

THE SECRET LIFE OF OTTO AND HILDA

Jody Hobbs Hesler

Otto Augsburg knew exactly what he wanted when he walked into the Jiffy-J on Avon Street: Utz sour cream and onion potato chips, his favorite American junk food. Actually, the chips were the only American junk food Otto ate, and the Jiffy-J was the only store in town that carried them. He knew because he'd dispatched one of his underlings to search for them once when a craving hit him especially hard.

Today he selected the single serving size, the bag no longer than the fingers of his own hand but enough to slake his craving. He would have bought the chips and gone on his way if one more thing, standing at the checkout counter, hadn't caught his attention and set off an entirely new craving. The bright red human-height plastic M & M, with black plastic arms and legs, white mitts for hands, white boots for feet, wearing a Christmas hat and a smirk. Otto wanted that, too.

Unlike some of his colleagues, who bought Jaguars for their children's sixteenth birthdays or vacation homes in Jamaica, Otto preferred more modest indulgences. Especially ones that tickled his sense of humor. Here—this thing was ridiculous: If one wished for candy, why would one be likelier to buy it at the hands of a giant, anthropomorphic morsel of it? Plus, the Santa Claus hat, four full months after the holiday had passed, added spice to the silliness.

He would buy it and give it to his daughter, now in her third year at UVA. Surely Marta would enjoy the absurdity as much as he did. Anyone would. And a surprise like this would justify a spontaneous visit, even though she discouraged these. What he considered a German propensity for timeliness and propriety skipped him, more or less, but manifested itself perfectly in Marta. She was stern and precise in her habits, particularly as they regarded spending time with him. He was always looking for a way around her reserve.

At least she still talked to him. She was the only child of his second marriage, and his two children from his first marriage, now in their thirties, lived in California and Montana and only called a couple times a year. Otherwise, they didn't seem to think of him, except when they wanted money. Same with both ex-wives.

The clerk behind the counter looked up at Otto over the steaming brim of a Styrofoam cup. He wore a red apron stamped with Jiffy-J in white letters over a striped polo shirt.

Otto laid his chips on the counter and said, “Good day to you.”

“Morning,” the clerk said and scanned the bag with the register wand. “Anything else today?”

“In fact there is.” Even after forty years in the States, American consumer culture still amused Otto, but his humor didn’t always translate. He fished for a way to phrase his request and opted for the simplest possible words. “How much for that?” he asked and motioned toward the life-sized M & M.

Strapped to the M & M was a tray of small bags of the candy: dark chocolate, milk chocolate, peanut, and pretzel. The clerk pointed to the sign that hung from it. “Three for a dollar,” he said.

“No, not that.” Otto let out a soft laugh like a car starting. The clerk couldn’t know that any candy Otto ate was shipped directly from his homeland. “The creature.”

“*Creature?*” the clerk answered. He looked both ways before settling his gaze on the M & M. “You mean *that?* Sounded like you meant some kinda horror movie thing.”

“Yes,” Otto said, touching the M & M’s ersatz shoulder. “This fellow, right here.” He imagined Marta’s face when he brought it to her later, how her usual determined expression would give way to something softer and easier.

“Not for sale.”

The odor of hot dogs rotating in a case behind the man began to disturb Otto. Long, skinny, pinkish tubes, revolving in the strange orange light of the countertop heating oven. Such a poor imitation of actual frankfurters. Otto caught his own reflection, distorted in the chrome housing of the oven, his wild whorls of white hair and bushy eyebrows meeting in the middle, his face drawn long and rippling like in a funhouse mirror. Not for the first time, he wondered what he seemed like to other people.

“It’s well past the holidays.” Otto tapped one of his long, thin fingers against the fringe of the Santa hat.

“Don’t matter.”

“What will happen to it, though?” Otto said. “Surely someone will collapse this display? Heave the creature into the garbage? Any day now.”

The clerk picked up his coffee cup again and took another sip. “I wouldn’t know,” he said. “Buck fifty for the chips, by the way.”

Once when Marta was small, Otto brought her a mason jar full of tadpoles from a friend's pond. They were tiny writhing things, tumbling in the murky pond water, endlessly entertaining to watch. His friend had called them "pollywogs," a source of hilarity on its own. Marta took the jar with a look of trust in him and wonder at the world. She brought that same jar back to him a couple weeks later, every pollywog floating belly up, not one of them turning into a frog. The look she gave him then was full of blame and sorrow, feelings that seemed to shadow every look she's given him since. If this gift could change that, for even a moment, it will have done its job.

