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Madison's sister Grace hears a story from her great-aunt Edith.

Contains: *Breast Expansion as Weight Gain*

The Manchurian Appetite

Grace was visiting her great-aunt Edith in her assisted living condo. Though she'd never admit it to Madison, she couldn't deny that the place was more like a luxury resort than a nursing home. As much as her hedonistic sister annoyed her, the facility would have been little more than a dream without Madison footing the bill.

"Did I ever tell you the story of my first roommate?" Edith asked as she shuffled the cards.

"In college?"

"After school. I'd gotten a position in a typing pool for one of the New York papers. I've forgotten which one—I think it has a different name now, if it's still around."

Grace studied the cards in her hand. "Okay..."

"I'd found an apartment near the Village, a little shoebox of a place with only one window—a drafty one. And the pipes... My god, they were worse than jackhammers when you were trying to sleep. At any rate, my roommate was a woman named Rae; she'd served as an auxiliary in Korea."

"Auxiliary?"

"A nurse or a secretary, something like that. I don't think the army calls them secretaries. Maybe she was a typist or a clerk. The important part is that something happened to her platoon or whatever while she was over there. I never got the whole story, but she must have been captured by the communists."

"Most of those 'communists' were fascist dictatorships, technically speaking..."

"Well, we called them communist. I don't know which group it was; maybe they were working together. Either way, she'd been brainwashed."

"I mean, with all the propaganda flying around, I'd say almost everyone was brainwashed."

"Not like that. I don't mean she supported McCarthy or wanted to build a fallout shelter. She was a—what do you call them?—a sleeper agent. They'd done all this conditioning to her brain. If you had the right code word or trigger, you could make her do whatever you asked."

Grace looked up from her cards. "Come on, are you serious? I saw a documentary about that MK-Ultra stuff. It was just the CIA torturing people. None of it really worked; they mostly just drove people insane."

"Well, maybe *we* couldn't figure it out, but someone in the Eastern Bloc did. They got it to work on Rae Shaw, at any rate."

"Okay, sure, suppose that's true. How would you even find something like that out? It's not like you could ask her, 'Say, doll, you're not a sleeper agent for the Soviets, are ya?'"

"That's a terrible Kate Hepburn impression."

"It was supposed to be Judy Garland—don't change the subject. Isn't the whole point of a sleeper agent that they don't know they are one?"

"Well, my first clue," Edith said, snapping a trio of cards on the table, "Was when a member of her platoon came to visit Rae once. Mark, Marcus—something like that. He was a Captain, or maybe a Major. Regardless, Rae was out, so I offered him a drink. She was a bit of a tough nut to crack, and I was hoping to learn more about her from someone from her past. But all the officer said was... how did it go? 'Raylene Shaw is the kindest, bravest, warmest, most wonderful human being I've ever known in my life.'"

"That's quite a speech. He said it exactly like that?"

"Exactly like that. I remember it because he said it three times over a fifteen-minute conversation."

"I was going to say, it sounds rehearsed."

Edith nodded. "The other reason I remember the line is that none of those words seemed to describe the woman I knew."

"I mean, maybe she was nicer to her commanding officer? Maybe they were lovers during the war."

"That's the thing; I couldn't imagine Rae having a friend, let alone a lover."

"Harsh."

"She went to the office, came home, and sat in her room like a zombie. She never went out; she was snappish and irritable with everyone."

"Still..."

"Still, yes, of course, I could have been wrong. After I talked to that officer, I made more of an effort to connect with her. If I was right—and she didn't have any friends—then I would be her friend. We played a lot of cards, naturally, and that's how I found out about her trigger card."

Grace fought to keep a smirk off her lips. "Oh, a trigger card. Well, in that case, it sounds totally legit."

"Don't sass me." Edith rearranged the cards in her hand. "We were playing Rummy, and I had a set of queens. I laid them down, and bam!"

Edith paused. Grace didn't react.

"You were more fun when you were little. At any rate, she froze."

"Froze?"

"She just... stopped. Like she was in a trance, comatose. Her eyes were open, but they were glassy, unfocused."

"Did you call 911?"

"We didn't have 911."

"Well, couldn't you just pick up a phone and say, 'Operator, I need a doctor, tout suite!'"

"What did I say about sass? I didn't need to call anyone, because when I told Rae to snap out of it, she did."

"Just like that."

"Just like that. One minute, she was Stephen Hawking; the next, she was her usual, grumpy self."

"Jesus, Aunt Edith."

Edith waved a dismissive hand. "You young people are so touchy."

Grace rolled her eyes. "Fine, so the cards magically hypnotized her?"

"Not magic, conditioning."

"You said you don't even know what happened to her."

"Maybe I don't, but it obviously wasn't magic."

"Because magic isn't real."

"Exactly." If Edith detected Grace's sarcasm, she ignored it.

