

### **Proud to be a Gold-digger's Daughter**

Until today, I thought all Sam wanted was a mother's hand to rock him into the grave. He seeks comfort in every way, at every turn. He is so cold, even in the blanketing humidity of South Florida, I crowd the house with space heaters and pile the settees with blankets. He cannot escape the hunger of his own thin body, waking several times through the night to slice off hunks of the Porterhouse I order daily from his favorite chophouse, where he once grandstanded every weekend, buying rounds, trading stock tips, doling out unsolicited advice, plotting his next affair.

I keep the steak warm in the oven overnight. Each morning when I pass by the kitchen on my way to Pilates, the plate is on the countertop puddled with grease and gristle. The meat is always gnawed to the bone. And the man doesn't gain an ounce. Who knew the press of death was the key to successful dieting? I am a little jealous, as most women in Boca Raton would be. I haven't had red meat in seven years, not since my thirty-fifth birthday, when Sam pinched my rear and made that comment about trading me in for a newer model, all the while ogling an actual model – nubile, exotic and supine – scantily clad and playing the role of a sushi table across the crowded deck of the rented yacht. The sushi was low calorie, both an indulgence and a suggestion, he advised, before slapping my backside and trotting off for some single malt to wash down his sashimi.

Sam is seventy-two now. I thought my status had been upgraded from trophy to asset. I thought he needed me to help him, feed him, hide his infirmities from his friends and partners at the firm he founded, where he still tries to put in forty hours a week, if only to assure clients that there is a pulse behind the name on the door. I covered for his absence at last year's Christmas

party, saying he was deep-sea fishing with a fraternity buddy. That had been the week Sam spent sprawled in bed watching *My Little Chickadee* on a loop, giggling and stroking his flaccid penis as a black-and-white yet very blond Mae West jibed and quipped on the screen. Later, when his fraternity buddy called, asking why he missed their annual reunion I explained that Sam was in a major trial in Tallahassee. In fact, he had cultivated an obsession with model trains that spring, refusing to leave the guest bedroom he converted in to a railroad depot except for work and then he only left on the rationale that he needed more money to buy more trains. These are the problems I deal with now, not strange panties between the couch cushions, not foreign perfumes invading my airspace. Until today I thought tomcatting was a physical impossibility for him. But there really is no other explanation for the smear of cheap orange spray tan tracking through the stark white walls and fabrics of my house like a neon slug trail.

I noticed it when I arrived home from a regularly scheduled lunch and spa date with Ariel Zwelling and Bunny Keene. There was no effort to hide the evidence. He miscalculated the maid's schedule by at hours if he expected her to whitewash this mess. He is slipping. The cover-up used to be his specialty, a point of pride, a display of his cunning. Or maybe he has just grown too old to care, too tired to lie. I went to my study, shut the door and queued up the home security video on my laptop. I fast forwarded through the usual motions of the day, and got to the time I left the house. I watched the wrought iron gates to our home swing apart to let out my Porsche Cayenne. Minutes later, they opened again, this time to let in Sam's silver Jaguar, which glided down the curve of our Royal Palm-lined driveway, the deep tint of his windows obscuring the interior. He parked in front of the imposing pillars of the grand entrance, and sprang out of the car with vim I haven't seen in years. He opened the door for her. Gentlemanliness was

something else I haven't seen from him in years. His advancing age has trumped any obligation he felt toward the weaker sex.

She tumbled wildly into view, teetering like a newborn fawn on stilettos. I didn't know her. But I'd met her a million times. She was a species of aspirational party girl indigenous to South Florida, a climbing, scratching, grasping creature unable to rest, driven by the urge to ascend to higher and higher altitudes, driven by the certitude of the singular philosophy that too much will never, ever be enough. Her plastic surgeon also espoused that credo, by the looks of her implants, which were too large and clearly inserted over the muscle, unlike my subtle, frame-appropriate C-cup, executed by the best hands in Palm Beach County. One of the benefits of having a husband who defends medical malpractice is access to the best procedures and pharmaceuticals, as well as inside gossip as to who had what done when. My discovery of Sherri Thompson's second vaginal rejuvenation is justification enough for my marriage to Sam. Or so I have often thought to myself on dark nights when I questioned my decision to marry an inconsiderate blowhard who boasts of his ability to keep ham-fisted, accident-prone obstetricians in business with asides about how thinning the herd of humans is not necessarily a negative outcome. He calls the dead baby cases "doing my part for global warming and population control." I think he really means it.

