
December 2019

The Perfect Bubble

Elizabeth Orwig
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>



Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Orwig, Elizabeth (2019) "The Perfect Bubble," *The Hilltop Review*. Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol12/iss1/11>

This Creative Writing is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

The Perfect Bubble

By Elizabeth Orwig

This morning he told me to stop stressing out so much.

“Just sleep,” he had said. “Today is your day to relax.” I remember saying that I didn’t think I would be able to stop stressing out, especially with him being away. “Just pretend like I’m here. Just pretend it’s a regular Sunday morning, we don’t have to work. We can do whatever we want all day.” I smiled at him, grateful that he always had the ability to relax me, even for a moment. The window in our bedroom was tall and narrow, allowing a slip of sunlight to come in and dance off of our pale green walls. I closed my eyes and leaned back against him, savoring the moment.

It’s Tuesday, September eighth, and I’m still in my bed at nine in the morning. I roll over and grab my phone off of the nightstand beside me. The screen is so bright, but I can’t help but smile at the photo of us. His arms wrapped around me, my head against his chest, it was a perfect moment. I pressed my finger against the home button, unlocking the screen, and begin going through notifications. I had a lot of text messages this morning, more than usual.

Mom: Good morning honey. I hope you’re doing okay today. If you need company just let me know, you shouldn’t be alone today.

Chelsea: Hey girl. I know today is gonna be hard, but I’m here for you.

Riley: Hey. If you need anything today let me know. I know I don’t live as close to you and mom anymore, but I’d come back for my little sister.

Marissa: Hey, are we still getting coffee today? I will get you out of that house, especially today!

I couldn’t think of why they all seemed concerned, I mean, I guess I was kind of sad that Matthew was gone on a business trip, but that didn’t mean I needed people to treat me like this. I quickly responded to everyone, basically telling them that I was okay, thanks anyway. I told Marissa we could get coffee if she wanted, but that I felt nauseous this morning, which was only kind of a lie (I did feel a bit queasy for some reason). I pulled the lavender sheets back over my shoulders, they were silk because Matthew had insisted that I deserved nothing less.

I remember the day he bought them like it was yesterday: he had been angry with me because I had spent all day with Chelsea and hadn’t done his laundry in time for work the next day. He came home and immediately turned angry. My skin quickly became covered in goosebumps as I prepared for the angry, passive-aggressive Matthew I had come to know well. He announced that he was going to sleep on the couch to leave me to think about the “issues” I had, and how to be a better girlfriend. But, the next afternoon he came home with the silk sheets and told me that I was perfect and deserved nothing less. I knew that

because he bought me the sheets and said what he did, that I was forgiven. I just needed to try harder to be better. And I know I have been. I briefly wondered where our dog, Oliver, was. But before I could really question it I was lulled back to sleep.

It was eleven in the morning when I woke up again. This time, when I checked my phone I had only one notification, it was just a snapchat from Chelsea. I guess the rest of them decided to leave me alone, for the time being, anyway. Even though she hadn't left me a message, I had a feeling my mom would stop by regardless. I felt a tugging in my stomach, not quite a stomach ache, but nerves—the kind you get when you know you did something wrong. I thought about Matthew, I did that a lot whenever he wasn't around. It was weird that I hadn't heard from him yet today. I was about to check my text conversation with him, when I heard a banging on my door. I groaned, climbing out from underneath my sheets and blankets. I had on a white silk nightgown (Matthew insisted that I wear it. "White makes you pure," he'd said). It was chilly, so I grabbed my long-fuzzy-purple robe. I rushed to the door, again wondering where my dog was and why he wasn't running behind me. I looked through the peep-hole, and sure enough there was my mother. Sighing, I opened the door.

"Claudia! You still haven't gotten out of bed?"

"Hello to you too, mom."

She sighed, wrapping me into a hug. "I'm sorry, honey, it's just that we're all so worried about you today." She then stepped inside my house, looking incredibly dissatisfied.

"Mom, I'm fine. Really. I don't understand why everyone is so worried about me today. It's not a big deal."

My mom gave me a look, the kind that made me feel like she felt very sorry for me. It was like she felt guilty. "Okay, honey. How about you shower and we go get some lunch, okay?"

I nodded, knowing I wasn't going to win this battle.

"Alright, whatever. I have food in the kitchen, help yourself."

I went back to our room and shut the door. I slipped out of the silk nightgown, tossing it on the bed. Where's Olly? I wanted to go look for him, but I knew my mom would have none of that, at least not until I'd showered.

I walked across our soft, white carpet into the bathroom, stepping onto the cool-smooth white tile. Matthew liked white. No, he *loves* white. I turned the shower on and stood in front of my mirror for a moment. I looked different, thinner. I wasn't sure why. I stepped into the shower and couldn't help but wonder why Matthew's things were gone. Maybe he took them with him? But, he'd always had that travel pack he took everywhere... I shrugged it off, and began shampooing my hair.

My mom insisted on buying me lunch and making sure I ate most of it. I really felt very nauseous though, so eating was a difficult task. I couldn't get Matthew off my mind. I knew he probably wouldn't approve of me spending all day with my mother, though he did understand that I had to see her sometimes. He told me that she wasn't good for our relationship because she always tried to put ideas into my head, and he was right. Later, as we were walking through the mall, I decided to talk to my mom about this. She only meant well, after all.

"Mom?"

"Mhmm?" she responded.

