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Look So Pretty

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Dunlap: Look So Pretty

Once upon a time there was a princess, a very beautiful and delicate princess to be sure.

Tina lay in her bed this particular Saturday morning thinking, when she heard herself saying aloud "Whatever made me wake up thinking about *The Princess and The Pea*?" Feeling foolish that she was speaking aloud with no one there, she looked around in embarrassment making sure no one had, in fact, heard her. She vowed to continue her wonderment in silence.

Could it be this new bedding, being thick and luxurious as it is, that caused my thoughts to focus on that particular fairy tale?

She seemed to answer her own question as she snuggled, rolled, and snuggled again deep into the softness of the luscious satin comforter her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. What an extravagance! He had always been so conservative, partly out of necessity, partly because it was just his nature. Everyone knew him as such. Many because of the 12 year old car he drove, still looking new and on its first set of tires. Surely the rubber would rot right off the wheels causing him an untimely demise! How she had hoped not. She loved him very much, and he was all she had now that her mother was gone. Even the clerks at the grocery took notice of his being conservative as they checked out the items he purchased; staples purchased in large economy sizes, getting the most for the dollar, while foods such as meats were bought only in just the right portions. What bothered Tina most was that he never bought butter. Oh, how she hated that cheap lard tasting margarine! She turned to gaze at the picture of her mother and father which she kept near her bed. It was a picture of happier times for all of them. As she turned she caught a glimpse of her long brunette curls contrasting against the creamy colored satin pillow shams like a dark chocolate sauce flowing down a mound of mocha ice cream and she forgot the picture, as once again, her thoughts turned to *The Princess and The Pea*. Giving an impish giggle, followed by one quick look of admonition to herself in the mirror because of her delight in her own beauty, she sprang to her knees on the bed and began folding, arranging, and stacking her bedding in such a way as to form her own pile of mattresses. Could she pass the test? What could she use as the pea? As she, clad in her favorite green pajamas, slid her tanned body to the floor, her toe caught in the folds of the comforter and brought the entire stack to a tangled heap on the carpet. Try as she might, she was not able to stop the avalanche of pillows, blankets, and comforters in time to save her own tower of luxury. Briefly she damned the slick satin sheets — the very thing for which she had longed, lo, these many years — blaming them for her tower's fall. Once again she was intent on searching for a pea, leaving the mass of luxury lying on the floor next to the nearly naked bed. She crossed the room and, looking back at the bed shivered as the picture of the bare slab at the mortuary came to mind. The bundle of bedding on the floor, reminded her of her mother as she lay dressed in fur coat, at the base of that cold hard slab where she had fallen, upon identifying Robert's body.

Why couldn't her mother have left her at home? What was the lesson she was to have learned as her mother screamed at her hysterically all the way to the morgue? What was she to have gained from staring at her brother's barely recognizable form? Would she ever forget? Could she ever forget? Only when she allowed herself to, the Dr. had said. What did he know!

Grabbing her hairbrush, she stroked her full curls with vengeance, but soon, as always, her anger subsided, and the brushing became graceful stroking.

Maybe a new hairstyle . . .

First, the hair behind the right ear with left eye slightly covered — seductive; next, a cluster of hair like a bun covering each ear — a Swedish school girl; then, every bit of the thick locks piled on top of her head except for wisps at the ears and nape of the neck — demure, yet provocative . . .

No, the family would never like it.

Again she admonished herself for feeling so good; should she not still be mourning her brother?

Gently her expression changed to one of adoration as she thought once again of her father. She was not able to feel the same warmth for her mother as she did for her father. Was it because her mother did not seem to feel it for her? She was sure her mother had felt really good about Robert, why not about Tina? Tina was secure in her father's love though. Was this one of those complexes Freud had written about? All of this was disturbing, but comfort came as she remembered a song her father had sung to her since she was a baby.

"Pretty baby, baby mine
look so pretty, look so fine
love your mother,
but say you're mine"

Again and again she sang as she searched the room for a pea.

A peek into the button basket was rewarded with only the slightest glimpse of a very tiny spider scurrying to hide from her scrutiny under the very button which was most like his color. How could these mindless creatures of nature do it? Was it luck? Do they knowingly have a sense of camouflage? Adaptation, wasn't that what her biology teacher would call it? Yes, she believed it was.

"Pretty baby, baby mine
look so pretty
look so fine
love your mother,
but say you're mine."

