

“Small Secrets”
by Sara Reish Desmond

Adult Fiction First Place

It was the shoes Howard found most fascinating. The variety, the spectrum of styles and materials; sling back, open toe, wedge, bootie. Suede, patent, linen, brocade. His mother was a size six narrow devoted to keeping the boxes and organizing by season. As a child, he'd played in her closet, stepping into a pair of gold lamé mules, putting on her silk robe and leaving it beltless to trail behind him like a waterfall. His mother had emptied a dresser drawer and had filled it with discarded rings, missing clip-ons, broken chains, and antique pins. Upon returning from school, Howard raced to the drawer, slipped a ring over a chubby knuckle, draped chains and beads over his school uniform, played queen. Occasionally, when he was summoned to the dinner table, he forgot to remove a necklace, an earring, and his mother would discreetly gesture so that Howard would quickly remove it before Mr. Diller noticed.

When Howard's brother, Pat, started off to school, Howard was left at home with his mother who found a kind of forlorn friendship in him— a friendship which sated her rescuing instinct and perhaps offered her temporary redemption from her own self-loathing. In her bedroom, she would create a canopy of clean white sheets still warm out of the dryer (*They can't have wrinkles, can they,*

Howard. No, sir. Not for us), tie one to the canopied bed, another to the ceiling fan until the room was ensconced in cotton sheets caught in the breeze of open windows. She would put on a record, glide through the room hung with sails, keeping her neck long and her chin up until the needle crackled through the dust and picked up the first track. She would take him by the hands, dance him around, holding him to her bosom. And sometimes she'd take him by the hands and do the Jitterbug. Howard might've learned his steps from her, might've learned just how to jive right on the balls of his feet and pop his heels and allow his legs to go akimbo. They would collapse on

the bed and she would tickle him to tears until he would try on the British accent he'd learned because they spent other afternoons in the little theater downtown watching foreign films and he'd say in a protracted, but nevertheless convincing accent, "Please, mummy. Please." She would relent and laugh proudly at her happy boy. And occasionally, when she'd already gotten into the brandy and it was winter and it would take a wee bit longer for Howard's brother or father to arrive home in the evening, she might place a forearm beneath his knees and another behind his head and scoop him up like a baby, too big to be carried this way, and place him on the bench of the vanity. She would continue the ruse, crafting the words in her own British accent, "M'lady, how can I be of service?" And Howard, looking down at the silver tray of curious lady-things (a silver plated brush and comb and a hand-held mirror), was most excited by the peculiars: an eyelash curler, tweezers, an assortment of pots and cremes. He would freeze. He could not ask. But his mother knew. She sensed that his fascination ran deeper than these afternoons. And so his mother would start in with the big puff of powder that smelled like lilacs (a smell he's never stopped missing) and ghost his face with it. She might twist the tube of lipstick, too, dab a red dot on his lower lip to bring some color back to his face. He adored this ritual and felt closer to his mother than ever before, the two of them with their make-up and their small secrets, his mother with her brandy.

Across the street from the Dillers lived Lorne and Sheila Butterman. Lorne worked long days as an attorney at the firm his wife, Sheila, had established, twentieth century woman that she was. On weekday mornings, when Sheila put on a freshly dry-cleaned suit and backed her Mercedes out of the driveway, she waved to the mothers at the bus stop, so coiffed at this early hour, all of them looking well-rested as they waited with their children who were immaculately dressed, their lunches tucked in with notes of encouragement.

After several years of indecision about starting a family and occasional, apathetic sex,

Lorne and Sheila bore their only child, Laurel Marie Butterman. She had come too early, her veins spider-webbing beneath the surface of her pale skin in a way that left Sheila uneasy about being alone with it. After several weeks, she found herself bored with the baby, but enlivened by a fresh curiosity about the domestic life of those mothers at the bus stop. To Sheila Butterman, there was both intrigue and menace about this cadre of women, so polished in their daily routines—hoisting a younger sibling onto a hip, pushing strollers, bringing out lemonade for their children to sell.

For the first time since her childhood, in the absence of work and its subsequent ambition, Sheila Butterman needed a friend. So when Lorraine Diller brought over a silver rattle and bonnet for the infant, Sheila invited her in, let her hold the baby, accepted Lorraine Diller's invitation to learn bridge at the Diller's on Wednesday afternoons.

