

The Thing With Feathers

“It’s a sin to wear tight-fitting pants.”

Dolores’ lips open only enough to drone the words. Her gaze fixes on Paul, the psychologist-in-training, but there is no eye contact. Instead, she stares at the crotch of his pants.

Paul draws his hands to his heart in mock surprise.

“Wow, you don’t miss a beat, do you? But these aren’t tight. See? They’re practically falling off.” He sucks in his gut and tugs at the thighs, scootching the pants down over his hips just enough to expose the striped waistband of his briefs.

Dolores clutches the crucifix pinned to her jumper. Paul wonders what messages his elastic waistband flashes to her with its broken dots and dashes. Danger? Emergency? SOS?

“Oooh,” he says, “Did you catch a glimpse of my tighy whities? Now *that’s* a sin!”

It always encourages Paul to see color rise in Dolores’ cheeks. Knocking her out of her rituals has been his number one goal since he began his psych internship at Tri-City. While the others ignore her or push her away, Paul loves to jolt her with absurdity—his own brand of shock treatment. Not that Paul harbors any illusions about the prognosis. With almost twenty years through the revolving doors of hospitals and residential treatment centers, Dolores is as chronic as they come. Any notions to the contrary repudiate Paul’s professional education. Still, despite his better judgment, Paul feels a ticklish feather of hope whenever he gets a rise from her—an unfounded hope that he can make a difference and somehow affect a lasting change. He doesn’t

know where this uninvited feather comes from, or why it keeps reappearing so devilishly under his ribs.

He takes her hand and pulls her aside. “It’s vending time,” he whispers. “If you leave right now, you can be first in line.”

Paul knows he *wants* to cure people, but can’t. Even though he knows he can’t, he still wants to believe that he can. And because he knows he can’t, he wants to stop believing that he can. But he can’t stop wanting both things: believing and curing. It’s a loop he can’t stop looping. A loop that looks like a feather and peeps like a bright yellow marshmallow bird.

“*Almendras y cajeta*,” Dolores murmurs.

Paul searches his limited Spanish vocabulary: *almendras*—almonds. *Cajeta*? He studies her drooping eyes for a clue, but they’re transfixed on his hands. Surgeon’s hands, his grandmother always reminds him, even long after he pursues a career as a psychologist instead of a real doctor.

Paul coaxes Dolores toward the door. He waits until she shuffles out, then cups his hands around his mouth. “Vending, East Unit, Vending!”

Vending time is a twice-daily highlight for the residents. First, Paul opens the heavy, double-locked doors and leads the residents down the main hallway. When they reach the vending room, Paul fakes a prolonged search for the right key among the dozen on the ring, just to make Dolores fight a smile while the others grow restless and complain. Once the door opens, coins slide into slots. Snack foods revolve, drop, and escape through flapping trap doors. The excitement falls nothing short of a Las Vegas casino, especially when an errant machine eats someone’s quarter or pays off in double Lifesavers.

Dolores allows herself to go to vending only on Fridays, when her grandchildren might

visit. She always buys two packets of Gummy Bears and keeps them ready in her pocket. Sometimes the candy has to wait in her nightstand, piling up for weeks until the drawer can't close. Pia, born prematurely three years ago, stands no taller than Mario, her baby brother who toddles around like a honey-drunk bear cub. Their mother, Crystal, brings them every week until she loses her last nerve and blows up. She nurses her guilt for weeks and then starts over again and again.

Today, Dolores doesn't have to feed her dresser drawer. When the lobby doors open in East Unit, Mario and Pia tumble down the hall, hands and mouths ready. Crystal follows them to the resident lounge. In an act of instinctive propriety, the other residents slide from their seats and out the door, even as they grumble about the damned rug rats.

"Buh-bye," the little ones call after them.

"Ay, *la inocencia*," Dolores whispers.

Paul watches as she pulls the candy bags out of her pocket, crinkling the plastic to get their attention. She pours the sweets into her open palm, and the kids race to shovel them in their mouths. Dolores strokes their stuffed cheeks as she eyes her daughter.

"It's a sin to wear low-cut shirts."

Viewing the scene from behind the chart, Paul has to agree that in Crystal's case, a multitude of sins overflow from her push-up bra and pour like caramel over her spandex top. This time, he is the one to avert his eyes. He leans against the door jamb and scribbles in the chart, sneaking glimpses of a tattooed hummingbird on Crystal's left breast.

