

The Ladies of First Avenue

As a result of the humdrum conditions that are unfairly flung upon housewives following marriage and motherhood, the ladies of First Avenue have each developed unique habits in order to experience some sense of melodramatic reprieve. The ladies still keep their wifely manners to avoid their husbands' suspicions, limiting their interests to the most dim-witted of activities when in their presence. If the men of First Avenue are asked to relay their wives' favourite pastimes, it is likely they could offer nothing more specific than the acts of matching lipstick to nail polish or watering home-grown vegetables.

Yes, the ladies of First Avenue are good at playing their parts, though secrets only remain secret for so long before they induce wrinkles. Every Wednesday afternoon, a few hours after the women have seen their children off to school and a few hours before their husbands will come home from work, they get together to triumph in each other's scandal. Mrs. Smith, the eldest of the six, hosts their weekly luncheons, incurring envy among her peers through her mastery of domesticity. She doesn't mind the glares that her perfectly baked ladyfingers receive, nor the wandering hands that swipe every possible surface for dust when they think she's not looking. In fact, these anxious acts of jealousy give her the drive she needs to continue outperforming them in all avenues of womanhood.

Today's meeting begins no differently than the others. Mrs. Smith glances out the front window and watches as each lady approaches her home, opening the door to her picket fence with elegantly gloved hands, careful not to drop whatever casseroled dishes they bring with them. They follow the impeccably-laid masonry to the steps of her wrap-around porch, careful

not to step their pumps of patent leather in the lawn sprinkler's puddles. She lets them open the screen door and knock, leaving a moment between their arrival and her approach to make it seem as if she had been preoccupied before greeting them.

After each woman has been shown to the sitting room, Mrs. Smith prepares six glasses of sweet tea respective to their preferred amounts of ice. Once they have all settled in, noses powdered and drinks in hand, Mrs. Smith stands before them with her hands clasped in front of her chest.

"It is wonderful to see all five of you together on this beautiful Wednesday afternoon." She swivels her head from side-to-side to make eye contact with each one of her guests, taking a mental note of those who might have been skimping on their skincare routines recently. The ladies return her compliment with identical smiles.

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Smith," replies Mrs. Johnson. "Your home looks positively baroque, and always so welcoming!" The other women in the room audibly concur.

"Why, thank you ladies, you all are much too kind for your own good!" She takes a sip of her sweet tea before continuing. "As I always say, honesty is a woman's best outlet—"

"—though only if she's honest with the right people!" chimes Mrs. Goldberg, placing a hand on her bosom and laughing. "How wise you are, Mrs. Smith!"

The other guests begin to laugh along with her, though rather than joining them, Mrs. Smith purses her lips and furrows her brow. The ladies of First Avenue stop and clear their

throats. Mrs. Goldberg looks at her lap, blushing while consuming herself with the creases of her swing skirt.

“Now, ladies, why don’t we get started. Mrs. Johnson, would you like to begin?”

“I would love to, Mrs. Smith,” says Mrs. Johnson, twirling a strand of stringy white-blond hair between her fingers. “Well, all of you are familiar with the boy my Roger has been bringing to the house to clean the pool every Saturday, yes?”

“Of course,” says Mrs. Miller from the windowsill, “the Hispanic one.”

“He can’t be more than, what, seventeen years old?” adds Mrs. Jones. “Oh, but he is quite handsome. What I wouldn’t give to have him scoop the guck from *my* pool.”

“I’m happy to share that he’s even more attractive up close,” replies Mrs. Johnson, snickering into her veiny hand. “Yes, he’s quite a respectful boy. Always does exactly what Roger says, never looking him directly in the eye and pretending to not notice me strutting in my swimsuit.” Her falsetto voice grows hushed, leaning in as she continues. “Though this weekend, I finally convinced him to let me have him—right there, in the backyard!”

The others gasp in unison. “Oh, you are just awful, Mrs. Johnson!” exclaims a smiling Mrs. Brown. “Was he more sensitive than Roger?”

“Oh, please,” scoffs Mrs. Johnson, “Anything with a pulse is likely to be more sensitive than Roger.” She pauses. “It’s not necessarily that, though. There’s just something about the

underaged... so fresh-faced and eager to please, especially when you're holding the chance of being able of college tuition over their heads!"

Again, the women laugh. Over the course of the afternoon, the laughs will become less and less candid, though they shall never cease as long as the lead is taken by Mrs. Smith.

