Storylandia

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The Wapshott Journal of Fiction

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Edited by Ginger Mayerson
Miranda

By Kelly Ann Jacobson
ROSEMARY

Miranda saw Rosemary for the first time across her father’s Poconos estate. It was summer; the garden overflowed with tomatoes, beans, and squash that sat like children hiding in the stalks. The flowers, sunflowers like bonnets and purple gladioli, stood with their faces to the sun; and the pool, a glacial blue body, sunned in the dazzling yellow light. The woman was small in the distance, childlike as she bent to pick something from the stretch of green life next to her, and Miranda only identified her as a woman when she bowed at the waist to reveal curves Miranda had just acquired a few years before.

“At least tell me she’s older than me.” Miranda turned to look at her father, who stood next to her with hands in his seersucker suit pockets admiring the view of his natural empire, and he squinted at her from below his hat and then grinned.

“She’s older than you.”

Miranda put her hands on her hips. “By a number in the single digits?”

“Why don’t you meet her first and then judge her, Peanut?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Very well then, Miranda, go say hello.”

She put her duffel bag down on the thick pad of grass with a satisfying whump, probably the jostle of hair appliances, and then took a step towards the stranger on her way to becoming the third Mrs. Anderson. Rosemary’s hair was as light red as an orange
Gerbera Daisy, a detail Miranda had not expected in the girlfriend of a man who dated former models with blond hair and anorexia, and it shimmered against the starchy white of her sundress. Rosemary, unaware of the incoming assault, bent down and grasped a green bean between two fingers, pulled the pod free, and popped it in her mouth with a crunch audible from over ten feet away.

“I think you’re supposed to wash those first,” Miranda said as she came within talking distance.

Surprised, Rosemary put a hand over her mouth and blushed. As she finished chewing, the two young women looked at each other, and Miranda was glad she had chosen to wear a tight purple dress and black sandals that tied up her taut ankles to her knees.

“I grew up on a farm,” Rosemary said. “I used to run out into the fields and eat as many vegetables as I could get my little hands on, at least until my father would find me with skins and rinds scattered around me and would put me in time out.”

Don’t smile, don’t make a joke, don’t become her friend.

“I feel like I know all about you from your father, he talks about you all the time.”

Miranda forced a laugh. “Funny, I heard about you from the driver who picked me up at the airport because my father was ‘otherwise engaged.’ From that sparkle on your finger, which I recognize as my mother’s former wedding ring, I now realize he meant both figuratively and literally.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—”
“No, you wouldn’t have. You’re both too busy drinking expensive red wines and bobbing around the pool to think about how any of this could affect me.”

“Miranda—”

“My best guess? My father woke up this morning as my plane landed, drank his orange juice while reading the Washington Post, took a horse ride to ‘survey the kingdom’ as he likes to say, and then watched golf. Nowhere in that busy schedule was the pause where most people would have asked, ‘Hey, I wonder how my daughter will react to a woman practically her age becoming her new stepmother? Maybe I should have mentioned that small detail before I threatened to pull her college tuition to force her to spend the summer with me in the middle of nowhere without friends or the one parent who actually considers her feelings.’”

“Just let me—”

“Oh, and I’ll go a bit further and speculate that he doesn’t really care about me visiting at all. I’m here to train you: to polish those rough edges, get you ready for prime time at Rolling Hills Club, teach you how to style your hair and do charity projects in heels and a dress that packs you in like a sausage.”

Silence. That one had hit home, and Miranda went in for the kill.

“He likes you because you’re different, but deep down, my father is a politician who needs a politician’s wife. In less than a month, you’ll transform into one of us, identical and dispensable, and soon he’ll drop you for a newer model like he dropped my mother and the
wife who went before her. Take this ride for all it’s worth, Rosemary, because it won’t last long.” Miranda turned away and walked towards the house; she had done what she came here for, and yet that night, she couldn’t forget the tears in Rosemary’s eyes as she left her in the garden, alone.