On the video, Sam began to nuzzle the girl on the front porch, causing me to wonder what kind of pharmaceutical elixir his doctor friends had passed on to him lately. I had thought him incapable of amorous activities for the past two years when his heart attack necessitated the use of a defibrillator, which seemed to have sapped him of his sexual urges, while giving him a new undeserved lease on life. The girl tossed her white blonde hair and kissed my husband with such a sense of belonging that I could see her the thoughts as he mind detached from her body,

floating up in the air, zooming out, watching herself admiringly, looking back at her curvy form, arms draped over Sam's shoulders, leg lazily kicked up to expose the red, roughed-up sole of her fake Vuitton heels.

Marriage in this town, to men of a certain age is like a game of musical chairs. Whoever's with him when the music stops wins the trifecta: money, freedom and an intact social circle. I unseated Sam's third wife, Liz, waifish thing with sharp features and a sharper tongue. I felt little remorse. Sam had two kids with her, so she still made out alright. I have a prenup and no interest in reproduction. To me a menstrual cycle is a just an excuse to beg off of sex once a month. I didn't enjoying having a mother. Why would I want to be one? Though of late, I've felt more like Sam's mother than wife, cutting his food for him, changing and washing his soiled sheets to hide his mishaps from Maria the maid, who I am pretty sure he was screwing five years ago, and who he still takes a shine to. I even devised a system of hiding his medicines from prying eyes. Heart pills in the aspirin bottle, prostate meds in the Sudafed, blood pressure capsules in the Pepto Bismol. Not that anyone is buying the charade of good health. His own body betrays itself more than the pill-bottle maracas keeping time from my handbag. But I consider protecting Sam's delusions one of my primary roles as wife. I direct the play we put on every day. I choreograph his movements and speech. I keep him on time and his neckties in perfect Windsor knots. I hiss forgotten names in his ear, which I inspect for long, errant hairs to tweeze nightly. At this stage of the game the learning curve would be severe for any newcomers. He needs me now. For the first time, I am not easily replaceable.

So when I saw the spray tan girl and Sam frantically pawing at each other on their way into the house, I should have brushed it off. It was just another affair. I would weather the storm, hang on to my man till the fading music thrummed its last vibration. But this time, something

shifted inside. An unexpected jealousy welled up, made my gut drop to the floor, made my thoughts un-form into incoherent mush. It wasn't that another woman was fucking my husband. Sam's philandering hasn't affected me in years. Not on an emotional level. There were times when I secretly appreciated another woman to share the burden of his ego and libido. My jealousy had nothing to do with him at all. It was her. I couldn't take my eyes off her as she shimmied and minced her way toward the hand-carved double doors to our home.

I wanted to be her. I wanted to be young and dumb and trappy. I wanted to be so carefree and uninhibited that I could smear my spackled on spray tan all over the eggshell whiteness of a stranger's custom designed drapery. I wanted to stand tall and proud in my knock-off designer rags, insouciant, with the misguided confidence that I could become the empress of my surroundings, that I could conquer and vanquish and not pay a price for my sins due to my sheer ignorance that any crime had been committed.

I long ago accepted the terms of the game that I am playing. Men rule the world. Youth and beauty rule the men that rule the world. I leveraged my own resources as best I could. But Sam is always quick to note: "Men appreciate, women depreciate." I fear he might be right. My face has become a battlefield, the testing ground for a million stratagems to defeat time's relentless plod across my brow. Just today I opted for a few more ccs of Restalyne. The lapsed time between each Botox treatment is getting less and less. I am becoming what I once mocked – an old fool, deluded into believing she can mask her age with money. Youth is what the spray tan girl has – a horrible exuberance, a blithe crassness, the belief that something different, something good may just be waiting around the corner for you, just because you are you, and you are beautiful, a belief that while idiotic, often has the infuriating effect of self-fulfilling prophesy.

My body erupts into tremors. I grip the smooth wood arms of my desk chair and grind my manicure into the varnish. I am cracking. The fissure inside is so deep and sudden, it must have been forming bit by bit for years. Every little insult in the dark of deceit, every indignity in the brazen light of day, they have worn me down, slow and steady, like beach erosion, so incremental you don't even notice it is happening until it's way too late. It is inescapable. It is the only thing in the room. It's acute as the heart attack that broadsided Sam on the marble of our bathroom floor. I freeze frame on the spray tan girl as she casts a sly look over her shoulder, eyes feral, hair swinging free and long, shoulders thrown so far back the fabric of her shirt seems hung from them. I want to be her. But I never can. She wants to be me. And that is totally within her reach.

And I am hit with a crystalline clarity. I can no longer be me. I will let her take my place. She can be me. I'll go away. I'll be somebody else.

