CEDAR BOWERS

Daycare

We’d been dating for nearly two months when Colin said the magic words that permitted me to give my body to him. And I don’t mean sex, we were already doing that, I mean actually give it. I was only twenty-one at the time, and Colin was seven years older. That day, we were lying on the brown grass behind my apartment building drinking beer. Colin smelled of cheap fragrance and suntanned biceps, and he spoke simply. He said the words like this, he said: “I love you, you know.”

Because I grew up with some terrible messaging and very little affection, by age ten I’d concluded my sole purpose in life was to find someone to say something like this to me. Specifically a man. Once I found that, my only job left on this planet would be to get my body from here to there, move it around a little, shake its limbs, flap its lips, keep my brain out of the equation.

“You know what I picture?” Colin said next, tucking a piece of my black hair behind my sunburnt ear. “Me and you, not here in the city though. Somewhere better. And we have a huge tv in our living room.”

I’d never owned nor longed for a tv, but I didn’t tell him this. I was already gone. I’d left The Body with its love interest on the crunchy grass like it was a wooden puppet, and I, its marionettist in the sky.

I pulled the strings that worked its jaw. “Totally,” it said.

Throughout the pregnancy it had all the normal symptoms: it was revolted by the smell of Colin’s breath, it itched all over, the enamel on its teeth weakened, its bones brittle, and it shed murky lakes of sweat at night. But there were other more worrying things going on
too. Every time it sat down its lower body fell asleep, giving it the sensation it was sitting waist deep in shitty champagne. In the mornings, it couldn’t feel large sections of its face. In the evenings, it couldn’t comprehend language when Colin spoke. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, it lost all feeling in its fingertips. Its hands were useless and it dropped whatever it tried to hold, like change or keys or lip balm. But I didn’t know much about pregnancy at the time, so it was easy to chalk all this up to the condition.

A year after I’d given The Body away, and soon after their daughter was born, they moved to the country. The Body put Candace’s car seat on the rotting picnic table in the yard, then Colin and it unloaded the boxes and furniture from the U-Haul. Wind shook the firs and needles spun to the ground. The baby either smiled or passed gas. They were starting a new life. Candace, Colin, and The Body centre stage, with me peering down from the bridge overhead working my strings.

The rental had been advertised as “perfect for a young family,” which was what I suppose they were. We were? Still are. The house sat on a highway that passed through the town before leading on to better places. It needed paint, the fireplace was bricked over, and there were rumours of rats in the roof. But it had one large window in the living room, and out back—deep in the evergreens and maples—ran a seasonal stream.

Colin said they were lucky to get in when they did. The town was growing rapidly due to its relative proximity to a large urban centre, its many south-facing waterfront properties, and its recently built regional hospital. It had a library, two gas stations, an out-of-date DVD rental shop, and a budget-brand chain grocery. In the summer there were honesty stands at the ends of people’s driveways where you could buy eggs, kindling, or mason jars of flowers for five dollars. The first time Colin saw the stands out the car window he said, “I bet you’d be good at something like that.”

I pulled the correct string, nodding The Body’s head enthusiastically, though I knew it wasn’t capable of anything so bold.

Behind the bakery, the town’s first subdivision was going in. When they arrived, construction hadn’t begun yet and the development was only a treeless, multi-tiered cake of dirt climbing the hill, ornamented with some broom and foxglove flower. This site was where Colin found work, and that work was why they’d come. Colin showed The Body artist renderings of the soon-to-be townhouse complex: ocean view, small interlock patios, three bedrooms, a garage. Colin wanted to buy one one day. He believed in tangible dreams and the comfort that came from an obtainable real estate goal.
A month after they moved in, a delivery truck pulled off the highway and up the driveway.

“Maybe he wanted to surprise you?” the mover argued, when The Body tried to send him away.

The man removed the TV from the cardboard box, stripped away the bubble wrap, affixed it to the wall and plugged it in. He found the remote and an HD glow filled the room.

“The cable is set up already and everything,” the man said. “You’re one lucky lady.”

“Mm,” I made The Body mumble.

