

A Paper Forest by Claudia I. Haas

CAST:

LUCY (female) 18; She's on a mission and it may not be possible. Busy.

GARY (male) 20's; starting over without any knowledge of how to do it.

(Characters can be any race.)

PLACE: A patch of land along the Gunflint Trail in Grand Marais. In the background we may see hints of a forest – a forest that is dying. Stretching from the front yard, we see white pine saplings – newly planted (way too deep). Fit as many as you can into stage areas and suggest there are more that we cannot see. At least ten of the saplings have their top bud covered with gaily-decorated pieces of paper. Some will have paper towel tubes over them. There is a “fairy door” or a “fairy house” with some a shiny penny to attract the fairies. It's an odd, eclectic mix of human activity and nature.

SYNOPSIS: Gary is sent to help Lucy plant a forest. But the forest is planted and Lucy needs art – fast-food art – to keep the deer from eating her forest. This could be the last forest planted in Minnesota because the forest really wants to move into Canada. A tale of climate change and clinging to hope.

*MUSIC: The two songs used are in public domain. There are two versions of “Ain't We Got Fun” – do make sure you use the earlier one if you use a recording. The Boom Box can be eliminated and LUCY can just sing.

A Paper Forest

AT RISE LUCY is folding sheets of paper across the main tree buds of white pine saplings. She staples the edges of the paper to hold them in place. The papers have been simply colored with scenes from nature. There's a lawn chair nearby, a boom box and a picnic basket. The front porch of her cabin is cluttered with planting supplies. There could be a wheelbarrow nearby as LUCY tries to clear a clutter-rock-free path for her grandfather.

It's early June – a time of wildflowers and new growth. Lucy is dressed accordingly – jeans, boots, a light jacket. She has a cell phone in her pocket. She is singing “Ain't We Got fun” as if it was a ballad with a melancholy air. She is on a mission – to build a fledgling forest.

GARY enters. He has a backpack and is dressed north-woodsny – but not Duluth-Pack north-woodsny. More like “living on the edge-have no money” north-woodsny. He watches. LUCY turns around and sees him and is startled.

GARY

Don't stop on my account.

LUCY

Campgrounds are a half-mile north. You missed the turn off.

GARY

(Stepping closer to LUCY.)

No – I don't need campgrounds. I'm looking -

(LUCY grabs her cellphone and starts snapping photos.)

LUCY

Stay away! I just took – like ten photos of you and now I'm posting them all over social media – so if something happens to me – they'll find you! The photos are time-stamped. When they figure out my time-of-death, they'll know you were the last person to see me alive!

GARY
Wait! NO! I'm here because –

LUCY
And I have a gun!

(GARY whips out his cellphone and starts videotaping.)

What are you doing?

GARY
If you shoot me, I'll have it all down on videotape.

LUCY
Did I saw I was going to shoot you?

GARY
You said ... something about a gun.

LUCY
Yeah – up in the house. A hunting rifle. Locked away. Unloaded. Jeez – some people – just think the worst of everyone.

GARY
I just -

LUCY
- 2 seconds away from tweeting you. And I have twenty-five followers!

GARY
- I'm going. I'll just tell -

LUCY
- pressing the button –

GARY
- STOP!

LUCY
And I have a cheese knife! Somewhere ...

(She digs around in her picnic basket and pulls out a knife – attached to a piece of cheese.)

Got it!

GARY

Cora didn't say you were deranged. I'm gone.

LUCY

Wait. How do you know Aunt Cora?

GARY

I work for her. Just started last week.

LUCY

Where?

GARY

At the restaurant - The Whispering Pines.

LUCY

Don't you just hate that name? It's like a Nancy Drew mystery. What do you do there?

GARY

I'm a short order cook.

LUCY

Why aren't you cooking?

GARY

Cause Cora – *my boss* – sent me here. *To help you*. Are you Lucy? She says you need help planting. She said she stopped by yesterday and you were “overwhelmed and manic.” She wanted to help you. Guess I'm too late. You're planted.

