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A Notion I Took

I jumped into the San Antonio River once, for a hundred dollars. After I got pregnant and had to quit dancing, I worked nights waiting tables at The Bayous down on the Riverwalk. The night I jumped, Marisa was still nursing, and my breasts were fat and swollen with it. The belly left was nothing, hidden under the black apron we all wore for pens and the money.

Eleven o’clock, we were still turning tables. *Cats* was at the Majestic, and we had a special menu to catch the people coming out late. They flooded the lobby, gabbing and impatient, all excited with their fancy clothes and the opinions they were saying. Maybe a hundred of them, and the manager freaking out, *we’re out of this, we’re out of that, you bus table seven right now or you’re fired*, and the busboy getting stoned in the cooler when you go in to find more lemons. Fuck, what a night.

A four-top of men from Tennessee kept messing with me—business guys, not theater people. They were in their forties, fat, flush with ego and big gold watches in the candlelight, proud over some triumph they kept lifting their bottles to. Every time I crossed the patio with more salsa or another round, it would be something: “Baby, are all the girls here as fine—” and that kind of shit. Come to Texas, play cowboy for a week. But one thing led to another until I was saying the things I say when men flirt. Bold, dumb things. Then it was happening: a hundred lay flat on the table, the river stretched out like a grin, and I was giv-
ing my apron to another girl to hold. I smiled and waved from
the edge of the safe cement while the whole restaurant looked
on, holding its breath.

Standing there, I knew the plunge was only half of what they
wanted: to see a woman do something crazy, maybe get fired,
even—the power of their money that could work other people
like puppets. That, I knew all about. And the other half I knew
about, too: the girlie show when I’d get out, black hair stream-
ing and sticking, wet brown flesh gleaming silver, mouth all vul-
nerable, opened for air, the white shirt transparent, clinging,
showing the black bra, the full ripe slope of the breasts, nipples
prodding, the nursing pads’ little white circles the only surprise.
The whole restaurant would gape.

Standing on the edge, I could hear already the sudden clapping
when I climbed out, see the hot glazed rove of male eyes,
the tight smiles of women applauding to show their dates they
weren’t bothered, of course not, why should they be? The laugh-
ter and looks that would follow me as I strode between the
tables to the four Tennessee men and took my hundred. In my
bra I would tuck it. And they’d roar.

The other waiters would look pissed, and the ratlike manager
would write me up, furious, fidgeting with loose fabric at the
knee of his khakis. But the owner wouldn’t fire me. She’d shake
her head, smiling, and wave him off, privately pleased that her
restaurant might get known as a place where things happened,
where things could get wild, where a waitress might jump in
the river, who knew? Anything to stand out in a tourist zone
as safe and planned as Disney.

The four Tennessee men would get a story to take back with
them about those crazy big-titty Mexican girls down in San
Antone: just like a border town, man, anything for a buck. You
go there yourself. You try it. And me, I would get to take the
money and the rest of the night off, listen to the manager bitch, go home to my apartment where my mom would freak out and switch back and forth between yelling at me, “My God, Iréne! What is this? What are you doing with yourself for God’s sake?” and telling me all about her TV show. Finally she’d go.

It would be quiet, then, just me and Marisa. I’d shower and scrub off the scum and toxic waste, soaping and re-soaping the nipples to make sure, and I’d put the hundred in the Catholic school jar under the bed and nurse Marisa, the whole time thinking, _Who the hell knows anything about me?_ until we fell asleep in the big bed together. I could see it all happening like that as I stood on the edge in the dark.

I turned from them then, leaping and arching, flying for a second and then falling, falling through air and falling in water, the lukewarm rush of it filling my ears with silence, blotting out the clatter of dishes and quick kitchen disputes, the fake smiles at the table and the things you say to make people with money give some to you. All of it, gone. Just a rush of soft silence, the slippery liquid the same warmth as my skin holding me as I swept through in a shallow arch. It’s a canal, after all, made for drainage and boatloads of white people. But deep enough. I felt my body slowing. _This water is filthy_, I thought as I kept going down, and I kept my eyes closed against it. _So filthy and polluted they dump dye in to make it blue for the tourists._ And I thought as I sank how soft the words sounded: _filthy, polluted_. I tried to think, _No real water is turquoise_, as its silk slid over me and my own weight pulled me down. _It’s only filth, with color added_, I tried to think in the dark smooth quiet, but all I could feel was its pull like the pull of a soft door opening.
How to Warp Your Kid

When he comes home from Montessori claiming life’s not fair because girls are luckier than boys, do a double-take. Refrain from saying that your own twenty-seven years of existence have not borne this out. Ask him what he means.

When he says that girls get to wear pants or skirts, while boys can only wear pants, and that’s not fair, say, “Ah.” Nod sagely. You’re in graduate seminars on deconstruction, feminist theory, postcolonialism. You read Foucault. You can handle this one. This one’s easy compared to those Why is the sky blue? questions that strain your memory of Physics in the Fine Arts, which you took instead of a lab science because you are intellectually lazy and cutting fetal things makes you sick.

