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## DRESS UP

THE FACT IS, DRESSES ARE for girls and no matter what my wife says I'm not really comfortable with this whole "trying something different" thing, and if I'd wanted to make it different, I'd slip it to her friend Nancy instead of this whacked-out shit with a pair of frilly panties around my ankles and that crazy look on her face. Do I tell her to dolly up like Pamela what's-her-name? Do I beg her to let me in through the back door? She gets me coked then she puts me in high heels. She mixes bombers and suddenly I'm wearing mink. Perfect, she says. That's perfect, James. Then she's on me tooth and nail, taking pieces from my neck with her teeth. She says, oh James, that's really great. And for a minute, everything is all right, everything is better than all right. But when she grabs beneath the dress it starts to get a little crazy. When she grabs beneath the dress and gets it in her hand—that's the part that scares me. Your cunt, she says. She pulls on me and she pulls the neck of the dress down, and she kisses my shoulders and my collarbone, bites the meat on my pecs so hard it's all I can do not to hit her back.

We're in the bedroom, and she's shoving me against the teak dresser, rattling the handles that swing from the drawers. Quiet, I say, the boys. The boys? She laughs. In the basement? They'll never hear a thing.

The room is different when she's like this, when I'm like this. She's got my hair in her fist, yanking my head back, grinding her pelvis against my thigh. I'm looking at the powder blue walls, the Robert Bateman prints hanging askew, the floral bedspread bunched up at the foot of the bed. The things in here are made to be seen, but by whom? Me. I'm seeing them, as her fingernails scrape across my back. In the mirror on her vanity, she's standing on one big leg while the other twines around my body. She's cinched into my jeans with an old leather belt, the pants hanging like a set of drapes, and the stubs of her white toes just peek out of the cuffs. The thinnest red moons of polish. Her upper body swims in one of my work shirts; I can smell the dust and grease from the shop. Behind her, barely visible, is me:

hairy legs up to the fringe of red satin, the rest hidden behind her body, just my stubble and lipstick-smearred mouth over her shoulder, head angled up toward the ceiling. She lets go of my hair and lifts my arms above my head and pins them to the wall. She reaches beneath the dress with the other hand and squeezes my nuts so hard that I yelp. What's wrong? She asks.

Safety word, we need a safety word, rules. The ceiling swims silver-white, as she slowly increases the pressure.

Why? She says quietly, her breath filling the inside of my ear. This hurt?

The next day she apologizes. We'll set some ground rules she says. Luminous white fogs around the perimeter of the curtains, shadows tint with the clock's searing red. I'll pick up a first-aid kit, just in case. She reaches to the night table and snaps on the lamp, propels herself out of bed with a grunt. I watch as she takes up the laundry basket and prowls the room naked, picking up clothing. Good thing this is red, she says, stuffing the dress into her load. She drops the basket where she's standing and swings into her housecoat, tying the cloth belt around her waist. She bends to lift the mass of linen from the floor. And do you think, she says as she turns to me, a rubber sheet?

I sit at the table drinking coffee, Kleenex stuffed into the collar of my shirt.

What happened to you? Junior asks, grumbling, sleepy-eyed, as he stumbles into the kitchen light in his PJs, newly raised from the subterranean depths of a bedroom relocated to the basement.

Yeah, you're bleeding, says Adam. He crosses the kitchen and takes a mug out of the cupboard, his new thing, and then fills it from the perk. Royal rumble with Mum after we went to bed?

Watch yourself, tough guy. I sit at the table, swirl cornflakes in the bowl with my spoon.

And a good morning to you, too, Adam says, as he pushes down toast in the toaster. They circle the kitchen clanging cutlery, reaching for cereal and glassware from the cupboards. Junior passes me a paper towel and he sits at the table with a glass of juice, shakes cornflakes into the empty bowl in front of him. Mum see that you're leaving for work like that?

Junie, your mother sees everything.

