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Uniform

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Abstract

Colin Myers first slept with his neighbor four days after his eighteenth birthday, but he'd wanted Wanda Mitchell for two long summers. He liked wrapping his arms around her and tasting her salty neck in the fleeting minutes before she slid off the bed and sent him home. He lived across the street. They had not been caught, no close calls, but like adrenaline after a car accident, the possibility lingered.

Keywords

fundraising, baseball, sex, cheating



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May 20, 2011

Uniform

by Andrew Scott

Colin Myers first slept with his neighbor four days after his eighteenth birthday, but he'd wanted Wanda Mitchell for two long summers. He liked wrapping his arms around her and tasting her salty neck in the fleeting minutes before she slid off the bed and sent him home. He lived across the street. They had not been caught, no close calls, but like adrenaline after a car accident, the possibility lingered.

When the Mitchells moved in Colin had watched from his basement bedroom window as movers hauled cardboard boxes into the house. Since that day, he'd taken an interest in Wanda, who was thin with short black hair. His parents sometimes spoke with her and Gary, her husband, a short man with a belly. Colin had twice seen them arguing in the front yard. It was inconsiderate, Colin's mother claimed, to air your troubles outside.

For two years he'd noticed Wanda, nodding when she said hello, trying not to stare, until the beginning of this summer, when his baseball team raised money for renovating the ballpark and Colin had walked from house to house, enticing his neighbors with cheese spreads, tins of chocolate, and

other unwelcome items. The coach said wearing the uniform lent credibility to the task, but Colin felt stupid. He and the team's best pitcher had already been down his street and back again when they met in front of the Mitchells' house, with only four sales on Colin's order form. The pitcher said, "You take this one. I'm heading home."

Colin smoothed the front of his jersey and walked to the porch.

Wanda opened the door and said, "You hear a knock one afternoon and what do you find? A man in uniform."

Colin looked at his feet. "Hi, Mrs. Mitchell." At least he hadn't worn cleats.

"Oh, don't call me that," she said. "Call me Wanda."

Of course he'd spoken her name in the quiet of his bedroom, but never aloud in front of another soul, so now he spoke those two easy syllables, pleased to hear his own voice.

"There," she quipped. "First-name basis." She invited him in, offered a soda, and thumbed through the catalogue while Colin noted the fireplace and the leather couch, where he promptly sat. Photos of her and Gary lined the mantle—vacation shots of the beach, Paris, a skiing trip. Catalogues covered the coffee table, and a knotted rope, a dog's toy, lay at his feet, though the Mitchells almost always kept the dogs in the backyard.

The silence crashed against him. "This couch is a nice color," he said.

"Hunter green," said Wanda. "Gary hates it. I told him it was my living room, and he'd better get over it."

Wanda returned the order form after she'd signed her name and marked a few items. "That's it for me," she said. She showed him to the door. "Hope it helps. What position do you play?"

"Center field," he said.

"The leader of the outfield. You're in charge out there."

"I guess so."

She touched him on the shoulder and said, "I'm sure you'll have a good season, Colin."

He went home. Later, after dinner, his mother rapped on the bathroom door and asked why he'd been in there so long. Was he okay? Did he need anything? Colin had said he was all right. He only needed Wanda; he kept imagining her elegant fingers lingering on his shoulders, and then across his body. He imagined well into the night, every few hours, until he went to bed and dreamed of her instead.

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Four weeks later, Colin again knocked on her door, with Jalapeño Jack spread and a tin of chocolate-covered macadamias tucked under his left arm and the order form rolled in his back pocket. Since first stepping into her home, he had spoken with Wanda several times, starting conversations with her when they were both outdoors. She'd wanted to know how the team was doing. He was happy for the chance to be in her house again—and without the goofy uniform.

She called from inside, told him to come in.

A radio hummed in the kitchen. Dogs barked and romped in the backyard. Upstairs, light footsteps shifted across the wooden floor. Wanda appeared at the head of the stairs, wrapped in a beach towel, her short hair angling in every direction. The towel featured Warner Bros. cartoon characters.

“Colin.” She looked on him kindly. “You’ve brought gifts.”

“You did order them.”

She laughed. “Not for me. Only my husband would eat that junk.” She retrieved a checkbook from her purse on the dining room table. “To whom shall I make the check?”

The items grew heavy against his arm and chest. "I'm not sure." He put the items on the floor to check the order form, but she stopped him.

"Never mind," she said, digging through her purse. "I have cash."

"It's twelve dollars," Colin said, too quickly.

She reached into her purse before looking up. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. Blood rushed to his cheeks. He didn't like to lie, especially when it was obvious.

