

MAGGIE & SUSIE

I was ten years old when my step-dad asked me if I wanted to play Russian roulette. He was married to my mom at the time. I never addressed him by name. When I wanted his attention, I spoke loud. Greg would tell us we weren't his kids and he was glad of it. My brother and sister and I would say we were glad he wasn't our father—our *real* father, but that was only when he couldn't hear us. He told us never to call him dad, daddy, or anything else related and we didn't, gladly.

He was white, tall and skinny with a red-gold beard he trimmed the day they married in a downtown courthouse. His mustache matched the flames of hell. His forehead stretched wide and long over shallow-light blue eyes and his broad shoulders dwarfed his skinny hips like a banana balanced on top of a stick. His arms long; hands small, and feet like elephants. His uniform: dusty green and brown T-shirts with sweat stained armpit circles, camouflaged army surplus jackets, matching dark green and khaki cargo pants.

We never met Greg until my mom decided we should leave the flat plains of Kansas and move with him down to the dry, mountains of New Mexico. Grandma said she was nuts. Why would she give up her school? She was working towards a Master's degree at Kansas University. Aunt Kim agreed and added 'why would she leave when she had her family there to help take care of us?' Grandpa didn't count. He disowned his lily-white daughter after she decided to sleep with a black man and have us, her three mixed kids.

Before the move, momma went on a quick get-away with Greg to Galveston. In Texas, he took her to a battleship and a war museum while we got one last visit with Aunt Kim. I kept the picture she brought back. Momma looked like a flower fairy. She wore a white dress with deep blue orchids printed on the bottom. The wind wrapped her in it and blew hard enough to outline her skinny legs. Greg stood out like the stains under his arms; a crooked giraffe next to Tinker Bell. He wore the faded green cargo pants and a tan camouflaged T-shirt. They posed in front of his monstrous pick-up truck which was the same color as his pants.

I didn't want to leave Kansas and neither did my siblings. Momma said we were

going to get a real house. Something bigger and better than the bottom floor of a two-bedroom duplex. My brother would have his own room and Greg would build bunk beds for us girls. Why were we so worried momma wanted to know? We would still see Grandma and Aunt Kim she promised, but it didn't matter. She also said Greg would make a good dad. The move was fast and before we knew it we were on the road and out of Kansas before the school year was up.

Welcome to New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment. The sign hinted at fairytales and unicorns. What it really meant was welcome to the Land of Dry Air, hard blue skies, rattle snakes, pueblos, and Indians, or as I learned to say, Native Americans. The Sandias Mountains anchored the city to the north and a cluster of inactive volcanoes cradled the south. Sandias was the first New Mexico-Spanish word we learned. The mountains turned pink in the evening sun and the natives thought it looked like an upside-down slice of watermelon. We'd never seen a mountain before. Were there bears? Sure, momma said but Greg was a professional camper, he hunted. We'd be safe with him.

Momma found her job first, easy enough. She worked as a secretary for a big accounting firm. Her office was downtown, in the heart of the city close to the original five blocks that started as Albuquerque. She had to drive through traffic an hour each way and didn't come home until after dark. Her job was important. They handled paperwork for a famous painter, Georgia K. Leaf or something. Greg's first job was as a security guard. He didn't handle much. He took time off to find another one delivering pizzas. He vacationed a lot, more times than we had days off from school. How hard, momma wanted to know, was it to deliver pizzas? And why, we asked did we have to move every time Greg went on vacation?

My sister was in middle school while I was still in elementary. Her school started late and ended late. Mine started early and ended early. That meant she got home much later than I did. It also meant that after school I walked home with Keisha, my first black friend. Her size alone scared me at first. Her skin concerned me next. She stood a head taller than me and was darker, much darker than my brother and sister and I. Keisha always beat me (and every other kid) at tether ball during recess. But she was alone and I

was alone so we walked home together after school. She never came over though. Said her parents told her to stay away from white trash. I wasn't sure if she was talking about me or not and when I asked, she shrugged then asked me why my parents were white. I shrugged back, and wondered if she didn't think they were really mine? We split at my street, Douglas Macarthur, and I walked the two houses up hoping Greg was not on vacation.

