The Brown Ring

Jenny Stanley*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2005 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
April scrubbed every one of the linoleum tiles in their new kitchen. She used an old toothbrush. Black scum lifted out of the cracks and bubbles foamed from the cleaners. She rubbed sores into her knees and calluses on the palm of her hand. Her stringy blonde hair whipped her face with every thrusting motion down onto the floor. She bought Comet, 409-All Purpose Cleaner, Lysol floor cleaner, Windex, Dawn, and Pledge.

April thought of her recent wedding day. It was horrible. Jackson looked great, but she was seven months pregnant. She had only two semesters left to get her high school diploma and she was getting married. Her face was swollen and the top button on the back of her dress wouldn't latch. April shook her head in disgust and cleaned.

Rebecca played by herself for once. She was nine months old and finally at the age where she could grab toys and see different things to play with. April arranged nearly all of her toys in a circle around Becky in the living room, plopped her in front of the TV, played “Winnie the Pooh,” and kept an eye on her from across the kitchen.

April cleaned the bathroom next. It was like the landlord hadn't even stepped foot into the apartment after the last tenants moved out. She sprinkled Comet on the rust streak from the bathtub faucet to the drain; she scrubbed in Lime Away, and poured nearly the whole bottle of Drain-O into the sink which held scummy yellow water. Sweat beaded on her forehead and ran down both sides of her face. The toilet bubbled when April flushed it, and the brown ring where the water line rested against the bowl stayed perfectly round. April called Jackson to tell him that she had a surprise waiting for him when he got home.

She checked on Rebecca down the hall. She slept peacefully on her side on the brown, shaggy carpet. Her little head, soft and round, had small curls of brown hair. April brushed the fine hair off of Becky's forehead and leaned over to kiss her cheek. Becky didn't flinch or move. April turned her daughter onto her back and Becky's lips were blue, her eyelids half open, and her eyes rolled back into her skull. “Oh my God Becky!” April said as the breath left her lungs. She lifted her tiny daughter into her arms and began tapping her face and shouting at her. She ran to the
phone in the kitchen and her baby's head bobbled at her side. The dial tone rang in her ear and her finger trembled over the nine, then the one. “Oh my God! Oh my God!” April shouted to no one, and held the phone on her shoulder and under her chin. The phone was silent and slipped to the floor. She went to her knees and held Becky in front of her and shook her lightly, but there was no movement; so April turned her daughter over onto her knee and slapped her back as hard as she could and Becky coughed and a small yellow bouncy-ball hopped across the living room floor. Becky gasped and started wailing. April squeezed her daughter, she kissed her head again and again, and rocked her frantically on her knees. She scrambled throughout the new apartment and looked for something to make her daughter better. April snapped her fingers and clapped her hands in front of her daughter’s face and received no reaction other than light breathing. Becky looked in her direction, but didn’t look at her. April gathered a warm bottle for Becky to suck on to return the red back into her lips. They looked icy and blue. The color returned slowly, but a slight shade of dark blue stuck out on her lips. April heaved air into her lungs and watched her daughter breathe. Becky nuzzled her nose into her mother’s shoulder and felt asleep.

An hour after watching Becky sleep, April held her hand over her daughter's mouth and felt warm moist air tingle her fingertips. She picked up the phone to call Jackson and her fingers trembled as she dialed the phone number for the Hy-Vac Laboratory Eggs Company. The receptionist explained that Jackson was behind schedule, but April begged.

She waited. She tried to control her shakes and she continued to stare at Becky breathing on the floor.

“April. What’s up?” Jackson spoke through the phone.
“Don't get freaked out and don't get mad. Promise?”
“What the hell is going on? Is everything ok?
“Becky tried to swallow a bouncy ball, but she didn't and I fixed it. She's fine now.”

“Did she choke? What are you saying?”

April reached for Becky’s warm cheek and knelt down beside her on the floor. “I started to call 9-1-1, but our phone wouldn't work so I slapped her back and it came out. It was really scary and I don't know what to do, will you come home?”

“God damn it, April! I don't have any time-off left.”

“What am I supposed to do?” she said.
“Does she need to see a doctor?”
“I don't' know. I can't go by myself.”
“If I leave, I won't get paid for today.”
April ran her fingers through her hair and took a deep breath, “Jackson, I need you here.”
“Damn it! I'll be home. Hopefully I still have my job tomorrow.”

Jackson came home and glanced at the clean apartment. He didn't say anything. He went to Becky who lay on the floor and he kissed her cheek. She was silent and didn't move.

