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THE FAMILY JEWELS

SCOTT WHITTIER

Please let it be the girl in the red shirt.
That's what I thought to myself the first morning.

I could hear water splashing into the sink. I could see sunlight and shadows glint and sparkle through the half-closed bathroom door. I wasn't sure how much I'd drunk, how much I'd slept, how much I'd done or with whom.
The sheets only smelled half like me.

The faucet squeaked and went silent. I saw a sleeve as she gripped the door's edge. Red.
Ruby walked into my room.

I can't go to breakfast without make-up.
She was too beautiful.

She was that kind of girl who didn't know it was the plain ones who needed her dedication. The kind of girl you remembered in red no matter how drunk you were or how long the night dragged on in blackness. She was stunning. But I was charming. And we had omelets. I paid with cash.

*

Two years ago.

That's when I learned how much things are really worth. How they can be taken away and taken back. I learned to take what I wanted. Because you can't buy love or happiness or trust--all that good stuff we already know about. But that was when I learned I could steal it.

I didn't tell Ruby about the divorce right away. I didn't tell her how they were throwing away thirty years and robbing me of every youthful memory. I didn't tell her how I gritted my teeth when her friends teased me about being too pretty, gelling my hair, shining my shoes, cufflinks on French cuffs. I never told her that dad broke our family and cheapened our name by becoming a liberated homosexual in his fifties.

I certainly never told her about the first time I signed dad's name to a check. Mom laughed nervously. She understood resentment. It was practically a joint account anyway. After the fifth signature, she stopped laughing.

When I used his credit card to buy dinner, Ruby noticed. I laughed it off.

And it felt good, like revenge, like freedom, like taking back something that had been stolen from me. But in the end it was just money. It wasn't personal. There was a part of that feeling that wasn't satisfying. Its value was too easily replaced. And it couldn't repay the emotional debt I was owed.

I needed sentimental value. It's not about making them pay. It's about making them feel it. I knew my theory was right the day mom got the restraining order.

I had to smile to myself as I twirled the diamond earrings between my fingers inside the pocket of my pants. Like change. Like payment handed back to me.

So I stopped visiting. The divorce really upset me. I didn't want to be pushed and pulled between them. Everyone understood.

*

I just started spending the weekends with Ruby's family.

I even had my own room there. Ruby slept upstairs in the preserved suite of a teenage princess. I wanted that family. So I took part. I took it.

They had everything. House, money, all-American kids who actually visited on weekends, lapdogs, canopy beds, even insurance. Her mother didn't blink when the pearls disappeared.

This place is a mess. There have been carpenters and plumbers and pool men in and out of here all summer long.

It's the only thing Pearl said before she picked up the phone and called her insurance. Pearl loved me like a son. Like a family heirloom that would gain value in future years.

I was the handsome rich kid--fancy boy. I hated it until it was taken away. And then I wore the old me like a disguise. I smiled and laughed and paid for dinner. No one suspected I wasn't genuine. Overlooked obvious flaws.

*

Everyone and their sister keeps their jewelry in their underwear drawer. That was true. I knew it.

Ruby was pretty upset when the bracelets vanished from their hiding place under all her silky unmentionables. Thin threads of jewels, like straps. So easy to slide off. Strapless.

You were the only person who knew where they were. That was true. She knew it.

But it wasn't hard to imagine someone looking in the top drawer, peeling back her panties. It wasn't hard to imagine the friends of friends and late-night parties that revolve around a house of pretty roommates.

It wasn't hard to imagine what people would think. The things that would have to be said about someone's boyfriend's gambling problem, someone else's lapse in fidelity, the kind of men, the possibility of strangers. Self-incriminating accusations.

How much was it really worth? Relationships? Friendships? Us?

Priceless.

*

No lease. Cash is fine. Half the utilities. I'll deal with the landlord.

The usual deal. But not the usual reasons.

She wasn't the type to cut ties and her losses when the debt got too deep. I should have known. Short hair with brassy tips. A little overweight. A little too much make-up. A nurse who chain smoked and used the c-word. She did what it took to do what she wanted.

Low-class bitch. A rich girl would have known better. She would have taken aerobics and gotten a pedicure.

Brassy just talked on the phone to her wispy little boyfriend, blew smoke at the receiver, stroked her cat. Pussy. At least that's a more polite word.

But she had a Rolex.

*

Brassy found gay porn on his computer, you know.

They all sat around the table that night with their drinks and added giggles to the bar noise. As if someone would admit something like that. As if girls tell secrets about their boyfriends that only make themselves look worse. No one here ever would.

I looked over at Ruby and smiled.

And Brassy is a slut.

