

MELODY

Melody dropped another ice cube into her bra. She pulled up the bottom of her t-shirt and watched one of the half-melted cubes ooze down her belly, wetting the fine hairs along the way and forming tiny creeks on their downward trek toward the waistband on her jeans. Melody unzipped the jeans about three inches so she could keep track of the ice a little longer. Small ponds of cold water from the melted ice cubes were conceived in the indentations of her skin where the slightly raised red scar on her stomach was healing into a crooked road.

The scar reminded her of the children's song about the old woman who swallowed a fly. Melody sang it a different way, one that suited her.

"They snipped out her guts, to stop her from bleeding, which stopped her damned periods, but made her go crazy...and I don't know why, she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die."

Melody amused herself with another ice cube from the bucket. Her stomach looked like a railroad, she thought. Puckered skin stretched too tight and sewn in crooked railroad tracks across the place where her other babies would have squirmed and kicked at her. She pulled her lips together in an exaggerated kiss and tried to see it, to see if that was a good imitation of her belly, but all that she could make out was her nose. She let her lips fall back naturally.

As she lay still on the love seat for a long time, she began wondering why they called it that-- a love seat. Who would give this piece of furniture a name like that? Who named it anyhow? Furniture namers? Were there really people who spent their time naming furniture? Did they buy a little book at the corner drugstore with 1000 names for furniture?

Melody wondered how much they got paid to think up hutch and divan and love seat. Probably more money than she ever was paid in her life. If the people who named furniture could have lived here at her house even for a week or two,

they never would have called it that. There was no love to be had on this small sofa. They would have renamed it an ignore seat.

Melody sighed and looked around the living room for anything else that she could use in the stand-up comedy routine that was always going on in her head nowadays. She never said any of it out loud but it wouldn't have mattered anyhow--no one heard a word she said anymore. She was the 'unheard comic'. That was a good line, she thought, wishing she knew someone to tell it to---someone who would think she was a hoot.

She tried to picture who she knew that would say that to her. "Oh, Melody, you are such a hoot." The picture was fuzzy. When the picture finally lost its fuzziness in her head, it was empty.

Her pores alerted her of what was going to happen. "Oh boy. Here it comes, everyone on board," she muttered to herself. Wave after wave of heat seared her.

She looked straight up at the ceiling in a desperate bid for redemption from the heat at an old dilapidated fan with white metal blades. That stupid fan was even old and dilapidated back a couple of years ago when they bought the house. One of the blades was bent in an unimpressive way. The bent blade in the ceiling fan made relentless sounds---whir-schh, whir-schh, whir-schh.

Melody could feel absolutely no air on the sweat-soaked hairs on her arms as she watched the fan whirling above her. She could just about feel the cooling breeze from that fan on her skin but it missed her by a fraction of an inch every time---driving her almost mad with longing for relief.

Tom and she always meant to replace the fan but everything else was always a higher priority. Melody found herself defending the fan when Tom brought it up yesterday to her. "That fan is so annoying, we should get rid of it, throw the darn thing away," he told her. "It isn't living up to its potential."

"Nah," she told him, "it's kind of comforting in its sameness. That fan is like a member of the family." She felt as if it was her responsibility to defend the fan and its ridiculous whir-schh, whir-schh because she wasn't living up to her potential either. She looked at Tom's face to see if he was drawing a straight line from her to the fan. She couldn't see anything on his face, but that didn't mean anything. He hid lots of things from her anymore.

She glanced back up at the fan and decided that the fan was just no good. Evil, actually. It provided comfort for no one except the one fly who survived her killing spree earlier today. In her head she decided that the mean-spirited fly was sitting on the top of the fan, on one of the good blades, hitching a ride and

laughing at her misery. With each turn of the blade the damn fly would smirk at her and then throw its little black head back and let out a high-pitched laugh that ended in a snort.

Melody felt an arrow of true hatred for that black-hearted bug as she imagined its little wings fluttering as it rode the blades on the fan round and round, shivering and giggling down its nose at her. Ingrate.

