

Creepy Kid

A memory memoir

Survived by

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It is a clear, crisp day. I am gazing off into the distance. A look of great confidence and contentment is on my face.

As I look off, the imaginer, me, reaches for my happy, content, and fully realized self, the image I have yearned for every second of every moment of my life, the image I know I am meant to be, and that's when it happens -- my fingers touch the outer rim of the dream and as they do, the image, my destiny, breaks apart and disappears, like pale dandelion tufts floating into a summer day, vanishing, never meant to be a cohesive whole, beautiful and fragmented and fragile.

Dumb fucking dandelions.

Wella and Me

“Well, let’s see what the hell it looks like, Creepy Kid.”

I was eight years old. I watched my mother gnaw on a peach. The juice dribbled down her chin and dripped over the front of her flowered blouse. My eyes wandered over the sagging flesh on her arms. It was lumpy and moved as she moved. I often found myself in the middle of the day lost in the movement of her aging flesh. I was fascinated how it seemed to drip off of her bones, like melted wax.

We were sitting at the dining room table and I was about to open a package in front of me. I glanced over her shoulder and my eyes rested on the framed photos of our family on the wall behind her. All of them were crooked, as if we had just made it through a small earthquake.

My favorite photos were those of my mother sitting in a lawn chair in our back yard, eight months pregnant with me, smoking away on a Marlboro and eating a chocolate bar.

My mother was the oldest mother of all the mothers I knew in our tiny town built on the outskirts of Seattle. She gave birth to me when she was in her late thirties. As long as I could remember, she was old. There was never a time I didn’t remember her as having a shock of grey-white hair and aging skin.

She had been born in the early thirties in the rural, farming community of Kellogg, Idaho. When she was barely a toddler, she was uprooted by her mother to an even smaller farming town in Washington State called Opportunity.

“There’s some goddamn irony for you,” she often said. “Out of the frying pan and into the shit heap is more like it. Opportunity my ass.”

My mother pointed to the package in front of me which had arrived a few days prior. “Stop waiting so long, Creepy Kid. Open the goddamn thing. Jesus, you’re slow as molasses sometimes, you really are. Your father’s gone, so we can see it. He won’t be back for two solid weeks, so you got me all to yourself, you lucky sucker.”

I frowned. “Why did we have to hide this until Dad left?”

“Why do you ask me that every goddamn time?”

“Why can’t he see what we get?”

She grabbed the package off of the counter and held it in her hand. Peach juice dribbled on top of it. “The juice will get inside!” I screamed as I reached for it.

She lifted it higher into the air. “You want this?”

“Yes!”

“How bad do you want it?”

“Bad!”

“Bad enough to shut your mouth and do what I tell you?”

“YES.”

Her eyes darkened and she reached out and clipped me across the face with the back of her hand. “You watch that tone with me, sonny boy, or I’ll give you something to cry about.”

She shook her head and exhaled, muttering under her breath, “Just don’t learn, just don’t learn.” She took another bite of her peach, tearing into the flesh. I could hear it rip. “Now apologize for hurtin’ my feelings.”

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

“And?”

“And I won’t do it again. Promise.”

“You love your mama?” She leaned in for a kiss, tapping her cheek. “Give your mama a kiss.”

I leaned in and I kissed her on the cheek. She smiled and dropped the package on the table. The tip of the package flew through the air and cut me across the eye. “Ouch!” I hollered as I slapped my palm over my eye.

“Oh, stop being such a goddamn baby.”

“It hurts!”

“Open up your eyeball.”

“No.”

“Stop being such a goddamn baby. Let me see.”

I released my hand. She stared into my eye. “Nothin’ worse for the wear. You’re fine. Sorry I gave you a little nudge like I did.”

“It’s okay.”

She stared at me and I stared back at her. She waited, then said what she always said when there was a lull in a fight: “Does your sister say bad things about me?”

Joy and my mother never got along. My mother said she never trusted women, said they were evil and always conniving. I shook my head. “I haven’t seen Joy in two weeks,” I said.

“She just moved out two weeks ago; of course you haven’t seen her. I mean, before she moved out, you two were so close. Did she say bad things about me?”

“No,” I lied.

“You’re lying,” she said, leaning back and putting her hands on her hips, the peach pit still in her hand. She pointed to my eye. “Your eye is fine. Joy blames me for every goddamn thing in her life. Poor Joy. Always the victim. At least your other sister Pam deals with her shit, but Joy can’t even see straight without cussin’ and screamin’. No reason to cuss so goddamn much in life.”

“My eye hurts.”

“You’ll get used to it. Things hurt. You’ll see.” She reached out to me and I flinched. I knew she was reaching out to brush my hair away from my face, but I was afraid she was going to clip me again.

Her face turned dark. “You know I don’t mean to do those things.”

“I know,” I said, taking her hands in mine. I petted her. Whenever I touched her or stroked her hands during these moments, she would suddenly crumble before my very eyes. It was fascinating and made my stomach do flip-flops.

Thin lines of slobber stretched between the lips of her open, gaping mouth as she planted her huge ass on the chair nearest me and began to sob. "I just never had it good as a girl, kiddo. Raised by a floozy of a woman who was crazy and now I'm crazy. How is them apples?" she said, lifting my hands into the air and kissing them. "I don't want to be crazy," she said, turning away from me.

