



**THE  
PREMISES**  
A Good Place to Start  
**ISSUE #31**  
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**STORIES IN WHICH A PIECE OF CLOTHING (OR  
CLOTHING IN GENERAL) PLAYS AN IMPORTANT  
ROLE...**

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## FIRST PLACE

Bryce Albertson doesn't want to write this bio. He remembers a day when he would have works published in *On The Premises*, *Pseudopod*, *The Brooklyn*, *Necrotic Tissue*, and others. He remembers relishing opportunities to write bios because they allowed him to go on and on about his favorite subject: himself. Now, even though he is still amazing, Bryce is too old, too tired, too married, too employed, and just too darn humble to brag.

### The Thinking Cap

by Bryce Albertson

What seven-year-old Karen didn't know—couldn't know, in fact—was that the dusty old shelf completely agreed with her. It was a silly hat, at least in the shelf's opinion.

\*

At first, the shelf had thought the idea of consciousness had been a novel one. For the first three weeks, it had been fascinated with the simple tactile sensations that come with being a sentient plank of aged maple. It had studied the textures of the things placed upon it: the shoeboxes filled with who-knows-what; the smooth, cold steel of the .357 magnum that was always loaded, but never shot; the cargo shorts that went away during the warmer months, and the glossy slickness of the dirty magazines that were hidden beneath them; and, of course, the silky smoothness of the brim of the old top hat.

The simple concept of touch had fascinated the shelf—which had been unaware of its own existence prior to the arrival of the hat—for several weeks. Even when it had been part of a living tree it had never been aware of anything, but suddenly it

had been thrust into a veritable universe of input, albeit a smallish one. There were textures! There was heat and cold! And then, there were the shelf's favorite sensations: the vibrations. Perhaps they, like this new experience the shelf had come to call "life," had meanings. With so many new thoughts and feelings to explore, the shelf had been figuratively beside itself with joy at being literally in the top of the closet.

When simple sensory processing became routine and uninteresting, the shelf had spent the better part of a year contemplating the nature of its existence. It had conjured in its mind a mythology about its own creation. Perhaps there had been another shelf before it, a Big Plank which it had once been a part of? Perhaps there was something out there which possessed a will, something that had created the shelf with a purpose? Perhaps this creator had made the shelf in its own image and endowed the shelf with a similar mind, one capable of logic, of love, even? Surely this was the case.

However, after years of isolation broken only by the groping, grasping, and hasty replacing of a dog-eared copy of *Hustler* on the one night a month when its owner's wife went to play canasta, the shelf had come to believe that it had been wrong about the nature of existence, which of course it had been because... well, because it was a shelf. Dauntlessly, the shelf had continued its search for meaning. It had assigned its own meanings to the vibrations which rang through the house. Amazingly—and quite conveniently—the shelf had called these vibrations "sounds." Even more amazingly, the shelf had called the sounds which it believed had meanings "language."

The shelf had imagined that there might be many different languages, for what else could explain the fact that the cargo shorts had nothing to say to it when they returned from wherever it was that they went when the world grew hot and humid?

The greatest miracle of all was that the shelf had come to understand the vibrations that were produced by the man and his family, and that the shelf had named this special set of vibrations "English." This miracle had its limits, though. While the shelf could understand the family, it couldn't figure out how to communicate back.

For the better part of a decade, though, it had tried. O, Big Plank how it had tried! It had tried every time the man had needed clothing and every time the creature that the man had called “Honey” had placed the nice-smelling pants (which she referred to as “laundry”) on its poor, lifeless sibling below. The shelf had tried when the man had shown the handgun to “Bobby,” a thing that the shelf had come to think of as the man’s own little plank. The shelf, too, had tried to caution Bobby that the gun was not a toy (even though the shelf had no concept of the true nature of either guns or toys, nor a concept of danger).

No one had heard the shelf. No one had cared. And so, over time, the shelf had given up trying to communicate and had simply *been*. For a brief moment, the shelf had been proud of itself for being the first sentient being to truly experience Zen, but it soon realized that it had no way of verifying this. Then, it realized it had no need to verify it, and finally, no desire to do so (setting another record for the shelf: first sentient being to experience true Zen twice).

This state of Zen, however, eventually became a state of ennui, then a state of depression, and finally a state of utter despair. After years of sitting in near-perfect darkness at the top of the closet, the shelf had grown weary of spending its entire existence as a place to park infrequently used belongings, and without so much as a thank you.

It was in that moment that the shelf had decided that this thing it called “life” wasn’t worth “living.” The shelf, having no concept of death, longed to die. Again, it was just a shelf, so it had no way to bring about its own demise. It invented another word for this state. It called it “madness.”

When the weather outside (which the shelf had never once seen because of a bad angle between the closet door and bedroom window, as well as a lack of eyes) had become very cold again and the shorts had been resting comfortably on its lower sibling for months, the whole family gathered and came to see the shelf: the man, Honey, Bobby, and an even smaller plank named Karen. And they were creating very peculiar vibrations today. The shelf had heard similar, more accurate vibrations when Honey had turned on a thing called the “radio” while folding laundry, but these out-of-tune vibrations seemed strangely sweeter, yet

bittersweet, for the shelf would never have a family to call its own. At least, for a brief moment, it could share their joy.

And then, something new. A different touch. From the smallest, highest pitched plank. She had never touched the shelf before, and her hand was even stickier than the man's. The shelf felt. It listened.

“Thumpity thump thump! Thumpity thump thump!” the family sang. The shelf had no clue as to what “snow” was, much less the concept of a “snowman.” But it had a concept of magic, and it had heard of a hat before.

And then it remembered.

The shelf had known nothing before the arrival of the hat. There must have been some magic in it. And the shelf knew that it would remember nothing once, after long years, the hat had been removed. It would cease to be. And the shelf was thankful, so thankful for that.

Silently, as was its way, the shelf said goodbye and wished this Frosty fellow luck.

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## SECOND PLACE

Gargi Mehra is a software professional by day, a writer by night and a mother at all times. Her work has appeared in numerous literary magazines online and in print. Her short story [Belles and Whistles](#) was a finalist in the [Open Road Review Short Story Prize](#), and her story [Reading the Leaves](#) won 3rd place in a contest held by the [Creative Writing Institute](#). Check out her [website](#) or catch her on Twitter at @gargimehra.

### White Piping

*by Gargi Mehra*

On the morning of Naina’s visit from America, an argument exploded over our breakfast table.

Ma slapped butter on her toast in a huff. “These Mukherjees I tell you!”

Baba turned his rounded eyes upon her. “Why, what happened?”

“It’s bad enough they’re using us as a stopover. But I’m sure they’ll expect premium services for their daughter too. Maybe they’ll want us to take her shopping, or worse, for a buffet lunch at a five-star hotel.”

Baba, ever the accommodating soul, as long as the burden of responsibility never fell upon him, attempted to placate her. “You must help people, Promila. Someday our Reena might have to visit US for her higher studies. That time I am sure they will step up and do the same for us.”

He looked at me for affirmation, but I kept my head down and ploughed my way through my boiled eggs and toast.

Ma shook her head. “You know I am ever ready to help people. It’s just that... she is too...”

“Too what?”

“Too... what’s the word... *fashionable!*”

“Oh, these young girls are like that. Not all of them have the good sense to dress as modestly as our girl.”

He gazed upon me rather proudly.

Ma said, “If you remember Naina, she’s the one who used to wear her skirt short and roll her socks all the way down.”

Baba clucked his tongue. “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.”

Ma harrumphed, but it escaped his notice. He polished off the contents of his plate and left to pick up Naina from the airport. Her parents had emailed us a scan of her itinerary, and I, following Baba’s growled instructions, handed him a printout of it just seconds before he stepped out the door.

\*

Naina landed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport on the first cool morning that signalled the onset of a Delhi winter. A misty fog swirled in the air and froze my palms. I slipped into my woollen pants, thermals and a cardigan, and shuffled to the balcony.

Five years Naina and I had spent together in school, hogging the last bench, doodling in our notebooks as the teacher’s voice droned on in the background. I sketched leaves, sunflowers and butterflies, but she indulged her creative expression in the form of rude drawings. Once the teacher caught her sketching what looked like three letter Us in succession, the middle one noticeably longer and thicker than the others. Mrs. Oak had snatched the paper and admonished her. Naina protested, innocence oozing through every syllable: “I only meant to draw a puppy, Ma’m.”



