

Broadening the Scope: Female Authors Are for More Than the 'F-word'

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ABSTRACT:

Though contemporary fiction has evolved significantly alongside the social and political revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there remains the tendency to return to the stigmatized classifications of literature in the past, especially in regards to contemporary female authors. Is a story feminist simply because it has been written by a woman, about a woman, and for a female audience? This used to be the definition of feminist literature, but in the twenty-first century, this broad definition becomes a scarlet letter that can trivialize the work of female authors. Evolution is therefore necessary to a full understanding of these works.

In the course of writing my creative fiction collection I was forced to examine and question the feminist undertones in each story. All three pieces are about women in their early thirties facing various struggles of self-discovery. As each woman fights for independence from her situation, she is forced into a catharsis of identity. Though each character's personal revolution is often against either patriarchal or societal norms, it would be too simplistic to simply categorize the stories only within the confines feminist fiction. Rather, it is important to evaluate contemporary literature for all its many dimensions.

I will examine the work and words of my contemporaries to address the stigmas associated with the work of a female author. Through an analysis of my own collection, I hope to prove that there must be more involved in a critique of an author's work than her gender.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM:

Literary criticism has, for the most part, evolved alongside contemporary literature throughout the centuries, with one notable exception. Though women today have achieved a vast majority of the equal rights they have been fighting for, they remain on an uneven literary platform. Contemporary women are still seen as divergent from the preferred norm, and as such, receive different treatment than the homogenous white male authors in the field. Despite significant progress, there remains the tendency to return to the stigmatized classifications of literature in the past, especially in regard to contemporary female authors.

To understand the stigmas I am referencing, we must first look at the terminology of the gender issues being discussed in order to grasp the fallacies of those terms. In her book on literary theory, *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson points out that there are many cultural conceptions of feminism that block the path for female writers. She catalogues the urban legends associated with feminism such as the belief that all feminists do not shave their legs, wear bras, or like men (83). Tyson says that even after moving past these outlandish stereotypes, there are still many obstacles women face. "Even today, unless the critical or historical point of view is feminist, there is a tendency to under represent the contribution of women writers" (Tyson 84). Additionally, because of this truth about literary criticism, there is an exaggerated tendency to label pieces as having a feminist focus or being specified as "feminist fiction." Often the only qualifier for such a classification is that the work highlights a strong female protagonist or includes a focus (however small) on gender. Furthermore, categorization of female authors as "women writers" presents another setback because it implies a separate genre for what is seen as the lesser gender. In her book, *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking*

Subjectivity, Radha Chakravarty points out another fallacy in the categorization of “women writers” when she explains:

The term ‘women writers’ is also a contingent and problematic category, for my consideration of women writers remains constantly premised upon the understanding that gender is linked to other related issues that together constitute subjectivity... Terms such as ‘women writers’ and ‘women’s writing’ foreground the primacy of gender in the feminist enterprise, even as they point towards the need for constant vigilance against absolutist reifications. (16-17)

Chakravarty’s call to action, which raises the heads of sleeping watchdogs, is precisely what this essay is also hoping to accomplish.

THESIS:

The focus of this essay is to examine the ramifications of such classifications of female writers and to argue for a non-gendered approach to contemporary literary criticism. Rather than characterizing literature on the basis of the author’s gender, an evolutionary literary theory is necessary to foster a full understanding of the writing of female contemporary writers. All critical theory, Chakaravarty says, should follow this principle: “the need to generalize must be balanced by a constant openness to change and context-sensitive modification” (17). Through an examination of recent events in the literary world, I will present my analysis of current critical views towards women. I will then introduce a close reading of my own recent fiction pieces to provide multiple interpretations in line with the theories in question before refuting the oversimplified nature of such inadequate analysis. I will then conclude with a presentation and analysis of quotations by my contemporaries on the subjects of feminism and the genre of “women writers.”

CURRENTLY IN CRITICISM:

In her essay, “Against the Unfair Playing Field,” Dr. Marjorie Allison discusses the Man Booker Prize, and makes the claim that “the playing field of publications and awards is stacked against female writers.” She questioned why an award that claimed to be founded for “supporting writers against oppression,” would feel “the need to generate sales for the type of writers who most typically win, i.e. men who already appear to have advantages in the publishing world” (2-3). This raises the question, are women still considered a minority that is facing such oppression? I was initially inclined to point out how far women have come towards equality, but publications and awards shine light on the disparities between male and female success. The irony in the Man Booker Prize, Allison says, is that “the award is supposed to counter the evil of censorship and to presumably offer an open, level playing field for books to be considered and judged,” (3) but instead, the prize honors instead the homogenous norm.

In an interview with Publishers Weekly last month on the subject of her new novel, *The Woman Upstairs*, Claire Messud took umbrage at the questions she was asked, causing quite a stir in the literary world. The reporter from Publishers Weekly asked, “I wouldn’t want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim” which elicited this response from Messud:

For heaven’s sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? Any of the characters in *The Corrections*? Any of the characters in *Infinite Jest*? Any of the characters in anything Pynchon has ever written? Or Martin Amis? Or

Orhan Pamuk? Or Alice Munro, for that matter? If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. (Messud)

My question is this: Would Messud have received the same insipid question if she had been a male writer? The answer is impossible to know for certain, but that does not place the question outside the realm of things to consider about the reception that female writers receive. Messud continued by saying, "The relevant question isn't 'is this a potential friend for me?' but 'is this character alive?'" which brings up the crux of the problem being addressed in this essay: Why isn't the reporter asking Messud about her writing? In an informal search of online writing magazines, interviews and blogs, I found that Messud's situation is not the least bit rare for a female writer. As a female writer, I am joining the ranks of women who are asked about their shoe collections, weight gain (or loss), and even—in one situation I came across—the paternity of an unborn child. Why is this the case? An analysis of my fiction through the methods used by these critics might shed some light on that question.

AM I A FEMINIST? A WOMEN'S WRITER? BOTH? NEITHER?:

How might my fiction be classified in regards to the terms I have introduced thus far? I am a female writer who has written three short stories that each follows a female protagonist along a journey of emotional discovery. Right off the bat, there are already three black marks beside my name in the literature books. It would seem that my fate is cast in stone; I am a woman, my protagonists are women, and they do things in emotional (i.e. "female") ways.

I. Puzzled

In my story, *Puzzled*, it is possible to view Barbara at both ends of the female spectrum being discussed here. On the surface, Barbara comes across as the archetypal, broken down victim character that easily fits the categorization of "sentimental," another genre that ties closely

to canon of “women writers.” There has been a mixed reception of both terms because of “a host of negative and misleading connotations,” (Jay 4) but both essentially refer to writing that focuses heavily on the ethos of the character and work of a piece of writing. Like Barbara, the women in these stories are often overcome by their emotions. In this reading of the text, Barbara is submissive to her mother and to the suitors who invade her home, representing the stereotypical characterization of a woman. I will not dispute that for the majority of the piece, Barbara appears to be a flat character who has no aspirations and does not take charge of her situation or her life, acting in this way, very much like the belief towards women that the feminist movement has been so keen to destroy. Barbara acts as if she does not deserve her independence because of the vows she made to her husband before he left her a widow.

However, this is not the only way to read *Puzzled* or to assess the significance of Barbara’s character. It is also possible to analyze this short story using a feminist critical lens. In doing so, a feminist theorist would focus instead on the countless ways that Barbara resists or breaks away from what is considered a typical female role. From this angle, Barbara is no longer viewed as submissive, but rather as either quietly persistent to maintain her status quo, or as actively resistant to the loss of her independence that would occur if she were to remarry. A feminist could even take this argument a step further by arguing that Barbara not only maintains her independence, but that she also defies the role of motherhood that society imposes on all women. Barbara does this both by rejecting her own mother and by refusing to seek a partner for procreation after the sudden death of her husband.

II. *Something Shredded*

In *Something Shredded*, Karen tries to balance a complex friendship with a coworker with her desire to succeed at her job and earn a promotion. This piece, as is true of most writing,

can be forced into the mould of a particular critical theory if that is the intent of the reader, but in the case of Karen's story, the genre of feminist fiction marks a significant stretch logically. That said, this is a story about a woman that has been written by a woman, so I have no doubt that critics will try to label it as either feminist fiction or "women's writing." I will not argue that Karen does achieve a level of catharsis at the end of the piece through the act of breaking free from her role as the dependable friend, but I would go so far as to bet that if this exact same piece had been written by a man, people would not try desperately to argue feminist intent. Why then, will this story about a female protagonist rebelling against society be automatically chained to feminist literary theory? I argue that it is because the author of this story, as a woman, is divergent from the established norm of acceptable literature.

III. *The Aegean on Her Skin*

In my final piece, *The Aegean on Her Skin*, Katrina chooses to leave her husband for the pursuit of her own happiness in what can easily be seen as a feminist fiction story. The setup follows the tradition of feminism almost to a tee: unhappy woman breaks free from her restraints and pursues her independence which comes in the form of artistic expression and creativity. I do not doubt that this oversimplified telling of *The Aegean on Her Skin* will reflect the thoughts of at least some of my readers.