"You have me," I said.

She shook her head, and then turned and faced me. Suddenly, she had transformed. Her face was bright, her eyes were filled with light. "Do I?" she asked.

"Yes, you do."

She wiggled in her chair and blew her nose on a nearby napkin. "You mean that?"

"I do."

"Well, that's good. Because people tell you all the time in life to trust them and that they love you, but they don't mean it. Best you learn that now."

"I mean it."

"You really love your mama?"

"Yes."

"Say it like you mean it."

"I love you, Mama."

"Well, that's good, because I gave birth to you. Now, let's open this damn package already. Jesus. With that performance, you'd think they'd give me an Oscar. Lord and little fishes, I'm the most maudlin son-of-a-bitch you'll ever meet."

I walked back to my spot at the table and took the package into my hands. All was calm. We had few hours. Maybe.

"Want some ice cream, sweetheart?" she asked, her voice bright yet tired.

"No, I'm okay."

She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist and said with a quick severity, "It's because your father, bless his heart, is too dumb to understand these things. You asked why, and I'm tellin' you now. It's always war, war, war with him. And JOY, well, she's so goddamn difficult. Always wants to fight, that one. Apparently she wasn't loved enough as a little girl. Well, two can play at that game, missy. You weren't loved enough? Well, neither was I, no sir, neither was I. Welcome to life. So anyway, that's why we wait and open things like this when your father is in some godforsaken European country selling airplane parts. Probably to Arabs, for all we know."

I ripped open the package, and pieces of annoying packing stuffing leaked out like leeches and fixed themselves on my skin. I tore at my cheeks where they refused to budge, discarding them like forgotten caterpillar molt.

"Dear God and little fishes, Creepy Kid. Who the hell do you think has to clean that shit up?"

"Sorry," I said, dipping my head to the side. She was in the kitchen, which meant she had access to wooden spoons. I'd been hit more than once on the head with a wooden spoon for not listening to her, and I hated the dent it left in my head. I was sure everyone could see. Today I can still feel the thick, pronounced ridge in my skull from her repeated smacking.

"No use crying over spilled milk now. You get to vacuum it up later, that's for goddamn sure," she said, slurping on a bowl of ice cream now in her hand.

"Can I keep opening it up?"

"Open it, open it, yeah, yeah."

I thrust my hand into the package and pulled out the contents.

"Careful or you'll rip the dickens out of it," she said.

"I won't."

"Good things come to idiots who wait."

"That's not how the saying goes."

"It does for me."

I ripped open the package and pulled out the contents. I laid it on top of the dining room table, under the amber glare of the massive chandelier my mother had purchased from Sears a month before. It was a fake chandelier, complete with fabric teardrops and a tinkling sound when turned on. My mother opened the chandelier when it arrived, took one look at it and said, "Well, you can't polish a turd. That's what I get for ordering a chandelier from goddamn Sears."

Watching me, my mother leaned forward, cupped her hand under her chin, and caught dripping peach juice. I stared at the item on the table. It was perfect. No, it was better than perfect. It was beautiful. It was so beautiful I started to cry.

"Oh, are you serious? Jesus Christ, Creepy Kid, it's a tee shirt. Lord. How on earth I gave birth to a boy who cries over a tee shirt is truly beyond me."

It was the most amazing tee shirt of all time. It was a bright yellow with a spectacular iron-on of one of my favorite singers in the entire world.

I was amazed at the artistry. Someone who loved Barry Manilow had made the tee shirt. Barry's face was encased in a glittery gold border and beneath his face, in swirling red, yellow, and brown cursive letters, was his name.

In the photo, Barry (I called him "BM" once and my mother said, "You may not want to call him that in mixed company, Creepy Kid") played the piano, his swooping and swirling mane of thick brown hair framing his face perfectly, an orange spotlight in the distance, giving him an angelic glow.

I reached out and touched the iron-on. It was smooth, perfect. I leaned forward and inhaled--a sweet chemical scent and the faint scent of old cardboard.

"Why the hell you smellin' the damn thing?" my mother asked, squinting at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. "There's a reason I call you Creepy Kid, you know. 'Cause you are one. But I say that because I love you. You know that, right?"

"Yes."

I nodded, but I didn't hear her. All I could see was the tee shirt in front of me. "I can almost hear him singing," I said.

My mother hissed and walked back to the kitchen. She had put on her apron. "That's ridiculous."

On the stove was a boiling pan of water. She put on a pair of dirty yellow Playtex gloves and slowly lowered can after can of fresh raspberries from our garden into the boiling water. In the back of the house, we had two enormous freezers where she kept endless jars of frozen fruit she'd use in the winter. Berry pies and jams were her favorites.

We never ate everything she made. She canned as if we were an extension of a local orphanage. Hoarding and her constant, chaotic gathering became fixtures of everyday life. Nothing was ever enough, and it was too much at the same time.

She looked over at me and hesitated. I knew she was going to say something, but I could tell she wasn't sure if she should say it or not.

I gripped the sides of the table. She cleared her throat. "Where are you gonna wear that?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I honestly didn't know what she meant. Of course I was going to wear it everywhere. To school, the mall, bed, in the shower.

