

White Bread

by Jessica Anya Blau

Brian takes off his size eleven shoe and shakes it out on the table. Nickels, quarters and dimes tinkle atop each other, some roll to the floor. Barb watches her son from the table beside him. He is fifteen-years old, almost six-feet tall and he smells like a dog that's been out in the rain. They are in McDonald's and Barb wants to tell him that not only shouldn't he take his shoe off, but, really, he shouldn't put it on the table. Instead she says nothing. Brian is with his new friend from swim team, Will, and she doesn't want to embarrass him by treating him like a baby in front of his friend.

Before she has finished her coffee and before Will and Brian have finished their second round of fries (Barb paid for the first round, Brian used the shoe money to buy more), her son looks over at her pleadingly. She knows this look, it is the same look he has been giving her since he was three-years old when he first started wearing big boy pants. It is a look that says he needs to poop.

Barb hustles the boys into her car, pretending for Brian's sake that it is she who must hurry home now. They drop Will off at his house, which is on the way, then pull into their driveway.

"Help me with the grocery bags," Barb says, has to say, because Brian would never think to help carry bags from the car.

"Mom, I really have to go." Brian runs from the car to the house, which is locked, and stands there shifting his weight from one leg to the other while he waits for Barb who slowly carries out three of the six bags of groceries. Once on the porch, Barb hands her son the bags, then unlocks the door. He shouldered his way into the house, drops the grocery bags on the hall floor and runs into the bathroom.

As Barb is carrying the second load of groceries into the house, Brian calls to her.

"Mom, I'm ready," he says.

“Did you flush?” Barb asks, as she walks past the bathroom into the kitchen.

“YES!” Brian is clearly frustrated by the question; Barb has been asking him every time lately and the answer is always yes, but in truth, even when he says yes he sometimes has forgotten to flush. And it's not that she actually minds when he doesn't flush—truth is, until recently Barb was as interested in the quality and texture of her son's droppings as she was in her son. But suddenly, unexpectedly, she is tired of it. She's been looking at it since the day he was born: enough is enough.

Barb sighs, looks down at the bags of groceries, then goes into the bathroom.

“What are you going to do when you go to college?” Barb asks, wiping Brian's bottom.

“You ask that all the time, Mom.”

“Well, what are you going to do?” Barb pulls a second wad of toilet paper from the roll and wipes again, just to be sure, insurance against having to use Shout on his underwear.

“I told you! I'll wipe myself when I go.”

Barb washes her hands and looks in the mirror at her son who is relaxing on the toilet reading a Sports Illustrated. He takes up as much space in a room as her husband—more even, if you add in his smells and noises. When he was four-years old and still not wiping his own bottom, her husband complained. He was offended that his wife, who was serving him dinner, would rise from the table to handle the boy's excrement. Barb wasn't a fighter and she usually let her husband dictate how things went, but on this issue she stood her ground, the basis for her argument being the presumption that by the time Brian was in school he'd be wiping himself. And now here is, larger than she ever imagined, a learner's permit tucked in the bottom of his left shoe, lawn-mowing earnings tucked into the bottom of his right shoe, and he has yet to wipe his own bottom.

When Brian was nine Hank wanted to send him to sleepaway camp. He found a camp, ordered the video and

brochures, then sat Barb and Brian down in the TV room to watch boys canoeing, hiking, singing songs around a campfire. Brian started crying immediately—he wasn't fooled by the canned, staged images. He knew there was an underside to camp: bullies, short-sheeters, perverted counselors, crafts with macaroni noodles and non-toxic paint. Barb cried, too. She wasn't worried about the counselors or the macaroni, she was worried that Brian wouldn't poop for the entire two weeks he was gone. He had shut down his bowels before when Barb had left him with her mother for a four-day overnight while she and Hank went to Florida. Hank had planned the trip as an anniversary present. He presented Barb with a brochure from the Sarasota Marriott and said, "My present to you is lots of Hanky-Panky with Hank!" But every night when Barb called her mother to check on Brian, she hung up the phone in tears. Brian hadn't made a B.M., her mother said, he wouldn't do it without his mommy. And then, when Hank climbed on top her after taking a shower and slicking his charcoal hair back with a comb, all she could think about was her son and the pain he must be in, holding it all in while he waited for his mommy.

"We can't do the camp," Barb had told Hank, "it will be dangerous to his system."

Hank argued his point for a while, but then gave up when the boy began wailing into his mother's lap. He didn't like to see his son like that—so attached to his mother, and so intimate with her body in ways that he himself wasn't.