However, I argue that it is through this familiar construction that something unique comes forth in the form of a realistic fiction which many critics associate with "women's writing." In her essay, *American Feminist Criticism of Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Ellen Cronan Rose talks about this turn to realistic fiction and says "The writers of several of the books under review justify their focus on realist novels on the grounds that this is the fiction that has meant the most to women readers...that people read novels because they believe these texts have something to tell them about life" (356). This turn to the realistic helps readers relate to the

character as though the character is providing a “how-to” guide for life (356). In this piece, Katrina can be seen as providing a lesson in achieving personal happiness, or alternatively as a cautionary tale of the perils of leaving one’s husband. The interpretation in this case, depends on the reader’s context, rather than my own as a female writer. I would argue that it is not one of these techniques, but a combination of all of them that is present in my fiction, causing my work to break the moulds of each genre.

WHAT THE CONTEMPORARIES HAVE TO SAY:

In an interview about the role of feminism in this century, Emma Donoghue, author of the novel, *Room*, discussed her views about the issue:

I suppose to me a feminist novelist (of any gender) is one who notices gender. So you might say I am an obviously feminist writer in that my work often focuses on women's lives; I try to tell neglected stories and many of them are women's. But I would argue that I'm being just as feminist when I write about my male characters, because I just am as interested in how notions of manhood shape (and in many cases cage) them... I certainly don't feel as if I'm working within a distinct tradition of women's writing. I know what it means to be a feminist in my private life and my political life. But as for my writing life... I'm less sure. Not that I'll ever reject the F word, but to say 'I am a feminist writer' sounds somehow as if I have a manifesto, as I begin writing a story, when in fact all I have are questions... There's a curious optical illusion when we read the work of someone from a 'minority' (including women); we notice the 'minority' aspects more... I find that although I've had important male point-of-view characters in many of

my novels and short stories, that doesn't get noticed because I'm seen as a woman-focused writer. (Donoghue)

Margaret Atwood said “feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledge the shadows as well as the lights” (Chakravarty 144). Such an understanding of the cannon of female contemporary fiction is crucial because it underscores the positive and negative tones of female writing, rather than only acknowledging the genre as it often is in popular discourse as being either empowering or self-righteous depending on the gender of the speaker.

My conclusion about female writers is rather similar to that of Chakravarty, who says, “in considering the representations of women within the chosen texts, I discover no homogeneity, only overlaps. Certain shared features stand out, such as... a focus on the experiences of women who transgress the boundaries of home, marriage [and] family... to enter the public arena” (189). I do not dispute the claim that my work may mirror other writers in multiple ways, but I do dispute the conclusion that this overlap is caused by gender alone.

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Puzzled

By: Stacey Sobelman

Barbara answered the door to find a stranger standing on her stoop. He was holding a creased note card in one hand and kept looking from it to the metal numbers beside her door and back. “This is 2312 East Wessley, right?”

“Yes.” Barbara assumed he was selling something and her interest peaked, always intrigued to see what the door-to-door salesmen would promise her on any given day. Maybe a set of Ginsu knives or perhaps those outrageous “Space Bags” that they promised the astronauts actually use. Barbara was never gullible enough to buy their tactics or their products, but she enjoyed watching them try nonetheless.

The stranger mumbled incoherently. This guy needed lessons in public speaking, she thought, twirling her wedding ring on her finger, beginning to lose interest.

“Yes?”

He fiddled with the note card and it unfolded slightly to reveal a corner of its contents. She craned her neck, trying to decipher the upside down note scrawled in blue cursive.

“You’re Barbara, right? 2312 East Wessley, Barbara Ann Schwartz?” He asked in a single hurried breath.

“Actually it’s Rosenbloom.” And then she saw it. Even upside down and from a distance, her mother’s handwriting was unique. “Who are you?”

“Joe—Joseph. Joseph Barowitz.” He extended a sweaty palm towards her.

“What are you doing here, Joseph?”

“Our mothers play bridge.” The look on his face suggested that this was supposed to mean something to her. She just stared at him, noticing his features for the first time. His eyes were too

far apart leaving a puzzle piece shaped gap between them. And they were not the sweet hazelnut of Mark's eyes, but rather the deep brown of bitter baker's chocolate. The eyes narrowed and the eyebrows arched, reminding Barbara that he was still waiting for her to say something.

"My mother isn't here."

"Oh! No, no. I'm uh, I'm not here to see your mother."

Barbara was losing interest, anxious to get back to the jigsaw puzzle waiting for her in the living room.

"I uh, I have groceries in my car," he gestured towards a standard black BMW parked on the street. "I thought maybe I could make dinner for you?"

She shrugged, knowing full well what this whole thing was about, but not feeling up to fighting it. Joseph hurried out to his car and came back with the groceries a minute later, an over-eager smile now plastered on his face.

"Your mother told me that brisket is your favorite?" Joseph said, unloading the grocery bags onto the counter a few moments later.

"It was," Barbara said under her breath.

"What?"

She grabbed an onion out of the bag and went to work on it across the room from him. She sliced it into thin strips and kept mincing and mincing until there was almost nothing left besides mush and juice. When he asked, she pretended her tears were just from the onion.

Joseph excused himself and Barbara finally had a moment of peace to process the situation as he headed down the hall in search of a bathroom. She had known what he was doing here the moment she saw her mother's handwriting on the note card. Her mother had been trying

to set her up with every eligible bachelor at Temple Israel practically since the final day of sitting shiva after her husband Mark's death three years ago.

There had been blind dates sitting at the table when Barbara showed up for family dinners, eyeing her hungrily as if she were the main course. There had been men "conveniently" in attendance at functions and parties who always knew a little too much about her likes and dislikes but never enough about her back story. But this was the first man her mother had delivered to her home unannounced.

Barbara squinted back more tears as she scooped the onion mush into a ceramic bowl. The toilet flushed, the sound of the sink rushing to life, the soft thumping of footsteps on the wooden staircase.

"You didn't mention you're redoing your guest bath."

Barbara's heart quickened at the mention of the unfinished project.

"I had to wander around upstairs. But no big deal! I found a bathroom."

Joseph was making himself right at home now and it seemed to Barbara that the nerves he had displayed earlier must have worn off. She wished they hadn't.

He was bustling around her kitchen, through her cabinets and drawers, disrupting everything as he chattered away about everything and nothing simultaneously. Barbara cringed when he knocked a wine glass. It teetered and threatened to dive onto the tile floor below, but Joseph righted it just in time.

"When your mother suggested this whole thing, I gotta admit, it seemed a little crazy," Joseph leaned against the counter and popped a carrot into his mouth.

Barbara just nodded, unsure how to respond. She was usually the only one who seemed to find her mother's antics to be anything outside of ordinary.

“But I’m glad I listened to her,” he paused, but Barbara missed the cue that he intended for her to agree with him. “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

Joseph’s eyebrows arched and Barbara knew at once that she had said something to offend him. That was never her intention, but it seemed that she was always insulting the men her mother selected for her.

“Your mother was right about you,” he said instead.

“What?” That was not at all what Barbara had been expecting.

“She warned me that you liked games,” His tone was awkward, but his face was confident. A smile inched across it, but Barbara couldn’t discern the reason.

Not games, puzzles. I like puzzles, Barbara thought, assuming this was another one of her mother’s attempts to give the guy some bonus points but failing miserably.

“Do I have a long night of Monopoly ahead of me?”

“I hate Monopoly.”

“Oh.” Joseph fiddled with the digital kitchen timer resting on the countertop. He shook it. “Is this thing working?”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“What?”

“She’s not paying you, is she?”

“Who? No!”

“Then you can just go.”

The timer screamed. Barbara slid on a pair of oven mitts and pulled the brisket out of the oven. She handed Joseph a dishtowel and then thrust the entrée into his arms.

“I’m really not hungry.”

* * *

The next morning, Barbara’s cell phone buzzed, seizing wildly. It wasn’t until it clattered onto the hardwood floor and split open that Barbara tore her eyes away from the book of crosswords she had propped against her legs tented over the cushioned arm of the chair. She shrugged and went back to her book.

In the kitchen, the landline started ringing.

7 Across: six letter word: penance doer... blank, I, blank, blank, E, blank...

The phone kept ringing.

Six letters... Penance doer...

The answering machine clicked on. “Barbara Ann.”

Six letters... M-O-T-H-E-R? Barbara counted out the letters on her fingers, but the I from 3 Down interrupted 7 Across. The word was not mother.

“I know you’re home. Pick up the phone.”

Oh. The phone. It was her mother.

“I’m just going to sit here tying up your line until you answer Barbara. Although, it’s not as if you have them beating down your door...”

Barbara groaned, erasing her mother’s influence from her crossword puzzle as if she could snuff out the sound of the monologue spilling out of the kitchen if only she had a big enough eraser. The eraser cut a hole in the thin sheaf of paper, ripping right through the intersection between 7 Across and 3 Down, leaving a hole where the I used to be.

“It’s a good thing I’m not in the middle of some tragic emergency Barbara! I mean, really! A daughter who screens her own mother’s phone calls! I don’t know what I did to deserve such an ungrateful—”

“Hello mother.” Barbara said as she lifted the handset off the wall. She leaned against the laminate countertop, bracing herself for what was sure to be another uncomfortable conversation.

“What in heaven’s name were you thinking, making me wait like that?”

7 Across: Penance doer... S-I-N—Barbara counted each letter on her fingers, squeezing the corded phone between her chin and shoulder –N-E-R.

S-I-N-N-E-R. Sinner. She stared at the book on the coffee table and thought about how far the phone cord would stretch. It was a few feet too far away. So she fumbled around in the junk drawer for a post-it, a note card, anything on which she could record the answer before it slipped away. Instead, she found an old recipe card from a set she never used. A housewarming gift from one of Mark’s aunts.