"I mean, where are you gonna wear that?" She dipped her gloved hand into the boiling water and moved the glass containers around, the steam from the pot fogging her glasses, making her look like a blind ghost.

"At school."

"Uh-huh. You think that's a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

She frowned and took off her glasses. As she squinted and glared at me, I had a flash of a movie I'd seen late one night on television after my parents had gone to bed, *Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice?* It was the story of two old women, Geraldine Page and Ruth Gordon, who killed people and buried them in their garden, next to their lovely country home. As I watched the movie, I squinted my eyes and knew if the two actresses melded together they would bear an uncanny resemblance to my mother.

"You said you liked my Elton John shirt," I said to her, carefully watching my tone.

"That is a good one."

"It's my favorite."

"Well, let's not go overboard."

"You don't like that one either?"

"Don't go puttin' words in my mouth, Creepy Kid. I'm just askin' you a simple question."

"Sorry."

"I don't know why you're apologizing."

A long time passed as she stirred the water and wiped her brow with the back of her hand. I didn't know what to do, how to react. Her face was very red, redder than the red raspberry juice, which had dripped on the floor of the kitchen. It fell in a pattern, reminding me of the splotches of blood from the shovel Geraldine Page used to kill her victims.

She cleared her throat. "I don't want you getting hurt, is all."

"I won't."

"Look at me, Mike."

"I am."

"If looking at Barry is lookin' at me, then you got a whole new definition of lookin' I've never heard about. Okay. Good. Now, you know I like Barry Manilow."

"He's great."

"He sure is. He can sing up there with the best of 'em. He's not as good as Engelbert Humperdinck--"

"We could get you an Engelbert Humperdinck tee shirt!"

"Now what in the Sam Blazes are you talking about? Me in an Engelbert Humperdinck shirt. At my age."

"You said you don't care what anyone thinks."

"I said that, but it don't mean that's what I think. Now I lost my train of thought."

"Why you don't like Barry."

"That's not what I said! I said I like him. But I'm not sure wearing that to school is a good idea."

"Where should I wear it then?"

"Around here with me."

"Just here?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I just --"

"I'm sayin' this for your own good."

"Okay."

"You can help your mama around the house and wear Barry."

"Okay."

"And I'll even do you one better, Stinkpot. Let's go into town and we can ask Jeff to put down an order on Barry's new 8-track, which is comin' out real soon."

"Really?"

"Why would I make that up?"

"I love you, Mom."

"That's good, sonny boy. So just around the house."

"Just around the house."

"You get a catalog from that place?"

"Sure did. Right here."

"Well open that thing up and let's take a gander. Let's see if they've got an Engelbert size that'll fit your fat old mother. Lord, I hate cooking these damn jams. I think I want to do it and I stand here and sweat my ass off. Joyce, you haven't got the good sense God gave you sometimes, you really don't."

All of the adults told me I was very grown up for my age, and it was true. Since my only friends were two middle-aged adults, it was easy to play the part.

Being liked was all that mattered to me. I had to be liked above all else, and what better way to be liked than to be the perfectly charming kid who acted like he was sixty-five and battling rheumatoid arthritis?

I knew how everyone saw me and I knew it was important I keep up appearances, despite my secret life.

First of all, I knew I was the secret love child of actor Dirk Benedict and Farrah Fawcett. I knew this as strongly as I knew I lived in a poor town where the neighboring lawns were often littered with the latest in white trash décor of old car tires, battered lawn chairs and, occasionally, a broken-down washing machine.

I daydreamed that Dirk Benedict would spend countless hours with me at the park, pushing me on a swing, his dirty-blond hair flowing in the breeze. For some reason, Dirk would always be wearing very small, tight white-and-red striped gym shorts, and I, of course, would be wearing my favorite Barry Manilow tee shirt.

Since I was Dirk's illegitimate love child, I spent hours making sure I looked just like him in the event we met and he wanted to whisk me away to Hollywood.

Late at night, I'd drag my father's footstool into the bathroom and carefully lock the door behind me. I'd pull out my favorite eight-by-ten signed color glossy of Dirk (from a secret hiding place in the linen closet) and I'd place the photo on the edge of the sink. I'd study it for a good five minutes. It was important I not rush the process.

Taking in a deep breath, I'd slide open the medicine cabinet, careful not to unsettle the growing mound of pill bottles my mother had recently begun to store inside. Every day felt like an Easter egg hunt in the house. I never knew where I'd find a new stash of pills.

One day I had found a pill bottle in my bear-shaped cookie jar and I showed it to her. She took the bottle out of my hand and squinted to read the label.

“In the cookie jar, really?” she said, opening up the top and sniffing. “At least this one will taste like chocolate going down,” she said, popping one as if it were a Pez candy.

In the bathroom, I would grab my brush and stare at the photo of Dirk. I brushed my hair with short, even strokes. His hair had volume; my hair had volume. His part was a perfect line down the left side of his head, and so was mine. The sweep across his forehead gave him a big wave-like look I loved, but there was one major problem. His hair was lighter than mine. Much lighter.

I had to make mine lighter. But how?

The answer came when my mother and I were watching *The \$10,000 Pyramid*. It was our favorite game show. I loved the theme music. As with most game shows, I'd secretly tape the music off the TV with my Radio Shack cassette recorder, and then listen to it alone in my room at night, pretending I was Dick Clark and my stuffed animals were my guests.

