

# The Comforts of a Robe

*by* Angela Kubinec

Andrea is a hobby writer. That means that she shares her musings and observations online with a small group of people, and they count on each other to read and comment on one another's work. They consider themselves to be open-minded, well educated, respectful, thoughtful, and they maintain their boundaries nicely, she thinks. She doesn't truly know what the others do, with respect to boundaries. When she first started, it was firmly suggested that she not initiate personal dialogues with any of them for many reasons, and thus far she has been compliant.

This morning she arrives, as she regularly does, at the wellness/ cardiac rehab center at the local hospital. There are the faces there each day that she can easily recognize and has come to rely upon. For example, there is Pete, who is so old that his doctor no longer removes his basal cell lesions. Then there are the ladies on the recumbent bikes, concentrating on the peddles, oxygen bottles resting in little carts. Earlier, in the parking lot, she pulled in next to a youngish woman standing beside her worn sub-compact, fighting mysteriously with several boxes of bottled water. The woman is wearing a heather knit dress and her hair is cut with all those feathery wisps around her face. The sun is bright, and Andrea can see that the woman's skin is not smooth. The tiny bumps on her face make Andrea ache to help her, but thanks to her improving ability to control her impulses, she does not offer. Offering to help her would mean so much more to Andrea than a simple gesture of kindness. She is learning to accept her seeming, but necessary, lack of consideration as a strangely positive trait.

Andrea feels a bit proud for resisting her urge to assist this thin and overwhelmed woman, until she remembers that she has gained eight pounds in the last six weeks as a result of the medication she takes, which is specifically designed to temper the intensity of her inappropriate impulses and to curb her obsessions. Being properly tempered, but apparently not well curbed, she ambles over the

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Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/angela-kubinec/the-comforts-of-a-robe>»*

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asphalt to her destination, Treadmill Central, at the far side of the hospital lobby. Woman With Water Bottles has taken up a little spot in the back of her brain, the woman's hair tickling her eyes in the breeze.

All there is for her to do today is to push the "Calorie" selection, enter the number of calories she wishes to convert to sweat, and her ever-increasing weight. Then she presses "Quick Start" and walks. Reading while walking is not an option, since no one there understands what a book rest (holder, rack, stand, thing-to-hold-a-book-while-you-walk) is. But there are two large television screens hanging high on the wall, so she is now able to recite all the procedures for appearing on *The Price Is Right*. While she is walking, Andrea hears the treadmill next to her running, although no one is on it. Soon it beeps. Some invisible runner next door to her may have completed his route. No one behind the desk looks up. None of her other treadmill fellows show a reaction to this beep, either. This is a clue to her to keep quiet about her little auditory observation - a skill she mastered some time ago. She walks on. Her ghost of a walker on the empty treadmill continues to stroll beside her, and when his beeper sounds a second time, Andrea has to push away a very strong urge to ask whether or not anyone else heard that noise. Their inaction makes it obvious that they did not hear the beep, and it is equally obvious to her that she should not have heard it, either. Instead of questioning the employees, she keeps pace with her unwelcome secret friend. Feeling some unease, she watches the display by the keypad on her treadmill. Its green light gently strobes toward her goal of one-hundred percent. Did Ghost Walker reach one-hundred percent just before she got there? Will they soon be equally invisible?

She holds the tedium of *The Price Is Right* responsible, by way of allowing her mind to wander, for her growing obsession with Woman With Water Bottles, which has been itching itself into the forefront of Andrea's mind in spite of her treadmill anxiety. In her vivid real estate mind, Andrea has given the woman a sweet little apartment, one with extraordinarily tall windows and worn plaster walls. It is

painted in a semi-gloss white, and old-fashioned paper shades cover the windows. It always feels a little cold there, and Andrea has wrapped the woman in a fluffy pink terrycloth bathrobe that is about two sizes too big. Looking adorable, and completely unselfconscious of her acne scars, the woman rolls the collar up to her ears. She has slippers, too, but Andrea is unsure of the style and color. Whenever she visits the apartment, the two of them sit at a round table, and then snuggle in bed, because Andrea has not given the woman any other furniture. Light shines through from the street at night, and it is never completely dark. Since it is too bright, Andrea cannot sleep there, but the woman understands. Andrea does not know where the woman goes when she leaves, but she is certain the woman is faithful. Andrea hopes to tell the woman all this if she needs more bottle-help, but when she exits the wellness center, the woman and her tired car have vanished.

When she gets home, she is irritated about having to call her fellow garden club members to remind them of the date and time for an upcoming meeting. She cannot call them in the order they appear on her list, or something bad will happen to her - but she is not sure what. There are two names on the list that make her hands shake, because the letters that spell those names are angry at her. One name she dislikes because it has an unusual collection of consonants that make her suspect their owner of being a Russian spy. After this task, exhausted, she tries to nap, but the fucking dog barks every time she enters dreamland, where all her illogical thinking is relaxed and acceptable. Luckily, she has On Demand cable television programming, and with an obscure Kate Winslet film murmuring in the background, Andrea is able to doze a little, although once she is startled by Kate's splayed legs embracing a man, the two of them locked together on the edge of a workbench.

She knits, and tells people she likes it, and supposes it is as likeable as anything else. Everyone she knows now possesses an oddly colored scarf, so she has expanded to tote bags, which she anticipates will be more difficult to unload. Her friends are enthusiastic about her original color combinations and the way she

mixes yarn textures. David, Andrea's husband, points out her most recently completed projects to them when they visit, and pronounces her work beautiful, which leaves her feeling like her artwork has been stuck to the front of a refrigerator with mismatched magnets. It seems to her that she should have known how little this process differs from her writing hobby, but today it is a new idea. Like everyone, David is well intentioned, and also like everyone, he does not know how to comfortably interact with the mentally ill. The poor man knows too much about her brain function, she thinks, so she accepts his occasional awkwardness gracefully. Much to his credit, he has not run away.

To make herself useful, Andrea eats food, does laundry, and makes the daily call to her parents, whom she reassures with limited success. She bathed today, although she has not been allowed to go to work in a year and a half - something about paranoia and an inability to perform tasks. She only spent two hours trying to come up with a striking orange, grey, and blue interior color scheme on the Valspar website, when at times it takes much longer. There is plenty of Diet Dr. Pepper, and she is outwardly quite calm. Woman With Water Bottles is rising to her deserved archetypal significance. She will soon join the Samaritan woman at the well, both physically and spiritually. There they will partake of the One true and living Water. Meanwhile, Ghost Walker persistently paces through more than one hundred percent of his treadmill potential. Later, she will write a harmless little bit on the comforts of fuzzy pink bathrobes, round tables, and warm slippers, to entertain her online friends.