No one likes sluts, not even other sluts. Ruby's cheap little roommates tittered and gasped and never mentioned the men who spent the night when their boyfriends were away. We never mentioned them either. We just passed in the halls on those mornings and pretended to be half asleep. There are so many things people don't mention.

Secrets are good. They make you feel safe. Something to protect that protects you in return. A little bit of knowledge, a few words, a tiny fact that gets locked away like a trinket. No one can take it away. It almost disappears, ceases to exist. But you never lose it because you know where it is, right where you put it in your tiny stash of hidden treasures.

*

Time flies. Watches disappear. Shit happens.

There have been so many people over here.

There hadn't.

Friends of friends. I didn't know half of them. What about that guy you had over?

Brassy didn't flinch at the hint of blackmail. That guy was months ago. No one ever came over, and she knew it. But it hardly mattered. I was moving. I just couldn't live with her and the cat and the smoke and the phone. Bitch. Everyone understood completely.

Can you believe she's suing me for back rent and utilities? Of course I paid. Cash as always. No I didn't get a receipt. We were roommates. I trusted her. Bitch.

I almost used the c-word. But that would have been classless.

*

Ugly. Old. Probably not even antique. But they belonged to her grandmother and she was supposed to love them even if she never wore the rings.

I didn't hear her roommate's stories until the tarnished little gold circles were long gone. But it increased their value in my internal account. I knew. I could tell. I could feel it when I saw their own little box inside the box, tucked under all the prettier pieces. I could feel their warm weight and rich history resting in the palm of my hand.

Goldie threw a fit. She was always a spoiled little brat. She was short and slim and pretty in that way brunettes manage cute when they should really go blonde. This one would be a piece of cake.

She accused me right away, at the top of her lungs, irrational.

You know he did it. Your bracelets. The stuff at your mother's house. It's so obvious.

Coincidences. She probably just lost them, left them at her parents' house, dropped them in her closet. There were a million explanations.

Why blame me?

But I wanted her to. It was so easy to be the rational one as she stood there screaming.

SIDE B

Call her bluff. Cooperate. Deny.
Please, call the police. I want to clear my name.

Fingerprint me. Give me a lie detector.
As if Goldie could facilitate such a complicated process.
Is it really as easy as seen on TV? Slices, dices, cubic zirconia...

*

There were a few things I didn't count when I appraised my worth.

I didn't expect Ruby to be so levelheaded. She was supposed to be overcome with emotion or scandal or denial.

It doesn't matter if you did it. But for some reason I can't bring myself to defend you. Why don't I want to stick up for my own boyfriend? I can't date someone I can't trust.

But I could have fixed it. She wasn't serious. She'd cool down and come back. After two years, I had earned some sentimental value of my own. Within days, she was calling.

But then that airhead Goldie actually called the police.
They couldn't do anything about it. But they could tell her about the checks and the court dates and the restraining order.

Still. I could have fixed it. I was upset. The divorce. My poor mother. I wasn't myself. And I didn't want to worry Ruby. She could be so emotional. She could understand.

But then there was Brassy.
I could have fixed everything else. I should have known better. She wasn't just rational. She was tenacious. Like a bulldog. Short, fat, squat, ugly. Dog. Bitch. C-word.

How many pawn shops are in this city? How many Rolexes are there in those pawn shops? How many stacks of papers are filed away with rows of social security numbers from sellers of jewelry and stereos and guitars?
An inefficient formality that never led anywhere~a convoluted treasure map.

But she deciphered it, followed the trail, retraced my steps.
She found it all--the shop, the Rolex, the paper, my incriminating number.

Turns out gaudy, overpriced watches have serial numbers that can be as unique and incriminating as my own nine digits. Turns out there is paperwork that comes with a six-thousand-dollar timepiece. Turns out the paperwork was halfway across the country with her fairy ex-boyfriend.

*

He put it in the mail Monday. Or so I hear.

And that was the last I heard.

An old roommate passed me on the street and pretended not to see me.
I don't care. That's not what I care about.

They will never find the rest of it. Not even if I remembered and admitted.
But I don't care about that either. It doesn't matter anymore. They ruined it.
It's all worthless now. They uncovered my treasure. They exposed my truth and revealed my true value. They took my prized possessions. They stole my secrets.

GOOD SUNDAY

MELANIE LOCAY

“I’ve never spoken to a convicted murderer before.” After an hour of silence, this is all my mother could come up with to say.

“Daddy was a criminal defense attorney. I’m sure you’ve spoken to at least one before.” I feel strange right after I say it. I haven’t really mentioned Daddy since the trial.

“I know that dear but he was very good. None of the murderers he defended were ever convicted. Ironically, I bet he could have been the only one to get you out of this mess.” This makes the nearby prison guard snicker.