"Must be worth something," Otto said. He was not one to back away from a deal.

"It just ain't something we sell, man," the clerk said. "Don't know what else to tell you."

"Everything's for sale, young man," Otto said. "Besides, it's clear whoever brought him here has forgotten all about him now that we're in the month of April." He flicked the Santa hat to make his point and pulled a roll of cash from his pants pocket. "It's a question, I suppose, of what it's worth to you."

"Hell, it ain't me, man. I'd love to take your money," the clerk said, flustered. "It's just not mine to sell."

Otto leafed several bills, all fifties, off the roll. “How about these? Will these cover it?” he said, handing over the stack of cash that now curled together, making a roll of its own. “Share it with your boss. Then everybody’s happy, yes?”

The clerk gulped visibly but didn’t argue. Satisfied, Otto unhitched the tray of M & Ms and its cardboard shoulder-strap from the creature. Then he tossed another \$1.50 onto the counter. “For the chips,” he said and slipped the little bag into his rumpled blazer pocket before bracing the M & M and wrangling it out the door.

Outside, Otto leaned the creature upright for a moment so he could point his key remote at his bullet-shiny Mercedes-Benz and open the passenger door. Then he tried to slide the M & M into the passenger seat, pushing from the rounded shoulders, but it didn’t bend into a sitting position and swiveled the wrong direction instead, bumping against the open car door. Next, Otto laced his arms around its wide waist and sat in the seat himself, pulling the M & M onto his lap. Even though it remained rigid, this worked. He slid out from under it and went around to the driver’s side, waved to the clerk through the glass storefront, and got in.

§

Otto had meetings to attend and business errands to accomplish before he could take the M & M to Marta. When he came out from doing some banking downtown, a man with a small dog stood beside Otto's car, staring into it.

"That's old Hilda," he said, conjuring the name in that moment, because it seemed funnier and better for the creature to have a name that had nothing to do with its American branding. The ad campaigns seemed to make these creatures out as male, but the sudden name also came with Hilda's decided femaleness. She was a hearty, laughing sort of woman. He pictured her around a fireplace at an Alpine ski lodge, telling loud stories to an appreciative audience of fellow skiers. "She likes jokes."

The man with the dog smiled now that he could tell Otto didn't mind his peering into the car. The dog's claws scabbled the sidewalk as Otto eased open his door. "Dirty jokes best of all," he said to the man, offering a two-fingered salute before he sank into the driver's seat again. Out of his rearview he watched the man shake his head and walk away. "How about that, Hilda?" he said. "People can't keep their eyes off of you."

Next came a meeting of his development group, reviewing plans to turn a derelict building into office space downtown. He loved having the power to

transform wasted space into something beautiful and new. He left the meeting tossing his keys into the air and catching them, whistling a happy tune as a light rain thrummed around him.

It was a pizza delivery woman ogling Hilda this time, using the vinyl pizza pouch as an umbrella. When Otto approached, she lifted her head. "You got yourself some good company there."

"She never gets tired of me," Otto said. They both laughed.

Now that it was rush hour, Otto traveled around town through the most congested intersections on purpose, in order to get caught at stoplights. This afforded him more chances to see people's reactions to Hilda before he gave her away. At one stoplight, he fetched a paper napkin out of his glove compartment and carefully daubed Hilda's face. A woman in the next lane flinched and turned away as if he had done something obscene.

The line of traffic was so long, Otto had to stop at the same light again, and this time he pretended to argue with Hilda, mouthing no real words but pinching his eyebrows together and shaking one fist in the air toward her. The guy in the left turn lane beside him shot disgusted looks his direction and kept creeping forward, trying to get farther away from him.

For Otto's last trick, he leaned over and pretended to give Hilda a full-on mouth kiss, a long slow one. When he opened his eyes again, the light had turned green. The driver behind him laid on his horn. Otto laughed and waved into his rearview, as if the man could share the joke.

By now, copper sunlight crested the blue mountain ridges and edged the trailing strands of the day's clouds with a metallic sheen. Dogwoods bloomed and redbud blossoms feathered through the air. He wasn't far from Marta's apartment now, at a red light at Cherry and Ridge. Even though she kept insisting that he plan his visits ahead, he believed she would welcome the surprise of meeting Hilda. Besides, it was a good time of day, past afternoon classes and before evening ones. He wouldn't be interrupting.

