

The Smallest Actions

by Chavisa Woods

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He'd been gone three days when he returned. From where, they did not know. Maybe he didn't know either. They were still as he entered, his seven children settin' doll eyed on the living room floor. They did not rise to meet him. They did not jump and shout 'daddy daddy,' and slide down his legs, unrelenting, little drunken memories tugging at his pockets. They just kept settin', watching, as he steadied his bony hip against the sink and slowly undid the dusty blue buttons on his polyester work coat that probably hadn't seen work for weeks, at least not the kind of work that pays.

After laying the coat across the back of the chair, he made his way, not wavering now, to the wooden cabinet on the wall and opened the doors which squeaked as they spread. Those fourteen eyes followed him as he removed the cardboard box from the top shelf and began spreading the puzzle out on the kitchen table. Silently, as a man who has no more cause to continue than a run in a panty-hose creeping slowly up time's leg, he spread the pieces, the five thousand bits of windmill and river cut in strange cookie shapes, sobering shapes. These shapes he'd already placed once, a broken map of recollection, of some problem repeating itself in new order. The oldest boy rose from the floor to the couch where he sat like a guard over his siblings, and chewed his lip with readied anticipation.

There were five boys and two girls. The younger of the girls, the fat one, sucked her teddy's arm as she watched. The younger boys fidgeted and picked at their toenails. A moment before, two of them had been fighting over a broken toy truck whose pieces now littered the floor. The house smelled like cigarettes and diapers and somehow, honeysuckle. Somehow the house smelled of honeysuckle as well.

They did not know why, and maybe neither did he, he called her to the table, the second oldest, the nine year old.

She was a tough scrawny one, a pretty one who took care of what needed taking care of when she had to. But mostly she kept to playing games with boys in the cornfields that surrounded the house. When he called her name, her oldest brother, the boy on the couch, did not want her to go. He shook his head 'no' at her. He'd been expecting to hear his own name. He shook his head without meaning to. It was barely detectable, but he shook his head 'no' at her and then looked to the ground, hoping his father had not noticed. He hoped it would be different for her.

She hoped so too. Or, not 'hoped so,' but, in that moment it was as if she'd lost her memory, and she stood without hesitation. She stood up from the dolls, swelling with pride of being chosen by a never engaging father, by God, with a pride of being spoken to by an always silent voice. She stood and made her way trembling into the kitchen, where her father sat hunched over a worn jigsaw puzzle.

His beard hadn't been swiped for days and looked more like salt than pepper against his rough, tan skin. He leaned forward on two folded arms, creating for himself a mock hump-back. He turned his head slowly toward her. Their eyes met, and he seemed to come to life for her suddenly. He smiled, almost charming. She felt dizzy from excitement. It had been so long since her father smiled at her.

"Well, come on then. What are you waiting for?" he asked, almost playfully, and patted the chair beside him.

She seated herself, folding her slight legs under for height and smiled back at him. She beamed at him, beamed like a bare light bulb at him. For a moment they sat there like that, her beaming at him, and him squinting into her eyes, playfully, she thought. Then he turned his face from hers and shook his head quickly, as if he were just waking. He blinked a few times and proclaimed, "Alright then."

She inhaled deeply, preparing, and tried to steady her trembling breath that smelled like wet flour. Keeping his eyes fixed on the table, he pointed to an empty spot, unfilled spot, a spot that needed figuring, where windmill disappeared into the linoleum table top. He said to her, "Your job is to find this piece."

Pulling his attention completely away from her, he continued sifting with his hands through the massive pile of puzzle pieces, searching for his own missing piece that would fill a curving bit of wave from the river. She had been given her assignment, the corner of a windmill blade, and was now on her own.

Like a child, she had little patience, thinking it was just beginning, the long search, thinking there was time for trying, time for mistaking. He began mumbling to himself as he tried several bits of water against the wave. None of them worked. She traced her open space with her finger, memorizing its shape. She held a couple pieces up to the light and hummed happily.

In the living room some quiet fighting resumed between two younger boys. The fat girl and the oldest boy on the couch continued watching the kitchen where their sister and father sat like known characters in a new play, outlined by a plaster archway. The girl continued chewing her teddy-bear, and the boy his lip, but he sat back now, resting his shoulders on the cushion and kicking one foot in the air off his crossed knee.

Her father was becoming frustrated. She could feel it from him. She touched his arm. He mumbled something incredulous about the manufacturer. She set a piece aside and excused herself to get a glass of water. When she sat back down she gulped the water furiously, like she hadn't had a drink for days. It filled her stomach and swished around, cooling her, calming her. She asked her father if he wanted some water. He didn't want any water.

Touching him lightly on the arm again, she told him that she thought she'd found the piece. He stopped what he was doing and turned his attention back on her. She smiled a bit, nervously. Something in her stomach began to gurgle. It was his eyes that did that to her. They were more expectant than an adult's eyes should be, she thought, but not in words.

"Well, let's see it," he said, holding open his palm. She handed him a piece that looked right, but wasn't.

So he took the glass lamp from the counter and smashed it over her beaming head, and smashed it over her long brown hair, smashed it over her smiling cheeks, her once doll eyes, her skinny legs folded under for height. He smashed it. She did not think of her future, of never wanting to be chosen again, of never reaching steady again out to choose, of thirty years terror at the sight of a lamp. Nor did she even wonder over the missing piece as he thought she should, but held silence through her like a suffocating prayer, while blood from her head leaked onto the kitchen floor. The head does the most bleeding. She knew that. Everyone knew that. The wound would heal alright. Her fat sister began howling and twisting the snotty bear. The others quickly found a place against the wall. One ran out.

Her older brother stood from the couch, shaking with anger, and balled his fists. All the words in his head would not come out, but over and over again he repeated, "I'm goanna kill you. I'm never goanna be you and I'm goanna kill you," as his father exited, quietly as he had entered, through the torn screen door, for three more days. To where, they did not know.

ABOUT CHAVISA WOODS

Chavisa Woods was born and raised in southern Illinois. Much of her literary work reflects the circumstances facing working class women in rural, fundamentalist America. Her work (Short stories, essays, and fiction) has been published nationally and internationally, including such renowned publications as: Matador, Prima Materia, Cake Poetry, The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, and others. Her first full-length book of fiction, Love Does Not Make me Gentle or Kind, was released in January 2008 by Fly by Night Press, receiving outstanding reviews in the Brooklyn Rail and Go Magazine and others. Woods has been featured on WBAI's Cat Radio Cafe, as well as the Dixon Place Theater Hot Festival, WOW Theater, the Fresh Fruit Festival, The New York Vision Festival, the Howl Festival and many others. She is currently active in several literary and performance programs in and around NYC, and collaborating with a contemporary artist, combining video / animation and text from her most recent book.