I feel like I've been untethered from a boulder, buoyant with unexpected relief. I will not leave with malice. I will take what is mine. I will abide by the prenup. I will not be like the other Boca divorcees, poisoning the air with screeds about my husband's misdeeds, waging a decades' long court battle, leveraging friendships and housecats, cars and boats, blow-torching the earth as I walk away. I just want out. I have been unseated. I will leave and I will go back to who I was. I live in Boca Raton, but I am not of Boca Raton. I can still escape.

I pack two suitcases, folding and smoothing slacks, blouses, blue jeans, simple dresses inside. I leave the ball gowns and designer frocks hanging in my closet, lined up and ready to taunt their new owner. I briefly smile at the thought of spray tan girl trying to wriggle into them. It will be months before she achieves a size two. She will also need to modify her botched boob

job, a suggested demand Sam will surely make once her new role is solidified. I wonder how long it will take her to realize when he orders his steak rare, he really wants it medium. I wonder how long it will take her to learn not correct his mistake at the table, but rather to follow the waiter out of earshot, in order to avoid the verbal bloodbath that customarily follows any slight to Sam's conception that he flawless and that any imperfections he encounters are the sole responsibility of someone else, most commonly his wife. I wonder how long it will be until she learns about Paul, the secret son doing time outside of Orlando for Medicare fraud. And when will she find out about Nancy, Sam's mistress of forty years that he keeps in a condo across town. I wonder how long it will take her to drop her eagerness, lest she be thought of as unsophisticated by the jaded clique of social raptors in our circle. I hope she enjoys her spoils. I decide to enjoy mine for a few minutes longer.

I drop my suitcases by the door, I ransack the wine refrigerator for the oldest, French-est vintage of champagne in Sam's collection. I take it out on the veranda, give it several violent shakes and pop the cork. The frothy bubbles stream over my hands, cool and sticky in the warm afternoon sun. I sit poolside, in my favorite chaise. I drink a single glass and stare out at the Intracoastal as it wends its way through the opulent stretch of mansions on the banks. Water slaps the sides of the seawall in a hypnotic rhythm. Yachts bob with deceptive lightness, like play-toys in the water. I'll miss the easy access to beauty and freedom that money brings. I leave the champagne bottle, uncorked and three quarters full, out in the heat and air. It is my one job at Sam, who blanches at the waste of others, though never his own. It is a weak, meaningless job. The champagne would have been eventually consumed by some force of nature, be it human appetite or exposure to the elements.

I go indoors and dial my mother's number. She picks up on the first ring and greets me with phlegmatic hacking.

"Wendy, why haven't you returned my calls?"

"Whatever, you haven't called me in the past six months. Anyway, I just thought you should know I am leaving Sam."

"Are you a downright fool?" my mother squawks. "At your age? At his age?"

"I just can't do it anymore. My decision is made. It's a done deal."

"You'd better undo that deal real quick. What are you gonna do? How are you gonna eat? How are you gonna get a job? They ain't got no union for gold-diggers. No retirement, no pension, no benefits."

I grit my teeth.

"I'll get a little money in the divorce. Enough to start over, maybe go back to school."

"A little money? Why not wait it out and get a lot? He's got one foot in the grave, and the other on a banana peel. What's that man done that's so bad? Ain't nobody gonna hire you or marry you at your age. Nobody you'd want anyway. You've been out of the game too long. You need to get on your hands and knees and go crawling back to that crazy old asshole. "

"Not gonna happen. I'm packed and out the door."



“Honey, I’m just trying to help. There are two kinds of mistakes in this world: those that can be undone, and those that can’t. You just better be careful you don’t burn the bridge to the place you’d rather be.”

“Thanks for your support, Mom.” I hang up.

I curse the deep-seated reflex to call my mother at major junctures in life. She has always been jealous of me. She’s a gold-digger, she just operates on a small scale. Cubic zirconium was her idea of a girl’s best friend. She accumulated her assets man by man, relationship by relationship, over the course of my lifetime. A Chevy from Charlie, a small pre-fab house from Jim, a small chunk of cash from Gary and a mix of Social Security and pensions from a couple of the dead ones. And lots more I don’t recall or care to recall. Her one failure was my father. She never managed to get anything from him but pregnant.

I grab my suitcases and leave the doors wide open. May as well give him a clue right off that things aren’t well on the home front. As I drive off the property, I admire the imposing palms I ordered when I first moved in. I uprooted all of my predecessor’s landscaping, an attempt at an English country garden I felt was incongruous with every element of the property. The palms are buttressed up by two-by-fours forcing them to grow straight into the air. If left to their own devices they may follow a natural inclination to grow twisted in the wind, or to lean toward the sea, slowly sloping eastwards at varying angles. But the braces have confined them to uniform lines, ramrod straight with military exactness. I feel as if each tree is saluting my efforts as I glide down the driveway and out of the gates.