"So am I," she said. "I'm in a great mood. I've had a wonderful afternoon."

"My day's getting better," he said.

She held one bill in the air. "I've only got a twenty."

"I don't have change."

She stepped down two stairs and leaned towards him, clasping her towel with her other hand. "Take it," she said. She hopped back up the steps.

"I can bring it later," Colin said. "The change, I mean." Every word sounded forced and awkward. He wasn't a talker.

"That would be great," said Wanda.

She could be his mother. But she wasn't; she didn't have children. What she did have was a belly ring—he'd seen it several times. She always wore a bikini top and short-shorts when she mowed the lawn. "Nice towel," Colin said.

"You like it? I've had it since I was a girl."

"Daffy's my favorite," he said. The duck's bill scrunched around her hips.

Wanda asked him if he'd ever seen a naked woman. "In the flesh," she said.

"Not in a magazine."

This time he did not lie to her.

She smiled and pulled back the towel. Colin glimpsed the whole of her body in those brief seconds: small white breasts, tan lines and dark nipples, a pierced navel, the lines of her form seamlessly meeting. Then she gathered the towel. He looked up at her face, which shone like a paper lantern.

“Don’t forget my change,” she said.

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Later that week Colin stopped by with Wanda's change and they made love for the first time. Her husband usually returned after five o'clock. She made sure Colin was home well before that. Colin's parents both worked, too; his mother owned a crafts store downtown, and his father was a surgeon, an occupied, distant man. When they thought Colin was out of earshot, his parents spoke of divorce, but remained married. He didn't know if married people could be happy.

How had he ended up in Wanda's bed? He still wasn't sure. He'd walked in, given her the change from her twenty. He made her laugh again. Then she took him down the hall to her bedroom. It seemed that simple. That complicated.

When they were finished, Wanda asked if he knew how to keep a secret. "Just don't say anything," she said. "You should be used to that."

She added: "You don't feel funny about this, do you?"

Of course he did; he'd never had sex before, and everything he'd heard about the experience had been wrong. First of all, she'd been on top, not him. She unrolled the condom for him; she kept the condoms in the closet. He hadn't lasted long. Wanda had not screamed his name. She hadn't said

a word, but did moan a few times near the end. Yes, he felt funny. But he said, “Not really.”

“Are you scared?”

“No.”

“Are you scared of Gary?”

“Should I be?”

“If he finds out, he’ll get angry. That’s what men do.”

“Then he doesn’t have to know.”

Wanda walked to her dresser. She faced the mirror, and Colin could see her breasts in the reflection. He knew it wasn’t cool to stare at them, but that’s what he wanted. She said, “You don’t think I’m bad, do you? For doing this with you?”

“No,” Colin said. “Sex is a normal, healthy activity.”

That line was from a book about sex. He’d read so many of them—some discovered in his parents’ room, intended to help couples like his parents strengthen their relationship through sex; others he had flipped through at bookstores when no other customers were around. He hadn’t wanted to think that his parents had sex—and preferred not to know that they needed a book for it—but now it seemed normal enough. He wondered who had purchased the book. His mother seemed too prudish; his father, too arrogant to admit he needed help.

Wanda looked down at her jewelry box, picked up a ring. “This is from my first marriage,” she said, turning to him and holding the band up in the light. She tossed the ring back in its box. “I really liked that ring.”

“You could make it into a necklace,” Colin said.

“I’ve done this before,” she said. “You’re not the first.”

Colin felt held in place by her gaze, her shape in front of the mirror. He’d

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seen her laugh and yell at Gary, and now she'd revealed the face she made during sex—lips pursed, an expression his parents used to show appreciation for expensive wine. She asked him if he understood, and he said yes. "It will have to be okay with you, or we'll stop." She told him to go home, but to come back tomorrow afternoon. Colin dressed quickly and left. They did not kiss goodbye.

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Weeks passed this way, afternoons in her bedroom. Wanda told him he was becoming a good lover. The team kept winning, and his only other concern was that his parents wanted him to get a job. “We know plenty of people around town who would hire you,” his mother said at breakfast one morning, the newspaper spread across the table like battle plans. She ate bran cereal with fruit. Colin slurped down a bowl of Apple Jacks. His father had been at the hospital since before dawn.

“When am I going to work?” Colin said. “I practice all morning, and we play every other night. I don’t have time for a job.”

“You should do something besides play games all summer.”

“It’s not just a game,” he said. “You know that.”

“Sure, maybe you can get a baseball scholarship. But there’s more out there, Colin. And you don’t need a scholarship to go to college.”

