

UNA CONFRONTS DEATH

LAURA L MAYS HOOPES

A fantasy about a moment in the real life of Una Jeffers, wife of Robinson Jeffers, the California poet.

It was almost dark and the sea was grey, heaving and crashing, white spume flying. The warm wood of the wall, carefully made by Robin long ago, took on the grey of the sky and looked lifeless. Una Jeffers stood in her window on the second floor of Hawk Tower that night in 1945. She ran her long, thin hands over her heavy dark braids, coiled in back of her head, smoothing down stray hairs. She looked at the photograph on the wall, showing herself and Robinson, sitting in front of a big spire of rock in the mountains. Had she been beautiful then? Or just fascinating?

Now she only felt drained, exhausted. *So much joyful effort I put into life, and now an errant cell, almost Irish in its perversity, that Yeats might call an evil sprite from the dank peat, takes over my body. It's one thing to feel ill from time to time, but something else to hear that you have an incurable disease. I. Have. Incurable. Cancer. Next week I will have the biggest lump removed. But part of it has gone wild, spread everywhere. It will get me in the end. It's hard to accept, hard to believe.* She knew that she was going to die, without ever knowing what death meant, along with all the other poets and writers who tried to know and describe what was over the horizon. She didn't want to go there and find out. She had no choice.

Una asked herself, who is that flying in the broken clouds, streaming over the gray sea with its violent waves crashing all the way out to the horizon? She could see so far from the Hawk Tower, but there were no hawks to be seen. Only that illusory dark shape in the clouds, elongated dark limbs, pointed beard and dark hair flying, Lucifer it must be. She didn't exactly believe in Lucifer, but she remembered lines from Hamlet, Act 2, "The spirit that I have seen may be the devil; and the devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape; and perhaps out of my weakness, and my melancholy, as he is very potent with such spirits, abuses me to damn me." All the years of family readings at night, scared boys trying to be brave, Robin relishing their terror, and she so calm, flicked across her mind. Now she felt like gelatin inside, shaky and unstable.

"Hello, Una my dear. A little down tonight?"

Una shivered and drew her grey shawl up higher around her shoulders. She picked up a pen and doodled on a block of note paper on her desk. "I suppose my imagination is fired up, considering what happened today. Hello, Lucifer. No, I'm not a little down, I'm depressed and terrified."

"Aren't you afraid to tell me what you think, Una? I am dangerous." She answered, "If you exist, you could be a danger, but only if I agree to give you that power."

Lucifer's voice sounded anxious to please. "We're allies, don't you know? We work together."

"Oh, yes? I don't think so." She put down the fountain pen, realized that she had written "Lucifer" in grandiose script. She walked over to the seaward window and looked out at the clouds, seeing that it looked like Lucifer's eyes were open wide and his eyebrows were raised.

"What about the other day?" Lucifer said, "when you yelled at poor Edith for throwing the cheese rind into the fire when you planned to use it for the macaroni? It was an honest mistake, and you know she loves you."

Una said, "You are a vicious tease, Lucifer." Una thought of her close friend, Edith. She was younger, but just as passionate about literature as the Jeffers. Of course he'd try to use Edith against her. "Yes, I had to tell her it was a problem. She needs to stop thoughtlessly wasting, she's always been so rich. I needed that cheese, it would have made the macaroni delicious. But I suppose I could have told her in a kinder way." She pulled the chair over to the window and sat with her elbows on the stone windowsill. She brought along the pad she'd been scribbling on, and played with the closed pen for a minute, then opened it and crossed out the ornate Lucifer with a big X.

"You know you hurt her feelings. Ever since she married Teddie Kuster when you deserted him for Robinson, she idolized you. You yelled at her like a virago."

"But it's not the way I usually treat her. You know that very well." Una tore the sheet in half. She felt stiff, so she stretched her arms high above her head.

"So you admit you did wrong to her. And what about the Gutierrez family down in Carmel? You cheat them regularly, or bargain them out of their fair prices for vegetables and fruits. They feel sorry for you and you take shameless advantage of them."

"No, they enjoy bargaining as much as I do." Una stood up and put her hands on her hips. He was trying to put one over on her. Then she hesitated.

"Well, Juan does. Margarita sometimes looks sad when she agrees to the price."

"So, admit it. We work together don't we?"

"Sometimes we do. But we're no allies." She picked up the pen and pad and put them back on her desk. She walked over to the landward wall and touched one of her pictures of the unicorn tapestries. So calm and mysterious, not like this strident storm.