Junior tilts the jug of milk, his hand shaking as it spills into his bowl. Adam grimaces as he forces down a sip of black coffee, leaning against the counter. They are only a year or so different, but at the wide part of their ages.

Adam's face shines with adolescence, his voice beginning to carry the bellow of his adult self. His younger brother, Junior, lives beneath his shadow, the full grade landing them in separate schools for the first time.

Adam pinches the toast between his thumb and forefinger as it twangs up hot, and transfers it to plate as quickly as possible. He sits at the opposite head, scooping globs of margarine with his knife from the plastic tub in the centre of the table. Junior lifts his bowl to his mouth to slurp the last of the yellowy, sugared milk. Adam reaches over and pulls down on the lip of the bowl, and when he feels Junior return the force, Adam lets go, laughing as a wave of milk surfs up and over Junior's face, and spills down the front of his pyjamas.

Fuck you. Junior drops the bowl, thrusts his chair back and jumps to his feet. Adam snickers, chewing, holds up the piece of toast, investigating the shape of his bite.

The both of you—cut it out. I stand with my hands steadying the table, about to pop my eyes from their sockets. I glare at both of them but I'm watching June, and when he lunges, taking a fistful of his brother's hair, cramming the greasy toast up into his face, I'm only a split-second behind, pulling them apart as they thrash and try to jerk their arms free. Enough.

You want to fight with someone? You can fight with me. They rub their arms as I let them go.

What the hell is going on here? Steph clumps up the stairs, empty laundry basket tucked beneath her arm. Adam? Junie? She swirls the loose front of her robe closed, pulls the belt tight and tucks it in. She's not much taller than Adam, but when she looks at them, they shrink.

I took care of it, I say, as she tosses the laundry basket to the floor in the hall and marches through the doorway. The boys both massage their arms, sneering at each other even after their mother enters the room. She hits them with the same look they give each other, and watches them squirm, as they turn to the bedlam of tipped jars and juice spilled across the table.

I asked *the boys* what the hell was going on, she says without turning.

Adam looks down at his plate. He draws his fingers through toast crumbs as Junior wipes his face with his sopping sleeve and begins to sniff. They are twins in their colouring, their freckles, and their coarse brown hair. Angry, they are their mother; cheeks emblazoned, hard-eyed.

I said I'm handling it.

She turns, her eyes wide, hair hanging limp down her forehead, her arms folded across her lilac-patterned bathrobe. I can see that.

You, Adam, she says. Shower, move it. You, Junie—count to twenty, and then you wash that face and hop into those school clothes. Not another word.

Adam turns from his chair and disappears down the hall. We hear him clump down the stairs at a run. Together, Steph and Junior count slowly from twenty. Not another word, she says, as he scrambles out from behind the table and through the doorway.

She turns and wipes her palm against her forehead, lifting her flat bangs straight into the air. What will we do with them? Moving towards me, she lifts her hand to my neck. For chrissake, Jim, she says, fingering my collar. Change your shirt. You're covered in blood.

Outside, the sun shines and the banks of snow lining the driveway are skeletal, receded, chipped with pieces of black asphalt and shrinking by the minute. Slipping my arms free from my jacket, I get into the car and pull the door closed, lay the tangled wad of nylon on the passenger seat beside me. My key is in the ignition and my hand is on my keys, and I look in the rearview, at the bungalow with its wide windows and white siding, and the Japanese maples framing the green door with a shock of budding crimson. She is my wife, and she is everywhere. She is my wife, and the pain she inflicts is like a clothes iron pressed up to my body, a vice cinching closed on my neck. It isn't me she's fucking, it's herself. What does that mean? She is changing me. I start the car, drop the parking brake and roll down the driveway. I am changing.

Work is an exercise in disappearing. I swipe in and spend the day on one of the terminals, processing Statement of Work orders, requisitions, changing totals in SAP and running budgets. The shop is hot, loud, vibrating with the pitch of a dentist's drill—someone upstairs drops a grinder off an elbow of pipe. An arc stutters as it touches steel. When I go to the washroom midmorning, I turn to the mirror and it looks like my fucking throat is cut.