LUCY

Maybe I'm Lucy. Maybe I need help planting. Who are you?

GARY

Gary.

LUCY

Indiana?

GARY

How'd you know?

LUCY

(Holding out her cellphone.)

I'm good with names. Don't come any closer. Trying to decide if you are legit or not. You are one step away from your photo being tweeted. And you should know – I'm jail bait. For a few more months. Nobody's kind to child molesters in jail.

GARY

Got it. See ya.

LUCY

Oh! A text from Aunt Cora. You are legit. Sorry about the misunderstanding. I'm not used to being alone out here. Feeling vulnerable.

GARY

Going.

LUCY

Want a ride back?

GARY

Not getting in a car with jail bait.

LUCY

Oh that – totally lied. Turned eighteen months ago.

GARY

I'm good on foot.

LUCY

Stop. Sorry. I guess I'm not a good welcome-wagon.

GARY

Threatened with social media, a gun and a cheese knife – yeah – I've been welcomed better. If I can walk up the bluff – I can walk down it.

LUCY

You walked all those miles uphill to help someone you never met plant?

GARY

Love walking. And I'll love it more on the way down. All those views of Superior. All that distance away from you.

LUCY

Wait! Since you were kind enough to walk all the way here to help me - want – some cheese for your walk? Organic from a nearby cheese farm. This town's lousy with local, organic, Birkenstock food-eaters.

GARY

It so happens – I have a grilled cheese sandwich I made for myself at the -

(He pulls out a sandwich from his backpack that has clearly died.)

GARY

Oh.

LUCY

Yish. Don't serve that to customers. You could be imprisoned for attempted murder. Take my cheese.

GARY

It is looking good.

(And LUCY walks over with the cheese on the knife. GARY takes some.)

GARY

Oh! Truffled?

LUCY

Only the best,

GARY

Sublime.

LUCY

There's more where that came from. If you help me.

GARY

Looks like you're planted. Are you starting a garden of children's art?

LUCY

You don't know much do, you? If you're here to help – help. Here – draw!

(Giving him magic markers and some paper.)

GARY

Draw ... what?

Something colorful.

LUCY

I like parameters – boundaries. Give me a subject.

GARY

Nature.

LUCY

Too broad.

GARY

A forest. Go.

LUCY

(GARY walks away looking at the landscape.)

You're not drawing.

GARY

I'm taking it in – finding clarity in the colors first. Those wildflowers -

LUCY

- weeds –

GARY

- point of view -

(He snaps a photo with his phone.)

LUCY

You shouldn't do that.

GARY

Why? Am I stealing its soul?

LUCY

You don't really see anything through a lens. Look at the view. Really see it.

GARY

(And he digs into his backpack and takes out a real camera.)

I want an accurate record. Before my mind changes what I see.

LUCY

Jeez, you're not another wanna-be-photographer traipsing around the North Shore trying to make a name for yourself, are you? Cause you should know – this town's lousy with them.

GARY

No! It's my way of storing the "pretty" for the days when there isn't any.

LUCY

It's always pretty here. You get used to it.

GARY

I'd never –

LUCY

Totally lying again. It's pretty over-the-rainbow wonderful. Going to help or just play artiste?

GARY

I'm helping I'm helping.

(He looks at one of LUCY'S drawings.)

A dog?

LUCY

Do you know nothing? That's a martin. Sort of. What do you think of my bear?

GARY

That's also a dog.

LUCY

Here you go – do better! Triple-dog-dare you.

(And GARY sits down to draw.)

LUCY

So, Gary, Indiana – what brings you to these parts?

GARY

How do you know I'm not from around here?

LUCY

P-lease! This town is a freaking cult when the season's over. Everybody knows everything about everybody – all the way down to Duluth.

GARY

I'm actually from a town near Gary, Indiana. Kind of a nowhere place for a nowhere man.

LUCY

Black Oak? Portage? Highland?

