

SPEED BUMPS

For nine years, their lives mingled in the clothes' basket, slinked together between the suds, caressed each other as they tumbled in the warm moist air of the dryer. Their dishes played hopscotch between the stove, sink, and dishwasher. It was 1996 when he dumped his Navy issue duffle bag on her bed, hung his dress blues, whites, and cammies in her closet. Hers became theirs.

The mismatched dressers—bought at Goodwill—were stuffed with neatly rolled t-shirts, skivvies, and socks. The empty shell with walls and floors had come alive and radiated happiness. Sounds of laughter, barks of joy, and sighs of pleasure escaped the single paned windows circa 1942.

The two were collectors. Collectors of waifs, whether they were animal—they preferred that kind—or human. It was not unusual to wake and find someone bunked on the couch, floor, or even the pantry, which had only happened once.

One morning, she stumbled in the front door after forty-eight-hours of duty to find him sprawled on the couch. His jaw, slacked for comfort, boasted a golden stubble—the kind that itched to be rubbed by a sleepy cheekbone. She was sleepy.

In his arms, he cradled an old, wrinkled towel., and draped across his legs was their Shih Tzu, Cody. She hovered at the door and waited for the dogs exuberant welcome, but he stayed in blanket form as if keeping the chill from the man's lap, or away from the towel.

The sight of the towel transported her back to the beach in Florida where she had first laid it on the sand. It had been hot that day, but this morning its colorful stripes looked cold and still. Too still.

“It's Cutter,” he said. “I found him beside the curb when I got home. He can't move his back legs. He pissed on me, but I can't put him down.”

“Better not move him,” she said and grabbed clothes out of the laundry basket beside the couch. She had rescued Cutter seven months earlier. He returned with her from a spiritual retreat where she had tried to reconnect with God—any God would do—but she came home with him instead. The kitten had been left as a sacrifice in a field of dead corn stalks that rustled as the wind whispered incantations along its rows. He was brown and withered rather like the soul she had exposed.

Twenty-two minutes later, they pushed into the Vet's office. Nine minutes later, they knew what had happened: Cutter had become a speed bump. His spine had been unrepairable. She cuddled the kitten close to her chest as the needle entered his vein. The breath slowed. Stopped. Her tears dampened the towel's wrinkles as he drove home.

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In 1959, there had been a speed bump in a young mother's belly. During this pregnancy, the young, overwhelmed woman had tried suicide. Her first attempt. She was twenty-four years old and had a six-month-old baby boy. Progenitor of the family name. Another baby? So soon? Did want another baby? The overwhelmed women chose Valium as her savior and the baby's

deliverer. However, the amniotic sac had cuddled the tiny bump as the rubber tube snaked its way to the stomach.

Liquid pumped in.

Valium suctioned out.

Liquid in.

Valium out.

In.

Out.

All the while, the tough, thin membrane of life cradled the child. The same child that wonders if her mother felt as let down by the Valium as she had the day he moved out.