"Ma, for Chris' sakes, don't start. I keep telling you. I'm not gonna bring the kids if you pull that stuff. I mean it."

Dolores blinks.

“It’s a sin to take the Lord’s name in vain.”

“Alright, if that’s what you want, we’re outta here.”

Paul backs out of Crystal’s way as she charges up to the nurses’ station and bends toward the half-moon opening in the Plexiglas.

“Hey!” She smacks the counter with the heels of her hands, protecting her long fingernails. “My mom’s been in here nine months already and she’s only getting worse.” She shouts toward the open door of the med room, “Can’t you give her something more?”

Paul approaches and clears his throat.

“Uh, I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but it seems to me like your visits are probably the best medicine she gets.”

Crystal bangs the counter with her fist.

“Listen,” Paul interrupts again, “her whole face changes whenever you walk in with those kids, you know? Yanking them away from her like that, trust me, she’ll be crawling on her knees for the rest of the day. Look for yourself. She’s at it already.”

Crystal sees her mother at the window bowing and crossing herself. She sets Mario on his feet and gives both kids a soft shove.

“Go give Nana a hug”

The two eager faces approach Dolores without any inkling of something wrong with their Nana. In their eyes, it seems, compulsive genuflection simply belongs to the list of things grandmas do.

Dolores stops, presses her face into Pia’s neck and hair.

“Don’t be sad, Gamma.” Pia wipes the tears from her grandmother’s face. “Have candy?” She extends a tacky bear in her chubby fist and presses it to Dolores’ lips. Dolores covers her

teeth with her lips and takes the bear between them, pretending to nibble Pia's fingers.

"*Gracias mijita.*" Dolores gives her a gentle pat. "Go now."

Paul watches Crystal inhale, sucking her thoughts into her tattooed bosom. He imagines she would have tattooed directly onto the heart, if possible, that the pain on the surface had done little to distract from all that went on underneath. Crystal lets out a whistle from behind her teeth.

"Okay Ma, I'm going to go pick up something to eat and come back in a little bit." She glares at Paul and sticks out her steel-studded tongue. "And not because of anything you said."

Crystal has a way of making him squirm in his not-so-tight pants. Paul clears the tickle in his throat that feels like a feather. It goes against protocol, but the words fly out of his mouth. "I'm heading over to Taco Time for lunch, if you want to come along."

Crystal shoots him a look.

"I just thought . . . if you want to talk or whatever. They have frosties there for the kids." He notes the whirring behind her eyes, the tallying of cost/benefit ratio. "My treat."

"Tweet! Mommy, pweeze?" Pia begs.

"Nice work," Crystal mutters. "For sure you're treating now." She flicks her hair over one eye with a long, curved nail and marches past him, corralling the kids in front.

"*Vámanos,*" she says, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Professor Big-Mouth is buying us lunch *and* dessert!"

Once again that feather tickles, only slightly lower this time.

The Taco Time chalet sits alone on a corner, in a large dusty parking lot. At one time an abandoned Wienerschnitzel, the decrepit A-frame now boasts a paint job reminiscent of a fluorescent Mexican flag. Inside, posters of busty women draped in the rippling arms of Aztec warriors adorn the walls. Taco Time outlets dot the streets throughout town. This particular

franchise is run by a Spanish-speaking Chinese family that sells chow mein alongside burritos.

“Order me two kid’s quesadillas, and a chow mein plate with eggrolls,” Crystal says. “I’ll wait with the kids outside.”

Paul carries their order to the picnic table outside. Mario sits on Crystal’s lap scribbling on the back of a take-out menu, while Pia flies napkin-ghosts around the hot sauce bottles. Paul watches as Crystal folds back the yellow wrappers into quesadilla holsters that fit perfectly into pudgy fists. He plans to listen carefully to Crystal as he asks her questions, but after two minutes of hearing about her boyfriend’s latest tattoo, he loses patience.

“So, what’s the story with your Mom?” he asks. “She must’ve been a decent mother at some point if you’re still visiting her.”

Crystal flicks chili sauce off her eggroll, and sucks the spatter from her forearm like a sloppy hickey. “She’s my mom. What am I supposed to do?”

