



Breaking the Seal

by Reggie Morrissey

The November 20 auction at the mansion on Coffee Pot Bayou in St. Petersburg, Florida officially starts at 1 p.m., but well-heeled bargain hunters flock to the estate grounds hours before to inspect the finery.

Near the bayou's Venetian stone bridge, two fishermen in overalls cast their nets, eying the heavy foot traffic up the brick walk between the stone lions. A Great White Egret veers toward them from Bird Island. It lands on the wall next to the fishermen and waits. One fisherman nods at the stampede of shoppers from the double-parked SUVs.

"Jackson, that crowd looks as wild as the flea market by the junkyard."

Tipping his Buccaneer baseball cap, Jackson shrugs, "Junk's junk if you ask me, Davey, and you'd pay dearly for the junk in that house."

"Bet I can find a bargain."

"Your trailer need a new chandelier?"

"Maybe not a chandelier, but something no one else would see its value, and I'd just pick

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it up for a song."

"You a betting man, Davey?"

"Aren't you just a little curious to see how the other half lives?"

"Huh!"

"So, how about we stow the nets in my truck and see what's what?"

"I don't have my American Express card in these overalls."

"You're scared is all."

"In a snook's eye."

"Ten minutes," Davey said. "We take a look and get back to fishing."

"What're you so fired up about?" mutters Jackson as he draws up the empty net. "There's a yard sales every other street corner."

"Pitiful, you calling this a yard sale," says Davey. "That mansion must be 10,000 square feet. Look at the veranda. Bet there were parties there in the roaring 1920s with speak easy booze and babes."

"Okay, so it's better than a yard sale, but do I need a bunch of antiques?"

"Maybe the guy who lived there fished in Coffee Pot and will not need rods where he's going."

"I would look for them."

"Why don't we check the garage, too, and the pool shed, and the greenhouse, and that wooden sailboat, and work our way up to the house?"

"Oh, alright, Davey."

* * *

A bow-tied auction rep steps in front of the men as Davey kicks the tire on a 1960s BMW convertible.

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"You are supposed to inspect tagged items," the rep snaps. "The rest goes with the house."

Jackson straightens to his 6'3" height and crosses his arms over a barrel chest. His blue eyes narrow under bushy brows. "And what if I want to buy the house?"

The rep starts walking into the mansion. "Then I guess you'd only look at the items *without* tags."

Jackson scowls. "I should buy the damn place and wipe that smirk off his face."

"Yeah, do it!" Davey says, darting toward the dock "Hey, check out those rods."

"Now we're talking, Davey," Jackson says. "That's an 1880s Chubb rod. See the star trademark. Worth a fortune."

"Get outta town!"

"I read it in *Field & Stream*."

"What does it catch, goldfish? "

"Shhh," Jackson says as a couple stares at them. "Behave yourself."

"Let's see what's in the house, Jackson."

"Bunch of yuppies is all," Jackson says. "Bet I'm the only multi-millionaire."

"I know that, but when was the last time you sprung for lunch?"

"Supposed to *make* money, not spend it."

"You read that in *Money* magazine?"

"*Forbes*."

"Jackson, you won the freaking lotto," Davey sighs. "Buy something!"

"Always said it wouldn't change me at all."

"Look, didn't you buy things *before* the \$90 million?"

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"Well, I always liked to order magazines from Publishers Clearing House."

"Look, here's a nice bamboo magazine rack!" Davey says. "Goes with the Chubb rod."

Jackson squints at the rack.

"Bid on it," Davey presses. "You need practice."

"I suppose."

"And this lamp in the hall."

"Nah. Let's see what they got in the living room," Jackson says.

Davey surveys the room. "Bigger than your whole double wide and comes with a great view of the bayou."

"Now, that's a recliner," Jackson beams, crossing the room.

"Yeah, it goes nice with the leather couch."

"I'm heading upstairs, Davey."

"Wait up!"

"Well, that's a big tub," Jackson nods, hands on hips.

"Those jets can make a lot of bubbles, Jackson."

The irked auction rep stands in the doorway. "The spa tub is *not* part of the auction.

Nothing upstairs is. Get your number if you're going to bid on the sale items."

"Let's go, Davey."

