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Forbidden Things

The license plate on the new '69 Corvette read *Joe Jr 2*. It was the second among Joe Jr.'s vehicles, if the tag could be believed. Parked in the lot of the Crown Hotel, it belonged to the son of reputed mobster Joseph Franconie, known as Frankie the Blade for his alleged proficiency with knives. Claire once saw a black Rolls parked at the east entrance of the hotel, the side that faced the lake. Its license proclaimed it *Frankie 1*. Claire and her girlfriend Angela were coming back from tanning on the benches that lined the Lake Michigan overlook. Wearing swimsuit tops under loose sleeveless shirts, their golf shorts stopped a chaste two inches above the knee. Whimsical plastic flowers decorated the straw sunhats they bought at Gambrels Department Store, where they worked as clerks. Their oiled skin gleamed and they trailed sweet scents of banana and coconut.

"Don't stare." Angela turned her face away from the limousine. A voluptuous girl, always on a diet, she held up her hand to block her peripheral vision. "It's bad luck to look evil in the face."

"I'm not looking at its face. I'm looking at its car," Claire said, staring all the same.

The chauffeur at the wheel of the Rolls Royce glanced up from his newspaper. He seemed to look into Claire's blue eyes, though they were hidden behind her big round sunglasses. A twinge of excitement tingled in Claire's stomach. She pulled the end of her ponytail, wrapping the blond hair around her lithe neck as if it were a silk scarf.

Claire lived in the apartment building next door to the Crown. Her powder blue bedroom was on the third floor above the parking lot where Joe Jr. kept his sports car during the humid summer months. A pair of cheap binoculars hung in her bedroom closet, on the door hook behind the dry-cleaned white shirts still in their plastic bags. Claire spent hours at her bedroom window, binoculars pressed to her face.

Her vigil was rewarded with sightings of Joe Jr. climbing into his convertible. A handsome man in his twenties who preferred black and white checked three-piece suits, his black hair curled over his ears in keeping with the rock and roll fashion of the day. By contrast, his father was a short, Brylcreemed, man with a hooked nose who liked blue suits and loafers with gold bows on top. Frankie was frequently on the news going to and from the Milwaukee County Courthouse to haggle with authorities. Claire never saw him through her lenses. Her view was of the front entrance of the hotel; Frankie the Blade used the back door where Claire spotted his limo.

Frankie's mistress lived in a suite at the Crown. A buxom, bottle redhead who strutted on stiletto heels and looked every bit the part, Claire sometimes caught sight of her emerging from under the hotel's canopied doorway like a magician's accomplice. At least, Claire thought it was her. She couldn't be sure since Frankie was never seen in public with his paramour. No photographs of her ever appeared in the paper

Joe Jr. lived in the Crown as well. Claire wondered if they had cocktails together, Frankie the Blade, his mistress, and his son. She tried to peer into the rectangles of the curtained windows that faced her bedroom imagining the three of them on plush couches, Old Fashioneds in their hands, observing the strained propriety of secrecy.

Or did Joe Jr. ignore his father's woman? Did they ride the elevator together in an undeclared pact of non-recognition?

"Why do you even think about such things?" Angela said. "You know what those men are."

"Aren't you curious?" Claire asked. "Don't you wonder?"

"I don't spend my time contemplating mobsters and neither should you. What do you think they would do if they saw you spying on them?"

They were best friends, so of course Angela knew of Claire's voyeuristic hobby.

"Did you read how they found that guy in the trunk of a car? His throat was cut. Do you want that to happen to you?"

"That man was from Chicago," Claire said. "It had nothing to do with our gangsters."

A poor rationale, but Claire got gooseflesh at the sight of Joe Jr. striding to his Corvette. He walked across the asphalt like every inch he stepped on belonged to him, which it did in a way since his father owned the hotel. A bachelor, Joe Jr. escorted an assortment of women to the passenger seat of the convertible. They wore tight sundresses held up by spaghetti straps, or Capri pants below midriff showing shirts. Short shorts and halter tops. They tied kerchiefs on their blond, brown, black, red hair. Joe removed the hardtop from the car lifting it over them gently, like foreplay. He'd leave it leaning against the brick wall of the hotel for a lackey to stow. The women threw their heads back in laughter when Joe Jr. roared onto Prospect Ave. The binoculars trembled in Claire's hands.

