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The Perfection of Ten

Jacquelyn Anderson
Concordia University-Portland

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It’s Better That Way

Casey Kerns

My brother somersaults around the house rolling to where he wants to go, he says it’s better that way.

He dips raisins in ketchup dunks hot-dogs in milk, he says it tastes better that way.

On the couch, he nests under cushions barricading himself in, protecting himself from the sun, he says it’s more comfortable.

When we play twenty questions he creates mythical creatures, he says it’s more fun.

He tumbles around in shorts and mismatched cowboy boots carrying a toy gun with his hands hidden in bulky winter gloves, he says it makes him cool.

He reads with his arms wrapped around knobby knees gently rocking, like Smeagol in Lord of the Rings, he says it helps him focus.

My brother lives in his own unique world to him nothing is normal, he says it’s better that way.

The Perfection of Ten

Jacquelyn Anderson

Pluck, grab, pull, pluck, tear, pull, tear up. The glowing orb reveals every craterous imperfection in her illuminated face. These magnifying mirrors are every girl’s worst enemy; the tiniest flaw is amplified to horrifying proportions. Still dripping on the linoleum in her towel, she has spent the last half hour plucking in sets of 10. Caught up in the two caterpillars above her eyes, she stares into the mirror-of-terror and pulls out every stray hair until her eyebrows are a masterpiece worthy of a frame in the Guggenheim.

After the eyebrow maintenance comes the moisturizing. First, she applies five even dots of skin cream and massages it into her face in small circles. Next, her body, which she lathers with the care of a nurse in the burn unit. If there was one thing besides messes that terrifies her, it is dry skin. In her nightmares old men with saggy hides threaten her with their dandruff flakes and red, irritated elbows. Just in case, she applies an extra coat of lotion.

She locks eyes with herself, admiring the circles of tiny lights reflected in her emerald green irises. Getting ready to go anywhere is a feat of epic proportions, so she listens to her therapist’s advice and takes ten slow deep breaths. An obsession with perfection and order cripples her, despite the effort of four therapists over the last ten years. When she was twelve, her parents decided that they had had enough of her compulsions. Despite being a brilliant student, her teachers had complained that she wasn’t turning in any assignments on time. She stayed up late into the night, writing and erasing her tidy handwriting until it was perfect. It took her three hours to get ready every day, and the water bill was getting enormous. Her parents had tried grounding her, but it only taught her how to keep a secret. In a last ditch effort to “normalize” her, she had been sent to see a psychiatrist.

“So, tell me a little bit about why you are here today.”

“I don’t know. My parents sent me.”

“But it’s you that is here right?”

“Well yeah but I can’t drive, so obviously you know that my
parents dropped me off.”

“But it was you that got into the car, and it is you that is sitting on the couch right now... Right?”

“Right.”

“So why do you think you are here?”

“I don’t know, because my parents don’t know what to do with me.”

“Well, I guess that’s right, but I talked to them and they aren’t mad at you. They just want you to help you. Help you get better.”

“There is something wrong with me?”

“That’s what we are here to find out.”

Ten years later, she was not far from where she started. As her secret skills got better, her parents got happier. So she saved her behaviors for private times. The obsessions had not gone away; she had simply gotten better at hiding them. She could still see germs on every surface; have to touch her bathroom doorknob twice. Everything was counted in groups of ten, the perfect number. Ten steps from the bed to the bathroom, ten from the couch to the table. She even chewed her gum perfectly, in sets of ten, evenly on each side. Order reigned, perfection was king.

The battle wages between the voices in her head. “Jesus girl! He will be here in an hour and we haven’t even put on any underwear,” the voice of reason says. “If our eyebrows aren’t flawless, there is no way he will want to fuck, or much less date us,” the crazy voice replies. She stands in front of her open closet doors, staring at her color-coded wardrobe in search of inspiration. Endless combinations of coordinated tops, shoes, pants, and jewelry end up on the floor. This is the only mess she will allow, the pile of casualties from choosing the perfect outfit. One hour and forty-seven wardrobe changes later, the death toll of the doorbell clangs through the house. Panic makes the little men start a mosh pit inside her stomach as she hears her roommate usher the gentleman caller into the living room.

