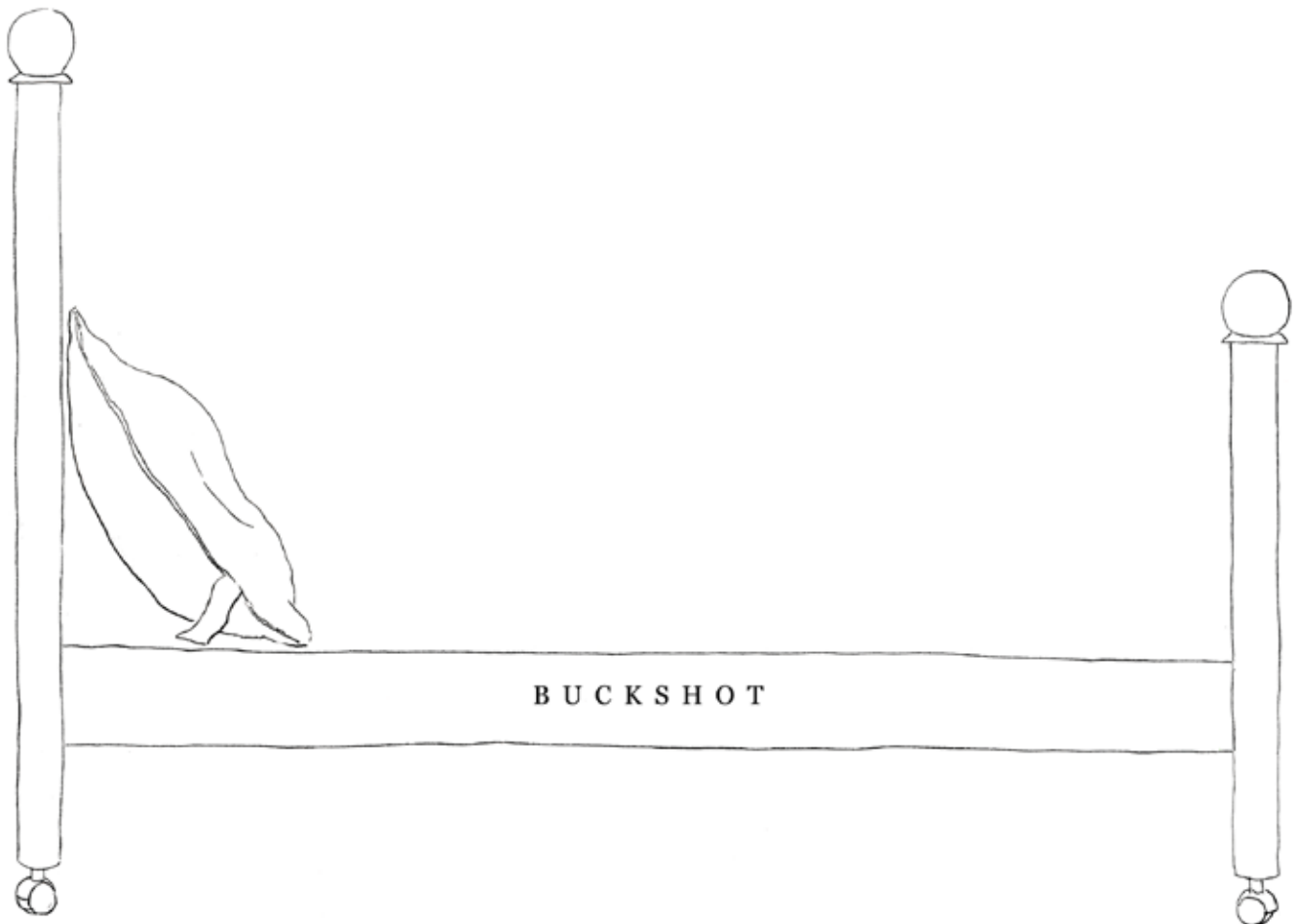


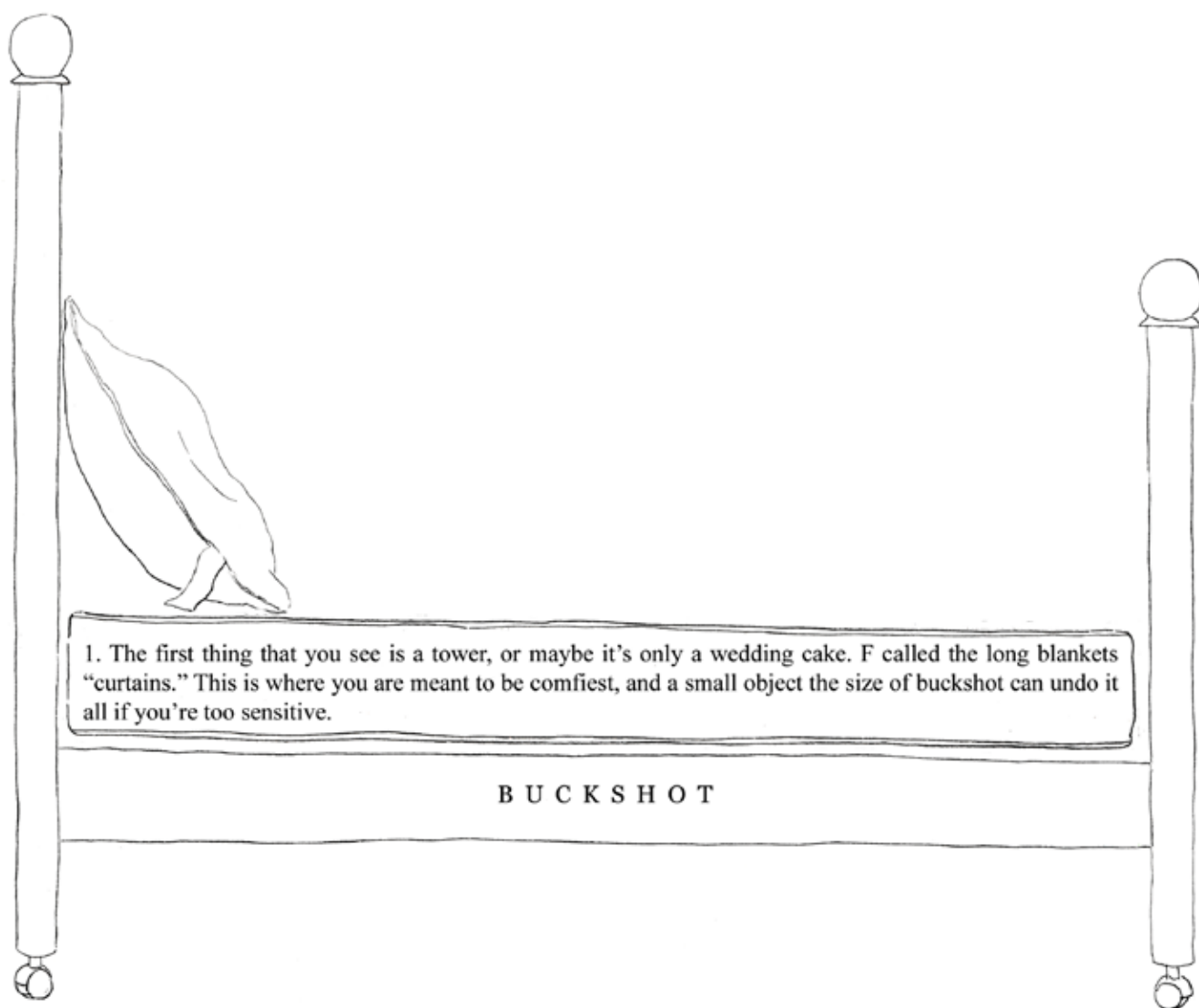
1st Place Nonfiction 2021 Summer Contest

How the story we tell ourselves of who we are is a cumulating text of Murphy's multi-media essay—how one moment, one sentence, one sensitivity can layer upon the other until what lies beneath is no longer something as benign as a pea but something more sinister, hardened by experience and injury into a tensile threat. "Buckshot" is fabulous in its conception and even more fascinating in its execution, the writing spare and lovely, the images vivid and arresting... and always that sense of tension building, weight bearing down, our speaker "clinging like a tree frog," ready to spring.

