

Queen for a Day

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White Heat is the title of a Warner Brothers gangster movie starring James Cagney and was a favorite of Malory and her two friends, Claire and Peg. Claire was the beauty, blonde and fragile, while Peg was the slightly overweight one with the sardonic sense of humor. Malory was the leader, trim and athletic, not so much pretty as strikingly handsome, not so much beautifully dressed as impeccably groomed and tailored. She had the looks and confidence, the graceful fearless radiance of the born athlete; her features were sharp as if hammered from sparkling metal. Everyone looked to her, it had always been that easy.

She was a graduate student at the Boston Institute of Contemporary Film, and she had made several short films of herself and her friends engaging in illegal activities. Malory cultivated the role of auteur film maker as master criminal; to her, the true artist was anti-social by nature. In one fifteen minute short they went on a shoplifting spree disguised as the Kardashians, sequined party-girl tops and padded rumps. In another, they set up a 900 number and turned the second bedroom of Malory's Fenway apartment into a parlor in which third-world women without green cards performed iPhone-sex via Skype. Indeed, that scheme was still blossoming, the cameras still running on their three top operators, a pair of coffee-colored twins from the Dominican Republic and a plump, truculent Haitian with a nasty C-section scar who did sexy and incongruous things in the linguistic no-mans-land between French Creole, Spanish, and English.

Malory had first seen *White Heat* when she was eight, sitting with her father in the parlor on a Sunday afternoon, and it had made an impression. In the film, James Cagney plays Cody Jarrett, a psychopathic gangster with a mother fixation. Everything he does, every move he makes, is based on what his mother (presumably an even smarter gangster) would have done. "Top of the world, Ma!" he proclaims at the end of the film, just as he is about to go up in flames atop an exploding gas

tank in a chemical plant his gang has attempted to rob. Malory loved the irony of this ending, a single moment of ultimate success and ultimate failure, because of which she also went around saying what Ma had done and what Ma would do, Ma's golden period in New Orleans and the brilliance of her colorful exploits to inform every word and action. This was in part Malory being ironic with herself, because her mother when Malory was growing up had been a stay-at-home mom who'd become "a garden variety afternoon sofa drunk," as Malory's father had expressed it on more than one occasion. Her father was the Frederik T. Kloss Distinguished Professor of English at Damascus, a small liberal arts college on the Fenway; he was a medievalist who specialized in the writings of Sir Thomas Malory, who'd written down the King Arthur stories in the fifteenth century in a book called *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Malory did often imagine herself as a brave and plucky knight, a real grail-quester who cut her way through the world in a brilliant suit of armor, sword and lance at the ready.

She imagined herself in exactly this way as she came up the flagstone walk of her mother's Dutch Colonial in Arlington. It was Sunday afternoon, Malory's usual visit at the usual time. She entered the vestibule lined on both sides with her mother's mixed-up shoes, mainly running shoes, which was funny because her mother never even walked anywhere. She had her groceries delivered by Peapod and her liquor by the Arlington Cask and Flagon while her '89 Saab convertible sat rusting in the driveway. In the shade-drawn living room Malory found her mother half sitting, half lying on the red velveteen sofa, over one side of which she had draped a soiled petal-green Sateen bedsheet. She picked up a stack of paper money from the coffee table, then explained that for a minute she thought Malory was the Peapod man. Her features were soft, fuzzy—out of focus as some of the undated snapshots she kept in a decouped box in her bedroom closet. It wasn't even one o'clock in the afternoon. Malory could understand

how her father had finally lost patience with this woman. The drunkenness alone would do it, but on top of that he'd come home one afternoon to find his wife on this very sofa with one of his Teaching Assistants.

"Damascus," Joan said, sitting up, blinking and hiccupping. "Da mask is us."

Later that week her father told her the story; despite the vulgarity of the situation, he was impressed by Joan's drunken but witty pun. This was in his office at Damascus, 80s IKEA computer desk and water-damaged Edward Hopper poster left behind by the previous occupant. He'd called Malory in and shut the door and told her that her mother was "a garden variety afternoon sofa drunk," and because of that was rapidly becoming a "slattern," that he'd had enough, and that he was moving into a studio apartment on the Fenway, down the street from his office, until he could get things sorted out. Malory remembered feeling like she was one of his students. It was like he was conferencing her, telling her what she needed to do if she wanted to bring the grade up on the next paper. Then, at the very end, he mentioned that he would need some help moving his things. Could she possibly round up a few of her friends? He was only putting a few items in the studio, and nothing very heavy. He said all this in a way that was very detached. He could have been giving directions to a tourist looking for the Public Garden. She rounded up a couple of mooks from the Student Union and kept her real friends to herself.

