

THE CUDDLER

Emily Schultz

“Would you say this is yellow?” I reached out to stroke its surface, but drew my hand back before my fingers made contact. I was afraid to touch it, that I would fall in love with it.

The sales girl nodded. “We call it Buttercream.” It was a nod with authority. Her fingernails were painted black, as if she didn’t really belong there either. She stood apart, assessing me. The store was the type where they didn’t wear nametags, just chic clothes. She was outfitted in shoes I couldn’t have walked two steps in. But then there were those fingernails.

“Go ahead,” she said, “Try it out.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.”

She had cornered me. I’d only meant to nip in and have a peek. The store was full of beautiful things I couldn’t afford. “Limitless” was the name on the sign. The space was cavernous, dark with small track lights—I’d fooled myself into believing I could walk through, invisible.

The piece was velvety, plush with a tall, curved back, low-slung in the front and double wide. In my mind I was already painting my blank, all-white condo something daring like chocolate brown to provide the perfect backdrop for it. It seemed so sophisticated. I could imagine myself a new future. Earlier that day I’d asked my co-worker Elly, “Everyone talks to themselves, don’t they?”

Elly turned in our shared cubicle and just stared at me. “A cat,” she said. “Get one.”

And now, there was this. I’d seen it in the window.

“Go ahead, sit on it,” the sales girl put in.

I let myself reach out and touch it. The sales girl watched my fingers slide along its surface. Its back came up and around, ending in curved points, almost like animal ears sticking out on either side of a head. I traced one of the buttons on the backrest. She knew she had me. I turned and sank slowly into it, felt its firm, snug cushioning beneath my office-fatigued butt. I sat with my purse on my knees, but then leaned back and the purse fell onto the floor. To my surprise, I didn’t lean forward to retrieve it.

“That’s it,” the girl said. “Get comfortable. It’s what it’s made for.”

“I’m just browsing, really....”

I stared across the store at the plump, geometrically shaped rockers in jellybean colors—violet or red chenille. At the sleek gray and white swivel chairs, at tweedy orange sofas with arms like pillars, at low contemporary pieces in olive green and hydra blue whose arms were almost part of the seating. There was even a chartreuse chaise that resembled an octopus, its footrest divided into sections, legs that seemed to take steps away from itself.

“I wasn’t even going to come in....”

I swiveled in the other direction and took in the immense sectionals. I’d walked past them to get here. They loomed larger than my living space, and all had women’s names affixed to them: Lola, Thelma, Jenna, Lily,

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Stella, Simone, Catherine, Scarlet. None of them had my name.

“I’m sure it’s out of my price range...”

The girl just smiled. Her front teeth were crooked but very white, as if she’d had them processed.

I leaned back. The item was built so that its walls and arms seemed to embrace the person sitting on it. It wasn’t circular, but rounded, yes—too big to be an armchair and too snug to be a loveseat.

“My place is small...” I said, closing my eyes and imagining it there.

“It’s called the Cuddler,” the unnamed girl announced. “It’s sized for one but built for two.”

“I could watch TV in it...”

“You *could*.”

I opened my eyes and looked at her. There seemed to be an insinuation in just those two words.

“Will it actually fit two?” I asked.

She beamed. “That’s what it’s made for.” There was something about her look that made me readjust my position. I crossed my legs, but eventually scooted down a little further, creeping my way around its rounded back. Clearly it was made for cuddling, but had she meant more than that?

She walked around behind it so I was staring up at her from the depths of the upholstery. She explained the design, the fabric, the fabric protector, and the frame, which I couldn’t even see.

“I don’t have company that often...” I began to protest as she pushed further into her pitch. The Cuddler. I wondered if she was selling me something distasteful. I got up off of the thing.

“Maybe you’ll have people over when your place is the way you like it.”

I stood there staring at the object, considering that. I still hadn’t picked up my purse. It lay on the shiny black floor.

“You live close to here.” It wasn’t a question. She startled me into telling her which condo was mine. I told her my name. I told her about the office seven blocks away, how I was just walking past when I saw the chair. The Cuddler, I corrected myself, the name exotic on my tongue.

“Just moved in?” she asked. She leaned forward and touched my Cuddler, showed me the detail of the stitch. Then she said casually, “You know, they’ll top up your loan by several thousand to furnish your condo. Everyone does it. The bank’ll do it for you like *that*.” She snapped her midnight fingernails.

I told her I did know, but that I’d turned the option down, trying to be sensible.

She nodded like she knew my type. “So you put your old furniture in your new life.”

“The interest... I—I wanted to avoid it,” I told her plainly. I bent to pick up my purse. That was when she won me.

“We have a monthly payment plan, Marlene,” she said, expertly. “We could have it delivered for you on Saturday.”

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“What color would you put this with? I mean, I’ve—I’ve been thinking of painting since I moved in.” I trailed her through the store’s dark, glittering aisles. She walked ahead of me with my credit card.

“Something dramatic.” She glided around the glass counter, behind which staplers, receipts, and calculators felt like art objects. She prepared my invoice.

That was exactly what I’d been thinking! I told her.

“Black,” she said, as I signed my name.

“Black?” I stared at the document. “I was thinking chocolate. Buttercream against chocolate.”

She tapped another line. “Nice, but that color is a little last year. If you want to be really bold, maybe fuchsia. Fun!”

“No,” I told her, and passed the form back. “I’m not the ‘fun’ type. Blue? Green?”

“A bit ordinary. Depends what shade,” she said with some distrust.

“Let’s go sophisticated then,” I suggested, as if she would be living there too. “Black.” I nodded, ready to dedicate myself to any color that would best match the Cuddler.

