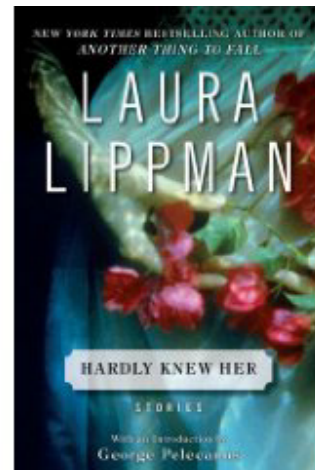


Hardly Knew Her

by Laura Lippman



Sofia was a lean, hipless girl, the type that older men still called a tomboy in 1975, although her only hoydenish quality was a love of football. In the vacant lot behind the neighborhood tavern, the boys welcomed her into their games. This was in part because she was quick, with sure hands. And even touch football sometimes ended in pile-ups, where it was possible to steal a touch or two and claim it was accidental. She tolerated this feeble groping most of the time, punching the occasional boy who pressed too hard too long, which put the others on notice for a while. Then they forgot, and it happened again – they touched, she punched. It was a price she was more than willing to pay for the exhilaration she felt when she passed the yew berry bushes that marked the end zone, a gaggle of boys breathless in her wake.

But for all the afternoons she spent at the vacant lot, she never made peace with the tricky plays -- the faked hand-offs, the double pumps, the gimmicky laterals. It seemed cowardly to her, a way for less-gifted players to punish those with natural talent. It was one thing to spin and feint down the field, eluding grasping hands with a swivel of her hips. But to pretend the ball was somewhere it wasn't struck her as cheating, and no one could ever persuade her otherwise.

She figured it was the same with her father and cards. He knew the game was steeped in bluffing and lying, but he could never resign himself to the fact. He depended on good cards and good luck to get him through, and even Sofia understood that was no way to win at poker. But the only person her father could lie to with any success was him self.

"That your dad?" Joe, one of the regular quarterbacks, asked one Friday afternoon as they sprawled in the grass, game over, their side victorious again.

Sofia looked up to see her father slipping through the back door of the tavern, which people called Gordon's, despite the fact that the owner's name was Peter Papadakis. Perhaps someone named Gordon had owned it long ago, but it had been Mr. Papadakis's place as far back as Sofia could remember.

"Yeah."

"What's he doing, going through the back door?" That was a scrawny boy, Bob, one of the grabby ones.

Sofia shredded grass in her fingers, ignoring him. Joe said. "Poker."

"Poker? *Poker*? I hardly knew her." Bob was so pleased with his wit that he rolled back and forth, clutching his stomach, and some of the other boys laughed as they had never heard this old joke before. Sofia didn't laugh. She hated watching her father disappear in the back room of the tavern, from which he would not emerge until early Saturday. But it was better than running into him on the sidewalk between here and home. He always pretended surprise at seeing

her, proclaiming it the *darnedest* coincidence, Sofia on Brighton Avenue, same as him. On those occasions, he would stop and make polite inquiries into her life, but he would be restless all the while, shifting his weight from one foot to another, anxious as a little kid on the way to his own birthday party.

“How’s it going, Fee?” That was her family nickname, and she was just beginning to hate it.

“S’all right, I guess.”

“School okay?”

“Not bad. I hate algebra.”

“It’ll come in handy one day.”

“How?”

“If you get through high school, maybe go on to community college, you won’t be stuck here in Dundalk, breathing air you can see.”

“I like it here.” She did. The water was nearby and although it wasn’t the kind you could swim in – if you fell in, you were supposed to tell your mom so she could take you for a tetanus shot, but no one ever told -- the view from the water’s edge made the world feel big, yet comprehensible. Dundalk wasn’t Baltimore, although the map said it was. Dundalk was country unto itself, the Republic of Bethlehem Steel. And in 1975, Beth Steel was like the Soviet Union. You couldn’t imagine either one not being there. So the families of Dundalk breathed the reddish air, collected their regular paychecks, and comforted one another when a man was hurt or killed, accepting those accidents as the inevitable price for a secure job. It was only later, when the slow poison of asbestosis began moving from household to household that the Beth Steel families began to question the deal they had made. Later still, the all-but-dead company was sold for its parts and the new owner simply ended it all – pensions, health care, every promise ever made. But in 1975, in Dundalk, a Beth Steel family was still the best thing to be, and the children looked down on those whose fathers had to work for any other company.