Sheila figured that if the mothers were coiffed at the bus stop, they surely dressed for bridge. Sheila Butterman, owning no formal attire that wouldn't hold up in court, put on a charcoal grey suit, tucked her infant into her carrier and walked across the street to join Lorraine Diller's bridge group on a Wednesday afternoon. With Patrick and Howard off to school, Lorraine could rely on bridge to consume great swaths of afternoon and provide an excuse to offer chardonnay and cheese crackers in place of lunch. Lorraine had been hopeful and perhaps cunning about Sheila's company, knowing she'd be disadvantaged for months on account of the learning curve.

Among the other women, Sheila Butterman, *the attorney*, was an anomaly: a career woman who came to play business, her hair unstylish but neat, her face unpainted, refusing the wine the other women indulged in. Sheila brought the baby, heated her glass bottles in a pan on the stove, learned quickly and counted cards, standing on no ceremony when she took their quarters hand after hand. She made no friends in these women, save an increased affinity for Lorraine who'd invited her in, allowed her a place at the table and tolerated her relentless victory. Sheila was merely passing time, staving off the boredom that accompanied infant care, though she looked forward to Wednesday afternoons (even weeks after others had soured on her company).

After three months, she announced her gratitude to the assembly of ladies, no longer intriguing nor menacing, and was delighted to return to her career because the baby was finally old enough to be left in capable hands. This was the extent of Sheila Butterman's contact with the Dillers and their sons (whom she'd met only once) until baby Laurel was grown enough to have strong opinions and interests.

Laurel Butterman grew into a precocious young girl, lightning beneath the skin where veins used to be. She asked risky questions of her nanny who never betrayed her with deceit nor shared her curiosities with the Buttermans even when, perhaps, she should have. Lorne and Sheila did not participate deeply in the rearing of Laurel and were, therefore, content with their enterprise—a daughter who, they believed, had her mother's sense of determination and her father's allegiance to the rules.

By this time, Lorraine Diller had filed for divorce, no longer willing to endure Frank's extramarital interests, and she was looking for opportunities for her young teenage boys to demonstrate their worth in the world, considering Lorraine was doubting the nature of Frank's. Laurel was just beginning sixth grade and Howard Diller, an awkward boy with pale skin and thin bones, was of perfect age to make sure that Laurel arrived home safely from school and had company until her parents returned from work. Howard wore two keys around his neck—one to his own house and one to the Buttermans who paid him handsomely to turn on the TV and eat Ritz crackers by the sleeve. It was likely that the Buttermans took pity on Lorraine and the boys and furthermore suspected that Howard was an atypical child, the subject of ridicule at school, which explains why very little was expected of him in the hours before they returned home to find no homework completed, Laurel elaborately coiffed and painted like a French doll. He was talented, Sheila would give him that—Laurel's eyes expertly transformed into those of a mannequin; eyelashes curled, lids shadowed in gray, lips red and glossy. And, of course, there was no harm in a little imaginative play.

What the Buttermans didn't know was that Howard also slipped into Sheila's nylons and suit

jackets, her pencil skirts and blouses. Howard questioned Laurel about her mother's dim wardrobe— why she didn't own anything but dull colored suits and chunky heeled pumps, why and how she could be a self-respecting woman without a few articles to remind her of her success. They had laughed about that— how little her mother needed, how boring it was to play in a closet that offered no fantasy. Howard and Laurel developed a certain space for role play, Howard acting as Laurel's mother, leveling a court decision in which Laurel was found guilty, a sentence issued for kissing a boy, for keeping a dirty room, for failing a test. And sometimes, without Laurel knowing, he slipped into the Butterman's bed. For Laurel, Howard became a proxy for affection while her parents only offered her a warped kind of love, distant and perfunctory. As an adult, Laurel would call this "proximal emotional neglect," never speaking of what it had done to the woman who had been developing inside her.

It wasn't until Howard was in his late twenties that he started building a collection of shoes and scarves and dresses (from the Macy's sales and the Sears, Roebuck clearance area). Self-respecting ladies own appropriate shoes and accessories. And, if his mother had been more robust, he would've tried to fit into her blouses and her evening dresses on Sunday evenings after they'd both had too much sherry to drink and his mother thought it all a curious but acceptable interest and used it as an opportunity to inquire about his personal life. Since, at this time, Howard was openly whatever-he-was, he took advantage of his mother's bounty of jewels and scarves and hats still in boxes, some from a milliner who made custom things for her out on the main-line— his favorite, a pheasant pill box that had feathers laid so precisely it appeared a cock was roosting on his head.

