From the Ashes

Zan Bockes
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So here I am, age 20, in Longview State Hospital, being executed. Here, they do it slowly, like torture, with a needle in the hip every day.

Before I was 20, when I became "Laura Laurelee" and the stone general in North Square Park became my mentor, I was not an extraordinary human being. I was raised in an Iowa farming community, an only child, lying awake most nights while my parents argued and banged things downstairs. Until my father quit drinking and my mother got religious, I spent my childhood years hiding from my father in the closet with a flashlight and my dollhouse, which I'd made from a shoebox and had an imaginary two-inch family living in it.

My parents later tried to make up for those early years. When the interstate came through and my father's truck stop boomed, the money came to me instead of going to Hadley's Haven for beer and package liquor. Suddenly, when I asked for $5, they'd give me ten. When I asked for a bicycle, I got a 10-speed. I often thought, when I was 12, that my parents had exploded in their sleep one night and been replaced by new parents.

At 20, I left Iowa and headed for Boston in my '62 VW Bug, hoping for a new life in the city. Although I was a little reluctant to leave my parents, I wanted to break free, capture something, grab life by the horns and climb on its back and ride.

But outside this small Ohio town, my car blew a piston rod. I could hear my dreams being mangled in the engine as I slowed down on the highway near a clump of long, 2-story buildings. I thought it was a college then. I only glanced at the isolated figures on the lawn, thinking they were between classes. Then I saw the sign: "Longview State Hospital," but I didn't give it a second thought. I walked on into town.

While my car was being fixed, I stayed at the Green Star Motel. I contemplated calling my parents but decided against it. My mother would only whine at me to come home, and my father would launch into a diatribe about the foolishness of my leaving in the first place. They'd both been upset about my move—my mother tearfully fluttering her hands around my hair, my father digging $20 bills out of his pockets and forcing them into my hands. They'd be sure to point out that a broken piston rod was a likely sign that I still couldn't take care of myself.

At the Green Star, the owner, Mrs. Hawkins, learned of my troubles and offered me a job as a maid to make money for repairs. I decided to stay for awhile. It wasn't Boston, but that wasn't the main thing.
So I worked days at the Green Star. I got a small apartment. The winter passed. I considered Mrs. Hawkins one of my friends, since she sometimes offered me a can of Coke at the end of the day. Another friend was a brittle old woman with arthritis in her knee whom I often passed on the walk to work. We usually exchanged a few pleasant remarks about the weather. I didn't know anyone else.

Meanwhile, I kept my apartment clean, I bought groceries, and I put my pay in the bank. It wasn't hard; it wasn't easy. These were just things I did, like putting one foot in front of the other.

But gradually things began to change. At first I thought it was just the weather—spring sun warming the snow, the musical tricklings of icicles melting, the slow rise of green things from the damp earth. Spring fever, I told myself. That's where the giddy feeling comes from.

I stopped walking. Now I waltzed. I rejoiced in changing the rumpled beds, in emptying the overflowing ashtrays, in digging the mildew from the shower tiles. Mrs. Hawkins' broad, rubbery face became saintly and serene. The green neon star on the motel sign guided me through the day; its pulsing flash throbbed before my eyes at night. I spent quiet evenings in my attic apartment, speculating about the significance of a passing blue car, smiling at the white shirts hung out on the clothesline, noticing the boy down the street had a bicycle the color of the night sky. A warmth rose in my heart—I saw myself healing the brittle old woman's bad knee, turning her face to the smooth, pink complexion of a young girl's.

At work one day, I spent a whole hour cleaning a mirror, absorbed in the slow, wiping movement of the rag across the glass and the way my face looked up close with my nose leaving smudges on the surface. I tried to wipe away my image, but the stranger who stared back at me only frowned, her face contorted. I saw hairline cracks in her skin, and her teeth gleamed like a mouthful of fluorescent lights. Mrs. Hawkins caught me then and chided me for "entertaining" myself when there was work to be done.

Another day, I noticed a dead bird on the motel roof, and I climbed a ladder to take it down, staying up there next to the bird most of the afternoon, planning a proper burial. I saw the bird as a dead spirit, and I needed to say the right chants and incantations to send it to the next world. While I was whispering some of these over the bird, I looked up and saw Mrs. Hawkins in the parking lot, her arms crossed over her large chest, her mouth open as if calling me. She may have called me, but I could not hear her, the chants were so loud in my head. She motioned for me to come down, and I did, carrying the bird. "Laura!" she scolded.
"We just don’t have time for this!"

