



The Lawnballers by Angela Lovell

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My mother lives the life of an upstanding college professor: moral, calm and well behaved. Her two younger sisters give similar appearances, dispelling any suspicions that these women are, in fact, quite dangerous.

Becky, the middle sister, is a master of the sewing machine, and once crafted me a beautiful adult-size *Alice In Wonderland* Halloween costume with only my child-size dress as reference. When we were children Becky sewed tiny jinglebells into the petticoats of our handmade dresses, took us for mini-golf, and made threats of no more outings if we refused to finish our fishsticks. She taught me to climb trees without teaching me how to get down which made for interesting evenings of family members with flashlights. She fried funnel cakes in her double-wide trailer before moving into lovely little houses whose walls and floors she pulled apart and refurbished by herself. Becky was tough and once followed a ghost into our farmhouse basement toting a butcher knife and threatening to cut off its balls.

The youngest sister, Priss, holds a special title. When I was a little girl Priss dubbed me "Girlfriend" in that same way black girls sometimes refer to one another. The nickname stuck, and even my friends picked it up. Girlfriend kept goats, ponies, sheep and children, even while living in the trailer park my grandparents owned. Girlfriend held jobs as dog groomer, truck driver, photographer, and once experimented with selling her used panties in the back of porn magazines. Girlfriend took last minute roadtrips I was often a part of, seeing Plymouth Rock and various beaches. She used to chase my brother, Adam, and me with our cousins' dirty diapers. Becky and Girlfriend rolled and smoked joints while babysitting me when I was very young, giggling about radio DJs. Girlfriend would call and sweet-talk for concert tickets.

These days they deny such shenanigans, accusing me of exaggeration. Becky now has a very successful arts and crafts publication. For extra cash she makes ceramics in the two kilns kept in her garage, and sews Barbie lingerie and furs you can purchase on eBay if you have about \$100 a pop. Girlfriend chose a jolly Scotsman with a heavy accent as husband #5 and happily resides just outside Edinburgh, Scotland where they own a popular tourist attraction, art gallery, and beautiful home/inn for friends and family. Mom dresses for the role of classic school teacher in JC Penney's finest, constantly quotes Mark Twain, enjoys the easy listening of James Taylor, and did not have her first margarita until she was forty-five. These women are happy, successful, and essential members of their communities. But I knew them before they had an array of credit cards, respect from the PTA, and a variety of car payments. I knew these women when they were lawnballers.

Our Pennsylvania home was in the middle of farmland. Traffic jams were only ever caused by lazy cows and yard sales. We could trick-or-treat without fear of poison apples, though there were many raisins scoffed at due to the elderly population. Everyone knew their neighbors and the best farmers to buy eggs from. The biggest concern amongst the town was who would drive the afternoon kindergarten kids to school. Until that night...

My mother is not much of a drinker. Like me, her youth was not spent cracking boredom with drugs and alcohol. But her inhibitions could be loosened in the right company. The night in question was spent amongst her sisters and their young Aunt Bonnie, who was close to them in age. Aunt Bonnie was also a wild child, sexy and wisecracking like the trio. Growing up in a family of coon hunting and Bible beating gun-toters, these girls were easily bored by evenings around the TV. They had a van and the promise of a dark night. I was home watching black and white horror movies with Dad and Adam, getting chased through the dark, haunted farmhouse on commercial breaks, screaming with glee, forgetting Mom was out with girls. Forgetting until we heard them outside.

Adam and I rushed to the driveway at the bottom of the hill. Mom was fondling part of the booty, posing for photographs, laughing hysterically with her partners in crime. I am almost certain Girlfriend peed her pants as she often did from too much laughing on nights of shenanigans. Mom held a pink flamingo on each side of her tear-streaked face. Why people thought pink flamingos should inhabit a lawn five miles from a ski resort, I cannot say. Clearly, Mom was right to remove them. These were some of my first lessons of morality, standing in pajamas, watching Mom and aunts rummage through stolen lawn ornaments. It seemed okay though. Especially since what they mostly stole were lawn balls.

We could feed a whole starving country if we pooled the funds Americans spend on ridiculous lawn ornaments, or as my cousin Katie and I call it, "Yard Porn." It is garish, ridiculous and wasteful. It serves little purpose and makes its owners look like morons. And that is my defense, Your Honor.

That night, those crazy women, who I come from, decided against keeping the yard goods. What was the point of gambling the neighborhood's respect just to stash their winnings in the back of the garage? No, they knew they had only gone half the distance. They went all the way by distributing the tacky clutter evenly among neighbors' property, sometimes recreating a scene right across from its point origin. They never resorted to making deer hump one another, or damaging any of these treasures as lawnballers of today do. They had much more imagination, class and style.

"Oh look, Honey! The yard gnome will drive you to work today!"

It took about two weeks until we could drive to the grocery store and see everything returned to its proper home. Mom was delighted. The town was confused.

It didn't end that night. Soon afterwards Adam and I were driving with Girlfriend when she shouted, out of nowhere, "Oh my god, they're all staring into that lawnball! They're fucking mesmerized!"

She slammed on her brakes and moments later Adam had to scoot over to make room for the shining blue ball in the backseat. Girlfriend had been in the middle of recapping the entire story of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to the two of us. To an eight and six year-old, Girlfriend had just described the scene where Leatherface puts a kicking and screaming girl on a meat hook. My brother and I were quietly spellbound until Girlfriend had hit her breaks and filled our car with stolen property. This was habitual now, the random confiscation of lawn ornaments. It took us about an hour to scout a better location for the ball. Girlfriend left the animals staring into their void though. She claimed its message was clear. It was also daylight and lawnballing worked best under the ol' cloak of darkness.

Mom, Becky and Bonnie lost interest for the most part, but Girlfriend was the baby and could not seem to kick the habit as easily as her recovering junk junkies. She moved far from our area and her lawn disappeared under trinkets collected from our neighbors. I was completely amused by my aunt until she acquired a life-size wooden Indian chief. The chief's real owner put MISSING posters around town as though the chief had never come home for dinner. This wooden Native American made me sad. Had I taken the time to carve a chief out of a tree I would like him to hang around too. The chief stood guard on Girlfriend' porch until she moved to Florida. Girlfriend was crazy about that chief, but he was forsaken due to his weight, which made us all wonder how she got him to the van in the first place.

Once we all moved to Florida lawnballing seemed less of a challenge because you couldn't throw a pink flamingo without hitting another one. People in Florida are naturally tacky. Sometimes friends or family would bring Mom a lawnball as a gift, knowing the times she spent in van and black hoodie, laughing, falling in ditches beneath the weight of plastic animals. But Mom had changed. She was now subdued, overworked, and raising pre-teens. It was obvious these gifts of lawnballs had been plucked from a nearby yard by their telltale scratches and the sweat upon the brow of each happy deliverer. But Mom turned them away. Her days of lawnballing were behind her now. She dreamed bigger dreams than raping and plundering the yards of our neighbors.

Years later a dirty girl named Kay was employed and fired by my parents. My parents suspected Kay was stealing lotto tickets and cash from their video store. Their suspicions were validated when Kay was caught stealing baby Jesuses from their mangers one December in our small beachside town. We read about it in the paper. The Jesuses were found crammed in the trunk of Kay's car. Adam and I laughed hysterically, but Mom just shook her head and said, "That girl has no class."

Mom would know.