“What’s the rest of the condo?”

“White.”

“It should be bone,” she said decisively, tearing off a carbon copy for the store.

I peered at her. “What’s the difference?”

“Ask at the paint store. They’ll help you.” She gave me a watery smile, as if I was beyond help. We arranged a time for delivery. “How do you feel, Marlene?”

Better, I admitted.

“I thought so.” She smiled more broadly this time, screwing the pen back onto a rope that hung around her neck. “When you came in, you seemed as though you had a real purpose. You went right towards it.”

“Did I?” I laughed. I gestured vaguely. “I was looking at the bookshelves, too....”

“Really? I didn’t see you there. It was as if you just materialized in front of the Cuddler. You must have known what you wanted.”

“Yes,” I told her as she folded up the \$3,000 paperwork and handed it to me. The Cuddler would cost me \$125 per month for twenty-four months, plus tax and interest. “Yes. I do. Almost always.”

* * *

I had pulled all the furniture into the middle of the room to paint, then left it there so I could find the best spot for the Cuddler when it arrived. The old furniture was covered with plastic sheeting to protect it. Speckles of paint dotted the surface of the drop cloths.

“Where do you want this?” one of the delivery men asked. His blue uniform had the name Joe stitched on it. He was bald but good-looking, amicable.

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“I didn’t know I’d have to put it together!” I cried as Joe and his co-worker tipped the box this way and that to fit it through my doorway.

“Oh no, it’s together,” Joe said. “The box is just to protect it. You don’t pay this kind of money to put it together yourself.”

They got the box in and through the foyer. Joe began busting the staples open with his bare hand. He tore part of his fingernail and shook his hand and stuck it in his mouth. “See?” he said, and there it was, the Cuddler. I could tell it was going to look stunning. Joe pulled away the rest of the cardboard, then straightened up and looked at my handiwork.

“That’s sure pink!” the younger guy said from beneath a ball cap.

Joe gestured to the corner where the two fuchsia walls met. “Clearly that’s where it belongs.”

The rest of the living room was a more subtle bone. I had sat in my condo, on my old couch, staring at my walls for two days before deciding the sales girl was right: I did need more fun in my life. When I imagined putting the Cuddler against a black wall it seemed so desolate, like an island floating in the middle of a dark sea. I beamed at Joe, who looked quickly back to the piece of furniture.

“Funny little number,” he said as he and the other guy hefted it up between them. They edged it over to the corner, backing it in carefully.

“They call it the Cuddler,” I told him with authority. As the men set it down and stepped away, I clapped my hands. “Oh, it’s just as I dreamt it would be!”

“Cuddler, eh? Your boyfriend’ll be happy.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I told Joe. “It’s just for me.”

The other guy tried smiling at me as he picked up the cardboard. He had a row of pimples along his forehead, and I hadn’t liked his reaction to the fuchsia. I ignored him.

“Well,” Joe said. He presented me a clipboard, and as I signed it, I noticed the name of their company was different from the store name. I stood close to Joe and signed with a flourish: *Marlene Fuchs*. He smelled salty, but also like peppermint and Gillette shaving cream.

Joe squinted at my signature. “How d’you pronounce that?”

“Fewks.”

“Bet you took some teasing over the years. Well, enjoy then.” He held an open palm out to the furniture, as if presenting it to me for the first time. They backed out of the apartment, dragging the plastic ties and cast-off cardboard that had protected my new life.

I sat for a while looking at the Cuddler. I didn’t sit on it right away. I just wanted to look at it in its new home. I walked around my condo and looked at it from all different angles. I went into the kitchen and looked over the counter at it.

It was perfect. If someone were standing in the kitchen, they could pass a glass of wine through to the Cuddler. Someone could lounge on the Cuddler and have a conversation and look up at the person in the kitchen adoringly. The person in the kitchen could walk through the living space and out onto the balcony. Then the person on the Cuddler could call them back in.

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After a while, I went and sat on the Cuddler. It was so soft, and it seemed to cradle me. But it was too big. There was a whole space alongside me. It would be better if there were someone to lean into, even just an arm to snake along the back of the Cuddler behind my neck. I sat there all alone and tried to enjoy it. Just the beauty of the thing. I sat there for an hour. I peered into the kitchen and watched the hands move around the arty glass clock that Elly from work had given me at my condo-warming party six months before.

Joe was right. The Cuddler needed another person.

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“Do you take away furniture as well as deliver it?” I asked the “Y’ello” on the other end. Phone cradled to my ear, I lounged backwards on the Cuddler.

“W’hell... Where’d you get this number?” the man on the other end asked.

“Is this Joe?” I pressed.

“Joe’s out on a run.”

“It’s Marlene Fuchs. He delivered my Cuddler from Limitless,” I told the anonymous man and rattled off my address.

“Something wrong with it?” the voice asked.

I ran my hand up its soft back. “Not at all. But my other furniture doesn’t go with it. Any chance Joe could haul it away?”

The man on the line said they didn’t usually do that sort of thing, but when I pleaded with him, asking if he could pass the message to Joe, he said he’d see what he could do.

* * *

Joe was married. I’d been so enamored of the Cuddler I hadn’t noticed his ring. While the pimply headed boy squeaked in and out with the dolly, I made eyes at Joe, who eventually said, “Now cut that out,” and held his large hand aloft for me to see the nicked-up gold band.

“How long?” I was gracious enough to take a step back.

“Forever.” He looked past me, towards my bedroom.

“You work afternoons.” When the lackey had wheeled my old IKEA couch and end tables out into the hall, I said, “I could take a day off.”

