

Trespases

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There were several people at the cosmetic counter when the saleslady curtly held out Rosalie Rucci's MasterCard and told her that it had been rejected.

The saleslady's voice was shrill and she snapped her wrist twice, card in hand before Rosalie could take it from her. "I haven't used this in almost a year," Rosalie said, but the woman had already pushed her purchases—a bottle of liquid foundation and a mascara—off to the side,

"You'll have to talk to Credit."

Rosalie glanced at the woman standing beside her, hoping for sympathy, but the woman averted her eyes, and in that instant, Rosalie felt her confusion turn into humiliation. Clearly, the saleslady and this other customer had already defined her as a deadbeat, or careless, or simply stupid for not knowing there was a problem with her card. She backed away from the counter that glittered with silver and gold-capped bottles, sleek black compacts, and hourglass flasks of expensive perfumes, but she told the saleslady, "I'll be back for those," and pointed to the makeup.

It was a sweltering Saturday afternoon, mid-August, and the shopping mall was crowded. Rosalie disliked the malls and still preferred unrestrained, city-street shopping, but years of living in the suburbs had made driving into the city seem an extraordinary inconvenience. There was something insistent about mall shopping that rattled her, and whenever her daughters dragged her out with them, she noticed that they moved from store to store with grace and determination and left the mall, swinging packages, grinning as if they'd just been released from a funhouse. They had credit cards in their own names, not the names of their husbands. The card Rosalie had with her that day was in her husband's name: Mr. Leonard Rucci. Her daughters often teased her about this, but she told them, "If your father has to see the bill, it'll keep me from going haywire and buying out the store." And they would roll their eyes at her because they'd never known their mother to go "haywire."

Rosalie was pretty in a plain way, with broad high cheekbones and smooth olive skin. She wore a simple, pinkish lipstick and some powder on her face, and her clothes too were simple and tasteful, chosen always to hide the girth of her hips. She was fifty-eight years old, and in the past, year she'd been giving a lot of thought to doing things differently in her life. She had signed up for an aerobics class two evenings a week, and although Lenny disapproved and grumbled about it, she took a part-time job in a card store three days a week. There was a small bookstore in the shopping plaza where she worked, and while she'd never been much of a reader, now sometimes on her lunch hour she would wander in to page through books and magazines. She read articles about "empty nesters" and the second half of long marriages. She even flipped through the pages of a book about sex in middle age and was surprised at the ink illustrations of sexual positions. The drawings were meant to be realistic renderings of older bodies—men with slight paunches, and thinning hair; women with rounded bellies from childbearing and soft upper arms, less than firm breasts. In all of the drawings, the expressions on the faces of the men and women were just short of shock. There were positions she and Lenny had never tried, or been aware of in their thirty-eight year marriage, and her lack of sexual technique made her feel slightly naive and dowdy. One day, holding the book shyly to her chest, she made it halfway to

the checkout counter, then changed her mind and returned it to the shelf. But many nights while Lenny lay snoring loudly beside her, she wondered if she should go back and purchase it after all. Other than these brief misgivings about whether she and Lenny were behaving as older marrieds

TrespasesStoryQuarterly 19

should, Rosalie felt their life together was a pleasant one. On weekends, they had dinner with friends, or went out to the movies, or drove to Atlantic City to see a show at the casinos. It wasn't a jet set life by any means, but she was happy with it right now, however, as she stepped onto the escalator and made her way to the credit department. She was stupefied by the embarrassing scene that had taken place at the register. Lenny usually dealt with the business of credit and taxes, mortgages and car payments, and it was unlike him to forget to pay a bill. She pushed down the tide of suspicion that the problem might be more serious. Lately, he'd come home from his mail route so tired he would fall asleep in the chair before the evening news. When she questioned him about it, he said, "Nothing's wrong—except that I'm old." But twice in the past week, she woke from a sound sleep to find him staring out into the night from the bedroom window. Now, she wondered if he was sick and keeping it from her, so sick that he'd gotten sloppy with the bills.

The credit department was on the second floor, and Rosalie was relieved to find it bustling, too. Apparently she was not alone in this. When it was her turn, she stepped up to the high Formica counter and slid her card across to the customer relations expert. "The cosmetic department sent me," she explained. "The computer downstairs rejected it."

