



Booth

Volume 2 | Issue 9

Article 3

12-17-2010

Playing House

Sarah Scoles

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth>

Recommended Citation

Scoles, Sarah (2010) "Playing House," *Booth*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 9 , Article 3.

Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/booth/vol2/iss9/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Booth by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Playing House

Abstract

Every night, Sam and I can hear our downstairs neighbors fighting. They fight about whether cooked green beans should crunch or not, whether inadequate pre-washing has led the dishwasher to produce speckled plates after its cleaning cycle or not, whether red wine can ever really go with fish or not, and whether it is possible to track down all the pieces of their relationship and superglue them together again. Or not.

Keywords

rocket, growing up, fighting, memories



[ABOUT](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [LINKS](#) [NEWS](#) [SUBMIT](#)

Playing House

by Sarah Scoles

Every night, Sam and I can hear our downstairs neighbors fighting. They fight about whether cooked green beans should crunch or not, whether inadequate pre-washing has led the dishwasher to produce speckled plates after its cleaning cycle or not, whether red wine can ever really go with fish or not, and whether it is possible to track down all the pieces of their relationship and superglue them together again. Or not.

“The problem is that I’m only willing to pay for Elmer’s glue, and that just won’t cut it this time,” says the woman.

“Well, maybe if you’d invested more in the first place, we wouldn’t need to buy any glue at all. You never think in the long-term,” says the man.

“Is that why I planned out our future for us? You didn’t follow the plan, because you want to put your full efforts into ‘helping the community’ and can’t be bothered with good jobs or quality time with me. What does ‘community’ even mean? What if we had a child?”

“Jesus Christ, how can you talk about having a child when we’re like this?”

Every night, the sounds of conflict eventually dampen, in the way that springs bounce less and less and less and less. Some nights, the verbal abuse fades into creaking wood and hospitable grunting. This, oddly, seems less intimate than

arguments.

Sam and I lie on our respective sides of the bed reading like respectable couples do before sleeping. She puts her book down and stares at its cover.

"I kissed Kara Novak on Halloween," she says. Her hands are holding the comforter against her mouth. "We were twelve. I didn't even know I knew she was pretty. She was a witch, go figure."

If I stay quiet long enough, she will say more. Given a little silence, she usually decides that her dream-quick thoughts are worth verbalizing.

"I thought that I was so big, you know? I thought that I knew things, almost every thing. I thought, *We're almost grown up*. And not because we'd kissed. No. We'd kissed in the first place *because* we were almost grown up. A few more inches, some menstrual cycles. That's all," she says. "Kara's married now."

"I'm sorry," I say.

Some people move easily forward along their timelines, hardly considering what is to the left of them. And some people have timelines that are all collapsed and curled, so that what is to the right squirms up and smashes what's to the left, or what's here now: Sometimes when Sam is twenty-nine she's actually five and wobbling down Beech Avenue on her first two-wheeler, and sometimes she's twelve and dressing up for Halloween and feeling nervous without knowing why, and sometimes she's only twenty-nine again and understanding why but wanting to be just twenty-nine, nothing else. This is something Sam and I have in common.

"It's called Intrusive Recollection Disorder," Sam told me once. "It's a technical term. But it's only clinical if it causes 'persistent and marked distress.'"

"Well, does it?" I asked.

"Who wants to be twelve again, Emily?" she said.

"In my seventh-grade yearbook," she says now, "Kara just wrote *Halloween*. No signature. Just *Halloween*, with a little curlicue underneath."

"That's pretty clever for a twelve-year-old."

"I told you," she said. "We were all grown up."

When I was twelve years old, I told Elaine Taylor that I would build her a rocket.

"I'm going to build us a rocket," I said to her when we were wandering around a construction site in Kingsbridge Heights, our incomplete neighborhood. "So we can get away from here."

She was standing at the top of a set of stairs that ended there, at the top. They were thus stairs in the purest form, fulfilling only their goal: to go up. Light from a streetlamp came through the second-story window and hit the right half of her face. It was as if she were the moon, the lamp the sun, and I the earthbound observer, looking up at her first quarter phase.

"Why do we need to get away from here?" she asked. Only I knew.

She hopped down the steps and was soon in the darkness with me. Moments always moved like this when I was around her: one second high and bright, the next shadowy and grounded.

"I mean, why not, right?" I said. "If we were on a rocket, your mom wouldn't be wondering where we were right now. Because we'd be on a rocket."

