

A Degree in Sociology

When you don't press too hard, the wheel of the grinder works on its own, lightly ripping through the window frame's ancient layers of putty and paint and shooting the particles out into the summer air. Since the windows were in horrendous shape they required the most rigorous grinding, which is the reason you decided to put them off until last. *Zzzzmmmt. Zzzzmmmt.* The wheel flattens against the wood and you guide its rotations, watching the tiny chips spray left and right. Dennis always reminds you to put on a respirator but they make you hot and uncomfortable, and at thirty-six, you often give up on safety and instead opt for comfort. Especially in an occupation that is routinely uncomfortable, and especially on this underbid job.

You turn off the grinder and cast a look down at the end of the house where Dennis is working. "I'm watching you," he says. "You're alright." He pulls the Wooster brush out of the shiny bucket and works the glossy paint, pepper-can red, across the thick blades of one of the home's shutters. You nod at him, appreciative of his awareness. Paint dust let loose by the fury of a grinder can give other painters working nearby a conniption. You've seen it, you've done it, and since both of you are making diddly from this customer it's the absolute last thing you want.

It's Friday, just before noon, the tenth day on the job, and though everybody always thinks that the weather here in the southern chunk of California is Tahiti-like, when you're working a grinder in the middle of August and the sun is in full force you've got a different perspective. Your sports bra is coated with sweat, your dirty-blond hair is all the dirtier, chock full of paint chips and dust, and you hate the way you have to constantly rework your panties around your waist because of all of the stooping, bending and climbing associated with the work.

It wasn't fair that men on construction sites could yank off their shirts and work without any consequences, showing off the predictable tattoos of **LA** or some symbol from the Chinese alphabet they didn't even understand. "When was the last time a woman on a job site could do something like that?" your aunt Jackie once suggested at a family get-together, to which your father just snorted dismissively. It's bad enough that you generally avoid working near the high-traffic areas of most jobsites because of the constant catcalls and stares. *Is that really a girl doing this kind of work?* But whatever. You and your aunt have had plenty of symposia over the phenomenon of women that work in construction, of the imbalance of the two sexes on the jobsite, and you're past all of that.

The grinder zips past the last corner of the window frame, stripping off the flaking particles down to the fresh gleam of the exposed oak. After running a fist across your dusty nose, you wipe it on your hip, and before climbing down from the ladder you turn to sneak a gander at the house behind you, at the window which looms tall over the wooden fence.

When Dennis first made the discovery a few days earlier, he estimated there were hundreds of Wacky Package stickers in the neighbor's house. Though the two homes are separated by the fence, once atop the six-foot ladder there's a clear visual of the entire side of the other house. Yellow clapboard siding, peeling, chipped and rotting. Grass and weeds as high as three feet, choking the sides of the foundation. But the highlight of the ladder view was a wonderful glimpse into a bedroom that contained something that has captivated you ever since childhood.

"Jodi, you're not going to believe what I'm looking at right now," he'd said. Tall and thick, Dennis looked comical straddling the top of the ladder, bucket and brush on his lap. The two of you had been deep in fascia board battle, intent on being the first to finish your allotted

section of the board that ran around the whole house; it was one of those unspoken little contests that painters have, this one especially pertinent since there had been an argument that morning over whose fault the underbid job was.

The discovery helped bring some levity to the workday. “How can you tell they’re Wackies?” you asked. While Dennis remained perched on the top, you climbed up to the ladder’s fourth rung, peering over the fence at the window. Like many homes in Long Beach’s Belmont Heights, the two houses are close to each other, maybe five or six yards apart, and with no curtains or blinds covering the window the room lay naked, warmed by the midday heat. “All I see is a bunch of junk.”

“Read the sides of those boxes, genius.”

He pointed to a large nightstand stacked high with green and white boxes, the telltale colors and logo on each side. The tops and sides of the colorful cardboard were stuffed and overflowing with the bright foil wrappers of packaged stickers; there were at least seven or eight boxes, and then probably dozens of individual packages scattered across the nightstand. “At least, that’s my guess. From this far, you can’t tell *exactly*. But it sure as hell looks like Wacky Packages.”

