

STORIES OF LIFE AND OTHER SUCH HAPPENINGS

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ABSTRACT

Stories of Life and Other Such Happenings is a combination of three short stories, *Breasts Before Brunch*, *Two Pink Lines*, and *Tooneressie*. *Breasts Before Brunch* is a comedic romance telling a story of a young lady attempting to find love even despite a crazy family. When her flamboyant cousin insinuates herself into Natalie's date with her new boyfriend, Natalie's imagination of what she would like to do to her cousin runs wild. When her cousin decides to show Greg her new boobs, the situation goes from bad to worse for Natalie. Alternatively, *Two Pink Lines* tells a very different type of story. The main character, Mia, not having found love, seeks the fulfillment of a family even without the requisite man. Her journey leads to a romance with a turkey baster. Finally, after two scintillating stories, *Tooneressie* is a journey into childhood fantasy. Nettie thinks she wants to run away, instead she finds herself in a world behind her house of very small people. When she is found in the woods asleep, everyone assumes she had been dreaming. She knew the truth. All three stories, though very different in scope, all tell a human truth. The need to make connections.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	iii
Critical Preface	v
Breasts Before Brunch	1
Two Pink Lines	17
Tooneressie	32
Chapter	
I. Into the Woods	32
II. The Other Side	38
III. Home Again	47

CRITICAL PREFACE

The following selections are creative fiction that are very different in nature, but have an overarching motif. These are stories taken from elements of my life, but given a character and a plot that is different from my own. I will briefly discuss the three stories and their relevance to the short story genre, and the children's fiction genre, as well as how they relate to the reading that I have done and to my favorite genres and authors.

Over the last twenty years, Janet Evanovich has been one of my favorite authors. She writes detective/mystery genre fiction with humor. She weaves humor into the situations as well as the characters. Her Stephanie Plum books, in particular, I have enjoyed as a reader, and have attempted to emulate. Stephanie is a bail bond enforcement agent who cannot do her job well at all. She always seems to find herself the target of some madman or woman, while still attempting to do her job. Stephanie has a sidekick that causes more problems than actually helps her, and usually only succeeds in helping out when she sits on someone. Along with mystery, there is also romance which is also woven into a humorous situation as Stephanie finds herself the object of desire of two very sexy men, and with all of her ineptitude and various fluids constantly being spilled upon her, the reader is left to wonder just how those men can find her so sexy. Though these books are formulaic, the humor in the characters and the situations keeps the reader reading. In writing *Breasts Before Brunch*, I have attempted to emulate this style of humor.

Breasts Before Brunch is a character point of view piece. It originated during a Summer Writing Workshop at Cleveland State. I was working on developing different points of view. I wanted to write a piece that contained different character perspectives of one single humorous event; therefore, there are three different character perspectives in this

piece. The event takes place in a very short amount of time, but the situation lends itself to humor. Though the mood of the piece is light, humorous entertainment, the tone of the characters is very different.

Natalie, the main point of view character, is not at all amused when her cousin shows up to meet her new boyfriend, Greg, and ends up showing Greg her breasts. Natalie did not want her cousin to stay for lunch. She says, “just when I was about to revert to serious sign language by mouthing “get the fuck out” when Greg’s head was turned so that he wouldn’t see me, it happened. Somehow her boobs became the subject of conversation and out they came.” The reader may find this situation humorous, but Natalie does not. Left with the little alternatives, Natalie serves her cousin lunch.

She says, “I wanted to assassinate my cousin. Instead I served her salad. All three of us sat in conversational silence. The only sound was the munching and crunching of vegetables. I fantasized about Eleanor choking, and then smiled at her knowingly. I didn’t perform the Heimlich. After Eleanor had hypnotized Greg with her breasts, one would think that she would at least have the decency to leave or drop dead, but she didn’t do either, and so there we sat.”

Natalie’s tone is one of irate irritation at her cousin’s behavior, which lends to the overall humorous mood. Many times, we find ourselves in situations in which looking in from the outside might be humorous, but on the inside, involved in the situation, the humor cannot be found. This is the case with *Breasts Before Brunch*.

Eleanor’s tone also lends itself to the humor of the piece as well. First, she seems blissfully ignorant of how she is hurting her cousin, but we also get a glimpse of her

jealousy of her cousin. She then becomes irate and indignant when Greg throws her out. The audience cheers.

She says, “as I opened my mouth to say just that, the most vulgar thing happened. We were standing now nose to nose fuming into each other’s faces, breath being exchanged with breath. Everything started to become hot and intangible. And then I was being scooped off my feet, not romantically, and being forcibly carried down the steps and toward the door.”

Just when the audience thought that Greg might cheat on Natalie, that her cousin might be that much of a s***, (can I use the word slut in a critical preface?), Greg throws her out. The situation is resolved by Greg being the knight in shining armor of Natalie’s dreams. That dream comes into full view at the end of the piece. Word choice and pacing was critical for this piece as the events take place so quickly, the words had to be concise and specific.

The challenge for this piece was the male perspective. Given the situation, I had to ask myself, how would a man who thinks he might be in love with this woman, react to not only her cousin, but also to her reaction as well. The end then is very satisfying as he turns into the guy many ladies long for; the one who cancels a flight, makes dinner, and loves her when she is at her worst. (He might not be realistic.)

Greg’s point of view begins with absolute confusion.

He says, “I just stood there, frozen, uncertain how to react. Do I look at them and then politely say, “Oh, those are nice!” Do I become insulted and say something like “what the hell do you think you’re doing, anyway?” What does a guy do after this? Natalie told

me that she had some interesting people in her family, but my god, she didn't tell me about that!"

Much of the rest of Greg's reaction is based on him trying to wade through these troubled waters and trying to choose which steps he should or shouldn't take. His confusion at the beginning of his point of view section further lends itself to the satisfying ending of him making the right choices to develop the relationship.

Unlike *Breasts Before Brunch*, *Two Pink Lines* takes place over an expanded amount of time, but contains one single overreaching event that shapes and changes the character. When the character realizes she has endometriosis, which prevents many women from ever having children, she feels the need to make drastic changes to her life. She has to find herself in her new situation. This is a story of a personal journey, of perseverance and triumph. Even though she makes drastic changes to her life, she is fooling herself because she is never able to accept her situation. The ending is satisfying and yet leaves the reader with an unanswered question and guessing.

Two Pink Lines was born of a very real struggle that many women face: not only the idea of lack of fertility, but also not finding the right person. This piece is timely for today's society in that it speaks to single professional women, as well as women with alternative lifestyles who are making choices based on their situation rather than whether or not they are married to a man. Therefore, this story belongs in the realistic fiction genre. The ending is very specifically left as a cliffhanger leaving the reader to wonder who is the father. But the fact is that the father is insignificant because the story is about the woman's journey.

I utilized spacing, and sections to show time had passed in this piece, as well as text features such as italics to show reoccurring instances and ideas, specifically the writing on pregnancy test boxes. When a woman's only desire is to have a child, those words can mock her. When a woman who really wanted a child first realizes she is pregnant, those words are the most beautiful in the world.

The dialogue is also significant because the dialogue drives the plot forward. At the beginning, we learn of Mia's problem from her Maggie and the concern Maggie feels for Mia. "Mia! You're in pain. It's not supposed to be this way every month. Maybe once in a while but not every month. Not to the point where you can't walk, eat, sleep, or work." Maggie's words help the reader to understand why this situation is so significant and the dialogue then escalates the tension while moving the plot forward. We also learn through dialogue that Mia has not been able to find the right man, that he is a selfish person that is not emotionally invested in her. Therefore, the reader is happy to think the child might be the product of a one night stand with a turkey baster.

Finally, *Tooneressie* is a children's fantasy chapter book that was derived from my childhood pretend friend, Tooneressie. There are three chapters in this book. Each chapter is framed through a different setting. Because this is a children's chapter book, the language needs to be simple, but the plot needs to be engaging. As part of the revision process, I have worked on condensing my sentences and using strong verbs to keep the story moving forward. Child's fantasy, as well as fantasy fiction is the genre in which I find myself most interested as a reader and a writer.

Growing up, my favorite author was J. R. R. Tolkien, he is still one of my favorite authors. I love his worlds that he created as well as the characters within those worlds. His

books allow me to escape into another world in which ultimate good will always triumph over ultimate evil. The same can be said for J. K. Rowling and her Harry Potter series, which I picked up as an adult, read, and fell in love with. She, too, was able to create a whole new world that interacts with our world and also allows ultimate good to triumph over ultimate evil. Though *Tooneressie* is not a good versus evil story, it too allows my main character to interact with characters from another world or reality.

There were two challenging aspects of this piece. The main character, Nettie, is young so her voice is particularly challenging as she needs to be a convincingly precocious seven-year-old. The reader needs to believe she is following a fairy creature into the unknown much like Lewis Carroll's Alice when she followed the rabbit down a rabbit hole. The other element that is particularly challenging is the setting. The new world Nettie's enters needs to mirror her world on a smaller scale, but also needed to have enough new characteristics, such as the distillery room with all of the tube, to make it seem like something new and fresh.

