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## Second Story Sunlight by Philip Davis

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*(It is mid-afternoon on the second story front porch of a white country house. The sun is shining brightly. In a chair in front of a window sits **Jeanette Richardson**, a woman in her mid fifties, reading a folded church bulletin. Next to her on a table is a cordless telephone receiver. On the railing of the porch is **Beverly Richardson**, her daughter, twentyish, sunning herself in a two-piece bathing suit.)*

**Jeanette**

*(Reading) Ooohhhh.... Goodness!.... Well, I'll be... (she looks up at **Beverly** whose eyes are closed against the sunlight.) It's just too much...*

**Beverly**

Mother, what are you carrying on about?

**Jeanette**

The rector's comments in the church bulletin are too kind!

**Beverly**

What does it say?

**Jeanette**

Nothing really, there is just a little squib here about the Duncan-Chappelle wedding...

**Beverly**

What does it say?

**Jeanette**

I don't want to toot my own horn.

**Beverly**

Yes you do. You love it when all those hifaluting Episcopalians heap their praise on you. *(Takes the paper from **Jeanette** and reads)* "and, of course, our congratulations to

Mrs. Jeanette Richardson for her beautiful floral arrangements. Hard as it is to believe, she has outdone herself again.”

**Jeanette**

Oh, it’s just too much!

**Beverly**

*(Continuing to read)* “The sanctuary was a sea of pink gladiolus and white carnations upon which the bride floated like a beautiful gossamer sail boat, coming to safe harbor in the arms of her handsome groom. What makes it even more special is that each bloom was nurtured in Jeanette’s own greenhouse.”

You got more ink than the happy couple. *(She hands the bulletin back to **Jeanette**.)*

**Jeanette**

Oh, there’s some other stuff about them here. I hate that you had to miss it.

**Beverly**

I’m sure you took lots of pictures. I can’t wait to see them.

**Jeanette**

If you had been there, you could have caught the bouquet.

**Beverly**

Please don’t start.

**Jeanette**

It was a beautiful bouquet, a lovely nosegay of white roses, alstroemeria, lizanthus, Queen Anne’s lace... *(A timer goes off.)* It’s time for some more sunscreen.

**Beverly**

Mother, you just put some on me.

**Jeanette**

You can’t be too careful. *(She opens tube and starts applying to Beverly.)* I do wish you would use something stronger than SPF 15. I might as well smear you with butter and salt and pepper. You’re roasting.

**Beverly**

And you're basting me. Fifteen is plenty. I want to get *some* color.

**Jeanette**

When I was young we used to bathe in buttermilk and avoid the sun to keep our skin white. Women were supposed to look delicate.

**Beverly**

Look it? Sounds like deception.

**Jeanette**

I think "decorum" is a more appropriate word.

**Beverly**

Trap a man by looking delicate, then after you've got him, reveal the battle-axe.

**Jeanette**

That's a gross exaggeration. Men like the illusion that women are weak. (pause) It feeds their illusion that they are strong.

**Beverly**

The guys I know like a tan line.

**Jeanette**

That's vulgar. Boy's like a lot of things, and would do anything if you allow it. That's why God put us here on earth. To control them.

**Beverly**

What a hopeless romantic you are.

**Jeanette**

It's true! Left to their own devices men will behave in the most uncivilized fashion. God created marriage so that women could lead men to a better, nobler life. It is a romance of the soul. Young people today think romance is just about throwing their bodies together.

**Beverly**

Not pasty white bodies, they don't.

**Jeanette**

*(Looking towards the house next door.)* I wonder where Mr. Hughes is? Sometimes when you're out here sunning I catch him looking out the window at you in the most distasteful manner. People should mind their own business.

I used to see Ethel White lying out in the sun all the time. Now her skin resembles my allegator bag and she looks like a truck driver. Not to mention *(whispering)* cancer.

**Beverly**

*(Whispering)* Why are you whispering?

