

S.L. GILBOW

## Red Card by S.L. Gilbow

Late one April evening, Linda Jackson pulled a revolver from her purse and shot her husband through a large mustard stain in the center of his T-shirt. The official after incident survey concluded that almost all of Merry Valley approved of the shooting. Sixty-four percent of the townspeople even rated her target selection as “excellent.” A few, however, criticized her, pointing out that shooting your husband is “a little too obvious” and “not very creative.”

Dick Andrews, who had farmed the fertile soil around Merry Valley for over thirty years, believed that Larry Jackson, more than anyone else in town, needed to be killed. “I never liked him much,” he wrote in the additional comments section of the incident survey. “He never seemed to have a good word to say about anybody.”

“Excellent use of a bullet,” scrawled Jimmy Blanchard. Born and raised in Merry Valley, he had known Larry for years and had even graduated from high school with him. “Most overbearing person I’ve ever met. He deserved what he got. I’m just not sure why it took so long.”

Of course, a few people made waves. Jenny Collins seemed appalled. “I can hardly believe it,” she wrote. “We used to be much more discerning about who we killed, and we certainly didn’t go around flaunting it the way Linda does.” Jenny was the old-fashioned kind.

Linda would never have called her actions “flaunting it.” Of course she knew what to do after shooting Larry. She had read *The Enforcement Handbook* from cover to cover six times, poring over it to see if she had missed anything, scrutinizing every nuance. She had even committed some of the more important passages to memory: Call the police immediately after executing an enforcement—Always keep your red card in a safe, dry place—Never reveal to anyone that you have a red card—Be proud; you’re performing an important civic duty.

But flaunting it? No, Linda blended in better than anyone in town, rarely talked and never called attention to herself. She spent most of her days at the Merry Valley Public Library, tucked between rows of antique shelves, alone, organizing a modest collection of old books. In the evening she fixed dinner. After Larry had eaten, cleaned up and left the house for “some time alone,” Linda would lie in bed reading Jane Austen. No, Linda never flaunted anything—never had much to flaunt.

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After she shot her husband, Linda returned the revolver to her purse and collapsed onto her oversized couch. She then picked up the telephone, set it in her lap, and tugged at her long, pale bangs—a nervous habit that drove Larry crazy. She had once considered cutting them to make him happy, but Sarah Hall from across the street had commented on how nice they looked. “They really bring out your eyes,” Sarah had said. “They make you look as pretty as a princess.”



Linda would never have called herself pretty, but she always looked as nice as she could. Her makeup—tasteful and modest—came straight off of page twenty-seven of the current issue of *Truly Beautiful*. She applied her eyeliner, mascara, lipstick and blush precisely according to the instructions, copying every detail of the model's face, framing each eye with two delicate, taupe lines. But she realized she could do no better than pass as the model's homely cousin.

Linda let go of her bangs, lifted the receiver and dialed a number from a yellow sticker plastered across the phone; the sticker doubled as an ad for Bob's Pizza Heaven, so she dialed carefully.

"Merry Valley Police Department."

"I'd like to report an enforcement," said Linda.

"Linda?"

"Yes," she replied, trying to recognize the voice.

"This is Officer Hamilton."

"Oh, thank goodness," she said, unable to hide her relief. She admired Officer Hamilton. Once, while making his usual patrol through Merry Valley, he had pulled over to help her carry two bags of groceries, heavy with the dead weight of frozen meat and canned vegetables. He was probably just fighting boredom, but she still appreciated the help. You rarely found that kind of service anymore.

Linda paused, wondered what tone to strike, and settled on matter-of-fact. "I've just shot someone. The Enforcement Handbook says I'm supposed to call you."

"That's right," said Officer Hamilton. "Chapter three, I think. Who did you shoot?"

"My husband."

"Is he dead?" he asked.

Linda studied Larry, sensitive to any movement, the slightest twitch. "He's not moving," she said. "He hasn't moved since I shot him."

"How many times did you shoot him?"

"Once," she said.

"I'd recommend you shoot him one more time just to be sure," said Officer Hamilton.

"No," said Linda, "I'm sure he's dead enough." The Enforcement Handbook recommended at least two shots, but the thought of shooting Larry again bothered Linda. The first shot hadn't been easy, in spite of what the handbook said.

