

Lucky Piggy

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I clean lucky piggy in a gas station bathroom with a toothbrush and Dawn dish soap. I am careful not to go against the grain of his bristles since he sliced my index finger last time. Mitch tells me to be careful with his teeth, too. Technically, he's a hedgehog, but hog sounds so gruff for something so delicate. I use a stiff paper towel to pat him dry. There is a moment when he tilts his black eyes at me and looks like he could be my baby.

Mitch says it's dangerous to treat a probability enhancement totem like a person. "That's what they want," he says. "Makes them unpredictable."

Crumpled toilet paper sticks to the bottom of my flip flops when I shift feet. The restroom smells like chlorine and grape flavored bubble-gum. I think about my best friend in high school who used to say that pool water smelled like semen. I would just laugh and ask "And how would *you* know, Holly?"

The door is heavy and rips shut behind me. I clutch lucky piggy like a cantaloupe beside my breast. The air is thick, hot, and humid. Mitch leans against the gashed in hood on the front of the car, holding a burning cigarette. He's only ten years older than me and the hair on his head is all brown but his facial hair always comes in gray. What my mother would have called a hatchet face.

The first time we met at the donut shop, he told me his sister's name was Miranda, too, and I don't know why, but I thought that meant he was a nice guy. He asked me if I'd ever been to Canada and I was mostly curious about what he had in the cat carrier sitting at his booth.

I move past Mitch and open the back door of the car. I kneel in the passenger seat and place lucky piggy back in his cage with his goldfish shaped pillow and the 2016 Republican National Convention t-shirt he uses as a blankie.

Mitch finishes his cigarette and gets in the car. I sit in the passenger seat and he drives. Later we'll drink vodka mixed with sugar-free soda in bed. He'll fall asleep but I won't. I'll smell his shoelace breath and run my fingers over the stiff bristles on his jaw, careful not to go against the grain.

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The next day we're at a gift shop in a Windsor casino and a well-meaning cashier runs over to me with Mitch's clover shaped keychain dangling from her fingers.

"I think your husband left this," she says, smiling.

I don't correct her. There's something about the shape of a husband-wife-and-child family that people like to see. I carry lucky piggy in my arms to the elevator. People think he's a baby and don't look twice unless it's to say, "What a cutie. He looks just like you."

Magical creatures are obviously banned in casinos, but we're able to get around the rules with lucky piggy. Part of his abilities are to make people see what they think they *should*, not what's there. I don't understand all the specifics. I just know that the more people mistake him for my baby, the more I want it to be true.

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I once asked Mitch where he found lucky piggy and he told me he won him at an underground poker game in Boston. "It's a hard game to get into," he said. "If you don't have anything of value, they make you put your soul up for collateral. Thing is, they're picky about that, too."

I asked if he lost his. All he said was that the order is real strict. “They’ll hunt you down and slit your throat if you get caught in a casino with a P-E-T,” he said. “They don’t fuck around.”

“But what do they do with it after that?” I asked.

“The fuck does it matter?” he said. “Your throat is slit.”

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Lucky piggy sits on the bed and watches TV with me. It’s a curling championship. I flip through the glossy room service menu during commercials. Mitch hits the bathroom and comes out freshly shaven, dressed in a clean gray blazer over a blue shirt and black slacks. He asks me for lucky piggy, which he just calls *the PET*, and I keep my fingers perched on his head.

“He doesn’t want to go,” I say.

“Miranda,” he says, opening his hands. “Don’t treat it like a person. It’s dangerous.”

He tucks the baby in the pocket of his blazer. Lucky piggy’s small enough to fit. People will see him and just think he’s a cell phone or a pack of Camel Lights. They leave and I consider fixing myself up so I can go down and play some slots.

The blue and green tiles on the shower are arranged in alternating squares so that if you squint, it looks like a swimming pool. I think of Holly and her pool water semen. Fancy ovals of soap sit on folded towels. The label says they’re supposed to smell like chamomile tea but they remind me more of apples.

In the sink, I see tiny flecks of Mitch’s white and gray facial hairs. I use my finger to swirl around the smooth bowl, making lines in the grit. It reminds me of sitting in the sand, making moats. I look through my reflection in the bathroom mirror, wondering how different I would look without a soul.

I don't get dressed or go to the casino. Since Mitch will make a lot of money tonight, I order a banana milkshake with rum and a fancy grilled cheese stuffed with brie and roasted pears. The hotel employee who brings the room service says the kitchen forgot to add the pears. I tip forty percent anyway. I take the bottle from Mitch's bag and add extra vodka to the shake. The curling championship ends and I watch *Easy Rider* with Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson.

It's late when Mitch comes back to the room but I don't know how late since the curtains are thick. He smells like cigarettes and dirty socks. His heavy paunch rises and deflates, occasionally punctured by a rip of snores. I peer into the darkness, trying to make out lucky piggy. His cat carrier sits on the floor near the bathroom. Beyond the wall, I hear gentle thumps and muffled moans. I always imagine when other people make love they are handsome and young, with gym toned bodies and shiny hair. No split ends. Beside me, Mitch keeps snoring through it all. I lift his arm from my waist and roll out of the covers. The carpet is soft beneath my feet. I kneel and flick my fingers through the grates in the cage. Lucky piggy's little spine rises and falls like a tiny balloon.

I unclasp the door and scoop him into my hand. We sleep curled together, his sharp, spiky head beneath my chin. I am careful not to press him too hard, though there are times I want to squeeze.

In the morning, Mitch walks to the bathroom and takes a piss. The door stays wide open the whole time.

"Don't treat it like a person, Miranda."

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I order a Sex on the Beach not really knowing what it's supposed to be. It tastes like cranberry and vodka but something in it cuts the back of my throat like horseradish. Mitch has

lucky piggy with him at a blackjack table so I am all alone. I wander through aisles of red, blue, and yellow slot machines. They blink and squeal and beep like video games. In the bathroom, an old woman in pink stretch pants tells me that the trick is to find the machines placed at entrances and end caps.

“They want people to see you win those,” she says. “That’s why they hit more.”

I carry a purse filled with Canadian coins that Mitch gave me. I sip my drink and crank levers and I don’t win anything.

I get bored again. Mitch looks like he’s on a winning streak but he knows better than to be obvious about it. I am probably the only one on the casino floor who can see lucky piggy poking his head out of his blazer pocket. Everyone else sees what makes sense. A pack of smokes, a handkerchief, a folded valet ticket. A waitress passes by and asks if I need another cocktail and my first thought is, *“But how will you find me if I leave?”*

I tell her that I would like something less sweet this time, maybe with an olive. After she walks away, I dart three rows over and duck behind an electronic baccarat game. It reminds me of when me and my sister would hide from our brothers behind the stairs. The boys almost always gave up and went off to play something without us.

The waitress has no problem finding me. She holds a square shaped glass with three green olives on a plastic toothpick.

“It’s a real martini,” she says, crouching to her knees. “We just can’t use martini glasses.”