"Hilda, lieblich, I've got someone I'd like you to meet," Otto said. His voice boomed in the small car. He was surprised how much he enjoyed her company, how the bright flash of red in the next seat over never quite stopped being funny to him. "What's that you say? Better than some old pollywogs?" He craned toward her with a hand against his ear, as if to listen better. "I couldn't agree more."

He imagined the fun Marta would have with Hilda. She would make a ridiculous prop for parties or a great gag to play on a friend. You could make

her knock on somebody's door, tuck her into somebody's bed, bring her to class...

He pulled into the parking lot of Marta's apartment complex and parked in one of the spaces marked GUEST. He had offered to buy her a little house even closer to Grounds, but she had said no. She worked at a coffee shop and paid her own bills. A scholarship paid her tuition. He appreciated her self-sufficiency, but he missed spoiling her. She wouldn't even let him pay for a parking spot for her in the University lot. She said she'd rather walk.

He wrestled Hilda out of the car. Her hard plastic shell plunked against the door on her way out. It was drizzling again, and she was slippery. He carried her piggyback, holding her by the tops of her legs, her stiff body standing upright at an angle from his. She was heavier than he had gauged from his first moments transferring her into the car. He had to stop a couple times on the sidewalk to catch his breath and mop sweat off his face with his lavender-scented handkerchief.

Other students who lived in the same building trickled in from different directions with backpacks slung over one shoulder. Some said hi to him and Hilda. Others pointed from afar and laughed. Everyone looked. Otto took the attention as a sign of his success. He imagined certain things to be as true for

others as for himself, and he felt anyone who had thought of it would have wanted to take the creature from the store. What made him special a lot of the time, in life the same as in business, was that when he saw something he wanted, he went for it. People understood the wanting, and they envied his ability at the getting.

Marta's apartment was on the third floor. Otto half-dragged, half-carried Hilda up every flight of the outdoor staircase. At his daughter's door, he stood Hilda up just beyond view of the peephole, poofed his hair with his fingers, and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief one more time. Hilda was sprinkled with raindrops from their walk, so he patted her dry as well. The hallway was brightly lit, and Hilda gleamed. He chuckled into his hand, then knocked.

He worried his daughter's roommate would answer. She was South Korean, with a name that sounded like Hi. Even after spending his entire adult life in America, Otto was still self-conscious about the remnants of his own accent, which made him especially afraid of mispronouncing the girl's name. He preferred not to say it all. Marta noticed how he avoided using her name and frowned at him when it happened.

When the doorknob rattled, sticking a little, he pictured Marta's roommate on the other side with her perennial tie-dyed t-shirts and spray of forehead acne. But when the door opened, he was relieved to see Marta instead. She was wearing sweatpants and the wire-rimmed glasses she used for reading. She bought most of her clothes from Goodwill, instead of letting him buy her attractive new clothes, and he was pretty sure she'd had the same glasses since middle school.

Most of her blond hair was swept into a ponytail, except for the bangs and some soft strands that had gotten tired from being held so tight and had drifted free. She looked tired herself and showed no signs of joy when she looked at him. At sight of Hilda, she made an audible exhale, then steeled her expression, the way her mother had those last years before the divorce.

"Voilà!" Otto said, presenting Hilda with a grand swoop of his hands.

"What is this?" Marta crossed her arms. One hand held a pencil, and it jutted out and away from her like a tiny saber. She looked from Hilda to her father. She didn't step away from the threshold or make any motion to let him in.

"Great for parties. A gag gift for somebody? A practical joke?"

Marta didn't even smile.

“I thought you’d like it,” Otto said. He could hear the sadness in his own voice.

“You thought I’d like a giant M & M?”

“I did, really.” The smile on Otto’s face felt crooked. He almost touched it to check its symmetry.

Marta’s next expression was a ringer for another of her mother’s. Equal parts exasperation and pity. She might have reached out to touch his face or to slap it. “It doesn’t look like something I’d want. Look at it, Dad. It’s all you.”

Something inside him smarted as if she had gone ahead and slapped him. He did look at Hilda, but he wasn’t sure what Marta thought he would see.

“I hope you didn’t pull one of your money tricks to get it?” she said.

“Money tricks?” Otto noticed that Marta’s feet were bare and her toenails needed a trim. A few thin treads of old polish clung along the nails, and the edges were split and rough.

“Nobody just sells stuff like that,” she said. “I bet you threw a bunch of cash at some unsuspecting kid who didn’t have a right to say yes or the will to say no. Just like that time at your club.”

