

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: "The Skirt Fetcher"



Sadie was a do-gooder, someone who was aware of the deeply rooted systematic injustices that perpetuated oppression throughout the world, and who wanted to do something meaningful about it. She was a liberal cliché and she knew it. Sadie found it interesting how drugs caused the woman who lived behind the grocery store to give an outward physical representation to the inner processes of her mind. Which is to say, while most of us carted around incorrectly remembered personal histories, useless grievances, and unhelpful fantasies, this woman had found a way to bring her mental garbage into the physical realm; she filled shopping carts full of non-redeemable waste, trash which was result of overproduction which was caused by capitalism. Sadie could admit that she did not want the transient woman in her own apartment, and she didn't believe handing money to the woman would be helpful, but almost involuntarily, Sadie cultivated empathy for the woman. Sadie's mental garden of empathy was bathed daily in love, and attention, but it was admittedly hard for Sadie to share the fruits of this garden with anyone. Sadie strived to pass out her excess empathy at her workplace, as though her empathetic thoughts were lemons that grew in unneeded quantities in her front yard and could be left up for grabs in a plastic bag by the cash register. Sadie worked for Saint-Loup, a high-end clothing boutique.

A stocky woman, wearing expensive boots and a fashionable top entered the store. The woman maintained a powerful-yet-clumsy gait, as though she were important but unsure of herself.

"Villeparisis dress, size forty," the woman said.

It took Sadie a moment to realize the woman was requesting a garment. Sadie fetched the dress from the back and brought it to the sale's floor. The shade of the dress channeled a rosé targeted at hip young women. The dress had a sash in front which, if asked, Sadie would describe as sexy-Michelle-Obama chic. Had the designer not added a few almost imperceptible qualities, the piece would resemble something a punk girl

could wear to prom to both sincerely celebrate and ironically comment on the occasion. The Villeparisis' touch ensured the garment was worthy of a stylish and well-mannered rich woman. The outfit was cliché, original, traditional, and new, all at once. Though, in Sadie's opinion, the garb was a few years out of style. The woman tried it on and nodded. Some women, who were spending upwards of four thousand dollars on a dress, wanted Sadie to spend the better part of an hour engaging in flattery. Sadie sensed that this woman wanted as little human emotion as feasible to seep into the interaction. The woman paid with a card, and Sadie learned her name was Rachel. When Sadie handed Rachel the bag containing the dress, Rachel grabbed it without a word and walked out.

Sadie, who was thirty years old, lived with her mother and younger brother in Napa. For a time, she had paid sixteen hundred dollars a month to rent a detached in-law unit, which consisted of four hundred square feet of livable space. That space had been cramped with her mattress and boxes containing psychology text books, much loved novels of her childhood and books she had not yet had the chance to read. Most nights, her seventy-year-old female landlord invited her into the main house to watch TV. Sadie accepted. After a year and half of watching murder shows on the couch of her landlord, she figured that if she was going to spend her nights watching TV with an older lady, she might as well save sixteen hundred dollars a month and live with her mom.

At dinner that night, a pizza her brother brought home from his job at King's Pizza, Sadie recounted her interaction with Rachel. Though their exchange with Rachel was wordless, Sadie believed she had allowed her acceptance of Rachel to shine through her eyes.

"It's possible she just didn't want to talk," her brother, said. "Like, maybe she was holding in a fart."

When Sadie was twenty-one, she had graduated from the

University of Irvine with a Bachelors in Psychology. She knew that to utilize her degree and training, she would need either a masters or a doctorate. Instead of immediately applying to graduate school, Sadie increased her hours at Target. She had no illusions about the American health care system. She knew that an individual's insurance might cover a year of therapy sessions, but by the time a provider had an opening, six months of that year had passed, and then the individual might be seen less than once a month. Sadie daydreamed about opening her own clinic where financially strapped people could walk in and receive free therapeutic attention, but she also knew that earning a doctorate would put her in six figures in debt. As a woman in her early twenties, she had believed she was using everything she had learned from the university when she helped Target customers, some of whom could clearly benefit from mental health services. She gave them as much validation and encouragement as she could. For Sadie, the logical next step was to work for a high-end clothing boutique that paid its employees more, and had fewer customers. That way, Sadie could shower the relatively small number of shoppers with meaningful attention. Sadie had recently begun working for Saint-Loup. She had embarked on her dream job. She was beginning to understand that her brother and mother viewed her life choices differently.