"Are you getting a number, Jackson?"

"Why not!"

* * *

Jackson, the multi-millionaire, successfully and without competition, bids on the magazine rack. He then signals to stop the auction and buys the mansion, lock, stock, and

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fishing rods. And, as a reward for the cash purchase, the deliriously happy real estate agents award Jackson a deluxe trip for two to Las Vegas.

* * *

Jackson and Davey board the jet to Vegas on December 7 and settle into their first-class seats. A slightly claustrophobic and non-drinking Jackson downs bourbon on the rocks and promptly falls asleep. Ever the smart shopper, Davey spends his time studying the Sky Mall catalog. He sighs contentedly at the finery and begins marking off must-have items for Jackson. Somewhere over Texas, the wealthy man stirs.

“Hey, Jackson, I found a way to make you money.”

“That would be a first.”

“You know how you’ll need to make your mark on your new place?”

Jackson nods.

“Well, I figured out a way you can buy a ton of stuff and make money every time you buy something.”

Davey signals for a fresh drink and lays out his plan.

“Well, this says you get a \$50 Sky Mall gift certificate for every \$200 you spend. The catalog has 278 pages. Say you average about \$200 worth of stuff on every page. At most, you spend \$55,100 and make \$10,000.”

Jackson takes a deep breath and says, “Buy like what?”

Between Texas and Nevada, Jackson broods as Davey ticks off his wish list. The bounty includes:

Page 6: 7 Rhinestone time mugs for \$210.

Page 7: Panasonic Core trainer, e-z vision video glasses with 50” screen
\$1,499.95.

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Page 10 Bed & Breakfast gift cards \$200

Page 16: World map \$149.95

Page 17. Snow flurry generating snowman \$149.95

Page 17: Remote-controlled helicopter \$79.95

Page 18: Marshmallow shooter (2) @ \$24.95

Page 19: Christmas tree 9'5" \$799.95

Page 25: Robotic vacuum \$399.95

Page 31: Pop-up hot dog cooker \$49.95

Page 39: Gravity-defying boots (2 sets) @ \$139.95

Page 42: Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot \$299.95

Davey continues through to page 278, including a page 200 holiday feast of ham, ribs, game, and sausage from Burgers' Smokehouse for \$430.

When they land in Vegas, the two commence a wild night for the Sky Mall call center representatives, who quickly get into the spirit of the blow-out and suggest they add Adirondack lawn chairs, bookcases, globes, storage units, televisions, and a pool sound system into the mix.

* * *

The Sky Mall spree makes it easier for Jackson to get into the spirit for Vegas. He and Davey spend their days at casino slots. Given a few nights at Cirque de Soleil, an uncomfortably close encounter with two bored escorts, and a side trip to the Grand Canyon, they arrive back at the mansion just shy of spending \$50,000.

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The Sky Mall loot begins arriving the week before Christmas, quickly filling corners in the mansion's five-car garage and most of the downstairs rooms. Jackson single-handedly

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sets up the revolving, music playing, fully-lighted 9'5" tree in the two-story entrance hall.

As dusk approaches one evening, Jackson calls in an order for pizza, tucks his new *Architectural Digest* in the magazine rack, and goes fishing.

Jackson imagines even the local pelicans on nearby Bird Island can see the sparkling tree through the wall of glass. Certainly, tourists leaning on the railing of the last *Dolphin and Mansion* cruise could spot it as they turn from the bayou and back to Tampa Bay. They must wonder who lives in such a grand house. Jackson vows to set up the snow-flurry-generating snowman to dazzle street passersby.

The doorbell rings and Jackson works his way to the front door. Before him stands a pretty Asian American teenager. She wears a Santa hat over her long black hair, and a sweatshirt and faded jeans over her somewhat plump body. She smiles up at Jackson distractedly and thrusts the pizza box at him.

Jackson balances the box on one hand and fishes in his pocket for money. He also startles the girl by saying, "Madison Smith, of all people!"

"You know me?" the girl says, taking a step back from the doorway.

"You're the spitting image of your mother, and I knew her pretty well from the trailer park." Jackson frowns. "Course I haven't seen the two of you since your father took over her trailer... must be two, three years ago."

"I'm just there now."

