

Adults at Home

by Marcy Dermansky

The afternoon my little sister won her first U.S. Open, I was also busy, having strenuous sex with David Solemn, a man I'd met earlier that morning at Dunkin Donuts. We did it on the white living room carpet in my parent's new Connecticut house while the match was broadcast live on the big screen TV. David kept pace with the rallies, moving fast when Amy served and volleyed, thrusting hard for first serves and overheads.

"Your sister hits the shit out of the ball," he said.

My sister, Amy Luna, rising tennis star, took the second set at love. She rocked back and forth on the heels of her sneakers during the closing ceremonies, grinned throughout her older opponent's retirement speech as the defeated former champion bid farewell to her loyal fans. Amy threw her racquet high in the air, filled her hands with the monstrous trophy and a cardboard replica of the check for the sum of \$750,000.

The camera panned over to my parents, wearing new white linen outfits, hugging, kissing--lips on lips, hands in each other's hair. I watched, my mouth hanging agape. All year long my mother told me about her divorce lawyer. She talked about equitable property settlements and wanted to know if I'd started looking for an apartment. She took an inventory of the furniture, offered me the old living room sofa and matching armchair, a new set of white ceramic dishes from the Pottery Barn. "I'm fine here," I said, though I wasn't, and my mother sighed loudly before asking me to return a stack of over-due library books.

Amy handed her trophy to a ball girl and took the microphone. She spun around, around and around, taking in the crowd, the applause. Everyone at Arthur Ashe stadium was on their feet. Amy giggled. John McEnroe, a commentator for NBC, cooed about her infectious charm. He rambled on about her amazing poise on the court and the adorable slope of her nose, comparing it to the

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distinctive Nike stripe. They all loved her, adored her. She was seventeen. Her legs were long and skinny and nicely curved. She had a flat chest, a long blond ponytail.

David Solemn stared at the TV.

"She's so cute," he said.

I stared at David Solemn. He was a good-looking man, even without clothes. I ran my hand through his thinning hair but he didn't respond. I shut my eyes. Amplified by three-foot high speakers, Dolby surround sound, I listened to my world famous, vain, selfish, giggling sister clear her throat.

"I'm so happy," she began.

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The next day, my family sat me down at the long oak table in the dining room. Amy wore the red velvet mini skirt that signified victory. Dad ran the palms of his hands over his new laptop. My mother drank a Bloody Mary.

"Why don't you start?" Dad said, looking to Amy. "Put the ball in play, so to speak."

Amy giggled.

"It's nothing personal, Rebecca," she said. "But I just hate looking at you in the morning, seeing how sad you are. I think about you being too broke to go to the movies or to pay for your own groceries and I feel guilty for how great my life is. Dad says I can't give you any of my money or I would. I'd write you a check for \$20,000 today, but Dad says that you have to earn your own way. Anyhow, you're ruining the best time of my life. *Sixty Minutes* is coming for an interview tomorrow and I don't want you living here in this house. It's embarrassing. I'm ashamed of you."

"Hmm," Dad said, opening his laptop. "Is that it?"

"Yep," said Amy, giving Dad a hearty nod. "I said it all."

"Lacking in sensitivity, but to the point."

Amy grinned. "Just like my game. No mercy."

"Why not \$100,000?" I said to Amy. "Why not \$200,000?"

Mom coughed.

Dad started pressing buttons on the keyboard.

"Your mother has decided to let me speak for the both of us," he said. "I've prepared a speech."

I looked to Mom for support. She'd finished her Bloody Mary and was chewing her celery.

"I typed this up, Rebecca," Dad said, "because I wanted to make sure I didn't forget anything."

Dad put his hand on Mom's. She grimaced and then seemed to rethink her decision, smiling and deliberately covering his hand with hers. Dad lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Amy rolled her eyes.

"As you know," he said, "our marriage has been strained. We've had problems. Who could have believed we'd get through your mother's affair with Amy's tennis pro? My unfortunate dalliances with secretaries are also common knowledge. Your mother and I have been through plenty. Too much.

