

Iain Grinbergs
June

June stood in front of a SportSaver mirror, looking at a pair of running shoes. She felt like she needed to lose some weight, especially after her breakup with Jet, her ex.

"Why's it called a muffin-top?" June said. "It's too fun."

"Shut up," Ash said. "You're beautiful the way you are."

June huffed.

"Do you want me to call Frank over?" Ash said into the mirror.

"God no," June said. "I can't be slavered over today."

"Then shush," Ash said. Then, "I like these shoes more than the others."

"Yeah," June admitted. "It's like walking on expensive mattresses."

Ash said, "You have such beautiful hair." She went to run a hand through June's mahogany-colored hair.

"Not yet," June said, even though she very much wanted to feel Ash's hand on her. But it was too soon. And she had never been with a girl.

Frank rounded the corner, red. "Guys," he said, patting his pelt-like toupee, "I need you at the front. Too many people are buying up those bodyboards."

"On my way," Ash said, saluting Frank, as she normally did.

"I'm off today," June said.

"But I really need the help right now."

She looked at him.

"I'm just playing," he said. Then, "Did you give any thought to what I said?" Behind his steel-rimmed glasses, his gray-blue eyes were wide.

"No," June said, "I haven't."

"That's okay," he said. "I'll ask someone else."

She felt bad about how she always talked to Frank, but she couldn't help herself. It wasn't Frank's fault he resembled Jet, especially with one nostril bigger than the other. The final straw between June and Jet came when June's grandma, who had raised her since she was thirteen, was in the hospital. Stressed out, June finally snapped and told Jet he needed to help around the house.

"I told you I'm tired," he said.

June threw a spoon straight at him over the kitchen island. It hit his head as he sat in the faux-leather recliner. Before he could say anything, she threw another spoon and then a wine glass, which missed him and smashed against the bottom of the far wall.

"You crazy bitch," he said, running away as he covered his head with a cushion.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

Jet didn't come back for days. When he finally did, he said he'd be a better man. He gave her a bunch of lilies and a small teddy bear with "Be mine" stitched into its belly. "Be mine?" June said.

"Again," Jet said. "Be mine again."

June looked at him. She hated his patchy stubble and how he never plucked his wild eyebrows.

"I shouldn't have called you crazy," he said. "Or a bitch." Before June could respond, he went into the kitchen. "I'm going to make us some lunch." Soon, June sat staring at a sandwich with limp wings of lettuce. "I'm trying," Jet said. After a minute, he shook a container of black pepper. "And I'm ready to spice things up."

"What?" June said.

"You're always talking about trying to spice things up," Jet said. "Sexually." He walked off and came back with a black plastic bag. Then June watched as he plucked out a ball gag and put it by her plate like she was supposed to use it for lunch.

June stayed silent.

"It took a lot for me to walk in there to buy this stuff," he said.

June had indeed been bored with their sex life. Something was missing. Someone was missing: Ash. But June couldn't accept that yet. She thought she could make it work by adding some excitement into the mix with BDSM equipment. She had wanted to humiliate Jet by treating him like a horse. She wanted to whip him and dangle a hotdog in front of him as she rode his back. She didn't fully understand it, but she wanted to do it, nonetheless. Anyway, the only thing helpful thing he ever did was water the peace lily. She was tired of baseball and hockey always on the TV. She was tired of the crushed beer cans around his chair. She was tired of beard hairs in the bathroom sink and on the floor. She was tired of jumping from man to man and never acting on her desire to be with girls.

Back her grandma's beach house, June put on some workout clothes and her new shoes. In the living room, surrounded by prints of sea turtles and glass containers of shells, she turned on the smart TV, selecting the channel FlexHex. She picked a random workout. The woman who led the workout couldn't have been over five feet, which made June feel better. But then the woman was doing crazy stuff like crunching and hopping up and kicking. June tried to keep up. Behind her, the front door opened and her grandma walked in, huffing, with a bunch of plastic bags in either hand. The coastal breeze had splayed her nest of tin-gray hair.

