
MARIA CICHOSZ

GLITTER

DOUG

The linoleum is warm.

I stand by the counter, a glass of orange juice in my hand, condensation already running down the plastic glass. It's so hot, breathing becomes difficult, and the orange juice is bitter, always bitter in the morning. I remember making it last night, trying to add as little water to the concentrate as possible, and instead of tasting better, the orange gunk just wears into my raw throat.

My mouth is disgusting, all slick with the plaque off my teeth. Everything is sticky and the juice doesn't help. I should brush my teeth, maybe, but it's too hot to move.

Sweating on the sticky linoleum floor at six in the morning, I decide that I'll sleep more, maybe get a few hours in before everyone gets up and starts clanking pots together in the kitchen, frying eggs and popping toast and brewing coffee. Before everyone starts leaving for work. I put the plastic cup in the sink and the bitter juice back on its shelf in the fridge. Unsticking my feet from the floor, I leave the kitchen.

The living room is worse. It's even hotter, if that's possible, the air moving like syrup in and out of my lungs. I find the couch and lie back down, kicking the blankets to the floor. The couch reeks of sweat, of cigarettes—of all the nights I've slept here for lack of a proper bed. I stare at the ceiling and trace the light fixtures with my eyes. Back and forth, back and forth, swirling elaborate chunks of metal holding decorative bulbs.

Tangled between the ornate lights is a fan, its blades rotating. I swear they're not even moving the air, which drips in the stillness.

The lock on the front door clicks open, which is strange because everyone's still in bed, or at least they should be. Shuffling footsteps, a wet cough, keys placed gingerly back on their hook, gripped tight in a sweaty palm to stifle the noise. The lull of careful socks on carpet. I raise my head in time to see Scott's body disappear into the kitchen, and I know.

Who does he think he is?

Again. The bastard.

I reach for the blanket and pull it over myself, over my head. The temperature immediately rises ten degrees, but that's okay. I don't want to look at him, yellow son of a bitch.

"Doug?" Calling from the kitchen even as he's washing his hands, his face.

"What?"

"Have you been up long?"

He should wash his fucking balls, too. "A few minutes."

"Is Natalie up?"

Oh, I wish she was, I fucking wish she came in here and caught you at the fucking sink at six in the morning. "I don't think so."

"Good." He comes out of the kitchen, drying his hands with a dish towel. "It's been a night and a half."

"I bet." I'm peering out from under my blanket, one eye shut so tightly that it's starting to tear up. Scott's shirt is buttoned up wrong, the buttons misaligned and one of the shirttails sticking out of his pants. His hair is limp, severely lacking gel. He's grinning much too widely, and I'm sure that no one, not *ever*, has looked more conspicuous than he does now.

"Tired, still?" he asks, and I have to swallow my own puke.

"Yeah, it's only six."

"You should get used to it, buddy. Job pretty soon, right? You been thinking about that? A job and maybe moving out to your own place? You could get a bachelor apartment. They go for five-hundred a month." He crosses his arms across his chest, making his biceps bulge out a bit.

I grip my own arm under the blanket. It's tiny, thin. "Uh huh. Next month."

"You should seriously think about it."

"Uh huh."

He goes off to shower, and I clench my eyes shut, pretend to sleep. I sleep through breakfast too, and until they've both left for work.

I eat alone, washing down stale toast with bitter juice.

SCOTT

The water is scalding, and that's how I like it. It feels a bit like my skin is peeling, but it's nice, too, all my pores opening up and breathing at the same time.

I scrub at myself hard, wielding the soap like a weapon. I squeeze it in my hand until I realize that I've warped the thing, my fingers becoming imprinted into its soft white surface.

I start to laugh.

I rub at my face with the mutated soap bar, and my balls, too. Up and down, side to side, fucking circles. Especially my balls, because I somehow think that Natalie would know just by looking at them. Girls are like that, you know.

The shower's steam rises past the curtain, and I wonder for the fortieth time if I closed the door, because it's hot enough in the apartment as it is. It doesn't help that Doug is always sprawled on the couch, all six feet of him, lanky and pale and limping. Son of a bitch needs to find himself an apartment or a job or both. When he's in there with his cigarettes and his musty blanket I can't breathe properly.

I'm running everything around here. I can pull it off, I think, as I turn off the tap and step out of the bathtub. I can keep this up and Natalie won't catch on,

because I'm too good for it, because only guys like Doug ever get caught.

Wiping the steam from the mirror, I check myself out. Everything looks in place until I turn my head and see the shimmer on my skin, in my hair. Everything is covered in sparkles, miniscule and pink, adhering to my face. There's a crop of them on my cheeks, an entire forest tangled in my beard. I have no clue where they've come from until I remember the girl, the fucking girl who had that shimmery pink glitter on her face.

