

Cheerios on the Sunday After

By Lauren Schmidt

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor DAVID KHOLAMIAN writes:*

A diary comes to life! Schmidt renders a tight milieu from the mind of a teenage girl within structure and poetry that packs power. This story makes use of the page space, breaking its brief narrative into punchy, sudden vignettes that quickly tip the plot's questions into startling scenes. This is a story defined by blood and the most fundamental red of shame. The culturally embedded Scarlet Letter is quickly deployed within this fast moving story as a lynchpin for a veritable fountain of red imagery, of blood pumping on the inside and bleeding on the outside; this is a story predominated by the contrast between internality and externality, on the animal strength of shame in adolescence, the crushing weight of appearance and the flight of the inner body towards freedom and maturity. "My heart pounds, pumping this red pepper, faster and faster until I can't make my arms move, my hands or my legs move. I can't think. I can't speak. My muscles and guts shake so badly from deep inside them that I drop everything I'm holding—my cell phone slides off my Physics textbook and crashes to the ground. The noise is loud enough to turn the heads of a few kids in the back of the circle, but I don't hear a thing."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is an excerpt from a work in progress. (Spacing and formatting is author's own.)*

The Slutty Girl

“Cheerios on the Sunday After”

There's something awful about seeing your mom on the morning after a party where something like that happens. She looks at you on your way to the bathroom in the hallway. She

sees your messy hair, your mascara smudged across your cheeks, the glitter in your eyeshadow just, like, everywhere. She sees that you're in the same t-shirt and jeans you were in last night, your fly open, which was all the undressing you could manage in the dark. She sees the deep pillow creases pressed into the right side of your face because you didn't move at all once your body crashed against the bed. And even though you won't get close enough to hug her, she can probably smell the Vape and beer on your breath, the guy you didn't really want to kiss but did, and sometimes, even puke.

But when you get down to the kitchen to force yourself to eat a bowl of cereal, even though you don't have the stomach for it yet, she's willing to put on the same little play with you.

"How was the party, honey? Did you have fun with your friends?" she'll say, her wide eyes looking over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Yeah, mom. It was really fun," you say. You stuff your mouth with a spoonful of Cheerios, a few wet ones falling from your bottom lip onto the table next to your bowl and into your lap. You pretend to be distracted by the mess you're making. You shove the stray Cheerio on your chin back into your mouth, pick up the ones that got away, and drop them back into the bowl. You devote more attention to your Cheerios than anything else in the room.

Your mother understands everything. "Oh good," she'll say. "I'm glad."

She continues to pretend to read her woman's magazine, happy that, after two years of fighting almost constantly with you, she knows when the questions should stop. She knows what to ask to get you to talk with her and what to avoid so you don't, like, flip the fuck out on her and hide away in your room for three hours. Your mom is, by your senior year, proud of herself because she's learned a little to let you go, even after what happened in tenth grade.

“It won’t be too long before you’ll be out of here, so I can’t watch over you all the time,” she’ll say, echoing your own idiot words back to you.

Normally, this little charade is OK, but on a Sunday like this—after your phone’s been blowing up with texts from a bunch of nervous football players, after all the not knowing what’s going to happen next to that girl, the girl you’ve been before, after feeling like you had something to do with the whole confusing mess of the night you can barely recall yourself—you don’t have it in you to carry the show on for too long. You know that changing the subject will only make her feel like she’s being too nosy again and your brain isn’t functioning well enough to make shit up in order to hold a conversation. All that’s left to do is to eat your Cheerios and scroll through your phone, hoping you aren’t in any of the pictures being sent around last night.

So far, so good.

And then his text message comes through.

The Slutty Girl

“Muscle Memory”

I feel my cheeks get hot, like, immediately, when I see what’s on the screen.

Ever since Sophomore Year, it doesn't take much for my body to do that to me. It doesn't matter that I'm two full years away from all that stuff that happened—all it takes is a second, and I'm, like, right back there again.

In Biology, we learned about this thing called Muscle Memory, which is basically, like, your body knowing how to do a certain movement without any real effort because your muscles are accustomed to doing the movement over and over again. So, like, riding a bike. That's why they say that it's as easy as riding a bike because your body knows how to ride a bike without your brain. That's why texting is so easy—you don't even have to think about it. Your fingers just know where the keys are and, boom, you hit "send" and you're done. And because your body doesn't need to think about what it's doing, it's, like, really good at doing the movement.

