

The Liars' Asylum

..... *Stories*

Jacob M. Appel



Black
Lawrence
Press

To Rosalie

Contents

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1. Bait and Switch	I
2. Good Enough for Guppies	26
3. Prisoners of the Multiverse	49
4. The Frying Finn	64
5. Picklocks in Oblivion	78
6. The Summer of Interrogatory Subversion	99
7. When Love Was an Angel's Kidney	120
8. The Liars' Asylum	144

Bait and Switch

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Aunt Jill had been courting Mitch W. at the Citarella fish counter for eight relentless months, stockpiling our freezer with pompano filets and hand-sliced sable, when the giraffe painter swept her off of her swollen feet. This happened the summer I turned fourteen, the year we lived opposite Grant’s Tomb in a rent-stabilized railroad apartment strewn with half-depleted bottles of Xanax and Zoloft. I’d been looking forward to having free run of the place while my aunt played “den mother” at an upscale day camp—to savoring lazy afternoons with Jeff Katz on what had once been Grandma Edith’s canopy bed—but these plans collapsed one blustery June evening when Aunt Jill charged into the kitchen looking as though she might spontaneously hemorrhage from glee. She carried a paper shopping bag emblazoned with the distinctive Italian boot of Marconi’s Bakeshop. A turquoise visitor’s pin, hooked to the lapel of her raincoat, informed the world that she’d recently visited the Museum of Natural History. “Laurie Jean! We’re celebrating!” she cried, setting an enormous strawberry cheesecake on the linoleum countertop and carving us each the tiniest sliver. “I’ve *finally* met the man I’m going to marry.”

“Not Mitch W.?” I asked.

“Mitch had *his* chance,” she said. “A woman can’t wait forever. Besides, Mitch Weissbaum doesn’t hold a candle to Silvio. Silvio Sebastian Santino. Can you imagine a name any more romantic than that?” Aunt Jill licked a smidge of whipped cream directly off the pastry knife, then carved herself a second helping of cheesecake. “I hope you’re looking forward to having a new uncle, Laurie Jean, because your old aunt’s ship has come in.”

I doubted that. By the age of forty-eight, Aunt Jill—perpetually single, beak-nosed, squat as a parlor stove—had foretold the arrival of an entire fleet of would-be husbands who had never managed to reach port. Before Mitch W., she’d spent nearly two years chasing after Phil Marcus, a mustached piano teacher who escaped her pursuit by getting himself crushed to death in a speedboat accident. Leading up to this incident—which I thought of as proof of a just and merciful Poseidon—I had learned how to play “Hot Cross Buns” in multiple keys. Aunt Jill had discovered that handsome gay men in their thirties don’t turn instantly straight to seduce overweight kindergarten teachers. Still, I tried to appear enthusiastic about “Uncle” Silvio.

“I hope he’s not out of my league,” said Aunt Jill. “Guess how we met.”

“In line at Citarella?”

I thought mine was a reasonable guess, but she ignored it. “We took the kids to the museum this afternoon,” she explained. “On account of the rain. And there he was, in the Hall of African Mammals, painting spots on the giraffes. So obviously, I had to find out why. . . .”

“*Obviously.*”

“It turns out Silvio is an artificial foliage designer. He earns his living making fake plants for hotel lobbies and zoo attractions, and whatnot, but he also does museum backdrops now and again. Any-

way—get this, Laurie Jean—he takes his stepsister to the museum last year, and he realizes the *stuffed* giraffes and the *painted* giraffes don't match. They've got reticulated giraffes out front and Kordofan giraffes in back—and nobody has ever noticed before. Or it could have been Kordofan giraffes out front and reticulated giraffes in back. Whatever. The bottom line is that they hired Silvio to repaint the entire exhibit. Isn't that amazing?"

"So you asked about the giraffes and he invited you out to dinner?"

"More or less," answered Aunt Jill. "He gave me his business card."

She opened her handbag and removed the glossy card from her change purse, displaying it like a lover's photograph. The card read: S. SANTINO, INTERIORS & SETS. WOODHAVEN, QUEENS. In the upper left-hand corner, a panda bear peered between bamboo stalks.