The rest of the room appeared dusty and unkempt, crammed with five-gallon buckets, crates of what looked to be large bags of candy, laundry baskets, an ironing board, a miscellaneous collection of domestic crap. A large bed was covered with a mishmash of blankets, towels, and various stacks of fabric. But it was the vivid colors of the stickers that caught your eye.

“I know you’d love to get your paws on that stash, wouldn’t you?” Dennis said with a laugh as you walked back to resume the brush battle. “But seriously. Can you believe that?”

Your own sticker collection is paltry, since you're constantly either affixing them to various items around the house or giving them to your two little nephews, pieces of candy secretly stashed in-between the stickers which just ticks off your sister. Since childhood, you've bought the goofy decals in spurts, a few packages here, a few there, on through middle school, and sometimes even in high school. In recent years you've returned to your fixation of the colorful collectables, purchasing them online, in convenience stores, usually when you are alone. "How old are you again?" your sister once asked as she looked at the row of spoof stickers on your refrigerator door. *Cheepios. Kiss Kat. I Can't Believe It's Not Better!* Old enough to know that your husband and children and three-bedroom, two-bathroom setup is far less interesting than what I want in life. The vibrant colors and the satiric simplicity of Wacky Packages have always left you enamored, and that's something you don't think should cease just because of age. What was so hard to accept about that?

"Don't stare too hard, " Dennis's taunting voice rings out from the corner of the house as he finishes the top edge of the shutter. "Or when we finally leave this job you'll regret that you didn't go for it."

Your cousin is always the daring, mischievous type, something you sometimes appreciate since the monotony of the day can be excruciating. Sneaking a handful of oatmeal cookies from an unattended plate in the kitchen at that job in Torrance. Rearranging the family photographs on the mantle at a customer's house in Anaheim, an uptight woman whose nerdish ways were just unbearable. But breaking and entering? Is that what it would amount to? Would aunt Jackie smile at this?

"Just looking. I thought I saw somebody in there," you lie.

“Nobody’s in that house. I’ve been keeping an eye on the driveway.” Dennis wears his hair crew-cut style, and the sun has baked his cantaloupe-shaped head evenly, on all sides. As he talks, he holds his brush in the air like a portraitist studying his canvas. The high heat strikes the glistening bristles, and the bright sheen of the red paint is so searing that you have to turn your head.

“Trust me,” he says, “we would have heard them park and get out. That house is abandoned. But relax. I won’t tell mom you were scared.”

Please. Though he is your business partner and does bring a level of animation to the workday, Dennis’s loud and prankish ways are nothing like his hip but demure mother, who’s one of the few glimmers of reason in your life. Unlike literally everybody else, aunt Jackie generally knows what to say and when to say it, and *scared* is the last thing she would call anybody. For as far back as memory serves you, you’ve cherished being in her melancholic presence. The way she used to dispense advice over iced tea and snacks, you playing a pair of garage-sale bongos while your sister rummaged through a pile of hatboxes, trying each one on, those many after-school afternoons spent at your aunt’s house.

You hang the grinder and cord over the fence and shake the dust from your lightly freckled arms, reasoning like you often do that aunt Jackie is part of why you’ve partnered with Dennis for so long. With her hair pulled back in some colorful scarf, she could often be found in her cluttered kitchen—the glint of her nose ring ever-present—rustling up a quick workday lunch for you and Dennis, listening while you complained about the latest round of drama from your father, or your boyfriend at the time. Listening. One of her many strong points.

“Your dad is angry, honey. Always has been. No use getting worked up over *his* getting worked up. He’s the one that has to get up in the morning and choose his attitude.” There was something about the *way* aunt Jackie said things that made them so soothing and constructive.

“Let him live, you know? Hell, that goes for all men. Let ‘em live.” She handed you a paper plate of egg salad sandwiches, neatly sliced in halves. “No use in trying to change a few millennia of ingrained habits.”

