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THINGS THAT MATTER  
LITERATURE AND ART ANTHOLOGY

# Red Silk

Linda Briskin

She fingers the silk slip, imagines it next to her skin, imagines herself walking differently with the fine silk sliding beneath her plain corduroy skirt and brown turtleneck. She lifts it to her cheek and inhales its smoothness, then drops it, reminded suddenly that her lunch break is almost over. She leaves the store and heads toward the donut shop at the corner of King and Princess where she has worked for the fourteen years since she graduated high school in 1966. Like every small Ontario town, the streets are named for royalty. The closest she ever gets to royal is caressing the silk underwear in Berman's Department Store when no one is watching.

The shop smells of stale coffee and cheap cooking oil. By the end of her shift, her clothes will take on the odor, her skin will feel slick with it. She struggles to imagine herself elsewhere, tries to feel silk between her fingers and call up the scent of the white climbing rose she passes on her way home.

She tries not to watch the clock. When she does, time slows down mercilessly. When she has only fifteen minutes left on her shift, she allows herself to count down the minutes, all the while keeping her mouth rigid with a smile.

She is wiping down the table near the back window. She likes clearing tables because she does not have to speak to anyone. Today on the chair, a customer has left a catalogue: *Victoria's Secret*. The cover is unbelievable. A woman is displayed on a lounge dressed only in a pink bra and panties, garters holding up stockings, her expression bold and coy.

She drops the magazine into the garbage bin and it slips down beside used cardboard coffee cups, plates sticky with remnants of donuts and crumpled napkins. She finishes cleaning the table and goes to dump the bag. Just before tying it for the trash, she pauses. Then she rescues the magazine and flips through it, her cheeks blushing pink. She visits the locker room and tucks it in her purse.

The box from *Victoria's Secret* comes in the mail sooner than she expected—just two weeks. Slowly she removes the green wrapping paper. She flattens its creases, runs her hands over it as if it were silk itself, then folds it neatly. With her finger nail, she slits the tape that seals the box shut. She places her hands on top of the box, shuts her eyes, and takes a full breath before removing the lid and opening the tissue paper. Finally she holds it up: a red bustier. Her breath catches in her throat as she caresses the silky sleek material. She grabs at her shirt, tearing off a small button in her haste. She unhooks her cotton bra, the same style she has been wearing for as long as she can remember. She wraps the bustier around her and begins to lace up the front, titillated by the idea of the garment as much as its sensation against her skin.

Heat flushes her face as she moves toward the closet. Opening the door hesitantly, she looks at herself in the mirror. Her breasts—so small, so ordinary—shimmer. She leans over and the edge of her nipples emerge, tightening now, knowing they are being watched. She straightens up and tilts her head sideways,

(Continued)

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confronting the stranger in the mirror, her gaze drawn to the cleavage, to the mystery of the garment, its redness. Her fingers find the laces, untying and retying to make them taut, all the while watching her breasts rise expectantly.

Her eyes stray to the clock. Her shift starts in less than an hour. Her hands smooth the satin of the bustier, reluctantly starting to undo it. Then her mirror image catches her attention again. With a slight intake of breath, she reties the laces quickly, and pulls her brown turtleneck over her head. The red is gone, the breasts vanished.

She pulls on her skirt, tucks in her top and grabs the yellow and brown jacket with the coffee shop's logo. As she bends over to tie her shoes, her breasts touch each other, a slight caress. She laughs, feels herself taller, someone else. She flings open the bedroom door, almost dances down the stairs. She hears her mother call out, "Mary, is that you?" but she doesn't answer as she slips out the door.