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*Avis*

THERE WAS A YEAR of no desire. I don't know why. Margo said I was depressed; Jill thought it was "the change." That phrase made me laugh. I didn't think I was depressed. I still grinned when I saw the roadrunner waiting to join me on my morning walk. I still stopped to look at the sky when fat clouds piled up against the blue, or in the evenings when it streaked orange and purple in the west. Those moments did not feel like depression.

But I didn't desire my husband, and there was no certain reason for it, and as the months went by, the distance between us grew. I tried to talk myself out of this, but my body would not comply. Finally, I decided to rely on what in my case would be mother wisdom, or as Sharlene would say, "to fake it till you make it."

That night, I eased myself out of bed carefully, not wanting to fully wake Jim. I had grown up in Las Vegas, grown up seeing women prance around in sparkling underwear, learned how to do the same prancing in the same underwear when I was barely fifteen, but years of living in another Las Vegas, decades of being a suburban wife, a

mother, a woman of a certain social standing, had left me uneasy with sequined bras and crotchless panties. My naughty-underwear drawer was still there—the long narrow one on the left side of my dresser—but I couldn't even remember the last time I had opened it. My heart skipped a little when I imagined slipping on a black lace corset and kneeling over Jim in bed. Well, I had made a decision, and I was going to do it. I would not give up on twenty-nine years of marriage without at least trying this.

So I padded quietly over to the dresser, and eased open the narrow drawer. I was expecting the bits of lace and satin, even sequins, but nestled among them, obscenely, was a gun. It made me gasp. How had a gun gotten in this drawer?

I recognized it, though. Jim had given it to me when Emily was a baby. He had insisted that I keep a gun. Because he traveled. Because someone might break in. I had tried to explain that I would never use it. I wouldn't aim a gun at someone any more than I would drown a kitten. There were decisions I had made about my life a long time ago; firing a gun was on that list. But there were things Jim could not hear me say, and in the end, it was easier just to accept the gun, just to let him hide it in one of those silly fake books on the third shelf of the closet, where, if I had thought about it—and I never did—I would have assumed it still was.

How long had the gun been in this drawer? Had Jim put it there? Was he sending a message? Had Jim wanted to make the point that I hadn't looked in this drawer for years? Hadn't worn red-sequined panties in years? Had Jim been thinking the same way I had, that maybe what we needed was a little romance, a little fun, a little hot sex in the middle of the kitchen, in order to start over?

I could hear Jim stirring behind me. He would be looking at me, naked in front of our sex drawer. Things weren't going exactly the way I had intended, but I shook my bottom a little, just to give him a hint at what I was doing.

He coughed.

I stopped then, not sure what that cough meant. I didn't even want to touch the gun, but I carefully eased the closest bit of satin out from under the barrel, still thinking that I would find a way to slip it on and maybe dance my way back to the bed.

"I'm in love with Darcy. We've been seeing each other for a while."

It was like the gun had gone off. There I was, naked, having just wagged my fifty-three-year-old ass, and there he was, somewhere behind me, knowing what I had been about to do, confessing to an affair with a woman in his office who was almost young enough to be our daughter.

Was he confessing to an affair? Had he just said he was in love with her? The room melted around me. Something—shock, humiliation, disbelief—perhaps just the sudden image of Darcy's young bottom juxtaposed against the image I had of my own bottom in the hall mirror—punched the air out of me.

"I wanted to tell you. I know I should have told you."

Surely, this was not happening. Jim? Jim was having an affair with Darcy? (Or had he said he was in love?) Like the fragment of an old song, my mother's voice played in my mind. "Always leave first, Avis. Get the hell out before they get the hell out on you." That was Sharlene's mantra: get the hell out first. She'd even said it to me on my wedding day. It wasn't the least surprising that she'd said it, but still, I had resented that comment for years. And, look, here she was: right. It took twenty-nine years. Two kids. A lot of pain. But Sharlene had been right.