She proceeded to draw the rest of it, rendering the initial part of the sketch as the puppy's face. Mrs. Oak stood there, her cheeks burning crimson and her nostrils flaring, unable to tell off Naina even though she probably knew this old trick herself.

I stood watch on the balcony that overlooked our lane, rubbing my hands together to offset the chill setting into my bones. The prospect of slipping on woolen gloves tempted me, but at ten in the morning with the sun streaming through, the thought embarrassed me. What would people think—that I had the tolerance of a llama to temperatures below ten degrees Celsius?

Presently, our car pulled up outside our gate.

Naina stepped out, looking like a plus-size fashion model, clad in skinny jeans, a leather jacket with fur at the lapel, and matching fur-lined boots. She looked up at me and squealed an effervescent 'hi'. I expressed similar enthusiasm in my greeting, without really feeling it.

Ma joined me at the balcony and peeked downward, wrinkling her nose when she spotted Naina. "Still as fashionable as ever, isn't she?"

I stayed silent. We watched them drag one suitcase each through the front gate, while the driver followed behind hauling three heavy bags.

Ma made no move to receive them at the door. I did the honors. Naina enveloped me in a warm hug, and conferred the same on Ma, who had deigned to present herself by then.

Naina shrugged off her stylish jacket and heaved out of her boots. I showed her to the spare room that would be hers for the day. We stashed her luggage in one corner and returned to the living room.

"How are your parents?" Ma asked, as we took our seats around the centre table. I poured tea for everyone, while Baba offered biscuits and sandwiches to Naina. She appeared famished, but politely answered Ma's queries before wolfing down everything on her plate.

Baba drank his tea, and then stood up. “I’ll take your leave, ladies.”

We bid him a good day as he left for office. Ma spotted Naina’s drooping eyes and advised her to rest. She had only a few hours left before her flight to Kolkata in the evening. She would have to leave before sundown to get to the domestic airport in time.

Her tiredness compelled her to grab on to Ma’s advice like a lifeboat. She retired to her room exhausted but grateful. I looked in on her a little later, and found her sprawled on the bed in the same clothes she’d worn on the plane. She hadn’t even changed out of her skinny jeans.

We didn’t disturb her the rest of the day. When I stopped by her room at lunchtime, she appeared in the same comatose state as the morning.

Shortly after five, Ma hauled me up from my studies. “Go wake up your friend. She’ll need time to get ready, and I’m sure she’ll want some tea and snacks before she leaves.”

I nudged open the door, and found her awake and scrolling through her iPhone.

“Hey Naina! Had a good sleep?”

Her eyes remained fixed on her screen. “I’ve missed so many messages!”

She sounded a little like a diva who couldn’t afford to go ‘off-the-grid’, ever. I didn’t feel like hanging around if I wasn’t wanted, but I didn’t want to snap at houseguests either. “Don’t worry, you can always catch up later.”

She turned to me with a friendly smile. “You’re right! Just give me a few minutes—I’ll get dressed.”

In the living room, Ma had laid out the evening tea fabulously as she always did. Thin rectangular slices of sponge cake lay in a circular pattern on her fine china plate, and a stack of *pakodas* perched upon another one.

Ma slumped back onto the sofa, tired from deep-frying the fritters. I joined her and positioned myself in the middle, ready to start serving when the time came.

The minutes passed. I overcame more than ten levels of Temple Run 2. The pakodas lost their warm crispiness and grew cold.

Ma prodded me. “Why don’t you check on her? Take her tea to her room. She might be too tired to come out.”

I carried a tray containing a plate of *pakodas* and her tea to her room. Just as I knocked on the door, it opened.

Naina stood at the threshold, clad in the most stunning dress I had ever seen. It was navy-colored, and ended mid-thigh. What really set it off was white piping—on the décolletage, the hem and the edges of her sleeves. I knew little about makeup, but guessed she had applied a whole bag of cosmetics to her face. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks blushed rosily, and a twinkling diamond pendant rested on the enormous long line between her breasts.

She had always been attractively curvy, but the dress accentuated her curves even more. I glanced at the white piping on her neckline. Even two pairs of socks stuffed into my T-shirt would not achieve the same effect.

“Hello? Reena?”

I jerked my head up. She looked rather amused at my inspection of her cleavage.

“Your tea?” I muttered.

“Why don’t you keep it in the living room? I’ll join you there.”

I nodded and took the tray back.

Ma asked, “What happened?”

“She will join us here.”

I wondered if I should warn Ma, but as I struggled with the right words, Naina waltzed into the room. “Oh, what a lovely arrangement you have done, Aunty! May I pour you some tea?”

Ma scanned her, from the foundation brightening her face to the deep line between her breasts. Ma didn't answer, apparently struggling with her emotions.

I said, "Of course. Please pour some for yourself—"

"—and for me," Ma said, recovering just in time. "I just remembered I need Reena to take care of some work. Reena, come with me."

She pulled me by the elbow into the kitchen, well out of Naina's earshot.

"What is she wearing?"

"Just a dress, Ma! Why?"

But I knew why.

"There's a reason this place is called the rape capital of India. It's because girls go around showing their bodies like that. Its fine for actresses but—"

"Ma, please. Rapes don't happen because of the dress. I hope you know that."

"Oh, it doesn't matter! You modern girls will drive me crazy. Please go tell her to change her outfit at once!"

"Why should I do it? You tell her if it bothers you so much!"

"Listen, child, this is not a place to dress like that. If I say it, she will simply ignore it, because it's an instruction coming from a mother. You can pass it off as friendly advice!"

I sighed.

"I will leave you two alone to gossip. Then you can try and slip her the message."

She hurried back while I racked my brain for how I would pull off the task entrusted to me. By the time Ma excused herself from the room, I had hit upon only one way.

Naina had already plunged into juicy gossip. “Hey, do you remember Frank and Fatima?”

I nodded absentmindedly. Who could forget the hottest couple in our school?

Naina’s eyes shone excitedly. “Their parents came to know of their affair! There was such a hullabaloo about it!”

It might have felt strange to hear gossip about my local circle from a girl who had crossed the Atlantic, but that’s how Naina was—always equipped with the latest news about people no matter where she lived.

When she stopped talking to sip her tea, I pounced.

“Naina, don’t you think you will feel cold in that dress?”

She lifted a palm to stop me. “Reena, do you know what the temperature was in New York? Minus twenty degrees, and six inches of snow had piled up yesterday morning when I left! I had to take help from our neighbours to shovel it out of our driveway!”

I grasped for straws. “But here it feels colder than it looks.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me Reena. I’ll be fine. If you think this is cold you should visit Toronto!”

She burst into girlish laughter. I joined in rather nervously. When Ma would return and find me failed in my mission, I don’t know what would become of me.

Ma entered the room just then. “Naina, do you think—”

The bell rang, shattering her sentence.

I jumped to my feet. “I’ll get it.”

Baba stood at the doorstep, looking smart in his blazer. I couldn’t remember if he had it on in the morning or not.

He joined us on the sofa. Ma poured him a cup of tea.

We all looked around at each other. I looked at Ma. Ma glared at me. Baba and Ma shared a brief ocular exchange of their own. I lowered my eyes and bit into a *pakoda*.

“All set, Naina?”

“Yes. I’ll just pack some of my last-minute things.”

“Good, we’ll leave in ten minutes.”

A strange silence hung in the air for a moment before he said, “Naina, are you planning to wear that to the airport?”

“Yes Uncle.”

He took a long sip then set down his cup. “Listen, my child. I hope you have been reading the news. This is not a safe place. The crowd is not good. America is different. The people there are used to a more permissive open environment. But this is slightly different. Girls cannot wear exactly what they want to without inviting unwanted stares.”

Naina’s friendliness and mirth had disappeared from her face. “But isn’t that wrong? Isn’t it bad to impose restrictions on us rather than on the perpetrators?”

“It is absolutely wrong. I agree with you completely. But until such time every individual conforms to the right way of thinking, isn’t it better to exercise precaution?”

Naina looked down. So did I.

“You don’t have to listen to me. In fact I have no right to tell you what to do—you are nineteen now, both of you! But you are like my daughter. If you were Reena I would have said put on some pants and a jacket and we’re good to go.”

He sighed.

“But you are not my daughter. So I can only tell you what I feel is best. The rest is up to you—totally your decision.”

He picked up his tea. “Pass me a sandwich.”

Ma complied. For a few minutes no one spoke. I was still reeling from Baba’s speech. I had never heard anything like it from him. Ma looked rather pleased. The only sound came from the traffic outside.

Naina broke the silence. “I’ll just be back.”

