She crouched on the stool like a statue; a statue ready to pounce. In her clenched fist was the lid of a Tupperware cake platter. The rim hovered inches off the floor. Her gaze did not leave the small black abyss that separated the stove and the ground. Her eyes darted back and forth, straining to see into the dark cave beneath the oven. Although she could not see it, she sensed its presence. Perhaps it shared her perception of life beyond what was visible and that is why it had not been seen. But she knew it was there.

She had been perched woodenly on the couch, an open book in her lap. She could not read, for all she saw in the letters before her were the unrelenting taunts that plagued her young existence. Acknowledging her drifting mind would mean punishment, for laziness was a sin and her mother’s past ridicule would replay in her mind. And so she sat, every nerve in her body taut with the strain of avoidance. Then she heard it. The scratchy pitter-patter of tiny nails against tile floor. The sound of a distraction that could justify the day’s lack of productivity. She knew how to avoid the guilt that accompanied laziness. All that was needed to rationalize her day of nothingness was an enemy to blame. An enemy that was not herself.

Her voice, in an unconscious impersonation of her mother’s, pierced the silence.

“Stupid girl. You didn’t clean up the crumbs right.”

Temporarily satisfied with her self-derision, she abandoned the book and rose to investigate the intruder.

On cautious tiptoe she crept across the room and mounted a stool, observing the situation from an aerial perspective. To successfully hover above potentially mouse-occupied territory, a great deal of flexibility was necessary. Secretly this pleased her, for if the situation required effort, it silenced her mind’s constant accusation that her actions were mere idleness.

The rodent in question remained quiet. But, she didn’t mind waiting. For waiting was the best excuse for doing nothing. Nothing else should be done while waiting as it might distract from what is being waited for.

At last it trotted confidently out of its lair, twitching its whiskers in search of an appetizing scent. She watched the mouse from above, partly fascinated by its self-assuredness, partly terrified by its aliveness. The creature scampered across the ground intent on its quest for this morning’s (non-existent) breakfast crumbs. Sighing emphatically, though only for show, she contemplated how she might snare her wandering foe.

Her gaze scoured the kitchen, pupils probing the room for inspiration. The open pantry door intrigued her and she descended catlike from her perch and crept across the cool tile floor. Entering the perimeter of the pantry, she sucked in her breath, engaging in the ritual that had plagued her for a decade. She did not know why she found it imperative to avoid inhaling the pantry’s stale air, only that the action seemed essential to her sanity. She scanned the alphabetized rows of food. Oatmeal, parsley, pasta…peanut-butter. She retrieved the wash cloth that lived, folded in thirds, within her pocket and gently rubbed the exterior of the jar, ridding it of any traces of oil that might contaminate
her skin. Exiting the pantry she exhaled, and closed the doors. Retracing her steps across the kitchen, the tile floor became a game. Left foot first- on the white tile- then right foot, two pink tiles ahead. Her practiced mind whirred as the stakes were established. Three steps were all she allowed herself to cross the kitchen. More or less and some undefined consequence would occur. Climbing onto the stool once more, she undid the jar’s cap and, grabbing a plastic spoon from the drawer on her right, extracted a liberal blob of peanut butter. The goopy utensil was deposited in the middle of the mouse’s exit, a seductive distraction to even the most wary animal. As she adjusted her knees, a Tupperware cake platter peeking out from a nearby cabinet caught her attention. With the hint of a smile, quickly stifled, she extended her arm and retrieved the container’s lid. A perfect trap. Now, she adjusted herself so that the quivering hand which grasped the Tupperware hovered directly above the gob of peanut butter. She settled into her position, a hunter once more.

The mouse soon recovered from the traumatic flurry of activity that had disturbed its quest for a snack. Whiskers appeared in the stove’s shadow, and the creature slinked into full view. The feelings brewing within her were foreign and confusing. She was excited. Fascinated. Hopeful. Where was the guilt that so often occupied her mind? She was irked by her emotions and almost jumped from the stool, ready to abandon the whole operation, but an unusual phenomenon occurred. The driving impulses that so often ruled her actions were ignored, for something else captured her attention. The mouse, directly below her outstretched arm, had discovered the mountain of peanut butter.

Her prey positively quivered with anticipation. The mouse raised its head in silent thanks to rodent heaven, and bolted for its gooey prize. Face buried in the nutty goodness, the mouse was oblivious to its approaching fate.

Poised to strike, she tightened her sweaty hold on the lid’s handle. The habitual ceremony that preceded every important action was begun. Breathe in, three, breathe out. The lid began to slip from between her damp fingers, but the countdown continued: Breath in, two. Breathe out. Breathe in, One. Breathe out and-… the phone rang.

The creature darted back under the security of the stove just as the lid collided with the floor. The piercing ring sliced into the silence. One. Two. Three times. Sprawled across the stool, face glazed, eyes vacant, she listened to the phone’s shriek for attention. As the answering machine clicked to life, she cursed herself. No blame was pinned on the anonymous caller who had interrupted the hunt. It was her fault!

“OLIVIA!”

Her mother’s accusing voice blasted out of the recorder’s speakers.

“PICK UP THE PHONE RIGHT NOW! YOU LAZY GIRL! DO SOMETHING RIGHT FOR ONCE AND PICK UP THE PHONE!”

Olivia remained motionless on the stool not listening. She was not trying to escape punishment, for her thoughts reprimanded her far more than her mother ever could.

The voice on the answering machine droned on, “You’ll be alone this afternoon, I have a hair appointment at three and then I’m off to the masseuse…”

Olivia examined her fingernails and frowned. They appeared longer than the three centimeters she liked them to be. The answering machine let out a tired beep, warning the speaker that the recorder would soon shut off.
Her mother, harried but undaunted, continued, “- Have-dinner-in-the-oven-by-5-and-for-Gods-Sake-Olivia-don’t-pick-out-all-the-red-ingredients–again...Heaven forbid you act like…”

BEEEEP. The answering machine clicked off. Olivia knew it was not over. Sure enough, the phone resumed its incessant jingling.

Her mother’s electronic voice again blared from the speakers:
“A NORMAL CHILD!”

Click. With the hateful words filed away inside her head for future use, Olivia recovered the lid, and adjusted herself so that it hovered directly above the half devoured peanut butter.

Stepping lightly on padded toes the mouse slinked towards its mouth-watering goal. Olivia watched it come, with each step willing it to continue. This was no longer a frivolous waste of time. It was a mission. A conflict she truly wanted, needed, to resolve. Within the deep confines of her mind, the impulses which ruled her life had been creating the stakes, brainwashing her senses until all she could feel was the driving urge to CATCH THE MOUSE. The rules were clear; self inflicted torture.

*If I catch the mouse, mom loves me, lose it and she hates me just as much as I suspect.*

The mouse continued, obsessed with the urge to reclaim its nutty reward. At last, it reached the peanut butter, and squeaking with contentment, lowered its head and began to eat.

Olivia looked at the clock: 2:59. The world in which she existed knew no justice, for even under the direst circumstances the rituals which dictated her every action could not be ignored. With a gasp of frustration, Olivia watched as the mouse ambled in a bloated stupor back towards the stove. She could not drop the lid for the demons inside her head demanded every action be completed on the hour. Her eyes swept furtively from creature to clock. The mouse moved, time stood still and the battle raged inside her head. The naked tail vanished beneath the stove just as the clock struck three. CRASH! Down came the lid onto floor still warm with mousy heat. Empty. She let out her breath and fell to the floor. She began to cry.