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The Faithful Couple

Written by A. D. Miller

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The Faithful Couple

A.D. MILLER



Little, Brown

LITTLE, BROWN

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Just for Emma

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1993

HE WANTED to concentrate on the girl, but he found himself glancing at the young man in the corner of the yard. She was telling him about her course at USC, and the details, when he caught them, were reasonably interesting, but there was something about the man that was distracting. Perhaps they had met before, Neil thought, though he couldn't place him.

'. . . and after that I'm hoping for an internship in the Valley. Anyways, what do you do, Neil?'

The baseball cap. It was the baseball cap.

'Soap,' Neil said. 'Soap and shampoo.'

Not just the cap: it was the cap and the shoes together. The guy was wearing suede Timberland boots, notionally designed for walking but not looking as if they had done much. The cap was from San Diego Wild Animal Park and featured several animal silhouettes roaming around the zoo's logo. The boots belonged to a fashionable adult, well-off and image-conscious; the hat suggested a goofy adolescent.

'Uh-huh?'

'I mean, I used to be in soap. I worked for a pharmaceutical

company before I came out here. In London. Or, you know, nearby.'

'You're in research?'

The man appeared to nod at him.

'Salesman. I mean, it was a graduate scheme,' Neil lied, realising that he should try to impress her. His heart had gone out of it. 'I'm going to look for something else when I get back to London. Or I might, you know, start my own business.'

'Okay, so you're an entrepreneur?'

The hat, the boots and the eavesdropping. The man was sitting at a table in the shade. As well as the cap he was wearing green swimming shorts and a beige T-shirt. Sand matted the blondish hairs on his legs, darkening and thickening them. He was pretending to read *Time*, but Neil could tell that he was listening and observing from behind his sunglasses.

'Yup. Entrepreneur. Well, you know, that's the idea. That's the plan.'

'What kind of business?'

'You know, I'm not sure yet. I haven't really thought it through, to be honest.'

Neil laughed self-deprecatingly, aiming for a raffish nonchalance, but he could tell she wasn't charmed. He couldn't see the guy's eyes but he was definitely watching them. Ordinarily, in Neil's experience, when two young, unacquainted males appraised each other like this, there was something gladiatorial and menacing in the gaze, and they quickly looked away. On this occasion neither of them did. The man smiled. Neil smiled back.

'That's too bad.'

He had seen this girl on the beach the night before, had wanted to try his luck, had tried and failed to engage her around the illicit bonfire some surfers had lit after dark. She wasn't interested, he had concluded, probably she hadn't even noticed him.

He was pleased to have manoeuvred her into this almost-private conversation, after the barbecue that the hostel had laid on for lunch. She was from Phoenix, but studying in LA, a Masters in Business Development, Neil thought she said; she had come down to San Diego for the beaches, went to Italy last summer, wanted to see more of Europe. She mentioned something about Scotch-Irish ancestry. She was staying elsewhere but had a friend who was working at the hostel (Cary, or possibly Cory, he hadn't taken in the name). She had an arresting sharp manner and oddly unkempt eyebrows, which contrasted appealingly with her otherwise disciplined appearance. Those ideal teeth.

Now Neil had screwed it up. He and the man in the baseball cap between them.

'Well,' the girl said, sensing his distraction and rising, 'good luck with it all.'

She re-tied her sarong, tilted her sunglasses from the crown of her head to her eyes and walked to the gate that led from the yard to the beach. She moved at a relaxed pace that, Neil figured, was meant to dispel any suggestion of retreat or defeat. The man in the cap watched her go, too. There was no one else in the yard; the two of them followed the girl's departing curves in what felt to Neil like collusive appreciation.

'Know what I think?'

He was English, too.

'Do I want to?'

'It's your socks. Definitely the socks.'

Neil instinctively processed the man's accent for class and geography, as the true-born English must. Received Pronunciation, southern but not London. Posh (those giveaway vowels): not so posh as to be alien, but unmistakably a few rungs above Neil, at the upper, genteel end of the expansive and nuanced middle. They hadn't met before: that wasn't what the connection had been.

'They're my best pair.'

'No socks.' The man removed his sunglasses and put down his magazine. He was handsome in a straightforward, symmetrical way, and slim, with a medium-rare English tan. He was roughly the same age as Neil. 'Uncool. Not even with your trainers. Trust me, really. They make you look like a kid.'

Neil glanced down at his off-white, tennis-style socks, and at the man's boots, into which his slender legs slid naked, then felt gulled and foolish for looking.

