

JOE ARMS

Childhood

A hummingbird flaps its wing
and the world stands still.
A cool, summer breeze pushes a swing.
A hummingbird flaps its wing.
I hand you your dandelion ring.
We dream of dancing, of driving, and of drinking till
a hummingbird flaps its wing
and the world stands still.

Adulthood

Hot tears drop to the snow, steaming,
as they hand me your dandelion ring.
I begin to dream of dreaming.
Hot tears drop to the snow steaming.
Your granddaughter won't stop screaming.
While angels begin to sing,
hot tears drop to the snow steaming
as they hand me your dandelion ring.

MADISON RHYMES

Bob and the Best Birthday Gift Ever

Thea had known the day was going to suck. She just hadn't known how. The hands on the bank's clock indicated that another hour had passed. It was going to be a long day.

"Stop giving me that look," Naomi whispered from behind her. After dealing with her sister for some thirty-odd years, she could sense Thea's look of brooding contempt, and she was beginning to lose her patience.

"I'm not giving you a look," Thea hissed back. "This is just the face I perpetually give to prissy, paranoid-assed idiots."

"*Language!*" Naomi said, offended by her sister's blatant lack of social etiquette. "And *I'm* the idiot? We wouldn't be in this mess if you knew how to follow basic cooking instructions. The dinner for Mom's birthday could have been done by now."

"I told you that I didn't even wanna be part of our parents' stupid get together in the first place. If you could use a credit card like a normal human being, we could have just gone out for food instead of needing to buy more ingredients, but noooo! You have to go to a bank for change every freakin' time you leave the house."

"Credit cards leave a trail that enables salespeople to track your purchases and makes it harder for you to regulate your spending. Using cash is much s—"

Another gun fired in the air. "QUIET!" The robber shouted. "And keep still. Nobody try to be a hero."

The sisters and the others had already been stuck with the robbers for two hours now. Thea guessed that the men, with their dark clothes and masked faces with large mouth slits, had origi-

nally planned to successfully be in and out of the bank within a few minutes, but the police had surrounded the establishment almost as soon as the robbery began. Guess their day wasn't going according to plan either. Good thing the men had so many hostages, huh?

But yeah, Thea thought. Using cash is so much safer.

The mass of customers and employees cowered together before the mighty robbers in a plea for their safety—which naturally meant that Thea was going to say something, because Thea could never keep her mouth shut.

"Trust me," she said. "I wouldn't dream of trying to save anyone. The Princess over here is not worth a bullet." She expelled a loogie on the floor for emphasis.

"Why do you have to be so disgusting?!" Naomi looked on the verge of fainting from the sight of the offensive blob.

"Why do you have to be so damn dramatic?" Thea retorted. "We're being held hostage but you wanna faint because of some stupid *spit*? Get your shit together, Princess."

"I told you to stop calling me 'princess'!"

"Well, maybe if you'd stop acting like one—"

"For the love of God, shut them up!" The first robber shouted. He was the more muscular of the two men, with a large chest and arms that he had likely labored over in an effort to compensate for his smaller stature. Thea called him The Short Stack.

"We already tied them up after we got here," said the second robber.

Through his eye slits, he looked down on the sisters with an expression that could rival Thea's contempt. He seemed a little pretentious, but there wasn't anything special about him—Thea called him Bob.

Yes, despite the glares they made at the sisters, the other hostages were compliant and remained unbound as they sat on the floor surrounded by the far-from-bulletproof plastic bank desks and chairs that had been painted to look expensive, but the indifference the sisters had shown after the first few bullets had been fired made the robbers wary of them, and they were tied to a nearby desk for good measure.

"Maybe you should gag her," Naomi politely offered, doing her best to jab her sister despite the desk wall that separated them.

"Maybe they should gag you," Thea retorted, jabbing her sister back. "That way we don't have to hear your stupid—"

The Short Stack pointed his gun at Thea's head. "I'll shut both of your mouths permanently if you don't quit talking right now!" He seemed a little trigger happy.

The sudden ringing from one of the bank's phones startled

him into almost firing his gun.

