

Behind the Smile

By Ann Ormsby

As Elizabeth watched her daughter, Celeste, stand in line to receive her high school diploma, she smiled to herself. Yes, she had been successful in raising her daughter. The girl was both beautiful and brilliant, but, more importantly, she was as cold as steel. After the ceremony Celeste came to find her parents in the crowd. Tall, with long dark hair and striking blue eyes, she stood out from the other girls who were crying and smiling happy, young, vapid smiles. Celeste's face was set. She had not shed a tear. She approached her parents, looking lovely, but detached. She fixed a polite smile on her face as she bent to embrace her mother and then put her cheek up to receive her father's tentative kiss.

"Shall we go?" she asked looking bored by the festivities.

"Yes, we're to meet grandmother and the boys at the hotel," said Elizabeth falling in stride with Celeste and leaving her husband, John, to bring up the rear. She noticed the look of confusion on his face. A look he always had when he was near his daughter. "Then we're going back to the house," she said.

"Such a fuss," replied the girl. "And, mother, they're not 'boys'. Rodney is 29 and a vice president at Goldman Sachs."

"Just a little fuss," said her mother. "And they will always be boys to me."

Driving to the hotel in John's new BMW with Celeste in the front seat next to him, Elizabeth Peacock thought back to the time when her daughter was born and those early events that would shape this formidable woman who was her daughter. She remembered the day, 18 years earlier, when she had moved her family into the large Tudor mansion where they still lived. They had planned the move for a school day so that Elizabeth would have only the baby to contend with as she instructed the moving men where each piece of fine wood furniture should be placed. She had drawn floor plans for each room, but couldn't quite hand them over to the men. That would be, somehow, relinquishing her authority and she wanted to watch them place each piece, warning them not to scratch her floors. John was still at their former home on the other side of town moving the few boxes that they had agreed were too precious to be moved by the men. There were the boxes of china, Elizabeth's bridal pattern, her mother's best china—which her mother had given her when her father died and holidays were moved to Elizabeth's house—and what was left of her grandmother's serving bowls, the Waterford crystal, Elizabeth's jewelry and the most important family portraits, the largest of which was the most recent photograph of the Peacocks that had been taken by the famed New York photographer, Clifton Savage. Elizabeth had plans to hang the portrait in her new foyer.

As the men went out to bring in her large dining room table she stood in the center of the foyer putting her hands on the small of her back and stretched backward to ease the pain. Celeste, who was nestled in the denim pouch that Elizabeth wore on her chest, was sound asleep, and although she only weighed ten pounds, she felt heavy and hot. Elizabeth cursed herself for not bringing the baby to her mother's house. Her back was aching, but she was afraid to leave the tiny child sleeping in one of the rooms. Until the men left, she couldn't emotionally take ownership of the house and she would worry that something would be dropped on the child or

that she would be kicked or bumped. As she waited for the men to get the table out of the truck, John pulled up in the driveway. Instead of feeling relief that he was there, his arrival made her even more nervous. He wouldn't take Celeste and now he would want to work with the men. She wished that she had insisted that he personally move more of their stuff. Tasks that would eat up more of his time and keep him away from the new house.

He entered the foyer and smiled. "Go sit," he said.

"I know how I want everything arranged," she countered.

"Give me the plans," he held out his hand for her floor plans. She hadn't shared her plans with him, but he knew she would have them.

Elizabeth turned and went into the enormous kitchen, rifled through her purse for the floor plans, found them in the side pocket and brought them to her husband just as the men started to enter the front door with the dining table on its side. She silently handed the papers to John, shook her head, and returned to the kitchen. The men had brought in the kitchen furniture first. Now that she could stay in one room, she took Celeste carefully out of the pouch and laid her in the infant seat on the round glass table. She stood there for a minute studying the tiny baby with her soft wisps of dark brown hair, her translucent skin, and her little pink mouth. She reached down and ran her finger over her daughter's doll-sized hand feeling the skin that was so soft it felt like it almost wasn't there. Soft as a whisper she thought to herself. She turned away and opened the first box beside her on the floor. It was marked "Kitchen Desk" in black marker. She folded back the flap of the box and took out a small box marked "pens and pencils", then she took out paper, ruler, protractor, phone, phone chargers, dictionary, markers, all the things that the boys would need to do their homework. At the bottom of the box, were frames wrapped in

packing paper. She reached down for the one on top and then thought better of it and pulled her hand back.