'Thanks for the advice,' he said. 'Who should I make the cheque out to?'

'Don't mention it,' the man said. 'This one's on the house.' He laughed, loud and confidently, rocking his head back.

Neither of them found a way to graduate from one-upmanship to conversation. The man picked up his magazine, smiled and followed the girl out through the gate, watched by Neil alone.

THERE was a keg party in the yard that night, with all-you-can-drink beer for the guests and anyone else who wandered in from the beach. Neil came down from his shower just as the biker who supervised the entertainment was hauling in the barrel and pumping apparatus. The sandy breeze blowing in from the ocean civilised the heat. Neil already preferred the evenings in California: he could legitimately cover up the pale, unmuscular body that embarrassed him on the beach in the afternoons. His features suited the half-light: wide-set, almost-black eyes, long, feminine eyelashes, lipstick-pink lips that sometimes appeared theatrical against his luminous skin. He had a large beauty-spot mole on his left cheek, with a matching blemish on his neck. When he swivelled his eyes downwards the mole on his cheek seemed to him to loom blurrily at the edge of his vision.

He stationed himself at the side of the yard and leaned against the wall, his back to the hostel's door. A voice behind him said, 'Buy you a drink?'

Neil didn't turn. 'It's your round, Casanova.'

The man approached the barrel and filled two plastic cups with watery American beer. He had ditched the baseball cap; he had shaggy, dirty-blond hair, in the low-rent Romantic poet style that, Neil knew, was fashionable among a certain breed of public schoolboy. They stood side by side against the wall, swigging in unison. The biker produced a microphone and a pair of thigh-high speakers, which he set up on the landward side of the yard, outside some unfortunate guests' window.

'Adam.'

'Neil.'

'I know.'

They shook hands.

Adam proved to be franker than the types of people Neil was used to, and the casual manner of his openness suggested he would have been the same if they had met at home. This wasn't intimacy, exactly. No dark secrets were disclosed: Adam didn't give the impression that he would have many of those, rather a clear run of frictionless and unblemished accomplishments. He was transparent in the manner of someone who doesn't expect to lose anything by it. He had graduated from university in June – history at Durham, he said – and come out to California before starting work. I wonder who's paying, Neil thought.

Actually he was supposed to travel with his girlfriend, Adam continued. It had been her idea, Chloe's, she had always wanted to visit Los Angeles, see Venice Beach and the Hollywood sign. They both had. They split up just after their finals – it was mutual – but Adam had thought, fuck it, I'll go anyway. No, he didn't have a job waiting for him in England, but he planned to get into television: ever since he saw the footage of the

Ethiopian famine, he had wanted to make documentaries and a difference. Before he flew out he sent off a load of applications and begging letters; he was hoping something would have come of them by the time he got home. His mother was keeping an eye out for any encouraging envelopes. He had landed in LA but come straight down to San Diego on the Greyhound, intending to meander back up the coast.

'When did you go to the zoo?'

Adam took a few seconds to work it out, half-lifting a hand towards the phantom cap.

'Yesterday. I saw it on the telly when I was a kid. Always wanted to go there.'

After that it was Neil's turn. He wasn't accustomed to talking about himself, he feared his biography wouldn't captivate, so he kept it short: economics at Sheffield, then the pharmaceutical sales job, which, in reality, had involved driving around the south-east for almost two years with a sinister-looking case of hand cream and tampon samples, 'until I got totally sick of it. They offered me a marketing thing at head office, up in Birmingham, but I turned it down. Last month, that was. Yeah, crazy, I know, but I'd saved up enough to come out here, so. I'll find something else when I get back. Or, you know, I hope I will.'

No, Neil had never been to America before. He had only been abroad a handful of times: 'We went to Spain, once or twice, when Mum was . . . with Mum. Costa Brava.' He took a swig of beer. 'And, you know, booze cruises to Calais.'

Adam nodded unconvincingly.

'I'm heading up to LA next week,' Neil continued, 'then San Francisco.'

'Me too,' Adam said. 'Maybe Yosemite after that. Are you on your own?'

'Yeah,' Neil replied. 'On my own. I'm on my own.'

They were quiet. Neil said, 'Another round?'

The yard was filling up. The girl in the sarong was back, now wearing a strappy white mini-dress and chatting to another woman over by the gate. She and Neil seemed to have made an unspoken pact not to acknowledge one another, curiosity flipping into surliness through some binary logic of unconsummated flirtation. When Neil finished pumping the beer he saw that Adam was talking to two other men. He felt irrationally jealous.

'This is Neil,' Adam said.