Colin held back, didn’t give in. She wanted to fight. During the spring semester and well into summer, she’d goaded him, snipping at him and his father. Her shop did well. They had more than enough money. Only his father’s schedule raised her hackles like this. The man was rarely home,

and when he was, his mother spent most of the time fighting with him *because* he was never home. His mother had accused him of cheating on her. His father had denied it. Colin wasn't supposed to know, but their voices carried down the vents into his bedroom. He reasoned that his father had to keep busy, since he was a surgeon, but maybe he had cheated. Colin just wanted the fighting to stop.

"I could work for you," Colin said.

This eased his mother's mood, and she allowed herself a small smile. "What do you know about crafts? By the time you learned, you'd be ready to start school again."

"Great. Now my own mother won't even hire me."

She slapped him gently on the shoulder with the sports page. She took her bowl to the sink, where she left it unrinsed.

The front page featured a former teammate who had been drafted by the Pittsburgh Pirates. Colin envied him, even though he'd been chosen in the last round of the draft. There was also a sidebar about his team's game against Mount Central tomorrow night. Colin's team had only lost twice all season and they were favored to win this one. The paper described Colin's hitting as "timely."

"Are you and dad coming to the game tonight?"

His mother said, "I don't know. We'll see what happens."

"I understand if you can't," he said. He felt obligated to ask, but never wanted his parents there. The game was something he could make his own. And now his parents would be bad luck; they had missed every game during the current winning streak. Six more wins and his team would have the best record in school history.

"I mean it, though. We want you to get a job of some kind," she said. "Mow lawns or something."



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That afternoon in Wanda's bed, Colin asked if she needed him to mow her lawn.

"I usually do it," she said.

"I know. I'm supposed to get a job."

"That's not a job."

"It's good enough for now."

"How much do you charge?"

"How much am I worth?" He stood and flexed his muscles for her, and she laughed. He didn't know how to act around her, especially naked. Often he went for the easy laugh, a nervous habit.

"Twenty bucks, plus fringe benefits," she said.

"What kind of benefits?"

"Never mind."

He lay down beside her and kissed her belly ring. He wanted to ask her about the other men. He wanted to know if there were other men now. He must've crinkled his face because she asked him what was on his mind.

"Nothing," he said.

"Come on. I see those gears turning."

"I was thinking," he said, "about you. And other guys."

"What about them?"

"I was trying to picture them. Who they are. What they look like."

"And?"

"I can't do it."

"You want to know about the competition," she said. "Such an athlete."

"I guess so. Besides Gary."

"Gary," she said, snorting. "He lives in his world, and I live in mine."

"Then why would he be mad if he found out about us?"

"I'm sure he's had other women. Secretaries. Paralegals. But I'm the wife on his arm at the firm's parties. He's supposed to get angry. We never talk about what we do. But we understand."

"He's a lawyer?"

"Country club lunches, golf outings, all of it. He almost always settles out of court."

"What about other men?"

She looked up at the ceiling. "Yes. There are other men."

“Now?”

She nodded. “Sometimes.”

He turned away from her. Wanda said, “I’m sorry if it upsets you. I told you how it is.”

“I know.” He reached for his shorts on the floor.

“We can stop this any time, Colin.”

“I don’t want that. It’s okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s fine.” He pulled his tank top over his head.

“I like you,” she said. “You’re fun. You’re young. You’re here. You remind me that I’m not old.”

Those were good qualities. If he made her feel young, why should she need anyone but him? He couldn’t wait to see her each day, to make her smile and whisper in his ear. And she’d started calling out his name lately, unlike that first day. His heart thumped stupidly in his chest.

“When’s your next home game?”

He tugged on his shoes. “Tomorrow night.”

“I might go.”

He looked at the clock. Gary would be home soon. “I should get out of here.”

“So I’ll see you at the game,” she said.

“Before, probably.”

“Tomorrow afternoon?”

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“I’m your new lawn-boy, remember?” The talk bothered him, but he accepted his role in her life. She could have it her way. He said, “Twenty bucks plus French benefits.”

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Colin's mother woke him the next morning. "Your coach is on the phone. Get up, sleepy-head." She handed him the cordless. His coach rescheduled the morning practice; they'd now take some light fielding and batting practice in an afternoon session before the game. It was too hot to push it, he said.

Sleep kept calling him back to bed, but Colin finally made it to the kitchen. His mom clipped photos from a crafts magazine.

"What are you doing home?"

"I took the day off," she said.

Colin could not remember the last time she'd stayed home from work. "Who's at the store?"

"My employees, silly." She kept snipping the photos, seemingly engrossed in the dullness of the act. She had a strange look on her face—not a smile, not a frown, but somehow both. The look gave him a headache.

