

"Toketwat"

Even with seven houses between on the neighborhood street, the scent of Meryl still drove me crazy. Three houses away was not far enough to insulate me from her whiff— a crisp, nagging odor, clove cigarettes mingled with breast milk, the color of a faint, faraway rage.

We usually sat in the den of her two-bedroom house with the curtains closed. The faux wood walls stayed bare except for a few family photos. Our occupation consisted of nursing our babies and laughing. In early spring, we scanned digital sewing patterns, and stitched house dresses up-cycled from garish estate-sale curtains.

As mothers, we grew accustomed to certain patterns in sleep cycles, close-out sales, and diaper rashes. We grew in tandem through textbook crises and into their solutions.

"It helps to have a friend I can trust nearby every time the world ends," I joked to Meryl during a morning walk in that month or two when we decided to consider running a marathon. Too bad that every marathon these days involves promoting some product and every runner finds themselves plastered in spandex, racing towards some commercial end or another. Ultimately, it was an unremitting attention to the fine print of things that kept us from running

marathons or hawking Avon cosmetics to the lonely widows at Serene Valley Hills. We didn't stay home with the kids to sell shit.

Many things began with a ice cold coffees and our sewing machines. Both of us got into sewing around the same time, though Meryl was much better with patterns and measurements.

I'll never forget her first gift to me: a postpartum maxi-pad sewn from organic silk cloth. It felt like a kiss between my legs.

"Meryl, you're terrific..... and rather naughty."

"Oh come on, Angie! Our privates have been through so much- what, between the men and the birthing of babies- I figured they could use a little pampering..."

And so it was that Meryl came to mind every time the monthly cramps raised their glaring red flags across my panties. My partner, Ralph, was horrified to discover that blood stains do not disappear from white organic silk even in the most rigorous wash cycle.

Ralph is actually my husband, but I call him my partner to make sure none of my career-driven female friends mistake our relationship for something traditional and repressive. As a stay-at-home-feminist (SAHF), I'm a proud member of the only demographic consistently under-represented by market study research. This is mostly because the SAHF's anti-consumerist ethos keeps us from cutting coupons and joining those online mommy-boards where market research is conducted.

Ralph's sentiments on the subject don't make a smidgen of difference. Nothing makes a difference in the I quiver with excitement at seeing the bleedings of bygone months on the soft silk pads as I press them into my underpants.

"It's very modern," I told Meryl, as we sat on the back stoop watching the kids tie rope ladders. She wondered whether she should dye the silk fabric to hide the blood stains.

"I don't think you should dye it at all. I like the rawness of it. Raw and modern, that's what it is. Straight from the pages of a MOMA gift store catalogue..."

The laugh came up like water bubbles in a tub. "Oh yeah? I was aiming more for plain old tie-dye."

"You could definitely sell some of these pads at Bonnaroo."

I'd gone and put a point on the map. What had I done, she laughed, but gone and launched us into a season of sewing and stitching which ended only with two duffel bags, a sack of stitched "Momma pads," and a long bus ride minus husbands and children. Meryl made a t-shirt that said "Bonnaroo or Bust" that looked really nice laid out over her massive, double-D breasts. We had the time of our lives.

Truth be told, we never actually made it to the music festival itself—our bus got a flat tire at a campground in northern Alabama. Still, the campground introduced us to snake-handling and seances which did wonders for our historical consciousness, particularly the seance in which a Confederate soldier would only communicate through kazoo notes translated into Morse Code.

When she wound up with her second bout of mastitis, Meryl knew how to nurse through the pain. We shared the rickety office chair in front of her husband's gigantic computer screen and nursed our babies in tandem. There was so much to do just for the hell of it.

"Hey, let's try to find my old friend, Virgil," I suggested, after the French lesbian soft porn lost its luster.

"I don't feel like moving." Meryl pouted as she massaged her left breast.

But we didn't have to move-- we could sit right here and wander through a whole new world. At the time, downloading hadn't been established as a form of movement-- it straddled the gap between an action and a reaction.

"No movement needed," I explained. "All we need to do is download World of Warcraft." I cleared my throat and added, "Virgil got lost in WoW."

"What's WoW?"

It didn't take long to explain that World of Warcraft was a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) created in 2004, the favorite online game of freaks and geeks of every combination.

"Isn't Virgil the friend from college? The one that became a philosopher?" Meryl asked.

"He's a philosopher. But a fantasy fan, first and foremost."

Graduate school taught me that if you want to know something about a person's worldview, don't bother to inquire into favorite philosophers-- your best bet is to probe their preferred utopias and fantasy worlds. That's where you find ghosts and resilient mental saplings.

The absence of wince led me to assume Meryl was game for online adventure.

"First, we have to create a character." I patted Celeste on the back lightly, trying to decide whether to full-out burp her or let her dawdle to sleep on my breast.

"Goody, goody," Meryl's blue eyes twinkled like swizzle sticks, all trick-or-treat mischief. You know that moment when you share a thought with a person and you know you've shared it but neither of you has spelled it out yet? Well, we had one of those moments just before dissolving in giggles.