I think she just noticed. I was hoping she would. My orange jump suit is a size four. Prison has done wonders for my figure. If only I could get the word out to all the poor women wasting their money at *Weight Watchers* and *Jenny Craig*.

“Yes. It is true, Daddy was a fantastic lawyer.” I reply to her with my palms flat on the counter. The guard has requested I keep my hands there since last week’s incident with the hairpin. I could really use a manicure.

“He wanted you to follow in his footsteps, Mia. Can you believe, after all this, USC is still badgering me to finish paying off your tuition? And I told them, if one of their top law students could be so unsuccessful in court, the fault obviously lies in their shoddy teaching. Then they came at me with that whole “pleaded guilty blah blah blah.” I wonder if she has a nail file in that small yet tacky beaded purse of hers. Maybe that wouldn’t be the

smartest thing to have in front of the guard. Mommy's nails are perfectly manicured, long and blood red. Is she still talking?

"Mommy, I never would have been an attorney of Daddy's caliber. Oh, I said caliber!" I haven't had such a good laugh in a long time. I can see through the Plexiglas window that divides us my mother and I; She isn't getting the joke.

"No pun intended Mommy! Oh, come on, laugh. It's funny." Larry the guard is trying to control his laughter. He is standing about two feet away from me and I see his gun shaking as he holds in the giggles. Mom and I are the only ones in the visiting room. I'm sitting on the side with Larry and a single door that leads back to the cellblock. Mom is across from me; on her side there is a potted plant and a door that leads back to her Mercedes parked outside. This Plexiglas window dividing us is pretty familiar; it's been here all my life really.

Nose twitching and eyes squinting, she says to me in her most scolding tone. "Mia, you're right you never would of been good like him." She has the nerve to look at me as if she is actually upset. No one has benefited more from this than her. But playing the role of the mourning widow suits her, attention craving moron.

"I never would have been as good as he? Is that what you are trying to say Mother?" It is so like her to see me in a good mood and have to just snatch it away.

"Here we go. I knew we couldn't have a conversation without you correcting your stupid mom." *Let the record show she said that.* "You and your father always did that. You two thought you were so above me. Look where you are now." I feign looking around, dramatically surprised I am in a Prison visitation room and not standing in line at Bloomingdale's.

Simple twit, Grandma was right she is nothing more than trailer trash. She could never understand why her only son turned a one-night-stand into his wife. Grandma would always say he could just never throw anything away.

"Mommy, I don't want to argue with you. He and I, we're not good people like you. He made money off the misery of others. He lost sight of what the word justice meant. It was replaced with phrases like plea bargain, reason of insanity, or anything else he could come up with just to get a client off, regardless of their innocent or guilt. He was an excellent pleader, Mommy. I would never have been able to plead as well as he did, Mommy. Do you want to hear about how he pleaded?" She follows my example and leans closely into the Plexiglas window. I lower my voice a bit to a whisper. "Oh, he pleaded up until the very end."

Mommy didn't want to attend the trial. She told me she hadn't watched any of the news about it nor read any of the newspapers. Which isn't hard to believe coming from this woman, whose number one source of news is *Woman's World* magazine.

"I want to know. Tell me about how he pleaded, Mia." The look in her eye could be categorized as one of morbid curiosity. I could see the white in her knuckles as she tightly clutches the tacky, small, beaded purse. That doesn't exactly clash her tacky beaded Gucci jacket, at least the rest of the ensemble consist of a simple black linen blouse and pants. After all, she is in mourning. After twenty-two years of living amongst the wealthy upper class, she's deflected any culture that may try to penetrate as if she were made of Teflon.

I light a cigarette and proceed to tell her my story. I never smoked before, but here I guess, I want to live the cliché to its full extent and it makes me look cool.

It was a beautiful autumn day. There had been a storm the night before, a lot of wind. The day was so gorgeous and clear. You could see the snow on the mountains. It was sunny, yet chilly enough that you still needed to wear a coat, my favorite type of weather. I have always hated Sundays. But that morning I knew that day would be different, unlike any other Sunday. I left home pretty early I wanted to run some errands before I saw daddy for lunch, our traditional Sunday lunch. My first stop was the bank. The Washington Mutual near school was open one Sunday every month.

* * *

"Baby you shouldn't have! What color is it? Aww pink! That is my favorite color. You know me so well. I can't wait to see it. It's an extra small right? Uh what?! You bought me a large!! Are you trying to be funny?? Really, that is so not funny. You think I'm a large! Do I look like a large to you?"

