

1st Place Fiction Division

**Everyday Imperatives: A Cinderella Story**

By Rebekah Orton

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Rachel walked to work the swing shift at Kroger in all but the worst weather. When it snowed or when the humidity was especially fierce, she boarded 216 and kept her head forward to avoid looking at the other passengers. She felt for them: the hobbled, the poor, but she didn't have an ounce to give them, not after being with Diane all day. It made her blush to avoid them as she counted the stops: Dwight, Cane, Peachtree, Woodrow, and then--finally--Harper, where Kroger came into view and she reached up to pull the indicator string. For some reason, the night buses retained the physically impaired when everyone else had already gone home. At night she could feel them and she resented it. Even as she cringed, she had to fight the urge to invite them back to her house, where she would bathe them and powder them and wrap them in quilts until she was sure that the tremors weren't from cold and that the neck was fully supported. She liked to imagine them fresh as babies and just as understood.

But she got off the bus alone at Kroger, air cold on her cheeks, her breath and bus exhaust mingling in the thick air. Rachel walked in to greet her boss, Andrew, the night manager and a day student at the university.

"Did you bring the documents?" He called from check stand two where he was scanning Gatorade for an overweight woman. The woman didn't flinch or turn to look at Rachel. Night customers were used to being the wallflowers of the grocery store dance.

Rachel held up the manila envelope.

"On my desk," he called.

She looked at the envelope and swallowed. Social security numbers. Bank statements. Four sets of credit scores. Andrew saw her hesitate as he hefted a case of Chef Boyardee into the woman's cart. "Want to put it in my locker?"

She nodded.

"56-11-23."

He had a dimple in his right cheek. Rachel blushed.

It took her two tries before the door swung with a guilty clang, revealing a mess of empty Doritos bags, chocolate milk containers, and an apple core. Rachel debated removing the garbage, but the sound of footsteps distracted her, and she shoved the envelope in amidst the debris and slammed the locker shut.

She put on her apron and counted her till and waited at Express Lane One. She waited for the frat boys and the coupon shoppers and workers stopping for a carton of milk and a dozen eggs on their way home from the Honda factory. Waited, yawning, for morning. Waited for Andrew to open the envelope and divine the future.

“Nice work tonight,” he called from his office next to the break room when she retrieved her purse and coat at 5 am.

“Night,” she called back. She wanted everything explained to her in his confident baritone, but her feet were aching. And, of course, there was Diane.

She zipped her coat, shivered in the cold air, and decided against the bus. Head down to avoid any glimpses of the riders through the bus windows, hands in her pockets gripping her keys between her fingers just in case, she walked along Broad Street past Harper, Woodrow, Peachtree, Cane, and then--finally--Dwight, where she hung a right and walked around to the backdoor of the craftsman bungalow. She paused on the cement steps, alone with the clouds, streetlights reflected off their white underbellies in her own private dawn.

From the smell of cold grease and garlic she encountered in the kitchen, Rachel could tell Lana had been home. Rachel moved an egg encrusted pan to the sink and wiped an oil slick with the damp sponge. A bottle of ketchup sat on the counter; Rachel replaced the lid. Lana had left a carton of orange juice next to the fridge and when Rachel picked it up, it was still full. And cold. She set it back on the counter, her ears pricked for the smallest sound.

Rachel didn't worry about her footsteps echoing off the rutted wood floors down the hallway to Diane's room. She half expected that Lana locked the door, so she pushed on it with more force than necessary and half fell into the room. Diane snorted once, a guttural noise against the whoosh of the oxygen tank.

Rachel surveyed the room as she made her way across the handmade rug towards

the bed. The machines were all tethered to their electrical sockets; three sets of slippers lined the wall. She lifted the comforter to check Diane's body, and then, reassured, she pulled the covers up over her. Often Diane thrashed in her sleep and sometimes she threw the blankets off. Also, she drooled. Rachel wiped Diane's cheek and covered her with another afghan. There was still a handful of change on her dresser and, Rachel checked, Diane still had both her diamond studs in her ears.

Rachel lifted the bed skirt to check under the frame. She found only a copy of House Beautiful and an empty prescription bottle. Satisfied, she crossed the room and closed the door behind her with a thud. One room safe, two if she counted the kitchen, four more to go. The living room revealed only furniture and knickknacks. Rachel pulled back the shower curtain in the bathroom, but Lana wasn't sleeping in the tub again; the computer didn't feel warm in the office alcove.

Tonight she smelled nothing more than the must of an old basement, but goose bumps rose on her arms, and she shivered involuntarily. A window was open--amazing that snow hadn't fallen indoors--and the covers of her twin bed were pulled down. Lana had been here, but from the temperature of the room and the temperature of the sheets,

Rachel couldn't estimate how long she'd been gone.