And now here he is, so thin that the armature of his body beneath the red dress shows his angles; the triangular shape of his torso twisting abstractly in a way Laurel imagines he's learned from watching the runway. His shoes are noticeably large but still elegant, a peep toe patent pump with a thin ankle strap. His wig is passable. Blonde. His nails have been manicured. His friend,

who has chosen no wig but elaborate make-up is trailing behind in a purple miniskirt and flouncy top. Howard's legs look incredible, lean and muscular and somehow offensive to Laurel, too:

It's the confident swagger, his lips parted and his jawline rudely angular when she remembers that she had let Howard touch her. Kind of. It had happened only once. She had been reading for school—a book about a boy who takes a deer as a pet and whose mother orders him to shoot it—and she'd needed some affirmation that the world was not quite as cruel as the story suggested, when she found Howard in her parents bed, startled at having been discovered. She had crawled up beside him, her eyes flooding with tears and lay her head on his shoulder. He turned to her and held her and when she'd calmed he climbed on top of her, placed his knees in the mattress on either side of Laurel's hips. She had not known the words to stop it. In a different home, in a different town, at a different time, with parents who believed in educating their children about the the necessity of boundaries, Laurel might've said *No* or *I'll have to tell someone about this*. But instead she said *You will be a really beautiful woman* and she let Howard Diller, brown hair in shags at his brow, mauve matte lips (her mother's only color), a slender hand unbuttoning the white silk blouse her wore, make the face of a lover in a distant fantasy. She felt him hard against her pelvis as she lay still, afraid and curious. All at once, he was danger and confusion; primal, forsaken. He fingered the soft flesh at his sternum, cast his head to the side. She remembered only his expression in profile, those teeth pronounced and sparkling, an abandonment that frightened her for the will it possessed. He shuddered and gasped, put his fingers to his lips to muffle the surprise sound of exhaustion and shame; a sound that, once Laurel knew sex, would change the way she thought of it, would make her forever silent in ecstasy. He rolled off of her, breathing hard, his lipstick smudged with agitation. Howard did not come to pick up Laurel from school for the rest of the week. She walked herself home, scanning the sidewalks for Howard, looking for his slight figure in the pizza and coffee shops she passed on the way. Howard knocked on the door that Saturday morning, never stepping inside, telling Sheila Butterman (even as she called for Laurel *Laurel, honey, Howard's here*) that he'd gotten an apprenticeship with a theater

company in the city and would no longer be available to care for Laurel after school. Sheila congratulated Howard (*Oh, that's great news, Howard, you're clearly so talented!*) and bid him good luck with his new endeavor. The Buttermans went on to think only occasionally of the Dillers, when they bumped into Lorraine at the grocery store or into Patrick when he came to visit his mother. But it was Howard who seemed to disappear entirely. And it was Laurel who'd not remembered, until now, how Howard Diller had ushered in so many twelve year old curiosities and made them plain, sometimes made them beautiful.

The neighbors have come to gawk at their windows, children and adults and cats and dogs alike, all come to see the spectacle. Sheila puts a hand on Laurel's shoulder as she looks out the window, too.

"Sunday Evening Drag Parade," her mother says.

"Look at his legs. Those muscles," Laurel replies.

"That's an extra short skirt." Her mother raises an eyebrow.

"How long have they been doing this?" Laurel asks. She is home from college where the habits she is developing are reactive, where she allows questions to crack open the sensibilities of a small suburban town.

"Oh, a few years."

"You always knew." Laurel says it as both a statement and a question.

"No. I don't think I did. You did, though, right?" Sheila smooths the bedspread, revising her memory. "He was always different."

"Different than what?"

"The rest of us." Her mother is smirking. Her treatment isn't ridicule exactly, though even at twenty, Laurel is challenged to parse out the difference.

"Come away from the window. You shouldn't gawk." But Laurel senses that Howard and his friend are hoping for an audience. Her mother leaves the room and calls behind her, "Come

down for dinner.”

“I’m coming,” Laurel says, still staring out the window. She inspects Howard’s chest, the way he moves confidently even without breasts, the red silk pinned primly at his sternum. He is moving the flowing hem of his dress from side to side with two hands like a can-can dancer, the fabric jumping up above his knees. She puts her hand on the glass and Howard turns, flashing her that sparkling smile she remembers. He tips back his head, brings his shoulder coyly beneath his jawline and waves just the tips of his fingers like a worthy performer. His eyes, unapologetic, say something she cannot hear. Laurel’s breath condenses on the window glass, and in it she traces a heart.

Sara Reish Desmond grew up in rural Pennsylvania, graduated from Kenyon College and received her MFA in Fiction from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her short stories have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, *Waterstone Review* and elsewhere while her collection of fiction entitled *What We Might Become* will be published next year. She works for a non-profit arts center and likes to cook, garden and make art.