"So are you going to call him?" I asked.

It didn't matter, I knew. He wouldn't be interested.

"That's where you come in," answered Aunt Jill. "Honestly, Laurie Jean, I really need your help on this one."

I had already suffered through two years of piano lessons and eight months of smoked mackerel. "I'm not eating any artificial plants," I said. "Or any giraffes."

Aunt Jill carved herself another slice of cake, this one far larger than the first two. "Look, Laurie Jean, I didn't know how to get his number . . . so I told him that you were still looking for a summer job. I thought maybe you could help him with his exhibits a few days each week . . . and I could lease a car and come pick you up after work." My aunt toyed nervously with the handle of the cake knife, scraping patterns into the frosting. "I realize it's the summer . . . and I can't *make* you do anything . . . but this is extremely important to me . . ." She looked up abruptly, desperate yet hope-

ful. "It might even be fun for you," she added—but in a tone that suggested we both knew otherwise.

It was true that Aunt Jill couldn't *make* me do anything. Or, at least, she wouldn't. But the studio photographs of my mother that stood watch around the apartment—in the foyer, above the escritoire in the living room, on my aunt's nightstand—meant that she never had to. In the pictures, my mother appears gentle, untroubled, a newly minted Barnard graduate with a rambunctious two-year-old at home and all the time in the world ahead of her. How could she foresee that my father was planning a surprise weekend jaunt to San Juan, that he had already reserved the hotel suite where the smoke and flames would trap them? Why should she suspect these photos would become the enduring reminder of the singing career that her baby sister had to sacrifice to hand-raise her orphaned niece? So the moment that Aunt Jill recruited me to bait her latest crush, I lost all hope for lazy afternoons with Jeff Katz on the canopy bed.

"You'll do it for me, won't you?" she pleaded.

I nodded. "Maybe I'll even have fun," I lied.

"I *knew* you'd come through, Laurie Jean. You're about as loyal as they make them." She took a last finger-nibble of the cheesecake and tied up the box. "I'm thinking that I'll lease a little red Saturn with a sunroof. We can manage to afford that—at least for a few months."

I knew that we couldn't. That whatever money I earned working at Silvio's would go to pay for the car.

"He's thirty-nine," Aunt Jill added. "You don't think I'm too old for him, do you?"

But before I had a chance to answer, she already assured herself that she wasn't.

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Two days later, we drove out to Woodhaven in a not-so-sporty Pontiac Bonneville that had set Aunt Jill back \$400 for the month. The vehicle smelled enchantingly of plastics and fresh vinyl—but my aunt insisted that we roll down the windows to keep from “catching” cancer. She’d phoned in sick to her camp that morning. A one-time indulgence, so she could personally introduce me to Silvio. After that, I’d be taking mass transit out to Queens: the A train to the Q21 bus and then a twenty-minute hike up Juniper Boulevard. I’m still not sure which part was worse: sacrificing my summer to make artificial plants, or the mortification, at the age of fourteen, of having my aunt introduce me to my new boss. Aunt Jill didn’t make the encounter any easier by demanding that I wear a business skirt and stockings. *So I wouldn’t look like a street urchin!* Her own low-cut blouse boasted a lace frill along the neckline, drawing far too much attention to her cleavage. She wore costume rings on all ten of her fingers.

We pulled up in front of 1550 Tilden Parkway. On the outside, Silvio’s workshop was a low-slung, stucco-faced structure that might have passed for an abandoned bowling alley or even a downscale strip club. Sumac shrubs poked through the joints in the adjacent sidewalk. Across the cheerless six-lane avenue, caddy-corner to a wholesale liquor dealer and a bodega promising “instant check-cashing,” rose the chained service entrance to Mount Zion cemetery.

Aunt Jill evaluated her appearance in the rearview mirror. She reapplied her mascara.

“Does your old aunt look presentable?” she asked.

She looked like a middle-aged prostitute on a television western. Straight off the X-rated version of *Gunsmoke*. “You look fine,” I said.