By the time he was ten, Hank let himself believe the boy was wiping on his own. In truth, Brian had set his body clock to evacuate his bowels only after nine a.m. when his father was at work, or before six p.m. when his father came home. His usual schedule was to go once after school, around three-thirty, and often a second time around five-forty-five. On the weekends, if his father never left the house to run errands, Brian would hold it in, eating less and less, so that by Sunday dinner, he could barely put in a mouthful. Barb fretted and worried on those weekends, made special dinners that would help constipate her son, and tried to

drum up a reason for her husband to run out of the house. But really, those weekends were rare, as Hank was a man who liked to stay busy and usually had some project or another that required at least one trip to the hardware store each day on the weekend.

Barb returns to the kitchen and finishes putting the groceries away. Her son emerges, still reading *Sports Illustrated*. He plops down on a stool at the counter and grunts.

“What?” Barb asks.

“Still hungry,” he says.

“Did you flush again?” Barb asks.

“Yeah.”

Barb goes to the bathroom and checks. The discolored toilet paper sits in a swirly clump in the center of the bowl.

“You didn't flush again!” Barb calls.

“I'm hungry,” Brian says, when his mother returns to the kitchen.

Barb gets behind the counter and fixes a tomato, mozzarella and pesto sandwich for her son. It's a little exotic for her household, but she likes making it anyway, the sandwich makes her feel like she lives in New York, or Los Angeles rather than Bilbuoy, Maryland. Brian ate a tomato, mozzarella and pesto sandwich at his new friend Will's house—Will's mother had prepared it and Brian talked about it at dinner that night.

“Where do you get the pesto?” Barb had asked Will's mother on the telephone.

“I make it,” she said, “in the Cuisinart.”

Barb had never met Will's mother, but she knew from Will that they were from Manhattan and were living here because Will's father got a job transfer. Barb guessed Will's mother would be beautiful: long, chestnut hair, maybe, skinny, like a girl who might appear on the TV show *Friends*. Barb imagined Will's mother looking at her as they sat together at the next swim meet, taking in her stout Mother-Hubbard body, her clipped, manageable hair, her white Keds. She couldn't admit to a chestnut-haired woman that she

didn't really know what pesto was, or what you'd put in the Cuisinart to make it, so she said, "Of course," then got off the phone quickly and looked up pesto on the internet.

"This is like what I had at Will's," Brian grunts.

Barb is beaming. She can barely believe she pulled it off. She made pesto. She made a tomato, mozzarella and pesto sandwich just like a beauty from New York.

"Is it better than Will's mom's sandwich or worse?"

Brian shrugs and takes another bite.

"If there were only two sandwiches left on earth and you had to eat one of them, and one was made by Will's mom and other was the one that I made, which would you choose?"

Brian isn't listening.

"Is that the bread Will's mom used?" Barb asks.

Brian pulls the sandwich from his mouth and looks at it. The bread is brown and grainy. Barb bought brown grainy bread because that was the bread she imagined a woman from New York, probably wearing pointy-toed alligator boots, would buy. Barb had never bought brown bread before, it reminds her too much of cardboard.

"No, her bread was white."

"You mean like the bread we have?"

"Nah, it was different. It had, like this crust on it. Like it was all crust or something."

"Crusty bread?"

Brian goes back to his magazine and finishes the sandwich with one whopping bite.

Barb has a burning ball in her stomach. She wants to know exactly what type of bread Will's mother used. Barb prays that Will's mother didn't make the bread herself because Barb has baked bread before, and that is not an easy task.

"If Will calls will you let me talk to his mother?" Barb asks.

Brian ignores his mother and turns the page. It is four-thirty, Barb needs to get dinner started. She always starts dinner at four-thirty, though today she has been thinking about not starting

dinner at four-thirty. What if she started it at five? What if she started it at five-thirty? Barb feels she is a hamster trapped in orangey-yellow plastic tubing. She has never minded being this hamster—it's nice to feel the walls around you, it's nice to know where each end of the tube goes. But lately Barb has wondered what it would be like not to be the hamster. She wonders what it would be like to be someone else—someone more modern; someone who doesn't vacuum every day, or do the ironing; someone who doesn't wipe her son's bottom once or twice a day; someone who doesn't cook every meal and then say things like, “kitchen's closed,” when her husband wants a snack after the dishes are done.

As Barb is pounding out the meatloaf she recalls a conversation with the mother of one of Brian's classmates. The woman, Lidia, told Barb a story about buying an iron for her daughter's dollhouse. Her daughter had never seen an iron before and asked what it was. Lidia explained to the child that an iron was something people used in the olden days to get wrinkles out of their clothes. At the time, Barb thought that Lidia must be an unorganized fool—I mean who doesn't have their iron out every day? Who doesn't keep their ironing board in the laundry room, or at least folded up in a handy closet? But then Barb started watching people, spying on them almost, and slowly, very slowly (the way age or fat creep up) Barb realized that most people probably don't iron and that she, Barb, was the one who was out-of-sync with the world.

