

Imposter Family

by Trevy Thomas

Everything important to me had to fit inside the trunk of my MG Midget. That included a framed photograph I'd recently bought on the street where I worked in D.C. It was a pink ballerina-slippered foot poised atop an egg. It was the most beautiful picture I'd seen in my nineteen years, and I hoped it mirrored my identity. So, even though it was large and covered in glass, I allowed it about half the trunk.

We drove for two days to reach Florida. My sister, Helen, sat in the passenger seat. She'd rightfully counseled me not to make this trip alone. It was my first move out of state, and even though she couldn't drive a standard shift, she was good moral support. We made one overnight stop in a hotel, but the rest of the time was solid driving with the car's top down. I arrived in Florida with one of the worst sunburns of my life. After our arrival, layers of skin peeled off my face like the shell of the egg in my trunk.

Helen left after a few days, and I found the tenement house where my friend, Iris, was living in West Palm Beach. She'd moved there with her boyfriend and convinced me to join her through calls to my dreaded job. "You'll love it. We're so close to the beach. Just quit and find work down here." My mother had given me some cash to get me through until I found employment, but not until I'd worn down her worries with pronouncements of my independence. Back and forth we batted until I finally triumphed with the ultimate teenager's rebellion: "I'm over eighteen. You can't stop me." Only then did she offer cash. Memories like this one make me glad I never had children of my own.

By the time I'd arrived at the house, Iris had dumped her boyfriend and was sleeping with the tenement's homeowner in his bedroom. The other tenants and I could hear them having sex at night. I lay on the air mattress she provided in one of the rooms, peeling skin off my face and keeping an eye out for Palmetto bugs on the floor.

The owner, Troy, made extra money selling weed out of the house. Whenever he was home from his construction job, he sat in their room doing bong hits. I'd never heard someone speak in such a monotone drone. He blew his sentences out in one long stream like a bong exhale. The smoke seemed to strangle his vocal cords, so he only had the one note left. "That sunburn isn't gonna do you any favors in a job interview. People down here can spot a snowbird pretty fast. If they don't think you're gonna stay, you won't get hired."

A big guy came in the bedroom and greeted Troy, who took him out to the bedroom porch where he kept his stash, sandwich bags, and professional-grade scale. He was proud of his perfectly-measured ounces. He was also industrious for a stoner. Between the room rentals of his family's former home, his construction day job, and dealing weed, he should have been in good financial shape, but I suspect his habit cut into some of the profits.

Troy turned out to be right about my sunburn because I was struggling to get hired. One job I really wanted was at Sotheby's in Palm Beach. Iris and Troy had to counsel me several times on how to say the name. "Suth-a-bees." It sounded exotic and worldly to me, the kind of place where my real grownup life could properly begin. It was one of the oldest, most esteemed art auction houses in the world. Big money. Old wealth. Impressive art. I put on my best dress and went to the interview. The perfectly-coiffed woman who met me stared in open disgust at the layers of skin flaking off my face. Undeterred, I chatted about how I'd just moved to Florida but loved it and planned to stay permanently. It was a brief interview.

Back in the thick of marijuana smoke, I told Troy and Iris it didn't go well. Water bubbled in the bong while he held a lighter expertly to the weed. "You should show them a picture of all those boxes you had shipped here. That should prove your commitment." Helen had instructed me to ship any belongings that would fit in a box by UPS. She'd moved a lot and assured me this was the cheapest way to go. Together we packed up my small Maryland kitchen with every plate, glass, and pan I owned for a home I didn't yet have in Florida. I shipped all of it to Iris's tenement. Troy wasn't thrilled to have it in his living room, but it didn't look like I'd be moving out anytime soon, at least not before my sunburn had left me with whatever new face might warrant permanent employment.

I was still sleeping on the air mattress when Thanksgiving came around. Iris and Troy left to have dinner with some of his family nearby, as did every other tenant in the house, and I was alone for the first time on a major holiday. Just me and the palmetto bugs, my dwindling cash supply, and a burnt face now salty with tears. I missed my mother's Thanksgiving table, my sisters' laughter, and the place in that home that belonged to me. But I'd come to Florida to prove my independence, so there was no running back. I drove around looking for food and discovered that the drive-through at McDonald's was one of the few places open on Thanksgiving Day. The girl at the window handed me a greasy brown bag with a look of pitiful camaraderie.

A secretarial job finally came through at a law firm, and I moved into a one-bedroom apartment barely a block from the beach in a little town called Singer Island. Singer, as in the sewing machine family. I loved the name of it almost as much as my new home. Troy was glad enough to see the boxes leave his living room that he agreed to load them in his van and move me. The apartment owners—a family with a daughter my age—lived in one of the buildings on the first floor. The mother knocked at my door a few times and scolded me until I turned the music down. Weekends were spent at the beach, where I started Saturday morning with a pale face. By Monday, I entered the law firm with a new sunburn. Every week. The ladies in the office teased me, and I worry now whenever I see a suspicious mark on my skin.