We rang the buzzer and waited. After the better part of five minutes—we could hear muffled arguing inside the workshop—Silvio Santino opened the door. He was shorter than I'd anticipated, yet handsome. *Ruggedly* so. His hair was coal black and waveless—more Native American than Mediterranean—and his skin had a dark olive tinge, but his fast-moving eyes gleamed a striking cornflower blue. My plaid wool skirt and conservative top must have appeared ludicrous, even self-important, to a man sporting paint-splattered coveralls.

"Greetings, ladies," he said. His eyes darted between us. "Two for the price of one?"

"I'm merely the chauffeur," replied Aunt Jill. "Laurie Jean didn't want to come out here all alone on the first day, so I let her talk me into giving her a lift."

I threw my aunt a look meant to scald flesh, but she didn't notice.

"She's a lucky girl," said Silvio. "Luckier than I was, at least. I landed my first summer job at twelve. My pop woke me up one morning with his iron-tipped boot and said, *Get out and earn fifty bucks, or you're not sleeping under this roof tonight.*"

Silvio's tone was matter-of-fact. Almost indifferent. As though he had read about the incident in a history textbook. I knew Aunt Jill would take this remark as a criticism of her own parenting style—that she now regretted appearing to coddle me—but her perceived comeuppance didn't raise my spirits.

"I'd best get going," she said. "I'll see you at five o'clock, darling. Right out front." She turned to Silvio and added, almost apologetically, "It's on the way for me."

My new employer watched her depart without uttering another word. Then he sliced himself a plug of chewing tobacco and tucked it behind his lower lip. I thought he might offer me a piece too—a polite refusal rested on the tip of my tongue—but he didn't.

“Let’s go find my sister,” he said. “I’m going to set you both to work on the same job, and maybe you can be a good influence on her.”

Silvio led me along a narrow entryway, lined with sacks of woodchips and gravel, into a colossal warehouse teeming with exotic plants. Avocado trees and jacarandas towered over fern-filled bogs and luscious stands of frangipani. Strangler figs burst from crepe myrtle thickets, dangling orchids and bromeliads. It was like visiting the tropical hothouse at the botanical gardens—until it struck me, after a moment’s processing, that every last leaf and branch was entirely synthetic. Most of the chamber’s light filtered through dusty, heavily barred panes in the ceiling, augmented by a perimeter of fluorescent floor lamps. A strong aroma of paint—not pollen—hung in the chilly air. The only sounds to be heard were the low-pitched rumble of a vintage dehumidifier and the murmur of an exposed porcelain toilet. Among all that greenery, the absence of bird chatter was genuinely creepy.

In an alcove behind a wall of sago palms, we found a girl my own age, eyes closed, sprawled across a threadbare sofa. A copy of *Seventeen* lay open on her exposed midriff, and she was blowing large pink bubbles toward the skylights. Nearby stood a pair of workbenches littered with oddly shaped tools.

Silvio shook the girl’s foot. “Time to get to work,” he said. “You ladies have six hundred alocasia leaves to paint by the end of the week.”

The girl blew another bubble and popped it. Then she tossed the magazine onto the nearby concrete and propped herself up on the armrest.

“Slave number one, reporting for duty,” she said.

“This is my sister, Maia,” said Silvio. “This is Laurie Jean.”

“Stepsister,” said Maia. “His father married my mother.”

Silvio drew up two chairs alongside one of the workbenches. Then he reached underneath and produced a pot brimming with

broad plastic leaves. That's when I noticed the other vegetation—there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of artificial plants beneath the benches. All a monotonous kelly green. I sat down on one of the chairs. Maia joined us reluctantly.

"These are alocasia plants. Elephant ears," said Silvio, setting two more pots atop the workbench. Next, he retrieved a long cardboard tube from behind what appeared to be the lower half of a stuffed flamingo, and he unrolled a poster. "*These* are alocasias in the Amazon Basin. Take a good look." I peered at the lush, fan-shaped leaves, trying to memorize the complex web of veins. My new coworker rolled her eyes. "Your job, ladies," explained Silvio, "is to make *these* plants here look like the ones in the photo. Got it?"

I nodded tentatively.

"Have you ever painted a plant before, Laurie Jean?" asked Silvio.