It all came rushing in then. Emily. And Nate. And the years with Sharlene. The hard years. The good years. Why Jim had seemed so distant. The shock of Jim's words, as I stood there, still naked, still with my back to my husband, my ass burning with shame, brought it all rushing in. So many feelings I had been trying not to feel. It seemed suddenly that the way I had been trying to explain things to myself—the way I had pretended the coolness in my marriage was just a bad patch; the way I had kept rejecting the signs that something was wrong with Nate, that Nate had changed, that I was afraid for Nate

(afraid of Nate?); the way that getting older bothered me, though I was trying not to care, trying not to notice that nobody noticed me, trying not to be anything like Sharlene—it seemed suddenly that all of that, all of those emotions and all of that pretending, just came rushing toward me, a torpedo of shame and failure and fear. Jim was in love with Darcy. My son had come back from Iraq a different man. My crazy mother had been right. And my whole life, how hard I had tried, had come to this. I could not bear for Jim to see what I was feeling.

How could I possibly turn around?

I AM NINE YEARS OLD, and inspecting the bathtub before getting in. I ignore the brown gunk caked around the spigot, and the yellow tear-shaped stain spreading out from the drain; I can't do much about those. No, I am looking for anything that moves, and the seriousness with which I undertake this task masks the sound of my mother entering, a good hour before I expect her home from work.

“Yep. You sure have got the Briggs girl ass. That'll come in handy some day.”

She laughs, like she has said something funny. I am frustrated that my mother has walked in the bathroom without knocking, and I don't want to think about what she has just said. I step in the bathtub quick, bugs or not, and pull the plastic shower curtain closed.

“Should you be taking a bath? What if Rodney walked away?”

“He won't,” I say, miffed that she is criticizing my babysitting skills. “He's watching *Gilligan's Island*.”

“Okay,” she says, and I hear her move out of the bathroom and toward the kitchen. She is going to make a peanut butter and banana sandwich. Sharlene is twenty-seven years old, and she loves peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

“I'M SORRY, AVIS. I NEVER wanted to hurt you.”

I was still standing naked at the drawer, my back to Jim, the red satin

fabric in my hand. I didn't know what to say to that. I couldn't seem to think straight, I couldn't seem to keep my mind on what was happening right that moment. Did Jim just say he was in love with Darcy? Why had I opened this drawer?

And still I was racing toward Jim's apology, grateful for it, hopeful. One of the first things I ever knew about Jim was that he was willing to apologize.

I AM TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD, and working at the front desk of the Golden Nugget casino. It's taken years to get where I am, years to extricate myself from Sharlene, years to create the quiet, orderly life that means so much to me. That day, Jim is just one more man flirting with the front desk clerk, one more moderately drunk tourist wanting to know if I am free that evening; I barely register that he has said he will be back for a real conversation at four. And, of course, he is not back. But at ten to five, he rushes up, carrying a bar of chocolate, and tickets to *Siegfried and Roy* at the Frontier. I hear his very first apology.

"I'm sorry. I know you thought I wasn't serious, but I was. I couldn't get here at four. I was hitting numbers at the craps table, and if I'd left, I would have caused a small riot. Please forgive me. You don't even have to go to the show with me. You can take a friend."

That's how he apologized. All straightforward and a bit flustered and as if he meant it, as if I were someone who deserved better from him.

I WAS WONDERING WHY THE gun was in the drawer. I was thinking that I would have to turn around. I was acutely aware of being naked. I didn't know which one of those problems to address first. Turning around. Being naked. Figuring out how the gun got in the drawer. And, of course, none of those were the real problem.

"I didn't mean to fall in love with her. It just happened. We've been spending a lot of time together at work. You've been so distant. I don't know. I didn't plan it."

He just kept talking. He seemed to think that I was listening. That he should talk. As if the fact that he didn't plan it could make it better. He said he was in love with her. Was that supposed to make me feel better? I wanted to get angry—I wanted to grab at the lifeboat of anger—but instead, my mind kept repeating—*cover your ass, where did the gun come from, always get the hell out first, did he say he was in love*—as if I were on some whirling psychotropic trip.

I AM SEVEN YEARS OLD, and Sharlene and Rodney and I have been living in and out of Steve's brown Thunderbird for a year. We fill the tank with gas whenever my mom can pick someone's pocket or Steve can sell some dope, and then get back on the road, driving until we are almost out of gas, until Sharlene sees a place where we can camp without the cops catching us, where there is a park bathroom we can use if we are careful not to be seen. We have criss-crossed the country, even driven into Canada. That was a mistake, because the border patrol might have stopped us. But they didn't.