The morning of the next swim meet Barb changes her shoes three times. She always wears the Keds, but can't bring herself to do that today as she knows she will be meeting Will's mother. She finally decides on a pair of flat, peach, ballet-slipper-looking shoes which she wore with a peach dress to her cousin's wedding. She has seen women wearing colored shoes lately, she has a feeling that the peach shoes with jeans might be just the thing.

As she drives to the swim meet, Barb puts on the radio to distract herself from her thoughts. She can't help but think about Will's mother, her fancy sandwiches and her chestnut hair. The DJ on

WPOC is asking people to call in and tell a story about the most outrageous things they've done for their kids. One woman calls and says she once stayed up through the night sewing a Dorothy costume for her daughter to wear in the Halloween parade at school. A man says he quit a job when his boss wouldn't let him leave in the middle of the day for his son's Karate competition. Barb smiles when she hears these stories. She likes WPOC: she likes the DJs and the people who call in and the music they play. These are hamster people, too, Barb thinks, these are people who aren't interested in what's beyond the orangey-yellow tube. Before the DJ goes to a song, he asks for more people to call in. Barb digs her cell phone out of her handbag and sets it on her lap while she tries to think of the most outrageous thing she's done for Brian. Her mind is spinning like a slot machine as she runs through list after list of things she's done for Brian. Barb remembers the first time Brian had homework. He was in nursery school and he had to come up with two words that rhyme. Barb spent hours at the kitchen table cutting up poster board into street-sign-sized planks and writing rhyming words on either side. The next day, Brian wanted nothing to do with the rhyming placards, he had discovered his own rhyme: Mother, Smother. The entire drive to nursery school Brian repeated the words over and over again until Barb finally turned to him in the backseat and said, "Come now! Do you even know what that means? Do you even know what smother means?!" Of course he didn't, it was as meaningless to him as Dog, Rog, or Cat, Gat, two other rhymes he had thrown out during breakfast.

The song ends and a caller tells the story of when she was the Matron of Honor in her sister's wedding.

"All of a sudden my four-year old son had to go!" the woman says.

The DJ, whose voice makes Barb feel a little giddy asks, "Number one or number two?"

"Number two!" the woman answers, "if it had been number one my husband coulda took him, but being that it was number two, he was used to Mommy cleaning him up and all—"

“Well heck, he's only four!” Barb says aloud to the radio.

“So what'd you do?” The DJ asks.

“Well I'm standing up there and my son has this look on his face and my husband is mouthing to me that it's an emergency and I—“

“You didn't!” The DJ shouts.

“I did! I handed my bouquet to one of the bridesmaids beside me and I tiptoed away and took my son to the bathroom!”

Barb is laughing at this story as she pulls into the parking lot of Brian's school. She has a feeling that if she met this woman they would be fast friends. She would confess to her new friend that she still bends over her son's behind every day and wipes it clean. Her new friend would laugh and say something like, “Well heck! I bet I'll still be wiping Chip's behind when he's fifteen!”

Barb scans the bleachers for the unfamiliar face of Will's mother. A few people wave at her and she smiles and waves back. And then she sees a woman with feathery, short blond hair, big sunglasses and (Barb is pleased that she guessed this next one correctly) a figure as skinny as those girls on Friends. Barb klunks her way up the hollow, metallic bleachers and sits next to Will's mother.

“Hey there,” Barb says, smiling.

“Hi,” the woman says flatly.

“I'm Brian's mother, Barb.”

“Oh hi!” The woman is friendlier now. “I'm Will's mother, Daphne.”

Barb has never met anyone named Daphne, but she knows she's heard the name somewhere before. Is there a TV personality named Daphne? Barb does not want to ask in case it's obvious, someone she should know, like a news anchor on Sixty Minutes or someone in those popular HBO shows she keeps hearing about.

The subject of the sandwich comes up naturally and quickly, so Barb has no problem asking what kind bread Daphne uses.

“It was probably a baguette,” Daphne says, “I usually use a baguette when I make something like that.”

“You mean like those long, skinny French breads?” Barb asks.

After the swim meet Barb drives over to Eddie's Market where Daphne said she had bought her baguette. Brian moans as they pull into the parking lot.

"Why we stopping?"

"I need to buy a baguette for that sandwich you love."