Two weeks later, Rachel returned to Saint-Loup. She said she wanted a conservative cocktail dress, something that would be appropriate for her son's birthday party. Rachel had offered a detail about her personal life and Sadie would not shirk from the opportunity to support her.

"I couldn't imagine being a mother. The cooking, cleaning, waking the kids up, being a chauffeur, it's like you work twelve jobs," Sadie said.

"My son is twenty-four," Rachel said.

Sadie nodded empathetically.

Sadie wanted to be absolutely present. With her facial expression, she yearned to say that even if Rachel was addicted to pain pills, even if she interacted with her child as little as possible, even if she spent every day burning through her husband's money, and had never had a job of her own, Sadie would give the woman something that she lacked—something that she needed. She smiled as though she would give her soul to Rachel, as though, if she had her druthers, she would run away with Rachel to a concert, a night club, or a cabin in the woods, where the two friends would share with each other, from the infinite patience dwelling inside of them, except, it wouldn't really be patience, because patience wasn't needed with friends who cared so deeply about each other.

Rachel found a dress, tried it on, and decided not to buy it.

Sadie's mom made turkey chili for dinner that night. Her brother Evan ate quickly, putting away more than his two female family members combined.

"At work today, this old boomer was screaming, you make people eat out of a box at this restaurant? Cause I accidentally entered his order in as to-go. I put his pizza on a pan and he was fine. Anyway, it's too bad you weren't there Sadie. You could've given him your phone number, and told him that when he woke up in the middle of the night, weeks later, upset that his pizza was in a box, he could've called you, and received comfort and support," Evan said.

His smile indicated that he had thought up this joke hours ago and had waited all day to deliver it at the world.

"And it's too bad you're not a stand-up comedian, because humanity would benefit immensely from your witty observations

on life," Sadie said.

After dinner, Sadie went to her bedroom and browsed Tinder. The first profile she saw belonged to Tony, a man she knew in high school. Sadie acknowledged the significant drawbacks involved with online dating in her hometown. She swiped left on Tony and blocked his profile. Almost immediately, her phone rang. She cursed herself for maintaining the same phone number since she was fourteen years old.

"Yes?" Sadie said.

"It's nice to hear your voice," Tony said.

Sadie said nothing.

"I'm wondering if you told people... about our thing... because, I'm an important person in tech now. ... I want to know you're not disparaging my reputation," Tony said.

"Oh," Sadie said.

"If you told anyone, you should tell them you forgive me."

"I don't forgive you," Sadie said.

She hung up her phone and blocked the number. Once, when Sadie was in high school, she had found Tony attractive. He invited her to his house when his parents were out of town. She drank the whiskey and cokes he handed her. She had been able to keep her clothes on, but he had forced himself on top of her, grabbed parts of her body, penetrated her with his fingers, and brought himself to completion. At the time, she told no adults of the incident.

At the store the next morning, Sadie noticed a short man in a starched, tucked in, checkered dress shirt, and grey slacks. Sadie asked a number of times if he needed help, but he always

demurred. He was content to watch the store while writing things on his phone. The other employee on the sale's floor ignored the man completely.

A couple in their sixties walked in. The woman wore heels, faux leather pants, and a flowy grey cashmere sweater over a white top. The man, who was shorter than his wife, dressed in worn blue jeans and an old Kirkland flannel, as though proudly flaunting his wife's fashionable inclinations. The woman admired a long, Verdurin scarf. Sadie stood by eagerly. The man locked eyes with her.

"This would make a great addition to my rape kit," the man said.

