

## Advance Praise for *Midnight at the Organporium*

“Tara Campbell’s stories exist at a delightful quarter turn to the left from our world—places where CEOs turn into lions, and hearts are sold in the mall—while simultaneously beautifully and deftly exploring exactly what it means to be human.”

Tina Connolly, World Fantasy-nominated author of  
*On the Eyeball Floor and Other Stories*

“So much unexpected happens in Tara Campbell’s weird and wonderful short story collection, *Midnight at the Organporium*, that I didn’t want to let these stories go. This slim, but packed collection of 12 stories makes the ordinary extraordinary—from the ghost of Lucille in “Death Sure Changes a Person” to a thief of hearts in the Southside Mall in the title story, “Midnight at the Organporium.” Red from Red Riding Hood re-tells her story with a roar and a vengeance in “Another Damn Cottage.” Whereas, “You, Commuter,” is a nightmarish wonder of flash fiction about an everyday bus ride. “The Rapture” comes at you slant, or at least that’s how it opens, and we soon have much more than a commonplace end of the world story—we have a story of race that rises on the shoulders of Octavia Butler. These stories all astonish and astound. From full-length to flash fiction, Campbell’s stories in *Midnight at the Organporium* sneak up on you with an exquisite hyper-realism, a sure-fire wit, and most of all, a daring sense of adventure and possibility. “

Caroline Bock, author of *Carry Her Home*,  
*Before My Eyes*, and *Lie*

“Sometimes funny, sometimes frightening, and always full of heart—in *Midnight at the Organporium*, the everyday and the fantastic conspire to create the authentic.”

Erin Fitzgerald, author of *Valletta73*

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 67

# Midnight at the Organporium

by  
Tara Campbell





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## Death Sure Changes a Person

The first time I saw Lucille after she died, she told me, “You better find someone new, Harlan, or you’ll be lonely.”

Needless to say, I was surprised. Just three weeks after she’d passed on, here was the world’s most jealous woman telling me I should run out and start dating someone new.

“I don’t know what I expected over there,” she went on, “but it wasn’t this. Everyone is with everyone they’ve ever *really* been with. I don’t mean flings, but the people you actually loved. Even if you wouldn’t have wanted to share that person with anyone else, it’s okay, because they’re sharing you with everyone else too.” She flung her hands out, supposedly gesturing at the piles of people sharing each other around her. “I mean, not everyone,” she backtracked. “We’ve still got some standards. But it doesn’t matter anymore, is what I mean.”

So by now you might have guessed that Lucille, unlike me, had had a normal love life. By the time we met, most folks had been through a marriage or two; but me, I’d just been chugging along on my own. Not like I didn’t want to be with anyone. But I was quiet in a loud world, as my mother put it. Didn’t get out much. Lucy on the other hand had had her loves and affairs by the time we got together, which didn’t bother me really. She

never talked about the others that much, and when she did they were more like milestones in a previous life than flesh and blood men I'd actually have to worry about.

"I lived in that part of town when I was married to Mike," she'd say. Or, "I was in Cancun once; Joe took me on his miles." She didn't say too much more about the men in particular, and I didn't really need to know more.

Sometimes, back when she was alive, she'd get this faraway look in her eye, and I'd wonder what she was thinking about, if she was back in that little house on the other side of town or on the beach in Cancun. I asked a couple of times, and she'd just say, "Nothing," and then busy herself with something else like dishes or laundry or checking if the bird feeder was full, and then she'd be further away than before. So I stopped asking, 'cause like I say, I didn't really need to know. It could honestly have been nothing, like she said. Or maybe it really was something, more than she wanted to talk about; like maybe she was wondering if she should have stopped to have children somewhere along the way. Wasn't in the cards by the time we met.

Anyway, the first time I saw her after she died, it was really bad timing. It was a few weeks after we'd laid her to rest, as I mentioned, and I was ready to get back to work. The shop would have let me stay home longer, but my hands needed a car or truck to tinker on, even if I was tired as hell most of the time. I still wasn't sleeping right, seeing her in my dreams and waking up. She'd be lying next to me in the dream, asleep, and I'd get this feeling like *thank God*, and pull her close.

