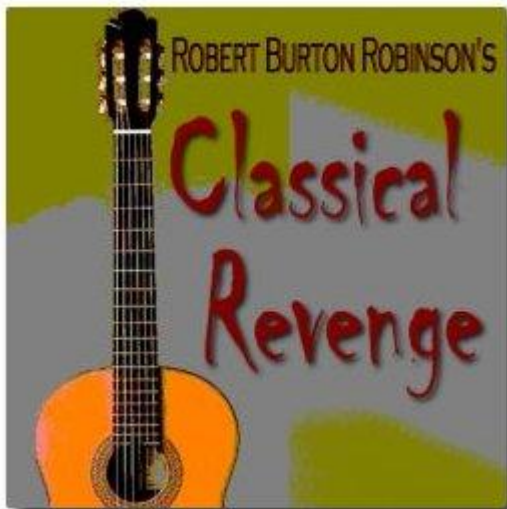


Classical Revenge

by Robert Burton Robinson



GENRE: Humor/Horror. LENGTH: 2,398 words. SYNOPSIS: A woman ventures out at night during a snow storm into a dangerous part of town to get the last item on her Christmas list.

Amy took the ring of keys out of the drawer and walked toward the front door.

The door burst open, and a woman rushed in and pushed the door against the blowing snow until it closed. “If the stupid idiots can’t learn to drive in the snow they need to move out of Cleveland—find themselves a nice warm spot in Miami!” She pulled her hood back, took off the parka, and hung it on the coat rack near the door. Then she saw the ring of keys in Amy’s hand.

“Were you about to close?” She checked her watch. “It’s only six o’clock.”

“Yes. We close at six.”

“Two days before Christmas?”

“It doesn’t matter. Our hours never change.”

“Oh, I understand. It’s because of your location, right? Customers are afraid to come to this part of town after dark.”

Amy locked the deadbolt, ignoring the woman’s comment. “Welcome to Amy’s Classical Guitars. I’m Amy Kilmore.”

“Good to meet you. I’m Luci.”

“So, are you looking for a guitar for yourself? Or is this to be a Christmas gift?”

“For me. Wow, I’ve never seen this many classical guitars in one place.”

“It’s my specialty.”

“So, I guess you don’t get many rockers in here—even though the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is just a few blocks away.”

“Actually, I do get some occasionally. Mostly those who have seen the error of their ways and are converting to classicalism.”

“Classicalism?”

Amy smiled. “That’s what I like to call it. When a guy’s been playing steel strings all his life, and then gets his hands on a great classical guitar—well sometimes he’ll convert—as he *should*. Because the dynamics, the overtones, and the warmth of the classical guitar are far superior.”

“Steel strings are all I’ve ever played, since I was 14 years old. But I’m considering a classical guitar. So, convert me.”

“Okay. Come on over here and take a seat.”

Luci walked over to the chair and sat down.

“Now put your left foot up on this little stool.” Amy turned and reached for one of the guitars hanging from the wall. She handled it lovingly—as though it was a newborn baby. “Try this one.”

Luci reached into her pocket and pulled out a pick.

Amy frowned. “Oh, no—you don’t use a pick. You pluck and strum with your fingers.”

“I feel naked without a pick—but I’ll try it.” Luci formed a G Major chord with her left hand, and strummed with her right thumb. “Nice. Very nice.”

“Yeah. See what I mean about the tone?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful. What kind of strings are these? Catgut?”

Amy smiled. “No, they’re man-made. In fact, those are my own special brand. I give each batch its own unique name. Those are *Macho Delights*.”

“Interesting name.”

“Thanks.”

Luci hesitated. “They never really made strings from cats, did they?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Catgut is short for *cattle* guts. Usually sheep intestines.”

“Yuck.”

“Most classical guitar strings are nylon these days. Or a composite material made from synthetic fibers. But you can still buy catgut strings. You can order a set on the web for \$80.”

Luci’s face contorted. “How do they make guitar strings out of intestines?”

“It’s quite a process. They have to remove them from the animal’s body while they’re still warm. Then they clean and strip them, twist and polish—“

“—gross. I’ve heard enough. So, what’s so special about *your* strings?”

“If I told you that, I’d have to kill you,” said Amy, stone-faced. Then she laughed. “Just kidding. But it’s a secret process. Amy Strings are only available from me. And I plan to keep it that way, so I can continue to charge \$250 a set.”