He had taken her out to dinner at his country club many times, but she meant something that happened in the fall. The glass-walled dining room

overlooked the club's golf course. A rugged backdrop of Blue Ridge foothills, afire with fall colors, framed the manicured greens, a perfect contrast of wild and tame. "I just wanted my usual table," Otto said.

"So you paid the waiter-kid to move a family who was already sitting there," Marta said. She sounded more puzzled than angry, but her words put Otto on edge.

"I bought them champagne for the trouble. They seemed happy enough." His voice had risen, but he quieted it again. Footsteps sounded down the hall, and he didn't want anyone to see him, stuck in the hallway with the huge M & M and a daughter who wouldn't let him into her apartment.

"I know, I know. The best champagne in the wine cellar, and your fluttering waves of thanks," Marta said, mimicking his gesture from that night. "But what difference would it have made for us to sit somewhere else? We would've seen the sunset just as well one table over."

The footsteps faded, then began echoing from a stairwell. Still, Otto felt embarrassed. He wanted to remind Marta that the hostess was the one who had made the mistake. He had booked his usual table beside the window. He had felt generous paying someone else to correct the error, and generous again when he had made things right with the family that had moved. But these

arguments would only beget other arguments. There was truth in Marta's words that he didn't fully grasp, and he knew she wouldn't let go of it.

"Anyway, I'm in the middle of writing a paper. Due tomorrow," she said. "That's why I always ask you to call before you come by. I don't have time for random visits."

"I just wanted to bring you a gift." His tone shifted. He had gone to some lengths to acquire Hilda, and he hadn't foreseen this backfire. He wanted, maybe, a simple thank you. A shred of appreciation.

"You know, Dad, just one time I'd love to get a gift from you that was sweet and simple and didn't cost anything extra. No conniving. Nothing on a grand scale. Not a gift meant to top all gifts, just a gift that showed you thought of me."

"I think of you all the time," Otto said.

She squinted at him. "Then it should be easy." Sometimes her voice slipped backwards in time and sounded fragile and hopeful mixed together. The same as when she was small and he would put her to bed. She would tease him for sitting on her legs, again, and he would slide over, pretending it had been an accident and not part of their ritual. He would say he loved her very much, and she would say she loved him very, very much, and he would reply with

more verys, and she would reply with more, until one of them would say, “I love you with *all* the verys!” and they would laugh.

“I really have to go now. Call next time, okay?” Marta still looked sad for him as she shut the door. He stood there, with Hilda, not knowing what to do with her now, and he could tell his daughter lingered on the opposite side of the door, too, because he didn’t hear any footsteps moving away.

§

Hilda seemed to want to tussle with him on the way back down the stairs. Her legs whacked the banisters. Her hands got stuck between railings. Her head bumped his head. He started to take her painted smirk personally.

Just beyond the base of the stairs, Otto stumbled. He went from looking at the white cement walkway beneath him to staring at the cloudy sky above. Hilda landed flat on top of him, and his head barely missed the concrete, thumping into the damp, mulchy earth beside it. The impact brought tears to his eyes, but Hilda seemed unscathed.

It took some effort to right himself and Hilda again. He had hoped to brace himself against her a little to help him stand up, but she kept sliding into his way, preventing his feet from gaining purchase or causing his hand to slip across her middle as he tried to push himself up. Finally, he heaved her to the

side altogether, then squatted a moment, gaining strength. It wasn't so easy for him to stand from this position at his age.

A line of dumpsters edged the sidewalk where the parking lot began. He considered hoisting Hilda in there. But the prospect of Marta bringing her own trash down later and seeing Hilda's legs poking up stopped him.

Clouds leftover from the day now banked along the horizon. Fallen red-bud petals floated in puddles, browning at the edges and turning mucky. Other tenants noticed Otto as he limped and dragged Hilda down the sidewalk. Now their expressions seemed jeering and fraught. Maybe everyone saw in Hilda what Marta had.

Eventually he made it back to his car and, once again, slid into the passenger seat, lugging Hilda in on top of him. He sat there, his hands wrapped around her cold plastic middle. He might have cried if he hadn't minded how that would look to people passing by outside the car.

So he wriggled out from under Hilda again and shut her door with an air of gallantry. Before he put the car into gear, he fluffed his hair again. A few more slivers of bark shivered into his lap. He turned to Hilda. "Well, lieblich, nothing ever goes as planned, does it?"

The permanent smirk on her face seemed to put him in his place. He didn't talk to her for the rest of the ride home.