She never let me spoon her when she was living. She didn't want me feeling her belly, which she thought was

too soft—but who doesn't have a little extra padding by this side of fifty? I didn't care. If I woke up while she was sleeping, I would scoot over behind her and hold her as close as I could without waking her up. Her hair always smelled so good, clean and warm, not too full of perfume. I'd squeeze her, tight, so hard she'd know how much I loved her, but without waking her up.

But now I was the only one waking up, clutching nothing but a mangled pillow.

So the first time I saw Lucy after she died, I was just trying to get myself back into the shop, and it was morning, and I hadn't slept well. I was kind of floating in and out before my alarm was set to go off. I'd been dreaming I was holding her, and that time I couldn't help it, I just squeezed her so hard she wouldn't be able to breathe, much less stay asleep. And then I heard, "Oh, Harlan, let go of my belly." Not bossy, mind you, but shy. Embarrassed. It was her voice, her soft, sleepy mumble, and it made me want to cry, because the thing is, I never saved any of her messages. I didn't have her voice anymore. You never think about that when you have the chance. You don't realize that's your chance.

I heard her voice again and woke up, and then she was turning in my arms, and sitting up against the headboard, and looking at me like she was actually there.

I sat up slow, not wanting to lose this part of the dream, and that's when she told me, "You better start dating, Harlan."

Of course I didn't know what to say, which was okay because she did all the talking. That's when she told me how it was where you go after you go. She didn't call it heaven or the afterlife or anything like that. She called



it “over there,” I think because she wasn’t quite sure herself, being new and all. There wasn’t really any kind of orientation, you just woke up from whatever event brought you there (car accident in her case), and there were the people you cared about most, *whether they were dead or not*, even those who had moved away, or those you hadn’t thought about in a while.

You were just all together, eating or singing or dancing or exploring ruins or hiking, whatever you liked to do most. It was like a mashup of all your favorite memories, even if they didn’t happen that way.

I found that part out when she told me about going to Macchu Pichu with Rod.

I’d never heard that name before. “But wait,” I said. “Aren’t these supposed to be memories?”

“Yes,” she said, examining her fingernails.

It seemed a little ridiculous to press her about Rod at that point, so I asked, “But you never went to Macchu Pichu, did you?”

“No, but Rod and I always talked about it.” She shook her head, still looking at her nails. “I don’t know why I spent all that time painting these things.” She sighed and looked at me. “I want you to have this kind of life when you get over here too.”

“But I thought I was already over there with you. You said everyone you cared about was over there.” That meant everyone, ex-husband, past boyfriends, family, everyone. Including me.

She shrugged and picked at the quilt. “Yeah, you’re there. But...”

“But what?”

“Well, I’ve got a lot going on over there, and you’re just kind of . . .” She shrugged again. “I see you sometimes, standing off on the—what’s that word, on the side?”

“On the periphery.” Popped right out of my mouth. I’d been looking at that entry on her little “Word of the Day” calendar every morning since her accident.

“Right, ‘on the periphery.’” She took my hand. “But you deserve better, baby. You need to experience more things *here*, because then you’ll get more out of life over *there*. I don’t know, travel, sing, dance, bungee jump, anything. You just need to get more to draw upon *now*, to last you *then*.”

I didn’t know what to think, her looking into my eyes, her hand so soft and solid in mine. Why would I want to go anywhere else with her back here at home? All I could think to do was mumble something about the job I had to stay for, the funeral expenses I had to pay off. I felt bad as soon as I said it, and she looked hurt.

“I always told you to just burn me up.”

“I did. You’re right over there.” I pointed toward an urn on the dresser. “It costs more than you think.”

She stared at the urn for a moment, then looked down at the quilt in thought. “Well, you don’t actually have to travel, if you don’t want. Whatever you do, you just have to want it. Really want it.”

I must have looked dubious, because she squeezed my hand and said, “It doesn’t have to cost anything.”

My heart clutched right then. She really knew me.

“Just live,” she said. “What do you want?”

I kept looking right at her.

“I mean,” she said softly, “aside from me. Is there anyone else?”

I shook my head.

“Come on,” she said, a little smile weaving its way into her lips. “Isn’t there anyone else you’ve been thinking about?”