GARY

How'd you hear –

LUCY

Winters are long here. You look at maps for entertainment. Plus there was a special on TV about Gary being a ghost town. Didn't think anyone lived there anymore.

GARY

Just people with a past but no future.

LUCY

Depressing. Done?

GARY

Haven't started!

LUCY

Stop talking and draw! I have four done already.

GARY

They're all dogs.

LUCY

Look!

GARY

Not a dog!

LUCY

A fish!

GARY

Dogfish.

LUCY

With a catfish -

GARY

One fish, two fish...

LUCY

Red fish, purple fish ... don't want to do a blue fish. The water's blue – the sky's blue.
Need some contrast.

GARY

Magenta!

LUCY

Puce!

GARY

Drunk Tank Pink!

LUCY

Bastard Amber!

GARY

Best color ever.

LUCY

Done?

GARY

Go away.

(LUCY goes towards the cabin.)

Where are you going?

LUCY

Away. Draw. Faster.

GARY

Can't rush art.

LUCY

I think you need music. It will open up your creative muscles.

(LUCY turns on the boom box. "Glow Little Glow
Worm" is heard in the background.)

GARY

You have – interesting taste in music.

LUCY

These old songs calm my grandfather. I live with him.

GARY

Parents?

LUCY

No. Just Gramps and me. Aunt Cora used to live here but now she's in town. Ironic about worms, you know.

GARY

Didn't know worms had any irony in them.

LUCY

They're not native here. People think they're good for soil. And they are – but not for forests. The “I'm-in-the-freaking-wilderness-fishermen” leave them. They go fishing in the lakes and dump the worms in the woods. Instant forest pollution!

GARY

Never would have thought worms were – evil.

LUCY

Stupid, slimy, forest-sucking worms!

(LUCY turns off the CD. GARY looks at his unfinished drawing. LUCY comes over. The drawing is a pine tree. It is in the “pointillist” fashion* – composed of many small dots/circles. And it's not too shabby.

*There are two ways you can do this: it can be hidden on the set. Or the circles can be lightly drawn earlier (copied so there's enough for rehearsals and performances) and the actor simply fills them in with pre-designed colors.)

LUCY

Crap! You lied. You are so an artist.

GARY

I – just like playing with color.

LUCY

You sure do. Blue and yellow dot trees. From someone who criticizes my dogs.

GARY

Step away. Go on. Take a few steps back. Now what do you see?

LUCY

Kind-of-green. A mish-mosh of kind-of-green trees. You're doing that Seurat thing!

GARY

You know him?

LUCY

Not personally – he's sort of – dead. But yeah – I know his famous painting – the one in Chicago – “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grand Jette.”

GARY

Color me surprised. Nobody back home ever heard of him.

LUCY

I told you – this place is lousy with art. Can't get away from it. So, pointillist-artist-Gary, what else can you do?

GARY

That's about it.

LUCY

Can you draw other things?

GARY

Thomas the Tank Engine characters.

LUCY

I loved, *loved* Mister Conductor!

GARY

Ringo Starr!

LUCY

George Carlin!

GARY

Genius time!

LUCY and GARY

Genius time!

Dora the Explorer! LUCY

Oregon Trail! GARY

Red light, green light – LUCY

One, two, three. GARY
(GARY closes his eyes.)

OUT! (LUCY runs and stops. GARY sees her moving.)
GARY (cont'd)

Didn't see me move! LUCY

Did, too! GARY

Eat – chocolate! LUCY

Chocolate? GARY

My answer to every question. LUCY

Works for me. Good chocolate. Really good chocolate. Jalapeno? GARY

Cayenne pepper. LUCY

I'm starting to like it here. GARY

This town knows how to eat. Remember that when you're cooking for Aunt Cora. LUCY

GARY

Is this going to be a cut-down-your-own Christmas tree farm or something?

LUCY

With coloring books, hot cider and Santa? And reindeer for the kids to feed. And then a bouncy toy shop with bouncy elves – is that what you're thinking?

GARY

I would have liked the bouncy elves.

LUCY

No. Not a tree farm. A forest.