"Jesus," June's grandma said. "What's going on in here?"

"Nothing," June said, wiping sweat from her upper lip. "Just working out."

"Is my cooking that unhealthy?"

"No one wants a Teletubby," June said, "for a girlfriend."

Her grandma scoffed. "In medieval times, largeness was a sign of wealth."

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

June stopped and turn around. "Grandma, this is 2018." She dabbed her forehead with her shirt. "No one will really love me if I look like Henry the Eighth."

June's grandma went into the kitchen. June could hear her putting down the bags and opening the fridge. She turned back to see the woman on the TV doing a roundhouse kick. She tried to do one but fell over, knocking over the gold floor lamp. She crawled toward the remote on the coffee table she had pushed to the side and turned the TV off. "Fuck this," she said.

Her grandma shuffled into the living room holding a russet potato. "What happened?" she said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," June said.

"Do you need some ice?"

"No," June said, standing.

"Well, then," her grandma said, "you can help me with the stew."

"I can't," June lied. "I already have plans."

"Hopefully not with a car paint guy." Her grandma winked.

"Not funny."

"Lighten up, dear," June's grandma said. "No man wants a girl who's all doom and gloom."

"And what if I don't want a man?" June said.

Her grandma said, "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," June said.

She went down the hall and into her bedroom. She sat at her desk and looked out the window. She watched as a sparrow flicked toward a few dry pines. After a minute, she wrote a haiku: "A sparrow flicking / into a stand of sad pines / this is so shit wow." Her English professor at Florida Bay College had put two of her haikus on the board last year, before she dropped out, and it was the first time she felt like she had truly accomplished something. She liked that feeling. Then she started doodling a portrait of Ash on the back of an envelope—her bob and her big dark eyes. She tore the little portrait away from the rest of the envelope. She grew a little warm. After a second, she slipped it into her running shorts and felt herself with it. But soon a knock sounded, and she snapped her hand out of her shorts. She turned halfway around.

"What?" she said.

Her grandma cleared her throat. "Jet's here."

"You didn't tell him I was out?"

"I'm sorry," her grandma said. "I was so focused on dinner."

"God," June said. "Okay."

After her grandma left, June looked at herself in her floor-length mirror. She looked fresher. Her green eyes looked greener and her cheeks

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

were blushed. She patted her hair. She thought about one of the last trips she had taken with Jet. They had gone to Asheville. She didn't really want to go, and she thought the roadhead she had given him there in his pick-up would've made things more exciting, but it didn't. She was just left feeling nauseated and kept popping mints. She drank too many IPAs in Asheville and wasted the whole next day in bed. She couldn't even hold down the crackers and banana Jet had gone out to buy. She kept saying sorry, and Jet kept saying don't worry about it. She knew he was upset, though.

As June came up the hall, she watched Jet finger the few gemstones her grandma kept on the end table by the front door. The gemstones, her grandma said, kept away bad luck. Jet noticed June and stuck his hands in his jeans.

"What do you want?" June said.

"Nothing," Jet said, crossing his arms. "I just came by to talk for a minute."

"I'm heading out," June said.

Jet looked her up and down. "Have you been working out?"

"Look," June said, "what do you really want?" She walked over and grabbed her car keys from the end table.

"I told you," he said, "to talk."

She peered at her bitten nails to avoid looking at him. "I have nothing to say to you," she said. She opened the front door and walked down the long flight of stairs towards her old SUV. Jet followed.

"You know," Jet said, "the guys at work still talk about that picture."

"What picture?"

"You know which one."

June unlocked her SUV and sat behind the wheel. She tried to close the door, but Jet held it open.

"The guys still all call me Marilyn now."

"I told you I didn't send it," June said.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know," June said, trying to put the keys in the ignition.

"Was it Ash?"

She looked over at him. "What?"

"Ash," Jet said, "your girlfriend."

June tried to close the door but dropped her keys. Jet kicked them away.

"I still can't believe you'd do something like that to me," he said. "And now you won't talk to me. It's like you're a psycho."