Her egg salad sandwiches. At lunch you determine that you’d give your left breast for one of those right now. Loxpoli’s might advertise *the best roast beef in southern California!* but on this particular day it’s doubtful. You ball up the rest of the dry sandwich inside the wrapper and toss it in the bag while Dennis happily chomps away. When hungry, Dennis could eat the insides of a deceased goat. As he works the sandwich he drips grease and mayonnaise across the front of his paint-splotched wife-beater, down onto the hair of his thick, sun-burnt arms. “I figure if we get out of here by Monday,” he says in between massive bites, “we’ll be okay.”

“It’s still a loss, overall.”

“I know it. We both know it. But Tuesday’ll be here and we’ll be done with Tim, and on to the next job. What do we have next, that customer in Garden Grove?”

You nod, but continue to mull over the sequence of communication that brought about the underbid job. The initial conversations with Tim—who has been dubbed the professor--were easy and relaxed, but something somewhere went wrong. *You told him three thousand? I thought we agree on four.* No, that was for the house *and* the garage! *You didn’t specify that!* But we talked about it!

Such mixed-up communication rarely happens but there are occasions when things go loosey-goosey with a customer, leading to a verbal contract from only one of you, and before you know it, things have gone South. With the professor, this was one of those times. “Well,” Dennis continues, “let me do the talking on this next one so we can avoid confusion. This customer is that big Mexican guy I told you about. He’s an old-timer, and a former wrestler. In his living room there’s all these pictures of him in those stupid wrestling masks they used to wear.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Sucker must weigh three bills. Let me talk to him. I think he’s a real machisto tough-guy type.”

The still-fermenting anger from the underbid job now slides into a new realm: so *what* if this guy is a machisto Latino? You can, and usually do, talk to the customers more effectively than Dennis. And although you know what Dennis says comes from experience, why should a man be more effective with certain customers?

While Dennis makes a phone call, you pull out a bag of Reese’s Pieces, your secret stash, and head back to work. No need to share since your sandwich wasn’t satisfactory. On the side yard, the ground is riddled with paint rags, roller frames, dozens of tubes of caulk, and as you search the sea of tools for your five-in-one, the window is right there, just above the fence, taunting you. Someone simply died, right? Is that it? A reclusive widower, a hoarder, someone who’s now gone on to glory, an individual whose wonderful possessions will all wind up in probate, in a dark storeroom in some official county building somewhere in Long Beach.

Or maybe the realtor or a family member has come and cleaned everything out. That’s what’s happened. A greedy granddaughter, trying to score a mini-profit on Ebay. You stand at

the fence, staring blankly, munching on your chocolate. Just overhead, a trio of Half Moon parrots flits by, their *cawcaws* ringing through the palms and pines.

“I told you about that. No use looking at it if you aren’t going to do anything.”

Dennis has walked up behind you, and since he’s still chewing his food, you can barely understand him. But his challenge is hardly veiled. You don’t turn, though, and hesitate before answering. “What if they’re just baseball cards?”

“Jodi, wake up. You saw the colors and the logo on those boxes. Whoever lives there probably deals those stickers wholesale or something. Why do you think he has all that candy and that other junk in there?”

“I don’t know.”

“They probably just died,” he says, “and nobody knew what to do with all that stuff.”

This is logical. The machisto Mexican wrestler skips through your mind. And then comes the underbid job, and the little money you two are making on this job. You turn to look at Dennis. Your cousin, whose lips are lathered with bits of roast beef and grease; your cousin, who generally means well, but whose sarcasm and taunting can climb aboard your very last nerve .

“Come on. Let’s do it.”

“What?”

“You heard me,” you deadpan like a dictator, pointing to the backyard. “Let’s head for the back, cousin. We’re doing this.”

“Is this the older and more mature Jodi that I’m actually hearing? The niece of my distinguished mother?” He runs his fat tongue around the inside of his mouth, collecting the rest of his food, and after swallowing breaks into his usual grin. His head is all the rounder when he smiles.

“Move it,” you retort, shoving the bag of candy into your pocket, then pushing his chest lightly with the five-in-one. “Before I change my mind.”

“Oh, don’t do that, he says with a whirl, marching towards the backyard. “I love it when you’re like this. I’m in like Flynn.”