I felt suddenly self-conscious. I focused my eyes on my lap.

"Maia will show you how. It's not rocket science." Silvio scanned the shelves along the far side of the alcove and returned with a can of titanium-based paint. "There are only two rules when it comes to manufacturing synthetics," he said. "They have to *look* authentic and they have to *be* authentic. Either is easy—but *both* together are a challenge." Silvio grinned—revealing a silver bicuspid. "Not that you ladies have to worry about anything like that right now. All *you* have to do is color inside the lines. Any questions?"

Maia sneered. "Is it time for our lunch break yet?"

Her stepbrother glanced at his watch. "If we're going to fill this order on time, you ladies will have to paint four—even five—leaves every hour," he said. "I'm counting on you both." Then he patted Maia on the shoulder and disappeared into his manmade forest. We heard him periodically throughout the morning, dragging ladders across the concrete, hammering polyurethane knots into fiberglass tree trunks.

“We might as well get this over with,” said Maia. “They’re for some Christian theme park in Florida. For their Garden-of-Gethsemane ride.” She passed me a paintbrush and dipped her own into the thick white paint. At the time, I’d never heard of the Garden of Gethsemane—church was a place where Aunt Jill and I went for other people’s weddings and funerals—but I kept my ignorance to myself and painstakingly mimicked Maia’s brush strokes.

“Jackie and I sewed the leaves onto their olive trees last week,” she explained, “and when Silvio wasn’t around, I lacquered satanic pentagrams along the stems.” This petty subversion was obviously a source of great pride for my coworker; she turned toward me, beaming with satisfaction. “Jackie quit after two weeks. She couldn’t take the heat,” added Maia. “So how did *you* get roped into this?”

“It’s a job,” I said. I didn’t see the advantage in mentioning that I was helping my aunt stalk her stepbrother. “I’d *so* rather be hanging out with my boyfriend.” Jeff Katz wasn’t actually my boyfriend, not technically, but I suppose I wanted to assert my popularity—and just mentioning Jeff’s name made me feel closer to him.

Maia shrugged. “I was planning to lifeguard this summer, but they raised the minimum-fucking-age from fifteen to sixteen,” she answered. “By the way, how much is he paying you?”

“What?”

“How much is my brother paying you for doing this shit? I thought we could compare . . .”

I had no idea. “How much is he paying *you*?” I asked—thinking I’d say the same.

Maia eyed me warily and scratched her nose with her elbow. “Enough,” she said. So that was it: she was afraid she was getting less than I was. “He’s hot, isn’t he?”

For an instant, I thought she’d meant Jeff. Then I realized she was talking about Silvio.

"I guess," I said.

"You know he is. If he wasn't my stepbrother, I'd fuck him."

I wasn't used to people cursing so gingerly. I could feel the blood pooling like molten iron in the tips of my ears. Maia giggled.

"You'd fuck him too, wouldn't you?" she demanded. "Right here on that dirty couch."

She was right. I did think Silvio was hot—much sexier than Jeff or any of the guys in my grade at Woodrow Wilson. My cheeks were broiling, and I nearly admitted that I would have made out with Silvio, but I was immediately glad that I hadn't. Maia stopped laughing, as quickly as she'd started, and glared at me fiercely.

"Well, don't you fucking dare," she snapped. "He's *my* stepbrother."

"I have a boyfriend," I replied defensively. "Jeff. He plays hockey."

After that, we worked in near silence for several hours—speaking only when necessary to compare leaves or retrieve a new can of paint. The labor was mindless but not unpleasant. I had plenty of time to daydream about becoming a famous runway model and jetting around the world to display the latest creations of Yves Saint Laurent and Oscar de la Renta. Jeff Katz accompanied me on these adventures—after a dramatic clash with my aunt. Sometimes, my mother, secretly rescued from the blazing Hotel Castillo, climbed onto the catwalk and wrapped me in her arms. I was engrossed in one of these fantasies—telling my mother how Aunt Jill had done her best at parenting, despite her obvious shortcomings—when Silvio returned.