He was. I pushed my key in the door and felt the lock lax. Trepid, I walked in and closed the door behind me. Greg was sprawled out on the couch. He watched TV with a crumpled bag of Ruffles in his lap. I sighed. We were trained not to cut in front of him and the TV whenever the TV was on. It didn't matter if he was watching it or not. Since it was less than three feet from the front door I had to stop near the entrance and wait for a commercial break. An ad for Lucky Charm's popped on and I thought to cross but his eyes watched me.

"You just get home?" he asked.

I nodded and watched him the way his dog did the mail-lady.

"Where you been?"

Was that a trick question? "School."

"You walking with that girl?"

I nodded again. Had he followed me? "Is it alright if I go over there?" I asked, ready to leave. I would have just gone home with her, but I was told I had to come home here first.

"No." He was slow today. No explanation. He turned his head when Pat's voice came back on and I was stuck. Like a robot his head turned towards me with the next commercial. He studied me for a moment. "How come she don't come here?"

"She can't."

"Why not?"

I had to be quick. Weigh the truths, see what I could get away without saying, and remember not to say what I left out. He wasn't generous with time, ever, and he wanted an answer quick. The narrow slit of his eyes told me this.

"Her momma said we're white trash." Out it tumbled but shit, wrong answer. The energy in him flared to life.

“What the hell kind of language is that? You asking for a spanking?”

“No. That’s-”

“I said are you asking for a spanking?”

“No, it’s what she said. I don’t know what she means. Serious. What does it mean?” He laughed. I wanted to escape. I stood by the door and pretended to watch when his show returned. If I was still enough maybe he’d forget I was there. But no, the segment ended and he stood up. The bag of chips fell from his lap. He brushed the crumbs off his shirt then stretched, watching me.

“Come on.” Here we go. I took a deep breath then followed him down the hall. “What the hell is a nigger doing calling you white trash?”

I didn’t think he meant for me to answer, so I didn’t. Instead I focused on his heels as he walked down the hallway and ignored, on the right, his coyote skin nailed to the wall. It was almost as tall as he was. The tip where the nose was cut off and the holes where eyes should have been reached for the ceiling. Its bushy tail still tangled with burs hung two inches above the dark brown carpet. It swayed when he walked by. The four legs splayed out dry, leathery, wrinkled. I hated it. I swore I could hear it howl at night and tried never to touch it when I walked down the long dark hall.

Greg entered his and my mom’s room. I stopped just inside the door frame. He squatted down next to their old yellow sofa. The bed was pulled out for sleeping. They propped the worn seat cushions with gold piping against the back as a headboard. Ugly brown and blue striped sheets covered the thin mattress. They were never made. We couldn’t afford a real bed in our real house. Greg leaned on the armrest and reached under the couch frame. When he didn’t feel what he was looking for, he got down on his hands and knees and bent his head to look fully under the bed.

“Uh-oh,” he said with such drama, I felt sweat prickle along my back. “You been playing with something you ain’t supposed to?” he asked and my heart wanted to stop. I glanced at the back of their bedroom door. The black leather belt with nailed-out holes was still there. My sister and I used to take it down when we saw them leave together. We folded it over and clamped the ends in each hand to snap it the way he did. We made fun of his voice and beat his fake bed with it. One time he came home and slipped in through the back door. My sister ran out to the living room to stall him. I ran to put the

belt up. When he saw her, he knew we were up to something. He shot to his bedroom and rammed me with the door. If that belt was not in that spot and on that nail, it added to any other beatings he might have already planned. The belt was there today but I still couldn't relax, not yet.

