

The Miniature Wife

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The truth of the matter is: I have managed to make my wife very, very small.

This was done unintentionally. This was an accident.

I work in miniaturization and it is, therefore, my job to make everything smaller. I have developed a number of processes, which members of my staff then test. They will, let's say, make a smaller hat box in order to test the process that I used to make a smaller hat. That is simply an example, of course. We do not actually make hats or hat boxes. I cannot disclose to anyone, not even to my wife, exactly what I make, or how small I make it. I can only say that I am quite good at my job, and I have moved quickly through the ranks and now head an entire department of miniaturizers.

And let me say this, too: I never bring work home with me, tempting though it might be. I have set strict rules for myself, the same rules I enforce on my workers. I can hardly afford to be seen as the employer who abuses his power. I do not make the boxes in my attic smaller to make room for more Christmas decorations. I have never made our winter wardrobe small in the summer or our summer wardrobe small for the winter. I rake and pile and bag the autumn leaves like anyone else does.

Still. There it is: my wife, shrunk to the height of a coffee mug.

What bothers me most about the current situation (not her size, as I am quite used to seeing normal objects reduced to abnormal sizes, even to the point that I wake up some mornings overwhelmed by the size of everyday objects, alarmed even by the size of my own head), what bothers me most is that I don't quite know how it happened. Otherwise, I would gladly reverse the process, as I have done time and

again at the office. But, as there are many different means of making things smaller—the Kurzym Bypass, ideal for reducing highly complex pieces of machinery, for instance, or Montclair's Pabulum, which is the only process by which one might safely reduce inorganic foodstuffs, to name only two—and since this reduction was accidental and I don't know how it was performed, I am at a loss as to how to bring her back.

The irony of this is not lost on me, rest assured. Would that I had an ally in my office, with whom I could brainstorm solutions to this problem, then, surely, she would be returned to normal by now, but I have no one of the sort, and have made no progress on my own. Hence the dollhouse: something solid, fashioned of wood and constructed with her in mind. The enormity of our real house and its furnishings—craterous bowls, cavernous pockets, insurmountable table legs, and bathroom counters slick with puddle-sized droplets of water—fill me with a great anxiety. I have also, claiming allergies, given the cat to a friend and have refused to let the bird out of its cage. I should like to get rid of the bird entirely, but I know that such a loss would upset my wife, who is, at the moment, upset enough already.

We were in the kitchen when it happened. She screamed—I could see her scream but I couldn't hear her, though, in my imagination, it was not so much a scream as a startled yelp. I've learned, since then, to listen for a different register of voice. I have also fashioned small ear-cups that fit nicely around my head and allow me to pick up softer sounds.

So: She screamed, but I couldn't hear her. Then she took her purse off her shoulder and threw it at me. She threw it hard, so it seemed, but a person the size of a coffee mug can only do so much damage. Unable to hit me, then, and with nothing else in reach, she attacked herself, or, rather, her clothing. In a matter of seconds, she'd torn off her skirt, ripped through it with her teeth, ripped the shirt off her back, thrashed at her panty-hose, and broke the heels off her shoes. Then she grabbed her purse again and dumped out everything in it, and, there, found a lighter. Before

I could move to stop her, she set the small pile of clothes on fire, then stamped at them, and then kicked them off the edge of the table.

It was quite a display.

Needless to say, her clothes were ruined.

And my wife, who was very small, was now naked as well.

The thing is: My wife's condition has begun to affect my work.

On two occasions, colleagues have remarked on the sloppiness of my appearance. Generally, I am a very neatly dressed, well-shaved man.

I want to but can't tell them that my wife is a strong climber. That she is resourceful beyond my imagination.

I want to tell them that she has fashioned ropes. That she has forged small tools.

I want to tell them:

To be honest with you, Jim, my face is unevenly shaved because my three-inch wife climbed up the porcelain sink, hoisted herself up to the medicine cabinet, opened the heavy mirrored door, and dulled all of my razor blades.

Truth be told, Paul, my miniaturized wife removed every other button on each of my work shirts yesterday while I was in the office. And if we look closely, I mean, really closely, with one of our best magnifying glasses, we could probably see her tiny teeth marks in the thread.

I want to tell them this but I cannot. Instead I spend more time in my office.

And I've had to suspend my open-door policy.

She is not unattractive, my wife, in her miniaturized state. Her best features—her waist, the round curve of her hips, her shapely legs and fine eyebrows—are there still, undiminished by her diminished size. But what's more—and more surprising—her more difficult-to-reconcile features have softened. The hard, reproachful look in her eyes. The often angry or disappointed set of her jaw. Her rather large feet. All of her should have reduced proportionately, and maybe it all has and this is but a trick of the mind, but one night, as she slept in the small, makeshift bed I made for her—matchbox, tufts of cotton, stitched squares of felt—I crept up on her and spied on her with a magnifying glass—I own quite a number of very good glasses—and it seemed to me that something in the process of miniaturization had enhanced the look of her.