I dab lightly with a wet paper towel. It's another mouth, an angry sneer. Pink water dribbles onto my shoulder. There are lines around my eyes, my hair thinning to scrub, a slight frost covers my stubble, and I am too fucking old for this shit.

You get in a fight or something, Jimmy? I hear the door swinging shut and John, one of the painters, waits for the sink with his coffee cup. Jesus, he says when I turn. That looks raw.

Feels it, too.

Get it x-rayed. Make sure there's no metal in it.

John bumps me out of the way at the sink, runs the water for a bit before rinsing his cup. He washes his face, his hands, dark splashes across the front of his coveralls. Do yourself a favour, he says, and get it taken care of. He wipes his face with his sleeve. They have to do an MRI for some reason, and that metal will pull itself through your goddamn windpipe.

Outside the shop, hanging pipes and fluorescent lights, eyewash stations and pull alarms cram the hallways. Plaster dust, metal shavings coat the cement floor like flour on a baker's tray. In the locker room, men shoot the shit before their break. Here's Jimmy! Jimmy James! tosses around the room as I open my locker, crouch and pull my small red cooler from the foot.

The men sprawl along the benches with their feet propped up, the toes of their boots worn through to steel, the knees of navy coveralls thickened scabs of grease, legs and arms pocked with burns. Crumpled brown bags swing from big, calloused hands. Some of them still wear their hairnets, coke-bottle safety glasses. You get that messing with the broads up in Quality Control? They snicker, point to the lash of red across my neck.

That Rita's a monster in the sack. I shake my head, feign shock, as they laugh and play along. Rita is seventy if she's a day. Three hundred pounds to boot.

Roll her in flour, one of them looses into the cackle.

Ain't nothing for Jimbo, here. You seen his wife? Anthony stares from across the room. Right up his alley.

More laughter. I bend down and reach into my cooler, pull my brown bag out from the cold packs and tins of pop.

Pipes like Arnold-fucken-Schwarzenegger.

I shut the cooler, slip it back into my locker.

Anthony laughs, kisses his teeth. And balls like Dennis Rodman.

All right, all right, I say, standing. Enough.

The room fills with a low oooh. Anthony leans against the opposite bank of lockers. He looks at me like he's looking at a pile of shit. He says, no wonder he busts our balls about totals in friggen SAP—his wife probably makes him piss sitting down.

Cut it out, Anthony. I look right at him, and drop my lunch to the floor. He crosses the room until we are eye-to-eye. Gotta wear the pants at work, he says, because there's no way he's getting into them at home.

Nobody laughs. He is bigger, broader than me. He's eyeballing with deep blue eyes. Half his teeth are crooked. His nostrils flare, and breath pushes through his coarse moustache. Pussywhipped, he asks, or just pussy?

When I kiss him, I feel the sandpaper of his chin scrape up against mine.

He shoves me hard against the lockers. For chrissake! He yells, spits, wipes his hands over his mouth and moustache. What the fuck? But now he's pacing and spitting and everyone pissing their pants laughing, choking with it, nearly bursting blood vessels in their squeezed-up eyes.

Except Anthony. His face burns crimson. They are grabbing him around the shoulders, pulling him towards the door. You were asking for it, they say to him. Being a right prick. Alone, I feel a weight snarl itself in the centre of my chest. My shoulders hum from the hit into the lockers. I'm too old for this shit. I bend and pick up my crumpled, half stepped-on lunch from the floor.

At first it was a hard sell. They're boys, Steph. Twelve and Fourteen. In the long run, it'll be a lot less embarrassing for everyone.

Thirteen until November, she said.