Ma offered him the plate. “Have a *pakoda*.”

Her delight in his speech showed in her face. She could almost have added, “You’ve earned it.”

The three of us feasted silently. Naina returned wearing black tights and a sky-blue jumper over her dress. The outfit looked odd and mismatched. We exchanged glances. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but I liked to believe we had both arrived at the same conclusion—we had to sacrifice fashion for one measly additional layer of precaution that guaranteed no more safety. But maybe, the smallest things mattered more than we knew.

Baba placed a friendly hand on her shoulder. “You look beautiful as always, my child.”

She smiled, a delicate blush colouring her cheeks. “Thank you Uncle.”

As they were stepping out, I said, “Shall I join them Ma?”

Ma folded her arms across her chest. “You have not finished your assignments yet. It’s better if you don’t waste your time.”

Naina turned to me. “We’ll catch up more next time. I’ll FaceTime you from Kolkata!”

We exchanged another round of warm hugs.

I watched them drive away from my vantage point in the balcony.

Ma joined me. “Thank God she changed her dress.”

“Oh God, Ma, seriously. There wasn’t anything wrong with it, not nowadays.”

Ma flashed her eyes at me, but I saw fear in them, not anger. “Maybe, when you come to my age and have a daughter, then you might understand how I feel.”

I found nothing to say to this, and held my peace.

That night I dozed off immediately after dinner. I dreamt of navy blue dresses floating in a meadow where I chased them, while streams of white confetti fell and attached themselves to the edges of the dresses.

A ping from the phone jolted me awake. What had the dream meant? I never knew. I never understood dreams. Why did white confetti fall all over the place?

Naina’s message read:

*Reached home safely.*

I thought of padding over to Baba’s room to tell him the news, but then thought better of it. He might have seen the message already if he was awake—Naina would have sent it to him as well, but he had likely dissolved into snores already.

Naina didn’t FaceTime me from Kolkata. At least she had let us know she was safe.

Sometimes the small things mattered the most.

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## THIRD PLACE

Annemarie Catanzaro sees the potential of global conversations every day from her home in Dalian, China. Her current projects include *The Bigger Picture* on Youtube and a blog called "Waters' Wakes", a series of stories shared by people around the world about the way that water impacts their lives. Both are aimed at increasing the variety of voices present in global conversations and challenging the simplicity of our comfort zones.

### Winds of Change

by Annemarie Catanzaro

"Isn't it beautiful?" she trills as I am wrapped tighter around her neck. The wind yanks at my ends, pulling me closer. We stand overlooking craters of rocks jutting out from the ground like giant fingers reaching for the sky. We've seen things, she and I. We've seen the ocean and the mountains. We've stood in the sand of deserts and lakes. We've leaned over the edges of the tallest buildings in the world. I've been dipped in soup and dragged on the floor, always accidentally of course. My edges have been carefully tucked in when she leaves me behind. I crowd closely with her other outerwear sharing the great many things we've seen and secretly seething that we weren't on this particular journey.

I've never been brought out on the days when the sun beats down, although her goggles continue in a never-ending soliloquy on the joys of exploring the Dead Sea. I stay safely hidden on the long flights to new lands, but her socks have lots to share about all of the small clues left beneath the airplane seats. They think they know best about the world, but, in the end, compression is not comprehension.

I've been tossed by the swells of wind in the Grand Canyon. I've been swung side-to-side by the turbulence of misty ocean winds. I've been tickled by the whisper of

a breeze entering through the doors of a cable car. I've been whipped around by wind burrowing through canyon walls.

She chose me for these days—and for the day when she quickly ran down the hall of Home to catch a car. I was whipped around her as she dived out the door and into the taxi. One small piece of me poked out of the car door living the dash through the busy city streets. We arrived at the opera house where I was lambasted with song.

She chose me for that day.

She chose me for today too. She murmured praise about my colors matching well for photos as she shifted through the luggage. I beamed secretly, happy that the other clothes could hear. Even though I often matched, it was important to bask in the moments of favoritism before the next day when I would be shoved back deep down into the bag. This would be yet another story to punctuate the socks' and goggles' never-ending tales.

I relish every gust as she poses for picture after picture. She is alone with us garments, using a long stick to find the best angle with her phone. Other travelers generously offer to take her picture. She tilts her head and spreads her arms so that the sun reflects me and all of my silky colors bloom before the camera. The travelers pause for a moment looking at the photo, doubtlessly admiring me, before handing it back. With the evidence secured, we are ready to go.

When we reach the hotel, I hold onto all of the smells of the wind. Her flight home is today and I know that the more these smells cling to me, the longer she will keep me out and breathe in the memories. She hangs me on the door's convenient built-in hook so that she won't forget me as she rushes around the room packing her bag. When she is ready to leave and tilts the bag over, heaving it through the small hallway, it is suddenly too large to fit through the doorway. I watch as she struggles to balance the large, heavy bag and pop the door open at the same time. With a yawn and a grunt, she opens the door, rolls her bag out and closes the door behind her.

It clicks closed and, still hanging on the hook, I wait.

I wait.

I continue to patiently wait.

Something has gone wrong. I am on the wrong side of the door. I wait, still, annoyed. The bag has been removed; her shoes are gone. She is gone, and, yet, I am here. *What does this mean?* At reception, she will lightly touch her neck, cry out, and run back upstairs to reclaim me. She will hold me tightly to herself shaking from the thought of having left me behind.

I wait.

She doesn't come.

I wait.

Finally, after the light in the room changes, the door clicks open. *Finally!* I relax, allowing every fiber to shiver away the taut despair that had captured me. I try to peek around the edge of the door with the faint motion of it gently swaying closed.

It's not my person. It's...

A small older woman, whose dark hair is tightly bound to the top of her head and whose neck is bare of any silky social marker, rolls in a vacuum, completely blind to me. I tense at the sight, remembering how my person would always pull us closer when she saw the locals of the country that we were in. If I were not a scarf, I would be rigid.

She spends an hour vacuuming, polishing, and washing. I watch and wait for the door to open once more. I must be retrieved.

The woman is on the floor, on her hands and knees – something I have never seen my person do before. She puts her hand against the wall and leans into it as she slowly pulls her knees out from beneath her, standing up.

That's when she sees me. I see the flash of surprise. She looks around and quickly grabs me, rushing forward into the hallway. *Good!* I purr. They will call my person and she will come back from the airport to claim me. The speed with which we run

slows and my ends drop down to hang in front of the woman. She is breathing heavily and leans against the wall. In this pause, she turns her eyes to me, rubbing me softly between her fingers. She drops one hand down and reverently wraps me around the other. I am not used to being touched by hands which have recently been drenched in bleach, but I will allow it on this day. *If this is the cost to finding my way back, then fine.* She runs her fingers down to my ends and takes in the radiant colors that emanate off of me. As she finishes wrapping me around her right hand, she lays her other arm against the wall and begins quickly, anxiously tapping. *What is wrong with this woman? She's wasting time!* The tapping stops. She takes in a deep breath.

With a sudden jolt she unceremoniously shoves her hand, and therefore me, into her pocket. I feel her other hand reach inside and gently smooth me off. In the twist of movement, I am disoriented. It feels like we turn back to the room- *Why would we—?* Everything remains black with the only clues to my fate riddled in the wheel and whir of the vacuum cleaner. I hear words garbled in another tongue—not the one my person spoke.

The next time I see light, it is the brightly colored glow of neon signs in darkness. I am held reverently once again and stroked under the multi-colored moonbeams.

This is not the hotel where we stayed. The residue of bleach continues to sharply sting me from the hands of this silhouette in the dark.

*Thief!* I want to cry out as I am limply carried down the streets filled with rubble and past the carts filled with street food. *I belong with her! I belong on the road with the wind and the canyons and the adventure. Not in your filthy hands.* The screams rattle my fibers, but I remain paralyzed by her gentle grasp. I only fold back slightly with the rushed breeze as I am carried further away from ever returning to the bag again. Desperately, I race through options of salvation. My person has photos of me around her neck and around the world on Instagram. The police will track my image from there and barge through the door of this criminal. People begin greeting my carrier more frequently. *Call the police!* I cry.

We enter through a door. There is no click, only the slide of a latch. She carries me into a room and wipes off the bed before laying me down reverently. She moves

quickly around the room; her actions are all filled with nervous excitement. I watch and, somewhere deep inside, realize with guilty glee that I will never need to hear goggles' story about the Dead Sea again.

The woman leaves the room for a moment and returns with a dry piece of newspaper. She lifts me carefully before folding it around me.