One weekend, I lay on my towel watching a guy navigate expertly on a windsurfer. He was a little older than me and very fit. He saw me watching so he came over and invited me to dinner. At the restaurant, I noticed something was off about him. He told me he was really into Scientology. "What's Scientology?" I asked. As I said it, a woman at a nearby table gave me a look of warning. He frowned and struggled to explain. He was at once angry and superior. I didn't go out with him again but every morning for the next month my phone rang, waking me earlier than I needed to get up, and there was a strange male voice either breathing heavily or making crude comments.

I developed a routine. Monday through Friday at the office; evening walks and weekends on the beach. Once in a while, Iris came to visit me, but her boyfriend wasn't crazy about that, so I spent a lot of time alone. A coworker and I sometimes went to

lunch. She told me about a nearby restaurant that served blue cheese salads. “It’s Gorgonzola cheese but it’s basically blue. They’re delicious.” It sounded weird but I craved the companionship. She told me about a friend who’d just broken up with his girlfriend. I agreed to meet him. She looked at my long-painted fingernails and said, “He’s going to love me for introducing you to him.”

Jim was a high school teacher with white-blond hair. He drove a sporty old Porsche. We went out once a week for a while but never had much to say to each other. He invited me to a schoolteacher’s party one weekend. There were chips and drinks on the kitchen table and people packed in every room. As we walked through the living room, a group of teachers was laughing at the television. All of them were watching porn together. I whispered to him that I had a surprise for him. He smiled and we rushed out of the party. I don’t know why I said it because I couldn’t come up with any surprise, but it got me out of there.

After three months at my apartment, the owner knocked at my door again. “In six weeks, your rent increases to \$1,400. Either pay the new rent or get out by then.” At that time, I was paying \$300, which was just about all I could afford, and I didn’t have a lease. “I can’t pay that. Why is it so much?” She showed little sympathy. Except for work, I stayed in skimpy dresses or bikinis, always played loud jazz, and had an occasional beach bum friend over whenever he had weed to share. But I did pay my rent on time. She tried not to roll her eyes. “Because we can get it. It’s tourist season and we can rent it out every week for a lot more than your summer rent.” I saw she meant it and I started to panic. “But what if I signed a lease, agreed to stay for years? You’d have secure rent coming in.” She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head no. “Six weeks. Up to you.” She started down the steps but turned back once more. “And turn the music down.”

My beach bum friend painted houses for a living and drove a long white station wagon with plenty of room for paint cans and ladders. It was also roomy enough for my UPS boxes. For the second time in a few months, I moved. The beach bum was not exactly a boyfriend, so this move was pushing the limits of his generosity towards me, but I couldn’t ask Troy to lend me his van again. Iris’s relationship with him had grown

complicated, and she'd rented an apartment of her own. Then she escaped the entirety of Florida while he was at work one day and needed someone to sublet the apartment she'd signed on.

I made an appointment with the realty company to view it, though I really had no other options. This apartment was in Palm Beach, and I was reluctant to leave my beloved Singer Island, landlady notwithstanding. Palm Beach was for rich people, but you could find dive apartments thanks to their need to house the support staff they didn't want living with them. It was one room with a half-sized kitchen, no oven, and a tiny fridge. The shower was narrow even for my teenaged frame. The apartment was right at street level, so the only window had to remain covered. One good thing was the building's owner also had a furniture store and I was allowed to choose from two furniture styles for the chair and dining table that would fit into my one-room home. I signed the lease.

"I'll be there at 7 a.m.," the beach bum informed me. "Have everything boxed and by the door. I'm not packing your stuff." When he arrived and saw that I'd done what he said, he looked surprised. We loaded his station wagon and drove to Palm Beach. He helped me unload then left. "I have a house to paint." It didn't take long to unpack. I was in a hurry to get out and explore my new walk to the beach. Nothing was as good here. Iris, my only real friend in this place, was moving away. I'd changed jobs and was starting over in an architectural office. Even the beach bum was now far away and not inclined to visit. On weekends, I spread my lone towel out on the beach and lay out to burn. One day I noticed a group of people about my age all together on the beach. They laughed and talked about their plans for the night. I wondered how they managed to find each other. They were a whole family of people. Maybe they'd grown up here, towels touching for a lifetime of beach parties. Maybe they'd see me alone and invite me. Maybe I'd just go home and boil pasta with canned clams again.

The following weekend, I drove to my beloved Singer Island beach. By the end of the afternoon, I put a tee shirt over my damp bikini and drove the MG back towards Palm Beach. As I turned a corner onto Route 1, the car just completely stopped functioning. No warning. Just rolled to a dead stop right in front of a pornographic theater. I was blocking a lane of travel and had to act fast. I stepped onto the street in

my wet tee shirt as a carload of young men pulled around from the back of the theater. The passenger smiled. "Need help?" They looked at the wet fabric pasted against my bikini, the tee shirt barely covering my bottom. They were cruddy looking, like they hadn't bathed. The driver was missing most of his teeth. I was in a spot though, so I nodded yes. "We'll be right back with some rope." As they drove off, I ran across the street to a convenience store. A safer-looking guy asked if I needed help and I said yes. We pushed my car into the store's lot and he gave me a ride home, long before my wannabe kidnappers returned.