I could feel myself blushing. “Come on, now, it hasn’t even been a month.”

“I know, but don’t you want to hold someone? Kiss someone?”

Sure, and she was sitting right in front of me. But Lucy went and misinterpreted my look.

“See, I knew it,” she said. “I understand. You’re a man; you have urges. I *want* you to.”

“You want me to...” I couldn’t even finish the sentence because I couldn’t imagine anyone I’d want to finish it with but Lucille.

But she said, “Yes. I mean... Yes, I want you to love someone again.” She let go of my hands. “Someone else.”

And just like that, I was sitting there with my hand gripping nothing, the quilt deflating from the sudden departure of her shape.

I couldn’t believe it. Here my wife comes back for a good half hour, and spends it telling me to go out there and forget all about her. When she was alive she would always try to trip me up, figure out if there was anyone else in, say, the past few decades before we met that she should be worried about. Seems she was finding out now that I’d always been telling her the truth.

Well, I called in sick and waited for her to come back. Half the day was gone before I started to feel cooped up and had to go out for a walk. Sidewalks around here are pretty non-existent, and I was pretty out of it, so it’s

a miracle I didn't get hit—although truth be told, maybe that's kind of what I was going for.

In fact, I almost had a scrape that day with Beverly's cherry red '68 Mustang hardtop convertible, though I didn't know Beverly's name at the time. I can only assume there was some kind of divine guidance going on because (1) I didn't get mowed down and (2) a woman as cute as her in a car like that actually stopped and said hello. Not at first, though. At first it was "Sir, would you mind stepping out of the middle of the road?"

She'd stopped with more than enough room to spare (believe me, the worst accidents we see in the shop are not from women drivers), then crawled up to me in that 'Stang real leisurely, and popped her head above the windshield to ask if I weren't interested in getting out of the way.

I turned around and stared at her, still as a stump, and here's where divine guidance struck again because (3) she didn't call the police. She could see how bad I was hurting, and asked me where I had to get to, and when I said I didn't have anywhere in mind, she told me well come on then and go with her to Bingo.

I didn't know what to say.

"Or does the man standing in the middle of the street have a better idea?" she asked. So I got on in the car.

I kind of play-scolded her about letting strange men into her car, but she told me I wasn't a complete stranger. She did nails at my cousin Margot's beauty salon, where I got my hair cut (it's unisex, mind you). Margot had given me a haircut the day before Lucy's memorial, which was how Bev knew I could probably use a lift right about then.

It turned out Bingo was at her father's nursing home and was just the kind of mindless activity I needed. I even won a coupon for a free Domino's pizza, delivered, which I gave to her daddy; which, she told me later, was her sign that I'd been worth picking up. I was almost afraid to go home after Bingo 'cause of the nice time I'd had so soon after laying Lucy to rest. Well, Bev asked did I want to talk about it, and while I didn't want to wallow in all that, I didn't want to go home either. So we went for a coffee. Felt kind of like a traitor, even though I guess that's what Lucille wanted to happen. I'll never know how women always wind up in control.

I didn't dream about Lucy that night, and she didn't come back the next morning. I spent my first day back at the shop dropping wrenches and bumping into waste barrels and tire racks. Just glad nobody saw me almost drop a car off the lift. Thing is, I was expecting to see Lucy's face in my mind—I didn't expect to see Bev's. Or think about her laugh. Or feel that same crazy-good gut-squirm I felt when she revved up her Mustang.

Sure, I looked at the number Beverly had saved on my phone, but I didn't call her that day. Or the next. And a third day was slipping by in the same manner when Lucy appeared with folded arms and a frown and said, "Come on, Harlan, would you call her already?"

Well, and there was the paradox, see? I couldn't call Bev with Lucy standing right there, but I wouldn't call her otherwise. Lucy had to threaten me with a regular old haunting to get me to do it. And she'd never been one for idle threats: she came back the following night bearing a hatchet and knocked some stuff off the shelf, and even though I knew (or didn't think) she'd really

hurt me, I figured it also wouldn't hurt to get on the horn to Bev the next morning. We made a date for the following week.