This is the only way I can describe how I feel right now. When I am reminded of anything that happened Sophomore Year, my body does this thing—like, my heart races, my face gets hot, but I'm somehow really cold, and I sort of tense up all over. When it's really bad, I can't really hear anything either, like my head is under ocean water. Since I spent most of Sophomore Year feeling this way, it doesn't take much for muscle memory to kick in, for my body to, like, take over itself, even if I don't want it to.

I know this feeling better than anything I have been taught in high school. I wish I could understand Physics or recite parts of *Macbeth*, but I can't. Part of that might be because we read *Macbeth* Sophomore Year and I don't remember anything about Sophomore Year. I get tense feelings just thinking about it and not because he gets his head cut off at the end or anything, but because that's what we were reading when I got called to the Guidance Counselor's office, first period in the morning. I heard my name and felt that heat in my cheeks.

And I know when it happens, my face is probably, like, really red, so I know it's just a matter of time before my mother looks up from her magazine and sees me. I get up to leave.

“Where you going, honey?”

Already at the sink, I go, “I have to get ready for work. I have to be at the diner by nine. Sunday's a big day for brunch.

The Muscle Memory is bad this morning, so I think I hear my mother say something about dinner.

“I should be home in time for dinner.”

I go upstairs and as I'm getting ready to take a shower, I hear my phone again.

This time, it's her.

I read it, put the phone down, and get ready for work. I am just, like, not in the mood to deal with this today. I'm just not.

But I also can't get her, like, off my mind. I am already out of the shower and blow-drying my hair before I realize I don't remember doing anything that came before. I don't remember getting undressed, or stepping into the shower. I don't remember shampooing or conditioning, toweling off, or even getting dressed again.

I wonder how much of my life am I going through like this, where everything I do is just done by my body, not some kind of willful act. How much am I even aware of what my body says yes to—the way I sit in desks in school, how I walk from one class to the next, the way I brush my hair in my locker mirror, the way I hold my pen. How much, in the last two years, have I just been, like, riding a bike?

Three more texts from her: *How am I gonna get out of here? Can you come get me? Pleeeeeeease?*

I specifically do not text her back.

This is the first actual choice I have made today.

The Slutty Girl

“Blood Hurricane”

From far away, it looks like the after-school crowd is gathered around my locker. Immediately, my blood vessels, like boiling clouds, pop and thunder throughout my body, blasting from my chest all the way to my knees, down and out my arms, into my fingertips and back up my throat to my face where the red heat gathers and hangs in my cheeks. My heart pounds, pumping this red pepper, faster and faster until I can't make my arms move, my hands or my legs move. I can't think. I can't speak. My muscles and guts shake so badly from deep inside them that I drop everything I'm holding—my cell phone slides off my Physics textbook and crashes to the ground. The noise is loud enough to turn the heads of a few kids in the back of the circle, but I don't hear a thing.

Some freshman girl asks, "Are you OK?" I can't answer her, but it's her eye contact—the horrified worry glittering in her eyes—that brings me back from this storm of hot blood blowing through me.

I give her a quick nod and inch towards the circle of kids. Slowly, as if fighting the winds of my hurricane, kids I know and kids I don't part for me the way a crowd of commoners parts for a queen, the way a mob does for an outlaw on his way to the guillotine—I'm not really sure which and my body doesn't think there's much of a difference anyway.

With everyone out of the way now, I realize that it's not my locker with red spray paint slicing across it, but the locker to the right of mine. Her locker. The locker of the girl who hasn't responded to my texts, who hasn't shown up to school at all this week, the girl who was supposed to be the savior of my senior year, the girl I might never see again.

The thing about my hurricane is that when all the blowing around settles, I am left so weak I can barely do anything. I turn into a zombie. The hallways grow quiet and still, which makes it easier to calm down. And even though everyone else has left, I stand there, alone, staring, not at the whole word, but the first letter of it, the S, the way the spray paint, collected and bled because the can was held too close to the small metal door, the way the swell of the S gently swoops across the hinge of her locker onto mine, the way the bottom of the S bleeds in three long drips and falls to the floor, the linoleum freckled with spattered red.

And suddenly I'm flashing back to the bathroom, standing there, over the girl who used to be my best friend, the girl who used to be my everything, the girl who cut herself up because of Big Blue and The List, the girl who cut me off two years ago, halfway through our Sophomore Year, the girl I will probably never see again.

She was sitting under the window on the right wall of the bathroom, cuts all up and down her arm, her blood falling in slow drops to the floor.

“Oh my God, what did you do?”

Not thinking, I dropped to my knees and grabbed her arms to stop the blood, which was warm and thick beneath my fingers. She didn't have it in her to pull her arms away from me, which I was grateful for—I couldn't handle her rejecting me in the Girls' Bathroom that way again.