Finally she called me into her office. I sat on the edge of the folding chair before her desk, looking directly into her grey, watery eyes. I never switched my gaze except to notice that she habitually turned her gold ring around and around her finger. My mother did that once, playing a game where she made the twinkling stone on her wedding ring disappear and reappear, like a small eye shutting and opening again. Mrs. Hawkins continued to do it, as though that circulating ring were responsible for the earth turning under my feet.

"You’ve been a fine maid," she said. "No question about it. But recently your work has been... well, substandard." The ring circled her finger. I felt the earth shift forward another notch. She said, raising a finger, "The Green Star is no place for a young woman to spend the rest of her life. You’re not obligated to stay here."

I opened my mouth. Took a deep breath. "But I like it here! Why? Am I in trouble?"

Mrs. Hawkins gazed at me steadily, then looked down at her hands. "Laura, I don’t think you’re feeling well. I think you need a rest. I think you need to go home to your parents and talk things out."

I stared at her ring. Its shiny onyx glistened like the eye of a small animal trapped in her hands. I could hear it squeaking.

"Laura," she said. I looked into her eyes. "I’d like you to resign."

A faint roar began in my ears. I swallowed hard. "All right," I said. I stood and went to the door, the floor undulating beneath me. I opened the door and turned to Mrs. Hawkins. "Thank you," I said, and I walked home.

With no job, I spent my time in North Square Park, gazing up at the monument of the general. He sat on a carved marble horse, one hand holding a sword to the sky. The marble was stained dark on his shoulders and down the sides of his horse. His bearded face was at first stark and impassive, except for the eyes. Vandals had crayoned a sloppy spiral in each eye, making him look a little wild and crazed. The more I studied his eyes, the more the rest of him seemed to come alive. We developed a relationship based on eye contact, and he began to smile when I playfully saluted him. After awhile, he began to salute back, and finally when I greeted him one day, he spoke:

"Good view up here."

"Is it?" I said, by now feeling completely natural with him. "You can see the whole world. World’s not so good, but the view is."

So began the first of many conservations we had. But I felt
uneasy. Though I welcomed these changes in things, I could not explain why they were happening. I could not explain why I suddenly had the power to give life to stone, or see colors I had never seen before, or understand the whisperings of the trees. I knew I had mystical powers, but I didn't know what my responsibilities were. Something was happening to the Universe, too—something black and twisted and sinister—and the knowledge of this ate at my heart like a rat in my chest, gnawing and scraping endlessly.

Isolated events in town pointed toward the coming apocalypse. The mayor was involved in an embezzling scandal. A room in the Green Star caught fire, and although the fire did not spread, I saw the room where it happened—smoke-blackened walls, charred carpeting, a mattress with a gaping burned hole in it: "Gutted" was the term the newspaper used—it gave me a sick feeling. Then the little boy down the street was struck by a car. I swore I had heard his screams.

I told the general about these things. One day, he said in a tired voice, "Evil is basic. It runs in cycles." And then in a flat loud voice, he added, "Someone oughta fix that."

I began to see that evil was multiplying to such a degree that goodness was being choked out, and in order to save the good, I had to destroy all I could and rebuild from the ashes of the world I was to destroy.

The general and I spent long hours discussing the problem. He had a gift for summing things up in a few words. Regarding the destruction of the Universe, he smiled grimly and said, "Incandescence. Destroy the essence."

I spent my afternoons walking through town, looking for objects that I could possibly sacrifice as the essence of evil. And then, behind a bicycle shop in the back alley, I found the box. It was a cardboard box, painted black, with white stencilled letters on the side: "DAMAGED." Inside were nine rubber tubes, and I stared at them.

I saw myself crouching in the basement behind the water heater, cutting George Washington's picture out of a dollar bill for my dollhouse. My father was roaring my name, coming down the basement stairs. I tried to stuff the cut-up bill in the water heater's pilot light, but my father grabbed me, shouting "Shame! Shame on you!" He dragged me out to an antique piano stool and threw me on it, then snatched a strip of inner tube from the pile by the door. He yanked down my pants to my ankles. The rubber snapped and cracked. It stung my skin as he whirled the stool seat around and around, whacking me each time my bare skin passed him.

