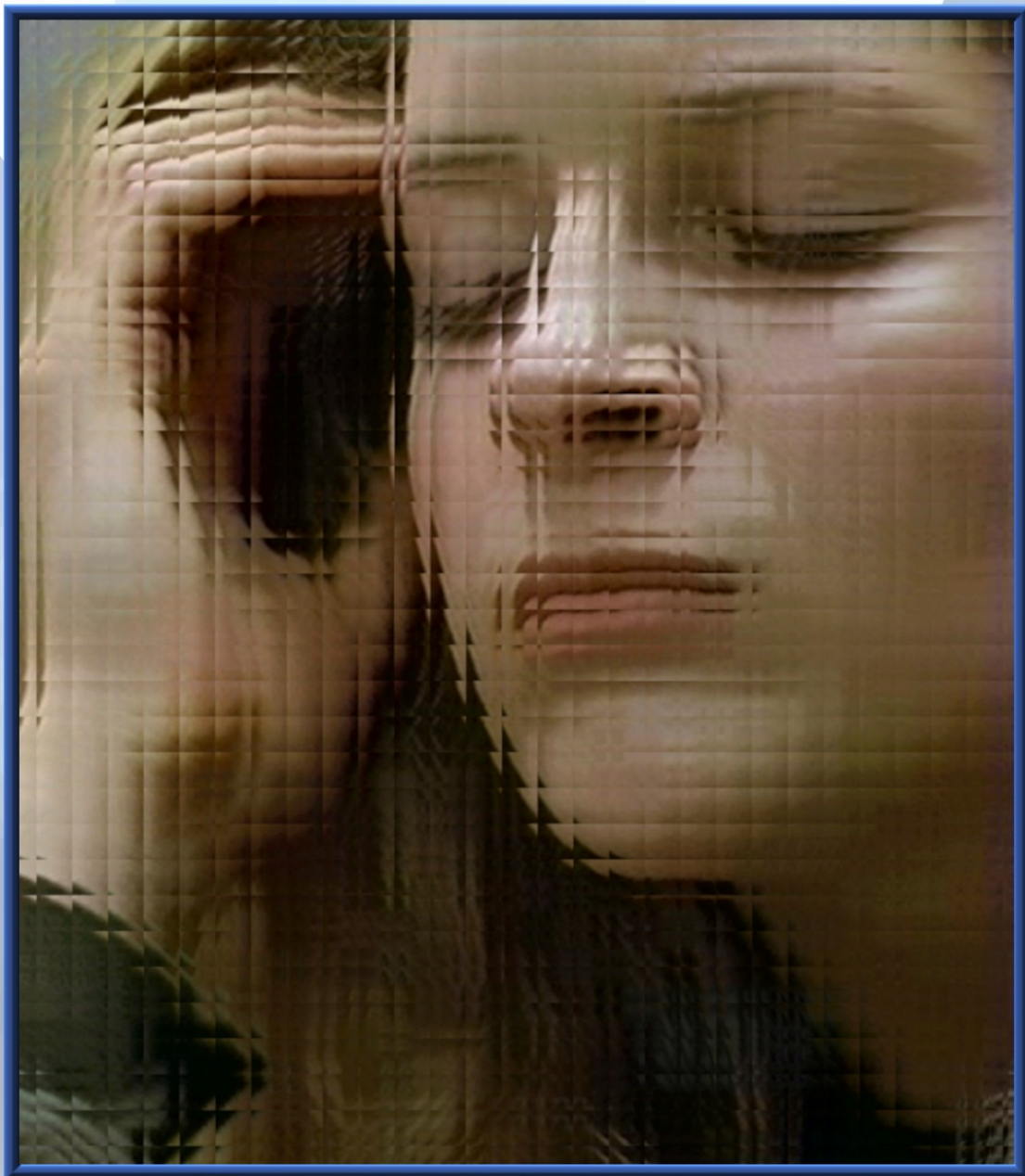




Brave



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: What do you do when your luck has run out? Lilly Derwent has to find that out, the hard way, after being sexually assaulted by a serial killer, and then, mere days later, being pushed out of a moving train. When your luck is gone, all you have is *yourself*. Is that enough for recovery?

