



Booth

Volume 6 | Issue 5

Article 2

5-9-2014

Armor

Sarah Mollie Silberman

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Recommended Citation

Silberman, Sarah Mollie (2014) "Armor," *Booth*: Vol. 6: Iss. 5, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol6/iss5/2>

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Armor

Abstract

I decided to go as a knight to John Diefendorf's party. I cut up a piece of cardboard and spray-painted it silver for the shield. I made a lance out of cardboard paper towel rolls. "Very authentic," said my wife, Betsy. She surveyed the kitchen. "You really did a number in here." I had spread sheets of newspaper on the floor by the pantry, and various strips of cardboard were scattered on or around the newspaper.

Keywords

costume, marriage, relationships

Cover Page Footnote

"Armor" was originally published at *Booth*.



BOOTH



A JOURNAL

May 9, 2014

Armor

Fiction by Sarah Mollie Silberman

I decided to go as a knight to John Diefendorf's party. I cut up a piece of cardboard and spray-painted it silver for the shield. I made a lance out of cardboard paper towel rolls. "Very authentic," said my wife, Betsy. She surveyed the kitchen. "You really did a number in here." I had spread sheets of newspaper on the floor by the pantry, and various strips of cardboard were scattered on or around the newspaper.

"I'll clean it up."

"I find that unlikely."

"We could go to the party as a couple," I said. "Like, in complementary costumes."

"I could go as a horse," she said.

"Or a maiden."

"A maiden," she said. "What's that?"

"A maiden is a young unmarried woman."

"Ha," she said.

"What?"

"I know what a maiden is," she said. "I meant how would I dress like one."

I thought about it for a minute. “You would wear a long velvety dress. And you would wear your hair down, with maybe a garland.”

“A garland,” she said, amused. “I could pick dandelions from the backyard and tie them in knots.” I was almost positive that Betsy had never picked a single flower in her life. She was not the flower-picking type. She sighed and crossed her arms over her chest, which was much more in character. She did it with dispiriting frequency. To be fair, it had been a rough year. And she looked good when she crossed her arms like that—she looked good pretty much all the time. Strangers often complimented her skin, which was clear and looked a little flushed, like she had just come in from the cold. She turned to leave the room. “It’s a nice idea, Sam,” she said. It was her way of saying that she’d stick to her original costume.

*

At John Diefendorf’s party, Madeline was dressed as a head of romaine lettuce. Gary, in a red wig and gingham dress, was Lucille Ball. Nicholas was Rutherford B. Hayes. He was always someone from American history who was important enough to be mentioned in textbooks, but not so important that you knew what he looked like. Last year he was Francis Scott Key, and the year before that he was Florence Nightingale. Jason was in his banana costume from two years ago, but he had grown a moustache and added a sombrero. “I’m a plantain,” he said. He took a drink of tequila and extended the bottle, which I accepted.

“Is Betsy here?” he asked.

“Somewhere,” I said.

“I saw Alicia earlier, by the way,” he said. “She’s Ms. Pac-Man.”

“Ah,” I said. “Is Mr. Pac-Man here?”

“No.”

“Interesting.”

“Careful,” Jason said. “She looked hungry.”

I drank steadily for several hours. I accidentally dropped my shield out the window and threatened the Chinese food delivery guy with my lance. He may or may not

have been an actual Chinese food delivery guy, but the apartment smelled a lot like lo mein noodles and I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. I twice evaded Ms. Pac-Man: once by exiting the apartment under the guise of retrieving my shield, and once by darting into the bathroom, locking the door, and counting to five hundred. I had nothing against Alicia, but she flirted with me when she was bored or lonely, and I flirted back, and I was tired of it. I was tired.

I left the bathroom and shared a joint with a Secret Service agent in sunglasses and a wireless headset. He declined my requests to try on the headset. “Please?” I asked.

“It’s out of the question,” he said. He kept repeating that he never smoked marijuana.

“Me neither,” I said.

“It really clouds my judgment.”

“That must be difficult in your line of work.”

He removed his sunglasses and looked at my lance, the top of which was now bent at a ninety-degree angle. “And yours,” he said.

I never smoked pot because it made me feel sad and unfocused, like I was far enough away from my problems to see them clearly, but too far to do anything about them. I thought about Betsy. How when we first got together, she sent me short, funny love notes through our company’s inter-office mail system. They arrived in manila envelopes stamped “confidential.” It occurred to me that she had been right: I had never cleaned up the mess in the kitchen. I had simply left it to deal with later.

“Where’s Betsy?” I asked Jason. The last I had seen her, she was deep in conversation with a Volkswagen Beetle, but that was hours ago.

“I saw her a few minutes ago,” he said, “with Edward.”

I had never liked Edward. He claimed to have been an underwear model in his early twenties, forced into retirement after a spelunking accident. Now he was in the consulting business, which he talked about endlessly and referred to as the “biz.” Whenever he saw Betsy, he tried to recruit her into the biz. He said that she had killer instincts about people—that she could read them like a book—and it was true. It was one of her more disarming qualities.

“Why does he talk like a 1980s stockbroker?” I had asked Betsy, once. “I bet he owns every Michael Douglas movie on Blu-ray.” He was precisely the kind of asshole who would have waited in line for a Blu-ray player the first day it went on the market. “I bet he practices Michael Douglas lines in the bathroom mirror every morning.”