Lucifer gave her a soft answer. "I have your best interests at heart."

You're a powerful woman, able to move a lot of others to your side. That's important to me."

She shrugged up one shoulder, felt impatient. "What do you want?" "What you want. I want you to die happy."

His answer took her breath away. Die happy? How could she do that? What a hateful idea, happiness, when her reality was so barren. She gritted her teeth. "What do you mean?"

"We'll come back to that later," he said. "Let's talk about Robinson."

"What about him? He's gone to talk with Dame Judith Anderson about Medea." She relaxed her guard a little, since he had veered away from death. She walked back to the sea window and looked out over the lantern. Lucifer's image was elongated now.

"He's mine, body and soul." Lucifer's pointed eyebrows seemed to raise.

"You're wrong. He's his own man." She hoped she sounded confident. With Robin, she never was completely sure where his wide-ranging mind would take him. She sat at her desk again.

"He's a heathen. Maybe you are too."

"Robin only thinks God doesn't care. I think He/She/It is more benevolent than that." Una ran her hand over the smooth wood of her writing desk. Was she fairly representing Robin's thoughts? She hoped so. Her knitted Irish shawl fell to the carpet, and she slowly picked it up and wrapped it around her again. Her fingers twirled the fringe as she thought about her husband's mind and how different it was from her own.

"Robin rages at me sometimes, saying 'How can you believe a benevolent God would kill so many beloved sons?' He gets infuriated when I won't try to be logical." Una sighed. She heard a wavering roll of thunder in the distance. "Are you laughing at my illogic, Lucifer? Is nothing sacred to you? Oh, of course not. You're the master of emptiness. I believe what I will, and Robin does too. You're not whom we worship." She put her shawl down on the wooden desk chair and paced around the small room.

Lucifer's black tatters of cloud clumped together and he struck out with a crack of thunder. Una jumped. He bellowed, "Robinson is careful to be logical. He doesn't retreat into illogic the way you're bragging that you do." Una shivered. She knew that lightning strikes could destroy the tower if Lucifer really lost his temper.

Una looked out the window to the north side, across the small lawn at Tor House. No lights on, no one home. The rocks lining the tower room's window casing were beginning to darken with the intense burst of rain. She thought about what Lucifer might be implying. "You're thinking about that poem about Hitler. He had his own reasons, his own pressures when he wrote that." Roll after roll of thunder resembling raucous laughter pealed

from the skies and a sheet of hard rain splashed onto the window in front of Una. She looked out the sea side again. The ocean was no longer visible. Her brow wrinkled. Here she was dealing with her life and death and he was laughing at her. It made her angry. She stood in front of the sea window, leaned forward with her arms extended, propping herself on both hands, and stared into the sky. She said, "Stop laughing before you fall all the way to bits. I can barely see you in that cloud any more, just little flecks of swirling black. People were so cruel about Robin's anti-war stance, saying he was pro-Hitler, hated America." Her voice got soft and gentle as she thought about Robin. "He only hated the killing. He hated the pretending, how people who lost sons had to act proud of their bravery." She picked up one of the oyster shells she kept on the shelf next to the desk, tracing its lines with her finger.

"Why, Una? I never understood that, really. Why emphasize the parents' feelings?"

"He identifies with those parents. Our twin sons are such companions to him. But since his poems are full of sex and blood, the critics don't believe he's against killing." Una felt a lump in her throat as she harked back to that incident, because she had wanted to help Robinson but it hadn't worked out. "I wrote to some of his friends to explain, but their answers were just polite. He is *persona non grata*. Maybe having this *Medea* play produced will help his credibility." She put the seashell down on the desk, traced its outline on another sheet of note paper, then put the shell back with the others.

"That play... I enjoy seeing him rake up all this old evil."

"What do you mean? It's a classical theme. Critics said his historical themes go too far with sex. I've written to them to suggest it's symbolic." She drew swirls inside the traced outline of the shell. "I don't think they believe me, even ones half in love with me. It's a pity. I'm right." Una walked over to the bookshelf and picked up Euripides' *Medea*. She opened it at random and read aloud,

"I cannot do it. Farewell, my resolve,

I will bear off my children from this land.

Why should I seek to bring their father's heart,

When that same act will doubly bring my own?"

"Child murder, that's right. I see what you mean, it's certainly a somewhat evil theme," she said. Following his argument intellectually invigorated her, gave her confidence. She felt less threatened.