She forced herself to look away from the fan. There was always moodiness and hot flashes and crazy thoughts running through her head nowadays. She had tried discussing how miserable she has been since the surgery with all of the women she knew.

"It's all part of being a woman. We all go through it, honey. You're just going through it early because of the surgery." The old women said it all in hushed, quavering voices as they patted her hand.

The young ones didn't have a clue. "You have two kids, that's about all anyone can afford nowadays. You said that was all you could squeeze out of your poor body, remember?" They said it in regular voices and didn't bother doing anything with her hand.

She couldn't seem to make anyone understand. She didn't want another baby. That wasn't the point. Knowing that she could never have another baby wasn't what she wanted either. The surgery had made it all so final.

And finality was last thing that Melody needed right now in her life. The fly on that fan was living proof of that. She had killed the rest of the fly's family and friends with a vengeance, but when it came to the last fly, she couldn't make herself wipe out a whole species.

"Go, you rotten little fly, and do not multiply," she sighed, defeated. "Seems like you and I both need to learn a different trick in Math, eh, old girl?"

The end of anything was beyond what she could endure. The last spoon of ice cream in the carton, the last fly in her house, the last period, the last chance to be pregnant, the last time Tom had kissed her like he was smitten with her.

But this is life. And it isn't always what we want. That was what Tom told her anyway. "Life isn't always what we want," he told her without a hint of understanding on his face. "Do you think my mom quit functioning because she couldn't have any more kids after me? No, sir. She picked herself up by her bootstraps and kept right on going. That's how life works, Melody."

That was the whole problem with real life, it wasn't that funny, it was just a whole bunch of real gathered up in to one place. Tom knew that. Tom's mom knew it. Why didn't she know it?

Real life was the whir-schhing of the fan. Real life was the whir-schhing of that damn fan and it was also the plodding drum beat from the stereo screaming rap music in the house next door. Rap music. The words, if there ever were any, never survived the distance between the two houses. The drum beat was always the same infernal sound over and over again. Beat-tah. Beat-tah. Beat-tah. And to make matters worse, the drum beat was off. It was incapable of keeping time with the whir-schhing of the fan.

Melody amused herself for a while by turning the ceiling fan on and off, on and off real fast in the hopes of getting the two sounds together. It didn't work. The result was always beat, pause, whir-schh, beat, beat, whir-schh. "Turn that shit down," she whispered in the direction of the drums.

Over all of the beat, pause, whir-schhing came the blaring of the television in the living room. The kids were watching The Wizard of Oz for the third time this week. The noise seemed to make the house even hotter.

The movie was at a critical point. A tornado had just dropped Dorothy's house right smack dab on the old Wicked Witch. She remembered what came next from the movie she had seen as a child and the other 47 times that her own children had played and replayed the movie since Tom's mom had bought it for them last month.

Dorothy's black and white world was about to change instantly to a world filled with colorful flowers and beautiful witches and little people who loved and adored her.

What a lucky gal Dorothy was! Dorothy didn't have to lay around all day on an ignore seat, watching a fly hog up all the cool air in the room. Dorothy got her very own tornado complete with wild, uncontrolled winds that took away every bit of the heat and cooled her skin down and killed off that terrible old witch in a double-header of good luck.

Sure, the tornado's high gusty winds knocked her silly, put her in a coma--- but it gave Dorothy the imagination she needed to get her out of Kansas and a black and white existence.

Melody lay silently on the love seat, her face turned toward the stream of wisdom emanating from the tv in the living room. Teeny voices from the little

people in Oz were telling Dorothy to follow the yellow brick road. It was like the Munchkins were speaking directly to her and Melody understood exactly what the Munchkins were telling her. Talk the talk and walk the walk and she would be okay. At least Tom wouldn't think she was as crazy as a zebra.

Tom wasn't much in favor of this stage that she was going through. He didn't understand her. He told her that. "I don't understand you," he said every ten minutes. Actually, Tom was rather proud of not being able to understand her. His mom had never acted like this.

