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# Lisa Taddeo

## Ghost Lover



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# **GHOST LOVER**



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*Animal*  
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# GHOST LOVER

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STORIES

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*Lisa Taddeo*

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*For all the girls  
who've loved before*





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# **GHOST LOVER**



# 1

## THE ONE AND ONLY

YOU'RE IN LINE AT THE HIPSTER SANDWICH PLACE ON A FUNERAL block in the hills, and you don't want to build your own. You could choose from one of the featured selections, but each is fattening. Pastrami is the polar opposite of Los Angeles.

You had wanted to make something yourself, avocado toast for example, in your gleaming kitchen overlooking the Pacific. But you were out of avocados and there was only a quarter stick of butter left, which meant you couldn't yield anything toothsome. You could have had someone bring butter by, but that would have made you feel spoiled and flabby. And even though you would have wanted Kerrygold, you would have probably said *Organic Valley or whatever, just no Land O'Lakes*. And the gofer would have texted no less than twice. *All they have is Breakstone's or Horizon?*

And you would have sat looking at the waves thawing on your

rocky bandage of beach in abject misery, waiting no less than three minutes so that the light-brown-haired girl who was younger and smaller and poorer than you would have had to tarry there, in the refrigerated section, wearing a sleeveless shirt on a gorgeous beach day, for you to reply, *Salted*. Sometimes, the most you could do to make yourself happy was control another being. In the end, of course, it would never work out for you. You would always, for one, be fatter than you wanted to be. Controlling other people adds about five hundred calories. A delicious tropical drink at the bar next to Nobu on the PCH has one hundred more calories, if you're trying to make your assistant pay for the fact that you are on a bad date, by texting her while she is on a good one.

In line you open a bag of Caesar Twice-Baked Croutons. If you only eat half the bag, it will be 170 calories. There is a fly, large and slowed by the greatness of late summer, coasting low. A couple in front of you is playful. Leaning in, the young man inhales the mid-section of the girl's hair. She turns to meet his eyes, smiling. They don't hear the fly, which is buzzing loud at ear height. When the love-making gaze breaks the boy turns and notices you. At first he barely registers you, because you are not hot and his girlfriend is. And then he recognizes you. He punches his girl in the arm.

—Hey! he says. *Hey!* It's— You're Ari the Ghost Lover! Right?

You feel dizzy, a crouton in your mouth the size of a nightmare. You try to chew it quietly, but there is no quiet, fast way to get rid of a crouton. There is only slow disintegration.

The girlfriend widens her eyes, in apparent recognition. The fly whirs past. Behind you the sooty screen door opens and shuts, and you take the opportunity to turn your head in its direction and chomp the crouton.

—Oh my god, says the girl, it's you!

You turn back to them. Flecks of dried parsley on your lips. She wears a sleeveless Cure shirt without a bra, and side boob slaloms around Robert Smith's ear. Her shoulders are smooth and round. She is twenty-five. You were never twenty-five.

—You're the reason my best friend is getting married to, like, the guy of her dreams! says the girl.

The boy smirks. *Luke* is the guy of her dreams?

The girl punches him and rolls her eyes. They both turn to you.

—No shit, we're going to their wedding in like two months! It's all because of you!

You smile, though you don't mean to. You imagine the girl's best friend is probably a Tier III customer. Although this could have just come from watching your show. It is the only self-help show that has ever been binge-watched, on Netflix. This is something Jennifer, your PR girl, says more often than she says her own name.

—Oh my god, Pandora is going to shit herself when we tell her we met you!

The boy, by now, has lost interest. He is scraping the meat of the girl's waist with his fingernails. Her black jeans are low waisted. Her hip bone is a seatbelt. All he wants to do is fuck her. You are more adept at reading this, you know, than anybody in the whole world.

—You are amazing. You are, like, my hero.

You nod. You resolved a week ago to stop saying thank you. To be icier in general. The decision was made on a day that your sliding door was open to your balcony and a strange bird whined in the distance. The noise of it made you want to pluck its eyes out, and your own. On that day you were the furthest from God you had ever been. You never believed in Him, but on that day you could feel the



whole ocean freeze. You felt your toes go bloodless. That was the day the card arrived, sailing forth over the tender shoots.