Lucifer changed the subject. "You know, your torture of those men who are infatuated with you, your former lovers, shows you belong to me."

"No, good grief. I never tortured anyone. Teddie Koster even married

Edith right after we divorced." Una laughed a little. She picked up a big beige and tan cockle shell from the coast of Ireland. He didn't understand. She would never harm anyone. Calling it torture was almost funny.

She continued, "I can't feel like Teddie missed me much, although Edith says I have this "calamitous magic" and he'll never really get over it. She says that's why he moved up here to Carmel. That's just silly." She traced each line of the shell with her index finger and then gently rubbed the silky interior. She and Robin had been so happy in the stone cottage on the coast of Ireland. It was a charmed time, and holding the shell helped her feel more in control.

"I think that's right." Lucifer's face was larger in the cloud; he looked stern.

"But Lucifer, he doesn't hang around me or stare at me with a lovesick look. It's strange that Edith and I've become friends all these years later. She teases me and says she's in love with me too. I don't believe her, but we've been very close recently."

The wind moderated and Una could see out the sea window to the whiccaps again. Lucifer's voice became deep and smooth. "Let's talk about death. Isn't that on your mind tonight?"

"It's coming much faster than I want. I have serious cancer. I'm not prepared. And who that I care about has died? Very few. Who'll welcome me to that country I fear?" Her thumb moved rapidly over the smooth inside of the cockle shell. Cancer was so dangerous, it was almost taboo to mention it. People kept it a secret. But she was intimate with this inner decay, it was eating her alive. She breathed hard, frowned. She tried to get her breathing under control, counted as she breathed in and out, tried to think of the little farm on the coast of Ireland where they had stayed, the sheep, the friendly neighbors.

"Your daughter died."

"Yes, Maeve died, my little Eve, born in Los Angeles before we ever came up here. I can hear her cry in the wind, my baby hawk." She held the shell between her two palms, pressing them down on the shell as if she was trying to glue something together. A tear formed and rolled down her cheek. "She was stolen by the faeries before she took a breath. Yeats' poem, "The Stolen Child," is about Eve. It says, "Come away, O human child! To the water and the wild/ with a faery hand in hand/ For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand." I want to think Eve's death spared her the worst of the world. But we were so ready to love her!" She stroked the shell rhythmically again. Would she ever get over Maeve's death? Was it possible she could meet her again after she died?

"It's stupid to say Yeats wrote about her; he was dead when she was born. But it's good to hear about it." Lucifer's face was smaller again, and

he appeared to be smiling.

"Of course I know Yeats was gone before Eve was thought about. It's the feeling he captured. Don't be a Philistine."

The wind blustered and a crack of lightning struck the rocky point. This time Una managed to keep from jumping. Lucifer growled, "You have a problem with the Philistines?"

"Of course you knew and loved them, never mind." A quick glance out the sea window showed her that Lucifer's cloud was much bigger and still just as dark. But as she watched, pieces of it blew away and it became a lighter grey.

"But what do you really think about death?" Lucifer asked in his smoothest voice. "You, yourself?"

"I don't know." Una thought for a minute. "I fear death. It's too unknown. I'm in pain. My breast, part of me my whole life long, will be cut off next week. I'll be poisoned with the anesthetic, I won't feel it go, but I'll be sick with the loss of it." She put the shell down and braided three strands of her shawl's fringe, then unbraided them, over and over. "And I won't be cured. There will still be growing lumps all over my body. I am sick. I will be sicker, and then I'll die." Her voice was husky and her eyes watered again. Why was she saying these things to this dangerous spirit? Could she be sure he wasn't real?

"That's not all you have to lose, is it Una?" She saw his knowing smirk in the huge cloud, now much darker than before.

"I will not lose Robin!" Una's head jerked back as if she had been struck. Lucifer was looming up, threatening to take Robin away from her. A bolt of lightning struck a juniper not fifty feet from Tor House. The clap of thunder shook the tower. Una's heart pounded, but she made herself say calmly, "That was close. I've always loved storms. Your lightning doesn't scare me. No, I won't lose him. He's mine, not yours. I've always been his muse, ever since we first saw each other in class at USC." Had she convinced him? Would he back off and be urbane again?

Lucifer's voice was smooth, almost gentle. "No, don't think about the past. In the future, you'll hurt, you'll get old fast, be a hag. What will Robinson feel for you then?" His silky voice became almost a growl. "You'll hang on his sleeve like a beggar. You'll hate yourself, but you won't be able to stop. The pain will be all you can comprehend."

