



VESTAL REVIEW

The Longest-Running Flash Fiction Magazine in the World

Issue 26

It's Not Your Hat

By Cate McGowan

"That's my hat." Your accuser's black hair frizzes in a calamitous scribble-she really needs the hat more than you.

"No, it's mine." A lie. The words, monosyllabic, feel wrong rolling off your tongue. But it's January Upstate; it's finders keepers. You lie again—"It's mine."

But it's not. You found the hat yesterday abandoned outside the English Department. Black wool, pod-shaped, a flowered cotton lining sewn inside with crude fever stitches. You pulled it low over your forehead and tromped home in the snow, glad you had something new, something warm.

The next day, your first week back from break, you attend French 201. You hate the French and their abstract words, but you need the credits to graduate. You've put off this class until your last semester. It lasts for hours. Outside during a break for coffee and cigarettes, everyone stomps around on the arctic sidewalk; they blow smoke and vaped air. The little bitch with wiry hair approaches you. She points at your open bag, where the hat peeks out like a scared animal.

"That's my hat."

"No, it's mine." You jerk at your bag's loose flap, pull it over the chapeau. "It's mine." You stand taller. You aren't cold anymore. She persists.

"I lost it yesterday."

“Sorry.”

“Let me see.” People stare as bitchy antennae-haired girl’s voice shrills. “Let me see!” She grabs for your closed bag. But you catch her dark eyes, square her gaze and pretend you’re strong. She stops her advance and uses reason. “I saw the lining. A friend did that.”

“No, this is my work.” Another lie. You walk out of arm’s reach, pull out the hat, plop it on your head. Break’s over. The hat’s hot in the stuffy room. You’re ashamed, cornered, but you keep up the front. The gray professor rambles on in French about declensions and past pluperfect. Parlez vous shit.

The girl sends out glaring death rays from behind you. She sighs meanly. You wish you’d said you’d found it.

You don’t know why you didn’t.

You go shopping after class. A bell trills, incandescence embraces you as you enter the shop, and the East Indian lady, wrapped in her bright scarves and the scent of curry or something that smells like a balmy night, looks up and, as always, says something kind.

“Good to see you today.” In the back, you fold a Tree of Life tapestry into your bag-the pattern’s similar to the hat’s lining.

At home, you cut a large square from the stolen textile, center on a perching turquoise bird. You rip out the girl’s lining, sew the hat with new, silken stitches.

The next day, you drop the French class. You seldom step foot on campus for fear of running into the girl. You don’t graduate for another year. You hide the transformed hat in your bottom bureau drawer where it will sit for years. Funny, but you cannot throw it out.