Well, this laying around on the loveseat wasn't getting her anywhere. She made an abrupt decision to get up, get moving and get her mind off things that she couldn't change. Melody went into the laundry room, by way of the living room. The TV was still blasting, the kids were still enraptured by the same scenes that had played three times so far this week at the exact same blare. "Turn it down, guys," she said to no one in particular and no one in particular listened.

It was more than she could bear to say it again. She crossed the room through the tangle of little feet and arms, throw pillows, bowls of soggy Frosted Flakes, Legos, sippy cups of grape Kool-Aid and turned the volume down herself. "Wait. This is the best part, Mom, watch this..." The scarecrow was telling

Dorothy about his life, trying to walk and sing at the same time. "If I only had a brain," he lamented.

Melody felt a stab of jealousy. She knew that the scarecrow was going to be all right. Yes sir. He was going to get his brain and then his whole world would be one of constant color and smart moves. She continued out of the room, back to the semi-quiet of the laundry room, quickly, before she would burst out crying in front of the kids over the beauty of a scarecrow having a full and complete life.

In the laundry room, Melody dropped the load of clothes into the dryer and wiped her sweaty face again on the bottom of her T-shirt. The combination of bleach and Shana's blue jeans had given all the white undies, Sean's new Reeboks and Tom's brand new white dress shirt a bluish cast. Great. That would be another mark in her inept column when Tom saw his shirt and the fact that her inattention had turned all of the laundry blue. Instead of being proud that he had a shirt that didn't look like everyone else's, he would probably bitch and moan and accuse her of not being his mother again.

She felt her shoulders round up as she closed the dryer door and hit the start button on the dryer. The first couple of tumbles were uneventful but then the Reeboks began hitting the inside of the dryer. Bang-a. Bang-a. Bang-a. She

should open the dryer and let the shoes air dry. Yes, she certainly should. She walked into the kitchen. Melody purposefully chose to ignore the sounds of the shoes in the dryer by not even glancing toward the dryer. Melody made up her mind that she would not be defeated by a pair of Children's size 3 Reeboks.

Buzzart. Buzzart. Buzzart. Buzzart. Buzzart. Buzzart. Buzzart.

The phone was relentless.

Tom had programmed the phone for eight rings so that she would have plenty of time to reach it no matter where she was at in the house when it summoned her. She stood rigidly beside the phone, and stared at it unable to make herself pick it up.

On the last Buzzart, the answering machine told the unfortunate caller in Tom's big, loud, booming voice, "Leave a message for Tom, Melody, Shana or Sean. We will call you back later. Sorry we missed your call."

The beep that signaled the caller to begin talking was barely through when the nasal voice of her mother-in-law shrilled above all the other noises in Melody's life.

"Melodyah, it's me, dearah. I don't need anything in particularah, I just wanted to say hiah and see how the kiddos are doing," She covered her ears with

both of her hands. Melody knew in her heart that if she listened to that terrible sound for one more second, she would lose her slippery grasp on reality.

What she needed in her life was structure and Tom was the uncontested conductor of that train. "You spend too much time thinking and too little time doing things. My mom always stayed busy," was one of his famous cheers. Oh, that boy. He sure knew how to shift her into high gear.

Melody made a decision. Her first real one today. She would make a difference in her children's lives by turning on the oven, pulling out a cake mix. That was all she needed, she reasoned, chocolate cupcakes. Yes siree, bob, they were exactly what she needed to maintain her good mother status.

She pulled out her best ceramic bowl realizing the importance of her actions. This was a special occasion---the return of her sanity via cupcakes.

Oil, water, 3 eggs, and a Double Dutch Chocolate cake mix whirled around together in the bowl as she fired up the mixer, shutting out all of the other sounds from the house. Clankkk, clankkk, clankkk, clankkk, went the beaters in the ceramic mixing bowl. Melody was digging the sound. Clankkk, clankkk, clankkk, clankkk. It was comforting to be June Cleaver--even if it was just for three minutes.

Chocolate was good for whatever problem you could come up with in your life. She sensed that instinctively. Melody had read somewhere that chocolate was a substitute for kissing. You use the exact same muscles to eat chocolate as you did to pucker up for a kiss. That was why so many people craved it. Since Tom had all but stopped kissing her, Melody bought out the stores in the chocolate section.

