

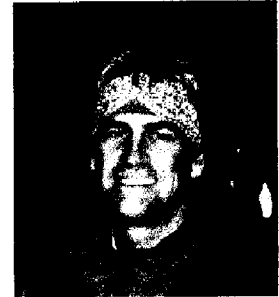
Sunken Lin

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Pillar of the Community

by

Paul Mann



I told my boss Rick I needed the night off, but of course the hardass made me come in anyway. He doesn't care if my car's not running and I've got to take the bus in with all the creepos, especially that lowlife a couple seats in front of me. Mouth-breathing knuckle dragger gave me the willies staring at my tits the whole ride.

I've only got myself to blame, but I still don't know how the hell I ended up working in this two-bit diner in Vegas. Don't get me wrong, waitressing's fine for some folks, I mean people gotta eat and someone's gotta serve them and all, but this isn't where I'm supposed to be. I grew up in the suburbs for Christ's sake—Littleton, Colorado, right outside Denver—shopping malls, clean streets, good schools, all that nice shit. I should be in the back of Beemers blowing frat boys up in Boulder, not slinging hash to homeless guys in filthy peacoats toting around Safeway bags full of aluminum cans.

And okay, so maybe my home life wasn't Leave it to Beaver. Mom did have a taste for the hardstuff, bourbon, vodka...well, okay, anything she could get her hands on really. Her favorite was Wild Turkey—ugh, more like Rotten Turkey. But who could blame her, what with that freakin' psycho she married after Dad split, Carl. Now again, this is the suburbs, so I ain't talking Brando chewing the scenery as Stanley Kowalski, or some moustache-twirling Simon Legree type. No, my step-dad was much worse, a pillar of the community, a civic leader, respected and praised—excuse me while I puke.

Jesus, if they only knew the shit that went on. I'm sure the neighbors did, the Richardson's especially, our houses were only about twenty feet apart on the east side, and that's where our den was, or as I like to call it, "the ring." Stevie, their son, was my best friend, matter of fact he's the first boy I screwed. We were...how old? Oh hell, let me think...oh, probably fourteen. We had smoked a doobie in his parent's basement and he did me right there on the couch in the game room. Couple years later he's Mr. Popular-Ass-Jock at Mountain Vista High and I'm little Miss Slut-Ass-Don't-Exist-No-More.

Anyway, when we were still friends he used to call me on my cell after Mom and Carl had a big blowup, probably over some stupid shit like how the table was set for dinner, and he'd be real worried, said he

could actually hear Carl's fist hitting skin. Sometimes it was mine, sometimes it was Mom's. My half-brother, Jimmy, was Carl and Mom's, and he was only a few years younger than me, but Carl never messed with him. I always figured it was because he was Carl's own kid. Until the day I split.

I was seventeen, barely went to school, and when I did I was miserable. As I said, I was Miss Slut and had zero friends. It was around ten at night and I was in my room, which I kept locked because of Mr. Psycho. I was listening to Nirvana, doing bong hits, and flipping through People. Mr. Psycho came in the back door from a night at the club, raging about something or other, when I heard Jimmy, who was fourteen at the time, scream. I went out to the hallway to the top of the stairs and looked down into the den. Mom was sitting on the couch, also drunk, with a whopper of a black eye, and Jimmy was on the floor, blood trickling out of his ear with Carl standing over him like a winning prize fighter. I probably wouldn't have done anything, but when I saw the look of absolute fear in Jimmy's eyes, I just snapped.

I walked down the hall, past all of Carl's civic awards crammed in the bookcase and cluttering the walls, pictures of him with the mayor, state senators, and all kinds of bigwigs. I got to Carl's office, broke the lock on his desk, took out the Glock 9 millimeter he kept for "intruders," walked quietly down the steps and came up behind Carl. He still had on his Hugo Boss suit, and I could smell the Drakkar on him, his favorite—shit made me nauseous as many times as I inhaled it while he kicked my ass. He stood over Jimmy, taunting him.

"Come on tough guy...big man...you want to stick up for this whore you got to take your lumps." Jimmy looked at me, his eyes wide, the Glock in my hand pointed at the base of Carl's skull. He saw the look on Jimmy's face and turned around.

At first Carl wasn't sure what he was seeing, messed up as he was. Then Mom freaked out. "Ellie! Ellie! What are you doing? He'll kill us all!"

"Oh, you little bitch," Carl seethed, but didn't move a muscle. "If you don't put that fucking gun down you are such a fucking dead slut..." and he took a halting step in my direction with his hand out, "I'll kill you right this goddamned second you—" I cocked back the hammer. Click. He froze. That moment is still one of the best moments in my pathetic life. I looked deep into Psycho's eyes and for the first time I saw fear—true fear. I mean he was scared, not just boo kind of scared, I mean the Blair Witch lose your shit I'm really gonna die here kind of scared, and my only regret is it couldn't have lasted longer.

Fairly certain in the knowledge that this was my last night at 201 Woodbridge Way, and even more certain that there were no bullets in the gun (crazy as he was, Psycho was a stickler for gun safety, putting us all through his little "Glock" safety course—I even made sure to clear the one out of the chamber), I simply cold-cocked him—hard—across the temple, and he went down like an intern on the President.

Mom ran over. She stood over Carl for the longest time, staring, tears and sweat and snot merging on the canvas of her flushed and confused face like an abstract post-modern. Carl's head was lolled over to the side. Blood flowed from a huge gash into his eye socket, over the bridge of his nose, down into the other eye and onto the expensive oak flooring where it pooled and spread out like mercury. The blood-splattered Glock was still in my hand hanging at my side, Kurt Cobain's voice drifting down from my room, Rape me my friend...

Suddenly Mom reared her foot back and kicked his unconscious ass right across his forehead, her stiletto heel cutting a crimson path mirroring my own handiwork. "You fucking piece of shit!" Mom screamed as she lifted her foot for another go around before Jimmy and I grabbed her and pulled her away. She looked me straight in the eye and I saw in that moment that she was capable of killing Carl.

She hugged me and Jimmy and then pushed me toward the door. "You have to leave Ellie," she said, her voice cracking. "Now. He'll kill you."

"We'll all go," I said as I looked over at Jimmy.

Mom shook her head, but I already knew she was staying. "I'm sorry Sweetie, I can't, I can't—"

"I have to stay too," Jimmy interjected, "Mom needs me. He won't always be bigger than me."

Mom gave me some cash and I took a train to Vegas. Been here three years. I saw Jimmy last year when he was out here checking out colleges. He's really smart. I talk to Mom every few months. She's still with Carl. She tries to convince me he's changed, but I can hear in her voice that she's lying to me, and worse, to herself. I want to feel sorry for her, but it's just not there. I wish Carl would die, but I don't tell her that.

I'm surviving if not exactly thriving. Could be happier. No real friends to speak of. I have a cat, Rambo, and when I come back to my apartment after a ten-hour shift he's waiting for me. I lay down on the couch, prop up my swollen feet and zone out on the tube while he stretches out on my chest, purring and clawing. He's my best friend. I'll never get married.