Kim Barnes

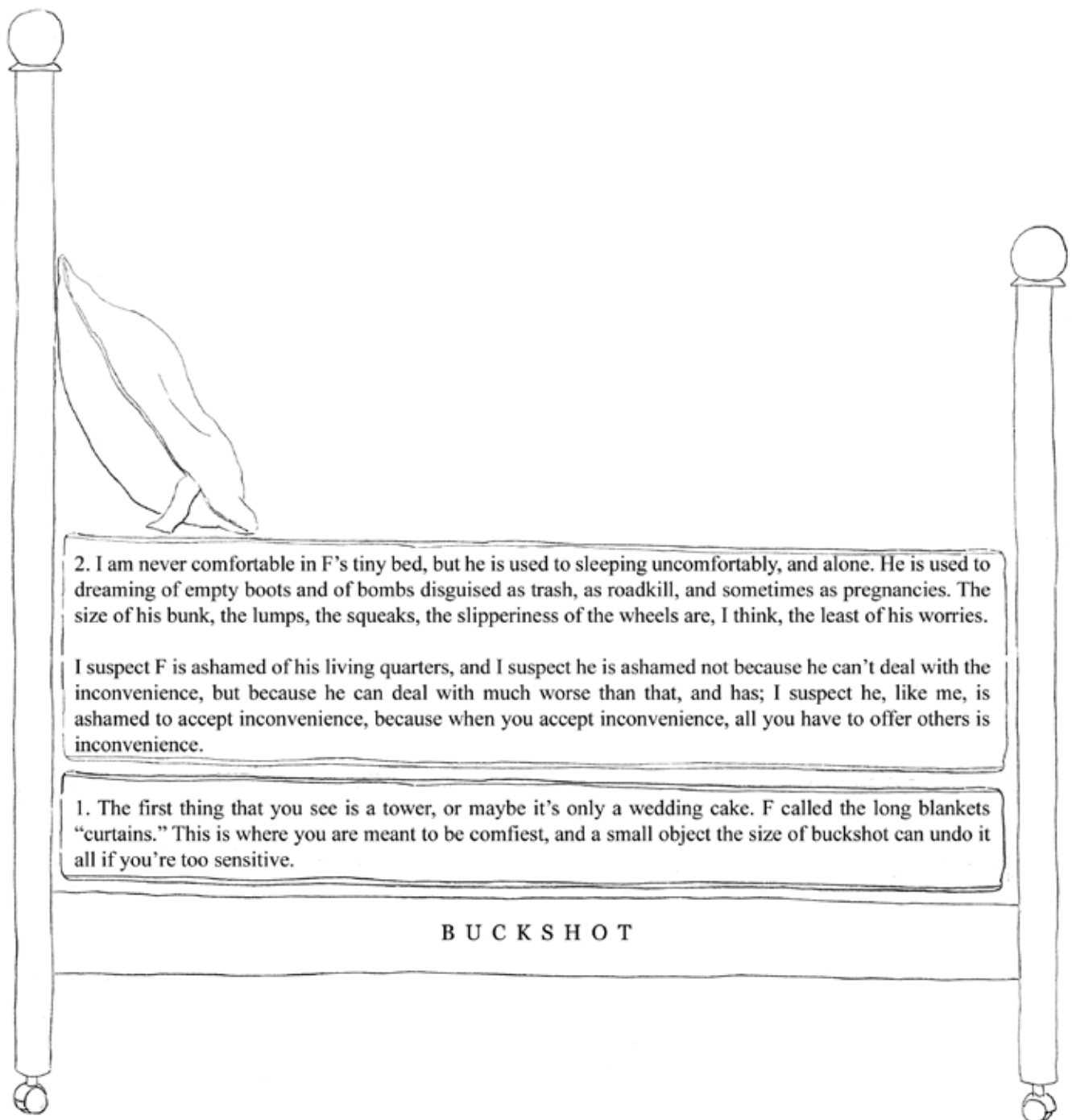
Buckshot