When he pulled into his building's parking garage, he left Hilda behind alone. He canceled dinner plans with friends and ate toast with melted cheese by himself in his empty penthouse apartment.

As his first step to getting ready for bed, Otto emptied his blazer pockets. His car keys. Yet another errant chunk of mulch. And the mostly empty package of Utz sour cream and onion. He examined the bag a moment, as if it could explain something to him. This was a simple thing that he liked. No conniving required. No extra cash.

Imagine Utz sour cream and onion and two or three other little Jiffy-J items, wrapped in nothing more than a Jiffy-J red plastic bag. He would take Marta to eat at the taco truck that parked in the lot outside his building during the work week lunch rush. They would sit by the train tracks, because Otto had always loved train tracks. The faint smell of creosote. The tracks creeping out of view into infinity. The whole rest of the world lying just beyond.

He would share a handful of simple things he really liked and she would stare at him, uncomprehending, because what else could she do? Who would want to share such basic, boring things?

Before bed, he texted Marta. “Doing like you asked and planning instead of dropping by. Would love to take you to lunch tomorrow.” In person, a barely tolerant sigh would likely accompany her answer, but Marta’s response just said, “Should work. Finishing paper now.” He asked her to meet him just outside his building so they could walk together.

Really, Utz sour cream and onion was an even funnier gift than Hilda ever could have been.

§

His giddiness about his task the next morning made Otto forget Hilda altogether until he got into his car again, and the sight of her peering at him from the passenger seat startled him. “Hilda,” he said. “What am I going to do with you?”

The way Otto saw it, his mission was simple. Go back to the Jiffy-J, get another bag of the Utz chips, and find two or three other things, too. They had to be things he or Marta actually liked. Their simplicity would render them absurd.

At least when Marta seemed disappointed by an offering of cheap oddities from the convenience store, her reaction wouldn’t hurt him. It would make

sense. He cast another glance at Hilda. "She should have you liked you, liebbling." Otto fired the ignition and backed out of his space.

It was a sunny day, yesterday's drizzle forgotten but for a few small puddles and patches of mud. Flowers bloomed cheerfully in medians. The grass and all the new leaves were greener from the rain the day before. In the parking lot of the Jiffy-J, Hilda shone as red as tulips from the front seat.

The clerk inside was the same one from the day before, and he winced as soon as he recognized Otto. He craned a look at the car parked out front, and rushed toward Otto from behind the counter with waving hands. "No, no, no, sir," he said.

"What is it?" Otto asked, looking all around himself for a cause for such concern.

"I'm sorry," the clerk said, peeking back toward Otto's car again, "but a deal's a deal. I can't take that thing back."

"No, of course not."

"As long as we're clear," the clerk said. "I almost lost my job over that thing."

Otto glanced backwards toward his car now, too. “Over Hilda?” But of course the clerk would have no clue who Hilda was, and his face showed his confusion. “The M & M, I mean. You almost lost your job because of that?”

“Yes, sir. Never seen my boss so mad. Even after I handed over all the money.”

“Was it not enough?” Marta’s remarks from her doorway yesterday came back to Otto. Something about an unsuspecting kid. He reached for his pocket, with the thought of offering more, but the clerk’s eyes bugged and his hands shot out to stop him.

“Dude, no, there’s cameras everywhere in here. I can’t just take your money. Not again. And I can’t sell stuff that’s not mine. Just, please, man, don’t hang around for long with that thing out there, okay?”

“Certainly,” Otto said. The clerk nodded, only half-satisfied, and headed back to his station behind the counter. He fiddled with a display of caffeine tablets, and then checked outside again, looking harried.

The counter, and the whole store for that matter, seemed a riot of bright yellows and blues and reds. Plastic packaging and glossy magazine covers glared from every aisle and from the ends of every aisle and from stands along

the counter, too. The colors banded together and seemed to collect into a raucous noise that began to unnerve Otto. He wanted to get out of there quickly as much as the clerk wanted him gone.

The Utz sour cream and onion were, of course, where they always were, and Otto eased a package from its display clip. According to his challenge to himself, now he must choose at least two other gifts.

On one aisle, he found motor oil and tampons and cans of soup whose labels sported gruesome pictures of what the soup inside was supposed to look like. To Otto, it all looked like dog food. To the right of the soup cans, in fact, were cans and bags of dog food, and diapers. He switched aisles.

So much American candy, which he had never liked. But it was a small store, and he was already running out of aisles. He had a challenge to satisfy, and a point to prove. The point that the kind of gifts Marta was asking for were meaningless. Liking something didn't grant its importance. So maybe his grand gestures weren't so bad after all.