“Go home and do your homework,” her father told Sofia.

“No homework on Fridays,” she said. “But I want to eat supper and wash the dishes before *Donny and Marie* comes on.”

They never spoke of his plans for the evening, much less the stakes involved, but after such encounters Sofia went home and hid whatever she could. She longed to advise her mother to do the same, but it was understood that they never spoke of her father’s winning and losing, much less the consequences for the household.

“I bought it for you, didn’t I?” her father had told her younger brother, Brad, wheeling the 10-speed bicycle with the banana seat out of the garage. Brad had owned the shiny Schwinn for all of a month. “Why’d I ever think we needed fancy candlesticks like these?” her father grumbled, taking the grape-bedecked silver stems from the sideboard, as if his only problem was a sudden distaste for their ornate style. One Saturday morning, he came into Sofia’s room and tried to grab her guitar, purchased a year earlier after a particularly good Friday, but something in her expression made him put it back.

Instead he sold the family dog, a purebred Collie, or so her father had said when he brought the puppy home three months ago. It turned out that Shemp

had the wrong kind of papers, some initials other than AKC. The man who agreed to buy Shemp from them had lectured her father, accusing him of being taken in by the Mennonite puppy mills over the state line. He gave her father twenty-five dollars, saying: "People who can't be bothered to do the most basic research probably shouldn't have a dog, any way."

Sofia, sitting in the passenger seat of her father's car – she had insisted on accompanying him, thinking it would shame her father, but in the end she was one who was ashamed that she had chosen her guitar over Shemp – chewed over this fact. Her father was so gullible that he could be duped by Mennonites. She imagined them ringed around a poker table, solemn bearded faces regarding their cards. Mennonites would probably be good at poker if God let them play it.

Her father spoke of his fortune as if it were the weather, a matter of temperature outside his control. "I was hot," her father crowed coming through the door Saturday morning, carrying a box of doughnuts. "I've never seen a colder deck," he'd say, heading out Saturday afternoon after a long morning nap on the sofa. "I couldn't catch a break."

You just can't bluff, Sofia thought. But then, neither could she. Perhaps it was in her genes. That was why she had to out-run the boys on the other team. *Go long and I'll hit you*, Joe told her and that's what she did, play after play. She outran her competition or she didn't, but she never tried to fool the other players, or faulted anyone else when she failed to catch a ball that was thrown right at her. She didn't think of herself as hot or cold, or try to blame the ball for what she failed to do. A level playing field was not a figure of speech to Sofia. It was all she knew. She made a point of learning every square inch of the vacant lot – the slight depressions where you could turn an ankle if you came down wrong, the sections that stayed mushy long after the rain, the slope in one of their improvised end zones that made it tricky to set up for the pass. With just a little homework, Sofia believed, you could control for every possibility.

Sofia's stubborn devotion to football probably led to the onslaught of oh-so-girly gifts on her next birthday – a pink dress, perfume, and a silver necklace with purplish jewels that her mother said were amethysts. "Semiprecious," she added. There were three of them, one large oval guarded by two small ones, set in a reddish gold. The necklace was the most beautiful thing that Sofia had ever seen.

"Maybe you'll go to the winter dance up at school, Fee," her mother suggested hopefully, fastening the necklace around her neck.

"Someone has to ask you first," Sofia said, pretending not to be impressed by her own reflection.

"Oh, it's okay to go with a group of girls, too," her mother said.

Sofia didn't know any girls, actually. She was friendly with most of them, but not friends. The girls at school seemed split about her: Some thought her love of football was genuine if odd, while others proclaimed it an awfully creative way to be a tramp. This second group of girls whispered that Sofia was fast, fast in the bad way, that football wasn't the only game she played with all those boys in the vacant lot behind Gordon's Tavern. What would they say if she actually danced with one, much less let him walk her home?

"I'd be scared to wear this out of the house," she said, placing a tentative finger on the large amethyst. "Something might happen to it."

"Your aunt would want you to wear it and enjoy it," her mother said. "It's an heirloom. It belonged to Aunt Polly, and her aunt before her, and their grandmother before that. But Tammy didn't have any girls, so she gave it to me a few years ago, said to put it away for a special birthday. This one's as special as any, I think."