About a month ago, Tom's mom was sitting at the kitchen table while Melody brought in things from the car that she had bought at the grocery store. His mom didn't offer to help carry in any of the groceries. She only sat on her perch, inspecting and cataloguing every purchase that Melody had made that day.

When Melody began to pull out bag after bag of Snickers and Hershey Kisses and bars of Godiva---his mom didn't say anything out loud to her. That wasn't her way. Instead, she clicked her tongue, raised her eyebrows so high they almost touched her hairline and promptly reported her behavior to Tom.

"You need to stop buying so much candy, Melody. I never had all of that chocolate when I was a kid. My mother knew it would ruin my teeth even before there was any scientific proof of it."

Melody had looked up at him steadily and nodded her head solemnly. She said "Okay, I am sorry, Tom, I wasn't thinking," to him.

Later on that day, she hid the chocolate bars around the house in secret places so that she was the only one whose teeth would go bad. She didn't care what it did to her teeth as long as she could feel like she was kissing someone.

When she turned off the mixer, Melody could hear the beat of the house again. Whir-schh, beat. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. How could she fix this? The sounds were her life--erratic and plodding.

She studied herself in the mirror over the kitchen cabinet. Her eyes looked back at her steadily, like they were judging her, looking for any faults that may have escaped Tom's mom.

Melody's eyelids were swollen-looking even though she hadn't cried for days. A bead of sweat was lying above her upper lip and her hair looked like she had been in the shower. She looked like a barren woman, doomed to fail.

The noises came back with a vengeance. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Melody looked down in the good ceramic bowl at the batter. It was all mixed properly and ready to go into the cupcake liners where it belonged.

The directions on the package were clear.

When the batter was mixed together perfectly, pour the batter into the paper-lined cupcake pans. Bake at 350 degrees for fifteen minutes. Melody knew

the drill. The directions were always the same no matter if you were baking lemon or orange or white or spice or chocolate cupcakes. Pour the cupcake batter into the lined cupcake pans. Do it. Do what you are told.

Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Slowly, ever so slowly, she began to sway to the noises. There was a certain rhythm to the sounds that Melody became aware of in her capillaries and veins and arteries as the sounds pumped through her dehydrated body.

Dipping her fingers into the batter, she slowly and deliberately stroked her cheeks with smooth, straight slashes of chocolate brown batter. It felt strangely erotic on her parched skin. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a.

She remembered reading somewhere that brown was a warm color, an earth tone, but she found that hard to believe because the dark brown cake batter didn't feel warm on her face, it felt cool and inviting.

The sounds made her heart pound in a rhythm that seemed to rise out of the deepest parts of her. A rhythm that would not be ignored. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Melody watched herself in the mirror as she licked the batter from her fingers, dropped two more ice cubes down her bra and began to dance a non-mommy, non-wife, non-daughter-in-law dance.

Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. The beat from the house sliced in to her brain, sending her messages that she had thought were long gone from her body.

Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a.

She lifted the bottom of her t-shirt and stared for a moment at the red indentation on her stomach, the crooked railroad tracks that marked the end of her life as a woman.

Melody dipped her finger into the cool batter and drew the universal sign of man on one side of the scar, a circle with an arrow and the circle with a v for woman on the other side of the scar.

Then a miracle happened. The heat from her body as she danced in front of the mirror caused the batter to slide down her belly, and the two signs become one. It wasn't what either sign started out to be, but they were both stronger once everything ran together. A fertility dance, performed to the beat of the house.

Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a.

Melody began to sing the song softly, to the woman in the mirror. "They snipped out her guts, to stop her from bleeding, which stopped her damned periods, but made her go crazy...and I don't know why, she swallowed that fly, perhaps she'll die."

She watched her face change in the mirror as she finally got the meaning of the song. Melody knew what it meant now. She knew why that old woman swallowed the fly. It was obvious. The old woman swallowed the fly because it wouldn't stop giggling and shivering on the bent blade of that evil fan.

Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a. Bang-a, beat, beat, whir-schh, bang-a, bang-a.

Anyone would have done the same thing.