I fingered the beam next to me, being careful to keep my hand away from the insulation. My mother had warned me about insulation. "It's made of tiny particles that get under your skin," she said. "You'll itch, but they won't come out, so you'll keep itching."

"You're projecting," Elaine said, a verb she'd learned from her mother. "*Your* mother is wondering where we are right now, even though she doesn't even have a reason to think we left my house."

"Well, maybe I'll just build myself a rocket, then," I said, hurt, as I often was around Elaine, because I took every word she said as either an acceptance or a rejection of my personhood.

"You can't leave me behind," she said. "You can't."

"I could so," I said, because I wouldn't.

Elaine ran back up the stairs and surveyed the undivided house, which was really just a rectangle that happened to be protected from the elements. The space could have become anything.

"This could be our launch pad," she said.

"Definitely," I said, though it would have made a terrible launch pad, given that crashing through the half-roof would have been an inefficient use of fuel. But it

was important to me that Elaine think she was right until she forgot what she'd said, so that when I contradicted her, she wouldn't even know. She sat down on the landing and moved her hand toward the pink, exposed wall.

"Don't touch that," I said. "You'll get hurt."

"Let me make my own mistakes," she said, another theft from her mother, but still she pulled her hand back, making the light shift across her finger bones.

Mine didn't stick out enough to make shadows, though sometimes I pulled the skin tight across them to see what I would look like if I were more like Elaine.

"Thanks for letting me sleep over at your house," I said.

She was my best friend—I didn't need to thank her.

"You're welcome," she said. "Let's get back before the bogeyman gets us."

We already said "bogeyman" like it was a joke, not something to worry over our shoulders about. We had some sense of what was true and what was false, as if life were a test we were preparing to pass. False: Life is a test. True: No one in this town was going to build a rocketship, although if Elaine had asked me seriously, in all seriousness I would have said, "I have already bought the parts on eBay with my mom's credit card." The pragmatism of that imagined statement, though, meant that I was already tethered to the sharp edge of the real world.

We were, that night, on the brink. The brink of many things, really: of finding ourselves turning into real people, of finding out that we couldn't just nose around no-trespassing zones, of finding hairs beneath our zippers, of finding that our creative powers were fading. At a certain point, after all, people become incapable of saying, "You be a unicorn, and I'll be a dinosaur, and we'll just spend an hour doing that."

"Watch this," Elaine said, as she jumped from the middle of the staircase. "I'm a bird."

"Now you tell me something," Sam says. "Something about when you were little."

"How little?" I ask. "What age?"

"Well, I just did twelve. So twelve."

"Um," I say. "Hm. Give me a minute."

She does. She puts her hand on my clavicle and her head on my chest, and she mouths all the numbers from one-one-thousand to sixty-one-thousand. Her breath barely breaks across my skin.

“You know what?” I say. “I don’t think anything happened to me when I was twelve.”

She sits up, pressing her hand down into my collarbone for support. This is what support feels like: pressure, not entirely unpleasant, but capable of breaking bones.

“What do you mean nothing happened?” she says. “It’s seventh grade, the worst year of everyone’s life in the entire world, and you’re telling me nothing happened.”

I pull on her earlobe to make her face come down and kiss me, but she dislodges herself and stands up at the edge of the bed, crossing her arms over the Barney the Dinosaur t-shirt I gave her the first year we were together.

“I don’t understand why, after all this time, you don’t think you can confide in me,” she says. “Look, I know you were a nerd, so it’s not like whatever you say is going to surprise me and make me say, ‘Oh, really, this is my cohabitating partner? I had no idea she was such a loser. I’d better pack my things, but not any stuff she touched, because there’ll be cooties.’”

“It’s not that,” I say.

When I was twelve, I used to think, “When I look back on this time, I won’t remember the Law of Cosines, and I won’t remember what my History of the Americas textbook looks like, and I won’t remember how many minutes were between the class bells. When I look back on this time, I will remember a person, that person.” I think the same thing about now and Sam.

I move to pat the bed, to motion for Sam to come back. At the same time that my hand hits the mattress, there is an outburst from upstairs, and the synchronicity causes me to think I’ve made something terrible happen.

The upstairs woman, punctuating her words with the banging of cupboards, says, “I don’t know why I wasted my goddamn time on you. You can’t even admit that you were wrong about the grocery bags. You don’t even listen to me when I say what I’m saying.”

