

Three Flash Fictions

Sarah Golden

A Cracked Case

My purple outside is cracked, worn, and slightly grimy. My two circular ends are broken as well; the tubing inside me snapped long ago, misshapen edges barely keeping their form. I fall flat when I am empty. The pink stitched letters on my side shout "GLAM," with the silver felt star following right behind. It's a wonder none of them have frayed or fallen off yet. I am grimy on the inside, too. I desperately could use a wash, but I don't think it's ever going to happen. My dark cloth insides are permanently stained with the ink and lead and graphite of the previous visitors I've housed.

How long has it been? Seven years at least, maybe eight? I can't remember anymore. I didn't think I would last this long. Owner got me at a church raffle, eyebrows raised as she was handed me from the prize box, wrapped up in plastic. I don't think she wanted me; she kept making eyes at the nice marker set on the prize table next to me. But, nevertheless, I went home with her that day, and that has made all the difference.

Did I mention I didn't think I'd make it this far? I could've sworn I was going to get thrown out after a year or two, replaced by some

cheap new sliding pencil box, like the purple one from the Dollar Tree that Owner had. He got covered in stickers, and I haven't seen him since Owner graduated. I hope he's well. There was the scare with the other few pencil bags, back in seventh grade, I think. There was one that was shaped like a shoe. He was quiet and, I feared, my replacement, but I soon realized I had nothing to worry about. Shoe Boy was inconvenient to open and only used for drawing pencils anyhow. I have always been the focused one, all for business. I always went in the front of the backpack, with the other important items, easily accessed.

Though I may seem prim and proper, and despite my years, I can have fun, too. Sometimes Owner would take me out and, with my cylindrical shape, pretend I was a medieval sword, a lightsaber, or a twirler's baton. I often flew high into the air or was tossed back and forth between hands. Sometimes I got dropped harshly on the floor, rattling against the ground, but I didn't mind too much. I'm surprisingly sturdy, and the pain of being dropped was nothing compared to the euphoria of sailing through the air. I could see so much, all the way up there, just for a second.

It's been since at least eighth grade that my zipper's been broken. Thank goodness it wasn't my zipper track; that would have made me a goner for sure. No, Owner kept fiddling with my zipper pull, bending it back and forth, idly, until it snapped clean in two. I wasn't really that surprised, to be honest. I've seen how she treats her stress balls, those poor souls. And yet, despite this, she keeps me in use, carefully pinching my half-a-zipper-pull until I am all the way closed.

I can hold at least 15 pens and pencils, and even a few more besides. It's been a while since she crammed me full of different writing utensils, not since high school I think. The bell would ring and Owner would frantically pack everything up, trying to jam my zipper closed, overstuffing me until I was sure I would tear a seam. I have seen Paper-Mates, Sharpies, and #2 Ticonderogas, BICs and Dollar-Tree highlighters. There's a few odd ones too. Currently I am occupied by an Elmer's glue-stick, the twin Pentel 0.7 lead refill packs, and the large Mapped eraser. Mr. Mapped has been around since the old days. I think he's been around as long as I have. He's still going strong, though he doesn't get much use these days. I guess Owner hasn't had as many big mistakes worth erasing.

There are quite a lot of pens in here, and the more I have to carry

them all, the more I wish they were somewhere else. Some of them have personalities that are entirely too colorful for my tastes. Owner has hoarded them since she was young, and she still does, honestly. I swear that every time she can get a free pen from a vendor booth or sees one on the ground she picks it up without a second thought. I think at least half of the pen-folk in here arrived from that sort of situation. Most of them don't mind, but some of them complain. For instance, PaperMate Write Bros 1.0 will not shut up. I grow increasingly annoyed at his attitude. He knows he's fancy and was just nabbed from the inside of a locker, abandoned. Owner rescued him from who-knows-what sort of fate. He thinks he is too good for my homely insides; he should be more grateful.

In addition, I currently home two Papermate mechanical pencils, and one lone wooden #2 pencil, the Target brand. I wish Owner didn't like the mechanical pencils quite as much. They're not as good conversation as the good old #2's. They jab at my insides with their sharp, exposed lead, poking and prodding, their plastic creaking and groaning. I wish she would throw them out. Just last week we lost Unsharpened #2, a remnant from Owner's high school standardized test-taking days. He had been with us for a while, at least two years, I think he had said. He was violently pulled out by one of Owner's friends and then whittled down with a pocketknife. So uncivilized! Such brutality! Just use a sharpener, it's less painful for everyone involved, or so I'm told. I don't care to say what happened next, I had to turn away, as he was tossed back and forth and mutilated. He hasn't come back and I don't think he will.

Eventually my time will come, just like Unsharpened #2. My zipper will finally break, or my casing will finally rupture, and everyone will come spilling out of me. I'll end up in the trash can, most likely. Too dirty, too broken, and too battered to possibly be of use to anyone else. Or maybe, the end will be more peaceful, bittersweet. Maybe Owner will carefully unpack me and put me in a donate pile, for some other purple-loving owner to discover. Or maybe one day I will simply be left behind on a table or desk, or slip out onto the floor. Then it will just be the pens, the pencils, whoever else is left, and me, out on our own again. No more Owner to pack us up neatly and slip us back onto the bookshelf for another day or two, or into a bag "just in case." We might never be used again, left to collect dust in a lost-and-found bin, or a dark and silent office space. Or, I suppose, it could be an exciting new

adventure—uncharted territory. At least I can hope that at the end, we will be together, and that will be enough for me.