As the days passed, Elizabeth unpacked box after box, but after a week, with boxes still stacked in almost every room, she hired a woman to come in and watch Celeste while she unpacked. The woman, however, was energetic and couldn't—or wouldn't—sit and rock the baby and ended up unpacking the boxes while Elizabeth sat with Celeste in the rocking chair or helped the boys with their homework after school. As a result, Elizabeth did not know where anything was in her new home. Never impolite, she had a hard time telling Rosa, the woman, that she did not want her to unpack the boxes; she wanted her to rock the baby. How her mother would scowl if she knew that Elizabeth was too timid to tell the help what to do.

And now she was coming. Elizabeth's mother, "Queen Clementine", as John called her, had phoned to say that she wanted to come and see the new house. Elizabeth knew that this was not a friendly visit, it was an inspection. Clementine MacArthur had inherited the Ripley fortune from her father. The Ripley's were in the tobacco business, but they rarely mentioned this fact. If asked, they said that Ripley Inc. was a "conglomerate." People were usually adequately impressed with this response and did not pursue it further. Elizabeth, herself, had inherited a large trust fund on her 18th birthday, but she had not inherited her mother's confidence and regal demeanor. She had never had to struggle, as her mother, who was not born into money, had, and this was why her mother said that she was weak and timid, yet controlling. While John made a good living on Wall Street it was Elizabeth's trust fund that had enabled them to buy the new house.

Before Elizabeth could set a date with her mother, she had to hang all of the paintings, tapestries, and photographs throughout the house. The house would never pass muster with Clementine without the walls being properly dressed. The next morning, she insisted that Rosa take Celeste for a walk and she went upstairs to the children's rooms to begin. She moved from room to room eyeing the walls. She loved the fact that they were real plaster and not plasterboard like the last house. In the nursery, she ran her hand across the newly painted pink wall over Celeste's crib and felt the slightly gritty, uneven texture. She smiled and went to get the retractable measuring tape, hammer and hooks to get started. She had carefully propped each painting, poster, print or photograph against the wall it would hang on. She had a good eye for decoration and moved quickly through the rooms measuring, banging nails and hanging each piece. Rodney, her oldest, had insisted on having his room painted a brash and offensive ochre color. Elizabeth couldn't help but wrinkle her nose as if she smelled rotten eggs every time she walked into the room. As she hung the photograph of Rodney and Alex all dirty in their soccer clothes she remembered how they had fought that morning the picture was taken, after breakfast, over a video game, and how she had had to break them apart when Rodney, three years older and 15 pounds heavier, held Alex in a headlock until he cried. She could still see the hesitance in Alex's face as she had ordered them to smile.

Finally, she made her way down to the foyer and held up the family portrait. They were a good-looking family she thought to herself as her eye fixed on each of her sons with their glossy dark hair and bright blue eyes. Alex, the middle son, was a shade darker than Rodney and Collin, but everyone knew they were brothers immediately. They all had the MacArthur chin, wide and square. Celeste, just two weeks old in the photograph, was sleeping angelically in Elizabeth's arms wearing a lacy pink gown that fell over Elizabeth's white skirt. She purposely

didn't look at John in the photo, although she felt his presence. She looked at her own smile and the bright enthusiasm in her eyes, and thought, what an actress I am.

It had been around 3 a.m. the morning before the photograph was taken when the baby had started to cry. Just little calls to her in the dark, not a scream or a howl. She went to pick her up and carried her down to the kitchen where she heated a bottle of Similac in the microwave. The baby's eyes were impatient and she chortled to her mother to hurry up. Elizabeth got comfortable in the glider and watched Celeste eagerly suck at the bottle. At first Elizabeth closed her eyes, but she couldn't rest. She looked around the room at the boxes and the confusion from the packing and there on one of them was John's cell phone. She could see in the darkness the red light like a beacon glowing on and off. The red glow in the grey light of the room called to her. On impulse, she got up and went to get the phone. Celeste opened her eyes looking annoyed at the movement. Elizabeth grabbed the phone and went back to the chair quickly and comforted the baby who started to fall asleep. The front of the phone said "two missed calls." She hit the button and called voice mail. The phone commanded her to enter the password. John, who lacked imagination, would probably use the password for their bank account, she thought. She tried the four-digit password and the first message began.

The voice was rich and sweet and made Elizabeth think of honey with a little rasp. The voice wanted to know if they "were still on?" The voice didn't seem to care if they were or not. The voice was young and sexual and risky. The first message ended and the second message began. The same voice was saying it was in the hotel room. "Where was he?" The voice was needy, breathless, filled with desire. Elizabeth sat holding Celeste as the full moon rose high into the dark sky. She could see it shimmering outside through the tall palladium window; somehow she felt that it was mocking her. It made her feel small. Expendable.