The man: “Maybe I would listen to you if some worthwhile words were coming out of your mouth. But all I hear is a factory of queen bees buzzing around

inside your face.”

“See,” she says, “that doesn’t even make any sense. I can’t be with someone who can’t even make a sensical sentence.”

Sam, who has been standing silent next to our bed, gets back in and winds herself around me.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“Me too,” I say.

When we leave to get coffee the next morning, all the neighbors’ furniture is on the front porch, so dense we can hardly get through.

Please take this memorabilia, says a Sharpied sign.

“I want that bureau,” Sam says. “It’s quirky.”

Elaine was the first seventh grader to become weird. I was, therefore, the second. She began stringing neon beads together and wearing them, 60s-style, across her forehead. She dragged a Wite-Out pen across her backpack, calling up unevenly thirderd peace signs and clauses like “circuses are cruel to elephants” and “socialism lives.”

I bought *Utopia* and tried to slip its lines into casual conversation.

“Look at Mike Bixon following Carey around,” Elaine said. “It’s pathetic. He’d do whatever she said, even if it involved knives.”

“Reason directs us to keep our minds as free from passion and as cheerful as we can,” I replied.

“Yes,” Elaine said, still fixated on the chase. “Absolutely.”

My mother’s trips to the thrift store, formerly embarrassing, now seemed the perfect opportunities to find articles of clothing that would alert people to the fact that I was an individual.

When I wore a Mickey Mouse dress with a layered skirt, Mike Bixon said, “Isn’t that a dress for children?”

I said, “It’s ironic.”

Elaine, always just close enough, shut her locker. “You just don’t get subtlety,

Mike.” She turned to me. She always did, eventually. “You look really individual right now,” she said. “I think the ironic child is a grown-up look.”

We thought we wanted to be grown-ups, but we actually wanted to be teenagers. Who else would, like I did, Sharpie the word “idealist” onto a pair of cutoff shorts from the blue-tag men’s section of the Salvation Army?

“Teenagers,” my mother said one weekday when I had already spent an hour on the phone with Elaine. “Didn’t you spend all day with her?”

“We’re in different math classes,” I said. “Elaine,” I said into the mouthpiece, “are there any Emilies in your geometry?”

“Emily Smith is there,” she said.

“No,” I said. “I mean any *mes*. Any people who are your new Emily.”

“Never,” she said.

I pulled my German Army-style button-down tight across my planed chest.

“Let’s take some of this furniture back inside,” I say to Sam. “We wouldn’t want someone to steal our potential new possessions.”

“Really?” Sam says as if I have never contributed anything so great. “I want this, too.” She points to a vintage vinyl chair.

“That’s all yours,” I say. “This is mine.” I point to a creamy, hard-carved end table.

“And this is mine,” she says, touching an oak nightstand.

“I claim this one.”

We stake our territory. We stake out all new furniture, nicer than any we could get on our own. Neither of us, though, says, “We want this one. This one for us.” We are already dividing it, so we won’t have to later.

After we lug the furniture inside, it takes over the living room, and each piece waits for one of us to give it a new home.

“It’s kind of creepy, isn’t it?” Sam says, surveying. “Having the spoils of their war in our place? It seems like bad luck.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say, because I’m not sure it will be. I have learned that a large part of a successful relationship is saying most emphatically that things will be okay when you know least certainly that they will be. I say, “That was upstairs; this is downstairs. Everything will be different. All this means is that we’ll sleep better because they won’t be slamming any of this stuff around.”

I used to put myself to sleep by imagining Elaine passing out. In my nighttime daydreams, she became faint and withered toward the floor. I—what a hero—caught her before she spilled her brain-blood all over the speckled tile. She always collapsed in the Earth/Space Science classrooms at Kingsbridge Heights Middle School.

I laid her on a lab table and, always prepared for the catastrophes I made up, pulled an already warmed washcloth from my pocket.

“It’s all right,” I said, and it was.

“Sh, don’t speak,” I said and put my finger to her lips.

When she fell asleep, which she always did, she twitched her fingers like Morse Code. This was the only way I could save her.

I did feel bad about mentally harming her just so that I could make everything better, but I assuaged my guilt by remembering that my imagination, like everyone’s imagination at age twelve, was beginning to fail.

Imagination fades gradually, so that you don’t even notice until one day you can’t really picture yourself as someone who is on an extravehicular spacewalk. Then it starts to sputter, and there are some days when you can’t go anywhere at all. Then it stalls out. There’s a spark now and then, under the right conditions, but you are reluctant to fuel up, reluctant to give yourself over to even that kind of delusion.

