

Leigh Ann Cowan

What Little Girls Are Made Of

On nice days like this, she and I like to walk down to the creek and wade. In the summer the water is cool and shallow, and the snakes stick to the other side, where the exposed, straggling roots of trees make good nesting places and trap plastic bags. Old firework cartridges litter the banks, odd splashes of color amongst the natural hues. I like to pretend they're flowers. Side by side, we slowly pace up and down the small stretch of shallows, the sunlight warming our hair. We chat about what we've been up to in the weeks we haven't seen each other—she had gone to New York City for a paid internship, while I'd continued my education at the local college.

She talks mostly—about the people she's met, the food she's eaten, the theatres and plays, the parties, and things like that. I have nothing of that nature to add. My life has been pretty uneventful.

But I never expected anything else; I had stayed in our rural hometown, while she had moved on to bigger and better things, such as the theatre industry, where she works as an assistant casting director. While I live with my parents, she rents her own apartment, and parties with friends and meets famous people. Living large has never been a dream of mine, but she seems happy enough.

After a while I begin to tune her out. She has a habit of being extremely repetitive, and I can usually get away with nodding along when her voice rises in pitch. What is it about me that is fundamentally content with where I am? People have always teased me for being an old soul, a prude who won't drink or smoke, but I pride myself for these things. Perhaps I was born into the wrong era, the wrong culture—or I am exactly where I should be. I can't imagine living anywhen else.

“Lulu.”

“Hmm?”

I glance over at her, only to see that she is peering at something upstream. Following her gaze, I spot it, too. At first, I dismiss it—though it's illegal, it isn't uncommon for people to throw trash into the water from the bridge not far off. But as it floats closer, I realize that it isn't trash, not in the conventional sense of the word.

A plastic baby doll in a pink onesie bobs toward us. My friend bends over and scoops it up, brushing soaked synthetic hair out of its face.

“Gross, Claire,” I tease. “You don't know where it's been!”

“I used to have one of these named Juliet!” She ignores me, holding the doll out of reach as I move to playfully smack it out of her hand. “Some little girl must have dropped it.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Way out here? No. A dog must have gotten hold of it and gone for a swim.”

“Lulu, if it had been a dog it would have teeth marks and it'd be really dirty.” She turns the doll over to show its impeccable condition. “It looks brand-new.”

“Well, maybe—hold on.” I turn upstream, a sudden flash of light catching my attention. Something else is floating downstream. I wade out into the deeper water to intercept it, my knees getting soaked in the process, then return to Claire, drying the smooth plastic lid with my pant leg.

“What is it?”

“It’s a bead kit, I think,” I reply, rattling its contents.

Claire takes it, tucking the doll under one arm so she can open the box. Inside are rows of small compartments, each containing a different size, shape, or color of beads. A reel of plastic string and a how-to booklet are also included.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever used it,” I say. “It’s a miracle it’s not all wet.”

“This is so weird,” she answers. “Where are these coming from?”

I want to say someone is throwing junk off the bridge, but somehow it doesn’t feel right. What could possibly motivate someone to do such a thing?

We both look upstream and see yet another toy. I stoop to meet it as Claire closes up the beading kit and sets it on the bank with the doll. The item appears to be a tiny lunchbox at first glance, but upon opening, it reveals a plastic doll surrounded by accessories.

“A Polly Pocket!” Claire exclaims excitedly.

“A what?”

“A Polly Pocket. I’ve always wanted one of these.” She takes it, and I frown, vaguely recalling her having some sort of obsession over a Barbie back in elementary school. It too looks to be in perfect condition, with a miniature doll and colorful plastic accessories to dress her in.

A chill travels up my spine, and a niggling sense that something is wrong intensifies. In all my years of wading in the creek behind my house, nothing like this has ever happened. I resolve to walk farther upstream to investigate.

“Where are you going?” Claire demands.

I roll my jeans up over my knees, though they’re already wet, and pick up a palm-sized rock just in case. “To see who’s dropping stuff in the water. It’s pollution, and they shouldn’t be doing it.”