The darkness helps time to pass faster. Soon, I awaken to wisps of light as the newspaper is unfolded. A shrill shriek escapes a teenager as she pulls me quickly and softly from my newspaper cave. I am whisked in circles around the room and she wraps me around her neck eagerly. She runs to a small broken mirror and strikes pose after pose, lifting and dropping me while chattering incessantly to the older woman.

The older lady's hair is down now and she smiles silently and broadly. Her gaze feels like the wind that runs up from canyon walls and gently floats you.

I smile as well, or I would if I could, when the teenager runs into another room and drags in a small boy to increase the size of her audience.

We see things, she and I. Every day I am worn out into the world. Every day I am whisked through markets and schools. We create wind as we run and pass by air filled with stories of spices and scandal. Every day I am carefully unwound from the young neck at the table and placed gently into her lap. The steam from the kitchen and gentle breeze from an opening front door tickles my ends as my people speak of their dreams. I am never dipped in soup and never dragged on the ground. I no longer am dropped on marble floors or knotted around railings, since I am never too bright for a picture.

Each night, I am gently hung from a hanger next to the door. A slow hand runs down me, admiring my colors. It is the gentle hand of the older woman, my rescuer, after she comes in to share words of love and delight.

With all of the movement and life in this world, I begin to fray, but I know joy like I have never seen before. My girl and I aren't in many pictures, but we are never alone. I am never crammed into the dark and forgotten. I am never forgotten again.

I am never forgotten.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

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### The Only Thing That Matters

*by Eli Ryder*

Fear is the thing, really.

It's the thing that pulls the dogs off their beds and shoots them out through the doggie door into single-digit temperatures at night to bark at whatever it is they heard that I didn't.

Kris, my wife, looks at me wide-eyed and tight-lipped, not quite awake, breathing hard, sweating.

It's the reason there's a safe bolted to the wall, and the reason we went with thumbprint locks instead of a combination. Our daughter can't figure out a combination if it's hidden in the whorls and loops on our thumbs.

The dogs stop their noise, trot back into the bedroom. I get up to check their paws for foxtails, afraid of another expensive extraction. Afraid of more pain, more limping. The eldest, a golden retriever gone gray in the snout, still licks his front right paw raw, years after that first foxtail was removed. We're still licking the wounds in our wallets. Afraid of bank balances without commas, all that.

The next morning, my daughter asks me who was walking outside the night before. Kris looks at me wide-eyed again.

“Told you they heard something,” she says.

“They hear something every night.”

“Go look,” she says. “Footprints, maybe.”

“Yeah, Daddy,” my daughter says around a mouthful of cereal. “Go look.” She giggles.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Kris says.

My daughter giggles again and cereal spittle hits the table in front of her. She laughs harder and tries to cover her mouth, but the rest of her half-chewed food ends up back in her bowl and in her lap.

Fear drove us out to the wind-swept edges of a rural suburb. Didn’t want to be neighborly; afraid of having to talk to people. Not another house for a mile in any direction. But, the dogs last night, and my daughter said she heard something. So I go look for footprints I know won’t be there. Like monsters under her bed, or in her closet.

The retriever follows me out, one of my wife’s purple socks in his mouth. It’s a habit he’s held over from when he was little, when she and I both worked and left him alone. My best guess, he was afraid he’d be alone forever and having a mouth full of something saturated with either of us was comfort.

No footprints in the dirt under my daughter’s window. Carlo, the retriever, sniffs and whines at the stucco. The sock is balled up on his tongue and his whining is thick with cotton.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, ruffling the fur behind his ears. “What’d you hear?”

Nighttime is a thousand colors of fear beyond our reach. It’s why we have dogs. Makes the unknowable somewhat accessible.



Carlo spits the sock out on my shoe. It's faded, matches the purple sage flowers weaving through the scrub on the other side of the driveway. It rolls onto the sand, muddies up. Without crouching or squinting I can see how thoroughly he's slimed it over. I leave it.

Inside, Murphy, the beagle, drops his ass to the floor, pisses, and wags his tail through the puddle trailing away from him. He flings droplets and splashes Amy.

My daughter scrunches her face and shakes her hands in disgust. It's a gesture that looks far older than her four years.

My wife snatches her up and takes her straight to the bath. It's a routine we know without thinking. Murphy has peed his greetings since he was old enough to be happy to see us. Vet said it was a submission thing, showing appropriate fear to the master of the pack, or something. Meant scolding him only made it worse. Fear is his salutatory language, apparently.

Carlo roots around for another sock, comes up with one of my black ones.

"You okay, big guy?" I ask. The sock thing seems a weird habit to pick up again. I'd have figured he's too old to fall back on that kind of pacifier. I try to take the sock from his mouth, but he dodges me, lopes off to his bed.

I can't imagine what that thing smells like. I'm afraid to go near it.

He lays down, drops the sock, and rubs the side of his head against it, rolling it up between his cheek and the fur-beaten fabric. Maybe he's dying, wants to soak up as much as he can in the meantime.

It's my wife's day to drop Amy at school. I buckle her into her booster, nice and tight against the seat, kiss her forehead, wave to Kris. My heart stops for a moment, as it always does, when they disappear down the road. It's two emotions doing that, but the biggest is—yeah.

I shower, dress.

Underwear, to protect me from rubbing against the inside of my pants. Which are there because I'm afraid of the cold, and indecent exposure. Afraid of what the

ground will do to my feet, so boots. But, to save my feet and ankles, socks. Takes me a minute to find them—Carlo can't have them all, can he?—but I do.

So afraid, I need protection from our protection.

I buy socks to replace what we've lost and maybe a little for Carlo, too. If he is on his way out, he might as well be comfortable. If a mouth full of dirty sock is what does it, well. He's a good dog. I'll wear two pairs a day.

I'd left the doggie door open and Murphy pisses hello in the backyard grass. Carlo noses my hand, takes his scratching behind the ears with dignity. He's still got the sock.

Below Amy's window, where I'd found no footprints and left that purple sock, another lay next to it, folded into itself.

"Huh," I say, and walk toward them.

Murphy whines.

The socks are sun-dried and crusty, one purple, one black.

"If you're just leaving them out here," I say, and pick them up. This time, I do see prints—Carlo's. I sweep over them with my shoe.

That night, again, the dogs are out barking. I hear it this time, though. What I know is a drove of jackrabbits thumping around below Amy's window, the night turns into chitinous clacking against the stucco wall. I hear hungry spiders sniffing around the darkness, walking up the walls of the house.

My wife hears too, elbows me toward the safe.

The flashlight on the end of the ammo tube shakes when I shiver, and I'm glad it's a shotgun. If there is anything out here, I'm going to need the forgiving spread of the pheasant load to do any damage.

Carlo follows me out and stays on my heel. We shove that light into dark corners around the house, find nothing, then—

Under Amy's window, two balled-up black socks like eyes in the sand.

The gun safety people tell you not to keep your finger on the trigger. They're afraid you might be twitchy sometime when the barrel swings around at something it shouldn't, careful as you might be. Good thing they tell you that. I'd have put that pheasant load right through the window and into Amy's room.

I'm no action hero.

Instead, I jump back, propelled by the involuntary whoof of air that shoots out my mouth. My body tenses. Carlo steps back too, then leans toward the socks laying in the dirt. Whines. Steps away.

I pick them up and just outside the reach of the flashlight, something moves. Carlo barks. I whip the barrel up at the corner of the house, and catch something disappearing around it. Something shapeless and unidentifiable.

It's just a jackrabbit. Probably.

But, fear.

It's shadows gone tangible and malignant. The hand of darkness reaching for us all. Six-legged anthropomorphs that feed on children's tears. In the dark, it's everything.

I have to catch my breath. That takes a few moments. Carlo sits next to me and noses my thigh. I drop a hand to his face, he nuzzles.

I pick up the socks. Sand sticks to their wetness.

Inside, Kris has gone back to sleep and Murphy hasn't moved since he crawled into Carlo's bigger bed when the older dog left. Carlo looks at Murphy, looks at me, paws Murphy's face, and the smaller dog gets up. Carlo takes his place and I smile. Old guy still has some fight in him.

The next morning, Amy chatters at me between bites of cereal.

"They were loud this time, Daddy! And so many! I want to see them."

“Did you see anything out there?” my wife asks.

“No,” I lie.

I could tell them about the movement, the socks, being scared enough to almost shoot a hole through Amy’s window, maybe through Amy. But it was just jackrabbits. They were just socks.

