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The Writer

by Nicole Musci

The annual family gathering. Once a year, everyone travels from across the country to meet up in one place in order to perform some strange bonding ritual. I have a big family; for some reason everyone seems interested in procreating numerous times. It leads to these events being very loud and chaotic, especially if you factor in the fact that everybody likes to be in everyone else's business. If it wasn't for my mother I would probably avoid the whole thing altogether. What is it about mothers? No matter how old you get, around your mother, you always manage to feel six years old. It's like this super power they have. Even now, as a twenty-six year old man with the possibility of facial hair, my mother still treats me as if I just learned to tie my shoes.

For example, Jimmy King's fourth grade birthday party. It was a costume party because Jimmy was obsessed with Halloween and wanted the holiday to come twice that year. I wanted to go as Superman or better yet, something cooler like the Joker. What kid doesn't want to be a super villain at one point in his life? This was my chance to finally make a claim on a position of status among the fourth grade boys. I could be cool.

The day of the party arrives and my mother enters the house with a Looney Clown's Costumes bag. I couldn't wait to tear open the bag and get into my costume. I heard my mother saying something, but my mind was focused on the bulging bag in front of me. I tore open the tissue paper and froze. Instead of a big "S" or face paints, the bag was filled with pink and fluffy. Mother's voice penetrated through the haze.

"The costume selection in June is very limited. They don't get their new orders in until the end of August. But isn't this cute?" My mother lifted the atrocity out of the bag. "They still had some of their Easter costumes."

My eyes crossed as they focused on the bunny tail. Who knew that a ball of white fluff could be so threatening. My stomach dropped and my dreams of attaining status among Mrs. Taft's fourth grade class vanished. Attending Jimmy's party as a pink bunny would be social suicide.

It's okay, I thought. I can make this work. I knew what to do. Zombie bunny. Rolling around in the dirt, some ketchup, and I would be set. Next thing I know, I'm standing on Jimmy's front porch with a silver gift bag in my hands and a pristine bunny costume encasing my body. My mother hadn't let me out of her sight for a moment. She had thought I looked cute. I was doomed.

Shaking off the memory, I arrived at Camas Park, the annual location of the family reunion. Supposedly, the family's monarchs, my great-grandparents Stacey and Stan first consummated their love here, leading everyone else in the family to believe this was the ideal location for the gathering of their progeny.

"Hey Peter Cottontail," my cousin Jimmy grabbed me around the neck and started dragging me towards the rest of the group. The same greeting I'd received since that fateful birthday party. Jimmy had never been interested in originality. He was 6'1", buff, or had been. He was forming a bit of a pouch due to age and a lack of decent eating habits. Think a Big Mac washed down with a 20 ounce soda and a handful of cheese balls for desert. In high school he'd been a jock, captain of the football team, one of the cool kids. He'd gotten to host his party as the Flash and attained a high-ranking status that carried on into high school. Meanwhile, I was a scrawny artist, who'd spent most of high school eating lunches in an abandoned stairwell. Jimmy never let me forget that unfortunate birthday.

"Look who decided to show up," Jimmy said releasing me as we entered the covered patio and were absorbed into the mass of relatives.

I straightened, rubbing my neck. The sight was similar to last year's reunion. Red-white checkered plastic tablecloths covered the rusted, wooden picnic tables. Your potato salad, pasta salad, actual salad and bags of chips flourished in plastic containers and ceramic bowls in excess amount, hamburgers and hot dogs were on the grill, and various coolers full of sodas and beer littered the concrete. Children ran around screaming because unlike myself they seemed to enjoy being here. I looked through the approximately forty other adults to find my mother. I figured if I made my presence known to her it would be easier to make an early escape.

I finally spotted her in the midst of a throng of my aunts and uncles. She was waving her arms excitedly as if that made whatever story she was telling that much more real. Afraid to get caught up in the whole mess, I decided to hang back and observe from afar. Unlike my mother, I preferred to be in the background rather than the center of attention.