"I think I need to talk to you about Matthew"

She got a strange look on her face, it was almost like relief. "What about him?"

"Well, he thinks you disapprove of us and that you are bad for our relationship. I think he's right."

My mom sighed, and looked at me shaking her head slowly. "Claudia. We have already talked about this. Matthew doesn't like me because I see what you can't. I see the way he talks to you, even when your brother and I are around."

I felt anger boiling up inside of me. Everyone always told me that Matthew was bad. But, he *loves* me! They are all wrong. "Whatever. Forget it. I'm not arguing about this with you. I just probably should stop seeing you so much. Matthew loves me so much and does so much for me, I don't want to do anything to make him uncomfortable."

My mom didn't even look angry, just sad. "Okay, honey. Let's take you home."

I felt guilty, and a little bit of me hated Matthew for making me put a wedge between me and my mother, but his love was worth it.

When we got back, my mom insisted that we watch TV for awhile. It was coming up on seven in the evening, I was beginning to wonder if she would ever leave. We were sitting on the plush tan couch, watching Food Network, although I wasn't sure what show we were watching; I kept thinking about Matthew too much to pay attention. "Have you seen Oliver?" I asked her, remembering that I still hadn't seen our little ball of fluff. I had wanted a big dog like a German Shepherd, but Matthew insisted that smaller dogs are better. "They can't attack you that way", he'd said, hugging me so tightly I thought I might break. Oliver had a habit of hiding and sleeping the day away, but he should have shown himself at this point.

"What? Oliver? You haven't mentioned him in awhile... Are you sure you're okay?"

I was getting annoyed, Why was I being treated like there was something wrong with me. "Why do you keep asking me that? Why wouldn't it be? Matthew is just gone for business, he'll be back in a few days. I just want to find my dog."

As I spoke, tears welled up in my mother's eyes. "Honey... I thought we'd gotten past this. That's why you're allowed to be here again. You promised this was over."

Again? What was she talking about? “Mom? What are you saying? Gotten past what? I told you, I’m fine!” The tugging in my stomach was getting worse.

“Claudia. Four years ago today, Matthew died.” She said the words in a slow, careful voice. But they didn’t register right away.

“What? Why?” That’s all I could say. My stomach was starting to feel sick now.

“He did go on a business trip, on September 8th, 2015.” She swallowed harshly. “He was killed in a freak accident, a car crash that tumbled off the side of the road in New York.”

I didn’t register any of what she was saying. “But, I just saw him... it was...” When did he last hold me? It couldn’t have been last night, the sun was shining when that happened. But I didn’t see him this morning, did I? I swallowed, trying to keep the nausea down.

“I’m sorry, honey. It’s been four years, One year since you were told by your therapist that you could live here again. You insisted that you just loved this house, and it’s close to your work. He said you’d overcome the trauma, clearly he was wrong.” She seemed angry, almost.

“But, where’s Oliver?” I couldn’t think of anything else. My mind wasn’t working.

“Matthew took him away about a week before he left on that trip, honey. He was mad at you for something I don’t know what...”

I was remembering now. “Because I told him you thought he was bad for me.”

I felt obligated to pretend I believed her, even though I kind of did. But I also felt so angry at her. I had brief flashes returning to me now. Silk sheets on the ground. So many white tissues that they formed another layer atop the white carpet. Me checking my phone, nothing from Matthew—more tissues. And now, I was remembering. My mother going through the bathroom, throwing away his things. I’d wanted to keep them. I wanted to pretend he was coming back, that was the only way I could sleep that night. “I’ll face it tomorrow,” I’d just kept saying. But really, I never did face it. I wasn’t going to now, either.

“Claudia?” My mother asked, she looked so worried.

“Yeah...” I croaked. My throat felt swollen.

She pulled me into her arms, squeezing me tight. “You know, it was for the best that he’s gone. He hurt you so badly. He made you feel like you weren’t worth anything. He abused you in the way that leaves invisible bruises.”

I felt angry. “How can you say that? Especially if he really is gone?” He isn’t. “Matthew treats me like a princess. He says I only deserve silk, and white to be pure because princesses are pure. He says I don’t need anyone but him to be happy. How can you say it’s good that he’s gone?!”

“Oh, goodness.” My mother sighed, she began stroking my hair. I felt tears drip onto the sleeve of my shirt. I wasn’t sure if they were hers, or mine.

It was ten-thirty at night. I'd finally convinced my mom to go to bed, although she insisted on staying the night on the couch. I crawled into my own bed. I hoped Oliver would come out from hiding tomorrow. I thought about what my mom had told me. I winced. I thought about Matthew screaming at me, telling me I was disgusting. "You have to wear this nightgown, it's white. You need to become pure. You're disgusting. But only I love you enough to put up with it." I shook my head in order to physically shake the memory away. It couldn't be real, I can't survive if I allow it to be real.

I plugged my phone in, smiling at the lock screen. The perfect moment. I burrow beneath the silk green sheets. Silk, because Matthew insisted I deserved nothing less. He loved me so much. I felt the tugging in my stomach again, but I closed my eyes. I remembered that moment, when he told me to relax, stop stressing out so much.

"Just sleep", he said. I smiled. Only he could love me that much, no one else would be able to. That moment felt so far away, but really, I knew that was just this morning. I did what he said, I pretended he was behind me. That his arm was wrapped around my waist. That he was there. And, maybe it was just the weight of the sheets, but it felt like he was.