"I almost lost my business to the recession, and we were all unhappy then. You probably remember. You had to give up your flute lessons, ceramics class, even summer camp. We sacrificed. Your mother and I double-mortgaged the old house to pay for Amy's lessons. Your mother continues to clip coupons. Everything she buys, she buys on sale even though I tell her these are the salad days. We could live on the interest of Amy's winnings alone, not to mention the endorsements.

"Do you know what has held us together? During the hard times? The glue of the Luna family? Amy's tennis.

"Amy's tennis. I wanted to leave, admit my failure and start a new life, but I couldn't give up, for years, because I had to pay for Amy's tennis lessons. She had that kind of promise you can't ignore. So you had to go to a state school instead of Swarthmore because I couldn't afford tuition and the tennis academy. I asked you if you would give up a prestigious education for your sister and you did.

"Well, I look at you now, living at home, wandering around the house in your leggings after quitting that wonderful job on Wall Street, and I wonder if we let you make the wrong choice. My heart breaks for you, Rebecca."

Dad looked up from his computer and smiled at Mom. He drank from her empty Bloody Mary glass. Amy stretched her arms over her head. When she saw me watching her, she smiled.

"We've made it," said Dad. "Your sister is a star. She won the goddamned U.S. Open. We bought this new house in Connecticut. Your mother and I completed our therapy with a marriage counselor and we've resolved our anger. I can honestly say that we've worked through our problems. We are through with the lies, the infidelity. The Luna family is at the light at the end of the tunnel and we deserve our happiness. But to get to this solid ground, we've come to a painful realization."

Dad took a big breath.

"It's you, Rebecca. You are ruining our marriage. Three years ago you moved back home for what was supposed to be a summer. You've shown no signs of wanting to leave. You spread your dirty dishes all over the house. You borrow your mother's new car and return it with an empty tank of gas.

"You've become a walking, aching mess and without our help, I don't think you know how to help yourself. We all love you Rebecca - your mother, and Amy, and me, your Daddy. We all love you. You don't need to win a Grand Slam to win your parents' love. We love you as much as we love your sister. And it's because we love you that we've decided you can't live here any longer. We want you to leave the house today. Before we back down in our resolve. You have to live your own life. We all know that you can do it."

Tears streamed down my mother's cheeks. Amy rolled her wrists in small, concentric circles. I waited for what came next, the finale, the money. The money! Of course, the money. My parents knew I had no money. Where could I go without any money? Did they want me sleeping in a homeless shelter in New Haven? I couldn't even afford a weekend at Motel 6. Dad shut the computer down and left

the room. Amy put her hands on top of her head. She looked at me and shrugged her shoulders.

"Tough luck, huh?" she said.

When I was eight years old, not long after my sister's birth, I stopped talking. My parents took me to a specialist in Manhattan. The tests revealed no physical impediment, but the bills were more than my parents could afford and we had to move to a smaller apartment. Dad yelled at Mom. Amy slept soundly in her crib. I hid in my bedroom closet.

* * *

David Solemn was thirty-five. He was an artist. For the last twelve years, he had lived at home. The Solemns had long ago stopped asking when he was going to move out. Instead, his mother got her own apartment in New York. She visited on weekends.

David had given up on finding a job or a girlfriend. So when I called him from the Dunkin Donuts where we met only the day before, there was no hesitation in his offer.

I moved right in.

During the week, when Mrs. Solemn was gone, I cooked dinners for David and his father. In October, I made a practice run at Thanksgiving. I did the turkey, the stuffing, cranberries and sweet potatoes and string beans sprinkled with slivered almonds. Gravy made from scratch. For dessert, there was homemade apple pie and vanilla ice cream. "Now this is a girl," David's father had said. When we were done, the three of us went upstairs and watched a TV movie--three adults, sprawled across the fluffy, white comforter on the Solemn's king-sized bed. I gave Mr. Solemn a kiss goodnight before David and I went off to bed.

I'd been living in the Solemn house for over a month when Mrs. Solemn invited me out to the back porch for a chat.