“Do you ever notice how many other visitors you see around?”

Crystal shrugs. “I figure it’s not her fault.”

“True. But what about her family history? What were her parents like?”

“Her parents? Shee-it!” Crystal leans forward and punctuates each syllable with a jab of her eggroll. “How do you think she got like that? They almost let her die.” She pops the rest of the eggroll in her mouth, taking her time to chew.

Paul waits for the explanation, which pours out after she swallows

“Okay, so she had an appendicitis when she was twelve, right? And she’s sitting on the doctor’s table in her little paper towel? And right in front of her, the old man says if it’s God’s will for her to die, so be it, but she’s not having any blood. Then they start fighting. See, all those years my grandma had been going along to the Kingdom Hall with Grandpa, but she was raised

puro Católica, right? So, all that time she's been slipping my mom the crucifix and teaching her the stations, just in case. So, when Granddad said 'absolutely no transfusions and that's final,' well, Grandma just made sure my momma crossed herself plenty before she went under the knife. Can you believe that? Good thing the doctor was able to do the surgery without losing too much blood. But imagine hearing your parents argue whether it's okay for you to die."

Paul nods. "Well, it doesn't completely surprise me. I've heard similar stories. Some of my most challenging clients have come from Jehovah's Witness families."

"You mean your craziest cases?" She snags a trio of Paul's fries, swabs them in ketchup, and jams them in her mouth. "Well," she says, chewing, "I guess like you say, the Witnesses are a fucked-up religion."

"I didn't say that."

Crystal wedges her pinky nail between her back molars to jiggle out something, then loads up the next bite. "Yeah, but that's what you meant, right?"

"No." Paul searches his empty plate for the right words. "Professionally speaking, I would say that for some, religious beliefs can present deep conflicts, especially when they contradict instincts like Thanatos and Eros."

She stops mid-bite. "Like *what?* Speak English, please."

"Death and sex— very powerful forces. People can get pretty twisted inside if their feelings are denied or demonized."

Crystal finishes the rest of her food in silence. She says nothing when the kids started sword-fighting with their bendy-straws and spill their frosties. Stays silent when Paul gets up and returns with two more cups.

"So, how are the eggrolls at Taco Time?" Paul scans her face for clues.

“Hmm?” Crystal pushes her plate aside. “Lousy, but it’s better than the so-called Mexican food.”

“Yeah?” Paul picks up a chopstick and pokes at a noodle on her plate, “So, who makes the best Mexican food around here?”

“I don’t know. Nobody. My mom, I guess, when she used to cook. Or maybe I only remember it being good compared to the crap I ate after she stopped.”

“How long ago do you think that was?”

“Oh God, I was so young. Christ, *she* was so young—had me at 16, and supposedly she was already a little weird then. I must’ve been about six—first grade— we lived in the house in Glendale, so that would make her, what, 22, 23? One day she showed up like that at my school.”

“Like what?” Paul asks.

“At a desk with her knees tucked under, writing all kinds of religious shit that didn’t make sense. That’s when I went to foster care. Of course, my grandparents didn’t want anything to do with the bastard child.” Crystal snorts a half-laugh and nods toward the kids. “Like mother like daughter, I guess.”

“So, the F.O.B.’s not involved?”

“Damn! Why do you have to call names and to jump to conclusions? Their dad’s a good man and we’re getting married as soon as—”

Paul makes a stop sign with his hand.

“F.O.B.’s a medical abbreviation. It means ‘father of the baby.’”

“Oh. Well, he’s a really sweet guy, once you get to know him.”

A crease deepens between Paul’s eyes. With the boyfriend involved and idolized, how should he interpret the flirtation, the semi-intimate sharing of fries?

“The misunderstood type, huh?” he asks.

“Yeah, he’s got that hard shell, you know, but he’s a softie.”

Paul’s eyes check off the black lacquered fingernails, the piercings, the heavy make-up.

“That kind of protection can scare off a lot of folks,” he says.

“Yeah, well, that’s their problem.” Crystal answers. “Maybe they need to get over it. At least when someone likes me, I know it’s for what’s inside.”

Paul picks at the radish rose.

“A regular person, like you, isn’t exactly gonna go after all this.” She waves toward her tattoos.