My hope for each of these stories is to get them published. I believe the short stories will have an audience in a number of magazines. I want to publish *Tooneressie* as a children's book. Though this is currently a three-chapter book with a clear beginning, middle, and ending, I do have plan to expand upon Nettie and *Tooneressie*'s adventures. I believe that there is an audience for books like *Tooneressie* because of not only the fantasy aspect, but also the psychological aspect of the pretend friend.

BREASTS BEFORE BRUNCH

“I had my breasts enlarged.”

This, Eleanor proclaimed as she flipped down her orange sherbet tube top, presenting her breasts as if they were two soldiers standing at attention saluting their commanding officer. Greg and I both stood there shocked and amazed. I think I was shocked, he was amazed.

This particular date was supposed to have been special, or at least I had planned it to be. Greg was to come over to my place at about 11:00. We had planned a light lunch, salad, and then maybe take in an early matinee. It had to be an early date because Greg was supposed to be going out of town to some type of computer conference. What he didn't realize was that I had actually made quite different plans, and these plans didn't involve going out.

I really liked Greg, we had been dating for a couple months, and I thought I was ready to show him just how much. He had only been to my apartment once before, very briefly, to pick me up for a date. Most times we simply met at a location after work. So this date would mark the first time we spent real time together in either one's place. I looked around my modest two-bedroom to make sure everything was in place. Generally speaking,

two bedroom apartments in New York were hard to come by, and even harder to afford. Lucky for me, I inherited mine from a great aunt who passed childless. I was her favorite great niece. In the last year and a half, I had gradually been updating it. I had a small arched foyer with a coat closet that opened into the main living and kitchen space. My apartment covers two floors of an old brownstone. The space is long and narrow. In the living room, I had recently replaced my auntie's 1980's plaid couch with a plush, comfy cream sectional with lots of colorful pillows, a reading chair with side table and lamp sat by the front window. The TV hid in a shelving unit on the side wall on the other side of the stairs. The stairs led up to a very small second bedroom I used as an office, then my one and only bathroom, and then my not so master, master bedroom.

I made quite a few changes in the kitchen. Everything was sparkling new. The kitchen, originally an "L" shape at the back of the apartment now had an open island I was able to use as prep space and also helped define the two spaces. In the back right-hand corner of the kitchen was my little bistro table I set for the two of us. I chilled wine in the bucket. I was just learning about wines and hoped Greg liked my choice. I tend to like the sweet wines as opposed to the dry.

I worked hard to create a mood, from the clothes I chose, the food, the wine, to the candles in the bedroom, ready, just in case. I went through quite a dry spell in between my last disastrous relationship and Greg, and in an attempt to exorcise those demons of the past, I included anything remotely sexy. I took a quick look at myself in the mirror in the living room. Sleek black pants, baby blue blouse with just a hint of cleavage, tear-drop necklace, dangling ice blue earring. Baby blue pumps. Sophisticated, with a hint of sexy. Or so I hoped.

And then, Eleanor appeared. She said she might stop by, just to meet “the guy”. Eleanor, my cousin and as life happens, neighbor in a nearby brownstone, feels that it is her God-given duty and responsibility to check out all of the possible and hopefuls of my love life. I think she snoops and then reports back to my mom, whose only quest in life is to see that I am, happily or not, married. I am an only child as is Eleanor. Therefore, our mothers are both on grandbaby watch. You would think it was their biological clocks.

Greg and I had been talking, silly stuff really. Not about the weather or politics, but about favorite candy, colors, and music, about funny things that people do, and bad habits that they have; just a lot of little things that don’t seem important—but the process of saying those things is. We were startled out of our laughter by the door banging inward and my cousin presenting herself.

I introduced Eleanor to Greg, Greg to her, and then didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t planned for her to stay, I didn’t want her to; but she started up a conversation with Greg and off they went. I was at a loss. Of course, I should have known this would happen. My cousin has been known as a man stealer. I just didn’t want her to steal mine; after all, I hadn’t had him that long.

I moved to the kitchen side of the island and began chopping up vegetables I pulled out of the refrigerator, thinking that she would realize we were going to eat and then she would take off, but she didn’t get the clue. Just when I was about to revert to serious sign language by mouthing “get the fuck out” when Greg’s head was turned so that he wouldn’t see me, it happened. Somehow her boobs became the subject of conversation and out they came.

I stood there in front of the island, butcher block full of chopped up vegetables for the salad in front of me, Eleanor on the living room side of the Island with those two star globes fixed in the general direction of my newly acquired boyfriend, and Greg standing by the couch transfixed as if a beam of radiant light had shot out of her nipples and blinded him on the spot; his search for the Holy Chalice of Christ over.

My friends tell me that my life is what soaps are made of, fodder for the talkies. My life stories keep my friends in stitches. I, however, living the part, do not always find it so amusing during, or after each episode. This was one of those times.

“Anyone want onions in your salad?”

As the three of us stood there the whole world seemed to stop, the earth didn't revolve, and the tides didn't come in. All was still, except for Eleanor's tits that were heaving up and down with the rhythm of her breath. I think Greg began to float. Then, I could hear the clock ticking on the wall in the living room again; a dog began to bark in a neighbor's apartment. My water was dripping in my sink again; I could hear it leaving the faucet and screaming its way toward the stainless-steel tub to commit suicide by splattering itself into a million droplets. I stared down at the knife in my hand contemplating the possibility of deflating the balloon shaped orbs. Would they make that air being squeezed through rubber sound, or would they recreate the big bang, I pondered as the knife and her spheres seemed to gleam back and forth at each other?

I finally turned around to wrench the faucet lever closed. I wanted to go down the drain with the water, sinking into happy oblivion. Greg just stood there with this stupid died-happy grin on his face, which irritated me all the more. I did the ten-count in my head and practiced breathing before turning back around; however, when I did Eleanor's top

was back up, so I guess she decided the show was over. I took a long, deep breath and thought about the last time she had shown them off.

It happened at my cousin Lennie's bar mitzvah in Hoboken. My aunt Julia about died. She said Eleanor's nixed from the family, and that she wants nothing more to do with her. She spat on the ground in exclamation. So now Aunt Julia and Aunt Claudia are fighting and mom is trying to play the go-between. She is still calling me three times a week to give me an update.

That was three months ago, the end of March. Eleanor means well, I guess. She's just so damned proud of those boobs. She was flat-chested all of her life. I can remember growing up—I'm two years younger than she—I started developing breasts when I was ten, and by the time I turned thirteen I was wearing a 32 B. She was fifteen and her chest looked like an asteroid crash site. She didn't date in high school or in college, and has basically concentrated on her career since she graduated. She buried herself behind books in a law library looking up case law and writing legal reports. Then one day, these projectiles appeared at my door with my cousin behind them, and she was beaming. All drugged up from the surgery—I think she took more than just Tylenol—she stumbles into my apartment, proclaims: "I got tits" and then crashed on my sofa. And there she stayed for three whole days.

I remember thinking, "if only Janice were here she would love this one. Janice, my best friend, and has been forever, was in Paris working on an ad campaign, the one that landed her the bucks, the prestige, the man, and the rock that was a replica of an iceberg. Janice met Brennan, an Irish photographer, film director, and entrepreneur while in Paris. She married him three months later, thus stripping me of my best-friend/maid of honor

duties. Actually, I was really kind of glad. That old saying always a bride's main, never the bride is beginning to sound a lot like me. I've pretty much watched as all of my friends took the plunge, walked the celestial mile, while I still sit on the shore wondering why the water's so cold. The scary part is when I see friends with kids in-tow crying "mommy, mommy." My eyes well up with tears I and check my wristwatch. Don't ask me why I think my biological clock is on my wrist.

I was beginning to think that maybe I had finally gotten lucky, found the one, the one just as perfect for me as Brennan is for Janice. But there I stood behind my island, with Eleanor, her boobs, and Greg who still seemed to have been struck dumb, on the other side an ocean apart in a small space.

I wanted to assassinate my cousin. Instead I served her salad. All three of us sat in conversational silence. The only sound was the munching and crunching of vegetables. I fantasized about Eleanor choking, and then smiled at her knowingly. I didn't perform the Heimlich. After Eleanor had hypnotized Greg with her breasts, one would think that she would at least have the decency to leave or drop dead, but she didn't do either, and so there we sat.

I guess at some point Greg came out of his stupor and decided to become the scientist or philosopher, and after staring at her rainbow tube top while he crunched his greens he decided to enquire:

"So what did they cost?"

"I paid eight-grand for them, and worth every penny." Eleanor happily explained. "I love them. I wanted to get D's, but the doctor was afraid they would give me problems

later on, especially if I ever have kids and want to breast feed, so these are C's." She lovingly caressed her breasts.

"What are they made of?" Greg then inquired.

"These are made of saline, completely biodegradable, in case of leakage. The old gel ones could cause infection if anything happened."

"Why'd you have them done, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Not at all. I have been flat-chested all of my life, and believe that a female's chest is the sole reason why she is picked for a job, or rejected; why she is asked out on a date, or left sitting at home on a Saturday night; and in the long run the tits are what a man wants to be married to, and I want to get married."

While Greg sat contemplating the validity of her statement, I was contemplating witchcraft: first, for an invisibility spell for myself; and second, for a shrinking head spell for both Eleanor and Greg. I was crawling inside, seething. He couldn't take his eyes off of her damn top.

"So how do they do it? Perform the surgery, I mean." Greg then inquired.

