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Everyday Unordinary

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Everyday Unordinary

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Emily D. Bufford

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2007

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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family for feeding me and putting up with lots of my bad moods; you've given me every kind of support I could ask for. Thank you to Roby for enduring my tears and screams and for tolerating my fourteen-hour sessions locked away with my writing. Thank you to UNO for creating a diverse and supportive group of student writers and instructors that have helped shape me into the whacky writer I am today.

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Filling Gaps

The turd in cubicle sixty-three stares at me a lot. Sixty-three is directly across the aisle from sixty-two, and there's no doors to close. The nice lady in sixty-two is technology clueless, so at least once a week I go by to show her something new or fix a small glitch. I remember the day I had to replace her motherboard. Turd Sixty-Three stared. He probably didn't like my headphones, or my hair with faded black dye, or my stretched earlobe holes still gaping open. I didn't like his face, red and hot and puffy. Office gossip said he'd cheated on his wife, and for that I wanted to pound in his head with a meat tenderizer. And if it had been a year earlier, I might have.

"Excuse me." The turd waved at me.

I was on my back on the floor trying to remove the computer's casing. I could see him and hear him. I ignored him.

"Excuse me, technician." He'd rolled his chair out of his cubicle across the aisle and nudged me with his foot.

I pulled the buds out of my ears and sat up. I grinned at him but stretched my lips so hard over my teeth it hurt. "Can I help, sir?"

"On this floor, we aren't allowed music while we work."

I wanted to flip him off, lie back down, and continue removing the casing.

"Mr. Jones cleared me to wear headphones while I work alone to increase my concentration." That puffy turd deflated and wheeled back into his cubicle. Douchebag.

I don't actually know it, but he was probably the one that reported my code of appearance violation to Mr. Jones. I changed myself a lot for this job; I took out my half inch earlobe plugs, stopped dying my hair, cut it off, removed my septum ring, and wore white, long sleeved oxfords

every day in the ninety plus heat to hide my tattoos. There were more changes than that too. That was the easy stuff, but really, I'm happy to leave most of it behind.

I miss the tattoos though. Scratch of needle over skin, permanently announcing to the world my loves, my hates. Putting on the outside what I feel and believe on the inside. I don't regret any of my tattoos, even if I don't believe in what they represent now, because I did when I got them. I can't throw away my history—no one can—so I stamp it on my skin to remind me of where I've come from.

The brick wall tattoo on my right shoulder came out of me because of my dad. Hell of a place for your first tattoo, the guy at the shop told me. I didn't know the tattooist, didn't look into him at all, but I was fifteen and happy anyone would sit me. While he worked, I told him why I wanted it. For my fifteenth birthday my mom had made me a killer cake. It had fifteen layers of yellow cake with creamy, smooth, chocolate icing—some sort of French name. She'd roasted a chicken and potatoes too—my favorite. We'd have dinner and dessert at eight when my dad came home. He didn't show; I left at ten with my buddies to get trashed.

When I came home—some time around four or five—he was waiting for me. We were both slop drunk.

“Where the fuck you been?” He had a scrawny chest, but his arms were big as car axles.

“It's my birthday.” I tossed my keys on the kitchen table toward him. I snorted loud, trying to be intimidating.

“I know. I been waiting on you.” He tossed his hands up, letting them crash back to the table.

“You know what, Dad? You’re a real ass-hat of a father.” I knew he’d gone drinking with the guys from the shop, just like he did every Friday, birthday or not. I skulked away, too proud to let him see the tears standing in my eyes like soldiers deserting a losing battle.

The chair scraped on the kitchen floor, I even heard the whoosh of it before it cracked on my shoulder. Lucky me, it was the slatted back and not the solid bottom. I can’t remember a lot of what happened after that, but I know I didn’t hit him or even try.

Soon as the bruises healed six weeks later, I sat for my brick wall tattoo. I might have fallen down from the hit, but I stood tall and strong inside. I didn’t strike back. He left that night without much word on where he was headed. He came back six months later. He never really did apologize, but he was sober. And he has been since. When I turned eighteen, he gave me some money for a clock-inspired piece on my spine. I wanted a series of gears and cogwheels up and down my back like the bones in my spine. Instead, I had Chad, my regular artist, ink a graffiti peace symbol on top of the brick wall.

A few months later, I had the money to get my gears and cogwheels piece started. In history class we had been reading about the Deists. My teacher told us how they believed the universe was like a giant clock that God built, wound up, and let spin. For them, faith and miracles and all that wasn’t real and wasn’t needed. Only logic and reason mattered because the whole universe was a machine. I believed we were all a part of God’s unstoppable plan, part of His machinery, His biological robots. I wanted my body to be more machine like, so I got mechanical parts tattooed on my spine. Not all of the gears are finished, some are still just outlines. I don’t think the world is a machine anymore, but I’m happy I learned about those Deists because they got me learning about math and computers. It’s because of them that I have my tech job now.

It's been more than a year since the last time I sat in a chair, expectant of the permanent art to come. But I won't be getting another one soon, even though I've changed so much over the past year that barely any of my tattoos reflect what's in my heart right now.

The turd in cubicle sixty-three doesn't know any of that though, and even if he did, he probably wouldn't give a crap. I can't prove he turned me in for code of appearance, but it's just the kind of thing that prick would do. Mr. Jones hasn't sent me back to cubicle sixty-two since, and I miss seeing the technology-dense lady. Helping her really made me feel like I could make her workdays less miserable, like I had something to give. She's hot too, which helps.

Of course I've got tattoos of girls. Justine, the first girl I banged, lives on my right calf. She's an incredibly hot robot pin up, legs in the air. I put little rabbit ears on her head. Everyone said she was a dirty slut, and that's why I went out with her at sixteen. My buddies told me she'd fuck me if I took her on a couple of dates and gave her coconut rum. For our fifth date I took her to a house party at a friend of a friend's place. I got her a bottle of Malibu Rum at the crack store around the corner from my neighborhood. By one she'd drained the bottle of rum, so I took her to the detached garage and pushed her into the broken down Chevy. It smelled like stale pot and dried urine. The seats were brown, cracked vinyl. She pulled down her jeans and panties, then handed me a condom. I took the plunge inside, because I was sixteen and horny and selfish. All I really remember was shaking around like a bass speaker turned up too loud; I never even kissed her or looked at her face. When I was done, I finally looked. She waved her hand, shooing me away, then pissed herself and blacked out. I left her there and returned to the party; I told a couple of her friends where she was but didn't even make sure she'd gone home okay. By the next week, I had her emblazoned on my leg, so proud of my stupid-ass conquering.

A year later, a rumor started at school that she'd killed herself at college. Taken a knife and cut open her throat, they said. I got online and looked up the newspaper in Tucson where she was for school. Sure enough, she had, and I felt part of it. I'd treated her like a sex vending machine. Pay with rum, insert dick. I cried for the next ten nights, until I eventually told my mom what happened. She told me that sex is always connected to the heart. Always. Men have a harder time seeing it, and women try to deny it a lot, she said. I cut twenty-eight lawns in eight days and went back to finish Justine's tattoo the right way. A heart torn in two, gushing blood now forms the background of the pinup, bunny robot. I knew then and still know I was a piece of shit for treating her like that. Changing that tattoo was the best way I knew how to fix it, since she was already dead. I think about her and that tattoo every time before I bed down now.

I'm meeting with Mr. Jones this evening for the last hour of my shift. He didn't say what for, but when I logged into my employee account I saw the anonymous complaint against me. In the comment box it just said "tattoos." I know when Turd saw them too. This Tuesday I forgot to pack my undershirt in my bag. Riding a bike four miles to work in the drenched, humid air causes me to sweat like a fat guy at a habanero-eating contest. That morning I didn't have a clean undershirt. Laundry machines are expensive, and I try to send as much money as I can back home. When I got to work my oxford was completely stuck to my back with sweat, and my first appointment was with the lady in sixty-two. I'm sure—hard as he stares—Turd Sixty-Three could see my tats through my wet shirt. Especially the gears and cogwheels piece, since I'm such a bony bastard now. I lost twenty pounds since I started this new job, since I moved to New Orleans' north shore from Pittsburgh, when I started eating rice and refried beans and bologna

loaf all the time. That's the cheapest I can do without losing my mind. And I won't lie, it blows monkey nuts to live like this, but I know it's all worth it.

If I can win the scholarship available at my company to attend college nearby at Southeastern for an electrical engineering degree, and I can get a really good job afterward inside the company, and that job gets me really good health insurance, and if I can get my daughter all the surgeries she needs. If I can do all that, then I will get more tattoos.

About two years ago, I hooked up with Izzy at an Insane Clown Posse concert. Drunk and stoned, she'd lost track of her friends. She recognized me from school, even though I'd already graduated. She gave me a joint for lifting her up on my shoulders. While I smoked that shitty pot, she flashed her tits at the band. After the concert, I drove us to Waffle House for some munchies. She talked a lot, her voice kind of scratchy and high, but I liked it. She told me her daddy was a drunk and tried to kill her mama one night. The police came and put him in jail; Izzy still went to visit him, even though her mama didn't like it. Izzy didn't give a fuck.

She leaned in toward me real close, keeping her hair out of the waffle syrup. "You too messed up for sex?"

I didn't say anything at first because I was thinking about Justine.

"I been thinking you're hot since ninth grade. Now I'm graduating. So, you want to?"

I said, "I'm so drunk my dick wouldn't stand up for six strippers, but I'd like to take you to prom next month."

She said "sure," and I had my first real girlfriend. After three months, I got a tattoo for her. It's a deep red heart on my left rib cage. I got nipples on the round tops of the heart to remember how we met. We had a lot of fun together for a while because we were so much alike,

but about nine months later we stopped getting along so good because we were too much alike. I thought we'd break up real soon, but something else happened. Annabelle happened.

Twenty months ago I found out Izzy was pregnant. We'd been dating a year at that time, but she wouldn't tell me, wouldn't talk to me. Then I became a serious jackasserton. Drinking, partying, blacking out, fighting. I lost it at first because the idea of being tied to Izzy forever terrified me, but about one month into my binge, I realized Izzy didn't matter at all. My little child—innocent, untouched, a bubble of pure love—was inside her. She wouldn't take my calls; her friends held me down when I tried to grab her at home. I can understand why, now; I was completely trashed, screaming at Izzy to talk to me, my fists bloody from punching the concrete. After eight weeks I had no money, no job, no place to live. I can't remember it, but my roommates said I'd held a gas can and threatened to burn down the house with everyone in it. Lucky me, it was empty. They kicked the shit out of me and dumped me at my parents' place.

For that time, I'm going to get large, black dots inked on top of my elbows. It will hurt like hell, and I'll have to remember all the pain I caused and felt.

I slept for ten days at my parents', and when I came around, Dad forced me to his AA meetings. He said I didn't need to say much, but that I had to be there, to see that alcohol was not a plaything.

At the start of Izzy's second tri-mester, she called my mom without me knowing.

My parents took me into my bedroom and sat me down. Mom turned off the overhead lights and snapped on a lamp. "This is going to be intense," she said and grabbed my hand.

Abortion. I wanted to rip Izzy's head off and stomp her body into pieces.

"There may be, may be, something wrong with the baby." Dad winced after it came out of his mouth.

I didn't do anything. I felt numb and tingly all over. What kind of wrong? No baby, no innocent little baby, could be wrong. That was impossible.

"Izzy wants to talk to you, but you have to control yourself, son."

"She's very scared." Mom squeezed my hand harder.

I was twenty-one, and my Mom still had to hold my hand to tell me bad news. I was twenty-one, and my dad still winced, waiting for me to scream and curse. Izzy and I weren't together because I was still a kid, a fuckball. I couldn't do that anymore; I had a kid, a kid in trouble. I felt small then, tiny. Felt like I was folding into myself. I couldn't just stop being a kid; I didn't know how.

Together at an ultra sound months later, with my mom and Izzy's mom, the doctor told us the baby had Treacher Collins Syndrome. Treacher Collins is pretty bad. The baby's face bones don't all grow, so the baby could be deaf and need a tube in its throat. A ton of surgeries can help the baby hear and eat normal, even put its face back together. I didn't even know if my little baby was going to be able to breathe.

I threw up in the parking lot, where Izzy couldn't see me. I wanted to flip over a car and beat in its windshields; instead, I helped Izzy up onto the trunk of her mom's car so she could sit. I held her hand. She cried.

Izzy was only twenty, and her mom's insurance through the bank would cover her and the baby until Izzy turned twenty-five. But Annabelle's surgeries would probably last long after that; my baby would need insurance in five years. I knew I couldn't be a dad, not yet, but I know how to work hard when I want something. That night I applied for fourteen low-level technology jobs.

I only got two phone interviews. Mr. Jones in Hammond, Louisiana said my personal essay with my application convinced him; he likes hiring young people with purpose, he told me. And here I am, twenty-two sitting outside his office waiting to find out if I'll be fired for my life's story on my skin. My story is what got me here in the first place.

"Come on in, Jason."

I'm trying to walk in confidently like my dad told me I should, but I feel like hiding in that corner behind his plastic plant. I don't know if I should sit or not.

"Have a seat." He's shuffling through papers. "I saw the complaint about your tattoos."

I feel numb, like passing out. I sit.

"All I ask is that you get some of those tight work-out shirts to go under your button up. I don't care if your face is purple, but company policy is company policy."

I can breathe. I'm not fired.

"I want you to have this." He pulls a Walmart gift card from his desk drawer and holds it out toward me.

I'm just staring; should I really take it?

"I know you send most of your money home. It's only twenty dollars. Go on, take it. Enough for two shirts."

I put my hand out for the card and mumble thank you. My lips are thick like hoses. I'm thankful I can continue sending money home, thankful I can support Annabelle, thankful I might still get the scholarship.

"I also want to tell you your application for the scholarship has made it to the second round. You'll need letters of reference from teachers and employers."

"Yes, sir." I want to ask him if he'll write me a letter, but I can't get it out.

“Now go on home; stop by Walmart tonight for those shirts. I’ll start your letter tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

I reach out to shake his hand like a man, even if I’m trembling and sweaty. I have to hide my tattoos, hide who I was and the boy I’m slowly leaving behind. I must put that away right now, but when I’m older and when Annabelle has all she needs, I can fill in my story on my skin. I will change Izzy’s tit-heart. I’ll put two iron cross bands on it, because we’ve made Annabelle and will always know each other. I’ll get flowers and green vines wrapping around my gears and cogwheels; beautiful miracles do happen, even when you don’t expect them. That’s what Annabelle looked like when she was born. Like a curled flower bud, waiting to open up and show the world how pretty she is.

Most importantly, my first new tattoo—when I have some money and insurance—will be of Annabelle. Over my heart I will get a seal pup tattoo. She’ll be curled up in a little circle with a pink bow on her head. “Annabelle” will be inked in bubble letters up over the seal. I chose a seal because they don’t have ears, and neither does my baby. I’ll do the best I know how to help Annabelle, to one day have my entire body filled with tats for Annabelle. I’m not there yet. I have to work hard to fill in the gaps.

Five Pixels

I can use the green knife. I can do this. I can use the green knife to cut the beef. Last week I used the red knife to cut the bell pepper, but that was a red bell pepper and a red knife. This is red, bloody beef being cut by the green knife. The green knife is made of yellow and blue and the beef of red. That would make the primary colors, that would make it balanced. Except there is far less blue and yellow in the knife to the red beef. Maybe if I used two green knives to cut the beef. Then yellow, blue, and red could be balanced. Maybe I could use two green knives on the beef and cut it twice as much. That means quadruple the touch of yellow and blue to red beef, and that could make up for last week's red bell pepper with red knife.

It should not matter. This is the last barbeque of the hot months, and my family is counting on me. All Sheryl wants is for it to taste good, and the kids just want it on time. Just cut the beef with the green knife; the universe will not explode. I can see the orange knife in the sink. It would be better to cut the red beef with that. I will wash the orange knife quickly and use it. Then everything will be fine. I will cut the mushrooms, onions, and lettuce with the green knife. The second green knife I will use on the tomatoes. Tomatoes are not really fruit or vegetables—they're somewhere in between—and I hate them. The kids need some fruit and vegetables with their meat, which is red now but will be brown later. Sheryl will prepare the cantaloupe and watermelon, so I do not need to reserve any knives for that. Maybe she will use the silver melon scoop. Silver is the best because it simply reflects whatever color is placed in front of it. I wish we did not own these knives with colorful handles. I wish Sheryl had never bought them.

The orange knife was last used to cut open a package from the mail and is easy to wash. My wife received some crafting items inside that package, for making autumn gifts. She is very

good at card making, and I know she would like me to take more interest in her artistic endeavors. But I cannot look at the those cards for very long; she used red cards with blue and white stars and stripes for the Fourth of July. But where was the yellow to provide stability? I wanted to grab her dye-cuts and fix those ugly, unbalanced cards. I could teach her that true beauty comes from equal color balance of the primaries: red, yellow, blue. In pigments, like her paper, white is an absence of color whereas black is an equal combination of all three. Brown is a horror because it is mostly red-yellow with a dash of black. Sheryl does not use much brown in her cards. I try to look at all of the cards without brown. Lately, it has been harder, and I feel vile because I disappoint her. Her autumn cards always contain a lot of brown, so I refuse to look at any of them.

I am happy to see summer time blow away with the North Easterly winds. All the colorful, unbalanced flowers whither and die. Pinks, purples, reds clashing against the soft green foliage. It is ugly. One cold sweep already came through, curling and killing the flowers. Now only green leaves touched with sour yellow stand in my yard, and this is better than the bright flowers. The knife is clean, and I can cut the meat. I am not late yet.

Sheryl is looking at me; she wants to know why I am washing the knife.

So you can use the fresh ones from the drawer. We have a lot of chopping to do.

And I smile to make things appear normal.

Fall is here. I feel better. I feel so much better I might wear my blue tie and my red socks to work. The grass outside is going green with sour yellow but all the flowers—all of them—have shrunk away. Outside the leaves are coming to a near full agreement. Soon they will all be orange and red, and the sky blue, and the grass green with yellow tips. The colors will be in

balance soon. Today I can wear my blue tie with my red socks. Maybe I will put a piece of yellow paper in my pocket to help. But the paper won't be clothing, so my clothing will still be unbalanced. I do not own any yellow clothing to help.