"Shit. It's the police," The Short Stack said.

"More hostage negotiations," Bob agreed, his arms crossed over his chest contemplatively. "We need to think of something else to say."

"They need to start taking us more seriously," The Short Stack said, as though the two of them were discussing their neglectful employers at dinner on a Friday night. "Maybe if we pop some heads and take a few people hostage as we leave it'll get them to listen."

"We don't need the extra weight," Bob replied. "It would be better for us to try to escape with just a bit of cash."

"Fuck that," The Short Stack said nonchalantly as the phone continued to ring. He pointed his gun at Thea's head again. "This will make them take us more seriously."

"We're in this together, remember, buddy?" Bob reminded him. "We agreed to both be on board before making any serious decisions unless it was absolutely necessary."

"I know, I know," The Short Stack said. "But this is necessary." He took the safety off his gun.

"Oh, I don't think you want to do that," Naomi said. The robber had made a technical error, so of course, know-it-all Naomi had to point it out. "Don't you watch *Law and Order*? You're already looking at quite a few years for armed robbery and assault," Naomi continued. "If you start killing your hostages, not only will it add time to your sentence, but—"

"Will you quit trying to be an expert on everything!" Thea yelled.

"I'm just trying to help!" Naomi yelled back.

"You're going to get us all killed!" The Pregnant Woman cried.

"Daddy, are we going to die?" asked The Boy with the Missing Teeth.

The phone continued to ring.

"Shut them the hell up," shouted the Old Man at the far end of the crowd.

Bob and The Short Stack looked at each other.

The phone continued to ring.

Bob nodded and looked away.

The Short Stack glared.

"Fuck it!" he shouted. "Just take them to the back while I answer the phone and we're overrun by the cops," he added dryly.

Bob ignored his snarky undertone and complied. He couldn't see his partner glaring at him as he took the sisters to a nearby storage closet.

The minute they were out of sight en route, Thea jabbed her

sister in the arm.

“Why did you hit me?!” Naomi shouted as Thea put her in a headlock.

“I just saved your life, you ungrateful troll!” The Princess indignantly elbowed Thea in the kidneys.

“We both know that’s not the reason your smart ass said anything!” Thea shouted while Naomi rammed her into the wall.

The bang of the impact and their battle cries could be heard on the other side of the bank by the rest of the hostages.

“I—I think I’m going into labor,” The Pregnant Woman sniffled.

Bank Teller #1 began rocking back and forth.

The Old Man looked up at The Short Stack. “I’ll pull the trigger for you,” he said.

The Short Stack merely released a seething sigh into the phone while the police listened to the chaos on the other end.

The other hostages couldn’t tell which was worse—the sisters or the robbers—but Bob had his own idea. By the time he managed to pull them apart, both of the sisters had torn clothes, Naomi’s lip was bleeding, Thea was missing chunks of hair, and Bob had what he knew was going to be a black eye. He finally shoved them into the storage closet.

“What the hell is wrong with you two!?” Bob exclaimed. He could already feel his eye swelling. “I have a gun pointed at you and you still won’t shut up!” He sighed. “Look. I really need this money, and you’re making us look bad out there. Can you please shut up so I don’t have to shoot you?”

“Nothing you can do could make this day any worse,” Naomi said. Thea rolled her eyes. “It’s our mother’s birthday, and it’s been completely ruined...the food will never be ready in time now, even without all of this.” She gestured to their surroundings.

“I’m so sorry I can’t be as gracious as you, Your High Horse.” Thea wasn’t sorry. She rubbed her bald spot and tried to hide a grimace. “If we’d just gone out to eat like I suggested, I could have added some years to your life, seeing as that’s the only reason why you need me.”

“Psh,” Naomi responded, “I do *not* need you for your terrible cooking skills.” Her tone suggested a condescending laugh at the thought. “I needed you there to help so it could be like how we used to make food together when we were younger. It wouldn’t have been the same if we’d gone out.”

“Yeah, right,” Thea said. “You hated doing that, so did all of us—especially me.”