Which was nothing new. Between Malory and her parents had always been so much distance. When she was younger she considered that maybe it was because she'd been adopted (and they were so much older than the other kids' parents), but then she finally understood that there was no connection between either one of them, independently of whether she might or might not be their daughter. When she was seven her father had had a serious talk with her, explaining that she had been adopted but that he and her mother loved Malory just as much as they would if she'd been their "biological daughter." That was the phrase he'd used to explain things to a seven-year-old girl.

Malory had memories of the time before she'd been adopted and also of the time right around the adoption itself. She never knew if they were true

memories, though, because she had such an active imagination, and because her parents refused to talk about it. She'd always had a sense of missing information, some important part of her life hidden but present, the real story behind the obvious one.

In one memory she was a very small girl who lived with a couple of street musicians in New Orleans. She didn't know for sure if the city was New Orleans, but she remembered hot weather, slow days, courtyards bursting with strong-scented flowers the size of cabbages.

In another memory, even more vivid, she pictured an orphanage: starched white sheets; quiet, waxed hallways; institutional-green walls. A long row of iron-frame beds in a chilly, sunlit room. Also a man and a woman in antique clothing, outsized hats and a small fur piece with the animal's head still attached, a long plane ride, Malory between them descending from the plane onto the tarmac. Snow on the ground, the first time she'd ever seen snow.

All this added up to a somewhat coherent narrative, but her parents told her that they didn't know anything about her birth parents, and that she'd been adopted in a time when airline passengers no longer stepped from the plane onto the tarmac. Where had she ever learned such a word, her father wanted to know. That part of it fascinated him, that at a young age she knew the word "tarmac."

Years later he explained to her that those images were the start of her "becoming a person in the modern world. Human beings in contemporary western society, my good daughter—what do we have but bits and pieces of this and that held together with duct tape and Krazy Glue? King Arthur stories set to music by Lerner and Loewe followed by a Jimmy Cagney movie followed by a blurry black and white photo of a couple with small child descending from a prop plane onto the tarmac. Then somebody reruns the Zapruder film and the entire room starts dancing the tango. What can you claim as your experience but what they show on TV between commercials? Then if you want more, add the commercials. From this you construct your meaning, you construct your life. But for human beings, my good daughter, this state of affairs has not always been so. The world of Dante and the world of Chaucer were cohesive, a flowering of culture to celebrate the wholeness of

culture, the wholeness of the human world. The Christian epic the first course of bricks in the foundation, the great tapestry the only suitable thing with which to decorate the walls of the house. A correspondence between society and individual, a vision with one eye on this world and one eye on the next which we see so perfectly realized in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Now in modern life also a correspondence—unfortunately. Your world is the world of the ‘tarmac.’ Maybe you experienced it, maybe you dreamed it or watched it on TV. And anyway, what’s the difference? It’s what you have to show for your own experience. The blurry photo of the orphan descending the plane onto the tarmac, my good daughter, is the central figure for our time.”

Later Malory found out that people still do descend from small planes directly onto the tarmac. Her father hadn’t known what he was talking about. Or the old gasbag was spewing more of his endless supply of scholarly bullshit.

Pronouncing silently the word “tarmac,” Malory looked once more at her mother on the red velveteen sofa.

“Have a beer,” her mother offered, cheerfully waving the stack of money and then replacing it on the coffee table, a wrinkled Benjamin on top. She squared the stack up at the diagonal corners with thumbs and forefingers, slowly and deliberately, forceps-like, as if money were among the few things one needed to be precise about. “Oh, go on and have a beer, you’re *old* enough,” she said, too loud, trying to be festive but only seeming desperate.

As soon as Malory brought the beer from the refrigerator her mother went to the sideboard and poured four fingers of Highlander scotch into a smeary water glass. Joan sat down, tipped the rim of the glass in Malory’s direction, and drank back half the scotch before setting the glass on the coffee table. She lit a cigarette with a gold Dupont lighter, then placed it next to her drink, which was next to the money.

She exhaled and looked directly—was she summoning the courage to look at her own daughter?—at Malory.

Her side of the conversation was usually a retelling of TV programs she’d recently viewed. Since she had family money independent of Malory’s father’s

income, and since the house in Arlington had been paid off for about a hundred years, she was free to spend most of her time on the sofa, drinking scotch and watching television. Just last week Joan had watched a four-hour special on Marlon Brando and explained to Malory in all seriousness that that’s what Brando’s mother had done throughout his childhood—well, not watching television, since it hadn’t yet been invented, but lying on the sofa happily drinking away the afternoon—and look how well he’d turned out. Every so often she needed to remind Malory that she was her mother, she loved her, but for some people the world was just a little too much. Malory was lucky she wasn’t like that, so strong and brave, she’d practically raised herself, and what a fine job she’d done!

