

# Upholstery

*by Rebe Huntman*

She was a girl under construction. Pretty but not, and always splitting herself in two. There was the exacting-self, who hardly ate in the hopes that there would be less of her to disappoint. At work she rejoiced in the latest in colonics and spinning classes with a group of unnaturally thin and beautiful co-workers who'd decided, as a collective, to starve themselves for the benefit of worldwide women's perfection. At the gym she pumped and sweat off any trace of kale. And when she finally emptied herself, she made her way home and sank, exhausted, into her purple chair, where the other self—the one that fed her hunger—took over.

As she clicked from one TV show about celebrities with white teeth and sculpted bodies to the next, the feeding-self heard voices the hungry-self pretended not to hear. They started innocently—a bunch of grapes boasting from the refrigerator about how fresh they were, their voices so low they were almost indistinguishable from the sounds of the refrigerator running. Before long Little Debbie began arguing with Papa John about whether the girl preferred sugar or salt, which got the rest of the sweets and savories going, their combined voices reaching such a pitch she'd have to leave her chair to calm them down. She returned carrying trays of bologna sandwiches with extra mayo and sides of cream puffs, all that salt and sugar and fat filling a place inside her that salads never could.

Because she so enjoyed her nights in the chair, she began missing work so she could spend more time there. And when she did show up she wore loose tops and pants with elastic waistbands. Her co-workers ushered her into the conference room for an intervention.

“Look at you,” one said. “You used to be so almost pretty, so almost thin.”

“How you've let yourself go,” said another.

“You could be one of us,” they chanted in unison. “If only you put your mind to it.”

Buoyed by their rally, the girl drove home and threw out the king-size M&Ms and pretzels. The red velvet cake and the carrot cake too. She filled six garbage bags, took them to the dumpster where she'd be less likely to pick through them later, and began packing salads for the next day. And the day after that.

With great fanfare, the coworkers charted her weight loss on the break room wall. But when the girl looked at herself, she saw only what was not yet right—the still-sagging belly, the dimpled thighs. She fasted on liquid shakes and sweated in the steam room. Enlisted a plastic surgeon to chisel and suction and staple her smooth.

When she reached her target size, the coworkers bought her a session with a portrait photographer, who posed her peeking through pine tree branches at the park and in the

studio with her hands tucked under her chin. She hung the pictures across from her purple chair, where she now sat to admire herself. How almost beautiful she looked with the light streaming just so onto her three-quarters profile. She needed more.

She hired a glamour photographer, who captured her arching over a motorcycle in a miniskirt and stilettos. In short shorts and a police hat. In a football jersey and knee socks. He took her to the beach and photographed her in a white flowing dress and to a hotel, where he posed her in a lace teddy on top of a room service cart.

They added the best shots—the ones that made her look like she had cheekbones and cleavage—to the growing gallery. They made love and photographed that too. And when they'd filled every inch on the wall, the girl sent the photographer away and settled alone into the purple chair. Her co-workers left messages. She wasn't going back to the food, was she? They were throwing a Botox party. Would she come? But by now she left the chair only to shower or eat, both of which proved more work than they were worth, so she abandoned them too.

She spent whole days now scanning her image until she grew dizzy and the chair began to form itself around her. She thought she might be hallucinating when its threads began to wind across her left hand. They made their way toward her shoulder and then her throat, crisscrossing over stomach and rib, weft and warp latticing in and out, until there was no way to tell where she stopped and the chair began. With her head plaited to its back she could only look forward. And so she was able to admire herself in the white beach dress—the sunlight caressing her cheek, her right arm stretching toward the camera—whenever she wanted. It was her favorite, the most perfect of the perfect. So it surprised her when she noticed. How the left eye was larger than the right. One breast higher than the other. The outstretched fingers too long in relation to her suddenly small head.

For the first time in weeks she felt a flush of dissatisfaction. She needed to call her surgeon. He would know how to fix her. And surely the photographer would come back. They would start over. Find a fresh angle. Try new lighting. But when she reached for the telephone she found that her fingers, which looked so grotesquely long in the photos, were caught beneath the grasp of purple threads. ■