"Fine then, but you'll need to come down to the station to fill out the paperwork."

“Of course,” she said. “Do I need to call someone to pick him up?” The handbook hadn’t mentioned how to remove the body.

“We’ll take care of that,” said Officer Hamilton. “Just come down to the station and don’t forget to bring your red card. You do have a red card, don’t you?”

“I do,” she said.

“Wonderful,” said Officer Hamilton.

“And I’ll bring the revolver,” she said, paraphrasing a portion from chapter two of the handbook.

“And any spare ammunition you didn’t use,” said Officer Hamilton. “We can reissue it with the card.”

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Linda hung up, set the phone on the floor, and rose from the couch. She looked at Larry, and the longer she looked at him the more she expected him to move; it seemed so unnatural for him to be so still, so silent—he had always been in motion. Early in their courtship she pictured him as a hummingbird—a large, gawky hummingbird—but lately she saw him as something else—perhaps a mongoose.

“Larry,” she said without taking her eyes off him. She wondered if she should follow Officer Hamilton’s advice and shoot him again. But there was no movement, no sound. She thought he looked like he was asleep, but then she remembered the constant rolling and snoring that marked his nights. No second shot would be needed.

Linda felt an urge to wash. She stepped around Larry’s body, crossed the living room and passed through the spare bedroom into the bathroom. Linda filled the sink with warm water, adding a delightful mixture of strawberry and watermelon soap. The crimson color had never bothered her before, but now she braced herself as she plunged her hands into the water. She scrubbed her hands for more than minute; it seemed like the right thing to do.

After she dried her hands on a monogrammed towel, Linda went to her bedroom. Larry and Linda referred to it as the “spare bedroom,” but it was the one room Linda had all to herself, her refuge from Larry when he got wild—even wilder than usual. The room became her sanctuary, and Larry rarely entered it. Not that Linda forbade him to do so. It’s just that Linda had filled it with things that made him uncomfortable. A large four-poster bed dominated the center of the room. On top of the bed were a handmade quilt, a pile of embroidered throw pillows, and a stuffed animal Larry had given to Linda years ago. Linda called the animal “Sally Cat” but lately had considered the possibility that it might be a ferret. Beside the bed stood an antique vanity bordered by two windows, each framed with lace curtains adorned with a delicate tea rose pattern. The room radiated Linda; there was nothing about Larry in it.

Linda scanned her closet and filtered through a row of clothes she had worn only once—a wedding dress, a pink prom dress, and an evening gown. She finally settled on a gathered lavender dress. She had once worn it to The Merry Valley Bistro, the one restaurant in town Linda looked forward to. Larry criticized her for being

overdressed, and she hadn't worn the dress since. But tonight it seemed right—the lavender dress and a matching pair of high heeled shoes. Linda wasn't sure who might be at the police station, but crowds had a way of forming in Merry Valley, and she wanted to be presentable. “Besides,” she thought, “there's no chance of Larry objecting.”

When she finished dressing, Linda gathered the red card, the government revolver, and the last two rounds of ammunition, and dropped them into her purse. She checked her makeup in the vanity mirror and then, deciding she was in no mood to drive, called a taxi.

She opened the front door, paused, and surveyed the living room one last time. “Damn it, Larry,” she said. “I gave you fair warning.”

#

Linda stepped into the dark night of a new moon. Her outdoor light had burned out weeks ago, but the porch light on Sarah Hall's house across the street blazed like a beacon, allowing Linda to navigate her steps safely.

Sarah, swaying in time to a big band tune coming from her living room, deadheaded flowers that grew in large pots that framed her house. She was a large, nocturnal woman with a strong jaw and an unmistakable silhouette.

As Linda neared the street, Sarah was attracted by the unexpected movement and gave a friendly wave. Linda wished she hadn't been noticed, but if she had to deal with anyone tonight, besides the police—which at this point seemed inevitable—it might as well be Sarah. Linda liked Sarah and believed Sarah liked her too. She liked the way she complimented her bangs; she liked the cheesecakes she occasionally brought over; she liked her sisterly advice. Often Linda would call Sarah when Larry acted up. “You should get help,” Sarah would say.