I thought that was cute, the sparkles. In the mess of limbs and the heat and the effort of the whole thing I forgot about the sparkles. Now I look like I fucked a pixie.

Shit.

I get back in the shower so fast I nearly slip.

NATALIE

Scott is quiet this morning, picking at his eggs with his fork, running them around the edges of his plate. He looks tired.

"Are you all right, Scotty?" I'm pouring myself more juice, which is starting to taste like it's too much concentrate and not enough water. Doug must have mixed it again.

"I'm fine, hon."

"You sure?"

He glances up at me before returning to his eggs. "Yeah."

I sit down and play with the hem of my shirt, kneading it between my fingers. "Your brother doesn't want any breakfast?" I ask.

"He'll eat later," Scott says. "It doesn't matter."

"Did you ask him to look around for a job, Scott? It gets annoying to see him here every morning. He takes up the whole living room. You know what I mean."

Scott finally puts a bit of egg in his mouth. The chewing that follows is reluctant. "Yeah, I asked him. He said he would."

"Soon?"

"Yes, soon. I can't just kick him out."

"I didn't say that, did I?"

"We all know you don't like him."

I sigh, pushing back in my chair. "I like him, all right, just not when he's smoking on my couch or sleeping all day or making orange juice like *this*." I throw down the pitcher, hoping it will tip and spill.

It doesn't.

"I know, honey. Soon." He looks up, and I catch a glimmer of something pink in his hair.

"Scott what's that in your—" I can't figure it out, and then I see that it's *sparkles*, the kind that some girls wear on their faces and shoulders when they go clubbing. Not a whole lot, just a little patch. He turns his head, a little too quickly, maybe, and then they're gone.

"What's wrong, Natalie?"

"Oh, nothing."

Now it's my turn to be quiet.

DOUG

Scott is asking me if I want any potatoes. He knows goddamn well I hate potatoes. I hate the bland, corpsy white things like nothing else.

"No, I'm all right."

"No, have some potatoes, Doug. They're good for you. You look sickly." He thrusts the bowl at me from across the table.

"Scott."

"Come on now."

I want to jump over the table and kill him. That's all. Him and that patch of glitter near his temple. Natalie is watching me, frowning.

I take the bowl.

"Natalie spent so long making dinner, you shouldn't turn any of it down, Doug. Really."

Natalie slants her eyes a bit, first at Scott and then at me. I ladle a scoop of the mashed gunk onto my plate, where it lands noncommittally beside my slab of pork. The pale slop stares up at me from its bowl. The potatoes don't look like food at all—they remind me of something medical. Flesh-like. Like something off the coroner's table down at the morgue.

I almost throw up in my mouth.

"There you go," Scott says, grinning too widely. Always so goddamn *smug*.

"You don't look too great, Doug," says Natalie. She's sawing at her slice of pork. "You should eat more." Her brow furrows. "Or go back to see Dr. Reeds. Have you thought about that?"

I want a cigarette so badly. "No, I'm all right. I'm just not hungry today."

"You weren't hungry yesterday, either." Scott is sipping at his wine, a deep red liquid that seeps down the insides of his glass. It looks like blood, like warm, half-congealing blood.

This time I actually gag.

"Doug?"

"I'm okay, Natalie."

"Scott and I were looking at apartments, earlier. Bachelors this side of town aren't too bad, only five hundred a month. Have you considered that?"

"Yeah. It's just—"

"And a job," Scott adds, chewing. He's pointing his fork at me, waving it around a bit. "Just check out job listings, Doug. Loblaws is hiring right now, so is the Blockbuster across the street. You should go out tomorrow, get some résumés in."

"I will." I don't plan on leaving the house. There are splinters of something like steel digging into my hip, my spine.

"Good."

Natalie lifts the mostly empty wine bottle and nods it in my direction. The two of them always sit across from me, like dinner is a cross-examination or something. "Have some wine, Doug."

"I don't drink."

"No?"

"You know I don't drink."

She places the bottle back on the table. "Do you remember Scarlet, Doug? From Scott's birthday party? We're having her over for dinner tomorrow night. You should wear something nice, maybe."

I sigh, lean back in my chair. The food on my plate is getting cold. "You don't have to play matchmaker for me, Natalie. It's okay."

Scott jumps at this. The wine in his glass sloshes around, nearly spills over the top. "Come on, Doug. It's not like you can get a girl on your own."

"Scott."

"It's true."

"Scott, please."

"Remember at the Christmas party? You just sat by yourself on the couch, and then you went out to smoke the rest of the night. That's hardly social."

"Yeah, maybe."