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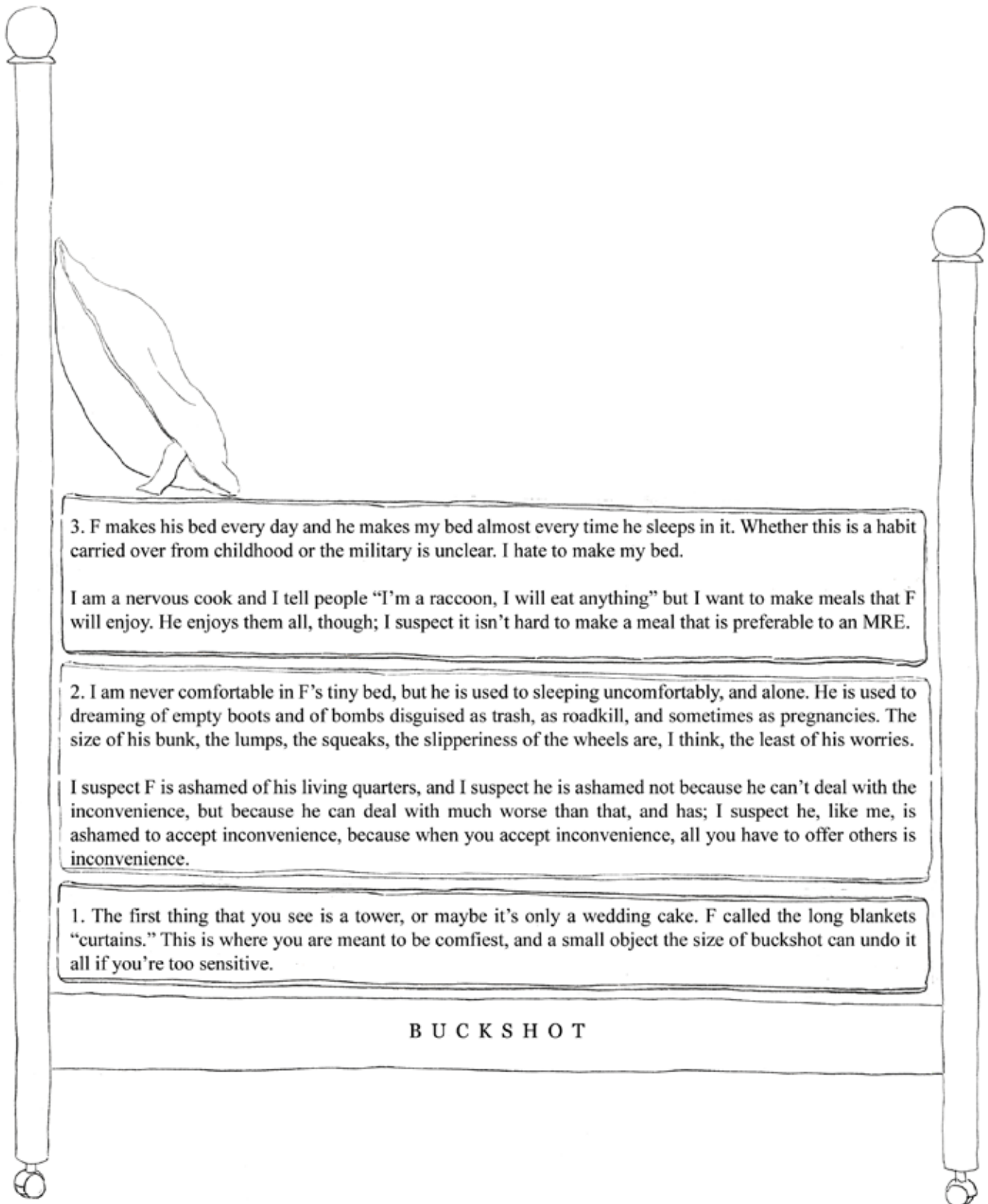