I was a sophomore when naked pictures of me were sent around school. I had taken them for my boyfriend at the time, who was a senior. What was really bad was that the pictures were leaked when we were still together. It wasn't that long after I gave him those pictures that they were all over the place. He was the only person I had ever done anything like that for—I thought we were in love. I wasn't having sex with him—actually, we weren't doing much of *anything* at the time. I said I wasn't ready. He asked me if I could take pictures so he could see what he was doing all the hard work of waiting so long for.

In my stupid sophomore head, I thought that was a reasonable request.

And if I'm being honest, it made me feel kind of sexy, knowing that someone wanted to see me naked that bad.

So, I made a thing of it. I sat in my bedroom for hours trying to get the right angles:

I messed my hair around just the right way.

I half-closed my eyes to get that *don't-you-want-me* look in them.

I put lip gloss on my lips and pout them out, like all those female celebrities on Instagram and Snapchat.

I angled my face in a particular way because I never liked my nose.

I lowered my chin to look mysterious and sexy.

I practiced all kinds of poses trying to look as skinny as possible.

I pushed up my boobs with my free hand to get more cleavage.

I tried different levels of lighting, from really bright to really dim.

And when I had a bunch of photos on my phone, I played around with, like, *every* filter to see which was the most flattering: black and white, denim, soft glow.

By the time I was done, I must've had over a hundred photos of me and parts of me—eyes, lips, breasts, belly. I couldn't really bring myself to take anything other than topless ones because I felt really embarrassed trying to get a good shot of anything below the belly button. In the end, I was topless in only two of the ten photos I sent my boyfriend, and even those pictures weren't all that bad. They weren't nasty, like, porno pictures or anything. They were just a little naughty. But trust me, that was enough.

I remember the guidance counselor calling me into her office. It was, like, the longest morning ever, and I was so grateful that someone wanted to talk to me. But instead of asking me about how I felt now that the entire school had seen me in all these embarrassing shots trying teenager-hard to look sexy, she gave me a bunch of pamphlets about safe sex, STDs, and pregnancy. I was so pissed. I wasn't called in to talk—I was called in to listen. She wasn't trying to protect me—she was trying to protect herself, the school, or whoever. Not me. Who knows, maybe she even judged me. I refused to take them, told her to go fuck herself and left, but when I reached Biology, I realized that they had been stuffed into the mesh water bottle sling on my backpack. Fucking pamphlets. I couldn't handle the irony of being given all this reading material on sex when I wasn't even *having* sex.

I took the pictures so I didn't *have to have* sex.

They were supposed to buy me time.

But what they *did* do was cost me my best friend. The morning all the pictures came out, she texted me to meet her in the bathroom first period. She was in there, like, hysterical crying in a confusing mixture of anger and sadness. *How could I do this* she asked me over and over again, almost as if I had done something to *her*, like my mistake was going to follow *her* around because she was my best friend.

By the time she was done ripping into me, I was in tears too, apologizing and shaking my head over and over again. I felt ashamed more because of her reaction than anyone else's and I was, like, dying for her forgiveness. I reached for her for a hug, the kind of hug we've hugged a million times over the years when shit's gone wrong. But she threw her hands up and shook her head. Then she squeezed herself passed me out the door.

I had a stink on me in her eyes and she couldn't afford to get any of it on her. Not in *this* school. That shit follows you. I didn't understand why she did that then, but looking back, I can't say I blame her. Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt, though.

But there we were again, a year later, after a year of not talking, me holding her blood in my hands. She didn't snatch her arms away like she did a year ago. I thought she might actually talk to me.

"Why did you do this? Why would you try to hurt yourself?"

"I just can't take this fucking place anymore."

“That’s no reason to kill yourself,” I say. I’m shaking and a little sick at the metal smell of blood, the way it’s starting to glue my fingers to her arm. I didn’t know what else to do but stay there.

“I’m not trying to kill myself. I do this sometimes because it makes me feel better. I just did it more than usual today. Look, the cuts aren’t deep enough to kill me. Promise.”

She pulled her arms to show me. She was right that the cuts weren’t deep, but there were a lot of them. Then was like, “Can you do me a favor?”

“Yes, of course. Anything.”

“Can you get the nurse? I don’t feel good. I think I need to go home. My parents are gonna be so pissed I did this again, but I would rather face them than stay here the rest of the day.”

“Again? What do you mean *again*?”