Then a couple of hours before the date, Lucy came back to make sure I wouldn't chicken out. She said the me over there—the place she'd started calling “Now”—was rooting for the me over here—the place she now called “Before.” She said the other me, Now-me, was really hoping I'd hit it off with Bev.

“I know it seems early,” she said. “And if I were still here with you, I'd think you were a pig. But I know better now.” She chuckled. “I guess death sure changes a person.” She cupped my face in her hands. “Harlan, I want you to get out there and fall in love again. Don't waste your Before just sitting around missing me, because in the Now you'll have me forever.”

Well, by then I was too confused to say no. And honestly, as ashamed as I was to admit it, I was actually looking forward to the date. I told myself it was partly about wanting to ride in the 'Stang again, but deep down I knew better. Then I told myself I was mostly doing it to please Lucille, but I knew that was a bunch of bull too.

Simply put: I was really looking forward to seeing Beverly again.

As to where we'd go, Bev had said she wanted to surprise me. Said it was somewhere she'd been wanting to go for a while and she hoped I'd like it too. I assumed it'd be something like a wine tasting or some garden show like Lucy was always dragging me to. But doggone if she didn't surprise me by taking me to the go-cart track. What a hoot, Bev and me and all those kids zipping around the circuit! She whooped every time either one

of us plowed into a tire-lined wall. We topped it off by going for burgers, and she ordered a boozy milkshake that turned out to be about the size of her head. So I helped her finish it, and then out came the coffee and the corny jokes while we waited for her head to clear. And by the time she dropped me off, my face was sore from smiling.

Well, things went on like that, and people started talking, but Bev and I didn't care. We were happy, and despite everything, I felt at peace 'cause I knew I had Lucille's blessing. She said as much when she came to visit me a few weeks later.

I was in the bedroom one evening after work, getting ready to go over to Bev's. I'd just slipped into my birthday suit and was about to head for the shower when I heard the water turn on. Well, I walked into the bathroom, and guess who I saw there, wrapped in a bitty pink bath towel with her hair pinned up.

"Hey, darlin'," said Lucille. "I'd ask how you're doing, but I can already tell things are going gangbusters over here. Over in the Now you're positively beaming. The way Now-you's talking, your Now-Bev could show up any minute." Then she gave me this sexy little smile and looked me up and down. "What say we celebrate?"

Well, I'm not ashamed to say I was tempted. She was my wife and all, even if she was dead. But I had somewhere I wanted to get to, so I gathered up all the willpower I had and told Lucy I was kind of in a hurry just then.

Then she got this surprised look, though I thought that might be for show, since she seemed to know ev-

everything going on in my life already. “Oh, you got somewhere else you got to be?”

“Well, you see, Bev’s waitin’ on me and—”

“Now, now, I’m sure she’d understand a poor widower needing a little time to himself.” Then she winked and let her teeny pink bath towel slip to the floor. Death hadn’t diminished her curves one bit.

Now, I’m no apologist for necrophilia, but at that moment I was wondering how closely this circumstance fit the generally accepted definition of the act. And judging from his reaction, little Harlan didn’t seem to mind either way.

The shower was running hot, real hot, with steam billowing out from behind the curtain. The humidity was almost targeted, coaxing me to relax, conspiring with everything else to loosen my resolve. Still, I managed to stammer, “I’m sure I’d be just as happy to celebrate with you over there, in the Now.”

And that’s when it happened. Her face went from sexy to sour and back again, so quick I almost missed it. She paused for a second, then cocked her hip and raised an eyebrow. “You’re already happy over there. Don’t you miss me over here?”

She stepped over to me, and I could barely breathe. Steam had begun to curl the loose hair around her face into those ringlets I loved. Moisture beaded on her skin. She looked up at me, heavy-lidded and sure of herself—of us. I wanted to reach out and touch the drop just beginning to form at her collarbone, follow it down to her breast.

But she wasn’t real. I don’t know where I got the strength, maybe it was that other me over in the Now



rooting for Bev, but I backed right out of that bathroom and closed the door. I'd love to pretend that's the only thing I had to do to *relieve the tension*, shall we say, but I was a man, and Lucy was still in great shape, so I had to take independent countermeasures to clear my head.

By the time I got myself situated again, the shower had turned itself off. I opened the bathroom door. The room was empty. Still, I called Bev to see if she minded my showering over at her place. And she said only if I didn't mind her joining me.