"They cut incisions at the base of my breast, or where my breasts should have been, inserted the implant, sew that back up and that's it. It's really quite simple." As she explained the procedure, she diagramed it with her fingers across her breasts. Greg looked ready to pop. "When I first took the bandages off, I looked like the Bride of Frankenstein, Eleanor laughed as she explained. I was afraid they would always look like that, all scarred and bumpy. Nattie, glancing in my direction, said they looked like something that got caught in a barbed wire fence, got ripped off, and then a drunk, blind man tried to sew them back on. They were quite hideous. But now, well you saw them. They're perfect."

Greg seemed to contemplate that for a while. When I realized there was silence in my apartment, I looked up to discover Greg's eyes piercing my skin, looking directly at my breasts through my top, as if the top simply vanished.

"So what size did yours used to be?"

His eyes were, for the first time since Eleanor arrive, focused on me. But not on my eyes, oh no! They were focused right on my cleavage peeking out of my top. He was wearing a sly cat that ate the canary grin on his face, and I instantly wished I had taken a kick boxing class. I wanted to pound that look off of his face.

"I beg your pardon?" I lashed back at him.

"You know, before you had yours done; what were they?" He further inquired.

"Holy shit! I have not had a tit job; these puppies are one hundred percent female mammary boobs! They are not fake!"

I do have rather large boobs that haven't heard of gravity yet. Friends tell me that people have wondered. I tell them it's not my fault. My sister got the brains, I got the boobs; though I don't actually have a sister. Unfortunately, with all the boob jobs these days, I guess no one expects to see real breasts that look as good as the fakes. But I wasn't thinking rationally at the time. I was thinking about castration.

My vegetables got the raw end of the deal, my salad bowl went flying toward the direction of the sink; salad spraying out in all directions. I yelled something rather incoherently to the backdrop of a crashing bowl at both of them having to do with leprosy and certain body parts, and then stormed off up the stairs to my bedroom, slamming the door shut.

I paced, as my own storm raged. I know I was being dramatic, but I couldn't help it. I liked Greg, and the way he looked at her chest had made me so angry. God! I hated both of them! I wanted that relationship to work, to go somewhere, to be real. After my chest had stopped heaving and the sounds of the creaking wood stopped as I stopped pacing, I glanced in my bureau mirror just long enough to capture my own image, which was enough. The tears that had been right under the surface found their way out and I sank into my bed so that my pillow would absorb the sound of my weeping heart. Hope dashed on the sea of expectation.

I just stood there, frozen, uncertain how to react. Do I look at them and then politely say, "Oh, those are nice!" Do I become insulted and say something like "what the hell do you think you're doing, anyway?" What does a guy do after this? Natalie told me that she had some interesting people in her family, but my god, she didn't tell me about that!

We had arranged to have an early lunch. I was going out of town on business and I wanted to see her before I went. I thought as I approached the big brick building where she lived that this was going to be the highlight of my day, my week, and possibly the month if my meeting went longer than planned. I felt anxious and had to wonder at the new feeling: now where had that come from?

Natalie and I had been dating for about a month. We met on a blind date. Someone who knew someone who knew someone—that type of thing. I was reluctant at first. I hadn't dated a lot since I moved to New York. I grew up in the mid-west, and I'm pretty

laid back. Frankly, New York women scare me. They all seem so...I don't know, arrogant maybe—as arrogant as a man. When I met her, I immediately knew that Natalie was different. We didn't do the normal meet at a bar for drinks routine. I think that's a cop-out. When I decided to let myself be set up, I wasn't going to do it half-assed. I rented a car and took her for a ride up the coast to a little town on the northern tip of Long Island that makes great crab cakes, even better clam chowder, and the lobster is the freshest, best I've ever tasted. We laughed and talked the entire way there and back. I have never been so at ease with another human so quickly. I think that we were both a little awed, and scared by that connection.

We were taking it slow, real slow, but it bothered me that I was about to be leaving for two weeks or maybe more with a relationship that was still so new and as of yet, untested. We decided on an early lunch; she said she'd make a salad (I don't do well on planes), and we would be able to spend some time together before I left. I wanted to leave a lasting impression, and had made plans to do just that. She said that a cousin might stop by to meet me.

“Okay,” I said. After all, I'm not afraid of meeting the family, even though she said they were a little weird.

I arrived at her place about 11:00. She had chilled a real light White Zin., one that would go perfectly with an early lunch. That is something that we realized we had in common right away, wines. I like fine wines, am actually a bit of a connoisseur; and she had recently taken up wine tasting as a hobby. That is what initially got us talking on our trip up the Island. She mentioned a winery that she had recently visited on part of a wine tasting tour.

I brought wine with me from that same winery. I poured our glasses while we talked about little things mostly. She seemed kind of nervous; she spilled some of her wine. I watched it trickle down between her cleavage and disappear—I continued to imagine the liquid sliding over her breasts long after it disappeared. Just when I was at the brink of embarrassing myself, I snapped my mind out of the course it was following, it wouldn't do any good right now to let her know exactly what I was contemplating. I was trying to put her mind to rest by keeping it occupied. This was the first time I had spent a significant amount of time in her apartment. We both had hectic schedules so most of the time we agreed where to meet in advance: went to dinner, or just had drinks and talked, and recently had met at The Hilton for a show; and then we took separate transportation home. I remarked that I couldn't get over the space that she had in her apartment. Manhattan apartments are not known for their roominess. A place like hers on the open market would capture quite a price tag.

I discovered that she had inherited the apartment from her great aunt. She told me her life story over a glass of wine. She had moved into the apartment after World War II. She married a young Irishman and they bought their first apartment together; it was brand new. Five years later, he was killed fighting an apartment building fire. She never remarried. She believed in true love, and he was hers. Before her death, she spent much of her time in Arizona, away from the New York winters. Natalie went to NYU, so she moved into the apartment as a freshman. Her great aunt put the title in her name a couple of years back, creating quite a shock wave in her family. If she ever sold she would be a millionaire.

Maybe that is why Eleanor did what she did, jealousy.

I could hear Nattie crying through the door handle key hole. They were the old-fashioned locks. The kind that, when light is shining through the hole, you can see right through. I stood at the end of the hallway, upstairs, outside of her shut door. I looked out the small window to the enclosed garden below. I wondered yet again why it was that auntie signed this gem over to my cousin.

I turned to see Nattie's boyfriend slowly ascend the stairs. His eyes registered shock, and anger, embarrassment and maybe even something like hatred. They were directed at me. When he looked past me to the door, I saw care and concern soften his brown eyes.

Okay, so I really felt like shit. Even worse than I felt at Lennie's Bar Mitzvah. How could I be so stupid? So insensitive? It had to be the boobs. Ever since I got them, I seemed to always find myself doing really dumb shit, the kind of shit that only real assholes do.

"I'm sorry." I said to him, then to the door, to my crying cousin behind it. Louder, I said, "It's just, no big deal really. Won't you come out? I didn't mean to upset you. I was just...you know..."

"Go!" I turned, shocked and a little apprehensive to see Greg, shoulders heaving, stalking toward me.

"Just Go!" He fumed.

He was yelling at me? The nerve! I've known her my whole life, he's only known her, what, a month, and he was going to yell at me? No way, not going to happen.

As I opened my mouth to say just that, the most vulgar thing happened. We were standing now nose to nose fuming into each other's faces, breath being exchanged with breath. Everything started to become hot and intangible. And then I was being scooped off my feet, not romantically, and being forcibly carried down the steps and toward the door.

"Don't you man-handle me, you grubby geek in a cheap-Armani take off. Let go of me or I will scream! Nattie!" I kicked and yelled for my cousin to rescue me, but he just tightened his grip. As I struggled against him I couldn't help but notice that for a computer geek he was well built. I began to struggle, just a little less, and in such a way that my breasts rubbed up against his firm chest. I became flushed as a lovely tingle began to find its way into my stomach heading south.

And then I was unceremoniously dumped onto my ass on the exterior side of her door. "You dirty bastard! Who the Fuck do you think you are?" I glanced up shocked, no longer tingling, I was enraged! Just as I made ready to leap into his face and claw his disgusting eyes out, the door slammed shut in my face. I was left to stare in amazement.

I yelled incoherently into the wooden door. Much to my dismay, frustrated tears popped into my eyes as I hurriedly wiped them away. I made a B-line for the stairs so that no one would see the state I was in. Shopping, I needed to do some shopping. And then, I was going to give Aunt Fran a call.

I must have fallen asleep. My pillow was still wet, and my hair was now damp from the combination of tears and sweat. I glanced toward my window and quickly realized that

the sun was now on the other side of the frame. It must be mid-afternoon. I sat up in bed, a little woozy yet from sleep, to realize that I had a throbbing headache. Every time I cry, not small crying, but all out blubbering, I am rewarded with a splitting headache afterward. It just doesn't pay to be emotional. The possibility that I could simply roll over and sink back into oblivion was exceedingly tempting, but I immediately became aware that not only was my brain about to explode, but I was most likely dehydrated and on the verge of starvation. To pound the point home, my stomach began a slow steady rumble that could probably be heard next door.

Thinking about all of this brought me quickly back to what had occurred just this morning. Shame washed over me, and tears threatened to spill again. In order to prevent that I jumped out of bed, steadied myself against my footboard for a moment until I gained my balance, and then stepped forward, placed my hand firmly upon my door knob contemplating going back to bed one last time before turning the knob.