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Total Word Count: 2,942

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Brave

Fighting her way back from the darkness was, for Lilly Derwent, an ordeal of pain and confusion. Her dreams were tormented, plagued with two horrifying ordeals that intertwined and made both terrible sense and no sense at all.

She was standing on the beach, a beer in her hand, the warm spring air on her skin. A man's voice behind her was saying that he had a present for her. She turned—

...and found herself on a train car. A man she'd never seen before was staring at her with intense, angry eyes. Was he a friend of *his*?

I knew someone was going to come after me.

Closing her eyes, feeling masculine fingers brushing her throat and something cool settling against her skin. A pendant of some sort. Another, colder object was pressed to her throat and she opened her eyes, seeing the knife.

I knew he was going to kill me.

Fleeing down the dunes, her clothing torn, death at her heels. If she reached the water, there would be people. If she reached the water, she would be safe.

Hurrying down the length of the train car, trying not to look back or panic. Unable to hear whether or not she was being followed over the sound of her hammering heart. If she got into the next car, she would be safe.

Gentle hands on hers as she fell to her knees on the sand. She clutched at them, trying to answer a man's questions about what she'd seen. Her head was rioting.

Reaching out for the door to the next car, just as she felt a large hand settle on the small of her back. Not even time to scream before she was flying, flying...

He got me. He got me. He got me.

Now there was only darkness.

Sometimes she thought she could hear the sound of her mother crying. Sometimes, there was also a rhythmic beep that she wanted to scream at. It wouldn't stop, wouldn't shut up and leave her alone. Endless and awful and she wanted to rise out of her bed and destroy whatever was making the noise, but her body wouldn't respond.

A first crack of light appeared long after she'd despaired of ever seeing any again. She studied it in fascination, wondering if it would grow. Slowly, very slowly, it did. Very slowly, things began to swim in it.

"...hear me, Miss Derwent?"

"Still non-responsive..."

The light grew brighter, painfully so.

"Pupils are constricting. Not as much as they should, but..."

Those are people.

The things in the light were blurry and strange. She didn't see people before her, just blobs. They came and went, and some of them tried to talk to her. But her voice wouldn't respond.

"...definite signs of awareness. It's massive progress. She may actually recover..."

Lilly wondered who the lucky "she" was, envying her. All of *her* luck had deserted her in October.

She became aware of discomfort. Tubes invading her body, needles invading her skin. She struggled to move her hands, so she could pull them out. One hand lifted, and chaos followed both within and without.

Time passed. She learned to wiggle her fingers while indistinct blobs cheered her on. Then she began to move her hands. Toes followed, and then feet.

"Lilly? Can you hear me?" Her mother's voice. She wanted to answer but the tubes were in the way. Pat the sheet once for yes, twice for no. Pat. Wait. Pat. Wait. Pat. Wait. *Yes, I can hear you...*

"Mrs. Derwent, please be careful of the tubes. I know you want to hold her but her life still depends upon them."

"I'm sorry, Doctor..."

Doctor. The white blob was a doctor. And the yellow-and-blue blob was a... *mother*.

Time passed and a new, familiar-but-not voice was beside her. "Lilly, can you hear me?"

Pat.

“My name is Harriet Walker. I was one of the detectives who investigated your case. Do you remember me?”

Dark hair, large eyes... *are you on drugs?*

Pat.

“I need to ask you a few questions about your accident, Lilly. Do you remember what happened?”

Hammering heart, almost safe, the door in her grasp and a hand on her back—

Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat.

Another voice, male and wry. “I’d say that was a yes, then.”

Harriet again. “Did you fall by accident?”

Pat-pat. Wait. Pat-pat. Wait. Pat-pat.

“Bloody son of a bitch...”

“Lilly, did somebody push you?”

Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat. Pat.

“Did you see who did it?”

Pat-pat. She hadn’t looked back, but she was sure of who had been behind her. Pat.

“No and yes... what does that mean?”

The male voice. “Lilly, did you see who was *going* to push you?”

Pat!

“So she saw someone before the attack, but didn’t actually see them when she was pushed. That won’t stand up well in court.” Harriet sounded discouraged.

