The Kid Rides Again

My cousin Melinda left town wearing a shirt almost long enough to be called a dress and carrying a clutch that held lipstick, her driver’s license, and a few pills no longer produced in the states. Probably also our grandmother’s emergency credit card, since it went missing about the same time. Ten years later, she was at the door in a vintage pink St. John suit and heels, a tote slung over her shoulder and oversized sunglasses perched on her head while she squinted at the paper she was holding.

She looked, as our grandmother would have said, like a character from Characterville. Jewel, our grandmother, had legions of stories about such women, almost all of them ending in “…and the Good Lord only knows what happened to her after that.” I used to picture them, frozen in bus stations and airports and Interstate rest stops, sitting on their luggage, at the end of the line.

“This was in the door,” Melinda said, handing me the paper.

I turned and let her follow me into the house. From the paper beamed a good color photo of our neighbor Mr. Samuels’ capuchin monkey, Kid Curry. He was wearing a houndstooth scarf and eating a lemon cupcake.

“$500 Reward for safe return.”

“He isn’t really lost,” I told her. “He gets out and runs around sometimes, and Mr. Samuels offers a reward so no one will call animal control.”

Instead, all the neighbors just left bowls of fruit or child-sized hammocks or buckets of Mardi Gras beads in their yards. It made the street one big playground for the monkey, but none of them were ever fast enough to catch him.

He was named Kid Curry after the famous bank robber who escaped from prison in Knoxville in the early 1900s, a figure who was an obsession of both my grandmother and Mr. Samuels. We were related to one of the girl members of the Wild Bunch, and Jewel’s mother had written a novel about her, “The Thorny Rose.”

Mr. Samuels, who owned the land that became this subdivision, still lived in a big house at the top of the hill. When my grandparents moved to the neighborhood, Mr. Samuels had two chimpanzees, Bonnie and Clyde. They were both girls, as it turned out, although Clyde shopped the boys’ section at the children’s boutique in town. My mother had grown up in terror of the chimps, and Melinda’s mom, her twin, had sobbed every night because she couldn’t have one. The chimps had gone to a primate sanctuary many years ago, after breaking into someone’s house and throwing her blue-and-white china. Mr. Samuels still brooded about it.

“Don’t you feel bad, Sam. She got those dishes from cereal box tops,” Jewel had said to Mr. Samuels. He used to stop and have coffee with her when she got sick, a few years after Melinda left. I was a teenager then, and my parents had started going every weekend to their river cabin a few counties west while I stayed with Jewel.

“And I paid for some cabinets she said they scuffed up,” Mr. Samuels said. Without the glamour of wildlife, he was a skinny man who looked uncomfortable in the smoke-gray suit he always wore.

“I hate to see you sad all this time,” Jewel said. “You ought to get just a small monkey.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

A few months before Jewel died, three years ago, Mr. Samuels adopted Kid Curry and brought him to visit with us. The first time we met him, Kid Curry had on orange gym shorts and a Lady Vols T-shirt. My grandmother loved the Lady Vols. He usually sat quietly on Mr. Samuels’ shoulder while he and Jewel talked about the dashing escape of the first Kid Curry, when he bribed the prison guard and made it all the way West. Sometimes when I was in the study Kid would come sit on the couch with me while I read to him from “Little Women.”

Melinda had made it all the way to Colorado, we heard. She hadn’t come home for the funeral, even though my dad sent her money for the ticket. At the last minute, she couldn’t get on the plane, because she had lost her driver’s license. I didn’t understand why she couldn’t get it replaced, but it turned out she had lost lost it, like the state had taken it away.

“I guess you got your license straightened out,” I said to her now. “I mean, you flew.”

She looked at me blankly for a second and then said, “Oh, that. Yes, I mean I had to change states to do it, but it’s fine now. I’m probably not living out that way anymore anyway. I mean, this is home, right?”

I don’t know what my face did then, but she started laughing. “Oh, Amy.”

She went into the kitchen, opened the broom closet, and reached behind the bleach to where Jewel had kept the good whiskey.

“Yeah, my dad took it,” I said. “There’s vodka in the freezer, but I have to go to work.”

I was a second-shift call agent for a shopping channel based in town. The actual workplace was just a few miles away, but you could work from home if you had a spare room. I did now, but I wouldn’t when my dad sold the house. I didn’t know how anyone was affording more than couch-surfing on $14 an hour.

