

Knocking off the edges

by Siren of Brixton

The chipping sound started around the time Susannah reached puberty. Not all at once, it was just now and then at first.

“What's that noise?” she'd say, and everyone would cock their heads to listen. Her mother eventually took her to the doctor. He said it was tinnitus but when she looked that up it didn't seem the answer at all. Before long she realised it made her seem strange, so she stopped talking about it. But it was always there; sometimes quiet, sometimes loud.

As a child Susannah was a warrior woman, an adventurer. She protected endangered animals from poachers in the wilds of Africa, rode dolphins across oceans to retrieve pirate treasure, and trapped criminals with the cunning of her mind. She wrote poems, composed music, designed clothes, published magazines. Nothing was impossible. She was as big as the sky and as deep as the ocean.

Somehow, as her body grew, her spirit shrank. The older she got, the more she was told what she couldn't do: you can't dress like that, you can't talk like that, you can't sit like that. You can't go there, you mustn't behave like that, don't even think about this. An endless litany of rules and manners was all she seemed to hear. That and the chipping noise, like a chisel on stone.

All through high school it was there, strong and insistent. She liked school, and she did well — although she learned early on not to do too well. Instead of designing clothes, she went shopping for them, paying careful attention to the rules. Dolphin rides and pirate treasure gave way to sneaky ciggies in the back of the bus. She was happy to fit in. Sometimes, in private, she'd let her mind run wild but she didn't dare do so amongst friends. She knew the price you had to pay.

The chip, chip, chip subsided when she went to college. She soaked up the readings like a sponge. In politics, the lecturer scythed her timid views and rent her mind open. The freedom blew through her, opening her up, filling her out. Sitting in lectures, the

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seam of her jeans pressed against her crotch, she would almost pass out from desire, a lust borne of feeling alive.

Getting knocked up put an end to all that. She kidded herself she could pick it up again but even before Teddy was born she felt possibility drifting away from her. Standing before the celebrant in a second-hand dress, she could barely hear the vows for the chip, chip, chipping.

Nate wasn't a bad husband. She knew she could have done worse. He took his fatherly duties seriously, and she was thankful for that. But he had his ways and he chip, chip, chipped away at her too. Susannah slipped from view, replaced by Mummy and Mrs Carter. Inadequate housekeeper. Pedestrian cook. Chip, chip. Chip chip.

The children became her life. When little Anna first smiled up at her, it felt like a second chance. Susannah indulged and pushed her daughter far more than she did the boys, who rough and tumbled through life, snapping at their father's heels. When Anna turned from her — turned on her — she consoled herself that all teenagers rebel. But the words stung, and any hope that she might fly on her daughter's wings desiccated and crumbled.

One day Nate came home to find a pot boiled dry on the stove, the stench of burned carrots polluting the air. The tele was on: perky home shopping presenters pushed their wares to the empty lounge room. But Susannah was nowhere to be seen. The police came, and the police went. The children huddled close, bewildered.

Nate fell apart, so he had no comfort to offer. Teddy, barely out of boyhood, had to man up and step into the breach. One Friday night, putting his drunken father to bed while his mates were all out chatting up pretty girls, he thought he heard a faint chip, chip sound.

Susannah saw all this from the place under the sofa she'd rolled when the last of her edges was chipped away. Watching Teddy resize his expectations of life was like watching a butterfly being crushed back into its chrysalis, but what could she do? She had no resistance left, no sharpness, no traction. All she could do was be grateful that the chipping had finally stopped.