Joe ignored the invitation and asked what I did. I ignored his question and told him again I could afford to take a day off. He put one of those large hands on my back, right at the spot where the spine curves upwards and the buttocks out—only for a second, as if he was going to move me around the room like a piece of furniture.

Somewhere his wife was sitting with her mouth hanging open, changing the channel on their flat-screen TV. I had a very clear picture in my mind. She was lazy, selfish. That’s what I told myself. I didn’t feel bad at all.

Then the kid came back, and Joe said, “So, Thursday?” as if it was all set.

“Thursday.”

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“What are you going to put there?” The kid gestured to the rest of the fuchsia wall.
“Nothing,” I told him. “I want it just like this, so there are no distractions.”

“From what?”

“No distractions,” I repeated, as if the phrase ought to have been enough.

* * *

But Joe wasn't a fit. He came over and sat on my Cuddler on Thursday afternoon, his big white hands upturned on his knees, almost as if he were meditating. He refused the glass of wine I poured, saying he had to go back to work and he didn't drink and drive. Instead of looking up and back at me in the kitchen, his eyes kept wandering around the empty condo. He asked a lot of questions, but not sexy ones. He asked how long I'd been in the space and where I came from. He kept licking his lips. He got excited when he found out I was a small town girl.

“But I'm not really. I just lived there,” I insisted. “I belong in the city.”

“Sure, money, clothes, shows, lots of entertainment.”

I told him about a movie I'd seen, but he hadn't heard of it. I asked what he liked to watch, and he breathed out like he'd never thought much about it and then said, “Action?”

I'd barely joined him on the Cuddler when he suggested we go in the bedroom.

“I'm happy here.” I drank some of my wine and held it in my mouth for a second before letting it slip down. I admit I didn't have a lot of experience at being seductive, nor with married men.

“I get it. You wanna break it in?” Joe slapped my thigh like he'd made a joke.

“Shush,” I told him, and put my finger against his lips like a femme fatale in a movie.

He took the hint and kissed me. He smelled good. My eyelids fluttered open and shut, wanting to see him there in my space, on the Cuddler, at the same time I fell into the kiss. He had a whorl of hairs at his throat beneath his undershirt and work shirt. He kissed like he was a bit afraid of me at first. Then he grabbed me by the back of the neck and slid me down on the Cuddler until I was almost prone. It was too small for this, and he wasn't even on the furniture anymore, but the speed with which he worked was sexy—until he kicked over my wine with his work boot. I watched it spread across the hardwood while, in spite of my attempt to get up, he circled my mouth with his tongue and pushed his hand up my shirt, right underneath my bra without unhooking it. Beyond his pool-ball head, I watched the wine continue to spread across the floor.

We didn't do it that day.

I auditioned Joe several more times, but things never went quite as planned. Once I made the mistake of asking about his wife. Once he came in and stood around and refused to sit down on the Cuddler at all. The third time, finally, knowing he was taking risks without any reward, I let him do it to me in the bedroom. His penis looked like an anteater, and he asked if I would say dirty things, which I did, more to amuse myself than him. Through the open doorway, I stared at the lemon smirk of the Cuddler and wondered how I'd got to this point—I'd thought I'd known what I wanted. I'd told the sales girl I knew. And now I'd lost four days of work in a single month when I had bills to pay. I had the Cuddler to pay for on top of the mortgage. Joe finished up with a groan like he was in pain. He sounded regretful when he said he'd come by the following Thursday, and I said of course then stayed at work that day.

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“Don’t you have somewhere to go today?” my cubicle-mate, Elly, asked me.

I frowned. “Nope.”

She turned around and continued working. We sat back to back, and I could hear her fingers tapping over the keyboard. There was a hesitation to it—as if she was only pretending to work.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“What?” I said again.

She swiveled around to face me. “I just thought maybe you were seeing a counselor, Marlene. You’ve taken the same day every week. Are you all right?”

“Like a therapist? Does our health plan cover that?”

“So it’s not a counselor.” She stood up and gazed over the cubicle’s top. Satisfied, she plunked back down and drew her chair up to mine. We both leaned in.

“I was having an affair with a married man,” I confided. “But it’s over. Too much work, and he isn’t the right one for my—lifestyle.”

Elly was aghast and excited: her face was suddenly pink, her eyes overlarge. “I could fix you up!” she whisper-exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me you needed a fix-up?”

She made it sound like I was a car in need of a mechanic. I asked her why, if she’d had someone she thought was right for me, she hadn’t offered before.

“You always seemed happy on your own. Self-sufficient.”

“I am happy on my own,” I agreed. She had already turned away to open up a social networking site on the computer.

She scanned through pictures of her friends, available men she knew. One of them, a Roger, had posted a quote from Langston Hughes.

“Who’s that? Isn’t he a poet?” I asked. Roger was holding a pint glass up in the picture. I tried to imagine him suddenly three-dimensional, lazing in my Cuddler, quoting poetry and saying intelligent things while the city twinkled behind him. Roger only had half a beard. I felt like you should either have a beard or no beard. I was also skeptical about the fact that he was a beer drinker. It didn’t really go with my decor.

“He likes Scotch, too,” Elly said. “He brought us some one Christmas, so he must drink it himself.”

“Scotch...” I considered it.

Tom Davis from Marketing walked past, glancing in to see what we were doing. Elly clicked the window closed. After he had passed, she said, “I know another guy, James—”

“No, no,” I said, reopening my spreadsheet. “I’ll take Roger.”