“Maybe not.” It was true, the tough stuff doesn’t turn him on. But the way she moves behind it—in spite of it—the juxtaposition of sweet and sour turns him to jelly even though he knows better.

“Anyways,” she goes on, “look who’s talking. You wear your jeans and your t-shirt like you’re some everyday guy. But open your mouth and you’re all Mr. Professor. Big words keep people away, too. You’re wearing a costume as much as anyone else. I mean, what’s with this? *Éjole!*” She reaches over, slips her nail under his earring, clucking her tongue.

Paul cranes his head around, “Hey . . . where’d the kids go?”

“Right there.” Crystal points under the table behind them. “What? You don’t think I’m keeping an eye on them? You think I’m being negligent?”

“No, I . . .”

Crystal laughs. “It’s alright. I’m just messing with you. Go ahead and ask me another question.”

“Alright, what about your dad? Did your mom have contact with him or talk about him when

you were growing up?”

Crystal snorts Pepsi and draws a napkin to her face.

“My dad? Yeah, she talked about him all the time.”

“So?” Paul waits.

“She just never admitted that he was my father. In fact, I think she took some kind of death vow to never reveal him. Only problem? I look exactly like him. You know how certain traits skip a generation?” She points to the cleft in her chin. “My granddad has chin cleavage to beat anything I got.”

The comparison throws Paul off. He takes longer than usual to register. He pokes again at the remains of the radish, which now resembles a bloody tooth.

“You’re talking about incest?”

“No shit, Sherlock. You learn that in college, too? I bet you read whole books about people like us. ‘Subject was quoting scripture while banging his daughter.’”

Paul thought he knew where he’d been heading when he started this whole thing, but now that it’s picking up speed, he recalls a recurrent dream—where he can’t find the brakes in the car as he zooms toward a brick wall. He sits without answering for what feels like way too long.

“Well, she certainly had all the ingredients for a psychotic break,” he says, finally.

“All because of them, because she had the bad luck to be born to those two freak-asses.”

Paul rubs his chin. “Well, actually, twenty-two, twenty-three is right in the range for onset of adult schizophrenia.”

“What’s that mean?”

“She probably had a pre-existing biological predisposition.”

“In English.” Crystal frowns.

“It’s kind of like she had the seed in her system all along and it bloomed at that time.”

“What? You’re saying she’d be crazy even if she’d had a normal life?” Crystal pushes up from her chair and reaches under the table, feeling for the kids.

“Mario, Pia, let’s go,” she barks, then jerks her arm back in disgust.

“Oh, Christ! Look at this.”

Pale multicolored strings of chewing gum trail from her hand to the underside of the table. Her babies grin, their faces smeared with grime and sugary saliva trails. Sticky strings wind through their arms and legs and into their hair.

“Aw, shit! Now I have to take them back to her looking like garbage, and it’s probably some kind of goddamned sin. Will you go get me some wet napkins? And order a burger and fries to go for my mom while you’re at it.”

“They’ve probably already served lunch . . .”

“Get her a Pepsi, too!”

“I don’t think that caffeine, at this point . . .”

“A large,” she hollers, “and lots of wet napkins.”

Back in the car, the kids grunt and shriek, protesting their confinement in the car seats that Crystal had insisted on bringing along. Paul knows the prudent response is to take the most direct route back to the facility. Instead, he weaves through side streets to prolong the conversation. Crystal pulls a grease-spotted paper from her purse, containing two churros she’s saved from lunch. Four little hands surround the doughy cinnamon-sugar sticks and plug the howling holes. Paul marvels at the instant silence and the foresight of motherhood that make it possible.

“So, you never really gave me an answer.” Crystal blurts.

“About?”

“About what caused it!”

“What caused what?”

She slugs him in the thigh.

“*Ouch!* What?”

The car veers toward the next lane, thumping three or four barrier dots before straightening out.

“What do you think? My mom’s breakdown. And don’t give me any bullshit about chemical imbalance. I know lots of unbalanced people who take loads of chemicals and they aren’t dropping to their knees in front of a goddamned invisible cross every ten minutes.”

Paul clicks on his left turn signal to circle the block again. “Okay, how I can explain this? Schizophrenia—your mom’s diagnosis—still isn’t one hundred percent understood. But there’s definitely a genetic component.”