As much as I hate to admit it, I felt some pride in this. One of the many complaints we face in my office is that in the process of miniaturizing a thing, we rub out the details of it. For the past two years, we've been working diligently to develop—across all of our miniaturization processes—an ability to retain the sharp and necessary details, the inherent beauty, the power of a thing's function even when shrunk down to the size of a cup, a blade of grass, a grain of sand.

Gazing down at my wife through my magnifying glass, I could see that we had finally found some measure of success.

In the construction of the dollhouse, I have not relied on a kit. Instead, I have leaned heavily on blueprints. A kit, so I assumed, would not allow for enough customization. Made-to-order dollhouses do not account for room size, doorjambs, ceiling heights, are not designed to be inhabited. Not to mention that what I had to build, in order to coax her into it, to persuade her that some kind of life, a temporary life inside it would be an improvement, for it to do what I required of it, the dollhouse needed to be, in miniature, a much better house than our own.

In all, the exercise has been quite enjoyable. There is the smell of sawdust and wood and wood glue, the metallic smell that lingers on the tips of my fingers after handling so many small nails. And of the dollhouse furniture, I have finished

carving all but the bed, which I found to be beyond my small abilities. Excuse the pun.

I've asked one of the guys in production to build a bedframe to my specifications, and then I will have someone else miniaturize it for me. Then I will take the small bed home and place it inside the dollhouse and the house will be complete. The roof is already installed. The rest of the house has been furnished, despite my wife's objections, despite her petty vandalisms, the graffiti (nail polish, easily removed), the torn curtains (easily replaced). Despite the fact that she has broken the glass out of the windowpanes, which I decided don't need to be replaced, as there's little threat of rain or snow.

She is against the dollhouse now, but once I have the bed in place and have the bedroom decorated, almost exactly as our bedroom is decorated now, I know she will fall in love with it just as I have fallen in love with it. Until then, however, I've closed the dollhouse and have blocked the door and covered the windows.

I miss my wife. It's strange, though, since, technically, she is here with me. Is in the house, anyway, though I don't know where, exactly, or what she's doing. It's as if she has gone away for business—though she doesn't have a job to speak of—or on an extended vacation with a group of girlfriends, though she doesn't have that, either. In any case, I find myself, when not actively building the dollhouse, reverting to an inert state. I do not cook for myself, content to simply order in or to raid the cans of peas and green beans and Chef Boyardee ravioli with meat sauce, which I crank open and dig into with a fork or spoon, without heating it up or tasting it in my mouth.

I find it hard to fall asleep. I do everything within my power to stave off the hour that I must finally go to bed, and when I do, I throw myself into the bed into the most uncomfortable positions, my legs hanging over the side, a bunched-up pile of duvet or a small throw-pillow distractingly placed under my side or the small of my back.

The bed is permanently unmade, the kitchen uncleaned. I call in sick with more and more frequency and then spend the day in my sleep-wear watching day-time television when before I did not watch television at all.

The only time I feel like myself is while in the garage, wearing my magnifying goggles, the soldering iron in my hand, or my miter shears, or when using the diamond-tipped carving burrs I bought only a few days ago. I think of her in these moments, or if not of her directly, of what I'm doing for her, for us, and it's almost as if she is standing right next to me, watching me as I build.

In my imagination, my wife is training. For survival, for success.

In my imagination, she is strong, much stronger than before. She has taut arms and a strong back and thick legs. Her feet are tough, her hands gloved in calluses.

Since my wife's accident, I have found more than the normal amount of dead flies in the house—on the windowsills, on the kitchen table, floating in the toilet water. Under the magnifying glass—borrowed from my office—most of the flies look to be stabbed through, a small sliver of wood run through an abdomen, or an eye. One of them looked caught, tortured, its legs removed, wings twisted back. Normal sized, my wife was never this cruel. Her need for survival, I believe, has made her so, and in a way I am proud, am glad that she survives. She is a woman who, before, could not open jelly jars, who was afraid of dogs and open closets and mice and insects. Not to say that I am not concerned, however. If I do not find a means of reversal soon, I fear that she will be lost—to civilization, to me.