**Jeanette**

You never know. I use the highest sun protection factor I can buy.

**Beverly**

Mother, you'd use life protection factor if they made it.

**Jeanette**

I look for it every time I go to the drug store... but alas, they don't have it.

**Beverly**

So you have to make your own.

**Jeanette**

*(She looks at her daughter, admiringly.)* Some man is going to be very lucky to catch you.

**Beverly**

I thought women did the catching.

**Jeanette**

I've already started planning the flowers. I have a very rare hybrid growing in the

hothouse now.

**Beverly**

Why don't you put some of your flowers out here on the porch? It could use a little color.

**Jeanette**

They get destroyed by the wind and the sun and the rain. It's so much easier to keep them pretty in the hothouse. No one at the church has seen pretty until they see my creations for your wedding.

**Beverly**

You'll probably discover a whole new genus before I get married.

**Jeanette**

Then what's all this oiling and tanning for? I thought you said it's what the boys like.

**Beverly**

They do, Mother. But this is for fun, not for marriage.

**Jeanette**

Beverly Richardson, you say these things to get at me, I know it. You're not a child; you're becoming a young woman. The time for fun is over. *(She switches tubes and starts applying high SPF sunscreen to her arms.)* Marriage is a beautiful, sacred institution, and I want it for you because I love you.

**Beverly**

Oh sure. It was so beautiful and sacred for you and Daddy, wasn't it?

**Jeanette**

That's unkind. It was not my fault... No. I made a solemn pledge that I would never denigrate your father in front of you, so I can't respond to that.

**Beverly**

Daddy apparently made no such pledge.

**Jeanette**

What did he say? No, I don't want to know. I shan't stoop into that gutter.

*(pause)*

That's his business and his problem.

**Beverly**

*(Turns her back to Jeanette to sun the other side.)* Good. I admire your nobility.

*(pause)*

**Jeanette**

Probably something to impress that *other* Mrs. Richardson.

**Beverly**

What time is it?

**Jeanette**

Three-forty-five. Why?

**Beverly**

Billy's supposed to call me between three and four. He's taking me to Luciano's tonight for dinner.

**Jeanette**

Billy? That seems a little high class for him.

**Beverly**

Now who's being unkind? You don't know him.

**Jeanette**

I know his family. His brother's a jailbird. You can do much better.

**Beverly**

Billy's not at all like his brother. He's smart and sweet. He has a stable job and makes good money.

**Jeanette**

He's too old for you.

**Beverly**

Only four years older. Nothing compared to the 25 years between Daddy and "that *other* Mrs. Richardson", as you refer to her.

**Jeanette**

Boys his age are all hormones and recklessness. And let's be accurate; he's actually a man, not a boy.

**Beverly**

What do you know about men today?

**Jeanette**

Men are men, regardless of what day it is. I was young once.

**Beverly**

Let me see if I can picture that.

**Jeanette**

I was no wallflower. The men were after me like hounds after a fox. And I had to be sly as a fox to keep them from crossing the line.

**Beverly**

I'm sure no one ever crossed the line with you.

**Jeanette**

It was important. Virginity was a prized virtue. When I presented my honor as a gift to your father on our wedding night, the package was still wrapped, and the bow was not yet untied.

**Beverly**

If I know you, you probably still have the paper and ribbon neatly folded in the attic somewhere.

**Jeanette**

Don't scoff at virginity dear. Be thankful you still have yours.

**Beverly**

What?

**Jeanette**

Your virginity. *(Long pause.)*

**Beverly**

Maybe if I had saved my paper and ribbon I could wrap it back up *(giggles nervously)*.

**Jeanette**

This is not funny, Beverly Richardson!

**Beverly**

Come on Mother. You're acting like I committed murder!

**Jeanette**

These things have consequences!

**Beverly**

We're taking precautions.

**Jeanette**

Those things break!

**Beverly**

I'm on the pill.