I drive to the interstate and head south back to where I was when Sam found me – Miami, a town of transience. Of immigrants. Of new beginnings. It’s a good place to be a stranger. To

start over. I moved there fresh out of art school, and manning the front desk of a trendy gallery by day, painting and partying by night. I lived a life of bohemian excess. Love, art and all that shit that doesn't pay the bills.

The billboards and drivers grow more brazen and aggressive as I whip past the exits – Pompano Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, Hallandale, then the Miami-Dade County line. The air around me thickens with tropical humidity. Here I am, but where should I go? I look for a sign, some fateful object, a sliver of coincidence to right my path and give meaning to my decision.

I scan the billboards. They are all full of sex and money-tinged promise. “Scarlett's Gentlemen's Club -Five Stages! All-U-Can Eat Lunch Buffet!” “Your Wife is Hot - Fix your AC!” “Injured and Angry? – Call Jose Luis Carillo Esq!”

Then –just over exit seven – I see it. “Discount Eyeglasses at 24 Hour Optical – You Can See Clearly Now!” A white-toothed, bespectacled family smile down confidently from the sign. Everything clicks. Glass is the answer.

I swing off the Interstate and roll down the familiar ramp, right into a red light. The intersection is besieged by scraggly homeless guys. A legless man in a wheelchair darts between the cars, slapping on windows and shaking his change cup. I feel like I remember him here from years ago, when I frequented this exit. Or someone like him. I need all the good karma I can get. I crack my window and slide a five out, never making eye contact, and quickly snapping my window closed as soon as his cracked, grey, thick-nailed hand snatches the bill from mine.

The light changes and I continue on to Tony's. I wonder if he is still there. I am not even sure if he is still in Miami. We didn't keep in touch after our break-up. I had cast off my circle of

friends like a reptile sheds an old skin – just molted them off one day and regenerated something newer and shinier.

Street murals – turbaned women surrounded by disproportionately large hibiscus, dancing children waving brightly colored flags – line the way. Small, low-slung rows of shops, small houses with barred windows, botanicas and bodegas, they are familiar memories, but they now seem darker and grittier, more sinister. As jarring as the city is, the way to his place is comfortably embedded in my muscle memory. I turn a couple of blocks before U.S. 1, and park street-side in front of a small complex. I see his sign – Tony's Custom Stained Glass. I exit my car, lock the doors and don't give myself a moment to think. I lightly lift the glossy, pointy toes of my pumps over glassine envelopes and small plastic baggies licked clean of their contents. I kick past crumples of greasy waxed paper and fast food bags also licked clean of their contents. I shudder. Such sloppy detritus of appetite is not on public display on the streets of Boca Raton.

I approach the shop. The neon orange OPEN sign is switched on. Behind a plate glass window, an array of colored glass glints in the sunlight. I burst in and stop short on hearing the too-loud jangle of a leather strap of bells on the door handle. The interior of the shop is brightly lit by dozens of stained glass lamps and light boxes. I am in a sea of romantic Tiffany style flowers, clean Mission-style lines, and tropical motifs. The colors clash and glare and I begin to feel as if I have done something very wrong. And he comes out of the back, gangling and smiling, his once-black pony-tail now grey-streaked, his white t-shirt ripped and torn and stained.

“Hi, can I help you?” Tony greets me in his warm cadence with a hint of a pot-smoker's dragging slur.

“Tony, it's me Wendy.”

His eyes pop wide, then narrow. His thick brows arch up, crinkling his broad forehead. I smile, put a hand on my hip.

“Come on, I don't look that different do I?”

Tony gives a small, strained smile.

“No, no, just surprised to see you. What's it been, ten, fifteen years?”

“Something like that.”

I notice that as he speaks, he averts my eyes. He seems focused on a mid-distant point to the left of my shoulder.

“So, Wendy, what can I do for you?”

I stammer at this formality. I quickly regroup.

“I am looking for some glass pieces. Thought I'd stop by.”

“Really,” Tony says archly. “Plenty of nice glass shops up in Palm Beach County.”

“Well, I am buying a condo down here.”

“Oh, I see. Well, look around. I'll be in the back, doing restoration work.”

“That's fine,” I say officiously. I begin to browse the lamps, turning up price tags, clicking light bulbs on and off. I muse over the cold reception. It has been a while. And I did dump him. For Sam. Although I can't be sure that he knows of Sam's involvement.