“Hello? Did you hang up on me?” Her mother’s voice rose an octave higher.

“What? Oh. Sorry. No.” Barbara stuck her pencil into her hair, slammed the junk drawer, and twisted the coiled cord of the phone around her finger as her mother rambled on about some new scandal amongst the ladies of the charity league. She crumpled the “Rosenbloom Recipes” card in her fist, trying to physically crush the painful memory into dust.

“Barbara Ann, are you even listening to me?”

“Of course mother,” Barbara said, throwing the wadded memory into the trash and resuming her quest for a scrap of paper. The paper towel rack was out of reach. The napkin holder was all the way on the table.

“...I just cannot believe you were so rude to that lovely man...”

Barbara grabbed the pencil, releasing a lock of hair with it. She shoved the hair back into place but it would not stay. Each time she tried, more hair fell around her face.

“...Went through all that trouble to make your favorite meal...”

Barbara ripped the hair tie out of her hair, releasing the few remaining strands after her futile attempts to fix it one-handed failed. She saw the pencil on the counter and remembered what she had been doing in the first place.

“...But I suppose there are plenty more where he came from...”

She looked at the painted plums, bananas and grapes on her kitchen wallpaper, remembering how she and Mark had just about died laughing when they saw it at the hardware store the day after watching Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory. Right there in the middle of the store, Mark had licked a pear. “The snozberries taste like snozberries!” he had announced to a random passerby.

“...But really Barbara Ann, you need to put yourself back on the market...”

Barbara clutched the pencil. She wrote the answer to 7 Across on a juicy red apple.

* * *

Mrs. Schwartz had informed her daughter a month earlier that she would be accompanying her to a charity “gala” that she was hosting with the Women’s Charity League. Barbara had tried to argue with her, but it had been a futile attempt. So, when her mother called to remind her for the fourth time, there was nothing Barbara could do to change her mind.

Her mother did not show up, as promised, at 5:00 on the Friday of the “gala.” She arrived an hour early, blazing into Barbara’s house in a cloud of hairspray and Clinique beauty products.

When she waltzed into the living room Barbara was lying on the ground, peering into a box of puzzle pieces on the floor beside her, searching for that last piece of the barn door amidst partial pansies and fragmented pieces of an autumn sky.

“Barbara Ann Schwartz! What do you think you’re doing?”

It took a moment too long for her mother’s presence to register among the familiar furniture of the room. What was normally a cozy little living room seemed to shrink whenever Barbara’s mother entered.

Barbara took a deep breath and turned back to her box of answers.

“I was just waiting for you.”

“You were just wrinkling that dress into ruins! That’s what you were doing. If you didn’t like my gift you should have just said so.”

Her mother was an expert at employing the good ole Jewish guilt trick.

Barbara located the piece she had been searching for at last and popped it into place with satisfaction. She looked up at her mother’s disapproving expression reigning down upon her.

* * *

The “gala” Barbara’s mother had droned on and on about turned out to be just a modest fundraiser. Modest, but over-the-top in that tacky sort of way. It only took Barbara the ten seconds that it took to walk through the archway of pink balloons to realize that in her freshly ironed dress, she was without a doubt the most overdressed patron there.

The room looked like it had been swallowed up by buckets upon buckets of Pepto Bismal. Pink crepe paper canopies hung from the ceiling, pink balloons bobbed over tables with pink tablecloths. The wait staff wore pink bowties and pink ribbon buttoners.

As much as she hated pink, Barbara wished she had a camera so she could construct a puzzle out of this décor. This much of a single color would make for a delightfully difficult jigsaw puzzle.

Her mother's form bustled off into the crowd and the pieces started to click into place in her head. Her mother gossiped with her bridge club, stage whispers behind open palms. Though they were well into their sixties, these women might as well have been wearing ponytails and cheerleading uniforms.

An animated flick of the wrist from across the room. Barbara had been summoned to the huddle. She searched the room for anything she could do instead but, finding nothing, she dutifully returned to her mother's side.

“Did you hear that Ida Silverman's eldest got a divorce?”

“About time, really. That woman was never good enough for Ida's son.”

“Why Barbara, that's him over there! See? By the pink lemonade? That handsome gentleman. In the blue. Go on over and introduce yourself.”

Mrs. Schwartz had never been one with a knack for subtlety.

Barbara followed her mother's eyes across the room. It wasn't hard to pick his bright blue polo out of the masses of pink silk, pink cotton and pink polyester.

His back was to her, but this only made it easier for Barbara to fill in the blanks with her own details. Mark's details. He was the right height. Same basic build. And from where she stood, Barbara was convinced that this man's hair was the exact same shade of brown so dark that it almost appeared black.

Barbara found herself searching desperately for an excuse but coming up short.

“He is a doctor Barbara.” As if that settled it. “Go!” She gave Barbara a light shove in the right direction, her gaudy bracelets rubbing against her daughter’s back.

Barbara walked across the room and stood next to Ida’s eldest son at the refreshment table.

Ida’s son, Barbara soon learned, had already been briefed on the details her mother deemed important. He made idle chitchat about all the right topics, but Barbara was not listening. He was a decent enough guy and Barbara could see why her mother had chosen him for her. He was attractive and intelligent, but there were still pieces missing. Big chunks missing right in the middle of his gaze.

Barbara looked down at the industrial tiling of the community center, trying to avoid the empty gaze that was boring holes into her. She focused on the intricate pattern of squares and rectangles in varying shades of taupe, each one fitting into the others. Maybe if she focused hard enough, she could manage to sink into the little square beneath her patent leather pump.

She took a step backwards, and then another, eyes still glued to the tile. Another step. Another. And then she tripped. She backed right into an old woman’s walker, the only walker in the entire place that had the original feet planting it into the floor, rather than the traditional tennis ball substitute.

The slow-motion fall, Barbara couldn’t believe her horrible luck. The one walker in the entire room that had stronger roots than her own two feet. Her face flushed a deep shade of red—red, not pink. She couldn’t even blend into the Pepto Bismal mess of decorations and save her remaining dignity.

Though she knew her mother had only the best intentions, part of Barbara hated her in that moment for dragging her along to all these public functions and blind dates.

She felt dozens of pairs of eyes on her and could not resist looking. The little old ladies all stared down at her from their vantage points of five feet off the ground in every direction. These shrunken withered women seemed like giants in that moment. The women glared at her. And the men all had gaps in their eyes.

* * *

A cryptic phone call from her mother had all but threatened death if Barbara continued to spend her Sundays “moping around in that god awful sweatshirt,” as she put it, so fearing loss of life or limb, Barbara was wearing her nice silk robe in lieu of her Berkley sweatshirt when the doorbell rang at nine o’clock the following Sunday. Assuming it was her mother on one of her unannounced visits, Barbara padded to the door, her fuzzy slippers making a soft thump-thumping against the hardwood.

It wasn’t her mother.

She saw the toolbox in his hand before anything else. Her eyes rose slowly to meet his gaze. It took a minute to comprehend what was going on. There was a man on her front stoop. A man with a toolbox.

“Hello. Barbara, right?” He set the toolbox down and stretched out his hand towards her. She stared at it, dumbfounded.

“Who?” Her voice trailed off.

“Jack. Jack Stein.”

As if this was supposed to mean something to Barbara. His smile faded into confusion as he realized that this new information meant nothing to her. Soon his face matched hers.

“You have no idea who I am, do you?”

Barbara shook her head, still eyeing the polished metal toolbox.

“Wow, uh, this is embarrassing. Mrs. Schwartz made it sound like you’d be expecting me...”

“My mother sent you?”

“Yeah. To fix your guest bath. She said you had a problem with some pipes?”

Barbara hadn’t set foot in the guest bath in three years. Everything was still exactly as he left it. She fiddled with her ring, choking back tears, completely ignoring whatever John—or was it Jim?—was rambling on about the pipes.

He stopped talking and she realized he was looking to her for an answer. She didn’t have one.

“So, you gonna let me in?” He asked with an awkward laugh.

Barbara retreated down the hallway of missing puzzle pieces where frames had once hung. Now, only their shadows remained on the walls to remind her that the happy faces of the couple she used to be a part of were now locked in her bottom desk drawer. Jack, taking her action as an invitation, followed her.

They stood on the threshold of another room a moment later. Mark’s toolbox was exactly where he left it. His wrench rested on the lid of the toilet seat. His notebook sat open on the half-finished tiled floor with his chicken scratch handwriting. The open page showed his calculations, the realization that he needed twelve more blue tiles to finish the pattern; the realization that made him rush to the store in the storm; the realization that got him killed.

“Guess I didn’t need to bring my own tools after all,” Jack interrupted her thoughts and squeezed past her into the bathroom.

“No—I mean—Don’t—”

Jack turned back to her with a quizzical look. Barbara noticed chunks missing from his upper lip. A whole section missing where his nose should have been. More fragments had fallen away from the expression she had come so close to piecing together moments before. His right eyebrow was an open question mark. Something had chiseled trenches into his forehead. There were gaps in each eye where she expected to see the familiar twinkle she looked for in every man she had met since the accident.

“Just—just use your own.” Barbara fled back down the hall and took refuge on the living room floor with her latest puzzle, sobbing silently to herself.

This was the exact reason that Barbara had been suffering through her mother’s complaints about the unfinished bathroom for the past three years, she thought as she sifted through the unmatched puzzle pieces. There was just something wrong about hiring a replacement to finish Mark’s project. Twice since his death, Barbara had tried to hire a plumber in order to please her mother, but each time she had tasted something sour on her tongue and had hung up before saying a word.