GARY

A forest of drawings?

LUCY

A woolly-wild forest of pine trees! Stocked with moose and deer and cute rodents. It's a wish. For my grandfather. I can see them fully matured – forty – fifty - *sixty* feet tall! But I'm not sure he will. Of course – he sees more in the past than the present. What do you think?

GARY

Now that's clearly a dog!

LUCY

Thought I'd stump you. But yeah – it's a dog. Get going on the next drawing.

GARY

Pushy.

LUCY

In these politically-correct times, I like to call it leadership skills. Draw! I need the drawings before dusk.

(GARY gets up, looks at the light. He takes some photos.)

GARY

Figuring out the light.

LUCY

We are not Rembrandt figuring out the shadows! Hurry! The drawings need to be in place before the deer come at dusk!

GARY

Wait. What? We're drawing for deer? My not-too-shabby pointillist drawing is for – deer?

LUCY

Well – ye-ah. So they don't eat the tree buds. If the tree buds go, the forest will be nothing but ghost trees.

GARY

So – I could just draw stick figures. Or a big balloon and color it in? Or just a mass of color with no form –

LUCY

Not you, Gary Artiste with good taste in chocolate. You couldn't.

GARY

You're right. And when I am done no deer will come near my tree. They will be an awe of my creation.

LUCY

They're color-blind. They're not known for their art appreciation skills.

GARY

Do you have any other colors than this ten-piece magic marker set?

LUCY

Stop worrying about the colors and get a move on. I'm on a deadline. I need a forest before my grandfather comes home from the hospital tomorrow.

GARY

Feeling the pressure.

LUCY

Good.

GARY

Sorry. That he's in the hospital.

LUCY

Dehydration. It happens. A lot of stuff happens to old people. It's not – fun. Grandpa can't even hear me anymore. So I just chatter. No filters. I'm going to have to be more careful when I go back to the "Land of the Hearing."

GARY

And when would that be?

LUCY

September. The college thing. But – I may not go. Don't want to leave my grandfather, you know? He could be lost without me.

GARY

Where you headed?

LUCY

North Dakota. Don't really want to go there – it's not – here. I like it – here. Finished?

GARY

No.

LUCY

Take it easy! We're drawing for deer, remember? They won't appreciate the pointillist method.

GARY

I like the illusion - the tricking of the eye to see a color that's not there? Actually – it's what you're doing – tricking your grandfather to see trees that aren't really there.

LUCY

But they are here.

GARY

But they're not really a forest.

LUCY

You just can't see the forest for the trees! Once, this was all forest. Once upon a time in my childhood, there were birch stands everywhere.

GARY

And now there are none.

LUCY

I want it back.

GARY

Then why don't you plant birch trees?

LUCY

They die. They had a good run –about twelve thousand years – but they're history.

GARY

Can you even plant a forest? Doesn't the earth have some say in the matter?

LUCY

I want – something for my grandfather to look at when he comes home. Something so tangible – he'll relax and think the forest's regenerating. When my grandfather was little, he thought there was a giant in the forest. Whenever there was a fire or something that could ruin the forest, he thought, "The giant's on the prowl. I should slay the giant." But then the forest would return. But not anymore. It's moving north. Last winter, I'd find my grandfather outside – wandering in in his robe and slippers – rifle in hand – searching. "Gonna find the giant, Lucy. I'm gonna get the giant."

GARY

And you think these anemic saplings will convince him?

LUCY

I know it looks like an under-nourished-little-forest-that-couldn't. But there's a possibility. Please sir, draw some more?

(LUCY hands him some pieces of paper. GARY takes them. He is about to draw.)

GARY

Need this?

LUCY

What?

GARY

A note. "Don't open the damn door, Henry."

LUCY

I just picked up papers from all over the house -

GARY

Your grandfather's name – Henry?

LUCY

Yes.

GARY

Opens doors when he shouldn't?

LUCY

And then leaves – into the snow with no jacket – he doesn't know any better anymore –

GARY

You're trying.... To do what?

