Once upon a time recently in...a land nearby

Gravity Hates the Cream Puff

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College of DuPage

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“Do you remember hormones?”
I swallowed a smile. “Being a teenager?”
“Yeah. Yeah, that. There’s one in the house now, you know. But I swear I was never like that. Angry all the time. No one wants to talk to him, much less request he pull his weight. ‘Hey Luke, could you—’ ‘No-oo! I’m tired! I’ve been at school all day! My life is harder than yours,’ “ she mimicked. “Honest to god, he has actually said that. ‘My life is harder than yours.’ So I said ‘No one can know how hard someone else’s life is.’ He just didn’t get it. He’s so stupid. He doesn’t know anything.”

“And of course she never does anything. Or moves. Just yells down the stairs at me. I don’t know why she thinks she has to yell. Lazy bitch, just come downstairs. How many steps is it? Thirteen, right? Thirteen steps down, and believe me, she could use the exercise,” Dana said, and flopped onto the couch. She looked at me upside-down over the arm and I couldn’t read her expression, but watched her face get red as blood rushed to her head.

“Maybe I’ll just start pretending I can’t hear her. Uncle Frank can’t hear, and everybody knows it. No one tries to yell for him.” She swung her legs down and righted herself. “Is that what it takes to get respect? Being defective?”

I shrugged, and that seemed enough encouragement for her to continue.

“I bet Uncle Frank hears just fine. It’s just his way of dealing with her. Everyone has a way of dealing with her except me.

“You really don’t like living there, do you?”

“Bet your ass,” she muttered, like there could be no disagreement on the fact.

“Why don’t you leave then?” I asked.

She picked at the tassels on a throw pillow. “Don’t think I haven’t thought about it. I have. But where would I go? I have no real money.”

“I thought you had a job.”

“I do. Part-time, anyway.”

“Well, evidently you’re employable. Why not just go to it full-time?”

She stared at me with an exasperated frown. “Can’t you see where that would lead? Where the road goes? The writing on the wall?”

I shrugged again, and she went on.

“Electric, water, phone, gas, rent, insurance, food,” she ticked them off on her fingers. “I’ll have to quit school to pay for it all. And don’t forget cable.”

“Cable?”
“I’ll have to get cable to help me forget what a miserable life I lead. Fast-forward twenty years, and I’m still in the same crummy apartment building, still in the same shitty job, still talking about someday, and maybe about my telly programs I have dates with every night. Another twenty years, world’s sucked me dry and cats have eaten my face off.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Cats? That’s a little melodramatic.”

“Is it?” she said. “Is it? I don’t think so. I’ve seen it happen. Maybe not the cat thing, but the rest of it. I see it every day at work. People who are dead inside, or dying.” She leaned back deep into the cushions and looked at a Van Gogh print on the wall.

“If I knew I had to keep working at the grocery for the rest of my life I’d die inside too. Just to protect myself, you know? If I let the creativity go, settle to the bottom like pond scum and just relax into the monotony of the working world, it wouldn’t be so bad. It wouldn’t be so good either. Sort of like limbo.” She trailed off and I could see her imagining it, her pale green eyes troubled and far away. I shifted in my seat and she came back to attention.

“They’re really shallow,” she said abruptly.

“Who?” I asked.

“The people at work. Reactionary. Stupid. Dull. But I don’t blame them, most of the time. It’s just sad. I don’t think I could knowingly choose that road. It’d be like...suicide for the soul. ‘Stead of chicken soup. God I hate those books. Emotionally manipulative pap for the masses.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“If I knew. If I knew.” A short, slightly bitter laugh. “Wouldn’t I be doing it?”

“Some people wouldn’t. Some people know what they need to do but never do it. They stick to what they know. They stick to what’s safe. The knowable path.”

“Who wants their whole life laid out for them like that?” she scoffed. “Where’s the fun? Where’s the adventure? Where’s that variety—is-the-spice-of-life attitude?” She grinned and tilted her hat to a jaunty angle.

“Do you trust yourself?” I said.

“What the hell kinda question is that?” she said, not unkindly. “Of course I do.” Silence. “I mean, I guess. What do you mean, anyway?”

“Well,” I said slowly. “If you left, really threw yourself on the fates for a turn, would you trust yourself not to let cats eat your face off?”

She smiled. “I was only kidding about that.”

“What I mean is, do you really see yourself letting it get so bad?” She didn’t answer right away. That was one of the things I liked about her. Ask a real question, get a real answer, or as much as she could give of one.

“I guess...the thing is, I could.” She frowned and then started up again defensively. “I mean, couldn’t anyone? It would be so easy. An object at rest tends to stay at rest. Naturally we all tend toward stillness,
toward decay and rot and sagging. Everything does. What a depressing thought. Even gravity is working against me.” She snatched off her hat and dropped it. We both stared it for a moment. It was bright red against the gray carpet.

“Well,” I said slowly, “If you know about it, you can’t really excuse yourself, can you?”

“Are you lecturing me? Because I hear how lazy I am from enough people already.”

“I don’t think you’re lazy. I think you’re strong.”

She made a noise of derision. “Oh, yeah. Real strong. Look how strong I am, whining at you, whining about my life. I will still be here in forty years, only minus a face. Thanks to the cats I will buy to keep me company.”

I shook my head. “I have to tell you, I really don’t see it happening.”

“Maybe I’ve just got a better imagination than you.”

I sighed. “This is getting us nowhere.”

She smiled slightly. “See, you’re not so dumb.”

I wanted to smile, but I knew I shouldn’t. So I stared at her, and finally her shoulders kind of slumped. She leaned toward me.

“Look. I know.”

Whatever it was, I knew she really did know. It was in her eyes.

“Real life...real life’s a fight. I know that. Sometimes...sometimes I want something to come along and make it easy. For everything to fall into place. Even though I would hate it and I know I would hate it because it’d be too easy...you don’t need to psycholyze me. I just need a slit.”

“A slit,” I said. She never said what I expected.

“God that came out wrong. Look, we’re all cream puffs. Have you ever made cream puffs?”

“No.”

“It’s a lot of work. It’s complicated. Boiling water, melted butter and you pour the flour in, and eventually this ball forms in the pan. You turn off the heat, but when you add the eggs one by one, you beat up the ball every time. Then you spoon-drop the mix onto a baking sheet. It’s gotta bake for a while. Then you peek in, turn the heat down, but it’s still baking. When you take it out of the oven, you cut a slit in the top.”

“Oh,” I said, confused. She could tell I was.

“For the steam. Or it gets soggy inside. I’m a cream puff.”

“A cream puff.”

She nodded.

“Then what happens?”

“Well, you scoop out the insides of the puff.”

“Ouch,” I said.

“It’s how the recipe goes,” she said, shrugging. “It’s a great recipe.”

“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“It is. But there’s cream at the end.”