“You can just tell that blonde one is stupid.” It was late in the day and my mother and I were watching the season finale. Two women sat across from each other, the looming pyramid behind them. Dick Clark stood nearby, ready to start the action.

My mother took a giant swig off the warm Tab in her hand and pointed with her pinky finger at the television. “See that Dick Clark? He’s a womanizer. Did you read that thing in Rona Barrett this week?”

I nodded as I sat on the floor by her feet. It was true. I read it but some of the words, such as “pedophile” and “mistress” went over my head. I asked my mother if I could look them up in the dictionary and her reply was “Over my dead body.”

As the show came to an end and the blonde woman blew the final question, an ad came on television for a new product called Sun-In.

A very pretty young woman with a giant head of dull brown hair stood on the edge of a deserted beach. “I never used to stand out at a party on the beach,” she said, frowning into the camera. “Then my friend Betty gave me a bottle of Sun-In. A few sprays, a day out in the sun, and look at me now!”

This angel of a woman, this vision of perfection, did a small twirl on the beach and like magic, her hair went from brown to blonde in a matter of seconds!

I turned around to share my excitement with my mother, but the tiny voice inside of me told me to shut my trap. I had to make a plan. I had to find a way to get Sun-In and claim my rightful place next to Dirk.

A few weeks later my chance arrived.

I was sitting alone in the corner of the living room, heat from the nearby vent in the floor blowing in my face, listening to my favorite 8-track, Barry DeVorzon's deeply depressing theme to the deeply depressing movie, *Bless the Beasts and the Children*.

I had snuck into the movie the day my mother had taken me to see *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. She had gone to mall to go shopping and left me alone. When the usher wasn't looking, I snuck into *Bless the Beasts* and was haunted by the story of a group of lonely boys who tried to save a herd of buffalo. One of the boys was shot in the end. When the credits rolled and I heard the opening cords of the movie theme, I was hooked. It was so sad and sweeping and epic and plain depressing. My cup of warm tea on a chilly Washington Day.

My mother stormed into the living room. "Why are you listening to that 8-track again? I mean, I like depressing, but Christ on a crutch, Creepy Kid."

"It's a good song."

"Okay, well, let's all shoot ourselves later, shall we? Come on. I'm going to the mall and I want company."

The day had come. My mother said she was going to the mall. Sun-In. I was finally going to get Sun-In.

My mother parked the car as far away from the mall as she could. "No one will hit us here. Weirdoes always park near the front. Never know when you'll be raped."

After walking twenty minutes, we arrived at the entrance of the Fabric Barn, my mother's favorite store. She stopped and dug into the bottom of her yellow flowered purse. I could hear the familiar *clink-clank* of the numerous prescription medicine bottles colliding.

“Did you find the map? We need to come up with a plan.” *Dig, dig, dig* went her tiny, withered hands and *clink-clank, clink-clank, clink-clank* went the bottles as she rummaged in her purse, just like Judy Garland sang in that movie set on a train.

“Where are those pills? I gotta get one in my system before I crap my pants. You got the map, stinkpot?” She was sweating now.

“I did. You left an old one at the house.”

“You brought the old one?”

I plunged my sweaty hand into my pocket and out came an aged, folded map of the entire mall. “Here.”

She found the bottle she was looking for, opened it up, took four pills, and swallowed them with the last of the warm Tab she’d been carrying since we left the house an hour earlier. “Aren’t you the clever one today, stinkpot. Now let’s see. Open that thing up.”

“Shouldn’t we get out of the street?”

A huge, lumbering truck drove around us; the driver, a redneck with a full mullet and handlebar moustache, honked his horn and gave us the finger. My mother returned the favor and gave him two fingers in return. “I don’t give a good goddamn if they honk or not. I can stay right here in the fucking parking lot if I want. Everyone always telling me what to do. Okay. Let’s see. We’re here and the Fabric Barn is there.”

“We’re going to the Fabric Barn?”

“Yes, we’re going to the Fabric Barn. Your father wants a new sweater and I’ll be goddamned if I’m gonna pay the prices at Fredrick and Nelson. Goddamn rip-off if you ask me,” she said as she yanked the map out of my hands and shoved her massive purse into my chest. “Hold that, snotrag. Let me see. Now where is the first bathroom?”

I put the purse in the crook my arm and bent my elbow as I’d seen women do in the mall. I pointed to a spot on the map. “See? It’s right there. It’s a few stores down from Fabric Barn.”

“Shit on a shingle. That’s kinda far. There isn’t a toilet in the store?”

“Maybe.”

“I can’t live off of a maybe! What if I have to crap my pants in the store? What are you doing?”

I stepped away from her. “What do you mean?”

She pointed to the purse in the crook of my arm. I shook my head. “I’m holding your purse.”

She frowned.

“I don’t--”

“That’s how women hold their purses. Are you a woman?”

“No.”

She put her hand on her hip, the map still in her fist. It crinkled into a little ball as she clenched and unclenched her fist. “I dunno, Mike. Looks pretty weird, if I say so myself. Why don’t you give it to me, or people are liable to get the wrong idea.” She took the purse off of my arm and then reached out and took my hand. “Don’t do that again, okay?”