One Saturday, making her way to the benches, Claire got up the nerve to cut through the Crown. Radio and suntan lotion in hand she hurried past the patio, its little red umbrella tables enclosed by a decorative wrought iron fence, and ducked through the ebony painted doors. The

entrance to the hotel's restaurant and lounge was inside on the left. Claire glanced through the open doorway at the red upholstered booths and marble bar with its black, ladder-backed stools. All the men wore ties, the women skirts or dresses — an implicit dress code.

Men in dark suits were scattered around the lobby on leather couches and wing chairs covered in elaborate material. They eyed Claire while the desk clerk nodded as if he knew her. She quickened her already rapid steps. Claire did not make eye contact but stared up at the crystal chandeliers suspended from the molded ceiling. Or away, to the white stuccoed walls and statues of Roman nymphs and goddesses. Or down at the thick crimson rug. She held tight to her suntan lotion, exuding its tropical scent, and rushed past the chrome trimmed elevator out the lakeside door.

What a thrill!

The next time Angela came over to tan, Claire suggested they take the shortcut through the lobby. She told her friend about the extravagant furnishings, the stunning statues. She didn't mention the shadowy men.

"I wouldn't want to breathe the same air as those people," Angela told Claire.

"It doesn't take long to cut through," Claire said. "You could hold your breath."

"Ha, ha, very funny."

They went around the block.

Not long after, Claire watched Joe Jr. exit the Crown heading for the Corvette. He stopped to wipe a spot from the fender with his handkerchief. Suddenly, he turned and stared straight up at Claire. They locked eyes through the small round lenses.

Claire dropped the binoculars. They swung on the strap around her neck, hitting hard against her chest. She pushed from the window, the low chair of her vanity scraping the wood

floor. The casement only covered by a white gauzy drape, Claire grabbed the crocheted pull of the yellowed shade and yanked it down. It spun round and round on its roller. The pull slapped the top of the window, punctuating the beating of Claire's heart.

She could still see Joe Jr. on the far side of the lot. He stood for a moment before he climbed into the Corvette and backed out of the parking spot. He stopped the car right below her window and gunned the engine. Claire held her breath until Joe Jr. raced out onto the avenue. She put the binoculars in their scuffed brown case and hung them in the closet.

"You'll be happy to know I've decided never to watch Joe Jr. from my bedroom window," she told Angela the next day. "Never again."

"Well, halleluiah," Angela said. "Now I can stop worrying."

They were on the number 35 bus on their way home from work. That route went down Brady Street in the old Italian neighborhood. Claire's apartment was within walking distance of Brady and, in the past, she might get off the bus early to pick up a loaf of hard crusted bread from Cantini's bakery, the heady aroma of yeast making her mouth water. Sometimes she bought homemade sausage from Alioto's meat market, cradling the bundle of soft white butcher's paper. On hot days, after she got paid, Claire treated herself to a dish of spumoni ice cream at Ballestrari's corner store.

Recently, however, the Hippies had moved in. They came one weekend in spring and never left, transforming Brady Street into a Midwest version of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. Women in heavy black shoes and long housedresses swept their stoops shouting in Italian at girls dressed in bright clothing, their hair braided with feathers. Merchants shoed away unkempt young men with bare feet and beards. The street filled with the sound of guitars and harmonicas. A strange smell wafted through the air.

“Gypsies.” Angela spat out the word. “That’s all they are, dirty Gypsies.”

A girl in a rainbow dress walked by the slow moving bus. An ankle bracelet of bells tinkled with her steps.

“Where’s Quasimodo when you need him?” Angela said.

Claire pulled the stop cord above her head.

“What are you doing?” Angela pushed Claire into the seat. “You can’t walk home from here. Not anymore. Not with those vagrants around.”

“They look harmless to me. Besides I want to pick up a few things. I’ll be all right. See you tomorrow.”

Claire hopped off the bus into the sun.