Right?

“Need you to pick up some socks after you drop her off today,” Kris says.

I’m making faces at Amy, who is trying not to giggle her cereal out onto the table again. “I just bought some yesterday. Did you not find them?” The words are scrunched up by my mugging for Amy.

“If I’d found them, would I ask you to buy more?” she asks.

I go check the drawer where I’d left the plastic bundles the day before. I hadn’t even opened them, I just left them in their packages. Which aren’t there now.

“Huh,” I say. I look down at Carlo. “You stealing the new ones now, too?” Not a single shine of plastic around him, no sock in his mouth.

I check the laundry basket we toss our dirties in and the two socks I brought in last night are gone, too. Not a single sock there at all, like we’re a sandals and flip-flops family.

I’m afraid of why the socks are gone. And, I’m afraid of my boots.

I drop Amy at school, where she sandwiches her goodbye around telling me she needs socks too, and shows me her bare feet shoved into her slip-on deck shoes. The thought of Carlo comforting himself with Amy’s socks is heartwarming, but for the whole family to be out of socks? Doesn’t sound like Carlo.

So, quick stop at the department store and then I’m home with brand new, bulging plastic packages. I set them out on their Kris and Amy’s beds so they can see I actually did bring them home. I head to the wall outside Amy’s room. This time,

Carlo doesn't come. I figure it's too cold, but there's a shake in his whine I haven't heard since we lived across the road from the county fairgrounds. The Fourth of July used to rattle our windows.

I do see footprints this time, sort of. Sharp indentations in the sand that circle the two pairs of socks sitting there—one black, mine, and the other, tiny yellow fuzzies with rubber slip knobs on the bottom, Amy's—and then beeline for the wall, where they stop.

No. They don't stop. They continue up the stucco. Dime-sized chips in the paint crawl up the wall and around Amy's window, then down to the edge of the building, where the wall turns the corner. The chips in the paint end there, like whatever had been walking on the wall just kept going out into thin air.

I shiver, suck in a sage-laden breath, breathe it out slow. I puff steam into the winter air and calm my nerves. The socks, paired as they are, feel obtrusive, like they're ogling. I shove them into my sweatshirt pockets and go inside. They go straight into the washer with the contents of the laundry basket.

For the forty-minute cycle, I'm afraid they'll be gone when I pull the rest of the clothes out.

They aren't. Into the dryer they go, and for the first half of the cycle, I wonder what it would mean if they weren't there.

Carlo barks at something outside, Murphy follows, and I go check. There's a roadrunner fat as lazy Christmas ten feet outside the gate at the edge of our property. It waves its long tail at the dogs, hops in a slow circle, then waddles away.

Murphy fires off a rasp of barking and yowling and I hear desperation in it, like he's afraid he's never going to see another roadrunner ever again.

I go back inside to the dryer and it has stopped tumbling. The clothes inside are still a little damp. I check my watch. The dryer shouldn't be done.

The socks are gone.

This time, knowing Amy is at school and my wife won't be home for at least another hour, I do hide behind the shotgun, finger on the trigger, less afraid of the gun going off than I am of what I'm looking for in the house. I've never shot at anything that wasn't made to be shot at.

The house is empty. My bare feet slap against the tile. The echoes coming off the walls are just that, but fear—well. Fear makes the sound tiny feet chipping the paint as they run out of the laundry room and then the house, socks in tow.

Anymore, I'm not so sure fear is wrong.

At dinner, I'm quiet. I don't eat much. I keep hearing tapping just out of identifiable reach. My wife doesn't talk much either, disappointed in there not being new socks for all of us when she got home.

"My feet are cold," Amy tells me.

Kris eyes me.

"I bought them, I swear." I show her the receipt. "Left them on the beds, honest."

"So where'd they go?"

"I don't know. Are you pranking me or something?"

Amy laughs.

"So," my wife says, "we've got a sock prowler, is that what you're saying?"

It sounds ridiculous. And I don't like that she's throwing the word "prowler" around like it's not something to be afraid of. I wish I'd told her about last night and the chips in the stucco. Something about her strong and stern face, though, makes last night and all its fears seem just as ridiculous as a sock prowler would be.

And yet.

"I'm sorry," I say.

“What’s going on?” she asks. There’s concern in the strength in her face now, and I remind myself to appreciate that more, and better.

“Nothing. I don’t know. Sleep, I guess. I need sleep.”

She rubs my shoulder and Amy smiles.

This is why I’m afraid of the nighttime and all its unnamable dangers.

I leave the safe open after Amy goes to bed, and then I do end up sleeping. Not well, though. I’m barely under, then up, then turning, then under again and dreaming of falling deep into darkness, feet first, forever. Then up. Under again, and then—

Clacking on the tile floor in the hallway in front of Amy’s room. Any other night, I’d know it was Carlo’s claws tapping as he walked. Sometimes he parks himself next to her closed door, sentries through the night.

Tonight, he butts his head against my hand and the clacking in the hallway speeds up to running, and I swear there’s more than four feet out there.

I hit the switch on my lamp and look to my left, reach out to reassure my wife. She’s not there. Murphy has his paws up on her side of the bed and sniffs around. Whines. Sniffs again, then bounds to my side.

I’m up with the shotgun and flashlight pointed down the hallway before I register the sound of Amy’s door closing, the dogs bray painfully and the light hits a gangly bundle of sinew and bone hunched just outside my bedroom door, its black eyes open wide, infinitely deep. It dissipates before I can hit the trigger and its eyes fall to the floor.

Carlo noses one of them, picks it up in his mouth, drops it with a yelp.

It’s my black socks on the floor.

The dogs stop yowling and stick to my hip. I step over the socks into the hallway.

“Amy?” I call out. “Kris?” Nothing. The dogs whine.

In front of Amy's door, the tile is chipped in little polka-dot patterns that run to the door, then up, then further down the hall. I open her door and the flashlight shows me her empty bed, her head-dented pillow, her covers pulled back and two fuzzy yellow socks crumpled on the sheet. I swing the light back to the hallway—the floor is clear, socks are gone—then back into Amy's room and I swear I catch the socks settling to rest. I ball them up in my left hand, up against the fore end of the shotgun.

There's chattering on the stucco outside.

The dogs beat me there, barking and snarling, paws up on the wall. In the light, I catch another of the twisted sockeyed creatures perched on the wall like gravity bends sideways there before it puffs to nothing and drops lavender socks onto Carlo's and Murphy's snouts. Carlo snatches one up, spits it out, and looks at me.

I slide in my bare feet to a halt next to Kris's socks and try to pick those up too, try to bend down, but something is wrong.

I can't get the flashlight turned around right, but I can still see—feel—that one of them has stabbed its spiked feet to my hip. It hangs on, pinned by that same sideways gravity, and looks up at me. Its eyes are blank and its feet are sharp bones. My hip is bleeding. It shakes and I let go of the shotgun with my left hand to bat it away. Amy's socks fall out of my hand and the thing shoves off my hip, catches Amy's socks, lands on the wall with them in its clawed grip. It crouches, steps into them. Sinks all the way down and comes out the other side bone-feet first, then twisted skin and backwards-angled joints, then its head.

It's Amy's face, socks for eyes, smooth bone instead of soft skin.

The Amy thing blinks its fuzzy yellow eyes at me. At the edge of the flashlight's glow I see lavender eyes blink twice, then both sideways creatures clatter across the stucco to the edge of the building and past it. The clattering noise stops because they're walking on nothing and Carlo yelps. I look down, see black socks balled up at my feet, and when I look up the yellow and lavender eyes are gone.

Murphy pees and howls, Carlo whines, and I look down at the socks in front of me. They're a little gritty from the sand, a little wet.



The why of it all doesn't matter. Carlo knows that and nudges the socks toward me. I should probably think about how many creatures there are, how many lost socks there are in the world, but that doesn't matter either.

The only thing that matters is I'm afraid.

It's fear that opens my hand and drops the shotgun to the ground, fear that sits me down with the socks in my hands, fear that puts my feet in them and makes me pull with all I've got down into darkness.

I'm so afraid I'll never see them again.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Raymie says, "I am in my second year of a part-time Creative Writing course, focusing on fiction. I particularly like using historical settings as the location for narratives. I have just starting submitting my work, so I have no past fiction credits."

### Wouldn't Be Seen Dead in That

*by Raymie Martin*

*I should have spent the extra, taken a single room.* William halted, squinting at the two shapes on the bed, heard a woman's low moan.