Before she had been reduced to the size of a coffee mug—in fact, ever since we have known each other—my wife has been the kind of person to leave notes. Notes of thanks, notes of displeasure. Small reminders of things to be done, gentle and not-so-gentle reprimands. One night, shortly after we were married and living together for the first time, and after I had gone to bed for the night, she placed a plastic grocery bag full of dirty dishes next to my side of the bed. These were dishes I had used but hadn't yet washed and put away. They were a day old, or no

more than two days old at the most. After I woke the next morning and stepped on the bag of dishes and twisted my ankle on them and nearly fell over because of them, I picked up the bag and found affixed to it a small yellow Post-It note on which she had simply written, *Yours*.

Often her notes began, *Please remember to*, or *Don't forget we need*, or *Did you remember that*. But just as often she dispensed with even these pleasantries and left me notes that read, *Laundry*, or, *Dishes*, or, *Your shoes on the floor*, or, *The hairs you left on the bathroom sink*.

Even now, even the size of a coffee cup, she leaves me notes, though lately I do not understand them, or cannot read them, even with the assistance of one of my many very strong magnifying glasses. Nor do I know where she has found the paper or the pencil with which to write these notes. I find them in surprising, implausible places. Affixed to the bathroom mirror, which seems much too high for her to reach. Mixed in with the little pieces of lint and detritus in my pants pocket or the inside breast pocket of my jacket. At the bottom of my cereal bowl. Stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

At first these notes offered some form of communication between us, though there seemed to be only so much for her to say. *Please hurry. I miss you, too. At night I am cold. The ants rarely bother me, but I cannot abide the flies*. But the longer she remains in her miniaturized condition, the less intelligible these notes are. I found one just the other day that read, *Puppies make the best mayonnaise*. And another that read, *Flies on the living room windowsill*. A third that read, *The life you promised me*. I have found some notes that do not contain words at all but merely doodles or scribblings or diagrams. She will draw on them at times, but, as she is not a very accomplished artist, these drawings do little to move me.

Rarely do I know what to make of these notes. For a while, I thought to keep them, though I couldn't say why or to what purpose. As a needless reminder of this somewhat rocky moment in our marriage? Now, as I find them, I collect them in a small envelope I keep in my back pocket, and at the end of the day, as I undress for

bed, I empty the envelope's contents into the trash and the next morning, I start all over again.

The house took me nearly two months to complete, much longer than I had expected, but having completed the house, having added the bed and the rest of the furniture, having finished painting the rooms inside and out, I opened it up to her yesterday, only to wait to see what she would make of it.

Already, less than a day later, there are signs of life inside it.

The bed is unmade and there is a mess in one of the living rooms—pillows on the floor, a lamp left on, signs of domesticity, of being lived in. I can't see very well because I am only looking through the windows. I'm afraid to open the house up. If I unhinge the house and pull it apart, I run the risk of catching my wife and splitting her into two. Regardless—there are signs of life, of living. Soon, I should be able to devise a way to return her to normal.

But then again—it is such a nice house. Much nicer than our own, normal-sized one. Is it possible that she and I could be happy there together? Once a week, I could return to normal size and buy groceries, run errands, make our lives comfortable. I could even continue working—shrinking myself every night after coming home. I could sleep with my wife, then. We could be together. Though it goes against my sense of ethics, true, it is so much simpler a solution.

And I have so far tried just about every known process for deminiaturization that I can think of. I have brought home engorgement and enlargement solutions, a number of which I developed myself and know for certain to be foolproof; I've made her spend four hours inside the Magnifying Chamber, a rather small device itself, small enough, anyway, to slip into my pocket before I left the office for home, breaking any number of laws and office policies; and, as a last resort, I carried her out of the house and drove her to the remote piece of badlands owned by the company and there, uncertain as to whether she would even survive, I pushed her through the Fibonacci Tunnel.

Nothing has worked.

I'll leave my wife a note explaining my idea to her. If we discuss it, I'm sure she'll see the benefits. I'm sure she'll see that this might in fact be the best thing for us.

For a moment, for one single moment, I harbored a fantasy of what life might be like, what our life together might be like, if I were unable to restore my wife to her original size. If we were to live together in the dollhouse I built for her, which is, as I've said before, a very nice house, a much nicer house. Then I spoke that fantasy out loud and then the fantasy was ruined.

What I mean to say is: This ordeal has taken its toll on all of us.

Today, I had to fire one of my employees, Richard Paul Wear. He was not the best man—as his actions proved—but he was a very good miniaturist; he was ambitious.