"What if I lost it?"

"You can't," her mother said. "It has a special catch – see?"

But Sofia wasn't worried about the catch. Or, rather, she was worried about the other catch, the hidden rules that were always changing. She was trying to figure out if the necklace qualified as a real gift, one that her father couldn't reclaim. It hadn't been purchased in a store. It had come from her father's side of the family. And although it was a birthday gift, it hadn't been wrapped up in paper and ribbons. She put it back in its box, a velvety once-black rectangle that was all the more beautiful for having faded to gray. Where would her father never look for it?

Three weeks later, Sofia awoke one Saturday to find her father standing over her guitar. Her father must not have known how guitar strings were attached because he cut them with a pocketknife, sliced them right down the middle and reached into the hole to extract the velvet box, which had been anchored in a tea towel at the bottom, so it wouldn't make an obvious swishing noise if someone picked up the guitar and shook it. How had he known it was there? Perhaps he had reached for the guitar again, and felt the extra weight. Perhaps he simply knew Sofia too well, a far more disturbing thought. At any rate, he held the velvet box in his hand.

"I'll buy you new ones," he said.

He meant the strings, of course, not the necklace or the amethysts.

"But you can't sell it," she said, groping for the word her mother had invoked so lovingly. "It's a hair-loom."

"Oh, Fee, it's nothing special. I'll buy you something much better when my luck changes."

"Take something else, anything else. Take the guitar."

"Strings cut," he said, as if he had found it that way and believed it beyond repair. "Besides, I told this fellow about it and he said he'll take it in lieu of . . . in lieu of debts owed, if he finds it satisfactory. I don't even have to go to the trouble of pawning it."

"But if you don't pawn it, we can't ever get it back."

"Honey, when did we ever redeem a pawn shop ticket?"

This was true, but at least the pawnshop held open the promise of recovering things. If the necklace went to a person, it would be gone as Shemp. Sofia imagined it on the neck of a smug girl, like one of the ones who whispered about her up at school. A girl who would say: *Oh, my father bought me this at the pawnshop. It's an antique. My father said the people who owned it probably didn't know it was valuable.* But Sofia did and her mother did. It was only her father who didn't value it, except as a way to cover his losses.

“Please don’t take it,” she said. She tried to make her face do whatever it had done the day he had backed down before, but it was dim in her room and her father was resolved. He pocketed the beautiful box and left.

But he didn’t leave the house right away. He never did, not on the glum Saturdays that followed his bad nights, the ones that came and went without doughnuts. He went down to the breakfast table and wolfed down a plate of fried eggs. Sofia followed him down to the table, staring at him silently, but he refused to meet her gaze. Her mother might intervene if she told her, but Sofia didn’t feel that she had earned anyone’s help. She had sat by while the candlesticks left, turned her back when Brad cried over his bicycle. She was on her own.

Her father took a long nap on the sofa, opening his eyes from time to time to comment on whatever television program was drifting by. “Super Bowl’s going to be a snorer this year.” “Wrestling’s fixed, everyone knows that.” It was going on 3 by the time he left the house and Sofia followed behind, shadowing him in the alleys that ran parallel to Brighton Avenue. She thought she might show up at the last minute, shaming her father, then remembered that hadn’t worked with Shemp. Instead, she crouched behind a row of yewberry bushes at the end of the property that bordered the vacant lot. She had retrieved many a misthrown football from these bushes, so she knew how thick and full they were. She also knew that the red berries were poison, a piece of vital information that had been passed from child to child as long as anyone in the neighborhood could remember. *Don’t eat them little red berries. They look like cherries, but one bite will kill you.* When she was little, when she was still okay with being Fee, she had gathered berries from the bushes and used them in her Hi-Ho, Cherry-O game at home. For some reason it had been far more satisfying, watching these real-if-inedible berries tumble out of the little plastic bucket. She was always careful to make sure that Brad didn’t put any in his mouth, schooling him as she had been schooled.