"But it wasn't just any cards," Edith continued. "We kept playing, and on the next hand, she drew a card, and it happened again."

"She froze."

"Yes. This time, I said, 'Show me your cards,' and she did."

"So she's bad at cards," Grace said, drawing a card. "Pass."

Edith shot her a glare. "The top card in her hand was the Queen of Hearts. The same queen that was on the top of my set."

"I mean, that card could have just triggered something for her."

"Haven't I been talking about triggers this entire time?"

"That's not... never mind. So, the Queen of Hearts..."

"Right. Whenever Rae saw a Queen of Hearts, she'd do whatever I told her. I got her to bark like a dog, to dance and sing—only once, though; she was awful at both. She even cleaned the whole apartment."

"And none of that—I don't know—bothered you?"

"Looking back on it now, of course. It's awful what they did to her, and though I had nothing to do with that, I probably shouldn't have taken advantage."

"But you did."

"Of course I did! I was twenty years old, on my own in the City for the first time, with a roommate who would hardly say two words to me, even though we worked in the same office."

Grace played her turn in silence.

"It wasn't like I made her do all the housekeeping. She just, maybe, did a bit more than her fair share. Once in a while. And she was a much better cook than I was, especially when she wasn't grumpy about it. So I did all the shopping, and I let her do all the cooking."

"You *let* her."

"Yes. And if she made a bit too much, and I used the card to make sure she gave me the extra, well, I was just saving her from putting on weight. A woman from our family would make better use of those pounds, anyway."

"Why am I not surprised this story comes back to boobs?"

"Well..." Edith glanced meaningfully out the window, toward a pair of tanned mountains in the distance.

"Wait. I thought great-grandma didn't tell you about the secret until you were twenty-five."

"Closer to twenty-four, really."

"Still, if you were only twenty, you couldn't have known that you wouldn't get fat."

"Alright, fine, I didn't know for certain, no. But I'd made it through college with the dining hall and the physical checkups. I'd watched other girls worry about their skirts and their hips, and I just... never did. I figured I was one of those women who are effortlessly thin; you know the type."

Grace gave a begrudging sigh. "Yes, I do."

"And besides, her cooking was so good. After a while, I didn't use the card for anything else; just had her cook for us every meal. I didn't put the pieces together until later, but it was kind of like a last hurrah for my growth phase."

"Mmhmm."

"I wasn't always a frumpy old lady, you know. I had the biggest gams in the typing pool, and with Rae cooking for me so well all the time, they kept getting bigger. Most of the other girls hated me, and the boys were making passes at me about every other weekend."

"Sounds like some real *Mad Men* shit."

Edith rolled her eyes. "A lady likes to be appreciated once in a while."

"That's a weird way to pronounce 'harassed.'"

"It was a different time. We were all worried about the bomb."

"Sure, sure. So that's it? Your roommate turned out to be a Soviet sleeper agent, and you made her feed you until you outgrew your extra-small Marilyn Monroe sweaters?"

"I'll have you know I was wearing medium sweaters before I started college. By the time Rae disappeared, I couldn't find any bras at Macy's that fit. I had to shop at the maternity section at Gimbel's and hem the bands to fit around me."

"Oh no, not maternity bras. I thought you were going to say you grew like my piggy sister and got stuck in your matchbox apartment."

"Always with the sass. Don't you think you'd have heard if I got too big to move and spent the rest of my twenties dieting it off?"

"I don't know. You were roomies with a femme Winter Soldier, and this is the first I'm hearing about it."

"Fair enough."

"Wait, did you say she disappeared? Like, her plane went down in the Arctic?"

Edith scooped up the cards and shuffled with surprising dexterity. "Oh, you're so funny with your movie references. One day, I was out doing the shopping. I came home, and she was gone."

"She went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back?"

"Smoking is bad for you, Grace."

Grace frowned at her great-aunt.

"At any rate, she was gone. My guess is her actual handlers caught on to my taking advantage of her conditioning and relocated her. I never heard from her again."

"What, in all that time? Fifty-some years?"

"More than sixty, by now."

"You never tried to find her?"

"I filed a missing persons report with the police, but they never turned up anything. I think they stopped looking after a few weeks."

"Typical."

"I even tried to hire a private investigator, but I couldn't afford it."

"I guess it was pretty easy to disappear people back then."

"Well, there was one time..." Edith drew a card.

"One time what?"

"Well, there were all these pictures in the papers. Crowds lined up for a parade in Dallas, Texas. November of sixty-three. I couldn't be sure in a grainy newspaper photo, but I thought I recognized a figure walking away from a certain grassy knoll."

Grace barked a laugh. "You should have been a novelist with some of these stories. 'A certain grassy knoll...' You almost had me going for a minute there."

"I'll have you know that every word of that story is true, young lady," Edith said, peering hard at Grace over her glasses.

“Of course it is, Aunt Edith. Come on, it’s your turn to deal.”