

Wanting

Sarah Bennett

WE DIDN'T WANT FOR ANYTHING. That's what our mother always said before telling us to leave her alone. Give her some peace and quiet. Over and over, she reminded us of this as we grew up. Her litany of reassurance. We weren't that bad off. There were worse. We should appreciate the fact that we'd never had to go without dinner. Like going without dinner was the worst that could happen to a kid.

Look at Robbie O'Dell, she'd say. That poor kid went without dinner one too many times and social services came and took him away. Just a wisp of a boy he was. So we ate up our Kraft Dinner and hot dogs and tried not to think about Robbie O'Dell, the kid who could disappear by turning sideways.

Sometimes we wanted to disappear. Oh, to be invisible when she was hollering for someone to run down to the Chinese store and get her a cigarette. Back when they sold singles for thirty cents a piece. We'd go down there with just enough for one or two but never enough for a bag of chips or a chocolate bar. We ate up Smarties and Snickers and Sweet Maries with our eyes, kept our hands balled up in our pockets while we imagined milk chocolate melting over our tongues, candy coating crushed between our teeth.

She always said we had enough to wear too. What with the bag of hand-me-downs that came every August from her cousin across town. We attacked that bag, all of us ripping through it, trying to find something that fit, something that didn't stand out too much, wouldn't make us a target. Anything at all that wouldn't inspire clever rhymes or random hallway violence at school. The bag held a plethora of material ripe for teasing. Jeans that were too tight or so loose they'd fall down. Sweaters with holes in the armpits. Leggings with baggy knees and seats. Colour combinations that should have stayed in the 70's.

We don't like to think about the sock situation. Never mind matching pairs. Every morning was a scramble as we each tried to find two that weren't stiff with dirt. Any two would do. And please, don't mention underwear. We mentioned it once to her and she shooed us away, called us ungrateful, yelled for another beer. We figured even Robbie O'Dell had clean underwear.

When we were old enough, we scattered like a handful of marbles tossed down a hill. We left her to make her own

way down to the Chinese store. Left her to make her own Kraft Dinner. We found couches and spare rooms and other little spaces we could sleep in when the parents of our friends took pity on us. There were burgers and roasts and pork chops for dinner. Salads and broccoli and cauliflower. There were even quiet packages of brand new socks that appeared on our pillows. There was a shopping trip to Sears for new bras and underwear. We grew taller and brushed out our hair and spoke louder and left her further and further behind. And in a collective moment of doubt, when we turned our shining heads back and wondered if we were being neglectful, we remembered that she didn't want for anything.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

This story upset me. It is about daughters and a mother who haven't bonded. The daughters, who grow up poor, do not blame society for their neglect, but their mother, who they see as cold and cruel and inconsiderate of their needs. I felt for the mother in ways that I don't know if the narrator was capable of. The narrator is triumphant because she decides to belong to a world outside of her narrow, small, impoverished family home. I think it upset me because I felt that I could never make the decision that the narrator makes at the end. And that made me wonder if it was because I was more moral or more weak. And that it troubled me so much is why I gave it the prize.

—Heather O'Neill