Malory knew that Joan merely wanted to be told that everything was all right, that Malory was living a happy and successful life, so that Joan could lie on the sofa watching TV and drinking scotch without having to feel guilty about it. Malory told her mother that she was fine, everything was fine. “It’s your choice, I know,” Malory often said. “It’s how you want to spend your time. I know. It’s all right, really. I’m getting along just fine. Don’t give it a second thought.”

Today Joan was excited because she’d just watched a two-hour special about the Golden Age of Television, and there had been a segment on “Queen for a Day,” a program that had been very popular when Joan was a girl. “In fact,” Joan said, lighting a cigarette and dropping the lit match into the ashtray, “my own mother appeared on that show. I guess I never told you about that. When my father left us she went out to see her sister for a while, out in California—before she came east again and married old Klezmer, by whose good grace my life at the present time is in any sense bearable—and one afternoon she ended up going on that show. Not only that, but she won! My mother, your grandmother, was queen for a day!” As Malory’s mother spoke, her lips, which were always covered with too much lipstick, moved sluggishly to pronounce the words, giving the effect, as Malory imagined it, of a lipstick-smeared talking clam.

“Here,” she offered, “take a look at this. I printed it off the Internet after I saw the show about all those old TV programs.”

Malory read through the page her mother had

printed off the Internet, some information about the show along with a handful of black and white photographs. In one, a middle-aged woman who looked like Queen Elizabeth II sat on a throne with a large bouquet of roses on her lap, on either side a prissy female attendant in what appeared to be a futuristic-looking beautician's smock, while a man who looked like an insurance salesman placed a large, fake-looking crown on her head.

QUEEN FOR A DAY

One of daytime television's most popular tear-jerkers. Four women were chosen each day from the studio audience. They appeared on stage one at a time, and each woman told about the great tragedies and misfortunes in her life. At the end of each program, studio audience applause determined the day's winner, who was proclaimed "Queen for a Day" and showered with gifts.

Broadcast from the Moulin Rouge, a theater-restaurant on Sunset Boulevard near Vine Street in Hollywood, the show also featured a daily fashion show with commentary by Jeanne Cagney, sister of actor James Cagney.

The program originally began on radio in 1945, where it continued until 1957. It was first seen on television in the Los Angeles area in 1952. In 1969 a new version of the show with host Dick Curtis lasted one season.

"Can you believe it?" Joan asked Malory. "My own mother. She kept all that stuff they showered her with, the crown and scepter, and that spotted fur cape. Then when she died, I got it. Have I not ever shown it to you? Can that be possible?"

"It seems a little degrading, if you ask me," replied Malory, ignoring her mother's question. "Sort of like those shows now where people go on television and reveal the most painful, sordid things about themselves. They completely humiliate themselves, then everyone claps and cheers. Why would someone do that? I have friends who watch those shows in the afternoon, and if I'm in the room I make them turn it off."

"Oh, you have it all wrong, dear. But you're so independent-minded, just like your father." Her mother sat up, almost straight, as if she might actually be

interested in discussing something intelligently for once in her life. "That program was to help people, dear. All those programs are about helping other people. Wait, let me show you. I have it, I still have it. I can't believe I never showed it to you until now. Let me go upstairs and get it. Just you wait right here!"

Joan stood suddenly, wobbled a bit, then started off, in outwardly expanding wobbles, up the carpeted steps.

"It still seems degrading," Malory said, whether anyone was listening or not.

From the second floor Malory could hear doors opening and closing, also what sounded like the rasp and clatter of dresser drawers. Malory stood to get another beer. She walked into the kitchen, walked around as if for the first time, as if this weren't the same kitchen where she'd spent so many hours as a child, where she and her parents ate their dinner on weeknights at the same marbled-green Formica kitchen table that was still in its place next to a picture window that looked out on an overgrown English garden. Before Joan's drinking had gotten the upper hand she'd been a very good gardener, the only thing that had interested her besides cigarettes, TV, and scotch.