"I gotta go to the bathroom," Brian says, "go later."

"But we're right here. Just hold it in a minute."

"I GOTTA go!" Brian says.

"Sweetheart," Barb is calm, "it will only take me a minute. I just gotta run in and buy one of those long, skinny breads."

"Mom," Brian sits up in the seat and leans toward his mother, "do you have any idea how hard I just swam? Do you have any idea how exhausted I am? All I wanna do is go home and go to the bathroom. Please!"

Barb puts the car in reverse and pulls out of the parking spot. Brian leans forward and changes the radio to the station he likes.

"How can you listen to that country music crap?" he asks.

"Don't curse," Barb says.

"Will's mom listens to black music."

"What do you mean?"

"We were in her car after practice the other day and she put in an OutKast CD."

"How do you know it was black music? Maybe it just sounded black? Everyone thought Elvis was black when he first came out."

"Mom, everyone except you knows who OutKast are. They're black."

"Well I'm glad that Will's mom is making herself so popular with you boys."

"She's not making herself popular, I'm just saying she doesn't listen to housewife music."

Brian reaches forward and turns up the volume. Then he rolls down his window, turns his head and sings out the open window as if his mother isn't even there.

When they get home, Brian heads straight for the bathroom. Barb stands outside the closed door waiting to be called to action,

her purse hanging neatly on her shoulder. Brian belches, loud and long, as if he's singing.

"Say excuse me," Barb says.

"I'm busy," Brian says.

Barb looks at the door and imagines kicking it. Brian would be stunned; Barb has never even kicked a soccer ball. Instead of kicking, Barb pulls her purse up higher on her shoulder, turns and walks out the door.

In the car, Barb changes the station back to WPOC. She arrives at Eddie's Market in the middle of a Tim Magraw song that she loves, so she sits in the parking lot for a couple minutes until the song ends and the advertising begins. When she goes into Eddie's Barb feels as if she's snuck out of the orangey-yellow plastic tube. This is a gourmet grocery store for people who regularly buy baguettes; people who don't need to look up pesto on the internet. Barb cruises the aisles the way she usually cruises the mall. She picks up a baguette, some coffee-colored meringues, and a cream tart with berries arranged on the top in an elegant pattern. During the drive home Barb feels a lightness in her back and shoulders; the trip to Eddie's was an indulgence, like a trip to a spa.

Back at the house everything looks frozen in time, just as she left it.

"WHERE WERE YOU?" Brian calls from the bathroom.

"I went to Eddie's to buy some of that long, French bread." Barb doesn't shout, she is speaking as if Brian is standing right beside her. She takes the bag of groceries into the kitchen, puts the tart in the refrigerator and the meringues in the cupboard. The baguette sits alone on the counter. Barb pulls the bread out of its paper sleeve and lays it on the cutting board. She examines the bread, trying to figure out how to cut it into sandwich slices: a big hunk off the end, then down the middle? Or small slices, as if she were cutting up a sausage?

Brian shuffles into the kitchen, his pants and underpants around his ankles, Sports Illustrated dangling from one hand. He glares at his mother who is holding up a serrated carving knife. Thankfully

Barb does not have to look directly at her son's genitals as his t-shirt is long enough to cover them.

"Mom," he says. "I'm ready!"

"Not now, Brian." Barb glances back and forth between her son and the baguette. "Mom! Please! I need you to wipe now!"

"I'm makin' a sandwich." Barb lowers the knife about a fifth of the way into the baguette. She has decided to lop off a hunk, then cut that hunk down the middle.

"Mom! What is wrong with you? I just took a dump, okay? I need you to wipe me! What do you expect me to do here?"

Barb looks up at her son. She is not sure what she expects him to do. She is not sure what she expects herself to do. All she knows is that right now she does not want to wipe his bottom. Right now she wants to make a tomato, mozzarella and pesto sandwich on a baguette.

"Just let me have my sandwich first," Barb says.

Barb turns on the kitchen radio and listens to WPOC while she eats her sandwich. It is a really good sandwich; she can't believe she didn't even taste it when she made one the other day for Brian. When she is finished, she washes her hands, wipes down the cutting board and puts away the tomatoes, the mozzarella and the pesto. She is unsure as to how to store the baguette: too long for the bread drawer or the refrigerator; quite likely to go stale if left out on the counter.

"I'm still waiting!" Brian calls from the bathroom.

Barb methodically cuts up the baguette into sandwich wedges and puts them in a plastic storage bag that she places in the refrigerator.

"Mom! My legs are falling asleep!" Brian sounds near tears.

Barb looks down at her peach shoes and a small content smile worms across her face.

