Hoarded

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I knew it was in there. I felt ten, solid, even paces pull me closer to the cupboard. The distressed, duck-egg blue, artificially aged wood, so smooth under the soft pads of my fingertips, I lingered on the cusp of courage.

She would have to wake up.

The cupboard was one of the few furnishings in this empty, unused room of the house, alongside a plush, zebra-print rug and a sweet beveled mirror opposite the window. I unlatched the golden clasp joining the two doors. The pile was anxiously still before me. From a mountain of every colour man had created, the smell of wooden drawer dust invaded my shaking breath, and alongside it, the smell of a mandarin moisturizer that reminded me of simpler times, of joy. All heaped to the capacity of the cupboard, hidden and demeaningly preserved. Atop the conglomeration, three little juggling balls in a small net bag began to stir, and one by one rolled steadily from an opening of the bag onto the carpet in three little thuds.

I took a few steps back into the centre of the room, where the cracks in the curtain cast rays of sunlight, and ever so slightly warmed my feet. Piece by piece, the jumble rolled onto the floor around me in an avalanche. Items of various shapes, sizes, colours, and purposes fabricated before my eyes in rapid succession, each one carrying with them a distinct time and memory. Various CD collections bundled together with elastic bands from when I was convinced I would only listen to CDs from now on. A mesh bag of all the watches I needed to fix, frozen in time at the exact point I had stopped wearing them, forever. A magic 8-ball stuck on "Ask

again later". A small cloth bunny whose shape burned into my eyes like a blinding light. Broken-heartedly, my eyes wandered over these belongings of mine through bulbous tears yet to spill. Dried-up paints that might work if I checked. Pencils of varying lengths and brands. Toys I used to love, but now I feel that they are dirty to touch. Beads, bracelets, crystals, and cards. Empty notebooks, unused stickers, unmelted candlesticks, and letters from old friends.

Before I even had time to process any of this, one fishnetted leg with a satin red wedge kicked its way out from under the flowing rubble, and then another from the other side of the jumble. She wore black denim booty shorts with a brown cowboy belt I borrowed from a man I dated two winters ago, and as she dusted herself of the ribbons, blue-tacks, pipe cleaners, and other various bottom-of-the-pile rubbish, I noticed at least three layers of stick-on nails cemented on her fingers as they ruffled and freshened the fabric of her brown fur coat. Her face was momentarily covered by hair made of acrylic wool, the gradient kind, from pink to orange to turquoise to pink and around again. I noticed her neon lips first, bulging around a set of chattering teeth with the winding key pierced through the skin of her cheek. Then, her purple nose was made of a metallic putty, which she deftly corrected back to shape with her thumb. Her ears elongated and elvish, her neck, doll-like and detachable from her head. Lastly, her eyes fluttered open to reveal lubricated, rainbow bouncy balls peeking from behind the folds of her eyelids.

I fell to my knees in disgrace. How could I have let it get this bad? It had been years since I'd entered this little grey-walled room. I pulled the sleeves of my shapeless, black dress back down to my wrists, seeking warmth, seeking darkness. She lunged forward from the cupboard, the carpet now nearly totally covered in randomised clutter, and danced and balanced her way around me in circles, like a puppet on strings, stretching out like a captive

animal set wild for one, glorious moment. I was so ashamed.

I kept my head down. At my knees, an old camera, countless half-used nail polishes in ridiculous colours, rolled up paintings I didn't even want to see anymore. Essential oils, stupid hats, comedy glasses, scratched badges torn from old backpacks. Metal water bottles that hadn't been cleaned or sealed since the last use. Boxes of crayons. Gifts I had yet to use. Stuff I told myself I would use. This woman is an embodiment of every half-baked idea I'd ever had. I scowled at the disgusting landscape I had created, all these shapes and colours, and all I could see was wasted money, and all of it wasted on me. I had picked from every berry bush in life and never ate from the basket. I had promised to loop back round but only ever walked straight. I had indulged in passion without devotion, and taken but never given. And now, she was out of my control. An unorganised collection of things I'd never figured out, emotions I never worked through, memories I resented but gripped onto like the only thing tethering me to reality, to the truth of who I am. I had spent my life breathing in but never out, and now, no one could ever see her, see what I'd done, see what I was. So much of everything all at once, but nothing in particular. How could I be everything and nothing? She danced amateurishly, sang unrehearsed, and moved limitedly. She had to be locked away.

I turned my back on the dancing monster and began digging through the wasteland of novelties scattered along the floor. I found clothes I'd worn only once, the smell of perspiration still present within the fabric. I found paintings, ghosts of ideas torn through blank pages, the disappointing and unsatisfying appearance of 2B pencil on canvas. I found a stack of classical novels, each one dog-eared, with less than fifty pages from the beginning. I found notebooks with the first few pages filled with good-intentioned language learning – Spanish, Japanese, and Greek. I had tasted newness and became addicted to the flavour. I had fallen

in love, idiotically, every time, with the idea that something else, something different, would finally be the thing to change me. I had never dug deep, but tilled the soil as far as the eye could see. I remember every rotting memory of foolishly standing in a shop window, imagining my beautiful new life with silver-studded hoop earrings, with a fat leather handbag, with striped kitchen towels. Would people finally see who I am if they smelled Mango Pineapple Sunset Dreams wafting in the air as I walked past? Would blue eyeliner, a pom-pom keyring, or a strawberry incense burner be enough to convince everyone around me that I was interesting? Wouldn't everyone get tired of seeing me bring the same lunch bag to work every day?

But time had sucked the novelty out of every last item, like syrup from a slushie. The only joy they could give me now was to reminisce on the idea of what could have been. If I had begun tap dancing lessons after all, if I had given hula hooping or the harmonica a real shot. The excitement of a life I didn't have, trophies on a shelf, friends clinking glasses at the dinner table. Why wouldn't I throw them away? I had nothing else.

Sandwiched between two Bob Ross VHS tapes was the sweet little lace-bound book I had come up here to find. A hand-annotated poetry collection belonging to my old friend Kate, who was downstairs with a cold cup of tea, waiting for me to fish it out. She had written in the margins with an orange pen, matching the cover. Her name is in cursive lettering on the first page. It had lost the lively look of a loved book, flattened completely shut in its exile, not even the breath of a single unfolded dog-ear springing the pages open. I had borrowed it but never read it.

I kicked all the remaining junk back into the cupboard and pushed the doll woman in on top of it all, jamming everything back in in defiance of physics and volume. Her eyes softly shut, and I got one last glance at the bouncy balls rolling backwards into her skull as I latched up the doors again.

Debris from my excavation littered the room. I caught a glimpse of a frail woman in the little beveled mirror, with real eyes and real teeth, holding a beautifully loved book in her hands, the epitome of devotion. I smashed the back of my fist into the mirror and made a small crack in the glass. Book thrown to the floor, I beat the shit out of the mirror with both hands, neither one particularly stronger, until I was too tired to keep going, which didn't take particularly long, and until the mirror was fragmented beyond use.

I would have to buy a new one.