

Lorna Festa
149 Highland View Lane
Mill Spring, NC 28756
festalorna@gmail.com

lornafesta.com

KILLER & THE CROOKS
by Lorna Festa

. Summer .

Today one may pluck out one's very heart and not find it. Our generation is lost, it may be, but it is more blameless than those earlier ones. I can understand the hesitation of my generation, indeed it is no longer mere hesitation; it is the thousandth forgetting of a dream dreamt a thousand times and forgotten a thousand times; and who can damn us merely for forgetting for the thousandth time?

(Investigations of a Dog, Franz Kafka)

1. The Summer of Fear

The moment those bastards fall out of that white Land Rover I know it will kick off. A beer bottle hits the brick wall behind Penny and showers down, raining brown diamonds into her thick black hair. Her best friend Sophie jolts beside her, teetering like a coy bowling pin. She does not fall over, but continues blinking her eyes in disbelief.

I don't run at the fuckers like I want to, 'cause I know Seth will. Trust me, this isn't about defending Penny's honor.

We are not talking about honorable men here. Me included. Mad Max, my roommate's friend, has traveled here by bus to wreak birthday havoc as he and Seth turn the ripe old age of nineteen. They stand next to me and The Captain (whose first name I'm pretty sure is Jack), grinning like fools in their matching satin jackets, one maroon, one navy, shirtless underneath.

Sure enough, Seth stomps toward the oblivious clan of rednecks. They are all dressed the same: brightly colored polo shirts, khakis, visors, sandals, knock-off Ray-Bans with croakies. *Fraternity* might as well be sewn on their shirts in place of that little crocodile to the left. These are not *my* bros.

Seth towers above them with his goddamn black-metal-foot-long hair and his skin-tight jeans. Mad Max and The Captain follow suit, aces high and wild card call, none of them considering this birthday soiree must inevitably draw to an abrupt and violent close. No, that's the glory of it—their gift to themselves. A little carnage to put the cream on their already fully lit cake.

When I see Max, scrawny and vermin-faced, charge toward them, I can't help but laugh. I wouldn't fuck with him myself. I mean, he is certifiably insane, a goddamn

nutcase, if you ask me. Once I watched the kid get a stick-poke tattoo of the word "tough", but spelled T-U-F-F on his ribs by his psycho girlfriend. Seeing a wiry guy like that head-butt and take down a bro with a beer belly, now that's comedy at its finest.

My smirk melts when I catch Penny's all-knowing face. Sophie screeches at one of the goons wearing pastel pink. He moves intently toward them, smashed beer bottle held in bloodied hand. The Captain shakes his head, a menacing snarl spreading across his face, and taps an empty forty of Mickey's against a cinderblock. Breaking glass tinkles to the ground, resting among a flood of booze and shards. I watch as Pink Polo smears his bloody hand down Penny's forehead and across her cheeks.

"There you go, ya' coke-whore. Tell your friend Raggedy Ann to shut her trap."

A demolished ice cream cone piñata lies smashed on the loading dock, empty mini-bottles lie scattered along the Yard. Sophie grabs the rainbow-striped piñata stick and swings fast and hard, bloodthirsty for the candy center.

Everyone at the party seems to have frozen, standing still, waiting to see if the rumble will blow over. Before me lies the Yard—my backyard—a connect-the-dots of trash from late night arguments, drunken stumbles home.

The Loft rises above us—a fortress with metal doors and three barred windows visible from below. Some are caught in fascination of the spectacle. Others move discreetly away to their cars. Then, someone is on the phone calling the cops, his voice whining like the broken fan in our apartment. When I glance in the direction of the drone, all I have to see are fucking boat shoes to know it's one of them.

I run towards Seth and Max to retrieve the knives I know they always carry so I can hide them before the cops arrive. Knives that haven't made an appearance tonight. Tearing through meatheads to the side of the building, I hide them in a place I know

where no one will find them, and join Penny where she is standing near the brick wall. Shame I don't have time to run into the Loft for the O of headies in Seth's room or the chocolates in the freezer for that matter.

When the paddy wagon pulls up to the front of the Yard, my gut tells me that no matter what unfolds, we are taking the fall for this. Who here is lucid enough to communicate with the city's finest? Who here cares if they get cuffed and put in the back of that animal carrier?