On to the jewel box. Such an array of rings, pins, bracelets, necklaces, and hair ornaments — gold, silver, ruby-red, emerald-green, diamond-like rhinestones, plastic, and glass — all of them tarnished or clouded over with age; all except one piece. The emerald green in the eyes of the furry brown cat pin still flashed brightly as it caught the light, just as her brother had said her eyes did when he got her angry or excited, which only caused them to flash all the more as he teased her about them. She lifted the pin from the case and fastened it to her pajama top. She had worn it only once. Maybe her brother hadn't noticed, or maybe he had. Would he have liked her to wear it more?

It's too late now. I'll never know. Why was I so selfish? I never even told him what a neat brother he really was!

As the tears spilled down her cheeks, she found herself ripping the pin from the box. It was a beautiful and delicate princess to be sure. *Published by Digital Commons @ GCU, 2012*

Now look what I've done! Why am I always such a brat?

Taking a deep breath she regained her composure and found solace in repeating her daddy's rhyme

"Pretty baby, baby mine
look so pretty
look so fine
love your mother,
but say you're mine."
mmmm . . . Still no pea.

Ah! The nut-bolt-screw-pin-knob-button-coin drawer. Surely she would find something there that could serve as a pea. However, the picture she found there crumpled, worn, and yellow with age, somehow stopped her search. Her mother was pretty and young then, delicate like the gardenia often seen in her full, dark hair. In those days Tina would not sleep without this picture. She so worshipped her mother and longed to be just like her.

What caused mom to become so harsh and unyielding? Was it the great difference between her and dad? Mom in her heels, silk, and fur; Dad in his same dark suit, white shirt, and narrow tie?

She thought about how her father would never remove his suit jacket in the presence of women and how her mother seemed quite the opposite, seldom showing such reserve. Maybe that was where it started, but it had to go deeper.

Whenever it all started, maybe before I was born, I know it got rapidly worse after Robert died . . . Every day becoming more and more the unresponsive, unfeeling mass of humanity she is today; refusing to acknowledge any part of the world. I wonder if she feels anything ever? What will it take to penetrate that wall she has built around herself — the one the Dr. calls a "catatonic state"?

Tina allowed herself to ponder a soap opera she had seen on TV about a man in such a state who was miraculously retrieved from that lonely hell by his "prodigal" daughter's touch. Could she ever create such a miracle? Whatever she had to give, she would gladly give to see her mother loving and full of life again.

A sudden rap on the door brought her to her senses, and above the silent singing in her mind

"Pretty baby, baby mine"
she heard "Tina,"
"Look so pretty
look so fine"

"Tina, it's time you got ready to leave."

"Love your mother"

"Remember, we're going to show you off to your Aunts and Uncles today . . ."

"but say you're mine."

"so look your best."

"Yes, Daddy."

Tina sighed, took one regretful look at her tower of luxury reduced to a heap on the floor, then, impulsively dove into the middle of the pile where she rolled and sprawled and giggled as she had done many times among the beautifully colored leaves the Autumn caused each year to carpet the ground below the oaks and maples.

"Tina, you'd better hurry. You haven't had a bite of breakfast yet, though you best not eat much as we'll soon be having lunch at Aunt Clara's."

"O.K. father, I'll be ready soon."

She didn't dare say "in just a minute" when, in fact, it would be much longer, lest she be subjected, once again to her father's lecture on choosing the words that convey her exact meaning.

A quick glance at the clock caused Tina to realize she would impress none of her family if she was late.

Father beams so when Family tells him what a nice girl I'm growing up to be. I don't want to give them any reason to criticize or cause him unhappiness.

The bed was once again perfectly made-up; every corner neatly turned, comforter straight, pillows fluffed, and accent pillows placed just so — a bed fit for any princess.

Princess. He called her that often, and she wondered if he remembered *The Princess and The Pea*. Did he ever think of their little song? Some day she would ask, but not now. He still hurt too often.

"Pretty baby, baby mine
Look so pretty
Look so fine
Love your mother,
but say you're mine."

She hummed the rhyme as she, without hesitation, selected the most "proper" dress from her closet. Her Aunts always approved of the navy blue. Though she knew heels and hose to be more appropriate for a girl her age, she wore knee socks and her "Mary Janes" as was expected of her. Not since the day of her brother's funeral had she worn anything springy. That day she had put on her pale green gaudy dress, which was his favorite. She would never forget her mother's tortured look as she threw her a black cardigan and screamed "Cover up with this! Don't you know it is your brother's funeral not your coming out party!"

"I'll never risk that again. Not ever. Better to play it safe."

After pulling her hair straight back and fastening it with a rubber band, she searched her hand bag for her glasses. She could see without them, but somehow felt less vulnerable when she wore them.

As she headed out the door she turned to pull it closed and caught an ever so quick flash of green in the mirror and for a brief instant she saw a princess reflected back at her . . . a very beautiful and delicate princess to be sure.