And though his actions are unpardonable, I cannot blame him entirely. I should have known that miniaturizing a phone for my wife would lead to, if not this exactly, something similar. But I was concerned. I had had no word from my wife since I finished the project, and after the first two days, I saw no more signs of life in the house. The bed was made; the rooms were neat and untouched. I left her notes, but they went unanswered. She had stopped leaving me notes long before all of this. My questions about miniaturizing myself were ignored. I called for her, softly so as not to damage her shrunken ears, but my voice did nothing but agitate the bird. The truth is, I sorely missed my wife. The construction of the dollhouse, since it was for her, helped me manage through her absence, and there were little signs of her presence around the house—the flies, the dulled razors, the notes, the torn buttons—and though annoyances, they proved to me that she was still around. Since the completion of the house, I have heard nothing.

Therefore, I bought a cordless phone and miniaturized it.

I wasn't sure if the signal would work for such a small phone, nor did I have a means of testing the equipment, but I figured there was nothing left to lose. With a pair of tweezers, I placed the tiny phone on the coffee table of the downstairs living room of the dollhouse, where my wife could easily find it. Three days passed without word from her. I called home once or twice a day. The phone must not have worked, I thought. Either she has left me—even if she had not yet left the house—or she was dead.

On the fourth day, I came back to my desk from a meeting and found a message on my phone. "Come home for lunch, dear. I've missed you so."

Until that moment, I hadn't realized just how much I had missed the sound of her voice, full and loud and loving. Why hadn't I thought of the phone before? There was nothing small about her over the phone line. I did not hear the voice of my shrunken wife but rather the voice of the woman I loved, the woman whose touch I missed. The sound of it brought tears to my eyes. I felt faint. I wanted to leave immediately, drive home, meet my wife, tell her how much I loved her. I grabbed my jacket and was about to leave when one of my technicians came in with a problem, an accident in the lab, which took me until lunchtime to correct. As soon as I could, I sped home, my heart in my throat.

Only in hindsight did I find it odd that the door was unlocked. I expected to see her waiting for me on the kitchen counter or on the coffee table. I stepped gingerly through the house, the cups around my ears so that I might hear her. Then I heard a noise from the upstairs bedroom, where I kept her dollhouse. Of course, I thought. The dollhouse! How silly of me to have forgotten! I took the stairs three and four at a time, reckless and youthful in my haste. I burst through the bedroom door and threw the house open, completely forgetting in my excitement that I might harm my wife, might split her in two.

And there she was.

In the dollhouse. In the bedroom. On our bed.

Naked.

And there, on the floor next to the bed, inexpertly covering himself with a pillow, was a cowering and miniature Richard Paul Wear.

My wife smiled at me and then leaned over to him, tousled his hair, and gave him a peck on the forehead.

Sleeping with my wife aside, Wear had broken company policy. Not only did he use his knowledge of miniaturization outside of the workplace, he did so on himself. Granted, I have made my own innumerable missteps, but surely anyone can see the difference between miniaturizing yourself so you can step out of the office for a nice go-around with your

officemate's miniaturized wife, between that and stealing engorgement solutions and deminiaturizing machinery and using office resources to miniaturize beds and whatnot in order to make your (accidentally) miniaturized wife's (temporarily) miniaturized existence more comfortable.

But more importantly, he knew about my own situation. Such knowledge could find its way back to the office, could spread among my employees, could result in my termination, an investigation, police reports, legal action.

So what else could I do but cover him in honey and seed and then feed him to the bird?

A conflict has arisen between my wife and me.

I destroyed the phone, lucky that my wife had not called the police, or worse yet, my supervisor, had only called Wear, whom she had met briefly at the last company picnic. Once the phone was destroyed, I locked my wife inside the dollhouse and covered it with a drop cloth.

“Live in darkness,” I yelled. “See how you like that.”

I came home to find the dollhouse burnt to the ground. Nothing else in our house had been damaged, aside from the tabletop scorched by the fire. I do not know how she managed to free herself from the dollhouse itself—I had nailed it shut, had covered the windows with squares of cardboard that I glued and then duct-taped to the outside of the house, had weighted down the drop cloth, had made it impossible to escape from. Nor do I know how she controlled the fire such that the house itself burned but nothing else. Yet there it is, or, rather, isn't: the house, and everything inside of it (excepting, I can only assume, my wife), is gone.

I am not unprepared for this. I am the kind of man who thinks through all possible courses of events. Horrifying or not, I did at one point imagine this might come to pass, or if not this exactly, something like this.

If she can burn down the dollhouse even as it sits inside our real house, then she is capable of almost anything. For this reason, I wear headphones and swimming goggles to sleep. I tie down the sheets, layer the bed three and four blankets thick. On far too many nights have I woken up only just in time to see the small figure of her jump from the top of our mattress and scurry beneath the bedroom door and into the hallway. Taking these precautions allows me to sleep peacefully, but when I wake in the morning, it is to the sickening smell of a dead cockroach, speared through its abdomen by a tiny metal skewer, the tip of which has been shoved firmly into the soft wood of our nightstand. She has set the whole thing on fire, hence the smell.