The pigs brandish their weapons overtly, ignoring our line-up and walking straight up to Boat Shoes. He says something to the cop, but I can make out a few words. "Long hair," "skinny kid," and "knives" are among those words, damning my friends from the get-go. Seth stands motionless and defiant, a stoic giant. Captain backs up a few feet and stands next to me. Hearing him grind and gnash his teeth, I guess that he has a prior record and is scared shitless.

One of the pigs turns to approach our dwindling crowd, and Max, the spry piss-head, darts off to the steel door of the Loft. I hear him clanging up the stairs and cringe as I watch two cops pace after him, just cause to enter my residence, which right now must appear to be a drug den of sorts. The faces of everyone around upturn to the white moon, to the night unfolding. Penny's expression is blank and empty—dried blood still caked on her face—she hasn't moved since the glass fell. Standing near her, I can see her hands shaking, though I'm not sure if it's from rage or fright.

Max is the first to get thrown into the paddy wagon. One of the cops finds a rolled blunt from inside and some scales, but thank fuck that is all they find.

Seth gets pulled to one side, the pig in charge is so close I bet my friend can smell stale coffee and donuts on his breath. Handling every stupid question, he conducts

himself as he typically conducts business—no names, no games. He gets away with a ticket for minor possession and a court date. They don't even put him in the back of the van. I have to hand it to him, he gives them nothing.

I notice Captain has somehow slid away during the commotion, because I can no longer locate his sandy mangled quiff anywhere. I consider doing the same, but decide I have nothing to lose by staying. Like hell I'm going to miss the outcome. I haven't implicated myself during this whole debacle, and that's how I intend to keep things.

A girl whose name I can't remember but recognize for the red dress barely concealing her killer ass is next to be escorted to the van with chain link over the windows. No doubt she was running her mouth off to the cops, and they grew weary of listening to her before sliding shiny new bracelets on her wrists. Two more of our guys follow, still none of the polo-clad gentlemen. The police run out of handcuffs, and wrists are bound with nylon cable ties. The Polo Shirts start up the hill to the bars, laughing, satisfied that the freaks are being punished. One of them points his fingers in a gun toward our general direction. "Click, click," I hear him call, such bravery in retreat.

Penny snaps out of her trance and pleads with one of the cops. "I saw everything from the beginning. Why are you letting them walk away?"

The cop leans into her. "Don't look at me like that," is all he says. Blood rises to my face, and my ears burn.

I can feel the air, muggy and stifling. Summer has seared to an early beginning. Smoke and light pollution cast an eerie haze over the Yard, and fear rises up with steam from grates of the littered street.

When Sophie's slender arms are plasticuffed as well, Penny loses it. Her eyes glaze over and she faints, bloodying her knees on the gravel. I squat on the ground, propping Penny up in my arms. She was out a second, and then she came back to us.

"It's okay, gorgeous," Sophie tells her as the cops yank her away. "Everything's gonna be okay." The tiny curly-haired girl disappears with the others into the back of the van.

I swear I hear Penny say, "You're wrong."

Grace, our newest tag-along has stayed the whole time, unnoticed. She walks over to Penelope and helps me get her off her knees. Seth sits on the curb, folding the ticket over and over in his scabby hands. The rest of us stand in the Yard and look on as the van carts its prisoners away, the lights on top sparking blue, whirring loudly.

2. The River Below

There are daylilies growing outside the county jail. These dicks are lucky we drove to pick them up all the way out here in bum-fuck. I can't get over the flowers sprouting up next to the barbwire fence.

Grace rode her bike home or to a bar after the action last night. The Captain, Penny, Seth and I stayed at the Loft, but we didn't get much sleep. We didn't exactly talk until the sun came up either. I don't think anyone knew what to say. That and, we were *done*. At least that was the case for Penny and me. The Captain spoke for me and Seth the few times he piped up—pissed that Max was careless enough to get our stash confiscated. I knew we were lucky, so I shut my mouth and counted my blessings, so to speak.

Captain wouldn't shut the fuck up at first about Max's amateur behavior. "I can't believe that douche got himself arrested."

"Shut the hell up, dude." Seth growled more than spoke. We dozed for a couple morning hours. Captain was right. Max was a dumbass, and we couldn't afford to get in run-ins with the cops. He and I had more to lose. Tomorrow he has to drive back to Knoxville and his electrician job and his girlfriend and the home they share. And I'm a shoe-in for management at the firm.

I push, but the door doesn't budge. I look at the UV glass, noticing the sign that says PULL. I shake my head and hold open the door for Penny and Seth. Captain stayed in the driver's seat of his truck. He refused to come inside with us.

