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DANCING RAT

I don't know if I'm able to have children myself. Because we haven't been able to conceive, my boyfriend calls our sex "free sex." I'm not sure if he's referring to the cost we save on contraceptives, the funds it takes to raise a child, what. If I ask, "What do you mean, free sex?" he says, "You know. No consequences."

Kyle and I have a lot of free sex. Working on a children's show, I almost feel bad about how very much sex I have.

Whisker-Bop! is a musical dance program that's big on counting, manners, and recycling. The primary characters are myself (a mouse), a raccoon, and a bat. Due to their extraordinary length, our whiskers often comically get in the way of our counting/singing/dancing/morality-teaching. My name is Sneezoid because I have bad allergies; why this isn't a concern I'm not sure. Every episode requires that I atch-hoo in a high-pitched voice and giggle afterwards. This prompts everyone else to giggle. During the interview for the job, I was asked to do little more than showcase my fake sneezing ability. I had a whole speech planned: how much I love kids, my work in an inner-city children's community theater. It didn't come up.

I think I took the job as a sadistic decision-making tool: do I want a child, really, and if so do I want one badly enough to leave Kyle if he won't go along with the process? Kyle is low-key and has expressed no desire to drive a medical plaza and ejaculate in a cup.

But the longer I'm on Whisker-Bop!, the less I seem to worry about whether or not to have a child, because the young "actors" I work with are horrible. My costume includes a set of felt rodent teeth that are on my facial mask around my chin; I often wish these teeth were real so that I could gnaw the golden ponytail off my young costar Missy. She calls me Ratty, though I am obviously a mouse.

Like many lesser mammals, Missy can detect fear. She reminds me a lot of Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*, asking questions that insist she already knows more than she should.

"When you have a daughter, you won't make her do homework when she already has soooooo many lines to memorize, will you Ratty?"

After our initial meeting (she asked me if I had any children and I said “Not yet”), Missy’s favorite game is asking questions about my hypothetical future child that relate to Missy’s own life.

“I don’t know,” I tell her. She then runs over to her mother yelling about how Ratty said it’s unfair to make her do homework on set, and her stage-tyrant parent shoots me a laser-glare.

I’m haunted by how physically perfect Missy is, her clear skin and her white white teeth. She just landed a detergent commercial, and because I want to punish myself I will not be able to resist switching to that brand. *I am a zombie-slave under Missy’s control*, I often think. I don’t have a child and I probably will never have a child: I hate this but trying any harder to have one seems like it would make the reality sink in even more. It is far easier to just do the bratty things Missy asks me to do, buy her endorsed products, and act like this agonizing relationship somehow brings me closer to motherhood.

The show’s writers have somehow sensed the obsessive link between Missy and I. At first I was free: a free mouse. But as the episodes progressed and the show got renewed for a second season, it was decided that Missy would adopt me so I would no longer “have to sleep in the cold, cold fields. Brrrrr!” That was Missy’s line, then the two of us had a song and dance number called “I’ve Found My Live-In Friend.”

The other children, two boys who are a bit sweeter than Missy but already vain at age seven, sometimes hear Missy call me Sneezzy and try to use it as well. I snap at them, “I’m not one of the seven dwarves.”

“But Missy calls you...” they protest. And I just stare at them vacantly, as if to say, “Don’t you get it? I’m Missy’s grown-up zombie-slave.”

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Sometimes Kyle watches the show, even though I beg him not to. “Oh right,” he says, “like you wouldn’t watch me if I was singing in a dancing mouse costume?”

There are moments on the show when I can actually be seen glaring at Missy, killing her slowly with my gigantic fake eyes. Like the scene last week when she was explaining how stealing is bad: it is wrong to borrow things from mommy’s purse and daddy’s wallet, even if you plan on returning them. At the time, I was enraged at how purely incredible Missy smelled—like flowers but softer, without the alcohol of perfume. It makes me want to kiss her satin head.

Of course the home audience doesn’t notice my disdain. But Kyle sees all.

“Man,” laughed Kyle. “Look at your posture. You want to teach that kid a lesson.”

But I do not. I want her reborn. I want her mine, without any knowledge of show business, bleached teeth, or interview skills.

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Missy isn't very kind or gentle. At work it's common for her to greet me by jamming her tiny fingers between my ribs, insisting that she shouldn't feed her rat any more this week because I'm getting fatter. Something about Missy takes me back to high school, even though she is only six years old. Perhaps I project her popularity: she will no doubt be popular. This automatically makes her better than me, who was not popular ever.

Today she and I are doing a song called "Leave It Alone (If It's Under the Sink)." The dancing is hard, especially in the suit, where I have no sensation as to what my true range of motion is. I accidentally bounce my giant mouse midriff against her when we're doing a series of twirls.

"CUT!" Missy loves to yell this. The director and the producers have repeatedly told her that whether or not taping should halt is not her decision, to no avail. "Fatty Ratty bumped into me!"

I give a few humble apologies through my mask, which makes a large, distorted echo inside and allows me to hear the way I might sound to others if I had learned to talk although deaf.