"I hope you paid for a quickie. Some of us want sleep," he muttered into the gloom. Silence. *Too busy. Let him finish.* Retreating to the hallway, he debated whether to catch the last acts in the music hall or throw more dice, downstairs. Fumbling to close the door, shapes and colors from the tawdry room kaleidoscoped round his brain, causing him to pause. Something was amiss.

The room—copulating couple aside—was unchanged from when he had entered, bag in hand, late afternoon. There were three beds, a closet, a small ring-stained table with a bowl and cracked jug atop and an attempt at gentility with curtains and a looking-glass.

"First occupant today," the landlord had announced, as if that made a difference to bed bugs and cockroaches. From habit William chose the bed furthest from the door. Opposite was the bed where the couple now lay. *And if they'd pulled the bed curtain, I would go in and get some rest.*

Some men might be unconcerned or relish a free peep show, but not William—five sisters leave their mark on a man. He'd seen prostitutes before—who hadn't?—but in the ports he'd called home over the years, they were deep in alleys, skirts lifted in trade, eyes lowered in despair, their callers red-faced, grunting and fast. William was not immune, but he was more discerning.

What was it? The smell? Contrary to popular belief, he thought fresh air beneficial and had cracked open the window before leaving. Now, the room was thick with tobacco, sour whisky and tuppenny perfume. *Forget it.* He'd have one last bottle of Stout and then come back to sleep. His thoughts tumbled once more, pictures focussing and fading. With lightning clarity the image of the man's face sharpened in William's mind, propelling him back into the room. Candle aloft, he approached the bed. The light haloed a woman, wet-faced and whimpering on the bed. Alongside her, a man. Dead. He was dark-haired, but impossible to tell of what natural complexion as now his twisted features were livid red, blending into a purple-splotched bull-neck above a loose shirt collar. Mahogany eyes glared at the ceiling, as if affronted by the soot and tobacco stains, and ebony moustaches seemed ready to be twirled in front of an admiring feminine audience. But no female, however coarse or vulgar, would be captivated by the evil-smelling vomit that dribbled from his rictus grin, soaking the calico sheet.

"He's dead."

"I know 'e's dead. I know," she moaned, spittle bubbling over her lip.

"By God, what did you do to him?"

"Didn't do nothing."

"Well, you've broken him alright."

The woman tilted her head sideways a fraction to look, then rapidly back again to William. The forgiving flame softened her hair to sun-bleached oakum and her skin to iridescent pearl.

"It weren't me. 'E just started coughing an' grabbing 'is collar. I thought 'e was choking, first. 'E was sweating like a pig, and then suddenly 'is face went all

twitchy like and ‘is eyes went all peculiar and he rolled off me, rolled over, I mean, and then.. and then ‘e...”

“Hush yourself now. I can see well enough.”

She raised herself on one elbow, the man’s arm sliding off her.

“No, you don’t,” she keened, “’E was a gent. A real gent. A swell. I ‘ad such ‘igh ‘opes of ‘im. And now I’m gonna swing for ‘im.”

“Come on, sit up. Lying there blubbing won’t help.”

One day back and here he was in a backstreet lodging house with a dead man and a streetwalker. He took both her hands and hauled her into a sitting position, thankful that her shawl had fallen over the staring eyes of her companion but aware that she had more need of it than the man.

“Cover yourself, lass.” *You’d make a fine figurehead, but a bit of whittling would be in order else the ship might keel over.* “What’s your name?”

“Alice. Alice Waters.”

“Where have I seen you before, Alice?”

“The *Railway*, prob’ly. I’m barmaid there, one of ‘em, that is. I ain’t no dollymop.”

*The Railway Hotel.* Stepping down from the train at midday, he’d been drawn there by memories. It hadn’t altered. Nor had the faces—unlike his own. The ale was still watered and the air still dense: a permanent fug from fourteen-hour labourers and scented slumming dandies hemmed in by wood and cracked leather, blended with spilled beer and coal smoke; a faint high note of pleasure and an undertone of menace. One drink was enough before he left to seek lodgings. Ten minutes and several shillings later, he had a bed.

“You’ll have to get the peelers.”

“No! They’ll say I’ve killed ‘im, call me a murderess. I’ll swing for ‘im. You’ve got to help me. Please.”

“They won’t hang you.” *If you’re lucky.*

“They might. Or worse. I’ll lose my job an’ be out on the streets proper. Can’t we do something... get rid... of ‘im?”

“We?”

“It’s your room too, ain’t it?”

Placing the candle on the table, William peered out the window. The boarding house was one of four houses in a row of back-to-backs. The only way out was through the front. Down the road to the right, *The Railway Hotel*. Behind it steam rose from the station as a night train eased in. To the left, came snatches of song from outside the music hall where a crowd of revellers was loath to leave.

“Too many people.” He looked back towards the *Railway*. A rat skittered across the moonlit cobbles pursued by a starving cat. A stone thrown, a yowl and it fled.

“Alice. Were you working tonight, too?”

She nodded.

“Who was there, in the bar? Old Cullen? Did you see Dr. Cullen?”

Alice gaped. “What’s the point of fetching ‘im. This geezer’s dead. Look at ‘im! ‘E don’t need no doctor.”

“Was Cullen there this evening? Think, Alice! Was he?”

Her eyes screwed up with the effort of thought. She nodded.

“Was he oiled?”

Another nod.

“Well oiled?”

“Well, ‘e were as tight as a boiled owl. The booze pushers were giving him any old rot towards the end of the night and ‘e pissed in the spittoon. Charlie saw him and bounced ‘im out.”

William gripped her shoulders making her flinch.

“Alice. Do you want to be found in bed with a corpse?” Her eyes slid from the body back to William. She shook her head. “Good. Because I don’t want to be found with one in the room, even if he did pay for his bed. We’re the ones they’ll blame. So, do as I say. Go home. Get yourself dressed—properly dressed. Go and rouse Dr. Cullen. Tell him a gentleman is taken ill. If you need help, take Charlie, if you trust him. No one else. Fetch Cullen. Cry, beg, but bring him here.” He shook her. “Do you understand?”

She nodded, rubbing the red marks where his fingers had been. Knotting the thin shawl tight around her, he pulled her out into the hall.

“No one else, remember?”

Hesitation gone, she hurried to the stairs where she turned to whisper, “God bless you. I won’t forget.” Whether she meant his instructions or something more, he didn’t know as he watched her disappear into the gloom.

Alone with the body, William laughed to himself. *Done it again, William. A damsel in distress and you sail to the rescue. Too late now. But will it work? Maybe, with luck and a fair wind. Depends on Alice’s powers of persuasion, old Cullen’s capacity for drink. Is there any other way? Can’t think of one.* Icy air slid past the papers stuffed in the cracked window, agitating the candle. Fascinated he watched shadows dance across the corpse like a macabre magic lantern show.

William had seen dead men before, and this man was dead: from the top of his *macassar*-oiled hair to the soles of his boots. Quality boots, *Chelsea* boots with soft brown uppers and scarcely worn soles. They had an elasticated side-piece to ease pulling them off, not that he’d used it. Trousers and combinations were gathered below his knees exposing legs that had scarce seen sun. His waistcoat was unbuttoned, his cotton shirt loose, exposing a greying undershirt.

Sighing, William creaked across the wooden boards, feeling the newspaper stuffed in his own boots, which had been re-nailed so many times they were almost iron. He needed to stage the scene before Alice returned. Unwrapping his woollen muffler from his neck, he threw it on the bed, shrugged off his jacket and held it at arm's length. Charcoal coloured, it wasn't too bad for a third- or fourth-hand jacket, it should last a few years. He'd bought the jacket and trousers a week earlier, from an undertaker in Portsmouth with a side-line stripping the bodies of their finest before the lid was banged shut. William grinned, thanking his lucky stars he was a man. Men were buried in their clothes whereas women were buried in their nightgown. He'd have liked a waistcoat, but that had already been sold, so he took care unbuttoning his own, already darned in many places, hanging it on a nail hammered in the closet. It dangled above two loosely buckled travelling cases, presumably belonging to the room's other occupant. No time to investigate. He would look later for clues to the man's identity. William doubted he had divulged his real name to Alice.

*What else were you hiding from that brazen innocent?* William eyed the man's turquoise waistcoat, the maroon trousers in warm Tweed check, burgundy jacket and lilac cravat as he pulled at the *Chelsea* boots. *You're no swell. Gentleman, maybe, but with these clothes... a commercial travelling gentleman, I'd say. Proper gent? No. But I won't spoil the poor girl's dreams. God knows, she must need them.* He pulled the clothes from the corpse and threw them in the closet.

