

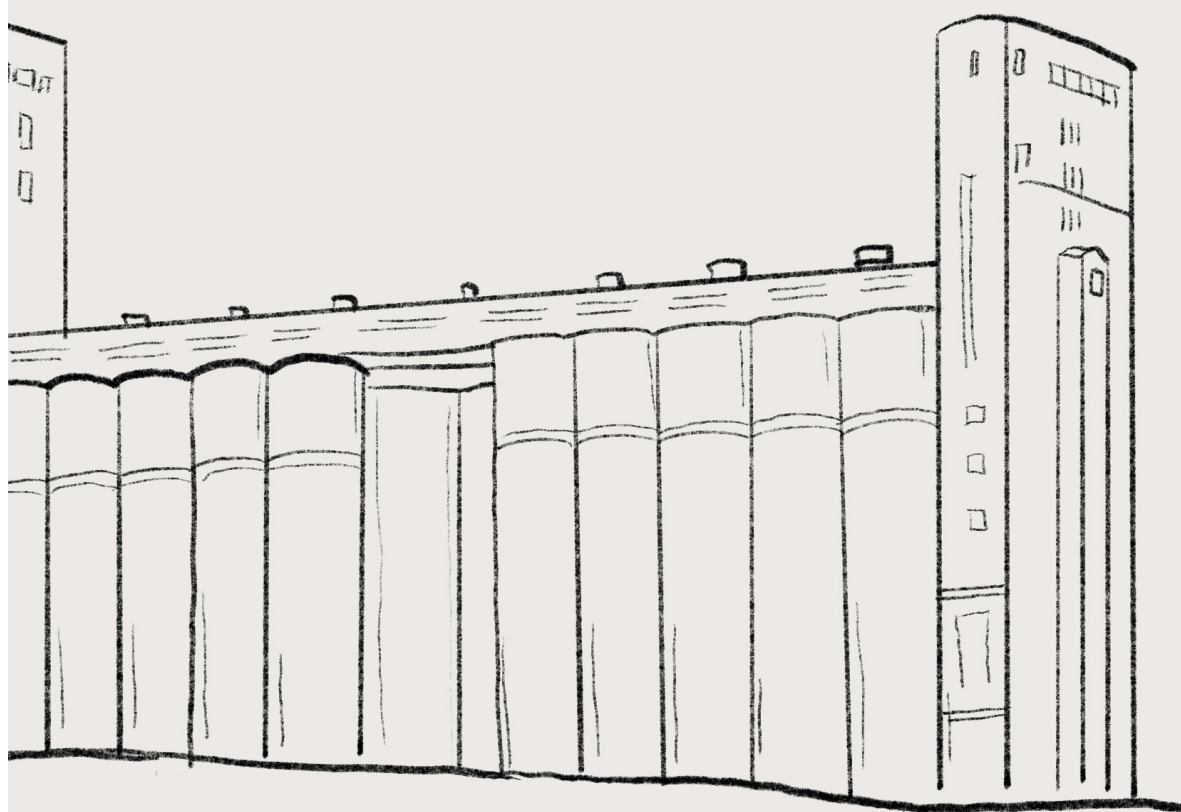
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YOLK LITERARY





2024 Montreal Fiction Prize

Knick Knack

Sabrina Fielding

First prize

The phone rings with an unknown number, and my mother refuses to pick it up. Our home phone isn't much more than a vehicle for spam callers: government officials demanding payment lest our home be seized and we immediately be taken to a Russian prison, my nonexistent sister tearfully explaining that she was mugged and left stranded in the Philippines and could we possibly wire transfer her six thousand dollars to get home? My mother philosophizes that the more time scammers spend dialling our home phone, the less time they have to prey on vulnerable old people. That said, her kindergarten teacher's patience crumbles the moment she catches wind of a call centre, so our phone has essentially become a noisy piece of decor. I feel that allowing a ringing phone to go to voicemail is an appalling waste, about as bad as leaving a twenty-dollar bill on the ground. Like a gambler, I am just fine donating a few good minutes of my youth talking down a desperate telemarketer in exchange for the minute possibility of something exciting.

On the sixth ring, to my mother's objection, I pick it up. "Hello?"

"Hello?" There is a soft, shaky voice on the other line. "Dorothy?"

I glance at my mother, who shakes her head vehemently. "This is her daughter. She's not available right now. May I take a message?"

Silence for a moment. "Is this Amelia?"

A funny feeling blossoms in my chest. "Yes. Who is this?"

"Mary Anne. Your mother's mother. It's nice to speak with you, Amelia." Nice sits heavy in her mouth, unnatural. "You must be, what? Seventeen, eighteen now?"

"Eighteen."

"And what might you be doing now?"

