Run the Risk

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Extract

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The auditorium had the strong perfume scent of too many roses, like the hospital room of an accident victim. That sweet, not entirely healthy air. It smells so good you just know something terrible has happened.

It's funny how the imaginary life you conjure up for your child is invariably nothing like the real thing. It's actually not that different from being a cop, except that the longer I'm a cop, the less surprised I am by the things I see. And the longer I'm a mother . . . well, I don't really need to finish that, do I?

I was watching my daughter compete in a beauty pageant. The Rose Parade Queen no less. How can you prepare for a moment like that?

How the hell did this happen?

I should be happy my daughter is on that stage, right? She's beautiful, smart. It's just that I always imagined beauty queens as girls from Texas with a missionary glow in their eyes as if they were selling a peculiar brand of

faith. And I always imagined they were someone else's daughters.

Maybe it's because I'm a cop that I don't buy any of it. Look at the girls on that stage. From left to right: Kimberley, Rebecca, Kellie, Grace, Caitlin. They're all hiding something – no escaping it. Doesn't take a cop's eyes to see it. Kellie had her nose done, Grace her teeth, Caitlin lips . . . God only knows what Kimberley had done. And Rebecca . . . Rebecca I think has done it all.

What isn't perfect can be hidden. Beauty queens cling to that like some ultimate, unshakeable truth.

My own daughter lied on her application for the pageant about two piercings. Bet the judges wouldn't be happy about that: I know I wasn't. I only know about them because I found the disinfectant in her bathroom.

Nothing is ever completely hidden – ever. A cop's one and only unshakeable truth.

I looked at my daughter and wondered how she'd become a stranger to me. I didn't know. It just crept up like the change of seasons.

A pageant official in a white suit started walking from judge to judge collecting the final tally sheets. I looked around for the other contestants' parents seated in the auditorium. They were easy to pick out. They all appeared to belong to a lost tribe of perfectly proportioned people. It's no mistake that their daughters are on that stage. Some have been in pageants since they were five years old. But why Lacy? I couldn't let it go. Six months ago her wardrobe didn't extend beyond jeans, T-shirts, and work boots. What is she doing in taffeta and heels?

I glanced at two of our SWAT officers wearing dark suits at the entrance to the auditorium. In the weeks before the pageant there had been whispers of the unthinkable happening. But those voices are everywhere now. In every civic gathering, in every speck of unattended white powder, in everyone's imagination. The auditorium had been made as safe as we could make it. The fact that a cop's daughter was one of the contestants seemed to give everyone involved an even greater sense of security, except me.

The master of ceremonies, a former TV actor who vaguely resembled his younger self, walked up to the mike.

'Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to crown our new queen.'

The auditorium fell silent. I looked at Lacy and began to wonder if I'd survive being a mother. She had a rope around every nerve in my body and was yanking it tight. And it never changes, not from the moment the doctor places her on your chest, to the moment you find the nipple ring and the diaphragm in the sock drawer.

My pager started vibrating and the woman next to me gave me a look like I had just crawled out of a dumpster. I pulled my jacket back just enough so she could see the gun on my waist. She stared at it with that blank look of fear that always accompanies the sudden sight of a weapon by a civilian.

'My daughter's the second on the right,' I whispered. 'Isn't she beautiful?'

The woman smiled nervously and looked quickly

away, not wanting to disagree with a mother packing heat.

I glanced down at my pager – my partner's cell number. I'd left word with him that I wasn't to be disturbed unless there was a body, so evidently somewhere in Pasadena, someone had died violently.

I tried to focus on the stage, but my mind drifted to the distant crime scene. I imagined the position of the body and started to work backward. I could hear the dull sound of the victim hitting the ground. The crack of a gunshot. The sound of a scuffle. Fabric tearing. Individual voices raised in anger as events spun out of control.

A flashbulb went off.

'And the 2003 Rose Queen is . . .'

'Come on, Lacy,' I whispered. 'You go, girl.'

A kid in his twenties, with long dreadlocks, wearing a knee-length jacket, jumped out of his seat across the aisle from me and stumbled, falling to the carpet nearly at my feet. He looked up at me for a second in embarrassment as if he knew me, then rushed up the aisle and disappeared. Behind me I heard the sound of movement. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the other parents stand up and point in horror toward the stage.

As I turned back to the stage I saw Lacy lifting up her dress and removing a dark plastic bottle that was secured to her thigh.

'You're poisoning the planet for a fucking parade!' Lacy yelled as she began spraying the audience with herbicide. 'Pesticides kill, herbicides are poison. You're all killers!'

People began diving under seats and shielding themselves with their programs as someone began screaming, 'Poison, it's poison, she's got poison!'

I jumped out of my seat and began pushing my way through the panicked audience trying to flee up the aisle. On the other side of the auditorium one of the SWAT officers was removing his weapon from under his suit jacket and rushing toward the stage thinking my daughter had a weapon.

I yelled no at him but my voice was lost in the shouting and chaos erupting throughout the hall.

I took out my badge and began yelling 'Police,' hoping it would help to clear people out of my way but the only thing they were seeing were the exit signs. A woman in a pink dress with tears streaming down her face and hair sprinkled with herbicide ran into me and briefly looked me in the eye before pushing past with the rest of the crowd.