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I met Roger at a coffee shop rather than my apartment. It felt smarter for a date arranged by someone at work. I did a lot of things in preparation, in case he came back with me, if not right away, then maybe after our second or third date. I was already planning ahead. I'd worried what he might think if I had a living room with only one piece of furniture in it, so I'd gone back to the same store and bought a very contemporary lowboy, although at Limitless they didn't call it a lowboy. They called it Leo. It didn't cost quite as much as the Cuddler, but I now had two payments to make. I also put some of my old things back up, pictures in their frames, an iPod hooked into speakers, a flat-screen hung on the bone-ivory wall so it could be viewed from the Cuddler. I had to make it look like I was living in my condo. I found an old vase in my closet that my mother had given me years before: a gift for my first student apartment. I dusted it off and set it on the lowboy. It didn't go. I put it back in the closet. Then I went, got it, and put it out again. It looked homey, authentic, in spite of its yard-sale quality. "I'm sorry," I told the Cuddler.

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Roger lived in a neighborhood near mine. I walked through condo land, then headed north past all the furniture stores and Starbucks and mega-pharmacies. Suddenly, it seemed, I was in an area filled with houses and auto mechanic shops, used car lots, junk shops, and grade schools, one of which was French—*école*, it said on its brick façade.

I'd had no idea I lived this close to a family neighborhood. I never saw any children near where I lived except on the weekends, when hip mummies came in with SUV strollers to shop at the huge indoor farmers' market. Even then, they only invaded a single block. The rest of the time it was just gay men or straight girls with small, curly dogs on leashes. I took a side street and found myself walking past some old colonial buildings and some really darling coach houses too. Then I came to a row of houses that were all so small they looked like they only contained a single room. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment gazing at them.

At the café, there were high stools looking out the front window, but Roger had chosen a wood table near the back. It felt private. He was older than me and had a bit of a widow's peak where his hair was receding. He had a large nose, and I wondered if other parts of him were large. His eyes were greener than they'd seemed in his photos, and his smile made me feel unbalanced. I set down my purse and touched the edge of the table. I could imagine his energy running through the wood from his elbows toward me into my fingertips.

"You must be Elly's friend," he said. "Roger. Hi."

"Marlene. Hi," I said back. It seemed like we should have shaken on it, but we didn't touch.

He stood up. "Let me get you something."

I was charmed. I watched him move around the place, confident, like he came here often. He took his wallet out of his back pocket and bought my beverage. When I asked him how he'd found the café, he gazed around as if he hadn't been paying much attention.

"Google Maps. I've never been here. It's halfway between our two places; that's why I suggested it."

He told me he lived in Regent Park, which was once a famous Toronto ghetto. Elly had said he lived in a condo, like me. Roger quickly confirmed that yes, he did. A new one. He'd just moved in. "The neighborhood's going through a lot of urban renewal and our condo's part of that. It's not gentrification—it's more of a communal action of mixing new residents with families who've been there a long time."

"I see," I said. I had no idea what he meant.

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He pulled a large orange from his satchel and asked if I wanted to split it. I looked around to see if anyone cared that he'd brought something from home. Before I could get embarrassed, he jumped up and got a plate from the counter staff. Then he took out a pocketknife and cut up the fruit. We ate the large, pulpy wedges. After I got over my distrust of the situation, I decided it was romantic. Like something you would do in a café in Montreal or Paris. I thought of the French school I'd seen on my way.

"I saw the tiniest little houses on my way here. On that street..." I pointed off in the direction I'd come from, not knowing the name of the street.

Roger smiled and tugged a bright section from the rind using his teeth, waiting for me to go on.

"I grew up on farmland outside the city..."

Roger asked where, and I told him it was essentially a large flea market, a gas station, and a Chinese restaurant parked in the shadow of the Niagara escarpment. Sounds great, he said.

"My best friend lived two concessions over. Next to her place was this tiny house, just like the ones over there. Couldn't have been more than a single room and a little attic, but the most enormous man lived there. We laughed about it, that he could live in that miniature house."

"You'll have to show me," Roger said.

I nodded, unsure if he meant the real house or the ones that looked like it.

"Did you ever see inside?"

I told him I hadn't, but my friend had, that there was a stairway so narrow she couldn't imagine he could get up it. He was so fat. He was the size of three men. He lived there all by himself, I said, and it had seemed creepy to me as a girl, that he was all alone like that. It made me think of him as a kind of ogre. People in the country and in small towns generally couple early and stay together for life. Or if they have divorces, they go on for generations in bitter feuds.

"But not you," Roger stated. "Elly said you've just started dating."

"Did she?" It wasn't accurate, I told him, I'd dated, just never had a real boyfriend—but I might be ready for that to change soon. He wanted to know what a "real boyfriend" meant. Knowing you would be seeing each other so you didn't always have to prearrange it, I said, and maybe staying at one another's places sometimes, sometimes even in the middle of the week. Oh, I see, he said. And what about love? I held my breath. Then he said it was getting dark and he would walk me home if I wanted.

I took him past the tiny houses, and we stopped and looked at them.

"What was his name? The big man?" Laughing, Roger held his arms out on either side of him as if to encompass the girth. He shook his head. "Very politically incorrect of me."

I tsk-tsked him. "Joe. His name was Joe." Truthfully, I couldn't remember the neighbor's name, or his face. All I could remember was the feeling. We laughed at him behind his back, and I was secretly terrified of him—or of what he meant, living in that big vast nothingness, all alone in that flimsy little space.

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At my condo doors, Roger agreed to come up, but only for a minute, as if he was trying to be chivalrous. Inside, he walked around touching things. He stopped at the vase I'd put out. He touched the lip of it.

"I like this, this green." Roger turned and looked around the space. "It's different than Elly said. You've re-decorated?"