Upon opening the door, the most fabulous aroma assailed my misty senses. Descending the stairs, I immediately spied a stunning orchid plant sitting on the sideboard table. But that wasn't the smell. The wonderful aroma of citrus, ginger, and something else I couldn't quite place was coming from the direction of the kitchen. I stood at the foot of the stairs transfixed by the smell. Mom?

I slumped across the floor, shoulders hunched, in the direction of the kitchen, dejected look upon my face. I was down, but the prospect of gaining a little sympathy had its advantages—especially when I decided how I was going to pay Eleanor back. Head downcast, I proceeded into the kitchen. I needed my mom, I needed that food. I saw a shoe. My head shot up. I became immediately aware that my savior was not my mother.

Standing there, in my kitchen, apron on, oven mitt on one hand, pot holder in the other, was none other than the man I had just spent the last couple of hours crying out of my life. I stood, transfixed, staring wide-eyed. He gave me a soft smile and turned to take something out of the oven. It smelled like chocolate, really good chocolate. Electrical charges were starting to pop around in my brain now. Wake up, you dolt, they screamed inside of my head.

“You’re still here.”

He smiled at me again, that soft, want-to-melt-into-him smile. But I couldn’t do that, I had to be strong. I had to remember why I hate him. Oh, yeah, he looked at my cousin’s tits. I couldn’t forget that. But the smells were making it hard for my brain to function properly. Maybe I would just see what he fixed, and then I would kick him out and keep it all for myself. That would serve him right.

“Why?”

“You didn’t eat any lunch, you are probably starving. Sit down. It is just about ready.”

How did he know I hadn’t eaten any of my salad? He was too busy ogling my cousin. Wasn’t he? I felt so stupid. I had no energy to yell, or to kick him out. The kitchen smelled wonderful, and he just looked so damn cute and silly in my hot peppers apron that I wanted to smile. I was quickly going from depressed, rejected, and angry, to warm and fuzzy, and happy. And then I remembered why we had planned such an early lunch to begin with.

“Your flight? Your conference? What happened? Was it cancelled?”

“Nothing happened. I just changed my flight plans. I leave early tomorrow instead. I’m covered. This is a Mongolian dish. I hope you like it.”

He placed a steaming bowl of the most wonderful smelling food in front of me as well as a glass of a deep red Merlot. Perfect. He then sat down across from me with his own bowl. The food looked and smelled wonderful but the lump in my throat was barely allowing me to breathe, let alone eat. I needed to say something to end this tension, but I didn’t know where to start.

“Your tits are getting cold. Oh, I mean your food.”

My eyes shot up to his. And I saw dancing laughter there. The laughter that we had already shared, and the laughter I hoped to share with him in the future. We wouldn’t talk about what happened. We didn’t need to. It wasn’t important anymore.

After we finished the meal, we decided to take desert into the living room. Chocolate torte. I think I’m in love.

As I walked past the mirror in the hallway and saw my reflection in it for the first time since I woke up I froze in horror. My hair was everywhere, eyes red and blotchy from crying, nose red and swollen. He put his arm around me, seemingly to lead me away from the mirror and toward the couch.

And then I knew.

TWO PINK LINES

“Mia are you in there?” The hollowed-out voice on the other side of her apartment door came from Maggie, Mia’s long-time best friend. Mia was too weak to respond. She could hear the loose door knob jangling and knew that Maggie was letting herself into her apartment with the spare key that she kept not-so-hidden in the planter on the stoop. Her townhouse was in a long row of townhouses that was owned by a large real estate company. The complex managers lived three townhouses down from hers. She wasn’t really worried about break ins. They were always on duty.

Mia lifted her head and raised one squinty eye out of the tight fetal position that she had been in for the past couple of hours. Mia attempted to sit up in bed but the stabbing pain wouldn’t allow it. She curled down into her down comforter and pressed her heating pad into her stomach, and listened to her friend rummage around in her kitchen downstairs. After a few minutes, Mia heard the one board on the stairs that always squeaks, and then Maggie appeared at the foot of her bed.

“What have you taken?”

“Three Aleve and a muscle relaxer.” Mia peeked up at her friend who was the picture of health. In her seventh month of pregnancy, she was just starting to really show, but Maggie still did her jogging every day as evidenced by the workout clothes she wore.

She radiated health and happiness. Mia pictured herself as a walrus contrasted against her friend the gazelle. Where her friend was tall, thin and blond, and happily married, she was small, with dark features and constantly had to worry about her weight. A few pounds on a petite frame made a huge difference.

“Have you talked to your doctor about this yet?” Maggie, always the pragmatist, brought her thoughts back to the here and now...and the pain.

“No.”

“Mia! You’re in pain. It’s not supposed to be this way every month. Maybe once in a while but not every month. Not to the point where you can’t walk, eat, sleep, or work. And certainly not to the point where you are throwing up and pain medicine or muscle relaxers don’t help! Why won’t you talk to your gynecologist? Or go to your family doctor and talk to her. You need to have this taken care of. It isn’t getting any better. I will go with you.”

Maggie’s final statement almost made Mia laugh if it wouldn’t be so painful. She knew what Maggie said was true, but Mia hated the idea of a doctor prodding her. She also hated talking about private matters. She was a very private person. On every aptitude test she had ever taken in school, she was quickly labeled an introvert. There was also a part of her that feared that something was very wrong. To go to a doctor meant she had to face her fear of not only opening up about something private, but also facing the possibility of putting a name on the unknown.

Maggie leaned down and kissed Mia on the forehead. Mia knew her friend would become a good mother. She already mothered her friends. This made Mia feel guilty for her jealous thoughts. She was truly happy for her friend’s joy. She lectured herself to

concentrate on things that were positive. She was giving Maggie a baby shower next week. She would finish her Master's Degree soon, and was playing with the idea of a PH.D. She needed to start doing research. She was now a career driven woman, not family driven. She just needed to keep reminding herself of the fact, once the pain subsided.

Mia knew her friend was right. Laying with her face buried underneath the pillows and covers, curled up in a fetal ball against the pain that was all consuming was not how she wanted to spend two and sometimes three days every month. Much like the migraines that struck without warning, light was unbearable, sound horrible, and any vibrations sent her body into spasms of pain. When she was a child, she had learned a form of self-hypnosis in order to ward off the migraine pain. Unfortunately, she had to have absolute dark, absolute silence, and absolutely no movement. Currently the sun was mocking her, shining through the curtains. There was a black-out shade behind the curtain that could be pulled down, but she was in too much pain to get out of bed to close it.

Mia held up her hand and pointed toward the window. Maggie, who knew her friend well, walked over and pulled the shade down. The room was immediately enveloped in darkness. "I'll be back in a little bit. Jim and I are going to grab a bite to eat, we'll pick you up something and bring it over."

"Soup," Mia whispered.

"Just soup?" When her friend didn't receive any response, she turned to go. "You really need to get over this fear you have of talking to your doctor about your period. For heaven sake, we're all women. We all have one. There is nothing to be ashamed of." With that Maggie left Mia to try to find her quiet place in her mind so that she could escape the pain.

* * *

Six weeks later, Mia sat in her gynecologist's office staring at the certifications on the walls and the family pictures on the desk waiting for her to enter. After another period, less than three weeks from the last, and another two days of pain, she had finally called for an appointment. She explained all of the problems that she had been having . . . the fact that they seemed to start not long after she stopped taking her birth control pill. She had stopped taking her birth control pill, thinking that she shouldn't take it anymore. After all, there was no reason. Her marriage of three years had ended.

They had separated after she pushed the child issue—he had always said they should wait another year, they were still too young—but at twenty-seven she felt that her wait was over. After all, many of her friends were already having children. Mia came from a very small Ohio town. Many of her friends had children soon after high school. Many more right after college. In small country farm towns, there is a truism. The more the children means the more help on the farm. Many of her friends had multiple children already. She was beginning to feel like the old maid even though she was married.

She even contemplated, too many times, not taking her pills and not telling Nate. But relationships based on dishonesty never lasted. She couldn't do it. When children truly became an issue, and she pressed him to start a family, he left. He snuck away while she was visiting family for the weekend. She returned home to a partially emptied apartment, and a completely emptied bank account.

She realized that no one had broken in. Only his things were missing. She was flooded by emotions. Calling him on his cell phone was one of the worst experiences of her life. He told her over the phone that he never wanted to have kids in the first place. He had thought that eventually, if he kept putting her off, she would simply get over it. His duplicity consumed her. She wasn't sure she would ever heal.

Early in their relationship they had discussed kids, had decided they would want a boy and a girl, and he had always seemed as eager as she at the prospect of having a family. They had even given the hypothetical children's hypothetical names. She could never understand how a man could give names to children he never wanted in the first place. She mourned the loss of the hypothetical children she didn't have, more than the man or the marriage after the divorce.

Sitting on the exam table, Mia explained her doctor how her periods began, the dizziness, the blackouts, the fevers, and the vomiting that seemed to accompany the beginning of each cycle month, the cycles that couldn't be predicted because it seemed to be different every month. Her doctor was shocked that she had not gotten an appointment earlier. Mia felt ashamed and foolish, but realized she was relieved to be talking to her doctor about the pain.