When the truck pulled away, Candace and The Body slumped on the sway-backed couch in front of the news channel. The Body’s legs were asleep, its tongue heavy. Candace started to squirm and twist in its lap. Then she started to scream, tugging at its T-shirt for breasts.

The Body breathed in and out unsteadily.

Although The Body was a little bit out of it, at first this arrangement was pretty easy for me. Simple. Concise. It was like a job: I knew what time to get The Body to work, how to treat the customers nice, and which closet held the broom. When Colin was home in the evenings or on weekends, I moved The Body exactly as I assumed he wanted it to move. I made it laugh when it seemed appropriate, it danced sexy when Colin wore that look in his eyes, and it cooked and cleaned and smiled and nodded along. I made sure said it wasn’t tired, even when it was exhausted. I made sure it said it was happy, when it had no concept of the emotion. I made it do all this, even when its face was numb and its tongue was overflowing from its mouth-space and sliding down the back of its throat-tube and I was terrified it was choking.

But then this: sometimes, no matter how hard I tugged, my strings started to prove useless. It was a rotating strike. Maybe I could get a leg going, or an eyebrow, but I couldn’t pick which, or when, or how. I wanted The Body to make something out of the old garden. To build a rickety bridge over the stream so they could marvel at the tiny salmon tickling over the rocks. Marvel at life! Instead, on occasion, The Body started acting crazy—and all on its own accord. It yelled at nothing. It screamed so loud it made Candace cry. It muttered madly under its breath, and even I was scared of what it was saying.


I watched it tantrum, purposely breaking plates and cups on the floor. I watched it cut itself cooking and then stand, fascinated, as the blood pooled on the counter. I watched it pluck out hairs on the numb areas of its skin with tweezers. Arm, chin, finger, labia majora. Was it trying to feel? What was it doing? Soon its toes and face and bits were
as bare as a baby’s bottom. And I began to feel guilty. I’d done exactly what I thought was right. I’d found someone to love it. What was with this backfire?

Fall and winter went like this: Colin worked early shift and The Body and Candace slept in. When The Body woke, it drank coffee while the baby ate diced bananas and Cheerios off her highchair tray. After breakfast, The Body buckled Candace in, and then pushed the crappy stroller along the edge of the highway while the various weathers pelted down. In the evenings, Colin drank beers with his co-workers and got home late. After eating, he fell asleep in front of the TV with his head pillowed on his bicep. Looking at him there, The Body felt nothing, while I was envious of how alive he was. I knew that if The Body plucked out one of Colin’s hairs, he would wake up and he wouldn’t even be angry. Colin would laugh and call The Body insane. He’d pull it down next to him on the couch and grab its ass.

I was starting to think that small towns positioned along a highway might be harder to settle into than towns pocketed away as a destination of their own, because the constant flow of traffic by the house seemed to be making The Body worse. It began spending a lot of time looking out the window, watching the cars go by, ignoring my instructions. It watched and watched and barely blinked. The only move it made was to eventually slush off the couch like a wet noodle and end up prone on the floor.

One morning when it was down there, Candace pawing at its shoulder blades and knotted hair, I tried my best to intervene. I made it slap itself on the face. I made it say: Get. Up. Thankfully, it responded.

Story Time was held in the library’s damp basement. All the parents were sitting on the carpet with the children, but The Body chose a distant folding chair and kept Candace on its knee. I felt nervous for it, out in the real world for the first time in months, so when the librarian turned on the stereo, I pulled The Body’s strings and made it clap along. I needed it to fit in.

Halfway through the song, a woman entered late with two small girls in tow. She didn’t look like she belonged in the town. She wore a pressed skirt-suit and her hair was ironed straight, while the other parents in the room were very West Coast Rural: gumboots and coarse knits, probably homemade sunscreen and jars of trail mix hoarded away in their canvas diaper bags. The new woman took a seat beside The Body, her shy children obedient at her hips. When the librarian started crowing again, the fancy woman took out her phone and began to type with her thumbs. When the sound of an email flew off, the parents on the carpet turned and glared. Then they looked at The Body.
This was my happiest moment in months: when they confused the woman and it as friends.