The craziest thing about that year in Steve's car is that there are thousands of dollars crammed under the front seats. Steve has stolen the money, stolen it from a casino, and we are on the lam because he is afraid of getting killed, because he knows the owner of the casino will have him killed the instant he knows where he is, and Steve has decided the bills are marked, that the casino owner—some guy Steve calls Big Sandy—has written down the numbers on the bills and has banks looking for them. So he is afraid to spend any of it, not one dollar of it. Even when we are hungry, even when Rodney cries and cries because his ear hurts, Steve does not give in; he does not spend any of that cash, any of those bills. They sometimes waft up when the car's windows are open, and Rodney and I try to catch them, and Steve slams on the brakes and swerves the car and screams at us that not one bill can fly out the window.

"AVIS, I'VE BEEN TRYING TO figure out how to tell you. I didn't mean for it to be like this. I didn't mean . . ."

His voice trailed off. He didn't mean for me to be stark naked and totally exposed when he told me? Then why had he told me?

Oh, yeah, things were about to get awkward.

Awkward if you were in love with your girlfriend.

I lifted my hand to put the bit of satin back in the drawer, and I touched my fingers to the cold, hard metal of the gun barrel. I had never liked guns. I was afraid of them. Afraid of the people who had them.

IT TAKES SHARLENE A LONG time, all of the year I might have been in second grade, but finally she has had enough. She waits until Steve is passed out stoned, and then she grabs huge fistfuls of the cash under the seats, and she grabs us—I remember being grateful that she had grabbed us, that she had not left us with Steve—and we walk to an all-night diner. We hitch a ride with a truck driver, and after Sharlene and the truck driver are done in the bed in the back of the cab, we get a real hotel room, and a shower. Sharlene stays in that shower until the water goes cold, and each time that the water warms up, she showers some more, and after a night and a day and a night of her showering—with Rodney and me watching television sitting under the pebbled pink comforter, pretending it is a teepee, watching all through the day and the night, whatever shows come on—after that, on the second day, we take a bus, and we are back in Las Vegas.

“WHY IS THERE A GUN in this drawer?”

It was the first thing I had said since Jim started talking. I realized it must have sounded incongruous. It was the only thing I could make my mouth say.

“What?”

“The gun. Our gun. It's in this drawer.”

I was still naked. My back was still to him.

“I don't know. The gun?”

He sounded shaken. He was wondering if I had heard him. He didn't know what I was talking about.

WE STAY IN A SHELTER when we first get back to Vegas, where I sleep on a cot near a man who burps rotgut whiskey and we line up for breakfast with a lady who screams that Betty Grable is trying to kill her. After a couple of nights, we move to a furnished motel where Sharlene can pay the rent weekly. That motel is not too far from the motel we lived in before Sharlene met Steve, though it is not the same one we lived in when Rodney was born, and it is not the same one we lived in when Sharlene first came to Vegas—when Sharlene came to Vegas with me, just a baby, and the boyfriend who owned the 1951 Henry J. The Henry J broke down in Colorado, and Sharlene and I and the boyfriend had to hitchhike the rest of the way to Vegas. That's what Sharlene told me anyway, that's what I know about how I got to Vegas—that, and that the Henry J was a red car without any way to get into the trunk.

But they were mostly the same, those furnished motels. They all had rats, which didn't even scurry when I stamped my small foot, and mattresses stained with urine and vomit and blood. In all of them, the neon lights of dilapidated downtown casinos blinked through the kinked slats of broken window blinds.

"THIS GUN USED TO BE in the closet. Did you put it in this drawer?"

I didn't know why I was asking these questions. I didn't care why the gun was in the drawer. I just had to say something, and nothing else that occurred to me to say was possible.

"I put it there. I forgot. I mean, I forgot until just now."

I waited. Still naked. Was he still looking?

"It was a long time ago. At least a year. I had it out. I was looking at it. And you came in the room. I just wanted to put it away before you saw it. I meant to go back and get it, but I forgot about it. Until just now."

I thought about this. The gun had been in the drawer for a year. Jim was looking at it. He didn't want me to see him looking at it.



“Is it loaded?”

I heard Jim move, quickly. I almost laughed. I didn’t know why I had asked if it was loaded, but I had no intention of shooting it. And suddenly, it was not funny. Did my husband just imagine that I would aim the gun at him? That I was asking him if it was loaded so that I could hurt him?

What had happened to us?