Explain cultural hegemony to your five-year-old. In short words. He grasps it; he’s bright. At two, he squeezed the huggable stuffed globe your friend Margaret gave him, pointed to India, and said, “That’s where they don’t eat hamburgers.” He has never eaten a hamburger. He has remained a strict vegetarian even after you met a guy—at the health food store, no less—who took you to New Orleans for a weekend where you tumbled off the wagon into platterfuls of seafood and you have never been able to clamber entirely back on. Your son is nobler than you. He is pure. In his soul, equations balance. Your variables careen all over the place; you cannot seem to solve for $y$. You are messed up, a fuckup, a single mother at
twenty-seven paying your son’s Montessori bill with your own student loans.

So your five-year-old starts a club to end cultural hegemony and paints a sign and establishes club headquarters deep inside the Ligustrum bush, but none of the married-student-housing kids will join. Only his best friend agrees to humor him, and soon The Club to End Cultural Hegemony is merely an elaborate front for a Lego-playing operation.

Take a fiction-writing class when your academic load gets too heavy. Hand in a story to your workshop called “Find the Thinly Veiled Ex-Husband.” Open the story with the disclaimer, “Any resemblance to any real person, living or dead, who has totally fucked me over & skipped town & refuses to pay child support & whose sorry ass I can’t afford to sue, is completely coincidental.” Get called angry. Be told your work is highly derivative and imitative of somebody, they can’t think who. Graduate, get a job, get called lucky, move across the country.

When your son is thirteen, show him the video your estranged father sends of Disney World and Epcot, where he has promised to take him for a grandpa-grandson vacation. Watch it together on the couch, holding hands. Wish you could afford to take him anywhere. Wish your father had taken you anywhere; be grateful on behalf of grandchildren everywhere for the mellowing effects of andropause. Collapse keening on the kitchen floor when you receive, over the phone from a stranger, the news that your father has died from a coronary infarction. Stay there sobbing in a heap while your son stands above you, twisting his hands, saying, “Mama?” See his scared eyes. Recollect yourself. Comfort him. Say you are sorry about Disney World.

Get tenure when your son is seventeen. Buy a little bungalow in the neighborhood he likes. Above the mantelpiece, hand-paint *Idleness is the root of all love*. Spend the summer strip-
ping the floors and painting the walls. Knowing he will only be there for a year, paint his room with him, coating its walls in the strange slate blue he picks. Do the white trim very slowly. When you finish, sit on the floor in the center of the room with your arm around him. Feel like you're inside a big Wedgwood ashtray.


Buy him a car that’s safer and better than yours, a used Volvo with every safety feature in the world. Teach him to drive. Wonder where his father is. Try not to get Chinese takeout or pizza too many nights a week.

All year, drive him to every college he wants to visit. Sing John Denver tunes in the car until he begs you to please shut up and puts buds in his ears and disappears from you for sixty or seventy miles at a stretch.

On campuses, hang back. Let him ask the questions. Do not ask about curriculum or campus safety or the accident rate on the rock-climbing wall. Do not refer to him as my baby. Do not strike up friendly chitchat with the admissions officers or the professors or the student tour guides. Tell yourself, This is his show. Take Ativan. On the drive home, resolve not to pump him, however subtly, for his opinions. Remind yourself that to point out strengths and weaknesses is a doomed enterprise, sure to backfire. Fail. Irritate him.

At his high school graduation, cry. Sit alone. Do not approach your ex-husband and his new wife, who looks twelve, who have flown in from California, where you did not know they lived.
Do not comment when their only graduation gift is a plastic box of color-coordinated office supplies.

That summer, learn to kayak. Learn to sail. Take cello lessons. Learn to play your son’s favorite video games, so you can sit on the couch together. Do not comment about the levels of violence or negative depictions of women. On the evenings he is out with friends, which are most evenings, learn to cook for one. Buy the cheerful cookbook: *Cooking for One!* Try not to feel entirely frantic as you acquire new interests, new hobbies, new friends, in the hope that they will fill up the time when he is gone. Learn astronomy. Borrow a colleague’s telescope and spend long hours gazing at faraway bright things.

Walk back to your car from the dorm that is now his home. Get in and drive away fast, not glancing in the rearview mirror, not once. Turn on NPR and handle it all just perfectly, until “La Vie en Rose” comes on, and you have to pull off the highway and into the parking lot of a Cracker Barrel and put your head on your folded arms on the steering wheel, because you have always been a sucker for Piaf’s frail warble of joy. Hate NPR for betraying you this way. Do not look up as the people walk by. When the tap comes on your window from the concerned elderly couple, do not raise your head. Just wave them away with your hand.
Other Women’s Jewels

She wasn’t Indian in the first place, which is to say she wasn’t Native American, as she’d learned to call it rather quickly when she’d gotten the job. Or better yet: to say Zuni, Hopi, Pueblo—just as she’d say French, German, Italian. In an upscale store you used the upscale terms, or you risked putting off the upscale clients who drifted from boutique to boutique in the upscale little mall.

