

# Barcode Babes

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Cat woke up with an itch on the back of her right hand and a throat as dry and as that place in Patagonia where it hasn't rained since before Elvis was born. Blearily, not quite half awake, she scratched the itch.

"Ow!" She leapt up in bed. "Shit!"

The back of her hand was red raw and burning.

"What the hell?" She staggered to her feet, staring at her hand. There was a livid rash stretching from her wrist to her knuckles.

"What did I do last night?"

Flashes of the evening before formed in her head. Drinks after work. Dancing. Singing Carpenters songs and trying to busk with Luce and Miranda outside the train station. The long, bouncing, journey home and an hour with Lucy as she prayed over the toilet, Cat soothing her and trying to keep her friend's hair out of the vomit.

"God!" Cat grunted as she swung her feet to the floor. She stood up uncertainly. Her head swirled a little and she reached out for the dressing table to steady herself. "I'm getting too old for this."

She teetered into the bathroom. The smell of stale vomit almost overwhelmed her. She held back a retch and grabbed the air freshener, spraying it liberally into the air and around the toilet bowl. The bathroom didn't necessarily smell better now, the spray's scent was more chemical than floral and it didn't really disguise the smell of last night's vomit so much as blend with it in an unappealing way, but at least it meant she could venture further in without adding to the odor. She grabbed her toothbrush and the toothpaste and began scrubbing the inside of her mouth.

A few splashes of cold water later and she was beginning to feel a bit more human. She wrapped her big towelling dressing-gown around her for comfort and wobbled down the stairs.

Luce was sitting in the kitchen with a cup of coffee and a cigarette. Cat felt relieved. She knew she was looking rough, but Luce looked like death, and not the warmed up variety of death either. Cat grunted. Luce closed her eyes and shook her head.

Luce was rubbing ointment onto the back of her hand.

Cat stopped.

She looked at her own hand.

"Luce?" She walked over to her friend. The rash looked identical. "What exactly did we do last night?"

Luce shrugged. "Vodka?"



It took several attempts, a glass of water and some serious cajoling to get Miranda out of bed, but when they did, Luce and Cath immediately saw that she had the same mark on the back of her hand.

Luce started to panic. Always the hypochondriac, she began to run through all the diseases she could think of that would give you a rash. She started at measles.

"It makes you infertile," she'd wailed.

"But you don't want to have kids," Cat had pointed out. "You hate kids."

"Well, it could be meningitis. That kills."

"It's not meningitis."

"How do you know?"

"It just isn't."

"Plague. That gives you a rash."

"Don't be stup—" Cat caught half the word in her throat, but it was already too late.

Luce stood up.

"I'm not stupid. Don't call me stupid!"

She slammed the table, slopping coffee over yesterday's newspaper.

Cat stopped. Luce was the only one of them who hadn't gone to university and she was always touchy about her lack of qualifications. Tears were starting to form and her face was getting even puffier.

Miranda stepped in, grabbing Luce's hand and patting it gently.

"She didn't mean anything by it, did you Cat?"

Cat sighed, relieved. No one could calm Luce down like Miranda.

"Of course not Luce. I'm sorry. I'm just worried."

Luce sniffled. "S'okay."

Miranda sat Luce back down.

"What time is it?"

"Ten thirty."

"Right. Lets get washed and dressed and we'll go to the hospital. Just to be sure."

Luce smiled and Cat relaxed. Miranda was in charge. Everything would be fine.



"Bastards!" Miranda charged out of her room, her long brown hair still soaking wet and whipping furiously around her. She'd put a blouse on but only one leg was in her jeans.

"The rotten bastards!"

Cautiously, Cat stuck her head out of her room and into the hall. She didn't remember the last time she'd heard Miranda swear.

"Men!"

Miranda was standing in the hallway, gesticulating wildly as though she were trying to grab words from the air. She stamped her foot. It was all Cat could do not to laugh.

Luce appeared, looking terrified.

"Miranda?"

"The television. The bastards. The rash. I don't believe it." She stormed back into her room, or tried to, the half on, half off jeans made her stumble. "Bloody men!"

Cat and Luce followed, warily. Miranda was struggling to sort out her clothing but she pointed at the television in the corner.

"Listen!" She said, shaking her head.

Cat and Luce flopped onto Miranda's bed. Cat, as always, had a furtive look around at Miranda's obsessively neat and stylishly decorated bedroom and felt a pang, a sense that she — in her more slovenly ways — was somehow failing. She pushed it aside.

Luce was shuffling uncomfortably. The news was on the television. Luce didn't watch the news. It made her unhappy. There were two broadcasters, a man and a woman. Cat noticed at once that the woman had a dressing on the back of her right hand. The man was talking.

"... the announcement comes just twelve weeks into the term of Prime Minister Hay's new government. It is being promoted by sources close to the PM as a sign of their determination to make good on their election slogan; *traditional values in the modern world.*"

The man, smiling, turned to the woman who scowled at him. A typically pretty blonde newsreader, Cat was surprised at how long it took her to compose her face. Then she looked at the camera, a smile wedged, unconvincingly, beneath a deep frown and narrowed eyes.