I comforted myself with the knowledge that at least the misfortune I gave Elaine wasn’t as vivid as it would have been were I eight or nine. The clamminess of her palms was less clam-like, the transfer of momentum from her falling body to my non-bony hands less mathematically significant, and the sound of my voice less like my own than they would have been had I been so perverse in my younger years.

“And this is the living room,” we hear our super say, later that afternoon. “There are 1.5 baths and 1.5 bedrooms. There are seven windows and three sinks.”

“Excuse me,” says a new woman’s voice. “What is a half bedroom?”

“Christ,” says Sam, who is sitting on her new vinyl chair. “They’re showing that apartment already? People move on so fast.”

“Sometimes,” I say.

“Christ,” says Sam, more quietly. She turns her head to the left, away from me, and bites her lower lip and closes her eyes, as if her thin eyelids can change the fact that she’s crying, or that I can see it. She is unsteady when she gets up to walk to our room.

Faint, I think.

“Hey,” Elaine said when she called me the next morning, in real life, not the least bit impaired or in need of repair. “You going to school?”

“Am I going to school?” I repeated. “What kind of a question is that?”

“I was just thinking you could tell your mom you were going to school, and then we could go to, I don’t know, the launch pad, or something.”

“I wouldn’t have to *tell* my mom I was going to school,” I said. “She tends to assume I’m following the law. School is the law.”

“Is that a yes?” she asked.

“You realize, don’t you, that you’re putting peer pressure all over me.”

“My mom says that that’s the most effective way to get anyone to do anything,” Elaine said. “I used to think that ‘peers’ meant ‘teenagers,’ but that’s not true.”

“I have a math test,” I said, because I didn’t.

“Well, maybe I’ll just build the rocket myself,” Elaine said.

“See you at school,” I said, and I would. The empty house, without me, would be boring, and not launch-pad-like in the slightest.

At school, I found Elaine by her locker, 115, where she was talking to Mike Bixon. Mike Bixon had never been so near her before. He was leaning against 114 like he’d taken a class in leaning.

“Hey, Em,” Elaine said. “Mike is here.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Hi, Mike.”

“Hello, Emily,” he said. Because he didn’t straighten up, this felt like an intimate moment.

“What’s up?” Elaine asked, like she was asking for our interaction to have a point, which it had never needed before.

I couldn’t think of one. “Nothing,” I said.

“Mike was just asking me if I wanted to skip,” she said.

He nodded as if his verification were necessary.

“I thought we were going to that place,” I said. “You know, our place.”

Elaine shut her locker and spun the dial. “You have a math test,” she said. “Remember?”

“Canceled,” I said. “It’s canceled.”

“You guys have a place?” Mike asked.

“Yes,” I said. “A clubhouse, kind of.”

“Aren’t clubhouses for kids?” he asked.

“It’s not like that,” Elaine said.

Sam doesn’t faint. I can’t make her. In the bedroom, she’s sitting on top of her new nightstand instead of our bed.

“It’s so quiet up there,” she says, looking at the ceiling. I imagine her gaze piercing through, up all the way to the sky. “We’re all alone.”

I touch the edge of the nightstand, making my fingertips barely press against her thigh. “They’re still with us,” I say.

We are both facing the door, both just looking, and we don’t say anything for a long time.

“Do you ever miss Kara Novak?” I ask. “Has there ever been another Kara Novak?”

Elaine and I left school and walked to the construction site, which was less than a mile away, the middle school being part of as well as named after our

neighborhood. In the daytime, it was harder to pretend that the structure could have become anything. You could already see where it was going, even though it wasn't there yet.

I realized for the first time that just by drawing a boundary, you could create something new. This is this; that is that. I imagined the first people to build a house, and what they told each other. This is safe; that is dangerous. This is warm; that is cold. This is together; that is alone. With a few bare materials, a whole concept was created: inside. Here is inside; there is outside. In this half-formed place, though, the distinctions were blurred.

"I've been thinking about it," Elaine said, "and I think that leaving in a rocketship makes sense." She went to a pile of bricks and began laying them down next to each other, then on top of each other. "This can be the living quarters," she said. "It'll look like home, but it will be better."

As we piled the rest of the bricks into a flyable living room, we kept silent. Speech, its reality, would have contaminated what was happening. Speech would have made us realize that this would never go anywhere. This was heavy. It would have no lift, no matter how many fins we superglued to it. Besides, people would laugh.