She swallowed, tasting the same putrid sensation in the back of her throat that she had felt in the past. She ran down the hall into the master bedroom and squeezed a gob of toothpaste onto her toothbrush. She was still scrubbing her molars when the phone began to ring a couple moments later.

“Barbara Ann Schwartz!” shrieked the answering machine in the kitchen.

Barbara groaned. She had been hoping to attribute the incessant ringing to a toll-free caller. She’d even be thankful for a call from a collections agency at this point. Anyone but her meddling mother.

“Hello mother.”

“Tell me you let him in. You let him in right? Oh god, please don’t be wearing that horrid sweatshirt! Did you wash your hair?” She paused for a breath.

“You hired a plumber *for* me?”

“Jack Stein isn’t some simple plumber! What kind of mother do you think I am?”

“He’s not a plumber?”

“Why would you think he’s a plumber?” Her mother responded, as if she had just asked something absurd.

“What is he doing in my bathroom, mother?”

“Oh he’s just finishing what you started three years ago. I mean, seriously Barbara, when was the last time you actually finished something you started?”

“Mark started.”

“What? Enunciate Barbara Ann. It is impossible to understand you when you mumble like a fool.”

“Nevermind. Listen, I have to go...John is calling me from the other room.”

“Jack. His name is Jack. Stand up straight. Smile. You have a lovely smile. Talk to him Barbara Ann. Give him a chance. He’s really—”

“I’m hanging up now mother.”

“I’ll call you later for all the details!” Click.

* * *

One month, six puzzles and six single men later, Barbara had begun contemplating moving to Paris or Venice and leaving no forwarding address. But each time the idea entered her mind it was paired with the knowledge that she could not bear to leave this house. His house. Their home.

Her anger towards her mother swelled with every knock at the door, but Barbara endured. Though her patience wore thinner and thinner until it was nearly transparent, Barbara couldn't bring herself to confront her mother, knowing that she was acting—though manipulative and overbearing—out of love.

That is why she barely flinched when the doorbell rang that night. She rose slowly from her puzzle on the floor. Her knee popped and it occurred to Barbara that she hadn't moved from the floor all afternoon.

She looked down at the coffee table and the progress she had made on her latest puzzle, a pack of Dalmatians playing, sitting, sleeping on a solid white floor in a room with white walls. She was so close to revealing the entire picture for the first time! Less than a dozen pieces sat waiting for her in the box on the floor.

The doorbell rang again, reminding her why she had stood up in the first place. She sighed, frustrated to walk away from an unfinished puzzle that was so close to being completed.

Barbara regretted opening the door immediately.

Underneath the lone porch light that had yet to burn out stood her mother and yet another man.

“What are you gawking at Barbara Ann? Where are your manners? Invite us inside!”

Barbara stood back against the wall, still processing what was happening on the threshold of her home. Her mother was wearing oven mitts and holding a casserole dish. The man just stood there, staring at Barbara.

Mrs. Schwartz busied herself and her husband in the kitchen, leaving Barbara alone with Adam in the living room. She twisted her wedding ring around in her hand, avoiding eye contact

at all cost, avoiding seeing only the missing pieces rather than the man her mother had dragged to dinner.

“So...you like puzzles, huh?” He kneaded his fist in his open palm, cracking his knuckles.

The sound caught Barbara’s attention. Mark was always cracking his knuckles. It drove her crazy. Without thinking, she looked up from her own hands at Adam.

He was the closest thing to a completed puzzle Barbara had faced yet. His hair was a couple shades too light, but it looked the way she imagined Mark’s might if he had aged along side her the past three years. The resemblance was uncanny. Barbara squinted at his face, trying to detect pairs of mismatched puzzle pieces. Piece after piece fell away as she peered at him, uncovering Adam as the imposter he was. Just like all the rest of them.

“Barbara Ann! The boy is talking to you!” Mrs. Schwartz hollered over her shoulder as she slid the casserole into the oven.

Barbara was confused as to how her mother thought that belittling her would make the man like her, but she was accustomed to her mother’s nit-picking and just shrugged it off.

Mrs. Schwartz took that opportunity to suggest a tour of the house and Barbara, wanting to escape her mother more than she hated the idea of bringing Adam deeper into her home, agreed.

He ran his fingers along the wall in the hallway, touching each empty space. Barbara followed behind him as he led her on a tour of her own home. She placed her fingertips on each spot he touched; righting the crooked picture frames and polishing the memories he tarnished with each step.

Upstairs, Adam reached for the doorknob of the spare bedroom and Barbara let out a muted shriek.

“What?” He turned the knob and walked into the abandoned room. Pastel patches of an unfinished quilt were painted on a background of pale taupe. Tickle-Me-Pink paint arched across the opposite wall in the sloppy scrawl of a novice painter. The handwriting was nearly illegible, but Barbara knew the words by heart: “Someday! A nursery in our home!”

Adam wandered further into the room, stopping, finally, and leaning against the monochromatic rainbow on the wall. Barbara watched as he fingered the paint job, as if the runs, streaks and drips were a part of a Braille alphabet.

“Stop.”

“What?”

“Please. Just—just don’t touch that.”

Adam stared at her and his mouth hung open like a cartoon character. Barbara might have laughed if she hadn’t been so furious at him.

His fingers blazed a trail through the thick layer of dust on the windowsills and on the dresser. Patterns formed in the wake of his skating fingers. Patterns that cut through the layers of resistance built up on every surface of the room. He bumped into the antique rocking chair that had belonged to Barbara’s grandmother. The wood creaked as the chair swung back and forth.

How dare he touch Mark’s things? In her head, Barbara yelled, cursed and berated him, screaming all the things she could not bring herself to say.

“What is this junk?”

That set Barbara over the edge.

“It’s not junk. These are our things! This is the life I was supposed to have.”

“Geez! I didn’t know.” He backed up until his back was against the wall.

Barbara glared at him, seeing only an empty silhouette lined with a couple stray puzzle pieces. This imposter in Mark's house was nothing but a shell of a man. At that moment she hated her mother for bringing him there. Barbara fiddled with her wedding ring in silence, twisting it around her finger so that the light danced off the diamond and reflected onto the opposite wall. She was staring at the ball of light when a shadow appeared beneath it.

"What is all this ruckus?" Mrs. Schwartz asked.

Adam took her arrival as his cue to leave. He uttered a rushed apology to Mrs. Schwartz and kissed her cheek. Barbara heard the front door slam a moment later.

"What did you do to chase this one off?" Mrs. Schwartz came further into the room. The reflected light danced as Barbara shifted.

"Barbara Ann Schwartz! What has gotten into you?"

"That's not my name." Barbara mumbled.

"What have I told you about enunciating?"

"That's not my name!"

Mrs. Schwartz took a step back, thrown off-balance by her daughter's newfound voice.

"You can't just replace him, mother."

"Adam? Of course I can! There are plenty—"

"Mark."

Barbara took a deep breath. "You can't keep delivering men to my door."

"Barbara—"

"I don't want to remarry," She started slowly. "At least not—"

"You are going to refuse me grandchildren?! Oy! Just kill me now Barbara Ann." Mrs. Schwartz clutched her chest and sank to the ground.

“I’m not ready yet mother.”

“Here,” Mrs. Schwartz grabbed a paint scraper off the desk and thrust it at her daughter. “Go ahead. Just stab me and make it quick.” Mrs. Schwartz waved the scraper around in the air and sobbing.

“Pull yourself together.”

Mrs. Schwartz stopped bawling and gawked at her daughter, speechless, probably for the first time in Barbara’s entire life.

“You are done trying to set me up with men. No more.” Barbara strained her voice, hoping her mother could not hear it wavering, praying her words would make it through the thick shield of hairspray around her mother’s head.

Mrs. Schwartz continued to stare at her.

“I know it will be hard for you, but it is time for you to take a couple hundred steps back and let me make my own decisions.”

“But—”

“No buts. This is how it’s going to be.”

“Barbara—”

“If I do have children someday, do you want me to move them to Switzerland to keep them away from their crazy bubbah?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t test me, mother.”

In the kitchen the oven timer buzzed, reminding Barbara how they got in this mess in the first place.

“Now, clean yourself up and come have dinner with me.” Barbara turned on her heel and left her mother blubbering on the nursery floor.

Something Shredded

By: Stacey Sobelman

Karen twisted her key and clicked off the ignition of her car, an old clunker she had purchased with the tips from her two part-time waitressing jobs back in college. The old Chevy sputtered to sleep with a cough of exhaust.

She threw her bag over her shoulder and got out of the car. The lab technicians at Mercy North had to park in the overflow garage with the janitors and volunteers. Constructed many years after the hospital itself, the overflow garage was almost a mile from the front doors, past the visitor lot, patient parking, the staff garage and the emergency unloading zone. Karen walked past clunkers, pickups and the occasional minivan, all in dire need of a good wash or a fresh coat of paint, on her way to the stairwell. The other garage, on the other hand, might as well have been on a different planet from this one. It was lined with sports cars, all gleaming even under the sparse lighting of the parking structure.

God forbid an esteemed plastic surgeon should park his Jag within a mile of the janitor's rusty pickup, Karen thought.

Elizabeth, Karen's friend and fellow tech, called out, hurrying to catch up, so Karen stopped and waited in the stairwell on the fourth floor.

