

JULIA and LINDA

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When someone tells you that they have a story, "that they just shouldn't tell you", and then they tell you anyway, *you should listen*.

This is one of the strangest stories I have ever heard. And it is a true story. Two women are at the center of it.

One, Linda, I knew. The other, Julia, I had never heard of until the night of the big *Chicago* concert, in Salt Lake City. The concert wasn't bad; I'm not that much of a *Chicago* fan, though. There were maybe 15,000 screaming people in that huge, circular, featureless arena that night. Even in Salt Lake, with the Mormon Temple just down the street, inside you could pick up a whiff of that sweet, special, "funny smoke" smell in the air.

My girlfriend at the time, Irene, and I, had gone to the *Salt Palace*, to see the rock group (too many horns for me) *Chicago* perform on Saturday night, July 17, 1971. We went with two of Irene's friends, Linda and Jeff, who had just recently returned from their week or so long honeymoon. They had been married only about six weeks before, in Salt Lake, and had gone to San Francisco for their getaway. It had been a road trip, with an overnight stop on the way, in Reno. Nice kids; they and us. We were "hippy-ish", but not hippies.

My dark hair was just over my ears, and a T-shirt and blue jeans were the clothes of the day. Irene was striking and hip with her very long, straight brown hair, her slender bell-bottoms, and her faint perfume of patchouli. Jeff was lean and strong, and had curly golden locks, but not very long, probably because of his job requirements. Linda, very cute Linda, wore her light blond hair not quite down to her shoulders, and that went well with her somewhat rounded face. She was a little shorter than the rest of us.

We had been at their wedding, back in June. Irene caught the flowers Jeff tossed over his shoulder, and I competitively caught Linda's garter, amongst the crowd of friends and family gathered together after a dressy, beautiful ceremony. Linda had been Irene's roommate the year before, when I met her. Irene and I had just become engaged, and we were planning on a wedding, too, sometime after I graduated from the University of Utah.

We were all around twenty or twenty-one at the time, and were partying after the concert at their modest apartment in Salt Lake's busy Sugarhouse district. A small transistor radio (battery powered, as I seem to remember) was playing some rock & roll, the kitchen light was on, around the corner of the dining room, and we were sitting around the table, with a candle burning in its center. Things were mellow, and it wouldn't surprise me if we had smoked a joint or two, with our beers.

I was visiting Salt Lake just for the weekend, as I was then in the middle of summer Field Camp, a nine credit course which in a geology curriculum is the final class, and living in Cedar City, Utah, for a few more weeks. Irene was living at the Salt Lake YWCA, and working. Jeff was a bricklayer, and Linda was doing secretarial work, too, I think.

We wanted to know how their trip went, how they liked San Francisco, and living together. I had visited Virginia City the summer before, on one of my few days off from my summer geology job, based in Reno. I was curious how they liked it, too. They kind of looked at each other, and then at us, and one of them said, "we have something to tell you." They seemed very serious, especially given the evening's previous fun.

"We haven't told anyone else about this," Jeff said, somewhat nervously. Linda glanced at him. They weren't happy about it at all.

So, I am going to tell this story, just like they told it to us. Even though I am writing this many years later, the evening is as clear in my mind as it was that night, and, consequently, I have never forgotten it and its details.

The day after the wedding, they left Salt Lake City in Jeff's Ford *Mustang*, and drove across the stark, brilliant, white Salt Flats, through barren, hot, but stunningly spacious and rugged Nevada, to Reno for the night. The next day, they decided to stay in that area, spending a bit of money in Reno's casinos, and taking an afternoon trip out to see Virginia City, in the hills to the East.

The name "Virginia City" is almost synonymous with the phrase "Old West". The picturesque Nevada village is a place many people have heard of. Samuel Clemens, better known as *Mark Twain*, the noted American author, got his start there. It was just outside the beautiful and fictitious *Ponderosa Ranch*, on TV's classic western series, *Bonanza*. As a geologist, I know it as the place of one of the richest silver strikes in the world, the Comstock Lode, discovered in 1859. It sits on a hillside, above a small valley, about twenty-five miles southeast of Reno.

