

Collected Short Stories: Volume V

by
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Damaged Goods

Jesse Caldwell loathed Miranda Huffington, the business secretary at Patterson Toyota. Whenever the mechanic delivered repair orders to the front office, he kept conversation brief as possible, scrupulously avoided making eye contact or inadvertently staring at the woman's deformed leg. Jesse had even considered taking a job with another dealership to be rid of the wretched woman. For her part, the only time Miranda paid Jesse even the slightest mind was when he did something wrong, which was why she was presently standing in the repair bay wearing an evil expression. "No signature on this form." Miranda waved a three-part invoice truculently in the air.

In her late twenties, the business secretary exuded no *joie de vivre*. She lurched about Patterson Toyota with a profound limp, her body pitching forward in a herky-jerky manner as though she were about to take a pratfall and end up on her keister from one humorless moment to the next. Miranda wasn't exactly ugly. Rather, she was one of those infuriatingly nondescript types who, despite her infirmity, might have been reasonably attractive if, once in a blue moon, she smiled or cracked a joke. The operative term here was 'might have been'. But the dark-haired woman didn't and so she wasn't.

Jesse signed off on the brake job and handed the three-part invoice to the secretary, who swung about on her heels with less than military precision and hobbled disjointedly from the repair bay. A lilac-scented perfume lingered in the stale air until it was quickly overwhelmed by the stench of exhaust fumes and burnt rubber.

Well thank you, too, and have a stupendously nice day, Ms. Huff, Huff, Huffington.

Al Florentine, the repair manager approached from the showroom floor. “What a clod!” Jesse muttered as Miranda retreated back to the comfort of the heated showroom. “That troll treats mechanics like garbage.”

“She ain’t so bad.” Al assumed a mollifying tone. The middle-aged Italian with the swarthy complexion and sloping shoulders arranged appointments when customers called the dealership. He also assigned work orders and oversaw the repair bay operation. “No worse than the last few goofballs in her position.”

The manager had a point.

The previous secretary arrived late most days and couldn’t file properly. A record labeled ‘Munson’ might, if lucky, end up in the ‘M’s but that was it. She never bothered to position the manila folder to the rear between the MT’s and MV’s. It was organizational chaos pure and simple such that, inside of a month, customer accounts were a garbled mess, a regular automotive Tower of Babel. The middle-aged woman who preceded her was a menopausal hypochondriac with a drinking problem; she lasted a sum total of two months before filing a bogus disability claim.

If nothing else, the grim-faced Miranda Huffington was an anal-retentive workaholic. All customer records had to be properly indexed. She retyped the entire Rolodex file on pristine, three-by-five cards and, using a desktop publishing program, revamped several of Patterson Toyota’s customer care forms. At a staff party Mr. Patterson presented the new employee with a mahogany plaque acknowledging her ‘exceptional team spirit and personal initiative’.

“Miranda’s had a tough life,” Al blurted.

“How so?”

The repair manager clearly knew something about the dour-faced woman to which no one else was privy but waved a hand distractedly in the air. “More to the point, what you got against her?”

The question caught Jesse off guard and he felt his face flush with shame. “There’s a busted water pump on a Celica needs replacing.”

“The water pump can wait.”

Thirty feet away an acetylene blow torch fired up as a mechanic began loosening the corroded bolts on a blown muffler. “I dunno.” The rusty muffler fell away from the undercarriage of the car hitting the cement floor with a dull clatter. Jesse’s brain had reached the temperature of the softened bolts scattered about under the hydraulic lift. He waved a stubby finger in the air listlessly. “She’s a sadistic bitch!”

“That’s a bit of a stretch,” Al chuckled. “Miranda ain’t a bad sort. She’s just...” Without bothering to finish the sentence, the man smiled weakly and wandered back into the showroom.

Shortly after joining Patterson Toyota, Jesse signed a lease on a studio apartment off route 106 in Plainville, Massachusetts. In his late twenties, the move was Jesse’s first real taste of independence. He took the apartment for a year, paying the first and last month’s rent plus a hefty security deposit. On June first, Jesse Caldwell bought a secondhand dresser and end table at the Salvation Army thrift shop, threw his lumpy bed in the rear of his Ford F-150 pickup truck and drove off to a new life. Or so he thought.

The new life was, in truth, no different than his stultified old life, except that now the mechanic returned home from work to a claustrophobically tiny, studio apartment. He had his dirty movies – small consolation – but in the bargain had bartered away something ephemeral yet infinitely essential. The apartment at Beacon Woods Estate was quiet – excruciatingly so. Jesse kept the radio blaring from early morning until he lumbered off to work.

Weekends he relaxed by the pool, twirling his high school ring in endless circles like the revolving drum on a Tibetan prayer wheel. The residents seemed friendly in a neighborly sort of way but kept their distance. Sunning themselves on chaise lounges by the pool, the women were, for the most part, white collar professionals - twenty-something school teachers, secretaries and businesswomen with no particular interest in a grease monkey with calloused hands, burgeoning beer gut, salt and pepper hair.

So where were the eligible women his own age? Probably living elsewhere. Or, like his sister, Eunice, married, divorced, divorced again and now living with a new lover. What difference did it make? From Jesse's perspective, finding a life partner, a soul mate, had devolved into a scavenger hunt.

One Saturday night toward the tail end of the following summer, an unfortunate incident pushed Jesse over the edge. With nothing to do, he had been stir-crazy all day, totally and irrevocably alone. Following the eleven o'clock news, he killed the lights and crawled under the covers. Two doors down, a Hispanic couple was blasting the radio ridiculously loud – a riotous mix of salsa and Latin jazz. Jesse finally dropped off to sleep but woke before dawn to angry voices. He glanced at the mint green numbers on the bedside clock. Five-thirty.

