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A.G. Dumas

The Robbed Is Not Blameless

*The murdered is not unaccountable for his own murder,
And the robbed is not blameless in being robbed.*
--Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

"Honey, why didn't you let me fix your lunch for you today?" she asked with a hurt look.

Hunter Jr. sat at the dining room table, fuming, trying to ignore her.

After a long silence, she pleaded: "Honey, please talk to me, please! You're the only one. Please, honey!"

Finally, he answered. "I didn't want to bother you today, Alma, all right! Now let's drop it!"

"Oh, honey, it's never a bother," she replied. "I look forward to making your lunch." She extended her arms. "Now come, give your gramma a kiss. Please?"

He ignored her. Hunter ate a hastily made sandwich and guzzled a bottle of beer. A cigarette smoldered in a clam shell ashtray. He took a drag and looked past her out a large picture window into the bay.

His grandmother sat in a fine leather chair in front of the large window, partially blocking his view. Her illness has made her a fixture in the dining room, where she spent most of her days sitting. She began filing her nails.

He pushed the plate away, abruptly stood and walked into the kitchen. He washed his hands again, wondering if she was catching.

From the sink, he glared at her through the archway. Look at that old bitch sitting there on her throne sipping her brandy, he thought. He wondered what she was thinking about, sitting there with that old bitch smile on her face.

Behind the smile, Alma East was grinding her brown teeth closer to the gum, cursing the day she became housebound. A bout of shingles earlier that year had caused her to break out with painful skin eruptions and landed her in the hospital in Hyannis. It became impossible for her to continue running East Cottages & Motel by herself any longer. That spring, when it was time to begin re-opening the business for the upcoming season, her daughter Elsa refused to step in and run the business for Alma unless Alma deeded it to her; if not, the place would have to stay closed. Elsa had the old lady over a barrel, and Alma knew it. She finally relented and deeded the property to Elsa and her husband, Hunter Sr., with the provision that she would be able live on the property as long as she was medically able.

Now that Alma was recovering and feeling much better, she wanted it back. She still maintained control over her personal finances and check-book, and still had income from other rental properties she owned. He

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problem was lack of mobility and the fear that he daughter would try to take it all from her.

She wanted Hunter Jr. to take her to the lawyer who wrote the deed -- and have it reversed. She pleaded with him daily about her scheme at lunchtime.

Alma believed she had it down pat, since she had schemed all her life. At 19, she married the first nice guy who came along to escape a large immigrant family with eleven children, of which she was the oldest. Warren East was a quiet and simple man who was groundskeeper of a large estate on the wealthy side of the Connecticut town in which she lived. After they married, she moved into the caretaker's cottage with him on the estate. In time, she bought a car with money they saved. But it was her car, and nobody could drive it -- including Warren. He found it easier to go along with her than put up a stink.

In time, Alma became friendly with the mistress of the estate. She loaned the couple money to build a home of their own. After Elsa and two other children, Alma became pregnant again. But this time she went to a midwife who performed abortions. She made Warren convert her sewing room into an extra bedroom. He wasn't sure why they needed an extra bedroom, until he came home one evening and found that Alma had moved herself in. She locked the door at night.

Alma had no formal education past grade school and worked in a local independent food market to help support her family while her younger sisters watched the children. As the Depression eased and the prospects for war grew, she learned from the Wall Street crowd that patronized the store that it was the stock exchange that kept them on opposite sides of the counter. With a wonderfully ingratiating manner, Alma sought their advice and invested on their tips. She purchased as many shares in companies that produced oil and nylon as she could, and in ten years' time, she was able to buy the store she had worked in for so many years.

"You'll run the place with me, won't you, honey?" she asked, out of the blue, as Hunter Jr. stood at the sink washing his hands. He turned and looked at her.

"What the fuck are you talking about? Christ, Alma, make sense!"

"Junior, don't use that language! I want you to run this place with me, of course," she replied. "This business that I bought with my own money!" she screamed, proudly. "This place that I ran for 25 years by myself, that I was forced to give to your mother and father! They stole it from me! When I get it back, you'll help me run it, won't you?"

"Yeah sure, Alma, yeah sure," he replied, shaking his head, laughing. "Next summer, you and me!"

"Good!" she replied, with much relief. "We'll get rid of my good-for-nothing daughter and her husband!"

Hunter shook his head as she talked on. As the eldest grandchild, he was always Alma's favorite and learned how to play the role of scavenger. He grew up watching how she manipulated and bullied his mother and

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father with her money and its power. From the time he was small, Hunter learned how to play up to her. It was always good for a ten or twenty, and as he got older, an occasional fifty. He learned about her dividends and rent checks from her income properties, and how she liked to keep lots of cash around. When she didn't come across with enough, he stole from her.