“Good incentive to get a job in your field, Amy-bug,” my dad had said.

My field was graphic design and studio art. There were about five times as many people who had studied it as there were jobs. While I talked on the phone I sketched the people who called me as various animals: possums, monkeys, aardvarks, racoons, all decked out in pink conch-shell necklaces and right-hand turquoise rings.

My phone lit up with a text. It was my dad.

“Did she get there? How goes the spring clean?”

Melinda took a Tervis tumbler out of the cabinet, filled it with ice and poured in vodka and orange juice.

“Does your dad have cameras here?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “We’re the only people without security door cams. I mean, you can see everyone else’s on the neighborhood page.”

“Because everyone is trying for the monkey reward?” she asked. I watched her count the money in her head. “I could use that $500,” she said.

She gave me a cold look, the one that she used to give me when I was 10 years old, and she was the undisputed 17-year-old princess of this house. “Not that your father wasn’t generous in getting me out here.”

Melinda’s mom had Melinda as a teenager – Melinda’s dad was some guy she had met a couple of times. His current wife talked a lot about Jesus on social media, according to my mother, who hate-lurked a bunch of people. My grandfather died when Melinda was 7, and Melinda’s mother left her here. Somehow, growing up, she had come to rule the entire upstairs, with my grandmother sleeping downstairs on the study couch and Melinda using most of one whole room as her closet while she commandeered the master bedroom. I always slept in a small den upstairs on a pullout sofa, and that was where I still slept. It was like I was a security guard for a museum devoted to Young Melinda.

I mean, not that I minded. But my dad had bought out my aunt’s share of the house when Jewel had died, because my aunt couldn’t get it together to come dismantle Melinda’s room and pack up Jewel’s things. Honestly, I couldn’t see my mother whipping through Jewel’s collection of Harlequin Intrigues and jam glasses to stage an estate sale either back then. But my dad was now officially fed up, and “Things were going to change around here.”

“I guess I should have one of those, too,” I said. “I’ve got a couple of hours before I have to talk on the phone.”

“Good,” she said, fixing me a drink and coming over to give me a hug. “I’m going to find my clothes and see if my old laptop works. Then I’ll start packing.”

We went upstairs, where my dad had left a whole move’s worth of new U-Haul boxes inside the door of the master.

“He wants to sell them back,” I said, and she interrupted me.

“I know, I know, I have a huge text about it. Just let me find my laptop first.”

I got her hooked up on Wi-Fi and helped her find the neighborhood site. She perused it while I built boxes and filled them with the Twilight series and Stephen King. Seven boxes in, she was still on the computer and hadn’t said another word to me. I went downstairs to the study and started work.

This had always been my favorite room in the house. Light came in through windows looking out on the side yard, with a view of the driveway. Jewel had had a flower bed under the window, and her phlox and vinca still bloomed. Sometimes I saw Kid Curry playing in the dirt or chasing bugs, but I would never tell Melinda that. There were four or five copies of “The Thorny Rose” on the shelf, and besides drawing my callers, I had been doing illustrations for it. For the first time, I noticed that I had made our outlaw ancestor the exact image of Melinda.

When my shift was over I grabbed some two-day old pizza from the fridge. Instead of the peace I normally felt in the house, there was an angry buzzing, both from the rooms upstairs and from my dad stewing 50 miles away. I went back to the study and fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning Melinda had shed her suit for a pair of Jewel’s old velour track pants and a sweatshirt. She was cooking eggs.

“We’re Keto-ing it here until I can fit in those old clothes,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe what they were charging to check a bag, Amy. I didn’t want to waste your dad’s money. Anyway, we’re on a regimen now.”

As far as I could tell, that regimen was about walking the neighborhood, looking for Kid Curry, and then coming back to the house and locking herself in her room with her laptop. Every once in a while a box appeared in the upstairs hallway, and I moved it to the room where I used to sleep. I had gone out with her the first day, walking to spot the places where the Kid normally hung out, but I was vague about them, and I felt so guilty I never went out with her again.