Uncle Ernie and Marvin were a part of Mom's circle, but their attention was solely focused on their game of cards. Uncle Marvin was a recovering gambling addict, supposedly. But every year he sat and the cards would come out. He would say that cards and gambling were different things. But you wouldn't think it, the way his eyes would light up. And then there was Aunt Ruth. As far as I knew she didn't do much. She was my mother's eldest sister, but at times she seemed older than my great-grandparents put together. She had a habit of sitting down and gradually falling asleep no matter where she was. Over the past few years all of my little cousins would play a game that involved poking Ruth with a stick when she was about to fall asleep. At least until my Uncle Rudy caught them at it and made sure they feared his wooden cane more than God himself. I wouldn't be surprised if even God himself feared Uncle Rudy's cane.

And then there was Aunt Annie Mae. Aunt Annie Mae was probably the only sibling of my mother's actually listening to her. But she was typical Type A. It always seemed like she had eyes in the back of her head, an extra set of ears, and a nose more powerful than any canine. If she had wanted, I had no doubt she could have played Marvin in cards, kept the stick-pokers away from Aunt Ruth, and manage to listen to my mother while continuing to glare at me with disapproval. Emphasis on the latter.

I'm pretty sure she still held a grudge against me for crushing her daffodils while throwing fists with Jackson Romero. The resident smart-ass of our fourth grade class, Jackson had to make a comment about everything to everybody. Seeing me in that bunny costume probably made him feel as if he'd landed the jackpot. By the time the adults were able to pull us apart, Aunt Annie Mae's daffodils were in tatters, Jackson had a bloody nose and I was covered in blood and dirt. I guess I had pulled off the zombie bunny after all.

Aunt Annie Mae had never quite forgiven me for crushing those flowers, although to be fair that had been the beginning of numerous other offenses. I like to think that much of my problems as a child were due to standard adolescent awkwardness. The older I got the more I began to notice that Aunt Annie Mae's house had seemed to become wrapped in bubble wrap every time my family was supposed to visit. Vases would be moved to higher and higher shelves. The expensive dishware would be put away for the holidays. Yet, despite her precautions, Jimmy and I would usually manage to terrorize something expensive or sentimentally important before being told to go outside.

Then there was the time that I dyed Jimmy's hair blue. I'm pretty sure I still get the blame for that, although at the time it had been Jimmy's idea. I was just the one who got caught with the brush in my hand, as if that meant it was all my fault. My mother laughed it off. She was of the impression that the blue matched Jimmy's eyes, and that we could have picked a worse color. Aunt Annie Mae did not think she was funny. So, I got grounded and Jimmy was the talk of the school for the next two weeks until the dye washed out. He still says that his school photo that year was his favorite.

My mother wasn't going to end her story anytime soon. Her gestures hadn't reached what I termed maximum flailing, which basically meant she was nowhere near the climax. Resigning myself to a prolonged stay, I searched for some form of sustenance, which I found in a can of Bud Light, Jimmy's contribution this year. Scanning the area I found home base, the least dirty picnic table on the edge of the patio. Technically close enough to be considered involved, but far enough on the outskirts to avoid serious contact.

It was only a few swallows of beer later that I realized someone was joining me at my table. I took a glance out of the corner of my eye hoping it wasn't Jill, my nineteen-year-old cousin's thirty-something, bleach blond, fake tan, and make-up plastered girlfriend. Apparently her sexual appetite was insatiable. Or at least that's what she told me last year as she tried to cop a feel by the dumpsters. The horror of the near miss overwhelming my thoughts, I was grateful that in my quick glance I caught the sight of brown hair. Another look assured me. The woman to my left was a brunette, and much prettier.

Without a word, she sat down next to me on the cracked wooden bench and placed a notebook and pen in front of her. I watched as she flipped open the top cover of the notebook, uncapped the pen, and paused. There was a slight shake of the pen as it hovered over the page.

“Who’re you?” I asked.

The pen moved from its position and stretched across the notebook. Its tip still hung over the page, but now it was still. The woman put out her hand and a huge grin plastered her face as she stared unabashedly at me.

“My name is Laura Delaney, and you are?”

“Matt. Matt Jericho.”