He loops his arm around Natalie's shoulders, and she actually smiles at him. *Glows* at him, more than anything else. "You should really look into finding a girl. Someone like Natalie, if you're lucky."

I catch the patch of glitter near his temple, that grin, that neatly trimmed beard. Find a girl, I think—and never do *that* to her.

"I don't feel good," I finally say.

And push my chair back, slip out the front door, and light a cigarette in the humidity outside, dragging at it until I cough.

NATALIE

Almost nine, and *The Fox and Fiddle* is getting crowded, mostly with undergrads and other college types. I'm sitting at the bar, pulling down at the back of my shirt because it's too short and I'm sure people are staring. I'd ask Scott if anything was showing, but he's not here, of course, because he "doesn't have time for bars," because he has to "work late tonight."

I suspect that he's cheating.

I don't know for sure, but I think so. Doug thinks so, too. Doug who is too thin and too pale and too tall. Doug who looks too much like a ghoul, or a corpse. Poor Doug. He gives me the creeps.

I raise my hand to flag down the bartender and ask for another drink—maybe a martini—but he ignores me in favour of the waving girls at the other end of the bar. I lower my shoulders and stir the ice at the bottom of my glass. The plastic straw is sticky, and all of a sudden I feel tired.

I shouldn't have come here, Friday night or not. Maybe I should have asked Doug to come with me. He needs to get out more.

I'm about to get up and shout at the bartender when a drink is placed in front of me. It's a martini, too, in one of those angular glasses I like. Shaken, probably two shots, and a pair of olives impaled on one of those green plastic stir-sticks advertising Captain Morgan rum.

A warm hand on the small of my back, crisp, minted breath. "You wanted a drink, no?"

I turn and he's already sitting beside me, a tall, sturdy man wearing a blazer and a cap. A young man, but too old to be in college.

"I did," I say, managing to sound almost completely collected.

"You look like a martini girl." He has a slight accent, soft and cajoling, twining through his speech like a vine.

"I do." I look down, try not to blush. Lifting my head, I smile at him. "You're not from around here?"

"I'm a transfer from Montreal." He pronounces the name of his city without any hard consonants, and it rolls out of his mouth like fudge. "Are you at the university?"

"No, no. I mean, I was. I graduated."

"Excellent. A graduate. You accept my drink, then?"

I look at the martini, reach for it, think briefly of Scott. Scott who wouldn't accompany me here, who went off God knows where instead. I want to wash the martini down in a single gulp, but I restrain myself, take a single sip. "Yes. But only because you're so polite."

"There's no other way to be around a lady." And he smiles, revealing a full row of perfect teeth. Clean-shaven, refined, foreign—he's everything Scott is not, and I feel myself leaning into him, into the smell of mint and aftershave and cologne.

He buys me three more drinks, and by the time we're leaving I'm hanging off his arm, no longer thinking about Scott and that patch of pink glitter in his hair. The night is humid, and the French Canadian has a rented apartment not three blocks from the bar.

And I'm not wearing any sparkles.

That's all.

DOUG

I'm out of tape.

This is a bad thing, a shitty thing, because tape was the absolute last thing keeping me occupied. I put down the scissors, stolen from Natalie's desk, and stand up, abandoning my pile of newspaper cut-outs and scraps of bristle board scattered across the carpet.

Walking into the kitchen, I throw open all the drawers, looking for glue. Or more tape. Anything, really, that can hold one surface to another for an extended period of time. Scott has everything in this apartment—forks and knives and coffee

mugs and cooking utensils of every cheerful plastic colour, bendy straws, bits of string, plastic bags, Gladbags, Gladwrap, twisty ties, toothpicks, lighters, *birthday cake candles*—but no fucking tape.

Not bothering to push the drawers back in, I skid back into the living room and lean over Natalie's desk. Her drawers aren't much better—paperclips, whiteout, pencils, pens, felt tip markers, Tylenol, gum, a single broken ruler, wallet-sized pictures of my brother—no glue. I slam them shut, enjoying the way they make the frail beechwood desk shake, the way the framed photos of Scott and Natalie in Bermuda fall over on their faces. How can there be no glue? No tape?

No tape.

I go back to the open real estate listings magazine on the floor and kick it. The thick little book flies, its pages fluttering, the loose ones falling out. Before I can really think about it I'm on my knees, tearing up the black and white pictures I'd cut out, the board I was going to paste them on, throwing the stupid blunt scissors that cut everything crooked right into the far wall. Scattering and ripping, doing it over and over until I'm breathing hard and collapsing on the deep carpet, the empty roll of tape jabbing into my cheek.