You’re already wondering how you’re going to explain this to aunt Jackie. Though your aunt’s the hippest fifty-five-year-old you know, she has still maintained a simple sense of right and wrong, and she’s done so without being preachy or critical, a quality that her brother—who doubles as your father but might as well be your brother since he acts like one-- never attained, evident by his loud, liberal opinions. Evident by a lot of other things. After you and Dennis easily spirit over the fence it’s quickly evident that nobody’s lived at the house for a long time. Old tires, sofa cushions, rusted-out lawnmower frames litter the background, strewn throughout the thick grass. The fence encloses the entire yard so the break-in might be easier than expected. You step through the thicket of weeds and assorted junk and climb the stairs to the back porch, one of those wraparound types with a mishmash of long wooden slats, pocked throughout with holes and rot. Sensing the ease that you feel, Dennis hops up on the porch and begins to lithely—if not dramatically--step around the rotting planks, doing his Indiana Jones routine. “Come on!” he kids. “We have to get the holy stickers.”

“Quiet,” you hiss.

“Quiet? Girl, nobody’s even here. Relax. You’re about to cash in on sticker heaven.” Dennis’s ape-like arms are big and present, tiny particles of paint flecked all through his hair, and you wonder how his wife puts up with all that.

There are a million padlocks on the back door, along with a plethora of official-looking papers stapled all over the place. Los Angeles Board of Supervision. *Occupational Safety Association*. California Inspection Code 51X. One paper in particular, a blue document, catches your eye but then there's a light rattling sound and you turn to see Dennis already checking one of the porch windows, jimmying the bottom of it with his caulk-encrusted fingers. He shakes the window, rattling it left to right, and then slides it upward, the soft *shusshhh* music to your ears. "You gotta be kidding me!" he says, pushing the bottom of the sill up squarely with both palms. "The temple's not even locked!" The last time he was this excited was the last day on a big apartment job square in the middle of Compton, the two of you pulling out of the driveway, exuberant and giggly at not having any troubles. He climbs through the window quickly, still doing the Indiana Jones bit.

And there both of you are, in said temple. There is no hallway or kitchen to tiptoe through, it's *the* room, right there in front of you, and although you muse that no respectable woman should be doing something like this, the job continues to look like a walk in the park. The scent of age and neglect hits you broadly, moth balls, old vinyl and dust, bringing to mind aunt Jackie's woman-cave, an unused bedroom in her house that's gradually become her own little temple of oddities and collectibles. Dennis steps over to the nightstand, on a mission, but you stop and absorb the bedroom for a moment, taking in all of the untouched antiquity. Something about such a forlorn setting has always stirred excitement in you, and you wonder if that's because aunt Jackie herself has hoarding inclinations.

Which Dennis confirms. "Reminds me of mom. I know: you could spend all day in here, and take in the nostalgia. But come on. Here they are."

The boxes and the nightstand look as if they've been sprayed with dust. Dennis runs his palm across the top of one of the lids, cleaning it off, and after placing the box on the edge of the mattress and opening it, your eyes are aglow with the kaleidoscopic reflection of one of the only things that's ever brought out the child in you. There's easily one-hundred packs inside, the bright squares lined up one after another. At eight to ten stickers per pack, you look at the other boxes and quickly do the math, determining that Dennis's guesstimate was much too conservative. Beautifully conservative. Would they really take a middle-aged woman to jail for lifting someone's long-forgotten stickers?

"Well? What do you think?" Dennis is squinting at you through his sweat, grinning like a mule after a full meal. It's a ridiculous question but you know that he's giving you the option of making the first move, deferring to you, the elder cousin. You meet his merry eyes, and after another sweep of the piles of records, the collection of blankets and fabric, the dark-paneled walls, this lovely snapshot of 1970s oldness, you pick up three boxes of stickers, whirl towards the door. "It's time to giddap, Indiana. Let's get out of here."

