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## Opal's Muse

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## OPAL'S MUSE

### RONDA CRAWFORD

It had been Pumpkin's idea to steal dogs, Opal just rode shotgun to that bad idea like she always did. Her head was always out the window and in the clouds, as her momma was fond of saying. But no one understood that she just liked the feel of the sun on her face and the way the wind moved her hair. Things just looked brighter somehow.

Now Opal was born beautiful, and not in that all babies are cute kind of way, she was what folks would call a natural stunner. Strangers on the street would stop her mother, astonished by the unique shade of green in her eyes, or admire the head full of perfect large sandy blond curls she was blessed with from birth. And by the time she was a year old those ringlets made a perfect halo around her small head, making her look like God himself crafted her as a model of heaven's perfect angel. She was the picture of rosy cheeked health, when other babies were gross with snot running from small pug noses, Opal's perfect upturned nose was dry. And while everyone marveled at the model, long, well formed limbed perfection she was growing to be, no one had noticed that the child was slow.

Why it had taken her own momma almost 5 years to realize that her perfect doll still only spoke baby talk! She was so cute that the coos and gasps that should have been words went unnoticed as anything more than an adorable affectation that she would soon outgrow, which of course she did, eventually. But even as a grown woman she found herself lapsing into the sing-song lilt of a child, which had the advantage of making men just melt into fantasies of taking care of her.

In school there had been at least one teacher every year, who would mention that she wasn't doing something at grade level; they would tell her mother that Opal was below average in reading, or math, they were concerned and wanted to do an assessment. Her mother refused, of course, attributing their concerns to jealousy, because anyone with eyes knew there was nothing the least bit average about Opal. Besides, she knew that no one would ever ask her baby girl to do any thinking. When you were pretty, tall and blond, there was always a man who would do that thinking for you.

Which is why Opal, just smiled and nodded whenever Pumpkin came up with a **BIG IDEA**. That's what Pumpkin's words looked like in her head when he started talking, big letters in bright pretty colors that made her feel happy and smart that she had such a man looking after her. There were times when Pumpkin would be trying to explain how they were gonna get rich, and how all she needed to do to help was to make herself up pretty, and take pictures for Instagram, and that there were strangers who would give her money just because they liked to look at her. And how he would take that money and turn it into more money, and while she never could see the details as clear as she could easily understand the **BIG IDEA**.

The details they were these small gray letters, close together like in books, and reading was boring to her. But that was okay because when it came to thinking up things that involved all those small gray letters close together type thinking, Pumpkin had a brain that was big enough for the both of them.

“Rich people like their dogs better than their own kids.

Why some of those dogs cost thousands. You think Miss Rich Lady in her LuluLemon wouldn't pay a king's ransom to get her emotional support dog back? That's a special breed, the emotional support ones. They buy all types of clothes to put on them and whatnot for a DOG...”

Pumpkin sat leaned all the way back in his chair, glass of brown in one hand, cigarette in the other, his thinking pose. During thinking time, Opal was still and careful not to make any sudden movements that might break his concentration, she had learned not to disturb him and she couldn't join him because brown liquor made her hurl, and she hated being sick.

She was content to sit on the bed and watch the TV with no sound, paint her nails or just scroll absently through her phone looking at things she'd like to have when the BIG IDEA became a reality and all the things that Pumpkin touched would turn to silk instead of to shit, as he would say. She could only think it through because she wasn't allowed to curse out loud.

“See the way I got it figured is we follow one them rich chicks to the dog park and when Fido is running around pissing on trees and yapping, you go and grab the dog and just walk off with it in your dog purse thing we bought. Rich lady post flyers, and we return the dog catch the reward, rinse and repeat. Easiest money we ever gonna make.”

The sentence is punctuated with the last single ice cube in the cheap plastic glass, clinking as it rang back and forth like a cow bell in the big man's hand. She could only smile as she watched him clang the ice back and forth, it was a good sign. A sign that there would be no yelling tonight, nothing in the hotel room would get smashed, there would be no loud banging on the walls and no red and blue lights.

Tonight it there was just the shuffle of cards, a worn, tattered, incomplete UNO deck that she had gotten on the first day they met at that gas station in Tulsa where she was working. She remembered removing the wrapper, and that slippery fresh from the pack feel. How there was just too much to hold at one time so she could never get her shuffle right. But Pumpkin's hands, massive and coarse, somehow managed with a dexterity that seemed foreign in hands that looked as if they were incapable of anything graceful.

He had gone through considerable effort to teach her not just how to play but how to win, and even beat him sometimes, although she knew he never liked it when she did. She looked at those cards and smiled and thought about the hours that they had stretched out with nothing to do, and all the time he took teaching her the game. No one had ever made that much effort just for her, and he wanted nothing in return. Just to see her smile, hear her laugh, see the joy in her eyes, he said.

Because of Pumpkin she knew things now like the fact that when they started there were 108 cards in the deck. But over time, the number had dwindled, she knew because each time they played she counted them. She never knew exactly what had happened to them, but tonight she knew that she was down to 64, almost halfway all gone. Some had been lost, she figured, in their many moves, or damaged by spills or soiled with food until they were too unpleasant to the touch and thrown away, and some just seemed to disappear. But after the dog caper, Pumpkin promised he would buy her some new ones.

They played two hands, and Pumpkin won both of those, so he let her order an extra large pizza and let her get mushrooms and black olives but only on her half. They drank cold beer, shared the same bottle back and forth just like they did when they first met. And they laughed, it had been a long time since she had seen that laugh reach his eyes.

“You know I saw this story on Instagram, a video with a woman who walks dogs for a living. Makes all kinds of money doing it too.” She took a long slow sip from the bottle. It was almost empty. “Why, with my looks and your brains I bet we could make a killing. People love funny pet videos.” She tapped the now empty bottle against the table, leaned forward so she could blow into it. She always liked that sound.

“Dog walking? Huh go figure. So rich folks pay you to walk a dog? How much we talking?”

“I don’t know but the girl in the video says that it’s all a part of what they call the gig economy and that is how you make money doing things for rich people that they don’t want to do for themselves.” She was popping the cap on a fresh bottle, icy cold from the little refrigerator tucked in the corner of the room. She took a long swig, it burned a bit going down, but her mouth was all of a sudden dry. She watched his face, from the corner of her eye, waiting for the light of recognition in it.

“You know what baby, I think we should start a dog walking business. Maybe take some videos with that phone of yours.” Opal handed him the bottle, let all the air she had been holding in her body escape with a soft sigh as she stroked his hair as he took a drink. She spread herself across the bed, gathering all her cards and placing them back in the tattered box. Shuffling and counting them one last time, just for luck. 60... 61... .

“When we get this money, I’m gonna buy you a brand new deck, cause these have seen better days.”

62... 63...

“No Pumpkin, I think I’ve just finally gotten used to these.”