

Uncle Meats

*Shit, an accident. Of all places, why here?*

Morning rush hour traffic slowed to a crawl, and my anxiety rocketed. A poor section of suburban Philadelphia displayed a rundown corner bar, pawn shop, and vintage mom-and-pop grocery store to the disgust of angry commuters. Nicknamed West Conshy because *Conshohocken* was a mouthful, it glared at me through my driver-side window as my car came to a halt. This was precisely where my life took a detour almost two decades ago.

Now, as I sat helplessly in traffic, the hazy details of my past re-crystallized around me. On my right was the old cemetery and, on my left, bittersweet memories. I'd become skilled at dodging old regrets, but now there was no escape. I swallowed hard and adjusted my rear-view mirror to the left, only to find that the dilapidated eyesore of conjoined wooden shacks had finally been erased. In their place stood an overgrown lot. From the looks of those weeds, it had been vacant for years. I wondered where everyone had gone and why the plot was still undeveloped.

Ahead, cars lined up as far as I could see. A distant sound of sirens wailed from behind, announcing that no one was going anywhere for a while.

My thoughts jumped back to the summer of '66 when I skidded to a stop at this same spot, captivated by a sexy teen washing a car on a gravel driveway. Long, shapely legs stretched from calf-length laced sandals to her undersized black bikini bottom. My gaze rose past her small but well-formed breasts to her tanned face with an impish turned-up nose. The eye makeup was too heavy, and her mound of raven-black teased hair was a bit much—even for that decade.

It didn't matter that she was washing a beat-up old Nash sedan. She glanced at my ride, a sweet '57 white Fairlane convertible, and gave me a shy nod. I slowly parked behind her, carefully avoiding an open ditch of jagged concrete scraps and crushed beer cans.

I got out of my car and carefully negotiated the trash-strewn, rutted gravel lane connecting her driveway to the main road. *Should I just move on?* At seventeen, my testosterone overruled my underdeveloped common sense, and my heart pumped pure hormones. "Hi. I think I'm lost." Never mind that I was on a truancy drive to nowhere because my urge for summer fun rose with the thermometer.

She bent over to drop her soapy sponge in a bucket. I swear her legs grew two feet longer as she smiled at me over her shoulder. "Where you from?" Her voice was deep for a young girl—just a tad. I found it attractive.

I peeled my eyes from her shapely bottom to avoid getting caught. "Upper Darby. I must have taken a wrong turn at Radnor Road or something." A wave of heat rose up my neck and over my face, afraid my inexperience was showing. "Can you spare a glass of water?"

"Sure. This sun's brutal, and I'm ready for a break. Follow me."

As if in a trance, I climbed the four rickety wooden steps to a patched-up, badly weathered front porch. It was separated from its attached twin by a railing that needed much more than just paint.

Rather than follow her in, I played it cool and waited for her in a low-slung beach chair. From the porch next door, a ghastly snore jarred me.

It was more of a snort. I stood to have a better look. Sunken into the cushions of a ripped-up easy chair was an unconscious skeleton of an unshaven geezer, baseball cap pulled over his eyes.

As my hostess opened the door, I turned to give her a hand, hoping the old fart stayed asleep. She nodded toward the snorter. "That's just Uncle Meats. Don't mind him."

I tore my gaze from her dark eyes, stared at my stained plastic mug, and forced a sip of the warm, cloudy water. "Meats? Unusual name. Mine's Aaron."

"His real name is Demetrius. As a kid, I shortened it. And thank God, we're not really related."

Two small dirt-smudged faces looked at us through a torn front window screen. The little guy whined, "We're hungry, Nadia. Who's the boy?" The little girl, a toddler standing on who knew what, just giggled.

I winked at the little waifs.

*Wow. This chick looks way too young to have kids.*

She waved me inside, and they met us at the door. She knelt down and tickled the girl. "This is Olga, my baby sister, and that cutie is my little brother Timmy."

I exhaled a breath of relief. "Hey. I'm Aaron."

Olga rushed over and hugged my leg. Timmy looked to be around five and was a little more cautious but seemed glad I was there. So, now I was almost family. Nadia invited me into the kitchen for a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches. The doorless pantry was practically empty. I had a strange urge to run out and buy groceries.

The kids wolfed down their food, and Nadia sent them to play in the living room. They peeked around the corner every few minutes to see what kind of face I'd make next. These kid's spirits were impervious to their drab environment. I was inspired.