"I see you're making progress," he said. We'd finished six plants between us—although the truth was that Maia had painted five and I'd hardly completed one. For all of her complaining, the girl was an industrious worker. "Why don't you go take an early lunch, sis?" said Silvio. "I'd like to have a word with Laurie Jean."

My stomach fluttered. It hadn't crossed my mind until that instant that I could get fired.

“You’re the boss,” retorted Maia. “I’ll be back in eight hours or so.”

She saluted dramatically and disappeared through a nondescript door, a barely noticeable rectangle carved into the unpainted dry-wall; moments later, I heard a shower running. Silvio settled onto Maia’s abandoned chair, backward, his muscular forearms resting on its steel frame. He examined me with ferocity, his eyes magnetic and relentless.

“So, what grade are you in?” he asked.

“Tenth,” I answered nervously. “I mean, I’m *going* into tenth.”

His eyes never left my face. “Are you learning a lot in school?”

“I guess.”

“Do you know what *I* learned in school?” demanded Silvio. His voice was soft—barely above a whisper—but dangerous. “I learned that I was an idiot. Dumb as a bucket of bricks. *Ten* buckets of bricks. What do you think of that?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be. They threw me out on my ass—and it was the luckiest break I ever got. I ended up in some city program for other kids as dumb as bricks, and the next thing I knew I was apprenticed to this Greek guy in Astoria who made silk flowers. I spent two whole years crimping petals with a goffering iron before Old Nikadakis would even show me how to stencil a leaf . . . but eventually he shared his tricks . . . and now I’m here.” Silvio waved his right arm in a broad arc so as to embrace the full extent of his bounty. “I’m telling you all this so you’ll know where I’m coming from. Because I’m going to make you the same offer I made to Jackie Banks last week. You can treat this as a summer job, and I’ll pay you your nine dollars an hour, and at the end of August that will be that. Or you can apply yourself, and I’ll teach you the business. You’ll work much harder than you ever expected—longer hours, weekends if I need you—but you’ll leave here with a useful skill. A portable skill. Am I making any sense?”

I nodded. "Okay," I said.

I understood that agreeing to learn his business meant even less time with Jeff Katz, less time for sunbathing on Jones Beach or Saturday afternoon jaunts to Fire Island. But I sensed that Silvio *wanted* me to learn his business—and I felt a sudden urge to please him.

"I'll work late," I said decisively. "Weekends too."

"Good. Smart girl," said Silvio. "Let's shake on it."

He offered me his calloused hand and held his grip just a moment too long. His palm was still clasped around mine when Maia stepped out of the bathroom. My coworker had her auburn hair bundled beneath a Mickey Mouse towel. Water trickled down her neck, dampening her tank top. Her feet were bare, the toes lacquered pink. "Let's order from Domino's," she said. "Silvio's paying." And to my surprise, her stepbrother agreed to buy lunch.

He stuck around long enough to scoop up a slice of anchovy pizza, then left us alone to eat and gossip. "Whenever he has a thing for a new girl," Maia confided, "it means free food. He was the same way last summer." She tamped the excess oil off her pizza with a paper napkin. "I'm sorry I snapped at you before. You *can* fuck him if you want. It's a free country." She flicked open a can of Diet Coke and sipped slowly. The girl was waiting for my response, I sensed, assessing whether I was accomplice or adversary.

"Don't be gross," I said—trying to mean it. "He's, like, forty."

"Thirty-nine," said Maia. "When he's seventy-five, I'll be fifty-one."

"That's so disgusting."

I guess that I'd said the right thing, because Maia was much friendlier after that. She told me all about the guys who were into her: college athletes she met swimming at the NYU pool, where she gained admission by flirting with the Ecuadorian guards, and the bartender at a pub in Elmhurst called the High Noon Saloon.

She even wrote my phone number on her dungarees and invited me to come drinking with her sometime. “We can’t hang out *inside* the bar,” she explained. “But Howie lives on the second floor, so we can hang together upstairs in his apartment.” I didn’t realize it was nearing five o’clock until I heard voices approaching from behind the sago palms. Maia tossed her brush into the industrial sink. “Quitting time,” she announced. Seconds later, Aunt Jill emerged from the synthetic forest with Silvio at her side.