The young woman behind the counter smiled and took the card. "We'll just check it out here." She turned away and moved to her computer. Rosalie watched the amber figures and lists appear on the screen, watched the woman's fingers flying over the keyboard, the pause she took when the screen flashed something new, the frown on her face. She held a finger up and said, "Just want to double check." Then began the process again. Finally, the woman made a quick phone call and spoke in low tones that Rosalie couldn't distinguish, then she handed Rosalie the card. "I'm sorry," she said, "but that card is \$200 over the permitted limit and it's a month overdue."

Rosalie laughed. "Now I know there's a mistake. We didn't buy anything costing that much. I haven't even seen a bill for anything."

The young woman shrugged. "Well, you'd better call your bank. Talk to them. The computer shows a total of \$8,200 and your limit is \$8,000."

For several seconds Rosalie was speechless then she was shouting. "Eight thousand two hundred? It's impossible!"

"I'm sorry," the woman said.

As Rosalie walked away from the counter, she swallowed hard and the taste was sour. She had to pass the furniture department on her way to the "Down" escalator and felt so light-headed she plopped into one of the plush chairs in the middle of a living room display. At first, everything was a blur, a collision of colors and sounds she couldn't assimilate, but once she caught her breath, she remembered that they'd been talking about a new living room suite too, some papering and painting. She lifted the price tag that was hanging off the arm of the chair. Seven hundred dollars. Then she leaned forward to read the tag on the coffee table. Fifteen hundred dollars. She looked all around the decorator room and mentally listed the objects in it, estimating the price when a salesman touched her shoulder. "May I help you?" he asked.

She stood up waving her hand in the air. "How much would a room like this cost?"

He quickly withdrew a mini-calculator from his breast pocket and said, "Well, why don't we add it up and see."

But Rosalie stopped him, "I really want just a rough idea."

He squinted his eyes and strolled through the room then turned to her when he reached the sofa table. "You want me to consider the—accoutrement—in this rough idea?"

"Yes. Please."

He pressed his lips together, took one more glance around and said, "About twelve grand, if you go with the A fabric list. Ten grand for B. Fifteen grand if you throw in the fireplace mantel."

Rosalie considered his estimate. "What might I get for \$8200?"

He seemed to realize that he wasn't really going to make a sale with her, then he raised one eyebrow and sighed, a bit rudely, she thought. She felt guilty at first that she was taking up his time until she remembered what Lenny always said when people in the service professions were rude: "Hey, he's not taking me out to the movies."

She had only one more question for him, and she walked over to where he stood to ask it, "Has anyone ever come in and bought a whole room as—as a surprise?"

"You mean a gift?"

Rosalie nodded.

"I guess so, but—people usually don't tell me those things."

"No, I suppose they don't," she said.

"Is that it then? Is that all you wanted?"

Actually, what she wanted was to ask him if an average-sized, thin, 60 year old man with dark hair and a slow deliberate way of talking, dressed as a mailman, had come in and bought a room from them then charged it to his credit card. "Yes. That's all I wanted."

Instead of dropping by to visit either of her daughters as she sometimes did when she was out on a Saturday and near their neighborhoods, Rosalie went directly home, and she was surprised when she turned into the cul de sac to see Lenny's mail truck backing down the driveway. Her car and his truck were parallel to each other as he pulled out to make way for her to pull in, and through her open window she said, "It's four o'clock. What are you doing with the truck? You should have been home an hour ago."

"Overtime. Just a few more stops, be home by five-thirty."

"Wait till I tell you what happened at the store—"

"Roe, an hour and a half. I've got to go."

He put the truck in gear and revved the engine as she called out, "I couldn't buy a thing with that damn MasterCard."

She thought she saw him lurch, she thought she saw his entire face fold in, but it was hot, so hot that the air seemed a blurry screen, and he pulled away leaving her with nothing to do but park the car and go inside the house.