It all started with a degree in sociology. That's usually what you tell people. That what-the-hell-do-I-do-with-this-degree misery that immediately followed the cap and gown ceremony which led to a stint in retail, gradually working its way around to weekend painting with Dennis, eventually becoming simply 'painting.' You're still not sure how this final leg of the journey became an everyday thing. But nine years later you haven't left, still working in an industry that contains so few females. Your hands are rough and dry and the milkshake-thick hand lotion you soak them in helps but has never brought back the tender skin you once had. And it sure as hell doesn't ease the carpal tunnels that has begun to set in. You wince slightly as you raise the boxes to your chest, the nerves in your left hand crying out, all the more reason to justify, albeit

weakly, what you're doing, this thing that only a child would do. Childhood flaps through your mind, those afternoons at the Super Stop purchasing candy and Wacky Packages, hanging out at Dennis and Aunt Jackie's before finally walking home. You're slapped with an electric reality: Yeah, baby. We are doing this!

But something breaks, a loud snap, and what you're doing is looking down in horror at your left foot, crunched right through one of the old floorboards, submerged in darkness below the floor. From behind, Dennis bumps you in the back, which jolts your body further, burying your foot even deeper.

"Jodi, what the hell are you doing?" You yank your foot upwards but the instant pain on both sides of your ankle suggests you cease and desist. The floor has your foot trapped like a steel vice.

"Damn, Sam!" He stoops to get a closer look. "You can't pull it out?"

"I'm trying." The floorboards on both sides pinch your ankles tighter and tighter with each tug. Pain creeps in even heavier, and sudden visuals of the emergency room followed up by a trip to the police station swim through the tears that are now blurring your vision. "It hurts, Dennis. It's—it's stuck." You pull one last time, which only worsens the grip of the planks. Though your painters whites serve as some protection you still wonder about circulation. "Go. Get a hammer or something."

"Are you sure?" Dennis is much too relaxed, which is infuriating.

"Yes! It's the only way."

"What if I grab your arms and yank you out?"

"Just go!" you shriek, honing in on the paint chips embedded in his arm hair while you suck in the pain. "Believe me, it's stuck."

He continues to assess the situation calmly, then turns to the window. “I’ll get the hammer and a chisel.” The spilled stickers all over the floor look like a Wild West card game gone bad and as you continue to fight off the flow of tears you consider whether the pain of the potential embarrassment of getting caught would be greater than the persistent throbbing in your ankle.

It’s the last thing you need, this episode that a degree in sociology has led to. Would this really amount to breaking and entering? In recent months you’ve been hoping that your college degree can help you make some sort of transition back towards an air-conditioned life; having an arrest record might change all of that. And further, would this affect your potential for any future beaus? All for a bunch of revolting stickers. Through the window, the grinder and cord catch your eye, hanging comfortably over the top of the fence, and it’s perhaps the only time you’ve ever longed to hold them.

The grip of the floorboards feels tighter and you desperately wipe the few tears that have surfaced at the corner of your eyes. Dennis doesn’t need to see any of that. His tough cousin, he’s always saying. Jodi, who would make a helluva *dude*. Aunt Jackie once retorted *why can’t she just be a helluva woman?* when Dennis opined with such idiocy, a regular occurrence in their house. Or anywhere. He pops his head through the open window and produces the circular saw along with its extension cord, a jumbled mass in his arms. “Hold tight, ol’ girl,” he says. “I’ll have you out in no time!”

“You brought the saw?” The sound will no doubt reverberate through the house, out into the neighborhood. He climbs in and drags the heavy mess across the floor like a dead carcass.

“It was right there so I just grabbed it,” he says between breaths. “I couldn’t find the hammer anywhere. Where the hell did you put it?”

It's too much to respond, and you just shake your head, hoping the tears are not visible. "Come on. Hurry."

The cord is still plugged in on the other side of the fence, and Dennis fights his way through the tangle in search of the end. As the prongs snap into the rubber connector he looks up at you, admonishing, "Hold on tight!" as if you're on a roller coaster at a carnival.