She never suspected him, choosing to blame others. For many reasons, Hunter was golden in her eyes. Perhaps it was the way he began spurning her affections as he became older that made her crave his attention more. Now, at 80, Alma's reason for living had come down to venting to him at lunch.

The day had started like many other Cape days. The sun, which had been shrouded in fog all morning, finally burned through. It poured through the large picture window overlooking the harbor. The heat irritated her old, ravaged skin. She put her emery board aside and began scratching. She scratched her arms and neck, and then her torso. The itching grew worse; and she pulled up her blouse. She wore an old-fashioned girdle that was too tight. She clawed through it at the underside of her large, saggy bosoms.

Hunter came in for lunch at 11:30 as usual. He began teasing her as soon as he walked in. "What are you doing, Alma? Practicing your strip-tease for the nursing home?"

"Oh, honey, please don't make fun," Alma whined. "I'm as red as a beet under here."

"You've been using powder again, haven't you?" he asked, scoldingly.

"Just a little, honey," she confessed.

"Why do you continue to use that goddamned powder?" he chided.

"You know it does nothing but irritate you. Now go upstairs and wash it off with plain water and no soap and use that ointment the doctor gave you. Christ, how many times do I have to tell you?"

She smiled and stood up. "You're always thinking of your grandmother, aren't you, honey? You're mine and nobody else's." She put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the head as she walked behind him on her way to the stairwell. She labored up the stairs to the bathroom.

Hunter smoked and drank his beer waiting for her to come down and make him a sandwich, as was the daily routine. He looked across at the point. He could see a fishing boat from the local fleet making its way out past the market buoy. In the days before he was perpetually high, he had worked on the boats. He actually had become the first mate on his last boat. That was before he was caught stealing and blackballed by the fleet.

Alma called to him from the head of the stairs. "Come up here please, honey."

"What the hell is it now?" he yelled back.

"Honey, please come to me."

"Jesus, what a pain in the ass you are, Alma!" he retorted.

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He got up from the table and went to the bottom of the stairs. She was standing at the top in a bathrobe.

"What?" he asked, impatiently. "What the hell is your problem?"

"Please come up here."

He thought for a moment. Maybe the old bitch has a twenty or fifty for me. He climbed the stairs and stopped two steps below her. "What's up, Alma?"

"Give me your hand," she requested.

He was right, he thought. He extended his hand and she took it. With the other hand, she opened the robe and exposed her unsightly, old body. There were patches of crusty red skin on her midsection and on the underside of her large, sagging breasts. She took his hand and quickly held it against her. He yanked it away, cursing. He turned and stomped down the stairs.

That was earlier. As he dried his hands at the sink and lit up a new smoke, Hunter continued looking through the archway at this bizarre, aged creature and realized the golden opportunity he had.

Alma looked up from her manicuring and saw him staring. She smiled at him with her old, brown teeth. "A penny for your thoughts!" she said.

It'll cost you a lot more than that you old bitch, he thought. He walked back into the dining room, smiling broadly, as if nothing has happened. "So, Alma," he said, sitting down at the table again, "another season is almost over, isn't it?"

"Yes, honey," she replied, "another season is almost over. What date is it?"

"It's Wednesday."

"No, honey, the DATE."

"Oh, it's September twenty-fifth."

"It's that late already, huh?" She leaned in his direction and whispered, "What are they going to do?"

He gritted his teeth and played along with her question game, which he usually had little patience for. "Well, Alma, I imagine they're going to Florida for the winter, just like they did last year and the year before that, and the year before that."

"Are they going to take me with them?" she asked, still whispering.

"Alma, you don't have to whisper...they're both out."

"Oh, honey, yes I do!" she said. "The walls around here have ears." She hunched in his direction again and confided, "They don't want me to live with them. I think they want me dead."

"Alma, that's crazy!" he said, playing the game.

"No, it isn't! Now listen to your grandmother."

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"Okay, Alma, tell me what's on your mind." He moved his chair closer to hers and pretended he was ready to listen intently, even though he'd heard this story dozens of times.

"Your mother and father gladly took over this place, and now THEY have the nice rents it produces," she started. "But now they're saying they don't want me around!" She bristled, clenching a fist and shaking it. "I'll take them back to the lawyer if they keep it up! They won't have a pot to piss in if I take it back from them! Huh, imagine treating me like that. Where would they be without me, honey?"

"They wouldn't have a pot to piss in, Alma," he goaded, playing along.