'Spilled a bit,' Neil said. 'Shit.'

'Ben,' one of the men offered in a southern American accent. Neil was tallish – my six-footer, his mother had called him, albeit before he quite got there – but this man was taller and well-built with it. 'What are you two doing in California?'

'We're hairdressers,' Neil said.

Adam turned towards him, too sharply. Don't, Neil thought. Don't look at me or I'll have to laugh.

'Cool,' the other, shorter American said.

Look at them and we can keep it going.

Neil had played this game before, mostly in clubs, on nights when he and his friends decided it was the most fun they were likely to have with the girls they were pursuing. The aim was to see how far they could push the lie before losing either the girls or their straight faces. The funny thing was, in California, the lies they told felt almost true. Or, if not true, at least possible, as if Neil might plausibly be someone new if he and his new friend willed it.

'Yeah,' said Adam. 'We finished hairdressing college in Cardiff, then we came out to work with a stylist in LA.' He gets it, Neil thought jubilantly; he's perfect at it. 'When it comes to fringes,' Adam went on, 'England is light years behind.'

Neil bit his lip: Don't overdo it. 'We're going to drive across

America,' he put in, composing himself. 'You know, cutting hair along the way. Campsites, motel car parks, that kind of thing. We figure five bucks a pop will get us to New York. How about you guys?'

'Graduate school,' the shorter man said. 'We're engineers. On our way down to Ensenada. You two detouring to Mexico?'

'Not this time,' Adam replied. 'We're heading north.'

Afterwards Neil thought the men must have seen through it, with that courteous American acuity that Britons often miss. But the strangers played along, helping to make him and Adam feel bonded and separate, until they left to join the queue for the buffet set out on a table in the corner.

Adam and Neil low-fived and had another beer. 'Bottoms up,' Adam said, raising his cup.

The waves rolling onto the beach were just audible above the chatter in the yard. Before the pause could turn awkward he pressed Neil about the job he had resigned. To Neil's surprise he seemed genuinely interested, and, though nobody else ever had been, he was: for Adam, employment was still a land of myth, populated by fabled creatures – the Secretary, the Boss – that he was yet to encounter in the flesh. Neil explained how the company had delivered crates of free samples to his father's house in Harrow in the middle of the night; how he would shop them round to wholesalers and retailers and the occasional department store. The idea was to distribute the samples and gather orders in exchange. Half the time the orders were cancelled by the pharmacists afterwards, but that didn't matter to the salesmen, Neil explained, because they counted towards your monthly sales figures anyway.

'Got it,' Adam said. 'Of course. Any, you know, action?' he asked, retreating from the world of kickbacks and sharp practices to more familiar territory. 'You know, secretaries or whatever.'

'Not really. I never went to the office much. Unless,' Neil deadpanned, 'you count this old woman with a beard who ran a chemist's up in Bishop's Stortford. She pinned me to my car once, said she wouldn't let me go unless I gave her another crate of free shampoo. Coconut, I think it was.'

'What did you do?'

'I gave her the shampoo and she gave me an order. I think that was the time I won salesman of the month. I got a weekend in a hotel in Brighton.'

'Did you take the old woman?'

'I took my dad. Sort of had to, you know.'

They drank, the repartee checked by the mention of Neil's father, its opaque dutifulness, but only temporarily.

'What's he like as a wing man?'

'Better than you,' Neil said.

After a few seconds they both laughed, Adam aloud, Neil almost silently, his lips drawn across his teeth in the semblance of a grimace.

THEY had another drink in the queue for food – almost nothing was left by the time they reached the table, a few rectangles of overcooked pizza and some token celery that no one else had fancied – and then another as they ate. The beer was cold and light and stronger than it tasted.

The biker had hooked up a karaoke machine to the speakers, and he checked that the microphone was working with the ritual taps and *Testing, testing*. He perched the screen on the edge of the buffet table and, without preamble, began to sing – 'You Shook Me All Night Long', followed by 'Sweet Child of Mine' – in one of those affected growly voices that substitute attitude for intonation. People applauded. Next two German women did a Whitney Houston medley, and a bare-chested Australian man mutilated 'Need You Tonight'. There were a few sarcastic

whoops, and someone threw a not-quite-empty cup at him. The cup hit the man on the shin, the beer splashing his leg.

'I will if you will,' Adam said.

Neil looked at Adam and at the humiliated Australian. His stomach knotted, then relaxed. He knew he had to do it.

'Together, right?'

'Of course,' Adam said.