The receptionist at the counter is laughing, most likely at me. I walk up to the plexi-glass, and now she won't acknowledge I'm there. "Doors are hard," I say, but no one's listening.

The phone rings, and she picks up. "County Jail. How may I direct your call?" I look back at Seth and Penny. Seth rolls his eyes and packs a cigarette on the wall. Penny takes a seat. The call is from the receptionist's boyfriend or her mom, because she's not talking in her professional tone now, and once in a while, she'll use a cutesy voice.

Fed up, I rap on the glass with my knuckle. She gives me the finger, the one that says "One minute, hun, can't you see I'm on the phone with someone more important than you?"

"Alright babe, I gotta go. This guy is getting impatient. ... Kay, see you when I get home. Kay, love you, bye." She puts the phone down. "Next," she says, as though it's a question.

"Yes, I'm here to pick up some idiots."

She doesn't laugh. "Full names, last names first, please."

I give her the two names I know. I tell her I'll collect anyone that was brought in with them. She's got these manicured nails that are too long for any functional use of the hand, and they click on the keyboard as she types. It takes forever. Seth has left the building. I can see him out the door, lighting his cigarette.

"Your friends have another thirty minutes in there, unless you want to pay their bonds. And one of them has a prior record, so he'll be here a while."

"Fuck that," I say. She looks at me like she's about to call an officer over. "I mean, we'll wait the thirty."

I sit down next to Penny and flip through a copy of *Gun & Garden* to pass the time. I am almost finished reading an article on coon dog day, when I see Sophie turn the corner. She doesn't look at me as she follows an officer to the counter and signs her release papers. The babe is behind her, grinning and oblivious. She waves.

Penny is up, walking toward Sophie with a hug when she's finished with her paperwork. "You good?" she asks her friend, leading her toward the exit. Sophie nods, and they push the door open to the blaring sun.

The babe comes and sits next to me. "That wasn't so bad," she says it with pride, as though she's added another notch in her belt. "We watched *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*—twice. I fell asleep halfway through the second time, but when I woke up—there was a shower and breakfast. I didn't eat the eggs, though."

"Did they at least have good biscuits?" My voice is brimming with sarcasm.

"They did!"

I look at her like she's an alien. She might be. If there is a god, how did he make someone so beautiful and not give her any sense?

A different cop brings Max out, followed by a friend who calls himself Golden who came up from the Low Country to deejay. I didn't realize he got arrested. Maybe he had drugs on him. They take a while to go over the charges and the court dates, but before long we join Penny and Sophie outside.

Seth pushes Max, who laughs as he trips forward. What a psychotic asshole. He still doesn't get it. Seth puts his arm around Penny and hoists her into the back of the truck. She's got one of those orange lilies in her hair.

Captain already has the engine cranked. With five passengers in the bed of the truck, and the three Musketeers in the cab, we look like a band of Mexican outlaws. Seth pushes open the window—"Someone hold on to the beer." Max grabs the 24-pack of PBR like it's his child, and we head through town toward the White Water Apartments. If we want to swim, we use their pool. My favorite spot to access the river is through their trails.

It feels like we're rewarding them for bad behavior, driving to the river on a beautiful day like this, but it's Captain's last day and Seth's birthday got ruined, and we have all this extra beer.

We walk down the National Swamp path, past joggers that seem to run faster when they see our group. "Is it my hair?" I say in a nasal and exaggerated voice.

"I think it's mine," Seth answers. We all get belly laughs out of that one.

I see the steep path down to the rocks coming up, and point it out to the babe, as she's about to walk right by. I grab onto kudzu vines and rappel my way down to the sandy bank below. I've been taking this entrance to the river since I was a kid. I turn around and grab the beer from Seth so he can jump to join me. Penny follows him, then Sophie. Max and Golden follow. But the Captain is waiting patiently to let the babe go first. She is gonna have to do it sometime or she's not gonna spend the afternoon basking in the sun on river rocks with the rest of us. She puts one foot forward and slips the rest of the way down on her ass. Sophie holds out her hand, and the babe takes it, rubbing her lower back and brushing dirt off that red dress, which from behind now looks like she has an incontinence issue.

We walk through the shallow water, stone hopping, careful where we step as we make our way over to the large quarry rock under the trestle. Someone is sitting out on

the far edge of the rock, facing the bridge that takes you from the city to the suburbs. The person is female, slender, and takes long, slow drags off her cigarette.