Both babies asleep, dribbling spittle onto our well-formed cleavages, we rocked back and forth in the black office chairs and selected the busiest, most buxom and scantily-clad female avatar. Meryl wanted to name our avatar "Spinoza", but the name was already taken.

"Too modern," I mused, "though I'm sure all the ancient philosophers are taken as well."

We blew a little time debating whether Plotinus had gone before Israel, and refilled our coffee mugs. After laying Celeste and Mack down on Meryl's bed and carefully ensconcing them inside a fence of pillows, we wandered back into the computer room.

Nursing limited the sorts of prescription pain relief Meryl could use for her mastitis, so she added a dash of whiskey to her coffee.

"What's the most ridiculous name we can get away with?" she asked, leaning into her laugh. How I love the way she laughs. How it sends chills up my spine and brings bouquets of words to my lips, all florid and bloom-like. Meryl hates flowers, but I'll be damned if sitting near her doesn't feel like being in a tropical greenhouse.

"Toketwat," I said, poker-face intact.

"Well, I'm *sure* that won't be taken."

We cackled like a toddler string ensemble. Then she paused to press her lips together, murmuring, "Toke-twat... Toke-twat. Tell me if I'm reading you right— to toke is a crime, to have a twat is a liability.— therefore, Toketwat, our avatar, a walking criminal liability."

"You like it." The words stood solid as curdled milk.

"I love it."

So Toketwat was born.

Meryl and I whittled away hours of leg-waxing time engrossed in the pixellated world we created for Toketwat. When the husbands complained about frozen pizza for the second night in a row, we laughed conspiratorially, then imagined what they might say if they knew we had killed three different men in our virtual world. There were so many weapons— and so many florid words to describe them. It wasn't a World of Warcraft so much as it was a World of Our Own Crafting.

The parameters of the game kept others from bursting our bubble through physical or emotional contact. Meryl was Meryl, Angie was Angie— intact as two uncircumcised penises— together we were Toketwat. Crimes existed only as violations of unwritten conventions, and there were no courts to resolve these vague violations. Justice was administered individually or through the collective action of guilds.

We didn't find Virgil. But we found so many other creatures; and we learned how to tell our friends from NPC's, or non player characters. Like high school mall rats, the NPC's persist in reenacting the same dull repetitions— standing near a building or a bridge, moving right and left, programmed by techies to live their fake lives in behavior loops.

Meryl called me at 1 am one night to tell me she knew what she likes so much about Toketwat. She said Toketwat was free from the legacy of unwashed dishes and failed parenting strategies. "She's untainted," sighed Meryl.

"I guess you're right."

Toketwat started out as a combination of distasteful words. But the conjoining of these words created a new word— a name so distinct and extraordinary that it lacked any precedent. *Toketwat*: the unblemished word, the unhistoried name. Meryl and me: the gods who made her.

Since Toketwat was our avatar, Meryl and I could not escape being her creators. Our job was to keep her alive. The commitment of creation coincided with the illusion of becoming real through practices and specified rituals. Like Civil War reenactments, the creators become the players and the boundary lines are so permeable that creators no longer distinguish between what they're doing and what they're playing.

We played as if the world would end— played as if life depended on it. Hard to explain to an earthling the precise point at which pixel becomes a god thing. Part of the shit a god must do or die.

When the kids got the flu, I missed out playing with Meryl for an entire week. By the time everyone felt better, Meryl had joined a guild. Actually, she'd made Toketwat join a guild and earned a battle-hardened thrash blade to boot.

"That's awesome," I said, feeling a little disappointed that she'd accomplished so much without me in the wing-span of a single week.

A week turned things around to the point that Meryl didn't even laugh when brought up her neighbor, a downright vulgar reductive materialist whose

born-again virgin ruse and labia-plastered face represented the *summa* of suburbanoid decadence. "She's on her third vagina," I quipped.

Meryl kept typing and clicking, moving Toketwat back and forth across the screen.

"Toketwat has a lot of friends now," she said. Her voice lacked its usual vigor.

"She's been keeping you busy, eh?"

Meryl nodded perfunctorily.

I tried again. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've become your avatar's social manager."

No laugh. Meryl's laughs were laid up in lounge chairs. Anywhere but here.

It dawned on me that Meryl didn't distinguish between herself and Toketwat much. When I'd given her a chance to dissociate, she pretended not to hear me.

"Well, I just dropped by to say hey and check on things..." The words were spilling from my mouth like jelly beans, or men's group testimonials, a deluge of jelly bean babbles hoping for something to stop the flow before things got stale and then sticky.

Meryl barely nodded. I must have looked as pathetic as I felt walking through the house towards the front door, tripping over a plastic zippy cup in the hallway. If Toketwat was more than pixel dust, I'd have strangled her.

"Bye, Meryl," I shouted from the door, trying not to look backwards.

Through the din of the kids' Barney show, I heard her reply, "Meryl's not here, but she'll be back in six months or so."

We never talk about it, but that's pretty much what happened.