My aunt had changed her clothes. She was now wearing jean shorts over a tight one-piece bathing suit and aviator sunglasses. The tops of her breasts were visible—a raw contrast to the tanned skin of her neck—and I feared one might pop out completely.

“I hope she’s earning her keep,” said my aunt. “She’s a bright girl, but she can be lazy.”

I hated her for saying that. I had sudden thoughts of dipping her Xanax in rat poison.

“She’s doing just fine,” said Silvio. He winked at me. “She’s got potential.”

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I was surprised by how much I enjoyed my first week on the job. Silvio proved true to his promise of long hours: he kept me past eight one night, waxing pomegranates for the Mount of Olives, long after Maia had left for her evening swim. But I soon discovered that I was engaged in a high-stakes enterprise. Gethsemane was merely a preliminary order, the tip of a Biblical iceberg. Silvio anticipated that a satisfied client would lead to a multimillion dollar contract for a twenty-acre indoor replica of Eden. Yet none of this prevented him from taking the time to teach me the business, step-by-step, as he’d pledged, from showing me how to sculpt foam lemons and embroider the satin slipcovers for damask irises.

Meanwhile, Maia—once she had decided that I wasn't plotting to seduce her stepbrother—wanted us to be partners in subversion. She coached me about where on the merchandise to best conceal obscenities and symbols of the Antichrist. Together, we applied a Star of David pattern while suturing the poppy blossoms onto their stalks. In short, everybody was pleased with the state of affairs at the workshop except Aunt Jill, who found her future husband discouragingly aloof.

She tried buying a new skirt, revealing her shoulders and thighs. But on the second night that her crush detained me past sundown—Aunt Jill waiting outside in the Bonneville, listening to Oldies radio, stubbornly refusing to let Silvio take me home—she drove us across Queens in a lethal silence, and she burst out sobbing the moment we entered the apartment. “This is killing me, Laurie Jean,” she cried. “Just *killing* me.” My aunt opened the freezer and retrieved the reserve stash of fudge ice cream that she used to complement her antidepressants. “I called my therapist last night, and she told me to move on—like she always does—but that's so damn easy to say when you're married to a surgeon and wear a size three dress.”

You couldn't argue with that. In any case, I didn't want to. I wanted to escape to my room and immerse myself in the Field Guide to African Plants that Silvio had lent me.

“What is *wrong* with the man?” asked Aunt Jill. “You don't think he's gay, do you?”

That didn't stop you with the piano instructor, I thought. But I held my tongue.

“Of course he's not gay,” said my aunt. “He's just ambivalent. That's how most men are past a certain age. Hot and cold. Sometimes they need a good solid push.” She clenched both of her fists, as though bracing herself for battle. “If Silvio Sebastian Santino

thinks I'm going to wait around forever, he is *sadly* mistaken. I'm going to give him a good strong push and then he had better get his act together."

I looked around the apartment: the leftover chop-suey rotting in carryout cartons, the stacks of unopened mail strewn across the coffee table. I couldn't imagine that we had much to teach Silvio about getting his act together.

"I'm afraid I've done all that I can on my own," said Aunt Jill. "At least without seeming pushy. You're going to have to help me, Laurie Jean. Okay? If you put in a few kind words about your dear old aunt—drop hints about how other men are chasing after me—that might make Silvio think he was about to miss the boat on something good."

"I'll tell him that you're being courted by Vanderbilts and Rockefellers."

"You don't have to do *that*," she answered earnestly. "Just put in a kind word or two. I don't want the man thinking I'm out of *his* league."

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The next day was a Saturday, which meant Silvio and I had the workshop entirely to ourselves, and I resolved upon making an honest effort to advocate for Aunt Jill. I didn't have an opportunity in the morning, because the white nylon for the almond blossoms never arrived, and Silvio had to drive out to Staten Island to retrieve it, but after lunch he called me into his private workspace, a cedar-paneled office cooled by an oscillating fan, to teach me how to stitch convincing fig leaves. My boss acknowledged that the New Testament made no mention of fig trees in the Garden of Gethsemane—and that the climate of the Kidron Valley wasn't conducive to growing most species of *figus*—but he wanted the