I nodded to her and then followed her as we ran to the store. A light rain had started and I could see my breath in the air. “God, I hope that really friendly woman with the big boobs isn’t in there. She gives me the willies. No one is that happy all the goddamn time,” she said, when she suddenly stopped. “See’s Candies!”

“Oh, yeah,” I replied as cars passed us, honking and yelling for us to get out of the road.

My mother ran her fingers across her protruding bottom lip. “They got a good toilet there, don’t they? ”

“Big and roomy.”

“That’s right. And they don’t glare at you if you wanna use it.” She laughed and crumpled up the map and hurtled it back at my chest. “Hang on to that, Creepy Kid. We may need it later.”

There was rarely a time in my childhood that my mother was not afflicted with intense physical ailments. Her most intense and shameful issues involved the need to shit at the drop of a hat. She couldn't control her bowels, as it were. I used to tell this to people all the time, as if it was the most normal issue for a parent to have, but I stopped after I heard, one too many times, the following responses: "That's disgusting" and "Don't you have boundaries?" and "Please keep that shit to yourself" and my favorite, "You're lying."

Today, I have learned to accept (through gritted teeth), that my mother has passed onto me her glorious ability to inflict upon herself intense physical pain as a result of her spiraling, obsessive worry. It seems it's a side effect she gained the moment her personality disorder was given full bloom the day her stepfather first molested her when she was nine.

She told me this glorious fact on the eve of my eighth birthday as we sat at the dining room table, waiting for the meatloaf cooking in the oven to be burnt beyond recognition. My father was at work and wouldn't be home for hours. He often worked on the weekends as a way to avoid the family.

My mother would start a meal, then become bored with the process, and then conveniently forget she had started cooking. We often ate dark, black meat and canned vegetables for dinner, which might account for my love of white trash cuisine.

At the table that night, she looked at me, her face knotted and dark. Something was brewing in her. I could tell. She woke up angry. When she woke up angry, it was as if I could picture a line of darkness all around her body, like she was a figure in a graphic novel and the artist had lined her body in a mist, obscuring her figure and plunging her into a forbidden netherworld.

"You need to know my stepfather didn't treat me well." She said this and stared at me, defying me to respond. I saw her stare as defiance, but what she was doing was begging me to understand, just as I had done for years when I told complete strangers about her bowel issues. She, like me, had no social graces.

Even at eight years old, I knew better than to confront or dismiss her. The only way to act when she was about to say something cataclysmic was to remain absolutely still. I had perfected the act of turning into stone after seeing a *National Geographic* special on South African frogs. They sat on rocks near raging rivers and never moved. Water poured over them and bugs landed on them, and

they didn't even flinch. They simply stared. I took their cue and stared at my mother, the rivers of her emotions rising higher and higher by the second. I wasn't going to let the waves wash me over. I was going to be perfectly still.

"Did you hear me?" she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

I nodded. "Yes," I said. I was proud of myself. My voice didn't crack. I was getting the hang of this frog thing.

"Well, he didn't treat me well. He did things to me if you get my drift, Creepy Kid. Bad things no one should do to a little girl." She began to cry. I pushed the balls of my feet into the worn, dark carpet under my feet, which ran under the length of the dining room table. My feet barely reached the floor, so I had to move my butt along the plastic-covered seat. I held myself in place. The flood was coming; I could feel it.

She cried harder and looked off into the backyard, something she always did when she became super upset. "He hurt me, did things, sexually. And that was wrong. It was WRONG." She had yelled and I didn't know why. It was like I wasn't even in the same room with her. She inhaled through her mouth. I marveled at the thick reams of spit that clung between her top and bottom teeth. It reminded me of an animated movie I had seen where a bad fish was being held in jail behind bars made of water. My mother had bars of water in her mouth, and it was holding her bad tongue inside.

"And then my mother, you know, she wasn't any help because she was always out, sleeping with everyone in town while that was happening to me. Christ. And they wonder why I'm a mess. Really, people? You wonder? There is a reason for these things," was what she finally said as she dug her fingers into the withered flesh on her arm and cried for ten minutes. I timed it by looking at the cuckoo clock in the living room.

When she was done she didn't say anything more. She stood up, took the black meatloaf from the oven, clucked her tongue, and cried a little more. She cut a piece out of the center to make sure it was done, then cut the center piece in half, popped one piece into her mouth and gave the other to me. We ate in silence, and then she left the room and went to her bedroom and slept for the rest of the day.

She began to break apart when she was first molested. I don't know how long it lasted, as no one in my family ever spoke of it. As for my grandmother Dixon as the town whore, this was common knowledge in the family. I would come to see my grandmother's craziness up close and personal in a few years, but at the time, I knew her only as the whore.

My mother's many days of being physically ill were a direct result of the physical rape she endured, and I would be remiss if I didn't admit I am the same. Oh, glorious day!

Case in point: two weeks ago I had a severe stomach cramp from eating a bad burger. Now, most people would chalk this up to a bad choice in dinner plans. They would take Pepto Bismol and call it a night and wait for the pain to pass and then continue with their life. But see, that is much too easy for me. No, I obsessed over it to the point of causing myself extreme, sharp and shooting stomach pain, exactly as my mother would have done.