"I'll go next!" pipes Mrs. Brown, popping up from her place on the ottoman. She rolls up the sleeve of her baby pink cardigan to reveal a glimmering string of princess-cut diamonds encased in white gold. The ladies scoot themselves closer to admire the beautiful bauble, fawning over the colour and clarity of the stones.

"Why, it's gorgeous, Mrs. Brown!" cries Mrs. Johnson. "How ever did you acquire it?"

Mrs. Brown's smile deepens, greatly accentuating her crow's feet, much to Mrs. Smith's amusement.

"Why, I took it, of course!"

The others nod as they recall the other stories Mrs. Brown had recounted in previous weeks. Since settling down on First Avenue with Albert just under a year ago, she had managed to shoplift a set of emerald earrings from Tiffany's, a pearl necklace from Birks, and a platinum watch from Piaget.

"Did it give you that *rush* again?" asks Mrs. Jones.

"Oh yes," moans Mrs. Brown. "And I relished in it, too. Even my fantasies can't replicate that sense of... euphoria, anymore." She sighs. "Only the real thing pleases me now."

“Where did you take it from?” asks Mrs. Miller.

Mrs. Brown bubbles with excitement. “Cartier’s, on Lord Street! I must admit, it was almost too easy. They had just hired this new girl, you see—red hair, chalky skin—a sickly-looking youth, if I’m being honest. Regardless, I approached her earlier this week and asked to try on bracelet after bracelet until she had given up on being thorough. While I had this one on, I asked her to fetch a mirror further down the counter, and while she had her back turned, I simply walked out with it!”

“Terrible!” flatters Mrs. Johnson.

“Atrocious!” lauds Mrs. Miller.

“Remarkable!” blurts Mrs. Goldberg, earning a few hawkish glances.

“You haven’t even heard the best part,” Mrs. Brown divulges between fits of laughter. “Last I heard, the manager blamed the whole thing on the girl simply ‘misplacing merchandise’ after she tried to tell him what had happened, and fired her!”

Mrs. Smith’s sitting room roars with laughter. Mrs. Brown is by far the most enraptured in her own story, as well as the last to collect herself.

“What about you, Mrs. Miller?” she asks once calm. “Is Dick still sleeping with the nanny?”

Mrs. Miller takes a large gulp of her sweet tea, licking her lips and rolling her eyes. “Well, I don’t actually know for sure if he’s sleeping with her. He might as well be, considering

the way she prances around my house in those thigh-highs and knee-lengths, and that dewy skin—positively *loose*.” She pulls a cigarette box from her handbag, sliding one out and lighting it.

“And we all know you can’t blame a man for lacking control when it comes to his vices,” adds Mrs. Smith. “It’s simply how God made them.”

Mrs. Miller sneers. “I completely agree. Especially when their vices go around... *baiting* themselves.” She takes a puff of her cigarette. “Regardless, I’m simply taking precautions.”

Mrs. Smith nods in approval, the others following suit. “That’s very pragmatic of you, Mrs. Miller.”

Mrs. Miller thanks Mrs. Smith for the compliment. “This week, I smacked her across the face right where the end of the eye meets the cheekbone. Oh, the way it made me feel! That’s how you know they deserve it, when it excites you afterwards.” She stops for a moment, cherishing the way in which she is able to hold the other women’s attention, even if just for a minute. “My wedding ring must have cut her right on the cheek, the way she bled all over my carpet. Would have left stain, too, had I not made her clean it up right after.”

The ladies laugh. “Oh, you are too cruel, Mrs. Miller,” applauds Mrs. Jones.

“Oh please,” Mrs. Miller retorts, “I’ve done far worse. I whacked the last nanny upside the head so hard, she forgot all about how I slit her right across the hand with the meat knife the week before!”

The ladies howl, their laughter growing hoarser with each heave. It is the point in the afternoon where their amusement begins to grow forced, though Mrs. Smith never allows them to let up the facade.

“But aren’t you afraid she might say something?” Mrs. Goldberg asks after the laughter has died down. “You know, to the police, or what have you?”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Miller scoffs as the other ladies roll their eyes at Mrs. Goldberg’s question. “The woman hardly even knows English. I don’t think she could speak to the police if she tried.”

“And besides,” cuts Mrs. Smith, “the police don’t arrest ladies who live on First Avenue.”

A few moments of silence penetrate the room before the conversation is continued.

“And you, Mrs. Jones,” says Mrs. Brown, “how is little Jimmy doing these days? I haven’t seen him walking to the bus stop lately.”

“Oh, you know how it is with boys,” says Mrs. Jones. “Always getting sick. I swear, almost once every two weeks he has to stay home from school. It’s striking!”