“People actually pay \$250 for a set of guitar strings?”

“Sure. These are professional musicians, playing \$5,000 instruments. I get orders from all over the world through my website. In all honesty, I don’t get much walk-in traffic here. The online sales are what keep me going. So, what do you think of that guitar?”

“It’s amazing. How much is it?”

“\$4,500, including the strings.”

“Whoa.” Luci carefully handed the guitar back to Amy. “That’s way too steep for me. Why is it so expensive?”

“Because it’s hand-made. Most of these guitars were built by a wonderful old luthier who lives down in LaGrange.”

“What’s a luthier?”

“A person who makes stringed instruments.”

“Well, don’t you have anything cheaper?”

“Yes. There on the back wall I’ve got a couple of Japanese guitars, and a few from Spain. But they’re not hand-made.”

“That’s okay.” Luci got up and walked toward the cheap instruments. On her way, she was startled by a cat that was sitting on the counter. It was frozen in place. She looked more closely. “What’s this? It looks so real.”

“It *is* real. My 20-year-old son is an amateur taxidermist. When he was 12 years old, his dog died, so we buried it in the back yard. But he couldn’t stand to lose his best friend, so that night he did a little research on the internet. And the next day, he dug up Fluffy and performed his first taxidermy.

It was a mess. Looked like some kind of furry alien. But he’s really improved over the years. I’ve lost track of how many little animals he’s killed and stuffed.”

“So, he killed this poor little cat?”

“Not on purpose. It kept running into the store every time a customer came in. So, he would shoo it out with a stick. But one day he accidentally whacked it on the head and killed it. Then he asked me if he could stuff it. I didn’t see any harm.”

Luci walked to the back wall, picked up a guitar, and began to strum it. “Does your husband help you run the store?”

“My husband was killed in a car accident.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She hung the guitar back on the wall. “Wait. I think I read about it in the paper. That’s why your name sounded familiar. Wasn’t that just a couple of weeks ago?”

“Yes.”

Luci walked over to where a stuffed squirrel was sitting. “Did Casey do this one too?”

“Yes, he did.” Amy wondered how Luci knew her son’s name.

Luci bent down and looked directly into the squirrel’s eyes. “It’s so life-like.” Then she pulled back, as though she wasn’t absolutely sure it was dead.

“Yes, he’s getting really good at it.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking—are you sure your husband was actually in the car when it went over the cliff? I read that they never found his body.”

“All I know is, we were having our annual Christmas party with twenty of his old college buddies and their wives, when Carl realized we were running out of beer. So, he drove the Mustang down to the 7-Eleven to get more. But when he came back, he raced up our driveway, plowed through the backyard fence and went over the fifty-foot cliff—right into Lake Erie. The police think the accelerator got stuck, or that maybe Carl was drunk, and he thought he was stepping on

the brake. I was visiting with some of the women, and didn't even know he was gone."

"I read that the top was down on the car. Why would he put the top down in twenty degree weather?"

"Because he thought it made him look cool. I told him, 'Carl, you're 40 years old—you don't look cool anymore, no matter what you're driving.' But he'd do it anyway—especially when he'd been drinking."

"Well, maybe he survived somehow," said Luci.

"We're clinging to that hope. But it's been two weeks, so... I can't believe I'm discussing this with a total stranger. I haven't opened up to *anybody* about the accident until now."

"Well, I'm glad I could help you get it off your chest."

"Kinda makes me want to share something else with you."

"Like what?"

Amy grinned. "Like how I make my \$250 guitar strings."

"Oh, that's okay."

"But I really want to show you. Come on."

Luci reluctantly followed her around the counter and through the door. "Smells funny back here."

“Yeah. It’s the mold. I’ve got to take care of that soon. But you get used to it after a few minutes.” Amy opened another door and led Luci inside a large room with no windows. There was a small lamp sitting on a work bench. But Luci’s eyes were drawn to the round table in the middle of the room. A dim light bulb suspended above the table barely illuminated four men playing poker.

“Carl!” Luci ran toward the table. “Carl, you’re alive! Why didn’t you call me, Honey?”

Thank you, thought Amy. She reached into the workbench drawer for the pistol and then began to walk toward Luci. Now I know for sure that you’re *The One*.