**Jeanette**

How dare Dr. Whitworth prescribe those things without consulting me?

**Beverly**

Because it's none of your business.

**Jeanette**

I beg your pardon!

**Beverly**

I'm of legal age. He's bound by confidentiality. It's my body!

**Jeanette**

Who's paying for them?

**Beverly**

Billy.

**Jeanette**

You're whoring yourself on the cheap aren't you?

**Beverly**

You're calling me a whore? You... horticulturist!

**Jeanette**

He can pull back the limbs of the tree and pick all the fruit he wants for the cost of a few measly pills.

**Beverly**

It's a mutually agreeable relationship. We guard against disease and pregnancy.

**Jeanette**

What about *dishonor*? Did the doctor give you any pills to guard against that?

**Beverly**

I don't feel dishonorable. Sometimes I wish I could talk to you about my feelings, but you don't even think I should have feelings.

**Jeanette**

Feelings are one thing, but actions are another. You should have discussed your feelings with me when they were just feelings. I could have helped you control them. But now it's too late!

**Beverly**

Too late? What do you mean?

**Jeanette**

You can't get your virginity back, Beverly!

**Beverly**

So discard me. I'm damaged goods.

**Jeanette**

I didn't say that.

*(The telephone rings. **Jeanette** answers it. We hear her voice.)* Hello.... May I say who's calling?... Just a moment.

*(She covers the mouthpiece.)* It's Billy. I don't think you should.....

**Beverly**

*(Grabbing the phone from her mother)* Hello Billy.... Just getting some sun... That was Mother. I'm really looking forward to tonight. *(Pause, then with some disappointment)* Oh! Well, bring her along. *(Pause, then disappointment grows)*... I see. I guess three's a crowd. *(Pause. The disappointment is total.)* Another night, then.... Uh huh.... goodbye...

*(**Beverly** absent-mindedly extends the phone to **Jeanette**.)*

His "cousin" is out for the weekend. He has to entertain her.

**Jeanette**

*(Trying to reassure her hurt daughter.)* It's a family obligation. I'm glad he has some sense of duty.

**Beverly**

*Bullshit!*

**Jeanette**

I do not allow that kind of language in my house!

**Beverly**

We're outside.

**Jeanette**

I won't tolerate it in my presence. What has gotten into you?

**Beverly**

She's not family. She's his uncle's wife's sister's daughter. Not even technically a relative. I know who she is; he's not fooling me. She's very attractive – in a slutty way. She has a reputation.

**Jeanette**

See what I mean about honor and virtue. Note what you think about her, and imagine what people will think about you.

**Beverly**

Just drop it! He has no obligation to me, anyway. We had fun – no commitments.

*(Beverly starts to cry, though she tries not to.)*

**Jeanette**

*(Moves to her daughter and puts her arms around her.)* Oh, baby, it'll be all right. There will be other boyfriends. Much better than Billy.

*(Beverly cries harder.)*

Such unchivalrous behavior! He owes you more than a quick brush off and a bouquet of lies. There may still be a chance to restore some shred of honor.

**Beverly**

What are you talking about?

**Jeanette**

I'm not up on the modern customs, but morally he has some obligation to you for yielding to his advances.

**Beverly**

I made the advances.

**Jeanette**

Nothing you say shocks me anymore.

*(Jeanette picks up the phone.)* What is that thing they advertise on TV? Star-six-nine?  
*(She dials it.)*

**Beverly**

What are you doing, Mother?

**Jeanette**

He can't do this to my daughter and get off scott free. *(Someone answers the phone.)*  
Hello, is this Billy?

**Beverly**

Stop it! Hang up, now!

**Jeanette**

This is Mrs. Jeanette Richardson. We just spoke.

**Beverly**

*(Tries to get the phone.)* Give me that! *(Jeanette turns away.)*

**Jeanette**

Beverly's mother.