I lie there quietly, getting my breath back and wheezing, because I'm a smoker and that's what smokers do when they can't breathe properly—they wheeze. It's then that I realize I've thrown a tantrum, freaked out because I couldn't find tape, of all things. Because I couldn't have just circled the apartments I liked in marker, I had to cut and paste them like a kindergarten kid.

And what if someone had come home?

I shake my head, struggle into a sitting position. My hip feels stiff despite the humidity soaking the room. It doesn't matter; I need a walk.

And a smoke.

SCOTT

Natasha is late and it's too hot out here. I want to be inside the club enjoying the music and the air-conditioning, maybe a drink or two.

People crowd the street, couples pushing past other couples, their hands clasped together, single girls in the tiniest shirts imaginable, single guys trying to look buff. Everyone here tries so hard.

There's a blonde, though, a pretty blonde girl smoking by the club's wall who keeps eyeing me and turning away, pretending that she's not looking over here at all. She's got a tube top on, and a skirt that might as well be nonexistent. One of those leopard-print purses.

The kicker is I no longer care whether or not Natasha shows.

This girl's not wearing any glitter.

NATALIE

I call into the dark apartment. "I'm home."

Nothing.

"Scott?"

I feel for the light switch, find it. The living room opens up before me. It's as it was, except for the scatter of torn newspaper and construction paper in the center of the carpet. My scissors, the green ones from Staples Business Depot, lie open by the far wall.

"Doug?"

The living room clock ticks—irritating me for the first time in my life—repetitive and unnecessary, making me wish we'd gotten a digital clock. It's a sharp, reprimanding click.

I sit down on the couch, pushing aside Doug's ratty blanket. It's plaid, one of those red and green patterns stamped onto its woven fabric. The tacky thing makes my designer couch look disgusting, dirty. It's an eyesore. Picking it up, I see that the blanket is riddled with holes—no, cigarette burns.

I can see Doug sitting on my couch, huddling beneath the reeking thing, holding a precariously short cigarette in one hand and flicking its ash all over the place. Onto the blanket, the couch. The leather couch. I'm sure my carpet is covered in burns, too.

And just like that I'm crying, sobbing into Doug's plaid blanket that reeks of nicotine, hugging the ragged thing to my chest. Because my carpet is ruined and I feel nauseous and I've had too many martinis and I smell like sweat and the French Canadian's cologne and I can't remember his stupid name and when Scott comes home he's going to call me "honey" and then I'm going to feel ashamed, ashamed and sorry.

DOUG

The avenue is deserted, except for a few parked cars huddled next to the curb. The day's humidity has turned to late-night fog, and now the parked cars peer out of it, large, hunched shapes in the gloom. The light from the streetlamps disperses in the mist, and everything looks hazy, incoherent.

I'm limping along the sidewalk, listening to my shoes scraping on the pavement. My hip has gotten so stiff it creaks as I walk, and my spine is all rigid. I must look pained, mechanical, but that's okay. There's absolutely no one out here to see me.

My steps are rhythmic. I move predictably—step, stop, shuffle. Step, stop, shuffle. I feel rusty, old.

I shouldn't. I'm twenty fucking two.

Maybe I should become an artist or something. Artists are allowed to be rusty, to look wounded and frail and irrecoverably damaged. It's part of their job description, really. But art isn't going to save me.

Something like a job would, I'm sure. Or an apartment. Or a girl.

I light up a cigarette, dragging deeply. It tastes good in the fog, almost

fresh. My hip stiffens again, and moving is suddenly impossible, because there's a steel bear trap clamped into my side. I stop breathing, look around. Behind me are concrete steps leading into what—a church? It doesn't matter. I sit down and hold my side, rock myself back and forth.

They never told me much about the accident. Apparently the woman who ran me down was senile. Some fucking creaky old thing who couldn't see the stop sign coming. I don't remember much, only that I was eight, that I was laughing, and that my friends had made it my turn to get our soccer ball from the street. Lucky me. That's where it starts to break down. There might have been tires screeching, but probably not, because she didn't slow down. She didn't even stop, afterward. And then I was lying on the grass, staring up at the sky and wondering why I couldn't get up.

Why I couldn't move anything at all.

It seemed funny to me, because I felt no pain. I remember just looking up and thinking—sky blue sky. The last thing I'll ever see is this sky blue sky.

The cigarette burns my fingers and I drop it, swearing. I always let them burn too short, never stub them out on time. Using my sneaker, I crush the butt and smear it over the concrete, leaving a dark smudge across the church step. And suddenly I have the strongest urge to get up and go inside, to sit in one of the church pews and bask in candlelight, absorb the silence of high ceilings and marble altars.

But I don't.

Instead I stay crouched on the steps, one cautious hand rubbing my hip, enjoying the warm fog and wondering whose glitter Scott will carry home tonight, and whether or not Natalie will even care.