“I started this last year, after our fight, I guess. It’s weird, but it helps me cope with how stressed out I can get sometimes.”

I started to cry. Did this mean she misses me? Maybe this was my chance to get her back and maybe I wouldn’t be so lonely anymore. I had so many questions, but looking at the blood, I knew those would have to wait.

I stood up, washed off what blood I could. “Stay here, OK? I’ll be right back with the Nurse. Is it safe to leave you like this?”

“Stay here. Like I can really leave…”

I frowned at her. To get me on my way, she said, “I’m OK. No arteries or anything. Really. But I am pretty tired. Once the high goes away, I’m always, like, wiped out.”

When I told the Nurse, she called 911, the Principal and the Guidance Counselor. After paramedics wheeled her away, I stood outside the Girls’ Bathroom, just staring at the door. They put one of those yellow caution signs where you see some, like, genderless body in the middle of falling to the ground due to a slippery floor. Someone in the main office typed up a sign that said “Out of Service” and taped it over the teeny girl symbol.

I am in the same stupid stance right now, standing in front of my own locker, the wind in my chest finally slowing. I hear a classroom door to the left of me open, keys jangling to lock it, and then the door click closed. Just like this morning, I knew he was standing there looking at me, probably wanting to say something, but not knowing how.

I turn to him, but say nothing.

He says in as calm a teacher-voice as he can manage, “Stay here, OK? I’ll call the Principal,” and hurries off, almost running.

Stay here, he says. Like I can leave.

No, I can’t leave. I stand here now, I have stood here before, I will be standing here forever, staring at the part of my locker stained red with that tiny bend of S, blood hurricane thundering in my ears.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Written in the voices of various unnamed teenagers (and a few adults), my YA novel is very loosely inspired by the Steubenville, OH rape case. The novel takes place in the immediate aftermath of the sexual assault and attempts to reveal the culture behind a tragedy such as this, which not only includes the rape itself, but the community's willingness to blame the young woman, as well as the ardent defense of the football team and the two boys, who were charged and eventually convicted. The Slutty Girl is the novel's protagonist—she is called this because this is how she feels about herself. The Slutty Girl represents the many women who suffer their own sexual assault, as she does, in silence and in self-loathing. As the Steubenville case played out on the national stage, it became apparent that, even though many teenagers were present, not one of them stepped up to help her—at least not in a way that was successful. Instead, many were laughing and celebrating the sexual humiliation of this young woman through pictures, texts, and posts on social media. The summer before my senior year in high school, I got deliriously drunk at a small gathering in the presence of my male peers, many of whom were football players and other high school athletes. But nothing like that happened to me. They took care of me, cleaned me up, and dropped me off at home, hours past my curfew. Cell phones and social media didn't exist then, but I am confident I wouldn't have had to worry about being so deeply disgraced. So, when this story came out of Steubenville, I wanted to know why this young woman couldn't have been cleaned up and dropped off at home to get grounded for six months by her parents. What are the values and beliefs systems of a community like Steubenville that shape the culture and create the conditions for something like this to happen? And because Steubenville is not unique, because the events that happened there can happen in other places just as easily, my novel answer that question.

AUTHOR'S BIO:

Lauren Marie Schmidt is the author of three previous collections of poetry: *Two Black Eyes and a Patch of Hair Missing*; *The Voodoo Doll Parade*, selected for the Main Street Rag Author's Choice Chapbook Series; and *Psalms of The Dining Room*, a sequence of poems about her volunteer experience at a soup kitchen in Eugene, Oregon. Her work has appeared in journals such as *North American Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Rattle*, *Nimrod*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *PANK*, *New York Quarterly*, *Bellevue*

Literary Review, The Progressive, and others. Her awards include the So to Speak Poetry Prize, the Neil Postman Prize for Metaphor, The Janet B. McCabe Prize for Poetry, and the Bellevue Literary Review's Vilcek Prize for Poetry. Her fourth collection, *Filthy Labors*, chronicles her volunteer teaching experience at a transitional housing program for homeless women in her native New Jersey. Schmidt is currently at work on a Young Adult novel. You can read her interview *10 Questions for Lauren Schmidt* at *The Massachusetts Review*.

EDITOR'S BIO:

'David Kholamian is a writer and poet living outside of Chicago, IL. He has had poetry published in Milk Journal and DePaul's Crook & Folly as well as creative nonfiction in Chicago's MAKE Lit journal. He currently has a finished manuscript lying around somewhere, waiting to creep its way into the hands of some unsuspecting and prominent literary agent.' His story *Mile End* was published in Issue 5 (Fiction)