bursting word.

"Mom?!"