A man was waiting for her father behind Gordon’s place. He held himself as if he thought he was good looking, and maybe he was. He wore a leather jacket with the collar turned up, and didn’t seem to notice that the day was too cold for such a light jacket. When he opened the velvet box, he nodded and pocketed it with a shrug. But he clearly didn’t appreciate the thing of beauty before him and that bothered Sofia more than anything. At least Shemp had gone to a man who thought he was a good dog deserving of a good home. This man wasn’t worthy of her necklace.

She watched him get into a red car, a Corvette that Joe and the other boys had commented on enviously whenever it appeared in Gordon’s parking lot. He wasn’t an every-wecker, not like her dad, but he came around quite a bit. Now that she was paying attention, it seemed to her that she had seen the car all over the neighborhood – up and down Brighton Avenue, outside the snowball stand in spring and summer, in the parking lot over to Costas Inn, at the swim club. He came around a lot. Maybe Joe knew his name, or his people.

Three months later. The clocks had been turned forward and the days were milder. There was another dance at school and Sofia was going this time. Things had changed. She had changed.

“Why isn’t Joe picking you up?” her mother asked.

“We’re meeting there,” Sofia said. “He’s not a *boyfriend*-boyfriend.”

“I thought he was. You’ve been going to the movies together on weekends, almost every Saturday since St. Patrick’s Day.”

“Just matinees. Things are different now. We’re just friends. This isn’t a date. But he’ll walk me home, so you don’t have to worry. Okay?”

“What time does the dance end?”

“Eleven.”

“And you’ll come straight home.” A command, not a question.

“Sure.”

Sofia shouldn’t have agreed so readily; it made her mother suspicious. She studied her daughter’s face, trying to figure out the exact nature of the lie. Reluctantly, she let Sofia go, yanking her dress down in the back as if she could extend the cloth. Sofia had grown some since her birthday and the pink dress was a little short, but short was the fashion of the day, as were the platform shoes she clattered along in. She had practiced in them off and on for two weeks, and they still felt like those Dutch shoes, big as boats around her skinny ankles, Olive Oyl sandals. Thank God they had ankle straps or she would have fallen out of them in less than a block.

Two blocks down, where she should have crossed the boulevard to go up to the school, she turned right instead, heading for the tavern. She didn’t go in, of course, but waited by the back door, which was just a back door on Saturday nights, nothing more. Within five minutes, a red Corvette pulled into the parking lot.

“Hey,” said the man in the driver’s seat, a man she now knew as Brian. He wore his leather jacket with the collar turned up, although the night was a little warm for it.

“Hey,” she said, getting into the car and pulling her dress so it didn’t bunch up around her.

“Never seen you in a skirt before, Gino.” That was his joke, calling her “Gino” after Gino Marcetti.

“And I’ve never seen you in anything but that leather jacket.”

“Well, technically, this is our first date. There’s a lot we don’t know about each other, isn’t there?”

Sofia smiled in what she hoped was a mysterious and alluring way.

“Maybe we should get to know each other better. What do you think?”

She nodded.

“My place okay?”

She nodded again. It had taken her three months to get to this point – three months of careful conversation in Gordon’s parking lot, which began when she threw the ball at the red Corvette, presumably in a fit of celebration upon scoring a touchdown. Brian, who had just pulled up, got out and started screaming, but he settled down fast when Sofia apologized, prettily and tearfully. Plus, she hadn’t damaged the car, not a bit. After that afternoon, he would stand in the lot for a few minutes, watching them play. Watching her play, she was sure of it. He brought sodas for everyone. He asked if they wanted to go for ice cream. He took them, one at a time, in rides around the block. Sofia always went last.

The rides were short, no more than five minutes, but a lot can happen in five minutes. He told her that he managed a Merry-Go-Round clothing store, offered to get a discount. She told him she was bored with school and thinking about dropping out. He said he had been married for a while, but he was single now. "I'm single, too," Sofia said, and he laughed as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

"Maybe we should go out sometimes, us both being single and all," he said. That had been yesterday.

The date made, it was understood that he would not come to her house, shake hands with her father and make small talk with her mother while Sofia turned a round brush in her hair, trying to feather her bangs. Other things were understood, too. That it would not be a movie date or a restaurant date. Sofia knew what she was signing up for. Her only concern was that the might want to drive some place, stay in the Corvette, when she wanted to see where he lived.

So she said as much, when he asked what she wanted to do. "Why don't we just go to your place?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Why not?" He passed her a brown bag that he had held between his legs as he drove and she took a careful sip.