**Beverly**

*(Yelling)* Billy, this is not me; I don't want this! *(She slumps and covers her face.)*

**Jeanette**

I want to know what kind of upbringing your parents gave you? You want to have your cake and eat it too, but not pay the piper?

**Beverly**

Good God!

**Jeanette**

I'm speaking of your dalliance with my daughter. You think you can just eat the candy and throw away the wrapper? *(Pause)* What do you mean she ate your candy? If her father had any gumption – *(to Beverly)* I'm sorry, dear, but he doesn't – *(to Billy)* he'd come over there and teach you how to be a man, but as it is in this topsy-turvy world, it's left to her mother to defend my daughter's honor. I have no weapon against you but your own sense of decency, which I gather, does not exist!

I will not tolerate your laughter! I won't! *(She hangs up.)*

I cannot imagine what you would see in such a thug!

**Beverly**

I might as well go dive into the lake and drown now.

**Jeanette**

Whatever for? He's not nearly good enough for you. You're better off without him. I told you his people were trash.

**Beverly**

You think he was laughing? After this gets around – and it will – everybody will be laughing. I won't have a friend left in the world.

**Jeanette**

If you lose friends over this, they weren't worth having to begin with.

**Beverly**

What am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? Sit here with you?

**Jeanette**

Is my company so bad?

**Beverly**

A nightmare.

**Jeanette**

Honey, you'll get over him. I want what's best for you.

**Beverly**

You'll have nothing to do with it.

**Jeanette**

I'm your mother.

**Beverly**

It's *my* life!

**Jeanette**

I gave you that life and I still have some responsibility for it. For guidance and protection.

**Beverly**

You haven't done such a great job with your own life.

**Jeanette**

Watch your tongue! That was entirely your fath..... No! You're not going to lure me into that trap.

**Beverly**

I should go live with Daddy.

**Jeanette**

Why don't you? Hmmm? It's because that *other* Mrs. Richardson won't have you living there, isn't it?

**Beverly**

She doesn't even use Daddy's last name, you know. She kept her maiden name.

**Jeanette**

Foolish modern gimmick!

**Beverly**

She wants to have her own identity – not be regarded as a mere appendage of her husband.

**Jeanette**

Fiddle Faddle! Shallow self-absorption, that's what it is. You find yourself in nurturing others. Creating a home and family, and that includes sharing a name with your family.

**Beverly**

Why not pick a new name? Why should it be the husband's name?

**Jeanette**

In your case it is a moot point, there being no husband or prospect thereof.

**Beverly**

If you're so desperate for a wedding, why don't you find yourself a man and have your own wedding? I'll be your maid of honor.

**Jeanette**

I'm not desperate. It's not just any wedding I want. I want *your* wedding; I've had mine. I have been breeding a new variety of orchid, and I'm naming it after you – The Beverly Orchid. I want it to make its debut as the centerpiece of your wedding bouquet.

**Beverly**

Why are you doing this to me?

**Jeanette**

I'm doing it *for* you. It's all for you.

**Beverly**

No, it's for *you*. You build the stakes so high so I know how deeply I'll disappoint you. You breed guilt with the same zeal that you breed flowers. You have your own exclusive hybrids. You say it's for me, but your head is full of fantasies of the admiration you'll get from those people and my undying gratitude and devotion.

*(Jeanette picks up the phone and dials 411.)*

What are you doing?

**Jeanette**

Yes, could I have the number of Mr. Danny's Florist, on Main?... Thank you.

**Beverly**

What are you doing?

**Jeanette**

*(Dials number)* Danny? This is Mrs. Jeanette Richardson.... Just lovely! How are you?... You're too sweet to say so. Thank you so much. It was lovely wasn't it?..... Oh, I know. It is their beauty and their tragedy that they die so soon after they bloom. But in the fleeting moment they share with us, they capture the very essence of loveliness, don't they?...

*(Beverly vocalizes "The Twilight Zone" theme.)*

...The reason I called... You remember my daughter, Beverly?