“Plain English!” She pounds him again.

“*Ouch! Jeez,* something that runs in the family, that she was born with, like a tendency to it. Maybe back in your family tree there are some relatives— strange cousins? Aunts or uncles?” He raises his hand to protect his thigh. “Don’t hit me.”

“Great, now you’re saying it could happen to me, or one of them?” She points with a jerk of her chin toward the backseat.

“Well, not necessarily. Even if you carry the gene you’re not automatically going to develop schizophrenia. There’s a socio-environmental effect, too.”

Crystal raises her fist.

“Okay—like how you’re raised. The strict religious parenting combined with sexual

abuse is actually pretty classic.”

Crystal drums her nails on the dash without saying anything.

“Alright, well, turn around up here,” she says, “I wanna to get back before the food gets cold.”

She drums her nails on the dash some more, then without warning, passes them through the hair at the nape of Paul’s neck. Paul clamps the steering wheel, plows through the yellow light, and pulls to the curb. Crystal reaches over again, but he catches her hand and holds it down on the dash.

“Crystal, what are you doing?” He keeps his hand on top of hers. He stares at the light and dark of their hands, *Almonds and cajeta*, he thinks, not meaning to say it aloud.

“What?” Crystal’s voice cracks. “Where’d you get that?”

Paul pulls his hand back onto the steering wheel.

“Something your mom said to me this morning. Cajeta’s a kind of candy, right?”

“It’s kind of like caramel sauce only thicker. Coffee and *cajeta* was my favorite when I was little. My mom used to make it with really strong coffee, then add the milk—but not real milk—it was almonds. She’d grind them down to powder, then add boiling water and a spoon of *cajeta*. A weird combination, but man, it was the best thing she ever made.”

“Some people might argue with that.”

He hadn’t planned to say that out loud either. He pulls on a string of vinyl that had come loose from the perforated cover of the steering wheel. In the back seat, Mario and Pia are asleep. The only sounds are the string twisting and Crystal breathing.

“Crystal . . . why did you touch me like that?”

“I don’t know.” She rakes her fingers through her own hair and pulls on her scalp until

her eyes water. “I guess I’m a stupid slut. It’s just . . . can’t you talk to the doctors or something. Can’t anyone do anything to help her?”

Paul turns on the ignition. He shuts it off. “You’re not a slut. I gave you mixed signals, when you’re full of emotions. It was completely unprofessional. I’m sorry.”

He turns the ignition back on, and pulls away from the curb.

“You know, Crystal, it’s unlikely that your Mom’s ever going to get significantly better.”

She starts pulling at her eyelashes.

Paul is a man who wants to be able to cure people, but he knows he can’t.

He can’t stop wanting to do the-things-he-wants-to-do-but-can’t. It’s a loop he can’t stop looping. A loop that looks like a feather and peeps like a yellow marshmallow bird, and makes him feel tight in the pants.

He immediately backpedals. “But, you bring out her best more than anyone else. I mean, she talks to you, she talks to the kids.”

“Talks?” Crystal’s mouth twists. “It’s a sin to do this, it’s a sin to do that. That’s all she ever says!”

“No, really. When you come, she actually stops the chanting for a while. She listens and nods. She responds to you.”

“That’s the best I can get? She nods? I’m supposed to just accept that forever?” Crystal’s voice thins out, like one of the long strands of gum she scrubbed off the kids. “So, what am I supposed to do when the kids get bigger, when they start asking questions, when they don’t want to visit her anymore?” Her voice breaks on the end.

Paul turns right at the corner and tries again.

“Look. I’m sorry. I am. I don’t have any good answers. I don’t know anyone who does.”

“Well, good thing you haven’t got your license or whatever.”

“All I can say is just keep doing what you’re doing for now. It helps her; it keeps her in touch with the world outside of her head.”

Crystal starts sobbing. She’s shaking. Paul sees the tattooed hummingbird on her chest jiggling as it sips nectar from a blossom. His response is completely inappropriate, the timing couldn’t be worse, but all that quivering makes him hard.

“Look, I could be totally wrong,” he sputters, “What seems incurable or impossible today may be a piece of cake in a year. You know how fast science and technology are advancing. Meanwhile, just keep showing up. We— she needs to see you.”

