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Rutting Season

Carl had a secret thought about his boss, Ray. Ray had a secret thought about Lisa, one of the girls in fundraising. Lisa had no thoughts about Ray, secret or otherwise. At least that's what she would have said if anyone asked her. And who would ask her? Ray just wasn't the kind of guy a girl like Lisa would think about. He was old for one thing—she put him at 35, minimum—and he had the slumped shoulders and jutting forehead of a Neanderthal. Also, he was short and prone to wearing v-neck sweaters in cheap synthetic blends. If for some reason his name had come up in conversation, she would have said something like, “Ray? You mean Ray the computer guy?” as though she knew a number of Rays and couldn't quite place him.

In fact, Lisa knew exactly who Ray was: She had inadvertently been the cause of a long-running joke about him. Once, at an office party, Ray had gotten drunk and stared so closely at Lisa's cleavage that his face practically touched the scoop of her scoop-neck body suit. In the bathroom afterwards, when Lisa recounted the incident to a handful of co-workers, Lauren had wrinkled her nose and exclaimed, “Eeew! A booby gazer!”

After that, whenever the database went down or the printer wouldn't work one of them would say, “Better call Booby Gazer,” and they would throw their heads back and laugh. They always pronounced it in the Boston way: “Booby Gayzah,” although none of them actually spoke like that. Over time the nickname had morphed, first into “Bobby Gayzah,” then, after a number of months, into simply, “Bobby.”

“Why does everyone call me Bobby?” Ray asked one day. He was standing in the hallway, looking back at them with the meek, bemused expression Lisa had sometimes seen on

her father's face when she and her sisters mocked him. She felt sorry then and a little ashamed, and she pretended to be busy with a file on her desk while Lauren said, in a bright, false voice, "That's not your name?"

These two incidents were the exception, though; most days Ray never crossed Lisa's mind. So it was a surprise one morning when she woke up to find that she'd dreamed about him.

In the dream, Ray had a daughter. That was it, that was the whole dream: the fact of the daughter (she was about five or six years old), and a sweet, floating sense of joy—Ray's joy—for he had been beside himself with happiness.

"Yeah, right," Lisa said out loud, throwing off the covers. The floor was cold under her feet but the air was warm, an early summer sensation. She stopped to stretch, naked, in front of the mirror and her breasts rose up a little, nipples erect. She stood there a moment on the cool floor, transfixed by the perfect wholeness of her reflected body. A nameless anticipation was blossoming inside her. The dullness, the shrinking withdrawal of the winter months, was over; she felt dilated and alive, like a flower tilting to meet the sun.

Out of nowhere she thought of the VP of fundraising, the corded muscles of his forearms when he rolled up his sleeves. Not that this meant anything. He was married, he had two children; there was no way she'd go down that path. The thought was just an extension of the physical happiness she felt right then, of the heightened sense of perception that brought to her, as she dropped her arms and walked into the bathroom, the memory of his smell—sharp and slightly sour beneath the starch of his shirt.

Lisa had no intention of mentioning her dream to Ray. Why on earth would she? It was weird enough that she'd dreamed it. Later that day, though, when she saw him sit down alone at the

other end of the office lunchroom, she heard herself call out, “Hey, Ray, I dreamt you had a daughter.”

Ray looked up from his sub. “A daughter?” he said, his face oddly empty of expression. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Lisa said carelessly, “a little girl, like about five years old.”

Ray tipped his head. “A daughter,” he said. A quizzical, wondering look came into his eyes.

Then Ray’s assistant Carl lumbered in with a slice of pizza on a paper plate and Ray’s expression darkened. “You better not be coming in here if that server’s not backed up,” he said.

Carl bent his head like a balky ox. “I’m not,” he muttered.

Ray glanced at Lisa and snorted. “What do you mean you’re not? You’re not in here?”

“Th-th-the backup’s already f-finished.” Carl’s face had turned the dark red of an internal organ.

Lisa stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork. Why do that? Why make the guy stutter? So Carl was a weirdo—that was still no reason to humiliate him. Ray really was a dick; she was sorry now she’d bothered to say anything to him. She took a few more bites of her salad and read another paragraph in her magazine, just to show that she had nothing to do with either of them. Then she closed the lid of the plastic container, tucked the magazine under her arm and walked out of the room.

She was aware, without actually thinking about it, of the figure she cut from behind: the curve of her skirt (her butt was one of her best features), the swing of her long, dark hair. It was not that Ray and Carl were men she wanted to attract; it was just a habit, like checking the rearview mirror in the car. She was used to being noticed and she dressed for it.

Down the hall in the kitchen, she dumped out the remains of her salad and put her fork and glass in the sink. Someone, or maybe several people, had left their dirty dishes: a few mugs, a plate, a glass filled with used silverware. Lisa squirted soap on the sponge and slowly, without resentment, began to wash them.

At the beginning, when she was thirteen and just developing, being stared at had humiliated her. Men seemed to watch her everywhere—when she bought a slushie at the convenience store, when she waited at the bus stop. She would feel it before she saw it: the tensing of the air, the sudden, blood-freezing isolation of being marked out. Then a hot shame would claim her body and she would hunch her shoulders and hurry by. No one ever helped her. When it happened once at the post office, her mother just turned away, a rigid half-smile on her lips, and asked for two books of stamps.

Over time, this fear and confusion had subsided. Being attractive became just a part of Lisa's sense of herself, something she could flaunt (in a white halter top and mini) or pretend to disregard (sweatshirt and baseball hat). This public Lisa was her, but also was not; she held it out at a little distance from herself, like one of those old-fashioned masks on a stick.

It was a relief, at times like this, to forget all that, to let the sound of the running water, the warm sun from the kitchen window, lull her into silence. An animal silence, without any need to think or react or monitor, the clamoring, unruly thing she knew as herself suspended, bat-like, in a corner.

She laid a clean paper towel on the counter and then, with a simple sense of pleasure, placed on it the clean forks and spoons, the mugs and glass, the plate.

That night Carl woke in a sweat, his blood pounding. He sat up and reached into the drawer of his bedside table, crawling his thick fingers past the magazines until they made contact with cold steel of his grandfather's gun. The red numbers on the clock read 4:08. He pulled his hand back and lay down again. *Go to sleep*, he told himself, but it was too late, he was already thinking about Ray.

What do you mean you're not? You're not in here? And then stupid him, stuttering like an idiot in front of that hot girl from the fundraising department. Lisa, her name was. They were all like that in fundraising, stalking around in their high boots, swishing their hair. They didn't give Carl the time of day. Or Ray either, for that matter. For a second this thought eased the tightness in Carl's chest. But then he started thinking of other things Ray had said, days and weeks and months of things. *You didn't know that, Carl? You haven't finished that, Carl? Carl, Carl, Carl.* He would come and stand in the doorway and say that, loud enough for everyone on the hall to hear: *Carl, Carl, Carl.* A sort of joke it was supposed to be, one guy ribbing another. No one but Carl seemed to see the hard edge of contempt in Ray's eyes.

During the day, when they happened, Carl's impression of these things was muffled and oblique, as though he were listening through a heavy scarf. Even the adrenaline that surged through him at those moments had a distant, barely-felt quality. One or two nights a week, though, Carl would lurch out of sleep, his body tense with fury. Then it all would come back to him with searing precision, and he would lie awake reliving every insult.

The gun added a new dimension. Carl had acquired it accidentally a few months earlier, at the estate sale at his grandfather's house. . . . (to read the rest of the story, go to

<https://mandelienesmith.com/read-online/>)