—Can I— Can we, like, get your autograph, I don't know, or something?

The boy doesn't care, not at all. The fact that the girl cares more about meeting you than she cares about her boyfriend in this moment makes you hate her very much, for having that power. She is lucky. A blind providence afforded her at birth, by how big her eyes were and how tall her cheekbones. At home the screen door is off its track. There is no one you can ask to fix this. There is someone, but you can't ask him to fix it yet. You know it is too soon. That it always will be.

—Next, can I help you! the sandwich guy yells.

It's Sunday, which for you is a whale's throat. Blue-black and forever. People always write and call you on Monday mornings, at 10:27, when you are the busiest. On Sunday, almost never. Not even the old high school friends whose husbands have a rare form of cancer and are looking for a handout. Even those people are too full in their lives to ping you on a Sunday.

The girl and the boy turn to the sandwich guy. Uh, one roast pork banh mi and one TOAO grilled cheese, says the boy.

You remember the first time you came here, and it was with him. He showed you LA like he was opening a sunlit door through his chest. His sandwich place. Scummy but redolent with the smell of half-cooked bread, on a hill over the highway, canopied by trees. The bottles of wine inside, for sale. You could go home with a bottle of wine, and sandwiches.

—No tomatoes on the grilled cheese, the girl whispers, tugging at the boy's soft gray shirt.

—No tomatoes on The One And Only, he says to the sandwich guy, who nods.

—Twenty even, the sandwich guy says. The boy pulls a twenty out of his pocket. It looks like the last twenty on earth, and your heart breaks a little more, when into the boy's shoulder blade the girl whispers, Thank you.

## 2

### THE FUTURE IS FEMALE

On the way to the Country Mart, you dial the temperature down to 60, and draw the flow to the max. Within seconds your face is chilled like a tumbler of milk. You used to worry over how much gasoline the air conditioning was using. Now you don't anymore. When your cheeks are cold, they feel thinner.

It has been almost two years now. In two years you have become something utterly different than you were, at least to the wide world. They didn't know you at all before and now almost everyone does. This is a crazy feeling. Men in Titleist hats and flaccid golf shirts know who you are, because their daughters do. Because your face is all over the place. You are rich. That word! You bought a house in Malibu. On stilts, with one of those driveways, right off the PCH. You used to say, This is not so great. *This* is Malibu? And Nick would say, You have no idea, the other side. And one day he took you to walk along the other side, over the rocks along the breathing water, and you could see the decks and the real fronts of the houses. The fronts were facing the ocean! The *other* side, the *highway* side, that was the

back. When you were on the ocean side, you understood how much more these people knew than you, had than you. He held your hand over the sharp rocks. You don't remember wanting more then, but you must have.

Your house is an A-frame. You lied to your best friend about how much it cost, because you felt bad paying for the place in cash when she was struggling across two jobs to pay the nursing school loans off. There is a terrific white bathroom on the topmost floor. A clawfoot bathtub overlooking the water, with golden spigots. Heaven-white towels on teak rods and a bar of soap on the teak stool. Vetiver with French green clay, still wrapped in its furred paper.

You are on your way to the Country Mart right now, for an iced matcha latte and to buy clothes at the sorts of prices that still beguile you. You can spend over two thousand dollars on a sheer blouse, that yet requires something to go underneath it. The less one's body is perfect, the more it needs expensive garments, heavy crepes to position themselves like aid workers across the fault lines.

Still, the old ways cling. The soap in your bathroom is an eighteen-dollar bar. You refuse to use it until you have lost at least five pounds.

The idea for Ghost Lover came, solely, from Nick. Or rather, from the dissolution of Nick and you. There was an insolvency. The opposite of an impalement. You defecated your soul, is how you marked it at the time, in less refined language, across the pages of your journal. You mourned for months and then you sat in coffee shops and strategized. At first you planned to get him back. There was one coffee shop in particular, on La Cienega, a place untouched by him, someplace he never would have noted. It wasn't precious enough, or clean. There were no whole Arabica beans for sale. There

was a fifty-something lady who worked in the kitchen there, and she also came around and tidied up the packets of sugar substitute and hand-swept the milk counter. At first you hated the grunts she made. You hated how shapeless her butt was and how noisy her shoes were. You hated the way she stalked behind you, her toes at your heels like dominos. You were sure that, even though she did not appear to speak English, she was reading the words on your laptop. Your journal entries. Then one day, as she mopped around your chair, she placed her hand on your shoulder. Hallowed, like a mother or a priest. It wholed you. You turned, and her ancient eyes absorbed your depth.