“Where the hell was you?” A gruff voice filtered down from the floor above.

“None of your business, Shit-for-Brains!” The woman was drunk, slurring her words.

Jesse knew the couple, but only to offer a brief greeting as they checked mail or passed in the lobby. Lean and morose with a nervous tic, the guy was a roofer. His shrimpy, dark-haired girlfriend worked at a Burger King. At least once a month, she slipped out alone bar hopping and came home sloshed. The roofer and his wayward girlfriend cursed each other, hurled insults back and forth but nothing ever came of it. Eventually the accusations petered away and they went off to bed. Sometimes Jesse heard the dysfunctional duo moaning with lust, the sexual release heightened by the foul-mouthed sparring - the titillating foreplay of culturally-challenged dimwits.

But this was different. The woman never stayed out all night. “I ask questions but get no answers,” The roofer growled. “Where'd you spend the night?”

“Put a ring on the third finger of my left hand and I'll answer your moronic questions.”

Fluffing the pillow, Jesse placed his hands behind his head. This was about as entertaining, as a carnival freak show. “One more smart-mouth remark,” the roofer snarled, “and I'll slap you silly.”

Dead silence.

Jesse eased up on his elbows and listened attentively. *Don't feed into his homicidal rage. Back off. Leave the room. Go take a shower. Keep your pie hole shut. Don't say another solitary thing. Don't –*

“Asshole!”

Two sets of feet scurried back and forth about the one-bedroom flat, followed by the crash of overturned furniture as the roofer beat his unfaithful lover. Jesse jumped out of bed and rushed up the stairwell taking the risers two at a time. By the time he reached the apartment, the

door was already ajar. Several male residents, who lived on the same floor, were restraining the boyfriend. The distraught girl sported a chipped tooth and black eye. A clump of hair was missing off the top of her head. Like an oversized dust bunny, the frizzy strands lay in a jumbled heap on the living room rug. Five minutes later police arrived and carted the roofer off to the lockup. The following week, Jesse spotted the lovebirds lounging by the pool. A shadowy bald spot on the right side of her scalp, where the boyfriend yanked the hair out, remained but new growth was filling in nicely.

In early August when the letter to renew his lease arrived from the rental agency, Jesse called home. "How you doing, Mom?"

"Good and you?"

"Well, that's just it. Five hundred bucks a month for a hole-in-the-wall, efficiency apartment... this complex is grossly overpriced. Plainville isn't really all that convenient to where I work, and things can get a bit lonely especially when nobody's around on holiday weekends and ..." He paused to catch his breath. Such a mortal embarrassment - a grown man in his mid-thirties tucking his tail between his stubby legs and escaping back to the safe haven of his parent's home!

"For crying out loud," Mrs. Caldwell interrupted in a face-saving gesture. "Don't waste your hard-earned money on some crappy, sardine can of an apartment. Cancel the lease and come home where you're always welcome." She slammed the receiver down mercifully sparing him any further mawkishness.

Jesse lowered his grizzled beard into his hands and had a good cry. Stumbling into the bathroom, he washed his face, patting the mottled skin dry with a terrycloth towel. Then he pulled a cardboard box from the closet and began packing the cutlery, dishes, pots and pans for the eight and a half mile trip home.

At noontime Al Florentine was back again standing near the tire balancing machine. "Wanna grab lunch?"

Jesse's head was buried under the hood of a Camry sedan checking the transmission fluid. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be done with this bag of bolts."

At a Friendly's situated two blocks from the dealership, the waitress took their order and ten minutes later set a bowl of chili in front of the repair manager and tuna fish sandwich with a diet Pepsi next to Jesse. "Last December when the boss was away in Vegas," the repair manager stirred his chili, directing his words into the spicy broth, "I interviewed Miranda for the job." He sprinkled a bag of oyster crackers over the top of his chili. "The girl attended junior college for a couple years, but that didn't work out so hot. What with her handicap, she wasn't much of a party animal."

"She told you all this during the stupid interview?"

"Not exactly," Al qualified. The repair manager pursed his lips and spoke tentatively. "Got a problem with her gimpy leg?"

Jesse opened a bag of potato chips and splayed them on the plate alongside the tuna melt. "At first, but I don't hardly notice it now."

Up down, up down, up down. When she crossed a room it seemed as though the woman was placing her right foot in an endless progression of shallow potholes. Now the mechanic hardly paid any attention. Or perhaps Jesse logically associated the secretary with the odd gait –

so much so that, if she suddenly began walking with fluid grace, that might have seemed equally peculiar. “No, her handicap don’t bother me.”

“She’s a beekeeper. The half dozen hives in her back yard brought in over two hundred pounds of honey last year.”

“How’d you learn that?”

“During the interview.”

Jesse tried to picture his personal nemesis decked out in an alabaster bee suit with dark veil and calfskin gloves. Beekeeping – yes, that would be the perfect pastime for an antisocial control freak like Miranda Huffington.

“It’s really amazing stuff how honey bees arrange things. In July and August when the weather gets too hot, they’ll fan the entrance with their wings to cool the hive. Amazing stuff, I tell you!” The more Al raved about Miranda Huffington’s stupendous bees, the more infuriated his coworker became. “Wanna hear something funny?” He rushed ahead without waiting for any response. “In late August all the drones get the bum’s rush.”

“What’re drone?” Jesse muttered.

