A Diluted Sort of Pink

Keywords
creative writing, non-fiction

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This nonfiction is available in The Mercury: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2010/iss1/10
I can’t really remember exactly what it was we were doing. Maybe the boys were wrestling as I sat to the side, watching, laughing at them, or maybe we were playing Jenga, a game I could never seem to win, being the smallest with the shortest of fingers. Either way, we were in my bedroom. The room was pink – not a Malibu Barbie, bubblegum, hot pink sort of pink, but more of a diluted Pepto Bismol type of pink, light and chalky. It had only one small window, the sort that you have to push up to open, always a challenge to my short-statured nature. The window was darkened by plastic blinds and decorated with a flowery curtain whose lace, once a pale, crisp white, had faded with time and disregard to a dirty tan.

Underneath the window sat my bed, a white frame covered in piles of blankets and an entire colony of stuffed animals, each with their own name and story – Pooh Bear, the chubby, honey-obsessed leader, Octy, the misunderstood octopus whom everyone was afraid of despite his loving personality, and Spencer the seal, sad to be so far from his home in Alaska. Next to the bed sat a small chest, filled with precious memories of my long-lived six years and, across the room from the window, a desk held a line of books haphazardly taking up most of the space, aside from a corner on which a small lamp sat. The lamp, like the lace curtains, had faded with age, both the lampshade and the potpourri inside the body a dim memory of the color they once were. Along the walls, at seemingly unintentional spacing, pictures of kittens, always white with pale pink noses, purred silently in their pink frames, only missing where closet doors interfered. My brothers were sitting on the floor, which was enveloped in lush peach carpeting, with knees bent and arms gesticulating every which way, when the door slammed. I looked up from my spot on the bed, just as the screaming started.

It was always the same fight – familiar subtext beneath a new screenplay. Josh stood to shut my bedroom door, to dim the noise, then leaned against my desk, clenched fists hidden in his arms folded across the bright red car on his chest; Sean came to sit next to me. We sat in silence wondering how long it would last this time. As the screaming grew louder, the wood between us and them no longer dampered the
sounds; every word and echo reached us. The exact phrasing was never really considered, though I’d heard them so many times before, just the subjects – money, family, and words I was neither supposed to know nor repeat. It never failed. I always cried. Sean put an arm around me, reprising his role as the eldest of us all.

“What’sa matter?” he would always ask, a slight smile forced in his voice as though I were crying over a lost game of Jenga.

“I...I...I don’t wanna lose my daddy!” I cried, dribbles running down from my eyes and nose and clogging my throat.

“Whatdy mean you don’t want to lose him? You aren’t losing anybody silly,” he affirmed, though I heard the sigh in his voice. We’d been having this conversation more and more lately.

“They HATE each other. They’re gonna get a di...divorce and he’s gonna leave and...and...and I’ll never sssssee him again!” I exclaimed, swiping dejectedly at my tears.

He didn’t say anything more. I stared at my feet, swinging feebly over the edge of my bed, too short to reach the floor. Josh stayed put near the door, simply nodding in agreement, though whether with Sean or me, I didn’t know for sure. I watched him swap from foot to foot, both swaddled in bright white socks with blue and red stripes across the toes, his ankles peeking out from jeans he’d already grown out of. Sean continued to sit next to me, rubbing my back as I hiccupped, my crying slowed, evidenced only by swollen, red eyes and my lip still quivering ever so slightly.

He reached for my cup – juice leftover from the night before—and handed it to me. I sipped, dribbling grape juice on my yellow stirrup pants, as the door slammed. We listened in quiet again as an engine groaned to life, angry, perhaps, at having to run in the stifling heat of a Pennsylvania summer evening. We could hear it reversing up the driveway, and squealing away. Sean leaned away to glance out the window, to see who had left. Usually our mother would give up first, and go to her aunt’s to complain about men and smoke her problems away until the early hours of the morning.

But this time, “Dad,” he said, looking down at me.