He steers the car into the lot and parks in a shaded spot.

“We’re here.”

“So?” Crystal’s voice follows the tremble of her chin. “Now I’m supposed to accept how she is and that she’ll probably never change, but at the same time I’m supposed to keep hoping for some one-in-a-million chance? How am I supposed to live like that? With a little pinhole of air?” She erupts once more into sobbing.

As Paul reaches across her to get a box of tissues from the glove compartment, she grabs his shoulder and holds on, weeping without sound. The fleshiness of her chest presses against his arm. The heaving silence, the smell of salt in her sweat and tears does nothing to help his condition. He reaches around and hands her a tissue.

While she wipes away her smeared mascara and takes out her compact to reapply her makeup, Paul opens his door, steps out, and readjusts his briefs. He peers into the back window and sees Pia staring at him. She flattens the stump of her churro against the glass, and Paul pretends to bite off a hunk, making her laugh and waking Mario, who twists his seatbelt and

begins to fuss.

Crystal gets out, unbuckles the kids, then walks around to the other side.

“You okay?” Paul asked.

Crystal nods and sniffs. “Is it too late to get a hug?” Without waiting, she embraces him, then pushes away with a look of surprise.

“You know, it’s a sin to wear tight-fitting pants,” she blurts, and bursts out laughing hysterically. The kids giggle along for no other reason than seeing their mom laugh. That does it for Paul. He stands there deflated, with the sheepish smile of one who finds himself the butt of the world’s oldest joke.

Crystal hiccups through her laughter, trying to regain control between words. “You know, we really need to get you a girlfriend. If I weren’t already engaged to a good man . . .”

“Yeah, that’s alright. I’ll manage. Are you okay to go back in now?”

Crystal wipes her nose with the back of her hand. “Yeah, I’m okay. What choice do I have, like you say?”

He hadn’t actually said that either—she keeps putting words in his mouth and yet they are always true. He marvels at how she pulls herself into position: smoothing shaky emotions under a stroke of eye shadow and lip liner, spit on her fingers to reactivate the shellac on her hair. Crystal’s exhale echoes in the rush of air conditioning as they push open the door.

Back past the locked double doors, in the heart of the empty resident lounge, Dolores stands in front of the TV, her eyes glazed and lips moving.

“It’s a sin to wear tight-fitting skirts,” she admonishes the female anchor.

“Hey, Mom! Look what we brought you.”

Dolores looks at her chest.

“It’s a sin to wear low-cut shirts.”

Crystal takes her mother’s elbow and guides her to the couch.

“Yes, I know. I’ll put on a sweater as soon as I get home. Now, open up.”

Crystal dips a fry in ketchup and feeds it to her mother. Dolores chews with her eyes closed, and smiles. She lifts her face, open-mouthed like a baby-bird, while Crystal feeds her another.

Mario and Pia both grab fries and rush in. Dolores eyes them, her pupils shining.

“Good today, huh Mom?” Crystal says.

“Yes, *mija*, a good day. Delicious.”

Seeing Crystal bent over, her cleavage spilling far enough to reveal the edge of a dark areola, Paul feels something tighten again, but this time in his chest. The quill, the sharp hard point of the feather jabs him now, poking the tender place.

“Forgive me Father, for I have sinned,” Paul bows and crosses himself in an exaggerated double X. He starts to walk toward the chart room when he hears Dolores sputter a laugh.

“That’s not how you do it,” Dolores giggles. “You’re supposed to make the sign of the cross up and down.”

“Oh, like this?” Paul’s arms flail in multiple directions.

Dolores snorts Pepsi out of her nose—a genetic tendency, Paul notes. Her eyes flow over.

Paul plops down in a chair, arms and legs splayed in defeat. He tries to manifest the feather between his thumb and forefinger. But what’s the point? It can’t sweep away the illness in Dolores’ brain. She might break for a laugh, but after a minute, with a perseverance developed through a lifetime of pressing pamphlets through slamming doors, she will begin her chant again. Once a week, if the gods of the vending room are charitable, a feather might appear long enough

to clear the air and silence her for a moment, to allow them all a glimpse beyond the fog of illness and failure.

Dolores opens her lips just enough to emit the words. “It’s a sin to sit with your legs apart.”

Paul pulls his knees together and covers his ears.