At nine o'clock that evening, after the dinner had dried up from so many reheatings, after she'd called the post office at least twenty times and got no answer, after she'd called both of her daughters and half a dozen friends and no one could tell her where he was, she heard the back door open. She walked quickly from the den out to the dim kitchen where the only light was the one under the stove hood. At first, she almost started to cry she was so glad to see him alive, but after that initial rush, anger shoved its way up so forcefully it was like an electrical jolt to her skin. The central air unit kicked on, a dull hum, while Lenny stood near the door with his

shoulders hunched forward, his shirt ringed with sweat under the arms. He looked like a man who'd spent the day running without water or rest.

"What is it?" she said. She'd only seen him look this way when Lolly was a baby and the doctor thought she might have spinal meningitis and when Vivian was in that awful car accident the night of her junior prom and whoever called to inform them didn't know if she was dead or alive and when he had to tell her that her mother had already died just as she was about to leave for the hospital. Each time, he'd been the one to bear the bad news first, the one to carry the burden of the telling.

He didn't move from the doorway, seemed in fact to be cowering near it. He held his hands out, palms up. "Roe, I don't know how—"

"What on earth is wrong?"

Suddenly he broke down, started sobbing, and she rushed to him to put her arms around him. Through his weeping, he was saying a stream of things she couldn't understand. She managed to guide him to a kitchen chair, and she pulled out a chair for herself, drawing it up near his, holding his hand, waiting for him to catch his breath and speak.

"I've been losing some money," he said with a huge sigh.

Still she wasn't sure what he meant.

"Out of your pockets? Like, on the street?"

It was something like that, he said. In the beginning just football pools and baseball pools at work, regular stuff, he said. A few times on his day off, he'd gone to the track with some of the men from work because he liked horses, he said, and Rosalie found this information astonishing. They had no pictures of horses in their home; he never *talked* about horses; they'd never gone horseback riding, not ever.

"You bet on them."

And he smiled—inappropriately, she thought, after such a storm of tears. "Yes. I know, you see. I was on a streak. That's how I bought you the emerald ring last Christmas and the pearls for Mothers Day," he said, and his eyes lit up as if she should have been pleased with this part of his confession. "Then on those casino trips, I was winning. I was winning big, so I had to start betting bigger. To keep up with myself, you know? So, so I borrowed a thousand or two on the MasterCard, and I won most of it back and it was all working out, but I don't know what happened. I used up some money from the credit union, and I had to put it back, so I borrowed more from the MasterCard and—" His voice cracked and he dropped his head into his hands. "My God, Rucci," he said, referring to her as they referred to each other on occasion, by their last name, as if they were one person. "I never wanted you to know. I was going to clear it up."

Rosalie's cheeks burned; her head was pounding. She squeezed her eyes shut, felt her mouth open, but couldn't make her tongue or lips work.

He let his hands fall away from his face. "I can fix everything."

She pressed her fingers into her thighs till it hurt. She was wearing culottes and when she opened her eyes again, there were bright red indentations in her skin. The whole day was flashing by her: that hideous saleswoman, the credit department and the room full of luscious opulent furniture, her own foolishness at thinking he'd charged a new living room suite as a surprise. She thought of all the afternoons he said he was working late, the nights in Atlantic City when he'd been quiet riding home in the car and claimed it was "just the excitement of the evening," the haggard, dark look that sometimes swept across his face out of nowhere.

"We've been married thirty-eight years," she said.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for you to find out—"

“I’m sure you didn’t.” She recalled some of those movies they’d seen together, movies with alcoholics and gamblers and drug addicts and love addicts in them; it startled her that what he was saying to her now sounded like make-believe.

“I was going to tell you, Roe, after I cleared everything up, cleared up the debt—”

“Lied more, you mean. Lied some more—”

“No!” he insisted. “No! Cleared it all up.”

She slammed her open palm on the tabletop, and he flinched.

“How much money? What money?”

He shook his head, pulled out a hanky and wiped his sweaty forehead, and she could see him calculating how much further he should go, how much more of the truth he should divulge.

He mumbled, “The credit union. The savings account. The MasterCard. The IRA.”

A wail escaped and she wasn’t even sure it was her own until she felt her throat pinch. She leaned up from her seat, her head near his head, feeling like a senile old woman. “Who are you?” she whispered.