Linda would agree and then tell her how she was starting to get things under control, how she and Larry were going to work things out with just a little more time, but Linda knew that the time needed to work things out with Larry was most aptly measured in geological terms.

Linda stopped between two small pear trees to wait for the taxi. She stooped under one and felt the soil—she would need to water it tomorrow. Larry had purchased the trees on the way back from their honeymoon five years ago. The trees were the only fond memory she had of that week.

Larry had surprised her with a Caribbean cruise, although Linda thought they had decided to go to New York. They spent two days in the Bahamas, but Linda refused to count it as one of the places she had actually visited since she never left the ship.

“You ever been on a cruise before?” Larry asked as they entered their suite.

The question surprised Linda. Surely they had discussed cruises in the five months they had known each other. She thought for a moment, but no such conversation came to mind. “No,” she said, “this will be my first time.”

“You're going to love it here,” he said.

But she didn't. Within two hours she was heaving into the toilet.

"You should give it more of a chance," Larry said.

"I'll try," she said.

"It's all in your attitude."

"I think I'm feeling a little better," she whispered, trying to prove him right. Then she grabbed the rim of the toilet and vomited again.

Larry spent the rest of their honeymoon pacing the ship's deck. Occasionally, between doses of Dramamine, Linda would look out the cabin window. She had never seen so much water. Larry refused to join her, refused to eat with her, refused to talk to her. He had decided to boycott any activity that included Linda.

Linda stood under the pear tree until the taxi arrived. As it pulled over, Sarah dropped her pruning sheers and dashed across the street.

"Sarah, I would love to talk but I need to go."

"I would say so." Sarah opened the taxi door and slid into the back seat; she waved for Linda to join her. Linda crawled in.

"Just tell me, dear," said Sarah, "why did you shoot him?"

"Where to?" asked the driver.

"The police station," said Linda.

The taxi sped into the night.

#

Linda stared out the window as the simple homes of Merry Valley slipped by. She felt Sarah's strong hands grab her arm and pull her close. "Now don't you worry," said Sarah. "You're not worried, are you?"

"A little," admitted Linda.

"There's nothing to it. Really. I had a cousin once who used a red card, and he said it was the easiest thing he ever did."

"Who'd he use it on?" asked Linda.

"I don't remember. It's been years. At least five and it wasn't around here."

"He said it was easy?"

"I think he shot a speeder. He always hated careless drivers."

Linda buried her face into the fat flesh of Sarah's right arm. She wanted to cry. The handbook had mentioned this—Shooter's Regret. It will pass, the handbook stated, just trust your decision, trust your instincts.

“When I was young, I used to drive around with my cousin,” said Sarah. “He would yell at people all the time. Yell at them for going too slow, for going too fast, for cutting him off. I wasn’t surprised when I heard he had used a red card.”

“It wasn’t easy,” said Linda.

“Think he got an award for it. Used the card the same week he got it. A lot of people like to see the cards circulate. Lets more people take part in the system.”

“How’d you know I used a red card?”

“Why, dear, I heard it on the radio. They broke into ‘Phil’s Follies.’ There’s nothing as exciting as one of the cards being used.”

“I guess,” said Linda. She didn’t mind excitement; she just didn’t want the excitement to revolve around her.

#

By the time Linda and Sarah arrived at the police station, a small crowd had already gathered. Sarah wrapped an arm around Linda and pulled her close. “OK, dear, you ready for this?”

Linda nodded.

“You stay by me,” she snapped with authority. Linda pulled in close for protection.

Linda recognized several faces in the crowd—Jerry Miles, Freddy Nevers, and Ann Davidson. She knew them well enough to carry on casual conversation at The Happy Druggist—Jerry’s store—or Mel’s Fill’em Up where Freddy and Ann worked. There were also half a dozen people not quite as familiar to her, but she had seen them all around town at one time or another.

Freddy Nevers called her name, and Jerry Miles even shouted a little encouragement: “Way to go!”

Deputy Williams met Linda and Sarah at the entrance to the police station and escorted them to the reception counter. At one point, Jerry, excited at having his monotonous evening livened up a little, dashed toward Linda to congratulate her, but Deputy Williams reached out and shoved him back. Linda gave the deputy an appreciative glance. “Where were you when I needed you?” she thought.