The librarian pointed to a sign by the door. “There are no cellphones allowed in here.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Work,” the woman said, her diamond ring flashing as she returned the device to her bag.

After the performance, they drank coffee out of soggy paper cups while the toddlers stumbled around the carpet fighting over the snot-encrusted stuffed animals. The woman sighed and leaned closer to The Body. “How long does this nightmare go on for?”

“I have no idea. This is my first time,” The Body replied flatly.

“Me too. I just started at the new hospital.”

“Are you a nurse?” it asked.

“No, I’m a cardiovascular surgeon.”


The woman shrugged. “It’s fine. I’m used to it. How about you? What do you do?”

“My boyfriend is in construction, and think I’m going to start a home daycare soon,” it said.

“What the hell? I nearly shouted from above, yanking on my strings ineffectually. This was the worst idea I’d ever heard. I hadn’t put these words in its mouth!

“Are you? We’re desperate to find help. My husband and I thought we could juggle the twins, but honestly we’ve never fought so much.”

“I could take them,” The Body said. “I’ve got nothing better going on.” Then it stood up and started stamping its feet. Its legs were asleep again. It needed the blood to flow.

“You’re a peculiar one, aren’t you?” the woman asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” it said.

Back at home, my strings continued to be useless. I watched helplessly as The Body picked through the toys, threw the broken ones in the trash, and displayed all the classic wooden animals from Colin’s childhood on a shelf in the living room. Sneezing from the dust, it swept and mopped. It brought the circular train carpet from Candace’s room and laid it in the corner. It stripped the better floral sheet from its bed, scratched off some drool, and hung it over the tv. From a distance and in poor light, it could be confused for a wall hanging you’d order off Etsy. It pulled the room together—sort of. The Body sat on the couch to admire its work.

When The Body woke up the next morning, it began cleaning again. Frantically. Sweating. It cleared the counters and shoveled the evidence of life’s chaos into drawers and closets. It bathed the baby and itself. Unfortunately, and despite the fact Fatima had said she’d be bringing
the twins, it was their father who walked them to the door. The girls stumbled in as he introduced himself, but I could tell The Body wasn’t listening. Maybe it had wanted to offer Fatima coffee? Maybe all this nonsense was because it was trying to make a friend?

Ronald was thanking The Body over and over. He grinned and shook its limp hand. Halfway to his car he stopped, looking back over his shoulder. A hesitation. His confidence wavering. The Body shrugged and closed the door.

Surprisingly, that first day was a success. The girls were happy to play with a new selection of toys, and Candace was pleased to sit on her diapered bum and watch. The second day, though, was a nightmare. Fatima arrived in a rush, refused The Body’s invitation in for a coffee, and then the girls screamed for half an hour after she sped away. Then they fought. Over toys, chairs, hairbrushes, raisins, even The Body’s lap. One of them received a decent goose egg after being pushed off the back stoop, and they both kept peeing in their pants, running through their spares, and The Body had to lend them Candace’s clothes.

When The Body looked like it was about to crack, its eyes blackening, brow breaking out in a rash, I tried my strings again. I managed to get control of both legs and guide it to the bathroom. I managed to sit it on the toilet seat. I managed to wring tears from its eyes. I watched it cry for the first time since we found out it was pregnant.

Twenty minutes later, The Body returned to the living room to find the floral sheet it threw over the tv each morning in a heap on the floor, and all three girls with their hands pressed to the screen.

“No,” it said.
“Dis?” the twins asked.
It surrendered easily, turning on the children’s channel and lifting them onto the couch. Then it went to the kitchen, made another pot of coffee, and looked out the back window, at the rain hitting the auburn leaves on the maples until dusk.

That evening, when the headlights of Ronald’s car started up the drive, The Body rushed to turn the tv off. It hung the sheet over the screen and joined the children on the couch with an open book on its knee.