I told him enthusiastically that I had. I went and sat down on the Cuddler, hoping he would come sit with me of his own accord.

"Elly said you had plants, that you were a green thumb."

"I did, but I threw them out."

"You threw away living things?"

"No—no, I gave them away." I gestured vaguely. "They didn't go."

"The windows. Not enough light?" he asked. "My place is the same. It's a sweet spot, but it has its disappointments too, which I'm still discovering."

I liked the tone that had crept into his voice, not bitter but tender. He looked at my view.

"I could have had the CN Tower," I said.

He chuckled. "I'll bet that was a lot of money though."

I admitted it was. He told me that from his condo he could watch the expressway traffic all day—that people should call him for the traffic report. Finally, he turned away from the balcony window and noticed me on the Cuddler. Roger was lanky, I realized as he made his way over. I hadn't noticed before, because he'd been sitting at the coffee shop, and then we'd been walking side by side. The facial hair was to compensate for the lankiness, I guessed.

"Say, what do you call that thing, a lounge?"

He kind of kicked at it, gesturing with his toe. I'd let him keep his shoes on, which were running shoes, but the stylish kind.

"Yes, it's a lounge, exactly!" I leaned back, stretching my arms out along the top of it.

"You look good in it," he said, and didn't join me.

I jumped up. "I have some Scotch if you like."

"I don't drink Scotch. I'll take a beer if you've got one though."

"No beer. It's the kind you gave Elly and her husband for Christmas." I showed him the bottle. I wanted him to know how hard I'd worked, that I'd done my homework.

He seemed perplexed. He took the bottle and examined it. He nodded. "Sorry," he said. He handed it back to me, and I felt the weight of it come into my hands just as he leaned in to kiss me, softly, at my mouth's corner. "I should go," he said then, and before I could set the Scotch back on the counter, he had plucked his jacket from the hook and pulled it on.

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On Monday, I told Elly about the orange and the Scotch. I didn't tell her about the tiny houses. She conceded that in spite of a few bumps, she thought it had potential.

When I asked her if Roger had said anything, she turned away and pretended to type. "Be honest," I implored the back of her head.

"He thought you would be more down to earth?" She said it like it was a question, as if I could decide for myself if he'd really said that. Apparently, he'd liked me until we got back to my place. Then he'd thought I moved too fast, and that I had pretensions.

* * *

In spite of what he'd thought, Roger got in touch again before the weekend. He said he'd picked something up for me that he thought I might like. We agreed he would come by on Saturday night. I picked a safe, friendly time—five o'clock—to prove that I wasn't just trying to get him into bed.

When I opened the door, he leaned in and kissed my cheek again. This time he missed and hit closer to my ear, which seemed more intimate and sent a flutter through me. He was carrying a Kraft paper shopping bag. Before he could give it to me, I went and pulled two beers out of the fridge. I held them up, and we both laughed. I didn't normally drink beer—it made my tongue feel like an old car tire—but it got us off to a good start. I flicked off the caps with an opener and left them lying on the counter so he wouldn't think I was anal. I sat down on the Cuddler. Roger came over and sat beside me. He was close, and had to stretch one of his lanky arms across the back. I didn't lean back against it because I didn't want to be bold, but I knew it was there. I felt like I was digging my toes into warm sand. Every time he took a drink from the neck of the beer bottle, he moved the arm from around me to his mouth, then back again.

"Open it," he said. The present was sitting on the floor at my feet.

I leaned forward, and as I did felt my thigh rub against his. The Cuddler was working. I slowly brought the bag up into my lap. It had a wood-stamp image on it, as if someone had decorated it by hand.

"It's from my friend's store. She's an artisan. She works with vintage fabrics and recycles old materials, like photographs and postcards and bottles and things." Roger took another drink, and the arm crept back and around me. I leaned back just a hair into it.

I reached into the bag and felt something soft, squishy. I retracted my hand without pulling the object from the package. "What is it?" I asked.

"Just take it out," Roger instructed.

When I did, I saw that it was a velvet pillow with a small patch in the middle depicting an angel. The pillow was purple and the angel was gold with flowing gold hair. The image might have been from a children's book cover. It was cheesy.

"For your lounge." Roger's face lit up. He stood up and left me sitting on it alone. "For your lounge!" He pointed to the spot he'd been in.

"Hmm," I said, "because of the gold, right?"

"Exactly." He took another sip of his beer and a little bit ran into his half-beard. He wiped at it with his fist.

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Reluctantly, I set the pillow beside me on the Cuddler. The violet was sharp against the fuchsia wall, maybe trendy—I couldn't decide. But the gold was lurid against my buttercream. I got up and stood next to Roger, assessing it.

"I'm just not sure," I said, tilting my head. "Maybe the bedroom." I picked up the pillow, took it in, and set it against the headboard with the others. "Oh yes, don't you think?"

Roger stood uncertainly in the doorway. He'd never seen my room. Unlike the other one, it was still all white, including the linens on the bed.

"But I got it specifically because of the gold, to go with your chair." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to where we'd been. "Won't you try it out and then see how you feel about it?"

Defeated, I extracted the pillow from the spot I'd found for it and carried it again to the living room. I set it down on the Cuddler and looked at it. Roger sat down beside it, which definitely made it look better. I sat down beside Roger, and he looked at me like an excited kid. He bounced a little, and the pillow moved between us. I realized that he was a dork, and that by setting me up with him, in essence, Elly was saying I was a dork. But I wasn't a dork, and why would she think I was? I tipped back my beer, hoping that would help.

