

LIVING, A LITTLE

Julia had just been laid off by her tax preparation firm and Sugar--Julia's mother preferred to be called Sugar by everyone, including Julia--was between husbands. "What better time," Sugar cooed into the telephone, "for a little mother-daughter bonding?"

"How?" Julia said. Cautiously. Bonding with Sugar usually ended up making Julia feel less like her mother's daughter, not more.

"Road trip!" Sugar said. "My treat!"

"Actually, I need to concentrate on finding some temp work," Julia said.

"Bullshit! We've both just come through horrible ordeals. We deserve this."

Julia hadn't considered losing her job such a horrible ordeal. It happened every year. And Sugar's divorces were pretty much regular events also. Sugar's divorce from husband number seven, a pudgy, sweet little man who owned a two-store hardware chain in Fresno, had been amicable. Julia had liked Seven but Sugar was now concentrating on Possible Eight, a middle-aged chiropractor from Sacramento. Possible Eight had a condo in Incline Village at Lake Tahoe.

"Don't pack a thing," Sugar told her. Sugar already had access to Possible Eight's credit cards. "We'll get whole new wardrobes while we're up there -- aprÈs ski stuff. You

know, tight stirrup pants and those furry snow bunny boots.”

“It’s almost June,” Julia said. She didn’t want to think about tight stirrup pants. She had spent the last five months sitting in an office where the boss brought in a box of doughnuts every Tuesday and Friday. Julia had a weakness for doughnuts. Lately, she’d noticed a definite ledge of fat running around the top of her thighs, as if instead of eating a doughnut or two, she had simply stepped into a giant one like an inner tube and rolled it up her legs where it remained, wedged under her rear end. It wasn’t a big ledge; put in proportion, it was only as big a ledge as the kind people crept out onto in high rises to commit suicide from, their toes and the balls of their feet suspended over the drop. Still, if you pulled a pair of stretch pants onto the high rise, the bulge of the ledge would be definitely noticeable. “Nobody will be skiing in August,” Julia said.

“Just this once,” Sugar sighed, “try not to spoil everything with your negative attitude.”

Julia couldn’t help thinking that her mother often confused reality with a negative attitude. And the worst reality of all was, of course, Julia herself. Sugar was glamorous. Julia was mousy. Sugar’s hair was a creamy blonde. Julia’s was a washed out brown. Sugar was tall and shapely. Julia was short and fond of pastry.

They both had the same distinctively wide, icy blue eyes and a nose that swooped up at the tip like a pixie. But that only made things worse. Julia knew she was the only girl in America whose mother was offended when somebody asked if the two of them were sisters.

“C’mon,” Sugar said, “live a little. We’ll go to a casino. Have fun. You used to like to have fun.”

Julia supposed Sugar was referring back to when she was six and enjoyed being pushed on a swing. Still, Julia had always wanted to go to a casino. She thought she might be good at gambling, being an accountant. Wasn't it all just numbers? Odds and averages? She imagined herself in the kind of evening gown that might conceal her ledge, a hoop skirt perhaps, leaning across the craps table, murmuring, "Come on, seven." She'd need to read up on why she'd be murmuring that.

Two days later her mother pulled up in front of Julia's apartment building driving a new green minivan.

"Where's your Mustang?" Julia asked. Seven had given Sugar a classic '67 Mustang, a glossy powder blue with exhaust pipes so loud the noise loosened your back molars.

"The chiropractor's got children, can you believe it?" Sugar said the word "children" the way she might say he had herpes. "I traded the Mustang in. I'm cultivating a more domestic image."

Julia threw her purse into the pristine backseat. Her mother *did* look more motherly than usual. She was wearing knee length Capri pants and white sandals. She had whittled the two-inch red talons she normally sported into something resembling functional human fingernails. Her face looked freshly scrubbed and her hair was swept back in a ponytail and tied with a scarf. She looked like a 1950's movie star playing housewife for the cameras.