They do not make many work-worthy clothes for middle-aged men in yellow; I do not know why. I see mostly browns and khakis, ugly. I buy greys. Sometimes Sheryl gives me socks and ties as gifts. She buys me colors to encourage me to brighten my wardrobe. But I like my white socks with black, shiny leather shoes. White is no color and black is all colors. That makes them even, especially because I wear very tall socks. I wear grey slacks, white shirts, black boxers, and black undershirts. My hair is black, and my skin is white. I have noticed some silver white in my hair. I would love to have salt and pepper hair. How balanced and safe. I believe most men dread those hairs because they worry they will look old.

My red socks are not as soft as my white ones. They feel tight on my toes. I do not like them. If I could wear blue shoes with red socks and yellow underwear and black undershirt and white slacks and a grey shirt with a black and white striped tie, then my red socks would be fine. But I know that wearing bright blue shoes would be improper for work. Many things that I want to do are improper for work. I want to rip down the brown paneling and paint the walls crisp white with all black furniture and a grey floor. I gave my son blue finger-paint and a small, slick, white poster-board to make a decoration for my office. He asked for red too, but I told him blue would coordinate better in Daddy's office. He looked at me with his avocado green eyes; they are unbalanced with no red, but I adore them. With his slender fingers he painted me a large spiral; it is very neat for a five year-old. He tried to put a smiley face in the middle, but the smile smudged to the side. I like to look at it near my blue stapler, blue paper clips, and blue telephone. It helps to balance the red-yellow filled brown paneling of my office.

I will wear the blue tie, and this will further help put back to balance the overly red-yellow walls. The blue tie is a piece of clothing but also a necessity for work, so it will balance. I do not need the yellow paper or the red socks. I don't know how I ever thought I could wear those red socks. I'll pitch them at work so Sheryl cannot see.

Sheryl doesn't know—she can't—I am subtle. She knows that I am particular; she knows that I am choosy. I'll throw the socks away at work, maybe even drop them at Goodwill to not waste. I like the Goodwill nearest to our house; they separate the clothing by color. There is very little yellow and red clothing, mostly blue. Blue jeans, blue t-shirts, blue blouses, in all hues, saturations, and values. They are never balanced, but they are well compartmentalized, kept from each other, controlled. Like a paint box.

I remember rearranging Jacey's crayon box for her first day of kindergarten. We put all the hot colors on one side, the cool on the other, and the indeterminates in the middle. The yellows, the beiges, the silvers, the greys, black and white, they are all indeterminate, I told her. They are not hot or cold. I asked what Jacey thought of brown; she said it was the color of chocolate and brownies and that she liked it. I took the brown crayon out of the box; I took it away from my child. That night Sheryl asked what I had done to Jacey's crayon box. I lied and said she needed help finding her brown crayon because it fell out. I said we took all the crayons out to make sure it wasn't there, and we put them back in how Jacey wanted.

I try not to interact with my children about color now. I don't want to influence them to be like me. I hope they're not like me. I'm throwing away the red socks.

Television on Halloween night is full of red. Blood is everywhere, and it is dark, thick, oversaturated. I'm filled with red blood, all of me is red. Even my skin is not white, though I

wish it was. I'm a sickly peach color, some blend of red-white with hints of yellow. Yellow is my least favorite primary. Pale yellow is the color of my wife's hair, but it was black when we met. Yellow is neither hot nor cold; it's indeterminate.

On Halloween night when I was five my mother dressed me as a pumpkin. She smeared my face with yellow-red makeup and made me go around the neighborhood. I cried and cried; I did not know why, but I now know I hated the orange without blue. The horrible imbalance. My face looked like an ugly, runny watercolor by the time I got home. I spent an hour scrubbing my face in the bath. Watercolors are the worst art. All those colors blending and bleeding into each other. My father never would have approved, but he wasn't there. He left two months before that October evening.

He was a powerful painter, but my mother called his art dumb and irrelevant. No one bought his work. He didn't use the brush end of a paintbrush. He used the opposite end, the wooden handle, to make thousands of tiny dots on the canvas. Pixel art, but not on computers. The last thing he left for me was a card, just before I entered kindergarten. Tiny red, yellow, and blue dots on the cover formed a rainbow over thick, textured card stock paper. On the opposite side it only said, "To help learn your colors—love Father." Each small dot kept separate from all the others. Perhaps my father knew me better than anyone; he could keep the colors separate, controlled. I cannot.

I'm no kind of father. I'm here in my white house with black shutters and stamped, grey concrete floors, but I'm not present many times. I can see my son in his blue and red Spiderman outfit, trick or treating without me, stumbling up to doors and away. To keep the primaries in balance, I bought him a yellow, Sponge Bob trick-or-treat bag. Sheryl told me no, that he already had a Spiderman bag. I put the yellow in his room, hoping he'd choose it. My daughter

is a cowgirl: brown boots, blue jeans, red-white checked shirt. She'll tell the neighbors stick 'em up and give me candy. I told her to say thank you after. I am missing my children's Halloween. Instead I watch ignorant, red-filled, horror movies.

I could not go. Halloween is so full of reds and yellow, with little regard to blue, and the sky is dark and not blue to balance with the orange. On a television screen is one thing, but under the blaring halogen bulbs of streetlights—I can't do it tonight. Red-yellow goblins dart in and out of the comfortable blackness, thereby ruining the blackness, corrupting it. The colors attack me; they assault me. I want to correct them by painting blue all over their costumes with large paintbrush strokes. I'd need a whole gallon with me to stop them. To stop the imbalance. It is blasphemy, a wrong, like they growl and sputter at me without sound. It is quiet and safe here inside my dark house. My family will be back, and I can help my son wash his face.

My throat's burning. I haven't vomited in years. I couldn't even make it to the toilet. I can't look at the sick on the floor. The colors will be coalesced by acids and churning. Oh no.

More vomit. I can't stop, I've got to leave this place. The bathroom walls are khaki, a light valued brown. The floor is khaki tile, the table khaki, the countertops, the turkey and gravy. Khaki, a vile color. There's so much out there and in here. The ceiling. The ceiling is white, stark, pure, innocent. The bathtub too. I'll lie on the white tub and look at the white ceiling until I feel better. I'll concentrate on the white meat of the turkey and the white plates, the silver dinnerware. These are good things. White, paper, rough napkins.

I begged Sheryl to let us have Thanksgiving at home. She wouldn't listen, and I didn't want to fight. I've never been to Jane and Bob's house; I didn't know it would be a trap of brown disguised by white. Ghosts trying to hide feces, moaning at me. The white feels warped and

dirty, I want to remove it. Leave the brown here, alone, save the white, take it away. Put it in the closet near my white shirts, or my drawer by my white socks. Pull out my father's card and explain to it that white, textured paper is the best and colors should never touch or blend, like brown, unless they are in equality, like black. Comfort it with the card, let it see each color individually, let it know that white light is a mix of all colors equal, and black space is an absence of all colors. No colors at all.

If I close my eyes I see the blackness of space. After my father left, I used to dream of living on another planet far away. There is no atmosphere, and everyone can see the black color-absent space with twinkling, all-colors white stars. Our skin is black and our short hair white, our clothes white, our homes equal balances of valued grey. Enough contrast to separate objects, but always balanced. My father is there, at a giant canvas, recreating the heavens by pixelating the whole sky on the rough surface. Dot by dot. Black black white black black black white. He had the power to separate everything, to keep it all apart but make it look whole. I can't do this, and he wasn't there to show me how. I don't have the dream anymore; I can't find it in sleep. It is lost somewhere, but I can remember. Remember the quiescence.

Sheryl's knocking at the door. I hear concern in her voice, a persistence to her knocking, but I won't open my eyes. I'll lay here, quiet and comfortable, eyes closed to the khaki. I've ruined Thanksgiving with my ugly vomit already. I don't know what Sheryl thinks about me anymore, and I can't stop her from her thoughts. My children, I hope they're too young to know. I hope they only see vomit and not sickness.

My family is sleeping in their beds. I don't understand how. Didn't they hear the screaming? Not in words so much, just pained shrieking. Yellow and blue called out in pain because they

lacked so much against the red. Sheryl thought red paper and red ribbons and red bows would look better this year under the tree. So much red! I had to. I had to unwrap. The paper burns in the backyard. Even the flame is red from the ink; the ribbons aren't taking as easily. I'll go outside and pile them more efficiently when I'm all done re-wrapping.

The gifts, the gifts under the red wrapping aren't right either. There are pinks and purples and oranges and cardboard brown. A lot of cardboard brown. The blue and yellow aren't as upset now. They aren't screaming, just moaning, waiting for balance. I could use white paper to re-wrap the presents and use twice as many green bows as red to make it all balance. We have no white paper. There is none, and the wrapping paper is so slick. I could turn it inside out, but then the colors are still there, still there being uneven.

I'll paint them. Paint them all pure, innocent white with a large paintbrush. I'll tell Sheryl that on this morning I had no choice, that the colors wailed out to me. To me. They won't mind, no one will mind. I've got to retain the balance. I'll explain to them, tell them how it is. I have a can of Killz in the garage.

Closet Kinky

“Thanks, Barbara.” Mark hung up the phone and continued filing the brown folders. If Barbara didn’t have the invoices, who did? It was over a month ago. How many hammers had cost him five hundred dollars?

Mark left his large office and headed toward the stock room. He passed Barbara, smelling of lavender soap, and gave a wave at her small, almond-colored desk. He hit the selling floor next, giving thumbs ups and smiles to the employees as he passed. Entering the storeroom, he brushed the hard plastic strips aside. The plastic, slick yet hard, reminded him of New York.

“Something I can do for you, Mr. Johnson?” The older employee operating a forklift looked at Mark with foggy, tired eyes as he passed.

“Nope, I’ve got it, Sheldon.”

He found the box of a dozen dozens of Stanley double claw hammers. One hundred forty-four hammers total with a dozen sold and one hundred seven left in the box. So that’s twenty-five hammers sold in a month. Pretty good, considering the 300% mark up.

Mark strode back to his office feeling accomplished. He even gave out high fives freely on the way there.

“Mystery solved, Barbara.” He snapped his fingers confidently.

“I’d be glad to make up a replacement invoice if you’d like,” she offered.

“Yes, do that for me.”

“You do always have everything under control, sir,” she replied.

He flinched; Mark didn’t want the control, not just now.

Once inside his office, Mark shut the door as he always shut the door. He counted the seven steps he normally took to reach his desk. As he lowered himself into his old, leather chair,

he made sure to bounce twice as he always did. He took the keys to his desk filing drawer out of his shirt pocket and twisted the lock to open. He carefully placed the brown folders into their proper places; then he reached behind them. He stroked the holographic, black, latex zentai suit and thought about his upcoming trip to New York.

As usual, Mark arrived home at 7:45. He unlocked the door with his keys; the keychain held a picture of his two children, Billy and Cindy. He could hear Shelly clambering in the kitchen; Mark smelled some kind of beef cooking. As always, he first went into the bedroom and changed out of his polo and khakis into jeans and a t-shirt and washed his face and hands. He wanted to be able to play with his kids without worrying about messing up his work clothes, and he didn't want to smell of lumber and fertilizer for Shelly.

Now it was time for Mark to sneak into the kitchen and grab Shelly. He stuffed his thumbs behind her apron and kissed her neck passionately. She giggled, but it wasn't high pitched, instead rather low and sensual.

“Hey baby, how's the store?”

“Big and full of tools.”

“I put the Ravens game on for you; I'll have taco salad out for you in a moment.”

“Thanks, honey.” He kissed her blonde hair; it had a rosy scent, instead of her normal mango. “Is that a new conditioner?”

“Herbal Essence Rose was on sale. Trying to keep on budget.”

Mark's face sank a little in disappointment.

“What? Don't you like rose?”

“Oh no, it’s great.” He plodded into the living room; how would he find a rose scent to match her shampoo before leaving tomorrow morning? Maybe the mango would still work. Yes, the mango would just have to do.

After the game on TV, he helped Cindy with her algebra and Billy with his poetry recitation. He then found Shelly at the dining room table. She had little piles of receipts stacked neatly in rows with color-coded sticky notes for different budgetary categories. Her hair was pulled back in a tight, little bun, her rectangle glasses low on her perky nose.

“Honey,” she called to him without looking up. “Our Visa bill has one missing receipt from Miller’s Sports Warehouse.”

“Must have been that Ogden jersey I bought.” He shrugged and moved toward the bathroom.

She called after him, “Could you find it for me, please?”

“Of course. I’ll go look now.” What would Shelly do without him? He kept the business running, smoothed out the household budget, made repairs to their home. It made him shudder. He didn’t want to be the hand to hold everything together; he wanted to be slapped around by strong hands.

He gave the receipt to her. “Here you go.” Budget saved.

“Thank you, darling.” She kissed his cheek softly.

As Mark walked to bed alone, he silently burned his frustrations inside; yes darling, no darling, thank you darling, certainly sir, you’re the best, yes Mr. Johnson...

Most of the other people around him drooled on their paperback copies or busied themselves turning off cellphones and digging through purses. Mark sat up straight and tall, his sandy hair

fluffing against the cheap upholstery. He watched the flight attendants intently. An everyday routine for Vivian the flight attendant, a personal thrill for Mark. When she pulled on the strap of the belt he gripped the armrests tightly. When she put the yellow, vinyl life jacket around her neck, he crossed his legs. And finally the mask. She expertly slid it onto her face, and he wished she was putting it on him. He could feel the slick, cold rubber smarting his face and the strong elastic snapping on his ears, then the kissing burn from his flesh being pinned tightly. He realized he had sweat beads on his temples and looked down at his shoes. Now was not the time or place; he was ready to be in New York.

A day's worth of haggling over prices for hard hats with store logos, power tools, and specialty cement dye with decorative stamps whipped Mark. He could not stand to look at another booth crammed with merchandise and people eagerly awaiting a signature and credit card. A thousand smiles, a hundred handshakes, and a dozen "Thank you, Mr. Johnsons" somehow made his body sore and his mind numb. He plunked himself onto the bed of his moderately priced hotel room and stared at the ceiling. He grabbed his suitcase nearby and picked up the mango perfume he had taken with him. He sprayed a little into the air and relaxed; he thought of his Shelly and all the naughty things he wished they could share together.

He perused Mistress Blood Wine's MySpace so he could recognize her in the club. She changed her hair relentlessly to "keep it fresh." He thought of Shelly's curly blond locks pushed up against him, soft and luxurious against the skin of his chest; Mistress Blood Wine often whipped her dreadlocks across his face so that they stung him. The metal beads and pylons she added hurt. This time her hair was long, straight, black with burgundy dreadlocks; it looked

great with her tanned, leather waist cincher. She always did have an eye for beauty, even in the darkness of the club.

Shelly too wanted everything to be eye pleasing; even the trashcan under the sink was regularly washed outside under the hose. Soap would drip down his wife's knees onto her ankles—Mark shuddered a little. He saw Shelly in a cincher washing the trash can on their driveway, breasts full of suds, holding a translucent PVC whip. If only...

Mark wanted to be off already. He showered fast and lurched into his zentai suit. He left the hood unzipped, threw on some sweats over the suit and got into a taxi; he gave the driver the address of Spanx.

“Yes, ma'am,” Mark answered in his soft voice.

“I can't hear you; speak louder when you answer me.” The handle end of her leather whip pushed under his chin. The ropes around his hands and ankles made his extremities pound with blood and pressure. He felt it building and building in his fingers like they might burst; that was all he had to think about, the rushing of blood, the stoppage of blood, obeying his mistress.

“I only wish to please you, ma'am.” He raised his voice a bit; the hood muffled all his pronunciation, making him feel deliciously small and dumb.

“Better.” Mistress Blood Wine tapped his shoulder with the whip's hard end. “I thought I asked for a new zentai last time. I guess you don't want to please me. So you will be punished.” She reached under his arm and jerked him up. As they walked he had to bend over significantly because his ankles and wrists were tied together. He was being lead around, yanked and pulled, when he couldn't even see the floor because of the hood and the dark. His brain felt light and lithe.

She shoved him down onto a bench, ass up. She shocked him hard with the whip once, and he flinched uncontrollably. After that she lightened her touch, only just enough. He knew logically that Mistress Blood Wine stood just behind him, whip in hand, in their private room at the back of club Spanx, but that wasn't his fantasy. With the full zentai suit on all sound and sight was gagged for him; he saw Shelly behind him. She was finally angry with him, telling him what to do, pleasing him by not pleasing him. He could smell her hair inside the suit where he sprayed mango. Shelly's whip was clear PVC more like a cat-o-nine-tails and less single braided than Mistress' black leather. Shelly's bright, blonde hair hung in wet clumps, all cutesy curls diminished.

"Sales could be better, Mr. J," Mistress sneered. "You'll do better next month, won't you?"

He was ready to amp up the play. He shook his head no.

"Okay then." Mistress twirled on her eight inch platforms and sat on top of his back. She took a large wooden paddle and slapped both cheeks firmly.

His breathing was restricted, blood built in his head, and he started to feel faint.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I can't hear you."

"Yes, Mistress Blood Wine, yes, ma'am."

She got up; the breath sucking into his chest was so simple. He reveled in that, the simplicity of being released from a hard grip. There he was, finally helpless, finally the one without any answers or any ability. He served her, not the other way around. He felt his brain locking into one piece, coming back together after feeling separated and disjointed. He knew the moment he stepped out of the club he would start to separate again, but right now he couldn't

concern himself with that. He shut his eyes to see Shelly even more vibrantly and took a deep breath to smell her mango hair.

Mark munched on some fried cheese sticks with a beer while Mistress Blood Wine sipped at a cranberry and seltzer. She liked to be alert while working her shift at the club; alcohol made her less attentive to her clients' needs.

"I really feel like I should pay your current fee." Mark began patting his zentai suit to find the money he had slipped inside of it.

"Mark." Mistress laid her hand on his. "I gave you my word four years ago. My fee freezes the first time you see me if you are a regular."

"I'm not really a regular though. Three times a year hardly counts—"

"Quiet. You're not paying me a dime more. That's final."

"Yes, Mistress." Mark hung his head and popped another cheese stick in his mouth.

"So, tell me how your kids are doing. Your daughter should be in sixth grade now, right?"

"Yeah. My son is in fourth now. It's a struggle to get him out of the door every morning. My little girl though. She's singing in the choir and making honor roll and chasing boys. I'm terrified of when she turns thirteen." Mark smiled and nodded, suddenly feeling like a scared father, despite the dungeon trappings squatting around him.