No, actually you look like a talking lollipop. You look like a stick with a head attached. In this day and age when it is more convenient to speak into a cracker-sized little box than talking to the actual living person next to you. It's inevitable not to invite everyone around you into your personal conversations. In line at the Washington Mutual, on this beautiful Sunday, I have to become witness to one of the greatest injustices in American society. This girl, who proudly wears the emblem of XS, on every label, of every garment she owns, has been subjugated to today's equivalent to the Scarlet Letter, an L! The more I look at her, the more infuriated I too become with the person on the other end of her multi-colored, gay disco club looking

phone. It is undoubtedly her boyfriend, who is bewildered as to why he deserves this verbal lashing. He must be quite the Adonis himself to be with a girl like her. Tiny waist, perky little...

“Oh I’m so sorry.” She says as she falls into me. It feels like just the slightest movement of my hand would send her delicate frame flying into the nearby plastic fern.

“It is quite alright.” Where was I? I remember now, perky little nose, butt, breast. I’ll just go with perky little everything

“Look what you made me do! I know you can’t look because you’re on the phone. But you’ve gotten me so upset. I’ve bumped into the lady behind me!” She screeches into her tiny multi-colored, gay disco club looking phone

“Lady?” I can’t help but mumble it to myself. I’m sure I am the same age as she is, if not younger. I see those crow’s feet she is desperately trying to hide. Simply because I am not wearing a tight, pink, velour jumpsuit zippered just so that my huge, fake, cleavage is exposed (obviously the uniform of some atrocious tramp patrol) does not mean I am some sort of old, frumpy, matronly woman. Her boyfriend’s blunder is really a personal affront. Perfect body, long blonde hair, perfectly glossed and manicured. But yet perfect is not enough for this man? Then where do I lie on the spectrum of socially acceptable?? With my Gap size sixteen jeans and USC XL sweatshirt? This woman and her boyfriend could probably use my sweat-shirt as a tent on their next camping trip.

“Hey!! Let go of my phone!” Ms. Pink Velour Suit screams.

She even has a perfect shriek. I grab her miniscule phone/slash gay disco.

“How dare you insult this freakishly thin and attractive woman and myself, mind you, by claiming that she would ever wear a large! If she is supposed to be a large, then I should be wearing some sort of car tarp size. And do I sound like an SUV to you? You ignorant, sizist bastard!”

* * *

“Mommy, I hadn’t cursed in years. I hadn’t yelled at anyone like that ever. It felt so invigorating. Why are you laughing? I really haven’t even gotten to the funny part. Which wasn’t very funny to me at the time.”

I wish I could say a Neanderthal sounding man, yelled profanity at me and told me that I did in fact sound like an SUV, or actually more like a mini van. But that was not the case.

* * *

“Hun, try to take a breath?” I wasn’t met with the voice of an Adonis. It was the voice of a woman, a kind sounding woman.

“Who is this?” I asked as if the phone were mine and the person I was supposed to have been talking to vanished.

“Well, I think that’s what I should be asking. But it sounds like you’re kind of tense. So I’ll tell you that I’m Susan, Jenny’s *girlfriend*. And I honestly don’t comprehend woman’s sizes, seeing as I purchase my own attire at men’s and army surplus stores.”

Embarrassment is an understatement for what I was feeling. Susan went on to tell me that I, in fact, did not sound like any sort of vehicle, but rather quite cute and if I would be interested in spending an evening with Ms. Pink Velour Suit (Jenny) and herself. I am paraphrasing quite a bit. Her proposal was much more colorful and graphic.

“Um, no thank you.” I handed the tiny phone/gay disco back to Jenny. Her face was so scrunched in confusion. I thought her perky little nose might break off.

“Next in line please.” The voice of the bank teller was like music to my ears. It took me a moment to catch my bearings and realize where I was. I quickly scuttled off to make my withdrawal. Walking to my car, it dawned on me that Susan thought I was cute and had propositioned me for sex. True, she did not see me in my full 200 plus-pound glory, but it’s nonetheless the first time I had ever been hit on. That brought a smile to my face. It was a going to be a good Sunday, one of “first-times”.

I didn’t need Daddy to give me another one of his lectures on how to dress seriously if I wanted to be taken seriously. I stopped back home to change before lunch. My roommate Lydia had papers strewn all over the living room floor and was in her favorite studying position, lying on her stomach on our shag-carpeted floor.

“Talk about a moment of insanity. Just imagine if you two would have gotten into a fistfight and were arrested. The steps taken by your attorney from that point on would be...” Lydia is relishing figuring out the steps to my imaginary case.

“Stop Lydia, please stop. I am having lunch with my father today. I am sure he will inundate me with law musings. I can’t bear to hear any now, not on an empty stomach.” Lydia was my best friend and only friend really. I felt so lucky to have her. When we met in college we became fast friends. We decided to become roommates at law school since we were both going to USC. She is the only person I could talk to openly. I could say things like, I feel hungry, even though she knew I had just secretly eaten in my bedroom closet. And she wouldn’t criticize me. I allowed her to laugh at my mis-

takes because it wasn't the malicious laughter I've been so familiar with hearing throughout my life as the "fat girl", but she laughed with me, and knew when not to laugh at all.