"You look nice," Julia said, without thinking. "Pretty."

Her mother narrowed her eyes. Julia braced herself. Compliments from women

always made her mother suspicious and mean, even if the woman giving the compliment was just frumpy old Julia. “What the hell is going on with your thighs?”

Julia slid into the front seat and scrunched down. “I’ve gained a couple of pounds.”

“A couple of pounds?” Sugar said, pulling away from the curb. “You look like you’re smuggling drugs in your pants. We’ll be lucky if we don’t get stopped at the border coming back into California.”

“They’re not looking for drugs at those border checks,” Julia mumbled, “they’re looking for plants.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Sugar said, rolling her eyes. “Why would anyone smuggle plants in their pants?”

Sugar insisted on shopping as soon as they hit Tahoe. “There are two basic functions of clothing,” Sugar told the tiny, chic salesgirl at a tiny, chic boutique. “Enhancement,” she pointed to herself, “or camouflage,” she waved her hand at Julia.

Julia stared up at the ceiling. She preferred shopping at the big box stores where she didn’t need to try anything on or look in a mirror. She didn’t need to be reminded that she had lumpy areas.

“She shouldn’t wear high-waisted pants like that,” the salesgirl nodded.

“She has reasonable calves,” Sugar said, lifting up one of her own legs to admire it. Sugar’s leg was lean and brown. Julia imagined her own legs, white as Wonder bread, possibly not recently shaved, quivering like aspic under her jeans.

“She should probably stick to skirts,” the salesgirl said.

“Short skirts,” Sugar said. She had apparently abandoned the aprÈs ski idea.

“Or short shorts?”

“Skorts! And high heels.” Sugar clapped her hands. “And something fun and playful on top.”

“Um,” Julia said, growing alarmed. There was that word again. Julia wasn’t sure what fun clothing was but it didn’t sound like something she wanted to wear.

“Just this once,” Sugar said, “let me dress you in something flattering. Live a little.”

Fun turned out to be a fuzzy and fringed lavender sweater with a keyhole cutout strategically placed so that it revealed most of Julia’s breasts. This, paired with a pair of white shorts and strappy platform sandals, was so much fun Julia was worried that people might burst out laughing when they saw her.

“I love it,” Sugar said.

“You can’t be serious,” Julia said. “I look like Cookie Monster's older sister.”

“No, I do love it,” Sugar said, chewing her lip. “I’d wear that in a heartbeat.”

Sugar looked down at her own new outfit, staid khaki slacks with a crisp crease and a flowered blouse. Sugar didn’t look happy but she was open to change. Julia had always admired how her mother seemed able to do whatever it took to adapt to new situations, to just go with the flow. A chameleon--that was Sugar. And Julia was the constant—constantly boring, constantly plain, constantly plodding through life. The merry-go-round to Sugar’s roller coaster.

Julia turned to look at herself in the mirror again. One thing was certain. No one would notice her ledge of fat. Long hairs from the sweater floated up, tickling the

underside of her chin. What poor animal produced this kind of yarn? Her breasts looked like two hairless baby bunnies curled up inside an Easter basket.

Maybe her mother was right; maybe Julia did have a negative attitude.

“Okay,” Julia sighed, “why not?”

Julia was reasonably sure that no one would give her a second glance at a casino. She'd watched television. She'd seen a James Bond movie or two. Casinos were full of eccentric types--Elvis impersonators, gangsters' molls, just-married brides with veils, tiaras, and hot pants, drunk college boys sporting backward baseball caps.