"He's so wild," the woman said, and patted his arm.

"I'm looking at woman's clothes, I just want my life back," the man said.

"We admire your sacrifice," Sadie said.

After the couple left, Rachel entered the store. There were customers who called out to Sadie because of their obvious need, a need that perhaps only Sadie could perceive. Sadie wanted a valid connection with Rachel's core. Rachel exited the fitting room wearing a twelve-hundred-dollar sweater.

"It looks fine," Sadie said.

Rachel reentered the dressing room. As Rachel changed, Sadie thought about a time when she was a child, when she viewed her friends as a natural resource that enabled her to live, no less necessary to her existence than clean drinking water.

Sadie saw her current life as relatively empty. She had excess energy to devote to Rachel, but had absconded from her duty.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said you looked fine. You looked absolutely incredible in the sweater. It was stunning," Sadie

said.

"It's okay," Rachel said.

"No, you're an incredible woman, and the sweater brought out your incredible nature. I should've told you that you're incredible. I'm just off today," Sadie said.

Rachel said nothing.

Sadie took a deep breath.

"I'm off today because this boy sexually assaulted me in high school and last night he called me on the phone," Sadie said.

"Oh, I hope the rest of your day goes better," Rachel said.

Rachel looked like there was more she wanted to say, but whether her unspoken words contained support or an admonishment, Sadie could not tell. She left the store. Sadie had not noticed, but the man in the starched shirt was typing furiously on his phone during this interaction.

The next customer Sadie helped was a blond hipster woman who wore tight blue jeans, black chunk heels, and a grey V-neck shirt. The woman was beautiful and she had expertly applied her makeup, but compared to the other customers, her clothes were heavily used. The woman was younger than Sadie. She tried on a number of La Petite Bande tops. Finally, she approached Sadie, holding a La Petite Bande garment.

"Do you ever have sales, or offer discounts?" the hipster woman asked.

Sadie held the blouse in her hand. She looked at the woman and understood how badly she wanted it.

"Would a seventy-dollar discount work?" Sadie asked.

"Yeah," the woman said.

“Some of our clothes get stained with lipstick, when people try them on. The lipstick comes out easy, with just a little bit of vinegar. If this top had a stain on it, I would have to give you the discount,” Sadie said.

The woman brought the top to her mouth and kissed it.

“That works,” Sadie said.

She rung up the blouse, subtracting seventy dollars from the total.

On Tuesday, Sadie had the day off. She went for a run and was back in her apartment, covered in sweat, getting ready to take a shower, when her phone rang.

“Sadie, this is Celine Diaz.”

Celine was the owner of Saint-Loup. Sadie had met her only once before, during her job interview. A woman named Ashely worked as the store manager, handling all of the day-to-day operations. Sadie had heard rumors that Celine was a multi-millionaire, if not a billionaire, who had purchased Saint-Loup during a period of brief-but-intense interest in clothing retail. According to the rumors, Celine had recently become interested in learning how to fly a helicopter, opening sustainable sushi restaurants, and making wine. Saint-Loupe was receiving less attention.

“I want to thank you for your hard work and attention to detail when arranging clothes,” Celine said.

“You’re welcome,” Sadie.

“Do you know who Marcus is?” Celine asked.

“No,” Sadie said.

“That does explain some things. Marcus oversees a lot of my

business ventures. He acts as my eyes-on-the-ground when I'm otherwise occupied. He informed me that you had told a customer about a sexual assault you experienced. He mentioned the customer was Rachel Feldman. She's been a loyal patron for years. He took the liberty of calling her and she agrees that we should let you go. Marcus also said, that you advised a customer to damage a top in order to receive a discount," Celine said.

"Yes, I did those things," Sadie said.

"We're going to discontinue your employment, but the problem is, we don't have anyone to replace you at this moment. If you're willing to stay on for a few weeks, I'll give you a good reference. You can quit right now, but then you wouldn't be able to apply for unemployment," Celine said.

"I can stay," Sadie said.