The next morning, Rosemary and Ray were already halfway through breakfast by the time Miranda emerged through the terrace doors. Her father read the newspaper, hiding all but the gray hair on top of his head, and Rosemary stared at an Alice Hoffman novel in front of her plate. The cook had prepared garden omelets with tomatoes and peppers from the garden served with freshly squeezed orange juice that he strained twice because her father hated pulp, but when the portly man tried to set a plate in front of her, Miranda waved him away.

“I’m not hungry, Juan, but thank you. Can you just bring me a cup of coffee with cream and two sugars?”

Juan’s chin dropped, but he removed the omelet quickly and backed towards the kitchen. “Yes, Miss Anderson, right away.”

Once the cook was out of earshot, Miranda’s father looked up from his newspaper and gazed at her over his black-rimmed glasses. “You’re going to hurt the old man’s feelings.”

“He doesn’t want to be here anymore than I do,” Miranda shot back. “How much did you have to pay him to leave his family for the summer?”
“Juan wanted to be here,” her father replied, gazing back at his newspaper and killing the conversation.

“Speaking of travel,” Rosemary chimed in, “I was wondering if I might take Miranda on a little trip today?”

“I don’t think that’s—” Miranda started to say, but her father cut in.

“What a wonderful idea! You two need some bonding time, and I could use a day off on the golf course.”

“A day off from what, retirement?” Miranda muttered under her breath as Juan came back in with her coffee, set the white china cup and saucer down, and winked at her.

“Perfect, then it’s settled,” Rosemary said as she took Ray’s wrinkled hand in her smooth one. “We’ll be back by dinner; you’ll barely miss us.”

“I’m sure.” Miranda scraped her chair back from the table, lifted her cup, and carried it to the door.

“Miranda?” Rosemary asked. She paused without turning around.

“Can we meet at the car in an hour?”

“Fine. What should I wear?”

“Something comfortable.”

They drove for about half an hour in Rosemary’s silver Land Rover, a gift from Ray but certainly not his taste. Miranda had decided it was a Banana Republic day, white cotton pants and a strapless white top, coupled with a pair of Coach flats and movie star Aviators.
Rosemary wore jeans, probably bought with her own money since Miranda didn’t recognize the brand, a white peasant top, and a floppy straw hat that hid her eyes as they bumped over godforsaken dirt roads. Abbey Road hummed from the speakers—Miranda’s favorite Beatles album as well, though she did not mention it, and right as “I Want You” finished its ominous three-minute repetition of a guitar riff, Rosemary stopped the car, turned off the engine, and listened.

“We’re here,” she said, though they were in the middle of a dirt road in the middle of abandoned farmland where there were no signs, mailboxes, or people to mark the “here” where they apparently were.

Rosemary hopped out of the car but left the keys in the ignition, so Miranda plucked them out before following her to a field of dried summer squash plants and pumpkin vines.

“I told you I grew up on a farm, but what I didn’t tell you was that my mother never fed me from her garden.” Rosemary found the hint of a trail in the middle of the field and began walking towards a house in the distance, so Miranda followed, trying not to think of her $500 shoes and the way the dirt already clung to them like fungus.

“We were so poor that every piece counted, and we children were the closest thing to farm hands my parents were ever going to get. Every once in a while I’d catch my mother popping a juicy red strawberry in her gap-toothed mouth when she thought I wasn’t looking, but I had to wait until dinner to eat whatever leftovers we had from the day’s sales.”
The stray vines crunched beneath their feet like shattered egg shells, and as the house loomed closer, she could hear the call of Eastern Towhees—“Drink your tea” they chastised, a call her mother used to imitate while training Miranda for her afternoons at the Club.

“I never had dolls growing up,” Rosemary continued, “I guess she thought they would make me crave the beautiful things I could never have. But her way was worse; it made me long for those beautiful things, dream about them as I fell asleep, and draw them in my notebooks. When I got my first job at your father’s law firm, I bought the most beautiful doll I could find: a princess in a pink tulle ball gown. She stands on my dresser, a constant reminder of where I came from.”

The house stood in front of them, a charred wreck of wood and stone, and the wind rolled over the hills and through the house like a whistle.