“Male bees. They don’t do much of anything other than play footsie with the queen and gorge on honey. In late summer, the female bees close things down for winter and the drones become *persona non grata*.”

“Persona what?”

“What with the frigid weather coming, there ain’t no place for moochers and deadbeats.”

Jesse raised the tuna fish sandwich to his lips but, felt a sharp pang – acid reflux – and promptly lowered it to the plate. “So the drones get kicked out in the cold to die a miserable death?”

“That’s right,” Al confirmed. “With absolutely no say in the matter.” The middle-aged man raised the spoon to his lips and ate with gusto making a raucous slurping sound as he shoveled the brown beans into his mouth. Al didn’t speak again until the food was gone. “Just before we broke for lunch, I was in the office shooting the breeze with Miranda and she says, ‘That Caldwell never remembers to sign the goddamn work orders. If I didn’t know any better, I might think the nitwit was screwing with my brain.’” Al snickered as though at some private joke. “Then, without skipping a beat, she adds, ‘Is the jerk dating anyone?’”

Jesse’s eyebrows scrunched together. “She called me a nitwit... a jerk?”

“You’re missing the point.” Al reached across the table and tapped Jesse forcefully on the forearm. “All the time I’m eating this chili, I been considering your options and it all boils down to this. Your personal circumstances ain’t more promising than that rusty minivan with the blown cylinder head over by the dumpster, and all the while Miranda Huffington limps through life in search of a good-time Charley.”

The waitress arrived and warmed Al’s coffee. When she was gone, Jesse leaned over the table. “I got this problem with the opposite sex.”

Al grabbed another roll, sawed it in half with a knife, smearing a pat of butter down the middle. “There’s medication for that,” he replied, lowering his voice several decibels. “Not that I ever needed any.”

Jesse wagged his head in protest. “No, it’s got nothing to do with plumbing.” A group of high school students wandered in and were seated at a booth near the back of the restaurant. “In social situations I just get tongue-tied... never know what to say, that’s all.”

“A personal shortcoming... so now you got something in common with the woman. Ask her out.”

“A date?” Jesse felt lightheaded. “She’d laugh in my foolish face.”

“Not hardly!” Al wiped the bowl clean with what was left of the roll. “Miranda thinks you’re a bit rough about the edges but salvageable... an automotive diamond in the rough, so to speak.” Al belched, loosening his belt buckle several notches. “The woman might be a sourpuss cripple, but I seen women like her mellow like a vintage Bordeaux when treated halfways decent.”

“That’s a tad melodramatic,” Jesse groused, “and I still don’t see -”

“This is what you do,” Al counseled. “Ask the broad out on a date. Treat her like there ain’t no female on the planet half as desirable.” He waved his hands frenetically in the air. “Sex on her terms, not yours! You don’t lay a perverted pinky finger on the woman until she sanctions it.” Several customers at adjacent tables looked up from their meals. In addition to a lingering dizziness, Jesse was developing a brutal case of heartburn.

“If there’s a freakin’ foreign flick from Kazakhstan playing at the Avon Cinema that she wants to see, you go and read the subtitles and tell her it was just about the finest movie you ever seen.”

“Okay,” Jesse muttered. “I think I understand.”

Clearing away the empty plates, the waitress placed the bill on the table. Al Florentine pulled a twenty from his wallet. “My treat. You pick up the tab next time.”

At five o’clock the mechanics packed up their tool chests and went home. Office help generally followed a half hour later. Jesse lingered in the repair bay until quarter passed the hour then meandered into a cramped office off the main showroom. “The *Blue Grotto*, it’s a fancy schmancy restaurant on Federal hill.” If you got nothin’ better to do, I was wondering...” Miranda glanced up from a pile of service orders strewn across the desk, her features as inscrutable as Sanskrit.

“A date?” She laid the yellow NCR copy she was processing on the desk and smoothed the edges with the spatulated tips of her fingers. “Never been there myself but I heard they got valet parking.”

Jesse cringed. He knew that the gourmet restaurant was notoriously expensive but hadn’t factored the added expense into the price of the meal. Miranda kept her eyes focused on the paperwork littering her desk. “It’s against company policy.” she spoke in a gravelly monotone.

“What is?”

“Secretaries fraternizing with the work-bay help... Mr. Patterson told me so when I was hired.”

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Jesse felt the turgid blood congealing in his brain. He shuffled halfway to the door on wobbly legs when her voice sounded again. “On the other hand, there’s no mention of it here.” She was clutching a copy of the Paterson Toyota employee handbook. “And I should know. I revised the manual... all thirty-five pages.” She sandwiched the three-ring binder between a row of paperwork neatly stacked on her desk. “I’m not doing much of anything tomorrow night.”

“Pick you up around seven,” Jesse replied. “I’ll make reservations.”

Saturday afternoon, Jesse found his mother hunched over the kitchen table stripping the skins off a bowl of Clingstone peaches. Earlier in the week she brought home a bushel of fruit purchased at a farmers' market. The flesh, which clung to the pits, was softer and juicier than the freestone variety sold in the grocery stores.

Crooking her thick neck to one side, Mrs. Caldwell sniffed the air. "What's that god-awful stench?"

"English leather."

Mrs. Caldwell gawked at her son. "Got a date?" Jesse's head bobbed up and down. A squat woman with a doughy nose, Mrs. Caldwell lifted her watery blue eyes heavenward. "I'll be a grandmother yet!"