The boys were at their grandmother's, scooping gunk from her eaves-trough, raking, bagging, putting lawn furniture away for the season. I poured coffee into two cups, set one in front of Steph at the kitchen table. It was late afternoon and the light coming in through the window had already faded to the orange of old photographs. They're at that age. They need their space.

She leaned back in her chair until it touched the wall, pulled at the collar of her turtleneck, fastened and unfastened the top button on the brown cardigan. She'd gotten her hair done, much shorter than usual, and she looked vaguely Pekingese. Aren't they still young for all that?

You do their laundry.

Jesus, she said, as the chair tipped forward onto the linoleum and she dropped her head into her hands. I'll clean out the sewing room and that can be Adam's. We'll put Junie in the den.

Why is this a big deal? They're not going into the army.

I won't be their mother anymore. She sighed, lifted the coffee to her lips. I'll just be that woman who picks up spermy socks from the floor.

Once the boys were in the basement it was like we were kids again. Fucking before breakfast, or we popped breath mints and brought each other

off with our mouths. We found uses for silk scarves. We invested in machinery. But it was a crack in the door. And it blew through the entire house.

It scares me. I think this as I skip through the holes in traffic, drifting lane to lane, climbing around frustrations. She scares me. Why does it have to be pain? She wants me to wear a dress, I'll wear a fucking dress.

I'm seconds from home when the cell phone in my jacket pocket goes off. I'm pulling into the driveway right now, I say. I turn the wheel with both hands, phone clamped between ear and shoulder. No, I'm just out front.

When I open the door, it's a shitstorm of tears. What the hell is going on here? I drop my keys on the bench and walk around to the living-room. Adam sits in the centre of the couch, his cheeks red and wet. The cuffs of his plaid shirt unbuttoned and balled up in his fists, one white, hairless knee pushed through the hole in his scrappy jeans. Steph paces, clutches the cordless phone. Your son, she says, and turns to Adam. She bites her lip. Leaning over, she picks something up off the coffee table. Here, she shouts, throwing it, and midair the blur turns into a pack of Player's Smooth that hits me on the shoulder and lands face-up on the carpet. Steph covers her face in her hands.

You're smoking? I ask him.

Adam lifts his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around himself. He turns his head and looks at the fireplace.

Huh? Look at me, for *chrissake*.

He looks up with eyes full with tears, freckles across his nose.

I should make you sit here, smoke the entire goddamn—. But it doesn't seem worth finishing. Just get out of my sight.

He gets up off the couch, a sneer twisted through his mouth. He walks to where I'm standing and he slowly bends and picks up the pack of cigarettes, stands, and walks down the hall.

Good, I yell at his back. That's a fucking respirator waiting to happen.

But he doesn't turn; he just walks through the kitchen, down the stairs to the basement.

This is all your fault, she says.

I'm learning how to put on lipstick. In the mirror, I embellish my lip line with brown pencil, give them shape so they look less like smooth, straight pieces of liquorice. At first, the brown wax slathered over my mouth like a bad joke, against the stubble and the wrinkles around my eyes and the uncultivated everything that says that I'm a man. Like a goddamned Benny

Hill skit, or a *sweet transvestite*. Now I see only the sweep of lines, the brushstrokes up close. I know how to choose my colours.

Steph strides into the room tying her housecoat closed. Wipe that shit off your face.

I sit at her oak vanity, sifting through the basket of tiny bottles of nail polish, compacts, nude and tawny lipsticks. You can't wear most of these, I say. The eighties were a long time ago.

She stops in the middle of the room, looks down so her bangs float in front of her eyes, crosses her arms over her chest. She wiggles her chipped red toes, shifts her weight from foot to foot. I'm so fucking angry, she says.

Me, too.

Why would he be so stupid?

I turn the stool to face her, and she comes, slowly bending to kiss me, and then falling across my knees. She wipes her mouth, laughing, and says, you don't need to apply it so thick. She reaches to the box of tissues by the mirror, folds one in half, and then slides the paper between my lips. Now blot. The smear of brown on the tissue is like butterfly wings.