I convinced myself I had an appendicitis and that my gall bladder needed to be removed, which, of course, was entirely absurd. I spiraled to such a degree I saw three physicians, called my psychic twice, saw my therapist three times and ate so little each day for fear it would cause the sharp pains in my stomach to increase, I lost ten pounds in five days.

I broke down and cried each morning. The pain woke me up each and every night for a week. I smoked pot on one day, hoping it would help. It didn't. It put me into a panic attack. I took a picture of myself crying on one of these days, and showed it to a few friends. They thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen. I looked at the picture with them and saw why it was so funny: the pain was real, but underneath it, there was a strange awareness in my face that the pain wasn't real, but a product of my own manic mind.

Back at the mall, my mother and I entered the Fabric Barn. It was a long and narrow store with rows upon rows of towering fabric on either side. The layout of the store was clever. No matter how hard you tried, there was no avoiding fabric. It assaulted you everywhere, a horror movie of benevolent fabric swatches on nearly every surface. *You want a Fabric Barn, well gosh darn it, we'll give you a Fabric Barn!*

Dangling from the walls were sparkling swatches of gold, silver, and rainbow accents. I inhaled deeply and walked deeper into the store. It was deadly

quiet. Women roamed the aisles, Egyptian explorers wearing invisible pith helmets, McCall patterns in front of them as ancient, tribal guides.

Being in the Fabric Barn was the most boring, horrifically butt-numbing experience of my life. I wanted a herd of trampling zebras to stomp on me until my face was unrecognizable. I wanted a serial killer to run into the store, a meat cleaver in his hand, and chop me up into tiny bits so I wouldn't have to sit and wait forever as my mother decided whether Plum Peacock or Raspberry Parade was the *exact* shade of fabric she wanted for my father's sweater.

I had to get out, I had to get Sun-In, but I had to be careful. She couldn't know. If she knew, she'd ask where I got the money, and if she asked where I got the money, it might call attention to the fact that I'd been stealing from her purse for months.

"I swear to God -- you don't get that look off your face I'm gonna smack it off for you."

My mother glared at me. I was lying on the floor, face down. I turned to look up at her. In her hand was an unwrapped McCall's pattern. On the front was a picture of an old man wearing a handmade sweater, which was clearly the pattern inside. He was smiling, but he also looked like he was about to throw up.

"I don't ask for much out of you, Creepy Kid. Now get the hell up and go do something productive or I'm gonna lose my temper with you."

"How can I be productive in a fabric store?"

"Don't get smart with me."

"Can I go to the bookstore?"

"No."

"What about See's?"

"No."

"I could go to the used book bin and get us both a new book to read."

A long silence. "What kind of book?"

"Not boring."

“That’s not a type of book.”

“I’ll get something about the war for Dad, too.”

“The war. God. Get over it, Lynn. You were there, it’s done, you didn’t get shot.”

A long silence. Then, “Don’t be long. Here’s ten bucks.”

“Thanks!”

“Mike! Pick me up--”

By then it was too late. I was already running down the center of the mall.

I found Sun-In without too much trouble. I successfully persuaded the sales clerk, a rotund girl with looming braces, to sell me ten bottles. “Wow, that’s a lot of Sun-In,” she said, her eyes wide as she scanned each bottle, her braces sounding like the gears on my father’s truck.

To make my trip to the drugstore plausible, I ran by the bookstore and picked up books for the family. There were no war books on the table so I got my dad one of his old standbys, a book by an author whose name I could never pronounce, Isaac Asimov. For my mother, I got a book that somehow reminded me of her, *The Stepford Wives*.

I turned to walk away when something caught my eye near the entrance of Nordstrom. I gasped. I put my hand on the wall to brace myself.

It was a cardboard advertisement for Wella Balsam shampoo. I loved Wella. I loved the way it lathered and how it smelled like a chemical dump. I knew when people saw me on the street, their first thought was, “Now there is a Wella guy if I ever saw one!”

But what drew me to the cardboard ad wasn’t my love for all things Wella. It was because it bore a blooming photo of the same actress I’d seen in the ad for Sun-In! It was fate. It was meant to be.

So I took it. The entire display.

I folded it along the proper edges (careful not to smudge her face) and ran with it through the mall. The cardboard flapped in the breeze, smacked against my bag carrying the ten bottles of Sun-In.

I ran outside and opened the back door of our dented and peeling green Nova and slid it in and covered it up with my jacket (along with the bag of Sun-In), and then slammed the door shut and ran back inside to meet my mother.

I was able to sneak the display into my room that night and shoved it in the far corner of my closet. I covered it with mounds of blankets and a few books for good measure.

A few weeks later, I came home after spending the afternoon at the local library. I walked in the front door and found my mother sitting on the plush green love seat next to the kitchen. She was rocking back and forth, staring at me. In her lap was the display I had stolen from the mall, as well as all my secret photos of Dirk I had hidden under my mattress.

She was biting the inside of her mouth, her cheek sunken in, making her left eye seem double the size of her right. Her right arm was crossed under her left arm. The flesh poured. Whenever she did this, I was reminded of a famous comedian we adored, Totie Fields.