Jesse watched her dice the blanched peaches into bite-size pieces which she tossed into a copper pot simmering on the stove. When the pot was half-filled, she sprinkled a generous cup of sugar over the fruit. Quartering a fresh lemon, she drizzled the juice over the mix.

"What's with the lemon?"

"Brings out the flavor." Mashing the soggy wedges in the palm of her hand, she drained the last few drops. "Opposites attract," his mother chuckled at the clever repartee, "even in food." She stirred the ingredients thoughtfully with a wooden spatula. "So who's the lucky girl?"

"Just a secretary from work."

The bubbling peaches exuded a tart aroma. "Can't go out on a first date looking like an ignoramus."

"What?"

"That grease spot on your fly isn't going to endear you to anyone. Go back in the bedroom and change your pants."

"The others are in worse shape."

Mrs. Caldwell eyeballed the thickening slurry before reducing the heat. "Take them off. I'll clean the stain by hand."

In the bedroom Jesse removed his pants and returned to the kitchen. "I never said anything about a first date," he grouched.

Now that the mixture had thickened Mrs. Caldwell proceeded to ladle the steamy fruit into individual preserve jars. A yearly ritual, she always steeped the preserves in a separate pan of water for ten minutes before tightening the lids. "Yeah, well..." She scrubbed the cloth with a wet rag and dish detergent. "The stain... it's thinning away to nothin'. Don't hardly show now." She handed him the soggy pants. "Throw them in the dryer and I'll run a hot iron over them when they're dry."

Drifting back to the stove, she teased a spoonful of fruit onto the ladle. "Taste."

Jesse nibbled at the hot fruit. A look of sublime joy ebbed across his grizzled face, the dark eyes scrunching shut. "Don't get much better than that!"

"Go dry your pants," his mother barked.

A half hour later as Jesse was inching down the driveway, the front door burst open and his mother waddled down the bricked steps. She thrust a jar of the homemade jam through the open window. "Geez," Jesse bellowed. "It's hot as hell!"

"Give the fruit to your girl friend."

"She ain't my girlfriend. Just a ..."

 He left the sentence dangling.

"You tell her I don't use no pectin. Nothin' artificial to thicken the spread. It's all-natural, fresh-grown. .. none of that high fructose, sickly-sweet, corn syrup crap."

"Yeah, okay." Releasing his foot from the brake, he continued down the driveway toward

the street. Before Jesse reached the highway, he cracked the glove compartment, tossed his mother's unsolicited gift into the cavity and slammed it shut.

"I ain't much of a conversationalist." They were cruising down the interstate ninety-five in the direction of downtown Providence. Wearing an inscrutable, sphinxlike expression, Miranda Huffington sat stiffly in the passenger seat, her slender hands folded in her lap. Since picking her up at the three-decker tenement behind the public library, Jesse hadn't spoke more than a half dozen words.

"All that mindless prattle," Miranda observed, "is greatly overrated."

"That's for sure." Jesse balked, not knowing what else to say. If he tried to elaborate was he further contributing to the garbage heap of vacuous jibber jabber?

"My Uncle Jack was painfully shy." Miranda cut short his self-damning reverie. "The man could sit in a room full of people and hardly string two words together." The golden dome of the Rhode Island state house loomed diagonally to their left. "Then he married Aunt Rita."

"And how did that work out?"

"Not so hot. The new wife was a non-stop talkaholic. Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. The woman never came up for air... never shut her trap two seconds back to back."

The last remnants of late afternoon light bleeding from the sky, Jesse could view the road clear enough but hadn't a clue where Miranda's monologue was heading "One day in mid-August, Uncle Jack drove to Green Airport in Warwick. He left the Toyota sedan with the keys in the ignition and booked a one-way ticket to the West Coast. No more captive audience. No more endless rants. No more Aunt Rita."

Not a bona fide smile per se, but the intimation of good humor flickered across Miranda's features. Jesse turned off the Atwells Avenue exit ramp. The Blue Grotto with its eggshell white, stucco veneer came into view directly ahead. "My father joked," she continued dryly, "that Uncle Jack should have married a deaf mute."

During the meal she ordered the *gamberie aragosta scampi*, which featured gulf shrimp and fresh lobster poached in a garlic butter. Jesse opted for the potato *gnocchi* tossed with caramelized onions, *pancetta* and *pomodoro* sauce.

"Al Florentine mentioned that you raise honeybees."

"Yes, that's true." Miranda dabbed at her thin lips with a napkin and a faint hint of burgundy lipstick came away with the sauce. The girl never wore makeup to work. The color softened her features. "Fifty thousand bees in a single hive... all working for the survival of the colony," she spoke in a confidential tone leaning forward across the table, "they're truly selfless creatures."

Dressed in a black tuxedo with cummerbund, the *maître d'*, a smallish man with a scant wisp of dark hair covering an otherwise bald forehead, was showing an older couple to their table. The last time Jesse wore a penguin suit with onyx studs down the front of a pleated shirt was during his sister Eunice's last wedding. "At the end of the summer the females kick all the drones out of the hive. That doesn't seem terribly fair."

Miranda eyed him pensively. "No, but the males might eat down the honey reserves and the colony starve to death."

"But then, Jesse protested, "in the spring when the bees emerge from the hive, there

wouldn't be any males to mate with the queen.”

“Toward the end of the winter,” Miranda explained they just make a new batch of drones to replace the ones that were evicted.”

After the meal they strolled about Federal Hill. Over the past few decades, the gritty, blue-collar community had witnessed a series of seismic upheavals. Those greenhorn Italians who originally settled the community had long since dispersed to the more affluent suburbs of North Providence, Johnston and Warwick as a wave of scrappy Hispanics invaded the streets running parallel as far down as dirt-poor Olneyville. Over the last decade, gentrification brought back the white-collar grandchildren of the original settlers to reclaim their heritage along with a mix of college kids and affluent yuppies.