"You're damn right! You'll take me to the lawyer, won't you?"

"Of course, Alma."

She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. The glow of arrogance darkened her old, pale cheeks. He noticed fresh bruises on her arms.

"You've been fighting with them again, haven't you?" he admonished.

"Oh yes, honey, we've been fighting terrible," she confessed. "Every night, when you're not here. When they start saying things, I can't help myself. You don't know how miserable it is to live under the same roof with them day after day. When she gets mad, she hits me with that big spoon!"

You deserve it you old bitch, he thought.

"Come on, Alma," he said. "I've lived with them long enough to know how it is."

"Honey, but you have your own cottage, and you can leave whenever you want to. I have no place to go."

"Yes, you do! You can go to the home!"

"The home! You want to see your grandmother in an old age home?"

"Then learn to get along with them!" he taunted. Her arrogance faded. She began whining for sympathy. He knew she would. She crumbled as easily as a mound of sand to an incoming tide. He bit down on his cigarette. He wondered how much he should ask her for this time.

He smiled and nodded as he listened to her rambling. In the distance he heard the horn of the incoming Boston ferry. He wanted to be on it when it left to return to Boston later that day.

He returned to his seat with a number in his head. "Now, Alma, you have to learn to get along with them, or it's going to be a very long winter season," he said. "I have a good mind to sit you all down when they come back later and give you all a piece of my mind. Now how would you like that?"

She put her hand to her heart. "Oh, no, honey, no, no," she pleaded. "They'll know we've been talking behind their backs and they'll throw me out on the street."

"They will not!" he scolded. "Now stop talking nonsense."

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"Honey, if they throw me out, can I come live with you?"

"Of course, you can," he lied, giving his stock answer. "I'll come get you from Boston."

Relieved, she smiled and sat back. "You're all mine, honey. All mine. Come give grandma a kiss."

"Of course, Gramma," he said. He hugs her and gives her a kiss on the cheek. He hates her old smell.

He broke off the embrace and gulped. "Gram, you know I don't like to ask, but I need some help and there is nobody else I can go to."

"Honey, don't ever be afraid to ask your grandmother's help. Do you need money?"

"Yes."

"Quanto?" she asked.

He gritted his teeth and dug his toes into the soles of his old sneakers. "Duee," he said. "Two thousand. "I know it's a lot, but I need it now."

She thought for a moment. "All right. Come by later when I'm sitting on the front porch. I'll have a check for you."

He hugged her again before going back to work cleaning cottages.

At 11:30 on a Friday morning in early October, she walked out to the kitchen and got the container of cold cuts out of the refrigerator. With a new cast on her right arm, it was an ordeal making the sandwich, but she managed.

After 15 minutes, and no sign of Hunter Jr., she got up from her chair and walked out to the front porch. "Junior! Junior!" she yelled. Getting no answer, she sat in a rocker and waited.

Finally she saw him, stripped to the waist in the Indian Summer heat, walking down the beach road toward the house. She sat back, relieved, and continued rocking. She began humming an old Italian love song that her mother used to sing.

As the bare-chested man walked past the porch, he nodded at the old lady.

"I thought you were my Hunter," she said after him. He turned and smiled, and kept walking. Alma became anxious and started calling her grandson's name again.

Inside, Elsa, who had returned to the house with her husband. for their lunch, listened.

"Christ, she's at it again!" she said to the senior Hunter. "Go tell her to shut up or I'll go out there and break the other one. Tell her favorite grandson has been gone for over a week and won't be back until the spring. Go tell her that!"

Hunter Sr. went out to the porch. "Mother, come inside now," he said through the screen door. "Elsa wants you to come in now. Junior's not here

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now.”

Alma looked at him with disgust. “You have the poor boy working too hard! You’re making him do too much! You good-for-nothing bastards!”

“Now, mother, keep your mouth shut!” he said, getting flushed.

“Oh, you shut up!” she yelled back. “You wouldn’t have a pot to piss in if it wasn’t for me.” She turned away and began calling for her grandson again. “Junior! Junior! Come help your grandma! Come take your grandma to the lawyer to get rid of these good-for-nothing fuckers!”

“Mother! Shut up and come in right now!” Hunter Sr. yelled. “Junior’s not coming!”

She looked at him with blazing eyes. “Junior is coming! He is! He needs his lunch!”

Inside, Elsa, was grinding her teeth. She reached for the large metal spoon hanging over the stove, but thought better of it. Instead, she grabbed a large meat tenderizing hammer and wrapped it in a dish towel. Nearly sixty years of hate flashed through her mind, and the rage welled.