He would not be going to Wanda's this afternoon. His mother would hover about the house all day. She acted differently when his father was gone,

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relaxed. But when it was time for his father to be home, she would get tense and snap at her son, or holler at the evening news. Today, since she was still mad at his father, she would nag Colin about getting a job, or inform him of her plans for the living room walls. He would be unable to escape.

“You’ve got a game tonight,” his mother said.

Colin dropped bread in the toaster, waited for the inner orange glow.

“I think your father and I will be able to make it.” Her scissors clicked together, *thwack thwack*, the pulse of their conversation.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m sure you’ve got better things to do.”

“But we want to be there.” Lately he’d noticed her saying “we” a lot, as if to emphasize their union.

The toast popped up, startling him. “Suit yourself.”

He ate slowly, thinking of Wanda with other men. It could be happening right now, for all he knew. She could be gone, across town somewhere, at a man’s house. At a motel. She could be with all of them at once.

He told his mother he’d be mowing the Mitchells’ lawn for the rest of the summer.

“Wonderful. When do you start?”

“Today, I guess. Look, maybe you shouldn’t come to the game tonight. We’ve got a winning streak and I don’t want to jinx it.”

“Nonsense.”

“All I know is, you and Dad haven’t been to these games, and my team’s winning.”

Colin carried his plate to the dishwasher and disappeared to the bathroom downstairs. He returned freshly showered, and his mother asked him where he was going as he opened the door.

“Across the street to my new job.” If Wanda was there, they could talk. If not, his suspicions could be true.

He shut the door—not slamming it, but with more force than necessary—and traipsed over to Wanda’s. “You’re early,” she said when she opened the dark oak door.

“I told my mom I was coming over to mow the lawn,” he said. “She’s probably watching us right now.”

She met him at the garage behind the house. She pointed out the mower and a red plastic container of gasoline. In the shade of the garage, Colin turned and looked at his house. His mother stood in the front window. For a moment Colin thought she was on to them. He wasn’t nervous. Secrets don’t last forever. He half-expected his mother to charge across the street and whack Wanda across her face. When he was younger she’d marched across the street to reprimand him and other misbehaving boys. But instead his mother casually drew the curtains.

“My parents are coming to the game tonight,” he said.

“Good. I won’t have to sit by myself.”

“You *want* to sit with them?”

“They’re not bad people, Colin.”

“You won’t feel weird?”

“I’m their neighbor. We wave hello, talk about families. It’s normal.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“You’ll get over it.”

He wanted her to himself, but he didn’t have the courage to say so. “My practice got moved to this afternoon.”

She stepped through the back gate and went up the deck. “There’s always

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tomorrow, I guess. Come knock on the door when you're done and I'll pay you."

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Colin left early for the ballpark that night. He drove himself. His legs were slightly sore, and he hoped he hadn't tired himself too much before the game. Mowing the lawn had been work; the machine was heavy and ancient, not self-propelled. He really had to push it, get his legs into it. He didn't understand how Wanda did it. The sun bore down, making him drip with sweat. He'd stored the mower in the garage and knocked on Wanda's door. She'd paid him, said thanks and smiled, but did not act like herself, formal and neighborly, as if he'd never spent an afternoon with her. He wanted to talk to her, but couldn't, not with his mother hanging around.

At batting practice, he did poorly; he made contact, but had no power, the balls popping up into the shallow outfield or dribbling weakly to second base. Only twice had he driven the ball with any real force. The coach asked him where he'd left his swing's follow-through: "You look like you missed a few hours of shut-eye, Myers."

Standing in the outfield, waiting to run down his teammates' long drives, Colin let his thoughts dwell on Wanda's terseness. Fans shuffled into the park and he tried to focus on the game.

Colin's team took the field. The lanky pitcher struck out the leadoff hitter. Colin scanned the crowd behind his team's dugout, looking first for his

parents, and then for Wanda . Finally he saw his father, eating a hot dog, sitting beside Wanda, who seemed to be looking at other members of the crowd. He didn't know where his mother was; she'd seemed interested. This was the first time he'd seen his father in two days.

The stadium was one of the largest in the state for high school games. Regional and national tournaments were held there each year. The town was fired up about the team's chances in the upcoming state tournament.

The pitcher got the next two hitters to ground out. Colin trotted back to the dugout. He batted third in the lineup, not the team's best hitter, but a player who always seemed to get on base. The leadoff hitter drew a walk, and the next batter arced a deep fly ball to left field; after the catch, the runner raced to second, sliding safely.