No to the fireball candies and to the myriad of American milk chocolates that had almost no flavor. No to the vast array of bubble gum. He was about to give up altogether when something from a low shelf sparked his fancy at last. A familiar paper roll of candies. Necco wafers.

He remembered the pale little disks from Marta's childhood. Their sugar powdered your fingers, and all they tasted like was sugar itself, plus a figment of flavor faked to correspond to each of the pastel colors. His mouth watered at the memory, not in anticipation but in a reflexive rush of cleansing. Marta had loved them, though. When given the chance, it was the candy she asked for. So he bent and retrieved a roll. It fit in his hand in a snug, satisfying way.

The clerk cleared his throat and gave Otto a pleading smile from behind the counter. He found it absurd to imagine a job so tenuous that a plastic creature could threaten it. Otto hadn't considered such a possibility in all his life. Thinking of it now made him feel an unfamiliar pang of responsibility for the clerk. He nodded in his direction, a cue that he would hurry, but he still needed to find one more item.

Accessories with no seeming relation to one another jammed a stand at the end of the candy aisle. Magnets. Packs of playing cards. Lighters with decorated cases. Key chain fobs emblazoned with various touristy images: tiny images of the Blue Ridge Mountains in metallic relief, several variations on Monticello, a Thomas Jefferson bust that doubled as a bottle opener. People would buy anything.

Then again, he had bought Hilda.

From the back of a rack of Virginia Is For Lovers keychains, something bright and green flashed in the fluorescent lights. Otto brushed the other fobs out of the way until he held the last one between two fingers. It was a tiny metal frog, lime green with four darker green dots and a streak of yellow for its belly. It sheltered under a red and white toadstool.

It made him think at once of the ill-fated pollywogs. A child is capable of almost ageless grief. The death of those tadpoles had proved something to Marta about the world—its ruthlessness, her father’s powerlessness over it, and, worse than that, her father’s ignorance and the harm it could cause.

That silly little frog surprised a knot into Otto’s throat, as if it could fulfill the promise the pollywogs, and so many of his own subsequent failures, had broken. With his free hand, he dug his lavender-scented handkerchief out of his blazer’s breast pocket and touched its edge to the corners of his eyes. Then he re-pocketed it and worked the frog keychain free from its display prong.

The clerk seemed happy to see Otto stride up to the counter, finally, with his three items in hand. The total came to a pitifully small sum and the booty hardly filled the bright red Jiffy-J bag, which swung from Otto’s hand on his way to his car. Again, before he backed away, he waved to the clerk, who, visibly relieved now, waved in return.

§

Back in his parking garage once more, Otto debated Hilda's fate. "It's been a lovely go of it," he told her, "but ultimately it hasn't worked out." Her smirk was starting to annoy him, and the Christmas hat wasn't funny anymore. He wanted to blame her for disappointing his daughter yesterday, and for his growing sense of unease about seeing her again today, and there was no one to contradict him.

The parking spaces were not large. Removing Hilda without whacking his car door against the Porsche beside it proved difficult. In fact, Otto wasn't entirely sure the doors hadn't bumped one another. There might have been a smudge of metallic gray in the center of the cobalt blue sports car's door. In the dimness, Otto couldn't tell for sure.

Hilda struggled, but not as much as she had coming down Marta's stairs. Otto liked to think she had learned something in their two days together. He lugged her over to the dumpsters. The scraping of her plastic boots along the pavement echoed in the tight space of the garage. It was one of those irritating sounds that prickled Otto's spine.

If he had any skill at physics, he was sure he could deduce the best way to lever Hilda up and into the garbage. Not only did Otto lack this skill, though,

he also lacked time. He had a few emails to return and a couple of grooming tasks to complete before meeting his daughter for lunch. So he stood with Hilda beside the dumpster to think.

She leaned into him so that someone from behind might mistake her for some kind of companion. At this thought, Otto shot a conspiratorial glance Hilda's way, and her painted sneer seemed to share his joke.

Throwing her away seemed cruel now. Why not just leave her here? Set her up beside the dumpster like people did with furniture they meant to give away. Marta hadn't wanted her, but maybe someone else would. Otto bobbed her to and fro until her white boots found their balance. "There's hope for you yet, Hilda," Otto said, and he touched a fist gently to her cheek.