Just like that, everything settled. And you thought, I am fine. I will send him a note. It was his birthday. You wrote, *Happy Birthday*. Sending the words across the avenues of code, you felt like a queen of love. Seven minutes later he replied, *Thx!*

A week later, Nick walked into your coffee shop. With a girl. A definitive girl, about a decade younger. You passed gas, when you saw him. The girl turned in the direction of the sound, and found you. Her face bloomed rose with compassion. He didn't seem to have heard. And she didn't know who you were; she didn't know how once Nick ate you out in your mother's house while Karl, the husband of hers who used to violate you, listened from downstairs.

Importantly, Nick hadn't noticed you, so you ran out, without your computer and your pile of books. You sweated around a corner until they left, in *her* car, which was sporty and black. This made you feel sick. Something about him being in a girl's car. Listening to her young music. When you went back in, the Chinese woman was standing by your table, protecting your stuff with her shadow. She nodded at you. You wanted to cry. You knew you would not come back, would never see her again. These tiny endings are all over the place.

Ghost Lover came easily from there, ideas borne from pain the way moths go to light. You quit your job as the second assistant to a mid-level celebrity. A job you had got only to have a reason to be in LA, with him. You began sleeping during the days, through iced drinks in fraternal sunlight and blondes in bathing suits playing volleyball. You'd go out only at night. Sit in Chez Jay's, which had been his, but you stole it from him. You felt the greasy luxe of being somewhere you shouldn't. The creepiness of lying in wait. You listened. Girls with text messages mainly. How to respond to this one or that one. They didn't know anything. They were young and pointless. But you felt for them, or rather, you felt for the pain in them. Or no. Your pain felt a kinship to their pain, and at the time you had to be wherever your pain was. It was the only thing that was real.

One night there you ran into an old friend of yours from home, pursuing an accelerated MBA in Long Beach and cheating on his girlfriend nearly every weekend. You continued on to drinks at Father's Office. The sweetness of the burger was pink and wrong on your tongue. You sensed he just wanted a place to sleep over in LA. But he was useful, like many ancillary characters; you didn't realize how much, until later. He said the only thing you actually learn in business school is Identify a Problem in the Marketplace and Create a Solution.

That night you ingested over twenty-five hundred calories, at the bar and later at home. You took an Ambien and wrote a business plan until the words melted across the screen. You slept with the friend in business school the next weekend. He felt like a soft iron inside you, something plain and graceless. The dumb pain of simple rod sex. You did not come. He ejaculated largely inside your belly button. The fatty pool of it.

Several weeks later, with this friend's help, you created the application. A forwarding system for text messages so that an expert would respond (or not respond) to a client's crush. The client would be briefed as needed, would otherwise enjoy holy ignorance. A way for girls, mainly, to be the coolest versions of themselves, inoculated in practice against their desire.

At first the expert was only you. You, thinking of how Nick himself would respond to a text. How the young and beautiful girls he was newly with would respond to the texts of grunting men. Quickly, your team grew. You hired small, stunning girls. You always brought on women you would imagine him wanting. One of the reasons was for the angry throb it drew from your pelvis. Another was so that you would never invite him back into your life. You could not feasibly, because there were too many limbs for you to be jealous of. All that superlative hair, all those surfing thighs.

### 3

#### BEAUTIFUL WITHOUT LOOKING LIKE YOU'RE TRYING

There are the girls who please girls, and the girls who please boys. Girls who please girls, even at thirteen, what they do is they blow a boy not to make the boy like them but to go back and report to their girls. The taste and flavor, checking a box. You were in the second group. You always fell hard for boys. Each one was his own fairy tale. One therapist said you got this from observing your mother. Another said it was a by-product of your father's death.

Right now there is one, Jeff. He is a photographer. You have been bringing him to parties. Events that require bow ties. He is always perfumed and ready on time. You-know-who was never ready on time.