"This is going to kill me one of these days," She announced as soon as Elizabeth was within earshot.

"Karen! Don't talk like that!"

"They'll find my body in a heap on the stairs somewhere between four and six."

"It's good exercise!"

"My god, Liz. Stop," Karen groaned.

At the foot of the stairs, the pair emerged into the gray fog of a February morning. The sky had been at least five shades lighter when Karen had entered the garage only—she glanced down at her watch—six minutes ago.

Elizabeth chuckled, “Gotta love Missouri weather!”

‘If you don’t like the weather, just wait five minutes’ could easily be the state’s motto, Karen thought, knowing the next line to Elizabeth’s tired and humorless joke.

Elizabeth was always the first to chime in with a ridiculous proverb (often of her own invention) in situations when most people would respond with complaints. This was the cause for most of Karen’s frustration towards her friend in the past six months since Karen started at the hospital, and was also one of the reasons for Elizabeth’s unpopularity among the doctors. Elizabeth, however, was completely oblivious and greeted each doctor they passed with a hearty smile.

Karen didn’t have the heart to tell Elizabeth how everyone felt about her. That her optimism came across as simple-minded nonsense more often than not, making her colleagues and superiors think she was somewhere between a simpleton and an outright idiot.

The automatic doors slid open and the lab techs parted ways, Karen climbing the stairs to the lab and Elizabeth walking down the hall to pull research from the filing room.

* * *

Bunched up wads continued to multiply like a bacteria across every surface of the room. Among the shreds of spiral notebook debris, crumpled paper blobs and piles of eraser shavings, Karen scribbled away, charting the progression of the newest enzyme in the bloodstreams of the test subjects.

Elizabeth returned with the research and flipped on the radio. Oldies KXPT filled the lab with sunshine and the words of the Beach Boys.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we could wake up with no traces of the virus left?” She sang, serenading an audience of mice.

“Liz, shut that off.”

Elizabeth ignored her and twirled around the lab.

“What the hell?”

Elizabeth jumped, mid-whirl, at the sound of her boss’s voice. With the radio on, both of them had missed the sound of the lab door opening.

Dr. Baxter stood in the doorway, arms folded across his chest, glaring at them. He was the epitome of the disapproving boss caricature in every bad sitcom and Made-For-TV-Movie Karen had ever seen. His bushy eyebrows were fat caterpillars that inched and arched across his forehead, often providing the only emotion on his stoic face.

“Who brought the radio?”

Karen and Elizabeth exchanged glances but said nothing.

“I—I thought it might liven things up in here sir. Maybe make the job a little more fun?” Elizabeth stammered at last.

“If you’re looking for a *fun* work environment, I think it’s best if you go back to Chuck-E-Cheese or whatever blasted children’s fun house you crawled out of.”

“Sir—” Karen interjected.

“I could replace you both in a heartbeat, do you understand me?” He didn’t wait for a response and turned and walked out of the lab. “...time wasted... training... children...”

Elizabeth switched the radio back on, this time turning the dial to six instead of ten. She winked at Karen and put a finger to her lips.

* * *

“Baxter will not stop busting my ass about the late progress reports,” Karen complained a few days later in the lunchroom. “It’s like he seriously expects me to treat this work like life or death or whatever.”

“I’m sure he’s just trying to inspire you,” Elizabeth suggested as she took a small bite out of her turkey sandwich. “We *are* saving lives every single day.”

“Recording how many times a day a rat takes a shit is saving lives?”

They had had this conversation before and would no doubt have it again.

“It’s just so dull!” Karen threw her sandwich onto the table.

“Dr. Baxter says there are people lining up down the street to replace us, so if you’re really that miserable, maybe you should quit.”

Karen couldn’t believe the words that hung between them. She could see the regret on Elizabeth’s face but the words still stung. She knew she was the first friend Elizabeth had had in this hospital since she started working here three years ago. It was moments like this that Karen understood why.

She stared at Elizabeth and consciously let her mouth hang open to show her shock.

“I mean—uh—” Elizabeth searched for the right way to explain what had come out sounding completely wrong. “When you’ve been here as long as I have the doctors start to appreciate your hard work. Take Dr. Baxter for example. Just the other day he was telling me what an excellent job I’m doing on our study and—”

“I should head back to work.” Karen got up and tossed her trash into the bin, leaving Elizabeth, mid-pep talk at the table.

* * *

The tension from the previous day’s lunch conversation still filled the lab the following day. With such tight quarters, they were bound to get under each other’s skin at some point, but Karen worried that this situation might be more complicated than she initially thought.

She pulled her headphones out of her purse and stuck them into her ears, choosing to mask the awkward silence with music and calm her anxiety back to a tolerable level.

Elizabeth reminded her of her little sister, quirky as hell and more than a little weird, but extremely smart. She masked her jealousy in apathy, offsetting Elizabeth’s enthusiasm. They complemented each other well and it normally made for a more positive work environment, Karen thought.

Lately however, Elizabeth had been getting quirkiest. Karen tried to ignore the nagging in the pit of her stomach, but it kept resurfacing. She watched Elizabeth cooing at one of the cages and tugged her earbud out of her ear. It dangled around her neck.

“Liz, I need the latest virus progression reports on—” she looked down at her clipboard. “Mouse 232 versus Placebo 182.”

Elizabeth turned away from the cages and looked at her row of pink post-it notes on the bulletin board. “Oh! Pinky and the Brain!”

“What?” Karen asked a little louder than she had intended.

“The mice—M 232, Brain. P 182, Pinky.”

“You really shouldn’t name them—” But Elizabeth had already lost focus and was chattering away in the corner.

* * *

The lab techs were eating lunch a couple days later when the chief's assistant walked in and posted a notice on the bulletin board of the staff lunchroom. The minute she left, Elizabeth jumped out of her seat to read the notice:

Friday, February 19

Attention Medical Laboratory Technicians:

Mercy North Hospital will be offering a significant monetary bonus to the laboratory technician found to be providing the greatest assistance to the senior medical staff on their research projects. Technicians will be under strict surveillance to ensure that no one is taking advantage of this initiative. Technicians will be judged on many variables, including but not limited to: progress on clinical trials, assistance given that leads to results, hours logged in the laboratory, time management, professionalism and detailed reports given by senior medical staff. Winner will receive, in addition to the monetary bonus, the title of Chief Technician. Promotion comes with a salary increase.

Elizabeth read the notice for a second time with Christmas morning eyes.

“So? What does it say?” Karen asked, interrupting Elizabeth’s third read. “Liz?”

“It’s a competition! For Chief Laboratory Technician!”

Karen scoffed. “Chief what?”

“Chief Laboratory Technician.”

“That sounds made up.” She joined Elizabeth at the board. “You know what this means?”

“Job recognition!”

“And I was like *this* close to a pay bump.”

“Didn’t you read it? This includes a pay increase, Karen.”

“For one of us.”

Elizabeth returned to the table, packed up her uneaten lunch and walked towards the door. “I’m getting back to work. I’ll see you later!”

Karen rolled her eyes at the bulletin board and said nothing. She knew that Elizabeth would go overboard with this one. Elizabeth always went overboard.

Karen thought about the eight-foot banner Elizabeth had hung for Nursing Appreciation Day right after Karen started working at Mercy North. About how she had nabbed the color-coded tags the nurses used for sorting medical files and had used them to make rainbow garland that she draped across the hallway. Not only had she inadvertently ruined Nurses Day for every nurse on call that day, but she had also nearly caused a malpractice suit when a patient’s IV got tangled in the garland and yanked the needle out of his arm. Karen also remembered how she had swooped in and saved Elizabeth’s ass when the chief came around asking questions. Feeling sorry for the girl who had only been trying to brighten everyone’s day, Karen had given Elizabeth an alibi and the “Decoration Fairy” had never been found.

As she stood in the recently vacated lunchroom, Karen wondered for a moment if it had been a mistake to cover for Elizabeth. Karen looked around the room; at the remnants of her peanut butter sandwich lying where she had left it on the table that was otherwise cleared. She shook her head vigorously, hoping to physically fling the thought from her mind.

She only hoped that her friend’s quirks would distract attention away from her own flaws and set her up to be the prime candidate for Chief Lab Tech after Elizabeth failed.

* * *

Karen was trudging up the stairs of the parking structure when she heard voices a couple platforms above her. She shuffled in her purse for her headphones, hoping to avoid idle chitchat with her coworkers, but stopped at the sound of her own name.

“...I mean, Karen’s new though.”

Karen strained her ears, anxious to know what being new was an excuse for.

“I’d still...” the voices began to fade and Karen realized she had stopped mid-climb when she had heard her name. She hurried up a few more stairs, clutching her keys in her fist so they wouldn’t jingle too loudly. She caught the end of the sentence, “...with Loopy Lizzie.”

Elizabeth. Karen sighed. Of course it was about Elizabeth, she thought.

“...really holding her back...”

That was something Karen hadn’t heard before.

She clambered up the steps, forgetting in her haste to keep her footsteps light. Realizing her mistake, Karen worried she would be caught and her heart started to quicken. She contemplated ducking out onto a lower level but her curiosity overpowered her urge to flee potential confrontation.

With each step up the stairs her apprehension grew. Karen pressed her back up against the wall and climbed sideways onto the next platform. She tried to identify the two voices but couldn’t manage to place them.

“...at least we have less competition now.”

That narrowed it down to fellow lab technicians.

The other speaker laughed in agreement.