She sat perfectly still. She was actually paralyzed with the knowledge that her suspicions were founded. Although she felt a brief moment of validation, her overwhelming sensation was numbness. So, John was having an affair. She repeated this to herself until she understood the words. She looked down at Celeste as if the child was somehow not her own. At that moment she was John's child. Part of him. The anger started deep in her belly and grew, moving upwards like fire until her face was red and her hands shook. She wanted to put the baby down. She had a desire to throw the child down on the floor. Mechanically, she got up and carried the sleeping child upstairs and put her back in the crib.

Once she was safely out in the hallway she leaned against the wall for support and took a deep breath. She was not prone to tantrums, so she quickly eliminated charging into the master bedroom where John was sleeping and pummeling him with her fists. Besides, she didn't want to wake the boys or the baby. Fuck him, she thought, as images of him in a hotel room passionately kissing the woman with the sultry voice danced in her head. She thought of telling the boys. Shaming him in their eyes. Making them hate him. No, she couldn't stand the thought of hurting them. She sunk to the floor. Sliding down the wall, she felt the silence of the house around her. How to hurt him? That was the question. She would leave him. After the move, she would leave him. Actually, it was her house, she would kick him out. Then, visions of her mother's face started to form in her angry, clouded mind. Clementine's condescending stare, her rigid posture as she would stand at the front door, a small, quilted Gucci bag hanging from one withered wrist, and she would look at Elizabeth's failure.

Elizabeth's failure to hold onto John would fill the space between them. The baby in Elizabeth's arms would mock her. The baby that John said he wanted and Elizabeth had rushed to create for him. No, she would never allow Clementine to have that moment. Her mother had

hinted that she was lonely. That maybe she would move into Elizabeth's new house. After all, they would have room and she could be helpful with the baby. Elizabeth had used John as an excuse. John wouldn't like it she had told her mother. Clementine had reminded Elizabeth that it was MacArthur money that had bought the house. Elizabeth had countered that it wouldn't be good for her family. If she threw John out, she would have no excuse to keep Clementine from moving in. No, she would have to find other ways to destroy John.

The next morning, with the woman's sultry voice playing over and over again in her head, Savage was coming to take the portrait. Elizabeth purposely hadn't pulled apart the living room in her packing so that the portrait could be taken with them sitting on the white satin divan. The younger boys would sit on the tapestry covered footstools that she had bought in a secondhand store in Paris. She had laid out light blue shirts for the boys to wear with khaki pants and rich brown leather belts in each of their rooms. John would wear a jacket. She was in white and the baby in pink. Savage was happy with the palette. The photo session took an hour, and by the end, the boys were sullen and refused to smile.

After Savage packed his lights and cameras and his assistants whisked all the equipment away into his car, John asked "Have you seen my cell?"

"In the kitchen," she responded. She watched him from the hallway as he looked at the phone. She had saved the messages. Two saved messages the phone said. John never saved his messages. She watched him stare at the phone, thinking it over. He put the phone in his pocket. She took a few steps toward him holding the baby in her arms. He turned and their eyes met.

After a moment, he said, "I'm going to change and then pack the tools in the garage."

"Yes, you should do that," she said.

They both turned in opposite directions and went to do their chores. Elizabeth wondered if this was how it would be from now on. She carried the baby up the stairs and down the hall to the nursery. She put her down on the changing table and studied her face. She had John's eyes. Dark blue with specks of darker blue. She felt her heart harden as she stared at the child. John had wanted a girl. Daddy's little girl. But, now that she was here, John paid her little attention. Elizabeth felt tricked. She felt that she had held up her part of the bargain and that John had, on a whim, wanted a baby. Then, he had wanted a mistress. Enjoying freedoms that Elizabeth couldn't imagine. She was overcome with an anger so deep and so powerful that she felt dizzy. Her hands shook and she had to steady herself by holding onto the changing table. The unfairness of the situation overwhelmed her. Free to do as he pleased after he had saddled her with a new life to be responsible for. Years of constant care, worrying, devotion.

A plan of action started to formulate itself in her brain. Passive aggressive, that's how Clementine had described her once. She would never allow Celeste to be daddy's little girl. Celeste would never trust or respect her father and she wouldn't even know why. Elizabeth would wrap her in a thick protective shield of invincibility. She would not allow her to be vulnerable. Ever. She would be hard and distant. She would have power over men. Elizabeth would teach her from the earliest age and the first man she would shun would be her father.

Elizabeth was jolted out of her reverie when the car pulled up in front of the Manor Arms Hotel. She came back to the present and heard Celeste's voice. "Mother. Is everything all right? Where are we meeting them? Do I have time to go up to grandmother's room and freshen up?" Celeste's tone was impatient.

Elizabeth looked at the girl. Confident, authoritative, formidable. No passive with her aggression. Elizabeth smiled. "Yes dear, everything is all right."

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