"And Shelly?" Mistress poked Mark in the ribs a little with her ever-present whip.

"Perfect, as always."

"You know, Mark, I've never heard someone complain so much about the perfect woman." She rolled her eyes and brushed her dreadlocks out of her face.

“She volunteers at the school and church, paints beautifully, cares for the kids, loves me... Everything, without a sweat, always doing as she should.”

“And in the bedroom...?”

Mark rotated his shoulders just slightly, and Mistress noticed.

“Do you remember what you were like when we first met?” She put her hand on his knee. “Thirty-five years old, short hair, wide shoulders, and a need to be dominated. You came to me, kneeled at my feet, kissed my boot, and told me, openly, exactly what you wanted.”

“But you’re different. You know all about this BDSM stuff; people assured me nothing I said could surprise you.”

Silence came between them. Mark noticed the thrumming beats from behind on the larger floor of the dungeon. He lifted the hood to his face and sniffed the mango.

“She’s your wife. She’ll understand—“

Mark cut her off. “She’s Shelly.”

“I don’t live in a vacuum, Mark. This is just my job. When I get home, I shower and put on my pjs and fluffy slippers. Then I work on my finances and receipts from the night before until the kids and husband get up. I feed all of them breakfast and go to bed. Every Thursday night we attend a prayer circle together, and many Monday mornings you’ll find me at PTA council meetings.”

Mark swallowed a big gulp of beer. He tried to imagine Mistress in her slippers at a table, looking over a spreadsheet at four AM, bacon sizzling in the background. She probably tied back her dreads. It was not hard to believe, despite his experiences of her in the club.

“She won’t like me being... weak and groveling. I’ve always been the strong one, the one in control.”

Mistress raised her eyebrows. “Then she’s probably ready to beat the hell out of you.”

Could Shelly like it? Would she?

“You’re not like my other bottoms; you actually want your wife to beat you. Most of the other men want Blood Wine, want something unreal. You, though, Mark J, you want your wife. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Mark had no problem picturing his wife as a powerful, controlling dom; he could visualize how it would look in his mind. But trying to imagine how Shelly would feel and react wasn’t as easy. He didn’t want Shelly to hate it and feel fragmented the way he so often did. Maybe they could start small, fuzzy hand cuffs or something. Save the zentai for later.

Mistress finished her fizzy cranberry juice. “Okay, I have another client to whip into shape. Promise me you’ll at least think about talking to Shelly.” She pressed the butt of her whip under his chin, making his eyes meet hers.

“Yes, ma’am. I promise.”

“Good.” She stood up and hugged him, with a little friendly kiss on the cheek and a whip on the thigh. Mark waved goodbye slowly.

Mark packed his suitcase in his hotel room. Sunday night had finally come, and he would fly home very soon. He looked at the wedding band on his finger. For better or worse, through making love and loving beatings. He folded his zentai suit carefully and placed it into the suitcase. The fuzzy handcuffs he purchased at Spanx and the rose tipped cat-o-nine-tails sat on the bed.

Maybe he’d wait until there was a good night when the kids were away from home. Maybe he’d approach Shelly just like Mistress Blood Wine. He could ask Shelly to close her

eyes and sit on the bed. Then he'd kneel on the carpet, kiss her toes with the pearly, pink polish, and beg to be hit. Maybe she'd scream, maybe she'd kick him in the face with surprise and disgust.

He fingered the soft leather of the red rose petals and stroked the fur on the handcuffs. He rolled them up in a shirt and stuffed them to the bottom of his suitcase.

Barbie Cave

The scraped-clean, chocolate-fudge dessert plate joined the empty bottle of red wine at the fringes of the white clothed table. A candle warmed the clasped hands near it. Maria thought it might be tonight that she and Walter could talk about beginning an exclusive relationship. The idea stirred her stomach, and the red wine and filet swooned her into a romantic mood. Feeling dreamy and delicious, Maria was ready for a second dessert.

“Over the past weeks, I feel like we’ve really grown close.” Walter rubbed his thumb over Maria’s knuckles.

“I think so too,” Maria replied. Maybe this was it.

“I’ve had such fun with you, and I feel so, so relaxed when we’re together.” He smiled, his dry lips stretching over his rounded teeth.

Maria liked the tiny grey and white stubble on his chin. She didn’t want to force Walter into saying something too fast. She just nodded.

“I thought maybe we could go home, talk a little, about us.”

Now Maria smiled, her red-orange lips moistening. She gave him a small wink. Her confidence in the coming affirmation grew.

“Hopefully a little of that too.” Walter winked back.

The waitress put the check on the table; both sat back at the intrusion.

Walter cleared his throat and then spoke, “Your house is only a few blocks away, right?”

“Yes,” she answered too quickly. The back of her throat squeezed closed a little.

“Why don’t I pay the check, and then you can drive us back to your place. We’ll have another bottle of wine and—“

“No.” Maria shook her head and put her palms flat to the table. She’d kept Walter out of her house over the past six weeks. Surely she could keep him out one night more. He couldn’t go in, Maria couldn’t even think of it. He didn’t know what she did for a living, not specifically at least. But this game could only go on so long.

Walter stared, his fluffy, salt and pepper eyebrows up in surprise.

“My living room floor is being re-stained. There’s lots of chemicals and smells, really not romantic. Maybe your place?” She sweated.

“Okay,” he replied slowly. “We’ll do your place next time. I’d like to see where you live at some point.”

“Next time,” she lied while smiling. “Next time.”

Maria felt like she was floating up her front walk the next morning. She was happy to be home, but even happier about Walter and her. Last night, after another bottle of wine at Walter’s, they had indeed agreed to see each other exclusively. Then they enjoyed brief but passionate sex. Walter wanted to leave the lights on, but Maria felt more comfortable in the light of candles. She liked her curves but not so much the wrinkles and daily darkening liver spots. Maria, however, could not entirely enjoy their new status. Now that they were serious, she must allow him into her home at some point. But she couldn’t stand the thought of Walter leaving her, and surely what was in her house, spread throughout all the rooms, covering every shelf and cranny, would drive him away.

Maria opened the front door to her house. Pink boxes with shiny plastic windows held down by museum quality adhesive perched on shelves. Framed photographs hung on walls, with pink matting and black frames. A throw blanket lay across the couch with the faces of several

different races of Barbie splashed across it. A sealed glass case held Maria's few opened Barbies who had lost their packaging long ago; her mother had given them to her as a child. She tapped the glass where the original 1959 black and white bathing suit Barbie dwelled. The pale doll's hair was matted and scruffy, part of her eye shadow chipped away, but she remained Maria's favorite doll by far, despite having no value to the over one hundred thousand Barbie collectors world wide.

Her mother had given her that doll as a birthday gift. Before Barbie, Maria had played with rag dolls her mother sewed for her from scraps of fabric. During the days her mother tailored at the local Laundromat, and at night, she sewed custom communion dresses and christening gowns with Maria at her feet playing. Her four older brothers explored the neighborhood, but little Maria, five years younger than any of them, stayed inside with her busy mother. The rag dolls provided innocent fun and adventures, but Barbie looked like a lady; Barbie came packaged with a story. "Dream big, little Maria," her mother said often, "and you can have everything you want." Maria wove her future, womanly dreams with Barbie. Seeing her mother working day and night, knowing Father left without a divorce or a goodbye, Maria took up Barbie's life as a mold for her future womanhood. Maria would find her own Ken before turning twenty-one, and they would buy a home together immediately. She would have three children before twenty-five, own a pink Mercedes, and get her nails done once a week. Hair appointments twice a month.

Childless, pushing fifty, and divorced, Maria fixed a quick breakfast snack and had to forgo her shower. She was going to be late for her first client call. She rushed the slicing of her morning orange and nearly nicked her thumb with the knife. She soothed it in her mouth and hurried to her desk. Just as she sat down, her first call came in.

“Good morning, this is Maria of Total Custom Dolls. How may I help you?”

“Hi, this is Lisa Ambrose. I’m calling about Courtney’s doll.”

“Yes, Lisa, you’re right on time.”

Maria and Lisa planned the custom painting, hair styling and outfit for a Barbie designed to match Courtney for her eighth birthday. This was Lisa’s third time to purchase a custom doll from Maria. The custom painting and handsewn outfit cost two hundred and twelve dollars; Mrs. Ambrose collected on her fifteen percent discount for returning customers. As the two women chatted, Maria sketched the outfit’s details and rifled through fabric selections. The whole doll began to form in Maria’s mind; she was able to turn it around and around in every specification.

Maria felt a surge of energy as she thought about Courtney’s doll. She was ready to get out of her computer chair and begin making the dress pattern. How happy Courtney would be to receive such a special doll. Making children happy was something Maria could not resist, having none of her own. Even if it was from a distance. Many of her customers sent pictures of the dolls happily clutched in little girl arms. Maria tried to imagine Courtney opening the pretty pink box, digging through the tissue paper, and finding the womanly replica of herself. If Maria had received such a gift when she was eight, she would have felt as though the moon had been given to her.

Once the call ended, Maria hurried down the stairs to her workroom in the basement. It was low ceilinged with many support columns, but she had painted the walls Barbie pink and installed plenty of bright lighting. She cracked open the meager window near the ceiling and headed for her parts and pieces storage. She had them arranged by body part and ethnicity; the Hispanic dolls occupied her eye level, but right now she needed the more rare Asian-styled dolls.

She pulled out each body part; head, torso, left appendages, and right appendages. She had to cut and re-plaster the right arm to hug a tiny teddy-bear which matched Courtney's.

When Maria was eight, Hispanic Barbie was not yet in production. Maria knew that the production of "Colored Francie" had turned Mattel away from ethnic Barbies, for a time. When she was little though it didn't matter; the blond, white-skinned Barbie provided the platform for Maria's dreams. Barbie's life was so simple, so perfect. Cleaning house, loving her husband, and looking pretty were Barbie's only concerns. Sitting at her mother's feet, listening to the whir of the sewing machine, Maria stitched into her own heart those same pink-hued values. She escaped into them at night, when her mother snored on the living room couch and her brothers turned restlessly, all piled into one bed. From her lumpy, single mattress in the back sun room, Maria built mansions of pink brick, a loving husband, and a two-car garage. At eight-years old Maria did not yet know she couldn't be Barbie.

The über-pink walls of her basement cast a blush on the slick, white plastic work desk. Clicking on her lamp, Maria fired up a Dremel tool and began cutting the doll's arm in half. Her stomach flopped a bit as the plastic curled up where she cut—pangs of guilt always struck her when demolishing a doll. When Maria customized a doll, it felt like changing the trajectory of that doll's life. Like destroying its original high heels, picket fence and pearls kind of world; the world Maria fell in love with as a child. But beyond the destruction, Maria shaped a new life into the doll. A life that reflected the passions and desires of the girl it was intended for, giving that girl her own dreams rather than Barbie's prefabricated ones. A bit of synthetic flesh flew into her eye, and she put down the tool and arm.

“A bit angry, are we?” she asked the doll. “Now, don’t you worry. We’ll have you plastered back together and better than new soon enough.” Maria put on her safety glasses and continued cutting, breaking the doll’s standard dreams to replace them with Courtney’s.

The first time she ever butchered a doll to customize it was for herself. She and her husband divorced when she was twenty-six; they cited irreconcilable differences, namely that he had promised Maria he’d get a good job, nice suits, a big home, and hopefully a Mercedes. But, after a year of marriage, he had not even filled out an application for his MBA, and he seemed content to continue selling used dirt bikes and ATVs. The fighting lasted a year before they both wanted out. Maria spent the next ten years crawling out from debt created by her happy, housewife purchases. She trudged through flakey secretary work, sweaty waitressing, and brutal factory jobs.

After she had cleared her debt, she earned her associates in interior design. On the side she’d been making outfits for her Barbies, but she needed a doll to hold a diploma in a graduation gown because Maria would not have that opportunity. With clammy hands, she shoved a tiny elbow between her scissor blades and squeezed. When the little appendage lay on the floor torn in two, Maria cried—how could she put her back together again? Superglue and masking tape formed the ugly, new joint, but all was hidden under the flowing graduation gown. Her college held no ceremony that summer she graduated. She felt intimidated by and disenfranchised from the other women in her class because they all had husbands, children, families, so she and Barbie celebrated her victory alone. From there, Maria subscribed to model train magazines and discovered the world of miniature and model materials. Six years later, she was running the largest online Barbie forum and paying to have her custom doll website built.

Maria might not be vacuuming in her pearls, but she had built a career for herself around that untouchable world. She'd had various romantic men in her life, but none were her Ken.

The arm was set to dry in her vice. She called Walter while she prepared a late breakfast. He was traveling across town to pick up some parts to repair a sink at a hair salon; she told Walter that work was going well for the day but didn't provide details. He knew she sewed custom items for other people; that was it. Retired from the army reserves only two years ago, Walter would surely think her silly for making dolly dresses. He was a plumber, a man working with his hands from a military background. He'd think her childish and immature for playing with dolls and leave her for a more sophisticated woman. How could he understand her relationship with plastic merchandise?

"Listen honey, I have a bottle of red wine, homemade Alfredo sauce, and some Fettuccine just waiting for tonight. Let me come over to your place and fix you some after work dinner. I don't care about the floor chemicals."

Silence.

"If you're feeling adventurous, I picked up some fuzzy hand cuffs at the gag shop next to the supply store. Maybe we could leave them at your place, try them out some time..."

Maria began to panic, her chest feeling a little tight. She didn't hear what he'd just said; all she could hear was "your place" echo in her mind. Two nights in a row he'd asked to come over. He was really pushing it. How could she say no? "Okay."

"Don't sound too excited."

"Sorry, I'm a little distracted by a new email. I'll talk to you later about this. Just call."

She hung up the phone. She stumbled to her living room couch and wrapped the blanket around

her shoulders. The Barbies, neatly aligned in their boxes, felt like bricks on her shoulders. What could she do?

Get rid of them, just for now. But it was too late to find a storage unit, how could she hide them? The basement. She might be able to shove everything down there. She knew it was silly and maybe a little crazy, but she thought the Barbies would be irate with her for hiding them. They wouldn't understand why she had to hide them for company, but she began grabbing boxes and shuffling up and down the stairs.

Maria was able to convince Walter to come over for a late dinner, about eight o'clock. Between nine and six Maria moved her entire Barbie collection, over five hundred pieces, into her basement. She boxed all of her merchandise, then stacked the packaged dolls on top. She left the light on in the basement, unable to bear leaving them down in the dark. They would feel abandoned, forgotten in the dark. As she moved all her precious pink things, she thought about how she'd come to this. All of this merchandise—pliant bodies, polyester clothes, plastic ponytails.

Maria kept up with her Barbie dolls years after many other girls had tossed them to the side. Her collection grew little by little; she and her mother sewed outfits for them while Maria described her future life. She would find a strong, tall, handsome man, and he would ask her to marry him at a fancy dinner with candles and table cloths. They'd marry just after her twenty-first birthday and drink expensive champagne with strawberries at the bottom of the glasses. Together they'd make gorgeous children, all big, blue eyes and golden curls. Two girls and a boy. They'd all live together in a big mansion with a two-car garage and bedrooms enough for

everyone. Her husband would wear suits to work everyday. She'd fix meatloaf every Monday—no more rice and beans. They would all be happy and together forever.

“Good, Maria,” her mother said. “I know you'll find a man that will love you very much because you are so special.”

But when she was fifteen stepping forward into high school, Maria's body finally reached puberty, transforming her into a full-figured, Hispanic, young woman. Standing in front of her full length mirror, wearing her favorite kitty print bra and panties, Maria really saw herself for the first time. Overnight, her hips were round and large, kittens stretching over her skin. Her long, black, curly hair hung down her back. After denying her for so long, her mother promised to help Maria dye her hair blond for her fifteenth birthday party. But standing in front of that mirror, with the box of Clairol Nice n Easy in honey blond, Maria felt her childhood dreams vaporize. Her olive skin, her prodigious booty, her curvy figure. Blond hair could not make her look like Barbie.

Maria threw away the hair dye and all her Barbies; she wanted to set the trashcan on fire. She was angry with the dolls for promising her such beauty for so many years, but mostly she hated herself for being an ugly, dark Spic.

When she was done moving nearly every last piece of packaging, Maria looked at the underground room crammed full of her memories and work. She only had the oldest, unpackaged Barbies to move now. There they were in the case, forever smiling. She placed her hand on the glass and knew she could not move those dolls away from her living room. They were her originals she received from her mother. She left them there.

When she was twenty-one, her mother passed away from an embolism in her lung. The death was sudden. Weeks afterward, Maria and her brothers began cleaning out their family

home, trying to make room for the eldest son Rodger and his young family. That's when Maria found the box. All the dolls and clothes she had thrown in the trash can her mother must have saved; even the box of hair dye still remained. She remembered the times she and her mother shared together sewing, unable to afford the expensive Mattel clothes. It must have hurt her mother when she smashed them into that dirty garbage bin. Over the years since she'd realized she could not look like Barbie, Maria had learned to appreciate her voluptuous body. Men liked her hips, thighs and breasts, especially when she slinked around in her red halter dress. When she saw these dolls again, she realized that just because she was not blond and skinny and blue eyed didn't mean she wasn't beautiful, didn't mean she couldn't attain Barbie's beautiful, high-heeled life. She took up the pink-flamed torch of her childhood, ready to fulfill her mother's words: "You will find a man that will love you."

The night she found them again, Maria took home the dolls and set them up in her small apartment. She stitched together the homemade outfits where they had been damaged and cried in misery for the loss of her mother. She promised to stay true to those dreams she, Mother, and Barbie had formed together. And she did find a husband; they courted, married, and divorced in five years. He could never fulfill her dreams of Ken.

Turning back to the basement, she announced to them, "Batman keeps all his secret toys in the Bat Cave, so I shall dub thee the Barbie Cave." She then shut and locked the door to the pink wall of boxes and headed for the shower.

When Walter first came through Maria's door, he seemed a little put off by the house's emptiness; her walls were white with just a whispered hint of pink in them, and they looked very bare. She'd put out every piece of non-Barbie decoration she had, but it only amounted to a few

pillar candles and some rearranged family photos. She explained it was the renovations she had been doing, but he looked doubtfully at the “new” living room floor. When she gave him a tour of her home, she told him that the basement was a little flooded so she kept it locked to keep the moisture out.

“I’ll go down there and take a look at the plumbing, really it’s no problem.”