§

Sleek, modern, and new, Otto's apartment building sat on Water Street, sandwiched between the parallel lines of the downtown pedestrian mall and the railroad tracks. His penthouse view surveyed the city's rooftops and the surrounding undulations of the nearest Blue Ridge foothills. But the base of the building opened onto cramped backstreets and acres of public parking lots and garages. He emerged into this backdrop to meet his daughter.

His invitation only promised lunch. He hadn't mentioned the gifts, tucked in his blazer pocket in their Jiffy-J bag, and he hadn't warned her that their food destination would be one of the curbside trucks that parked across from the Water Street garage.

Marta arrived, right on time, in a cotton dress he hadn't seen before, a faded brick shade that buttoned up the front. She left her hair down today, and it billowed in the soft breeze. It was wispy and light, looking far more carefree than she usually seemed. She had left her reading glasses at home, allowing a clear view of her eyes.

"I'm glad you could make it, Marta," he said.

"Planning ahead helps," she said in a careful tone that reminded him how often she asked him to make this kind of plan and how rarely he did. Maybe he should have tried, at least once, to do as she asked before making this strange joke of it.

"I have to warn you, right from the start, that I'm planning some surprises," he said. "Including gifts."

A quick sense of dread flashed on her face.

“Just little surprises,” Otto said. “I promise.” Her stiffness chastened him, and a twinge of worry pinched the pit of his stomach. What if his plan today was cruel?

Marta breathed out. “Good.” But he could tell she didn’t know if she could trust him.

“I want to take you to my favorite lunch spot,” Otto said.

“Am I dressed okay?” she asked, turning toward him for appraisal. The dress was nice enough, simple, slightly tailored, unwrinkled, and tidy. Obviously, she thought he planned to take her somewhere fancy and was simply checking to be sure she met the potential dress code, but still it struck him what a reflex it was for her to ask him to judge her worthy or not. So he didn’t question the dress’s provenance the way he often did. Today he tried to duck the feeling that her preference for Goodwill was one more way for her to control the distance between them.

“You look lovely,” he said instead. Her surprise at his compliment made him feel even worse.

The taco truck was inelegant, painted a shade of turquoise that reminded Otto of beach towels. They walked toward it, which was the same direction as the downtown mall and a host of other possible restaurant destinations, so she

didn't know where they were going until Otto pointed to the truck and announced, "My favorite food in town."

In fact, the tacos here tasted better to him than any meal at his club's five-star restaurant. But there was no enchanting view, no sense of occasion.

"Tell me what's good," Marta said, squinting at the menu painted on the side of the truck. She seemed at ease out here, almost relieved, with the wind tossing her hair. Two other people waited ahead of them and talked about a music festival slated for the weekend. Otto pointed out his favorite taco combinations, and when it was time for them to order, she chose the ones he mentioned.

"I was thinking we could sit by the train tracks to eat," Otto said. He was waiting for the detail of his plan that would unravel Marta's desire for him to share things he liked with her. He loved to be near the tracks, but the area around them was graveled and weedy. The backs of buildings that lined them looked industrial and dirty. It was no bucolic picnic setting.

Marta wiped a strand of hair away from her face as they walked from the truck to the tracks. "Train tracks always seem to be leading somewhere," she said. "No matter what you feel like looking at them, like if you're having a bad

day or feeling stuck about something, they take you away with them. Know what I mean?”

Otto laughed with recognition. “Yes!” he said. “I feel exactly the same.”

They lowered themselves onto a discarded railroad tie that sat twenty or so feet beyond the tracks, weeds growing high behind them. They peeled back the tacos’ waxy wrappers and crouched forward to let them drip onto the ground. Once, when some meaty juice dribbled down Marta’s chin, Otto reached out and dabbed it away with his own napkin.

Sitting on the railroad tie, they were nearer to each other than when they usually dined together. Otto liked the closeness. He spent a lot of time alone, and the people he spent time with through work, even when they were his friends, weren’t people he loved. There was something anchoring about sitting so close to someone you cared deeply about. It felt good.

“I like this,” Marta said. She held the crumpled wrapper of her finished taco in her hand.

“The food?” Otto said.

“No,” she said. “I mean, yes, I also like the food, but this. Sitting here with you. We’ve never done something like this before.”

Otto thought a moment what other things like this there may be, because now he wanted to do more of them. Then a train rattled in the distance. A memory flashed from his own childhood, holding his father's hand to watch a train clatter through an Alpine village they were visiting for summer vacation. The feel of his father's hand, closing around his, a tightness that meant love and safety. The train that meant adventure and life rolling on and on.