“Hey baby girl you look pretty today,” Jackson whispered in his daughter's ear.

Rebecca turned her head toward Jackson's voice, but she didn't look in his eyes. One eye looked straight ahead and the other looked outward at the wall. Jackson ran through the apartment in search of clean clothes. He reached into the dirty hamper and pulled out the jeans he wore the day before and he found a clean undershirt on top of his dresser. He ran into the bathroom and scrubbed off the dried yellow egg from his arms and face. The three left the apartment in a hurry to the nearest clinic.

April stood in line at the Wal-Mart Pharmacy. She had grown to hate the pharmacy and hated having to bring Becky along. Jackson didn't understand how hard it was; in five years he had never gone. April didn't count the time that he went without Becky because it wasn't the same.

Kids screamed and ran in and out of the aisles and the elderly lady who was getting her prescription filled couldn't understand why it cost twice as much as her last. Parents stared at Becky until their eyes met April's and they quickly looked down at the floor. She felt as if the crowded space between the aisles was closing in on her. Becky gurgled loudly and made a hacking sound to clear her throat. April quickly covered her daughter's mouth with a burp rag and wiped the saliva that trickled down her chin. Everyone turned as if they had heard a child choking. The oxygen tank attached to Becky's small wheelchair hissed and April adjusted it to a lower level.

“What's that thing in her neck?” said a small little girl who tugged at Misty's sweater. “Why can't she walk?”

The little girl's long blonde ringlets bounced when she ran
to her mother who whispered and pointed back at them. April watched the little girl and her mother walk away holding hands and imagined that the little girl was saying all sorts of cute and funny things. She then looked at Becky hidden behind the wheelchair. All she could see was the top of her ratted hair. April pulled a small black comb out of her purse and held her daughter's head as she brushed. The black, unruly locks were kept short, but they still stopped the comb halfway through. April tugged and gripped Becky's head tighter. She assumed Becky's face cringed when her head jerked back along with the comb. A large knot of frazzled hair formed at the back of her head. April gave up and stuffed the comb back into her purse.

The line moved several feet and customers walked away with their medications for colds and infections. One lady wore a heavy coat with a blue scarf and brown hat. She kept her head forward as she walked past, but stared at Becky from the corner of her eye.

April rested on her elbows against Becky's wheelchair. Over the years she had tried to memorize all of the over-the-counter medications next to her in line. It seemed like the drug companies tried to think of the most difficult names that no one could pronounce.

Finally she wheeled Becky to the front of the line. The pharmacist with the gray hair knew them by name and mixed up the new medication that the doctor had prescribed. This month it was muscle relaxers. He had told her that Becky's muscles would never be as strong as they should be because she doesn't exercise them, but that as parents, April and Jackson should stretch her arms, legs, and joints to keep them flexible. April watched the pharmacist shake up two different bottles and combine the two into one. The mixture turned to a light brown color and came with a syringe for measuring. The cash register rang up to $70. April became hot, her face tingled, and her palms started sweating. She reached into her purse and took out her checkbook. She read Jackson's deposit and ten withdrawals for the pharmacy. The balance held seven dollars.

“Oh. I left my cash at home,” April hesitated. “Can I bring it to you tomorrow?”

The pharmacist shook her head, “I'm sorry, I can't do that.”

April turned Becky around and weaved in and out of the people still in line. She stared at the floor and thought she could
feel all of the eyes on her. They put so much weight on her back that she thought her legs were going to give in. Becky's head bobbed from side to side and her face cringed when her head hit the wheelchair. April reached for Becky's head and held it back. They stepped out the door and the cold air bit April's skin. She broke down. She wished Jackson were there, but he was never there anymore. After adding a second job, he spent about two hours awake in the apartment everyday. She wouldn't be back to the pharmacy with the money and Becky's medicine would be thrown away.

April lifted Becky out of her wheelchair next to their car. She didn't expect any help from the thin limp body. Becky's arms dangled down toward the ground and her head cocked up at the sky. April lunged into the car's backseat and propped Becky up against the side. The oxygen tank went in next, and the wheelchair took up the rest of the room in the small car. April got in and hit the steering wheel with her fist and pain shot through her arm. She tilted the rearview mirror to look at Becky slouched under her seatbelt. She saw her warm breath turn gray in the freezing air. April remembered she hadn't brushed Becky's teeth in a few days and promised herself she would remember later.

