

The Price of Doubt

“Faith keeps many doubts in her pay. If I could not doubt, I should not believe”

-Henry David Thoreau

Sugar stared into the shiny, golden folds of fabric like they were some sort of crystal ball, searching for answers past and future. She studied the changing sheen and hues of yellow and wondered. She wondered if people really are who they say they are...or if they really are who we think and believe they are? How much of who we know in another person is imagined and how much is real? She wondered. She speculated. She rationalized. And in the end, she doubted. The specter of doubt proved too heavy today. Where her mind had drawn a line, her gut crossed over. Knowledge bears the weight we'll allow it - much, little or none at all. Doubt is indifferent; it always weighs heavy. Doubt will drag you to places you never knew. It toys with the mind. It comes and goes -doubt does. Today, Sugar was absorbed in her doubt like she was in her fabrics.

Fabrics hung in large colorful clumps from the ceilings and covered nearly every inch of surface in Sugar's house. Fabrics in every imaginable shade and length giving the house a tent like ambiance. She had her preferences. Shiny objects - especially fabrics like silk, chiffon, taffeta and satin - anything that had a detectable sheen. Costume jewelry was a close second and adorned her cabinets and doors all of which were completely covered, the stones glued in paisley like patterns and carefully arranged according to their color. She loved her stones - glass ones, rhinestones and crystals. The shinier the stones, the more Sugar like them. She'd go for anything glossy as long as it could not cast her own reflection. Sugar didn't like to look at herself; she hated her skin. It was as thin as wrapping tissue and so pale, so white - hence her nickname. When she was born her grandmother said she looked like a tiny

lump of sugar, white and sweet. At 6 months those sentiments are endearing, loving, but by the time she was 16, it had become a source of embarrassment and shame. No mirrors, no glasses, nothing large enough – not even the back of a shiny spoon – to cast a reflection back was allowed in the her house. Her grandson Matty knew this. And he chose his items wisely when they'd go on their dumpster diving trips. Still, from where she stood, through the slivers of tangerine satin and cornflower taffeta that hung from the ceiling she could see him lying in the floor on his foam mattress twirling that large, faux diamond she'd asked him to leave behind. When he'd shown it to her, she'd seen her reflection in the large facet of the crown, still white as snow, ugly as ever. She was instantly horrified and Matty knew he'd made a huge mistake. At age 7, he was beyond his years. Sugar thought he was just as wise as some of her 60-year-old-something friends. And cuter, too. His skin was near olive and when they held hands, their arms hung like long piano keys, his short dark arm next to her long thin ivory one.

They held hands every Tuesday and Friday night on the way to the Goodwill drop-off site where they'd rummage through the overflow bins until they were tired or until some curious someone came along and lingered, watching the strange pair pick through piles as if searching for some lost object or erroneous donation. That's when they'd move on with the night's bounty sometimes large, sometimes small and if there was too much, Matty'd leave behind any board games he'd collected for himself to help Sugar carry her fabrics and jewelry. He had started his own collection of checkerboards.

“Why would anyone give away a perfectly good checkers game?” he'd asked Sugar last Friday night. “I mean look at this. This is brand new in the box!”

“I don't know, Matty.” Sugar half answered him the way some adults do when they don't want to be bothered by kids. She was too busy rummaging

through the cache of fabrics to notice the checkerboard. Matty slipped it into his pack and continued picking through the piles. Lamps littered the ground around the overflow dumpsters and a large pile of shoes formed a small mountain between Sugar's real estate and Matty's area. Matty slipped the checkerboard out of his pack. It was still encased in the clear plastic shrink-wrap. "They hadn't even opened it," he muttered to himself. "It's brand new." in an excited shout whisper. He couldn't tell exactly how shiny it was; the shrink-wrap prevented a fair assessment of this particular fact. Matty knew if it was *too* shiny, it'd never fly. He'd take it out when Sugar wasn't around and look, careful that she didn't see the board or her reflection either. In another nearby pile he spotted a large faux diamond.

"Whoa Sugar! Look at this!" He held it up proudly for her to see. "Isn't it beautiful?!"

From where she stood, she could see it was magnificent.

"Yes...very." She moved closer, slowly stepping around the piles of books and plastic chairs and a moving box filled with large flesh-tone bras and took it from his small dark hands. It was heavy and very beautiful probably an accidental giveaway. Surely. She twirled it with delight and then gasped in horror. The facets were just large enough for her to see her own face. She dropped in on the ground like a piece of junk.

