

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

The gunshots ring in our ears, clamoring off the ceiling and back to where I stand and they kneel. Nobody speaks or moves save for the wincing from the echoes. Her creamy jaw flexes as she squeezes her molars together. Her head droops slightly to the right, but she awkwardly straightens it, trying to uphold some facade of dignity. Her cherry blossom perfume trickles off her shaking body.

“Oh, Christ, you fucking shot me!”

She bares her teeth for a moment too long, giving the impression of a starving animal brooding over a slab of meat. Her eyes narrow as my head leans away from her gaze. The crowd remains motionless, frozen on their knees like Atlas straining to hold the weight of the world. *Those knees must be bruising by now.* I stare at the white marble floor, only for a second. Around the room, the displays illuminate from the glowing cases they're nestled in, splattered multicolored reflections dancing on the trembling hostages. Lucida diamond earrings, laurel necklaces with platinum chains, sapphires and emeralds wrapped in Soleste bands make their eyes sparkle like Christmas lights. I study the fantastic array of colors, feel the pulse in my neck thump and hum. *Her heart wasn't in it anyways.* I tug at the scratchy wool hiding my face, stretching it to cover the bridge of my nose and distort her look of anger and confusion.

“They've seen your face, doll. That's all there is to it.”

I sink another bullet into her already gasping stomach, sending shudders through the Van De Ville jewelry store and all of its occupants. She lets out a soft gasp as her knees buckle and she slumps to the floor like a sack of potatoes. *A graceful fall.* I inhale the aroma of the kill. A thin veil of abhorrence comes over me and I unload three more bullets into her fragile chest. I see her perfectly shaped breasts lay motionless. *I'm going to miss her tomorrow. I can't afford to miss her now. Not now.*

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

“Push her next to the other one.”

The old man with the wire glasses and the Parkinson’s hands rolls her, with difficulty, next to the smug man in the gray suit. *The fucker. The bastard.* His stiff hand still holds her black ski mask, which was a bitch to find in Texas in the middle of August. *All our beautiful planning for nothing. Because of him.*

The bastard.

I unload another bullet into the side of his face. I watch the jaw recoil slightly as his head bounces against the tile and then lays motionless. The coagulated blood barely makes a mark. *If only it was that easy with the others. The heroes. The saints.*

“Get the rest of it in the bag!”

I feel my voice changing, turning urgent. The adrenaline from taking another life has long since disappeared over the string of robberies, but the bloodlust is rapidly returning. Or maybe it’s something else. What once seemed so poised and controlled is now lost, lodged somewhere deep within her breastbone. *I can’t fight with this now.*

I picture how everyone else in Van De Ville’s must be feeling right now, not able to move, sobbing, breathing in short gasps so as not to bring attention to themselves. It makes me smile. I stare at the cattle.

“Ladies, gentlemen, nobody else needs to die today, so please don’t test me and do something stupid. You don’t want to end up like these two. And her? Hell, I liked her.”

What I’ve done creeps through my lungs. I swallow hard to force the lump in my throat back down to somewhere I don’t ever want to go. I feel my breath shaking, my grip twitching around the butt of my .45 she gave me for my birthday two years ago. Told me it was unmarked

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

and everything. Lord knows where she got the means. The bloody corpse lying at my feet gave me her murder weapon as a gift. Despicable. *No time for that now. Focus.*

I take a deep breath, tasting the air, and unload another round into her arm. Her body quivers from the impact for a moment and then is still. I scan the room, searching their reactions. Everyone, even the adult men give me the same twisted face. I close my eyes, envision her arm still moving, seeing her chest rise and fall from her steady breathing. I never realized how much I took that luxury for granted. *Focus.* I shake my head and whisper a verse to myself.

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. They're all judging you. All of them!

I hear a scratching noise to my right. I spin on the heel of my boot and aim the gun into the chest of the shaky old man with the wire glasses. He holds his hands high, near his head. They continue their spasms, like watching hanging plants tremble in an earthquake.

“Get back on your knees, old man.”