“Yes, well, fortunately we now have enough on Gill to bury him alive. Would have been nice to have gotten his accomplice, though. Rotten little bastard.”

Gill? Who was...?

A charming face, smiling as its owner held out a beer. The face gone cold and cruel, to match the knife he held to her throat. Triumphant as he set the knife aside and began to touch her—

She shuddered. Gill.

The features twisting in rage as he lunged towards her out of the lineup.

“Lilly, it’s alright. He can’t hurt you now. He’s going to prison for a very long time.”

It was too late. He’d hurt her already. She was lying in a hospital bed, communicating solely through one-for-yes two-for-no taps on her mattress, solely because of *how much Paul Gill had hurt her*.

Hot tears leaked from her eyes.

“I think that’s enough, Detectives,” the familiar voice of one of her nurses said. “You’re upsetting her.”

Then she was alone again. Gill had done this to her. She’d tried to help a man find his way to the surfing, and her reward for not ignoring him or telling him to piss off was this hospital bed.

I want out I want out I want out...

Her hands clenched against the sheets. She forced herself to concentrate on her right arm, until she felt it lift.

Her task consumed her and she barely noticed the passage of time. Time was not measured in hours or minutes, but in breakthroughs. A successful arm lift, finding a way to bend her knee... soon she had someone helping her, encouraging her, telling her what to do next, and it began to go even faster. The world was still a blur, but things seemed to be acquiring edges.

When they took out several of the more invasive tubes she wanted to cry from both pain and joy. Now she could try to speak. Now someone — *Mother* — came by and spooned soft food between her lips while she learned how to use her mouth again.

“Fee... li... ba...”

“You feel like a baby?” Naturally her mother was the first one to begin understanding her attempts at speech. “It’s alright, Lilly. You’re doing wonderfully. The doctors are very impressed.”

She could hear the emotion choking her mother’s words.

“If you keep going like this, Lilly, you’ll be home in a few weeks.”

Movement was still limited. With the tubes gone, that became embarrassing a few times, but soon she knew how to use the call button to summon a nurse in time.

“You’re the darling of the floor,” one of them told her while brushing her hair. “Most people who go through what you’ve experienced never recover. It’s wonderful, seeing you coming back, and so brave about

it...”

Lilly didn’t feel brave. Her whole body still ached and the effort to communicate was exhausting. She was aware that her hair was very short now.

She asked her mother about it. It took a few tries before she got the question out in an understandable form.

“They had to shave your head for the cranial surgery. You had a...” The sound of suppressed tears clogged her mother’s throat. “...a lot of damage. You were lucky that you fell the way you did, but you almost died anyway...”

Lucky? Lilly no longer believed in luck.

She managed to lift her hand, reach out, and find her mother’s arm. She slid her hand along until her mother’s fingers were under her palm, and then she gave them a gentle squeeze.

There were no mirrors in her room and she began to fear that she looked hideous. After several tries, she managed to communicate her fear to the nurses, and they brought one to her.

Damn, I forgot I couldn’t see for shite...

The blurry reflection in the silver glass, though, looked... normal. She wondered if there was scarring she just couldn’t make out and began exploring her face with her fingers. No scars. Nothing seemed wrong.

“Your face is just fine,” her doctor told her. “Your arms were covering it when you fell. You have a lot of scars from the fall but not on your face.”

She didn’t know why, but that was a relief. *One* part of her had come out unscathed, even if it wasn’t a particularly useful part.

Words came more and more easily with practice. Her speech therapist came in the morning, followed by her physical therapist. She couldn’t really tell what either woman looked like — both were blonde, but that was all she could really discern — but progress was going well. She could walk, with assistance, now.

I’m eighteen and I’m using a walker and a bedpan, she thought wryly, and then had a good, long cry while no one was around.

Another two weeks, though, and the bedpan was gone. The walker gave way to a cane a month after that. Then the news she’d been hoping for came. She could go home...

Well, her mother’s home.

The apartment she’d been so proud of was gone. Her mother had packed up her things and brought them back home, and the building managers had agreed to break the lease. Lilly knew she couldn’t have kept it — couldn’t have managed herself on her own much less an apartment — but she still grieved its loss. Her greatest step towards true independence, the most meaningful one she’d ever taken... had been undone by one attempt to be a Good Samaritan to a good-looking man.