The metal in Karen’s palm grew warm and the ridges of the keys began to scratch her skin. She unclenched and re-clenched her fist, stretching her fingers. She looked down and saw the impressions of her fingernails sliced into her palm.

The two speakers exchanged goodbyes and parted ways. Karen stood in the stairwell long after she heard two car doors slam shut.

* * *

Karen walked into the lab on Monday morning to find it had been transformed.

The white cinderblock walls were barely visible behind an array of posters. Motivational posters that proclaimed “TEAMWORK: There’s no I in TEAM” and “SUCCESS: It starts when you do.” Hand drawn posters were interspersed among these professional ones and depicted cartoon mice scurrying up grandfather clocks, doing science experiments and munching on a wide assortment of cheeses.

“What the—?” She asked the room as she wandered down the aisles of bookshelves and cages, inspecting everything.

There was something stuck on each cage, plastered on top of the original identification labels that were meant to specify the procedure each mouse was undergoing. Karen moved closer to get a better look.

Nametags wallpapered to the glass walls of every cage, furnishings of identity, personalized décor swatches stuck in place. A nametag with a blue sorcerer’s hat with white stars. One with a pink and white polka dotted bow. Bubble letters in every color. Hearts. Stripes. Plaid. All drawn with markers and crayons and accented with glitter glue. Every cage had a unique nametag:

HELLO MY NAME IS: Mickey.

HELLO MY NAME IS: Minnie.

HELLO MY NAME IS: Cheeto. Gouda. Colby. Jack. Bleu. Cheddar. Brie. Pinky. Brain.

Jerry. Speedy Gonzalez. Hickory. Dickory. Doc.

The entire laboratory was a wash of color, making the room seem somehow smaller than it had before, as if the cluttered walls were actually huddling closer together than before.

Karen had the strange sensation that she was caught in a human-sized mousetrap. She scanned the room again, not quite sure what it was that she was searching for, but hoping that she would know it when she saw it. Everything was so surreal that nothing was jumping out at her.

“What the hell?”

The door slammed. The mousetrap whacked shut. Karen jumped.

Before Karen could even comprehend what was happening the screams of Dr. Baxter were filling the room, bouncing off the walls and ricocheting into the cages.

“WHAT THE HELL IS ALL THIS RUBBISH?!”

“I don’t know. I—”

“Completely unprofessional!”

Karen’s face flushed as she searched for some way to clear her name.

“Idiots! How am I supposed to work when I am surrounded by idiots?”

“Doctor—Can I, uh...” Dr. Baxter stopped yelling at the sound of her voice and Karen lost her confidence without the mask of his anger to fuel her to speak up.

“I’m waiting.”

Karen looked at the nametags on the cages. She looked at the posters covering the wall. She looked everywhere except Dr. Baxter’s face as she decided what to tell him. Dr. Baxter’s foot tapped impatiently against the tiled floor as he folded his arms across his chest and bored holes into her with his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” She mumbled.

“I can’t hear you. Speak up.”

“I’m sorry sir.”

“Clean it up. Then clean out your locker.”

And with that, Dr. Baxter stomped out of the lab and the door clicked shut behind him.

* * *

Karen fluffed a fresh trash bag and chucked wads of colored paper into it, throwing each wad with enough force to have brought a bowling ball into the bag. Her body shook with the tears she refused to cry and her cheeks burned.

She ripped the posters off the wall, tearing strip after strip, turning the posters into zebra stripes of color on the stark white wall. Slice. Scrunch. Repeat.

She had filled two trash bags with rainbow bunches of cheesy motivation when she heard the door open and saw Elizabeth standing in the doorway.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth rushed into the room. “I worked all weekend on—”

“I got fired.” Karen snapped.

“What?” Elizabeth gasped, bringing her hand up to her mouth like a melodramatic actress from a silent film.

Karen couldn’t answer her. She was still trying to hold back tears. She turned her back and shoved more paper into the bag.

“What happened?” Elizabeth came up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder.

Karen flung around to look at her, nearly knocking Elizabeth onto the floor. “Don’t.”

“What happened?”

“It’s all your fault.” Karen rushed out of the lab, locked herself in the bathroom and broke down in tears.

* * *

Karen slunk down the wall until she crumpled at the bottom, landing in a heap on the bathroom floor. Her body shook as she finally released the tension she had been storing for weeks.

A cardboard box of her possessions sat on the floor beside her. The way the lid was tilted to one side almost gave the impression of a crooked smile and that smile mocked her.

She saw Elizabeth in the crooked smile, oblivious to the consequences of her actions. Karen pictured her friend, imagining what she was doing at the end of the hall. No doubt she was humming along to the radio tidying up the lab. Karen visualized a hybrid mash-up of Mary Poppins and Snow White; all Liz had to do was snap her fingers and the world would come alive to help her. The rips and tears mended magically and without scarring. The posters zoomed back into place, pulled by invisible magnets. A dustpan followed a broom around the floor, scooping up the eraser shavings Karen had left behind. Soon everything was spick-and-span and every trace that Karen had ever worked there was purged.

She shuddered at the scene her insecurities had created in her mind. Neither Snow White nor Mary Poppins had a co-starring best gal-pal counterpart. What did that make her? The misbehaving children? The naïve woodland slave animals? Karen didn't like either option.

The cardboard failure smirk mocked her.

To Karen, that smirk was a challenge. "I double dog dare ya," it taunted. With the force of all her frustration, she flung her leg at the box and sent it flying. Her kick-knacks soared through the air and scattered, littering the already questionable floor. 365 Sarcastic Jokes, a day-by-day calendar landed face up on August 2 and a comic portraying men as common farm animals. The aluminum thermos bounced twice with an echoed boing. The glass of a Best

Friends Forever frame shattered on the tile, slicing between the two dimensional copies of Karen and Elizabeth.

Karen pulled herself to her feet and walked to the sink. She walked out of her way to stomp on the broken friendship on her way to the sink. The glass made a satisfying crunch beneath her shoe. She rinsed her face, scrubbing away any doubts about what she was about to do.

Karen walked down the hall and knocked on the chief's office door.

“Chief, there are a few things you should know.”

“Take a seat.”

The Aegean on Her Skin

By: Stacey Sobelman

Katrina sat at her computer and took a deep breath. She typed “Popular Tourist Spots, Greek Islands” into the search engine, ignoring its pleas for her to narrow down her search. Keywords popped up. “Honeymoon” and “Family Vacation.” But she clicked past them.

24,200,000 Results. She clicked through, past Santorini, past Mykonos, clicking through four pages of sites before scrolling her mouse over the “Last Page” link at the bottom. Skipping thousands upon thousands of viable pages without giving them a single glance.

“This,” she said to no one, “This is where I’ll go.”

Thirty minutes later, Katrina clicked “PRINT CONFIRMATION” and watched the mechanized parts of the printer slide left and right as it churned her escape route seemingly out of thin air.

She looked at Ted asleep in their bed and reached for her wedding ring as a force of habit, forgetting for a moment that it was no longer there. A pale band of skin tattooed on her ring finger took the place of the Tiffany diamond. Though it hardly conjured up the same effect, this mark sparkled up at Katrina anyway.

The ring had been the only thing she had felt that she had any right to sell. Aside from the cheap and tarnished costume jewelry she had brought to their marriage from her old life (the “junk” Ted always nagged her to toss) this ring was the only possession that was hers alone. She had replaced all her old clothes with new ones, upgrading from paint-splattered rags to designer threads. She had sold her old futon for ten bucks shortly after graduation. Nothing in this house was really hers.

But Katrina also had to admit that she liked the poetic irony of using the very anchor that weighed her down to make her escape. She launched an auction on EBAY and checked the ticker three times daily for the entire week. The bidding kept going higher and so did her spirits as she realized that her plan might actually work.

It wasn't that Ted had been a particularly horrible husband. In fact, from everything Katrina had heard, it sounded like he was doing most things right. He went to work, he provided for her, he always remembered birthdays and anniversaries... She ran through the list of male shortcomings that society had ingrained in her head. Nothing. But despite the fact that Ted did not have any major red marks beside his name, Katrina had realized that she wasn't especially happy anymore.

She knew that Ted would ask her a hundred questions about every minute detail of their relationship if she stayed to confess her feelings. She could already feel the heat of a spotlight on her shoulders as he flung inquiries at her. She pictured the backwards numbers of a giant countdown clock. A studio audience echoing each tick in a unified booming.

"Kitty Kat, the audience is waiting for your answer." An Alex Tribec-esque Ted would ask her as he flashed a million dollar smile at the cameraman.

"I don't know." Katrina could feel herself shrinking under the interrogation beam.

"Is that your final answer?" An arched eyebrow.

But Katrina didn't know the answer. Maybe there was no answer, she thought.

She slid her black AMEX out of its designated sheath in her wallet. The light bounced off the plastic as the card landed on the dresser with a soft clink. The MasterCard. The Discover. The Visa. The Country Club Membership Card. Each one clattered onto the dresser in turn until every pocket of her wallet was bare except three. Only her driver's license, library card, and

health insurance card remained. She placed her personal checkbook beside the array of cards. Ted stared down at the sea of plastic from a framed wedding picture of the two of them. Katrina slammed the frame facedown on the pile of money, knowing nothing short of a fire alarm would wake her husband anyway.

As Katrina rolled her suitcases out into the hallway, she looked around and sighed. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be back here,” She whispered over her shoulder to the lump that was her sleeping husband.