**Beverly**

What are you doing?

**Jeanette**

I have an engagement this evening. I'm going to have to leave the house, and I don't want to leave her all alone. I thought... maybe.... if you're not busy, that you could escort her to dinner for me.

**Beverly**

What are you doing? You have no right. (*Jeanette covers the mouthpiece to prevent Danny from hearing this.*) Hang up the phone.

**Jeanette**

Seven o'clock sounds perfect... Wonderful! I think the two of you will hit it off perfectly. Goodbye (*She hangs up*).

**Beverly**

What do you think you're doing? You can't make dates for me.

**Jeanette**

Danny is a lovely man.

**Beverly**

I'm not going.

**Jeanette**

He's kind and intelligent. He owns his own business. And he's very handsome.

**Beverly**

He's gay.

**Jeanette**

That's not true. Idle gossip.

**Beverly**

Everyone else thinks so. *Knows* so.

**Jeanette**

You worry too much about what others think. Just because a man has manners and style and likes flowers and treats women with respect...

**Beverly**

He's gay. You're so naive.

**Jeanette**

He is not. Remember? He was engaged to that sweet cripple girl for three years, until her wheelchair got stuck on the railroad crossing. She was dragged for half a mile. So sad.

**Beverly**

He probably rolled her onto the tracks so he wouldn't have to go through with it.

**Jeanette**

Beverly! That's an accusation of murder! Shame on you for even thinking...

**Beverly**

What was she doing on the railroad tracks in a wheelchair anyway? Have you ever wondered? He's dangerous. Call him back now and tell him I'm not going.

**Jeanette**

Just moments ago I told him you would go. What could I tell him now?

**Beverly**

Tell him I have cramps.

**Jeanette**

How vulgar! I'll do no such thing. You can go out with him once and see how you like him.

**Beverly**

And what if I come home dead? Who knows how many people he's killed?

**Jeanette**

What has gotten into you? I can't call him; I'd look like a fool.

**Beverly**

You'll look even more foolish if he drives all the way out here and I'm not here.

**Jeanette**

Where are you going?

*(Beverly picks up the phone and starts dialing.)*

Who are you calling?

**Beverly**

I'm going to Daddy's.

**Jeanette**

You were just there. I thought you would spend some time with me.

**Beverly**

*(Waiting for an answer on the phone)* More like doing time. *(Into phone)* Hi – Millie. Yes, it's Bev. I was wondering.... could you or Daddy come pick me up?... Nothing.... I'd like to come stay there for.... Oh. You didn't mention a trip before.... Sounds like fun. I've never been there.... Okay. I'd certainly be in the way *(forced laughter)*... Um hmmm.... You two lovebirds have fun.... love to Daddy. Bye-bye.

**Jeanette**

Trip? What kind of trip?

**Beverly**

A romantic getaway. The Woodfield Inn.

**Jeanette**

How extravagant. Your father has certainly loosened up the purse strings.

**Beverly**

They go on romantic trips quite often.

**Jeanette**

Acting like school children. Disgraceful!

**Beverly**

Billy and I went with them once.

**Jeanette**

Billy? Your father took you and Billy on an overnight...

**Beverly**

Forget I said anything. I wasn't supposed to...

**Jeanette**

Your father condoned...

**Beverly**

He said you'd go ballistic.

**Jeanette**

What did he think? ..... Someone in this family has to uphold some standards.

**Beverly**

He said you didn't like sex.

*(Extended Pause)*

**Beverly**

He said you didn't like it. That you and he.... almost never. That's why your marriage fell apart.

**Jeanette**

*(Dumbfounded)* He... He... discussed our.... our private.....with you?

**Beverly**

With me and Billy and Millie.

**Jeanette**

*Billy and Millie!*

**Beverly**

They laughed.

**Jeanette**

*(Enraged)* Laughed? They laughed?... Did he laugh too?... Did you?

