

## “Uneasy Lies”

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I want to live somewhere like a king. I'm not the kind of guy that does well with modest. I'm not greedy, five years would do it—and anyhow, who wants to live in a fucking banana republic for more than that? Just enough to taste the sweet life, where the nobodies treat you like royalty, yeah, like they *bow*, lord of the manor, that sort of thing, and you get your pick of pretty women, who cares if they really like you or not, just as long as they *ooh* and *ah* when you fuck 'em.

When I got bored with it, then I'd come home and start over, and if I missed the life, I'd pick some other old lady to screw. Naw, not that way.

One of my ex-girlfriends, who's a nurse, told me about a guy she knows, a plastic surgeon, he makes megabucks making old women look beautiful. Freaks, that's what they are. I coulda been a surgeon too, I'm smart enough, but you know what, that's way too much work, and what I do is more important. I make old women *feel* beautiful. Hey, I know what it's like, they confide in me. They tell me that it sucks looking old but feeling and wanting young. A guy taking care of them, that's what they want. You should see the light in their eyes when I come in with “Meals for the Elderly”—and boy do they hate that word, too! I come in smiling and ask them how they are and tell them how great they look. *That's* the mirror they want to look into. A mirror that always shows them at their best. Yeah.

One of the old dames I bring food to is a neighbor. She's in her eighties but in pretty good shape, except that her eyes are going. She can still see the stove but worries about what'll happen when she's completely blind. I feel sorry for her among other things. I know she's really careful with money, I never mention it, and I refuse the tip she's offered only once—I think to see what kind of guy I was in her book.

I guess I passed, because she doesn't immediately resist when I float the idea of a microwave, how she wouldn't have to worry about burning herself, how it could be set just for warming up, and how I'd put Velcro on the start button so she'd know when she touched it. I can be helpful that way.

That's how I handled my mom's problem before I had to put her in the nursing home. That was two years past and that's how long she lasted there. She called me a traitor for putting her there, but what could I do? I had to work, and she probably would've turned on the gas and forgotten about it and blown herself up and everyone else in the building. And anyway, it's not like I did it right away, I mean also because I had to think ahead. When I first saw the way things were going, that we were using up the money she'd managed to save even after good old dad ran out on us, I had her

transfer a good chunk into my account. I told her that way the government wouldn't get their hands on it. That way, I told her, I could always get her the help she needed if something bad happened to her. But shit, soon we were leaking that money like it was a faucet you couldn't turn off and what was the point? Let Medicaid take care of the expense of a nursing home, and it would, now that the money was in my name not hers.

Except ... didn't take me long to go through it. Me and the horses had one date too many, but hey it was a blast.

Anyhoo, what I was saying is, I float the idea of the microwave, telling her it's what I did for mom, and to my surprise, she immediately agrees; it'll keep her independent. "Yeah," I say, "that's the idea."

But how will she get it? she wants to know. I ask her when her social worker is coming and why don't I come the same time and arrange it with her. She's pleased with me, I can tell, though she likes to keep things close to the vest. She doesn't want me getting too cozy.

But after a couple of months – especially after the deal with the microwave goes so well, they get it at a discount – she begins to ask me to do other things for her, little things at first, like threading needles for her, which, tell the truth, me with my fat fingers can't do and she gets a little impatient. But I go down the hall to another neighbor who looks to be in her fifties and not bad-looking if you like 'em more than halfway over the hill, and her gloves look as if they've been stitched over a couple of times, so I guess she knows her way around with a needle, and I ask her if she can help just for a little bit. She's obliging and suggests to the old lady that she thread a whole bunch of needles for her and put them somewhere where she'll find them easily but won't poke herself. I suggest a piece of cardboard on a side table, and my dame is in heaven with this rescue mission.

I actually considered the neighbor down the hall as a possible fish I could hook before I latched onto the old dame. I've never seen a man in her company, and a little sweet-talking I figured might get her to open her purse. Once, I'd gotten a complete stranger to give me fifty dollars, when I told her I was locked out of my apartment and needed money to fix the window. Some people need to believe, it's a fact. But this one, well, obliging as she is, there's something about the way she looks at me that tells me she's on to me.

Back to the old lady and to my previous point about some people needing to believe. From little things to bigger things, she's beginning to trust me now. She asks me to help her write out checks, and I do. She asks every month what's in the bank account, and I tell her. I never lie. This isn't the time to. I'm setting up the sting for a payout later.

I'm patient. I can tell her sight is going. It's going faster than she's imagined, and I know she's getting scared. I tell her about power of attorney, and that if she trusts me, I can take care of all the expenses for her. She won't ever have to worry about someone saying she's incompetent. "That's what I did for my mom," I tell her.

Once, she asks me where my mom is right now.

“In heaven,” I say.

“Where did she die?” she asks.

I’m caught off guard. “You mean—”

“Did she die in the hospital or did she die at home?”

I pause, as if the memory is painful. I’m reflecting what story will sell best.