Totie had her left leg amputated and was often seen wheeling around the stage on television, cracking jokes about her ill health and appearing night after night on *Merv Griffin* and *Mike Douglas*.

She was rotund and short, like my mother. Her butt was gigantic, overflowing; a fountain of flesh. When she would spring forward in her wheelchair the flesh under her arms would rock back and forth.

I laughed when I saw my mother on the loveseat. She looked exactly like Totie Fields, and whenever I saw Totie I got the giggles.

“You think this is funny?” I immediately stopped laughing. “I asked you if you think this is funny.”

“I wasn’t laughing about this.”

“Then what were you laughing about?”

“Something Joy told me.”

She snorted and curled her upper lip. “Something your sister said to you just suddenly popped back in your mind right now? Is that it? She did say something to you, didn’t she? She’s always making fun of me.”

"I guess so."

"You guess so, you guess so. I'm always the bad guy, huh? Christ. Well, Mike..." she said with a sigh. "I really don't know what to do with you. I didn't raise you like this. Why the hell did you take this?"

"I dunno."

"And these pictures of this Dirk person. Is that why your hair is all bleached now?"

"You don't like it?"

"You look like an idiot. Why did you steal this advertisement from the store."

"I dunno."

"You must have a reason. Were you mad at someone at Nordstrom?"

This threw me for a loop. "Mad at – what do you mean?"

She sat up, transferred the cardboard to her left hand and planted her right hand on her hip. I watched as her underarm flesh slowly flowed back and forth and back and forth. *You are getting very sleepy now.*

"I don't know, Mike! I'm trying to find a reason why you'd humiliate me like this."

"I just wanted it."

"I just wanted it, I just wanted it. Grow up! You don't get things you want in life, Mike! How many times do I have to tell you this? Do you think I got what I wanted in life? Do you?"

"I dunno."

"I didn't! My life didn't turn out the way I wanted, but do you see me crying over spilt milk? Do you? Now, I want you to tell me why you took this, and I want you to tell me now!"

I inhaled sharply and said the first thing that popped into my mind. "I'm in love with her."

My mother's head jerked back as if she'd been slapped. She grabbed the cardboard and opened it up. She glanced at the woman on the cover, at her perfect nose, her strong and neatly defined chin, her kind eyes, her wide, wide grin, and her growing mound of unending hair cascading over her shoulders and said, "But she's not real."

"She's real."

"She's not. She's some actress in Hollywood. One of the Pretty Scum. Oh, Mike. You dumb kid. You can't love an actress."

"I can't?"

"No, honey. I mean, she is pretty. You got good taste in women, I will tell you that. But this isn't real. None of this stuff is real," she said, thumping the front of the cardboard with her index finger.

She gestured around the house. "*This* is real life. Those people are tougher than us; they can deal with the years of rejection it takes to be rich and famous. We aren't those people. You will never be that person. You are much too sensitive, sweetie. You need to get it through your thick head that you will never, ever be one of those people. It is not what you are meant to be. Ever. Trust me on this. I know. I tried, and look where I am. Same goes for you."

She held up the cardboard ad and extended it to me. I saw she had folded it across the woman's face. She crumpled up the photos of Dirk as well and handed them to me in a ball.

"Now, look," she said, standing up. "I'm not going to throw this shit away."

I heard myself laugh. I was so happy. She was going to let me keep it.

"I want *you* to throw it away."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you need to learn from your own mistakes. So I want you to tear this up and throw it in the garbage out back. Do you get me?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. I want to see you do it now."

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

She handed the cardboard to me, and the wad of Dirk photos. I took them from her, walked out to the back of the house, and threw them into the large trash receptacle, the one my father emptied every week at the biggest dump in town. I glanced once more at the Sun-In girl and Dirk before I shut the lid with a faint *click*.

It was later in the evening. I was sitting in my room reading, and heard the muffled voices of my mother and father talking about Joy. She had come by a few hours earlier and taken me to dinner at a local burger joint.

She and I ate in silence as I told her about our mother’s recent breakdowns and screaming fits. Joy listened and look out of the window, grinding her teeth. I looked down at her hands and thought they were perfect hands. So small and tiny, and her nails didn’t have a single scratch. Everything with Joy was always in the proper place.

Joy was classically pretty. I was never convinced our dad was her birth father. Her nose was much too pert and her face too pretty and small. She was tiny like all of the Bryan women, yet her hair was taut and curly, unlike the rest of the Bryans. I secretly suspected my mother had an affair in her twenties with a local Italian gardener and out popped Joy.

“She’s a mess, sweetie. You don’t see it yet, but you will,” Joy said, poking at the food on her plate. “What did she say about me?”

“Nothing.”

Joy smirked. “Mom doesn’t like me. She’s supposed to love me, not put up with me.” She started to cry then, a habit which would soon also afflict me in the oddest of places.

“But I love you,” Joy said, standing up and sitting next to me in the booth of the restaurant. I snuggled into her and put my head in the crook of her arm. I felt safe with Joy, protected, but at the same time, smothered and afraid. Shades of

our mother would pass in and out of her, despite her best efforts to keep them at bay, but I knew I couldn't tell her that.

Back in the house, I looked out of the window of my bedroom at the early-evening sky, thinking of Joy, wondering what I was going to do with my conflicting emotions around her. I heard my mother and father in the distance. They were chatting in hushed tones, my mother much louder than my father, as always.