So she was surprised when the North Shore casino that Sugar took her to was dignified, understated, with an older crowd. She guessed the average age to be seventy-ish. Everyone turned to stare at her. Julia felt like a furry lavender emu that had wandered into a rest home. She found walking any distance in her new “fun” sandals difficult. During the short walk from the parking lot to the casino, Julia’s ankles had buckled and actually made contact with the ground several times. Sugar had insisted they keep their purses in the car--“Only take what you can afford to lose,” she said--so Julia had wrapped a twenty dollar bill around her cell phone and tucked it between the bunnies where the little package shifted every time Julia moved her arms. The short shorts kept bunching up into the “V” of her crotch; it seemed unladylike to adjust them in public and yet impossible to leave them crammed up where they were determined to go. Just placing one foot in front of the other required the concentration of a plate spinner.

Sugar led Julia past the Black Jack tables, giving each one an expert glance. “We should split up,” she said, tapping her finger against her lips. “I’ll meet up with you in

the bar in an hour. Live a little, goddamit.”

“Don't you dare leave me,” Julia said, trying to grab Sugar's arm, but Sugar was quick and Julia's cell phone took that moment to slip farther down between her breasts. Sugar disappeared behind a bank of slot machines.

Julia staggered to the nearest stool and plopped down. The imitation leather adhered itself immediately to her bare thighs. The beeps and chirps of hundreds of machines whizzed around her like ricocheting bullets. It felt safer to just stay where she was, what with the shorts and the shoes and the traveling cell phone situation. She would just sit there until Sugar came back.

Julia studied the machine in front of her. There were rows of flashing electronic images: palm trees, diamond rings, cars, cartoon rodents. Superimposed on the screen was a spider web of blinking lines – triangles, squares and parallelograms that reminded Julia of high school geometry. Julia had hated geometry.

“You can't sit there,” a gravely voice called out. A gnome with red lipstick and blindingly white teeth sat perched at a machine two stools away. A cigarette smoldered in the ashtray in front of her.

“You can't sit there,” the gnome croaked again. “That's my friend's machine. She went to get change.” She pushed her glaring dentures out at Julia like she was sticking out her tongue then snapped them back into her mouth.

“Baloney,” said a man coming up behind Julia. “She's there now. You snooze, you lose. You go for it, sweetie.”

Julia turned to look at him. He was middle-aged with thick glasses that magnified his rheumy eyes to pie-sized proportions. He looked at Julia with something like

admiration though it might have been the effect of the glasses. He had called her “Sweetie.” Julia felt like someone else, someone sexy and wild and worldly, someone strangers wanted to talk with, flirt with. She raised a fluffy purple shoulder and smiled. “Thank you,” she said. “I will go for it.”

There was a brief struggle as she reached through the keyhole in her sweater and fought with the bunnies to relinquish her cell phone and the twenty-dollar bill. A small army of diminutive men gathered out of nowhere to watch. “Need help?” the man with the glasses said, and Julia threw her head back and emitted a series of yelps which she hoped might be perceived as madcap laughter. A couple of the men applauded when she pulled the money out and she bestowed upon them her biggest smile.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a man at the end of the row of machines. He gazed at her with an inscrutable expression. He was younger, as in not over sixty; more like thirty-something. He wore nice slacks and a short-sleeved shirt that showed off a pair of tanned, muscular arms. He was handsome, in the square-jawed, thick-necked way of a soldier. She tossed her hair like she’d seen her mother do when she knew a man was watching.

She found the feeder for the twenty. Then she took a breath, inhaled one of the long hairs from her sweater, choked a little, and pushed a big round button that read, “Maximum Bet.”

The images on the screen shuddered and regrouped. The machine played a happy tune and then went silent.

“What happened?” Julia said.

“You lost,” the gnome rasped.

“Tough luck,” the man with the glasses said slapping her heartily on her back. He stared over her shoulder at her breasts. “Got any more cash down there?”

“No,” Julia said, feeling deflated and indignant at the same time.

“Want some?”

Julia peeled her thighs from the stool and wobbled to her feet. She did not like to lose her hard-earned money, especially when she was currently out of work. She did not like this man looking at her breasts like they were being served up to him for dinner. The nice looking man was gone. She felt ridiculous, gangly, awkward, and half-naked. As if on cue, Julia thought she heard her mother’s throaty laughter floating over the din of the slot machines, mocking her. The unfairness of it all made her knees as weak as her ankles.