“It must be difficult caring for a sick child so often,” coos Mrs. Johnson.

“Mrs. Jones, you are undoubtedly strong,” purrs Mrs. Miller.

Mrs. Jones sighs. “Your sympathies mean the absolute world to me, ladies. Although, I must admit, it’s been much too long since Jimmy has been ill. I’ve had to start increasing the

amount of methanol I've been slipping into his milk more and more as of late. I think he's starting to build a resistance." Suddenly, Mrs. Jones begins to weep. Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Johnson gather around her, rubbing her back and dabbing tissues at her eyes before her mascara runs.

"There, there, Mrs. Jones," says Mrs. Brown.

"Don't cry, Mrs. Jones," says Mrs. Johnson.

"It's just so *difficult!*" she sobs. "Keeping up with the measurements, never knowing if they're enough, or if he might taste it and tell his father." She pulls a tissue from the box Mrs. Smith offers her, blowing her nose into it.

"The sympathy you get does make it worth it, though," says Mrs. Smith, licking her lips.

"Well, yes, it does," replies Mrs. Jones. She flushes. "The attention feels quite nice, actually."

Finally, Mrs. Smith turns to Mrs. Goldberg, who has been playing with one of her bare earlobes. "And you, Mrs. Goldberg? Do you have anything to share with us today?" The ladies of First Avenue all turn towards the couch, where Mrs. Goldberg sits with her knees tucked together. There is an awkward silence.

"Go ahead, Mrs. Goldberg. Tell us something you've done," urges Mrs. Jones, shifting her legs back and forth.

"Something *shameful*," emphasizes Mrs. Johnson, who has begun to sweat.

Mrs. Goldberg looks at each of the ladies one by one before proceeding. “Well, I did do something this week I’m not quite so proud of.”

“Please tell us, Mrs. Goldberg,” Mrs. Brown exclaims, tracing her exposed collarbone. “Something *terrible*.” The other women look on at Mrs. Goldberg with large, open-mouthed smiles on their faces, ready for whatever appalling anecdote she might have to share.

“Well,” Mrs. Goldberg starts, “Greg and I have been... well, we’ve been struggling financially, with the kids’ extra tutoring sessions and the fact that sales just haven’t been as good as they used to be at his insurance firm. Plus there’s our water bills, which seem to be increasing exponentially, and the second car just broke down, can you believe that? Anyways, money has been tight, so last week I decided enough was enough, and... I applied for a job!”

Mrs. Goldberg looks at the other women expectantly, waiting on the chorus of laughter that normally follows these kinds of statements. Instead, she sees Mrs. Brown recoil from beside her, and the room grows uncomfortably stiff.

Mrs. Goldberg swallows before clearing her throat. “Ladies?” she asks. “Is there something the matter?”

Mrs. Miller looks at her in disgust. “How... decent of you, Mrs. Goldberg.”

“Yes,” agrees Mrs. Johnson with a tone of disappointment. “How truly... proper.”

The other guests refrain from responding, looking to Mrs. Smith for guidance.

“Mrs. Smith?” asks Mrs. Goldberg. “Did I do something wrong?”

Mrs. Smith says nothing. She moves to take Mrs. Goldberg's hand, standing her up from the couch and leading her out of the room. Mrs. Goldberg throws a worried glance behind her shoulder, though each of the ladies avoid her gaze by pretending to be bemused with something other than her. Mrs. Goldberg tries to stop Mrs. Smith from leading her away, but her host's authoritative direction is difficult to combat.

"Wait!" she cries as she is lead down the corridor. "I don't understand. Isn't what I've done shameful? I *do* feel ashamed. Doesn't it make you feel so good, that I feel so bad?"

Mrs. Smith remains silent as she opens the front door, gently guiding Mrs. Goldberg onto the porch. "Mrs. Smith," Mrs. Goldberg protests, "please, help me understand. What have I done wrong?"

Mrs. Smith closes the screen door between them as Mrs. Goldberg maintains an expression of desperation. "You haven't done anything wrong, dear," she says.

"I still don't see—"

"—you haven't done anything *wrong*, dear," Mrs. Smith repeats, "and that's just not very satisfying. You see *that*, don't you?"

With this, she closes and locks the large oak door in Mrs. Goldberg's face. She continues to stand on Mrs. Smith's porch, left with the sweet smell of cultured hydrangeas and fresh-cut grass. Behind her she can hear bicycle bells ring from the sidewalk and birds chirping from the awning above. It is then that she realizes she has forgotten to collect her casserole dish.

She decides she does not need it.