Brian lived out Essex way, in some new apartments advertising move-in specials and a swimming pool. She hoped it wouldn't take too long because she only had so much time, but she was surprised at just how fast it happened. One minute they were kissing, and it wasn't too bad. She almost liked it. Then all of a sudden he was hovering above her, asking if she was fixed up, a question she didn't understand right away. When she did, she shook her head, and he said "Shit," but pulled a rubber over himself, rammed into her and yelled at her to come, as if he were a coach or a gym teacher, exhorting her to do something difficult but not impossible.

"I . . . don't . . . do that," she panted out.

He took that as permission to do what he needed. Once finished, he pulled away quickly, as if she were tainted in some way.

"Sorry, but if you're not on the Pill, I can't afford to hang around, you know? One little sperm gets out and my life is over. I've already got one kid to pay for."

That detail had not come up in their rides around the block.

"Uh huh."

"You ready to go back?"

"Can't we watch some television, maybe try again?"

"Didn't get the feeling that you cared for it."

"I'm just . . . quiet. I liked it." She placed a tentative hand on his chest, which was narrow and a little sunken once out of the leather jacket. "I liked it a lot."

He chose the wrestling matches on Channel 45, then arranged the covers over them and put his arm around her.

"You know, wrestling's fixed," she said.

"Who says?"

"Everybody." She didn't want to mention her father.

"So? It's the only decent thing on."

“Just seems like cheating,” she said. “I don’t like games like that. Like, for example . . . poker.”

“Poker? I hardly knew her.” He laughed and she tried to.

“Still,” she said, gesturing at the television. “It doesn’t seem right. Pretending.”

“Well, I guess that’s why you don’t do it.”

“Wrestle?”

“Fake it. You know, it wouldn’t hurt you to act like you liked it, just a little. If you’re frigid, you’re frigid, but why should a guy be left feeling like he didn’t do right by you?”

“I’ll try,” she said. “I can do better. Maybe if there could be more kissing first.”

He tried, she had to give him that. He slowed down, kissed her a lot, and she could see how it might be better. She still didn’t feel moved, but she took the man’s advice, shuddering and moaning like the women in the movies, the R-rated ones she and Joe had been sneaking into this spring. At any rate, whatever she did wore him out, and he fell asleep.

She didn’t bother to put on her clothes, although she did carry her purse with her as she moved from room to room. When she didn’t find the velvet box right away, she found herself taking other things in her panic and anger – a Baltimore Colts ashtray, a pair of purple candles, a Bachman Turner Overdrive eight-track, an unused bar of Ivory soap in the bathroom. Her clunky sandals off, she was quiet and light on her feet, and he didn’t stir at all until she tried a small drawer in his dresser. The drawer stuck a little and she gave it a wrenching pull to force it open. He whimpered in his sleep and she froze, certain she was about to be caught, but he didn’t do anything but roll over. It was the velvet box that had made the drawer stick, wedged against the top like peanut butter on the roof of someone’s mouth. But when she snapped it open, the box was empty. In her grief and frustration, she gave a little cry.

“What the -- ”

He was out of bed in an instant, grabbing her wrist and pushing her face into the pea-green carpet, crunchy with dirt and food and other things.

“Put it back, you thievin’ whore or I’ll -- ”

She grabbed one of her shoes and hit him with it, landing a solid blow on his ear. He roared and fell back, but only for a minute, grabbing her ankle as she tried to crawl away and gather her clothes.

“Look,” she said, “I’m thirteen.”

He didn’t let go of her ankle, but his grip loosened. “Bullshit. You told me you were in high school.”

“I’m thirteen,” she repeated. “Call the police. They’ll believe me, I’m pretty sure. I’m thirteen and you just raped me. I never had sex before tonight.”

“No way I’m your first. You didn’t bleed, not even a little.”

“Not everybody does. I play a lot of football. And maybe you’re not big enough to make a girl bleed.”

He slapped her for that and she returned the blow with her shoe, smacking him across the head so hard that he fell back and didn’t get back up. Still, she

kept hitting him, her frustration over the long-gone necklace driving her. She struck him for everything that had been lost, for every gift that had come and gone and couldn't be retrieved. For Brad's bicycle, for her mother's candlesticks, for Shemp. She pounded the shoe against his head again and again, as if she were a child throwing a tantrum and, in a way, she was. Eventually, she fell back, her breath ragged in her chest. It was only then that she realized how still Brian was.