But there were no people and no words, and we didn't need to think about the fins or the guidance system or the aerodynamics of the nose cone or whether we would use a liquid or nuclear propulsion system: Logistics were in the future. Right then, we were only concerned with the payload—ourselves—and not how we would move forward or what path we would take.

"Em," Elaine said, "you're bleeding."

I looked everywhere else before I looked between my legs, where a slow stain was spreading. I didn't yet know that my body wasn't something I should be embarrassed about, that it would do what it wanted when it wanted, that it would want what it wanted when it wanted to.

I didn't know any of that. I was only twelve. I was only sitting next to a pile of bricks and asking a girl to leave with me in that pile of bricks and almost believing that I—we—could go to space, and truly believing that when we got there everything would be different, not knowing yet that "space" and "Earth" are not totally distinct, that the atmosphere's particles become less and less and less dense, that the Earth just fades and that there is no line saying "this is space and that is Earth," and not yet knowing that even if I managed to move past any particles that could be considered atmospheric, I would always, no matter how far I moved in time and space, would always feel the Earth's gravitational pull. It might be miniscule, but it would be there, calculable, a reminder.

"This is horrible," I said. "There is nothing more horrible than this." I touched the inside thigh of my jeans and wiped the red evidence onto the concrete floor.

"It matches the bricks," Elaine said. She smiled without opening her mouth, and then she turned her head away. She climbed into our living quarters, which now had walls up to our undeveloped hips, her finger bones flexing out so that there was almost nothing between them and the air. "Come on," she said. "It's time to get out of here."

Inside the rocketship that neither of us would say was not a rocketship, we could see only the sky, each other, and the boundaries keeping us together. She touched my leg, where the seeping blood was at the lowest point. Even though it was only a fingertip, I felt warm, insulated. It seemed like she was saving me from something. Exposure, maybe. Or the whole world, though that seemed dramatic, even to a twelve-year-old.

"You're a woman now," Elaine said.

"No," I said. "I'm not going to leave you behind."

Sam continues to look at the door. I get up and close it, even though there's no one outside to hear us.

"I don't know about Kara Novak," she says. "Everything was different then. I didn't know what was happening, so I couldn't know what wouldn't."

I walk over and lean my hip against the bed. "I want to tell you something about seventh grade," I say.

She gives me just enough silence.

"Do you ever think back on things you've done," I say, "things that you'd never do now, and feel like they're in a dream, like maybe you never really did them in the first place and you just imagined them, but they're so vivid that you know they're real, and they're so strange that you couldn't make them up, and you want to think the person whose eyes you're looking through when you remember them isn't you, or isn't you anymore, but really you know that that person is still there inside you?"

Sam says: "Yes."

"When I was twelve, right after I got my period, when I was sleeping over at Elaine Taylor's house, I put ketchup on a pair of her jeans while she was sleeping, and then I told her she should wear them to school."

Elaine, trusting my opinion, wore them. Mike Bixon was the first to see.

“Ewww,” he said. “Elaine can make babies now.”

“Everyone pointed at her,” I say to Sam. “They said, ‘Baby maker, baby maker, baby maker.’”

I grabbed Elaine’s hand, and we ran to the Earth/Space Science building’s bathroom, and I used scratchy, public-school paper towels to wick her tears away, and she stood in a stall in her underwear while I washed the stain out, which was much easier than it would have been if the stain had actually been blood.

“When there was only a wet spot left,” I say to Sam, “I knocked on her stall, and we stood there next to the toilet and blew on her jeans until they dried.”

“It will be all right,” I said to Elaine. “You’re a woman now. We’re both women now.”

I’m crying a little, and Sam gets up from the nightstand and presses us back into the bed, and we are together there on top of everything, in spite of everything. I close my eyes and pretend our bed is something that can leave, something that can go out the door or through the roof.

“It’s all right,” Sam says. “It’s okay.”

Sarah Scoles is a writer and astronomy educator/outreacher working in West Virginia. She recently completed an MFA at Cornell University. Other short stories can be found in DIAGRAM and Fringe Magazine.

PUBLISHED: December 17, 2010

FILED UNDER: Uncategorized

« Previous Post

ELSEWHERE

[Butler MFA](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Facebook](#) |



© Booth Journal. Powered by [WordPress](#) and [Manifest](#)