I saw all this clearly. The tubes in the box looked like nine black snakes that had choked on their tails, feasting on greed and
corruption. Evil ran in cycles, stretching and growing, basic as a snake. When I gathered the courage to pick up the box and take it home, it was so heavy that I could barely carry it. I reached home exhausted, and I put it in a corner of my room, carefully covering it with a white sheet.

The next day I bought a five-gallon can of gasoline and selected a shiny black box of matches from a restaurant in my home town. I put them in the corner next to the box of snakes.

The next two nights I could not sleep. I stayed up, sitting in front of my open window, trying to anticipate each trick the Universe would play in order to preserve itself. At last a distant bell tolled.

That’s kind of how it all started. Think of it this way: Something in the darkness reaches for me, but it is only layer upon layer of darkness itself. The tiny threads that hold the Universe together brush across my face, and I wipe them away, again and again, as I pass under the shimmering trees where the insects crouch watching me. The trees whisper my name, "Laura...Laura Laurelee," nodding in their slow, familiar way. The insects’ iridescent pinpoint eyes shift and glow.

Ahead I see the general. The lights around him make his figure stark and white, and the nighthawks swirl and call above him. How perfect, I think, for him to witness the destruction of the Universe, with his arm raised high to order the onslaught.

I approach slowly though the trees, carrying the box. The white sheet glows like the face of the moon, the skin of a young woman. "I am a young woman," I say as I near the general.

"Never too young. Never too female to begin again," he says, grinning down at me. I place the box at the foot of the monument.

"Begin again, begin again," hiss the trees.

I place the can of gasoline and the matches next to the box, lining them up in order: snakes, gas, fire. I study the nozzle of the gas can from which rivers of fire will flow, raging through the town and the countryside, an incendiary elixir soothing the Universe as it burns. The shiny black cover of the matches glistens in the light like obsidian used to cut out a heart.

"Whose heart?" I wonder aloud, looking up at the general. He is smirking. "Your heart!" I tease, pointing my finger at him.

He grins, then wipes his mouth with the hand that holds the reins of the horse.

I try to gauge the time, but the darkness is my only clue, and I feel as though I am suspended in oil, hanging somewhere on a minute between twilight and dawn. From where I stand, I can see
the whole park. I believe I am standing on an Indian burial mound, and the grass and trees and walkways fall away into the darkness, a distant row of lighted houses at the fringe. I can feel the presence of those Indians who were slaughtered here, perhaps by this very general. I look up at him. He has heard my thoughts.

"I never told anyone, but I was always sorry about that," he says, looking up at the sky. In the thin light, he looks like my father, the way his lips are pursed and a tiny tuft of beard just below his lower lip sticks straight out. I feel sorry for him, for what a man does in a difficult situation is not always an expression of what he really is, and often a reputation for ruthlessness is a struggle to live down. I sigh and look down at the snakes lying quietly in their black box. When I remember our mission, I jerk my head up to look at the general again. He is gazing across the park, distance in his eyes.

"Wake up!" I cry. He glances at me, his face slipping back into the blank expression he wears for the usual park-strollers.

My cry has alerted two lovers. They are distant yet, walking hand in hand on the lighted lawn before the monument, their faces two pale ovals. "Fawns in the forest," the general whispers. "Only fawns in the forest. They will not disturb us."

I turn away and lean casually against the monument, considering where I will go once the Universe is destroyed. I had planned that I would be a smoke-spirit, and that I could easily travel. To go from the general to the Pacific seems a logical way to progress.

"There will be no Pacific, you fool," barks the general. I only glance at him, imagining rolling green waves and warm sun.


The lovers have stepped nearer. They are watching me. The grand stage is set.

I place the box in the center of the circular pavement before the general, yank off the sheet. The gas spills from the can onto the snakes. They glisten and writhe, a mass of black intestines curling upon themselves.

"What is she doing?" the female lover says. I look at them, the innocent fawns, so blissful in their ignorance. The male lover shelters her shoulder with his arm. He bends to whisper in her ear. I continue to pour the gasoline. When I look up again, the lovers are gone. The lawn is empty, the mown grass sparkling, the slow dark trees nodding and directing me: "Now, Laura Laurelee, light the world."