Barry Giles, lead reporter for Channel Seven, moved as close to Linda as he could, microphone in hand, ready to broadcast the details to all of Merry Valley. “How did it happen, Mrs. Jackson?” he called out.

Linda started to answer, but the deputy interrupted in a low forceful voice he saved for his most serious duties. “There’ll be time for that later.”

Officer Hamilton was waiting for Linda behind a mahogany reception desk. Linda pulled a revolver out of her purse and laid it gently in front of him. After Officer Hamilton confirmed the revolver to be official government property, the crowd, giving Linda some space out of politeness while inching forward out of curiosity, waited for the inevitable. Linda reached into her purse and pulled out the red card. The card didn’t seem special. It was

small, only half the size of a postcard, with rounded corners and a smooth edge. The one mark on it was an ordinary bar code.

“Son of a gun,” said Barry.

“Killed by a librarian with a red card,” said Jerry. “That’s got to be embarrassing.”

“I knew she had it,” said a voice Linda didn’t recognize.

“Like hell you did,” came a muffled response.

Officer Hamilton slid the card under an electronic reader and, with a nod, confirmed its authenticity.

“How long you been holding it?” asked someone from the crowd.

Officer Hamilton checked the reading. “Four years,” he said, impressed at Linda’s self-restraint. The crowd nodded its approval.

“My goodness,” said Barry. “Most of the other tickets have been circulating a lot faster than that.”

“Sure have,” said Officer Hamilton.

“How long have they been out?” Barry asked.

“A couple have been out for almost a year and one for about nine months. I’m not sure about the other two. I’d have to look it up.”

“Looks like another one’s going back into circulation,” someone said. The crowd hummed with excitement.

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Officer Hamilton led Linda away from the crowd. Linda glanced back at Sarah who signaled that she would be in the waiting room, an unimpressive area set off by grey partitions. It contained little more than four chairs, a television dangling from the ceiling, and two ash trays. “Thanks,” mouthed Linda.

They ended up in a small, secluded room in the back of the station. Linda took her place in a wooden chair behind an aging table. On a corner shelf stood a drip coffeepot containing the last few drops after a long day.

Officer Hamilton held up a Styrofoam cup. “Coffee? Looks like there’s enough for one more cup.”

“No thanks,” said Linda. She could have actually used a cup of coffee, but not from that pot.

Officer Hamilton sat in the chair across from Linda. “Well,” he said, “The enforcement isn’t over . . .”

“Until the paperwork’s done,” finished Linda, quoting the handbook. “This is the hard part, isn’t it?”

“There’s no hard part,” he said. “It’s all easy.” He smiled, placed an official looking form on the table and put on a pair of bifocals. He read the form quickly to himself, vocalizing a few key phrases, orienting himself on how to proceed.

"Are you ready?" he finally asked. Linda nodded.

"What is your name?"

Linda gave him a "you've got to be kidding me" look.

"These are standard questions, Linda. Just humor me."

"Linda Jackson."

"Gender?"

Linda didn't even answer. "Female," said Officer Hamilton in response to his own question. "Marital Status?"

"Widowed," said Linda.

"Oh yes," he said. "That's kind of why we're here, isn't it."

"It is."

"Where did you execute the enforcement?"

"In my living room."

"Why did you execute the enforcement?"

"Is that important?" asked Linda.

"We track these things for statistical purposes."

"I think the real question should be why didn't I do it sooner."

"Why didn't you? You've had the red card for almost four years."

"I don't know. At first I didn't want to use it because then I wouldn't have one. But later it just became a challenge."

"A challenge?"

"Sometimes he would egg me on, dare me to use it."

"He knew you had a red card?"

Linda wasn't sure how to answer this. She knew she wasn't supposed to tell Larry about the red card.

"Just answer honestly," said Officer Hamilton. "You have nothing to worry about. You performed an enforcement while in possession of a valid red card. That's it. It's that simple. These questions are just to help us improve the program."



"He knew," said Linda. "He's known for years. It was a mistake to tell him because then he would test me. It was like Russian roulette."

Officer Hamilton made a quick note.

"Is that alright? Am I in trouble?"

"Well some people view it as having an unfair advantage over other citizens. But in this case it doesn't seem to have made a difference."