“Carl?” Luci screamed. Then she turned to Amy. “What have you done? You killed him! And then you let that freak Casey stuff him! Well, you’re not gonna get away with it! Do you know who I am?”

Amy raised the pistol and pointed it at Luci. “I didn’t know who you were when you first came in. But now I do. You’re the bumbling police detective who shot the Mayor’s brother-in-law in the arm.”

“I was just doing my job. It looked like he was about to attack the mayor.”

“Too bad they put you on desk duty and took away your gun. It would have come in handy right about now, huh?”

“Why did you kill Carl? I was in love with him.”

“That’s why. Because he was having an affair with you. And I had warned him after his *last* fling that if he ever did it again, I would kill him. Apparently, he didn’t believe me.”

“So, you set the whole thing up? Ran his car off the cliff? Was he even in the car?”

“No. Casey called him while he was at the 7-Eleven and told him our van had stalled in a nearby dark, empty parking lot. When Carl came to help, Casey hit him over the head with a pipe wrench and killed him. Then he threw his body into the back of the van.

“He tossed several big blocks of ice into the Mustang and drove it back to the house. Carl’s buddies had moved their cars to the street to give him a clear path down the driveway.

“Casey got out of the car and moved the ice blocks to the driver’s side of the floorboard, depressing the accelerator. Everybody inside the house heard the screeching tires and the roaring engine, and rushed outside to see what was happening. One of the guys made it out the door just in time to see the Mustang going over the cliff.

“It was a daring plan. If the car had veered off to one side or the other...but it didn’t. I was so proud of Casey.”

Luci sobbed. “You didn’t have to kill him! Why didn’t you just divorce him?”

“Because he would have wanted half of my business—even though he never lifted a finger to help me run it.”

“So, he wasn’t even in the car when it went into the lake.”

“That’s right. And the ice blocks just floated away, leaving no evidence of foul play. Brilliant, huh?”

“What are you going to do with me? Surely you’re not going to kill me—I’m a cop. My car’s sitting out front. And what would you do with my body?”

“Well, let’s see...the car’s no problem. It’ll be stolen before midnight, and chopped into spare parts by morning. You see, this neighborhood does have its advantages. And, as far as what to do with your body...I’m sure I’ll think of something. But don’t worry—only the best will do for my husband’s lover.”

“No, no. I was in love with him—I don’t deny that. But we were just friends.”

“So, you weren’t lovers?”

“No, not at all. We just spent a lot of time talking.”

“In hotel rooms.”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Luci felt that Amy might not shoot her as long as they kept talking. “Why did you kill these *other* men?”

“I needed the raw material.”

“Raw material?”

“For my strings.”

“You said your strings were *man-made!*”

Amy gave Luci a sinister grin.

“You killed these men just so you could make *guitar strings?*”

“Sure. These men and many others. I told you I make most of my money through online sales. Why do you think I bother with walk-in traffic?”

“To get *raw material?* What did you do with the rest of the bodies?”

“We just flush them down into the sewer system. Pretty easy—if you have a commercial meat grinder. And it’s a shame, really. The typical candidate is a loner that nobody particularly likes or understands. Once I had put that first guy out of his misery, I did a little experimenting and discovered what wonderful strings I could make. Practically overnight, I had a real business. So, that’s why my strings sound so good.” She raised the pistol, ready to fire. “And now I’m going to enjoy the sound of you dying.”

“Wait. The people in the store next door will hear the gunshot. You can’t shoot me in here.”

“Good point.” Amy lowered the gun.

Luci relaxed a little bit. Maybe she really could talk her way out of this mess.

She didn't hear Casey sneaking up behind her.

Casey listened, as his mother played the Bach arrangement on her guitar. When she finished, he said, “That sounds amazing, Mom. What do you plan to name this batch of strings?”

She handed him a freshly printed string box label, and he read the name.

Amy Strings – *Luci nell'anima*.

Casey said, “What language is this?”

“It's Italian. It means ‘Shine your light into the soul.’”

“That's beautiful.”

“Thanks.” Amy turned her head. “What do *you* think, Luci?”

Luci didn't respond.

Casey said, “From the look on her face, I'd say she approves.”

Luci sat at the poker table, motionless, smiling at her lover, Carl.

THE END

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