"I'm sixty years old, Rebecca," she said. "So when I tell you something, don't think that I don't know. Let's say you're an artist.

If you are an artist and you live your entire life without making that art you might as well be dead."

She looked at me knowingly.

I knew Jackie Solemn was taking art classes. But I had no interest in making art. I wasn't ready to commit suicide either. I liked to cook but I didn't tell this to Mrs. Solemn.

"Oh," I said. "That's how my sister feels about tennis."

Mrs. Solemn shook her head. "Your tennis playing sister doesn't interest me." She put her hands on both sides of my face. "I'm talking about you. Living in my house, living in your unemployed adult boyfriend's parents' house. I feel like I can talk to you freely because you're not my child. Doesn't this situation trouble you?"

Most people, Mrs. Solemn included, will let you down. They put so much stock in employment. Making money. Working. In a previous incarnation, I'd done that. I had the fast-track job in the big city and five days a week, I wore the good clothes and sat diligently in front of a computer, performing the tasks that I was assigned, my head aching, black spots clouding my field of vision, until the clock struck five--and even then, I often put in overtime. Living this kind of life, you're too zonked out to be properly miserable. I rode the subway, paid rent, paid the electric bill and the phone bill, parceled the remaining dividends to the dry cleaners, the deli by my office where I bought lunch, the Vietnamese place where I got spring rolls and steamed vegetables and rice for dinner. Vacations, I went to the Caribbean with coworkers from the office, drank too much, and had drunken sex with relatively good-looking strangers.

My life, as I am supposed to believe, had value then.

"I like living here," I told Mrs. Solemn.

Mrs. Solemn tilted her head back gazing at the peeling white paint of the porch ceiling. A dog barked down the street; I listened longingly to the sounds of Sunday football on TV inside the house.

"I used to worry that David wouldn't wake up in the mornings," she said. "Sometimes, when he slept late into the afternoon, I'd vacuum outside of his door to wake him up. I'd cook bacon to lure

him downstairs. I'd knock on the door, wake him up. I lived in dread of opening up the door to find my dead son."

Like David and his father, I was relieved when Mrs. Solemn left at the end of her weekends.

* * *

Our lives were simple.

David made art during the day in the basement, elaborate cartoons based on his life, the quest to end tension and the simultaneous search for the perfect girlfriend. He'd been looking for this perfect woman for years. He even took one of the more beautiful candidates to Hawaii, bought her the jewelry she pointed to in store windows. David was tall and handsome and charming and talented and smart, the whole package, but most women want a man who has a job and doesn't live at home. A man who doesn't twitch.

Mr. Solemn worked in the attic. He was a distributor of rawhide bones and chews. On busy days, I went upstairs and helped out, answered the phones and helped with the invoicing.

I felt I was *it*, the perfect girlfriend. My love for David was so large, my affection for Mr. Solemn so pure. I wanted nothing. In their chaotic, three-story house, there were no maids to complain about the wet towels on the floor. No long-legged, bouncing sister, running into the kitchen for a Gatorade. No more breathless stories of trips to Paris and London, or tedious recounts of misplayed points. Better still, there were no three o'clock calls from my father, checking up on the day's job search.

Mr. Solemn gave me \$200 each week to spend on groceries. I cooked and cleaned and I was happy. Evenings, the three of us went to the movies. Sometimes we rented them. Other nights Mr. Solemn worked late, and David and I cuddled in the living room, reading in front of the fireplace. Mr. Solemn always finished by the eleven o'clock news. We would meet together on the big bed at the end of the day.

Of these all these good things, what I loved most was watching *General Hospital* with David. At 2:52 every afternoon, Monday through Friday, I'd start popping the popcorn on the gas stove. By 2:54, I'd be melting the butter. At 2:56, I'd put three ice cubes into tall, frosted glasses and pour the Diet Coke. At 2:57, David would appear from the basement. We would carry the popcorn and Diet Cokes up to the den, and still have two full minutes to settle down, kiss, munch on the popcorn until the show started.