They flicked through the tracks on the karaoke machine. Although neither of them especially liked the Eagles, they settled on 'Take it Easy' (short, and an easy tune). Somehow the music came on quicker than Neil was expecting: he almost cried out 'Wait!' but managed to contain the panic. He never went in for this kind of exhibitionism, always envying the unselfconsciousness of people who did. He sensed his skin warmly colouring and didn't join in until the second line: *I've got seven women on my mind*. His voice was lower and flatter than Adam's, his eyes locked on the miniature screen even though he knew the words, the lyrics of half the Eagles' songs being etched in his memory, along with those of the other seventies classics he had been obliged to appreciate at school.

But the two of them grew stronger and louder, like people singing 'Happy Birthday' in a restaurant. By the second verse they were clasping the microphone together; by the end of the third their spare arms were around each other in tipsy communion.

No one threw anything. When they finished, the Mexico-bound Americans high-fived them. The girl from that afternoon in the yard came over and said 'Good job' to Neil. He half-expected her to solicit an introduction to Adam, but instead she swayed suggestively, as if she were willing to forgive his earlier obtuseness and dance. He ignored the hint, curtly said 'Thanks', and turned to Adam to discuss what they should sing next.

Somebody had given them both another beer. They were halfway through them when Adam said, 'Let's go for a swim.' He repeated the proposal when Neil didn't respond, louder, shouting into his ear to be heard above 'Mr Tambourine Man'.

They went out through the gate, across the running and rollerblading path and onto the beach. Some kids were shouting somewhere along the shore, playing soccer in the dark. In the other direction, couples were giggling invisibly on the sand. Neil and Adam had the stretch of beach behind the hostel more or less to themselves. They pressed their beers into the sand, one by each of the volleyball poles, and stripped to their underwear. Adam saw that Neil had taken his advice and foresworn socks that evening, and Neil saw him notice, but neither of them commented. Adam undressed first and won the race to the surf.

The moon had clouded over and they didn't gauge the height of the waves until they were waist deep. The water was warm. As they were jumping backwards into the crests, a few metres apart, a piece of seaweed wrapped itself around Adam's shoulders; he caught it, raised it above his head like a banner, and let himself fall backwards into the ocean. He had a beginner's hairy chest, a wiry knot between his pectoral muscles that heralded the full Chewbacca his genes were promising. Neil's chest was narrower and baby-bald.

They splashed around and shouted into the Pacific until Neil dragged Adam out in a mock rescue. Adam resisted, but submitted before the wrestling became too fierce, allowing himself to be dumped where the wet and dry sand met. The two of them scrambled up the beach and sat against the volleyball poles, finishing their beers and watching the breathing, black-and-white ocean as they dried. The karaoke was over.

'Listen,' Adam said, 'don't take this the wrong way, but I suppose we could, you know, go together.'

'What do you . . . Go where?'

'Up the coast. On the Greyhound, maybe. Or we could, you know, get one of those cars you deliver for someone else. Driveaways, I think they're called, I read about them in the *Lonely Planet*. We could take it up to San Francisco. What do you reckon?'

Neil was sober enough to catch and question his own response. He couldn't account for the sense that he was being flattered, wonderfully flattered, and he resented Adam for this rush of gratitude. Adam wasn't older than Neil, or more experienced (so far as he could tell), or cleverer or funnier; he outscored him mainly in the unearned virtues of luck and class and those Athena-poster looks. At the same time he had his openness, and his poise, and there was a fit or alignment between them, something unfinished and possible, that it would be a shame to waste.

'Okay,' Neil said. 'Why not?'

All this – California, the sea, the adult, sovereign choices – was the kind of escapade that, as suburban teenagers, Neil and his brother had once fantasised about. He held out his cup for Adam to clink with his own, and he did, though the cups were plastic and noiseless and already empty.

A PAIR of surfboards were draining in the shower when Adam went for a piss at dawn. A woman was in bed with the Norwegian in the bunk opposite his, both of them asleep and naked. Adam climbed up again to his mattress, lay on his back and mapped the stains and cracks on the ceiling. The sand in his bed was as dark as dirt, the sheets damp with seawater; he could hear the waves. His wasn't a serious hangover, just dry mouth and sour breath, plus a dull ache, a sort of manifest unease, at the back of his head. Sleep was gone.