After her examination, Mia's doctor asked her to get dressed and meet her in her office. Mia was staring at her family when she walked in. She sat down behind her neatly organized desk and peered soulfully into Mia's eyes. She had recently switched to this doctor on advice from many friends. She was well known for her bedside manner, compassion, and expertise. Mia was beginning to worry and wonder lately. If there were problems with her period, might she have problems conceiving a child once that day finally

came. Divorced, with thirty in her sights, the panic and fear she felt that she may remain childless was palpable.

“Mia, I need to ask you a couple more questions if you don’t mind.” Her doctor said in her compassionately soft voice.

Dr. Maltz made her feel very comfortable, perhaps for the first time in her life, talking about issues she had never been willing to discuss, even with her ex-husband.

“This is a very personal question, I know, but I need to know if sexual intercourse has ever been painful for you?”

Mia’s face reddened and her eyes immediately dropped into her lap. How many times in the past had she lied when she had been asked this question, ashamed at what she considered her freak body. She was so ashamed. She couldn’t lift her eyes when she whispered the word, “yes.”

“I had a feeling. But I think I can make you feel better, get rid of some of that pain during your periods as well as during intercourse. I believe you have endometriosis.” Mia sat motionless, listening to the doctor as she described her disease.

“...In order for me to be sure,” here doctor continued, “we are going to have to go in and do a laparoscopy.”

As Mia listened to her doctor, her eyes swam with tears. Dr. Maltz reached out and took Mia’s hand in her warm comforting hand and continued to explain the procedure. Mia couldn’t remember when she didn’t want children. Now, faced with a surgery she wondered how this could have happened to her. She had always been healthy, except for her menstruation and headaches. She wondered if she would ever be a whole woman. She

acutely felt the cruelty of life to first have a husband leave because he didn't want children only to discover that she may never have been able to conceive in the first place.

Mia left her doctor's office feeling more alone than she ever felt. Her procedure was scheduled for over Christmas break. Teaching other people's children did have a few perks she thought ruefully; the break would give her enough time to recoup comfortably without the worry of work.

After the procedure, Mia's mother pampered her during recovery. Staying with her mom, she remembered what it felt like to have someone else care for her. Since the divorce, she had become fiercely independent, not allowing anyone to help her with the smallest of tasks. She went through the procedure well, but it was as her doctor had feared. The endometriosis was located in her fallopian tubes. She had removed as much as she could, but unless Mia stayed on the birth control pill, her tubes would fill up again and she would have to have the procedure again. She felt like she had been given a death sentence.

Mia had a lot of time to think while she recovered. She decided she needed to change her life, her career. She could not continue to teach other people's children knowing she may never have a child of her own. She needed a career that didn't involve children.

Two years later, Mia sat at her kitchen table, a cold mug of coffee sitting in front of her, staring into the void. After her procedure, she finished the school year, and resigned her position as a teacher. Soon after she began a new career as an educational resource publisher. Though still dealing with educational materials, she was removed from the

classroom. This career-move also entailed a move to a new city. Her new apartment looked out over the Olentangy River. It was scenic view in the heart of an urban area. The apartment had a wide balcony. She spent many hours filling flower pots creating a profusion of colors. She added a wicker patio set. Her patio became her sanctuary. She finally felt that she was settling in.

She met him at an off-campus bar at Ohio State University. Jason seemed larger than life and she was drawn to him, to his physique, to his charm, and to his magnetism like a moth to the flame. The first couple of months had been spectacularly filled with nights and days of hot, passion-filled sex, something that had been completely lacking in her marriage to Nate. For the first time in her life, she felt her body was so alive, so complete. She knew that she didn't or shouldn't need a man in her life to feel complete, but she realized she absolutely needed sex. But then the no-shows began.

Why do I do this to myself, Jason should have been there hours ago. She wondered as she struggled to contain the errant tears. He had done this too many times in the past couple of months to not see it coming. He would tell her he would be there, they would spend the day together, go out, have a good time. But the time that he said he would arrive would come and go, and each time she sat, waiting, expectant, hoping that this time would be the time that he would keep his word.

His excuses always sounded the same. Mia knew she should tell him to stop calling, that they would no longer see each other, but she couldn't seem to do it. She had felt so alone for so long. She couldn't give up the little bit of human contact. And when she was being completely honest with herself, she couldn't give up the sex.

Since her move, since her surgery, she knew she had changed, but knowing this, and knowing how to find herself again was another thing. Beyond Jason, she didn't go out, had met very few new people, and no longer had friends or family that were close. She spent most of her time alone. Even her job allowed her flexibility to work from home, so there were days when she didn't communicate with another living soul.

When he was there, she felt special; she felt important; she felt loved. She couldn't give that up. Even when he stood her up and not call for days. Just when she had given up, had realized he was not the answer, he called, came over, and she forgave him. Every time.

"I'm on my way over." No hello.

"Now? You said you would be here hours ago."

"I got held up at work. I'll be there in about a half an hour."

When he arrived, he had flowers and an apologetic look on his face along with an excuse that was long and drawn out, and Mia forgave him. They ordered Chinese and spent most of the evening in the bedroom. They did little talking.

Lying beside each other, weaving their fingers in and out of each other's, Mia broached the subject that weighed on her heart.

"You know, when you say you are coming over and then don't show up, I feel stood up."

"Honey, how do you think I feel? I've got an asshole as a manager I can't get rid of, a project that is months behind schedule, and I have investors breathing down my neck to get this project done. I shouldn't even be here now. I should be working, but I wanted to see you. You make me sane right now. I don't know what I would do without you. I really don't."

With that, the conversation ended. Later, when Mia awoke around mid-night to use the bathroom, she realized the other side of the bed was empty. He was gone, and she felt empty, the euphoria from the sex withered like the flowers left on the counter.

He didn't call the next day, or the day after, or the week after. And for the first time, Mia didn't call him because that night she truly began to realize he couldn't provide her with what she needed. That night was eye opening because she realized he was too concerned about what he needed to give her the emotional connection she craved.

The next day Mia took a good look at herself. Somewhere along the path of her life, she became a hermit. She worked from home three days a week, generally didn't go out unless she was with Jason, which was rare, and hadn't made any other friends since moving to Columbus.

She had also started to put on weight. She knew that she had gained at least fifteen pounds since moving, and so with determination she put on sweats and tennis shoes and got in her car to find the nearest fitness center. She decided that this was the first step in reclaiming herself.

Two weeks later when Jason called she didn't answer. She was walking on a track with a friend she met at the gym, and she was having a very interesting conversation.

"You actually ordered sperm on line?" Mia couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Yep. I wanted a child, and obviously my girlfriend and I lacked the requisite material," Mia's new friend Audrey said. "There are all kinds of sperm banks. You can put in a profile of what you are looking for in a child, one that has similar characteristics to you, and multiple donors are shown. You pick what you want and the sperm is overnighted."

It's really simple and discreet. She and I have the child we want with some of our similar characteristics. Do you *want* kids?"

"Yes. Though I have tried to convince myself that I can be satisfied with a career, but I really want a child."

"More and more women are choosing single motherhood. Women are adopting, are being inseminated, and to be perfectly vulgar, are using a turkey baster."

Embarrassed to ask, after all, Mia had just met Audrey, but her curiosity took over and she just couldn't help but ask, "is that what you used?"

"That's what we did. Of course, we tried to make it romantic, but it just wasn't. We spent so much time laughing, I think that is why it didn't take the first time around. There is nothing romantic about a turkey baster, I have to tell you. But it got the job done, and we have a little girl to love. We're thinking about trying for a boy."

This gave Mia a lot to think about. Once home, she sat late into the night doing research into different sperm banks, their policies, and their donors. She opened bio after bio, and asked herself what was she looking for? Then, around three A.M. she met him. Six feet two inches tall. *Not too tall or too short*. Athletic build, but didn't look like a brainless jock. Sandy brown hair, and green eyes. His face looked kind. Degrees in engineering. After staring into his eyes for more than an hour, she pressed the button.

* * *

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

Mia had practically memorized all of the directions of the home pregnancy test. In the two plus years following her laparoscopy, Mia had been on and off of the pill multiple times. A thick head, she just couldn't seem to grasp the concept that the one thing that helps manage her disease, a disease that prevents women from conceiving, but supposedly helps protect fertility, is also the very thing that is used to prevent pregnancies from occurring. Though her relationship with Jason was questionable at best, she stopped taking her pills when they began having sex, and she hadn't restarted.

Each time her period wasn't when she thought it should be, each time she peed on a stick, she was disappointed. Even though her doctor said that she had gotten all of the endometrial tissue that she could find, the main disease was on her fallopian tubes. Too much time had passed since the operation. The best chance of becoming pregnant was first six months or so after the surgery, not two years later, allowing the disease to regrow.

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

Two weeks ago, only twenty-four hours after Mia pressed the send button, she bought a turkey baster for a purpose for which it was not intended. She sat on her bed in her bedroom, and felt dirty. Sex in the past never involved inanimate objects. Because the sperm bios did not give names, she decided to name him J. R. R., after her favorite author. She decided he would bring purity to the situation. After all, his fantasies were religious analogies of ultimate good versus ultimate evil. She apologized to the baster, but decided that J. R. R. understood.