"Take your mask off when you talk," Missy yells, "because I can't understand you."

She says this despite knowing I cannot take my mask off unassisted. It is a very heavy mask with ceramic veneer on the upper face. Similar to a spacesuit, it screws on so that it will stay firmly in place throughout rigorous musical routines.

I put my arms up and shrug in a type of "oh well" expression. Like an abusive lover, Missy can sense when she's pushed me to the breaking point and needs to reel me back in.

"Silly mousie," she says, and then hugs me a little. I pat her tiny back with my oversized mouse paw.

*

"Draino? Oh nooooooooo..." I place my paw to my forehead and spin around several times in front of a blue screen. Animated, I will appear to be swirled down an oversized sink pipe. Everything is oversized on Whisker Bop! except for the children. For some reason, this makes them seem infinitely smarter.

Kyle has brought me lunch, which is our excuse to go have sex in my dressing room. I'm embarrassed that we do this near the set of a children's show, but we kind of

love it and cannot pinpoint why. It's not like it even feels naughty, just creepy and a little bit pathetic.

Today though, there are kids running through the hallway, shrieking their shrieks and banging on doors with their limbs as they pass. Though Kyle feels good, I can't help but have the children's screams redirect my thoughts to the *why* of sex, the primal reason he and I have been programmed and physically engineered to engage in this behavior. *There is more to life* I tell the part of my brain that wants so badly to know which one of us, if not both, is the reproductively defective one. I suppose if I found out that it was him and not me, this same part of my brain would then ask: what is the real point of having sex with Kyle?

I try to reign in my spinning thoughts. Children are not the only reason for sex, I remind myself. They are just one reason. A very loud reason that feels entitled to run around all over the backstage area yelling and laughing at things that aren't funny.

But in this one moment it suddenly becomes way too much that we aren't making a child right now. I love Kyle; at least I love a lot of him. There is enough to love there to be passed on. I want to distill us both down into seven little pounds that will grow as needed, both he and I but also someone who's free of us, free to ignore the ways that we're crazy and not valid. It seems like a baby would save us, not our relationship but literally *us*: half of us both could have a new chance.

"Sorry," Kyle mumbles, nuzzling his face into my chest. He's finished. I pet his damp forehead and his curly hair.

"I'm sorry," I apologize. "Sometimes it's weird for me at work."

*

Going back on set when I know I have semen inside of me reminds me of that urban myth about a chemical that will turn all the water around people purple if they pee in the pool. I kind of expect that one day, while walking across the Rainbow River Bridge over to the Sharing Seat, I will look down and realize my crotch is flashing like a police siren due to some product that detects seminal fluid on the sets of children's shows.

Kyle very sweetly helps redo my ponytail and screw my mask back on. The inside of the mask is disgusting; it almost looks like the hide from a real animal. I've never asked what it is. I could see the producer looking at me straight in the eye and saying "We recycled some old Nazi lampshades for the lining." It smells kind of like a cellar, if the cellar were filled with white tailed doe in estrus.

Kyle gives me a kiss on my mouse cheek and turns to leave when Missy appears out of nowhere like something from *The Shining*. Before she even opens her mouth I know that it is going to be horrible; I can feel the psychic energy she's drawing from my brain being sucked out the left side of my head underneath my ear.

“Why won’t you give Ratty a baby? Is something wrong with your seeds?”

Kyle shoots me a betrayed look at first, and I shake my giant mouse head “No,” as if to say, *I never told a child that your sperm might be deficient*, but then reason seems to soften into him—he does know Missy, after all.

Kyle puts on a horrific fake smile that is so scary; it’s like he’s wearing invisible clown paint. He squats down so that he’s eye-level with the demon. “That’s none of your business, is it cutie?”

I decide it’s best to intervene. “Bye, Kyle,” I smile, motioning for Missy to follow me as we leave my dressing room. Missy grabs my tail a little too tight and uses it to pull me to our start positions for the “Goodbye Should Just Be Called *See You Later!*” dance.

“What do you see in him anyway?” asks Missy. Then she giggles.

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When Missy’s mother called me for help, she caught me at a weak moment. I hadn’t been able to sleep all night, and around three a.m. I got up and watched a horrific birthing show on television. They showed babies coming out of crotches and then big jellyfish afterbabies, again coming out of the crotches. The odd part was how I was way more jealous than disgusted. I wanted to be the one screaming inside of a hot tub while Kyle rubbed my back and my cartoon stomach morphed and dropped out our very own child. Suddenly it was six a.m.; I’d been secretly crying since about four.

“Hello?”

Even as I picked up the phone, I wondered why I was picking up the phone; it was six in the fucking morning. The answer, of course, was that I hoped it would be a tiny fetus calling on some human tissue receiver, asking if it could please leave its mommy and crawl into me.

“Hello.” There was a pause and then the strained voice added, “Blessed morning.”

“I don’t go to church.” I started to hang up, but then there was the sound of protest.

“No, wait—this is Mrs. Gowers, Missy’s mom. I’m sorry to call so early but I have a bit of an emergency.”