"But it should have made a difference." Linda looked at Officer Hamilton and wondered if she was getting through to him. She wanted to tell him how things were supposed to be different, how they were supposed to get better, slowly, incrementally, but better. Her plans were never to kill Larry but to keep him alive, to keep him alive forever. "It should have made a big difference," she said. "He knew I had a card."

"Had he been drinking?"

"He'd been out messing around. He always seemed to be going someplace."

"Why did you shoot him?" asked Officer Hamilton, trying the question one more time.

"I really don't know," said Linda. "I think I just snapped."

"Linda," he said. His eyes narrowed. "People with red cards are allowed to snap. It's their duty to snap."

Officer Hamilton pressed on with questions for almost half an hour. How did you feel? Where did you keep your card? Did the handbook prepare you for your role as an enforcer? Linda answered as best she could, but she was ready for it all to end.

Finally, Officer Hamilton put down his pencil. "That's it," he said.

"Really?"

"That wasn't so bad was it?"

"Not too bad. Anything else?"

"Just a word of advice," said Officer Hamilton. "If you ever get another red card, don't tell anyone. I don't even know who has them. The program is random and anonymous. That's what makes it work. If you start taking those factors out, the program loses its effectiveness."

"Of course," she said, a little embarrassed at having made such a careless mistake.

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Officer Hamilton released Linda and led her to the hallway out. "Do you need a ride?" he asked.

"I'll go back with Sarah," she said. "I could use a restroom though."

In the restroom, Linda checked herself in the mirror. Her lipstick had faded from the right side of her upper lip, and black mascara crept up towards her eyebrow. Her blush had cracked except for the glow on her nose. The night had been hard on her face; she looked old and tired. She freshened her lipstick, brushed her hair, and killed the shine on her nose. It seemed futile. She would need to check Truly Beautiful for a look that could hold up better.

Linda left the restroom and walked down the long hall to join Sarah in the waiting area. She paused at the end of the hall, dwarfed by the grey partitions that separated the waiting area from the rest of the police station. She could hear voices, several of them, mingling, Sarah's dominant among them.

Linda looked above the partition and saw a small television, muted and pathetic, hanging from the ceiling. The television's color had shifted long ago, and a bald, blue man in a sweater dispensed advice. She thought she might have seen him before. He seemed vaguely familiar. Was his name Richard? She wasn't sure, but he seemed like a Richard to her. Maybe it wasn't advice; he could be warning her about something, some disaster, some great flood.

"Well I know what I'll do if I get the card next," she heard Jerry Miles say.

"Shoot yourself?" asked Freddy Nevers.

"Never mind, I just changed my plan," cackled Jerry.

"Well, if either of you get a card, let me know," said Sarah. "You tend to live a lot longer if you know who has the cards."

Richard now held a green spray bottle. He was selling something. Of course. Why advise or warn when you can sell. Linda decided to wait until the conversation settled down a little more before joining Sarah. Conversations tended to die once Linda entered into them.

"I never know who has the cards," said Jerry.

"I try to make it my business," said Sarah. "I try to make everything my business." She spit out the words as if they were rehearsed.

Richard, energetic and passionate now, waved the bottle about in his left hand. He held up a shirt and sprayed it. Linda moved closer to the television, but she couldn't tell if the spray had any effect. Richard sprayed the bottle on the floor and then on himself. He was obviously proud of its versatility. He looked straight at Linda and urged her to buy his product. She needed it. She needed to have what he was selling.

"What about Linda?" asked Jerry.

"I've known Linda for years," said Sarah. "Her husband too."

"I knew her," said Freddy.

"But not like I knew her, dear."

Linda hated to interrupt; Sarah seemed to be enjoying herself. She wondered what it would be like to enjoy yourself. Linda continued to watch the commercial, one of those long ones, one of those that could go on for five minutes. Richard had toned down the sell and appeared to be whispering, enunciating every word. He had two bottles now, one cradled under each arm, and he was talking to Linda, directly to Linda, only to Linda.

“Well, she shops at my store,” said Jerry. “Buys a lot of makeup. Careful shopper. Always did like her.”

“Sweetheart, you have to like someone who has a red card,” said Sarah. “Kind of dangerous not to.”

“How would I have known she had a red card?” asked Jerry.

“I knew,” said Sarah.

“You knew she had a red card?”