She reaches down and opens the top drawer of the vanity, pulls out the cigar box with its bill and mirror.

No blow, I say to her. I want to have a good day tomorrow.

She slides the box back into its drawer, wipes her hand over my mouth. Then we fuck like normal people.

I realize that it doesn't matter whether my sons hate me or not, that being liked has nothing to do with being a good dad. In the morning, their silence weighs like a carcass across the breakfast table. I'm almost proud of Junie—his head bowed into his cereal, he doesn't meet our eyes, doesn't let his brother down. Adam sits beside him with his arms folded, and won't touch the toast his mother buttered for him. He sips from his mug of black coffee. The pack of cigarettes outlines his plaid shirt pocket, the white band of its label just visible in the red.

Work is always the same, in it or out of it, there's just more. After, I walk in through the door and the boys are already ferreted down in the basement, the television's muffle of laughter floats up the stairs.

I find myself perched on the side of the bathtub, the water running; I drag a razor slowly up one lathered thigh. Each pass is like a highway through mountains of shaving cream. The hair catches, and tears. The skin looks clean for a second until red buds up through the pores. My legs are streaked with



pink; the bathwater scummed with hair and partially dissolved lather. There is one particularly bad gash across the back of my ankle.

In the mirror, the wound on my neck is puffed up and raw, verging purple. I tape it with gauze and a generous blob of antibiotic cream.

I can hear Steph downstairs putting away dishes, so I sit at her vanity and outline my lips with *cocoa*, fill with *toasted almond*. By the time I hear her on the stairs, I'm already in her red satin dress. She opens the door and then she sees me, sitting on the stool, a flowing of silk as one soft leg crosses the other. She stops, pulls her shirt up and over her head, slips her trackpants down to her ankles. She walks to me. I stand as she reaches up and grabs a hank of my hair in her fist, pulls my head back, pulls until I bend at the knees. I take her other hand and push it beneath the dress, against one smooth, hairless thigh. You shaved, she says. Something like a growl creaks out of her. When I'm low enough, she kisses me, forces her tongue hard into my mouth.

Jesus Christ, she says, as our lips unlock and she backs away looking at her hand. You're bleeding.

I reach up to my neck and the bandage feels wet and heavy. It's beginning to run, big drops of it on my shoulder, spatter on the surface of the vanity. In the mirror, the gauze looks swollen like a fat, red slug.

Here, she says. She peels off the tape and drops the pad onto the vanity beside her makeup. The wound is split, purple and raw, a black frown where the ragged edges have pulled apart. She presses a hand towel to my neck. Hold this here. How do you feel?

Okay. When I stand there's no purchase, the room bends.

Sit down. She wraps her arms around my chest, and grunts, easing me down onto the stool. Are you going to faint?

What? The room swims the fog around every angle, every line of furniture and light. In my gut a twisting, an airy lift. The weight of my head, so heavy to hold.

Are you going to be sick? Look, we're going to the hospital. She paces to the door, to her chest of drawers, to the closet, she picks up a pair of crumpled jeans and sits on the bed and slides them up to her waist. She takes the sweatshirt and pulls it over her head.

I have to change.

She's already calling the boys, standing at the open doorway, bellowing. I'm seeing her through a wad of cheesecloth, white flares in the periphery, a screen door over the surface of my eyes.

I have to change, Steph. My face is grey, tinged with lime. The boys. I know, she says, I'm sorry. There are tears in her eyes. I can't lift you by myself.

Steph kneels and pushes the dress up, past my thighs, tries to shimmy the fabric up past my ass. The boys come at a run, still buttoning their jeans, bare feet slapping the hardwood in the hall.

It's okay. She doesn't turn when the boys come through the door. Your father's a little light-headed. Adam, help me get this up and over his head. Junior is frozen in the doorway. He sticks his fingers in his mouth and he watches, but doesn't move.