Her old room wasn’t quite how she’d left it. Now it also held things from her few months of independent living, and it was a little cramped. She settled into it, carefully, noting the huge pile of cards that had migrated with her from the hospital. There had been flowers too, she thought. But she’d never seen them, only smelled them in her fevered dreams.

A week later she had glasses and could actually try to read the cards.

The discovery that she had to learn how to read all over again left her curled on her bed, bitter tears soaking her bedspread as she pounded her fists against it. Why couldn’t she understand simple words anymore? Why did all of the messages on the cards look like meaningless *scribbles*?

It wasn’t fair. *I hate you, Paul Gill, I hope you get raped to death in prison...*

The bitter rage within her drove her, though, and she set out to recover what she’d lost. It was embarrassing, reading through the primers, sounding out the words as if she was a child of five again, but it began to come back to her faster and faster.

In time, her mother let her read the press clippings of the Paul Gill trial.

The dunes he’d taken her to had ended up being ransacked by the police, who had discovered three more bodies hidden within them. Once the girls had been identified, the case against Gill had been airtight, because he’d kept personal effects of each of them.

“Do you have any idea how amazing you are?” Her mother whispered to her, pride edging her speech. “You got away from him. You’re the only one who ever did.”

That wasn’t exactly true. She read about the police clerk who’d baited him out, getting him to confess on tape that he’d committed the murders. The woman — Nicole — had received a commendation for it.

That's a real hero, she thought, and resolved to meet her.

Her arrival at the Kingsway police station resulted in controlled pandemonium. She was rapidly surrounded by six excited people who took her into one of the interrogation rooms and plied her with food and drink. Their enthusiasm was dashed, a little, by how much difficulty she still had shaping words, but they were still happy to see her... and she was happy to see them. She didn't believe in luck, but she believed with all her heart in *them*.

Finally she got to spend a little time alone with Nicole.

"You caught him," she began, and Nicole shrugged.

"We caught him, yeah. It'll be a long time, if ever, before he gets out —"

"No, I..." Lilly interrupted. "I mean *you* caught him."

Even with glasses it was hard to see some things, but she was pretty certain Nicole was blushing.

"Almost got myself buried in a dune. I was reckless."

"No, that was... so brave of you."

Nicole was silent for a moment, watching her, before she spoke again. "Maybe. Seems to me there's all kinds of bravery, though. Like yours."

"I could never have done what you did," Lilly protested, remembering how hard it had been even to go to the lineup.

Nicole shrugged, a sad smile on her face. "Maybe. But I don't know if *I* could do what you're doing now. You don't know how happy it's made everybody, seeing you. When we first heard about the train... I think Joe wanted to kill Gill with his bare hands. It's wonderful to see you getting better."

Lilly could feel herself blushing, too. Somehow, Nicole was making it sound like *she* was the hero. "I still have a long way to go."

"Maybe, but you're going there. That bastard tried to steal away your life, and you didn't let him. You're not letting him." Nicole reached out and squeezed her hand. "You beat him. If it hadn't been for you there'd be more girls buried in the dunes now."

"No, that was you. I wasn't the one who caught him."

Nicole's smile was patient. "Maybe not, but we couldn't have caught him without you. You hang onto that, okay? I know you still have a long way to go before you're healed. You just remember that you *are* strong. We're very proud of you."

There were more hugs — Joe Hill, especially, seemed to want to wrap her in fatherly embraces — and then her visit was over. She and her mother walked out to the car.

"Where to now?" she asked. Something her mother had said at breakfast implied more than one destination today. *I need to learn how to drive again*, she suddenly thought.

"I thought we'd go to the beach. You haven't been there since that day."

It had been spring when she'd last stumbled over the sand. Now it was spring again. Warm and bright, the beach still packed with sunbathers and surfers... Lilly felt a little awkward. Her scars were healing but she still didn't want to put on a swimsuit. Still, it was lovely on the sand. The water was warm and frothy on her bare feet.

"I need to learn how to swim again," she commented, and promised herself she would. *And how to drive. And how to cook...*

But not how to live. That, she realized, was something she'd figured out already. The rest would come.