“How’d it go?” Ronald asked.
“Fine,” The Body said.
“You’re a lifesaver, you know.”
The Body met his eyes. And then, when he took the twin’s backpacks, their hands brushed. And somehow even I felt this touch. But how? Was it that over the day, while the tv was watching the kids,
when The Body wasn’t being moved around for anyone, a little bit of me had been allowed back inside?

As soon as Ronald pulled onto the highway, I ran The Body to get tweezers. We found a thick hair on its big toe and yanked it out. We both gasped and more tears sprung to our eyes. Then we laughed so hard we fell on our side.

That night in bed, The Body saw Ronald standing at the door. Thank you. His teeth were a little bucked. Thank you, he said again with that slight lisp. And then we felt him touch our hand. We thought: what if Fatima died in a nasty crash on the slick highway and we became Ronald’s wife and we moved into their nice house and stayed at home with the three children and when Ronald came home each day he said, Thank you, this same way? And what if we gave The Body to him instead? Maybe I just picked the wrong man for it? What if Ronald’s love was better than Colin’s? What if because their house was fancy and far from the highway The Body became a different The Body, a happy The Body? And then we reached between the legs and we swear we found his beard hairs entwined with ours.

The next morning, it woke numb again. I wasn’t in it anymore, I was back trying to work the strings. Somehow, with the new day, I also understood that finding another man wouldn’t do shit. And I felt terrible for imagining Fatima’s dramatic demise. It wasn’t her fault Ronald triggered the first feeling we’d had in over a year. Remorseful, I made The Body whip up some batter and wipe the counters. At the door, it invited Fatima in again. Though the house smelled like muffins, Fatima wrinkled her nose. She ran back out into the rain, leaving The Body to care for her children for the rest of the day alone.

For the first hour The Body bribed the girls with juice—though it had promised their parents it’d never serve juice. After, it brought them into the living room and turned on the tv. Once The Body was alone in the kitchen, I begged it to pay attention. I closed its eyes. The numbness moved down its face, across its shoulders, into its mouth, along its spine, into its toes. The numb turned into a light sparkle. Then, the harder it concentrated on the sensation, the more and more I felt it too. I was inside it again. We wiggled our toes and our fingers. We clapped our hands. We even tried smiling.

Now that The Body and I have an off and on relationship—sometimes I control it, sometimes it ignores me, sometimes we work together and I’m allowed in and we become we—this is our new routine: for the first hour of the day we craft with the children or we cook elaborate meals with the set of small stainless steel pots in the crappy pink plastic toy-
kitchen. We play with the children for as long as we possibly can. We muster enjoyment. We try to find them funny. At snack-time we drink loads of juice. We give them seconds and thirds, going through gallons of the stuff. Our favourites are mango, peach, apple, pear. Mix them all together: there! Then at around 11AM we turn on the TV, lift the children onto the couch, kiss their foreheads. Back in the kitchen we concentrate on feeling. We think about Colin—who’s probably unaware that The Body is even his. Most likely the idea would horrify him. Then we think about the TV, and how it’s been helping us, giving us time to become one again. He’d been right after all.

This morning, when the twins bolted through the door, climbed on the couch, and stared at the floral sheet waiting for us to turn the thing on, Fatima said, “My God, the girls are so happy here with you.” And even though she was being kind and friendly, finally, we ushered her back outside. Because we knew how it was all going to end. Her girls were learning their words: Paw Patrol, Dora, juice, so soon we’d be discovered. And Ronald and Fatima would be very concerned about the damage we’d caused their little girl’s fancy brains with all the TV and the sugar and the mediocre care, and then they’d judge, and surely they’d fire us.

But until that day comes, we plan to carry on as we are. Soon Candace will be toddling, her hair will reach a barrette, the forest will thicken and green, and we will get better at enjoying these things. And if we keep this going for another month or so, maybe the numbness will leave altogether, and I won’t have to control my body with strings. Maybe I can re-enter it fulltime, be the one it dances for. The one who loves it. Probably this is what I should have wanted for it from the beginning. But I can’t tell you what will happen next. Maybe things will get so good for it, for us, for me, that I’ll put an honesty stand at the end of the driveway. Sell jars of wildflowers and kindling bundled with string, and be proud of what I’ve done.