Una saw the images as he talked. Wrinkled, shrunken, older than her age, not beautiful any longer, too sick to be fascinating. She pulled the Irish shawl up and tight around her shoulders and paced around the room again. She saw the *Meadea* where she had laid it down, picked it up and inserted it at its correct place among the plays on the bookshelf. She leaned on the desk and looked out the window. She was quiet for a while, sighed, and then

said softly, "Ah, I could climb up to the top of the tower, leap, and never feel that pain. It would be over."

The wind dropped immediately and the rain was a mere pattering. Lucifer said softly, "Why don't you?"

Una felt the attraction of top of the tower, the outside platform. She felt a pull almost like sexual arousal that moved her towards that perch. She smelled jasmine, one of her favorite scents. A faint flavor of chocolate was in her mouth. Could he manipulate her like that? These sensations were so pleasant, so enticing. Part of her mind fought against going out on the parapet, but she told her wary self that she merely wanted to experience the full power of the storm, something she had done many times before.

Una thought about using what her sons called the secret stairs. It was in a cupboard across from her desk. But she decided to take the outside stairs instead. They were wet and slippery, and the steps were about as high as her legs could reach, but they felt safer than the dark stairs inside. She took a flashlight. Her hand followed the stones of the wall as she climbed higher and higher. Una felt weak, so she ascended the stairway slowly, listening to the pounding of her heart. The flashlight was weak, only lighting about a yard around her feet. She arrived under the sheltering roof upstairs. She passed the portholes mounted in the wall and went out on the open top on the level above her room. The storm seemed a lot louder.

She breathed hard, felt light-headed, and leaned her shoulder against the roughly rounded stones that Robinson had fitted together to make the top of the tower. Above this level was a smaller tower top, with a ladder-like stair leading up. She didn't want to go that high. As she touched the stone walls, she thought of Robin's arm supporting her on difficult hikes. After a few minutes, she pulled herself together. Una turned so she could lean her back against the stone wall, looking out to sea. The whitecaps chased each other to the horizon. A flash of lightning illuminated a patch of rough water far out from shore. She watched the surf. The wind whipped locks out of her braids and lashed her neck with them. She felt cold. Her cautious side was ascendant now that she was outside. "This view doesn't move me as I thought it would," she said.

"You could be done with all the pain and misery. Why not jump and end it all?"

Una felt a strong urge to rush to the edge and leap out, strong and free. She visualized herself leaping, almost flying. But she kept her hand on the wall, feeling some of Robin's power in every rock. Una hummed to herself, calling back the vision of Robin building the tower, the house. She said, "I don't know. Robin would be hurt, and Garth and Donnan. They'd hate to find me smashed down there on the pavement. I don't think it's a good idea." The wind picked up and the rain intensified again. Her face streamed with

water, it felt clean. She stepped back under the roof at the top of the stairs to stay a little dryer, and shook the droplets from her shawl.

Lucifer said, back to his insinuating tones, "Don't you wonder what Robinson is doing without you at night for so long?" He paused to let Una's insecurities build. "Did he find another woman to love?"

"Maybe. I hope not." Una shivered. She said, more to herself than to Lucifer, "Robin looks so craggy and mysterious, tall, thin, looming like a headland in the mist. Women, young aspiring poets, and women who only want a roll in the hay, are attracted to him. Like most males, he can't resist adoration." She shivered. "But there hasn't been much of that problem lately. Not since we went to visit Taos that last time. Mabel Luthan invited us on purpose so she could put him up to having an affair, and she distracted me and the boys to make it possible."

Lightning hit another nearby tree. Una didn't pay attention to Lucifer's reaction. She continued dreamily, "So of course, I shot myself with that .38 I stole, but not very well. I bled, I hurt, but nothing like the hurt inside. I got well, at least outside, and what a dramatic scar it made under my left breast all the way around to my back. I won't put up with sharing him. If he wants someone else, that's it for me."

"Bully for you," said Lucifer. "You have to defend your claim."

"I guess that's something I need to be ashamed of." She rubbed the edge of the wooden door, sanded and varnished, it didn't hold any film of water.

"That's rude. You're ashamed when we agree?"

"It makes me distrust my own conclusions." Una thought about Robinson, Edith, her twin sons Garth and Donnan. She knew if she got very sick, Lucifer was right, she'd be a burden to all of them. But then, caring for her would perhaps bring out their best qualities. Maybe even lead them away from Lucifer.