Inside Cantini’s bakery, a crone argued with Mrs. Cantini. The old woman banged a hard roll on the pastry case. Foreign words flowed over each other. They ignored Claire when she entered, though the cowbell on the door gave notice of her arrival. Then Mrs. Cantini held up her hand, signaling silence.

“You there,” she looked past Claire, “Zingaro, get out of my store.”

Claire turned to see a Hippie boy, beaded necklace against his smooth chest, craning through the entrance. “How ‘bout some stale day old?” the Hippie said.

“Rattos! I’ll give you stale.” Mrs. Cantini grabbed the hard roll from the crone and threw it at the Hippie. He caught it with one hand. “Now get out before I call my son.”

“Thanks.” The boy grinned at Mrs. Cantini and left with the roll.

Mrs. Cantini softened when she noticed Claire. “What can I get for you, my dear?”

Hurrying down Brady toward home, Claire held the loaf of bread in the crook of her elbow. She felt out of place, the street crowded with teenagers arrayed in a myriad of colors.

Black skirts and white blouses were required of all the female clerks that worked at Gambrels. Claire wore sensible low-heeled shoes, no jewelry, and her hair was tucked up in a knot at the back of her head. Not much older than the Hippies appeared to be, Claire felt aged, mundane, compared to their carefree manner.

Wooden chimes rattled from a stairwell leading to the basement of a two-story flat. Claire peeked down the steps. A shop of some sort; she could see fabric inside. A musky scent met her nose. It was inviting. Claire glanced around and descended.

The space was one room crammed full of batik dresses, patchwork vests, and tie-dyed T-shirts. Ash littered the counter where a stick of incense burned from the neck of a stubby bottle. Beneath were displayed woven bracelets, dangly earrings, and chains of glass beads. One caught her eye, bright yellow orbs with cobalt blue baubles.

“That one’s for you.”

A longhaired man in the dark corner behind the counter startled Claire. She clutched her loaf of bread. “I was just looking.”

Tall and thin, his straggly brown hair framed a woolly beard. An earring made from a fishing lure swung from one lobe. The smell that lingered on him was not that of the incense he burned. “I’ll take it out for you.”

She watched him remove the necklace from the case. He laid it on his hand like a rosary. A shaft of sunlight made the glass beads glow. “It compliments you,” the man said, “the blue of your eyes and the yellow of your hair if it was let loose.”

He dropped the necklace into a plastic sandwich bag. “Take it, it’s yours.”

“How much?” Claire was wise to sales techniques, had used this one herself: wrap up the item as if the customer already made up their mind to buy it.

“It’s yours, man,” he said. “I was waiting for you to come get it.”

Claire didn’t understand what he meant.

He took her wrist and pulled her in. “It’s free. Just pass on the love.”

She stepped out of the store, the necklace held before her like a goldfish in a bag of water. Claire didn’t notice until she got home that she had crushed the loaf of bread under her arm.

Safe in her apartment, Claire put on the necklace. It shone against her tan skin and brought out the tones of her eyes and hair, like the man in the store predicted. She unbuttoned her blouse at the top and spread the collar. How surprised Angela would be when she saw Claire come to work the next day, the azure and gold sparkling on her neck. Claire sighed. Angela’s surprise would turn to disapproval and Claire’s boss would make her remove the necklace. It was too garish for Gambrel’s Department Store.

Claire wandered to the window. She had kept her resolution to forswear the binoculars. Without them, she gazed down at the hotel from another planet, detached and far away. The parking lot was a dead thing, blacktop and car roofs. Then she noticed the open Corvette convertible on the street, stopped at a red light, the left turn signal blinking.

Claire glanced around at her powder blue bedroom, at the single bed, the reading lamp, the closet where the binoculars hung behind the dry-cleaned shirts. Hearing the engine of the sports car rev, Claire ran to retrieve the spyglasses.

Joe Jr. parked the car in his spot and took out a pocket comb. Through her lenses Claire saw him smooth his curly hair in the rear view mirror, intent on his image. He was so close. He filled the room. Claire imagined she could smell his cologne, sweet and musky, like things forbidden. Joe Jr. readjusted the rearview mirror, angling it toward her window. He sat very still.

Could he see her, watching him? Her hand went to the glass beaded necklace lying against her skin. She put aside the binoculars and headed for the door.