She craned her neck out the window for some clue, then closed the window and locked it. She pulled the quilt over herself and kicked her shoes off without untying them.

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Lana pulled herself out of the basement and balanced her knees on the cement curb at the edge of the snowy lawn. She had snow up her sleeves, and she felt the pressure but not the cold. Her hair hung in strings over her eyes and she flipped them over her shoulder. A light turned on in the house in Diane's room and Lana turned away. She felt strong as she stepped through Rachel's tracks out to the sidewalk.

They'd always be slower than her—their eyes wide and shifting away from her. They were forever sniffing the air around her—hounds on scent for her failure. But they didn't realize that she could see more and know more and feel more with the drugs coursing through her. They didn't realize how much she wanted and needed to go back after they had worn off and she was, once again, like them.

Lana could see her breath in the dawn air and shivered into her windbreaker, her hands shoved so deep into the thin fabric they were nearly touching. She ducked into the service station on the corner of Knight and High. She relaxed into the warm air like a second skin, walking past the candy and pocketing a roll of butter rum Lifesavers before she paused at the stack of morning papers. She picked up a copy and paid for it at the desk with the coins jumbling around the Lifesavers. The attendant offered her change, but she shrugged it off.

Back outside the sky was lightening and the wind pierced her jacket. She slid down against the doorframe, opened the lifesavers and flipped the paper to the obituaries. One notice had run the day before as well, as if the family could prove their love by paying twice as much. She folded the paper. She blew on her hands and inserted another lifesaver.

Back to the house now, where she crunched through the snow and in the front door, silent as she slipped her windbreaker in the closet. She smoothed her hair back when she caught her reflection in the mirror. There was a time she would have been embarrassed by her unkempt image. Now anything less would be surprising.

Rachel appeared in the foyer. "You slept in my bed again."

Lana blinked. The entry way smelled musty and stale. Moist.

"You've got your own room."

Had the entryway always been this moist?

"You've got your own entrance." Rachel blocked her way as Lana tried to slip past her. "Snow falls in when you use the window. And what if someone saw you? What if they came in when I was gone? What if they hurt . . ."

"They wouldn't," Lana interrupted.

"They might."

"You think anyone wants this crap?" Lana pushed into the living room and knocked into a lamp. It fell and the light bulb shattered.

Rachel sighed forcefully as she bent to unplug the light. Lana stood next to the mess: knees and elbows, frozen joints, staring at the starburst of glass across the wooden floor.

Rachel shoved a broom in her hands. "I'm sick of cleaning up after you."

Alone again in the hall, Lana stared at the glass—the sharp points and fragments and the light from the overhead bulb catching on them: tiny, dangerous. She slid the bristles across the floor, gathering in bits and extinguishing the star.

“You have to get the corners.” Rachel wrenched the broom from Lana’s hands. She swept the broom against the same spot Lana had, but in her hands the broom collected millions of glittering pieces of glass. Lana’s hands felt useless and obvious. She leaned against the back of the couch. She placed her hands behind her then stood up and folded her arms, her hands tucked neatly into her armpits.

“She’s asking for you.”

Panic. Lana ran her tongue over her teeth, her hands over her hair. She side-stepped Rachel and her sighs and piles. Down the dark hall she went, the door at the end holding the smell of dead skin and old clothes. She stood outside the door, pulled her sleeves farther down over the heels of her hands, blinked and opened the door.

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Andrew clocked out and slipped through the automatic doors into the slushy parking lot. He tried to feel the importance of Rachel’s paperwork as he drove to the law school with its gray trees whose skeleton fingers laced through the parting clouds. He imagined himself a miracle worker for the pretty checker who burst into tears and told him everything when he teased her about buying adult diapers.

In retrospect he could think of no reason it would ever be funny to joke about buying Depends.

Since then, he couldn’t avoid Rachel’s long lashed, sky blue eyes. With other girls, he sometimes struggled to focus above their cleavage, but Rachel was arresting—so intense. She wanted an education; he played solitaire on his laptop in class.

“Sit down,” Professor Dobbs waved towards an ancient chenille couch. Andrew sat on the arm. “She gave you the information?”

Andrew held out the packet. At one point in time he imagined he’d ride the saddle of heroism himself, but he knew he would be lucky to keep a hold of the tail of the horse as it dragged him pell-mell towards what may or may not be a sunset.

His professor tore into the packet eager as a child at a birthday party. He thumbed

the pages then held out his hand. Andrew set the original application in it and Professor Dobbs pushed aside an open book to make room on the desk. He began writing in numbers and names, slashing out sections with writing so forceful he nearly ripped the paper.