He doesn't move. His legs look unstable, like a bad foundation beneath an old historical landmark, but he manages to stay standing. Sweat drips down the crevices of his wrinkled face and disappears beneath the collar of his button-down, forming small puddles on his shirt. His breathing is short and quick. *Heart attack?* I watch as his glasses slide down his nose and he pushes them back up with a shaky finger. His hands ball into fists and he licks his lips. I can almost feel the admiration coming from the rest of the group. Or maybe it's something else.

So, this is the guy, the one that's seen too many Steve McQueen movies and thinks he's going to be the hero, huh? A smirk spreads across my face and I inhale the comforting aroma of the kill-to-come snake over me. The dead man clears his throat and speaks.

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

“Son, what are you trying to prove? We aren’t trying anything funny. That man there,” pointing to the first body, “wasn’t in his right mind, pulling off her mask and whatnot. But the rest, we aren’t trying to stir up any trouble. We’ll give you our money and whatever else, no problem, but everybody’s scared. We have children here. They don’t need to see anymore death. They’re too young. Too, too young.”

I unload a round into his stomach, watch his eyes shake in his skull before they roll into the back of his head and he falls. A few muffled cries spark and sputter from scattered areas in the Van De Ville. I turn to the young girl behind the glass case.

“Hand me the bag now. I don’t care how much is in it.”

The old man’s bent glasses, now lying a couple feet from his body, gleam at the rest of the crowd as I pull the bag close to my chest. I don’t really care about the money or the jewels. Not anymore. The cash was just something to strive towards. *But not why we do it. Why I do it.* I look back at the old man on the tile floor. At the man holding her ski mask. At her. Her.

Grace.

My anxiety builds up again and my body stops, frozen in my position of power. I don’t even remember the chain of events that led me here anymore. Nothing makes sense. *What have I done?*

I look around the Van De Ville. Look into the faces. Look at the fear. All I ever see is fear. *They’re all judging me.* Except for her. And now she’s gone. Because of him.

The bastard.

I shoot a round into his shoulder, the sound bouncing through the small building.

“That’s it.”

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

I feel a calm shudder through the Van De Ville. I know they pressed the silent alarm. I know the police are on the way. *It doesn't matter anymore. Not without her. Not without Grace.*

The end happens in twenty seconds. As I stare at their faces, I notice the red dot on my arm. It sits on my forearm, dancing around on my patterned jacket. I lower my weapon and watch its small dips and dives. As it dances, it creeps its way up my arm, onto my chest, and disappears, up my neck. I glance around at the group that kneels before me. Not cattle. *My disciples.* I remove my jacket and throw it towards a young boy, leaving myself in a white shirt with a Star Wars logo on the front. *Still fits after all these years. Ageless. Timeless.* I stretch my right arm out as far as it will go, feel a different calm wash over me. My gun clatters to the floor. I turn for a moment and stare at the tattoo on my forearm. “*Dextera Domini*” *The right hand of the Lord.*

The bullet makes a subtle “chink” through the window, like two wine glasses chiming together. It breaches my forehead, through my frontal lobe, and finds the mushy center of my brain.

My moment of clarity.

I fall to my knees, dropping the bag in my left hand. My eyes bounce in my head, my pupils swinging like twin pendulums. I can't help it. I panic. And in my newfound panic, I pray.

Father, help me find her.

As I fall, my hand reaches out for the blurry shape next to me, searching for her hand, her fingernails with the light hue of lavender. Cherry blossom perfume seeps through my weakening nostrils.

A body. It has to be her.

It has to be Grace. My Grace.

Playing (God) in the Van De Ville

As I collapse, my blubbering mass of a head slaps against the marble tile, facing in the direction of her. Only it isn't her. Not the Grace I remember. Her face is contorted. Her eyes are glaring at me with confusion. No, not confusion.

Fear. Utter fear. *Judging me, just like everybody else.*

With my last moments, I feel her fingernails scratch my wrist. I shut my eyes, losing sight of the woman I once knew. The Grace I loved is gone, replaced with this creature beside me. I loathe her. I deserve better.