"Ah-ha!" he said and swooped what he found out from under the bed. He was like a magician expecting applause. I saw the gun. I knew I hadn't been playing with it, but I also knew that didn't matter. He examined it, looked for fingerprints and tested its weight. He checked for scratches. It looked to me as it always did, perfectly polished.

"Let me ask you something." He got up off the floor, sat down on the bed and hunched his banana shoulders even more. The weight of my backpack increased the slide of sweat down my spine. I wished we had air conditioning. School did. I should have volunteered for something at school. The bag was heavy, but I didn't move to take it off. I watched Greg stretch the edge of his T-shirt to re-shine the gun with surgeon care.

"You ever heard of roulette?"

Of course I had. He played poker with us all the time. He made up different versions for different games. One of them was roulette. We used the red dice from the board game *Risk* and *Yathzee* to play. My brother and sister and I never knew what was going on. He changed the rules so often; we had to wait for him to tell us when he won. We played four-card draw, blackjack, and Montana Red-Dog.

"It's a card game," I said.

He opened the chamber of his magnum and spun the barrel. During one of our lessons he told us it was a .357 magnum. The first time I shot the gun was in the woods. We were camping. Greg wanted to play 'Who wants to learn how to shoot?' Momma said it was a dumb idea but Greg won. If we were going to have guns in the house, we needed to know how to use them. My brother and I argued over who would go first. My sister didn't care and since I was the next oldest, the honor was mine.

I followed his steps. Load weapon, check barrel, safety off, pull trigger. Easy. Greg walked out twenty yards or so. He drained the last of his Budweiser then propped the can up high between two twisted branches on a rotting Aspen. He checked me twice; made sure I had the barrel pointing at the ground.

When he cleared the area I repeated the steps out loud to him then aimed at the

beer can. My hands gripped the gun. I paused and inhaled the sticky sap smell of pine coated forest. My arms held straight out, elbows locked, wind loud and high in the trees—I pulled the trigger. My eyes slammed shut. It happened in an instant, like a sneeze. They blinked out for a split of a split second. With all the loading checks and safety offs Greg forgot to mention recoil. He didn't show me how to brace. His laughter bounced off the trees before my butt hit the ground but it stopped no sooner than a split-second sneeze when I dropped his gun. Like a magnet, dirt, pine needles and bits of leaves clung to it. Momma stepped in front of me to cut Greg off and picked the gun up herself. I used my left hand to pick my right arm up. It felt like Greg took a bat to it and my shoulders. He snatched Maggie from my mom and said I'd better not ever drop her again. Or else. That went for all of us. Momma asked him what had he expected? My brother picked a rock up and glared at me. He wasn't going to get to shoot, not after I dropped her. He chucked the rock at my can in the tree and missed. Despite her shine and pull, I hadn't handled Maggie after that. 'Or else' packed more heat than she did.

"Uh-huh," Greg said back in the room. I waited for him to explain a new set of rules while he fondled Maggie. He stopped the barrel spin with the side of his thumb and used the tip of his pointer finger to rub each of the bronze bullets. Then he turned the tops around so each shell faced the same exact direction. He lined the etched numbers up perfectly. My shoulders ached from carrying my pack. I shrugged them to ease the pressure. Greg slammed the chamber shut again, got up and walked to his closet. He reached for the cleaning kit on the top shelf and opened it. Still holding Maggie, he snapped the lid off with his left hand and pulled a yellow cloth out to shine her even more. "You haven't messed with Maggie today have you?"

He named the gun Maggie after magnum, for our protection. If anyone robbed us he would say: Hey, let me go get Maggie. The robber would think Maggie was a small child or baby, and say: Okay, just hurry up. Instead of returning with a baby, Greg would come back with the gun and shoot the thief. Momma's hero.

"No, I haven't."

"You sure?" he asked with the sideways stare of a gator. I knew I couldn't answer too fast. Coming home to Greg in the house was worse than getting a pop-quiz every day in every class, forever. My sister and I once got into an argument over her pink pants I

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