It was a freight train, first clacking one slow car at a time, gaining speed as the locomotive passed the city limits. They had to stand up and step back to let it rumble past. Their taco wrappers fluttered in the train's wind. Marta counted up to seventy-five cars before she gave up.

"Lunch beside the train tracks, complete with train," Marta said after the last car shuttled past. "That was really fun."

"It was my pleasure," Otto said, surprised that it really was.

She was saying good-bye, he realized, preparing to walk back to her car and to whatever schoolwork she needed to get back to. "But wait," he said. "I still have presents."

He couldn't remember the last time they had shared time so happily together, unless it was all the way back to those bedtimes with all the verys. The presents were the only pretense he had to stretch this moment, even though

now he worried they would ruin everything, these things he had bought in jest to prove her wrong about what she said she wanted from him.

A car crossed the tracks beside them. Gravel crackled under the tires.

“They’re nothing,” he said. He scooped the bag out of his pocket. The worthless red plastic bag with Jiffy-J printed in white across it. He traded it for her spent taco wrappers, unsure which handful was more fit for the garbage. “I tried to take your advice. They’re just some things I liked.” He spoke quickly, nervous and ashamed now.

She took the bag with a curious smile. The first thing she lifted out was the biggest item, the chips. “Another favorite,” Otto said, “like the tacos. They’re cheap of course. Not worth a thing. But I like them.”

She ripped the bag open, tasted one, and offered him a couple. “They really do taste good, don’t they?”

It hadn’t occurred to him that she might like them.

Next she pulled out the Neccos. “One of *my* favorites this time,” she said. “That was sweet of you to remember.”

He couldn’t tell if she was just being polite, but she seemed touched by it. A cheap roll of candy.

Last out of the bag was the key chain. It was smaller than Otto remembered. She placed it in her palm and held it up for a good look. "It's cute," she said.

"I don't know if you even remember what it reminded me of," he said, "that summer I brought you the jar of pollywogs?"

She nodded, still assessing the little frog. "The ones that died, you mean?"

"You were so sad," he said. "As if you'd just learned about all the unfairness of the world."

"And this little guy is meant to cancel that out?"

"Maybe just a little?" He touched the frog in her palm and connected his gaze with hers.

Why were her eyes always so sad and serious? She pulled her keys out of her purse, and he was sure she was about to rush off and leave him there. Instead, she threaded her keys onto the new fob.

"It's a nice idea, Daddy," she said. And she kissed his cheek.

She hadn't done that in a long time, so he laid his hand on top of the kiss as if he could hold it there.

"But you know gifts don't work that way, right? They don't erase the past."

"Did I do something wrong?" Otto asked.

She considered the question before answering. He could see she was weighing something in her mind. “No, not this time,” she said. She might have had more to say, but she added nothing beyond thanking him for lunch and saying good-bye.

He smiled at her and waved as she walked away, relieved that she had loved his pointless little gifts, the tacos, the train tracks. She had loved him, even, just for being himself. But he wasn’t very good at being himself and wasn’t sure how hard it would be to do again.

§

Afterward, Otto slipped back into his apartment building through its parking garage. He had the urge to talk to Hilda. “Liebling,” he might say, “you won’t believe what just happened.” And he would spin the tale of buying all the items from the Jiffy-J. He would exaggerate their worthlessness and the garish colors of the store. He would try to describe Marta’s simple appreciation for his ridiculous efforts. “And the joke’s really on me, Hilda, isn’t it?” he might say. “I tricked myself into being sincere.” Hilda’s smirk would make a perfect reply.

After the sunshine, the darkness inside blinded him. He eased his way slowly along the concrete wall and waited for the dim garage lighting to register.

First he heard giggling, and as his sight adjusted, he saw a mother and her little daughter standing in front of Hilda. “How are you today?” the little girl asked.

The mother answered in a funny voice, “Not so bad, yourself?” And the girl laughed, like hundreds of tiny bells ringing. Their rapport was so easy and complete, as if it required no effort at all.

Otto didn’t want to spoil that. So he kept out of view and continued along the wall all the way to the elevators. When he came back down later, Hilda was gone, having left no trace of herself behind.

Jody Hobbs Hesler lives and writes in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her fiction, feature articles, essays, and book reviews appear or are forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *Gargoyle*, *Raleigh Review*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *The Georgia Review*, *[PANK]*, *Prime Number*, *A Short Ride: Remembering Barry Hannah*, and other publications. She holds an MFA in fiction from Lesley University and teaches at Writer House in Charlottesville, Virginia.