

**A STOLE OF PLASTIC**  
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**Third Place, Short Story**

Morgan thinks of her mental illness. Morgan thinks there is never a good time to tell anyone of her mental illness. Of course she told Ed, her fiancé. After 6 months of talking on the telephone long distance and sending e-mails they had fallen deeply in love. Her mental illness did come up as a subject. It is something she thinks he might want to know. She describes it as ugly because it is ugly this mental illness she has. He thought it nothing big. He would love her so much that she would not ever be sick. So she moves from California where she has been sick to Arizona where she will be loved to death. As it happens, she gets sick. Her mind splits itself causing reality to birth offsprings. So now there are many realities. She is not living in the reality of Ed, and he is not loving her in her reality. Ed says good-bye to Morgan when he sees that he cannot love her enough. The good-bye comes right after she is released from the psychiatric hospital. He says go live with your grandmother as Morgan walks through the door of his house, which is her house no more. He starts crying, but not she. She just stands there and stares at him and says I must pack. It is good she knows how to pack because he is of no help to her. Ed has a bad heart from a heart attack at age forty that prevents him from helping.

II

There were two counselors in her home. Grandmother had telephoned the crisis line, and the crisis counselor that spoke with grandmother had sent the two counselors to her home. They were both women. One woman wore beads around her neck. She kept playing with these beads like a child would a candy necklace. The beads were not the color of the candy, but were bold, bright colors. Red, violet, a flaming orange. The counselor rolled them between her thumb and forefinger. This counselor also wore Birkenstocks and had a welcoming face. The other counselor was more like a bulldog. Her face wrinkled in the right places, across her forehead and around her mouth. Her black T-shirt stretched taut against her torso. She wore blue jeans and heavy black boots. Neither of the counselors were wanted by Morgan. Morgan walked to the back room where she would have more privacy. The counselors followed her. The one with the beads asked her what was going on. Morgan answered that bugs were chewing her brain making it difficult to think. Morgan said that she was being called to travel to the fourth reality. Reality had six planes. She said to the counselors that she must chop her grandmother up and hide the pieces around the house. Her grandmother would occupy every room in her house at the same time and this would be truly a great thing. She said she had to be on the fourth plane to chop her grandmother up. Then she would swallow up all her pills and her kidneys and liver would stop functioning; she would be dead. It took a lifetime to be dead, and Morgan felt she had had her lifetime. She paced back and forth as she addressed the counselors. She wished a counselor would pace with her. The pacing counselor might keep Morgan tied to the common reality by simply moving in unison with her. Morgan said nothing and the answer to the situation passed; Morgan was going to remain outside the known reality of the common people. This is not to say that all people are common. The majority are not.

The voices in Morgan's head wished she would fall to the fourth plane like a tiny pebble tossed from an edge making a slight splash as it strikes the forgiving surface of water. Forgiveness is something Morgan craved each time she got confused. She recognized the confusion as her heart beat in rhythm to her pacing while her brain was being eaten. The counselor with the big boots and wrinkled face shouted, have you taken your medication. The sentence of sound had to enter the void that was Morgan in her fallen reality. Morgan shouted no from a distance of two feet. The counselor with the beads and the counselor that was a bulldog called their office to get consent to transport Morgan to the hospital. They wanted to take her away from her grandmother's house. She tried to communicate to the counselors that she was already away and did not need to go away to anywhere else. She had not packed her suitcase or brushed her teeth. They took her away anyway as grandmother looked out from the kitchen window of the house.

### III

Grandmother, permanently hunched over and with pretty white hair, always pulls aside the soft curtains that cover the windows of the kitchen. Grandmother likes to look at things happening in the neighborhood and with the neighbors. The neighborhood is generally quiet as the neighbors water their lawn or walk their dogs. Tonight it is her driveway that clamors with action. It is her granddaughter that is doing the protesting making the neighborhood lively. She watches as her granddaughter is asked to step into the van. She is astonished when her granddaughter acquiesces. Grandmother thinks acquiesce is such a delicate word for her to think of during a time when her granddaughter can only behave in a brutish way. My granddaughter is beside herself. Grandmother wonders how long it will be this time, and why can't she be of more help to Morgan. Grandmother prays the medication will take care of it. The it being the mental illness that steals the mind of Morgan.

