

## *More of a Handstand Girl*

My brother is allergic to people. He lives in the spare room closet. It is four years, two months and a handful of days since I last saw his face. It is no big deal. He is not my twin brother. I am a girl and I am not allergic to people. I like people just fine.

My brother is allergic to people. He told me this one night, ten days after he first moved into the spare room closet. I thought it was just an adolescent phase. He was odd and determined, utterly set on living inside the spare room closet.

He moved the stereo into the closet and ran an extension lead to the nearest outlet. I made him ready meals and peanut butter sandwiches, leaving them on a tray with eating instructions just outside his door. It was the best of times. I felt useful, like a real girl. Even then I couldn't see his face. He wore a motorcycle helmet every time he crossed the hall to the bathroom. I took to wearing dark glasses inside. I pretended like I couldn't see him; anything to indulge the invisible.

I was on the other side of the apartment when my brother first told me about his allergy. We were talking into two Campbell's soup cans attached by a piece of string. Before they were telephones the Campbell's soup cans had been soup cans and still smelt of mushroom soup when you raised them to your mouth for speaking.

"Don't lick the edges of the telephone," I said because my brother, when he was younger, had liked to lick things.

"Don't be stupid," he said. "I only lick things I like." My brother has never liked mushrooms.

I was watching television in the front room, describing everything I could see through my dark glasses, laughing into the soup can so the laugh went jiggling all the way down the string into my brother's ear. There was no television in the spare room closet.

Between the programs there was a commercial for hay fever remedy. “Hey,” I said to my brother at the other end of the Campbell’s soup can phone, “Remember the time our Mom got hay fever?”

My brother remembered that whole crazy summer like it was only yesterday or the day before. He remembered the way our mom used to tape a Kleenex across her mouth and nose to filter out the pollen. We talked about the way those Kleenexes rose and fell with every breath, like tiny parachutes descending on her face. My brother remembered the acupuncture and the time our mother set fire to the neighbors’ herb garden. In fact, my brother accurately remembered almost every detail of that whole hay fever summer and so naturally we got to talking about allergies.

I said, “I guess I’m allergic to this dumb city. I guess I’ve almost caught asthma from it.” I huffed on an empty inhaler to prove my point.

“That’s nothing,” my brother replied, “I am allergic to people. If someone sees me I might probably die. I might probably die the kind of violent death where I have to go to hospital immediately even though everyone knows it is already too late.”

I knew exactly the kind of death he was talking about. I watch a lot of television in my spare time.

I stopped considering the spare room closet an adolescent phase and became very serious about my brother’s condition. “Listen here,” I said in a very serious voice, though I could never be sure how well my vocal inflections were travelling down the Campbell’s soup can phone, “we’ve got to be very serious about your condition. This is no laughing matter. At any minute you might probably die.”

My brother agreed wholeheartedly. I could hear him nodding down the telephone string.

Right after this conversation I built a trash bag wall between my brother and I. I split the apartment in two and drew a map to avoid confusion. I am good with lines and other straight things. “That is your side and this is mine,” I shouted through the trash bag wall. Everything was plastic and futuristic like the part in

ET where the space people try to steal ET and do experiments on him. My brother used to cry at that part in the movie. It was sadder to him than the time our Grandma really died.

Building those black, plastic walls down the middle of our apartment, I felt older and clever, like a scientist.

We got a bathroom each and I got the television. “What about the kitchen?” my brother asked and I got it because I am the girl and I am entirely capable of sliding his meals under the trash bag every morning and evening.

“It works,” he said. I imagined it was the last conversation we’d ever have.

I wrote his words on a post-it note and stuck them to the fridge. “It works.” Last words are important things not to be forgotten.

It is four years, two months and a handful of days since I last saw my brother’s face. His allergy has gotten worse. Just thinking about people is enough to bring him out in hives all the way down his back. He tells me this, whispering into the soup can phone late at night. We don’t speak now. If I hold my breath and keep the line quiet, he can pretend I don’t even exist. He can imagine an apartment at the end of the world where he is the only real person left. He can tell himself, “This isn’t my sister. This isn’t a telephone. This isn’t even a conversation. It’s just the only boy in the world talking to himself, cramming all his thoughts into a Campbell’s condensed soup can.”

If I don’t breathe and I don’t speak and I manage not to jiggle the soup can string, he feels completely alone and the hives are barely visible.

Lately my brother has begun a new project. He is building himself a suit of armor which will protect him from all the people who might probably kill him.

The real suit of armor will take months and months, possibly years to be finished however, my brother is building practice

armor out of tin foil. He tapes the tin foil to his body with Scotch tape and gathers the ankles and wrists together with elastic bands. He wears mismatched oven mitts on his hands, though the thumb is in the wrong place on the left. He wears my father's old fishing boots on both feet and the motorcycle helmet up top.

"I wish you could see me," he says, whispering into the Campbell's soup can phone, "I look just like an astronaut in my armor."

This is a dumb thing for my brother to say. He has not yet tested out the armor. If someone sees him at this stage he might probably die.

My brother practices on next door's kitten, which is now a cat.