"Operation Destructo-Creation!" rumbles the general, raising his arm higher.

I slide back the cover of the matches. My hands shake as I
select the one with the most perfect head, and I kneel close to the box. I watch my fingers position the match on the abrasive strip, waiting for some command.

"Am I really doing this?" I ask.

"Yesno, noyes, yesno," say the general. "But it's right."

I look at him. His sword seems to glitter green against the night sky. "All right, then," I say. With a flick of my wrist, the match snaps and flares, leaping into the box. I roll away across the pavement, curled ball-tight.

I wait for an explosion, but there is none. The flames dance over the edge of the box. I rise to my feet. "Very peculiar, very strange," the general chants, "the way things go, the way things change."

I crouch near the flaming box. Black smoke rolls up, smelling oddly of skunks run over on the highway. The snakes hiss and bubble. The trees stand round, applauding me. The general smiles. "Now," he says, "dance."

I begin to dance around the box, slowly weaving my arms into the air, snaking my legs, crouching and leaping. I am a snake sliding up a tree, dripping down into the slime. I step into the box and out again, each time more quickly, feeling the heat of the fire on my legs. The clouds of thick smoke make me reel with their poison.

And then I hear them, the Sirens. They are not the Sirens which lure and pacify. They are warning Sirens. Police Sirens. Their voices sound like a child crying, a mechanical wind-up child. I can see the gears in its throat turning round and round as it scrapes out the sounds. The harsh cries draw nearer. It is the cry of the Universe trying to protect itself. I will be executed as a traitor.

The red flash flits over the lawn as the car pulls up to the fringe of the park. I see two men jump out and begin running across the lawn, toward me.

"Ignore," says the general. "They are not really there. Just go home." I turn away, trying to walk casually, swinging my arms.

As though from a great distance, I hear the men's cries: "Hey! You! Hold it!" I walk on, gazing at the trees. I tell the police in my mind, "I am a lone lover in the park. I'm supposed to meet my boyfriend here. No, I have nothing to do with the destruction of the Universe. A bum was cooking hot dogs there."

Suddenly my right arm is in a tight grip. I swing to look into the face of a man in a dark uniform. He looks vaguely familiar.

"What's wrong with you?" he snaps. He has a ridge of thick eyebrows over deep eyes and a young, tight-jawed face. Could be a relative of the general, I think. I decide to ask.

"Any relation to General...?" I can't remember his real name.
"Come with me, Miss," the man says, tugging my arm.
I slip from his grasp. "I'd rather just go home," I say. I start to turn away, but he grabs me again, calling to the other man: "Come here! I'm gonna need some help!"
I hear the trees rustling. "Run!" they cry, snapping their branches. "Run!"
I wrestle free and sprint, dodging the trees, jumping over bushes. I am flying, bat-like, over the ground. But then a black, leafy snake rises in my path, its jaws closing on my ankle. I sprawl on the ground, then surge halfway up before something huge and heavy knocks me windless.
The two men circle my wrists with cold metal behind my back. "You're going to the station," one pants. He jerks me to my feet and pushes me forward. We pass the monument, where a man with a fire extinguisher sprays the flaming box. The general frowns, shaking his head. "So now what?" I shout at him. He remains still, unblinking.
"Who are you yelling at?" the man with thick eyebrows says, tightening his hold on my arm.
The other man looks at me closely, his glasses reflecting the monument light like two white faces. "What're you on, anyway?" the man says.
"Destructo-creation," I snap. (I have a tendency to be irritable with police when they pretend not to know what's going on).
"Are you sick?" Eyebrows asks.
"I'm not sick," I say. "Everyone is. The Universe is. We're getting closer to the beginning." I pinch my lips together. I've blown it. Now they know.
"Oh. I see," Eyebrows says, glancing at the other man. We reach the car. Eyebrows guides me into the back seat, sliding in after me.
We drive down dim streets. The clamps behind my back chew into my wrists. Fuzzy voices cough and sputter over the car's radio. The other man says some numbers into it. I look at the floor of the car, wondering what the general would say about this. At last we reach the station. I realize I am going to be executed as a cosmic offender. They know of my mission. They knew of it when they came to the park to stop me. I sigh.
"Ever been here before?" Eyebrows asks as he gets out. I shake my head as he pulls me out and guides me through the door. He steers me down a hall and into a room with several plastic chairs in it, then he goes out, leaving the door open. The chairs look like traps—like the arms will spring up and crush my chest if I sit in one—so I stand against the empty wall, the clamps on my wrists clicking against the plaster.
I can hear the men talking in the hallway, but I can only hear
snatches of what they say: "...on drugs or just out of her gourd. . .two passerby in the park. . .gasoline. . .burning a box of inner tubes. . .acting very strangely. . .no ID. . .check it out."