She said, "I can't die tonight. I plan to stay alive for years; we have too many things to hope for. I want to see my sons' wives and children. I want to see this *Medea* produced."

"You have almost no time left. Do with it what you will. Jumping tonight would let you escape all the pain, all the suffering, seeing Robinson turn from you to those other women. Do you really want to go through all that? Just one step, fly in the wind, and it's all over."

Una said in an even stronger voice, "I'm going downstairs to my room now. I'm tired of debating you. Shall I play you a ballad? 'Edward, Edward,' the old Child ballad number 13?"

"Child ballad 13? One of my favorites."

"You do love 13, I thought you would. When I get down, I'll open the window beside my harmonium. Killing and lying—your kind of story."

"Sing loud if you will, over the storm."

"I'll try." As Una stepped through the heavy wooden door, descended the stairs, and returned to her special room, she mused about how Robin was inspired by that statuesque Jewish actress Hedwiga Reichert, who recited the words to Child ballad 13, standing under the lamp beside their front door. As she pulled out the bench of the harmonium, she said, "Hedwiga gave a chilling performance of this poem. Robin based Clyemnestra and Cassandra on her. I'm not the basis of any of his characters, but since they all come to bad ends, perhaps that's just as well. We might argue about it otherwise."

"You're wrong about that."

"You think? I don't believe you. I'll sing now." Una sat at the little pump organ she loved and played the introduction. Her knees worked the bellows to provide air to the pipes. She began the sad ballad in her clear, carrying voice that floated above the notes she played on the harmonium. The wind whipped the curtains about and the rain drenched the wood of the desk under the window, but she didn't care.

After the third verse, she stopped singing and played an instrumental interlude. Lucifer said, "You know, looking back over your life, I see that some of your friends were on my side."

"You're right. Mabel thought Robin needed to get away from me to ignite his creative work. Stupid. What she could not do, this tiny hateful cancer worm within me can. I'll be destroyed. If she's right, Robin will be inspired by my death and then he'll write his best work. She's wrong, though. I'm his muse. I always have been."

"His masterpiece awaits your early death."

"She's right? No, I won't believe it." Una continued the ballad. After a while she said, "Here's the end of the lying verses, where Edward denies that the blood on him is his brother's." She played another instrumental variation while she said, "Now for his admissions and future misery. This harmonium isn't quite in tune. I need to get Guy to come out and tune it for me."

"It's too late, your time is almost up."

"It's not too late, you're wrong. I'm going to live for years past this operation." She played a definite, angry-sounding chord, and stopped. "Yeats said, 'For everything that is lovely is/ But a brief, dreamy kind of delight.' All of my joys fading fast. And, 'I will arise there and go to Innisfree... I will have peace there.' If only those lines were for me. But here are his lines for me, 'Turning and turning in the widening gyre/the falcon cannot hear the falconer/ Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.'"

"You will fall apart soon." Lucifer sounded like he was sneering but his voice was faint, and Una looked out the sea window and saw the cloud was

more ragged, looked like fragments of its former self.

She said, "That's right. I'll decay to dust, the dust of the planets, the universe. Star dust. Some of my old admirers compared me to star dust, but not with the same connotations. Now star dust is ready for my burial. It's not the twinkles in a man's eyes from looking at night skies, next to a woman."

She started again to play variations on the plaintive tune as she said, "Star dust is just dust. Like dirt that I sweep up from the living room and throw outside. Like what my Irish Yew trees grow in, what the lavender and the lemon verbenas eat. I'll nourish flowers. Better than the rest of my death ideas." Una returned to singing the ballad.

Even while she sang of Edward's fate, Lucifer muttered, "You're deceiving your own mind with these silly thoughts, Una. But you don't have long; maybe that's for the best. I still think you should shorten the time and keep from suffering."

She paused for an interlude before the last verse. "I beg to differ. We Irish have a talent for suffering. I'm almost done, here's the last dialog between mother and son." She sang, "'When will you return, my son? / I shall long thy face to see.' / 'When the sunlight and moonlight meet on the green/ And that will never be.'" Then she said, "I'll be perfectly well at that very same moment." She played a final chord and closed the harmonium. Would she give Lucifer the same answer if he tempted her again when she was ugly, scrawny and sickly, and Robin was away? If she was lucky, he wouldn't come back. She wasn't sure she could trust herself to make the right decision next time.

"I'm tired of this argument, Lucifer. I'll take the dog, and walk beside the sea. I need the song of the surf to drown out my thoughts so I can sleep on earth a while longer."

THE END