“No, no. Maybe tomorrow, but that’s not why we’re together tonight.” She dragged him toward the kitchen by his wrist. Together they fixed the small meal for two, kissing and flirting as they cooked.

When they’d finished eating, Maria suggested a dip in her porch hot-tub. Walter stripped down completely naked and motioned for Maria to follow.

“What are you doing, Walter?” she asked, pulling her towel up to her bathing-suit-clad chest.

“Come on, let’s be a little silly.”

She had neighbors that might see them. They couldn’t.

“You don’t go in your own hot-tub nude?”

“No, of course not. The neighbors. What if someone sees?”

“Then they should mind their own business. Besides, it’s just me and you.”

“I can’t.” Maria shook her head and stepped back from the sliding glass door to the porch.

“Okay, that’s fine honey. Another night then. But I’m going nude!” He slid the door open and managed a pathetic leap into the tub, sloshing water all over the porch deck.

Maria reservedly lowered herself into the tub, only taking off her towel as she entered the water. She sunk her body in up to her ears, trying to let the warmth comfort her muscles from all

the manual labor earlier. Walter rubbed her feet. She could see his twig and berries bobbing in the bubbles. He spit water through his teeth at her. She giggled.

“You know, Maria,” he said, “this is why I want to be with you.”

“Why?”

“Because, I can just be me. Before, with my ex, I couldn’t be free. She expected me to act in certain ways and be certain things—everyone did. My parents, bless their souls, my work buddies, hell just the Army in general. But now, it’s different with you, and I really appreciate that.” He smiled, his eyebrows catching bits of sparkly water in them.

His words made her feel happy and relaxed. Big Walter, strong Walter, opening up to her like that. It was lovely and honest. He really did like her, cared about her as a person. He was more than Ken ever could be to Barbie—they were just a fabrication. She could most certainly tell him about the Barbies one day. Walter’s ex-wife tried to make him fit some non-existent mold; Maria tried to force her ex to fit Ken’s plastic mold. But there was Walter, dimpled and showing the first signs of sagging, his military body melting away to reveal a shaggy-haired lover of kisses and realism. Maria pulled down the straps of her one-piece bathing suit and pushed it down to her waist. She moved close to Walter.

That night she experienced sex on her kitchen floor for the first time and with the lights on. The cabinets and pans and glasses rattled and shook from their passion. Then they went to bed together, drifting into sleep as they held hands.

Morning greeted Maria with the aroma of coffee and the sizzle of meat in a pan. She rolled and stretched in her bed, sniffing Walter’s pillow momentarily. It felt good to have the smell of a man in her bed again, to have the sheets and blankets rumped by someone else. She’d lived in

this house two years, and for two years she'd not had a man. She stuffed her feet into her fuzzy pink slippers and donned a flannel robe to greet her serious boyfriend on a morning she felt was not picture-perfect at all—and that's why she loved it. There were no expectations for personal appearance, fancy meals, or immaculate dwellings; the only expectation was she and Walter being together.

“Hey there, honey bear.” Walter flipped a sad looking sausage in the pan. “Thought you might like some breakfast before I go.”

She sniffed in the bouquet of breakfast cooked just for her while closing her eyes. “You found everything okay?”

“Yes, after poking around a little bit.” He kissed her on the forehead and continued cooking. “Go sit down, I'll bring it to you in a minute.”

“Sounds wonderful.” She hurried to the couch and made herself comfortable.

He brought her plate of food and coffee to her then sat down on the chair across from her.

She sipped from the mug and found he knew just how she liked it. A spoonful of sugar and a touch of milk. They ate quietly, listening to the muffled morning noises of cars starting and front doors closing.

“What's with the dolls? That's a really nice case for them.”

With a mouthful of warm, salty sausage, there it was. The question. She could lie and say she'd been meaning to get rid of them, or she could speak the truth. She looked at Walter. He took a big bite of scrambled eggs, a bit falling out of his mouth back onto the plate. His eyes were a little watery, a little red; he probably didn't sleep well in her home because it was brand new to him and full of different creaks and moans. After a rough night, he bothered to get up and make breakfast for the two of them to enjoy together.

“They’re my Barbies. My oldest ones.” Her voice sounded a little squeakier than she would have liked.

“Neat. How old are they?” He gestured with his fork.

“That blond one in the black and white is from 1959. She was the first Barbie, ever.” She smiled with confidence.

“Wow. I bet those are rare. I still got my toy jet plane from when I was a kid. I used to ride that thing all over the neighborhood; I thought I could be a pilot, until I realized my eyes weren’t much good. I’ve been waiting on some grandkids to restore it and pass it on.”

“That’s really sweet, wanting to pass on your passions like that.” She nodded her head. Maybe she could see his plane one day, maybe she could see his grandchildren. “My mother sewed clothes for my Barbies when I was a girl, and that’s what I do now. That’s what I custom sew for people—Barbie outfits.”

“Really? I thought you did quilts or something like that. Must take a lot of skill to sew that small.” He bit into a banana and flipped the news on the television. “I’ve got to get going; I can hear people’s pipes calling me!” He shuffled toward the back of the house.

Maria nudged her eggs around the plate. There it was; she had told him, about half of the story anyways. And he thought it was a difficult skill to master. He had respect for what she did. The picket fences, the pink Mercedes, and the pearls and heels and blond and pink pink pink—all the things she thought she had wanted as a little girl, as a teen, as a married woman fell away. She only wanted Walter, just as he was. No plastic, no pearls, no pink.

Secrets inside the Shoebox

Jessica felt the dainty, pink leather straps with the rippled pads of her fingers. She fingered the tiny Swarovski crystals hand sewn to the leather, liking how the crisp, stone edges contrasted the pliant leather. She let two fingers probe inside the peep toe, moving them back and forth across the tiny suede fibers of the shoe's interior sole. She took the shoe down from its shelf and continued with a visual inspection. The threading appeared stable and became invisible because the color matched the leather. It sloped well from back to sole, coming down to a small point of a heel. The handwritten tag on the bottom read "6." She needed these shoes.

"I'll take them." She handed the shoe to the sales person who had been watching her since she began looking around the store. She had bought many pairs of size six shoes there before and always in the same way. She'd enter, do a quick lap around, bounce between three pairs, finally fondle and buy one perfect pair of size sixes.

"Yes ma'am. And what size will you need?" He propped the size-six shoe in his hand. He had to look up to meet Jessica's eyes because she stood over him at six foot four.

"I would like that exact shoe and its partner please." Jessica forced a smile onto her face, but she was not amused. He knew well she never tried on shoes.

The salesman looked down to see Jessica's size-eleven feet clad in school-bus-yellow Dr. Marten boots with flashy silver laces. He asked, "Is madam sure she would not like to try this pair on?" and then screwed his mouth up like an off center balloon knot.

"I want this shoe." She shooed him away with a flapping of her hand, and finally he left. Jessica lowered herself to the bench nearest the register and looked around the store at the other women being attended to.

A particularly tan young woman held up her foot, shaking it around, watching the charms dangle from the turquoise, bohemian flip flop hinged between her toes. The natural bronze grew deeper at the knuckles of the toes but lighter towards the pads of her feet. Her nails gleamed in a white pearl polish, accentuating her tan even more. Jess wondered how it must feel to prance lightly on such tiny feet, to what heights of heaven she could reach if only her feet were as dainty and coquettish as those.

The tanned woman furrowed her thin brows at Jessica, but Jessica didn't pay any attention to her face. She continued admiring the woman's foot. A size six, no maybe five and a half. A foot smooth as cinnamon ice cream.

"Excuse me?" the tanned woman said, noticing Jess' stares. She clomped her foot on the ground and grumbled under her breath.

Jessica demurely moved to the register.

The salesman had the shoe box wrapped in scented tissue paper and securely stuffed inside a white bag with a periwinkle ribbon. "One hundred fifty-seven dollars and eighteen cents."

Her credit card slid through smoothly, and Jessica signed the bill with her blue sparkle pen. She kept it in her purse for special purchases, just like this one.

"Enjoy your purchase. Thanks for shopping." His lips formed an apologetic, sloping smile.

"Thanks," she said and turned to leave the store.

Only ten steps from the door she saw the tan woman's tiny foot in her mind. So small and sleek, a gymnast's foot, a dancer's foot, a graceful, small, wispy woman's foot. Jessica could hear the laughter of the salesman and the woman in her ears as she stamped down the

sidewalk. They would laugh about her and her giant feet. Why does she buy size sixes all the time? Obviously she wears an eleven, maybe a thirteen! What a silly, gigantic woman. She'll never be as sweet and petite as I. All she's good for is crushing people's heads with her mammoth feet.

Once safe inside her own apartment, Jessica went to her closet first, the laughter still mocking her. She opened the double sliding doors to the shallow bedroom closet. Unused high heels, stilettos, pumps, platforms, sandals, in all colors, but all size six, were neatly displayed on eight custom-built, tilted shelves the width of the closet. Directly in the center of the shrine sat a tiny pair of beige sandal flats, looking time-worn and well-loved. Jessica retrieved the pink and crystal heels from the box and set them up next to her other peep-toe varieties.

She then took off her jeans, blouse, jacket, and yellow boots. She tossed the boots to the bottom of the hall closet, not looking twice to see how they landed. She went to her bathroom and examined her near-naked form in the mirror.

With her hand leveled at her shoulders she said, "Normal." She then brought her hand up to her chin. "Tall." Her hand leveled with her eyes. "Gigantimo." Finally she rested her flattened palm on her head and whispered, "Skull crushing." She sighed and smacked the mirror; the smooth glass felt icy under her hand. She bent to under the sink and brought out a saggy shoe box. It was plain, with a brown top and beige bottom; no markings or barcodes marred the exterior, only a hand-written twenty-two point fifty. While sitting on the closed toilet, she lifted the top off the box and looked at the inside of it. She kissed the photo taped to the lid. "I miss you."

In the photo her mother stood on a concrete patio overlooking the ocean. She smiled and squinted her eyes against the sun, scrunching her face into smile lines and bright teeth. On her five foot frame her pregnant belly distended outward in a weird, heavy oval. Jessica touched the belly with her finger, knowing that was herself inside her mother. The well-loved beige flats fit her mother's feet perfectly.

Her mother's mass and funeral program hung taped to the box's lid next to the photo. Jessica had no memory of the event; she was but a day old when it took place. Jessica traced the floral border of the program. Some of the ink had been worn off at the corners.

She put the lid down on the counter, her mother's photo facing the Formica surface. Inside the shoe box bottom an array of metal objects glinted at Jess. Nail clippers of varying sizes, files, tweezers, safety pins, a tiny pair of scissors, three inch deck screws, and a piece of six gauge wire with sharpened ends. A roll of gauze, some bacitracin, and a bottle of eighty-two percent alcohol also occupied the space. She poured alcohol into a paper cup and dropped all the tools into it.

She pulled off her sock, revealing gnarled stumps of flesh. The toenails were yellow against the irritated skin. Bits of soft flesh were missing from each toe, and scar tissue covered every knuckle. She snatched up a medium sized nail clipper and began snipping normally enough. A bit of dry cuticle here, a toenail there. Jessica took a breath and closed her eyes.

This was maintenance; she had to take care of her damaged feet, just maintenance. But her heart thudded, her hands sweated, her temples flamed with heat. Don't look. Don't look and see that tan foot. She looked. Burned in a blueish outline, like looking into the sun too long, was the shape of the tiny tan foot on top of Jessica's. Her eyes squeezed together, but she could still

picture it. At the end of her middle toe, Jessica pressed the clippers down hard and popped them shut.

Smaller, better. Blood began appearing just under the thinned flesh, so she switched toes. Another clip. The thin gap rushed with rouge. Another toe. She pushed down with force, and when the clipper released blood immediately rushed out. A stream of heat shot up her leg, and her brain sped.

Look now! Look at it, maintenance, it was maintenance. Just got to keep going at this point. She removed more flesh from the bleeding toe, carefully widening and deepening the gash. More blood came; it rolled off the toilet and dripped to the floor in a tiny pool.

She tossed the clipper into the tub, not hearing the metallic tings radiating against the tiled walls. With orange tainted fingers, she took the wire from the box. Slipping it under the nail of her big toe, she scraped it back and forth vigorously.

“Just like your mother,” her father’s voice sounded in her head, “only so much bigger.” So. Much. Bigger. “Maybe you should play basketball,” he’d say. “That’s what big girls do. Tall ones like you.”

Jessica cleared away the little pile of flesh at the sides of her nail. The tiny clumps got stuck to her finger. She had to fling them off, and when she did the wire flew from her hand. Moments later she had the deck screw pinched between her shaking, sweating fingers. She stuck it under the middle of her large toenail and began twisting and pressing.

So, twist. Much, twist. Bigger, twist.

Blood seeped out from under the nail; her fingers grew slick with it, and she had to stop. The pain enveloped her leg from the knee down. It pounded and ached. She threw the deck screw on the floor and did not look at her foot.

She lay down on the floor, tying a towel tightly around her injured foot. It was midnight when she finally hopped to bed. She'd need to get up at five AM to soak her foot before going into work.

Friday lunches at work were always hard; all the other employees chattered about weekend plans while Jessica ate her sandwich alone in her office. She felt young enough to still begin a family, but how could she be a mother, when she had never known one? Laughing, fighting, screaming, talking—these were normal day to day family household events, she assumed. Jess' own father barely spoke to her, even when they lived together.

Today's Friday felt harder than normal because Jessica's freshly maintained toes throbbed, and she could feel the blood and yellow seepage soaking into the gauze. She bit into her egg salad sandwich and some of it squirted onto her blouse and dribbled down her hand. Her big toe felt particularly hot and painful; what had she done, again?

She used her clean, right hand to write an email to her father. "Dear Dad," she typed. No, too typical. "What's up Dad?" Maybe he wouldn't understand that. "Hello Dad." No, maybe just, "Father." Too formal. "Hey dude!" No. Jessica rubbed her forehead, closed the email window, and shut the laptop. As little as her father spoke to her, she could not manage a simple email either. It had been six weeks since they'd last exchanged words. And even then, Jessica only needed to know how to change her car's air filter. She finished her sandwich and made her way to the restroom to clean up.

She could just call her father. Being on the phone meant they would have to speak, someone would have to say something. But if he said, "How's it going, tiger?" she might scream. Tiger. Who calls a daughter that? Then again this was the same man that she knew

secretly regretted his gigantic daughter wasn't a huge son. She'd heard him once at a barbecue tell a neighbor "If only they'd let girls play in the NFL. She'd be the best QB, standing over everyone with those strong shoulders." Why couldn't he just say she was pretty? Beautiful, like her mother.

Jessica pushed the metal door of the bathroom in and washed her hands. The cool water rushing over her skin felt good. She picked at the left over blood stuck under her nails. She'd always had crummy nails; her father paid for her to have them done once, for her senior prom. When she came down the stairs, glowing in her white gown with sequins, all he said was "Glad you didn't wear that green one" and left the room. Her date took her arm and led her out the door. No kiss on the forehead, no talk about drinking or sex. Just that.

She splashed her face with water and walked to the door. Slumped and looking at the floor as she continued to think of her father, Jessica did not hear the door swing open. She stuck her foot out to take her next step; the heavy metal door rammed into her boot, shoved up over it, and came to a stop. For the briefest moment, Jessica looked down at her boot lodged under the door, the leather torn slightly where the door had skidded over it, and hoped it wasn't her mangled foot. It was. She felt a wet rush inside her boot, and when she tried to wiggle it from underneath there was a crunching sensation. She screamed.

The sterile white exam room had a poster of the human body naming the popular bones; to avoid her racing thoughts, Jessica memorized what she could. The distal phalanx of the great toe on Jessica's foot appeared damaged; is that what the doctor would sound like? Jessica's thoughts returned to her explanation to the doctor. The nurse who had taken preliminary notes barely said

two words to her. They shared a look, a glance of eyes and facial expressions. The nurse's wrinkled forehead of non-surprise said "I know what you did."

Jessica already knew that look from another nurse. Toward the end of her short college career, Jess visited the campus health clinic for an infection in her foot. Creating open wounds on her feet, then attending an agriculture lab outing to the nearby worm farm turned out to be a big mistake. The class trudged through eighteen inch deep worm feces and mud for at least an hour.

The university nurse showed Jess the same expression—eyebrows up, wrinkled forehead, nose flattened, and mouth down in an angry but small frown. Her eyes were sandpaper hazel. Wait for the doctor, she said, just wait.

When the university doctor did come, his attitude was worse. He wouldn't look Jess in the eyes, kept squeezing her inflamed feet and slyly accusing her of hurting herself. At the end of the appointment the nurse handed her an antibiotic prescription and a pamphlet: "Stop Self Mutilation Now." It contained generalized statistics, terrifying facts, and horror stories. One young woman cut open her abdomen and stuffed the cavity with yogurt and noodles. That's what they saw in Jess. Insanity. Was she psychotic? It was just her feet, mostly her toes. All she wanted was to be small, petite, little; tiny people never hurt others, never hurt themselves, tiny people can love and be loved.

Maybe she'd try the lawn mower excuse. It had worked on the few people who had seen her bare feet since she began maintaining them. "When I was three," she would say, "this lawn mower rolled over my feet, so as I grew they became deformed." Accidents always brought pity; admitting to hurting herself could only bring judgmental stares. A doctor would probably know the difference between freshly mutilated feet and a twenty-four year old lawn mower incident.

So lost in her thoughts, Jessica didn't hear the exam room door open. The doctor tapped her shoulder, and she yelped, "Lawn mower!"

"Actually, my name is Dr. Lawson." The creamy-skinned woman extended her hand.

Jessica took it in hers. It felt warm and dry.

"What's up?" Dr. Lawson asked.

"It's my foot." Jessica pointed down to her still socked foot. "It really hurts and something crunched." Blood had seeped through the bandages, forming red-brown blotches on the white cotton sock. After all the time spent waiting, the wetness had dried.

"Let's have a look." Dr. Lawson rolled down Jessica's boot sock slowly, but even with such care, Jessica moaned in pain. "Do you mind if we cut it off? Could make this more comfortable for you."

"That's fine." Jessica thought about the medical dramas on television and how they cut through everyone's clothing to get to the serious injuries quickly. Please don't let this be that kind of injury.

Once Dr. Lawson pulled away the last of the gauze covering her foot, she sat back a little on her rolling stool. Jessica noticed the doctor's lips purse, and Dr. Lawson began a slow, rocking nod. "There was some kind of a door involved..." The doctor looked at Jess' foot from different angles, pressing lightly here and there.