Well, we went on like that, me and Bev, week after week. It was that floaty, magical beginning part, you know, where you felt like you were invincible, and anything that could have struck you down before was a mere bug bite now. Days at the shop flew by; all the repairs seemed easy. The guys started ribbing me, calling me the Florence Nightingale of cars—and I didn't even mind. Nothing could slow me down, you know?

Which was probably why I wasn't more worried about what was going on with Lucy. She started coming back more often, sometimes wearing a tight dress, or negligee, or a cheerleader outfit, even one time a full-on pleather dominatrix suit. She tried on different personas with the outfits too, sometimes sweet, sometimes sultry, or funny, or bossy; she tried a bunch of stuff. Just playing, she said. At first she'd come once a week, then a couple of times a week, then every day. I suppose I thought her coming back was just some sort of grieving process on my part—an unusually vivid, insistent grieving process. I started spending more time at Bev's because Lucy never bothered me there. But I didn't even realize—or admit to myself—I was going over there as much to get away

from Lucy as to bask in the glow of my new romance with Bev.

So the last time Lucy came by to visit, it was about four months after I'd laid her to rest. She came into the bedroom one night as I was getting ready for bed—Bev and I had decided to have an evening apart for a change. She wasn't in any get-up that time, just a T-shirt and jeans like she always wore before. I was mightily relieved to see the sane, kind, no-nonsense Lucy I'd always loved—until I noticed the shotgun slung over her shoulder.

My throat clenched.

"I know what's going on," she said, mournfully shaking her head.

I slid my hands stupidly over my pajama pants, wishing I was still wearing jeans with pockets to keep my hands from shaking.

"Harlan, I know you, and that's why I'm here: to save you from yourself."

"Well gosh, honey." I cleared my throat and held my voice steady. "I probably wasn't in any kind of danger until you walked in here with that gun."

"I'm sorry to shock you, Harlan, but I know what's about to happen. You're going to ruin everything!"

"Now, darlin'—" And there I had to stop myself, because I knew the best way to get her even more riled up was to tell her to calm down.

"Nope, too late to sweet talk your way out of this. You're about to get cold feet with Bev and try to back out so as not to get hurt. Why else would you be here tonight, alone?" She blinked back the tears welling up in her eyes. "I tell you, the Harlan over there in the Now

is already sick about it. So I'm not gonna let it happen." Then she leveled the shotgun at me.

But suddenly, despite how steady she pointed those double barrels at my chest, I wasn't afraid. Because I knew I didn't have the problem she was trying to fix.

"Lucy, darlin', that's not gonna happen. I learned my lesson. I learned it with you."

And that was the god-honest truth. Why hadn't I thought of it before: I'd been an idiot a few months into my courtship with Lucille. I panicked about getting serious and tried to slink away like a dog in the dark. And I bet she wished she'd had a ghost with a shotgun to make me see sense instead of having to go through all that drama and pain, losing me and then having to decide whether to risk loving me again when I crawled back and asked her to forgive a colossal fool.

She shook her head and gripped the gun tighter. "I know you, Harlan. You think you're in love, but that's just the rebound talking. I'm not gonna sit by and watch you realize you never really cared about that woman. It'll break Now-Harlan's heart."

"Baby, it's not like that. I'm not gonna chicken out."

A tear spilled down Lucy's cheek and the shotgun shook in her hands.

"Lucy, honey, don't worry." I held my hand out to her, pleading. "I love Beverly too much to leave."

And that's when the gun went off.

I'll tell you right now, it's not like what they show on TV, when everything shifts into slow motion and you have that high, whiny feedback sound in your ear; or everything fades to washout, or just plain cuts to black. Well, maybe there's an instant of suspended time before

you process what happened. But mostly, it hurts like hell. All you can do is squeeze your eyes shut and clutch your chest and think, “Shit!” or maybe, “Holy shit!” if you’re the religious type.

Next thing I knew, I was waking up in bed next to Lucille. I rubbed my eyes and tried to sit up, which was when I discovered my chest still hurt like the dickens, so I had to lie back down. I looked around the bedroom, bright with mid-morning light slanting through the blinds, and then up at Lucille. She was sitting up against the headboard with a book in her hand, looking down at me.