“Of course she had the card.”

“I suspected, but I was never sure,” said a voice Linda didn’t recognize. He seemed to be acting more important than he actually was.

“I’ve known it for years. I’m surprised you all didn’t know.” Sarah paused for effect. “Oh, I forgot, you all weren’t sleeping with her husband?” The crowd laughed. “Well, I guess I won’t have to like her anymore,” said Sarah.

Richard made his final plea. Under him flashed a phone number, barely legible, followed by the words, “Miracle Madness, for when clean isn’t clean enough.” Linda listened for the conversation to continue, but it had stalled. Even Sarah was silent.

Linda pulled back into the hall, found a phone near the ladies’ restroom, and called the toll free number.

“I want to place an order,” said Linda.

“Which product?”

“Miracle Madness.”

“Oh, you are going to love it. And with that you get Miracle Madness Plus.”

After Linda had provided her billing information, she joined Sarah and the others in the waiting room. “Sarah,” she said as she rounded the partition, “I’m all done now.”

“Wonderful,” said Sarah. “You’ve had a hard day and it’s time to get you home.”

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When the taxi dropped them off at Linda’s place well after midnight, Sarah was in full motion, feeding off the energy of the evening. Linda had been quiet during the drive home, but she didn’t need to speak since Sarah had rambled on without stopping. Sarah had pretty well resolved most of Linda’s problems. She had told her

how to improve her career—after all you can't stay a librarian your entire life. She had told her how to improve her looks—those bangs just have to go; they do absolutely nothing for you. She had told her how to improve her general disposition—you have got to stop moping about.

Finally Linda asked, "What do I do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"The handbook never talked about this part. I don't know what to do next."

"Well," said Sarah, "tomorrow we need to plan Mr. Jackson's funeral. I guess that would be next."

"Of course," said Linda.

"Then we bury him, and then you get on with your life."

"We need to plan a funeral," said Linda.

"Now don't be afraid to call if you need anything," said Sarah as they entered the house. "Really. Anything at all."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely. Whatever you need."

"Can I stay with you?" asked Linda.

"Stay with me?"

Linda nodded.

"At my house?"

"For a while. At least a day or two. Longer if I could."

"You really need to get back on your feet," said Sarah. "This is your home and it doesn't do any good to run from it. This is your place."

"My place," said Linda. She stood over the spot where Larry had lain. Now that he was gone, the room seemed much more open, almost cavernous.

Sarah joined her. "Is this it?" she asked.

"He fell right here next to the coffee table," replied Linda.

"They really are quite efficient. The enforcement program is run so well."

"It is," agreed Linda, noticing that even the blood had been cleaned up. All that remained was a small stain, barely noticeable, no worse than the tea spill on the other side of the room. But Linda would get all the stains out, the blood, the tea, everything. After all, Miracle Madness was on its way.

"I can stay for a bit," said Sarah, turning on the television. She folded onto the couch, pried her shoes off, and clicked through channels looking for the television version of "Phil's Follies."

"Stay for as long you can," said Linda. "I'll be with you in a moment. After I change." The lavender dress was beginning to weigh on her.

In her bedroom, Linda slipped off her high heels and set them in her closet. She then pulled off her dress and hung it neatly on a padded hanger. She lay down on her bed, closed her eyes, and folded her hands over her face. She exhaled, bathing her eyes and nose in the warmth of her own breath. She opened her mouth and made a guttural sound that echoed off her cupped hands.

She rolled onto her stomach, grabbed her stuffed cat, Sally, and pulled her close. She wanted to be a cat. No, a ferret, she would rather be a ferret. Linda slid off the bed and crouched on her hands and knees, almost feral. She could sleep here. She could sleep on the carpet once it was clean. That would be soon; Miracle Madness was coming.

"When clean isn't clean enough," she moaned.

Linda reached under the bed and felt around blindly. She pulled out a shoe box adorned with a lavender bow—a beautiful bow she had tied nine months earlier. She loved tying bows and she was proud of this one, bold and perfectly proportioned. Lavender—she loved lavender. Linda untied the bow and carefully slid the ribbon off the box. She opened the box, pulled out a red card and a small revolver, and finally cried for the first time that night.

This story can be found at <http://escapepod.org/2013/04/26/ep393-red-card/>