With a sigh of disgust, she settles on the 48th outfit and enters the bathroom for her obligatory ten coats of liner, lipstick, and gloss. Feeling somewhat comforted by the perfection of ten, she takes to the stairs readjusting the shirt she knows will never really lay “just right.” He latest Ph.D has informed her that she needs to “relax.” At 168 dollars an hour, that is the best he can come up with? Standing at the top of the stairs, she takes another ten deep breaths. “Just breathe baby,” the normal voice tells her. The crazy retorts, “Your shirt makes you look homeless.” Taking her last deep breath, she attempts to control the crazy: I can do this, I am fine, I am normal. “Relax you nutjob, you don’t want him to find out you are batshit crazy the first date.” Setting in place her best Pretty Woman smile, she bounds down the stairs and into the living room.

Next to her sparkling dining room table stands a tall man in a plaid shirt and jeans. She leans in for a hug, pressing her breasts against his chest, but keeping her bottom half away from his. An A-frame hug was intriguing, but noncommittal. The kind of hug you reserve for distant relatives and relatively unfamiliar acquaintances. “He’s going to think you’re a goddamn virgin hugging him like that!” The crazy voice was back, despite her efforts to subdue it. “Take it slow sweetie, everything will be fine.” She holds her smile, listening to the voice of reason as she notices just how many crumbs are on her kitchen counter. She takes his outstretched, if most likely unwashed hand, and counts her sets of 10 steps down the hall and out to the car.

To the novice eye, the Date’s car appears fairly clean. Under Jacquelyn’s obsessive gaze, bugs and crawlies breed and feed in the crevices of the seats. Little crumbs she can feel worming their way into the legs of her perfectly ironed pants. Floaty dust particles cling to her virgin-bride-white shirt. An abandoned McDonalds cup rolls with the motion of his turns, tapping the side of her camel-colored flats over and over again. She can hear the sound of debris shifting in the trunk as well, most likely a cesspool of unwashed gym socks and the carcasses of fast food meals. She can already feel her face getting sticky with stress-induced perspiration. Despite her best efforts at breathing in sets of perfect ten, she begins to lose her cool.

“GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!” the crazy voice says. “Just throw yourself out of the car door and then you will be free from this germy death trap.”

“Babygirl, you are fine. This boy likes you; the least you can
do is take some more deep breaths and let him take you out to
dinner.”

Once again, the voice of reason wins and Jacquelyn counts
slowly to ten, ten times. She can tell that the Date strains to fill the
silence, but she needs this time to get her shit together. Only years of
dealing with the opposing voices in her head allow her to carry on a
conversation. She nods and smiles and giggles in all the appropriate
places, but inside she squirms.

Frantically searching for something clean to fixate on, another
tactic she has learned in therapy, Jacquelyn glances down at the center
console. HIS HAND. Never had she seen such a specimen of
perfection. His hand seemed almost sensual, caressing the tough skin
of his car while his eyes fixate on the road ahead of him. Taking
advantage of his distraction, she nods smiles responds laughs and
stares openly. Supple skin, orgasmically manicured nails, and a firm
comfortable grip. The lower belly feeling starts to rise and all she can
think of is how those hands would feel perfect on her
well-moisturized skin. “How could you not have noticed the
appendages before, you crazy bitch!” the crazy voice says. For the first
time in accord, the voice of reason chimes in, “Those are the most
marvelous things I have ever seen.” In a life of order and
planning and 10s, Jacquelyn goes on impulse. She steals his hand
from the console and cradles it between her own. Shocked by the sud-
den intimacy, Ryan looks over and smiles.

This Little Piggy

Emma Sleeman

This little piggy went to market,
bought three bottles of cheap wine
and a 24 of Coors Lite-
“For a party,” he says. Right.

This little piggy stayed home,
where he’s been, safe and sound,
for the past 8 years
thanks to online bill pay
and grocery shopping.

This little piggy had roast beef
sliced into one-inch cubes,
chewed five times on each side,
and swallowed with a small sip
of raspberry Kool-Aid.

This little piggy had none;
hasn’t been “hungry”
since he turned seventeen
and his now-ex boyfriend called him
a fat hog for having so much cake-
“You know that stuff goes straight to your ass.”

And this little piggy cried
whee whee whee
all the way home
as he ran to escape
the government conspiracy
to take over his mind.