A big woman with a clipboard comes in, packed into a dark uniform. "Please sit down," she says, her voice echoing off the walls. I would like to sit down, but it seems too dangerous.

"I'll just stand here till it's over, if you don't mind," I say. The woman sits in one of the chairs. She runs her hand through her short red hair. Her face looks pasty and tired, as though she is irritated by my presence.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asks. By the way she is looking at me, with her head slightly tilted, I can tell she already knows my name.

"You already know my name," I say, puzzled.

"No, I'm afraid I don't." She is trying to trick me. She knows I have a real name different from the one I think I have, and she will accuse me of lying.

"Which name do you want that you don't know already?" I say. The woman glances at Eyebrows, who stands at the door, his arms crossed.

"Just tell me your real name," she says. "The one on your driver's license."

I decide to test her. "Laura."

"Laura what?"

"Laura Laurelee."

"How do you spell that?" she asks, her pen poised above the clipboard. I am surprised. I thought only the trees and the general knew I had that name. But they never told me how to spell it. I take a guess.

"Laurelee, like laurel tree, without the 'tr,' or like laurel leaves without the 'ves' and an 'e' instead of an 'a.' That's the way the trees would spell it," I say.

The woman stares at me. "I see," she says slowly. Eyebrows speaks up. "That's not a real name," he says, frowning. "She's lying to us."

Eyebrows steps across the room and looks into my face. I stare back, watching his eyebrows form a furry "v" on his forehead. Maybe he is a vampire, I think. He turns to the woman.

"She's too out of it to know her name," he says. He looks back at me. His face looks strong and tight, like a trap that has clamped down on me, his eyes two screws boring into mine and holding me in place. I snap my eyes away and look down.

"Better get her to Longview," the other man says. "We can't charge her with anything anyway."

Longview State Hospital? Is that where the executions take place? I look up, gazing deep into Eyebrows' hooded eyes. The
Universe burns there; I know he can feel it burning, and that he is trying to save it with his cool, evil smile. "Come along, Miss," he says, reaching for me with a tentacle-like arm.

I bolt for the door. Eyebrows wraps himself around me like a thick black snake. The other man and the woman help to drag me out to the car, where I am dumped on the floor in the back with Eyebrows’ knee in my back. I think of the general, wishing I had his sword.

We hurtle through the night, and I can hear the general chanting in my ears: "Destruction—creation—destruction—creation." As the Universe struggles to save itself, I am on my way to be destroyed in the clump of buildings by the highway, to no longer speak or move; where the trees will no longer whisper my name; where the Universe will be the same, going on unchanged, undefeated.

So here I am in Longview State Hospital, going on week three. Every morning, the sun blazes through the heavy screens; the nurses bring my food; the jingle of keys echoes off tiled walls; my parents call long-distance to tell me they love me, they’re praying for me, everything will be all right. But it’s like the snakes that swallow their tails—the same gnawing, writhing circle that turns around and around, going nowhere.

Through the fuzz of the medication, I struggle to re-create the Universe: I try to re-create the general, smiling down at me, his arm raised high in triumph; I try to re-create his voice, giving me direction and telling me jokes. But it’s like putting together a puzzle in the dayroom, where you get a few pieces in place and then, when you’re not looking, somebody comes along and takes them apart. It shouldn’t be that way. I should only have to re-create things once, and then they should stay. But I keep doing it.

One of these days, the pieces will stay where I put them, and the Universe will be a place I can actually live in. I tell myself that. I tell myself that I will rise from the ashes of those melted snakes and walk through the world like I was meant to. But for now, all I can do is lie awake at night listening, for the general to speak, for the trees to call my name.

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