"I leave for school in a few weeks."

"Ah. Well, good. Good. Anyway, I'm calling to let your mother know that your grandfather has passed away."

"Oh," is all I can think of to say.

"It was the kidneys, in the end. You can let your mother know that."

"Okay. Well, thanks for calling." And then, like she is just another verbally aggressive duct cleaner, I hang up.

*

My mother doesn't cry, at least not in front of me. In fact, she doesn't want to talk about it or him at all, waving the news out of the air like a bad smell. She does something far worse: she discovers Amazon.

"Have you seen this, Milly?" she gasps, showing me a whole gamut of multicoloured pencil sharpeners in the shape of a pig (you can probably ascertain where the pencil was inserted). I assumed she would be horrified, but instead she begins to coo about how cute they are and promptly orders three of them in each of the primary colours. "My students will love these," she murmurs, seemingly forgetting she hadn't set foot in a school for the better part of a year.

A new package seems to arrive every day, sometimes multiple times a day—it's almost always the same slouchy thirty-something delivery guy with red-rimmed eyes and holes in his ear lobes that sag so much they look like they're melting. My mother takes to him very quickly.

"Santos is here!" she calls to nobody in particular, standing by the door like a dog waiting for its owner as his white child-snatcher van rattles up the street. She then asks him all sorts of wildly inappropriate questions, such as what all his tattoos mean,

and if it's true that Amazon workers are grossly underpaid, while he responds mostly in grunts and nods. "What a sweet young man," she says fondly, clutching her package like he'd picked it out just for her.

The whole affair mortifies me, and I keep a safe distance from our living room so he understands that I am entirely indifferent to him and his packages, and do not endorse this behaviour.

At exactly seven o'clock each night, like a ceremonial ritual, she places herself at the kitchen table that once fit both of us easily, but has been overtaken with the sad shells of parcels, strewn about every which way, emptied and discarded. She recently bought a radio off Kijiji from a middle-aged dog breeder named Earl, who, upon pickup, tried to flirt by asking for her phone number. When she pointed out he already had it, he became so flustered and red-faced he sent her home with it for free. Like a token of the gesture, she keeps the station on Earl's default *103.4 Classic FM*. She sits with a plate of Wheat Thins and a marble cheese string, ensconced in a wave of Steely Dan, and cuts open each package one by one. She is slow and precise, like a surgeon making an incision, glasses perched on the end of her nose. She stares at the tchotchke in satisfaction, turning it over and over in her hands, humming a song from *Grease* or the Bee Gees or something else in direct opposition to the radio. Then her expression falls slightly, and she places the item on whatever bare surface remains and never looks at or touches it again.

*

My mother grew up a member of the Saviours of the New Light, a religious cult located in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, somewhere between Alberta and British Columbia. Girls were

not permitted to wear their hair above their shoulders, and had to recite a prayer when greeting a man who wasn't their husband. One day a week, the compound participated in a silent holy day, where, in order to move closer to God, speaking and loud noise were forbidden.

I know that the boys on the compound were often cruel and violent and unfeeling to the girls, like their fathers had been to their mothers. I know something happened to my mother when she was fourteen, and that the pastor stood my mother up on the pulpit and made her sing a song of repentance in front of the entire congregation. When I brought my first boyfriend home at fifteen, she didn't look him in the eye once. She refused to have him stay for dinner. I'd never seen her so cold, so utterly unwelcoming. Later that night, she sat in front of the TV with silent tears streaming down her face, the light from the shopping channel dancing across her wet cheeks. That boyfriend and I broke up a few weeks later, for reasons mostly unrelated to her (the first one being my boyfriend tearfully admitting to making out with his lab partner), but in my fifteen-year-old mind my mother had poisoned it from the beginning, thrown a fragment of glass into the relationship before it even had a chance to blossom. I was angry, angry that she soured something so sweet with her sadness. The next day, she was at my door with a pair of bookends she saw on Today's Shopping Choice, featuring a frog wearing a top hat and holding a fishing rod, telling me in a soft voice that she was so sorry, and that wouldn't this just be perfect for my shelf?

*

Her absence is quiet, unnoticed at first, and then so loud I feel it rattle around the house. It's Friday, a day I'd normally spend delegating french fry and ice cream machine duty, but my boss

gave me the night off after a leak in the back room. I feel a little untethered, a little antsy. I eat pickles from the jar while I wait for dinner, watching *The Vampire Diaries* and imagining a dorm room where I won't be watched by a bobblehead angel with dewey eyes. "Amelia," my mother calls from upstairs. "Can you bring me a Bubly? Anything but lime, please." When I hear her voice, it strikes me that I can't remember the last time I've seen or spoken to her. She's spent most of her time in her room, hunched over a laptop perched on the little white IKEA desk that used to be mine, tooth enamel eaten away by a constant influx of flavoured sparkling water.