We had the same favorite character, Carly Roberts. Carly had come to Port Charles to ruin the life of her birth mother, Bobbie Jones. Within months, Carly was able to seduce Bobbie's husband, family man and neurosurgeon Tony Jones. Soon Carly found out she was pregnant. She didn't know if the baby was Tony's or AJ Quartermaine's, the young, good-looking, wealthy, recovering alcoholic, eligible bachelor.

Ours was a happiness most people are too scared to try.

* * *

There are four months between the U.S. Open and the next big international tournament, the Australian Open. Amy hated to practice, she often refused to train between events. She was bored. There was no other reason for her to show up at David Solemn's house on one particularly warm and beautiful Saturday afternoon, driving a gleaming, white Mercedes convertible.

David and I were sitting on lawn chairs in the late afternoon sun, eating turkey sandwiches, while inside the house Mr. Solemn and Jackie Solemn discussed their dying marriage.

"Cool car, huh?" Amy called out.

She wore black, mirrored sunglasses, a scoop neck pastel pink T-shirt, a pink leather jacket, pink capris, and shiny pink lipgloss. "I only have a learner's permit, so I'm not supposed to drive. I'm seventeen years old but I've been so busy with tennis I haven't had the time to get my license." She smiled at David. "My name is Amy Luna. I'm Rebecca's little sister. I'm appalled that she hasn't invited

me over. I've been wanting to meet you, the mysterious boyfriend. Come out for a drive."

"No," I said, fingering the barely eaten sandwich on my lap. "We're busy."

David leapt to his feet.

We went to the Connecticut coast, David at the wheel, driving ninety miles an hour down the interstate, Amy next to him in the front seat, laughing, her blond hair flying behind her, crying "faster, faster." I closed my eyes, gripping the fastened seat belt.

At the beach, the blue sky had turned gray. The strip of sand where the waves broke was littered with thick white foam and dead jellyfish. Amy sprinted, showing off her speed, jumping over the glutinous corpses.

"Look at me," she giggled. "Look."

I thought about taking a rock hammer to her forehead.

"I'm jumping for my life," she cried. "I'm chasing ground strokes down the line."

Then David started running after her, tackling her from behind so that they both fell into the sand. Amy giggled and shrieked and David tickled her ribs. He slipped a handful of sand down her pink T-shirt. I walked behind them, quiet, hands jammed in my jeans pockets.

"Leonardo DiCaprio didn't even know who I was," I heard Amy telling David when she was back on her feet. "He doesn't watch sports. Supposedly he has a girlfriend, some model, but I don't think it's going to last. He took my phone number, but he's back in Hollywood. John McEnroe's having a big bash next weekend out at the Hamptons. He's always flirting with me. I promised to hit the ball around with his kids. You should come."

"Cool," David said.

He looked good that day. For weeks, David hadn't been doing all that great. He'd been slouching. And the twitching was worse, his legs, even his eyebrows. He'd lost interest in *General Hospital*, leaving halfway through the show. But with the infectious Amy Luna around, his body remained straight and still. His skin glowed.

"Let's go out for cappuccinos," Amy said. "I had the best cappuccino when I was in Italy last May for the Italian Open. Connecticut blows."

David nodded his head. I knew for a fact that he had never once left the country. He put his arms around Amy's shoulders, guiding her back to the Mercedes. I poked at a dead jellyfish with a long stick, looking into its bulging, vacant eyes. When they're alive, jellyfish are magical, arms long and luminescent and shimmering neon, pink and purple. It was insane to have thought I was the perfect girlfriend. Pathetic.

* * *

The local news showed footage of a six-week-old puppy at the ASPCA, the kind that breaks your heart, small enough to fit on the face of a tennis racquet -- big, soulful eyes.

"We could use a dog in this house," Mr. Solemn said.

"I've never had a dog," I said.

It was shameful. I could hear the longing in my voice. I was feeling sorry for myself because David just called. Amy had gotten drunk on tequila shots at John McEnroe's big charity gala in the Hamptons. She passed out in the guestroom, and McEnroe had invited David and Amy to stay on for the weekend.

