

Patricia Stacey
from *Inheritance*

In July of 2010, my mother died and left me twenty-five thousand dollars of BP stock, her master's thesis, and scabies.

I was at the time a middle-aged woman, petite, who often dressed like a teenager—jeans and t-shirts. I felt like an adolescent too. I had a teenager's sense of stuckness. My days were filled with thoughts about my son Walker's endless allergies and the other chronic illness that seemed more intractable: my marriage. My husband and I inhabited separate poles. He spent a lot of time at his new job, or in the room he rents close to it, two hours from our house.

A few months ago, he stopped staying goodbye when he left on Monday mornings. I tended to look away when he came home; I couldn't stand to see the disdain —imagined or not— that colored his face when he looked at me.

Cliff blamed me for bringing scabies into the house, and giving them to him and our son. I blamed him for our inability to get rid of them. He raged at my leaving clothes in plastic bags for more than a week. I blamed him for taking them out in less than two. Anyway, the scabies didn't seem to care who was right. They seeped out of our clothes, crept on our skin, burrowed, and left us waking in the middle of the night in fits of scratching — a tormenting itch that even Dante could appreciate. I didn't go out much, only to the store to buy food, more clean clothes, or plastic sheeting for our furniture. While the parasites munched at my skin, I lost my taste for food, books, anything. Instead, I donned toxic waste gloves and soaked our bedding and clothes in scalding hot bath water. I stirred the caldron of nearly boiling Borax with the gall of a necromancer, invoking help for murder. If I'd had baboon's blood I would surely have poured it in the mix. Fittingly, I used the handle of a broom. After the soaking, I transferred the blankets

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and towels and shirts to the front loader, where I poured more Borax into the mix and shut the door. Later, I transferred everything again into the dryer, folded it, brought it upstairs and remade all the beds. I couldn't hire anyone to do the work. I was terrified of contaminating people. This ritual continued for weeks. While I worked, Cliff often came home and disappeared into the guestroom, or sat at the kitchen table with his head in his hands, or leaned over his iphone squinting, rarely looking up. Months passed. We covered our entire bodies with pesticide cream and slept in it ten times. And visited countless doctors. Still the scabies did not go away. I began to wonder if I hadn't become a scabie myself. We stopped inviting guests over, cancelled our son Walker's piano lessons, all hair-cutting appointments, and ultimately, as some kind of poetic expression of alienation, we finally decided that we would forgo all expectation of touching. Cliff moved into the guest room.

During this time, Walker and I created an innovative way to give each other hugs. We developed what we called the "eye hug." He approached me and fixed me in his gaze, let his eyes go soft and loving and intentional. Huge like my husband's, his eyes pierced mine and when they did, I felt something like the presence of his soul. It reminded me of the moments when, in *Star Trek*, the Vulcan Spock puts his hands to the forehead of another and literally "mind melds" memory, feelings, essence. Spock knows a man; enters a life. So, too, Walker pierced me with his gaze. I felt seen.

No such accommodations were made in my marriage.

One day my scabies disappeared. Cliff's did not. I eagerly went to have my hair done and looked in the mirror for what seemed like the first time in months. My blondish hair had grown long. The beautician insisted that I keep it that way. She taught me how to curl it. I went to see the OB. She gave me new doses of estrogen. Friends invited me to lunch. I decided to dress up

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and pulled on the first skirt I'd worn in months. Meant to hang on the hips, it fell to my knees. I had lost weight without realizing it. I searched my closet for something to wear, and finally pulled out an old mini-skirt from my twenties. I pulled on a tight ribbed sweater and a belt. I hadn't had so much fun at lunch in years. Someone told me my stomach was "rock hard." During dessert a man stared at my legs. As he continued to look, I found myself not minding — sinking into a profound sensuality, a warm bath. That sense of being seen was a moment from other days, a moment I didn't want to lose. I went home in my new size four skirt hoping that Cliff would say something. He didn't. For several days I wore skirts and dresses. A man at a fundraiser asked if he could get me a drink. A woman gently grazed my jutting hipbone with the back of her hand. I almost jumped from the electric deliciousness of being touched. A man gave me his parking voucher. Cliff gave me a bag of laundry. On the street an elegant woman wanted to know if I was wearing a Diane Von Furstenberg. At home Cliff wanted to know who had turned the dishwasher off in mid-cycle.