Later, when we were making out, the pillow got in the way. It constantly snuck in between us, and finally I threw it onto the floor, hoping Roger wouldn't notice. There wasn't room for three in my Cuddler. Roger kissed like he wanted to keep his mouth closed and I was forcing him into opening it. He kissed like there were wires running through his body telling which parts what to do, and certain parts were prohibited. I began to wonder if he was a robot. His half-beard scratched against my face like a Brillo pad. I wanted to feel it in other places, but he was too stiff to go further than kissing. At the end of the night, I felt like my vulva had blue balls. This, in addition to having a tire yard for a mouth due to the beer.

"I should go," Roger said, replacing the ugly angel pillow on my beautiful Cuddler. As he gathered up his satchel, he said in a low voice, "You know, you never thanked me for the gift. You never said whether you liked it."

"Really?" I yawned. "I'm sure I did."

"No," he said, a bit tersely. "Actually, Marlene, you didn't."

"Oh, well, thank you," I said, and I held the door open for him.

* * *

After Roger, there was James, then Gary, then Maurice. James came from Elly, but Gary and Maurice came from an internet dating service. None was the right fit for the Cuddler, and Maurice least of all. I had no one but myself to blame for him.

I slept with James right away, because I wanted someone to come back. I could tell he wouldn't be the type of guy to sleep with me and then dump me—especially since I was Elly's friend and he would have to answer to her. My thought was that if I had repeat visits, the Cuddler would get the kind of treatment it deserved. But mostly James wanted to sit there and watch hockey on it. Every time he threw up his arms and hollered, my vision of my new life was demeaned.

At work, Elly asked to be switched to a new cubicle. "You've changed. Nothing's good enough for you," she told me as she lugged her file folders away.

I requested my own cubicle, but I was told my performance wasn't strong enough to warrant it. Management wanted me to share with someone who would inspire me. They paired me with a new girl, which I found even

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more demeaning than watching those hockey games. I knew I should be careful—what would happen if I lost my job and still had to make all those payments to Limitless? Would Joe come and take the Cuddler away?

* * *

Gary had potential. He was a wine hobbyist. Our first date was at a bar where the server acted like he was baptizing us into a new religion. Ramekins of almonds and olives arrived. We sipped berry and oak flavored blends from gigantic glass goblets, and laughed a lot. Gary had a big bald head and a ready smile that reminded me a bit of Joe, but he was cultured and well traveled. It was a good combination. The problem was that he never came to my condo. Because he owned a house, it was always his place. I slept with him six times before I managed to broach the issue.

“How come we don’t go to my place?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I guess we could.”

The first time he came was a Saturday, the busy day for the St. Lawrence Market, by my place. We were walking back from brunch to my condo, and I could imagine the Cuddler at home against its vibrant pink wall, waiting. A woman with a stroller and two more tots in tow strode ahead of us. Every time the boy, who was about six, walked over a grate in the sidewalk, he peered down and yelled as if he thought there might be someone under it. “Hey!” He went *hey* and *hey* and *hey* down the street.

Gary nudged me. “You want kids?”

The boy’s little sister was carrying a caramel apple on a stick. I could see the girl sitting on my Cuddler, the apple toppling from its stick, rolling a sticky mess across the fabric.

“I haven’t really thought about it,” I said, because “No” was the wrong answer.

Upstairs, the Cuddler drew Gary in right away. He sat down on it while I poured him a glass of wine. I passed it over the counter to him, but he was talking about those cute kids we’d seen, looking at me and not the glass. The wine goblet slipped from his fingers and burst on the floor, splashing up violently across the fabric.

I was able to scrub the stain out, but I took it as a bad omen.

* * *

Maurice came to my condo right away. He was a music producer, and I thought that was very sexy. I offered to make him dinner. Taking a cue from the restaurants Gary had chosen, I put all sorts of nibbles into fancy dishes so Maurice wouldn’t notice there wasn’t much actual food. Living almost on top of the market, it was easy. I could just buy everything there. I didn’t know why I hadn’t thought of enticing men with food before.

Maurice looked like his online pics, so that was a plus. He wore a leather jacket and didn’t take it off when he came in. I wondered if his large, sculpted hair suited him naked or only in his outfit: an untucked white collared shirt and black jeans.

“This is hot, this is so hot,” he said, making a rhythmic finger motion around the room, gesturing to the Cuddler, Leo the lowboy, and the walls.

He said the same thing about the food, which I’d spread out on the counter since I didn’t have a kitchen table. I’d cleared it out of my place to make room for the Cuddler. “A good meal is totally hot. People forget that. Everyone wants to be so skinny.”

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I wasn't sure if that meant he thought I wasn't.

He commandeered my stereo for the evening, and we drank. Through two bottles, I listened to him banter about musicians he'd known and the musicians on my iPod. He had a very sonorous voice, but he paced a lot. Eventually I went and sat on the Cuddler and looked at him expectantly. I stared at him long enough that he came over and joined me.

Maurice didn't start with my mouth. He raised my palm up to his lips and kissed it, then ran his tongue up the length of my arm, into the crook of my elbow, and up to my armpit. He raised my arm over my head and licked. No one had ever been so tantalizingly dirty before, and no one had ever been so original on my Cuddler. In short order, our clothes were on the floor. I was holding onto the ear of my Cuddler, the back part of it. My heart bumped against my ribs and I stared down the long pink wall as Maurice extracted a condom from his jacket pocket. He struggled against me, seeking. I leaned forward. It was happening, at last. It was happening on the Cuddler!

Maurice pushed and thrust a few times—I gasped enthusiastically—but then he popped out. When he went to penetrate me again, I could feel him knocking against my bum. I pulled away and looked back at him. “I don't—” I started, but he didn't let me finish. He tore against me. I pushed him away.