"I'm sorry," June said, "okay? I really am."

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

June really did feel bad after sending that picture of Jet in some lingerie and the Marilyn Monroe wig she bought last Halloween. She sent it late one night after too much red wine, which always made her angry. She thought if she were to quit, she could really believe he was a woman. She thought, at the time, she could make the relationship last that way.

"You don't mean it," he said. "I don't believe you."

June got out of the SUV and looked for the keys.

"I don't think I ever knew you," Jet said, trying to grab her arm.

"Don't touch me," June snapped.

"Why can't you just talk to me?" Jet said.

Unable to find the keys, overwhelmed, June shot away—she ran down the road and soon turned right by the stop sign. Certain that Jet would come after her, she kept going and going. She surprised herself and felt like it must've been the new shoes as she seemed to bounce along. She imagined that her parents looked down at her, worried, but still cheering her on. Soon, she ended up at the nearby bayside park and collapsed on a bench. Ahead, a few gulls perched on an old wire fence by a propped-up, reel-less fishing rod. In the distance, over the bridge, was the other side of town where SportSaver sat. As she caught her breath, she felt the piece of envelope still in her shorts. She pulled it out. Ash's face was a gray smudge. For some horrible second, June had trouble remembering what Ash looked like. She panicked. She pushed herself up and headed straight for the bridge.

It wasn't summer yet. There were still two months left. But in the sun, anyone could've been fooled. Still, June kept walking, peering off into the distance where the masts of a few sailboats stabbed towards the sky and a jet ski left a long white trail through the waves. She breathed in the ocean air deeply. Then she recalled having watched her parents run over this bridge while she and her grandma stood together in visors and battery-powered fans they had bought at Disney World. She tried to run again but couldn't. Her mouth was dry, and a headache was coming on. The back of her neck felt tense. Still, she felt good somehow, so she kept going, determined, like her parents would've wanted, no matter what she told them, no matter what she confessed to them. They would've liked Ash, or at least that's what she chose to believe. They would've come around. It's just that she was an only child. But it would've be fine eventually, right? Of course—her parents weren't bigots. They would've wanted her to be happy.

Finally, June was in SportSaver's parking lot. A blast of air conditioning hit her from above as she walked in. Over at the registers, she saw Ash handing over a bag for a young couple in swimwear and flip-flops. Ash noticed June walking over and began to wave but stopped. She came around the registers and asked her if she was okay.

"I thought this was your day off?" Frank said, coming up to her, smiling. Then he said, "You don't look too good."

"I need water," she said.

"Coming right up," Frank said, running towards the back of the store.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/3

June looked at Ash. "I'm ready," she said.

Ash said, "What do you mean?"

"You know."

"Really?"

June nodded, then sat down on the floor. She tried to fan herself with her hand.

"You weren't ready earlier, though," Ash said.

June waited a moment. "I was," she said, "and I still am."

Ash sat down next to her. "You make me crazy," she said.

They sat for a short while in silence before Frank came back, slopping a small white paper cup of water and carrying some wettened paper towels.

"Here you go," he said.

June chugged the water and laid the paper towels over her head. Then she moved one from her eye and looked at Frank. "Thank you," she said.

"Of course," he said.

After a moment, June said, "Can Ash go on break?"

"Sure," Frank said, "whatever you need."

Soon, Ash pulled her two-door car into June's grandma's driveway. June sat on the passenger's side with the wet paper towels still over her head.

"You really want to do this now?" Ash said.

June nodded, then took a deep breath. They got out of the car and headed toward the stairs. Ash grabbed June's arm. "Wait," she said, "do I look okay?"

"You always do," June said.

June took the paper towels from her head and balled them up. She could smell her grandma's fish stew before she opened the door. June thought it odd: her grandma usually made fish stew in celebration of something. Inside, she could hear grandma washing dishes while Lady Day sang low over the radio. June looked ahead at the turtle-shell clock over the kitchen doorway, the line of family pictures streaming into the living room where the sun pushed its way in from the skylight—everything was where it had always been. She grabbed Ash's hand.