It was odd how things had turned out. All her life she’d wanted to be the girl in the Wrigley’s commercial, skating swimming riding a horse, minty and gleaming with light. In school she’d switched her name from Lourdes to Liz, but no one had seemed to notice. Years of flamenco and tap, and still it was, “Well, I just don’t know. We’ll have to see,” until she’d done three back-handsprings in a row and they’d had to put her on the squad at last—with awkward pretty blond girls who couldn’t do the splits.

Odd. Because when the manager of Native Jewels had looked her over, it was her soft straight black hair falling to the small of her back, it was her smooth nut-colored skin and night eyes, and not the grade point average or abandoned scholarships typed neatly on her little résumé that made him hire her.


“Well, right,” he’d answered, straightening his tie, his glance drawn to some movement at the front of the shop, “but you don’t have to mention it to the customers, do you?” He’d cleared
his throat and smiled. “You look Native American, and that’s what’s important. Native American enough,” he’d said reassuringly, and so she got the best-paying job she’d been able to find, what with only two years of college and an eight-month-old baby back home at her mother’s apartment.

She borrowed money from her mother’s night-nurse wages to buy a week’s worth of clothes—skirts and blouses which could be matched and then re-matched the following week and perhaps no one would notice until she got her first check and could buy a few more things. Her mother’s old earrings and necklaces were fashionable again, fashionable enough to borrow, and the manager had said that after three months if she worked out all right then she could choose a couple of the low-ticket items for herself as long as she wore them in the store regularly. And a 10 percent discount on everything else.

It wasn’t bad, really. She liked memorizing the stories. Each piece of jewelry had a backstory, a small printed card tucked into the box beneath the velvet. What the little figures meant: that’s what the customers always asked first, and she always answered correctly: “This one symbolizes fertility and wisdom,” or “This one means that the wearer has a deep heart,” or that “the wearer has an old soul,” or “a kind spirit,” or “great vision,” and the women would clutch the little pendants or bracelets or earrings and murmur, “Oh yes, perfect,” and reach for their wallets, although Liz often read the cards suspiciously, wondering if perhaps the tiny silver man brandishing a spear might not really be crying something quite different. When business was slow, she would sit on the deerhide-covered stool and imagine herself telling the handbagged patrons her own explanations and then watching them shriek aghast and faint to the woven sisal.

But there were other things to memorize, too, the magical names of gems like secret charms from a fairy tale: topaz, tur-
quoise, amethyst. She checked out a gemology book from the library so she could tell the customers how each stone formed beneath the earth, which chemicals composed it, which forces melded its hot liquid into shape. Her boss was impressed and thought perhaps they could move that three-month review up to two months, and the clients loved it. They loved to hear about the thousands of years of heat and pressure that would dangle from their lobes. Heat. Pressure. She could almost feel them contract with pleasure when she said it.

And the tribes of course she knew, even down to the reservation where each piece was made, each with its own certification number promising that its maker was a genuine full-blooded Navajo or Cherokee or Hopi. That seemed to excite the women too: the authenticity, that this particular jewel and its setting had been shaped for them by a real person (Liz noticed they always said “he”), a person living in perhaps a very hot and dry place, perhaps in a home without running water or electricity even, a person who sweated in the sun and bent metals with his hands and perhaps ate food cooked over an open fire. And that their money was going there, helping that good native man who toiled in the heat and the dust and perhaps without any shirt on: that was surely a thrilling and commendable thing.

No, it wasn’t a bad job, and they weren’t bad women, not bad women at all, no more than the people whose bedpans her mother changed and cleaned were bad people. The way they said to her mother, “Clara, can you hurry up, there’s a good girl,” only made you see how needy they were, how dependent really, as her mother said. And actually they were often very nice, sharing chocolates when they had some left, or letting Clara have their bouquets when they started to fade, because they knew she made little pictures and bookmarks with pressed flowers.
They knew it from the times when they were lonely and wanted someone to talk to, wanted to know about her life.

All around the shared apartment, little withered flowers hung: over the sofa, over the kitchen table, on the wall above the toilet. Pressed petals from other women’s bouquets, glued slowly by Clara’s knotted hands onto scraps of leftover cards.

One evening Liz came home tired from work and found a new picture, dahlia petals and periwinkles flattened against the cream-colored back of an old greeting card, hanging above the baby’s little crib. And she couldn’t have said why she moved so quickly, with a swift convulsive clutch, why she swept her daughter out from under it, up out of the blankets, and carried her rushingly into the lamplight.

When the baby awoke and gazed quietly, half smiling, Liz sank into the rocker, stroking the soft light curls back from the tiny forehead with a quick soothing stroke until she felt herself gradually grow calmer. *Mi hija, mi querida,* she sang to the baby in a low voice, rocking her, gazing into the wet blue blossoms of her eyes.