

**Alice Shechter**  
**Before I Break Your Heads**

**M**om and I are on our way to Aunt Gert's for dinner and we are late but we have to stop in the cellar first. We have to go down the two stairways to where the laundry room is to get my pants. She goes out the back door of our upstairs apartment and I follow behind her.

I don't like the cellar. I know there are spiders there, even if I don't see any, and big slow water bugs. And there is cracked mirror leaning against the wall that makes me look broken when I look into it, which I also don't like. Daddy keeps tools there, too, hammers and paint and wire brushes for scraping rust.

We have to go to the cellar because my pants are in the dryer there, and I am wearing only my blouse and panties and anklets, and carrying my patent leather shoes. Halfway down at the middle landing I hear Mavis, the lady downstairs, through the door of the first floor apartment where she lives. She is talking to her little girl Claudia, who is almost as old as me: "We don't throw paint at our mother, do we, Claudia? Even if we are feeling very, very angry." That is how Mavis talks. She is a kindergarten teacher. Even though she talks to me like I am in kindergarten I like to go to her house. I like to play with Claudia. But also Mavis has an art closet just like at school, with shiny colored circles and squares to stick on the thick yellow paper like what you get at school. And white glue with spreading sticks like at school. In fact it is exactly like what we have in our class. I wonder if she gets it from school.

"C'mon, c'mon, your father is probably there already." Daddy is going right from work to meet us at Aunt Gert's. Mommy pulls my pants from the dryer and snaps them hard in the air to shake out the wrinkles. "Here, now, quick," she says, and I try to hurry. I put my feet into the leg holes and tug, and tug. The pants are hot, and the hot metal zipper burns me through my panties when I pull it over my stomach. I can't zip the zipper all the way. Maybe the pants got shrunk in the dryer; maybe they need me to bend up and down a few times so they can stretch a little. But we are in a hurry, and my belly pooches out through the top of the zipper part and the zipper is stuck and won't go up any more. Mommy bends down. Her face is right in front of me, red and big, and there are little drops of sweat on her lip. "Suck in your stomach!" she says, yanking hard on the zipper tab. It comes off in her hand. The slider falls off its track and the zipper spreads out till it is open right to the bottom.

"Now we have to go all the way back upstairs," she says, huffing as she stands back up. Her voice is getting madder. "Now we're really late." She pulls me by one arm back toward the steps. "You see what happens when you're too fat?"

I know not to say anything; if I do it will make her angrier. I always try to keep quiet when she is in a bad mood. Sometimes in the mornings before school she is mad at me. If she sees that I am wearing a wrinkled blouse she will rush into my room and bang open my drawers and throw things on the floor. "Look at this mess!" she shouts. "If you would fold

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things neatly your clothes would be fine!" Every day I try not to make any noise, and tiptoe out to school before she wakes up. I know that is the problem. She doesn't like to wake up early. I always want to tell her that it is okay, I am seven already, I can get myself ready for school. But if I ever say that it makes her more upset, so I don't say anything.

We are at the bottom of the staircase. I stop to try to hold up my pants so I can walk back up the stairs. "Wait," I say, but then I know I shouldn't have.

There is an old wire brush tucked into a pipe right there along the wall. Mommy grabs it and raises it above her head; her face is very red now. She yells at me. "I'll scrub the fat off of you with this brush!" I don't think she will do that, I am pretty sure she won't. In a little while we will be at Aunt Gert's and Mom will be talking and laughing, and she will tell stories and jokes and even tell Aunt Gert and Uncle Albert and Daddy what a good artist I am. That is what I think will happen. I am a very good artist. I like to play with my John Gnagy Learn to Draw set. And I like to write poems and make pictures to go with them. My teacher Mrs. Abramowitz gave me a certificate that says I am the class poet. But I still feel bad because it is true, I am a little fat, I don't know why. If I could be very small with a pony tail like Karen Pevner, and a nice hair bow, I would like that. Karen is the most popular girl in our class. The boys all like her and the girls like her too.

The brush has a splintery wooden handle with rusty iron bristles. I don't think Mom will scrub the fat off me with it.

I hear a squeak and I look up the stairs. It is Mavis' door making the squeak. She is looking down at me and Mommy. Claudia is standing in front of her. She is holding on to Mavis' skirt and her eyes and her mouth are very wide open. "Go inside, Claudia," Mavis says in a different voice. Not like a kindergarten teacher but very careful and slow. Claudia steps sideways through the door back into their kitchen. When she peeks out her head to keep looking Mavis says, "I said go inside, Claudia."

"Sylvia, I want you to listen to what I am saying," Mavis says to Mommy in a very calm way, like on Lassie when the snake is in the front yard and the grandpa is telling Jeff, "Don't move, boy, stay perfectly still."

"Sylvia, I think you want to put that brush down, now."

Mommy looks up at Mavis. She is turning even redder from the neck of her dress up her chin and cheeks right up to her hair. She is holding me by one arm that is bending behind my back, but it doesn't hurt. She is like a statue with the brush up in the air, like when you play Statues and whoever is IT yells "Freeze!" My pants are still open and they keep creeping down because of the broken zipper. I try to hold them up with one hand.

Mavis takes a step down the stairs, then another step. "Sylvia," she says while she is taking steps. She holds out one hand. "We want to give that brush to Mavis, don't we?"

When Mavis says that in her regular Mavis kindergarten voice it makes me think of yesterday when Mom and Aunt Gert were on our stoop and Aunt Gert hollered at my cousins like she always does, "Lenny, Elliot, you lousy kids, get over here before I break your heads." And Mavis

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stepped out of her door just like now but on the front stoop and she shook her head. "Tsk, tsk, Gertrude," she said with her scolding teacher face, "Don't you know when you say such things the children see their heads lying broken on the ground?" But that isn't what we saw. We did not see anything, or even hear it, really; it was just Aunt Gert having her bad temper, which she almost always has, letting my cousins know it was time to come in and they better hurry it up.

So when I see Mavis come down the basement steps I get a little mad because she is talking that way like she is always right about everything. I unwind myself from where Mommy is holding me and I stand straight, rubbing my arm. Then I pull my pants up even if they don't close. I move around so I am in front of my Mom. She is still holding the brush but she puts her other arm across me and pulls me close against her. We both just keep looking at Mavis until she goes back up the steps, shaking her head and making her tsk, tsk sound, and goes inside her own house.