“Relax,” she said. “Edward’s harmless.”

Harmless! My beautiful, naïve, arm-crossing wife! I resolved to find Betsy—to rescue her from the dull, business-casual clutches of Edward. We would leave the party together and return to our home, where I would clean the kitchen and heat a frozen pizza according the “crisp” crust instructions, as she preferred. We would eat it together in bed: happy, slightly drunk, unconcerned about the crumbs on the sheets. My efforts would be heroic, if long overdue.

I started for the kitchen—Betsy insisted on fresh ice in her drinks, she would have nothing to do with half-melted cubes—and I moved with such brisk determination that I did not notice Ms. Pac-Man until she was directly in my path. She wore red boots and long black eyelashes, a red bow planted jauntily in her hair. She looked, as Jason had suggested, hungry. Famished. “There you are,” she said. She placed a hand on her round yellow hip, feigning annoyance. “I’ve been looking for you.”

And I was so exhilarated by the prospect of the new, worthy man I was going to become that I took Alicia’s face in my hands and kissed her square on the mouth. She tasted terrific, like candy-infused gin. Then I stepped around her, past Eddie Murphy circa his 1987 comedy special, and walked into the kitchen.

Betsy was on the counter, laughing with Madeline as Edward clinked ice into their glasses. She was dressed as Diane Keaton’s character in *Annie Hall*: bowler hat, black vest over a white shirt, one of my old neckties. On the floor in front of her was a tennis bag with an old Dunlop racket. In the movie *Annie Hall*, Diane Keaton and Woody Allen meet on a tennis court, fall in love, chase lobsters around the kitchen floor, move in together, break up, have meaningless sexual encounters with other people, get back together, plod along for a while, and then break up for good. In one scene, Diane Keaton and Woody Allen are in bed, and she is so detached from the goings-on that she floats out of her body and watches the whole thing from a chair. That scene filled me with dread. I had been bored and indifferent in bed before, but never with Betsy, and I hoped to God she felt the same. Anyway, it was one of her favorite movies.

I looked at my wife dressed as Diane Keaton, her legs swinging against the kitchen cabinets, her white shirt coming untucked. She looked so relaxed and happy that I was pretty sure she had exceeded her usual two-drink maximum. I could picture how she would toss the hat on the chair in our bedroom when we arrived home, how she would shrug out of her vest and shirt, leaving them in a heap on the floor. She must have sensed me in the doorway because she looked up, smiled at me, and winked. She winked! She could wink with the best of them, like you were the only two people in the room. And it was because of the wink that I decided to leave the kitchen, to hang around the party until Betsy decided it was time to go home. It sounds irrational, I know. All I can tell you is that I wanted to quit while I was ahead.

And I was just about to leave when I noticed Edward's costume: he wore black-rimmed glasses and a too-big sports coat, his hair swept messily across his forehead. He handed Betsy her drink and sputtered something about Groucho Marx. He was, I realized, Woody Allen. He was Woody Allen, and Betsy was Diane Keaton.

I stood there for a second, stunned. "Hey Edward," I called. "Nice costume."

He turned. "Hey man," he said. "Thanks."

"Really," I said. "The resemblance is striking." The resemblance was not at all striking. Edward was at least six-foot-one.

"Yeah," Edward said. "I'm a big fan."

"It's nice to see a collaborative effort, for once," I continued. "It must have involved a lot of coordination on your part."

He glanced at Betsy, whose mouth was drawn in a line. Madeline smoothed down the leaves of her romaine lettuce costume, intent on avoiding eye contact. "Pardon?" Edward said.

"Sam," Betsy said. She sounded more tired than anything. "It's a *coincidence*. You've heard of those, right?"

"No," I said. "What's that?"

"It's when something happens by chance."

“I know what a coincidence is,” I said. “*This*,” I said, gesturing at the two of them with my lance, “is a *spectacular* coincidence.”

“It is,” she said.

“You expect me to believe that?”

She looked at me with her clear eyes. Sometimes they looked grey, sometimes green. “Sam,” she said. There was no cruelty in her voice but there was no heat in it, either. “I expect you’ll believe what you want.”

In a different kind of story, Betsy would have leapt from the counter and followed me out of the kitchen, and we would have engaged in a heated but restorative fight on the front steps of John Diefendorf’s apartment in which she cried into my shoulder as I whispered into her hair, and we would make promises to each other and, for once, we would keep them. But that is not what happened. What happened is that I left the kitchen and she stayed there. I imagine that she loosened her necktie, drained her vodka tonic, and made one or more jokes at our expense.

I left the kitchen and started toward the front door. My feet sank heavily in the wall-to-wall carpet. The Secret Service agent was sprawled across the couch, asleep. Jason was huddled in the corner with an ethereal Asian girl dressed as a dinosaur, or maybe a lizard, in a skintight dress printed in iridescent green and silver scales. He nodded a somber farewell and I bowed my head in return. Then I felt a hand at my elbow, and I knew before I turned around that it was going to be Alicia. She had a firm grip, the kind of grip that hurts a little in a good way, as if she had already known that was all it would take.

Sarah Mollie Silberman holds an MFA from George Mason University and lives in Virginia. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Prism Review*, and *Silk Road Review*. She thinks that chivalry is probably dead, but maybe not.