* * *

As she sat on the plane at 30,000 feet, Katrina thought about the events that led her to leave. There wasn’t a single powder keg moment that she could think of, but remembering the things that made her unhappy helped to reassure her that her trip was justified. The seatbelt sign clicked off and Katrina thought about the party at Ted’s office a few months back. The memory of the frequent misery of being the perfect wife for all these years was exactly what she needed to ease her nerves.

“Bob! Judy!” Ted’s voice always shot up about three notches at work functions. Katrina felt like he was shouting at his colleagues. Shouting, but never yelling. Using that overly-cheery fakeness that always gave her the urge to cringe.

Bob and Judy could not have looked more middle-aged, middle-class generic if they had tried, Katrina had thought as they approached, summoned over.

“Ted! Looking good!” Apparently the shouting was contagious. A couple inches shorter than Ted, Katrina had seen the moles peeking out from the bad comb-over job on his essentially bald head.

“I want you to meet my wife, Katrina.” Ted gestured at her in a way that had made Katrina feel like some sort of show dog on display. She had grabbed his outstretched hand to stop it from pointing at her.

“Yes, yes! The adventurer in the flesh!”

“Bob!” Judy whacked her husband with her burgundy handbag.

Katrina had opened her mouth to comment but did not have the opportunity.

“Nonsense Judy! My wife the hermit crab,” Ted chuckled with his entire body.

The Hermit Crab. Ted’s favorite joke, he would find ways to insert the nickname into as many gatherings as he could, using it as a lead-in to tell quirky anecdotes about his wife, the traveling painter who lived out of suitcases.

The clinking of the beverage cart brought Katrina back to the present.

“Something to drink miss?”

“A glass of red wine?”

“Can I see some ID?” The young, effeminate male flight attendant asked with a smile, probably hoping this would get him a large tip from the thirty-something woman in 12A.

Katrina handed over her well-traveled passport and returned his smile, stretching her face to unnatural widths to match his, pretending it was a cultural courtesy. Katrina always tried to assimilate to whatever culture she immersed herself in on any one of her trips. So now she was mirroring the fake happiness of a stewardess—steward? Flight attendant.

“Oh honey! With a name like ‘Katrina’ you must be one hell of a storm when you get angry! Ha ha!” He laughed at his own joke. “I better get you that drink straight away! Don’t want to unleash a hurricane! Ha ha ha!”

“Ha ha” Katrina mimicked him, masking her true frustration at the overused joke. She had heard it all.

In the wake of the hurricane, Katrina had spent hours researching the storm naming process, looking for someone to blame. She found that the practice began during the Second World War as a way to simplify things for the military meteorologists. This fact made her blood boil. Branding storms with the names of innocent bystanders may have made their lives easier, but it sure didn't help the Katrinas out there! But did they think about that? Nooo.

One passage stood out in her mind. She had read it and reread it so many times that it was posted on a bright neon post-it note on the walls of her brain:

The only change that is made to the list of Atlantic hurricane names is the occasional retirement of a name. This is done when a hurricane causes so much death and destruction that the reuse of the same name would be insensitive to the people who suffered losses. When that happens the World Meteorological Organization replaces the name. For example: "Katrina" has been retired from the name list and will not be used again.

The reuse would be insensitive. That phrase got her every time. Katrina gripped the armrest and tried not to relive the dozens of times the name had caused problems for her. She still wore the too-big smile of the flight attendant plastered on her face.

The flight attendant handed her her drink and moved on down the aisle and Katrina let her face fall. Smiling that wide had made her cheeks sore. It had been unnatural. She wondered if the man had practiced the gesture in the mirror. She came to the conclusion that smiling must have been one of the things taught at flight attendant school.

* * *

The salted air pulled at her hair, whipping it left and right and tying it in knots. Katrina had hoped to set up her easel on the ferryboat to paint the open expanses of clear blue water, but knew now that any effort to do so would be futile. Almost as futile as her attempts to talk to Ted about her painting without being placated like a spoiled child.

It hadn't always been that way though. Katrina thought back to the day, seven years ago, she met Ted. A pack of seagulls circled overhead like vultures.

She had rented a booth at a local art show with her overdue rent money, hoping to more than make up the difference by selling a few paintings. People would wander through the rows of tables and artists would jump up from their folding chairs, eager to convince the shoppers that their flower-speckled landscape print was brighter, cheaper, more colorful than the artist at the next booth.

Katrina had beamed at the masses of people lightly fingering the edges of her pieces. Her excitement swelled every time a woman with shopping bags stopped to linger at her booth, but the entire day she only made one sale.

She was packing up her work at the end of the day when Ted walked over. He had made idle chit-chat for about twenty minutes when she finally cut him off and told him the show was over. On the spot, he offered her three grand for the lot—fourteen pieces.

Katrina watched as a child threw the crust of his sandwich into the air at the seagulls. She watched them dive towards it, as if daring each other.

Ted's boldness, and his unwavering support of her art, had been the two things that made her fall in love with Ted of all people, the last person she had ever expected to end up with. As she looked out at the island coming into focus on the horizon, Katrina sighed aloud. Ted wasn't

the man who bought her paintings that day. And she wasn't the painter who sold them to him. She just hadn't realized it yet.

* * *

When Katrina arrived at the pension she was caught off guard. Even though she was a seasoned traveler, Katrina still found that the strangest things—though she thought of herself as an adventurer who could and would try anything—could still shock her.

The patio was littered with hundreds of white paper napkins and a handful of emaciated cats. The early morning light fell in squares through the spaces in the white trellis that supported a grape tree turned canopy overhead. A few stray napkins were caught in the branches of the tree.

She sneezed and all at once five cats swarmed around her feet. A white cat, the smallest of the group, pawed at Katrina's calves. A speckled cat toyed with the padlock on her suitcase, amused by the jingling noise it made when it knocked against the metal zipper. From a respectable distance, the black cat sat on a pile of napkins and eyed her suspiciously.

“Καλημέρα!”

Katrina looked around in confusion, searching for the owner of the deep voice with the thick Greek accent. It wasn't until she turned around that she saw him, a large man with thick dark hair, holding a hefty fish against his bare muscular chest, coming up the path behind her.

He saw the confusion on her face. “I say good morning.” Even English sounded almost foreign in his accent.

“Good morning,” She returned, “How did you say—?”

But the man was already disappearing into the open doorway off to her right.

Katrina stood beneath the trellis with the cats milling around her, unsure what to do. There was no Reception or Concierge Desk at this modest Greek pension, so she stood, planted to the patio and waited.

The sound of dishes clattering echoed from the open doorway and a round middle-aged woman carrying a tray of coffee cups appeared in the frame where the man had vanished.

“Ello!” She exclaimed, noticing Katrina with her luggage. “Checking in?”

“Yes please!” Katrina answered, stepping forward and sending the cats scampering off in all directions. She reached for her luggage but the woman stopped her.

“My son will get those,” She gestured towards the bag. “Nikos!”

The man reappeared at the sound of his name and listened to his mother’s directions in a hurried Greek that sounded more like music than words to Katrina. Nikos grabbed her bags, one in each hand and headed off down a different path than the one from which she had come. Katrina followed him with her eyes, anxious about her fragile belongings.

“Come. Sit. I bring breakfast.” And she was heralded into a chair before she could object.

* * *

The next day, Katrina set up her easel on the cliff overlooking the rickety goat path down to the Aegean, eyeing the way the silhouette of a palm tree was reflected in the water. This was what Katrina looked for for her paintings; a well-placed shadow, an interesting angle on a familiar view, life seen differently. The perspective is so unique, she thought, unaware of the dozens of tourists who had said the same thing seconds before snapping their disposable souvenir cameras at the same scene.

Katrina measured out the view on her canvas, carefully penciling an outline she could fill with paint. A child’s coloring book. A paint-by-numbers kit. But of course she would never have

thought so. She scratched away methodically, eyes locked on the white space looming before her.

A seagull winged by, calling out to its mate. The sudden sound made Katrina jump, smearing a dark gray splotch across the canvas.

“Shit!”

The seagull called again and Katrina swore his caw formed the word “crap,” labeling her work a failure, flying high above her head, shitting on her dreams. As if summoned, a splat of bird shit appeared on the painting.

She clenched the brush tighter in her fist, determined to salvage the 12€ spent on this canvas. She scraped away the blob of bird shit, taking the top layer of paint with it and nearly ripping a hole through the surface in her anger. Her grip tightened at the thought of the money wasted. She calculated the error in her head, converting Euros to dollars in dismay and concluding that she could not afford to waste this canvas.

Katrina ran the brush across the splotch, stretching the edges of the painted shadow to conceal the stroke of panic. An inch here, a few strokes there, layer upon layer of paint.

It wasn't until she looked up from the newly masked error on her easel that Katrina realized that the shadows had shifted on the Aegean. She sighed, made note of the time and resolved to resume the next day when the light was right.

* * *

“You paint this?” Nikos asked a couple days later, walking up and standing behind Katrina on the patio, her easel unfolded and propped before her.

Katrina turned her head over her shoulder, noticing the way Nikos' eyebrows were stitched together on his olive brow. "Nay." Yes. Katrina didn't know how else to respond and used one of the handful of Greek terms she had picked up thus far.

Nikos came closer and perched his hand on her shoulder as he studied the painting. He looked from the canvas to the patio and back again, comparing the two.

"Most people," He said, "They just take the—" he made the international gesture for 'photograph' with his large calloused hands.