### IV

Morgan thinks to jump out of the van because the cyborg sitting beside her orders her to do it, to jump out of the van when it stops. Says Morgan to the counselors, I am going to jump out of the van because the cyborg tells me to. The bulldog glances at Morgan in such a way that Morgan knows she better not. The bulldog drives fast and does not stop, not even for a red light. She will not stop until she gets Morgan to the hospital. This makes the cyborg angry which in turn makes Morgan mad. The counselor with the beads says there is no cyborg and that the best thing Morgan can do is sit still and buckle her seatbelt. The counselor turns the radio up loud. So loud that Morgan cannot hear the cyborg. The four of them arrive at the hospital. Morgan moves beyond herself. She begins thrashing around in the van, banging her head against the window, repeating all the dirty words she knows over and over. She bites the hand of one of the psychiatric technicians that has come to the aid of the counselors. It takes two psychiatric technicians and the two counselors to get her out of the van and onto a gurney. They decide she is beyond herself and needs help to calm down and come back. They place Morgan in a five point restraint. Cuffs on each wrist, cuffs

on each ankle, and a belt across the middle. Morgan cannot move. She complains desperately because she has an itch on her ear. Morgan says, please bring my brain back the bugs have carried it away. The beaded counselor assures her that her brain is still there and that her thinking it is not is a symptom of her illness. The explanation is too sophisticated for Morgan at this time so she starts to scream. The nurse comes and injects her with Haldol and Ativan. The counselors drive away in their van. The psychiatric technician named Mark rolls her into a room and shuts the door. If she could have screamed then she would have screamed that she hated closed doors. The medicine she was given steals her tongue. With no brain and no tongue she cannot shout. Later that evening a naked man walks into her room She still says nothing. The naked man says oops. The naked man has been looking for the bathroom. He excuses himself and leaves. It is a short stay.

## V

What brings mental illness to a person? Morgan thinks about this a great deal. The doctor and the nurse and her neighbor next door tell her it is a chemical imbalance in the brain. Morgan thinks that the chemicals in the brain are like the chemicals in a photo lab. If you expose a certain roll of film to certain chemicals you will get certain pictures, and the pictures will become memory and the memory, identity. Morgan remembers rolls of film that she does not wish to expose to the chemicals in her brain. Just as she was born long and with dark hair, so too was she born with suicide in mind. The thought of death would come to her in the happiest of moments much like a sneeze that sneaks its way between she and her lover as they begin to embrace. She never thinks it odd this preoccupation with death. She does know, though, not to mix suicide with the chemicals in her brain. The combination is certain to provide her with a roll of scenes that color her brain black with a stitch of gold for what might have been if only the self had lasted.

Morgan remembers the sadness of the first possibility of her death. She sits in the middle of her mother's large bed and watches her mother at the vanity. Her mother is rouging her cheeks and powdering her nose and rearranging her dark tresses. Morgan, usually mesmerized by her mother's activities at the vanity, becomes interested in the plastic left from the dry cleaned clothes. Don't put that over your head or you will die, says her mother. Morgan puts the plastic over her head and wraps it around her neck like a stole. At this point her mother looks at her and leaves the room. Morgan stares down the hall at the diminishing figure. Sweat breaks out on her small forehead. She panics until she realizes that she can take off the plastic hat and stole herself. Morgan remembers being saddened at six years of age because her mother doesn't do it for her. Her mother is not going to be around to take the plastic off. Possibly her mother does not know how to remove plastic. Perhaps her mother only knows how to apply it. This thinking tires Morgan at six so she jumps from the bed and goes outside to hula hoop.

## VI

Morgan slept alone. Her two younger sisters were down the hall. It was not good that Morgan slept alone but she could not help it. She was not strong enough to move her bed into her sisters' room. Her father would visit her late at night many times per month. Morgan did not count. Her young brain knew one was too much. So she did not count to two. It is always the same line. You belong to me and I love you. No she screams inside her head. Simple terror keeps her quiet. Maybe terror is too large a word to be simple. The house was quiet except for her banging. His thrust was so hard that her head banged loudly into the wall. Each morning she would inspect the paint at the head of her bed to see if it had flaked off. She would go to her mother and bring her back to her room and say, see, it's flaking off. I can't possibly sleep here one more night.

