

Florida

by Kathy Fish

Every morning she changes out of her wet nightgown and goes into the bathroom and shakes her mother's Cashmere Bouquet talcum powder all over her body and into a fresh pair of underpants before she dresses for school. For about an hour she smells like perfume. Once, she saw her dad put Ban roll-on on his armpits and then swipe a big "X" of it across his chest. She tried this, but the kids at school said Ban roll-on smells worse than piss.

She asks her mother if she can take a bath in the mornings. "But how will you ever learn if you don't suffer the consequences?" her mother says, pointing to her chin. "You have cereal there."

"So be it," Emmeline says.

Dick Fencil draws pictures of army planes and war scenes during class. At recess, he stands inside the monkey bars and sings "The Ballad of the Green Berets." He and Emmeline are both on the chunky side. They don't climb the monkey bars and everybody leaves them alone there. Emmeline wishes Dick Fencil would sing something a little more up-tempo.

They're getting their history papers back today. They were supposed to write a biography about a person from Civil War times. She was going to write about Abraham Lincoln but then found a book about his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln.

Mary Todd Lincoln reminds her of her Aunt Janine, who takes off every few months and drives to Florida and Emmeline's mom and grandma have to track her down and commit her. When she's not being committed, though, she's okay. She paints Emmeline's toenails and gives her sips of the cocktails she learned to make tending bar at Vic's Tavern. In her paper, Emmeline compares Mary Todd

Lincoln's crazy, which involved spending lots of money and going to séances, with her Aunt Janine's, which involves wearing cowgirl outfits and running with strange men.

So all the kids get their papers back except Emmeline. Sister Valeria calls her up.

"This," she says, flapping the paper on her desk, "is filth and nonsense." She's glaring at her. Behind her, Pope Paul and President Nixon are glaring at her too.

Emmeline wants to say, "So be it," but she can't open her mouth. She's sweating in her wool jumper (with the embroidered heart for the Sacred Heart of Jesus) and that stink melds with her usual pissy smell. Sister Valeria wrinkles up her nose and tears up the paper on Mary Todd Lincoln and orders her to write another one, twice as long. Emmeline is ordered to kneel in the back of the room and say a rosary. Out loud.

The floor hurts her knees. The kids are turning around in their seats to look at her. Dick Fencel is smiling goofily, giving her the thumbs up.

If she closes her eyes and breathes deep enough, she finds she doesn't smell so bad.

blessedisthefruitofthywoomJesus The words make her feel like she's all alone in a shiny new place. She wonders if Dick Fencel feels like this when he's singing about the Green Berets.
nowandatthehourofoudeathamen

Mary Todd Lincoln was holding her husband's hand when he was shot in the back of the head at Ford's Theater. After the funeral, she holed up in the White House for six weeks, and then one day she put on a fancy black dress and went to Chicago. Like that.