WE DIDN'T STAY IN THAT furnished motel very long. Sharlene got the shakes. She said she couldn't be alone, not with Rodney and me anyway. So we went to live with a friend from the bar where Sharlene used to work. We lived there for four months, and while we were there, Sharlene smoked and talked and cried, night after night, with her friend. And then she stopped crying and she started laughing. And when Sharlene and her friend had collapsed on the floor, laughing about Steve and the bills and the wind from the windows, for the third time, I knew we would be leaving the friend's house, and we would be going somewhere else. Eventually there would be another man, and another apartment, and if I were lucky, another school. I would go back to school.

“IT'S NOT LOADED. AVIS, PLEASE. Turn around. Just look at me.”

I didn't care that I was naked anymore, and I didn't care that Jim had apologized, and I wasn't even thinking about what he had said about Darcy. I had reached some sort of disembodied state, and what I was thinking about was whether the gun might be loaded after all, and why Jim had been looking at it a year ago, and if there was still any way to get my life back.

I picked up the gun, and it was heavy for something that looked like a toy. I remembered this from the one time Jim had showed me how to shoot it. It took me a second to open the chamber, to hold the gun so that the slide would move back properly. I felt oddly pleased at the automatic way that I had opened the bottom of the

gun, released the magazine, checked it for bullets. As Jim had said: no bullets.

No bullets. What about all those stories? All those guns that weren't supposed to be loaded? All those toddlers killed, eyes shot out, lives broken? Bullets could hide.

I AM TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD, in the parking lot of the Boulevard Mall at an Opportunity Village fund-raiser. Emily is done walking, wants none of her stroller, sits perched on Jim's shoulders. Small grubby fingers cling to his hair, his ear, his nose, as she rocks there. Jim sees the truck, so I buy the ice cream, the simplest one I can find, but still a swirl of blue and yellow dye.

Emily is amazed at this experience. At the truck, at the kids clustered next to it, at the excited chortle of their voices choosing treats. And then the ice cream itself. Cold! Her tongue laps in and out.

"Jim, her eyes are like a lemur's. She can't believe she gets to eat that thing."

She kicks her small feet into his collarbone.

"Whoa there, pardner," he says.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's getting in your hair."

"I can feel it."

In fact, the ice cream drips along his ear and down his neck, and before she has eaten half of it, Emily has dropped the whole soggy thing on his head. And then she puts her hands in his hair, lays her cheek on the ice cream, and says, as clear and sweet as those ice-cream truck chimes, "Good daddy."

So what can he do? Except walk around in the heat with a cream-streaked child on his head, blue and yellow stripes dripping down his shirt, and me laughing.

And later, just weeks later, when Emily's fever hasn't responded to the Tylenol, when we have raced to the ER, when the nurse has plunged her in a tub of water, when the fever will not abate, when the doctor

says it is meningitis, when he says it sometimes comes on fast like this, when thirty-seven hours and twenty-eight minutes and a hundred million infinite seconds pass, when Emily lies there, tiny in the ICU bed, her breathing labored, then faint, then fluttery (like a little bird), then gone, then a single heart-stopping gasp, and then, again, gone. And no gasp. Later, after all of it, I am so glad we bought that ice-cream treat.

“AVIS, I KNOW YOU ARE upset. I promise I will do right by you. We can figure this out.”

“What about Nate?”

“Nate? I don’t know. We’ll have to tell him. Avis, I don’t know. I haven’t thought about this. I don’t know what we’re doing. What about Nate?”

“There’s something wrong with Nate. He’s different. You know he’s different. Something happened to him. And he’s not getting better. I know you’ve seen this.”

“Avis. We’re not talking about Nate right now.”

“But we are. We are talking about Nate. What you are talking about is everything. Me, you, Nate, Emily, everything. We are talking about everything.”

I had always known that I would never stop loving the man who left that little girl asleep on his head in the sun. But Jim must have held no equivalent debt to me. There was no image that kept him from falling out of love with me, no matter what happened, no matter how many times. No equivalent moment to a soggy ice-cream-stained child glued to his hopelessly knotted hair.

He stood up and moved behind me. I startled, and he breathed in. Jim was still thinking of the gun. He had said it was not loaded, but it bothered him anyway: the gun, and that I was holding it, and that I had not yet turned around. Then he pressed my bathrobe against my shoulders, offering it to me without quite touching me, his cheek very near my hair.

And I folded. I slipped to the ground with the bathrobe around me, and the tears began. I could not stop them. Awkwardly, Jim put his hand on my back, but I shrugged him away. He stood up and went out. Then I cried harder. Because I wanted Jim to hold me. Because how could I want Jim to hold me?