Sadie wasn't in a position to turn down any income.

Sadie put on a holey pair of jeans and a Lou Reed t-shirt. For a moment, she fantasied about wearing the outfit to her remaining shifts. She imagined the conversations the outfit would spark. Sadie loved an ice cream sundae that was available at a popular fast-food restaurant, but she found it difficult to justify the treats' plastic cup, which would outlive her. Being fired was a good justification. She bought the sundae and began walking around downtown.

She passed a number of restaurants that had only a few, if any guests, which made sense, as it was a dead time between late lunch and early dinner. The outside patio of Baddiel's was completely packed. A sign indicated that the space was reserved for a private event. Sadie sat on stone bench in front of the patio and surveyed the scene. Many of the men gathered were guys in their twenties, who wore dress shirts, and gave arrogant looks to the other people present, as though every man thought they were the next Mark Zuckerberg. Within

five years, the most interesting aspect of the other people present would be the stories they would tell about the future tech celebrity, the man they were now sitting across from. Sadie guessed correctly that she was looking at tech workers. A few of the men were in their fifties, but they had hip haircuts and were in good shape. A youthful and industrious energy permeated the group. A few women were present but Sadie was able to get a good look at only one lady, a redhead with colorful Ed Hardy style tattoos. She wore lipstick and kept a cocky smile, as though she was more than used to holding her own in a roomful of men. Despite her loneliness, Sadie was not in the habit of openly gawking at groups of strangers. She assumed some men noticed her, in her terrible jeans and questionable t-shirt, but something about the scene had piqued her curiosity. She wouldn't stop staring until she determined what it was. Most of the men sat at one of five giant tables, conversations were conducted across several tables at once. At the far end of the patio, away from the loud men, a pair of women sat at a two-seater. One of the women appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties, the other in her thirties. The ladies looked at one another with a laser focus, but it didn't seem as though they were particularly enjoying each other's company. Sadie assumed they were afraid to look at the guys. The older woman was Rachel.

Two men wearing dress shirts exited the patio and walked in front of Sadie.

"Excuse me. Sorry, I have an awkward question. Like a really awkward question. Why are those two women over there sitting by themselves?" Sadie asked.

"That's our boss, Rachel, and her secretary," one of the men said.

"And why are they sitting alone?" Sadie asked.

The men exchanged looks. Their facial expressions indicated

had had a few drinks each.

“Rachel is a little girl who took on a man’s job. We make predictions about the specific demand for medical equipment over the next sixteen quarters. Our work impacts a billion-dollar industry, but Rachel doesn’t even know what an algorithm is. She can’t spell it,” the man said.

“I got my first job when was I seventeen working for Jack in the Box. My boss there was better than Rachel,” the second man said.

One of the men on the patio caught the eye of the guys talking to Sadie. With a happy drunk grin, he pointed to Rachel. He had inferred who they were talking about.

“Our boss has Downs syndrome. That’s why she’s alone,” the man on the patio said.

He spoke loudly. It was likely Rachel heard him and possible Rachel saw Sadie, though she tried to hide behind the men she was talking to. Not a single person spoke in Rachel’s defense.

During Sadie’s last shift, Rachel walked in. She surveyed the clothing, and refused to look at Sadie. Ashely, the only other employee present, was helping a customer. After Ashely finished, she ran to the back to complete her managerial tasks. Rachel finally approached Sadie.

“Sachar skirt, red, size forty,” Rachel said.

She went to the back to fetch the skirt.

New Fiction from Eddie Freeman: "Gideon's Thesis"

Gideon, a senior majoring in journalism at the University of California, Santa Cruz, fidgeted nervously. He wanted to write a senior thesis that could be turned into a podcast or miniseries. He had researched the criminal conviction of Moses West. West was imprisoned for murder. It wasn't hard to connect his arresting officer to a far-right group. Gideon had written West, and West had written back. Dr. Sandel spent four minutes reading Gideon's outline, before placing it aside.