The wail of the saw has the piercing of a pterodactyl and it abruptly fills the room, the blade ripping through the ancient grains of the hardwood, evenly cutting through the plank that holds the left side of your ankle. The grip is loosened but is still tight enough to keep your foot trapped. Dennis raises the saw and steps around you to get to the other side but doesn't bother to turn the saw off, the chaotic rumble of the metal housing bumping against your thigh as he moves. "Are you out of your mind?" you yell, to which, amidst all of the noise, Dennis just stares at you quizzically. You shake your head never mind, motion for him to keep on. He crouches and lowers the circular blade slowly through the wood; the thick plank remains in place but the grip on is released considerably as the saw slices through it, interrupting the pressure, no words to describe the gushing relief as you yank your leg out of the dusty hell.

"Come on," you gasp, rubbing your ankle, scraping the packages back into the boxes before scooping them up. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Climbing back over the fence is no cakewalk in your condition but you manage, never so relieved to see the familiarity of a jobsite. You collapse, sprawling out on the grass, gasping, fighting the temptation to pull up your painters whites and assess your ankle. Dennis, too, is a conglomerate of breath and sweat; after he kneels for a moment, sucking wind like an out-of-shape linebacker, he throws a drop cloth over the sticker boxes, and is now cursing about something else but you've tuned everything out, throwing your head back, eyes shut, attempting

to regain any sanity that a southern Californian painting contractor is supposed to have. Aunt Jackie is right there, her yellow scarf and large brown eyes roaming through the blackness of your closed eyelids and you feel a cold humiliation. “He’s angry, hon. Live and let live.” Would her words eventually transcend to “she made a mistake, boys. A simple mistake.”? A powwow with your two nephews, on the vices and *bad decisions* of their once-respectable aunt?

A chipper, birdlike voice rings out. “Hello?” It’s the professor, right on time, but then there’s also the continued grumbling and movement of Dennis, and when glancing over you see the reason: the shutter paint is now a pond of red enamel, crawling out of a five-gallon bucket that has tipped over. Dennis pushes the sticker boxes up against the side of the bucket, covering most of it with the same cloth. “Stupid extension cord,” he mutters, flinging it aside, continuing to move everything around to make it look as natural as possible, continuing to curse which just chaotically meshes in with the repeated chorus of “Hello? Hello?”

The Cal State academic is now standing right at the front corner of the house, and has dialed right in, horn-rimmed glasses, a fresh shave, professional posture, the whole shebang. He’s just far enough to not be able to ascertain anything suspicious.

“Oh, there you are,” he says. “How are you two? Getting a little work done?” He’s wearing khakis and a button-down shirt starched so tight that, even from this distance, it looks like it would hurt to wear.

“Doing fine, Tim. Just taking a little break,” answers Dennis, sitting back, doing his best to appear natural. You smile weakly, brush the wet blond strands of hair back off your forehead, and wave your hand, praying that he stays where he is.

“That’s good!”

Of course it's good. You got a coupon for a *1000 off!* on this paint job. Why wouldn't it be good?

"Hey, I wanted to ask you. You two weren't over knocking on the neighbor's door, were you?"

Overhead, the darting parrots and dotted palm trees have this wonderful crisscrossing pattern against the afternoon light of Long Beach but everything—no matter how beautiful--comes to a hazy halt, and this existence is frozen. *Did he just ask what you think he did. . . ?*

"Huh?" Dennis manages to sputter. "Uh, no. Why?"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know," the professor gushes, almost apologetically, which brings some relief. "One of my neighbors told me last night that yesterday he saw somebody knocking on the front door."

"Oh, okay. No, that wasn't us," Dennis says. "That place is abandoned, isn't it?" He nudges your left pinkie with his work boot, lightly smirks, and it's all you can do not to slap him. *Stop gloating, you idiot. We just dodged a bullet.*

"Abandoned isn't the word," the square laughs, shoving his hands down into his crisp khakis, a sudden calm now all over him. "The guy that lived there was an old hoarder. He has all kinds of stuff in there. He was basically evicted."

"No kidding?"

"Yep. His house and yard were both a health hazard. The city had to come out, and they gave him a few months to clean it all up."

"What happened to him?" Dennis's efforts at lengthening the conversation are flat-out annoying but you deal with it.

