

Still Running

by Mario Moussa

Aunt Net was waiting for Uncle Curty when he came home from the Dunes Hotel, where he was a pit boss. I watched from the living room sofa as Uncle Curty trudged over to his recliner, took off his thin tie and let it drop to the floor, did the same with the dark suit that barely accommodated his enormous belly, wrapped himself in a white terrycloth robe, slipped his feet into white velour house shoes, and stretched out in the chair. He sat for a moment, then yelled, “Bring me one!”

“Okay, Curty,” Aunt Net answered from the kitchen in a voice that made my back ripple with dread. She emerged from the doorway, with a beer in her hand, like a painted bird from a cuckoo clock. She shuffled to his chair and back until late in the evening, Uncle Curty taking hourly trips to the bathroom as he worked through an entire case of twenty-four cans.

I witnessed it all as the tension between them began to feel like electricity in the air. I sensed that Aunt Net would punish me for it. Why? For starters: because I was there and she could. But there were deeper reasons—reasons intertwined with my family’s history. I’d overheard conversations between my parents and was figuring things out. Aunt Net’s first husband had ditched her for a life on the road as a big band singer. Her younger sister was beautiful and Aunt Net wasn’t. My father had a big corporate job and Uncle Curty didn’t. For all these reasons, she was angry and needed a target for her anger. Anger ran in the family, too, growing from one year to the next like money in the stock market. Nobody ever seemed to feel they got what they deserved, no matter how much they got. The value of our collective holdings in resentment had become staggering.

This was decades ago. After a flight from our midwestern home, my parents had dropped me off at Uncle Curty and Aunt Net’s Las Vegas condo, then drove to LA in a fancy rental sedan to party for three days at a liquor industry convention. I remember exactly when it was—the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper* album had hit the stores in the morning.

Like every grade school kid I knew, I idolized Lennon and McCartney, and in my imagination I wore a multi-colored psychedelic uniform. But on that day, when I stepped out our front door, I was dressed in the standard-issue Middle America outfit my parents had chosen for me to wear on the plane: white shirt, khakis, blue blazer. I felt like an oversized Ken doll. When I skulked into the condo, Aunt Net looked at me and smirked.

In the evenings, I sat with Uncle Curty while he drank. Fingers wrapped around a beer can, stretched out in his recliner, he said little. When he did utter a word, he mumbled. We watched baseball on TV. I hated baseball—still do. Perched on the sofa, I twisted my head at an uncomfortable angle and sat immobile from the first pitch to the final out, doing all I could to avoid Aunt Net's attention.

The morning after my arrival, over breakfast with my aunt, I looked up from the newspaper. "According to this story, the Viet Nam war is escalating," I said.

"The little professor speaks!" she said, pursing her lips and taking a sip of tar-black coffee from a china cup. Aunt Net was generally nasty to me, but I knew this comment was about Eddie. Eddie was her grown son, and I was never going to be like him. He had stopped by the condo the day before in the afternoon. Hair slicked back, talking out of the side of his mouth. Deckered out in a leisure suit. A high-IQ mobster, he worked as a bookie. Aunt Net stood in the entrance hall and beamed when he walked in. I had different aspirations from Eddie. Aunt Net hated me for it.

After breakfast, I turned on the TV and discovered "This Morning" with Dick Cavett. Cavett had an appealing intellectual style. Legs crossed, smooth voice. But the highlight of my day was the news about the anti-war protests. Long-haired college students marched across campuses, clenched fists held high. The spectacle spoke to an unfathomable feeling—it's still with me—of outrage.

Meanwhile, Aunt Net paraded around the condo wearing an industrial-strength bra and high-waisted panties. She seemed to be preparing to leave for an event that would never occur. At lunch time, she stopped in front of the TV. Images of protesters flickered on the screen. "Oh, look at those *fairies!*" she said. As she strutted off, I pictured myself fleeing across the desert, hair flying, to meet imaginary friends at a California love-in.

A few hours later, spread out in the recliner again, Uncle Curty had finished his first beer of the night. A baseball game moved into the third inning. I sat motionless, watching as he brought a can to his lips. He swallowed and barked, “Another!”

“Okay, Curty.” Aunt Net stepped into the living room. As I followed her with my eyes, my chest was tight and my breath was shallow. She glanced over at me, scowling, menacing. But I realized that when Uncle Curty was around, Aunt Net was powerless. I felt elated about it.

The next morning, when Uncle Curty was at work, Aunt Net appeared in the kitchen fully dressed in a clingy orange sweater and skin-tight blue slacks. “It’s time to leave for LA!” she croaked, hands flapping in a frenzy.

I got in the back of her big-ass white Cadillac and we took off across the desert. Dean Martin crooned on the radio about everybody loving somebody.

Two hours into our trip, the radio grew staticky. Aunt Net changed the station. The Beatles’ “A Day in the Life”—ominous, dissonant—came on the radio. “What is this *crap*?” Aunt Net hissed. With quick twist of her hand, she turned off the music.

After we had driven in silence for a few minutes, I said, “Can we stop, Aunt Net? I really have to go.”

“Piss out the window!”

The desert scrub hurtled past.

“How?” I said.

“Piss out the window!”

I rolled down the window with the hand crank. The air hit my face in repeated slaps. I tried to picture this working. She was powerless around Uncle Curty, but now she was in control. The moment of my punishment had arrived. The wind blasted into the back, thumping like a two-by-four whacking a barrel.

“Are you going to go or not?” she yelled above the din.

I had to go. I propped myself on my knees and unfastened my pants. The stream washed back into my face. I wiped my face with my arm, closed the window, and zipped up.

“Done?” she said.

“Done,” I said, feeling the pain of humiliation. I saw her eyes in the rearview mirror. Then I looked out my window and there I was, running alongside the car, on my way to the imaginary love-in.

Many years later, I’m sitting alone in my kitchen drinking coffee. I just looked at my phone—the date, the news, my light schedule—and realized I’m the same age Aunt Net was in 1967. Even though she’s been dead for three decades now, there’s part of me still in that car. But I’m still running, too, striving for escape. Despite myself, I haven’t forgiven her.

I hadn’t thought about her for a while until a recent dinner party, when a friend asked if anybody had a meaningful relationship with an aunt or uncle. I told the story about hurtling across the Mojave Desert, Aunt Net at the wheel. Everybody laughed, including my wife, who hadn’t heard all the details. That was six months ago, after the last election. Dozens of news cycles have come and gone and I keep thinking about Aunt Net. But I’m not laughing at the dark turmoil on the streets—then or now—and in my aunt’s darker heart, or at the pain I can still feel, even today, when I think of her. By the tangled logic that governed my family, her anger—whatever its causes, the obvious reasons and the mysterious histories and humiliations that define a life—justified my punishment. I can still feel its sting.



Mario Moussa is a writer living in Philadelphia. His stories have appeared in *Write City*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Loud Coffee Press*, and *Litbreak*.