Malory took a beer from the fridge as she continued to inspect the kitchen where she'd sat with her coloring books on the black and white linoleum floor while her mother baked or clipped coupons. Joan had tried to be a good housewife, Malory had to admit, but then one fine day instead of a good housewife she was a garden variety afternoon sofa drunk. As Malory sipped the beer (Malory didn't like beer, but she was drinking it anyway), she heard her mother's clumsy steps in the living room. Malory didn't really want to go back in there and look at all that old depressing crap from fifty years ago. In that moment Malory wanted to disappear from her mother's kitchen and never return, or to return in some completely different, unrecognizable form, like a visitor from a more enlightened period in the future. The concept of family imposed such terrible obligations and restrictions that were, in themselves, inimical to art, which always presupposed the creation of an authentic self that would then create it. How could anyone create an authentic self while buried under a pile of shit?

"I'm really so through with this," Malory said

out loud, and as she said it her mother entered the kitchen dressed in the Queen for a Day costume. She wore a long red cape with a white spotted collar, a lopsided tiara, and in the same hand that held a freshly lit cigarette between index and middle finger she clutched a tarnished silver scepter. In the other hand she carried a tangle of dried roses, the buds purplish and drooping on their reedy stems.

Malory gasped at the sight even as her mother seemed to be humming (really more like muttering) an unintelligible version of “Pomp and Circumstance.”

“Make every woman queen, for every single day!” Joan pronounced at the conclusion of the song. She stood still, in the center of the shabby kitchen, as if surveying her subjects, her court, her holdings far and wide, waving the scepter and laughing pathetically. “I wish life could be like this. I wish I could dress up like this every day, and someone hand me a big fat cashier’s check, and make a big fuss over me, and make me feel important, and play queenly music, and present me with a dozen red roses!”

Malory drew close to her mother, as if to whisper something in her ear, and pushed her forward with one hand while she took the scepter with the other and tripped her with one well-placed foot.

Joan went down hard, although Malory was not able to decide if it had been harder than she’d intended. She looked toward the floor and saw a trickle of bright blood. The source was Joan’s nose. Joan was breathing in a shallow, uneven way and saying what sounded like “What? Wha’? What?” Then, without warning, she seemed to pass out.

Malory knelt on one knee beside her mother while she brought the scepter down on the top of her head. It was a cheap plastic scepter, and it broke in two without doing much damage to her mother’s skull or the imitation crown. The action was symbolically effective, or effectively symbolic. The roses lay scattered and broken on the black and white linoleum in a way she found aesthetically appealing.

Malory took another beer from the fridge and sat down on the floor next to her bleeding, half-unconscious mother, the beer in one hand and a pair of dried roses in the other. She thought again of New Orleans, of the

courtyard bursting with Bougainvillea where as a small child she’d spent so many balmy afternoons, her fingers tracing patterns on the filigreed ironwork and the painted golden roses that decorated the feet of the courtyard Madonna. Her parents had been thieves and drug addicts, beautiful sexy street musicians who lived in a squalid basement apartment in the French Quarter. Her father played the banjo and harmonica, her mother the washboard and spoons. Sometimes they took her to performances, where they taught her to dance the two-step; sometimes they locked her in the bedroom closet. When they opened the closet they acted as if they’d come back to rescue her, that the “Green Knight” had trapped her in the closet and they had returned to save her. They loved her, her mother always explained, and would always come back for her. When they opened the closet door they always smiled their gluey, drug-crazed smiles, her mother taking Malory’s face in her hands and kissed her, explaining how they once again had driven away the Green Knight, for they were in the service of the Queen of Heaven, who spoke to them through the statue in the courtyard. Malory always believed her mother and flew into her arms, every single time. What else did she have to believe? They held each other tight. Then one day it was the police who rescued her, the police who held her tight. In dreams her parents always returned for her, rescued her, smiled their gluey smiles, brought her back out into loud daylight; played their second-hand makeshift instruments and sang their bayou songs while she danced a clumsy two-step, the tourists dropping change and crumpled dollar bills into the blue velvet bottom of the open banjo case. At night they drank and took drugs and made love with her in the same room, in her little bed on the floor, her “pallet bed,” she remembered them calling it, lying awake in the night in that bed, listening to them like listening to the world itself in flames.

When the beer was finished she hauled Joan up off the kitchen floor and back on the sofa. She placed the twisted tiara on the coffee table next to the broken scepter, the cluttered ashtray, the empty whiskey glass, the neatly squared stack of money, and the cigarette lighter with old Klezmer’s initials etched into the gold plate. The full set of her mother’s priorities was now in order. Joan lay wrapped in the flimsy red robe like a fish in newspaper, a smear of dried blood on the fake ermine collar.

She came to just as Malory was pocketing the cigarette lighter.

“Wha’?” her mother said. Her eyes rolled, her head lolled. “What? Wha’?”

“Oh, you fell in the kitchen, you poor dear. I got it all cleaned up, though.” She patted the wad of Kleenex she’d stuck into Joan’s nose, then moved her mother’s hand toward it. “Just you hold onto that for a while, dear.”