“She was having trouble breathing, and I brought her to the hospital. They said her heart was bad and there wasn’t much they could do about it. I said to them, ‘I’m bringing her home,’ because I knew that’s what she’d want: to die at home.”

She smiles at me. “You’re a good boy!”

Not long after, I graduate to “man.” Namely: She gives me a key, so I can let myself in. “In case I fall,” she says. A few evenings later, when I come to check on her, I hear her bragging over the phone to one of her friends: “I have a man taking care of me now!”

That’s when I know she’s going to let me say anything, do everything, including use her credit card if she needs cash.

I take my time. One thing here, another thing there. I pretend the cable bill has gone up or the gas bill is higher than usual. I ask whether she’s used the heater more than usual to justify the higher charge—I know she doesn’t want to use it at all, she holds on to her pennies with a death grip, but this is one of those old buildings where the landlord isn’t all that generous with the heat. When she says no, I get upset at the company and swear I’ll call and get to the bottom of it. That way, it shows I’m on her side.

Every week now, I do an accounting with her, making sure she understands (which I know she doesn’t, she’s getting confused by it all) where her money is going and why. I’m always sure to tell her a fictional amount in her account balance, so she knows she still has a goodly amount of money left.

She’s so proud to have me manage everything for her that she tells me soon enough I don’t have to go over what I’ve done every week, she trusts me that everything is right as rain.

I siphon off the money slowly, carefully. I don’t want to leave her destitute, but I need most of what she has if I’m going to escape to that banana republic and live like a king. Yeah.

It’s my girlfriend who put me onto the idea. She knows a nurse who comes from Guatemala, who’s described what you can get down there for peanuts. I think to myself, why don’t the two of us do it together? I float the idea.

“You still have to have a nest egg of sorts,” she says. “I’m not going to support you.”

I float further the scenario I’m living, laughing while I’m saying it because I’m not sure how she’ll take it, even though I think she’s done some dicey things herself.

She looks before she says anything. “I can’t tell whether you’re serious.”

“I can’t tell whether *you’re* serious,” I say.

“I wouldn’t think that was cool *at all*,” she says. “Do you mean it?”

Not hard to tell which way the wind is blowing.

“Of course not!” I say. “Do you really think I could twist up an old lady?”

“You had me going.” But she looks dubious.

I kiss her and we make love and she forgets the whole thing, and I make a note to find another girlfriend, maybe down in Guatemala, more suited to my take on life.

The time comes when I have enough put away in a briefcase to put my plan into effect. I’ve done a lot of research in the meantime. I know where to go, what I have to do to get there, how I can get the money into the country without raising too many eyebrows. I figure bribes are a large part of that, and I’ve put some money aside for that eventuality. I’ll travel light, I can always buy stuff there.

The day I leave, I tell the old lady I’m going away just for a week, and she’s almost panicking, but I tell her I’ve arranged it all with her social worker to have someone come by and help while I’m away. And I *have* arranged it, I’ve gotten fond of the old dame and don’t want her to suffer more than necessary. I hug her, and she hangs on tight, and I can see tears in her eyes. I can’t believe I’m feeling a tug in my chest, I’m such an old softy. I’ve got to get out of there before I change my mind.

“Don’t go,” she says. “I have a bad feeling.” Jeez, now I have to deal with the spooky-dooks. I tell her I’ll be home before she knows it, and I’ll bring her back a present. That does the trick, she lets me go, and I’m out the door.

I’ve decided to treat myself and take a helicopter from the RiverRoof landing pad to the airport. There’re a bunch of us waiting.

Sometimes when I run along the river to keep in shape, I can see the copters lift off and land. I imagine myself in them, looking down at the city and everyone in it, like I’m the king and all the people beneath me are my—what’s that word?—min-something.

I think about the old lady. I think: I don’t really have to worry about her, she’ll be all right. The social worker will make sure she winds up in a nice nursing home somewhere, and she doesn’t need the money, Medicaid will pay for it. Hell, if it was good enough for my mom, right?

As for the rest of those—minions, that’s the word—those also-rans who’ll be looking up with envy, I say off with their fuckin’ heads, yeah!

There’s like a little shuffle on the roof, because we can see the copter coming, and my heart’s starting to pound, I’m so happy.

My cellphone goes off, and between the duffle bag on my shoulder and the briefcase in my hand, I can’t locate it quickly. I remember I’ve put it in my coat, which is draped over my shoulder. I put the briefcase down. I take the coat off my shoulder and look in the right-hand pocket. I take the cell out. It’s my girlfriend, the one who brought up Guatemala in the first place, her loss not mine, ha! I decide not to answer it, especially since the helicopter is about to land and it’s very noisy.

I bend down for my suitcase. I hear a crack and don’t realize one of the helicopter struts has hit the edge of the roof. I’m straightening up and, out of the corner of my eye, I see the copter sag onto the rooftop. Something breaks off and is coming at me very fast, so fast I can’t register it.

There’s pandemonium. I’m wondering what’s happened, even as my body crumples and my head rolls toward the side of the building. I hear a woman screaming and screaming and screaming. It seems to go on forever.