## VII

At age 12, Morgan specifically remembers walking up to her father, tilting her head just a bit because she was six feet tall and she had just a bit to tilt. Tilted, she looked her father in the eye and said she was awfully tired and only twelve and what did he think could be done about it. He started laughing one of those deep down laughs that let her know he thought her a fool. You are only twelve, he said. You cannot know what it is to be tired. And then he walked away leaving her with the tired. She laid down on the floor right where she stood. It was carpeted with orange shag which caused her to sneeze. Eventually, she stopped sneezing and slept. The poodle came and rested her chin on Morgan's back. She and the poodle awoke when her sister started raking the carpeting around her. Morgan said go away. Her sister said no, I won't go away. There is money to be found. Her sister continued raking. There had been a party the previous evening and always the guests unknowingly dropped coins from their pockets. Morgan wondered how the money came to litter the carpet. Morgan said to her sister, how do you think the money gets in the carpet? Her sister said people either had holes in their pockets or the coins fell out when they were fucking. It was true, what her sister said. After midnight, people were so drunk that they were pulling each other's clothes off and doing what appeared to be fucking half clothed. The poodle had already left Morgan's side for fear of being raked over. Morgan wearily got up and watched her sister from a wooden chair. Her sister was eleven and was very pretty with long tanned legs, a flat stomach and breasts that were beginning. She had bright brown hair and a clever smile. Morgan envied her smile. Morgan rarely smiled and when she did she smiled halfway which only made her lips crooked. Crooked lips puts people on edge. Her mother wanted to paint her lips red and line them with pencil correcting the mistake of the half smile.

More and more Morgan took to lying on the carpet in heavily traveled rooms. She hoped for the day that someone would finally say something is wrong with you and we must go to the doctor. The day did come. Her mother said get up off the floor, we are going to the doctor. Morgan was ready. She always wore her shoes and socks while lying on the floor.

The doctor examined Morgan and then met with both Morgan and her mother. His office was delightfully filled with flowers and colorful paintings by Chagall. The doctor sat behind his big, dark stained desk and told her mother that Morgan was twelve and healthy and only faking illness for need of attention. Rather than getting angry, Morgan began to cry. But this is not true, she said. This began a series of her visits to doctors to learn that she was twelve, healthy and faking it. She stopped crying after the first visit preferring apathy to the clumsiness of tears. Morgan was never taken to a doctor of psychiatry. Finally the visits stopped and age twelve ended.

## VIII

For Morgan, days, and the things that happen during days, passed and seemed not to be. Morgan sent her body out to the world as her mind hung back and stayed removed. One must trust that Morgan was able to enter the world without knowing it because Morgan does not lie. There was a great deal of drinking of alcohol. Alcohol quieted Morgan's mind which needed frequently to be quieted because she was hearing people inside her mind having conversations with each other and with her. The conversations were twisted and ugly and always involved death of herself or others. Joan of Arc was her hero because she too heard voices. The only difference was that Joan was in communication with God and Morgan was not. Morgan believed God would be a better conversationalist than her guests, who had no names. Morgan knows that suicide is an inconvenience for all involved. But one evening, Morgan swallowed many pills and chased them with rum. The dramatics of it all embarrassed Morgan when she came to in the ambulance. The ambulance drove down the streets and around some comers crowded with cars finally to arrive at a hospital. This is where Morgan was to meet her first psychiatrist.

## IX

Time and history and the people and things of time and history move on. Morgan remains mentally ill during the changes. The first psychiatrist of the several she has had named her such and prescribed for her a variety of pills that look pretty behind the windows of her medicine box that sits on her desk. Morgan continues to live with her grandmother who is 83 and continues to have a much stronger heart than Ed. Morgan does not know if mental illness is a part of her personality, a violet shirt she wears, the lint in her blue jeans pocket, or a crumb hanging off her chin. Morgan does know some things. Should she ever be in a hospital again, she will sigh and eat the hospital's tasteless scrambled eggs and moist toast with the knowledge that unlike many mentally ill people, she is assured additional days among the sane and the creative. Morgan knows her left hand from her right foot and that her grandmother likes canned apricots.