“I don’t know what happened,” her mother said in that same funny, breathy voice.

Malory kissed her mother on the forehead and told her she had to go, she had a midterm to study for. Joan rolled her eyes and forced a smile.

“Thank you,” she said, as if speaking to a stranger who’d helped her up from the sidewalk. “Thank you, dear,” her mother said, although “dear” sounded like “drear.” “Your mother loves you,” Joan added, gesturing with her right hand vaguely toward the ceiling.

“You rest up now,” Malory said on her way out, then turned to take one more look from just inside of the open doorframe.

When Malory got back to Boston the two friends were still in her apartment. They looked up at her like a pair of beagles waiting to be fed. Obscene murmuring twined with the scent of burning tobacco filtered through the just-open pocket-doors of the second bedroom. The Dominican twins were sitting together on a secondhand love seat, staring forlornly into their iPhones, their cigarettes smoldering side by side in a clamshell ashtray. On the other side of the room the Haitian Inez, reclining too far back in a mongrel-brown Barcalounger, muttered into her iPhone, “I would like you to seldomize me while my hands are bound tight and my eyes folded blind.”

Malory pulled tight the pocket doors and turned with a straight face to her waiting companions. It suddenly occurred to her that what she’d created in this apartment had possibilities for Reality TV.

“We were lost without you!” Claire cried out.

“What’s the plan?” Peg wanted to know. “We’re bored out of our skulls and need a plan!”

Malory jumped into her place on the sofa between them, and the young women put their heads together as they listened to Malory’s brilliant new plan.

There was this rich old lady in Arlington who needed her house robbed, for insurance purposes. Malory pronounced the word “insurance.” The plan was that she was going to report stolen a valuable painting that had been in her family for a long time, a small Edward Hopper acrylic, from the “Nighthawks” period, of a row of mismatched shoes in a secondhand shopwindow. It was not one of Hopper’s masterpieces, but it was historically important because of Hopper and his early use of acrylic paint. They were to go inside, take what they wanted, trash the place. The fix was in. The old lady would be attending a concert at Symphony Hall, *Till Eulenspiegels* or some such nonsense, followed by a swank reception for the visiting conductor at the Longfellow Hotel. The house had a basic alarm system, strictly Radio Shack, and Malory knew the code. The police would not be called. The painting itself had already been taken out, sold on the black market through the same fence who had planned the Gardner job. The old lady would return home, report the crime, cash in on the insurance money. They would be paid a thousand apiece and whatever they could carry away with them, which might include coin collection, stamp collection, jewelry, cash—shit like that. They would need to wear masks and gloves, of course, and bring baseball bats for proper house-trashing—aluminum ones, weightless and wieldy, the kind Ma always used on such jobs—and the fence would provide them with a stolen car, a junker Saab they’d later set fire to.

“I love it!” cried Peg. “Trash for cash!”

“More than trash, and more than cash,” Malory explained. “The thieves invading the Arlington Dutch Colonial to steal a painting that has already been stolen is the central figure for our time. Not just to steal but to mimetically replicate the act of theft, a sort of meta-theft appropriate to and commensurate with our historical moment.”

The two women burst into applause.

“That is really and truly the bomb,” Peg proclaimed.

“B and E as performance art!” Claire added. “Parody and the thing itself simultaneously!”

At that moment the pocket doors snickered open. The Haitian Inez in her slattern’s dishabille emerged from Malory’s postmodern den of iniquity, smoking a slender black cheroot and imploring her gringa overlords to call Eddie’s Pizza World for to order two medium pies with extra

cheese and three cold forties of Olde English 800. Malory shot her an evil glance, which she returned with greater skill before closing the doors behind her and shrieking something in Creole on the other side of them, at which the twins cackled uproariously.

“These here were Ma’s,” Malory continued, setting aside Inez’s stinkeye for another day, dipping down in the register, surfing the levels of diction, amusing herself with her own endless capacity for invention, reinvention—“lookee here,” she said—and from a roll of green florist’s paper unwrapped two long-stemmed roses that had been dried and spray-painted gold. She handed a golden rose to each of her acolytes, who held them like votive candlesticks. “To bring us luck, good daughters,” Malory announced, and drew the two friends close to her, one under each arm, a flowering of culture to celebrate the wholeness of culture, the wholeness of the human world. “Ma prized these things. They bring us closer to Ma, from back in the time when Ma was queen. They can’t kill Ma, no matter what they try. The very idea of it makes me laugh. Ha. You two close your eyes now and think of Ma.”