"The bathroom door, at my work. It's really heavy and metal. My foot actually got caught under it."

"Okay and the other long term injuries?"

Jessica looked at the wall, the ceiling, the floor; anywhere but at Dr. Lawson. The woman's eyes, soft green and waiting, stared directly into Jess' face waiting. Jessica couldn't

say it. It would be self-incrimination. She'd never said it aloud before. She couldn't admit to it, not with her voice, not outside her head. The sound of it would make it solid, something that had to be handled.

“Well I've seen this kind of thing before, especially on the feet. Usually it is one of two things. Option one is a foot fetish, either yours or your partner's—“

“No, no fetish.” Oh no. She fell for the trap. It locked shut around her.

“It must be self-injury then.”

Jessica made very sure not to nod her head or give any kind of affirming gesture to the doctor. She kept her eyes trained to a poster of an exposed heart.

“I'm going to give you some antibiotics and ask that you stay off that foot for a week to give it time to heal. In two weeks we'll have to remove part of your toenail in a very minor surgery.” Dr. Lawson pressed her hands on top of Jess' limp knee. “I know this is a very personal, very emotional topic. I want to suggest that you see this specialist. She really can help.” She placed a business card on the wax paper covered bed.

Jessica's eyes moved to it. She did want to be a mother one day with a daughter or a son. She wanted to have a family of her own, one full of laughing, fighting, screaming, talking—one full of love. She wanted to be there for her own family like her mother never could be there for her. As Jess grew up, all of her mother's friends told her about how excited her mother was to be pregnant, to have a daughter. Even when she was ordered to six weeks of bed rest, even when she was in horrible pain going to the hospital, even when she was wheeled into surgery near death. How could Jess feel that kind of love for a child of her own if she did not love herself? She could not give love as long as she destroyed herself.

“It's up to you.” Dr. Lawson patted the business card and left the room.

Jessica switched her eyes between the heart poster and the business card waiting for the nurse to bring her prescription. That was it; she'd just admitted to it, in some form. But Dr. Lawson hadn't judged. She would need surgery; had Jessica really allowed herself to dig so deep that she'd need surgery to fix the damage she'd done? Maybe it did need to stop.

The nurse brought in the prescription and placed it in Jessica's hand. She smiled warmly and said, "Have a nice day." The nurse began tidying the room, so Jessica left it.

On her way out the door, the nurse stopped her. "Hey, you dropped this card."

"Oh, I don't think..." Jessica looked at it, the psychiatrist's card. Did she really need that? "Yes. That's mine. Thanks." Jessica took it in her hand and rubbed the gold-inked border.

Bend Down to Hear What I Say

This chair is hard. You asked what I'm thinking, and this chair is hard is what I'm thinking right now. My bed here would be better with my Superman blanket. My Superman blanket was soft. I'd like to have it with me. Can I get it from home? I remember I peed my bed one night, and Mom yelled at me. Superman got all soggy, and Mom yelled at me about it. I didn't mean to pee the bed, I just hate toilets and sinks and bathrooms.

I remember when I peed my pants at school. Everyone laughed at me, made fun of me. I was scared to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't hold it anymore. They made me go to the office, once my teacher found out. They called my mom, but she wouldn't come to school. I had to wear someone else's gym shorts for the rest of the day. I didn't have any undies on. And the big kids made fun of me.

Superman isn't my favorite superhero, even though Mom thinks so. My favorite superhero is Mighty Mouse. I don't like Superman or Batman or Spiderman because they're bigger than me, and I don't like guys bigger than me. I really don't like the Hulk. Mighty Mouse is my favorite Superhero. Could I get a Mighty Mouse blanket for Christmas here?

I'm glad the monster from my closet isn't here. I must have killed him.

Yesterday you asked a lot of questions about my mom and my dad and what home was like. And I didn't say anything, because I knew you wouldn't listen. But I have nobody else to talk to here, so I guess I can do just a little. Julie says when I was really little Mom was sad after she got home from the hospital. That's when she started seeing a doctor every week, and when she got her crazy meds. Then one of the machines at her work broke and hurt her really bad. She

stayed in the hospital a long time and got a lot of money because of the accident—so much money she never had to go back to the factory again. And the doctors gave her more meds.

Then Mom and Dad started to fight a lot. I don't remember what they fought about because I was too little. Julie told me they just hate each other, and that Mom regrets getting into an inter-racial relationship. I guess that's because Mom is black and Dad is white. I don't know my grandparents because they are dead, or maybe they don't like Mom and Dad. Julie says Mom left for awhile when I was three. She went to live with someone else because she made sex with Mr. Turner from down the street. I sort of remember Mom being gone. It was quiet in the house and every morning Dad gave me chocolate milk in my favorite sippy cup. Light blue cup with a purple top and big white polka dots.

Then Mom came back, and it got noisy again. Near my sixth birthday Mom and Dad brought me and Julie to Disney World. I liked Disney World; all the grownups smiled a lot, and they bent down to hear what I said. They even answered me without yelling. I got a stuffed Buzz Lightyear. Julie got a pink and white and silver princess dress with lots of beads and sparkly things all over it. Dad said she looked like a perfect princess. It was very pretty. That day felt really hot to me because it was June in Florida where the sun always shines so hard. Mom drank lots of frozen drinks from the bar. After Julie and I rode Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, Mom looked really pale and sick. Then she puked green and pink drink all over Julie's dress. Julie cried and yelled that Mom messed up her perfect day, and Mom yelled back. Mom hit Julie across the face with her purse, and it knocked Julie down. Then Dad grabbed Mom really hard and screamed right in her face. Soon the Disney Police came and made us leave. I dropped Buzz on the way out, but I wouldn't cry because Mom's purse is heavy. We packed our

things and drove home that day. Julie's face turned red and purple. It took a few days before her face looked better.

It's only quiet here at night. All day I hear other boys talking. Sometimes their voices sound like men, like my dad. Dad never listened much either. After Disney, a year and a Christmas after, Dad and Mom screamed at each other so much there wasn't anytime for me to talk. They would scream at each other about my sister becoming a ho, and Dad would say Julie learned from the best teacher, and Mom would yell "It was one time six years ago!" and then she'd talk about how Dad used to hit her and that's why she made sex with Mr. Turner from down the street. Then my mom would start screeching like brakes on a car. She'd get white spit by the corners of her mouth and fling herself all around.

Dad would say, "Take another fucking Valium, Penny!" then slam the door and walk out. One time he walked out with a suitcase. He didn't come back. He got an apartment across town, and a new friend that's a girl. Mom says all he's good for now is paying tuition for me and Julie at St. Mary's. She tells me all men are fucking losers and should be locked up. Lucky for me, I'm not a man anyways. I'm just a boy, which means Mom must still love me. I never want to grow up like the big boys at school, like my dad. I wished Dad wouldn't pay for St. Mary's anymore. I really want to go to a different school.

After Dad left, Julie said she still loved him but that he was "screwing some twenty-two year old" and that she didn't like the other lady. It was a mid-life crisis she said. I didn't know what that meant, but it sounded bad. We didn't see him for a long time after he left; Mom wouldn't let us go by his apartment. I wonder what Dad's doing now. Maybe he has other kids who have a different mom; I wonder if one them is named Joseph too. Sometimes I think about

getting a new mom, but that makes me feel bad inside. I just want my mom to hug me and ask me questions and to listen to my answers. I want her to teach me how to use the washing machine so my underwears and shirts and pants aren't so hard to wash anymore. I really want her to use the stove and oven to make me food, because the frozen dinners are boring.

But now I'm not at home with Mom anymore, and the food here is much better. Not better than Julie's though. I don't have to wash my clothes here either, which is nice. All I have to do is sit in my room; I like being alone. You told me I might get to go to school soon, but I don't want to. There's no window in this room to leak during rainstorms, I like that. I don't mind the toilet in the room, because I can be all alone when I make pee and number two. Maybe one day I'll have a roommate. He'd better not be bigger than me though. If he's not, then that'll be nice because then we can play together. The monster isn't here, which is good because it means I did get rid of him at school that day. I'm glad I got rid of him, because he was mean and made me feel scared and bad inside. I don't want to talk about him anymore, because now he's gone. I was afraid of the monster, but he's not alive anymore so now I'm not afraid of anything I guess.

Mom never asked me anything. She just sat in the rocking chair watching TV. If her eyes were open, I'd tell her about my day at school, but she never listened. A few times I tried to tell her about my bad days at school; she yelled at me and told me to stop talking nasty. She wouldn't let me finish. On those days I went to my room and sat down for hours.

After Dad left, Mom was awake before we left for school. She would set out the cereal and bowls and milk and spoons for us every morning. Sometimes the milk smelled like my sneakers, and Julie poured it down the sink when Mom wasn't looking. When we got home

from school, Mom would be on the couch watching TV. Sometimes she'd say stuff, but it came out all grumbly and sloppy so we couldn't understand. Mom would cook dinner a few times a week then. Grilled cheese, PB and J, or even maco-cheese with hotdogs.

After a while, when we came home, Mom would be sleeping face down on the couch or all crooked in the rocking chair. She only cooked every once in a while, and the maco-cheese was very mushy. Julie would come home to see if Mom was asleep, fix me a snack, and then go away to her friends. That's when Julie met Henry. Julie was in sixth grade, and Henry in eighth. I heard the teachers say he failed a few times because he had "behavioral issues." He's wide and tall with funny yellow hair. Mom didn't know Julie was gone with Henry.

I did my homework, watched TV in Julie's room, and heated up my penguin dinner in the microwave. Julie would come home at about my bedtime, help me wash dishes, and once a week put my clothes in the wash for me. I told her I was old enough, but she was afraid I'd flood the house; Mom might kill me if I did that. So when Julie didn't come home every night, she showed me how to wash my clothes in the kitchen sink. If it wasn't raining I had to hang them outside, but if it was raining, I had to put them in the tub. I didn't start hating bathrooms until after Julie left for Mexico. After Julie left is when the monster came.

I knew Julie and Henry made sex together a few times, and that's why Mom was mad. Mom and Julie would yell at each other about it. Mom called her a ho and the devil's little prostitute. Before Julie left, I thought a lot about living alone with Julie. I felt bad because Mom couldn't come, but Julie said Mom absolutely couldn't be there. But Julie said she would be my new mom. I wondered if Julie would tuck me in every night, and we could cook special lemon chicken every Friday night. I wanted to have a blue room with no peeling paint and a window

that shuts all the way so it doesn't leak when it rains. I didn't want a couch in the living room, so no one could drink alcohol and fall asleep. We would have beanbag chairs, purple beanbag chairs. Julie would be home and awake every day when I got there, and she would listen to me talk about school, on good days and bad days. Our puppy's name would be Mighty Mouse, after my favorite superhero. He would be little and sleep with me in my bed.

After Julie met Henry, she wasn't at home a lot, and Dad didn't talk to us much. Julie came home a few nights a week and cooked me cupcakes or chicken. Mom never cooked, and Julie told me not to touch the stove or the oven. She taught me how to use the microwave. Julie called before she came over. She asked me to poke Mom, and if she didn't move, Julie came. Julie said she had boozed it up and passed out. (If alcohol makes people so sleepy, why do they drink? It's better to just take a nap.)

Then Julie and I would walk two miles to the store, and she would let me pick my microwave meals. I really liked the Kid Cuisine because the penguin on the front gave me someone to talk to when I ate. Almost every time Julie cried before she left. She held me really hard and cried. She said when I was a little older she'd take me with her, and we'd go live alone in a nice house near a park. I asked if we could have a puppy, and she said yes. We wouldn't have nice things, but we'd have each other. All alone, just the two of us. She could work at the grocery store as a check out girl in a few years when she turned sixteen—that's when we'd leave.

Then Julie came home one day without calling, and Mom was awake. I heard her come in, crying, and I sat on the stairs. Julie's eyebrow was bleeding. Mom got up from the couch and hugged Julie and told her to shush, it would be OK. They went into the bathroom, and Julie had on a Band-Aid when she came out. Mom asked her what happened. Julie said she decided

she didn't want to make sex anymore with Henry because he was mean to her, and she told him that. Henry got mad and hit her, then made her have sex. Mom started yelling really loud. She used the bad word fuck a lot. She told Julie she "got what was fucking coming to her" for being a ho. When Mom threw a plate at Julie, I closed my eyes really hard and covered my ears. I crouched on the stairs and held really hard until my muscles hurt, and I couldn't do it anymore.

Julie came back to live at home. She stayed in her room all the time, and sometimes I saw her on the roof smoking funny smelling cigarettes. She said they mellowed her. The big kids at school call it pot, but I didn't want to tell Julie I knew that. Those cigarettes made her not care about making sex with Henry anymore or about what Mom said. Those cigarettes made her not care about anything at all. I think she still cared about me though. One day, after she smoked a lot of those cigarettes, I had a question about my math homework. I knocked on her door, and it opened. I saw her lying on her bed, asleep, with her headphones on. She was only wearing her bra and hugging her special, white, fluffy bunny plushie, and I could see cuts up and down her arm. They were red and angry looking; I thought maybe Henry did it to her. She woke up and saw me. She made an angry face when she reached for her sweatshirt.

I asked if Henry did that to her. She said, no, that she had. I wanted to know why, but she told me I wouldn't understand. I was too little. I started crying because the cuts were scary, and I wanted to know why she did it. She hugged me around my shoulders and said it was because she hated herself. She didn't want to live with Mom anymore, and she didn't want to make sex with Henry anymore, but she let it happen to her anyways. She said it all made her feel ugly. I guess that's why she made her arms ugly. As she cried, she asked me not to tell Mom, and I said OK. Then she told me to never, ever let anyone push me around. "Always stand up

for yourself, Joseph, no matter how small you are and how big they are.” I promised her I would, and maybe that was the start of why I am here.

Not too long after I saw Julie’s cuts, Mom made her leave. Julie told me she was leaving to go to a new school where she’d stay all the time and not come home. She said it was only for girls, girls that did bad things. It’s in Mexico. She didn’t tell Dad. She said it was better that she didn’t tell him because he would be sad. She told me Mom was trying to spring it on her, but that she read some of Mom’s mail and knew the school people were coming for her two nights after her thirteenth birthday. She called Dad and asked him for dinner on her birthday, since she hadn’t seen him for so long. Dad gave her a pretty pink, very special sweatshirt; Julie hid it from Mom, so she wouldn’t know.

After I put myself into bed the night Julie left, she crept in. She got under the Superman blanky with me and held me. Her voice was really soft and low, which I didn’t hear a lot because mostly she was yelling with Mom. I liked Julie’s soft voice; it was like feathers in my ears. She told me to try not to listen to Mom, that she was “on crazy meds” and didn’t mean the things she said. She said she was sorry she couldn’t be at home anymore, and she cried. Julie wanted me to be careful at school, to not make the older boys mad, especially Henry. He was a big boy. He was like a man, Julie said. And all men should be locked up, Mom says; that’s why I want to stay a little boy forever. Then she gave me her very special pink sweatshirt from Dad, and the front door opened. She walked downstairs, and I sat and watched. Large men came inside. She had her book bag ready. Her hand holding her special fluffy bunny was all white because she squeezed it so tight. She didn’t look at Mom; she just walked out.

I miss Julie. She said her new school had lots of rules, and that she could never leave or use the phone. Can you find where she is so I can write her a letter? Mom would never tell me.

After you talked about Julie for awhile and said you'd try to find her address for me, you asked what I was afraid of. I didn't answer then, because I still don't think adults listen. But you remind me of the Disney people, so I'll tell you what I am afraid of. After Julie went to Mexico is when the monster in my closet came. The monster in my closet is very, very tall and peach colored. He doesn't wear any clothes. He has a little bit of hair all over, and it is long and curly and rough. He's got a giant, long, floppy nose coming out of his forehead with two big, saggy eyes under it. He is very scary. He comes out of my closet on nights when I have a bad day at school. He yells at me, spits at me, and beats on me. He hates me, and I hate him. He scares me by grabbing my neck and shaking me really hard. He's got no ears to listen to me. Sometimes he sits on my chest, and I can't breathe, and I can't move, and I get super scared.

I tried to tell Mom about him, but she told me it was my imagination and that monsters don't exist. And I know that, but he felt really real. Mom said I shouldn't tell lies, and then she punished me and took away my stuffed Mighty Mouse doll. Julie told me to not let anyone push me around, so when she drank her alcohol and went to sleep I got Mighty Mouse back from Mom's room. It smelled funny in there, like rotten yogurt, and there were lots of little orange bottles all over. I saw a picture of Dad on the floor, and I took that too because I missed him. I put Dad and Mighty Mouse and Julie's pink sweat shirt in my toy chest where Mom couldn't find them.

Then I washed my underwears in the kitchen sink like Julie showed me. I don't mind kitchen sinks, just bathroom sinks. I hung them up outside in the back yard on the fence and played with my army men until bed time. Even though my army men are men, I don't mind them too much because they are so small. I missed Dad a lot, but I was glad he wasn't around

because he was a man and all men should be locked up. After Julie left I didn't see Dad again, and Mom said he never called because he was an evil man. Julie was gone to her new school, and Mom wouldn't tell me where she was.

I don't want to talk about the monster anymore. I killed the monster in my closet at school with a knife. And I'm very sorry I made Henry's mom cry. Moms should never have to cry.

Yesterday we didn't talk about the monster. We talked about Mexico and what Julie might be doing. I liked the cupcake you sent yesterday for being brave and talking about the monster before. I also made dolls from my sock-string and toilet paper.

I've never told anyone about my bad days at school. I tried to tell Mom, but she yelled and said she doesn't need to hear about how I work my penis. Then I tried to tell Sister Ann at school, and she said that the peepee and the poopoo we make in the bathroom is private business, and I shouldn't talk about it to anyone. Julie wasn't home to tell. Dad wasn't home to tell. I was afraid to tell the other kids, because Henry might find out. But you said I could talk about anything, and when you said it, it was like feathers in my ears. Just like Julie.

Sometimes I needed to make number one or number two at school. I had to walk down the long hallway to the bathroom. I had to walk past Henry's classroom when I went. I tried really hard to run past his classroom so he couldn't see, but I guess I wasn't fast enough. So, sometimes, he followed me to the bathroom, and when I was making number one at the urinal, he would put his hand on my thing then he'd take out his thing. Then he'd make me go into a stall used for number twos and put it in my mouth. And he'd whisper in my ear, he'd say bad words like "nigger" and "fuck yeah"—maybe because he was white and I was kind of black—

sometimes he told me I was just like my “whore sister.” And inside my tummy it felt like a monster truck grumbling and rumbling, and inside my chest I felt a hammer pounding, and inside my head it felt like really hot flames, and my arms got so hard they hurt for hours after.