At a bakery three blocks down from the restaurant Miranda bought a box of vanilla biscotti. “Did Uncle Jack ever resurface?” Jesse ventured.

“No, never.” A short distance from the bakery they paused in front of an art gallery featuring high-end pottery, ceramics and custom-made jewelry boxes. “You lived at the Beacon Woods apartments a while back,” she suddenly blurted in a peremptory, no-nonsense tone. “How come you moved home with your parents?”

Everything was blissfully perfect and now this.

Jesse hesitated considering his options. He could lie - resort to verisimilitude, bloviate, confabulate, bullshit his way out of the ticklish situation. Stalling for time, he peered through the display window of the art gallery at a keepsake box fashioned from a shimmery orangey black wood. A tag hanging from the box read: *Cocobolo, Mexican rosewood. Two hundred fifty dollars.* A pair of brass hinges was cleverly recessed into the carcass of the box, the back wall mitered to support the lid at a comfortable angle. The craftsman probably used a slot cutter chucked into a drill press to make the cut with the thin, sliver of a blade spun on a horizontal axis at low speed - six to eight hundred rpm's. Jesse didn't know any of this for sure. As a mechanic his stock-in-trade was finding solutions, fixing what was broke.

Everything but his sorry existence.

“If it's something you'd rather not discuss...” Miranda's voice jolted him back to the present.

“Living on my own wasn't what I expected. No, not at all.” In a gush of emotional diarrhea, Jesse described his wretched loneliness and inability to make friends at the apartment complex. He even told her about the roofer and his shrumpy, dark-haired punching-bag-of-a-girlfriend. “Pretty pathetic, huh?”

Miranda screwed her features up in a bittersweet smile. Time seemed to flow in slower and slower increments. “Damaged goods... that's what we are.” There was nothing maudlin or self-serving in her tone. Stepping in front of him, she thrust her face up under his chin. “Give me a kiss.”

“Peach jam... when I was a kid, my mother cooked it up in huge, copper pots every fall.” They were back at the car. “The mushy yellow fruit didn't look half as nice as store-bought jams or jellies. What with the dented lids and smudged labels, I thought it was bogus... stupid as hell.” Opening the glove compartment, Jesse handed her the glass jar. “My mother whipped up a batch earlier today. She don't use that gobbledegoose thickener.”

“Pectin.”

“Yeah, whatever... It’s nothing fancy, but the taste is to die for.” Jesse fired up the car and glanced at his date. Miranda was staring straight ahead with just the faintest smudge of a smile brightening her mouth, the jar cradled in her lap like a precious heirloom, a fruity talisman.

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Will the Rain Hurt the Rhubarb?

“Adrian Flanagan’s working three to eleven over at the Brentwood Nursing Home.” Like a poker player dealt a lousy hand and waits for his opponent to fold or raise the ante, Jason Flanagan fidgeted with his hands. “Thought I might drop by later this week to see how she’s doing.”

His wife, who was stuffing the washing machine with a load of soiled towels grimaced but never bothered to raise her head. The wiry, elderly man, who stood a tad less than six feet, watched her measure a cupful of Borax liquid detergent. Kate, a petite Italian woman with a pointy nose and auburn hair streaked with gray, sprinkled softener into the machine before closing the lid. Her eyes flared and lower jaw flattened like a battering ram. “Not a good idea.”

Jason could sense his wife raising the emotional drawbridge, walling herself up behind a thick slab of brittle-minded certitudes “Why’s that?”

“The nursing home is a private business, and you’ve no legitimate reason being there.”

Jason cringed. After thirty-three years of marriage, his wife was still doing ‘the voice’.

The voice was a stilted, phony as a three-dollar bill inflection that she inadvertently slipped into when out of her natural element. A set of gears in the washer clicked and the agitator began swirling the dirty clothes in the sudsy water. Only now did the woman step back, hands on hips, and look her husband full in the face. “Some things are better left in the past.”

“Maybe I’ll go see my brother.” He scratched his stubbly chin reflectively. “What’s it been... fifteen years now? I’m sure he’s heard from Adrian by now.”

Kate Flanagan cringed. “You’ll be wasting your breath talking to that moron?”

Jason knew better than to argue the point. His older brother, Jack, was worse than a moron. He was a belligerent slug who never regretted a personal indiscretion no matter how much damage caused. A pot-bellied Irishman, Jack Flanagan was a loudmouth braggart who made it big in the durable medical supply business. Adrian’s mother was a non-stop talkaholic, who would rather slash her wrists than spend two hours alone in the house with her own private thoughts.

In later years, Jason developed the bizarre notion that his niece, Adrian, was switched at birth. Her parents—that is, the bogus couple who brought her home from the maternity ward—couldn’t possibly be biologically related to this soft-spoken, angelic soul. It was luck of the draw, and Adrian Flanagan got dealt a pair of duds, imbecilic jokers from the bottom of the deck.

Fifteen years earlier, Jack Flanagan’s mug was smeared all over the *Providence Journal*,

when the IRS indicted him for tax evasion. A private accounting firm sent to review his corporate records at the medical supply company discovered that the flamboyant businessman, who favored Cuban cigars, Lincoln Continentals and off-colored jokes, was ‘cooking the books’. A slew of hospital beds and motorized wheelchairs that never left the company showroom had been billed to Medicare along with a hundred eighty-five bogus claims for bottled oxygen. Worse yet, an elderly woman with rheumatoid arthritis receiving inhalation therapy had been deceased a half dozen years.