She smiled and said, “Some night last night, huh?”

That was about the time I remembered she’d shot me. I patted the bedside table for my phone, ready to dial 9-1-1.

“It’s not there, Harlan,” she said. “We don’t need them over here. In the Now.” She put down her book and slipped under the covers beside me. The slightest touch of her hand on my chest made me wince. “Ooh, sorry babe. I was in rough shape too when I first got here, but the pain’ll go away in a couple of weeks.”

“What the—does that mean I’m—”

“Yes, darlin’. You’re dead. But only in the Before. Here in the Now, you’re forever.” She rested her cheek on my shoulder. “We’re forever.”

I lay there quietly and gave that grenade time to explode inside my head. I thought about how bad I felt about Lucille when she passed, and then I thought about how bad Bev was going to feel when she found out I’d passed.

Lucy's voice vibrated against my shoulder. "I'm real sorry, Harlan. I just couldn't let you mess things up for Now-us."

"Well, I don't know about this."

"Don't worry, baby, no one will think it's suicide. I made it look like a robbery gone wrong."

"That's not what I—thanks, by the way—but I was thinking about Bev."

Lucy kind of tensed up at that, so I said, "I'm at peace knowing I've got you forever now, but that just makes me feel worse for Bev."

Lucy propped herself up on her elbow and looked down at me, cricking her mouth to the side like she did when she wasn't quite sure about something. "Let's give her some time," she finally said. "Then we'll try to get you a visitor's pass to Before." She slid out of bed and put on her robe. "I have to be honest, though: I don't think you'll qualify for a pass. She's a strong woman. I doubt you'll be able to prove she needs meddling."

I swallowed my pain (and my pride at that last comment) and sat up. "Well, who do I talk to? Where do I go for the pass?"

She yanked her hair into a ponytail and glared at me. "I really don't think you should worry about *her*." She marched into the bathroom, and then I heard water running in the sink. "Anyway, it's time to get up," she yelled through the doorway. "We're meeting someone special for brunch."

I was confused for a second, because it had been a Wednesday when she shot me, and I wondered for just a moment where we'd be going for brunch on a Thursday, and then I remembered we were in the Now, and

wondered for another moment if maybe every day was a weekend in the Now. And then my heart did a little flip, and I smiled. I'm a little slow, but just then it hit me, everything Lucille had told me about life and death and being with everyone you'd ever really cared about in the Now.

I ignored the screaming muscles in my chest and got out of bed. I shuffled toward the bathroom and waited until Lucy was done washing her face. "Beverly?" I asked. "Is that who we're going to see?"

Lucille whipped a hand towel off the rack and spun around. "No, we're not going to brunch with *her*," she said, blotting her scowl dry. "We're going to pick up my mother."

I must have looked pretty miserable just then, because her expression softened. "But... Bev did come around here looking for you a bit earlier." She sighed and twisted her lips. "I guess we could swing by her place after brunch."

I don't know if I could ever explain how it felt when my heart made that shift, when it had to grow big enough to contain both my joy over Beverly and the love I felt for Lucille just then. I took Lucy up in my arms and squeezed her just like I used to, so tight she could barely breathe.

And she followed through. After I discovered over brunch that I didn't really mind my Now-mother-in-law all that much, Lucy took me on over to Beverly's. Bev didn't have her Mustang—no need for cars in the Now—but I still felt that motor running when I saw her again.

Several months on, Before-Bev seems to be getting along well enough—Lucy lets me use her pass to peek in on the other side every now and then. While I feel for

Before-Bev, I never applied for a pass of my own. I don't want to meddle, because Now-Bev and I are happy, and I don't want to do anything to mess that up. And despite how I got here, I'm still on good terms with Lucille. I still want to be with her as much as I want to be with Bev. I'll always love them both.

I don't ask Lucy who she's with when we're not together, and she's stopped asking me. And I really do like it here; everything's working out fine. Except—well, sometimes I wonder how miserable Now-me actually was with the way Before-me was doing things. Could Before-me really have screwed things up that bad? And then I look at Lucy and, as much as I love her, I have to wonder if death really does change a person all that much.