He stands in the middle of the spare room wearing his tin foil armor and makes the noise which attracts cats. My mother, before she went up in flames, told me that people in France make a different noise to attract cats. If this is true I find it very intriguing. It means that animals can speak in foreign languages and that is a very interesting idea to consider. However, having known my mother in the years before she went up in flames, it is more than likely bullshit.

My brother practices being seen with next door's cat. He stands in the middle of the spare room, wearing his tin foil armor and forces the cat to look straight at him. He does not come out in hives. The tin foil armor is an all round success, though not very practical as it rips every time he takes a step.

"Back to the drawing board," my brother mutters down the Campbell's soup can phone but he sounds happy.

One Sunday afternoon my brother practiced on next door's cat without his tin foil armor. Afterwards he told me all about it. The experiment was not a success. My brother only got as far as removing the tin foil arms and his left leg before the hives started and he began to probably die so quickly he had to hide in the spare room closet for three hours. It was a close call. It took two weeks for my brother to fully recover but he did recover. My brother has always been odd and determined, as was my mother who'd been

vowing to go up in flames for years before she finally managed it.

In fact, last weekend I happened to see my brother climbing the fire escape outside the spare room window, stark naked with only the roof top pigeons to watch his progress. Pausing halfway up the ladder he scattered huge handfuls of breadcrumbs into the night sky while the pigeons swooped and dived and saw him in all his milk, white glory. I said nothing, following his logic from a distance. Being seen by a pigeon is a Hell of a lot less like being seen by a real person than next door's cat. There were no repercussions to the whole pigeon experiment. Perhaps my brother is recovering from his very serious condition.

I said nothing. If my brother knew that I had seen him stark naked on the fire escape, the chances are he might probably have died.

The real suit of armor is well under way now.

I steal knives and forks for him, fine cutlery from the street cafes outside our apartment. I carry a huge bag every time I leave the apartment. My Mother used to keep all her wigs in this bag. It is big enough to hide next door's cat and two other cats beside, should I ever have the inclination. I steal almost everything that isn't pinned down.

I am like a magpie. I only steal shiny things.

I steal knives and forks, biscuit tin lids, hubcaps from cars which park in the side streets behind our apartment, bicycle chains, scissors, nails and screws right out of peoples' doors. I steal earrings and necklaces from the department stores in the city centre. I'll steal anything made of metal. I shrink my lungs down into my stomach and do my youngest, smallest face so no one will notice me. Then I slide things into my enormous bag and run all the way home to our apartment.

I have never been caught.

Perhaps I am very good at stealing and this is why I have never

been caught. Perhaps it is because I only steal things which no one else wants.

My brother once said to me, “You should read *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens because it is about children who steal things. Maybe you will get some tips.”

What a good idea, I thought. The very next day I stole that *Oliver Twist* book from the downtown library. It was the only non-metallic thing I’ve ever stolen. I read it cover to cover in less than two days and wished I hadn’t bothered. I learnt nothing new from *Oliver Twist*. The words were old fashioned and gave me a migraine headache.

My brother keeps me up late with the banging.

Somewhere on the other side of the trash bag wall he is building a beautiful thing; a shiny, shiny suit of armor which will keep him safe every time he might probably die. I dream that suit of armor like you would not believe. I dream that all the banging, all the soldering and spoons, hubcaps and bicycle chains will build me a new brother; a seven foot tall brother with iron lungs and a silver smile. I dream a brother who might probably never die, who will climb fire escapes late at night and shine like a constellation prize. I dream a golden brother who no longer lives in the spare room closet.

The banging stops. It is 4:30 in the morning.

“Picture this,” my real brother says humming down the Campbell’s soup can phone, “I have robot arms and robot legs. I sing like a wristwatch when I walk. I am, all but my feet, invincible now.”

And I am happy for him in his biscuit tin suit, smiling over his soldering irons with a seven inch zip for a mouth. And I am same time sad for his real boy face which I can never again see and his skin which is half ways freckled and exactly like mine on both cheeks.

Sometimes I am lonely like a real girl should be. I whisper the loneliness into the Campbell’s soup can phone, early in the morning when I am sure my brother will be asleep.

I know all the boys in our apartment block. I bring them home and stick them like Band Aids on the loneliness.

“Ignore the cat,” I say, “And the banging. It’s only my brother who might probably die if anyone sees him.”

They think I am crazy, like my mother who went up in flames, leaving a charred spot on the living room floor. I serve them root beer in tall glasses and turn cartwheels across the floorboards.

“Ignore the banging,” I say, “Watch my legs make distractions in the air.”

I strip down to my underwear and turn cartwheels up and down the living room floor while the boys drink root beer and look nervously at the charred place where my mother went up in flames.

I never tell the truth. I have always been more of a handstand girl but these days it smarts to stand still.

The banging persists, sharking under the trash bag curtain. The boys get nervous. They look at their watches and check their cell phones for a getaway plan. I take both my arms and tie them to the living room sofa. I turn more cartwheels and the cartwheels are secret code for, “do not leave me. I am lonely with my brother who cannot be seen and the charred place where my mother went up in flames. Drink my root beer and talk to me like a real boy with a mouth that moves. Watch detective shows on cable. Bitch about the beautiful girls from the year above.”