Rumors circulated that Jack Flanagan was heading to Connecticut for a little rest and relaxation courtesy of the federal government. Jack’s new mailing address was a minimum security facility with an outstanding law library, soft ball field and state-of-the-art exercise gym. *Nolo contendere*. In the end, he copped a plea, paid a hefty fine and received a two-year suspended sentence. Case closed!

Throughout the ordeal, the man never showed a speck of remorse.

The week before his final court date, Adrian’s old man was yakking it up like a remorseless jackass at a Fourth of July barbecue. Decker out in Bermuda shorts and a garish print shirt, Jack Flanagan poked fun at the district attorney. Everyone cheated on their income tax, right? The unfortunate glitch with the hospital beds, bottled oxygen and wheel chairs was just sloppy bookkeeping. Sloppy bookkeeping to the tune of over two hundred thousand dollars!

At the cookout, not a single neighbor snubbed the man or expressed moral indignation. Even Jason’s parents, who damned the thieving bastard to hell in the privacy of their own home, laughed at their son’s flippant jokes and snide remarks. Jack Flanagan didn’t give a rat’s ass about a fall from grace. His only regret was getting caught.

Some things are better left in the past. The Thanksgiving following the indictment Jason was visiting his brother’s family. Adrian was hunkered down in the den, playing with a one-legged Barbie doll, which she was dressing in a glitzy evening gown. Jason remembered her as a round-faced imp with coal black hair cropped short —a persnickety tomboy with sparkling eyes, burnished coppery complexion and stocky frame. Adrian snuggled up alongside him on the couch with an impishly brazen smirk. “Uncle Jason, do you think the rain will hurt the rhubarb?”

“Well, I’ll tell you, Adrian,” he hunched over and whispered with a conspiratorial flair, “They’re forecasting a ninety-nine percent chance of torrential downpour, but if it’s in cans, everything should be okay.”

Adrian giggled infectiously but just as abruptly her features darkened and the girl lowered her voice several decibels. “Daddy told mom that she’s got shit for brains.”

In the kitchen, the thermometer popped and Jason’s sister-in-law was easing the turkey from the oven. “Cripes!” He didn’t know what else to say.

“She called daddy a two-timing louse... a human turd.” Adrian reached out furtively and grabbed her uncle’s wrist. “My parents hate each other so much they’re getting divorced. It’s supposed to be a secret so don’t tell no one.”

For a second time in as many minutes, Jason was rendered speechless. He was carrying on a conversation with a nine year old about things that no child should comprehend. “I want to come live with you and Aunt Kate.”

Jason watched as an array of holiday concoctions – string beans with almond slivers, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and butternut squash laced with honey – was laid out on the dining room table. “That’s not possible,” he countered. “And anyway, I’m sure your parents will work things out.”

“No, they won’t,” Adrian insisted glumly. “They’re too selfish.”

Jason stared at the crippled Barbie doll. One of her oblong breasts was jutting out from the tattered gown. “Time to eat!” The call to table rescued him from the need for any further half-truths and cowardly evasions regarding Jack Flanagan’s marital intentions.

* * * * *

A few months later, Adrian vanished from the home, dragged off to live with the garrulous mother’s extended family. Jack remarried the following year and his new wife, who was really just a repackaged, jazzed up version of his old wife, got down to business.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

They had three children, all daughters, in rapid succession. No one ever talked about Jack’s first child anymore. Ten years passed. One day Jason’s daughter, Rachel, took him aside. “Saw cousin Adrian last night.”

“Where?”

“Outside a musical in downtown Boston.” In her early twenties, Rachel was a prettier version of the mother with an equally blunt temperament but less pointy nose. “She was in the Theater District just off Tremont Street near Park Square, working the crowd.”

Jason’s face clouded over. “I don’t follow you.”

“Adrian was gussied up like a hooker. A car pulled up and the driver rolled down the passenger side window. They negotiated a price. Adrian jumped in and they drove off.”

Adrian Flanagan as streetwalker decked out in a flimsy halter top, neon hot pants and stiletto heels - this latest bit of titillating garbage fit neatly with the outlandish potpourri of hearsay, idle gossip and innuendo that filtered back to him over the years. “Did you say anything to mom?” His daughter shook her head.

Jason felt nauseous, light headed. “Sure it was Adrian?”

Rachel nodded once. Jason’s favorite niece still wore her dark hair in a close-cropped, pixie style. The same squat, compact torso. “She’s all grown up now,” Rachel reported with a sober expression. “Got hips and breasts.”

* * * * *

Later that night after supper, Jason removed the food processor from the cabinet over the sink and arranged a collection of spices and cooking utensils on the kitchen table. “What’re you making?” His wife asked.

“Hummus.” He ladled a healthy dollop of tahini from a metal tin into the bowl, then sliced a lemon in half and squeezed the juice into the mix. “Still visiting your brother?” Kate’s voice had mellowed since their conversation in the laundry room.

“Tomorrow morning,” Jason confirmed. Into the creamy paste he added salt and several tablespoons of olive oil. Grabbing a knife, he pried a garlic clove apart and began peeling the outer skins away from the fleshy interior. “I don’t expect much... just want to find out if he’s heard from his daughter.”

“I was a bit harsh earlier today,” Kate pulled up a chair at the table and cracked an apologetic smile, “but just the mention of your brother’s name sends me off the deep end.”

