

Julia Lynn Rubin

Rabbit Suit

When I look at the sky, I don't see color. The man in the rabbit suit doesn't either. I know this because I asked him one summer, when the air smelled like burning pavement.

"Did you know that all babies are born colorblind?" I asked him. "When they come out of the hospital and they look up at the sky for the very first time, they don't see bright blue if it's sunny, and they don't see all the yellows and reds if it's a sunrise or a sunset. All they see is a big, empty gray sky."

He thought about this for a moment, or at least it seemed like he was thinking. It's hard to tell when someone's head is encased in a giant rabbit suit.

He wore it every day, no matter the weather, an all-encompassing costume complete with electric blue fur and wide, plastic eyes that glowed cotton-candy pink. He'd chopped off the paws so his feet and hands could breathe, and wore dirty sneakers that were covered in grime from the sidewalk scum. One ear stuck straight up, towering over everyone that passed by his corner, while the other was lopsided and dangled from his head. Each day he stood at the corner, for no apparent reason, with his lopsided ear and shaking hands, and sometimes people whispered, but mostly they walked on by like he was merely a shadow.

It was always hard to tell if he was listening, but that summer day, I knew he was.

“Do you see color in the sky?” I asked him. He turned his head away, then began to wring his fingers. I moved closer to inspect them. His nails were encrusted with gunk, and he grunted and turned his head away from me, his hands shaking. I knew his answer then and there.

When I told Mama and Daddy and my sister this at dinner that evening, Mama interrupted me mid-sentence. Her face transformed into a web of harsh wrinkles.

“Don’t talk to that old junkie,” she snapped, waving her fork at me. “He gives me the willies. Stay away from him, and what did I tell you about talking to strangers on the street? You get to school, you get home. End of discussion.” Then she made a noise deep in her throat and stabbed her fork into her cod. My Daddy and sister said it was the most delicious cod they’d ever had, but to me it tasted like gasoline.

Daddy nodded in agreement and scowled for a moment as if he were angry, but when Mama wasn’t looking, his face softened and he gave me a wink.

That night in our room, my sister and I watched the glowing green stickers on our ceiling, like we did most nights. We liked to pretend it was the sky.

“When you look at the sky, do you see color?” I asked her.

She shuffled around in her bed. I could tell she was thinking hard.

“I don’t know,” she said, very seriously. “Do you, Malaysia?”

“No,” I said. “I see emptiness.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“Emptiness isn’t a color,” she said, and then rolled over and went to sleep.

The first time I cut myself, I was seven. I used Mama's scissors to carve deep lines into my wrists the way girls in the movies did when they were sad. After I was finished, I sat on the cold bathroom floor, watching the blood drip, drip, drip into little pools of cherry cough syrup, spoiling the clean white tiles. I thought about dying, and part of me was so scared that I couldn't breathe, but there was a bigger part sitting on my chest, telling me this would all end soon, and the pain would all go away.

It wasn't Mama or Daddy that found me, but Lily, my nanny. When she came into the bathroom, her face blanched and she started sobbing and praying in Spanish, hugging me close as she wiped the blood away with scratchy dishrags and wrapped my wrists in bandages. I hadn't cut very deep, and I tried to tell her that I needed to die, but she bundled me in up blankets and drove me to the hospital where nurses with stenciled eyebrows scowled at us like we were some kind of vermin. They clucked their tongues and asked a lot of questions, like who Lily was and why I was bleeding, and no one seemed to believe her answers.

"Can you tell me your name, sweetheart?" the doctor asked me when we were alone in a very cold, white room. The bright lights hurt my eyes.

"Malaysia."

"And how old are you?"

"I'm seven."

He nodded and scribble-scrabbled something onto his clipboard. I stared at a poster on the wall that showed a little boy's skin covered in bright red welts, his face twisted in pain. It made my toes curl, and I wondered why they had pictures like that in a place that was supposed to make you feel better.

"Can you tell me what happened to your wrists?" he asked me.

I stared at my bandaged arms, the blood having made splotchy stains into the fabric. “I needed to,” I said. “I needed to cut the bad stuff out.”

“Mmhm,” he said, and he nodded and kept scribble-scrabbling, and deep down in my stomach I felt I had said something wrong and I started to cry. I blubbered as he brought me tissues and blinked like a big sleepy giant. I tried to explain that sometimes it felt like my brain was lopsided and didn’t work right, and everything was twisted, and monsters sat on my chest and tried to choke me, but I don’t think he wrote any of that down.

They wanted to keep me overnight for an evaluation, a big word that I didn’t yet understand. When Mama and Daddy arrived at the hospital, Mama screamed at Lily and slapped her so hard I thought she might crumple to the floor, and I never saw my nanny again.

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My sister once said to me, “Malaysia, Daddy has really dark skin, and Mama has really light skin, and I have in-between skin. Does that make me an Oreo?”

I thought about it. “Like a cookie?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I said, “Where did you hear this?”