"I don't think you have the resources to research an investigation that took place in Los Angeles. I strongly encourage you to focus on a local issue," Dr. Sandel said.

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A few weeks later, Gideon attended a party. He tried and failed to keep the attention of a woman by making up a rap about a feather in her hair. Gideon found a seat on an outside couch which featured unique stains. A man, who introduced himself as Rainbow, inhaled a blunt and passed it to Gideon.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Rainbow asked.

Gideon shook his head.

"Tyler's dad is hella fucked up corporate leader. Tyler was going to expose his corruption, and his father had him committed," Rainbow said.

The two men locked eyes. Rainbow knew that Gideon had been placed on earth to uncover such a story. Rainbow wore a sleeveless black t-shirt, marked with bleach and a pair of green army pants. He smelled as though he had not bathed in weeks. His disregard for surface concerns allowed him to see a

person's true destiny.

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Relative to other campuses, UCSC was not huge. It was easy for Gideon to find Tyler on Instagram. Gideon was unsurprised when he recognized a woman named Drea in a number of Tyler's pictures. Drea and Gideon had worked on a group project together during Gideon's freshmen year. Gideon still had her number. She answered the third time he called her.

"Have you heard about Tyler Rosenthal?" Gideon asked.

"I know he took a leave of absence last year, for mental health reasons."

"I want to bring his story to wide audience. Who should I talk to?" Gideon asked.

"Tyler didn't go out much, but he lived with a guy named Riccardo."

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Riccardo agreed to meet in the apartment he once shared with Tyler. He was a tall, skinny, Latino man, with neatly combed wavy hair that stopped at his shoulders. He wore all white.

"At first Tyler was a little socially awkward. Like, he helped a woman on the bus with her bag without saying anything. He thought he was being helpful, but I could tell she was freaked out. He slowly turned into the worst roommate ever. One time he made a steak, and left it untouched in his room for days. Bugs feasted. He would stay up all night talking to himself, saying crazy things, like admonishing Owen Wilson for immoral behavior. I started seeing this woman Sarah. The first night she came over, she said Tyler was too high, and we had to take care of him. I told her it was fine, it was normal for Tyler. Sara stayed awake with him all night. In the morning, she used his phone to call his mom. His mom flew in from the East

Coast. I heard he's getting treatment and doing better," Ricardo said.

"What do you know about the role corporations, specifically the Divinity Hospital Group, played in poisoning Tyler?" Gideon asked.

"Nothing. I know literally nothing about that," Ricardo said.

Gideon had been using his phone to record their conversation. He turned it off.

"You can speak to me. I assure you, I know how to keep my sources safe," Gideon said.

"I agreed to talk to you, because I wanted to encourage people to speak out. I wished I helped him sooner," Ricardo said.

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Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with a transcript of his conversation with Riccardo, and a summary of the research he had conducted into The Divinity Hospital Group. Gideon had listed dozens of times the group had engaged in questionable corporate practices.

"If you give me enough time, I know I can prove Tyler was poisoned by his father," Tyler said.

"You can write about Tyler Rosenthal for your thesis project. But don't mention The Divinity Hospital Group. If you have to write about D.H.G, keep it to one paragraph, maximum," Dr. Sandel said.

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Gideon spent months working on his project. Gideon's older brother, Joseph, had trained as an electrician shortly after graduating high school. Joseph had been working for the state since he was twenty-one. He bought a house when he was twenty-

four. Gideon had always thought he was smarter than his brother. Their mother thought Gideon was smarter than Joseph as well. Gideon would use his thesis to prove that he could change the world, even if he never achieved financial stability.

Gideon presented Dr. Sandel with forty-five pages. His work detailed the role The Divinity Hospital Group played in the opioid crisis. He described instances in which doctors working for the D.H.G. had used medical implants which had never completed the proper trails. He told the story of a public hospital owned by the D.H.G. that closed under sketchy circumstances. Bernie Sanders had made a comment. Gideon was proud of the way he argued the C.F.O. of the D.H.G. was not above poisoning his own son. Gideon felt he had done the best he could. Dr. Sandel needed a week to read it. He summoned Gideon to his office.

