

## When I Grow Up

By Hailey Soles-Smith

The darkness of the bedroom is broken by the small glow of light I have gathered under our sheet. It's a storm candle, the thick, short, fat, pale, yellow kind. It made its way into my pocket earlier that day while my mother was looking for something cheap to satiate my brothers and fill a void. A void she had little care for acknowledging. My mother shopped in this way often, over-filling her basket in dollar stores with inexpensive knick-knacks she could give to my brothers to appease their busy minds and busier fingers. She didn't consider that a loaf of bread, some butter and hundreds of thousands slapped together and cut into triangles would have filled their tummies and their souls, while still giving her that which she coveted, an afternoon's peace. But my mother knows little of children's needs. She is better versed in the wants of adult men.

The candle flickers and licks the edge of my sheets creating a small, black cloud-stain. I stare at it for a moment, before sitting up and placing the candle in my lap using my head to tent the sheet. I read line after line of a novel I don't understand—a story about a woman and a handsome man's desire. He wants to own her, for her to be his. He leans into her and whispers, "You are mine." I press the pages against my flat



child's body and sigh. *Ab, I want to be a writer.* Then I notice the footsteps in the hall and wince as hot candle wax burns my skin and then hardens. In my haste to feign sleep by laying down I have spilled the hot liquid all over the bed I share with my little sister.

Our mother's too soft voice comes through the closed door, so hushed I feel like I have imagined it. "Baby girl, you better not be reading that filth, or your mind will rot before you are old enough to know what for." I want to argue with

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her, to explain that words written so artfully, words that weave a new world so different from this one—where women are wanted, needed, loved and cared for—could never ever rot my mind. How could these Mills & Boon novels I had squirreled away from my grandmother’s toilet be anything but magical lands of “not here”? I seethe that she thinks of my mind but doesn’t seem to care about my body. I had taught myself to read, the same way I taught myself so many other skills, by trial, pain, and error. I say none of this to my mother. I know better than to answer. I shift myself into a more comfortable position, thankful I did not spill any of the candle on my sleeping sister. She reaches out for me as I settle in next to her on our tiny single mattress on the floor. I wrap her up and fold her into me, whispering the story of a princess and a far-away castle into her ear. I weave tales of knights who fight dragons, of men who valiantly save women, daddies who protect their daughters and other mythical tales, until I, too, succumb to the land of nod.

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Stories like this one roil beneath my skin, some are memoirs and some are not, but they share the overwhelming feeling that I am supposed to be, meant to be, and long to be a writer. I am a storyteller; I have been from the moment I was

old enough to form the words of images. My imagination has conjured from the darkness fantastical beasts, tales of heroines and damsels in distress, and so much more. My childhood, which provided little in the way of formal education, was abundant in teaching me how to dissociate and live in the world of fancy. I have had one dream for as long as I can remember: I want to be a writer. I have been asked many times what is stopping me. Why don’t I just put pen to paper, or fingers to keyboard and write? My answer is always that I lack the education. I don’t want to be just a *writer*, I want to be an *author*. I want to pull readers in, make them feel my world, live in my experiences. I lived a childhood dissociated from reality, creating worlds to live in so different from my own so that I never ever had to feel alone. This is not the kind of writer I want to be—I am no longer interested in make-believe. I want to spend my life in the real world. I want to write and to ask big questions about life-writing. I want to understand my obligations to readers and the ethics of telling truthful but sometimes harmful stories. So, six years ago I turned to my husband with the look of loneliness and despair on my face and said, *this is not the life I wanted*.

—*Work-wise*, I clarified when he looked at me like I had just slapped him in the face with a half-alive fish. Once he had sufficiently recovered

from the initial shock of my proclamation he did what he does best—supported me. He supported me in the process of enrolling in a Bachelors degree in English and, four years later, he supported me when I began an Honours project. Successfully graduated and sitting in my home office, I am now about to embark on a Master's degree in Life-Writing. I can finally see the reality of my dreams laid out before me and I am . . . scared. Scared because I am unsure if I will be any good at this. Scared because I have lived with the constraints of dyslexia diagnoses, and with my mixed bag of acronyms—including PTSD and ADHD. Scared because I'd like to think that I am a good writer. Scared of the web that is the university system. Scared I am moving too far away from my dream—away from the possibility of sharing my life with others. Scared that I have tricked them all, and ended up here by default. I tell myself that I must either cunning or witty to have made it this far. That these are the traits of a story-teller. I tell myself that my dream is a simple one, to be a writer; and I know it is achievable, because I already am.

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