She said, “At school. These boys in my class told me that’s what I was.” I believed her explanation, because you learn everything silly at school, and you also learn important things, but it’s really all a matter of sorting out the silly from the serious.

I said, “I don’t think so, because Oreos taste like dirt, and you’re sweet. So I don’t think you’re an Oreo,” and she smiled so big that I could see her back teeth.

The next morning on my way to school, I asked the man in the rabbit suit if he liked Oreos, but he just rubbed his hands together very fast, like he was freezing.

In class, I tried get Robbie's opinion, but as usual he had none, so I just switched subjects, like I always did.

"Did you hear about the little boy whose Mama put him in the freezer?" I asked him. I poked him in the back with my pencil, and he turned to give me a look. His face reminded me of dough, chalky and pudgy. He had little pimples forming on his chin and hot breath that smelled like pizza.

"That's disgusting, Malaysia," he whispered, and turned back to his workbook. I hated workbooks, especially the ones we were doing now on the United States. We had to read a paragraph about each state and then copy the sentence, word for word, and at the end, color in the state we'd written about on a separate map with the same color as the paper in the workbook. It made my brain feel gooey. I hated summer school.

I poked him again, harder. "She was from two counties over, and when they found him, his eyes were wide like a dead fish. Like this." I showed him, and he turned away and shook his head. "He wasn't dead, but nearly. He had hypothermia and went into a coma at the hospital for two days."

"Leave me alone, Malaysia," Robbie said.

I looked over at the clock, which had barely budged, and then at all the other kids. Some were talking and laughing while Ms. Lemon tried to shush them, and some were quietly writing in their workbooks, concentrating hard. I thought all of them looked very silly.

I turned back to my workbook. Today we were copying a paragraph about Alabama, where we lived, and the capital and when it became a state and how many people lived here when it was founded. I tried to

form the words on paper, but after a while they blurred together and my hand felt heavy and hard to move, so I tore out a page and started folding it over and under like an accordion.

“Robbie, did you know that Jupiter has 63 moons?” I asked. “Can you imagine? We only have one little moon, and it’s so bright and white in the sky, but what if there were 63 moons up there, all over like big polka dots? Isn’t that crazy? And no one knew the moons were there until the ‘70s, even though they always were, but they didn’t matter until we knew they were.”

I waited for him to say something, but Robbie just grunted.

“Robbie, did you know that all babies are born colorblind? When they come out of the hospital and they look up at the sky for the very first time, they don’t see bright blue if it’s sunny, and they don’t see all the yellows and reds if it’s a sunrise or a sunset, they just see gray. Big, empty gray sky.”

Robbie turned to me and said, “Gosh, shut up, Malaysia, I’m trying to learn.”

I shrugged and went back to making my paper accordion. By the end of History, I had ripped out ten pages and made twenty of them.

Ms. Lemon came over to my desk, and I heard her breath catch in her delicate throat. She rested her hand on my shoulder, so lightly it was like she had tickled me. “Malaysia, what are you doing?” she asked.

I thought maybe she was angry, maybe she was going to lecture me, but when I looked up into her face—which was very, very soft and pretty—she just looked scared. All of the teachers looked at me that way after I was hospitalized.

That night at dinner, Mama and Daddy were arguing over electric bills and the lawn mower and the living room furniture. Mama was waving her arms around and making a big fuss. Daddy was calm and powerful like a stone, his deep voice never wavering.

I put down my fork. "We should write to Dr. Phil," I said. "Maybe he can fix us."

Everyone went silent and turned to stare at me. Mama's face contorted into a grimace, her lips pressed together so tight I thought she might pop. She looked like she was going to slap me, but instead she punched the table so hard her hand turned purple, like a plum. Daddy said that maybe she should slow down on the wine, and she had to leave the room for a moment. When she came back, her make-up was smudged, and Daddy just smiled at us like nothing was wrong.

"Finish your dinner, girls," he said.

It was then I remembered to give them my permission slip for tomorrow's field trip. Mama took one look at it and immediately tossed it aside, saying to Daddy, "You handle this," and stormed into her room, slamming the door so loudly the China plates on the wall rattled. Daddy waited until it was quiet and then began examining the permission slip, but I could tell he was just pretending to be thoughtful, and I knew that he'd already made up his mind.

"You know," he said to me. "This could be a really good learning experience for you, Malay. We can talk about it when it's over."

I wasn't sure what he meant. Maybe the man in the rabbit suit would know.

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“Today we’re going to visit a very special, historic site,” Ms. Lemon said the day of the field trip. Her lemon-colored hair was tied back in a bun that made me think of sweet danishes. “It’s called a plantation, something we’ve been learning a lot about this summer.”

On the chalkboard she drew a big house with pretty shutters and balconies, and then added in shrubbery and little wooden houses in the corner which looked run-down and cramped. She explained that the little houses were used to house the slaves who worked and worked while the men inside the big house sipped lemonade and made big bags of money from all of their hard labor. That was a plantation, she said, and it was where we were going to have an exciting field trip and see first-hand how everything had worked.