She put her ear to his chest. She was pretty sure his heart was still beating, that he was still breathing. Pretty sure. She put on her clothes and grabbed her macramé purse, still full of the trophies she had taken. She checked her watch, a confirmation gift. There was no way she could get home in time without a ride. She helped herself to money from Brian's wallet, and it turned out he had quite a bit. "I'll meet you outside," she told the taxi dispatcher. Still, it was almost midnight when she came up the walk and both parents were waiting for her.

"Where were you?"

"At the dance."

"Don't lie to us."

"I was at the dance," she repeated.

"Where's Joe? Why did you come home alone, in a cab?"

"He came with another girl, a real date. Another boy, someone I didn't know, offered to walk me home. He got . . . fresh."

"Who was he?" her father demanded, grabbing her by the arm. "Where does he live?"

"All I know is that his name was Steve and when I wouldn't . . ." she shrugged, declining to put a name to the thing she wouldn't do. "At any rate, he put me out of the car on Holabird Avenue and I had to hail a cab. I'm sorry. I know it was wrong of me. I won't ever take a ride with a stranger again."

"You could have been killed," her mother said, clutching her to her chest. But Sofia's father simply stared at her. When she went up to her room, he followed her.

"You telling the truth?" he asked.

"Yes." It seemed to Sofia that her father's eyes were boring into her macramé bag, as if he could see the stolen treasures inside, including Brian's cash. Even after the cab ride all the way from Essex, there was quite a bit left over. But maybe all he was seeing was another object that he would raid, the next time he was caught short.

"Daddy?"

"What?"

"Don't take any more of my stuff, okay?"

"You don't have any stuff, missy. Everything in this house belongs to me."

"You take any more of my stuff, I'll run away. I'll go to California and do drugs and be a hippie." This was about the worst fate that any parent could imagine for a child, back in Dundalk in 1975. True, the Summer of Love was long past, but time moved slowly in Dundalk, and they were still worried about hippies and LSD.

"You wouldn't."

"I would."

"I'll drag you home and make you sorry."

“I’ll make you sorrier.”

“The hell you say.”

“I’ll go to police and tell them about the game at Gordon’s, in the back room.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. I’ll do it this very Friday night. But if you promise to leave me and my stuff alone, I’ll leave you alone. Deal?”

He didn’t shake on it, or even nod his head. But when her father left her room that night, Sofia knew he would never enter it again.

That was the spring that Sofia learned to bluff and, once she started, she found it hard to stop. She would never have called the cops on her father because it would have killed her mother. She was sixteen, not thirteen, but she knew that she could pass for thirteen. All of a sudden, Sofia could bluff, pretend, plan, plot, trick, cheat, cajole, threaten, blackmail. Even steal if she chose, for while the necklace belonged to her and she would have been within her rights to take it back if she had found it, she had no claim on the other things she had taken. Brian hadn’t stolen from her, after all. He knew nothing about the necklace or who owned it or what it was worth, except in the most literal terms. He had probably pawned it soon after accepting it for payment, or given it to another girl who went for rides in that red Corvette. For several days, Sofia checked the paper worriedly, reading deep into the local section to see if a man had been found dead from a beating in an Essex apartment. She even considered getting rid of her shoes, but decided that was a greater sacrifice than she needed to make. Whatever happened to Brian, his red Corvette was no longer seen up and down Brighton Avenue.

She used part of his money to buy a padlock for her bedroom door, a fancy one with a key. She used the balance to buy a lava lamp from Spenser’s Gifts at East Point Mall. At night, her homework done, she watched the reddish-orange blobs break apart and re-arrange themselves. Even within that narrow glass, there seemed to be no limit to the forms they could take. Her father stewed and steamed about the lock, saying she had no right to lock a room in his house. He also criticized the lava lamp, saying it proved she was on drugs because what sober, right-minded person could be entertained by such a thing.

But for all he complained, he never tried to breach the lock, although it would have been a simple thing to pry it off with a hammer, not much harder than slicing through a set of guitar strings. He was scared of her now, just a little.

She liked it.

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