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

The words reminded her of all of the times she had been in this same spot over the last number of months, sitting in her bathroom on the white porcelain toilet lid, waiting to

see pink lines appear in a window. She was late. Her periods often come earlier than she thinks it should be, ranging between eighteen to twenty-one days, but it is almost never late. But when it was, she peed on a stick, hoping.

Mia made herself a cup of coffee and headed to the bathroom. She put her cup down on the sink and pulled a pregnancy test out of the box of tests in her medicine cabinet over her commode. Her hands began shaking as she tore the paper wrapper off of the pregnancy stick and pulled it out. Two events were playing with her mind as she as she stuck the stick between her legs and peed on it.

A little less than a month ago, she had sex with Jason. Two weeks ago, she had sex with a turkey baster, AKA J.R.R.

For the past year, Mia had been documenting her periods. She wrote down her first day, how many days she was on her period, and how many days in-between. She took her temperature and even started checking for ovulation.

Having a child, or the reality of never having children, had become for her a form of obsession that left her depressed and feeling more alone than she ever had in her life. At this point her self-esteem was not only in the gutter, but her whole idea of self-worth had been decimated. She searched for meaning in her life and was coming up empty handed.

As soon as the pink line appears in the control window, you can begin to read your test. One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

Mia set the test stick aside on the flat surface of the shelf above her toilet. The pink line in the control window immediately appeared, and at that point she dismissed it as another negative. For the past two weeks, Mia had thought a lot about becoming a single

parent. Could she do it? Could she adopt, or foster? She knew the sperm had been a spur of the moment decision, and the chances of conception minimal, but still she hoped.

Attempting to dismiss the test, and that sinking feeling at the bottom of her stomach, she stepped into a steaming shower to wash her dreams away. After her long shower, she got ready to go out with some co-workers from work. She was trying to put herself out there to make friends and was finally beginning to socialize. She left the test laying on the back of her bathroom sink, purposefully forgotten.

They were heading into downtown to eat and drink at a trendy restaurant and club. Mia realized she was running late. She rushed to put her makeup on and get dressed. As she pulled on her pants she knew she was going to have to get more serious about losing weight or she would have to buy new clothes, again. The pants were tight. She selected a top that would help cover some of the weight, grabbed her purse and headed toward the door.

Mia was about ready to rush out the door when she remembered the test sitting on the shelf. She didn't want anyone who might visit her to see it, so she turned around to go back into the bathroom to throw it away.

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

Mia pick up the stick and threw it in the trash, took a last look in the mirror and proceeded to walk out, and then stopped dead in her tracks. What did she see as she threw the test away?

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

Mia picked the test out of the trash can.

One pink line you're not pregnant, two pink lines you are.

A faint pink line had appeared in the test window.

Two pink lines.

TOONERESSIE
CHAPTER I
INTO THE WOODS

Mom helped Nettie into her light blue spring jacket, pulled up the hood, and tied it tightly under her chin. “Go only as far as the dog house,” Nettie’s mom told her before pushing her out into the crisp spring day.

Nettie walked out to the garden avoiding the soft clumps of dirt recently displaced by her dad’s rototiller. She strolled along its edge looking over the newly turned mud. Though she still had the idea that she could find treasures in the newly turned earth, she knew now not to enter the garden. She had done so only a week earlier and had lost one of her shoes in the soft sinking mud. Her older brother had to come to her rescue. He pulled her free of the mud, but her shoe had not been so lucky. It sank quietly into the mystery underneath. It was not such a mystery what her mom had to say about losing her shoe in the garden.

Nettie crossed the greening lawn to the dog’s run, the circle Rowdy had created that cut a path through the lawn. The dog, a large black Labrador sat patiently waiting for his

young master to approach. He had been watching her slow progress from the house to the garden, and then over to him, as if he knew that eventually she would find her way to him.

“Don’t jump, Rowdy.” The immense beast sprang at his chains ready to burst. If a stranger had happened to see the small girl-child approaching what appeared to be a monstrous black dog looking ready to pounce, even to attack the child, that stranger may have yelled out in shock. But soon would have realized his profound error. The beast crouched as if ready to spring, and then as the young master broke the plain of his ring, he leapt into the air joyfully and came down on his belly and immediately rolled over onto his back so that his legs were pushing up toward the sky. His head rolled back with a wide grin of his face, and he was ready for the joy of a belly rub. Had the same stranger seen the entire episode, he would shake his head unbelieving, but he would, in the end, swear that the large beast was smiling.

“That’s a good boy.” Nettie bent down and rubbed the belly of the gentle giant. She sat down beside the dog, rubbing his belly and scratching his ears. She looked up at the house and knew that somewhere on the other side of the wall was her mom folding laundry, doing dishes, or preparing lunch. Her brother was up in his bedroom playing a video game with his best friend, and in her own room, her sister was reading a book. Neither of them had time to play with a pesky little sister. Rowdy rolled over placing his head in Nettie’s lap. He seemed to sense her mood.

“I should runaway, Rowdy, I really should. Nobody wants me around anyway.” Just then, Rowdy perked his head and stared intently into the weeds. He sprang to his feet. Nettie had her hands on his collar, but before she knew what was happening, Rowdy had slipped his lead and streaked off, chasing the rabbit that drew his attention. Nettie sprang

to feet, chasing after her dog. She chased him through the fencerow that bordered the garden, and past the fencerow that bordered the field behind her house.

She stopped to look around. She was further away from her house than she had ever been. The weeds were higher and the trees dense here, shielding her from the sun light. She looked around and quickly realized her mistake. She had entered the woods beyond the row. The forbidden woods.

“Rowdy, Rowdy,” she yelled over and over. She looked around and couldn’t see the field, only weeds and trees. The trees were taller here, with large green leaves. She smelled pine, moss, and something very sweet. She looked toward the direction of the sweet smell, and saw a large bush with miniature bells, pure white with golden stems on top. Nettie approached the beautiful bush. A hummingbird drinking in their nectar, flew in and out of the sweet flowers. Bumble bees and honey bees perched on the bells to gather the nectar, and butterflies, bright blue orange and red, and fluttered around the bush.

Nettie saw something else and froze. Just on the far side of the bush was a boy pushing a wheelbarrow full of the flowers. This was no ordinary boy, if he were a boy at all. He was only a foot tall. His wheel barrow looked like something that belonged with her sister’s doll house furnishings. Nettie watched his slow progress as he pushed the laden wheelbarrow toward a hollowed-out log that leaned against a young sapling tree.

Nettie watched the curious boy, wondering what he was doing, where he was going, and how he could possibly be so very small. When she finally made up her mind to make him aware that she was there, something strange happened. He approached the log and the landscape created by the triangle of the log and the sapling shifted and changed before her eyes. Nettie peered into another land.

“Hey, wait.” She shouted not knowing what else to say. “Where are you going?”

The boy jumped, spun around seeing Nettie for the first time, eyes wide he jumped again, pulled his small cap he wore upon his head down further over his ears, and went back to his pushing in earnest. The small wheel of the barrow would not go over the root of the sapling sticking out of the earth. It was stuck.

Nettie approached the boy. Cautiously she said, “I see you, you know.” She said this, for somewhere in her mind the thought came to her that perhaps he didn’t see her, or was pretending like he didn’t see her. “I won’t tell anyone, I promise.” Promising not to tell was very important when you were the youngest of three children.

The boy must have understood her because he stopped pushing, took off his cap, wiped his brow, put his cap back on, and then turned to look at Nettie. He looked like a Ken doll with pointy ears, and dressed a soft winter tweeds that were the colors were earthen browns, rusts, deep greens. His shirt and pants looked like a patchwork of fall leaves.

“Where did you come from? Where are you going? I can help, if you want?” She ran out of things to say and decided to wait for a response, still inching closer and closer. She was almost close enough now to reach out and grab ahold if he decide to run.

“You’re a Firen, even though I think you’re a wee small one.” The small boy said.

“My name is Nettie. I don’t know that word “Fear on.” What does it mean?” She inched still closer so that she could touch him.

He took a step back and said in a firm voice, “You’ll stand still right now.”

Nettie, heard command in his voice. She stopped.

“That’s better. I could see it in your eye that you be thinking of touching me, yes? Or thinking you might be grabbing me. I won’t have that. I might be wee smaller than you, but I am mighty. A Firen is a human. That be what you are. I’m a fey of the wood. That be what I am. My name be Tooneressie.”

“But where did you come from?”

“I came from here, and not here. This is my land, and also not.”

“I might only be seven, but even I know that doesn’t make sense.”

Tooneressie stared at the child for some time. Then making up his mind he said, “I’ll show you my home, but you must never enter without permission. Understand?”

Nettie buzzed with anticipation from the tip of her fly away corn silk hair, to the bottoms of her petite feet. She nodded, afraid any words would scare him off.

“You’ll have to crawl.”

Nettie immediately dropped to hands and knees and crawled toward the tiny boy.

As she crept toward him, Tooneressie was able to back up the wheelbarrow, swerve it around the root, and push his flower-laden burden toward the hollowed log that was firmly wedged against a sapling tree. Most of the interior of the log was gone, replaced with ivy and moss of light green and near the bottom there was a fern growing up and out.

Nettie crawled closer, and realized ants and other insects were busy at work on the log. She stopped. She didn’t like bugs. She didn’t like them at all. She was afraid that if she crawled any closer a bug would crawl on her.