I open the pantry to look for the massive, Costco-sized flat of Pineapple Bubly. I expect chaos, mountains of granola bars and bags of rice lolling off the shelves like tongues. My mother hoards food like we are a family of eight and not just me and her, as if we are living in the Cold War. When I open the cupboards, however, I am shocked to find the shelves bare, apart from a dented can of refried beans and a half-eaten bag of Smart Pop.

"What happened to all the food?" I set the drink down on the desk next to my mother, where there is still a ghost of condensation from the previous can.

My mother's eyes dart frantically across the screen like two glowing white ping-pong balls. There are 18 items in her cart.

"Milly, take a look at the deals they have on here. Four packs of printer paper for eight dollars. Four! You can't even get it that cheap at Walmart. Incredible."

"What do you need printer paper for?"

"The printer."

"You don't use the printer. It's in the garage. You're never going to need that much paper."

"I thought I'd buy some for you. You'll probably need some for your dorm."

“That’s what the library is for.”

Suddenly, with a rage that seems foreign to her body, she slams the laptop shut and shoves it away. The mouse clatters to the floor. “Fine. Fine, you’re right, I don’t need it. You don’t need anything from me now, I guess. No one does. I will be here and no one will need me.”

I inch closer, like I’m approaching a wild animal. “Mom, get the paper. I’m sure I’ll use paper.”

She suddenly snaps open the laptop again, her voice becoming chipper. “You know what? I am going to get the paper. It doesn’t go bad. I’m sure I’ll need to print something at some point in the future. Might as well. Prices are only going up.”

I give up. “Sure, I guess. Where’s all the food?”

“I donated it. To the food bank.”

“What? Why?”

“We had way too much. You’re leaving in a few weeks. There’s no way I’m going through it all myself.”

The soles of my feet prickle. “Why not? You have to eat.” I take a good look at her, then immediately wish I could blink away the image. She has lost so much weight she looks like a stick-figure drawing of herself. Her skin seems to be folding in, collapsing at every joint, tinged green from the LED lights.

“I don’t need that much,” she says. “Besides, have you seen the cost of food these days? I don’t know how people support their families with the way minimum wage is. Some of the kiddos in my class show up hungry every day.”

“Mom, you don’t have a class.”

She finally looks up, blinking a few times, as if jolted from a deep sleep. “Before, I meant. I meant before. I’ll be going back soon.” Then her expression softens. “Oh, your hair looks so pretty, sweetheart. Did you cut it?”

I reach up to finger a lock of my cropped brown hair. I cut

more than six inches off a month ago. “Do you want any grilled cheese?”

“No, no, honey, I’m fine. I’m not very hungry. But... you know what I would take? Another Bubby. Anything but lime, please.”

The next day, I find a stack of printer paper in the pantry, right where the boxes of chicken stock used to be.

*

My mother fell pregnant at seventeen. Though the Saviours of the New Light implored married couples to reproduce enthusiastically, a woman who conceived out of wedlock was the ultimate violation, a direct assault against God himself. Her parents watched from the window of the compound as she was driven away for the last time, told she was no longer welcome to return under any circumstances. One of her distant cousins had left for the city a few years prior, allowing my mother to stay while she got her affairs in order. She found a job as a waitress at a sports bar downtown, right on the corner of Bay and Dundas, that was willing to disregard her age and burgeoning belly, where good tips seemed to be the tacit tradeoff for a constant barrage of harassment. “I was a pretty girl,” my mother said, shaking her head viciously as if ashamed. There are very few photos of my mother before I was born—cameras, telephones, and computers are hard to come by on the compound, anything that can capture or transmit information. I’ve only seen one picture of her before the age of twenty. She is pregnant in the photo, perched on a city bench with her hands braced behind her, holding herself steady amidst a massive, protruding belly. She *is* beautiful, in a sickly sort of way. Rivulets of brown hair are tied into a braid snaking across her chest, and she stares at the camera with a stern, probing

expression, like a ghostly Victorian child. When I was little, I had nightmares about the photo; I was the girl with the hollow, purple eyes, my belly was wide and moving, filled with something I didn't understand. I would wake in a cold sweat, stomach churning, and with an irony I couldn't yet grasp, I would call out for my mother.

*

I arrive home from work one afternoon to Santos' delivery truck parked crooked along the curb, one tire sunk into the neighbour's lawn, leaning like the Tower of Pisa. There are children swarming our yard, hula hooping, shooting each other with Nerf guns, girls drawing in chalk on the driveway. The screen door is open, and the trill of my mother's laugh spills into the street. Santos stumbles out a moment later, nearly tripping over his untied laces. He glances up at me and freezes for a second, his face turning red beneath his acne-ridden cheeks. I notice his hand is curled around a few hundred dollar bills. He mumbles something unintelligible and continues toward his truck, almost tripping over a kid as he runs past.