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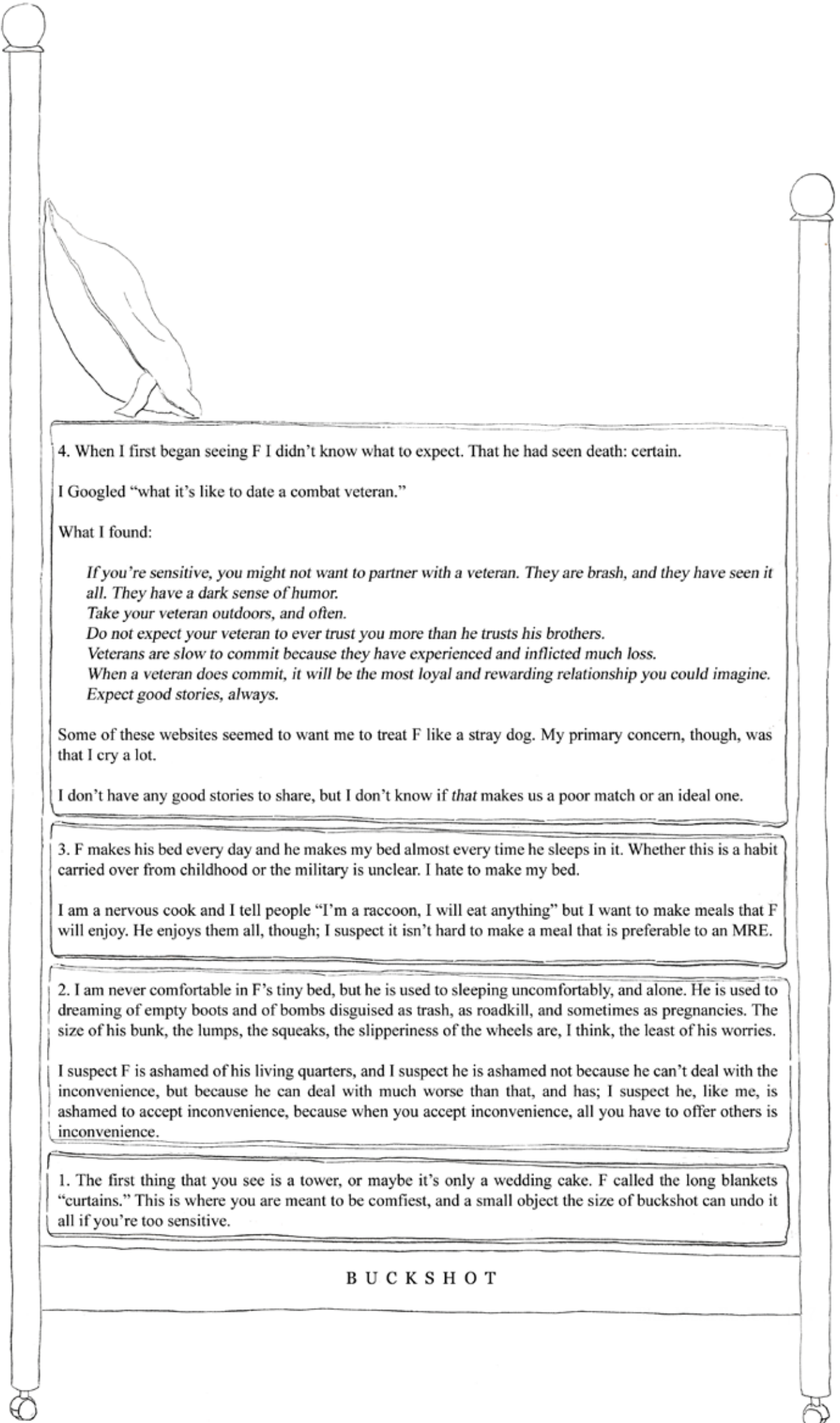
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10. In an effort to love my body more, a few months into our relationship, I find myself spending an evening taking nude pictures of myself on my phone.