I don’t really remember exactly what it was we were talking about. Maybe what was new in our lives, reunited for the first time in months, or maybe how obnoxious our uncle had been in comparison to other evenings. Either way we were on the back porch. It was dark out, the sun setting hours ago while we were still having Christmas dinner. The porch was weather worn, the cement beneath our feet cracked from cold weather and stained from living. Behind Sean stood a screen door, which, in the summer, kept the bugs from entering the house while it was trying to air out the sticky heat, but in the winter struggled to open against the
ever-expanding concrete. Masked by the screen was the thick back door, whose handle was so loose that more often than not, wrenching it off was easier than attempting to fuss with the key. Across from the door, long white poles, just thick enough to wrap your hand around ‘til your fingertips touched, stood from ground to the tin roof above, holding it in place. One had a black smear and a dent, just as tall as a car’s side mirror.

Sean and I sat in folding chairs side by side, Josh standing across from us – half on the porch, half in the grass that burrowed against its edge – Black and Tans in hand. With every change in pressure, the strips of shredded plastic that were our seats groaned, threatening to break through. Staring out at the woods in the distance, I sipped, grimacing slightly at the taste in my mouth. Though it was tinged with black, the edges of the white shed snuck out of the night, its blue trim and peaked roof mocking the house that towered over it. Our breaths gave our dark-swathed bodies away, flaring into clouds at their exit. I could hear dishes clanking upstairs, our mother where we had left her earlier, cleaning up after our family who had made a hasty exit the minute the coffee was drunk. Sean must have heard it too.

“Do you ever wonder when it was exactly that Mom went crazy?” he asked, neither to me or Josh, but more so wondering aloud. We exhaled a short laugh for lack of anything to say, though the question stood there, waiting for an answer.

“Mom, I get,” I stated, lying only a bit, “...but Dad, I don’t get,” I continued, hoping the thought would catch.

Sean shook his head. “No, no, no...Dad makes sense. It’s simple,” he explained. “He grew up in a family that was taught to work hard, get married, and have kids,” he continued, holding his hands out a certain width apart, beer in one, cigarette in the other. Josh nodded in agreement, leaning his head from side to side, cracking his neck. “He gave up a good job and moved back here,” Sean pointed to the ground, as though speaking of that very spot on the cement.

“For mom,” I filled.

“For mom,” he agreed. “He worked construction for Uncle Tony until he found a desk job. And he’s been working that same job ever since. He provides for his family. He could have left, like any other husband, like any other father, but he didn’t. He stayed, and worked, and did what he thought he was supposed to do,” he rambled, leaning his head back to finish off the bottle and tossing it over my head into the recycling can.

I looked at him then, as he opened another bottle, the sleeves of his button-down rolled up to just below his elbows revealing the words Non serviam etched in faded black on the bottom of his left fore-arm. And I glanced to Josh, leaning against the pole with the dent, the tips of his hair just barely grazing the roof. A cloud of smoke slipped out the
side of his mouth as he switched from black-shoed foot to black-shoed foot and popped his knuckles deftly, cigarette in hand. Water trickled from the tin roof above us to a crater in the driveway below, adding to the already formed pool of melted snow. The driveway extended out beside us and up past the house, its black tar cracked and chipped from lack of care and over-zealous snow shovels. In the distance, the shallow stream that ran down in the small valley at the edge of the yard could be heard, just barely flowing underneath the frozen overlay, pops of cracking ice echoing back to us.

I dropped my eyes to my feet, shoved inside my father’s too-big sneakers which always sat just inside the back door, too lazy to run back upstairs for my own. I hugged myself, pulling my brother’s sport coat closer to me, struggling against the cold and rubbed my eyes, red and swollen from exhaustion. Taking the bottle Sean held towards me, I sipped, wiping away a spot that dripped on my jeans.

“Why do you think he stayed?” I whispered into my bottle, half hoping they wouldn’t hear me. I began to think they hadn’t until Sean, pushing his frames up the crooked bridge of his nose with a long, middle finger, shrugged his shoulders and said “He’s Dad.”

Josh nodded, gnawing at the nub of a finger where the nail was never given a chance to grow. I looked away, my throat choked, only partially from the amber taste. I sighed, staring at the ground momentarily, and then turned back to him nodding. Sean leaned over to give me a one-armed hug, and then went back to debating our mother’s insanity with Josh, whose head was thrown back in laughter at a moment I hadn’t caught.