I hid myself in the study more and more, giving my father terse updates when he asked, drawing, reading some of Jewel’s old scrapbooks about the Wild Bunch, and playing games on my phone. I signed up for overtime whenever it was offered. Melinda began calling her mother – it seemed like the first time they had talked in years – and they had conversations that started when she left the house on her walks and ended after she got back.

I had the window open, and I heard her say, “Well, I think she’s depressed, and the way her father bullies her. I know. I know.”

My phone lit up. My father.

“Status?”

“?” I texted back.

I showered upstairs and ran out to the grocery store before my shift. When I came back, Melinda had brought her laptop downstairs and was sitting at the kitchen table with it.

“You know, I can’t concentrate if I’m trying to live in that room and organize it at the same time,” she said. “Do you think I could have the study?”

“No,” I said.

I walked into the study and shut the door hard. I knew immediately that she had been there. My work computer was password-protected, but everything was a little askew, from the drawings on the side table to the cushions on the sofa.

There was a knock at the door, and I opened it to let her apologize.

“Do you know what happened to Jewel’s jewelry?” she asked.

“Ask your mother,” I said. I shut the door again.

The next day I had two calls. One from my father, who left a rambling message that said he heard I was depressed but that I was also drawing again, and did I think we could make some money republishing “The Thorny Rose?”

“Call me back,” he ordered.

The next one I recognized as Mr. Samuels’ landline, which had been scribbled on a note on our fridge for many years. I answered right away.

“Amy, I hate to bother you,” he said. “But your cousin is marching down those streets like she’s an Army general, and I’m afraid if she finds the Kid he’ll run.”

“I can’t control her behavior,” I said.

“That’s what I told your grandmother,” he said. “She’s a bad seed, no offense.”

In the coming days, Mr. Samuels took to riding up and down the road in his old red Mercedes SL, meeting Melinda walking in the opposite directions. Once, when it started raining, he got the top up and offered her a ride back. The pace of boxing things had slowed, and I had been ignoring my father’s texts, one of which was about “concerning credit card charges.”

“She’s been locking the door,” I heard her say through the open window. “I mean, I don’t know what is going on with her, but I hope her parents are taking me seriously.”

I hadn’t signed on to work yet, but I started the computer, logged into the system, and messaged my manager.

“May I come back to work on site in the next couple of weeks?”

While I waited for her to answer, I took one of the pictures I had made for “The Thorny Rose,” the one where Kid Curry rides away from the jail, and I drew the little monkey in the oak above the old courthouse, wearing a fedora and a diamond earring.

A squiggle of dots appeared where my boss was typing. “We’d love to have you here,” she messaged. “Let me email you a timeline.”

I took a key from my pocket and unlocked the main desk drawer. From it, I took out the only piece of Jewel’s collection of costume jewelry that I had kept. I had bought it with my work discount just a couple of months before she died, a 14K gold monkey swinging on a chain. She had been delighted with it.

Outside, I heard Melinda say, “Mom, I’ve got to call you back,” and then I heard a car door slam.

“I’ve got you,” I heard Melinda yell, and I heard Mr. Samuels yell, “Kid!”

I popped my head out the window to see them both running to the side yard while Kid Curry bounced on the limb of the maple tree nearby. He was wearing baby-blue swim trunks and a gingham camp shirt.

I waved the necklace at him, the sun glinting on the gold and catching his eye.

“In here,” I told him.

Kid Curry clattered through and made straight for the couch while I shut the window and locked it. Melinda and Mr. Samuels stared after me before turning for the door. Just as they vanished from my sight, I saw my parents’ car come up the drive.

I walked over to the couch, where Kid Curry sat shivering. Picking up Jewel’s handmade scratchy orange and green afghan, I wrapped him into it and gave his trembling little body a hug, then propped an accent pillow beside him. I got up and took a pack of almonds from the desk drawer and handed a few to him.

Outside the door, Melinda said, “I saw that monkey first!”

“You can have the $500 if you’ll just stop scaring him,” Mr. Samuels said, and I heard my father yell, “This is my house. What’s all this about?” and my mom yell, “I wish I’d never let you buy it.”

I slipped the necklace on under my shirt and put my drawings in the desk drawer before I locked it again and sat down beside the monkey.

Kid Curry held his last almond up to me and chattered. I patted his silky head and poured a few more nuts into his hand.

“Eat up, little man,” I said. “It sounds like the law has us this time.”