

EDITED BY SHEILA TUCKER, JOSIE DI SCIASCIO-ANDREWS AND DERIK HAWLEY



THINGS THAT MATTER
LITERATURE AND ART ANTHOLOGY

Purple Polish

Linda Briskin

Emma sits in her wing-backed chair, smothered in a shawl textured in purples and greens, her reading glasses perched on the end of her nose, her eyes shut, her body heavy, her feet in leather slippers resting on a stool. On the side table, her coffee cools beside a closed notebook, a fountain pen, and a rolled newspaper secured with an elastic band.

What would it take, she wondered, to get up from the chair, look outside and appreciate the cloud formations. To open the window and inhale some fragrant spring air. To bake herself the jelly roll she always loved. What happened to her desire to be in the world, her courage, her audacity, her sassy voice. She remembers herself a different kind of person—a whirlwind of energy and passions and plans.

She was always ready to spin, even in the smallest of spaces, like the ballerina in the box her mother gave her. As a child, she loved to lift the lid and wind the key, mesmerized by the tune and the twirling. Closing the top and hiding the dancer was a satisfying secret. Then the mechanism broke, and the box was put away with other wounded things.

The doorbell rings. She does not imagine answering it. She hears the door open and Liana, her neighbour's daughter, comes in carrying a plate of dark chocolate digestive biscuits.

"For you, Miss Emma," she says placing the dish carefully on the side table.

When did Liana start to call her 'Miss Emma'? Although she feels like an aging crone, she is only sixty-three. Liana is eight years old. Legs in cut-off striped pink and orange tights, she stands in front of Emma, rubbing one bare foot across the other.

"Miss Emma, I have learned how to paint toenails." She lifts her foot and points her finger—a sparkly silver—at her toes. "All the colours of a rainbow. The green looks awesome beside the blue, don't you agree? Can I paint your toenails?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Why not?" Liana asks. "I will be so so so so very very careful. I need to practice."

Liana puts her hands on her hips, and tilts her head, looking at Emma expectantly. Liana's enthusiasm is more than exasperating. Emma turns away, swamped by swirling feelings of pessimism, apathy and cynicism. Then she has a sudden flash of the ballerina pirouetting in the box and hears herself say okay. In the way of the young, Liana runs off and is back almost instantaneously with a towel and a plastic bag. "What colour would you like?" She dumps the contents of the bag on the floor, lining up the different hues.

"You choose."

(Continued)

Linda Briskin

While Liana paints Emma's toenails, Emma keeps her eyes closed, and surprisingly, she doesn't mind the touch of Liana's small fingers on her feet.

"I am finished," Liana announces.

Emma looks down at her aging feet, her toes now a bright purple colour.

"To match the fringe on your shawl," Liana says proudly.

Emma startles herself by almost smiling. Well, not really a smile, more like an inclination. "Thank you, Liana." Emma settles back in her chair, more lightly than before, and reaches for a cookie.