Apparently two of her other star children (she has three, Missy and a set of twin boys, all of them on television, all *Village of the Damned* genetically engineered-looking) had a call-back and Missy’s nanny was sick. “When I told Missy that I didn’t know what to do with her, she specifically asked to spend the day with you.” Mrs. Gowers paused. “She likes working with you I suppose.”

Mrs. Gowers does not like me. I'm not beautiful and therefore am not a good role model for Missy.

"Sure," I agreed. At first I thought we could spend the day like her siliconeisaurus mother would want us to: get mani/pedis, buy some pink things with ruffles, practice walking. But when Missy arrived she was very curious about the size of our house ("Are you poor? How poor are you? Are you ever, like, hungry but you can't eat because food costs a lot to you?"), and these questions gave me a better idea.

Munchkin Burger touts itself as "the finest mini-burger palace in the land." Missy was the only child there who wasn't morbidly obese.

"Mom wouldn't like it if she knew I was here," Missy giggled. The skin around her mouth had taken on a greasy sheen.

"It's called pigging out," I said. This was Missy's good side. Even though she I knew she would tell her mother all about it later, pretend she hated it and make me out to be a total villain, here she was: my partner in crime. Eater of the forbidden fruit.

As the day went on, my urge to defile her perfection grew extreme. I had the thought of driving her down to some cantinas in Mexico to see if they'd let me drink free in exchange for Missy washing dishes.

"What now?" I asked. "Television?" Missy's mouth dropped open. I suddenly realized that even though Missy is on television, she's not allowed to watch it.

"I don't want to get fat," she said. "Do you think I'm fat?"

"Do you think *I'm* fat?"

Missy didn't respond.

*

We did watch television. During each commercial, she immediately began to critique aspects of the actor's performance and physical appearance, which I deeply appreciated. She is completely brutal. If someone's right eye is even slightly higher than the left, she will not let this slide.

When her mother came to pick her up, Missy gave me a mini-hug, but then she ran screaming to the backseat of their deluxe SUV to see if her brothers were hired for the part. "My whole week will be ruined if they got it," she told me. Apparently the Gowers children have a bit of a competitive spirit.

I watched as they drove away down the road. If her mother ever found out about Munchkin Burger, she would probably make Missy get a colonic.

A few hours later when Kyle got home, the contrast was nice. Adult World. It seemed a little amusement parky—sex, alcohol, swear words. I tried to take in the sudden quiet. It was *so* quiet. I told myself that there was something furious and wrong about the constant sound, color, and stimulation that children crave, their habitual need to celebrate and have a party. Life is not a party. I actually said this to Kyle: “Life is not a party.” I took it back as soon as I said it. It made him look sad.

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“I find people who have children as a move towards immortality totally gross. So that they can feel better about death or something.” He sipped his drink.

I made Kyle take me to a romantic restaurant to talk about the subject. It seemed more theoretical that way, like we were making conversation rather than *having* a conversation. Plus, if I felt myself starting to get upset, I could take a sip of martini in a slow, calculated way, like a robot mannequin in a commercial about robot mannequins who enjoy martinis the way real, elegant people do.

“I would like to feel better about death though,” I admit.

“It’s just death. You’re not going to care when you’re dead.”

I want to write Kyle off as a simple person, but I know him and he is not simple. It’s unfair though, how he can have so much clarity about difficult things. Why have children? Why fear death? “I mean you and I certainly don’t have to have a child for the sake of our species. I think mankind is pretty set.”

“Well, Kyle, I wouldn’t want to have a child to benefit mankind. That would take all the fun out of it.” My hand finds my martini carefully, straightened, like a mission payload specialist guided it there. Grip. Sip.

“What, do you want it to give your life some kind of purpose?” He lingers on the word purpose and his garlicky breath finds my nose. It’s a little sexy, how he smells like garlic and doesn’t need a purpose. I suppose I find garlic-scented rebels somewhat nice.

“Well what is life’s purpose?”

I think I had this conversation on one of my first dates at a coffee shop; both my date and I were wearing black and brooding and my date’s attempted-suicide wrist scars were displayed frequently—he revealed them often, as if they helped to back up his argument.

Kyle leaned into me, close enough to kiss. His buttery garlic lips, which are larger than mine and I am jealous of, held a wry smile. “I’ll tell you a secret,” he whispers. “There is no purpose. Purpose is a concept someone made up to feel better about how weird everything is.”

But the thought of becoming a mother is a weirdness I want to feel out a little more. I will live with it for a while longer as if it were truly a baby; I will let it grow and see what shape it takes before I decide what to do with it. Until then, I can go on living each day as Missy's secondary mother, a giant rodent who is slightly repulsed by her human offspring.

He and I make a toast to ourselves, to purposelessness lives and our candlelit table; dinner is expensive but the sex afterwards will be free.

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Other stories from ALISSA NUTTING'S first collection, *Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls* (Starcherone Books, 2011) appear in journals such as *Tin House*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Denver Quarterly*. She is currently a PhD candidate in English at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, where she is a Schaeffer Fellow in Fiction.