

1,690 words

Bless Her Heart

Here was Michael and Susie's daughter at the lounge on Seventies Night, looking a hot ass mess with her hair uncombed and her arms looped around some white boy's neck. Even before I got a good look at her face, I recognized her from her laugh and her behind, both of which had come from Susie. I had been hearing for eighteen months that she'd moved to Northeast and was milking her parents' friends for job leads, but I'd managed not to run into her even once. That was how I just *knew* the child would turn out to be a mess: The District's black intelligentsia is only so big, and I'm no more than two degrees' separation from each of about twenty people any of whom could have gotten her a halfway decent gig at an agency somewhere. And yet we hadn't had a single encounter, planned or otherwise, in over a year of living in the same quadrant. She wasn't trying. But you better believe I had been keeping my makeup right, my hair slick, and my cuticles pushed. Just in case.

And then here she was, in this bright yellow dress with nothing to it, slutty as all hell, and this white boy was handsome enough but didn't give two shits about her. You could tell from the way he was looking everywhere but at her body as she thrashed it around to the song. Which happened to have been a favorite of her daddy's a hundred years earlier. The beat would turn over and he'd dip his body like a ladle into a pot of melted chocolate. So then you had to assume this child had gotten her sense of rhythm, or lack thereof, from Susie. Who used to stand in a corner somewhere like she had a violin's bow up her ass, watching Michael dance with her face completely blank.

I think that girl is the daughter of a friend of mine, I said to my date, and I got to my feet, my hips looping loosely to the music. I walked over to the bar with my glass in hand and parked right by her, asking the bartender for another refill. The girl was actually bent over at the waist, her delicate fingertips on the floor, the yellow dress covering almost nothing. Could there be an easier song to look good dancing to? And yet. Her date's eyes met mine as she ground her behind against his thighs. *Help me*, he mouthed, a sardonic smile in his eye. He was cute, all right. But he didn't give two shits about her.

You couldn't blame him for indulging it, though: Her hair was a horror, but she had that crackling prettiness, just like Susie's. He let her go like that through the whole first half of the song, till just before the Three Degrees came in, the mild interest on his face giving way to perplexity and then boredom, and

then he leaned over and said something into her ear. She straightened up, panting a little as he walked away.

I love your dress, I said so she'd turn my way. So I could get a better look at her.

Thanks, she said in Susie's voice, pulling at the hem. Her eyes, which followed the boy on his march to the men's room, were glassy but wide and lovely, a brown so dark you couldn't make out pupils, and ringed with half a pencil's worth of black liner. Something, finally, from Michael, whose eyes could submerge you in nighttime at any hour of the day. Susie's eyes had been that saditty amber color, and she'd always done them up in green.

You're Michael and Suzette Lamb's daughter, I said. Aren't you?

Now her eyes snapped my way, a cringe flickering across her face, and she gave her collar a little upward tug. Oh, she said, smiling politely. Trying to look less drunk. Well, yeah, actually.

I'm Cynthia Hazlett, I said. Your father and I were good friends in college. Aren't you just the prettiest thing!

I could see that my name didn't trigger one bit of recognition, but before I could blink she had arranged her face into an unimpeachable imitation of warmth and familiarity. Cynthia! she said, and hugged me. It was all so Susie, the falseness of it, the fact that you couldn't find evidence of its falseness anywhere. She told me her name, one of those androgynous nightmares my friends couldn't get enough of in the eighties, and said she lived up the block from the lounge. That she and the boy had been walking by and been lured in by the pulsing disco beat.

You're your father's child, I said. He never wanted to leave the party till the DJ was packing up. He wore holes in some of my favorite records. This one included.

Haha, she said lightly. I just like a good beat.

I'm surprised your father didn't name you Lana, I said. He always talked about wanting a daughter named Lana.

Haha, she said again, rising to her toes to peer over my shoulder.