Rosemary bent to pick up a splinter of black bark. “She never left the farm, just let it die around her like a flower plucked from its stem. Eventually, she left a lamp burning too long, and it set the whole place on fire. It took them a week to locate my brother and me because no one in town had seen us in over ten years.”

Finally, she turned to face Miranda and held out the bark. Miranda took the chunk of rough wood in her hand and studied it; the ridges were gray like the strata of a rock formation.

“You were right about what you said yesterday. I love your father, he’s the only family I have, but I know his character well. I won’t end up back on this farm if he
dumps me for a younger model, as you so adeptly put it... I think I’d rather die than come back.” Rosemary faced the wind, and her red hair blew like flames across her face.

Miranda thought for a while as she stared at the house, its walls caved inward like a sinkhole, and then she took off her sunglasses. For the first time, she carefully switched off the malice in her voice. “Did my father tell you why he bought the Poconos estate?”

Rosemary shook her head. “The Poconos was how we started talking in the first place; he mentioned loving the forests and farms up here in a meeting one time, but he never really explained it.”

“How like him. He didn’t buy this house... well, he paid for it, but my mother picked it out. She was born here, on a farm just like you, and she loves the birds and the forests and the rivers more than anything in the world. During their divorce, he wouldn’t let her have it, he dangled it like a carrot and then yanked it away, and she ended up in the city house amidst the roar of traffic she hated.”

“So you’ll help me?”

“It seems I must.”

“Thank you, Miranda.”

Rosemary hugged Miranda, and as she squeezed, the younger girl could not remember the last time her mother or father had touched her. Long gone were the days of nannies who cuddled and played with her, the sweet Mrs. Benson who tucked Miranda in at night and kissed her on the top of her head. She let herself enjoy the warmth for a few seconds, the duet of their two
heartbeats, and then forced herself to step back.

“One more thing,” Miranda added, looking Rosemary directly in the eyes. “A warning: leave this farm behind, but don’t ever forget it. Desperation will be your best motivation, and trust me, you’ll need it.”

ADELITA

The large sitting room of the Rolling Hills Club was empty, save for the flickering candles and the menus that stood like protecting arms around their flames. The tables were covered with empty wine glasses, cocktail glasses, and snifters floating on napkins or abandoned on the side tables. Stray napkin balls sat like cats under the sofas and littered the floor. Unbeknownst to one of the guests asleep in her bed, a strand of pearls lay between the plush red sofa cushions. The cleaning woman will come into the room at five-thirty in the morning, find it, and hand it to the General Manager for safekeeping until the owner can be found. When no one comes to claim them—*after all, what are a few pearls to these women?*—one of the receptionists will grow bold and stick the strand in her pocket.

Jared, the current receptionist on duty since eleven, was witness to the last hours of the private bash. He watched the women float out on the arms of their husbands, their expensive furs like comforters around their shoulders and matching hats already perched to protect them from the cold. Most of them did not say goodbye to the old man as they left, but Jared was used to being part of the wallpaper. In fact, he preferred it
Kelly Ann Jacobson is the author or editor of many published books, including novels such as Cairo in White, the poetry collection I Have Conversations with You in My Dreams, and anthologies such as Dear Robot: An Anthology of Epistolary Science Fiction. She also writes young adult fantasy novels under her pen name, Annabelle Jay. Kelly received her MA in Fiction at Johns Hopkins University and is now working toward her PhD in Fiction at Florida State University. Her work—including short stories published in such places as Northern Virginia Review and Iron Horse Literary Review—can be found at www.kellyannjacobson.com or www.annabellejay.com
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"The large sitting room of the Rolling Hills Club was empty, save for the flickering candles and the menus that stood like protecting arms around their flames. The tables were covered with empty wine glasses, cocktail glasses, and snifters floating on napkins or abandoned on the side tables. Stray napkin balls sat like cats under the sofas and littered the floor."

This is the Rolling Hills Club, a place where Philadelphia's rich—including Miranda Anderson, the socialite who ties the seven stories in *Miranda* together—come to spend their time and money. From general manager of the club to Miranda's best frenemy, the other characters in these narratives show what kind of person Miranda is—and what kind of person she might become.