It is a very small town now. About 900 people live there today, but at the time of its peak mining years in the 1870s, it had around 25,000 residents. Scrubby pinyon pines and junipers dot the mostly barren hillsides, wherever they haven't been trashed by the old mining roads, mine dumps, head-frames, and assorted car bodies, rusting 55 gallon drums, and other mining junk. The smell of sagebrush is in the air. And, nowadays, when the wind isn't blowing, you can maybe hear the sound of a honky-tonk piano playing in one of the old-time tourist saloons along its main street. There are many stories about it, and its "wild west" mining days. You can read some in Twain's classic, *"Roughing It"*.

Neither of them had ever been there before, and Jeff was kind of an "Old West history" buff. Still feeling a bit celebratory, Linda was even wearing a skirt. These were the days when people actually got dressed up to visit the hotels, casinos, and nightclubs, of, what was then, one of the few places where one could legally gamble in the US.

Virginia City's main street, so cleverly named "C Street", runs roughly North-South, and is only a few blocks long. It is lined with some really nice, old, period architecture, from the 1860s and 70s, all preserved pretty well. A bar, a hotel, an old office building where Twain once worked, another bar, a church, another bar, and maybe another bar next to that one. You get the idea. This was a mining town. (Another mining town, that I once lived in years later, had as its motto on local T-shirts, "*Mino Ergo Bibo*" -- Latin for, "I mine, therefore I drink.")

One of those bars was the two-story "Bucket of Blood Saloon". It was on the East side of the main street, and in 1971 it had a small porch or balcony open to the air on its back side, having a great view of the valley below, with its small houses, mining debris, dirt roads, and the main cemetery, known colloquially as "Boot Hill", even though it is in the valley. They had one of those simple tourist telescopes mounted there -- the kind that has an accompanying bronze semicircular plate where it swivels, and shows labeled arrows on it, pointing out the various attractions in the valley below, and on the hillsides. You could aim the telescope, by using an arrow, to find let's say, a main entrance to one of the mines, or Boot Hill itself.

Along with the bars, there were a few (probably more than a few) brothels. Whore houses, cat houses, red light houses, et cetera -- whatever you want to call them. After all, there were thousands of miners -- tough, unmarried men, living there then, and probably not too many women who were not "working women", if you know what I mean. You get the picture. The fanciest one, the one with the "best" girls, was run by a shrewd, all-business, madam named Julia Bulette. She ran a classy place of wide repute, and respect, and the locals respected her, also. It was called "Julia's Palace". You could be served French cuisine, and fine imported wine, if you wanted, while you were waiting your turn.

It was a warm, quiet June afternoon, when Jeff and Linda parked the car, and decided to walk up and down C Street, browsing through some stores, and restaurants. Mark Twain's old office, at the *Territorial Enterprise* newspaper is on that road, too, now as a museum. As they approached the Bucket of Blood, a cold, strong, sudden gust of wind came out of nowhere, Jeff said, and then it stopped just as quickly as it had come up. They thought it strange, as the air was so still that day.

Wanting something to drink, they entered the bar, took a table, and ordered a couple of beers. It was a rustic place, with all kinds of Old West memorabilia around, and I imagine in its day, it would have been considered ornate. It still was, albeit quite touristy.

In a few places around the room there were small alcoves in the walls that were maybe ten feet above the floor. In each one, there was a standing, formally dressed doll, about two feet tall, with a face that looked like it was made of porcelain, her tiny eyes staring down at the tables. Each doll represented one of the more well known "working girls" of the town. Under one of them was a small sign with the name "Julia Bulette", and because of his interest in Old Western history, Jeff knew the story of Ms. Bulette.

She had been brutally murdered, bludgeoned and strangled, at age 34 or so, in her room, by an itinerant Frenchman, who also robbed her of her jewelry collection. Most of the town took a day off for her funeral. Even the saloons closed for the day, and hundreds attended her service, complete with a brass band playing.

But, having been in the business she was in, it was deemed that she shouldn't be buried in the same cemetery as "decent folks", so she was interred about a half a mile away, in a lonely spot, all by herself.

Seeing her image in that alcove, Jeff's jaw dropped a bit, as the face of the doll looked just like Linda's, with a little trace of a smile. There are photographs, in existence, of the real Julia Bulette, and she didn't look anything like the doll. He said nothing about it.

Getting up from their table, they decided to go out on the balcony in back, and have a look at the town-site. Taking turns looking through the telescope, they picked out some of the more famous tourist places in the valley, including Boot Hill. One of the arrows on the bronze directional plaque pointed to "Julia Bulette's grave", which was still all by itself, off a dirt road, away from the main cemetery. After a few moments of looking through the scope, Jeff said, giving up, "I just can't seem to find it. This arrow must be off."