“Nice to meet you, Matt.” We shook hands and I tried to figure out which part of this crazy family she got dragged along with. Before I had a chance to form a guess, Laura picked up her pen and once again held it aloft over the paper in front of her. She just sat there. Still. Her eyes stared straight ahead over the loud, jumbling mess of my family.

“What are you doing?”

She turned to look at me. A patient smile was on her face, the type of smile you gave a child when they asked why the sky is blue or where the sun goes at night.

“Looking for inspiration,” she told me. She turned away and seemed to become completely absorbed in the melee in front of her. I felt cheated. She’d answered my question, but I still felt as clueless as ever.

Irritated at my lack of understanding and determined to ignore my curiosity I turned back around and located my mother. She had reached the climax of her story, which was apparent as she almost took off Uncle Ernie’s fedora with a swing of her arm. My mother was the youngest of my aunts and uncles and had always been a family favorite. Aunt Annie Mae always said it was a pity I hadn’t received more of my mother’s charm. According to her I was too much like my father, a lone wolf. While he was alive my father spent most of his time in his homemade studio recording his own compositions. Aunt Annie Mae was convinced this was why my parents’ were having problems near the end of my father’s life. I’d always thought it was the chemo.

After my father had passed, my mother had spent almost an entire two weeks in his studio, listening to his recordings. The rest of the family had been concerned.

My father had composed songs for almost every major event since they had met. Before he became too weak to work, he had compiled all of these songs onto one CD and left it with a note for my mother in the studio. Throughout those two weeks the soundtrack of our house was those songs. I knew some of them better than others. The song he created for their wedding was a favorite and was played every year on their anniversary. The song for when I was born was always played on my birthday without fail despite my begging them not to when I grew to the age where being embarrassed by my parents was a daily occurrence. Others were new to me. Some were happy, others sad. They were my father’s way of communicating. Finally, I remember coming home late one night to silence. My mother had closed the door to the studio and hadn’t entered since.

I couldn’t ignore my curiosity. Everything else seemed consistent with last year, except for the woman next to me.

“Who did you come with?” I asked. Specificity, that’s what I needed. Specific questions should get me specific answers.

“What do you mean?”

I thought I’d been clear. I couldn’t figure out any way my question could be misinterpreted.

“I mean who do you know here?”

“You.”

“But you just met me.”

“Yes.”

Now it was my turn to stare. My confusion must have shown on my face because the woman sighed and put down her pen again.

“I don’t know anyone else here. I am here to observe and be inspired. I’m a writer, and a writer without inspiration doesn’t write, and a writer who doesn’t write gets really annoying voicemails from her publisher about the importance of deadlines.”

What she had said began to sink in, but full understanding still eluded me.

“Let me get this straight. You are here to watch my family’s reunion, a family you know nothing about, in order to find something to write about?”

“People are fascinating,” she said.

I wasn't sure I agreed. At least not the people I knew. "Do you do this a lot then?"

"Quite often."

"Don't you find that odd?"

"Maybe, but we're all a little bit odd, don't you think?"

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I didn't. Here I was, like every year, bracing myself against the chaos of my family, and instead I got roped into a conversation with a complete stranger. An odd one nonetheless, who seemed to be more comfortable surrounded by my family than I did.

"What do you do for a living?" Laura asked, ignoring my lack of response to her previous question.

"I'm a costume designer at the Black Tie Theatre."

"Then maybe you can understand. You change people into characters through makeup and costumes. I do the same thing, but with paper and pen."

I didn't understand. Not really. These were my family, not some actors playing a role.

"Imagine," she told me, "the man with the cane." She pointed to Uncle Rudy. He was still hovering in the periphery of the group surrounding my mother, but he was staring out at the youngest generation of the family.

"Why is he standing when there is an empty bench right beside him? Why does he have the cane in the first place? Why is he looking at the children rather than the adults?" As she rattled off these questions, I just sat there not sure what she was getting at.

"My guess is he was military. Not hard to tell by the way he holds himself. I bet he got that cane after being injured. He doesn't sit because standing despite his aches and pains makes him feel strong. And finally, most importantly he watches the children because of all the horror he saw during the war. They are something good." She paused, and turned away from Uncle Rudy and looked at me. "Was I right?"