“Looks like Cassie,” Penny says, turning around toward me. I smile, just a little, then move the case of beer to my other hand to get a better grip.

I set the case down when we reach the flattest part of the rock.

“Shotguns!” Seth yells throwing Max a beer.

“Shaken, not stirred, just the way I like it.” Max laughs at himself.

“You’re an idiot, Max.” I grab a can from the box and offer it to Captain. Golden grabs one too.

Sophie rolls her eyes. Penny goes to sit with Cassie, offering her a beer, which she takes.

The babe says, “What about me?” I hand her a beer with one eyebrow raised.

The five of us guys stand in a pow-wow circle. Seth reaches into his pocket for his knife. “Damn it,” he says, “I almost forgot.”

“Yeah, I took your blade last night. I’ll give it back to you when we go to the Loft later.” I have no intention of doing this. I pick up someone’s keys off the rock and pass them to Seth. He stabs the side of his can, then holds it parallel to the ground to save his beer. He passes the keys, and I puncture my can. When Max does the same, half of his brew spews up at him.

He plays it off like he remembered he got the shaken-up beer. “I wanted to get the stench of jail off me,” he says, wiping his hand on his jeans.

The girls sit on the rocks and watch us crack our cans and shoot streams of beer into our faces, downing them in one go. Seth finishes first, crushing his can in his fist. We throw our empties into a pile on the rock, except for Max, who throws his into the water.

“What did you do that for?” Sophie yells at him.

“Pssh. This water is filthy. Stub your toe and get hepatitis instantaneously.”

“Max, you really are a douche,” Captain tells him.

I wander down toward the edge of the rocks, then wade into the water. “Hey,” Cassie follows me out, the river up to her waist. Every step she takes is a dance move.

“Did we disturb your peaceful morning on the river?”

“You’re fine,” she smiles, “I was wondering why no one was out here today.”

We walk out a little further. I almost eat it on a mossy rock underfoot. “Watch out, there’s a slippery one,” I tell her. She loses her ground and slips, grabbing my arm as she goes down. I dip into the river, joining her, letting the water wash over my shoulders.

“Well, that wasn’t very graceful,” she says, her cheeks glowing with embarrassment.

“Can’t expect you to be Swan Lake all the time,” I joke. Cassie spends most of her free time at this little studio about an hour out of town, practicing her pirouettes and pointe work. Her expression gets a little solemn. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” she answers as I hold her hand and lift her to her feet. “I skipped dance today.”

I look at her fragile collarbone, her thin neck, her flawless cheeks. I don’t press the issue, but she continues, as though my assistance merits a response.

“It’s just my mom. She does expect me to be perfect all the time. It’s never enough for her. I told her the studio was closed today, but I lied. My ankle has been bothering me, and she’d be pissed if she knew it was from dancing at Pavlov’s.”

Everyone knows Cassie’s mom, she’s the superintendent of schools in our district. Most of us that went to public schools around here know her by that militant stare. I’ve

only seen her in the paper. I graduated from Westside High before she was elected, and re-elected, for a decade and counting.

“Look at this,” Cassandra points to something in the water. I lean over to take a look. She uses her hand to squirt the water up into my face.

“You’re in for it now,” I say. She’s already got some distance on me, and I chase after her. She lets me catch her. I take her by the waist, and pretend I’m going to dunk her under the water like I did with my little sis Arty when we were kids. I stop just before her head goes underwater. A train horn blares overhead. My face is just inches away from her lips.

“Alright you two. Sorry to blow the party, but we got company.” The Captain points to some visored-heads bobbing down the hill toward the rocks.

“Bro alert,” Seth shouts.

“Fuck, not again.” I set Cassie on her feet, and she looks at me, concerned.

“My friend Stacy was at your party last night. I heard about what happened.”

“Yeah, it was a rager, that’s for sure.” I take her hand and move back toward our group. Penny is picking up empty beer cans and throwing them in her canvas bag.

Sophie is trying to talk some sense into Seth. “Let’s just go back to Circle Square. They probably don’t even know those guys.”

Seth ignores her, with Captain and Max on each side, he walks forward, meeting the bros before they get to the first rock. “Private party. Find somewhere else to make out with each other.” Seth grins. They take one look at us and turn back up the hill without a response.

“Tell your buddies to watch their backs,” Max hollers after them. They look at each other and keep walking.