“Roe,” he said, reaching out for her hand, but she pulled it away and flopped back into the chair. She rubbed the tabletop.

“We have grandchildren. We have daughters we could have helped out if they needed it. We’ve spent our whole lives sacrificing so that now, now, we could have some freedom, and you do this. I don’t understand.” Her eyes flashed at him. “Make me understand, you bastard!”

More than her shouting, it was the word “bastard” that seemed to jolt him. In all their time together, neither one of them had ever uttered anything more profane than hell or damns in an argument

“I was doing it for us,” he said.

“For us to do what? To end up on the street?”

He shrugged and the shrug enraged her so much she thought she’d punch him. “To give you things you didn’t have before.”

She stood up, her arms at her sides, then, as soon as she was standing, felt she couldn’t hold herself up much longer, so she simply sat down the way she’d had to sit in the showroom earlier, wondering what things he could have wanted so desperately that he would wipe out close to \$50,000 to get them for her. She looked down at the emerald on her right hand; it was ugly now, a grotesque green nugget. She heard Lenny stirring in the chair. “Have you,” she began as steadily as she could, “have you used your paychecks too?”

He didn’t answer right away; she wasn’t surprised when he said, “A few.”

“And you just made sure you saw the credit card bill, right? You just didn’t deliver the mail to us.”

“Yes.”

She nodded her head. “You left that card on the dresser by accident today and when you realized you didn’t have it, you came back to get it.”

“Yes.”

She looked up. He could have been a Black man or an Indian or Chinese, so little did he look like her Lenny. “I want you to go now.”

“What?”

“I want you to go, but first I want you to give me your car keys because you can’t have she car.”

His eyes widened. “Where—where do you want me to go without a car?”

“Walk. You’re a mailman—you’re used to walking.”

He began to cry again, begging her to forgive him, to help him, insisting that it was for her, but she held her hand up as if stopping traffic. “Please—just leave now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.” She extended her hand, waiting until she felt the keys drop into it, and she closed her fingers around them. She didn’t watch him go; she just waited for the sound of his footsteps, the sound of the door opening and closing.

In the hour or so that must have passed after he left, Rosalie sat at the kitchen table. When had they stopped being the Lenny and Rosalie Rucci she thought they were? How was it that she couldn’t see this coming? She rubbed her neck, it ached so. She thought about the sex book and berated herself for not buying it. Maybe that was the problem. They’d never had sex on the staircase or on the beach or standing in the shower. He liked the horses because they reminded him of sex, and the excitement of winning reminded him of sex, and she’d been too blind to see it. Then she remembered all the times she’d told him she wanted a sable coat, She wanted one in the way many women want one, a wish but certainly not a necessity. No, it wasn’t only me. There have been two of us, all these years, two of us. She tried to pinpoint a cause for this sudden reckless behavior, but neither of them had ever been reckless—not with each other or with their family.

For a while, she considered calling her oldest daughter, and then she considered calling Vivian. Vivian was a college professor. She taught literature and surely she might know of a character, a story or a book, that could shed some light on this. But she couldn’t manage to pick up the phone, and she discovered that she was perspiring despite the central air.

She hoisted herself up out of the chair, her body like lead, and walked slowly to the sink where she turned on the faucet. She splashed cold water on her face then held her wrists under the faucet, letting the icy water run, feeling the chill shoot up her arms, After a few minutes, she dried her wrists and face with a fresh dishtowel, then finger-combed her hair, using the kitchen window as a mirror. Studying her faint image in the window, she realized that she hadn’t gone back to the cosmetic counter for her new make-up; this made her even angrier. All those years she hadn’t indulged herself and now, even if she wanted to, she and Lenny were on their way to the poorhouse—or worse, to prison. It was entirely possible that he’d gotten involved with mobsters or loan sharks; it was entirely possible they were hiding out in the Syringa bushes with clubs and guns and brass knuckles and whatever else they used when they wanted to let someone know they were unhappy with a payment plan. At that moment, she wanted new make-up. She knew it was too late to go back to the mall, but the mini-mart was open till twelve, and they carried a basic make-up line at cut-rate prices. She turned away from the sink and picked her leather purse from the back of a chair where it had been hanging since she returned home that afternoon. She grabbed her keys from the table and left.

