

# A Study in Plastics

by Tiffany R. White

She sat Indian style against the strawberry tree. In her hand she held a little mirror and a note that her father left her that morning.

*What a night, eh? See you in the morning.*

That's what it said.

The shade from the tree aided in solidifying her reflection. She twisted her mouth one way, then back. She couldn't return to the kitchen. Not this morning. Not today. Not tonight. Not ever. She declined breakfast for the first time in months. All she could see was her dad at the kitchen sink, filling the coffeemaker with cheap espresso grounds and cinnamon. Her mother fiddled with the iron in the laundry room that lent the kitchen it's closed in feel.

"Straighten your skirt," her mother said. She complied. Her father periodically looked up from his business of coffee, peering over to her subtly and sniffing his finger.

She lifted the curtain to the window in the kitchen. The sun was out. Its white shine was muted by a mashed potato cloud and she was tempted to run. The portrait on the wall to the right of the pantry betrayed the better senses of everyone in the kitchen. Mom and dad behind the son and daughter, standing. Congeniality oozing from the smiles they wore like pus. The sun, it seemed to her, had seen better days. So had they.

She went to her tree and sat looking for flaws in the design of her face, her skin. Were her lips too pouty? Did those few whiteheads on her chin detract from the shape of her mouth? She twisted her mouth and bit her pouty lip over and over. She surrendered. It was 9:30. She was hungry.

The refrigerator held bad milk. Her father poured her a cup of coffee.

"Don't tell your mother about this," he said.

"About what?"

"The coffee."

"Oh," she said.

“She would never let me hear the end of it, you know, how young you are and everything, and how I didn't need to give you coffee. Rev you up.”

“Yep.”

“She would be disappointed.”

“I get it,” she said.

“Do you?” he asked. He laid his hand on the table, wiggling that same finger as before. She nodded.

She tried the coffee. It tasted like dirt and rock salt and cinnamon. She laid the cup on the saucer and went into the basement. There, she saw her old dollhouse packed away, each doll sitting at the kitchen table, smiles burned into their faces. She was young then. Now, she's in her junior year of high school. So much has changed. The way things were never was really how they appeared. She knew this early on.

And so, she opened the dollhouse, collected the dolls, each with their plastic smiles, and plastic breasts and plastic hands and fingers and took them to her tree and buried them in the soft dirt right underneath it. She clasped her hands to her chest and sobbed there, until she could hear, “Dinner” ringing out in the cool summer night air.