“It’s been years since we’ve all been together though, and Mom and Dad aren’t getting any younger. I just wanted it to be

like old times, back when we could get along, before I realized how annoying you were.”

“You mean the old times when you annoyed me by rubbing it in my face about how much better you were at everything than I was?”

“I never—”

“Wait,” Bob interjected, pointing the gun at Naomi. “Let her finish. You,” he said, pointing the gun to Thea, “keep talking. Why do you feel like that happened?”

Thea swallowed, and continued, “Because she was the sweet one, the one on honor roll, on all of the sports teams, in all of the plays. She was the one who cooked the best food, while I burned everything I touched. Mom and Dad’s little princess. How do you think it feels being second best all of the time?”

“Is that why you didn’t want to cook with me?” she asked. “Thea, no one cares about how bad you are at—”

Bob cocked his gun.

“Okay, maybe I care a little,” Naomi admitted, “but that’s only because I had to. You were Mom and Dad’s favorite, the confident, assertive one. It was your grades that they hung up on the fridge and your trophies on the shelf, not mine. I only acted that way because I had to. It was exhausting.”

“Isn’t it possible that your parents just showed their affection towards you two in different ways?” Bob suggested. He shrugged sheepishly, with a hint of a knowing smile showing through the mouth slit of his mask. “How far has fighting about this issue gotten you? I mean, look at my partner and I. We have our disagreements, like what happened out there, but we try to talk things out to help each other be a more effective team. Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to encourage each other like that too, instead?” This Bob guy was alright. Maybe he could be a psychiatrist one day. He might have even been robbing the bank to help pay off his college loans.

“I guess you’re right,” Thea said, looking at her sister. “We can make the food over again if you want to.”

Naomi shook her head. “I’m fine if we go out to eat.”

There was a sudden commotion on the other side of the door, followed by gunshots and screams. The door swung open, and Bob fell to the ground, dead as the victim of the last round of bullets. Thea and Naomi looked at the perpetrator: Short Stack. His face twisted into a cynical smile, the kind of smile children have when they become gods as they burn mortal ants with a magnifying glass.

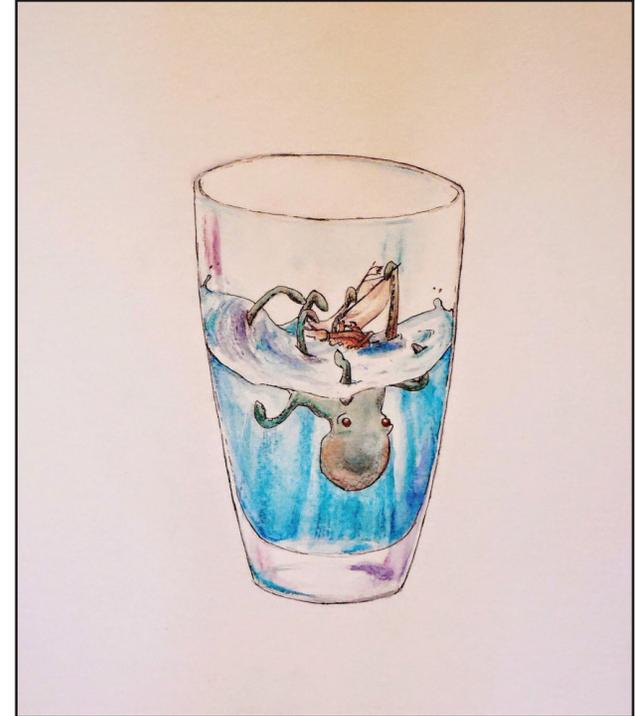
“Change in plans,” the man said as he tightened his grip around the Boy with the Missing Teeth. “I’m beginning to realize,

these 'hostage negotiations' are getting us nowhere. It's time for me to get rid of some of this dead weight." He pointed his gun at the sisters with his finger on the trigger.

Exhausted, for the first time in decades, the sisters clutched each other. "You know what? Those old farts can starve for all I care," Naomi said.

"Yeah," Thea nodded. "It's their fault we're in this mess in the first place."

MELISSA GABER



A Little Overboard
watercolor and ink