LUCY

To preserve what he still knows.

(And they draw for a moment. Quietly.)

LUCY

I don't want to live in Nebraska!

GARY

Not following.

LUCY

The grasses – the weeds – the North Woods is turning into Nebraska – We're keeping Minnesota from turning into a cornfield.

GARY

By drawing pictures?

LUCY

There's hope here. In the planting, in the drawing. We're giving Henry hope.

GARY

Any hope left in you?

LUCY

Too much. Thank-you. For helping me with the forest. Who knows? Maybe it will be enchanted.

GARY

With hulking giants.

LUCY

But touched by fairy grace. Did you see the ash trees on the way up – the ones with the white flowers?

GARY

Yeah. Nice.

LUCY

There used to be more. Ash giving way to birch giving way to cedar and pine. White blossomed-spring turning to orange-berried autumn. No wonder we have a gaggle of artists. Who could resist the color wheel? When I was little, I thought that fairies lived in the blossoms. I'd creep out early in the morning to peer into their buds – but I was never early enough – they had already flown away.

GARY

And it never dawned on you to think that there really weren't any fairies.

LUCY

Never! The trail was lined with freaking-fairy-loving ash trees. Pulling me into their low branches. I'd get into them and curl up and think – this is what it's like to be a fairy. All safe and snuggled in a tree branch.

GARY

Until the winds and the rains came.

LUCY

Jeez, hop off the negativity train. Show some compassion. My magical world is disappearing. If the Witch Tree dies, I will never recover.

GARY

Have to love your fairy-tale forest.

LUCY

The Witch Tree is not from a fairy tale! Do you know nothing? It's one of the most famous trees in the country. Wikipedia has a page devoted to it!

GARY

You do get defensive about your trees!

LUCY

It's this gnarled, very old tree. The Chippewa Tribe calls it "The Little Cedar Spirit Tree." They used to leave offerings of tobacco by the tree so that they would have a safe journey across Lake Superior. It's sacred.

GARY

I should have left offerings by that tree. I just got seasick on the lake.

LUCY

You never know what brings help. I'd hate to lose that tree. Hate change.

(LUCY gets up and starts clearing a path – getting rid of rocks. Making it "walkable.")

GARY

Your forest – it will do what it will do. You can't will a forest into being.

LUCY

Logging, forest fires – no matter what happened to the land – the trees came back. Maybe its tired of being "Minnesota Nice" – maybe that's why it moved to Canada.

GARY

I'm the guy. I'm supposed to pick up rocks.

LUCY

Don't get macho on me. You're the artist. You should draw. I'm just making sure the path is clear. Old Henry uses a walker. Plus – you're out of shape. Better off letting me do it.

GARY

I feel totally emasculated.

LUCY

Suck it up and draw.

(GARY gets up and helps her clear rocks.)

GARY

Feeling the need to stretch.

LUCY

How'd you learn to do the "dot trick?"

GARY

I studied it. I was attracted to the color tricks and I like – how still it is. How quiet.

LUCY

Frozen – it's more like a tree statue than a tree. A tree frozen in time. I could live in your dot-spotted trees. Yes. I could. And will. Not going to college. Going to live in dot-trees. Decision made.

GARY

Just like that? No list of pros and cons?

LUCY

First, someone has to nurture this forest. Henry can't do it. And someone has to nurture Henry. That would be me. Boom! Happily ever after.

GARY

Little idealistic.

LUCY

So? Is there a rule that when you reach eighteen, you put your ideals in the toy trunk?

GARY

You're the one that said you had too much hope? If it crumbles -

LUCY

Not going there, Gary, Indiana!

GARY

And if you have no choice?

LUCY

Jeez – what are you – a dream-killer?

GARY

Look at the reality of this – a paper forest, a grandfather who likely needs more care than you can give –

LUCY

I'll make it work!

GARY

And when it goes wrong – what'll you do – search for the giant in the forest?

LUCY

Hope killer!

GARY

Shut up!