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July 25th, the sun washes over Blossem, and the Texas heat seeps into my blood stream. Every day prior to this, it only beat against my flesh, turning me darker shades of tan and giving the illusion that I was actually my mother's daughter and not just a light-skinned replacement. Today, though, as I head to work, I could feel the rays moving with my blood, and I could see my skin glow. On these hotter days, when the temperature rises past triple digits, when eggs are baking on the sidewalk, when the window unit is buzzing so hard that it looks like it might shake itself to the earth, I tend to find missing pieces of myself. I used to think that this action had some spiritual meaning, but I've come to learn that it means a little more than that. I ain't sure how. Some things you just feel, you know.

Poppa doesn't like me walking around by myself on account of me being a pretty, young girl and it being a bad, bad world. He says it don't matter when; day or night, there's creeps out there, and they're looking to do me harm. That's what he says anyway. But he ain't ever left the house to walk me and keep me safe or anything. He just sits around the house, staring out the window, pretending like an eagle or something is going to swoop in and take him away. Well, I'm glad he never comes because he never could understand how I find these missing parts of myself. To him,

it's just junk. Like, when I found the plastic bag full of old bottle caps, he told me that the caps didn't have anything to do with my soul, that they were just somebody else's trash, and that I was a nutcase like Momma used to be. He didn't understand how the severed arm of a Ken Doll was a part of me either.

He doesn't understand because that's the kind of person he is. Poppa never went with us to church, never prayed, never read the bible, never told us stories about angels or heaven — not even when pets died or when grandparents died or when we happened upon that poor girl who washed up in the lake during one of our few family outings — he called them worm food, told us we couldn't see them again in any way, shape, or form. Momma talked about saving him all her life, but you can't save that kind of person. He was engineered differently from Momma and me, though I looked more like him than I ever did her.

When I step on it, and its hard plastic edge digs into the exposed soles of my feet, I think about how I could never explain to him how it was returning to me. I bend over and clutch it, carefully, like a precious jewel — a little plastic F plucked from a keyboard ... my little plastic F. Of course, I only ever saw computers at the library, but I could recognize them and their parts and whatnot. And I could see my soul in that F and in the swirling lines of heat stretching across the sky. The free parts; the fun parts; the fast, flowing, fresh parts; the fantastical; the fabulous; the fragile and feminine parts of me, and I wondered if there were another universe, in a mirror or in a black hole or down a well, in which Poppa understood, and I drifted into it, like a fever.

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She was cleaning out the closet, looking for items to give to Goodwill, when she found it. It was balled up at the back of the top shelf and had sat, collecting dust, for how long? Eight years? Nine? At least since they'd moved into the house and Will was a baby. It was Ted's old shirt from his single days, part of his "going out" outfit that he thought was so retro hip and cool, but which was really just fugly.

That was a term she's learned from Ted himself, along with "soup sandwich" and "FUBAR," back when he'd just left the army. He was a kid from South Dakota who didn't have a clue what was fashionable, who thought parachute pants were in style at least a decade after they'd been branded as a regrettable relic of the Eighties.

And really, how could he be expected to know what was stylish? Growing up, his mom bought all his clothes at Walmart, the only place within 50 miles that sold anything other than Wranglers and Carhartt. He'd joined the Army at 18 and basically never wore anything but uniforms after that.

When she first met him, he had no idea how to dress himself for civilian life, a fact pretty much summed up by this shirt. It was mustard colored, with huge paisleys that looked like more like hideous amoebae than a design element. It was 100 percent cotton that felt rough and stiff, and it wrinkled like crazy. "God, he must have spent hours ironing this thing," she thought as she fingered the now-faded fabric.

She remembered that he'd worn it when they went to the Green Mill once early in their dating days, how he'd slyly checked himself out in the car window as they headed out. She remembered too how he'd pulled her close later that night, the heat and the noise of the club disappearing as he drunkenly whispered in her ear, "I'm with the prettiest girl in this place." His grin was lopsided and sweet, and her breath hitched as he

spoke. How drawn to him she was to him, god-awful shirt and all.

It wasn't until months after that night, when they were firmly established as a couple and practically living together, that she finally gave him grief about the shirt. "Oh, the bloom is really off the rose now," he'd said smiling. He'd still pull it out occasionally, putting it on despite her groans of protest, not caring a bit how ridiculous it looked. She knew he wore it just to get a rise out of her, to establish himself as a still-independent guy, despite the fact that he'd happily let her replace most of his wardrobe by then.

Then, one day when he was at work and she was home with their first son, she'd come across it while searching for something to wear that wasn't yet stained with Will's spit-up. Nothing of hers fit yet and the shirt was lurking toward the back like an embarrassing drunk who won't leave the party. She had yanked it off its flimsy wire hanger and thrown it up onto the topmost shelves with a disgusted grunt.

Now this artifact from another life was in her hands, still just as awful as she remembered. She started to toss it into the Goodwill pile, but stopped. It was precious, this obscenely ugly shirt. She smiled to herself as she folded it carefully into a tidy square, stepped back to gather momentum, and launched it up into the darkest reaches of their closet.

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I found your soul discarded in the street today.

On a three by five index card, you scrawled in heavy black permanent marker letters, "YOU NOW OWN MY SOUL." Initialed under that. Today's date under that. It's a neat little binding contract. I bet it would hold up in the highest court, even if you meant it as a joke. You shouldn't be so cavalier with your immortal essence. I spied it between a wad of chewing gum and a mangled plastic bottle. Anyone could have found this card where it laid half-in, half-out of the gutter with the collected effluvia of a thousand passers-by.

But I found it. It's mine.

There was a footprint on it, you know? That's just how little they cared. Or maybe they didn't realize what they were stepping on, any more than you realized what you were giving away. You wouldn't throw out your own soul, no. You gave it to someone else. It wasn't a joke; I was wrong about that, wasn't I? You loved him — or her — and you wanted the depths of your devotion to be understood and returned by her — or him. Consumed by their own casual selfishness, they didn't grasp the importance of that simple, lined index card.

They threw it out. But I won't.

Or maybe it wasn't anything as crass as that. It could have been an escape attempt. Your soul, desperate to get back you, wriggling free of someone's backpack, or pocket, or plucked from their fingers by a lucky gust of wind. It does get windy here, this time of year. Whatever the method, your soul took flight in one last gambit, to undo the mistake you made in giving it away.

It won't escape me.

I have it pinned to the wall, now. Above and to the right of my family photos. It's a place of honor. Did you feel those four thumbtacks? Like a shiver up your spine or a goose stepping on your grave. I think I'll leave it there for awhile, just where I can touch it as I pass by. I don't know who you are. I probably never will. But I have the most important part of you, and it's mine to do with as I please.

I can't express how much comfort it gives me, either. To know that I control someone's soul, it makes every other issue in my life seem trivial. There's nothing I can't conquer, no setback I can't overcome. The boost to my confidence has been nothing short of life-changing, all thanks to one little index card.

That's why you'll never know who I am. Your soul is more necessary to me than my own. You'll never get it back.

I'd see it burn before I let that happen.

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