“You know it's hot,” he whined. “It's not working the other way for me.”

“It was for *me*,” I said. “And I don't want to.”

“Come on...” He grabbed me around the waist and held me upright against him. I could feel his heart against my back, and my own heart in my chest. I stayed there waiting to see if he was going to move into me again or not. I wasn't sure what to do. I couldn't decide if we were still having sex, or if something had seriously changed. Intentionally or not, his forearm was tight across my throat. If I didn't move soon, I might not have a choice.

I grabbed his arm and flung it away, jumped off the Cuddler, and sprang to the other side of the room. “Go. Please go....”

Maurice didn't move. He kneeled on the lounge, still hard, erection pointed in my direction. I looked around for something to grab, and my mother's yard sale vase found its way into my hand. It was long and heavy, as if it were cast iron instead of retro stoneware. I held it up, threatening.

Maurice started to laugh. It was clear he was drunker than I was. “All right, crazy chick. How could I know what you like and what you don't? I don't know you that well.”

He shrugged on his clothes, his leather jacket last. I stood there holding the vase against my naked body for a long while after he left. There was something on the Cuddler. Taking a step closer, I saw he'd dropped the half-used rubber. A man had almost raped me on my loveseat. I went over and picked up the condom between my forefinger and thumb. Then I whipped it across the room. It stuck to the fuchsia wall above Leo.

I carried the vase into the bedroom. It was cold against my breasts. I lay down on my bed with it. There, I found Roger's angel pillow. I wrapped my arms around it. Why had I thrown Roger away? Roger and Gary and James, and even Joe. I remembered what I'd told Roger about the fat man, and how we'd gone and looked at the tiny houses and made fun of that anonymous man from afar. What was his name? Albert? Like Fat Albert? No, it was Arthur. We called him Fat Arthur.

I slept with the pillow on one side of me and the vase on the other. As I was waking up, my leg kicked out, and the vase rolled onto the floor and broke. I bolted upright in the bed.

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* * *

The condom was still stuck to my paint job, and my clothes strewn around the Cuddler's UFO base. Dishes of olive pits and platters of pita pockets cluttered the counter. The stuffed grape leaves had hardened overnight into small green turds. I opened the balcony door to get some air into the place. A brisk April breeze flooded the space, and the curtains snapped and spun. Sirens warbled in the streets below.

I snatched up the platter with the grape leaves on it and strode across the condo. I watched as they rolled off one by one, down to the courtyard below. I looked around to see if anyone would notice. There were some dog walkers in the parkette across the street, but no one was near. I heaved back and flung the platter out, too. It shattered on the concrete, spreading the glass pieces around like a constellation. A ripple of satisfaction went through me. I ran back into the apartment and grabbed the other dishes. I smashed them on the kitchen floor. Leo and the Cuddler were too heavy. I pulled the lowboy out from the wall, then knocked it back again, chipping the paint. Then I went out on the terrace with the Cuddler's seat cushion. Unzipping it, I tore open the pillow's thin white mesh and yanked out handfuls of stuffing. The material floated on the wind, some tufts blowing back into my face, some sailing free or catching in the trees of the parkette below. When my hand touched the bottom seam and the covering was emptied, I let it go, and it flapped, twisted, and fell. I stood there, still naked, breathing hard, and waited for someone to knock on my door to reprimand me, but no one did.

The sun was shining. A girl my age, already dressed for work, was pointing to the grass in the parkette, directing her terrier to do its business. Obediently, the dog did.

* * *

"Someone died," I told Elly when I called in sick. "I have to go home."

"This isn't good, Marlene. You're on thin ice here. What do you want me to say?" She sounded tired. We still hadn't completely reconciled.

"Help me," I implored.

"Your aunt," she said. Her tone suggested someone was now standing near her. "On your father's side. I'm so sorry for your loss, Marlene."

"Thank you."

"How awful for you," she said, in a voice that was almost sincere.

* * *

Home was only forty-five minutes by train. When I got off at the station hut, my father was there to pick me up. He had become old almost overnight. He hunched more than I remembered. I almost cried when I saw him.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "That city is too much stress, Marl. You should move home."

"It's not the city, it's me. Really, what would I do here?" I said as he threw my knapsack in the back seat.

"What do you do there is the question." He got in and fastened his seat belt.

* * *

Later that weekend, I asked if I could take the car for a drive. "I think I'll go out past my old friend Natalie's," I said.

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My mother looked up from a jigsaw puzzle she was doing on the kitchen table and said Natalie didn't live there anymore. The family had moved away years ago, after she went off to school.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I just want to see."

"What's there to see?" my dad asked. He notched up the volume on the six o'clock news.

The wheels found their way over the dirt road. I'd forgotten how loud the gravel sounds as it shoots out from under the car, how slow you have to drive on such roads. Then, there it was—the little house, just as I remembered. I slowed down and before I knew it, I was turning into the driveway. In the evening light, it wasn't quite as shabby as I had envisioned, though it was just as small. It was sided in blue now, I noticed as I climbed out of the vehicle. I left the keys in the ignition, in case I needed to get out of there fast.

As I walked up the drive, I was aware of every step as if I were memorizing it—as if I had been meant to walk it. I watched my finger reach out and push the doorbell, but I didn't hear a sound, so I rapped hard against the bottom part of the screen door for good measure. The pain of the contact felt good.

The fat man answered. His face was soft, his eyes dazed and apprehensive. At first I wasn't even sure if it was him: Fat Arthur. But it had to be. He was the right age. I suddenly remembered the slope of his shoulders, which had become even more pronounced over the years. The inner door swung back, and he leaned against the screen door so it creaked open a crack. "Whaddya want?"