“I am recommending that you take the senior exam instead of working on a thesis. I am no longer willing to work as your thesis advisor,” Dr. Sandel said.

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Gideon took the senior exam. He graduated. He found a job as a cook and continued to live in Santa Cruz. He was listening. He firmly believed the town had one great story to give him before he moved away.

He attended a party where he drank beer out of plastic cups and hung out in the backyard to avoid the noise projects playing inside. He started talking to a woman, Sophia Turpin, who he vaguely knew from school. She was a journalism student, a senior. She was working on her senior thesis.

“I am focusing on the lives of undocumented college students. These people don't have financial aid and their parents

typically aren't in positions to help. They have to try and make it the best they can."

Sophia took out her phone and played some oral testimonies.

"You're brilliant and your project is brilliant. I know Dr. Sandel, if you need help talking to him," Gideon said.

"Sandel has approved of my project. Most of the work is done," Sophia said.

"I want to help you in any way I can. Can I have your phone number and address?" Gideon asked.

Sophia shared her contact information, likely because she was drunk.

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Gideon visited her apartment the next day. He was eager to express his sober enthusiasm in person. Sophia's roommate answered the door.

"Sophia isn't here," her roommate said.

"I know she is working on her senior thesis, but that is something I need to help her with. I am Gideon."

"She isn't here."

The door closed. It is possible Gideon heard the word weirdo.

Gideon texted Sophia around ten times that week. He rode his bike past her place sometimes, but refrained from knocking on her door. Eventually, Gideon decided that he could share his thoughts on undocumented students without Sophia's help. He spent two weeks writing twenty-five pages. He listed Sophia Turpin as the first author. Underneath Sophia's name, he wrote, with special thanks, Gideon White. He printed the work out, visited his old campus, and placed the work in Dr. Sandel's mailbox.

Two weeks later, Gideon received an email in his student account from Dr. Sandel. Sandel wanted to meet.

Dr. Sandel sat behind his desk. The thesis which Gideon had written, and attributed to Sophia, rested in front of him.

“Your actions constitute plagiarism. If you were working as a journalist you would be fired. If you were still a student, you would be expelled,” Dr. Sandel said.

Sandel talked and talked. He was a bald man in his forties. He wore a dress shirt. He appeared older than he was, maybe from the strain needed to keep a university job combined with his lack of interest in fashion. Gideon realized Dr. Sandel did not know how to change the world either.

For a couple of months, Gideon worked at the restaurant, and spent his free time binging TV shows. He gave some money to a group helping immigrants from Afghanistan. He received an email from his mother about a Santa Cruz woman who helped people volunteer with the elderly. I know you want to change the world, his mother wrote.

The woman's name was Janis Brown. She had broad shoulders and long gray hair. The first time Gideon and Janis met, he found her to be a mix between a high school principal and an ex-biker. The Harley lady who wanted to live straight. She arranged for Gideon to visit a woman named Ethel. Ethel no longer recognized the face of her children. They lived far away.

Gideon met Ethel inside of her senior care facility. Everyone in her unit had memory issues. He had to pass through a locked door to enter.

She sat in a room with twenty other seniors. A Lifetime movie played on TV.

“Where are we going?” Ethel asked.

"We're just hanging out," Gideon said.

"It would be nice to go somewhere."

They sat for ten minutes.

"Where are we going?" Ethel asked again.

Gideon texted Janis. He asked if he could give Ethel a ride in his car.

Insurance companies aren't going to dictate how we care for one another, Janis wrote back.

Gideon slowly helped Ethel out of the building. None of the employees stopped him. He had to give her step by step instructions on how to get in the front seat. First her butt went down, then her feet went inside, next the seat belt.



He drove to the down town strip. Families were eating dinner outside. People of all ages were walking around. Ethel stared at the scene and her face lit up. Gideon knew he had changed the world for one person.