Walking inside, the house burns with the acrid smell of new plastic. "Mom?"

"In here," she calls. She is at the kitchen table again in front of a box, a mini cactus in her hands. She is starting earlier than usual today.

"Who are all the kids?"

"Oh, just some of the neighbours. I thought it might be nice to get some toys for the kids on the street to play with. It gets them off the screens, you know?"

I can't even think of how to respond. "I think the delivery guy stole from us."

"What?"

"I just saw him walking out with a fistful of bills."

"Oh, Santos?" She pulls succulent after succulent out of the box like Mary Poppins' bag. "He didn't steal."

"So... where'd he get the money?"

"I gave it to him."

"You gave it to him? Why?"

"He works so hard, doesn't he? You know, he helped me set up that TV stand the other day. So generous."

"He didn't set up the TV stand. I did."

"Well, he carried it into the living room for me. Which was extremely helpful. So I wanted to give him a little something. I know he and his girlfriend are trying to get their own apartment before the baby comes. I saw I had some cash lying by the door, and figured he'd probably need it more than I do."

I glance at the table by the door, where I'd left three hundred dollars I received in the mail as a graduation award, waiting to be deposited. Anger swung through me in a ferocious wave. "Mom, that was *my* money. You just gave Santos *my* money."

Her eyebrows draw together, her mouth falling into a little O. "Oh, was it? Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. Here, I'll replace it now." She grabs her purse hanging on the back of the chair, and begins rummaging around. "Okay, no cash. Let me send you the money, then."

I watch her look for her phone, arms folded across my chest, staring her down like a cowboy. I am extraordinarily, wildly, disproportionately angry, my hands trembling.

She swipes at her phone, then frowns, then swipes at it again, more violently. "Hmm," she says. "Hmm." She swipes some more. "Sweetie, there's something wrong – I just have to figure out some things with the bank, with my account. I need to transfer a few things around. I try to keep things separate, so things are all over the place. As soon as I have that figured out I will send you

that money, okay? I promise.”

There is a line that has appeared between my mother and me – at first a faint compression drawn with a finger in the earth, but now like a trench blown out, too wide to cross and I am too stubborn to offer a hand.

*

The day I leave for university is the hottest day of the year, the August heat pressing into every side of the house. There are still kids appearing on the lawn, on the front porch, unfazed as I squeeze by them to load up my car. Boxes are stacked high to the roof of my little Sedan. My mother is nowhere to be found, likely locked away in her bedroom. When I come back for the final check of my bedroom, four small Amazon boxes sit outside my door. I know this is a peace offering. All of the boxes are open—a part of me hopes this might stem from a motherly duty to quality control, but I know it’s more likely that she can’t resist the high of a sealed box. Inside is a blue shower caddy, a set of bed risers, an electric toothbrush with six interchangeable heads, and a WaterPik. I step over them, leaving them to rot amidst the graveyard of other discarded items, fearing that I, too, have become just another trinket to add to my mother’s collection.

I knock on her bedroom door. “Who is it?” she calls, and I don’t think she’s joking.

The dark room is dark again, and it takes my eyes time to adjust. The figure of my mother, hunched over and eyes wide, looms in the corner above the laptop. Beside her, a bobblehead of Snoopy dances back and forth. This is what I will remember, I think, and then I feel so sad my heart collapses. “I’m heading out.”

She looks at me, like a bewildered nocturnal creature, her eyes wet and lost. “You’re leaving?”

I nod, and I cannot open my mouth because then I will cry myself into nonexistence.

She rises from the chair, and I am wary of her as she moves toward me. When she hugs me, she smells like sweat and old socks and something that is uniquely my mother, something that will always cut through. “Did you see the things I left by your door?” Her voice is small.

I nod again, into her shoulder.

“Okay, well, good. And that money, I promise I’ll send it to you as soon as possible. I’m just waiting for the bank to get back to me.”

“Sure.”

She squeezes me tight, and I feel wet and warmth stain my shoulder. “Oh, Milly, sweetheart. I’m sorry.” Her chest shudders, and her small frame melts into me. “I am. Come back soon, honey. Please.”

I take the four boxes with me, squeeze them into the final corners of my car.

As I pull out onto the street, I glance into the rearview mirror. I imagine my mother standing there in her pyjamas, arms folded in front of herself, hands waving frantically. Instead, I find myself staring at the taillights of a shuddering Amazon delivery truck, sliding deftly into the spot where my car used to be.