So then I’d go home at night, and I couldn’t sleep because the monster came out of my closet and would hurt me over and over just like Henry. I squeezed Mighty Mouse to make it go away, and I heard Julie’s feathers in my ears telling me to stand up for myself. I took a knife from the kitchen, even though Julie said not to touch the sharp ones. I took the knife to school, and when Henry followed me to the bathroom I got ready. And when he took me into the stall, I put the knife in him. I put it right through his man hair—Julie told me to stick up for myself no matter what.

Henry made the monster in my head, and I saw him in my dreams from my closet. He hurt me, made me feel bad inside—just like Julie felt. When Julie put the knife on her skin, it didn’t help. So I put the knife inside Henry and I felt better and the monster died.

All men should be locked up, but they wouldn’t lock up Henry even though he hurt me and my sister. Maybe I’m a man now, because they locked me up. I hope not. I want to stay a little boy forever. I’d put the knife in Henry again if I could go back. You asked if I was sorry for hurting him, and I’m not. I’m sorry I made my mom cry, and Henry’s mom cry, but I’d do it again. The knife inside Henry made the monster stop, made Henry stop, and finally made a grown up listen to me.

Quiet Soil

When Ms. Andropov woke up, she heard the noise. Chained dogs yowling, car engines warming, voices murmuring, and mostly the remnants of her dreams. Last night she'd revisited her seventeen-year old self when she worked as a cocktail waitress at a strip lounge. The deep hoots of men mixed with their piercing whistles sounded in her ears as she pulled on something decent enough for the early risers in her apartment building—namely Mr. Smith.

She moved to the mirror to check her reflection. Yesterday's mascara had dribbled to the puffy, creased bags under her eyes. She wiped it away with petroleum jelly then smoothed her grey hair down with a little water. She didn't want Mr. Smith to see her so disarranged. She concentrated to hear his voice in her clattering mind. "Call me Tom," he said softly. The hoots and whistles of the dirty-red strip lounge faded. She shuffled in her slippers to the laundry room.

"Good morning, Mr. Smith," said Ms. Andropov as she watched the young man steaming his suit at five in the morning. Clumps of laundry lint met her fuzzy slippers as she made her way to the washing machines. She turned the key in the first machine's money box and pretended to remove the quarters carefully; she was actually watching Mr. Smith's every move.

"Good morning, Ms. Andropov, and please, call me Tom." He sprayed the grey suit with some homemade, milky white concoction, then pressed the steamer against it. His back was to her, but she could see his tanned skin through his thin, linen shirt. She recalled the same tan on her father's back in their wheat fields against the cold Russian sun; that was the color, that deep tan of many layers. She tried to keep her father and the brushing sound of the wheat stalks inside, but the clank-clank-clank of quarters falling reminded her of the brass bed she shared with Buff. In southern California at the age of fifteen she made love with Buff, and the metal bed made that noise. She'd just come from rural Russia to America; Buff fed and cared for her, until

he went to jail for selling marijuana. The wheat completely vanished for her. She spoke, made noise, to match the banging bed in her mind.

“How is 3C holding up for you?”

“It’s working just fine, thank you.”

“No problems with the electric or plumbing then?”

“No Ma’am, just perfect.” He smoothed his hand across the lapel of the suit and fingered the fibers. “Nothing like wool, is there?”

“Can’t say I’d know.” Ms. Andropov looked down at her plaid, polyester robe and spandex pants that hung off her hip bones.

“Come here and feel. Wool is one of nature’s most flexible resources. Much heartier than cotton and much more eco-friendly, too.”

She crossed the cement floor to stand next to him. He stood a full twelve inches over her five foot three. She moved her fragile fingers toward the cuff of the jacket sleeve. The hem between her fingers felt pleasantly rough. She remembered petting the sheep next door to her parents’ land, and she remembered the braised shoulder they ate like a feast for her tenth birthday. She felt no guilt about it then; it was a very special and heart felt gift, a real sacrifice from her neighbors. When she told the story to a neighbor in Chicago on her twentieth birthday, she met horror and surprise. The same neighbor she heard beating his wife monthly, streams of curses crashing from his drunken, spittle-drenched lips. She covered her ears to soften the spongy thuds against the walls and the wails of pain. She didn’t tell any other American about the meal.

“Don’t be shy.” He took her hand and pressed her palm against the breast of the suit, sweeping it up towards the shoulder. The thuds gave way to the braying sheep of Russia as she touched the American wool. “Doesn’t that feel like woolen armor?”

“I suppose it does. Thankee, Tom. I’ll see you later.” She felt nervous yet comfortable. She wanted to be near him but had to move away.

“If you wouldn’t mind waiting, I’d like to get my rent money for you.” He still held her hand loosely, but Ms. Andropov thought he didn’t feel awkward about holding her liver spotted hands.

“Sure, I’ll wait here, you run up and get it.”

He nodded and went out into the corridor towards the stairs.

Ms. Andropov procured more quarters from the other machines, but her eyes could not keep from wandering to Mr. Smith’s bottle of homemade cleanser. She wondered if it could be some of that chemical the China men used down at the dry cleaners. If it was perc, Ms. Andropov would need to know, because that stuff was brutal, and Mr. Smith was using it in a common area. The little asthmatic girl could go bonkers with that chem in the air. Better check, just to keep everyone safe.

The interior liquid’s warmth stirred the nerves in Ms. Andropov’s hand pleasantly. She unscrewed the spigot cap and waited for the unpleasant odor to waft into the air. Nothing happened. She swilled the contents within the container and held her head back in fear of the dreaded stench. Again, her fear was not proven. She brought her nose down near the opening of the bottle’s neck and took a small sniff, then a big whiff. It smelled fresh as snow and sunshine. Hearing his measured foot steps echoing in the corridor, she replaced the spigot and pretended to count quarters.

“Here it is.” He placed the bills on top of the washer.

“All right, I’ll see you around, Mr. Smith.”

“Tom.”

“Yes’sir.” She knew what he liked to be called, but she also liked to hear him speak his own name. He said it solid, yet casual, and always with a bit of geniality, never aggravation.

Back in her apartment, Ms. Andropov counted out Mr. Smith’s money and the quarters. She carefully folded Tom’s money before setting it on top of the stack she’d collected from him then locked it all in her floor safe. She’d been saving it away from the other inferior money for four months, two months after Mr. Smith had moved in. At first she thought it might be counterfeit because not many tenants paid her in crisp one hundred dollar bills. More often than not it was hastily written checks and many crumpled twenties. But after the down payment and first two months went through the bank, she felt he was on the up and up. He was better than the other tenants, special, a treasure for Ms. Andropov. His money was one thing she could hold in her hands and keep.

After a shower and dressing, she stirred her coffee with five Sweet-N-Low packets in it while thinking about Tom’s watts. He used less electricity, far less electricity, than anyone in the building ever had. His water usage was also unusually low. She wanted to know why he would limit himself, why he would choose to use so little when there was so much in America.

Ms. Andropov headed to the third floor, the top floor, just to pass his door. The second floor smelled of cabbage and potatoes because of two battling tenants constantly making disgusting late-night dinners of the vile veggies. It reminded her of the soup kitchen she frequented when twenty-six and homeless on Houston’s streets. The metal ladels clanged on her

steel bowl. She heard it now along with the gruff mumblings of the insane bums all around her. The noise grew in her head to a dull, pervasive roar. She needed the calm. She traveled upwards in the building.

The third floor, smaller than the others, only had three apartments. A, B, and C were alone up there. A and B were vacant at the moment, so Mr. Smith had the third floor to himself. He was separate from the clatters and odors. When he signed the renter's agreement she noticed his indication that only he would be living there, despite wearing a wedding band. He'd also asked if children lived in the building. She had to say yes, expecting him to be displeased. So many young-adults found children noisy, aggravating, little brats. Mr. Smith seemed pleased about the asthmatic six year-old girl on the first floor. He had smiled and said something about how healing a little girl's laugh could be. Must have been a divorce far from his child, but then why the ring? Ms. Andropov did not know and never asked.

She went to the end of the hall and rested herself on the deep window sill across from his door; dust bunnies choked the air. She had some embroidery with her. A crude design reading "Home Sweet Home," except her apartment didn't feel much like home. Her apartment was messy and always smelled of rotten salad dressing, but she couldn't find the gumption to change it. Whenever she started to clean, she would run into old photographs, ticket stubs, and clothes. She'd remember the five decades she'd spent in this country, and she'd stop cleaning. When younger, Ms. Andropov never had time to think about her Russian past. As she aged and her friends died away and her body slowed down, everything became noisy to her; her memories of Russia were whispers against all of the other chitter-chatter, useless information gathered over the years, all of it becoming a blaring noise inside her.

She was able to sit there, next to Mr. Smith's door, and embroider to forget her apartment, her job, her woes. Although she was alone, her memories calmed when she sat by his door; they became a pleasant, yet unknown melody inside her heart. The third floor smelled of nothing except a bit of sugary must mixing with something earthy and deep. She leaned against the windowpane and tried to think of what that smell was. Ms. Andropov usually found it easy to pin odors back to a certain memory or place. Boiling sugar reminded her of the Halloween fair in San Francisco, when vendors dipped apples in candy coating. Cigar smoke reminded her of the nightclub where she sung for two years. Lemon brought back memories of the floors she had scrubbed at the governor's house. But this rubble, mud aroma she could not place.

"Good evening, Ms. Andropov." Mr. Smith passed by her on the front porch as she smoked her daily dulce mini cigar and sipped her caffeine-free coffee.

"Heydee there, Tom." She patted the rocking chair next to her to encourage him to stay. "The sunset's beautiful, Mr. Smith. Have a squat and let's be." Her eyes pleaded for him to stay.

"Of course." He settled into the chair and quieted down after loosening his tie.

Together they watched the colors fade from yellow, to pink, to purple, to navy blue against the city's skyline, and not a word passed between them. Every once in a while Ms. Andropov would sigh and tilt her head. She touched the green, iron rail of the porch and enjoyed its coolness. The creak of her wooden rocking chair soothed her. Mr. Smith's measured breath echoed pleasantly in her. She closed her eyes to the dark blue city sky and in her head saw the ink black and diamond dotted sky of home. It was so clear there, crystal, uncluttered. Quiet.

Tom's words did not break her image of Russia but strengthened it. "Ms. Andropov," he said, "I'll be leaving soon, you know?"

Mrs. Andropov's chest heaved a bit and her hand, which had been resting, trembled. "Oh, where to?" She tried not to appear concerned, but she could not help it. The noise of endless talk shows, cab calls, jet planes, washing machines—they all crashed deep inside her ears like out of control brass cymbals. Russia disappeared.

She turned her head towards him and took in his scent deeply. Clarity came in her distress; he smelled of the woods and barns and fields of her Russian youth. She even smelled the rich leather of the draft horses' harnesses for pulling the machinery to till the fields. There were moon landings and televisions and wars and tears and noise, just noise, separating her from the clear and unpolluted past. She wanted to hold his hands and put her head close to his heart, to see if she couldn't regain some of the Russian adolescence, to see if she could block out the modern racket. But she only sat as placidly as possible.

"I'm going somewhere... quiet."

Her eyes watered in jealousy, but she feigned sleepiness. "Be nice to get away for awhile."

"Did I ever tell you about my daughter, Ms. Andropov?"

She stopped rocking from the shock. Tom had never offered much personal history, even though Ms. Andropov longed to know. They'd shared recipes, conversations, long looks, and of course a home, the apartment building. But nothing like this.

"Can't say you've mentioned her, Tom."

"She was tenacious and beautiful. She had her mother's crystal blue eyes, but my brown hair. She wanted to visit Russia, her mother's homeland."

Ms. Andropov noticed the “was.” She clutched her heart for the passed child and looked at Tom. His head hung from his shoulders, face turned down to his open palms in his lap. She saw three wet drops in his left hand. She would not ask what happened with her voice, but her eyes pleaded.

Tom reached his hand to hers and grasped it firmly.

“My wife took her shopping for a dress to graduate from kindergarten. A stray bullet from an armed robbery pierced her tiny lung. Anya bled to death in my wife’s arms.”

Ms. Andropov cried. She felt light-headed.

After a long moment, Tom spoke. “I know I’ve been very reserved since moving in, but it’s been very difficult.”

She squeezed his hand.

“I only wish we could have been closer, but you have been a very good friend.” He wiped a few tears from his cheeks, then kissed her hand. “Thank you.” Rising slowly, he stepped inside.

Ms. Andropov understood his quiet demeanor, his cold sober ways. He’d lost his innocent baby-girl, and Ms. Andropov’s Russian name, Russian looks, Russian tongue must have reminded him so much of that past, of that destroyed home. The bedlam of the modern world tormented them both, but with him she found tranquil Russia.

The next morning Tom did not come down at four thirty to steam his suit. He did not come down at six to leave for work. He did not stir at eight or nine. Ms. Andropov ascended the stairs to check on him.

She knocked on his door, but it swung open. A large stack of hundreds sat next to a jar of dirt with a note tied to it with twine.

“Dearest Ms. Andropov,

I am traveling to Siberia to live with the Tuvan people. Though I’ve never lived there, I know I’m going home. My Anya thought of it as home. It’s easiest to leave this earth from home, Ms. Andropov. Are you home?”

She checked the rest of the apartment, but all she could find was a yak skin stuffed with hay, a few crude dishes, candles, and a book, *The Language and Throat Singing of the Tuvan People*. She let her fingers roll across the gold leafed letters on the cover as her heart thumped. The last wick of her life dimmed sharply. He was gone.

She collapsed onto the yak skin, gripping the book and jar. She let her tired fingers slide open the lid, and she took in a deep breath. That was Tom, that was earth and sweat and pride and home, not concrete and bitching and blood. Thomas Smith knew her without speaking, without any noise. She could not turn back the clock and undo the racket of her life in America, but she could travel home to rest peacefully.

God Bless Bonbons

It wasn't my fault his momma was crazy. She didn't even believe diabetes was real until they had to cut her leg clean off. We threatened her and told her time and again that all the sugar in those bonbons was going to kill her. She never responded very well to threats. A card lady friend of hers told me about one time when she was playing bridge at a friend's house years and years ago. Another lady threatened her life because Momma was cheating. They started hollering and screaming across that lace tablecloth, and wouldn't you know that lady—some say she was likely three hundred pounds of lady—laid there on top of Momma, beating on her like Jesus wasn't ever going to come. Momma never shut her mouth off. She kept screaming and cussing at that lady punching on her until blood came out her nose and she was missing at least one tooth.

And today his old Momma's been living in our trailer for one year, seven months, and twenty days. And I have been suffering her craziness all that time, but by tonight I won't be anymore.

Steve and I met just after high school was done. We'd gone to different schools, so we weren't sweethearts or anything like that. My best marks were in English class, but Steve's were in shop class. My family—really only me and my daddy—had just moved closer in to town after my graduation. We had lived far out; so far I had to walk five miles just to get to the school bus stop. Then we moved into an apartment building. It had been an extended-stay motel, but the new owners cleaned it out, fixed it up, and turned it into apartments. It was so strange for me to be so close to town and to people. For the first time I got to watch cable TV downstairs in the laundry room whenever I wanted.

One afternoon, bored as a pumpkin in a patch, I was at home mopping the floors in my clogs. I opened the apartment door so the floors could dry up right quick as I made my way from stove to fridge. I was singing and dancing while I mopped. But then I accidentally bootscootinboogied my foot into the mop pail. My other foot went up, my head went down, and my shoe flew off. Next thing I knew, I heard a yell and moan from outside the apartment door. I picked up my soggy, soapy self and went to see what had happened. Splayed out on the floor was a young man bleeding from the nose, looking very confused, and holding my clog.

“This yours?” he asked, holding up my shoe.

“Yessir. I’m so sorry about that. I was mopping and somehow my foot got stuck in the bucket and down I went.”

“Are you hurt? Let me help you sit down.” He got up quick and pulled a plastic lawn chair over for me. “My name’s Steve.” He held my hand all gentleman-like as I sat.

“Hi Steve. My name’s Lara.” I used the washing rag from my back pocket to wipe the blood from under his nose.

About a year after that my daddy died, but before he did Steve was able to ask him for my hand in marriage. A year after that Steve and I were getting married. All it took was one bloody nose for us to fall in love.

Steve and my ceremony was just beautiful. We had it down by the dock, which is what Steve wanted, of course. I only agreed to have it at the dock if we could have the ceremony at sunset. Steve asked what for, and I told him it was because of all the pretty colors. He just ran his hand through his hair, smiled with his square teeth, and kissed me on the forehead. So we had it all down by the docks at sunset on a Wednesday. I picked Wednesday because the word kind of

sounds like weddings-day. Everything we needed to rent was also a lot cheaper on Wednesdays. His momma wore a white pants suit, but I didn't say nothing at all. No one was going to ruin my day. It was hellish convincing the silk-flower company to let me rent them for use down by the docks. Eventually the company said I could use only the polyester flowers and not the actual silk ones. I said that was just fine by me and that we'd even spray some de-stink solution on them after we were all done.

My color of choice was peach, but not everything could match. Steve had his daddy's tuxedo to wear, which was a pinch small but no one seemed to notice, but we didn't have a matching cummerbund. So we had Aunt Dorris sew some cummerbunds together for us. Only, Aunt Dorris can't remember things real good, so when we said peach to her on the phone she had forgotten by the time she went to the fabric store. She bought all pale yellow satin. It was half-price, so Steve was happy. So when we stood together at the altar Steve and all his groomsmen were wearing their pale yellow things and me and all my maids were wearing our peach things. The silk flower company didn't have a bouquet of polyester flowers in peach because the last woman who had used it puked at the altar, and they hadn't had it dry cleaned yet. So I had to use the lavender bouquet anyway. All of this turned out to be okay though, because Aunt Dorris forgot to bring the camera too. Some of Steve's buddies took pictures with their cell phones, and when I saw them I noticed that the peach dresses, pale yellow cummerbunds, and lavender flowers matched the colors of the sunset behind us. Like I said, our ceremony was just beautiful.