"This is how the Prime Minister made the announcement today."

Prime Minister Hay appeared on the screen. He was lean, grey-haired man with small glasses that slipped down his nose so that he had to raise his head to peer through them. It gave the impression that he always looked down on the world around him and the perpetual puckering of his lips made it clear he did not like what he saw. He was standing outside, an enormous array of microphones arranged before him as journalists jostled in a barely controlled scrum.

"My government was elected because of a promise. That promise was nothing less than the moral rebirth of our great nation. The first pillar of our programme — to return a sense of morality to public and private life will only succeed if we put the family back at the heart in our political and civic lives. That is why today I am delighted to announce the successful completion of the first step on this path. It is the first step in a crusade we have called Operation Restore Faith."

Luce turned to Cat and Miranda.

"I don't understand." Luce's voice went up an octave, becoming an irritating whine. "What has this got to do with..."

Miranda shushed her quiet. "Listen!"

The camera had shifted back to the studio. The woman presenter was sitting beside a man in a tweed jacket, checked shirt and skew-whiff bowtie. Luce giggled at his clothes.

"... me now is Professor Quinlan from The BioTechnik Corporation. Professor, you led the scientific team behind Operation Restore Faith, could you briefly explain what it involves." The newsreader cocked her head to one side, slipping into her *I'm listening intelligently* pose.

"It is really very simple." The professor, a chubby, balding man smiled to reveal crooked teeth. "The carrier is simply a modified version of the measles virus—"

"I told you!" Luce squealed. "We'll all be barren."

"Shush!." Cat nudged her.

"- of course the virus is quite safe. We have retained the viruses ability to cause a rash, though directed it to create the barcode which will, from today, begin to appear on the hands of women of childbearing age."

The female newsreader rubbed the back of her hand, wincing visibly. If the professor noticed, he gave no sign.

"There may be a slight irritation for a while, but that will pass within, perhaps, a day or two, certainly with the week. Of course the virus's payload is much more complex than simple measles."

"Yes." The male newsreader interrupted. "We understand there are two main checks. Could you outline those, briefly?"

"Well the barcode is merely the most visible aspect of the virus, the way it communicates with the outside world. The more important functions are the monitoring of the body of the woman infected with the virus. The virus we have created carries out two types of check. First it monitors the subject's blood for traces of drugs. It will detect and measure levels of nicotine, alcohol, opiates, cannabidiol and other substances and reports, through the barcode, on their presence."

"Bastards!" Cat sat up. "The bastards!"

Luce shushed theatrically.

"...barcode and drug monitor, what is the other element of the viruses abilities?"

The professor sat back in his chair. It was obvious that he was very proud of this part of his work.

"The third part of the viruses payload is to monitor the sexual activity—"

Whatever the professor had to say, it was lost beneath the indignant roar from Miranda.



Miranda was trying to pace back and forth across the room but it wasn't having the dramatic effect she'd hoped for. First the room was quite small, so the opportunity for effective striding was fundamentally limited and, second, the room was crowded with almost a dozen angry young women and a scattering of hopeful looking young men.

After a moment she stopped, looked around, and flopped into a seat.

"We're all agreed that we have to do something about this government's action," Miranda said, to universal nodding from her audience. "The question is how can we best strike back?"

A scattering of hands went up across the room.

"Ooh, 142!"

"Luce?"

"Sorry!" Luce was playing with one of the boy's scanners. The government had sent them out in the week following the virus announcement. They were basically specialist barcode readers designed to make sense of the rash. They looked a little like black and chrome ray guns from some cheap science fiction show with a little screen that gave a summary of what the virus revealed. Some men had started to carry them around on their belts in little holsters.

The room was full of Cat and Miranda's friends from university. They were talking about retroviruses and vaccines and inoculations, and Luce was bored.

She leaned over and scanned the hand of Amy, a very serious physics student, next to her.

"Hey!" The girl yanked her arm away. "That's private!"

"Pfft," Luce looked at the screen, counting something out on her fingers. "Thirty-four? That's a rubbish score. I win!"

"Luce!"

"Sorry Cat," Luce started tapping something on her phone, then she moved on with her scanner and an innocent smile to the next girl.

"It's no good just trying to fix the bloody virus," one of the young men was thumping the arm of his chair. "We've got to get rid of the damned government, they're the ones who did this!"

"This isn't a political meeting," the physics student said. "We're supposed to be practical."

"But this is a *political* problem," the boy said.

Luce slid back into her seat having circled the room, her face split by a big grin.

Cat was slumped in her chair, she'd been skeptical about the meeting from the start and the developing split between the scientists and the politicians was confirming her worst fears.

"I win!" Luce hissed at Cat, nodding at her phone.

Cat arched an eyebrow.

Luce finished her tapping and passed the phone to her friend. Luce had developed a complicated scoring system with points awarded to the different things the barcode scanner

had revealed. There was a sliding scale of points for the time since each girl had last had sex, points for increased consumption of alcohol and other drugs identified and a big bonus for multiple sexual partners.