I woke in the middle of the night in my studio bed that pushed under an alcove into a couch during the day. Above the alcove was a stream of roaches climbing the wall. Not even the Florida Palmetto kind, just ordinary roaches. Needing to get out, I pulled on clothes and fished in a jar that had coins in the bottom. There was never much left after paying bills. I walked a few blocks away from the beach, grateful that at least I was living in a place that was safe for a young woman to be out in the middle of the night alone. I reached the soda machine and dropped in enough coins for a Coke. I felt the splash of sweet cold in my mouth and looked around at the foreign buildings I passed on the way back. Hotels and restaurants and investments offices. I didn't see a person or car or even hear a dog bark.

A letter arrived from my father. He pointed out the spelling mistakes I'd made in my last letter to him and asked if I was just staring at the four walls of my apartment. I'd complained of my loneliness but also my compulsion to stick it out. Now the four walls felt like my fault somehow.

At Christmas, my mother sent me a plane ticket for the holiday break. My sister picked me up at the airport, happy to see me. It was dark by the time we reached the house and I could smell my mother's percolator coffee as soon as I walked in. There was a fire burning and Christmas music playing. My mother gave me a big hug. Here in the cold northern winter, my heart melted a little. But because I had to defend my move, I didn't admit to how lonely I was. In a few days when my sister dropped me back at the airport, I couldn't hide my tears at the gate.

After my return, I started leaving my apartment door open to the building's hallway. The roaches were getting to me. One night, I pulled a knife out of its wooden block and a roach scrambled off the blade. I scrubbed it hard before mincing garlic. Donald lived across the hall, and he began leaving his door open too. We commiserated about the roaches. Sometimes I sat on the floor of his apartment while we played card games. He was an artist who used a style of painting I'd never heard of called pointillism where tiny dots make up realistic images. He had a girlfriend named Roberta, apparently the first girlfriend of his life. She was pretty and his father and brother couldn't understand what she wanted with him.

Donald and I moved together to an apartment closer to the beach. This time I left everything, except my clothes, behind. Especially the knife block. I could fit it all in my little car and move by myself. No weed-selling van or painter's station wagon necessary. The new place was in the top floor of a house and the owner, Letitia, also a painter, lived below. She'd painted trompe l'oeil murals over both floors of the house. A silver fern grew out of the shower wall to greet me. Pink flowers trailed green branches from the kitchen into the living room.

She watched me walk from my car to the back entrance one evening a few months after I had moved in and stopped me. "I have some clothes you can have that would be good for work. Surely you don't want to spend all your money on office clothes." I looked at her, trying to gauge the intent. Until now, she hadn't shown much kindness toward me. Was she trying to be motherly? Was it pity? She'd made some remarks about all the men I had upstairs. Donald's brother was practically living with us, his father was a frequent visitor, and by now I had a boyfriend. I could see beneath a wrinkled bitterness that she'd been beautiful before life took her by surprise. Divorced, more than twice my age, but somehow moneyed. The house in Palm Beach, albeit partially rented out, and the return trips to the Hamptons for months at a time were telling. Given my comparative struggle, and the goggles of youth, it was hard to fathom her bitterness.

Despite all the men Letitia thought were living in my apartment, it was just Donald and I paying the bills and we were doing it on small incomes. I accepted her offer of clothes. Then I helped myself to something from her that still makes me feel guilty.

When she was gone on one of her Hampton trips, I walked down the steps from my apartment and opened the door into hers. It was unlocked. I guess she trusted us. I tiptoed through her apartment until I located the phone. Sitting on the bed, I picked up the phone and dialed my mother. Calls home were a rare occurrence because we had no telephone upstairs. My mother didn't seem to understand the importance of the call and the risk I'd taken to make it. "What are you doing down there?" I looked around this stranger's bedroom and tried to answer. "When are you coming home? You don't belong in Florida." She couldn't know that I wasn't supposed to be in my landlord's apartment, making a long-distance call on her phone, probably soon to be tossed out on the streets when the Maryland number showed on her bill. I'd wanted home that badly, but it was a home that didn't really exist.

I hung up and tiptoed back up the stairs to my imposter home instead. There in the kitchen was my roommate, Donald, trying to perfect his recipe for bagel chips, his latest get-rich-quick scheme. On the couch were his girlfriend, father, and brother. My imposter family. In a few hours when he finished work, my new boyfriend was coming over. If I squinted, I could still see loneliness, but this façade would keep me going for a little while longer.



Trevy Thomas's work has appeared in *The Coachella Review*, *Dr. T.J. Eckleburg Review*, *Forge Journal*, *Sliver of Stone*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Visitant*, the *River Tides* anthology, and *Woodwork* magazine. Trevy lives in Virginia with her husband and two dogs and can be found virtually at <http://trevythomas.com>.