Since Steve and I couldn't afford a real honeymoon, Steve's boss offered that we could stay by his summer house for a few days; they were getting ready to sell it anyways. The house was about a two-hour drive from our trailer, and it was real nice. It was a big two-story house with five bedrooms and four and one-half baths. The hot water was always working; you never

had to check and make sure the pilot light was on. It had a pool with the blue bottom so the water looked pretty, and it even had a waterfall. Only it would have been pretty, but the pumps were broken. The one thing Steve's boss asked was that we cleaned the pool up really nice for the real estate lady and that Steve fix the pump. So our first afternoon and night there Steve cleaned out the pool's inside and worked on the pump. Steve wouldn't let me lay a hand on a work tool—not a broom, skimmer, or wrench. He wanted this time to be special for me, and there isn't anything special about laboring on a pool. The next morning we took an au naturale swim in its beautiful blue water. These were the three happiest days of our marriage.

That's when Momma bulldozed into our lives. We were supposed to stay at Steve's boss' summer house for five days for our honeymoon, but we had to come back early. Momma had fallen at home—probably tripped over a stupid cat—and was in the hospital. Steve's one sister didn't live anywhere near us, and Steve's daddy had been dead for ages. This only left Steve to care for her, which really meant Steve and me. So we started sitting in the hospital with her whenever we could. I started working morning shift at the diner, even though the tips aren't as good.

Every single night while she was in the hospital, I cooked dinner for her and brought it on over. She, Steve, and I sat around her small-as-a-Chinese-take-out-box hospital room, with the TV shut off as Momma was used to, and ate dinner together. Every night when dinner was done, Steve left the room so Momma could have her sponge bath. She asked that I stay to keep her company, but I would of course be obliged to stare at the wall. Every night I asked her how she liked her dinner; every night she would say, "Well, there's always hope for tomorrow night." I kept my tongue locked in my mouth, but it burned as if Momma had poured serpent's poison on

it. I just told myself that at some point she would leave the hospital and go home to her ten cats, which meant I would have to cook her dinner only once a month on the second Sunday. But that changed fast.

The doctors told us she didn't need an operation or anything, just some down time to get rest, so the doctor's released her pretty quick from the hospital. We brought her back to our trailer with us. I totally rearranged the entire house just for her. Steve and I didn't have much: one living room, one bedroom, one bathroom, one kitchen and one bed. So I dragged Steve and my double bed out into the living room by the TV with the end table squished between the foot of the bed and the Lazy Boy. I put our best one hundred-thread-count sheets on the bed, bought brand new pillows from Dollar General, and laid her favorite magazines on the end table. In Steve and my bedroom I fashioned a make-shift bed for us. It was all the extra comforters, bed spreads, and quilts that I could round up from the neighbors laid neatly on the floor in front of the couch. Then Momma came home.

At first I thought maybe Momma was just acting a little strange on account of being in the hospital, but later on I realized that she was just plain crazy.

"Oh dear, these windows just won't do. Darling, could you cover them with tinfoil so it won't be so bright in here. I like to nap in the afternoon." She tightened the strings holding on her oversized hat.

"Yes, Momma." And I set about taping tinfoil into the living room windows.

The next day, some time after Steve had been at work, Momma hollered loud while I was in the shower. I ran out the shower with soap in my eyes and barely wrapped in a towel. Momma had fallen down near the TV. "What is it Momma? What are you doing out of bed?" I kneeled by her side and checked her over to make sure nothing was broken.

“Oh, child, I just wanted to open up these windows; it’s too dark in here.” Her big watery, yellow eyes stared at me from under her blue painted lids.

“But, Momma, you asked me to cover them.”

“Did I?”

“Yes, because you like to nap in the afternoons.”

“Oh well, yes, sugar, but it’s not the afternoon.”

“Yes but—”

“No buts about it, sugar. It is not the afternoon.”

Things went on like that, but I kept hope because she’d be leaving in four weeks just like the doctors said.

During her third week of staying with us I took Momma to the doctor for a follow-up visit. They said her blood work had come back from the lab when she was in the hospital after her fall, and it turned out she had diabetes. The doctors gave us a couple of pamphlets and made appointments for Momma to come see about her health and her new disease later on. That night, Steve and I had a talk.

“I want Momma to stay with us until she’s all set up and understands what’s going on with her sickness.” Steve was always a straight-talker like that. He set his eyes on me.

“I really think she’d be more comfortable at home. I can take time off work to bring her to all her appointments and call her at lunch to make sure she’s doing okay.” I really didn’t think she’d be more comfortable at home, but I did think I’d be more comfortable in my home if she was gone. I just wanted Steve to think about it from all angles. I noticed Steve pick up one of the doctor pamphlets. He flipped open to the first page. I could see in his eyes he was struggling

to get it. Diabetes is real confusing, like trying to get homemade bread to rise; too much heat and the whole thing collapses, not enough heat and the dough won't rise.

"I'll take care of those things, sweetheart." I pushed the papers down from his face and looked him in the eyes. I could see tears by the corners.

"She's the last parent we have between us, Lara. I'm not ready for her to die." He pressed his fingers against his eyes and hung his head.

He was scared to lose her, just like I was scared after my daddy's heart attack. I wasn't ready for my daddy to die either, but I couldn't do anything for him at all. I could try with Momma, for my Steve.

"Okay. I'll bring Momma over after bingo, and we'll have a chat with her about staying here. And I'll look at all these things to figure it out." I gathered up the pamphlets, trying to keep them away from him because I knew—but would never say—that Steve could not read the big words and correct English inside them. "But those cats aren't allowed."

"We'll bring them to the pound." He grabbed my hand with his thick, rough fingers. "Thank you, Lara."

When Steve and I were sitting there I thought maybe I could help Momma regain her health and get her out in two months flat.

Six months later they took Momma's left leg. She played cards with other ladies from around the trailer park three times a week at night, and I knew it was those cackling old hens that were bringing Momma her bonbons. We told Momma she could not have her bonbons anymore. They were full of sugar and sure to kill her quick as a rattlesnake; Momma didn't listen. The morning after Momma was playing cards, I would wake up at four like usual and find Momma flipping

channels on the TV like the devil was chasing her. I'd look at her face, and her eyes would be all twitchy, and at the corners of her wet, orange-lipsticked mouth would be bits of chocolate and vanilla bonbons. Steve never saw her like this because he picked up two shifts at the shipyard and a second job working the graveyard shift at the timber factory three times a week.

One night, after I had worked a double, I came on home to Momma. She had played cards with the ladies night before last, so at least I knew they wouldn't be there tonight. I put left-over pork chops with rice in the microwave for Momma and me to eat. This was one dish of mine that she never said anything about at all. She didn't say anything nasty; she didn't say anything nice. I figured it had to be one of her favorites, so as I was heating it up, I just knew that tonight was going to be a good night. I brought Momma her tray, switched off the TV as she liked, and we ate in silence. As I went to clear our plates in the sink, I swear I saw a smile crawl onto the left side of Momma's face. I was going to bed happy, until I went to lay myself down.

"Momma," I hollered from my bedroom. I could hear her bangle bracelets rattling in the front room. "Momma, where's my bed?" She gave me a look of innocence from under her clumpy eyelashes. There wasn't anything left of my makeshift bed. The quilts, the comforters, the blankets—they were all gone, except Steve and my faded comforter with peaches on its off-white background. "Momma?"

"Well, darling, all the neighbors came by today and needed their things back. So off they marched one by one. I suppose it's because of the lice." She looked down at her dry hands and cracked a few of her knuckles.

"What lice Momma?"

"Well, your lice, sugar dumpling."

"I don't have lice."

“Sure you do. Other night while you were cooking them pork chops I saw one stuck in your lovely chestnut hair. Steve reached right up and said ‘Hey, you’ve got a bit of lice in your hair.’ Then he plucked it out and tossed it to the sink.”

“He said rice, Momma, not lice.” I smiled at her, gentle as I could. “If Steve said it, how’d everybody find out?”

“One of my card ladies is a retired school nurse. I asked her if she knew how to get rid of lice. Maybe she told everybody else.”

“Okay, Momma. Guess I’ll just have to let everyone know tomorrow I don’t have lice and may I please borrow their things again.”

I went back to my bedroom and started laying down all Steve and my sweatshirts and jackets. I went to bed right then. No point in waiting. But as I tried to fall asleep, all I could hear was the rattling of Momma’s bangles from the front room, like a rattler.

That’s how it was. If I wore pink lipstick, Momma would prefer me in red, but if I wore red lipstick she’d ask me if I weren’t selling any extra services down by the diner. If I cooked eggs for breakfast, she’d prefer cereal, but if all I had time for was cereal, she’d want bacon. She watched those home-shopping channels for so long it actually burned the side bars into our TV. She also ordered from those places so frequently that I was going by the post office twice a week to return all the ridiculous things she bought. Premium steaks, triple fold ladders, juicing machines. I thanked God every day that those TV shopping places had such good return policies.

This was our three lives. Me dealing with Momma every moment at home and serving at the diner, and Steve at work all the time. Steve, bless his heart, tried to help with Momma, but he worked so much he wasn’t ever home. He was working all those shifts to pay Momma’s

medical bills since she had to have her leg removed; she wasn't quite old enough for Medicare, and Medicaid kept giving us the run around about 'neglect of health.' I just couldn't tell Steve about her misbehaving. I'm all for honesty in a marriage, but Steve's a good boy and good boys love their mommas no matter what. I didn't want to stick him between a cactus and a briar patch. I just had to learn how to handle her, how to wear her down. I had time—God knows—trapped indoors with her every moment I wasn't working. I could have learned how to do it too, if things hadn't changed.

A year after they took her left leg, they had to take her right leg. After the second leg went, I didn't just have to assist her to the bathroom to take a shower, but I actually had to bathe her. The doctors gave us about a million different pamphlets to read and books to buy and rules to follow. Momma refused to read any of it, saying that nobody ever learned anything from a book they couldn't learn from trial and error. I looked at Momma's missing legs, and I knew that just was not true. The doctors said that Momma's pills, which she never took correctly, weren't going to cut it anymore. She had got to start checking her blood sugar regularly and taking insulin injections when she needed them. Fooling with the needles and the blood sugar machine wasn't a game; too much insulin in the needle could kill her, too little could kill her, avoiding veins was important, not to mention air getting into a vein if we hit one. Steve and I agreed that I needed to take a break from the diner until we got all of this covered, until we both knew that Momma could do her own shots when she needed them.

It's been a month since I left work; she hasn't given herself a shot yet. I've been riding her like a trader man on a donkey to learn how to do it herself; she simply refuses. Steve comes home when he can, but most nights he gets stuck at work sleeping in a chair or the pick-up until

his next shift comes around. About a week ago he did get to come home, and Momma's forked liar's tongue came out.

"Oh, my Stevey boy! Come give your Momma a hug."

"Hey, Momma." He gave her a weak wave, but came and kissed me first. I saw her eyes light up with a golden fire, and the blacks went thin.

"You been taking good care of yourself like you're supposed to, right Momma?" I waited for her answer but already knew it.

"Of course honey pie, I'm just an old injecting fool over here. Kind of makes me feel like I'm addicted to the drugs, but I know better." She gave him a wink and a hug. Her bangles rattled.

"How many times you done it all by yourself, Momma?" he asked.

"Every day for the past ten days."

"Good then, looks like the diner might not have to suffer without you any more darlin'. Once Momma's leg's healed up you can go back to work." I nodded yes to him. I let him think what he wanted. I only got to see him about ten hours in a week, so I didn't want to fill that precious time with worrying about Momma. He can't help anyways.

Yesterday morning I went into the free clinic, just for a check up. I didn't want any more medical bills coming to the house—Steve doesn't need to worry about me and his Momma. I told the nurse what's been happening with my body. I've been throwing up a lot, my period is out of line, and I've had light cramps every day. I thought for sure it was stress, but after a few tests, I found out I'm pregnant. Before Momma's second leg went down river, Steve and I still managed to have a roll in the hay every now and then; mostly when Momma's ladies were over

for cards. We went out to the cow fields down the road a ways in the pick-up truck. It wasn't glorious, but we both love each other, and that's a marital right neither of us wanted to give up.

The lady at the desk gave me a booklet on 'prenatal care.' I read the checklist inside on all the things I needed to do before the baby was even born. I stopped by the discount store to check on the vitamins and cribs I needed, and I started to cry when I saw the prices. Twenty dollars for a bottle of vitamins and two hundred for a crib that I didn't have room for. I only had three dollars in my purse. I thought maybe I could make a crib out of the bathtub; I could sit up against it and sleep. I'd be close when the baby cried.

I sat down at the bus stop and the tears came again. Steve and I wouldn't be able to afford Momma and a baby. We couldn't even afford Momma, and I wanted Steve to be a daddy to our baby. He couldn't if he was always working. And having a baby screaming crying as Momma hollers about the noisy baby just after I gave birth, and getting even less sleep—she'd drive me insane. She'd drive me to... I just might...

I looked up at the sun and smiled. That was one year, seven months and nineteen days. That was yesterday.

Tonight marks the end of the twentieth day, and I am sitting with my husband in our living room on what I now think of as Momma's nasty bed. He's got his head on my shoulder and is crying his little baby tears like men do. I stroke his hair, lucky to have him off work and with me. I haven't seen him for three straight days.

"I feel so bad Steve. I thought Momma knew what she was doing. I had to go out for groceries, to get her favorite sugar free hard candy—"

“There’s no need, honey. You tried to help Momma much as you possibly could. She must have just made a mistake and got some air into her needle, that’s all.”

“I’m so sorry, Steve.”

“I feel like a bad son, because all I feel right now is sad and relief because she won’t suffer anymore.”

“I know.” I know the relief. I know the relief because I won’t suffer Momma any more and I’ll get my husband back and our baby won’t suffer Momma either. And I made sure of that.

Yiff

Before the first bell on Monday morning, Janey Wilkinson strolled down the hallway. Jake noticed her tits and the way her gold hair rested on the fake fur collar of her vest. A perfect V of white fur tipped with light grey snuggling her Victoria's Secret-enhanced breasts.

"You know that's hot shit," Todd, his buddy, said. "When are you going to tap that?"

"Come on man, that's not cool. Anyways, she's a Junior. I'm just some Sophomore to her. Forget it." Despite his words, Jake couldn't keep his face from smirking charmingly as he met Janey's eyes.

"Look at her, dude," Todd whispered as the girl closed in. "She totally wants your junk."

"Nah." Jake shook his head, careful to keep his eyes locked on Janey.

"Dude, you were MVP of state last year. You're, like, god of the Sophomore class."

Jake liked to hear that. He was just waiting for someone to say it, again.

They were only a few feet apart now. Jake got a wiff of that girl smell—flowers and powder and dew. But his own scented deodorant soon washed it out as his body temperature skyrocketed and his pits grew slick with the nervous-sweats.

"Hey, Janey." Jake used his man-voice to address her, and he knew it was best to go first. Girls like that.

She slowed her step and stopped, turning her fur-lined boobs toward him. "Well hi there, Jakey," she returned. She smiled, her raspberry lips opening for him.

He noticed her teeth, notebook-paper white and large, but the edges curved softly. It'd be stupid to compliment her teeth. "Nice vest. It's furry outside today—" oh shit. "I mean cold outside, so the fur is nice, today." The odor of his deodorant flooded the air between them.

She loosened the wide smile into a smaller, more intimate smile. “Maybe I’ll stop by practice this afternoon to check out your skills.” She reached over and flicked the soccer ball keychain dangling from one of his gym bag zippers.

“Great!” He knew that was a little too much, but he felt so relieved he didn’t have to ask. “See you in home-ec. Later.” He tried to smooth out the excitement by flicking the stuffed wolf keychain attached to her bag.

Once out of earshot, Todd piped up. “It’s furry outside? Dude?”

Jake heard him but didn’t acknowledge the sarcasm. He had a date with Janey, or something like that.

“Home-ec is for pussies!” Ed threw a pencil at the back of Jake’s head as Jake pulled his sewing kit from his locker; he was getting ready for Monday’s last period. “You gonna sew yourself a purse to carry your tampons in?”

“Shut up, Ed.” Jake plucked the pencil from where it stuck in his polo’s collar. He tossed it in the back of his locker, next to his World History book and soccer journal.

Ed bristled at the lack of aggravation. “Faggot!”

“Hey!” That was over the line for Jake—a cruel word. “I said shut up, butt face. If you weren’t so dumb you’d realize I sit in a class surrounded by chicks every day, while you *rassle* with a bunch of dudes.”

Faggot was like nigger—an inexcusable hatred. Jake’s older brother had told him, “It’s decidedly un-cool to be racist now. But bigoted? That’s still awesome. Especially against women and homosexuals. Bigotry, racism, sexism—it’s all evil. Don’t play into it, Jake; even when it’s easy.”

Jake slammed his locker door and shoved past Ed. He just wanted to get to class with Janey. Janey with colored pencils and charcoal smudges on her knuckles; she enjoyed sketching animals and wild life. He hustled down the mostly empty hall, knowing he was late. The green lockers rushed by, each combination lock securely keeping the students' secrets from each other.

Their home-ec teacher had started the lecture, so Jake took his seat quietly behind a sewing machine. She was talking about stitch types and their uses. Jake pulled out a notebook and pen, putting on a confused face. But he already knew that zig-zags functioned well on stretch material, and that a satin stitch was useful for appliqués. The differences of the general purpose foot, zipper foot, and button-hole foot were familiar to him. He'd even replaced the worn feed dogs on his machine at home. The entredeux stitch? Child's play.

He felt a few of the girl's eyes on him: Jake the soccer player, Jake the hottest Sophomore, Jake the nonchalant. He didn't know what would happen if he threw in: Jake the sewing enthusiast. He felt disconnected so fervently he wouldn't go into any of the local fabric suppliers. He used the scraps left over from his granny's stash, even though he felt they were limited and boring. He'd already used the best yards. All the synthetic fur.

Janey waved at him from her seat two rows forward. He winked, wishing he'd made it early so they could have talked. From that small, pink-palmed wave, he felt confident they'd be talking after soccer practice.

Class continued, Jake purposefully ruining his project of the week—a pillowcase. If only he could show them what he had been working on at home over the past two months. He kept it tucked inside an old gym bag at the bottom of his closet, transporting it back and forth between his room and Granny's sewing machine only when he knew he wouldn't be seen. The home-ec

class made a great cover for his personal project; he wanted to have the scariest costume at next year's Halloween party.