"And your father?"

"Jail."

"Your mother?"

"She's ... out of the country."

"I'm sorry," Jackson says with a shake of his head. "That shouldn't be at Christmas."

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Madison stares at the ground. “So, things happened to you, too,” she says cheerily, nodding at the house.”

“I won the lotto pretty big.”

Jackson glimpses at Madison’s rusty Chevy in his circular driveway, hears its radio blaring with too much bass and takes a deep breath. “So, what *you* doing for Christmas?”

“Oh, I’m not a big Christmas person.”

“Hell, everybody has to have Christmas,” he scoffs. “Say, why don’t you come by Christmas afternoon and have a bite to eat with me and my buddy, Davey. He’s from the trailer park, too.”

He sees Madison frowning and slightly backing away again.

“Oh, believe me, we’re both harmless, and I am just talking a holiday dinner.”

“Yeah?”

“You bet.”

“So, you know my mother?”

“A fine woman,” Jackson nods. “Minnie and I would just shoot the breeze after work every now and then by the pool. A very nice lady who was interested in everything. I’m that way myself. Geography. Science. Technology. No reason for you to remember me, except maybe for the *National Geographics* I passed on to your mom for you.”

“Why, sure, I always used them for school!”

“One and the same,” Jackson smiles. “And ... you finished school, right?”

“High school.”

“Maybe you’ll go on,” Jackson says, adding “I got my associates in computer networks years ago, and it served me well till” His hand sweeps the opulence around him.

“I want to get into computers,” Madison admits.

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“Smart move.”

“For now, I got a factory job and the pizza thing.”

“Well, you come to dinner around 3 o’clock Christmas day, and tell me about it, okay?”

Madison peers into the mansion. “I don’t know.”

“Now, don’t argue,” Jackson says. “Your mother would want you to be having a good meal and, for her sake, I will see you get it, young lady.”

* * *

In the living room with his pizza, a contented Jackson answers a call from Davey.

“Christmas morning, we’ll put on the new gravity-defying boots and yuck it up in a battle with deluxe marshmallow shooters,” Jackson says.

“There are so many rooms for a shoot-out,” Davey agrees.

“I’ll get the Elvis robot going, too,” Jackson says.

“For dinner, we’ll eat Burgers’ Smokehouse meats, my fish boil and supermarket salad trays,” Davey says.

“To top it off, we’ll take apart the gingerbread house on the round table and eat all the gumdrops,” Jackson says.

Jackson hangs up and munches on the last slice of pizza. “Damn shame, Minnie’s girl, with no one here but that bad-ass dad to visit in jail and “Merry Christmas!”

Jackson closes his eyes and pictures petite Minnie Smith in her bikini, wading in the trailer park pool, her black hair swooped up in a loose pony tail, her almond eyes bright with interest in his description of an article he had read, “A woman you could talk to.”

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Christmas morning breaks early with Davey carting his fish boil into Jackson’s gourmet kitchen. He sets a large kettle on the six-burner stove, and the two men head out to the

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dock to fish. Back inside later for games, it takes some getting used to wearing the Sky Mall gravity boots. The two old friends crack open the marshmallow shooters and yuck it up with a ground floor battle that lasts an hour. They start to drink their coffee from the new rhinestone covered mugs, think better of the sparkling choice, and switch to Jackson's subscription gift mugs from *Field & Stream*.

Coffee turns into an early lunch of cold cut slices in the living room. Next, they get the Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot going and croon with it, belting out "Heartbreak Hotel." That's when the doorbell rings, and Davey looks quizzically at Jackson.

Jackson slaps his forehead. "I forgot to tell you Madison's coming for dinner."

"Madison?"

"Daughter of that nice Minnie Smith that lived in the trailer park - married to that trash guy in #21."

"What's she doing coming here?"

"Well, her mom is out of the country and her father's in jail, and when she delivered a pizza the other night ..." Jackson's voice trails off as he opens the door.

Madison is wearing a red sweatshirt and blue jeans and still sports her Santa hat. She thrusts a holiday bag of Dunkin Donuts at Jackson as a sullen Davey enters the center hall. The three stand around the tall, lighted, twirling Christmas tree as it plays "Jingle Bell Rock."