He reached for a jar of turmeric and sprinkled a half-teaspoon of the orangey powder into the food processor. “What are you reading?” he said, indicating a paperback at his wife’s elbow.

“G.K. Chesterton... *Orthodoxy*.” She took the crushed lemon rinds and deposited them in the garbage. “A Christian writer... very unusual.”

“In what way?”

“Chesterton said that children possess endless vitality. They want things repeated and unchanged.”

“True enough,” Jason confirmed.

“Here, let me read a passage.” She thumbed through to a section near the middle of the book. “It is possible that God says every morning, ‘Do it again’ to the sun; and every evening, ‘Do it again’ to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.” She abruptly laid the book aside.

“No, keep reading,” He insisted, but his wife began tidying the soiled counter and showed no inclination to return to the book.

Jason shook a dash of cumin into the mix. From the refrigerator he located a package of red peppers in vegetable bin and brought them to the table, where he sliced them methodically lengthwise into thick slivers. He was considering his niece and the rhubarb. How many times had she sprung that insanely corny joke on him? A thousand, ten thousand?

The childish prank never got tiresome. Each time he came to visit, Adrian set the trap. A child’s sacred ritual. Pure magic! Do it again! Do it again! Do it again!

Jason placed the peppers on a baking sheet, skin-side up and slid them under the broiler for ten minutes until the skin charred. Placing the slices in a resealable plastic bag, he set it aside until the vegetable steamed sufficiently to remove the peel in one piece. Dumping the bright flesh into the food processor, he reduced the pepper to a fluffy froth.

“Here, taste.” Jason tore a slice of pita bread into a wedge and scooped a generous helping of the coffee colored dip.

“Yes, that’s delicious. Real tasty!” Slipping her arms around his waist, she pulled him close. “Fourth of July’s right around the corner. If you hunt down your long-lost niece, invite her over for the holiday. We’ll cook up traditional fare... hot dogs, cheeseburgers, potato salad.”

“And red pepper hummus,” Jason quipped.

* * * * *

“I should have done something?”

They were lying in bed with the lights out, Jason comfortably nestled up against his wife’s rump, an arm slung around her waist. Kate only half-heard the unsolicited remark. “What did you say?”

“Back then... before Adrian fell off the edge of the earth, I should have done something.”

“Your brother’s toxic,” she replied acidly. “Everything he touches turns to shit.”

“True enough but I should have done something.”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. She was a dark-eyed innocent. What’s happened over the years... it felt like a Biblical curse.”

“You’re beating yourself up over nothing.” The room fell silent. Finally his wife rolled over and, wrapping her arms around his back, pulled him close. “The proper thing to do,” she said soberly, “would have been to remove Adrian from the maternity ward the day of her

delivery and place the newborn with a decent family.”

* * * * *

Saturday morning, Jason was up early and on the road. Half an hour later he pulled into the parking lot of a shabby, split rib concrete building with a sign that read Flanagan’s Medical Supplies. Killing the engine, he went inside. A portly middle-aged man with sagging jowls and a bald head looked up from behind the counter. “My kid brother, Jason... what brings you here?”

“Nothing special.” Jason glanced around the cluttered space. A collection of hydraulic Hoyer lifts were neatly stacked along the far wall. That was new. The oxygen canisters – portable and fixed had been repositioned further down the room. Respiratory care was a major part of Jack’s business. “How are the girls?”

“Good, good...”

“And Jasmine?”

Jack waved an arm, a peremptory gesture of disgust. “Royal pain in the ass... that’s what she is. Second wife ain’t no goddamn better than the first.”

“Your daughter’s back in town.”

“So I heard,” he replied.

“You haven’t seen Adrian?”

“I’m the father,” Jack shot back abrasively. “It’s her responsibility to chase me down.”

Jack Flanagan rubbed his flabby face with a mottled hand. “The feds hit me with another, stinking RAT-STATS.” When there was no immediate reply, he added, “You familiar with the term?”

“Yeah, I know what it means.” When the authorities did a Medicare audit and found discrepancies, they used an algorithm, a mathematical equation, to predict the likelihood of the event recurring over a broad span of time, usually a year. If Jack Flanagan inflated a bill by several hundred dollars and averaged seventy similar claims each year, he would have hypothetically defrauded the tax payers out of fourteen thousand dollars!

“How much this time?”

“Three hundred big ones.”

“Tough luck.”

Jack Flanagan smirked. “I’ll survive.”

“Why can’t you keep your nose clean?”

“I didn’t do nothin’ wrong,” he blustered, running all the words together. “It was a minor indiscretion... a bookkeeping error.”

An elderly woman with a pronounced limp hobbled into the store. Balancing on a three-pronged cane, she picked her way haltingly to the aisle with the motorized wheelchairs.

Between the digitalized parenteral feeding equipment, inhalation therapy supplies, hospital beds, wheelchairs and portable oxygen, there must have been a quarter of a million dollars in inventory littering the showroom floor. And that didn’t even take into account what his brother had squirreled away in the rear warehouse. With Jack, being honest earned you a comfortable living but was never enough, certainly not when the only valid crime was being stupid enough to get caught.

Reaching home, Jason found his wife puttering in the rock garden. “How’d your meeting with Jack go?”

Reaching down, Jason grabbed a clump of velvety blue lavender and let the delicate blossoms slip through his hand. Raising the fingers to his nose, he inhaled the bittersweet, cloying scent. "About as well as might be expected."

His wife gestured with a flick of her head. "Did you notice the visitors?" The ripe lavender buds were loaded with golden honeybees foraging for nectar. As they descended, helicopter fashion, onto a pale blossom, the delicate pastel stem dipped precariously.