Sensing that Nettie stopped, Tooneressie stopped and turned around. “What happened?” He asked.

“I don’t like bugs. I don’t want them to crawl on me.”

Tooneressie looked around as if for the first time and noticed all of the bugs crawling on the log. “Take a look at them closely, what does it look like they are doing?”

Nettie stopped and looked at the insects. They were all moving very quickly. That was creepy, she thought. But as she continued to look she noticed something more. “They are all carrying something,” she said.

“That’s right. They are working. All of those insects are carrying food for their colony, or building materials for their homes, or are carrying away waste that they don’t need. They are too busy to veer off course. If you crawl directly behind me, not a single bug will touch you.”

Nettie’s hesitation gone, she crawled and Tooneressie pushed his wheelbarrow forward. As the flower-laden wheelbarrow was pushed directly under the gap created by the old log, it disappeared. Then as Tooneressie continued to push forward, he disappeared. Nettie tried to wrap her seven-year-old brain around this new wonder, and hesitated again. Should she follow? She peered ahead and saw strange sights, and decided to follow. Nettie shimmered as if bathed in bright light and disappeared as well.

CHAPTER II

THE OTHER SIDE

Nettie was amazed at what she was seeing. She thought for a second that she had to be dreaming. She crawled under the log and the landscape changed. She saw rolling hills come into focus. Nestled at the base of the hills she saw a small village, an actual village of small houses. She also saw a small river or stream wind its way in and out of the homes in the village and disappear into the hills. She was able to stand now. She stood and stopped to take in the view. It was then that she realized she wasn't at home anymore. There were no streams behind her house.

She tried to stay calm but her voice came as a whisper of fear. "Tooneressie, where am I?" She asked.

"You're in my home. This is where I live." Tooneressie looked at the girl and noticed his mistake immediately. He saw fear in her expression. "It's okay, you're safe with me. You can have a look around and then I will take you home. I go in and out all the time."

His words made Nettie feel better. She could go home when she wanted. Excited, she looked around. There were soft pine trees in shades of dark green, light green, and a

bluish green that reminded her of Christmas trees. None were more than five or six feet tall. There were maples, elms, and fir trees. They looked like the same trees she had at home, and one looked like the giant elm that sat in the front of her yard, but these trees all looked like miniature versions.

They walked toward the houses. Some had smoke coming from chimneys, others sat quietly. She noticed that many of the houses were different than her home. The roofs were not shaped in the form of triangles, but curved and sloped like the hills. Some of the homes seemed to mold right into the side of the hills behind. She didn't know where the house ended and the hill began. Other homes stood near the stream and had walk ways that went out and into the water. Those homes looked like giant lily pads. These were the most curious because many were the same deep green shade as a lily pad, but they also seemed to have a flower growing out of the roof with smoke curling out of the flower.

Finally, Nettie noticed the people. All were very busy, and all were just as small as Tooneressie. There were more than she could count. She saw people working in their yards planting flowers, others were doing jobs like putting up fences around the homes. She heard the sound of clanking metal and saw a number of people fishing in the stream. Nettie remembered a story her sister told her once about a boy named Jack and giants. She realized that to these people she would be the giant. She wondered if these people would be afraid of her. She hoped not. She didn't want to scare them.

Tooneressie pushed his wheelbarrow up to a building that looked different from any house or store she had ever seen. All four corners of the building sloped down and disappeared underground, making it look like a hill with windows on all sides. There were round smoke stacks dotting the roof that was covered in colorful flowers.

He pushed his wheelbarrow into the building through a swinging door in the middle. Nettie had to bend down to go through the door, but once she did she could stand in the building. She looked around. The building had tubes everywhere. The tubes came from each corner of the building and met in the center of the roof so that the tubes formed a star pattern on the ceiling. The tubes connected to two gigantic pots in the middle of the large room. Both pots had fires burning under them. The tubes circled around the walls and smaller tubes ran down the walls, ending in smaller pots set around the room.

“This is the distillery,” Tooneressie said. He pushed his wheelbarrow over to one side wall that had a tray only inches off of the floor that led to a conveyor belt. Nettie watched as he pushed his wheelbarrow up to the right-hand tray and dumped half of his contents, then he pushed it over to the left-hand tray and dumped the rest. After that, he pushed the wheelbarrow over into a corner where other wheelbarrows sat, grabbed what looked like a broom, went back to the right-hand tray and started slowly pushing the flowers towards the belt. As the belt picked up the flowers they looked like dancing bells. At the end of the belt they fell into a glass with something spinning very fast. The glass looked like an upside-down funnel. At the bottom was the smallest tubes. Nettie walked up to the upside-down funnel and stood watching as small drops of liquid started drop, drop, dropping into the tubes.

Tooneressie finished his sweeping, put his broom back where he got it and then stood back to look at his handy work.

“This is how our Neektar is made. That’s the main drink of my people, but the last ingredient, the most important, comes from your woods. We can’t make it without those flowers. It’s important work, I do. Collecting those. It’s considered very dangerous.

“Why is it considered dangerous?”

“Didn’t you know? There is a giant beast that roams those woods. I’ve caught a glimpse of it. It’s big, and black, and has giant teeth, and moves very fast.”

The beast terrified her. That must be why the woods were forbidden. She didn’t know that there was anything behind her house. She thought about her mom. Was her mom in danger? She had to get home to warn her. “I need to go home.”

“I’ll take you back. Don’t worry, you’re safe with me.”

Nettie wasn’t worried about herself, she was worried about her family. Her sister spent a lot of time in her room reading, but her brother was always outside doing something which usually didn’t involve a little sister. Her mom put the laundry on the line out back, or sat outback preparing vegetables for dinner. Her mom also liked to sit on the back porch to fold laundry. Could the beast cut through screen and get onto the porch? Nettie didn’t know but she knew she needed to hurry.

As Nettie and Tooneressie exited the building through the swinging doors, bells started ringing all over the village. She could see people running with what looked like sticks in their hands toward the hill in which they came. “What has happened” she asked.

“Come on,” Tooneressie yelled, taking off in the same direction. For someone so small he could run really fast and Nettie had to run as well to keep up.

Tooneressie ran up to someone with a white beard and slightly stooped at the shoulders. His beard was long and he walked with a cane. “What has happened?” Tooneressie asked.

“The beast has entered our land. The blind was left open. Someone left it open, and the beast got in. It will destroy everything.”

Tooneressie's face froze in horror. He knew. He was the one who left the blind open. He was going to take Nettie back as soon as he showed her around and he hadn't closed it. Now it was too late. His home would be destroyed and it was all his fault. His heart pounded. He had always been so curious about the Ferin, that when he met one, he just couldn't resist getting to know her, even if she was just a wee Ferin. But now he needed to do something to save his people.

"Nettie, run to one of our tallest trees and climb it. Can you do that?" he asked her.

Nettie, eyes wide, her body shaking, too afraid to say anything, nodded her head solemnly. Tooneressie ran off toward the hill, and Nettie looked around for a tall tree to climb. Seeing one nearby, she ran toward it. She was good at climbing trees, so it took her no time to climb to the top. She looked around to see where everyone was and what was happening. Everyone seemed to be gathered at the top of the hill. They were running around and she could hear voices raised, yelling, but she couldn't hear them. Some people seemed to be throwing what might have been miniature spears, but looked like toys her brother had.

But then she saw it. The blackness coming out of the darkness of the woods that led back to her home. She watched clinging to the top of the tree as Tooneressie and others went forward to battle the beast. She could even see the old man with the cane ready to do battle. She felt helpless sitting in the tree, peering into the distance, but then she saw it.

Nettie scrambled down out of the safety of the tree and took off toward the top of the hill. She had to help him, she had to save him.

As she reached the top of the hill she could see the people throwing spears at what they called "the beast." She started to scream at the top of her lungs, "Stop, stop, stop...."

Everyone turned in shock to stare at the small Ferin running toward them. The spikes and spears stopped as the girl ran past them and toward the beast.

Unable to stop the giant child, the people, watched in horror as she ran toward the open jowls.

The beast, seeing it's new prey crouched low, ready to spring. It placed its large black head with brown eyes between its paws, its hind quarters above its front swaying with the wave of the weapon tail. The little girl stopped, planted her feet firmly on the ground and commanded, "Sit, Rowdy!"

The beast plopped its hind quarters down, and sat thumping its immense tail upon the ground. The People looked on, astonished, as the girl child approached the beast.

"No, child, no!" could be heard ringing across the valley, but Nettie didn't hear the small voices. She was focused on the large black beast sitting just feet in front of her.

As she approached, the beast crouched low again and showed all of its sharp white teeth. Tooneressie, running up behind Nettie held what looked like a miniature pitchfork in front of him.

"Get behind me." He shouted up at her. A curious look came over Nettie's face. The beast, ahead of her placed its head in its hands, it's hind quarters higher than the head, his backend swaying back and forth. "Why would I do that?"

Just then he sprang. Nettie was knocked to the ground and the beast covered her up. The People screamed. But then another sound quickly drowned them out. It was the sound of a giggles of a laughing little girl being covered in slobbering kisses by her dog.

“Rowdy, stop!” She gasped between her giggles. Rowdy sat down in front of Nettie. She sat up and began brushing herself off. She looked around and noticed the expression on Tooneressie’s face and that of the other People.