Someone seeing the other officer holding his gun screamed, 'No, no, no. He's got a gun.'

I reached the stage as the SWAT officer took the steps on the other side, his weapon at his side. An usher tried to stop me so I grabbed his hand and twisted it just enough to move him quickly out of my way. Onstage one of the contestants was crying and shaking her hands as if she had touched something hot. The SWAT officer was twenty feet from Lacy, his gun coming up from his side.

'No!' I yelled, but he didn't hear me.

Lacy saw the SWAT officer moving toward her and began to turn toward him and raise her spray bottle.

'Lacy!' I screamed.

The SWAT officer froze and raised his weapon to a firing position just as two pageant officials grabbed her from behind. The spray bottle was knocked from her hand and seemed to hang suspended in midair for a beat, then fell to the floor with a dull thud.

There wasn't a sound in the auditorium. All movement stopped.

The officer stared at the bottle on the floor for a moment then looked across the stage to me, took a breath, and quickly slipped his weapon back under his jacket.

Someone said, 'It's over, it's over,' as the two officials quickly walked Lacy offstage. I took a breath, then another.

The master of ceremonies, apparently confusing the pageant with the first space shuttle disaster, stepped up to the mike and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we've had a malfunction.'

Backstage Lacy was seated on a folding chair surrounded by a half dozen gray-haired men in white suits who appeared on the verge of heart attacks. The man in charge was standing over Lacy trembling with rage and repeating himself.

'You're in big trouble, young lady! You're in big trouble.'

Lacy saw me approaching and straightened up in the chair, trying to give the impression that she was still in control. I walked up and made brief eye contact with her, then turned to the men in suits.

'I'm her mother.'

The man standing over her turned to me, the veins in his neck pumping like fire hoses. He stared dumbfounded for a moment then yelled, 'She's disqualified!'

'I think she knows that,' I said.

He shuddered like a tree about to topple. 'In all my years—'

'Yes.'

'I've never—'

'I know.'

'Someone could have been hurt!'

'Only if they were beneficial insects!' Lacy said.

I looked at Lacy and started to shake my head.

'That's enough out of you, young lady,' the official said. He turned to me in a rage. 'What kind of a mother are you?'

The question caught me off guard. Who would really want to know the answer to something like that? I took out my badge and held it up in front of his flushed face. 'I'm Lieutenant Delillo, Pasadena Police.'

He stared at the badge as if confronted by a puzzle. 'A policeman?'

'-Woman . . . lieutenant . . . mother.'

The white suits all glanced at one another, looking for some sort of direction.

'I'll handle it from here,' I said.

'You damn well better!' yelled the man in charge.

I took Lacy lightly by the arm and led her toward the stage door. In case there had been any misunderstanding of his previous words the man in charge yelled at us one more time, 'She's disqualified!'

'Asshole!' Lacy yelled as I guided her out the door.

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Outside, a full moon lit up the parking lot with an almost unnatural blue light. As we walked silently to the car, I promised myself I wouldn't say any of the dozens of parental clichés that were fighting to come flying out of my mouth.

'I . . .'

I managed to stop the first outburst.

'What?' Lacy said.

I took a breath and tried to stuff the words back down my throat. 'Nothing.'

'Right.'

'Did you—' I bit down on my lip.

'Go ahead, say it, I know you want to.'

It was frightening how well she knew me.

'I hope you're proud of yourself.'

'Yes, I am,' Lacy said, displaying none of the weakness of character I had just succumbed to. She turned to me though I kept my eyes straight ahead.

'I did something I believed in. That can't be wrong.'

To the east, the snow-covered San Gabriels loomed over us like a brightly painted backdrop on a soundstage. Jasmine was blooming somewhere and the air held its sweet, delicious smell. Someone had covered the roof of their house with fake snow and strung a palm tree with Christmas lights. It was one of those perfect nights that sell the California dream without a word being spoken, but my mind couldn't hold on to it. Lacy had seen to that. It was fiction as surely as the notion of judging beauty.

The truth, or the only truth I was willing to confront

head on, was the call I'd gotten on my pager. Somewhere below these mountains on the alluvial fan that spread out below Pasadena lay a body that had been ravaged by violence.

We reached the car and got in. Lacy removed the rose-colored pumps she was wearing and took a deep, relief-filled breath. There were a dozen things I wanted to say to her, a few that I should have . . . *You're really something. I don't agree with your methods, but I'm proud of you. I wish I believed in something as strongly as you do.*

I said none of them.

'I have a call I have to take. I'll drop you at home.'

Lacy nodded, looking straight ahead. 'Sure, Mom. Why should tonight be any different? Go take care of the dead.'

As we drove away, Lacy opened the window and casually dangled her pumps out under the moonlight. She spun them once on her finger, then I heard them hit the pavement and skitter across the curb like rats racing for cover. I stole a glance at my daughter, who was staring straight ahead, the faintest hint of a smile showing at the corners of her lips. It was a perfect moment. Her moment. I turned my attention back to the road, and somehow managed to keep my mouth shut.