Jackson starts introductions, but Davey cuts him off. "I recognize her."

"Me, too," Madison says, hugging herself as Davey gives her a grumpy once over.

"Let's eat!" Jackson bellows, pushing Davey into the kitchen. A buffet is set on the marble-topped island. They load Santa-shaped plastic dishes with meats and salads and

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grab cans of Mountain Dew. Davey starts to fill three bowls with his fish boil, but

Madison holds up her hand and points to her Santa dish, “This is plenty for me.”

“Suit yourself,” Davey sighs as he drops the ladle into the kettle.

The three sit at the breakfast nook and Jackson points to the bayou, where pelicans cruise in formation toward Tampa Bay.

“Nice,” Madison says before turning her attention to her feast.

“Want to go fishing?” Davey asks Jackson.

Jackson frowns and shakes his head, nodding toward Madison.

Davey grunts, empties his plate, and picks his teeth, then rises to grab a beer from the fridge.

“Good potato salad, isn’t it?” Jackson asks.

“Everything’s real nice,” Madison agrees and eats as if it is her first or last meal.

“So, tell me about going to college,” Jackson says.

“I’m saving money to apply for Saint Pete College for a degree in network security cause the keep talking about viruses and hackers.”

“Good choice,” Jackson says, sitting back and studying his hands, before cautiously adding, “I bet I could give you a hand with college finances.”

The startled Davey blows a mouthful of Bud across the table as Madison and Jackson stare at him.

“What the ...?”

“None of your damn business,” Jackson says quietly.

“Since when do *you* give away money!” Davey sputters.

“I got \$90 million dollars and will do what I want with it.”

“You can get any girl with \$90 million,” Davey says.

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Shot out of her chair by Davey's volley, Madison says, "I'm not one of them!"

"Course not," Jackson says. "Davey's jealous is all."

Davey shoots out of his chair.

"For Christmas sake, everybody calm down," Jackson says.

Everybody calms down.

Jackson is silent for a moment. He takes a deep breath, then leans toward his old friend,

"So, how much money do *you* want, Davey?"

Jackson watches the storm brewing on his friend's face.

Finally Davey figures, "A million wouldn't hurt."

"How much you think Madison's education would cost?"

"Maybe \$100,000."

"And you got a problem with me giving that to our out-of-the-country neighbor's deserving child if she gets herself into college?"

"Not when you put it that way," Davey allows.

Madison stares at the two men.

"It's settled then," Jackson says, polishing off his Mountain Dew. "Let's have at that gingerbread house!"

The holiday party gathers round the four-foot gingerbread house and commences demolition. Jackson looks at his old and young friend as they pop gumdrops in their mouths and peel lengths of licorice string from the roof.

"Now, this is the Christmas I had in mind," Jackson beams. "Oh, almost forgot," heading to a side door and motioning them to follow. "I've got presents!"

Jackson leads Madison and Davey into his garage and switches on the lights. He hands them keys to two new vehicles festooned with red bows.

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Wide-eyed Davey circles his new truck, comes back, and punches his friend's arm affectionately. "Man, you have gone a good kind of crazy."

A dazzled Madison turns from her convertible, impulsively drags a step ladder up behind Jackson, climbs it, and places her Santa hat on his head. He smiles and adjusts the hat.

"So, Merry Christmas, you all, and to all a good night!"

"Merry Christmas, Jackson!" the dazed Madison agrees, patting his shoulder.

Back in the living room, Jackson asks, "Madison, where in the world is your mother?"

"I'm not supposed to say cause she doesn't want my dad coming after her."

Solemnly shaking his head, Jackson vows, "I'd never tell your dad a thing."

"She works on a cruise ship in the Caribbean."

"What does she do?"

"Massage," Madison says. "She does massages in a spa on the ship."

Jackson nods and settles into his recliner. "Davey, it sounds like I got a New Year's resolution brewing," adding, "I'm going to get me a cruise-ship massage."

The Alive Elvis Animatronics Robot croons, "I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You."

Jackson leans back in his recliner, "Madison, when does your mother's ship come in?"

Pipes in Davey with a sly smile, "I'd say it already has."

THE END

* Pastel "Sunset Royale" by Vincent Mancuso.