The next day I ask F if he would like any photos.

"Photos of what?" he says.

"Of me. Selfies."

"Oh! Like nudes? No, that's OK, you don't have to do that."

My tenuous appreciation for my body shrivels. I start to pout, and wait for F to notice. F doesn't notice.

At last I say, "Don't you notice I'm pouting?"

F says, "Not really! I thought if something was wrong you would tell me. Why are you pouting?"

"Because you didn't want any nudes."

"I didn't say that, I just didn't want you to feel pressured to."

"I don't feel pressured to, I offered."

"Yes, I would love some. I just don't... I don't want to send any back."

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(The next day, I send him three of the nudes I think are the best. He texts back, "Very nice!" I don't send anymore.)

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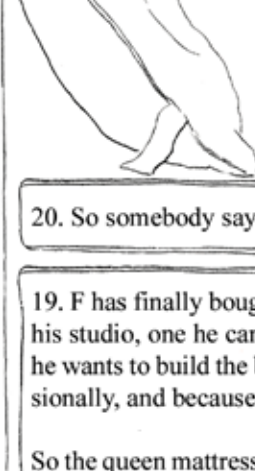
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"I didn't say that, I just didn't want you to feel pressured to."

"I don't feel pressured to, I offered."

"Yes, I would love some. I just don't... I don't want to send any back."

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(The next day, I send him three of the nudes I think are the best. He texts back, "Very nice!" I don't send anymore.)

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B U C K S H O T

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"Photos of what?" he says.

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"Oh! Like nudes? No, that's OK, you don't have to do that."

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At last I say, "Don't you notice I'm pouting?"

F says, "Not really! I thought if something was wrong you would tell me. Why are you pouting?"

"Because you didn't want any nudes."

"I didn't say that, I just didn't want you to feel pressured to."

"I don't feel pressured to, I offered."

"Yes, I would love some. I just don't... I don't want to send any back."

"That's OK, you don't have to send any back."

(The next day, I send him three of the nudes I think are the best. He texts back, "Very nice!" I don't send anymore.)

9. In fairy tales you can get away with a great deal, like testing. People in real life don't like to be tested and they're right not to like it. In real life, if you want something, you take it or you ask for it or you get used to disappointment. In fairy tales, passing a test comes with a reward, like riches or marriage or eternal life, something so glorious you don't even care that it all began because somebody found you untrustworthy.

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I Googled "what it's like to date a combat veteran."

What I found:

*If you're sensitive, you might not want to partner with a veteran. They are brash, and they have seen it all. They have a dark sense of humor.
Take your veteran outdoors, and often.
Do not expect your veteran to ever trust you more than he trusts his brothers.
Veterans are slow to commit because they have experienced and inflicted much loss.
When a veteran does commit, it will be the most loyal and rewarding relationship you could imagine.
Expect good stories, always.*

Some of these websites seemed to want me to treat F like a stray dog. My primary concern, though, was that I cry a lot.

I don't have any good stories to share, but I don't know if *that* makes us a poor match or an ideal one.

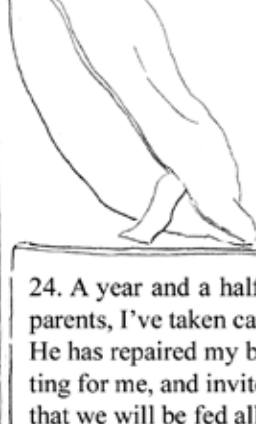
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I suspect F is ashamed of his living quarters, and I suspect he is ashamed not because he can't deal with the inconvenience, but because he can deal with much worse than that, and has; I suspect he, like me, is ashamed to accept inconvenience, because when you accept inconvenience, all you have to offer others is inconvenience.