Andrew leaned forward. "Is it that easy?"

Professor Dobbs didn't look up. "We'll write a provision section. The daughter needs to get counseling but there's no reason the mother can't have a live in."

"How soon?"

Professor Dobbs considered the question. "That's up to them. She's out of the house?"

Andrew coughed. "They've had some problems."

"You take away the key, she's out of there."

"She breaks in the window. Rachel says she's a comfort to the mother. That she loves her even when she's taking anything that isn't nailed down."

"So a restraining order."

"The mom won't sign it. She won't turn her in for possession. She won't sign her up for rehab."

Dobbs looked out over his glasses. "Then maybe we're filling out the wrong form."

"But Rachel is brilliant. She could do anything if she wasn't the caregiver."

Professor Dobbs nodded. He tapped the papers together and slid them back in the envelope. "You can't get someone else's life in order."

Andrew thanked Professor Dobbs for his time and slipped the envelope back in his shoulder bag before he stepped into the cold hall. He sat in his carrel in the library, opened a book and tried to care about case law. He dreamed of Thoreau and a cabin in the woods: beans, onions, and a coarse brown bread stuffed with walnuts and baked over a fire. And Rachel there, of course Rachel.

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By shifting her focus out the window up and down the street, Diane was able to create from her bed the impression of walking. Her limbs were as cold as if she actually

were out in the snow. There was a puddle of drool forming in the side of her mouth. Much as she would like to remove it she knew the consequences of sending her disobedient hand on such a mission. Rachel would be here soon. Or Lana. Lana wasn't nearly as gentle, and she moved so quickly Diane could never see her eyes. Rachel was gentle. Rachel was calm and capable of stillness so profound she appeared to be moving in time with Diane's tremors. The spittle hung in the precipice of her lips and, rather than risk injury she flung her arm to the wall and banged—once, twice, the hand fell again and again and she was unable to stop herself and her hand.

“Rachel,” she called, although no one but the two of them would recognize her call. She sounded like an animal howling. She laughed at the thought and then her body stuck and jammed in the laughter—the arm stuck pounding and Diane laughing until her stomach hurt eyes watered. Where was Rachel? This wasn't like her. Diane's eyes squeezed shut, but that sound, that laugh still came, bouncing off the walls and building, punctuated by the sound of her fingers slowly splintering against the wall. And then Diane heard the door open, but no footsteps.

She moaned, her arm still flailing and that laugh bubbling out of her—gushing, gurgling. It was Lana in the doorway. Diane could tell by the stillness, the shame hanging in the air, the terror of potential as Lana inventoried every limb for treason. And then Rachel came in with a whirl of calm and direction. She hefted Diane and placed her on the bed then pinned the dervish limbs with the quilt. She spoke to Diane like an infant in calm tones, the words less important than the rhythms that Diane could find and breathe to, laugh subsiding as her breaths met the measured tones of Rachel's speech.

Diane hardly realized she'd been gripping Rachel's arm until Rachel jackknifed Diane's fingers out of her forearm and tucked it under the blanket.

“You couldn't even try?” Rachel asked Lana, her voice a sorrowful accusation. And Lana was still in the doorway now, her limbs knobby tabs in her baggy khakis.

“Breakfast,” Diane garbled and Rachel nodded.

“I'll get you your juice.”

Lana lingered in the doorway, her body unnaturally stiff, an unconscious opposite of her wiggling, twitching mother. Diane wished Lana would sit beside her on the bed and stroke her hair like Rachel did. Once Diane had sung Lana to sleep, now it was

Rachel's face she saw last thing at night and first in the morning. It had been this way for years.

"Years," Diane said to Lana, who jumped at the sound of her voice.

"Another blanket?" Lana questioned. Diane made a move to speak again, and Lana's face filled with fear.

"Rachel," she called. "She's . . . She needs you!"

Rachel slipped back in the room past her stepsister and set the juice next to Diane. She tucked the blanket more tightly around Diane.

"Sorry," Diane said. "I'm sorry."

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Rachel stamped her feet on the freezing sidewalk, her body hunched into the puff of her winter coat. Her hand curled around the cell phone with the aid's number and she wouldn't look back at the house, not now. She had locked the window with the new locks and Lana hadn't come in for nearly a week.

Rachel wondered where Lana had gone, if she was warm, if she was even alive. There was always the possibility that Lana came while Rachel was at school, but the nurse hadn't said anything.

The bus came and Rachel boarded and flashed her ID instead of dropping coins in the till. She avoided eye contact with the passengers, especially the trembling man in the front row and that woman with her hands beaked who seemed always to be riding. Rachel looked out the window into the frost covered morning, shivering and ignoring, wondering where she'd meet Andrew for lunch.