"Give it to me!", Linda barked at him. "I'll show you where it is!" She grabbed the telescope and pointed it straight away at the grave-site, now visible in the small opening at the end of the tube, only about a half mile away. Decisively, she said demandingly, "I want to go to it. Take me there!" Her smile of a few minutes ago was gone.

They hurried to the car. There was still enough light in the late afternoon sky over the mountains on the west, although the valley floor was slipping into shade. They started making their way down the narrow, rutted roads towards the grave-site. Linda was directing, as Jeff was driving and unsure of the way.

The place was off the side of the dirt road, and a narrow, rough, pitted short lane led to the dilapidated grave and marker stone. Forlorn, it was surrounded by tall weeds, and sagebrush, and some junky debris, and away from anyone's houses or buildings. No one else was in sight.

Jeff barely had the car stopped when Linda opened her door, and leaped out, jumping towards the grave, now only a few feet away. He followed as fast as he could, but by the time he got to her, she was staring down at it, frozen like stone. He grabbed her shoulders. She turned, and when she looked up at him, with a visage on her face like he had never seen before, with wild and yet strangely vacant eyes, she quivered and mumbled, "*my mouth tastes like dirt.*"

As he described it to us, "a thought, like a voice, went through my head right then, and it said 'get her out of here, or *you will lose her forever*'." And then they started to fight, he trying to drag her back to the car, she clawing at his arms, hitting at him, screaming hysterically, out of control. She kept lunging at the grave.

He, of course, being a construction worker, had the upper hand, but it took a moment or so, of dragging her kicking through the brush, her legs now scratched and bleeding, fighting with all of her strength. He threw her in the car, and slammed the door. Running around to the driver's side, he got in, started the motor, put it in gear, but the drive wheels in back were stuck in some soft sand in a small depression. The car wouldn't move, and Linda was paralyzed and catatonic by then.

As unbelievable as it seemed, he got out, pumped with adrenaline, ran to the back, grabbed the bumper, and lifted with all of his strength, just enough to move the chassis over an inch or two. Once back in the vehicle, the wheels grabbed the road, and they took off, with smelly, burning rubber, in a squealing cloud of dust, heading up the steep road to the highway out of town to the North, towards Reno.

It was maybe after twenty minutes or so, when Linda asked what the hurry was, and, "why are you going so fast?" She saw the bruises and cuts on her legs, not knowing how they got there. In fact, she had no memory of the last hour or so. Jeff was shaking and almost speechless.

They went back to their hotel, and as they described it, did nothing the rest of the evening. And, the next morning they headed for San Francisco, but the honeymoon was already ruined, and they told us they never really got it back.

Irene and I sat in their apartment dazed. Linda showed us the nearly healed scratches on her legs, and as their telling of this story ended, in that small dimly lit room — *all at once* — the radio went to static noise, the kitchen light dimmed briefly, and the candle flame dropped to about half of its former height.

They looked at us, heads shaking, and Linda said quietly, "we don't want to talk about this anymore."

I don't remember much of what happened the rest of the night. I think that Irene and I just gathered up our stuff, and I took her home (the YWCA had curfew hours for residents in those days). I went back to my tiny little office in the basement of the Natural History Museum building, on the U of U campus, to sleep on a makeshift mattress that I kept in a closet. I drove back to Cedar City the next day, in my VW Beetle.

I don't remember if I ever saw Jeff after that. A few years later, while at lunch with a former employer in Salt Lake, I ran into Linda, and we talked for a minute. She and Jeff were by then divorced. And Irene and I were no longer together, either. I don't know what ever happened to any of them.

Many more years later, while on a road trip with my then wife, we happened to be driving through Virginia City, and we decided to walk around some, before heading to Lake Tahoe and some nightlife. I remember us going into the Bucket of Blood, as I wanted to see the doll statue. I can't remember if I even told my wife the story of why -- she might not have believed me, anyway.

She was still in the barroom, in her little alcove, and to me, Julia did have a bit of a smirking smile on her rounded white face, but the resemblance to Linda was only slight. The saloon was kind of quiet that day. I went to look out the back, to look through the telescope, but, as I remember it, I couldn't find Ms. Bulette's grave, either. We were in kind of a hurry.

I have never been back to Virginia City. I hope Linda hasn't, either.