“Excuse me,” Julia said and lurched away.

Julia found an empty table in a dark corner of the casino’s bar. The cocktail waitress pursed her lips and stared pointedly at Julia’s ridiculous sweater. Julia told her she was just waiting for somebody, pressing herself back into her seat until she all but disappeared into the shadows. Julia knew how to be invisible.

There was no answer when Julia called her mom’s cell phone. She imagined Sugar surrounded by every man in the casino, shrieking with laughter, the life of the party. After forty-five minutes of hitting redial, Julia crept out of the bar and, sticking close to the walls, staggered through the casino. Her mother had disappeared. Julia hoped Sugar hadn't forgotten about her. Julia did not know the address of Possible Eight’s condo, didn’t have any cab fare if she had the address, and didn’t have a key if

she had the cab fare.

Julia hobbled back into the bar. She thought both her ankles might be dislocated and the sweater was giving her an itchy rash on the swath of exposed skin across her chest. It was nearly midnight. Julia noticed that the bartender and the cocktail waitress put their heads together as she walked past.

“I’m meeting someone,” she said again.

The bartender glared then turned and picked up a telephone. For customer service employees, Julia thought, they seemed rather surly.

Before Julia reached her little table, her cell phone vibrated between her breasts.

“Where are you?” Julia spat into the phone.

“Goodness,” Sugar trilled and Julia knew instantly that her mother was not alone. “Hello, darling. Guess who came up to Tahoe for the evening,” Sugar said. Julia waited. “That’s right, *Donald* is here, can you believe it?”

“I want to leave,” Julia said. Donald must be Possible Eight, she surmised. Sugar had probably known he was coming all along.

“Sweetheart,” Sugar purred, “Donald and I are going out to paint the town. Can you find your own way to the condo?”

“No, I cannot find my way back.” Julia gripped the phone so hard her fingers ached. “I don’t know where the condo is. And I have no money. You told me not to bring any money.”

“Oh dear,” Sugar said. “Hold on.” Julia heard a hand placed over the mouthpiece and the sound of Sugar’s muted voice. Sugar sounded like such a nice woman if she wasn’t your own mother.

Sugar came back on the line. “Sweetie pie,” Sugar said, “John is going to run in to the casino right now and give you some money for a cab get home. I described what you’re wearing.” She paused then hissed. “Give us a half an hour before you head to the condo.”

“What? No, I want to leave now.”

“He’s on his way,” Sugar said in a syrupy voice and hung up.

Instantly a man walked into the bar and approached the bartender who turned and pointed to Julia. The man barreled toward her. Julia imagined that the prospect of being with her mother was enough to make a man hurry. At least this guy *could* hurry. Her mother typically liked overweight mama’s boys or frail widowers, soft men with money who were overwhelmed by Sugar’s brand of oozing sensuality. Then, as he approached in the dim light, Julia saw that it was the same man who had watched her lose her twenty dollars earlier in the evening. He recognized her too. He smiled. Great, Julia thought. The one guy in the whole place she had enjoying leering at her was going to be her new stepfather. Could this night get any better?

“Hey,” Possible Eight said, leaning onto the table. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Julia was tired. It was late. Her ankles felt like she’d been shackled and hung upside down. Her breasts itched.

“Look,” Julia said wearily, “we don’t have to have a conversation or anything. I’d like to get out of here. And I realize you probably just want to get going.”

Possible Eight had started to pull out one of the chairs. He seemed taken aback for a second. “Sure,” he said, taking his wallet from his back pocket. “So how much money will it take?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Julia said. “What do you think?”

“You must have *some* idea,” Possible Eight said. “Just tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“I guess twenty should be enough. And I’ll need you to write down the address.”