"Never, Rebecca?" Mr. Solemn said. "You've never known a dog's crazy love?"

I hadn't. I hadn't known a lot of things. I'd had my parents' love for the entire eight years until golden Amy was born. But maybe not. Maybe my parents were too busy cheating on each other to notice when I started to crawl or took my first steps. My Dad said I didn't need to win a Slam for his love, but once I moved into the Solemn's house, he never called. Not once.

Mr. Solemn was a warm, honest man, and the next day, after I made breakfast, we went straight to the ASPCA. The crying began when I found out the puppy, the one I was going to love with all my heart after David dumped me, had been adopted earlier that

morning. So Mr. Solemn led me back to the car and then drove onward, leading us on to the mall. I don't think he had any plans for the day.

* * *

After the Gap, we headed to the food court, collapsing at a secluded table next to the waterfall. Mr. Solemn summoned the energy to buy us frozen yogurt waffle cones while I slumped over the table, head on my elbows, crying onto my knuckles. When I closed my eyes, I found myself thinking about *General Hospital*.

Things hadn't worked out so well for Carly Roberts. After her baby was born, she told Bobbie that she, Carly, was her long-lost daughter, that her newborn son was Bobbie's grandchild. After so many months of build-up, Carly's secret was disclosed in front of the major players on the show, in the dining room of the Port Charles hotel. Outside there was a blizzard, the worst in years. And Bobbie rejected them both, Carly and the baby, her grandchild. Bobbie seemed lonelier than ever. You couldn't be more alone than Bobbie.

Mr. Solemn returned. He patted my hand.

"It's a good thing about the pup." He slid a waffle cone through my fingers, and didn't let go until he could feel my grip around the cone. "Now that I think of it, I couldn't bear to go through the housebreaking again."

I nodded, picking a strawberry off the smooth yogurt with my tongue. Tears continued to stream down my cheeks.

"Our last dog was in love with David," he said. "He had no use for me or Jackie. The nutty thing actually went on a hunger strike when David went to college, literally starved himself to death. After that we stuck to cats. That is until Boots got run over by the mail truck. Then Jackie decided it was bad luck with pets for the Solemns and called a moratorium. I'd forgotten. Yes, the pup would have been a big mistake."

"My mother never wanted pets," I said. "She said cleaning up after me and my sister was enough. I won a goldfish once at a school fair but Amy and her tennis friends flushed it down the toilet."

"I'm so sorry, Rebecca," Mr. Solemn said. "It sure is a pleasure having you around. As far as I am concerned, you can stay for as long as you like. I always thought it would be easier with a daughter."

It wasn't necessary for me to stop crying. Whenever I thought I was done, Mr. Solemn only had to say the next lovely thing.

"What do you say about going to the Body Shop?" he asked. Mr. Solemn started to gather up the dark blue Gap shopping bags, two to each hand. "I noticed you're low on bubble bath. How is your car running these days?"

* * *

Lying alone at night, waiting for David to get back from Amy's warm-up sessions in Florida, I closed my eyes, trying to remember us when we were first together. Memories of us at Dunkin Donuts at three in the morning when we couldn't sleep. Glazed chocolate donuts. Instead, I saw Carly Roberts.

"You've got to do something," she said. "Fast."

I rolled over, hugging my pillow. David and I had stopped having sex weeks ago, but we slept in the same bed, side by side, David's arm tossed over my shoulders.

"Mr. Solemn is sweet," Carly said. "But you can't live on a couple of outfits. And the Gap. Come on. He should have taken you to Nordstroms. He's a putz like Tony Jones, that pathetic excuse of a middle-aged neurosurgeon I used to think I loved. Your good father figure misses his wife. Pretty soon he's going to start making the moves on you."

I shook my head. The world was not as terrible a place as Carly believed. Mr. Solemn checked the oil in my car. He put fluid into the power steering gauge; he tightened the fan belts. My mother's old Nissan ran quieter, smoother than it had in years.