“Its Ok,” she said. “He’s my dog. My pet. I love him. He won’t hurt you.” She looked around, but didn’t know what else to say. The People looked at Rowdy with such fear in their eyes, she didn’t know how to tell them that he was the best dog and friend a little girl could have.

Then, Tooneressie put his pitchfork down and slowly approached the beast that towered over him. “He won’t eat me?”

“No!” Nettie exclaimed. She placed her hand on her dog’s head to pat him so that he knew these small people were ok. “He likes to lick you, but he won’t bite. But I guess maybe you look a little to him like a toy, and he likes to play with toys.”

“Stay, Rowdy.” She commanded just to be safe.

Tooneressie approached the beast showing great courage in front of his people, but also with great fear in his heart. The beast had been entering their land for the last couple of weeks and wrecking-havoc in the village. Though he never hurt anyone, he trampled houses, uprooted trees, and carried wheelbarrows away in its mouth, their contents spilled and spoiled on the ground. To approach this beast seemed to court disaster, and yet he inched ever closer to the mouth that could devour him with one gulp.

“Lay down, Rowdy.” Nettie commanded. Instantly, the big dog did what his young master commanded and crouched down low, his tail still swaying mildly back and forth. Tooneressie approached him, his hand trembling, but outstretched toward Rowdy’s nose. Rowdy sniffed the small hand and then gave him a quick lick, and then waited.

“You can pet him. He likes to be petted.”

Tooneressie laid his small hand upon the large muzzle of the dog, and ran his hand down toward the mouth. “He’s really soft,” he exclaimed, surprised at the feel of the animal that had terrorized the people.

Nettie looked around to see the people slowly, carefully approaching them. Rowdy, still laying where he had been told, also looked around at the people. Nettie kept one hand on his head reassuringly. “He won’t bite,” she repeated. “His name is Rowdy and he is my family’s pet. I’m sorry he scared you, he really didn’t mean to.”

“It’s Ok,” Tooneressie also stated. “Look,” he held up his hand to show the others. “He didn’t eat it.”

The people approached Rowdy, placed their hands on his soft fur. Exclamations could be heard, “He’s really soft.” “Are you sure it’s safe?”

After a time, the people turned their attention from Rowdy to the giant little girl and Tooneressie.

Tooneressie looked at the faces looking at him. There were stern angry expressions, but most, like him, were as curious about the child as they were about the beast. Lucky for him the people were very imaginative creatures. He introduced Nettie and explained how they met. With introductions taken care of, the discussion turned to trying to figure out how Rowdy had followed them into the blind, how he had gotten in before, and how to prevent it in the future.

Nettie explained that Rowdy liked to have things thrown and he always brought it back: balls, sticks, toys; and he also loved carrying things around in his mouth. They realized that he was probably chasing something and had entered the blind accidentally. With

this information, they formed a plan to try to keep him out, and also a plan for what to do if he entered again accidentally.

Nettie was invited to tour the rest of the town. She told Rowdy to sit and stay, before she began her tour, knowing he would be there when she got back. She saw houses that looked like bigger versions of the doll house her sister had in her room, with corners and sloping roofs. These homes looked normal, and so different from the ones she saw when she entered their land. She tasted some of the people's special foods and treats. At a bakery, the baker gave Nettie an entire cake, which looked like a small, short cupcake to her and gave Tooneressie a piece of the sweet, honey dipped cake. It tasted like caramel and cinnamon and honey to Nettie, and she loved it.

By this time the sun was beginning to sink in the sky and Nettie realized she needed to go home. Her family might be looking for her. They went back to get Rowdy, and then Tooneressie walked Nettie and her dog toward the blind. As she walked, she thought about the exciting day, but then she became sad. As they approached the area that she knew would take her home, she asked the question that made her unhappy. "Will I ever see you again?"

Tooneressie stopped and looked up at her, saw the sadness in her eyes and gave her the biggest smile he had to give. "Why so sad? We are friends and always will be. Of course you will see me again." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small bell and handed it up to her. She held the small bell in her hand. Once you reach the log that leans against the tree, tinkle the bell. I will hear it and come and let you in.

They said their goodbyes, Nettie tucked the bell into her jeans pocket and bravely walked with Rowdy into the blind.

CHAPTER III

HOME AGAIN

“Nettie!” “Nettie!” “Mom, I found her!”

Nettie heard her sister’s voice and sat up. She didn’t remember falling asleep. She looked around. She lay curled up by the tree with the log leaning against it. Rowdy lay curled up beside her.

“Mom, Rowdy’s here, too!”

Nettie looked around groggily trying to remember why she was here.

“Honey, what happened? We have been looking everywhere for you. What are you so far in the fencerow? You know you are not supposed to wander out here by yourself.

Nettie’s mom hugged her tightly, and then held her at arm’s length waiting for an answer.

“Rowdy got loose and I chased him, and then I met Tooneressie and I went to a different place and the people were really small, but then Rowdy got in and the people were afraid of him, but now they are not.”

“Mom, what is she talking about?”

“I don’t know, but it is getting late. Let’s get back to the house and then we can figure it out.”

Mom took Nettie’s hand and led her through the tall weeds out of the fencerow while Nettie’s sister walked by Rowdy.

“Mom!” Nettie’s brother’s voice rose above the weeds.

“We found her!” Nettie’s sister shouted back.

“About time!” Nettie’s brother found them and the family walked back up to the house together.

In the house mom looked Nettie over and decided a bath before bed was a necessity. Once in the bathtub mom asked Nettie to explain again what had happened.

Nettie retold her story. Rowdy got out of his collar, chasing a rabbit into the woods. She described Tooneressie with his wheelbarrow full of flowers. Then as mom washed her hair, she described following him into his world, seeing all of the houses and place where the Neektar is made. While she was being towel-dried, she told her mom how frightened the people were of Rowdy.

Her sister leaned against the door, frowning as she listened to the end of her story.

Mom helped Nettie put on her nightie, and then tucked her into bed. Mom kissed her forehead, told her to get a good-night’s sleep, and turned out her light. As mom slid her door closed Nettie heard her sister ask, “You don’t believe her, do you?” Her mom responded that she has a “vivid imagination” and that her small friend was “make-believe.”

Nettie didn’t understand “vivid imagination” but she did understand what “make-believe” meant. That meant made up, like when playing house with her dolls. Nettie sat up in bed.

“I didn’t make Tooneressie up. He’s real,” she said aloud to herself. Nettie jumped out of bed and crossed over to her closet. She opened the door and found the jeans she had been wearing that day in her laundry basket. She reached into the pocket and felt around. No bell. She placed her hand in the other front pocket. No bell. She could have sworn she put the bell in front pocket. She placed her hand in her back pocket and immediately felt the small object in her hand. She pulled the tiny bell out. It was real. He was real, and when she jingled the bell by the log, he would come so she could see him again. She placed the tiny bell between her thumb and finger and jingled it, but there was no sound. She jingled harder. Still no sound. She didn’t understand. If there wasn’t any sound, how would he hear? How would he know she was there?

Nettie cupped the bell in her hand and crawled back into bed. She looked around her dark room. She placed her other hand on her cat, Taffy, who lay curled up among the stuffed animals. “He’s real.” She said as she fell asleep.

The next morning, Nettie got up and dressed very early. She looked out her window toward her back yard and beyond into the fencerow. The sun was beginning to shine. Walking down the stairs to the kitchen, she knew she had a mission. She was going to prove that Tooneressie was real.

In the kitchen mom was already up drinking her coffee.

“And what are you up to, Little Miss, that you are up so early this morning?”

“I’m going to prove that Tooneressie is real,” Nettie exclaimed.

“Oh, you are? And how do you plan to do that?”

Nettie looked out the kitchen window to the backyard. The sun just started to peak above the trees. She knew she was only allowed to go as far as Rowdy's house, but Tooneressie's home was way back in the fencerow.

"Mom, can I go into the fencerow, just this once, so I can look for Tooneressie?"

"No, honey. Why don't you take some food out to Rowdy and then come back in and we'll figure out what we want for breakfast."

"Okay, mom," Nettie skipped outside to feed her dog.

Rowdy was sitting at the end of his chain, tail wagging waiting for his breakfast.

"Don't jump, Rowdy." Nettie said as she approached the black lab. She sat his food down in front of him, and he appreciatively began eating, continuing to wag his tail. Nettie patted his head and turned to go back in the house, but just as she did she stopped and remembered something.

Rowdy loved to bury treasures.

Nettie walked around the perimeter of his house. There were no fresh burial spots. She then looked around his house. She still didn't see any new burial sites. She had just turned to go back to the house about to give up when she spotted something out of the corner of her eye inside of his house. Nettie dropped down on her hands and knees and crawled into Rowdy's doghouse. She crawled into the back corner where she had spotted what looked like a wheel poking out of the straw. She carefully pulled it out. The tiny wheel was connected to a wheelbarrow that looked just like the one Tooneressie pushed into his land.

Nettie hugged the small object to herself and then held it out to take a closer look. It was made of wood. The wheels turned smoothly, and the handles looked worn as if from use. This was not a toy. This was real, and that meant Tooneressie was real.

Nettie hugged the object to herself again as she sat in the dog's house and smiled. She smiled and she planned.