There was a narrow cement walk along the side of the house leading to the inclined driveway, and she walked gingerly, her eyes darting about for signs of Lenny, the mobsters, or the FBI. When she reached the car, she thought she heard something moving or breathing close by but decided that in her present emotional state she was letting her imagination get the best of her.

“Go ahead, back out.”

Because the night was so incredibly still and dark—the street lamps burned out like matches—because there was nothing to illuminate Lenny’s belt buckle or the shiny chrome of the fender. Rosalie thought she imagined the resigned voice that floated up from the driveway. She jangled her keys once, a signal, and heard Lenny sneeze. Sure enough, when she followed

the direction of the sound, she found him lying on the ground, in line with the heavy back tires. He was on his side, his knees drawn up as if he had a stomach cramp of a charley horse, some expected run-of-the-mill pain people made no effort to conceal, not even from strangers. A cricket trilled.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked.

She couldn’t believe her eyes or ears, couldn’t believe that this absurd day could get any more absurd, “Lenny, get up from there.”

“I don’t think so,” he said in a voice thick with effort. Rosalie squeezed the keys till they dug into her hands. She’d had just about enough thwarting for one day.

“I’m going to buy make-up. The make-up I wanted this afternoon, the make-up I couldn’t buy because of you and your crazy idea that you’re some kind of Jimmy the Greek. I need mascara—not a fur coat, not an emerald ring—and I need it now.”

He didn’t budge, nor did he say anything

“Do you want me to run you over?”

“Like an ant,” he said, “What the hell?”

She surprised herself when after a short pause she said, “Fine.”

With that she yanked the car door open and slid inside. The vinyl was cool against the backs of her thighs, the odor in the car was pungent where stale, stubbed-out cigarettes in the open ashtray mingled with the lemon scented cardboard air freshener that hung from the rear view mirror. She sat for a minute or so, seething: waiting for him to get up and appear at one of the windows to put an end to this, but when he didn’t, she put the key in the ignition. Before she turned the key, before she pressed her foot on the accelerator, she felt completely capable of backing down the driveway, of feeling the car meet resistance like backing out over a cement stump, like backing out over the curb. She could claim anything, after all that: after an argument, she decided to take a drive to calm her nerves, it was dark and she was upset and how was she ever supposed to think that her husband was lying beneath the tires like a stupid cat seeking shelter wherever he could find it? Or no, no argument at all, just that it was a hot summer evening and she wanted air, she wanted to drive along an uncluttered highway, windows rolled down and feel air beating back her hair, whipping across her face.

She turned the key, pressed her foot down on the pedal, listening to the engine’s choked rumble. She smelled gas, exhaust, and glanced up to see plumes of it swirling up from the rear. She shifted into reverse, her foot still on the brake. Then slowly, she let her foot rise off the pedal and felt the car roll back just a fraction of an inch, astonished that she would go this far before she jammed the shift lever into park again. She sat there shaking, tears stinging her face, the car idling loudly for several seconds before she cut the engine.

The night was silent and unchanged; no voices called to her to stop—not Lenny’s, not God’s. The scars had not been altered and no neighbor’s living room light flicked on to see what was the matter at this late hour in their suburban cul de sac. This potential murder would go unnoticed and misunderstood. Only Lenny, who would have been mangled in front of his own house, could have come to her defense, could have said, “I deserved it. I asked for it.”

She pushed the door open and looked down, toward the back tires where Lenny’s sneakered foot was jutting out. He moved it, scraping its edge along the asphalt until she could see that he was shoving himself away from the tires, that indeed, he was moving away from the car. She had no idea which direction he might take or even whether he would stand up, but before she could tell if she’d actually hurt him, she heard his voice, gravelly, broken. One word, “Rucci,” he said.

The name, like a hypnotic suggestion, triggered something in her and, without thinking, she dropped down on all fours, the surface of the rough drive abrasive against the flesh of her bare knees, the palms of her hands. Her shoulder and hip brushed against the hot metal of the car, and it must have seemed as incomprehensible to him as to her when she discovered that in the dark, close to the earth, they were crawling toward each other.