Nadia was unlike any girl I'd ever met. We sat drinking coffee and talking for the next three hours. I cringed when she told me she quit school at thirteen when Timmy was born. "My mom had no one to watch him while she worked at the wire factory. Then came Olga." A shadow of disgust passed over her face as she lowered her head. "With all the lowlifes she drank with after work, even *she* doesn't know who the fathers are."

She thrust her thumb at the wall separating the attached shack, and hatred flashed across her face like lightning. "That drunk over there watched me when I was growing up. He was usually out cold by lunchtime."

When my coffee passed through me, Nadia directed me to the outhouse. I later discovered the upstairs hallway *honeypot*—a dented steel bucket for midnight relief. My God, I was out of my

element. My neighborhood was blue-collar, but I lived in a real house with two parents and a real bathroom. I'd been taking so much for granted.

I glanced at my watch. "Wow, better get home. I was supposed to be in school today."

Nadia stood, leaned into me, and shocked me with the longest, tongueiest kiss I'd ever had. I wanted to go further, but she kept sliding my hands back to her hips. I tried a few more times before giving up. It was getting late, but I left, vowing to get to know her better.

A polite horn tap yanked me back to the present. During my visit to adolescence, traffic had only inched forward a few yards.

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I glanced across the road at the cemetery and pictured my younger self playing hide and seek with Timmy and Olga in the rows of headstones while Nadia sat in the shade of a giant oak, writing her poetry. Although school wasn't in the cards for her, she was an avid reader and had already filled two thick notebooks.

Poetry was not my thing. I read her verses with feigned interest but was touched by their rage and sorrow. I crouched behind her and read over her shoulder. "You know, you should enter some of your stuff in a contest. I could see you becoming famous."

With no clothes budget and a need to distinguish herself, she learned to sew and created her own style. I called them hippy gowns, ankle-length and cut low enough in the front to show some cleavage. She made three or four at a time. The cheap, flimsy material didn't last long. When she stood between me and the sun, the silhouette of those legs teased more than my imagination. I believed those dresses, exaggerated hair, and overdone makeup were part of her private rebellion against convention.

After three weeks of heavy living room petting and an even heavier set of blueballs, I had one of my life's best and worst nights. Just when I thought my fly would burst, Nadia invited me up to her room and made me turn my back. When I could look, she stood before her bedstand lamp wearing a transparent black nighty that said she was ready to take things to the next level and beyond. Lordy, this girl knew how to do things I'd never imagined, and I had quite the imagination. Not much hands-on experience, but a lot of Penthouse Forum and street corner theory. I wished I'd saved my virginity for Nadia instead of my awkward first encounters.

Then came the horror. In our afterglow, we fell asleep on her bed. Hours later, the hall light came on, and I had my first glimpse of Nadia's mom. Through slightly parted privacy curtains, I could see into the hallway. The shape of a sturdy longshoreman, dressed in workman's clothes lumbered unsteadily towards our room. Holding up the wall as she stumbled, she cursed like a ... longshoreman.

It was more of a drunken mumble. "Motherfucker has nothin' on me. Rip his nuts off if he goes near my kids. He knows it." I closed my eyes and rolled away when she dropped her pants and hung her butt over the honeypot. I tried not to breathe and wrapped my pillow around my ears.

Nadia pretended she was asleep. I could only imagine how embarrassed she was. We waited until the old lady was snoring, then snuck by her slumping form, ass still wedged in the bucket. I was glad that until now, I'd avoided Mom's pre-dawn arrivals and vowed to avoid future encounters.

I departed with one long good-night kiss and a head full of mixed images of a hillbilly scene straight from the Ozarks. I didn't belong here, but there was a sense of worth and goodness about Nadia that kept me coming back. Well, that and the sex.

That summer, I worked part-time pumping gas and saw her every chance I could. It was a miracle she didn't get pregnant. I was on the every-other-time condom plan and thought Interruptus was a psychedelic rock group.

Once or twice a week, I'd catch old Uncle Meats shooting me the stink eye from under his baseball cap. We never spoke.

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One stormy night, at three in the morning, I sprinted through the downpour to my car for the drive home. As I started the car, Meats came out of nowhere, banging on my window, screaming, "You sonnamabitch! Keep your hands off her!"

Scared the shit out of me. He yanked my door open, and as he reached in to grab me, I spun in my seat and kicked the door panel with both feet to push him away.

Lightning struck above us, and in its flash, his limbs flailed as he stumbled and fell. I jumped out, braced for a fight, but he was gone. A second bolt struck nearby with a loud crack, and the sky again lit. Meats was lying at the bottom of the ditch. As he came into focus, I grew nauseous. His head had hit a broken cinder block and was tilted at a strange angle. He neither moved nor made a sound. I looked around in panic. Not another soul in sight.