"You should be taking notes of everything that man tells you. He is a genius. Do you know how much people pay to have a consultation with him?" To Lydia, Daddy was a hero. Edward Rosen, one of the best criminal defense attorneys's in the country. In college she recognized me by his name. She had read every article on him and new that I was his daughter. At first, I thought that was the only reason she was my friend, but then I convinced myself otherwise, believed we were true best friends.

"Lydia, you should be his daughter. You would benefit by it far more than I have. You're going to be this incredible lawyer like he is. Sometimes I wonder what I am doing here. I think I'm not cut out for this. I don't want to become a cold, heartless person like he is."

* * *

"Mommy I swear I wasn't intending to hurt her, at least not at that point. I didn't think about it when I said it. But like I said, there was something about that Sunday. I wasn't thinking about any of my actions before I did them."

"No, you weren't. But that little bitch deserved everything she got." That was the smartest thing I'd heard her say all day.

* * *

"But you have no difficulty envisioning me cold and heartless?" She was so mad her voice was shaking. She threw a red cushion at me that we had bought at *Ikea* the day before. Our entire apartment was an *Ikea* wonderland. It was page 46 of the catalog. I was lucky it was the cushion that was closest to her and not the iron ashtray we had also purchased.

"No, Lydia that isn't what I said." Or was it?

"You are such an ungrateful little brat. I have to work for everything I have and you sit around getting fat while Daddy provides you with everything. And your daddy isn't a drunken loser like mine. No, he is an incredible man that is so determined to see you succeed. I will be proud if I have half the career he's had. I recognize his drive and conviction, those qualities your simple mind sees as cold and heartless."

I was stunned. Was she still talking about Daddy? She was taking it so seriously. And she called me fat. "You called me fat. You skinny, bitch."

"Of course that is the only thing you heard. Your mind can't ever go beyond your fat ass. Well then do something about it *Mia*. Take some of Daddy's money and join a gym. You better go, you're going to be late for

your lunch date.” With that, she stormed off into her room. I could hear her talking on the phone, yelling and swearing about how I had treated her, but I couldn’t make out to whom she was talking to.

“Thanks for the stupendous advice buddy! I’ll make sure to tell Edward Rosen his number one fan says hello,” I yelled at her bedroom door.

I was so mad on the drive from my place to Daddy’s favorite French bistro. But for once I felt truly proud to be Edward Rosen’s daughter because it made me the source of envy for Lydia.

“Hi daddy, how are you?” The Sunday lunch thing had become more of a chore than a pleasantry. I think he felt the same. But like Lydia so astutely put it he was the man that financed my studies and pretty much my life. Not to say I wasn’t grateful, as Lydia liked to think. But.

“Hello Mia. I am doing very well, thank you. I hope you’re not squandering away any of my money. Your education is an investment in your future. I am giving you the greatest gift a parent can give their child. My worries lie with your spending on other frivolous things. How is your diet going?” By his reasoning my frivolous spending was on food. When I walked up to his favorite patio table he was snapping his cell phone shut. Talking to an important client no doubt, it must not have been good news. He seemed to be quite upset and he’d been eyeing me up and down closely, knowing perfectly well I hadn’t lost any weight since the last time he saw me. The Sunday before at that same spot. But I was very grateful because he was an excellent father and he cared about me. The man was a genius. Lydia was right. What kind of selfish, stupid, fat idiot would I had been to not be grateful to him?

“It’s coming along alright, Daddy. I was really busy this week with school and wasn’t able to get to the gym. I didn’t really lose any weight this week. I maintained.” I can’t look him in the eye when we discuss my weight. I made that mistake before and what I saw looking back at me were eyes filled with disappointment and longing for the thin, pretty, daughter he never had.

“You’ve maintained huh?” His voice was getting an angry tone I hadn’t heard him use ever outside of the courtroom.

“What exactly are you maintaining Mia, your fat ass!!” The slamming of his fist against the table caused my glass of diet coke to spill onto my lap. I could feel the cold liquid penetrating into my pants onto my bulging thighs and untouched crouch. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

“Daddy I’m sorry.” I could manage to gurgle out between sobs. This outburst caught me off guard. I was accustomed to his silent disgust but he had never spoken to me this way before. I tried to tell myself it wasn’t directed at me. The stupid client he had been talking to upset him, Daddy loved

me, and he didn't mean this.

