**Opulence**

By [redacted]

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Email: [redacted]@gmail.com

1.

Surely most good Southern families had at least one lockbox full of loose gemstones and gold jewelry stashed in a filing cabinet or the attic or the back of a closet. There were two ways to be rich, after all, and most people had things to hide. I’d figured this out for myself. The first involved Lincoln Continentals and mansions next to private lakes and weekend getaway homes down at Emerald Isle. If you were extra-rich, you might buy the upgraded version of the Lincoln. It was called the Versailles and the eastern North Carolina pronunciation rhymed with “your dailies.” We didn’t have one of those, although the big beige Mercury Marquis in our garage was just a Lincoln with a different badge. This was the second way of being rich: not looking like it, but having stuff and pretending you didn’t. Keeping secrets.

2.

*Don’t go rummaging. There are things you’re not supposed to see. You’re not old enough yet. Like this box. See, it’s got a little lock on it? Yes, it’s very pretty, isn’t it? It’s made of teakwood. Isn’t the carving beautiful? Your father got it in Vietnam. He bought a lot of things over there. In Southeast Asia, everything’s cheap, so when he was in Vietnam, he used his money wisely. He bought some very nice things over there, and he would ship them home instead of spending all his money on, umm… beer. I’d get a package and open it up, never knowing what I’d find inside! Yes, some of it’s in that box. The carving really is exquisite, isn’t it? It’s pure teak. Just don’t go looking for the key.*

3.

My parents owned and ran an antique store for a couple of years in the sixties. I was convinced half the knicknacks in the house were worth a fortune—the Noritake china, for example. Platinum-rimmed and flawless, it stayed on its shelves in a glass-doored cabinet. The stacks of plates and saucers gleamed like ribbed metal cylinders in the dusty shade. I set the table with it once. Why bother having nice things if you didn’t use them? My mother’s fine-bone look of white terror kept that from ever happening again. Back in the cupboard it went; out came the Corningware. But the silverware was actually silver and we had two or three boxes of it stashed in various places around the house. The trick, as always, was in knowing where to look.

4.

*I think you’re getting old enough to know a little bit more about this family, the kinds of things that we have. Do you know what meerschaums are? They’re beautiful, intricate carvings made from a special kind of soft stone. We have a full set of the stations of the cross. They’re the most beautiful things you’ve ever seen. I’ve got ‘em packed away in one of the boxes in the attic. I know we’re not Catholic, but we’re Episcopalians, which is almost the same thing. You’d hang the stations on the wall in a certain order, and then you’d pray to them. Like a ritual. Whoever the original owner was, they must have had a lot of money. No, you can’t see them. They’re so fragile, so delicate, even taking them out of their wrapping paper would risk damaging them. They’re up there, though. I don’t even know how much they’re worth, if you could get a full set made today, which you can’t.*

5.

Having been told not to, of course I went looking for the keys and of course I found them. When the object is true concealment rather than drama, you take aggressive steps to keep things hidden. The teakwood box contained photos and newspaper clippings. All people in old sepia photos look more or less the same, not of interest. The metal box in the filing cabinet, however, held actual, literal treasure. A clear plastic vial of gemstones, mostly smaller ones, the kind meant for pendants or rings. Rubies, star sapphires, regular sapphires, an emerald or two; some cabochons, some already faceted. An assortment of pearls. A few larger stones. My mother’s giant topaz ring—I already knew she didn’t keep it in her jewelry box. Necklaces. Cameos. Old watches. Gold gleamed in the afternoon sun, as did the sugared-silver glint of antique platinum. There was an ornate gold pen inscribed with a tracery of roses; a ruby or a garnet sparkled at the top of the narrow metal cylinder. Strings of pearls. Loose opals in a little metal box meant for cough drops. Realizing it would take more time to untangle and arrange all this plunder than I had, I stuffed it all back in the box, locked it, put the keys away. And said nothing.

6.

*Do you realize our family used to own a lot of the land between the Neuse River and Bogue Sound? That whole area around the air station at Cherry Point, that was ours. And Hyde County. Our ancestors owned a lot of that too. But you know what happened? My older cousin B. was about as dumb as a bag of dead houseflies. When he found the land grants from the Crown, you know what he went and did? He tore off the royal seals and sold them. The only proof we had that that land was ours, any claim we might have been able to make, gone. We were one of the biggest landowning families in this end of the state, and look at us now.*

7.