Luce had arranged the girls in a league table based on their scores. With 143 points she'd won by a handsome margin over a girl she'd named "Squinty2". Cat was pleased with her respectable mid-table showing.

"Did you just blog that?" Cat asked.

Luce nodded, grinning.

"What?" One of the girls jumped up. It might have been Squinty1 or Squinty2 Cat thought. "What did she do?"

"I won, so I put the table up on my blog." Luce grabbed the paper back from Cat and waved it under Squinty2's nose.

"You can't do that!" Squinty2 looked at her, plainly horrified. "That information is private!"

"She changed everyone's names," Cat came over to her friend's shoulder. "There's no way anyone could know who she's talking about."

The rest of the conversation died, everyone was listening.

"What did she do?" It was a boy called Hank. One of Miranda's friends.

"She's put a league table on the web. It has all our barcode data on it!"

"I won," Luce repeated again. She was still smiling broadly.

"You mean she's just told the world she's the biggest slut in the room?" Hank sneered.

There was a collective intake of breath — the room went silent.

Miranda stood up, her face flushing, angry words on her lips. But Luce just smiled.

"I won!"



The telephone rang at 3:13am. Cat rolled over slapping at her alarm clock twice before working out that the sound was coming from somewhere else.

She opened her eyes.

"Jesus."

She sat up and pulled the phone from its hook.

"I have a call for Lucy Tinsdale," the woman's voice was cool and had that East coast American accent that Cat associated with the Kennedys and yachts.

"She's asleep," Cat had the phone record the number for later, ended the call and went to put the phone down.

It started ringing again before it reached the cradle.

"Look I said she's asleep," Cat snapped into the mouthpiece, without listening to the other end. "Call back in the morning!"

"...from the New York Times." Cat heard faintly as she put the phone down again.

"What?" She snatched at the phone but it was too late.

There was a ring at the door.

Cat went to the window. There was a crowd gathering — lots of people chatting with mobile phones, men lugging cameras with impossibly long lenses and men with video equipment setting up lights.

The phone started ringing again.

The door to Cat's room opened slowly. Luce and Miranda were standing there, looking worried.



It had taken thirty-one hours for Luce's blog to go down under the weight of traffic.

By then Luce was no longer top of the league table she'd posted, she was barely in the top quarter. Over fifty five thousand women had posted their own details using Luce's formula to work out their score. The site had received millions of hits, its popularity increasing exponentially until the server owner had pulled the plug.

Luce tried to log on to her email. The account was locked, twenty-two messages told her that her mailbox was over-stuffed by increasingly unlikely amounts of data. She read a few of the emails that had downloaded to her phone before her service had collapsed. There were hundreds of messages from people she didn't know, some were congratulating her, some were insulting here and some were making some pretty strange requests. But there were also offers

to host the site from political groups and companies sensing a quick profit.

Cat flicked on her computer.

She flicked to a news site. And then another. And then another.

“Oh shit.”

Luce’s list was the top story on every site.

She turned on the television.

Everyone was talking about Lucy’s list.

There were spittle-flecked conservatives ranting about the moral depravity of today’s youth and happy liberals affirming that they always believed this foolish and illegal government policy was bound to backfire.

Then text rolling across the bottom of the screen revealed that the Prime Minister’s daughter had used Lucy’s site. And scored 157.

Miranda whistled.

“She beat me,” Luce groaned.

Someone started ringing the doorbell. They could hear people moving around the house. The two girls huddled together on Cat’s bed, watching the world go mad.

About an hour later Professor Quinlan appeared briefly, looking even scruffier and a lot less pleased with himself that he had a week ago.

“A scientist cannot be responsible for how his discoveries are used,” the little man protested.

The Prime Minister rushed past the cameras at a summit in Asia, smiling and refusing to comment. Sources close to the government hinted that they would be withdrawing support for the scheme. But it was already far, far too late.

Then the newsreader introduced a sociologist and a rightwing newspaper columnist who immediately started arguing about whether Lucy’s List was an example of young women taking control of their sexuality in an exercise of empowerment or the ultimate expression of a decadent society gone to rot.

“Can we turn the news off?” Luce said, yawning. “I’m going back to bed.”



Lucy's List was a national obsession for about eighteen months. It brought an end to Operation Restore Faith, brought down a prime minister and changed the political direction of the country.

The contenders at the top of the list became celebrities with tabloids gleefully latching on to every detail of their debauched lives. Within weeks the Internet was full of ways to trick the system so girls could artificially inflate their scores. Soon the girls at the top of the Lucy's List were taking drugs' tests to prove they were really taking the drugs they claimed.

Luce signed the rights to her list over to a gameshow company. Luce got five percent of the company's profits and a chance to appear as a contestant on *Big Brother*.

Luce enjoyed her fame, but didn't miss it when it ended either. She made enough money to keep her content for the rest of her life and she managed it sensibly. And, whenever anyone — journalists, friends, fans — asked her about the part she'd played in saving the nation from reactionary politicians with no regard for personal privacy or women's rights she'd always smile and give them the same answer.

"I was only playing a game."