I ran back to Nadia's room and woke her. She pulled on her jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and we ran out to the ditch. The shock was worse this time. A pool of blood oozed over the mud around his head. It was hard to tell how much blood was mixed with the stormwater. My head spun, and it was hard to breathe. I whispered, "He's either out cold or dead."

Nadia flashed an evil smile and said, "If he's not dead now, he *will* be in the morning. Come on inside for coffee. We need to talk."

I followed her into the kitchen, in no shape to drive. We sipped tepid instant coffee while she stared at a corner of the ceiling as if searching for a script. Then came her tears. Hysterics at first, calming to a whimper over the next few minutes. Still in shock, I could only hold her tight and rock her.

I took a few slow breaths and handed her a paper towel. Those tears were not for the old man.

She dabbed her eyes. They narrowed and met mine. "Meats was a monster. My mother was desperate for someone to watch me, and he was always home—on some kind of disability." I gulped and braced for the details.

She lowered her head and continued. "It began when I was seven. Not rape at first, but he'd make me do things to him. He even tried to make it a game." Her eyes drifted to that corner again. "By the time I was ten, we did everything. He threatened to kill me if I told, but my mother already knew. She'd look away whenever she dropped me off next door."

Nadia sprung from her chair and kicked the galvanized makeshift bathtub. "That last year of school was even worse. I was out of my mind listening to those little bitches compare their designer sweaters without a care in the world. I'd go home from a day of teasing, feeling like trash, only to be treated even worse."

Her mouth quivered, and she began shaking. All I could do was hug her and kiss her forehead. Finally, she pulled away and continued. "That bastard was drinking more and passed out every day. I had enough. I woke him with a knife to his throat. I wanted so badly to slash but couldn't bring myself to do it. I told him he'd have to sleep with one eye open if he touched me again. Guess what—that was the end of it. Soon, *I* became Timmy's babysitter. Since then, Meats has never looked me in the eye, but I know he's been watching us."

I assured Nadia that to the rest of the world, a decrepit alcoholic fell into a muddy ditch and died while the neighborhood slept. That's what the police concluded after interviewing her the next day.

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Back in the traffic jam, people were out of their cars for fresh air and to bitch to each other, but I returned to the past.

Near summer's end, after one of our trysts, I finally found the nerve to propose. "Your Mom is getting worse; one way or another, she'll soon be gone. You and the kids need a fighting chance, and I could get a decent job after graduation. Maybe get a loan from my parents to move into a nice apartment." The logic was right, but the words lacked romance. Still, I felt like a hero until...

The color drained from her face, and she put her head in her hands for what seemed like an eternity. When she finally looked up, her face was streaked with eye makeup. I had no idea she'd react that way.

She stood and paced back and forth, prodding a rip in the rug with her foot. "I need to tell you something."

Ready to accept whatever dark secret was about to be unleashed, my mind raced. *The kids are really hers? Meats was the father?*

She stopped pacing and led downstairs to the living room couch. "Remember how we met?"

I smiled. "You were washing that beast of a Rambler... in a killer bikini."

"Well, my car washing trick often attracted passing visitors." My stomach knotted as she looked down and continued. "Last summer, it snagged this older guy who lived on the other side of the cemetery. He said he was getting divorced and treated me really well. Bought me expensive gifts and dinners and loved to play with the kids. But after a few weeks, he disappeared."

*So, I was just one of your suckers! He had a lot more to lose than me.*

"Two weeks ago, while you were working, that guy stopped by. He really did get divorced. We talked all day and..."

My heart sank as I pictured her lying on her back, looking up into a blank face. "I can guess."

She closed her eyes and sighed. "He's offered to move me and the kids to his huge house. I told him I'd think about it, but it's a great opportunity."

A small part of me was happy for her. The rest was on fire. I willed my face expressionless. This was no time to cry. "When?"

"Next week. He wants to hire a Nanny so I can get my equivalence diploma. Then, go on to college!"

I saw the excitement flash across her face and wished I had a sensible counteroffer.

I attempted a smile, but my mouth wouldn't go there. I pulled her tight and dropped my head over her shoulder. "That's a way better plan than mine."

She pulled away and touched my tears. "You'll be a great family man someday, I know it. But not if I take you down with me now."

Later, back in my own bedroom, I spent the night tossing in agony. By sunrise, I realized she was right.

The End