“Does everyone have their permission slips?” she asked.

“Yes,” everyone said in unison, their voices blurring into a dull buzz.

I raised my hand and spoke before she called on me. “Ms. Lemon, my Daddy signed it but I could tell my Mama wasn’t sure if I should go. Is that OK?”

Everyone snickered and began whispering. I heard Robbie groan. Ms. Lemon’s face fell for a moment before she broke in to her usual big, sunny smile. “Yes, that’s fine, Malaysia. Please hand it over so I can look at it. Oh look, everything’s just right.”

I wanted to tell her that I could see she was lying by the way she moved her eyes.

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It was hot outside, so hot I could feel the heat sticking to my skin. We had taken a special charter bus to the plantation, passing golden cornfields and rickety little shops selling fireworks and sweet tea.

“There, there it is, everyone,” Ms. Lemon said. “There’s the plantation.”

Everyone huddled to the window to look, and someone pushed past me in my window seat for a better view, sticking his nose against the glass, his legs pressed into mine like I wasn't even there. When we finally stepped outside into the muggy Alabama air and saw the big beautiful white house with the columns and fountain and dirt pathway, something inside of my brain felt like it was breaking. I looked around at everyone else, to see if they had felt that same snap in their heads, but they all looked excited and were taking photos, chatting among themselves. No one spoke to me. No one ever did.

Our tour guide had big teeth and an even bigger smile. He wore a costume like the ones people wore back in the 1800s, and showed us through the gardens and the fields, and the slave quarters, where people had lived in horrendous conditions, baking together in the heat, bruised and beaten. People snapped photos of each other in front of the quarters with big bright smiles on their faces, and Ms. Lemon helped them take a few. Then we talked through the rooms in the big house, which were roped off so we could only glance at all of the decorations inside. It was like looking into a giant dollhouse, and I started feeling dizzy, like everything had gotten very big and very small again.

That's when I saw the picture. It was in black and white, and of a little girl like me, not very dark and not very light, but somewhere in the middle. An Oreo cookie. She was standing next to a white man in a fancy suit and hat, his hand clamped around her shoulder as he stared into the camera. Her face was hard like a stone, because people never smiled in old pictures. I thought it must have been very sad in those times, and I raised my hand and told the tour guide so.

Some of the kids laughed at me, and Robbie just shook his head like I had embarrassed him.

The tour guide opened and closed his mouth again, and I could tell I'd caught him off-guard.

“Well,” he said. “That’s a very interesting point, actually. And that’s a very interesting picture. What was your name, dear?”

“Malaysia,” I said.

More kids started laughing and saying things, trying to making my name rhyme with dirty words, but they couldn’t, because my name was already dirty.

The tour guide started talking as if he couldn’t hear their words and whispers, about civil rights and special relationships that sometimes happened between slaves and their masters. Ms. Lemon started getting fidgety at those words, her mouth twitching around as she tried to keep her bright smile in place. I looked to Robbie, but he was staring at his shoelaces and wouldn’t meet my eye.

I looked back at the picture, at the little girl who was the same color as me and my sister, and finally that thing in my brain fully snapped, and I could feel my classmates taunting me, hear the way the tour guide man was moving his lips as if he were deaf, and feel Ms. Lemon’s smile filling my head until everything got so bright with white light I felt the sky was going to shatter.

Ms. Lemon had started breathing my name, all hushed and gentle, but it was too late.

I grabbed the picture off the wall and held it above my head. Everyone stopped and stared at me, finally silenced, before I threw it to the ground so hard it smashed into a million pieces.

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“Red velvet cake,” I said to the man in the rabbit suit. “You know, it’s just chocolate cake dyed red with cream cheese frosting, and yet everyone raves about it as if it’s some groundbreaking invention. Isn’t that absurd?”

He grunted and twisted his neck around, the lopsided ear flopping against his fur. It was getting cooler, the hot months melting into fall, and his other ear, the one that had stood straight up, was beginning to flop over as well. His suit was even grimmer than I'd seen it last.

"They pulled me out of summer school," I told him, feeling the hot tears in my eyes. "I don't care. I don't care about anything or anyone. I want to die. They want me to die too, but they won't say it, and I wish they would let me."

He cocked his rabbit head at me and wrung his fingers. They were also dirtier than the last time I'd seen them. I could feel the stares of people passing by his corner—our corner—but they didn't concern me. I was free now, and it would all be over soon.

I reached out for his callused hand with its yellowed fingernails, and he held mine, gripping it tightly, his palm warm to the touch against my own. We stood like that for a while, and the sky was gray and had no color, only emptiness, only words that meant nothing and faces that looked like little Oreos with hard faces, and lopsided brains and shadow corners, and plantations where Mamas drank too much wine and ate cod that tasted like burning pavement and blood.

I looked into the big plastic pink eyes of the man in the rabbit suit, and he nodded, and his grip on my hand grew tighter, and I thought this must be what love felt like, when you both had the same thought as another.