Reaching down, she fondled an emerald green dahlia. The blood red flowers wouldn't emerge for another month or more toward the tail end of the season when all the other plants, except for a handful of hardy plants like sedum asters and toad lilies, had already played themselves out. Kate slowly rose from a crouched position next to the dahlias. "Are you going to see Adrian?"

"Later tonight."

"I could come along for moral support."

"No, it's not necessary."

* * * * *

After the evening meal, Jason drove to the Brentwood Nursing Home and sat in the car with the engine idling for a good twenty minutes before mustering the nerve to enter the building. "Adrian Flanagan?"

"Over in the west wing." The receptionist gestured in the direction of a passageway. "Check in with the nurse's station at the far end of the hall."

The Brentwood Nursing Home had a distinct odor—an odd mix of body wastes, Phisohex and medicinal ointments. Several bedridden women in adjoining rooms were moaning in a repetitive, sing-song fashion. As Jason passed the elevator, an emaciated gentleman dressed in a white johnny rose from his wheelchair setting off a shrill beep. A nurses aide came running and eased the fellow back down. As soon as his withered rump made contact with the padded leather seat, the hidden monitor fell silent.

At the nurse's station a colored woman was writing in a patient's chart while a male nurse sorted pills in thimble-sized paper cups on a medicine tray. A stocky, attractive woman with dark hair and a pink smock exited a room carrying a carton of juice. The worker hurried past toward the nursing station. "Adrian?"

The woman abruptly stopped and came back to where Jason was standing. Staring at him for the longest time, her features dissolved in a wispy smile. "Uncle Jason!" She leaned forward and, as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world, brushed her lips across his cheek.

At the nurse's station a telephone rang. The fellow with the pill tray was locking the medicine cabinet with a brass key. For a split second, it was like they were back on the sofa at his brother's house. "I'm off duty in ten minutes," she instructed in hushed tones. "Wait for me outside in the parking lot."

Like an apparition, Adrian floated off down the corridor disappearing into an adjacent room. Jason went outside and sat in his car. He felt mildly disoriented, as though time had begun flowing in the wrong direction, bleeding back into the past and forward into an as yet, unfathomable future - Einstein's theory of relativity turned upside down. A dozen years flushed down the toilet as though nothing had changed in the interim.

A little after seven o'clock, a steady stream of employees began dribbling out of the building. "Wanna grab a coffee?" Jason asked.

Adrian shook her head. "Got to get home to my little girl. I only live a few miles down the road. You can follow in your car."

Jason went back to where he parked. Adrian was a mother. A rumor to that effect circulated for years. At nineteen, she delivered a baby out of wedlock but signed away maternal rights at birth. A month later she was pregnant with a second child. Sadly, like everything else, the ephemeral truth lay buried beneath a bruising avalanche of tall tales, hearsay, melodrama and patently bad fiction.

Adrian lived on the second floor of a modest apartment complex in the Maryville section of town. When they opened the door, a small dog barking hysterically rushed to greet them. "My baby," Adrian said by way of explanation. In the kitchen Adrian removed a plastic container from the refrigerator. Scooping a serving into a bowl, she warmed it in the microwave. Before offering the food to the dog, she held the container under Jason's nose. "Bowtie macaroni, sweet potato, peas, carrots, corn, sliced apples, chicken livers and ground turkey."

The dog, a dirty gray shiatsu, devoured a chunk of turkey then went to work on the macaroni. Wolfing down the entire bowl in less than thirty seconds, it licked its chops, and then began rushing about the kitchen with its corkscrew tail arched over the hind quarters.

"You cook your own dog food from scratch?"

Adrian nodded. "How's my dad doing?" she asked.

"Okay. We sometimes get together at the holidays," Jason replied stiffly. "He had three more daughters with his second wife."

"So I heard," Adrian's lips turned up ever so slightly in a dry smile. "Are they nice?"

Jason hesitated. "The first two are obnoxious, but the youngest, Dawn, is rather sweet... reminds me of you."

Adrian scooped the dog up in her arms and nuzzled its face with her chin. "My father got himself into a legal mess a while back. Whatever came of that?"

"He beat the rap... walked away with a lousy fine and slap on the wrist."

"Sounds about right." The wistful smile lingered, but now her eyes turned flinty hard. "What have you heard about me over the years?"

The question caught Jason off guard. "A lot of hooley... lies and innuendo."

"Lies and innuendo..." She lobbed the words back at him like a tennis player parrying a well-placed shot. "And how do you know it isn't true?"

"Other family surely heard I'm back in town," Adrian continued after an uncomfortable silence, "but you're the only one with the decency to look me up." Adrian refilled the dog's water bowl and watched as Mitzi gulped her fill. She put the kettle on the stove and, when the water sent up a wheezy hiss, poured tea and placed a plate of sugar cookies on the table.

"This young lady," Jason reached for a physically challenged doll propped inelegantly on top of the sugar tin, "is she -"

"The only thing of value," Adrian interrupted with a sardonic smile, "I salvaged when my parents split up." "Did you know that Ruth Handler, a middle-aged businesswoman from Montana, originally invented the Barbie doll?"

When there was no response, she continued, "During a European trip Handler came across a German doll named Bild Lilli." The chesty novelty item wasn't exactly what Handler had in mind for a new product, but she purchased three of them anyway.

As Adrian explained it, the doll was based on a popular comic strip character. Lilli was a working girl who knew what she wanted and wasn't above using men to get it. At first, the

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