"Your loser boyfriend is doing it with your sister," Carly said.
"Don't take that kind of treatment from a man. You've got wiles."

Carly had wiles. She grew up scrappy and angry. I grew up too quiet for anger. I was the one who hid in the closet while my parents fought. A couple of times, I'd fallen asleep and they didn't find me until the next morning.

I turned on the light and pulled out a notebook. I'd make a shopping list. David Solemn would be home for dinner the next day. I would make one of his favorites: spinach lasagna, maybe, or broiled salmon with garlic mashed potatoes. There would be salad. I'd bake Tollhouse cookies, filling the house with that wonderful, warm aroma of melting chocolate. He would never want to leave.

* * *

I'd just taken the cookies out of the oven when Mom showed up at the Solemn house. She sat at the kitchen table, hands around the glass of milk I'd poured her, watching intently as I slid the warm cookies off the cookie sheet onto a red platter.

"Look at you," she said. "I didn't even know you could bake."

The spinach was in a strainer in the sink, waiting to be washed, dried, chopped. I shrugged and handed her a warm, chocolate chip cookie. Mom nibbled around the edges.

"You put in pecans," she said. She dipped her cookie in the milk.

David would be home in three hours and I had tons of cooking to do. I planned to change the sheets on our bed. I heard the dryer going in the basement. I had tried to plan the day perfectly but Mom was screwing everything up.

"I used to worry that she was involved with John McEnroe," Mom said. "As if that weren't bad enough. She's just a teenager, but what can I do? She has millions in the bank. Millions. I can't control her. She wants your David on the sidelines. When she could hire anybody. Anybody. Your Dad doesn't care as long as she keeps winning. I'm sick about it."

Mom looked pale. Her black cardigan was covered in lint; her hair was flat, dirty. I wondered how the revitalized marriage was going. My father had made promises before. They would be going to Australia soon to watch Amy play. The year before, they'd gone snorkeling in the Great Barrier Reef after Amy lost in the round of sixteen.

"Do you want a hug?" Mom said.

"No," I said, and took a step back. "What are you talking about?"

"I think you should move back home."

I noticed Mr. Solemn standing in the doorway. Normally he made noise when entering a room. It was the middle of the afternoon; he was supposed to be working.

"Your father agreed," Mom said. "He promised not to bother you about the job. We can redecorate your bedroom."

Mr. Solemn looked at the floor. "I'll miss you, Rebecca," he said.

"I'm making dinner." I went to the refrigerator and began removing ingredients: vine-ripened tomatoes, ricotta cheese, mozzarella. "You can stay for dinner, Mom. You can meet David."

Mom rested her chocolate chip cookie on the table. She walked over to me, carrying her glass of milk.

"You poor, delusional girl," she said. "He's not coming back. He's with your sister in Australia, helping her get ready for the Open. Amy says it's love. She goes and picks your unsuitable boyfriend to love."

Mr. Solemn took the bag of tomatoes out of my hand, the cheese from the other, and put them down on the chopping block.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "I thought I raised him better."

Mom shook my shoulders. "Wake up, Rebecca," she said. "Pack your things. I'm taking you home."

I thought about Carly Roberts. After the baby was born, after Tony left her and AJ threatened to sue for full custody, Carly took her baby to Jason Morgan, the brain-damaged, kind-hearted Port Charles mobster. They ended up safe and protected in his luxurious penthouse.

"Wiles," Carly said.

I looked at Mr. Solemn. "I want to stay," I said. "There's salad. I bought artichoke hearts for the salad."

"Which way is your bedroom?" Mom tugged at my arm. "I'll help you pack."

"There are croutons," I said. I shook Mom off, and pointed to the pantry.

"Rebecca, wake up," Mom said, and when I didn't budge, she flung her glass of milk at me. I felt the milk splatter across my face and run down the front of my T-shirt, make a puddle on my clean floor. I sucked on the ends of my dripping hair as Mom walked slowly towards the door. Mr. Solemn rushed to the counter for paper towels.

I would set the table with place mats. I would use the good crystal.