Arthur was not as gargantuan as I'd remembered. He was simply 300 pounds of large. Fat, but not monstrous. Maybe it was that I'd gotten larger. I was no longer a skinny ten-year-old girl. He didn't scare me at all. Everything about him seemed gray. How could I be afraid of an old, gray, pudgy man? His hair was gray, his skin was gray, his teeth were gray, his sweatpants were gray. He hadn't turned on his living room lamps yet, and the light was fading.

I moved from foot to foot, nervous, as though I was ten. "I used to be best friends with the girl who lived next door," I explained.

"What girl next door?"

"Natalie. The Bernards. The ones who moved away," I said. I shifted my weight again.

"That's a long time back. Don't know how I can help you." He looked down the road, then at the car in the driveway, trying to put together how and why I'd come. He didn't know my family lived only two concessions away. For all he knew I'd been traveling all day.

"Can I come in?"

He looked me up and down. "I guess."

He moved aside, and I followed him into the tiny house, which smelled like tomato soup and cigarette smoke. The walls were painted the color of saltwater taffy, pale pink. He had a calendar with a picture of birds on it, and a carved mallard on the front windowsill. We stood there, him slightly inside the door, me turning in the center of the room. As Natalie had described, it was only one room, with a kitchenette in the corner, a futon couch, and a TV. There was a fake-wood dining table in one corner. Nothing seemed cramped. It was just ordinary. Off the back was a tiny bathroom, and what looked like a closet.

"Everything fits," I said.

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“Of course it does.” Arthur stayed near the front door. He didn’t offer me anything to drink. We didn’t introduce ourselves.

I turned and gazed around again. It was no smaller than my condo, just a different shape. As kids, we’d been stunned by its size because it was a standalone house. A house made for one.

“Where do you sleep?”

“What business is that of yours?” he huffed. He was unshaven. If he’d ever worked, I supposed, he must be retired now.

The place was carpeted in dirty white. I stared at the gray cover of the futon sofa. It wasn’t dove or pewter, charcoal or slate. It was just plain gray. It sagged heavily in the middle, which must have been where he sat, right in the middle. I imagined him sitting on the Cuddler. He’d take up the whole thing. His own couch had cat hair on it, but if he had a cat it was outdoors. I looked at the depression and I said, “How do you do it, all these years living out here alone in the middle of nowhere?”

He sighed and closed the door. “It don’t bother me.” At last, he lumbered over. As he sat down in front of me on the futon, his breath gushed out of him.

“Don’t you get lonely?”

“Everyone’s lonely.” Arthur’s hand scabbled around on the side table, attempting to tidy up for his guest, but he didn’t move anything because that would have required him to get up again. There was a magazine, an open eyeglasses case with a pair of metal-framed reading glasses inside, and a plate with some breadcrumbs on it. “You knew the girl next door?” he asked. “One of the parents died, the fellow, and the other remarried. Daughter, I think she’s in the city now, but I forget her name.”

“I didn’t come here for her.” My voice was barely a whisper. I sat down beside his hulking gray form. “The loneliness is crushing.”

“Is it? I can’t do anything about that.” Arthur glanced at the door, then looked over his shoulder at the back half of his place. I could see what he was thinking: that there was someone else standing there, that it was an ambush, an elaborate set-up. He snorted, almost laughing. He said he had things to do, but again he didn’t move. It didn’t seem as if there was really anything that needed doing.

“Hold me. Just put your arms around me.”

The fat man hesitated. He understood that I had come to him. Whoever I was and wherever I’d come from, my visit had a purpose. He may not have remembered me, but I was here now. A look passed between us, and he obliged, the hams of his arms encompassing me. They were loosely draped, but it felt as if sandbags were stacked upon my shoulders.

“I’m pretty, aren’t I?”

He agreed that I was.

“I’m not stupid, am I?”

He said that I didn’t appear to be.

“Kiss me,” I said. I must have had a pull on him, too, because he leaned in and did it, softly. He still hadn’t put

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the light on, and it was dark in the house and dark outside. In an hour the whole world would be dark, and it would seem as if there was no light in it.

When he pulled back, his breath in his chest sounded like a bird flying up, wings fluttering. “You’re trouble,” he said. “Trouble, and troubled.”

“Kiss me again.”

“You’re too young to feel this way.” But he leaned in and kissed me again, deeper, a sexual kiss, and I felt my insides expand as his whiskers scratched into me, and his arms grew heavier.

“Crush me,” I told him. “The loneliness is crushing. Lie on top of me and crush me.”

“Sure that’s what you want?” he asked. Two white sprigs of hair stuck out at an odd angle from his eyebrows.

“I know what I want.”

He didn’t need a second invitation. It was as if I’d asked him to have sex with me. But I hadn’t, and his clothes remained in place.

The fat man obliged again, in his miniature house, on his shabby gray sofa a long way from anywhere. He crawled over top of me as gently as he could and let his heft sink me into the foam, his large hands wrapped in my hair, his chest against my chest, mouth solid against my mouth, and all his weight bearing down on my belly and my bones. Groaning beneath him, I felt a great weight lift from me.

Emily Schultz is the co-founder of the short fiction website Joylandmagazine.com Her novel, *Heaven Is Small*, recently released in the United States, was named a finalist for the 2010 Ontario Trillium Book Award. The novel she is now working on, *The Blondes*, is forthcoming from Doubleday Canada in 2012. She has published in the *Globe and Mail*, *The Walrus*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Prism International*, and *CellStories*, among others.