We lived in a succession of modest three-bedroom suburban ranch houses like everyone else did, until we didn’t. Although we had that gigantic Mercury, both parents drove little Datsuns. They didn’t break down. There always seemed to be money, though. Granny had lots of it. She lived in a trailer down in New Bern and passed my parents enough envelopes full of fifties and hundreds that she couldn’t not be rich. She only spent money on groceries and bright poly-cotton pantsuits at a store called Anne-Lynn’s and old Avon bottles. Collectables. Every square inch of shelf space held a glass menagerie of Avon perfume: birds, bells, animals, shells, cars, candles, buildings, anything, everything. These, we understood, were rare and valuable: worth a lot now and more in the future. Also, enough of them still contained perfume that had she uncapped them on a hot summer day, a single spark would have ignited the fumes and blown her trailer and the secret stash of greenbacks we knew she had to have but never found right into orbit.

8.

*Now that you and your sister are getting to be young adults, it’s time we made some decisions together as a family. We need to draw up a list of the jewelry, the gemstones, the china, and the rest of that stuff. We’re not gonna be around forever, after all, and if something happens [sigh], you’ll need to know what to do. We’ve already had our wills drawn up, but they don’t go into details. They don’t list everything. So your father and I have decided we should sit down together, go through the contents of the box, and divide it between the two of you. We’ll do that with my own jewelry as well. After all, you know I have some very good pieces. Why don’t you go get the box, and we can get started?*

9.

Some years earlier, I’d gotten in trouble for showing our secret box of opulence to a babysitter—a *kidsitter*, as I insisted everyone call her. We weren’t babies anymore. I despised babies. Since my mother worked in the international students’ office at the university, we were always meeting foreign college kids from places like France and Japan. A contingent from Iran had enrolled there because eastern North Carolina was about as far from the Middle East as it was possible to get. Our regular kidsitter was from Tehran—the Shah’s niece, or something like that. Apparently rich and in some kind of danger, she had to be on the lookout because of the crazy people behind the Iranian Revolution. Thus, I figured she needed cheering up and might find our lockbox of gemstones exciting. With that in mind, I fished the key I wasn’t supposed to know about out of my mother’s desk, and played Show and Tell with a pile of rubies and precious metals for the next half-hour or so. She told my parents when they got home. Things got unpleasant that evening.

10.

*I just can’t believe everything worked out like this. Your father… be that as it may. I don’t know what made him want to build a house that big in the first place, but he got a wild hare up his ass and there was no stopping him. Growing up the way he did in Louisiana, he must have been in hog heaven when we inherited that land down in Stumpy Point. You should have seen his eyes light up. Oh well. That’s all over and done with now, and he’s off with some hussy. For what we sold it for, I could buy the new place with cash. I just wrote a check and took it to the bank. Oh, I had to dip into my mad money a little bit. A lady always has to have her ways. I always had a little bit put back, you know. For a rainy day. I’d say this is a rainy day, isn’t it? But at least we have standards. I paid cash for my house, damn it.*

11.

The fullness of time turned into an emptiness. Objects began disappearing. I barely noticed at first. She hadn’t gotten tipsy and pulled her gun out of her purse to remind us it was there recently. I went looking for it—the pistol, not the pocketbook. It wasn’t in her filing cabinets, where she had always kept it. Must be up in the attic then, I supposed. But was it a good idea to store live ammunition in a hot attic in the rural South in the summer? Could bullets explode? Would the house burn down? Some questions need to be asked but just can’t be. The meerschaums were up there as well, those holy relics I’d heard about all my life and never once laid eyes on. So were the china, the silver, the exorbitant bric-a-brac. Yes, we lived in a smaller house now, not the four-story mansion on the golf course, but didn’t less room mean more of our luxury clutter ought to be lying about?

12.

*It was all fake. Can you believe that? I had a hunch one day, and I took it to a jewelry shop. They’ve got a man there who can give you a valuation. All those gemstones, all that jewelry, everything your father bought in Vietnam, I had him appraise it. Turns out all of it was fake, every bit. Oh, I don’t think they ripped him off over there. He had replicas made just to spite me. Us. Just to spite us. He took all that jewelry somewhere and had copies made. He’s got the originals somewhere, or maybe he sold them. But the stuff he left me with—that was meant for you and your sister? Cut glass. Cheap metal. Every bit of it, fake. I was so upset, I just got rid of all of it. The man at the jewelry shop took it off my hands for me. He took care of it.*

13.

The emptiness of time turned into a fullness again. There were moves out of state, across the country, and then overseas. Houses bought, houses sold: beach properties, rentals. As an adult I could understand details like equity and mortgage and divorce. Bad investments; choices that didn’t quite work out. We grew up drowning in sapphires and playing with rubies that were real. A single mom with two kids and a secretary’s salary; an ex-husband who allegedly took liberties with the monthly child-support payments. She sued him and lost. It was the South, after all. She sold off most of her valuables quietly, on the sly, then lied about it to make us resent him. The pearls, the heaps of gold, the meerschaums, the land deeds from the Crown, even the small fortune in collectable perfume bottles: the faded glory was real. The fake parts took longer to spot.