**Beverly**

We all laughed! We all had a good laugh at frigid, dried-up you!

*(Jeanette slaps Beverly. For a moment, both are dumbfounded. Then Beverly puts her hand to her cheek and Jeanette looks at her hand.)*

**Jeanette**

I'm... so... sorry...

**Beverly**

No! I deserved it.

**Jeanette**

I lost control.

**Beverly**

Good! Mother.... Mother.... look at me.... It felt good, didn't it?

**Jeanette**

It felt strange

**Beverly**

Alive, right?

**Jeanette**

I don't know... what...

**Beverly**

I was wrong to say those things. Daddy was wrong to tell everybody. I laughed, but I felt really hurt that it was going on.

**Jeanette**

It was your father's fault.

**Beverly**

Good, Mother. This is good. Pretend I'm Daddy and hit me.

**Jeanette**

No, I can't.

**Beverly**

*(Taking her mother's hands and making her hit her.)* He left you, Mother. He left us!

**Jeanette**

*(She starts hitting without **Beverly's** help.)* I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!

**Beverly**

*(Hitting back)* I hate him, too!

*(They collapse into an embrace, both crying for a few moments. Suddenly, the cries turn into giggles, and the two sit, giggling uncontrollably.)*

**Beverly**

I've never seen you act so silly.

**Jeanette**

*(Looking around for neighbors)* Lord, I hope nobody saw us. I should feel embarrassed.

**Beverly**

I like you like this.

**Jeanette**

I.... your father.... The things he wanted me to do....*(long pause)* It made me ill. It was not... part of my... nature. I tried to accommodate...

**Beverly**

You don't have to...

**Jeanette**

I was aware that part of him existed, but it wasn't really him. I knew he went elsewhere to satisfy his secret cravings, but I didn't mind. I was glad he found relief. That dark part of his nature.... was just a shadow, not the man. I had the real thing, the part of him that was best, the part that was a man. I nurtured that part of him, hoping it would eclipse the shadow. But I felt him slipping away into the darkness. I tried my best to give him what he wanted. But... he had no patience with me.... no tenderness left... Now *Ms. X* emboldens the shadow and neglects the man.

It mystifies me. *(Deep breath)* I suppose it's best that I devote myself to the flowers. They mate out of necessity, not out of desire.

**Beverly**

Maybe desire is necessity.

*(The phone rings, **Beverly** grabs it. Glumly)* Hello... Oh... hi... I'm sorry about.... What?... Are you sure? *(brightening)* Well, yes.... I can be ready.... Okay. About an hour.

**Jeanette**

Who was that?

**Beverly**

That was Billy. He thought about what you said. He dumped her and he's taking me to dinner.

**Jeanette**

At Luciano's?

**Beverly**

Yes!

**Jeanette**

Wonderful! All because of what I said.

**Beverly**

I thought you said he was trash.

**Jeanette**

Anyone can improve.

**Beverly**

It's what I want, and you want me to be happy, right?

**Jeanette**

Yes... Of course I do...

**Beverly**

I want you to be happy too.

**Jeanette**

Let's not press our luck.

**Beverly**

Mr. Danny's coming out here. Why don't you go to dinner with him? You can talk about flowers... and there's no danger of sex.

**Jeanette**

Beverly!

**Beverly**

And if it looks like he's trying to kill you, just kick him in the crotch.

**Jeanette**

You stop that. He is a sweet, kind man.

**Beverly**

I think you have a crush on him.

**Jeanette**

Now, stop that.

**Beverly**

I have to hurry and get ready.

**Jeanette**

Your light blue dress with the floral print. It's perfect. I'll press it for you.

**Beverly**

Thank you, Mother.

**Jeanette**

I can make you a quick little corsage.

**Beverly**

*(Exiting)* I've got to hurry.

**Jeanette**

*(Thinking aloud)* Billy is handsome.... Their children would be beautiful.

*(Fade)*