The banging persists. The boys get nervous. My mouth will not move honestly without a Campbell’s soup can phone.

I hold their knees and say, “I am very good at doing sex, you know.”

All the boys in our apartment block want to hear this but no one knows how to respond. They strip down to their underwear and turn cartwheels across the living room floor, avoiding the charred place where my mother went up in flames and though I am more of a handstand girl, even this is better than silence. When the banging grows too cymbal sharp to ignore, they leave through the front door.

They stop at every apartment on our floor and say, “It’s so sad. Those kids are crazy. We should send round Social Services, or

a chicken casserole.” They do not mention the cartwheels or the rings and chains, the belt buckles, braces and earrings they have paid for the privilege.

I am lonely like a houseplant, practicing my handstands against the bathroom door.

The armor is almost done.

At night my brother wears the motorcycle helmet and we have real conversations. As long as he keeps the motorcycle helmet on, we can have real conversations, pulling our sentences backwards and forwards across our Campbell’s soup can phones. We talk about the ever after. We talk about taking a vacation in a dry place; New Mexico is always an option. We talk about asking for help and always agree to talk more at a later date.

God is on our side. We asked him specially and he slept on it for three days, rising on the third to say, “Yes, yes and yes again.” We are still his children and we are glad like you would not believe. We write our gladness in the margarine tub with butter knives and baby fingers, passing the margarine like secret messages backwards and forwards beneath the trash bag wall. God is on our side, giving us good things: coupons for free fries at MacDonald’s, next door’s kitten, the perfect imprint of a dead moth on the bathroom tiles, a mother who left before she could do any real damage.

We do not talk about our mother now. I avoid the charred place in the living room where she went up in flames and her closet which still smells like hairspray and dime store soap. I drink her vodka and throw her records from the open windows and pretend like she never asked for children shapen in her own image. Every morning I watch my face in the bathroom mirror. I am becoming her, woebegone eyebrows and all. I pinch my cheeks and fold my nose. I suck my lips ‘til they bleed carnation pink.

I say, “We are not our mother. We will not go up in flames nor disappear with the sadness.”

On very good mornings, the days when we have pancakes, I almost

believe myself.

The banging is much slower these days. The armor is almost finished.

I ask my brother when he will be done.

“Soon,” he says.

And soon is not a year or months from now. Soon is Tuesday evening at six o'clock, after Quincy and a microwaveable Pot Pie.

“It works,” my brother says. Last words and first words, smiling down the Campbell’s soup can phone. “Even my feet are invincible now. I have practiced on next door’s cat and a whole host of unsuspecting pigeons. I am ready to come out of the spare room closet.”

My brother comes out, ripping the trash bag curtain from side to side in one huge metallic swoop. He stands before me seven foot tall in his silver boots. He is an astronaut, a robot, a golden calf waiting to topple over. He is half blind with the glare and accidentally steps in the charred place where our mother went up in flames. I wonder if he can feel her sadness leaking all the way through his robot shoes.

I reach out one finger and trace the outline of a dinner fork across the left side of his belly. He feels nothing. I pin fridge magnets to his back. He feels nothing. I beat him over the head with a fish slice and an industrial sized whisk. He feels nothing, only registering the dull clunk of metal on insulated metal.

I say, “Can you see me, seeing you? Do you still think you might probably die if I see you?”

He says nothing.

I push the Campbell’s soup can phone against the side of his motorcycle helmet head and repeat my question, yelling so loud that next door’s cat retreats to the safety of the fire escape.

No response, but I think he’s smiling.

I strip down to my underwear and turn cartwheels all across the living room floor even though I know it’s wrong. My brother stands right there by the coffee table, beaming like a television

antennae. He is shiny and useless, safe as cabbage. He might probably never die and I am mad like you would not believe.

I let my brother stand for three weeks straight. He has not yet chanced the world outside our apartment door. He sleeps standing up in his armor and eats through a tiny tube attached to the motorcycle helmet. I liquidize everything, even his root beer and pour the liquids into his head as if he was a potted plant.

I imagine my brother is disappearing inside his armor and no amount of cartwheels can bring him back.

I am lonely like my lungs are falling out. I have no friends my own age, even the boys from our apartment block no longer believe me when I say, "I am very good at doing sex." I have nothing left to steal and no one to hold still for. I watch detective shows on cable and sleep with one arm around next doors' kitten who is now a cat and squeals loudly against my advances, preferring anyone's arms to mine, even my mechanical brother.

I take a tin opener and slice my brother wide open in his sleep. I see him. He is milk white under the metal. His arms and legs are the color of frozen sausages. I see him thirty minutes; a whole half hour of seeing. I know that he might probably die now and I cannot quit seeing.

Nothing happens. My brother sleeps like a baby, unaware of the seeing and the wide metal gash splicing him open like a tin of beans. I can almost see his insides.

I go sit in the charred place on the living room floor. I think about going up in flames and my eyebrows are already there.

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