The waiter was cleaning my spilt soda off the table, off the floor, everywhere except for off me. I cursed Daddy in my head for always having to sit in the patio of the restaurant; particularly that day, that sunny, gorgeous Sunday in southern California. It wasn't enough that all of Sous Le Nez En Ville was staring at me, but the people strolling by with babies or dogs at toe all got a show as well. Trying to figure out our scenario, were we a quarreling couple? Most obviously not. Daddy was often compared to George Clooney with his dark and ruggedly handsome features. If it's impossible to believe that I could be his offspring, it's even more preposterous to believe we could have been lovers.

"Stop crying," he said, his teeth tightly clenched in a frighteningly controlled voice. "I have many colleagues that come here and I will not be made a fool of nor the source of trashy gossip. Do you hear me Mia? You're becoming more of a whimpering fool like your mother everyday. But at least she isn't fat too."

If the outburst had caught me off guard, this was a turn I definitely was not expecting. It was always he and I against my mommy. I may have not gotten his looks but I had his intellect. "You listen to me. I may be fat and not the size two Hollywood attorney you dream of me being. But I am not the piece of dumb trash you married. That is what grandma calls her, isn't it?"

* * *

"Sorry Mommy..." I meant it when I said it and I still think it today, but it felt necessary to apologize nonetheless. She just silently nodded. I knew she wanted me to get to the good part.

* * *

By now our table had been completely cleared. The waiters were drawing straws to see who had to be the ones to ask us to leave or at least move to a more inconspicuous table.

"Mia." Daddy began to laugh. The malicious laugh from my childhood that I loathed. "Kiddo I think we've both said some stuff we didn't mean. I have a meeting to get to. You know, I have to go be the cold and heartless lawyer I am. Go get yourself some ice cream or something." He got up from the table, threw a twenty at me and was off. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. I realized at that moment that Lydia was daddy's biggest fan.

* * *

"I can't go too much into detail of what happened next, Mommy. You know, where I went after the restaurant or how I got the gun. My lawyer

needs me to keep all that confidential for the appeal. But I know the part you're dying to hear. I knew where I could find them because you were going to be out of town until Tuesday. It was close to sunset when I got to the house. The sky was that shade of pink it gets right before the sun completely disappears on the horizon."

* * *

"Hello?" I don't know why I said that as I walked into the house. I couldn't believe my key still worked. Daddy was a maniac about changing the locks. Afraid of some of his not so trustworthy clients I am sure. All of the staff was off because it was Sunday, such a special Sunday. My old room was just as I had left it. A huge picture of Daddy and me in front of the Supreme Court stood on my dresser. I was small then and he could carry me on his shoulders. He told me how one day I would work there, the Supreme Court.

"Maybe I'll be tried there instead, Daddy." I whispered to the photograph. Just then I heard their moaning coming from his room.

"Oh my god Mia. What are you doing here?" Daddy frantically covered himself with the sheets. Lydia's body was as I always envisioned it would be naked. Perfectly tanned and toned.

"They didn't have the kind of ice cream I wanted Daddy. I got this instead." I pointed the gun toward them like I had seen them do in *Reservoir Dogs*. That movie had given me nightmares for days. It was one of Lydia's favorites. I was sure she would enjoy the pose. But all she could do was cry.

"Please don't do this Mia. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to call you fat. You're my best friend. I don't want to die!"

"Your laying stark naked, with my father, in my parents' bed, in the sheets I helped my mother pick out at *Linens N Things* and you think I am mad about you calling me fat? You're right." I shot her first, once in the stomach then in the face.

"Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. Mia put the gun down. Honey Daddy can get you out of this. We'll plead reason of insanity. We'll portray her as a whore that broke up my family and was threatening me. It will be okay. Please put the gun down. Please!" He was a lawyer to the end. He was standing next to the bed now splattered in Lydia's blood. The sheet had fallen and he was naked.

"Do you love me Daddy?"

"Yes, of course sweetheart. Give Daddy the gun." He was inching closer to me. I had never seen a naked man in person before much less that close up, or splattered in blood for that matter. He was shaking uncontrollably.

At first I thought he was cold. But it was fear he exuded. The room filled with an odor of fear and blood.

“Do you think I’m sexy Daddy?” His eyes widened. For once in his life he was speechless.

“I think you’re beautiful princess.”

“That isn’t what I asked!” I yelled back at him waving the gun around.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Yes I think you’re very sexy. The sexiest woman I’ve ever seen.” For once you could tell he was lying. He spoke the words as if he were choking on his own vomit.

“Well then give me a kiss daddy.” We got closer to one another. He touched my face with his bloody hand. I had never kissed a man before. His tongue felt strange in my mouth, but I won’t lie. I enjoyed it. I could feel his hand go for the gun. I pushed him away.

“You liar!” I yelled at him and kept firing until there were no bullets left in the gun.