Colin stood in the batter's box, swinging his bat loosely to settle his nerves. He took the first pitch, a ball on the outside corner. The second pitch was high and he swung, fouling it back to the stands. The third pitch he smacked up the middle, under the pitcher, the runner scoring from second. Colin stood on first base as the crowd applauded his efforts. He looked into the stands for his father, who gave him the thumbs-up before turning to talk to Wanda. She laughed at what he said, still clapping.

His father had always been comfortable around women, a trait Colin admired, since he himself was awkward, even though he played sports and girls seemed to like him. He'd never been comfortable, not like he was with Wanda. Colin thought she liked him in spite of herself, as though she knew better. She didn't want love notes or prom dates or going-steady bracelets, like his teammates' girlfriends. Wanda wanted of him what he wanted of girls. Attention.

She flirted with his father. Or was his father hitting on her? He couldn't tell. They both were apt to flirt. Colin could never do it well. His father wore a blue linen shirt, a birthday present from his mother. It pained him to think of his mother's gift, how his father wore it, top buttons open. Why would his mother want to be in public with him? And then a thought: his mother, at that very moment, could be with another man. He couldn't imagine the details of the scene and didn't want to, but he had to admit the possibility, every minute with her in the house now suspect. He didn't really know his mother. She could be anyone.

The next three hitters reached base; Colin's team scored four times before the inning ended. So much for superstition. They won by seven runs. Colin only had the one hit; in his other at-bats, he struck out once and popped up twice. In the field, he'd caught the two balls in his patch of grass. The game was not a challenge. He'd thought mostly of Wanda, of missing the chance to be with her that afternoon, of her easy interaction with his father, how each responded to the other's slick charm. He thought of the distant afternoon when she'd pulled back the towel. She'd probably been with a man that morning and had showered to wash away the sweaty evidence. He knew the routine.

The stadium was old and without locker rooms. After the game, the coach talked for a few minutes and dismissed them. Colin wandered up into the bleachers to where his father and Wanda were still talking. Many of the other fans had left. Her legs were crossed, hands embracing her knees. Colin's father tipped his head back and laughed; Wanda did the same. Wanda never laughed this much in their afternoons together.

His father noticed Colin standing on the first row of benches. "Mr. Baseball," he said. "Get up here."

Colin's first impulse was to leave and drive home, but he joined Wanda and his father. He did not need a lecture on being rude to their neighbor.

"Your father's kept me entertained," said Wanda. She fumbled with her purse before finding her lipstick, which she drew across her lips. "Not much of a game after all."

"Wanda says you've started mowing her lawn," said his father.

The night breeze picked up. Colin crossed his arms. "Yeah, I wore myself out today."

"Excuses, excuses," his father said.

Wanda said, "You did fine. There'll be other games."

They spoke more about the early innings; his father offered advice about his swing—his father, who hadn't played baseball since his own high

school days, who hadn't offered ^{Scott: Uniform} advice of any kind for years. Colin endured it as long as he could before saying, "I should go home and shower." He excused himself and made his way to the parking lot.

The lanky pitcher caught up with him outside the stadium. He said, "The life of a ballplayer. You show up, kick some ass, and everybody loves you."

"Keep pitching like that and they will, anyway," Colin said.

"Were those your folks back there?"

Colin shook his head: "My dad and my neighbor."

"I wish I had a neighbor like that." The boy let out a long whistle.

He faced the boy. "You don't know the half of it."

"And you do?" the boy said. "Like you're some expert."

Colin drew back his fist, ready to uncork the fury bellowing in his bloodstream, but the boy flinched, his arms moving to protect his face. The boy's eyes widened. "What the hell, man?"

Colin unclenched his fist, one lone finger pointed straight at the pitcher. "What you don't know would fill that stadium," Colin said. He turned back in the direction of the parking lot. "Get out of here. You don't know anything."

He opened his car door. His legs hung out of the car as he changed back into tennis shoes. He banged the cleats together away from his body, kicking up dust. From under the seat, where he hid them during games, he grabbed the keys and started the engine. He shut the door and looked forward to catching Wanda and his father emerging from the shadows of the stadium. He might never know the business between them. Perhaps nothing. He did know he would no longer spend his afternoons with her. He would not mow her lawn. He'd get another job to keep his mother happy. He would finish school, impress college scouts next season, and earn a scholarship to some far-away college. He'd side with his mother after his parents' divorce, if that's where they were headed. Above all, he'd keep quiet and to himself and try to forget this, and work to be different

than the adults he knew. Nothing had been decided, he reminded himself. He couldn't give up just yet.

Andrew Scott is the author of NAKED SUMMER, a story collection. He lives in Indianapolis.

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