April struggled to wheel her daughter up two flights of stairs. Becky gained weight slowly and weighed nearly ninety pounds at ten years old. Combined with her larger wheelchair and oxygen tank that hung off of the back, she probably weighed more than one-hundred-fifty pounds. April strained her calf and thigh muscles. Sweat formed under her armpits and across her forehead. At the landing, April took a moment to breathe and shake out her legs. The oxygen tank hissed as it pumped fresh air through the tube that led to Becky's throat. She gurgled from the saliva she couldn't swallow.

April reached the second floor. She pulled her daughter's wheelchair over the last hump of a stair.

She parked Becky in her usual corner of the small living room. Their apartment changed very little since the family first moved in. The living room was still covered in the brown, shaggy carpet and April continually tried and failed to remove the brown ring that rested inside the toilet. She looked up at her daughter and Becky looked past her at the white wall. Her right eye turned
slightly outward and the other didn't move from the spot fixed on the wall. April pictured her daughter normal. She saw her light brown hair brushed smooth and her eyes bright. The images covered over the real Becky whose hair knotted in the back where it rested against the wheelchairs head-support. She pictured her daughter's face smooth and her features soft, not coarse. She saw Becky's eyes placed on her face perfectly separated and not too close together which she hated on the real Becky. She saw her stand and reach out for a hug, not just sit there with no emotion like the real Becky. April shook her head in disgust.

Becky's arm crashed down on her wheelchair's armrest. The hollow clang pierced April's ears. Again, Becky slammed her arm down. “Rebecca, stop it this instant,” April shouted. Becky hit her chair again. The sound echoed in the apartment and April covered her face. “Becky, I said stop it, listen to your mother,” she said and walked over to her daughter. April grabbed her daughter's arms and pinned them down into her lap. Becky freed her arm and uncontrollably hit April across the face. April cringed, “Becky look at me. Look at me!” she said to her daughter. “Rebecca, look at my face!” she said. Becky remained restless and April drew back her hand and slapped it across her daughter's cheek. She let go of her grip on Becky and covered her mouth with both hands. Becky sat still. April went to her bedroom to lie down.

Later in the evening April rubbed her eyes open and walked through the dark hallway to the living room. Jackson sat cross-legged on the brown, shaggy carpet. He always had his shirt off around the house. Somehow Jackson was able to remain lean over the years and the name “Bee” on his left shoulder blade stared back at April. He lifted Becky's right arm above her head on the floor. Jackson strained and pushed when his daughter's muscles tightened and resisted his help. April turned her head. She didn’t watch; she never watched. In ten years Becky had only gotten worse. Her muscles would never cooperate.

“Hey babe,” Jackson said without looking up. He repeated the same stretch with Becky's arm. “How was your day?” “Same.”

April walked into the kitchen dragging her feet. She opened the fridge and saw three cartons of eggs, a case of Rebecca's liquid vitamin food, Velveeta cheese, and Diet Coke. She shook her head in disgust.

“I already fed Bec,” Jackson said and turned toward April.
“Hey, you want a ham sandwich?”
   “I'm not hungry.”
   “BLT? I'm in the mood for sandwiches.”
   “There's none of that in here,” she said and pushed the door shut.
   “No ham?”
   “I'm not lying to you.”
   “There must be some ham.”
   “Look for yourself!” April moved to the side and opened the fridge for Jackson to see.
   “Hey, I'm sorry,” Jackson said. He walked over and wrapped his arms around her soft stomach. “Why don't we just make some scrambled eggs tonight and you can get what we need at the store tomorrow.”
   “Eggs?” April clinched her teeth. “Eggs? God damn it, Jackson, I can't eat eggs anymore!”
   Jackson stepped back and April slapped his arms away from her.
   “And do you know how much it costs to get what we need?” April shouted.
   “God, can you stop worrying about money for once?”
   Jackson turned back to Becky on the floor.
   “No. Not when we can't afford Becky's medicine, or food, or bills.”
   “We have food,” Jackson said. “And we always get Becky's medicine.”
   “No. No. I can't believe you sometimes!” April closed her burning eyes. Her chest hurt and her throat tightened as she swallowed several times. “I can't do this anymore.”
   Jackson rubbed his face. He shook his head and sat next to Rebecca.
   April walked back to their bedroom. When she returned she carried a brown garbage bag over her shoulder. Jackson looked up at her and sniffed. His face was red. “What's that for? What're you doing?”
   She tried not to hear everything he said. She saw his eyes were red and his cheeks were wet. April shook her head and looked away when she bent down to Becky on the floor. She kissed her daughter's coarse, dark hair. On her way out the door, April looked back at Jackson and Becky. “I'm sorry.”