* * *

And the rest of the story you know because you were the one that found us. Sorry about using your Egyptian cotton towels to clean off the blood. They were just the first things I grabbed. Be glad it wasn’t your *Prada* raincoat that was on the chair, am I right?”

“Why did I have to come home early?” Mommy says it aloud to herself. She looks like she’s about to be sick. We sat in silence for what seemed like hours. Not really but I love how that sounds.

“So Mommy did you notice I lost weight in here?”

“THE PURE PRODUCTS
OF AMERICA”:
TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY EDITION

MICHAEL CERAOLO

As they boarded the bus because
they were clearly too young to drive,
they made sure to flash a large wad of cash
at the same time that they ostentatiously
fumbled for a quarter to complete the fare
Having nowhere to go but in a hurry to get there,
they were notably noisy during the ride,
calling the driver and other passengers names
from the safety of the back of the bus
When they got off the bus
they signaled their low expectations
with great expektorations
Dissed daily based on bigotry,
scorned for their style when in substance
they are the ones who have most
fully absorbed the majority's values

PEOPLE LIKE US

H.A. FLEMING

They had been gone for two weeks when Karla took a swig of her whiskey, looked at Jack and said, "Maybe we should kill someone." Amy, sitting cross-legged in the back seat, thought it was a joke and laughed nervously as she pulled at a tangle in her long blonde hair.

Jack kept his eyes on the road and was quiet for a moment before whispering, "I don't know, shit like that can stay with you a long time."

Karla picked at the scabs on the crook of her knee and said, "Nothing stays with me."

They hadn't meant to actually go through with it. It just happened, like a lot shit just happens. Like how Amy ran away from home with Jack four months pregnant and when his girlfriend Karla caught up with them two days later all coked up kicked Amy in the gut until she wasn't anymore-- had just happened.

"How would you do it?" Jack asked Karla and pulled into a gas station.

"I don't think that matters," she said and got out to pump.

"She almost killed me," Amy said remembering how after the miscarriage she spent two hours curled up in the back seat, with Karla cursing and wiping the blood off the hot vinyl.

"Shut up, Amy," Jack said and grabbed Karla's bottle from the front seat and took a sip to wash down the last two of Amy's painkillers she got from the free clinic they ended up taking her to. He leaned his head against the back of his seat and sighed waiting for the tank to fill. His hair, dark and full of dust, curled over the top of the seat. Amy tried to remember what it smelled like as she watched the white line hit F.

"Karla get into the fucking car!" he yelled and he threw the car into first. Karla jumped in without paying and they took off down the highway. Amy watched from the rear window as the attendant ran out of the office and chased them a little while before they disappeared over a rise in the road.

They had already run out of the money Amy had saved working at Dairy Queen all summer. She wished they had lifted some Cokes before they got the gas; her throat was dry from the hot air that rushed in from the half open windows.

"I wish the air conditioning wasn't broken," Jack said and wiped a trickle of sweat off his cheek.

"Don't look at me, I didn't steal this piece a shit," Karla said opening a new pack of menthols.

Amy closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She hadn't slept much in days, and the sway of the car seemed to help. They slept outside, driving the Nova a little way off the side of the highway and set up camp. The plains reached out wide around them and each night Amy was afraid a police car might come by and asked them what the hell they thought they were doing taking a minor across state lines. When she sat awake the only thing to look at, other than the blackness, were the sleeping faces of Jack and Karla slipping in and out of the firelight. When the wind would change direction and their faces would disappear from sight, she thought for a second that when the light shifted again they'd be gone and just their rumpled bedding would be there.

Amy woke up to Jack veering off onto an exit. The tires squealed and she could smell them cooking on the pavement.

"Where we going?" Amy yelled, her voice small against the sound of the engine.

"I want a beer, we're stopping," he said and grabbed Karla's thigh.

"We have a six pack in the trunk," Amy said and held on hard to the door handle as they skidded around a corner.

"They're warm," Karla laughed and threw a lit cigarette butt at Amy.

They drove for a while looking for a crowded bar as Jack moved his hand into Karla's jeans.

"I don't want to go in," Amy whispered as they pulled slowly into a parking lot.

"You're coming, Karla's no good at getting free drinks," Jack said and pulled gently at Amy's hair. He touched his fingers to her cheek. He hadn't touched her since Karla found them and she missed the feel of his hands.

The smoke was thick and Amy coughed as they walked inside. She could feel the men at the door looking at her and felt the warmth of their bodies as they rubbed up against her as she passed.

"I'm tired can't we just go," she said tugging at Jack's sleeve. Karla and Jack left her alone at the bar, and watched from a table across the room to see if she could get them drinks. In the mirror behind the bar Amy could see her face, pale and smudged with dirt, looking back at her. A man in too tight jeans and a baseball hat sat down next to her and touched her shoulder. His hands were red and large, and he offered her a cigarette.