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I tell my therapist and he says, "He finally said it. But it's still not good enough for you. There's always something to prevent you from being safe, from being comfortable."

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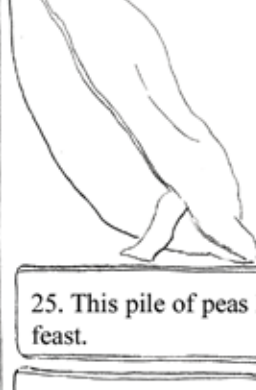
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13. As a teenager I brought a vintage green sweater home from the secondhand store and wore it everywhere even in the summer. It made me feel like Sylvia Plath, for some reason. So I wore it everywhere. Around that same time, I kept getting bitten at night. I kept awakening to reddish welts. *There must be something in my bed I cannot find.* I finally discovered the source: a small bug like a muddy teardrop, crumpled and dead on my nightstand. We burned the mattress in the backyard, and my mother made me throw the sweater in, too. "They came with that sweater, I know it." I slept on a cot for the next few months until I could buy a new mattress. During this time, I went to Lake Erie and fell asleep in the sunshine without applying lotion and it was the most comfortable and best sleep I ever had in my life. I woke up to skin like fried chicken. I slept on the cot in that skin, in my bedroom that didn't have AC, and because I was more obsessive then, I still shaved my legs every day, over the fried chicken skin. I can endure a surprising amount of inconvenience, depending on how high my self-esteem is.

12. Things you find under sheets: blood stains, coffee stains, bedbug excrement, crumbs. I spill coffee on my bed frequently. To clean it I dab at it with towels and go about my day and come back and sheet the spot up again, but F pulls back the sheet, wets a cloth, tenderly applies it to the spot, dabs, soaks up, dabs, soaks up. After he's done there's nothing left.

11. Four months in, I tell F I love him, even though he hasn't bought a bed yet. And why? It's a day when he is grumpy and tired and overworked and I feel ignored. And yet—in the dark, in my bed, as we begin to drift—I tell him, "Good night. I love you. You don't have to say anything." And he doesn't, for a while—just grabs me from behind and holds me tight in the dark and then says, "Those words hold so much weight, for me. I'm sorry, I can't say them yet."

10. In an effort to love my body more, a few months into our relationship, I find myself spending an evening taking nude pictures of myself on my phone.

The next day I ask F if he would like any photos.

"Photos of what?" he says.

"Of me. Selfies."

"Oh! Like nudes? No, that's OK, you don't have to do that."

My tenuous appreciation for my body shrivels. I start to pout, and wait for F to notice. F doesn't notice.

At last I say, "Don't you notice I'm pouting?"

F says, "Not really! I thought if something was wrong you would tell me. Why are you pouting?"

"Because you didn't want any nudes."

"I didn't say that, I just didn't want you to feel pressured to."

"I don't feel pressured to, I offered."

"Yes, I would love some. I just don't... I don't want to send any back."

"That's OK, you don't have to send any back."

(The next day, I send him three of the nudes I think are the best. He texts back, "Very nice!" I don't send anymore.)

9. In fairy tales you can get away with a great deal, like testing. People in real life don't like to be tested and they're right not to like it. In real life, if you want something, you take it or you ask for it or you get used to disappointment. In fairy tales, passing a test comes with a reward, like riches or marriage or eternal life, something so glorious you don't even care that it all began because somebody found you untrustworthy.

8. "I want a bed with springs in it," F says. We've been dating for a few months and he's decided to purchase a queen mattress. He's shopping around, in a vague sort of way. I'm not sure why he wants a bed with springs in it. But he's a gadgety sort of man, a brawny man of metal and wood and blood and sweat and bone, nothing memory foam about him.