Monday night Jake lounged alone in his bedroom.

Knock. Knock.

"Yeah, Mom?" Jake picked up his remote. He flipped off the *Project Runway* re-run and put the station to safe, every-teen MTV.

"Oh, Jake. Turn that off. It's disgusting." She waved her powder sugar covered hand at the screen.

Jake rolled his eyes instinctively then caught a look at the screen. A faceless woman shook her sequin-clad ass at the camera, causing such a jigglng of her shiny panties the station had to blur out her undercarriage. She was right. It was disgusting.

"Sorry." He clicked the TV off.

"Come on down, I've got some Monkey Crunch."

"I told you. I'm not hungry."

His mother closed the door, pulled the computer chair close to the bed, and sat herself down. "Any time a young man of sixteen refuses junk food means trouble."

Jake pulled his blue plaid comforter up closer to his chest. He already knew she'd sit there, silent and loving and concerned, until he divulged. She'd once sat with him for two hours after he'd lost a soccer match. She stayed until he fell asleep in his uniform, cleats, and shin pads. He still remembered the way she tucked his arm under his blankets with her dry, warm hand. In the morning, she got him up half an hour early for school to feed him her specialty,

heart-shaped pancakes, while prying at him with questions. The questions weren't painful, but he could feel his seams being pulled apart one stitch at a time. He was twelve then.

He might as well fess up, at least partially. But in the four years since the pancake morning, Jake recognized life's increasing complexity. Before it was hard to form the words from his heart—now it was difficult for him to even know what was in his heart.

"There's this girl."

"You mean young woman." She poked his knee.

"There's this young lady. She said we could, you know, hang out. Then she didn't show."

"And why not?"

"I don't know, Mom." He flopped his hand on the comforter and looked at her face for the first time since she came in the door. He saw little wrinkles of what he guessed was concern around his mother's eyes; she looked so much older now than she did when he was twelve.

"Don't act like a boy, you're a young man yourself." She poked his knee again, but then a doubting frown passed her face swiftly. "But it's still okay to feel frustrated too."

Maybe now it was harder for her to talk to him too.

"No phone number?" she asked.

"No, Mom. We're not there yet."

"Okay, okay." She looked around the room and pushed her sweater's sleeves up. "Can't you use one of those FaceSpace internet pages to speak with her?"

"Facebook or MySpace?"

"Sure." She shrugged her shoulders, obviously clueless.

"I use FaceBook. So does she. But I don't know. It's so middle school to ask for a date like that. I wouldn't know what to say."

“Even if you don’t know the facts, why do you *think* she didn’t meet you?”

Jake stared at his thumbs for a moment. “I’m a Sophomore, she’s a Junior.”

“And?”

“You’re not ancient, Mom.” He rolled his eyes at her over dramatically. “I’m just, not cool enough for her.”

She nodded her head slowly. “Maybe *cool* isn’t what she wants.”

Jake looked down at his clasped hands. That sounded wise, but then what did she want?

Jake didn’t want to look desperate the next morning, so he casually walked past Janey’s locker over and over again. His soccer mates advised to “forget that ho,” reiterating the common rumor that Janey slept around. Jake knew it was likely she’d had sex with someone. Jake had twice, with different girls. He remembered the fumbling and dry silence. He didn’t want it that way anymore, and he didn’t want it like porno—dumb girls and too much dick. He wanted sex but not as he’d seen, had, or imagined it before.

Janey popped around the corner, stopping herself from plowing into Jake. They were so close her faux-fur lined boots brushed his jeans. He could smell all her womanliness. The green streaks in her hazel eyes nearly glowed. She moved her foot back, brushing his jeans again. His stomach flew up to his throat, and his blood rerouted, south bound.

“Oh, hey, Janey.” Jake stumbled back a bit and swung his gym bag around his front.

She pulled her earbuds out swiftly and looked at his face closely. “You okay?” she asked.

He felt clammy and light headed. He didn’t know what was happening. He wanted to bite her ankles, pull her hair, sniff her breasts. He wanted her long nails to scrape down his back,

and her fisted hands to beat on his chest. Her sharp teeth digging holes in his shoulder. In his mind he heard cries and shouts—good ones. Even with a gym bag full of clothes, cleats, towels, and shin guards, he felt like his boner might tear through the bag and bludgeon her. He'd had lots of hard-ons before, many times a day, for several years, millions of them. But this wasn't just his wang, this was in his head, down his arms, pulsating in his chest.

"I've got to get out of here." He turned on his heels and ran down the hallway. Bumping into people with his gym bag clutched tightly against his crotch, he made it safely outside. No admins had seen him. He used the short cut through the park to get home, the wild, clawing, biting fantasies growing weaker as he put distance between himself and her.

"You call me, all in a fuss, and now you're just silent?" Ethan must have parked on campus because Jake no longer heard the engine running. After his intense experience, he'd run home to call his brother.

"I don't even know what to say!" Jake waited for his stiffy to go limp before calling; it took longer than normal. He couldn't talk to him like that.

"Just tell me what happened."

"It's hard."

"Look, I need to be in my Intro to Chem class in eight minutes."

Jake did not know what to say. He'd felt—bestly. Janey's teeth were round, but when he stood before her all he saw were white daggers, and he wanted them in his flesh. He could feel the stir in his pants, and it only made him panic more, losing his words. He heard a car door shut.

"I've got to go now, Jake. Text me later if you figure it out."

“Wait!” He hadn’t meant to sound so panicked, terrified. “Something weird happened to me this morning. With a girl.”

“Oh.” Ethan responded. “Okay, so what was it?”

“I don’t know if I can tell you.”

“How can I help if you won’t tell me anything?” Ethan wasn’t mad anymore; his Ts no longer came out sharp.

Jake heard a car door close and some rustling.

“I’m listening, Jake. You can tell me about this stuff. You know that I, of all people, won’t think you’re weird.”

Jake didn’t know how to tell his brother about what happened that morning. He felt childish next to his brother. At seventeen Ethan was able to sit Jake down and tell him in a straightforward, clear manner that he was gay. His big brother revealed his homosexuality first, and only, to Jake. Six months later, Ethan left home for college, where he was able to live an openly gay existence.

“How’d you know you wanted to have sex with guys?” Jake thought maybe his own brother’s alternative sexual presence could help clarify Jake’s strange woody that morning.

“I kind of always knew.”

“But, when did you realize?”

“Jake, just because I’m gay doesn’t mean you will be too. Every person is different and—“

“It’s not *that*.” Jake sighed. “When was the moment your were like ‘oh, guys are sexy’?”

“I don’t know if I’d put it like that.”

“Ethan, please.”

“Okay, okay. Probably sixth period science class with Mr. Jones my freshman year.”

Ethan stopped for a moment.

“What happened?”

“You probably know Ed Larson—he failed Senior year so he’s still there. Anyways, Ed had some photos from a wrestling tournament, and he was showing them to one of his buddies. I caught a glimpse of those boys all twisted in on each other, close, sweaty. I don’t know. I got all... excited. Then Ed looked at me, and I could have sworn he winked. And then there I was in the middle of science class crossing my legs to hide my... my excitement. I failed that quiz big time. I was too busy feeling terrified.”

“Then what?” Jake needed some of the after wash. Looking at pictures of male wrestlers and getting hard could only mean two things: a thing for wrestlers or homosexual.

“I went home later and looked at everything under my new circumstance. All my posters, my music—everything made sense. I had a copy of *Playboy*, and I looked at it once then tossed it under my bed. My normal behaviors and urges suddenly made sense. I just wasn’t like the typical guy.”

“It was really that easy?”

“No, Jake. Hardest thing I’ve gone through in my life yet. I felt ashamed and like a freak for a very long time; telling you helped me get over those feelings. Telling Mom will be next; now *that* I’m nervous about.”

“Thanks, Ethan.” Jake did not feel helped. Unless he told Ethan about his animal-type fantasies, Ethan couldn’t help. It was a mystery; teeth and claws soaked in hormones.

“Jake, if you won’t tell me—“

“Can’t.”

“If you *can't* tell me this weird thing, then think about it. Take a look at her. Was it her? Something she said? What about you? Anything different lately? Think about it scientifically; remember the scientific method from science class? That way you don't get so, upset.”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Whatever it is, Jake, we can talk.”

“Bye, Ethan.” Jake closed his phone. There was no time to begin his investigation now. He had to cover his tracks about ditching school.

He had lied to his mother Tuesday, and it had not felt good. And it was an embarrassing lie involving stomach upset and soiled underwear; he'd blamed over-heated mayonnaise on his sandwich. Wednesday night, Jake waited until he was sure his Mom was asleep. He heard the shower shut off. Ten minutes later, the TV clicked on. A while afterward the house fell silent. The time had come.

He started with Janey. She hadn't said anything except “Are you okay?” He drew a line through Audio on his list. She smelled just the same as she always did. He exed off Smell. It couldn't be Taste because he didn't kiss her, and he'd had oatmeal for breakfast. Blandest of all morning cereals. He'd save Touch for last.

Visual. She was wearing a pair of those incredibly skinny-legged jeans in pink. A big belt—maybe in white? A t-shirt with some sort of wolf or fox on it. A grey jacket, lots of buttons. Her hair was up that day. And the fuzzy boots with the fawn and wheat colored trim over a faux suede body. Nothing unusual for her. Ex Visual.

Touch. They'd nearly slammed into each other, but they didn't. His hand didn't even accidentally smack her boob. Their skin hadn't even touched. She rubbed on his leg—not really.

She just brushed it with the fluffy fuzz of her boots. Did he have a thing for legs? He had thought of biting her ankles. He wanted them in his mouth, spitting and drooling, to drag her around by them, to be kicked, and feel his tongue burn.

Stop! Scientific. Scientific.

He turned to his laptop. If Ethan's desire for men was triggered by a photograph, maybe his own could be too. On Google image search he typed in "gray fox." He clicked through half a dozen pages of cute, fluffy little foxes happily prancing in snow. He stared hard at them, waiting for his loins to spring to life. Nothing happened. Maybe it wasn't bestiality.

He shut the laptop and notebook. Digging through the bottom of his closet, he stuck the list inside the bag with his costume-in-progress. He didn't feel like working on it tonight. He had other things to figure out, like how he would avoid Janey tomorrow. Today had been hard enough. Sitting all the way in the back, ignoring every time she shifted in her seat, even the slightest amount. He was pretty sure she'd looked back at him a few times, trying to catch his eye. The ice-cold water bottle on his lap helped a great deal. He didn't want to be rude to her, that wasn't right. And he still wanted her, very badly.

He'd have to face her without losing his outward cool. Maybe if they could be alone he could narrow down the possibilities of the attraction. It could lead to disaster, but he had to try tomorrow.

Jake stopped by his locker after last period home-ec class, then peeped back inside the home-ec room again. There she was, alone, finishing up a project she'd started earlier in the week. Her skills were advanced for the class, so their teacher allowed her to move on to sewing stuffed animals. She wanted to hand make a replica of her nephew's dog for him. She'd chosen lovely,

yellow-toned brown fake fur to replicate the golden retriever's coat. She was very thoughtful, and he wished they could make sewing projects for each other. But first, he had to figure out Tuesday's freak boner.

Jake entered the room quietly so as not to startle her too much.

"Jake?" She stopped the machine and turned her eyes to him, staying in the hunched poise of a seamstress. Her pale, pink fingernail dug into the fur of her project.

He noticed the soft, tawny hair, where her scalp and neck met, bristle slightly. Maybe in aggravation, maybe in excitement.

"How's the dog coming?" He slid into the classroom, shuffling his feet. He tried to pose as relaxed, leaning an elbow on a machine and being sure to put the bulky metal and plastic machine between his pants and her face.

"What do you want?" She thrust her hands from the material clamped under the machine's foot.

"What happened Monday?" That was a safer subject than apologizing for Tuesday.

"Monday?" She shoved her chair away from the table. "How about Tuesday? You ran away from me. Ran."

"I thought..." He couldn't tell her the truth, not all of it. "I thought you changed your mind," he swallowed watching her nostrils flare, "because I'm a Sohpomore."

She looked down at her shoes, brushing a stray hair behind her slightly pointy ear. Jake noticed bits of fur clinging to her lap and chest. He bent over slightly in response to the warming sensation below his belt.

"That's why you ran?" she asked.

"Yeah." He squirmed.

“Well, I didn’t come Monday cause I was nervous, I guess.” She rolled her eyes slightly picking a few of the lint bits stuck to her front.

He watched her nails pick at the fur. He ran his tongue over his teeth, slumping forward a little more. He tried looking anywhere but at her.

“Jake?”

“Yeah, nervous. Me too, right now.”

“Oh come on. You’re Jake. Popular MVP; the only guy to take home-ec and not get pulverized.”

“That was just one game, a year ago.”

“That’s not it. You don’t curse like everyone else. You don’t joke in class or pick on people. You’re not like the other guys. You’re nice.”

Jake didn’t move. He felt his face burning, his crotch throbbing, and his stomach flopping. Janey didn’t want Jake the soccer player, Jake the hottest Sophomore, Jake the nonchalant. She just wanted him.

“But hey, I’m just Janey. Artsy weirdo that likes to draw wolves and foxes and stuff.” She flopped back into the chair.

Jake wanted to press her hand into his and whisper something charming in her ear. Not risking bumping her with his pocket tent, he instead said to her, “I like that you’re creative and nice to your family and you speak your mind. That’s why I wanted to hang out with you.” He paused, trying to stop his hormones from ruining the next utterance. “And pretty,” he squeaked out.

She fingered the fur of the half-done plushie.

He almost had to crouch down he felt so dizzy. He had to lick her ear, sniff her neck, bite her hip. He needed his tail pulled, but he had none, and it didn't make sense. He glanced at his own hand and didn't see paw and claw, but he felt them there. He wanted her to swipe at him, so he could howl. It was time to get out before he did something stupid, like pounce on her.

“Well, I've gotta go to practice.” He stood up, as much as he could, and looked for a route to the door.

“Wait.” She dug through her messenger bag and ripped a page from her sketchbook. She folded it carefully and wrote something on it. “My number. Just call, whenever. Or text, whatever.”

The peach fuzz of her knuckles brushed his, and he leapt out of the room.

He ran down the abandoned halls well as well as he could, given the lead pipe jammed between his thighs.

The locker room was quiet when he entered, so he slinked to the farthest stall and sat down. He rested the note on the toilet paper dispenser and put his hands in his hair. Deep breaths helped slow his racing pulse. Once he felt sufficiently calm, like he might not explode out of his skin in a rampage of teeth, claws and tails, he looked at the note.

She'd written all seven numbers in the swoopy, controlled curves of an artist. A line through her zero and tip on the one. Nobody else took that kind of time to write numbers. And the ink: beige. Who had beige pens? Janey.

He studied her name one letter at a time. A prominent “J” with the “a” snuggled against it. The “n” and “e” nearly indistinguishable. And the “y.” Its stem came down and around back toward the “J.” It formed the fluffy, tipped figure of a fox's tail.

The wild images came again, again he felt faint. He couldn't stop it, he couldn't put down the note. There was only one way out of that stall and back home undetected. He didn't want to because he didn't know why he saw paws, claws, fangs. He unbuckled his pants. He held the note up against the stall door with his right hand and put his left to work. He wanted to weep, to growl, to scream in confusion and ecstasy.

It was too early Friday morning. Jake floated out of his dream and back to the reality of his cotton comforter. He remembered a deep forest and pale moonlight on Janey's face. But her eyes were green and her teeth prickly. He kicked the covers off his sweaty body in aggravation.

How could he have done that yesterday? He knew of a few guys that had jerked off at school, mostly out of boredom or kudos. Jake felt shame; he couldn't stop whatever was plaguing him with such odd fantasies. He'd given in, after just two days.

It was early, but he had to dig out his old gym bag. In his sprint to leave before anyone could see his teary face, he'd forgotten his good bag in his locker. He pulled out the old one from his closet floor, but the note on his desk fluttered with his movement.

He wouldn't look at it. He wouldn't. Bestiality was freakish and wrong. He couldn't think of anything else it could be. He just couldn't look.

He unfolded the note to sniff the ink, noticing an image on the back. He flattened it out on his bed. "Janey Fox" was written in the upper left corner and in the middle space stood a fox, upright on two feet, with breasts, a fur lined vest, and fuzzy boots. She was sexy, it was sexy, she was, she. He sweated and stiffened. That was it.

Janey wore t-shirts with upright, talking, human-like animals on them. Janey had a plushie wolf keychain attached to her backpack zipper. Janey sketched foxes, real and anthropomorphic. Kind, thoughtful, talented; Janey was, different.

From his gym bag he yanked out his eight-week-long personal sewing project. A full-on, wolf-man body suit. Furry brown and soft black hairs. He hadn't sewn any paws yet, thinking it too complicated. He'd told himself it was for Halloween, but he'd never enjoyed that holiday anyways.

It wasn't bestiality. It was him. It was Janey.

Before school, he tried to plan something smart to say, but nothing came to mind. He brought his wolfman costume with him, and maybe, when he saw her, he could ask for help with sewing the paws. That could at least start a conversation. With gym bag thoroughly squeezed against his package, he walked to Janey's locker.

She spun the dial and popped the lock. The door swung open, and he could see more animal-like drawings hidden inside.

"Hey, Janey." He gripped the strap of his bag so tightly it hurt, but it helped him maintain some degree of control.

"Hi Jake." She faced him in a plain, grey t-shirt, dark wash jeans, and fluffy hair clips.

He swallowed despite having no spit in his mouth. "I wanted to tell you that I really liked that drawing you gave me a lot. I think you're a really good artist."

Janey smiled, exposing her wonderful white teeth, and she leaned forward. The kiss was small but planted earnestly. Jake's knees buckled because he could feel the hardness of her

fangs under the soft lips. She pulled back a little bit and swiped her wet, bumpy tongue across the tip of his nose.

“I thought you might be into it.”

“Yes, yes.” He took her into both of his arms, careful to lodge the gym bag between them. He pressed his face into her mane and breathed deeply.

Vita

Emily Bufford was born and raised in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans, Louisiana. She attended Delgado Community College and Southeastern Louisiana University but completed the bulk of her B.A. in English at Loyola University New Orleans from which she graduated in 2007. She will graduate with her MFA in creative writing in 2010 and hopes to attain a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition soon. Besides creative writing, her other passions include alternative hair extensions and special effects makeup.