“I don't smoke,” she said and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Oh, you're a good girl huh? You need to loosen up sweetheart,” he laughed and slapped her on the ass. His breath was hot against her cheek as he leaned over to ask her if she wanted anything to drink. He bought her two beers and four shots of tequila. She did the shots one after another licking the salt off the back of his hand, but she saved the beers. When he went for more cigarettes she brought them over to Jack.

“I don't like how that guy has been following you around all night, grabbing at you,” he said and took a sip.

“He's the one,” Karla whispered and smiled. When he came back Karla went over and sat on the bar in front of him. Amy couldn't hear what she was saying but she could see Karla lean in close and run her hands over his thighs.

“What's going on?” Amy whispered and sat down next to Jack.

“Shhh, it's a good day,” he said and wiped his nose. He pressed a small packet into Amy's palm. Her pulse quickened as she felt the sharp corners of the paper press into her skin. She didn't care what it was; she opened it and cupped her hand to her face.

Karla waved at Amy and headed towards the back door with the man. Amy and Jack followed them out the screen door, and Amy let the paper fall to the ground empty and licked clean.

They walked to the back of the parking lot to the guy's van and watched as Karla crawled in the back. Karla slammed the rusty black door behind her and smiled at Jack through the window. Amy sat on the hood of the car next to the van and listened to the sounds coming from the van. Someone was screaming. She turned to Jack but he wasn't there and the door to the van was open. The pale interior light made a line down the middle of Amy's body. She opened the door and touched her finger to a small drip of blood on the floor mat.

“Get in,” Karla said laughing. She was smoking the man's cigarettes and her hands left dark red streaks on the white paper. She held it clenched in her teeth as she pulled on her underwear.

“We have to get out of here,” Amy said and pushed open the door, knocking a woman who was standing outside the van to the ground. They didn't know that the man had come with his wife.

The women's eyes had looked at Amy as Jack grabbed her and pulled her into the van, as if to say please. Amy saw herself reflected back in her shiny upturned pupils.

“You don't see me,” Amy said softly and wiped off the woman's blood

that splattered up onto her cheek with the back of her hand.

After they drove away from the field they dumped the bodies in, Jack and Karla split up their things. Karla wore her wedding ring and Jack took his cash.

“C'mon Amy don't you want something? It's not like we can do anything about it now,” he said and threw a thin gold necklace into the back seat. She took it and let it trail out the window, watching it glint in the headlights of an oncoming truck before letting go.

“He didn't even know what hit him he was so wasted. It was like fucking and dying were the same thing.” Karla whispered to her later as they set up camp. Karla gave her one of her clean shirts to sleep in. The sky was black and it was hard to find a good place for the fire, where it wouldn't light up the brush.

They finally got it lit and Karla and Jack fell asleep right away, their bodies still speckled in blood entwined together in the blanket. Karla's knife was folded in the pocket of her jeans, and Amy could see its bulge on her hip silhouetted against the fire. The smoke billowed white against the sky as Amy shielded her face with one hand and prodded the ashes with a stick with the other. She played with the few strands of long brittle grass that poked up between her feet and stared at the last of the flames. They licked and danced around the last of the wood, as if begging it to let them live awhile longer.

The fire spit an ember onto her leg and she jumped but let it sit on her thigh until it burned out. She touched the tiny blackened circle on her skin. Her eyes ached from the smoke but she tried to keep them open even when they grew watery and burned. When she closed them she couldn't help but think of the way the bodies looked, crumpled and still with bits of sand and dirt stuck to their skin as they buried them. They looked like things that were never actually people.

She thought of the man's bumble bee tattoo on the inside of his wrist, how she had first seen it as she leaned over to lick the white smear of salt from the crook of his thumb. She looked down at her own hands. She licked the bits of sand stuck under her fingernails, and she could feel it gritty and tasteless in her mouth.

The wind rushed over the flat ground, cooling her cheeks, and blowing tiny strands of her hair, tickling her nose and lips. Off in the distance she saw the white blink of headlights coming towards them, but she didn't worry. Jack had said “that no one would ever know, that people like them, like us, disappear everyday.”

ON SUNDAY

DAVID NAPOLLIN

There are holes in heaven
When you look through the trees
Especially at morning
When rain in swift descent
Veers from the sky
When air is asleep
Except for birds.
The murmured drenching of leaves
And rumble
Of a distant train
An articulate six o'clock
With no gold but gray
And slow heave of foliage.

Why revere a cathedral
When trees in shadow
Spread wider and more varied
Than any church?
And who would not, without an altar,
Worship the inscrutable silence of a tree
Or loneliness of early rain?