One of those things we'd talked about on meandering walks around campus or maybe after sharing a joint in someone's dorm room. A son named Michael Junior and a daughter named Lana, which

he said was the prettiest name he'd ever heard. Michael Junior, maybe, but I'll never agree to Lana, I had said. Because of what it spells backward.

Only an English major would ever notice that, he'd said, rolling his dark eyes to the sky.

But still! I'd said, laughing. You can give up now. I'm never going to say yes.

What *do* you say yes to? he'd asked, leaning in.

Why of all the conversations we had over three years, *that's* the one that stuck with me, who the hell knows. Except that later I caught myself wondering whether sociology-major Susie, who said no to plenty but couldn't spell any better forward than backward, was going to let him have his Lana. Whether that was part of it.

Where is he, Michael and Susie's daughter was muttering, fiddling with the yellow fabric over the place where the underwire of her bra would have been. If she were wearing one.

Maybe there's a line, I offered. It hadn't been long; the same song was playing as when he'd left. This was the part of it where Michael used to do eight surprise counts of the robot and then switch back into his graceful, slender-hipped hustle, his sculpted Afro spinning in perfect half-circles.

His daughter, now, was tripping over her own feet. *Fuck*, she swore as her battered purse slipped off her shoulder and onto the ground; and then, 'Scuse me, Cynthia. Like I was going to call up her daddy and tell him. I leaned over and got it for her, noting the ridiculous height of her heels. She'd gotten Susie's size, too, shorter than me even on three inches of cheap-looking wood. Thanks, she said in that same flat, unwaveringly polite voice as I handed the purse over.

I haven't been in touch with Susie for a while, I said. Does she still play the violin?

She stopped messing with her purse's busted zipper and looked up at me, all eyes, her lip twitching in a way I didn't recognize. Not Michael's *or* Susie's. Oh, my mom? she said.

She used to play so beautifully, I said. Your daddy said she made him learn to love real music.

Oh, she said. My mom passed away a while ago. I mean, a pretty long time ago. When I was five.

It's funny: As soon as she said it, I remembered hearing about it. Through the same grapevine that, twenty-five years later, would tell me the daughter was living in Northeast, struggling a little bit and looking for a halfway decent job. Michael suddenly a widower with two little girls, neither one named Lana, everyone dripping sadness and sympathy, a couple of my nearest and dearest actually warning me

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not to reach out because it wasn't the time. Remember how you carried on at their wedding? Carmen had said. Don't put him through that same thing again.

Which I wouldn't have. He had cut his hair by then, was living all the way up in Philadelphia, raising little girls. I was firmly established in the District, raising no one, too busy filling my 401(k) to worry about all the births and deaths clogging up the alumni newsletter.

I'm so sorry, I said; and, Let me get your next drink.

Okay, she said, slinging the strap of her purse over one shoulder. It's whisky and soda.

What Susie would think, I thought as I ordered it, upgrading her to the top-shelf stuff. Susie, who wore her hems long and her shirts buttoned all the way up her pretty neck. Who wouldn't touch a drop of anything when we all piled into someone's room and shared two six-dollar bottles of wine.

Is it her? asked my date when I returned to my seat.

Sure is, I said, drumming my fingertips over his knuckles. We both watched for a while as she stood there, sipping her expensive drink and grabbing uncomfortably at the elastic around her décolletage. As the song ended and the DJ switched over to something from the eighties, something he was trying to pass off as disco.

Did her date leave? asked my date after a while.

I checked the time and saw that more than ten minutes had passed. Looks like maybe, I said. We watched her slam her empty glass onto the bar, wobble a bit on her heels, lift her phone to her face. Texting and backspacing with unsteady fingers.

Stupid man, said my date. Leaving a pretty girl like that alone.

Well, for sure, I said, stroking his linen-clad shoulder. But, bless her heart, the child has no rhythm. She can't dance worth a damn.

Well, when you put it that way, said my date, lacing his fingers through mine.