Adam stands behind me and lifts from under my arms. The towel falls away and blood weeps down my neck. Is it infected?

They manage to get the dress up and over my head. I'm naked, my penis like a shrivelled grub.

I'm okay, I can stand. I pull myself up the vanity, as Adam bends down, picks up the bloody hand towel. I'll get you a new one, he offers, pushing past June on his way to the bathroom. Steph collects clothes from my chest of drawers. I'm okay, I turn to June, still watching from the doorway. June, Steph commands, look on the table there and pass your father the cold cream. Junie doesn't move. She walks over with my clothes under one arm and unscrews the lid, smears a finger-full across my lips. Here, she says, and stuffs a wad of tissue into my hand.

Adam comes back with a facecloth. The rest are dirty, he says. Steph hands me my clothing, item by item, and Adam steadies me while I step into my underwear. He helps me to pull up my jeans. I'm okay, I say to all of them, I just lost it for a moment.

I can walk to the car, but the boys come anyway. It's silent as Steph drives us the short way to the hospital. Inside is blinding fluorescence, pots of plastic ferns, peach-coloured curtains, and stacks of dog-eared magazines. I sit on one of the chairs in a long row, pressing the towel against my neck. Junie sits beside me, and he hasn't said a word since we left the house. I can't imagine what he thinks. But I can. Steph talks to the triage nurse, and then gestures with the clipboard she holds in her hand. She scribbles something down, looks up, and asks again. Outside, Adam sits on a bench beside an old man with an oxygen tank, both of them smoking cigarettes.

Dad? Junie finally asks. Did you shave your legs?

Yes, I say, and though I can feel his eyes, I don't turn. I don't look.

Steph crosses the expanse of linoleum with the clipboard still in her

hand. Come on, she says, if it's just a couple of stitches they say we can be in and out in ten or fifteen minutes.

Together in the triage room, I sit on the gurney and Steph paces back and forth. When the tall, lanky doctor enters, he washes his hands and slips on rubber gloves, and then he moves the towel away from my neck. It's not bleeding but it's swollen, streaked with purple and black. This is going to need stitches, he says. He is wearing jeans and a golf shirt under his lab coat. Though he has a moustache, it's thin, scraggly, and he can't be more than thirty years old. He switches on the work light and twists the spot onto my neck. This is pretty infected, he says. Did it break open? He washes and disinfects the area. Steph covers her eyes as he administers a shot of antibiotics, and then another shot of painkiller. He looks in the wound for debris, scrapes something out with one of his tools. He jettisons water from a syringe, and I can feel it run into my shirt. He rubs in a numbing, tingling gel. After a moment, my neck feels cool, somehow a part of someone else's body. He loads a curved needle trailing thin black thread into a pair of forceps.

Can't you just use the staples?

This is a little delicate, he says. He squeezes the ragged, tattered edges together. I feel a pop, and then another, and a kind of rubbery scrape as the thread pulls through my neck. Steph covers her eyes, turns toward the door. Across the room, in the mirror above the sink, I can see the pursed, swollen lips stitched closed, the black threads spidering crookedly over the seam. He wipes another jelly over the area, tapes down a clean gauze pad. Steph is pale. Her hands shake as she covers her mouth to cough. The doctor snaps off the gloves, washes his hands in the sink. It's only then I notice the red tint of lipstick smeared around my mouth, the dark pencil lining my lips.

How did you get that gash, anyway? He asks, soaping, running the water.

Steph looks at me but she doesn't say a word. She crosses her arms, tucks both hands into her armpits. I'll go check on Junie, she says.

I fell at work the other day.

He pulls a brown paper towel from the dispenser on the wall, dries his hands, and then drops it crumpled into the bin. He squirts sanitizer into his palm, works it between his fingers. He turns away from the sink to face me, pulls a pad from his pocket, writes a prescription for antibiotics.

No really, he says, lifting his eyes, passing me the sheet of paper. Who did that to your neck?