“Oh, he was really old, and honestly, sort of losing it. His sister came over one day and tricked him into taking him out to lunch, and instead moved him into one of those elderly homes. Kind of sad, actually. Sweet old guy. But the house was full of mice and termites. And worst of all,” the professor says with a bright, professional smile, pulling out his keys and twirling them on his finger like some vaudeville journeyman, “were the bedbugs. The house is infested with them. In every room. That was what really got him evicted.”

You refuse to process what you’re hearing as Tim steps toward his front door, still twirling his keys. “Yep. Apparently Long Beach is full of them. I used to be in real estate, and believe me: when you see those bright blue papers stapled to someone’s door, you know what you’re in for.”

Ever the dope, Dennis throws his head back, clasping his hands together and cackling softly. Only a matter of seconds before he turns to you with that *we got away with it, cuz!* look. But all you can do is wince at the swelling in your ankle, glare at the colossal pool of paint working its way through the pine needles and grass, and then tremble at the dirt and tiny kernels of sawdust caked across your forearms and neck, hoping that the itch you are feeling is *only* from said dirt and tiny kernels of sawdust. Your cousin yaks it up, and his predictability and irritating ways make you want to mash his round head down into the spilled paint, get his sweaty scalp all gooey with the bright latex. If present at such an endeavor, his own mother might even nod her approval before looking away with a grin. But that’s immature, and you know it. And aren’t ladies supposed to represent maturity?

Paint dust cut loose by the fury of a grinder flits through the light of your days, mornings, afternoons, driving to and from work, the paint dust sometimes pixie dust straight from the

lavender backdrop of *Space Flakes*, one of your favorite Wacky Packages. The anguish from working the grinder is thick and consistent, compounded all the more when the next day is spent puttying and caulking door jambs or working the ten foot roller pole across a fifteen-foot high ceiling. Does Dennis have these kinds of thoughts? You wonder about the factory employee responsible for tediously inspecting each Wacky Package before the final phase of packaging, wonder if he too experiences such worksite anguish.

Another thought: does ice really reduce swelling? Dennis swore by it earlier, wrapping an ice-crammed Ziploc bag to your leg with tape, claiming how it saved him during high school football. As he sits behind the wheel babbling on and on about the day, you gaze out at the California sky and feel the chill seep into your ankle. Dusk has sounded its final toll, releasing long mauve-soaked shards across the I-405 horizon, and Dennis steers the work van through the thicket of traffic, recounting with an idiot's glee the look on your face when you first fell into the floor, looking and sounding every bit the part of every American fraternity boy you've ever known. There will be, for now, one more job followed by the next, to be followed by the next, the grunt of the workday, the grind of repetition, the delay of that air-conditioned life. The latex will flow, the caulk will harden, you will soak your palms in a dish of lotion every night after work. And Dennis will be Dennis.

But there will also be a celebration of the femme fatale, a victory for your gender that today resulted in a sizable stack of a hobby that makes each day worth getting up for. Indeed, aunt Jackie: why can't we begin our own such phenomenon? *If boys will be boys then can women be women?* The gender expectations brought forth by the millennia of human experience are ubiquitous, sure; but there will be no shame in today's breaking and entering, at this new venture that can gradually become the norm. The waning stretches of light pinken the tops of the

boxes of Wackies lying in your lap. The tiny fang-like scratches on your forearms bite slightly, wounds, you've decided, simply acquired during the quick getaway. Whatever it is, you'll take your punishment like a woman, an attitude that perhaps one day will stick in the vernacular of our times.

You grit your teeth and push this new reality of the woman through your tired vision, out through the latex-flecked windshield, splotchy remnants from the hundreds of jobsites the van has sat on. Yeah. There have been enough Huck Finns of the world, rabble-rousers and adventurers that are praised and fawned over, males who despite their mountain of mischief, can do no wrong. Your cousin jokes on and on, howling like a confused baboon, his happy-ass face aglow from the stretch of the California twilight. You continue to hope that the tiny specks sprinkled across your arms are just a casualty of today's ordeal, but you especially hope that aunt Jackie will relish in what you've done, this new reality that you've carved out, this new potential acceptance. This deed that began with a degree in sociology.