You're at the Country Mart to buy a dress for one such event, at the Getty Villa tonight. You come here because you cannot stomach downtown LA. Rodeo, with its chalky sunlight. And the malls are out of the question. You have grown up past the malls. Your tastes have become ultrarefined. You are hopeful today about Morgane Le Fay. You are imagining something breezy and decently transparent.

With this new one you are worried more than usual. Jeff has acquired some gentle fame via you. You suggested him as the photographer for your *Elle* shoot. He didn't want to do the lighting their way, and then he did. Since, he has booked gigs for *Vogue* and *Esquire*. You heard him on the phone with a girl from *W*, negotiating and charming. Jennifer, your publicist, called him *hot* to both your faces. This was vaguely unforgivable, but you forgave it. Privately, to you, and early on enough that she could pretend it never happened, she questioned his motives. You met him on a site for people with more than ten thousand Twitter followers. Either you were hot, or you had a certain amount of Twitter followers. You were in the latter group. He was in the first.

In the store a salesgirl recognizes you. Even in your sunglasses and Bruins hat. You have a pug nose. It is unmistakable. To be recurrently recognized for an element of unattractiveness is a scorching feeling. It makes you want to punish every brown-haired beauty in your path.

Jennifer is the other reason you are doggedly spotted. She is better at her job than anyone else you have ever met. It's mostly accidental. Like all huge successes, she had a few dead-on things happen and now she merely capitalizes on her reputation.

—Are you . . . Wow. It's you.

You don't even nod at her. Sometimes when you eat too much at lunch you need to be cruel to a salesgirl. You finger a flowing cream dress. She offers to start a fitting room for the zero items you have in your hand.

She says a few more things, platitudes both as empty and necessary for you as the hot lemon water you drink every morning, but when she asks if you are looking for anything special, you snap.

—No, in fact. I'm looking for something really un-special. Tell me. What is the *least* special thing you have in the store?

Back outside, you close your eyes against the sun and smush your temples. Oh, the indignity of Sunday!

You open your eyes and send Jennifer a quick text.

*I was a mild bitch at Morgane Le Fay.*

*Montana or Malibu? Customer or salesgirl?*

*Letters*, you write. This is how good you are at your job. You are a clinician of the text. You can eviscerate, palpate, abrogate with a mild word, combined with cunning punctuation. You want Jennifer to have to ask someone what you mean. You want her to feel dumb, undeserving. Like the PR girl that she is. Lest she mistake her thinness for value.

Having bought nothing, you walk back to the car. The sandy mountains in the distance used to confound you. On the one hand, they looked like nature and wild, but then all these boat-shaped villas had wedged themselves into the more hospitable rocks. The houses appeared white and dirty from below, but they were all gated. Nobody used the land they owned. There were horses, but they were dry and hot. The hills of Los Angeles used to confound you, but now you've been to parties in those neglected palaces. You have seen swimming pools used as swan ponds and naked man ponds. You have seen swimming pools that have never been filled with water. When you are inside



the mountains, you realize they are not mountains, but placeholders.

You wake up your car and use the key to turn on the AC before you get in. You will wear the red dress that Nick bought you, at that consignment shop in Cambridge. All these years later, all these diets later, you are still mostly the same size. If only people knew how much work went into your weight. The fluctuations in your mind rocket and plunge like an ambitious water slide. Your relationship with your refrigerator has given the cat an anxiety disorder. But on your body the movements are razor bumps.

Anyway, the dress still fits; it's the only one in which you have ever felt effortlessly beautiful.

You will be accepting an award tonight, to become the third annual Golda Meir Ambassador for Women. You have a speech to deliver to a room of very important people. At first you were going to talk about coming from mostly nothing into a lot of something. Nothing anybody hadn't heard before. You were embarrassed by the banality, but you are so starlit right now that it doesn't matter, not even to you.

Then the card arrived. And your bowels released themselves, meltingly, like a spoon of honey submerged in tea.

You took a long, eucalyptic bath. You changed your speech completely.

## 4

### THE OLD PLACE WITH THE NEW GUY

You are meeting Jeff for drinks, before the awards. For his thirty-third birthday last month you bought him a heritage green Triumph, and