7. I have busy hands like little fish out of water. F has sensitive skin, so when I play a harp across his chest he seizes my fingers and stills them. At first, I think my touching is a habit I cannot undo; over the months, though, I learn to cling and rest, like a treefrog.

6. F doesn't live in an apartment. He lives in a Victorian schoolhouse with three other artists, and they all work and live in great big classrooms, each as wide as four of my bedrooms and as tall as two of my bedrooms. One of the artists is also the landlord, and he has painted the corridors black and hung up taxi-dermy animals and drawn sigils on the bathroom walls. In a discrete room in the vast and dank basement the landlord has created a little shrine, but I do not know to what. He asked F if he could paint his room black, but F said "No."

F's room contains a twin cot, a couch, a television, a rocking chair, and an easy chair, and the rest of the space is devoted to his art. A sculpture of a woman's face, wailing and surrounded by artificial foliage, a baby's shoe protruding stealthily from the bottom of the frame. Great towering paintings of soldiers, of a childless Iraqi woman, of a cow beside a soldier's boot. It is almost a year before I discover the cow in the painting is dead and stuffed with explosives. "If you look closely there is a wire," F says.

I sleep over now and then. Sometimes F and I curl up together on the tiny bed, and I wake in the middle of the night sweating and confined with his big arms around me. Most times, though, he sleeps on the couch and I sleep on his cot alone. I tell myself I won't say I love you until he has bought a bed big enough for the both of us.

I always bring my sleeping pills to his house, because even if he isn't sleeping in the bed with me, I usually wake up in the middle of the night and believe I am being watched by ghosts. I tell F I think the schoolhouse is haunted and he says, "It probably is. Once I heard the sound of a piano and children's voices in the basement." I ask if he wants to conduct a séance to speak to the dead and he says soberly, "*That's all you.*"

5. Things you find under mattresses: coins, crumbs, peas, diaries, tax documents. When I was a child I pretended my mattress opened up into a secret world where my alter-ego lived. My little sister would knock at my door and I would tell her, Suzanne is not here. Suzanne has gone into the mattress. This is her Doppelgänger and secretary, Peggy Sue. My secretary was brisque and to the point and she got what I wanted.

4. When I first began seeing F I didn't know what to expect. That he had seen death: certain.

I Googled "what it's like to date a combat veteran."

What I found:

If you're sensitive, you might not want to partner with a veteran. They are brash, and they have seen it all. They have a dark sense of humor.

Take your veteran outdoors, and often.

Do not expect your veteran to ever trust you more than he trusts his brothers.

Veterans are slow to commit because they have experienced and inflicted heavy loss.

When a veteran does commit, it will be the most loyal and rewarding relationship you could imagine. Expect good stories, always.

Some of these websites seemed to want me to treat F like a stray dog. My primary concern, though, was that I cry a lot.

I don't have any good stories to share, but I don't know if *that* makes us a poor match or an ideal one.

3. F makes his bed every day and he makes my bed almost every time he sleeps in it. Whether this is a habit carried over from childhood or the military is unclear. I hate to make my bed.

I am a nervous cook and I tell people "I'm a raccoon, I will eat anything" but I want to make meals that F will enjoy. He enjoys them all, though; I suspect it isn't hard to make a meal that is preferable to an MRE.

2. I am never comfortable in F's tiny bed, but he is used to sleeping uncomfortably, and alone. He is used to dreaming of empty boots and of bombs disguised as trash, as roadkill, and sometimes as pregnancies. The size of his bunk, the lumps, the squeaks, the slipperiness of the wheels are, I think, the least of his worries.

I suspect F is ashamed of his living quarters, and I suspect he is ashamed not because he can't deal with the inconvenience, but because he can deal with much worse than that, and has; I suspect he, like me, is ashamed to accept inconvenience, because when you accept inconvenience, all you have to offer others is inconvenience.

1. The first thing that you see is a tower, or maybe it's only a wedding cake. F called the long blankets "curtains." This is where you are meant to be comfiest, and a small object the size of buckshot can undo it all if you're too sensitive.