Backyard Blues

No fences, no walls, and no privacy, but our backyard served its purpose. The space was small—is small—and feels even smaller each time I see it. Hours at a time we would spend out there, my brother and I. Countless warm summer evenings, or pleasant winter days. After the day's schoolwork was done, we would pull on our shoes and charge out the squeaky screen door like warriors ready to do battle once again, often against each other.

Nine. That's how many cracks were in our back sidewalk, separating it out into ten different slabs, traveling ever-so-slightly downhill from the back porch and finally leveling off at the garage. The sidewalk bisected the yard into two inequivalent sections: one for the small, unorganized garden, fenced in with chicken wire and tended with wishful thinking, barely battling back the Creeping Charlie, and the other side reserved for nothing but grass and the main event of the evening. This is where all the action happened, the south side of that concrete walkway.

"It's three strikes and then you're out. You got three chances and now it's my turn," my brother frowns, retrieving the slightly deflated plastic blue ball, dusty from many collisions with the ground.

"No, I didn't swing at the last two. Aunt Betsy said that if you don't swing it doesn't count," I scrunch my face up, gripping tighter onto the plastic kiddie-bat.

"That's not what she said! That doesn't make any sense!" He crosses his arms and plants his feet into the shaggy grass.

"Uh yes it does, I heard her say it herself when she was here. That's how real baseball is."

"Well this isn't real baseball, anyways. Real baseball doesn't have ghost players."

"Fine, if you don't like it, then you can play by yourself. I'm going inside," I snap as I toss the bat against the garage wall behind me. The hollow gray plastic clatters first against the yellow siding of the exterior wall, then softly lands in the brown dry grass at the base of the garage. Mom and Dad often called it the "concrete patch," since no grass ever seemed to grow quite right there.

I begin my processional march to the back porch, frown set in my

face and fists balled up. I almost make it to the back steps this time, when I hear the inevitable begging for me to stay coming from behind me.

This is how it always goes. We play, we senselessly squabble over mountains of nothing, and we make threats of abandonment. Almost always, the one that leaves is convinced to stay. We know that despite the endless possibilities to be found in the yard, they all seem to disappear the moment one of us goes back indoors without the other.

Labyrinth

You're in that once-familiar place again.

Only now, there is no holding hand. No looming figure, grasping the basket, guiding you through the metal and plastic labyrinth. Your thoughts seem to echo off of the high steel-beamed ceiling above you and bounce back around, across every surface and shelf back towards you again. You wish you weren't here, that you could just be over with it already. White knuckles across the plastic grip, an overwhelming sense of unease, uncertainty, unknowing. Wasn't it so much easier when you knew what you needed? Wasn't it so much easier when you didn't have to think for yourself? All you had to do was keep your hand on the cart, watch for others, hold the little slip of all-important lined paper. The paper was the ruler, a patriarch to a kingdom that was quickly toppled as soon as you left the store, items in hand. The paper, with its smiling loops and crosses, written in your mother's handwriting (but never your father's). Simple directions, you knew the place like the back of your hand. You've been here a million times.

But now, the landscape has changed. The labyrinth, redesigned, the higher shelves so much more available, tantalizingly close. The faces seem harsher and loom out around every shelf and corner. They can see you wandering. They know your directionless ambling, like the lost child that you are. There is no more monarch, no more clear-cut predetermined destiny. There is only you, the trembling phone in your grip, the shoddily crafted manifest typed out in unfeeling size 12 Arial font.

Gone are your days of fresh produce, the good organic cheeses and farm-fresh meats, and the ignorance of the slightest price raise. Now, the only thing to replace them are the mass-produced frozen hunks of things you might call food, barely effective morsels for anyone aside from the wallet-conscious, which you are. At least if you heat it up and close your eyes and pinch your nose, it's almost sort of maybe like how your mother used to make it for you.

Regardless, you wander. Constantly backtracking, surveying, worrying, choosing, picking up, putting back. *Bananas? No, too many? Not enough? What won't go bad? Do I already have this? Why is this so much?* You wonder if the employees can smell your fear. At least the one

that bags everything up for you doesn't seem to let on that she knows. She carefully arranges your uncertain choices, each one jumping from your mind into the bag. Plop.

The total is always too much but you're this far in, can't turn back now. So, you smile politely and claim your new-found treasures. Fool's gold, really. It seems a waste to spend so much on these temporary necessities that you will have to replace all over again in the next cycle. You make the dash back to safety, the bags jittering and jumping, the contents desperate to escape their thin plastic prison and kiss the concrete. Eventually everything is loaded up, safe, buckled up snug like a misbehaving child that would love nothing more than to tumble out of the seat at each quick turn.

You push the cart back to the herd from whence it came, and gaze upon the shallow sea of rubber-wheeled metal frames. A few of the plastic child carts dot the horizon, shaped like small vehicles of their own. We remember what it was like to ride along, a driver with no real wheel or guide. We remember what it was like to walk alongside, assisting with a few things, pointing out the better prices, feeling quite pleased with ourselves. Now we have no safety, no guardrail, no assurance from someone more experienced. We all must simply stumble along and hope that, with time, either the labyrinth will shrink or we will rise to fill the space.

Sarah Golden is a junior studying accountancy and human resources management. In the rare instance where she isn't running from one of her many weekly Dungeons & Dragons games to the next, she enjoys collecting uniquely shaped earrings, playing board games, and spoiling her roommate's cat.