Katrina didn't know what to make of his comment. Her mouth hung open as she tried to read his expression. Nikos shrugged and took another look at the painting. Katrina couldn't tell if it was the language barrier or if her painting had truly left him speechless. She hoped for the latter option.

"It's, how you say, too—too right." He waved his hands around in the air as if his wild gesticulation could conjure the message he hoped to convey.

"Too right?" Katrina repeated, unsure whether this was meant as a compliment or a criticism. "How so?"

Nikos shrugged again, as if his shoulders were being pulled to his ears by hidden wires, by the puppeteer of bilingual communication, directing the gestures and movements of miscommunication. "I just see what is here. No more." His shoulders fell back in place.

"It's realistic."

"I don't know 'realistic.' But what you paint Miss Katrina, is just like a—" he snapped his invisible camera again. "I want to see how you see. Nay?"

He turned and walked into the kitchen without waiting for a response.

* * *

Over the next few days Katrina continued painting, but always had Nikos in the back of her mind while she worked. “Too right” echoed like a mantra in her head, motivating her in ways she could not understand. How could anything be “too right?” she asked herself over and over. Hadn’t she been trying to capture the scene as it actually looked? Wasn’t that the point of everything outside of abstract art? These questions tortured both her conscious and the depths of her subconscious. When she painted, Katrina gripped the brush so tightly that her brush hand turned red, burning with unresolved tension.

Katrina could not separate herself from criticism, an issue that had plagued her all throughout art school. She wore each compliment as a badge of honor and obsessed over every critique.

That was probably the reason why Katrina and Ted had seemed to be such a perfect fit.

At the beginning, it had made her feel special that he had taken such an interest in her art. Ted had believed in her at a time when the whole world seemed to be telling her to give up and grow up already.

He used to get hard just watching her paint in the studio he bought for her. Her work was his foreplay. Saturdays at the studio were never very productive with Ted there. He would massage her shoulders while she painted and she would sometimes paint in the nude to please him. The best sex they ever had was each time Katrina finished a new piece.

She had loved the thrill of it all, but the excitement faded over time the way artwork always fades when left in sunlight for too long. Ted had changed. What had once spawned passionate lust mutated into comedic relief at family gatherings and work functions.

Katrina had become Ted’s quirky anecdote.

* * *

Though she had been methodical in planning and budgeting for her big escape, Katrina had been so distracted by guilt that she had neglected to grab many things she now regretted. She had scribbled a packing list on a couple wrinkled Wrigley wrappers pulled from the pockets of the minx coat that she had never liked, the day before she left. Thinking she heard the grumble of the garage door, she had crumbled her unfinished list into a tiny silver ball and had shoved it back into the minx before stowing it in the closet.

The next morning as Ted had slept, she scurried around the closet trying to recreate the list out of thin air. Each time she heard the rustle of the sheets as Ted adjusted himself, her heart had quickened and she had felt a fresh pang of guilt.

Even then, Katrina had known that leaving was the right decision, but that didn't silence the voices in her head that chastised her for abandoning her husband.

It was only now, two weeks later, that Katrina remembered what had happened to the list.

Her sturdy walking sandals were one of the main items she missed the most in the rocky terrain of the Greek island. For lack of a better option, Katrina walked down the goat path to the beach, her flip-flops flapping against her heels, the sound like that of someone with peanut butter stuck to the roof of her mouth. Each step was the frustrated lip smack of someone trying to break free. Flap, smack, flap down the narrow path. The handle bar wobbled beneath her shaky hand.

After what felt like an hour to Katrina, she finally reached the bottom, or rather, the bottom of the path. The dirt stopped six feet before she was level with the beach below.

Katrina took a deep breath and did her best to shimmy down the rocks jutting out of the cliff, but she didn't make it far before her flip-flop slid beneath a layer of rock and lodged itself in place, catching her off balance and sending her bag tumbling down the cliff and spilling out all

over the beach. Katrina flailed about and let out a shriek of pain as her ankle twisted further than it was designed to twist.

Below her, there was the sound of rock against rock and Katrina realized that someone was wading through the pebbly beach towards her.

“Help!” She cried out, wishing she knew the Greek, but falling short.

The face that appeared between the trees at the foot of the path was the last person Katrina wanted to see in her moment of need. She groaned.

“You are stuck?” Nikos asked, tossing a bag of fresh seafood carefully onto a nearby ledge and extending a muscular arm towards her.

“Nay.” Katrina stared at his outstretched hand in hesitation, not wanting to need help from anyone, much less from Nikos.

Nikos looked at her and back at his own hand. “You want?” A giant smile spread across his face, holding back laughter. Katrina instantly thought of that rude Cheshire Cat that taunted Alice. “I help?”

“Ohee, ohee.” No, no. “I’m fine.” Katrina shook her head and teetered on her one remaining leg before falling forward. Nikos caught her, unleashing a deep laugh that shook the trees around them.

Nikos reached down and unhooked her sandal with one arm still around her waist, laughing the whole time. Katrina’s face turned red as her embarrassment and anger bled together like daubs of paint mixing on a pallet.

“You tourists,” he said between laughs. “You wear the flippies—” Between his laughter and thick accent, Katrina struggled to understand him. “No good on island.”

Katrina didn't know what to say. She resented being lumped into one category with the honeymooners and ill-prepared school groups. But, with her ankle swelling larger by the minute, she was trapped, so she let her frustration bubble beneath the surface rather than argue this point. She eyed the bag of fish perched on the rocks, feeling a sudden kinship with the seafood. With eight tentacles, it was surprising to her that the captured octopus had not been able to escape a fisherman with only two hands. Then again, who was she to talk?

Nikos took a step backwards and for a moment, Katrina was afraid he would fall, bringing her down with him. But his feet were steady and he lifted her to the ground with ease. Katrina had never felt more frail or helpless than she did in that moment. And Nikos was still laughing.

* * *

Katrina hobbled up the stairs to her room a little while later. Nikos had insisted upon carrying her up the goat path and knowing she had no hope of making it back without him, she had regretfully accepted his assistance. But, the moment they reached the patio, she demanded that he put her down immediately.

Katrina was beginning to realize that her marriage had been little more than a mutual dependence. She made almost nothing on her own, selling only a handful of pieces each year. Eleven years since graduating with her art degree and her biggest accomplishment had been selling four paintings of post-9/11 New York to a wannabe-Hallmark company to use on their not-for-profit stationary set. Well, her biggest sale if she didn't count the pieces Ted had bought to get her attention. Which she didn't.

So Katrina was adamant with Nikos. She would succeed or fail on her own from this point onward. She wouldn't be Ted's hermit crab anecdote anymore, nor would she be Nikos' dumb tourist joke.

There was a knock at her door. She hopped to the doorway on one leg, only to find Nikos standing before her.

"You forget—" he held her art bag in his hand; the supplies that had scattered on the beach had been collected and returned to their proper place.

Katrina was taken aback.

"I bring—" He extended the bag towards her, a bouquet of paint, an olive branch?

She reached out for the bag and wobbled, missing the bag but catching herself on the doorframe.

Nikos burst out laughing, echoing the sound of Fourth of July fireworks exploding one after another. Boom. Boom. Boom! Katrina's anger bubbled to the surface again.

"You paint foot?" He pointed down at her ankle and fished a tube of purple paint out of her bag. More firecracker laughter.

What happened next may as well have happened in slow motion. Katrina saw Nikos inch forward, angling his head towards hers. Nikos puckered. She jumped backwards, forgetting about her ankle in her anxiety and losing her balance altogether. Katrina's ankle slipped out from under her and she fell, but before she hit the ground his arm was once again around her waist, only this time he pulled her close to him and she could smell the salt of the Aegean on his skin. She squirmed in his arms until he released her, confusion sweeping across his face.

Katrina grabbed the bag and slammed the door in one fell swoop, leaving Nikos on the threshold, still clutching the tube of purple.

* * *

Katrina stomped across the room, sparking a new burst of pain with each step, but she was so angry that the pain hardly registered.

“What the hell was he thinking?!” She yelled to her empty room. The room did not answer. It could not answer. Katrina doubted even Nikos himself could have explained what the hell he was thinking trying to kiss her! The nerve!

She grabbed a blank canvas off the dresser and threw it onto the bed, dumping the contents of her art bag beside it. She plopped down on the pale blue comforter and heaved her ankle onto the pillow, noticing for the first time just how much it had swollen. Blues and blacks blurred and blended across her leg, displaying her pain visually for the whole world to see.

Displaying her weakness.

“No.” Katrina grunted.

She snatched a tube of blood red from the mound of tubes splayed around her. She yanked off the cap and squeezed the blood onto the blank canvas in thick glops of paint. She did the same with burnt orange and midnight black, globbing stripes of paint across the canvas.

Her head buzzed from the fumes but her eyes only focused closer and closer to the canvas before her. She smeared the paint with the thickest brush she had, mixing and blending the colors in ways she had never done before. She squeezed tube after tube onto the canvas, stacking layer after layer of paint on top of the last.

Katrina did not pause the entire time. She did not let a layer of paint dry before adding another on top. She did not stop to consider the aesthetics of the piece. She did not stop, nor did she think.

It was not until every tube of paint lay empty before her that Katrina looked up and actually saw what she had painted. She gasped.

There on the now paint speckled comforter of the bed lay the best piece Katrina had ever painted. She set it on the dresser to dry, scooped the empty tubes into the wastebasket, and cracked open her window to let the salted breeze of the Aegean waft into the room and lull her to sleep.