She wasn't wrong, but I didn't think she was right either. The more truthful answer would be that I didn't know. Uncle Rudy didn't like to talk about his experiences during the war. He barely talked at all. The cane was used because of an old war injury, but his reasons for always standing were as foreign to me as the thoughts running through his head. As for the direction of his gaze, I could only guess. It could be for the reason Laura said, or maybe for something completely different.

My mother might know. One night when I was twelve, Uncle Rudy showed up at our house drunk. My mother had run to answer the door, her hair a mess and her fuzzy purple robe hastily thrown over her shoulders. I was supposed to have been fast asleep like my father snoring in the other room, but a flashlight and a few comic books meant I was awake enough to want to know what was going on. I crept out of my room and peered through the stairs into our living room. My mother had set Uncle Rudy down on the couch while she went into the kitchen to get a glass of water and start the coffee machine.

I didn't know what to make of the scene before me. I had always seen my Uncle Rudy as the tough guy. He didn't take shit from anybody, and if you gave him any you would learn that fact real fast. Yet here he was with bloodshot eyes, barely able to hold up his head. My mother came back into the room and I shrunk back into the shadows. I had a feeling this was something I wasn't supposed to be a part of, and I didn't want to get caught.

"What happened, Rudy?"

He mumbled something I couldn't make out and put his face in his hands. When he removed them I could see the tears.

"Do you have the letter with you?"

Uncle Rudy pulled a wrinkled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and gave it to her. I didn't know what it said, but it was enough to make my mother go silent for a long while.

"Is he yours?" The words broke the silence like a crack of a whip. I hadn't known my mother's voice could sound like that.

"He has my eyes, Brenda."

"He has blue eyes. You weren't the only soldier in that war with blue eyes."

"Does it matter?"

My mother didn't say anything. Instead she sat down beside him on the couch and held his hand. I don't know how long they sat there, but they hadn't moved or spoken before I became tired enough to crawl back to bed. It was years before I had begun to understand what those words might have meant.

Laura poked me with her pen, jolting me back to the present.

“So, was I right?”

“Sort of, but not completely. You barely scratched the surface. How can you justify writing about something or somebody when you barely know anything about them?”

“But I’m not writing about the man with the cane. I’m writing about the possibility he represents. A character can be a slice of human existence. A possibility that exists in this person or some other person, in this dimension or another one entirely.”

“You’re crazy.”

Laura just laughed at me and turned back to her notebook and started scribbling. I looked back towards my mother’s group to see if she was done. She was. The remnants of her storytelling were evident throughout the group. My mother was collapsed on the bench beside Aunt Ruth, sharing a smile as they both recovered from laughter. Uncle Ernie and Marvin had forgotten about their game and the breeze threatened to scatter their cards as they joked with Uncle Rudy. Even Aunt Annie Mae seemed to forget about the storm clouds appearing or her grandkids getting covered with dirt. She seemed only focused on the small circle around her.

I turned back to Laura. The space next to me was empty, except for a piece of paper stuck in a crack of the wood. I opened up the piece of paper to find the words, “Inspiration: a costume designer with a lovely family and a stubborn chin. P.S. It’s going to rain” scrawled out in slanted handwriting. I was still staring at the piece of paper when my mother’s voice rang out in front of me.

“I hope that’s her number.”

I looked up into my mother’s face. Without realizing it, all of my aunts and uncles had separated and had begun to clean up the patio.

“What?”

“The pretty woman you were sitting with. I hope you got her number. She seemed nice and you know I want grandchildren.”

“Yes, Mother, I know.”

“Besides, if you aren’t careful that bimbo, Jill, is going to come sniffing around again, and I expect better of you.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Now, get up and help clean up before this storm hits.”

My mother turned and went to help the rest of the group. I stood up and looked around. Laura was nowhere in sight. I walked over to the rest of the group, not sure if I was glad or not that the storm had cut the reunion short. I tucked the piece of paper into my back pocket, making a mental note to keep an eye out for any stories about a costume designer with a stubborn chin.