Light streams through the shop front spattering the floor with jewel tones from the stained glass panels in the window. I study a small abstract piece ablaze in the colors of a sunset.

It speaks to me. I want to buy it. I hold the price tag between my thumb and forefinger. One thousand dollars, SOLD, it says.

I traced the smooth solder lines of the glass piece and remember when he took me to this shop for the first time. He showed me how to cut glass, placing the plastic pistol grip of a glass cutter in my hand and guiding my hand over a cheap sheet of clear glass. A quiet ripping sound accompanied the formation of a slight line on the surface of the pane. Now you snap it, he said, picking up the glass in his hands and breaking it into two pieces. It's like controlled destruction, a beautiful kind of shattering, he said with a devilish smile. We slept together for the first time that night. I practically lived in the studio above the shop for three years.

I begin to simmer. Whatever the reasons for the breakup, however much time has passed, I am not just some customer off the street. I walk back behind the counter and enter the workshop area. Tony is bent over a waist-height table, studying a large religious-looking window – a large white cross, draped with a purple cloth and surrounded by a circular blaze of yellow, orange and ruby light.

“Whatcha working on?”

He looks up, startled.

“Church window.” He looks down.

“Oh?” I pour my interest into the window. The bottom quadrant is falling apart, the individual pieces separating from each other. He always liked it when I paid attention to his work. “So this is something that happens over time? The heat and the cold, wear and tear cause the breakage?”

“Not in this case. This is a man-made defect. I blame the integrity of the design. And shoddy craftsmanship. It is not strong enough to hold itself together under stress. It was fine for years, but one Sunday Father Sullivan walked into mass and it was falling apart.”

“I see,” I say. “That looks like quite a job. So when you finish, you wanna go out for a drink or something? I am just reacquainting myself with Miami.”

Tony lets his eyes fully fall on me.

“You are not seriously coming back to Miami,” he snorts incredulously.

“Sure. Why not? I miss this place. I’ve been in Boca for a while. But I am not really a Boca girl.”

“Coulda fooled me. You’ll certainly do until the real thing comes along.”

I don’t know what to say. So I laugh. And he laughs. And it’s like we – for a flash – are in on the same joke.

“Yeah, who’d of thought I’d end up in Boca, facial peels, polo, yachts and charity balls?”

“Well, me for one,” Tony says. This time, he is earnest. “You always seemed drawn to that sort of life. You liked bright sparkly things. That’s what you said about this shop the first time I brought you here. That’s what I said to myself the last time you stepped out of here.”

I hide a grimace with a grin. I don’t remember saying that. But it sounds like something I would think, and maybe say with enough to drink.

“Well, I need to get going,” I say. “I just came back to ask you for a business card.”

“Sure,” he reaches in his pocket and hands me his card. His hands are stained with carbon paper and patina. They are shredded and scarred and I think I see the small flake of glass flicker in the heel of his hand.

We say our goodbyes and I leave. I am two miles from the beach, so I go there, sailing over the JFK Causeway, savoring the particular bright dishevelment of Miami, the churning, oozing chaos, the unveiled slither and sleaze that Boca tries to scrub from its facade. Here it all hangs out. The id of the city is on full display, on every corner at every hour.

I park in a metered lot. I walk to the edge of the beach and kick off my shoes. Heels and sand are an unhappy combination. I walk to the water's edge, let the foam trickle over my toes, and I think of how this scrap of dredged up beach has altered over time. Miami Beach is an entirely man-made paradise. One hundred years ago, it was nothing but water. Then out of the water and the muck some men with machines, foresight and ambition built this sandbar into something long, lean and beautiful. But it seemed that grain by grain, day by day the water was reclaiming the sand back to the sea. But is this process of stripping things away, of going back to water, making the beach more itself? Or something else entirely?

I squinted at the sunset-hued clouds spanning the horizon. I decide it does not matter. I decide it is beautiful. It is perfect. I hold that thought in my head as long as I can, battering away all the whys and wherefores. You cannot fight the tides of nature and man. There is only way to go. Forward. So that is the path I will take.

I pull my cellphone out of my bag. The phone rings twice and goes to voicemail.

“Hello, Maria. It's Wendy Mitchell. I need maid service at our place today. One of my friends seems to have tracked her dreadful orange spray tan all over the house. Can you please take care of it before Sam gets home?”

I end the call and begin to walk back to my parked car. My surface is calm. My riptide still surges beneath. I will keep it there. I know I will break a million times, in a million quiet ways. But I will always break beautifully. And parts that wear away were never really me.