The peacock now divested of its plumes, William felt a pang looking down at the man in grubby combination vest and pants. *You're all show, aren't you? Swell outside; underneath, socks with holes in and darns in your combinations. Who are you?* He was maybe ten years above William, of the same slight stature and hair colour. His was cut fashionably short whereas William's was in need of a barber's attention. William was clean-shaven, but the man had black curling moustaches.

Holding his breath, and turning his head to one side to avoid the vomit, William bent and hauled the corpse upright. It immediately slid sideways, staring accusingly. William left him there. *Don't look at me, pal. I'm just clearing up after your mess and the lass you dropped in it.* The position looked natural. He just needed to position the whisky bottle. Pulling out the cork, he swigged—he'd earned it—then drizzled amber across the sheets and floor. Stepping closer to

place the bottle near the man's hand, he kicked the chamber pot. A bitter smell hit his nose as cold liquid hit his leg.

"Damn it!" He had nothing else in his bag, no clothes, no spare money. A draught stirred the candle and the corpse's eyes glinted, enraging William. "Damn it to blazes! This is your fault. If you were alive..." *But you're not.* His eyes swung to the closet.

"What difference? Pay an undertaker for corpse clothes or get my own? Cut out the middleman. A commercial traveller like you should appreciate that," justified William, dragging off his stinking trousers and pulling open the closet.

The maroon trousers were warmer than his old thin ones and a better fit. Any guilty pleasure in his new apparel evaporated at the sight of his worn boots. A heartbeat's pause, then he pulled them off, replacing them with *Chelsea* leather, swiftly followed by the cotton shirt, waistcoat, jacket and cyan cravat, before dropping his old clothes beside the chamber pot.

Hearing voices on the stairs, he left the candle casting its light over the corpse and hurried to sit on the farthest bed watching as Alice entered, followed by a swaying figure leaning on another man. Her jaw slackened. Tears flowed as she saw maroon trousers, turquoise waistcoat, burgundy jacket and lilac cravat: her lover returned.

"Doctor? Over there. I found him taken ill." Not her lover's voice. William shook his head at her before sinking into shadow. The tears ebbed. She pulled the doctor to the body, stood back biting her lip as his milky eyes swam over the cadaver.

He leaned forward, almost toppled, rocked back, sniffed, picked up one wrist then pressed his fingers to the side of the man's throat.

"Engorged." He gestured. Alice handed over a bag. The doctor pulled out a stethoscope, muttering about decent citizens being disturbed unnecessarily.

"You could have roused me in the morning. He's gone. Nothing I can do," and dropping the tube back in the bag he pulled out paper and pen, eyeing William in the shadows.



“Name?”

“Archway. William Albert Archway.” William had added the middle name after the Prince Consort’s death. Three names gave gravitas.

The doctor scribbled on the pad, watched by Alice who slowly mouthed, “Para... parocks...”

“Paroxysm. He suffered a paroxysm caused by drinking to excess.” He flourished a signature, blew on the ink and handed the paper to her. “And then his heart gave out.”

“Is ‘eart killed im?”

“Indeed.” He paused, milky eyes sharpening. ‘Ergo, no coroner’s inquest. Give this to the registrar and funeral director. William Albert Archway, deceased 14<sup>th</sup> December 1870. Cause of death: paroxysm.” Alice opened her mouth. William made a rapid cutting gesture across his throat and she snapped it shut. “Certified by myself.” The doctor rummaged in his pocket for a dirty handkerchief, pressed it to his face. “Get him swiftly underground. Don’t want a miasma in the air or we’ll be joining him.” He staggered to the door. “Now, a drop of whisky before I take my leave...?”

“Yes, sir. At once, sir. Charlie’ll see you right.”

Alice hissed into Charlie’s ear, “Give the doctor anything ‘e wants. Let ‘im piss in the spittoon if ‘e wants. Dammit, let ‘im piss anywhere. Go on. Get.” Then over her shoulder to William, “Mek sure you turn the looking-glass to the wall, else ‘is spirit will be trapped in ‘ere.” She left, leaving the two Williams in the room.

He carried the candle to the speckled looking-glass, the reflection flickering as if he was disintegrating. Behind him, and in the mirror’s depths, dead mahogany eyes watched him. Cupping one hand over the flame, his image dimmed.

*William Albert Archway is dead. I am dead.*

He examined the candle smut on his fingers then smeared two thick black lines above his lip: one twirl towards his left cheek, one twirl towards the right cheek.

*I'm a bit of a swell now*, he thought, curling pretend moustaches. *I'm a gent*. He saw the dead man's reflection.

Opening his lips he breathed over the flame. It shivered then darkness swallowed them both. He turned the looking-glass to the wall.

*William Albert Archway is dead.*

*Who am I?*

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## GUEST WRITER

Doree Weller was a mental health counselor in a previous life, and her passion for destigmatizing and creating conversations about mental health inform most of her stories. Currently Doree lives in Texas with six cats, two dogs, and one husband, proudly wears the label of “crazy cat lady” and is working on a novel.

Links to her other published stories and blogs can be found at <https://doreeweller.wordpress.com>.

## Emilie

*by Doree Weller*

For Pammy’s 12th birthday, Grandma gave her a silk scarf.

It was white and mint green with polka dots. A curved line separated the white background with green polka dots from the inverse on the other side. Pink and yellow butterflies swooped up and down.

She had no idea what she was supposed to do with a scarf that wasn’t even warm. In August.

\*

Pammy texted her best friend, Lena. “Grandma got me the weirdest present.” She added a picture of the scarf.

Then she waited. And waited. And waited.

At the beginning of the summer, right after Lena moved away, Lena would have texted back immediately. But then Lena had met some girls at the pool, and now she sometimes took a day or more to answer.

Pammy felt sick to her stomach. Since first grade, it had been Pammy-and-Lena. But now she was starting sixth grade alone, and she hated it.

The scarf felt silky and soothing as she ran one hand down it, then the other, back and forth.

\*

On the first day of sixth grade, Pammy dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, wondering if any of the girls got boobs over the summer, or how they'd treat her now that she was one instead of two. Pammy stroked the scarf as she worried, then stuffed it into her pocket.

The bus ride was normal since she and Lena had always ridden different buses. Pammy stared out the window and didn't even look when someone took the seat beside her. At school, other kids said, "Hello" or "How was your summer?" or "Did you go on vacation?"

The class part was fine. Find your assigned seat, sit, be quiet, listen. She could do all that. Though her eyes kept drifting around the room, searching for someone with a smile directed at her. Pammy had loved and hated how Lena always tried to distract her during class, but it was more distracting with her gone than it ever had been with her there.

It was lunch that she'd been dreading, and it was as bad as she feared. She took her paper bag and sat at the end of a table. Around her, conversations buzzed. Girls hugged and traded apples and desserts and half sandwiches. But no one came to sit with Pammy. No one even looked at her.

It was hard to swallow her lunch, but she managed to eat most of it and not cry. She put her hand in her pocket to stroke the silky scarf and wondered what she would do if she never had any friends again.

\*

At the end of the week, Pammy got to go TAG. The “Talented and Gifted” class was the first place she didn’t miss Lena since she’d been going there since first grade without her.

Mrs. Wolf greeted her. “Did you have a good summer?”

“Lena moved away.”

“That’s too bad, honey. But maybe it will be a good opportunity for you to make new friends.”

Pammy shrugged.

“Well, we have a new boy showing up. He just moved from another district. Why don’t you show Cameron around for me?”

Pammy did not want to do that but also didn’t want to argue with her teacher. So she agreed but reached into her pocket to stroke her scarf.

It had been the same kids in the class for the last several years, so Pammy knew them all. She glanced around at Greg and Sarah and Heather and Matt greeting one another. They said hello to her and she waved.

The new boy stumbled into the room. He was gangly, with scuffed corduroy pants and a striped shirt that was tattered at the cuffs. His grin was huge and he went toward Mrs. Wolf. “Hi! My teacher told me I should come here!”

Pammy had seen him around school. He seemed louder and dirtier than the other boys.

“Cameron, this is Pammy. She’s going to be your buddy today and answer any questions you might have. Right, Pammy?”

Pammy wanted to say no, to go off and do her puzzles without the dirty boy. But she loved Mrs. Wolf and wanted to make her happy, so she agreed.

\*

Sarah, Heather, Greg, and Matt were gathered together at a table, working on their “About Me” project. Before Pammy could stop him, Cameron went over to them and plopped down in an empty chair. The table moved a little when he bumped it. “What are you guys doing?” he asked.