"Leave it," she said sternly. For a moment her face went flush with anger but immediately returned to its snowy shade of white.

The walk home was quiet. Not like their normal walks full of chatter about their finds. Tonight Matty'd failed to protect Sugar from herself. He'd let her see her reflection. If he'd looked closer, he'd have known the facets were too large. The last time he'd chosen such an item, Sugar's reflection had made her sick and she'd fainted in a pile of purple chiffon. Tonight his pack felt

especially heavy with guilt. The winds blew in down the dirt road alongside the pineapple orchards. Sugar stopped.

“I’ll stay here and keep a watch out for field workers. You go and get us some o’ them pineapples. No green ones this time. Good ‘n ripe Matty.”

Matty disappeared over the barbwire fence into the long rows of spiky plants. He returned shortly, 3 large golden pineapples in hand. Any trace of tears now gone.

When they got home, Sugar sliced up the fresh pineapple while Matty rummaged through his pack, careful not to pull out the newest edition to his checkerboard collection. She handed him a bowl of bright yellow sweet chunks which he proceeded to eat until his tongue felt fuzzy.

“Not too much,” the words were empty. She looked around. How could she, in a place of excesses, utter these words with any real meaning? But she needed these things. She needed this and more. She loved her fabrics. She was a collector. Even her friends seemed to appreciate her dedication to her art. Yes. She was a collector.

Sugar watched the gold and green fabrics rustling in the breeze that came in from the window. Somewhere nearby a neighbor listed to Carol King sing *It’s Too Late* and Sugar hummed the tune...*something inside has died and I can’t hide and I just can’t fake it....* The sway of the fabrics seemed to agree with the song and faintly, Sugar could smell the cologne of the previous possessor. Chanel No. 5 she thought maybe. As the green-gold fabrics blew she thought of her eyes. Weren’t her eyes green-gold? She couldn’t remember now. Nor could she remember the rise of her brow or the shape of her lips. Those pictures were gone from her mind...gone even from the deep recesses they’d once been to some place beyond reach. She examined the parts of her she could see; she looked at her long white arms and thin, crumpled fingers. She looked at her feet encased in white sandals hard to tell where her skin ended

and the white leatherette straps began. Her thighs were large and her belly was round and soft under her cotton skirt. Still, what is in a face is *only in a face*. The window to a person's soul, right? It was odd not looking at the very thing that makes the looking possible. That fundamental part of her that drinks in the world's purpose; a face sees and smells and hears and speaks. She had forgotten her face. The thought sent a shiver and she dismissed it as quickly as it'd come. She simply could not.

Matty ate his pineapple and thought about his new checkerboard. He wanted to keep it but how could he? The board was almost mirror-like. He knew it would never go. He watched Sugar looking into the fabrics, moving them in the air, holding them to the light. What did she see if not her own reflection? Matty knew something bad had happened to Sugar. Is this why she was this way? Was she broken?

They rarely had guests but Matty had listened one night when a social worker came by to check on him. The social workers always came by to check.

"We can get you some counseling, Sugar. We can get you some help for free."

"I've had counseling, Sara, thank you. It didn't work then and won't work now. Things are better now. I've moved on." Her voice trailed a mix of lies and truth or something in between. A suffocating doubt filled the air between them. Doubt always found a way. Sugar would never find hers again.

"I understand, I do." The counselor looked around the room and wondered how one more piece of fabric or rhinestone could possibly fit.

"I don't think you can Ms. Sara." Not unless something sinister got hold of your soul, thought Sugar. A person can beg, borrow and steal from their gut, try and piece it all together but it don't matter. Doubt rules sovereign. Doubt had laid a choke hold on Sugar that day and never let go.

“Well I know this. I know that what you found that day can rot a person. No human should ever have to see a thing like that.”

Matty heard bits and pieces of their conversation, now in low whispers, barely audible. He hadn't known his mother. He hadn't known her, or his father or his grandfather either. All he knew was Sugar. That was his family. Sugar was what he had in this world; Sugar and her satin shards that hung from tacks in the ceiling and her rhinestones that covered kitchen counters and the bathroom floor. He thought of his checkerboard. He imagined how pretty and shiny it was. He twirled the faux diamond and wondered.

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