The man looked up at the ceiling, and then, almost reluctantly, pulled out a bill. He handed her the twenty with his left hand and, with his right hand, he pulled her to her feet. “You’re under house arrest. You need to come with me.”

He grabbed Julia high up under one arm and marched her past the bartender, who wagged his finger at her. “Don’t you know anything? You can’t solicit in here,” he sneered. A grey-haired, tall, and very distinguished looking man was standing at the end of the bar, staring at her with expression of horror. Julia had just a moment to watch Possible Eight’s mouth drop open before she was escorted forcibly out.

“That wasn’t even a real policeman who arrested you,” Sugar said the next morning as she merged onto I-80 at Truckee. “He was just a casino detective.”

“I know,” Julia acknowledged. “He apologized.”

“It was all just a misunderstanding,” Sugar said. “Who would have thought Donald would turn out to be such a priss?”

“Sugar,” Julia said, “you can’t really blame him for being upset.” She leaned her head back against the headrest. She had barely slept the night before. She had been forced to wait in a little office in the basement of the casino. She was still wearing her fuzzy purple sweater but she had taken off the tortuous shoes and now she stretched her legs and extended her toes until she felt her metatarsals pop.

“He was so judgmental,” Sugar sniffed. “He said he couldn’t have someone like you around his children. Well, how about I can’t have someone like him around my child?”

“It’s okay,” Julia said. “He doesn’t know me. And he doesn’t know you, not really.” Oddly, she felt kind of happy. Two amazing things had happened—someone, no several people, had mistaken her for a prostitute which was kind of flattering in a strange way and her mother had chosen her over a potential husband.

“I feel like I just dodged a bullet,” Sugar said. “What if I had married that man? I mean, look at me.” She threw her hands up in the air for a moment to gesture to her clothes, then her hair, then she adjusted the rearview mirror so she could see herself before straightening the steering wheel again as the van drifted onto the shoulder. “What was I thinking? I hate these clothes. I miss my Mustang. Let this be a lesson from me to you, Julia. Don’t let anyone change you. Just be who you are.” She sighed. “Now I’ve got to start all over again.”

Julia studied her mother. Sugar was chewing on her lower lip. Julia could see tiny lines around Sugar's lips and an area along the line of her chin where the skin was beginning to sag. Her wrists looked fragile. She had never held a job for more than a few months. She couldn't balance a checkbook. She had never had to negotiate with a car salesman or placate an angry client. She had no marketable skills, beyond being pretty. Her mother would always need someone to take care of her.

"Men," Sugar said. "You can't live with them...." Her voice trailed off.

"Maybe," Julia said, "you should take a break"

Sugar cocked her head, listening.

Julia took a deep breath. "You could come stay with me for a while," and the moment the words were in the air between them, Julia could see the two of them in her little apartment. Julia would sleep on the couch and her mother could have the bedroom. Her mother would be there when she got home after work. They could cook dinner together and go to the movies. Go shopping.

Shopping. What was she thinking?

Sugar took her eyes off the road and gave Julia a long, thoughtful stare.

Julia stared back. If her mother sensed fear, there was no telling what could happen.

"You know what we should do?" Sugar said finally, jerking the steering wheel. "We should trade tops. I've got a date later."

"What?" The van lurched and then straightened. "Mom! How did you..." Julia began.

"*Sugar.*"

"Sugar," Julia repeated.

"That sweater will look better on me." Sugar started unbuttoning her shirt.

"Wait...what?" Julia said. "Now? You're driving. And we're not remotely the same size."

The van swerved as Sugar let go of the wheel, thrashing her arm around to pull it from the sleeve. Someone honked. "Come on," Sugar said.

"I'm naked under here," Julia said, crossing her arms over her chest as if there was a possibility that Sugar might just tear it off of her.

"Well, so am I," Sugar said. "What's the big deal?" A convertible packed with

hooting teenaged boys slowed in the next lane. Sugar handed Julia her blouse. “Live a little.”