This is, unmistakably, an act of war.

In response, I am starving the bird. I haven't fed him since I fired Wear. Tonight, before I go to sleep, I will set him free in the house.

This morning I woke to find the bird (dead) on my side of the bed, covered so that he appeared to be taking a nap. Either she guessed my next move or she had been planning this move all along.

How did she kill him? How did she manage to move him—he's well over three times her size—and settle him on my pillow? How did she loosen the sheets, and when she did, why did she not do more to me? Questions I cannot answer, though I am not without my own next move. On my way home I will stop by our friend's house and retrieve our cat.

Not just the cat; now we also have a number of spiders and cockroaches that I set free to wander through the house. I like to picture my wife as Jason or one of his Argonauts, a sword in hand, fighting large and mystical beasts. Hordes of skeletons. Giant cats.

I have, furthermore, flooded the bedroom. The bed now sits on stilts. I have waders sitting just outside the bedroom door for when I come home and want to go to bed. The water is about a foot and a half deep. It is an unnecessary precaution. The cat will find my wife eventually, if he hasn't done so already. But one can never be too careful. With a large sheet of plastic spread along the perimeter of the room, I've built a miniature pool, a moat of sorts. Now that the room is flooded, I've stopped wearing my goggles and headphones. I sleep, some nights, without covers at all. And when I dream, I dream of the cat charging down on my wife. He has no front claws, but he has teeth. He has plenty of teeth.

I've also developed the habit of checking the house for spider webs and checking those webs for wife-shaped mummies. I have only found a fly or two. I scour the kitchen and the living room for the remains of my wife, but, again, nothing.

I've found nothing and have heard nothing.

Jason and the Argonauts. It is almost as if, by making the comparison in my head, I have brought this all upon myself. Now I am blind in my left eye, and the cat is drowned, floating next to the bed.

She loved that cat.

It all happened while I slept, of course. Though the cat must have been dead before it was drowned. Surely, the sound she would have made while struggling to drown her cat would have woken me.

I knew that she was still in the room. She must have been. She was somewhere hidden, her boat—how did she learn to make a boat, and where did she find the materials for the hull, the rudder, the oars, the sail?—safely anchored next to the bed. There was a good deal of pain, after she stabbed me, but partly I was acting as I writhed about the bed and tossed around the room, my hand cupped over my eye. While one eye bled, the other searched the room for signs of her.

I stumbled from the bed to the dresser to the closet, looking for threads, tiny ropes, anything she might have used to cross over the water. Nothing. She must have swum for it in those first moments when I was distracted by the pain. The waves thrown about by my stamping feet might have carried her even faster to the water's edge.

Or perhaps she is even cleverer than that.

Perhaps she is still in her boat or just beneath it, bobbing just under the surface of the water, a small tube feeding her air.

With a quick swipe of my hand, I smashed her ship, slammed it underwater and into the bedroom floor. Smashed at it again and again and again until my hand was sore and bruised.

When I stopped, the pieces of the boat floated to the surface, but, sadly, my wife was not among them.

My wife is stronger than I am. I am ready to admit that now.

You are stronger than me.

I haven't slept in three days.

Can you see the white flag, dear? Am I waving it high enough for you?

Part of the house, now, is entirely hers. She has set traps, tripwires. She nearly took me down the other day as I ventured into the kitchen, feeling all at once like Gulliver brought down by the Lilliputians, as thin but strong hemp twine twined its way around my ankles, my waist, my wrists. I stumbled into the stove but then shoved myself back and out of the kitchen, landing flat on my back, but with enough force to break the twine around my ankles, and quickly, then, I stood and kicked and screamed, in case she was nearby, ready to pounce again.

She has stuck tiny spears into the carpet, has formed a perimeter around her camp. Small spears bearing the heads of a spider or two, and some cockroaches. At night, I can see a small bonfire. I stare at it, transfixed, wondering what she is burning. Pieces of carpet? Or insects? Or what?

Her camp. That's where I am headed now. I will follow in her footsteps. It will be difficult, and, small now as I am, blind in one eye, weak from lack of sleep, I doubt that I will make it very far, certainly not to her camp, and if I do make it through the living room and across the cold landscape of the kitchen and into the den where she waits for me, then I can only guess at the fate that awaits me there. But I will do everything in my power, will fend off hordes of spiders or cockroaches if necessary, will sacrifice my right eye if only it will allow me even the one last opportunity to creep up on her as she sleeps.

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