The sun hadn't set yet and wouldn't for a few hours. It was rare in Seattle to have unfiltered sun for more than an hour or two in the winter. Dark days, overcast, diffused grey light, and passing clouds were what we lived under.

I put my book down and slid along the carpet until I was at the base of the door. I looked under the door and saw my mother and father pacing back and forth in the living room. My father said something to my mother and I heard her start to cry.

Then I saw his feet turn and walk away. The front door to the house opened and closed. I sat up. I'm not sure how long I sat like that. Waiting.

I carefully opened my bedroom door. I could see a small pin light. It was from the small lamp that sat beside my mother's chair in the living room. Other than that, the room was pitch black.

"Mike?"

"Yeah."

"Come here, honey."

I walked down the tiny hallway until I came to the living room. It was completely dark. Except for the lamp, all of the lights had been turned off. The blinds were drawn. My mother lay on her recliner, her feet propped up, a cold mask over her forehead.

She kept several cold masks in the freezer. She called them her "pain buddies." Many times during the week she would get an intense migraine and be forced to sit in a dark room for hours with a cold pack on her face. In the coming years, she would try over forty different migraine medications to ease her suffering. None of them worked. The only thing that worked was crying for a few hours, then lying perfectly still in a quiet and dark room. She often cursed her lot

during those hours of private days, but was also fond of saying, “At least you can’t say I don’t get my gooddamn beauty rest.”

She extended her left hand to me, the ice pack still on her forehead, her body immobile. “Come here, sonny boy.”

I was afraid. My body wouldn’t move, but I knew if I didn’t move I’d be in trouble. I took in a deep breath. Slowly, I walked to her and took her hand in mine. It was cold and clammy but soft. Her hands were always soft. There were so many lines in the palm of her hand. I often spent evenings holding her hands as we read our separate books, tracing the lines in her palm and imagining tiny cars riding along the roads of her skin, cars that would take us away to a much better place.

“You love your mama?”

I nodded my head. “Yes.” It was true. I did. She was my world.

“You mad at me about your girlfriend?”

It took me a moment to figure out what she meant. She meant the Sun-In woman. “It’s okay.”

“You sure?”

“It’s just a piece of cardboard. She’s not real anyway. She’s Pretty Scum, right?”

My mother sighed and lifted the edge of the blue mask covering her face. “She’s not Pretty Scum. I found her name. It’s Farrah.”

“Really?”

“She’s some new model on Rona’s Watch List. The mag is over by the love seat. Take it if you want. There’s a real good picture of her inside. She probably won’t amount to much, but you never know.”

She reached out and with the tip of her index finger flicked a piece of fallen hair out of my left eye. “You like her.”

“She’s all right.”

“Oh, stop being nice for me, kid. You like her, don’t you?”

“Kinda.”

“No kinda about it. You like her plenty. I can tell.”

I nodded my head. I did like her. I liked her a whole lot. I loved her. I knew what love was and this was love. “I do.”

“I’m sorry I made you do that.”

“It’s okay.”

“You mama gets mixed up sometimes. You know that, right?”

“Sure.”

“She doesn’t mean to make you feel bad. I really don’t, sweetheart. I just never had any love when I was a little girl. It’s hard for me, you know? I try so hard sometimes to fit in. It’s a curious thing to know you’ll never belong in life. We seem to always have that, us Bryans. I’m so sorry.”

She cried then, her tears flowing down her cracked, worn, and sagging cheeks. I grabbed a tissue from a box nearby and tried to dab at her tears, but they were unending.

She laughed as I carefully wiped her cheeks. “Christ on a crutch--you’re a mess, Joyce.”

I finished and then she lifted the entire ice pack and sat up a bit and looked straight at me. Her face looked like a memory. A forgotten face, sunken in, receding into the darkness, lost.

“You’re a good kid, you know that, sonny boy? I love you very much even though I’m shit at showing it sometimes. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Your father is going overseas to some godforsaken country again. Did you see the ad for that new movie, *Earthquake*?”

“Oh, that looks good.”

“Wanna go with your old mom to the movies then? Go for a burger at Red Robin and a good old disaster movie? Nothing like watchin’ other people suffer who aren’t you.”

“Sure.”

“Sure.”

She ran her fingertips along the edge of my face and glanced at the wad of tissues in my hand. “Dear Lord, the way I go through tissues I should get your father to buy stock in the company.”

She laughed and lay back down, but not before straining to smile at me. Her mouth twitched from the effort and her eyes briefly lit up, a spark of life, a sunburst of something other than the pain she always felt -- then it was gone, snuffed out, shut down by the blue ice pack as she placed it over her eyes.

“You want me to get you a fresh one?” I asked her.

“Oh, that would be great, sonny boy.”

I went into the kitchen, grabbed a very cold purple ice pack from the freezer, and placed it over her eyes as I took the warm blue one back. I poured her a tepid glass of water and gave her two pills from her pill drawer, which she swallowed down with an appreciative sigh.

“Yup, this is your mama. Your good old mama,” was the last thing she said as I went back to my bedroom, closed the door, and read my book until I fell asleep to the sound of her snoring softly in the living room.