Adam wasn't regretful or embarrassed that he had sung and swum and persuaded this stranger to join in. Unlike Neil he

was a practised exhibitionist, especially when he had been drinking: jokily synchronised dancing in clubs and at the odd countryside rave, acceptably risqué sixth-form revues, charades around the pool of the chateau that his father sometimes borrowed for a fortnight from some shipping millionaire. He was likewise used to getting people to do what he wanted them to – a dividend of being an eldest child, who had honed his will on indulgent parents before redirecting it at his idolatrous younger sister, and afterwards at what so far seemed a gratifyingly pliant universe.

His queasiness was neither shame nor simply alcohol. He remembered how he had propositioned Neil, and in the morning's clarity could see that he had rushed into this, on the basis of half a day's acquaintance, some one-liners and an out-of-tune duet. Adam saw the impetuousness, but that wasn't what unsettled him. His fear was that Neil might have changed his mind: that he might have forgotten his pledge to drive up the coast together, or might pretend that he had forgotten.

Adam wouldn't think the worse of him for that. The previous night had been a kind of hallucination, probably impossible to reconstitute and best consigned to pleasant memory. But he hoped otherwise. Neil was uncool, but he didn't seem to mind, which was itself a kind of coolness; his indifference had a negative power of its own. There was something intriguing in the way he faced the world, wary and not entitled, with low expectations set to be exceeded, rather than, as with most of Adam's acquaintances, inflated hopes that were destined to be thwarted. He was similar as well as different (they got each other's jokes), open yet unknown: for all their mutual frankness there was a part of himself that Neil seemed to be protecting, as he shielded his moon-white skin from the sun. He had done things that Adam hadn't. Neil was the kind of coiled person who, when you met him, you had a hunch that something interesting could

happen to, and you wanted to know him long enough to find out what it might be. A person you could measure yourself by.

Adam got out of bed. The interloping woman was lying on her front, her face in the Norwegian's armpit, her arse a bikini triangle of white encircled by chocolate tan: a road sign made flesh. He brushed his teeth, thought about shaving but decided not to, put on his shorts and shades and went out to buy a coffee at Burger King.

Neil was eating his breakfast in the hostel yard when Adam returned. He was sitting in a strange position, on a bench facing the wall, so that anyone who might want to speak to him would have to make a decision and an effort to disturb him.

'Morning, Neil.'

He turned around and smiled. 'Morning.'

Adam sat down next to him, astride the bench. They discussed their hangovers, as was customary, the sandiness of their sheets and the naked woman in Adam's dormitory. They talked about the volleyball game that the blackboard announced for later that morning. They heard themselves talk about the weather. Adam saw that he would have to be the one who raised and risked it.

'So are we still on? I mean, the car. You know, San Francisco. Los Angeles. Do you remember?'

'Yeah, I remember,' Neil said. 'We're on.'

THEY picked up a freesheet that listed the driveaways available in San Diego and assessed the offers in the yard that evening. They circled three that seemed promising: one vehicle to be delivered to Portland, one to Seattle, one to somewhere in Montana. They called the relevant agencies; Adam did the talking, specifying their ages, nationality, the particulars of their driving licences. Neil tried to decipher the notes his friend was scribbling in the margins, his insides inexplicably fluttering.

They decided that Portland would be far enough, especially since the owner would allow them several more days than the trip strictly required. On the following morning they were to go out to the suburbs, towards the Mexican border, to collect the car.

They packed, settled their hostel bills and rode the trolleybus in the direction of the address Adam had been given. It was a warm blue day. They walked the last few, rundown blocks, sweating and joking that they might never find their destination, might search endlessly for a house that didn't exist. But, eventually, it did: a decaying clapboard bungalow with a bleached porch and a high-volume argument in progress inside. At first they weren't sure whether to intrude, or to give up and leave, go back to the beach, forget the whole plan. Neil pushed the buzzer, curtly, once; a young woman with tattooed biceps opened the door and called for her father, who came out, tanned, tall and overweight in serviceman-gone-to-seed style. He made them sign two copies of the paperwork, grumblingly inspected their foreign driving licences and led them to a brown pick-up truck with a covered bed. He handed over the keys and an address in Oregon and watched from the pavement, hands on hips, until they rounded a corner and headed north.

The pick-up was a bigger vehicle than either of them was used to. It had an extra set of headlights above the windscreen, like something out of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, a scratched leather interior and a mysterious tarpaulin in the back, tied and chained up, under which squatted a heavy, ominous lump. ('Gun-running,' Adam speculated. 'Body parts,' Neil countered.) Parking was hairy, and on the northbound highway they were flanked by an endless sequence of outsized lorries, streaming up to Los Angeles at impossible speeds. But at other times and on smaller roads they were almost on their own. And they were in California and free.