“They’re not hurting anybody.”

“What about the fish?”

“Who cares?” She shrugs, sitting down on a dry patch of rock with her feet still submerged in the water. Claire begins to sort through the various clothes that come with the Polly game. “Fish aren’t good for anything but food.”

I shake my head.

Just as I turn to go and give somebody a stern lecture, something bumps into my leg. I nearly scream, but register that it’s an acoustic guitar. It glides past me and scrapes up against the shallows next to Claire, who reaches out for it with a delighted cry.

“My dad used to have one just like this! It even has a peace sign sticker and everything.”

I gape. “You’re not the least bit curious? None of this stuff worries you? Not even an exact replica of your dad’s guitar, which, by the way, should be completely ruined?!”

“What do you mean?” She regards me for a moment. “What, are you jealous or something? Lulu, we can share this stuff.” Claire tips the instrument over, pouring a stream of water out of the body.

“Never mind,” I say curtly. I turn again, and immediately cry out, “Oh, for God’s sake!”

“A keyboard!” comes the excited squeal behind me. “Yes!”

“There’s no way it’ll work,” I chide her as she lunges for the sleek electric instrument. The Yamaha logo flashes. “It’s all waterlogged.”

“There’s only one way to find out. I’m taking it home with me.”

“Claire, you can’t be serious. Something really weird is going on.”

She lets out an aggravated sigh. “Why can’t you ever just accept anything? Every time something makes me happy, you have to poke holes in it!”

“I do not!” Indignation sparks a rise in pitch. “You just can’t use your brain for once in your life? Look at all this stuff! It makes no sense! It’s all in perfect condition after floating down the creek for who knows how long, and it’s all stuff that you like!”

“Yeah, so?”

“I just don’t want you getting your hopes up,” I say. “You always do this!”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“Sometimes good things can happen,” she retorts. “You’re just mad—no, you’re jealous that nothing like this ever happens to you!”

Before I can say something I’d regret, her gaze moves past me, and her eyes light up with awe. “Oh my god,” she breathes. “Look...!”

Still scowling, I crane my neck to glance over my shoulder. “A dress.”

“Not just any dress!” She sets her prizes aside and pushes herself to her bare feet. “It’s my dream wedding dress. It’s exactly how I’ve always pictured it. Hurry, get it!”

With an aggravated groan, I wade out and stretch for it. The cream-colored dress bobs in the middle of the creek, just out of my reach. I manage to snag the hem of it, and drag it closer to me. The skirts, full of water, make the material exceptionally heavy. I can't help but to be reminded of Ophelia's drowning.

"If you want it so much," I grunt, "why don't you come and help me? You know, since you're so independent now."

She doesn't deign to respond.

Without Claire, I get the dress as far as the shallows, but then can heave it no farther. It jerks to a halt—probably caught on a rock—and I lose my grip.

"Good enough," I say. "Listen, you can get the damn thing for yourself, and I'm gonna—Claire?"

She's no longer standing behind me. The things we've fished out of the creek are still lying on the shore, but they've changed. The doll is now mouldy and covered with sand, its hair tangled beyond fixing. The bead kit is lying open, its contents spilled amongst the rocks, the paper booklet mostly decayed. The Polly Pocket is in the same state, but Polly is nowhere to be seen. The body of the guitar is smashed, the neck bent at an awkward angle, and the strings twisted into a knot. The keyboard is no longer shiny and new—a fat spider has made its home there, and looks as though it has been living comfortably for a long time.

All this I take in at a glance.

I suddenly feel very cold, and it has nothing to do with the cloud that passes over the sun, casting a long shadow over the creek bank. Confusion gives way to numbing fear, though I don't know why.

"Claire?" My voice sounds hushed, barely audible over the cold sound of running water.

There is still no response, but something compels me to turn—back to the dress in the shallows.

And that's where I find Claire.

She is wearing the wedding dress, staring up at the sky as she floats on her back. Her hair and skirts wave serenely in the current. Claire's lips are blue, and her chest is still. I can only stare in horror as the water swells up and carries her away from me.