“Hey, be careful!” Sarah wrinkled her nose. “There are lots of empty tables. Why don’t you go sit with Pammy?”

“Oh.” Cameron’s enthusiasm diminished only slightly. “Okay.”

Sarah had wrinkled her nose at Pammy in that way before, so she knew how awful it felt. She wanted to leave him to figure it out himself, but Mrs. Wolf had told her to help him. Pammy went up to Cameron and said, “Come on, I’ll show you where all the supplies are and explain what we’re doing.”

Cameron chattered as they worked on their project, and Pammy tuned him out, concentrating. She loved when she did her project just right and Mrs. Wolf praised her attention to detail.

\*

The next day, Pammy was on the playground. Nicole and Brenda had asked her to jump rope with them, but she didn’t feel like it. Pammy drifted back and forth on the swings, dragging her feet in the mulch. If Lena were there, they’d be racing to see who could get highest fastest. They’d take turns jumping off when the teachers weren’t watching.

“Hey!” Cameron plopped on the swing next to hers. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Just swinging.”

“Is that yours?” Before Pammy could answer, Cameron had reached down and grabbed her scarf off the ground.

Pammy hopped off the swing and snatched it back. “Don’t touch that!” The scarf must have dropped out of her pocket.

Cameron looked hurt. “Why not?”

“Because she doesn’t like it.”

“She? Your scarf is a girl?”

“Yes.” Pammy made up the story as she went along. “And her name is Emilie. She’s not just a scarf.”

He half scowled, like he wasn’t sure if she was making fun of him or not. “So, what is she?”

“She was a girl my age who was turned into a scarf by a mad scientist. I have to figure out how to turn her back.”

“Oh, that’s cool. Can I help?”

Pammy frowned. That wasn’t the response she’d been expecting. “I... guess so.”

Cameron got off the swing and did a cartwheel. When he was upright again, he asked, “Well, what do we have to do?”

“I don’t know yet,” Pammy said. “I’ll talk to her tonight and figure it out.”

“She talks?”

“Just to me.”

“Cool. I wish I had a talking scarf.”

That night, Pammy thought about what could turn a scarf back into a girl. The mad scientist must have gotten angry with Emilie for something she did.

Pammy remembered that poem her mom used to say when she was young, about sugar and spice. But Pammy didn’t think that’s what girls were really made of. She decided she’d have to come up with her own recipe, and if they could gather the ingredients, then they could turn Emilie back into a girl.

She scribbled on paper after paper, making lists, crossing things out, starting over, until she finally had something she thought worked.

*Girls are made of tears and fears  
Of strength and friends and lies  
Girls want to be heard  
They want to be loved  
And never left behind.*

*Help me change back to a girl  
By finding all those things  
When you have them all  
The spell will run out  
And I'll change back to me.*

She showed the poem to Cameron the next day, and he frowned. "What does it mean?"

"It means we have to find things that represent everything in the first part. Tears and fears and stuff like that."

He chewed his lip. "What do you think boys are made of?"

"I don't know. I'm not a boy."

He nodded, like that made sense.

"I have this," she said. It was half a heart necklace that said "Be Fri." Lena had the half with "st ends." They hadn't worn them since like third grade, but Pammy still kept hers in her jewelry box. "It's for the part about wanting to be loved."

"Okay. What should we work on next? What about the part about wanting to be heard? Like a phone?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "Or a megaphone."

"What about a kazoo?"



“A kazoo? Why a kazoo?”

Cameron shrugged. “I don’t know. I have a kazoo, so I thought I’d see if it could work for something.”

“It has to mean something,” Pammy said. “It can’t just be any old thing. This...” She held up the necklace. “...was from my best friend back when we were still friends.”

“Why aren’t you friends anymore?”

“We’re still friends. I didn’t mean we weren’t. She just doesn’t live here anymore so now she’s busy. She has to make new friends and maybe her new school is harder.”

Cameron kicked the dirt. “I have a baseball cap that was my dad’s. Before he left. I don’t see him anymore.”

“Oh.” Pammy thought about that, what it would be like not to see her dad anymore. He worked a lot but helped her whenever she had a hard math problem and took her for ice cream on Saturdays. “That sucks.”

Cameron shrugged like he didn’t care, but he didn’t look up at her. “So the baseball cap could be the part about being left behind.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

The bell rang, ending recess before they could figure out the other parts. But that was okay. Pammy didn’t want to figure them out too quickly. It was fun to pretend that she was doing something important.

Cameron brought the baseball cap and a prism the next day.

“What’s that for?” Pammy asked, pointing to the prism.

He turned it so that pieces of rainbow fell on the ground. “Doesn’t it look a little like tears?”

It kind of did. Pammy smiled.

Over the next several days, Pammy and Cameron met every recess to think of things they could find to represent the different parts. After a few days, Nicole and Brenda came up to them. “What are you guys doing?” Brenda asked.

“We’re trying to find lies and strength!” Cameron said.

Pammy glared at him. The poem and Emilie was their secret. It might not feel as special if he shared it.

“What does that mean?” Nicole asked.

Cameron grinned at her. Pammy reluctantly pulled the paper out of her pocket. “Here,” she said, handing the poem over to them. When they were done reading, they both looked at her questioningly.

“Her scarf used to be a girl named Emilie, who was captured by a mad scientist. He turned her into a scarf, and if we can collect all these things, we can change her back.” Cameron rocked back and forth on his toes as he explained it.

Nicole and Brenda were looking at them like they wanted to help, and Pammy liked the attention. Maybe it would be fun if they helped. “I have a necklace that means love, and Cameron has a baseball cap that means left behind, and a prism that means tears.” She took the prism and the necklace out of her pocket to show them.

Nicole frowned. “Where’d you get that?” She grabbed the prism. “That was in my desk. You stole it!”

“No, I didn’t...” Pammy stopped and looked at Cameron. He wasn’t looking at her, and she realized he must have taken it. She almost told Nicole that Cameron had taken the prism, but she didn’t want to get him in trouble. “I found it,” she said. “I didn’t take it, I swear.”

Nicole hesitated. “Really? Where was it?”

Pammy looked away. “It was in the trash can. Someone must have put it there. I thought someone threw it away.”

“Okay,” Nicole said. “Well...” She shrugged, then she and Brenda walked away. Pammy had thought they were going to help her and Cameron, but now they thought she was a thief.

She whirled toward Cameron. “Why did you take her prism?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t mean to, not really. I saw her showing it to someone else and I thought it would be perfect. I just wanted to bring you the right thing so we can change Emilie back.”

She shook her head. “You could have gotten me in trouble. You could have gotten us both in trouble.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Pammy was so furious that she stormed away and told herself that she’d never speak to him again.

That night, she took Emilie, the poem, and the necklace out of her pocket and left them on her dresser. It was all such a stupid idea.

She picked up her phone to text Lena and ask her what to do, but when she looked at the texts, she noticed that Lena still hadn’t answered the last one she’d sent. Tears burned her throat.

Pammy ignored Cameron for the next two days at school. She started swinging alone again but watched Brenda and Nicole running around the playground together. She wondered if they were talking about her. She wondered if anyone else missed Lena. She wondered if anyone else noticed she was always alone.

Cameron walked around aimlessly, kicking rocks and walking through the middle of the boys’ kickball game. He didn’t seem to notice when they yelled at him.

Pammy wasn’t sure what she felt. In one way, she was mad at him for almost getting her in trouble. In another way, he had pretended with her. Lena always

thought things were stupid if they weren't her idea. She wouldn't have liked Emilie. She would have said that it was a stupid game to look for any of those things.

Pammy reached into her pocket before she remembered that she'd left everything on her dresser. She missed the silky feel of the scarf, the poem crunching under her fingers, the cool metal of the necklace. She missed Cameron poring over the poem with her, telling her that he was afraid of spiders and clowns, and that he was not collecting either of those things for her.

He was still wearing his dad's baseball cap, as he had been since the first day he brought it to show her. Cameron understood about being left behind, just like she did. She wondered why they were so easy to leave behind. But there was nothing wrong with Cameron. Other than that he talked too much and couldn't stand still. Those weren't good reasons to ditch someone. Cameron had stolen the prism, but he'd just wanted to help.

Pammy jumped off the swing and ran up to Cameron. "Hey."

His eyes lit up. "Hey."

"I think we need to find a new thing to represent tears since we can't use the prism anymore."

Cameron grinned. "I had an idea about that..."

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