

# **Eliza Held Up the Button**

by Keeley Young

Eliza held up the button. It was a simple sort, something from any ordinary shirt. She would either have a closet full of them, sewed in, or a drawer somewhere almost overflowing. Or both. Something about this button seemed entirely wrong, though. It *was* a button. Eliza could see the familiar grooves, the perfect symmetry, the perfect round edge. She hurled the button toward the glass window, enraged by it. There was something so vile and plaguing about this silver plastic button. It bounced off the glass, scattering across the room. In an hour or so, Eliza forgot about the button, and yet...the thought of it awoke her at midnight.

At one o'clock in the morning, Eliza felt around in the dark for the button. She could have closed the study door and switched on the overhead light, but some tragic fury overcame her. It was a stealth mission. She banged her head on the underside of the desk as she stumbled back to her feet. The tiny little speck of a button was perfectly camouflaged in the dark. Eliza began to think she had imagined the button, or that her husband had found it, too, and stored it away in one of the drawers. Or thrown it away, he isn't one to collect buttons. She was a donkey for crawling around, slapping the carpet with her palms. She crawled back into bed, her balding husband breathing into his sleep apnoea machine. It was just a button, she reminded herself. She dreamt that night of visiting the sea with her father when she was sixteen, how he had bought a packet of fish and chips that had been over-seasoned with salt. In the dream, the salt was soy sauce, and her father had told her he was in a love with a sea star named Frederica. There were wild hogs sniffing at her legs, and she glanced down at her phone to see a message from her cousin – *I couldn't stay standing in the driveway, someone would have run me over.*

In the morning, after she brewed herself a coffee and kissed her husband on the forehead, Eliza scanned the study again, with daylight eyes. Tucked in the corner of the room, behind a potted plant, the button grinned back at her. She wasn't sure where she saw the mouth.

Her husband was buttering two slices of toast, humming quietly to himself. Eliza ran her fingers over the button in her pocket, unsure of how to approach him. Was she about to accuse him of infidelity, like all the other wives and husbands, like she made the one blanket prediction of him that showed she trusted him so little? The button seemed to taunt her so. If it could talk, would it say, *he's a filthy adulterer, Eliza*. She paused, sighing, and it startled him. He almost sliced right through the toast, an uneven jag leaving a dent in the bread.

“Did a button fall off your shirt when you were working?”

The question was a silly one – her husband might not have noticed if a button flung from his shirt as he entered the study, or perhaps it had flung off when he stretched his arms and pushed out his round belly.

He answered, however, with an inquisitive look. It had been awfully stuffy in the study, so he stood up from the chair, moved to the window and heaved it open. He returned to his work without much thought – back to the grind, love, he'd said. Some time later, a little magpie had seemed to have gotten lost on its journey home to the nest – or so he believed. It carried a button in its mouth, hopping in through the opened window. Eliza's husband had frozen, confused, running through what he could offer to the little bird to befriend it. He had no food in the study. The magpie hopped round with the button in its mouth, exploring its surroundings, but avoided the strange man in the corner. He must have startled it – the office chair, five or so years old, was creaky in the quietest of moments – and the magpie panicked and fled the scene, flapping its wings back out the window. Her husband guessed it must have forgotten about the button.

“Birds are drawn to shiny things, and look how silver that button is, Eliza.”

She pocketed the button. Certain mornings she would wander out into the backyard, which was overlooked by the study window amongst other windows, such as the tiny rectangle in the toilet, and she would eye the magpies stepping around the greening plants in the garden. Plants that stayed alive largely from all the rain they had been having lately. It wouldn't be so out of the question for a bemused bird to find itself in strange new territory...

The question of keeping the button in the house startled her, for she didn't realise at first that it was a question – she could toss it in the drawer, or keep it out until she found the gaping hole in a shirt when she sifted through the dirty clothes hamper later in the week. The button felt sickly in her palm. It bore down an invisible hole, felt entirely too molten for plastic. To Eliza, it was a button someone had bought from a dollar store and slid underneath the front door as a means to taunt her. *Lookie here, Eliza. You best be warned.* It sent a chill down her spine. The button could be stored in the shed. Locked away, but if she found the shirt, she knew where the escapee was. In the shed. Barefoot, she crossed the lawn, stepping on a bindi weed that pinched her skin. Eliza had no intention of leaving the button in plain sight, for her husband to notice and think she would not believe him, his story. She shuffled around the cramped garden shed, searching for a box of nails she remembered her husband had stored in here – he'd swiped an old tin she would have thrown out otherwise. It had a row of pine trees on it, flush against a backdrop of sky and clouds and the illusion of sunlight, but no sun. It would have seemed too childish, almost, for the artist to have drawn on some bulbous sun in the corner, splashing out golden rays.

The button was now in the shed. Up in the clouds, another storm seemed to be brewing – Eliza stood there in the yard with her head upturned, craning her neck. The deep greys were not stressing her this morning. She wanted an excuse to stay home and throw the washing in the dryer.

Inside, her husband was nowhere to be seen. It was an in-office day for him – he worked a pattern of sorts in the building in the city and at home. Most Mondays he would take the train; it was a Wednesday, and he was likely dodging the traffic to get to the station before his train left fifteen minutes past the hour. There was sudden bliss – they had no children, although they had tried four, five, six years ago. Eliza moved a hand to her stomach. The soft meow of Gideon, their greying old man, cut through the silence as he narrowly avoided colliding with the edge of the wall on the left side of the toilet door.

“Silly Gideon,” Eliza said, pacing toward him. He had gone suddenly blind a few months ago – the vets had said he was merely growing old and perhaps had spared her feelings and confessed the complete truth to her husband. She combed his fur with her hand, showering him with affection. *Beautiful boy*, she thought. Sometimes he crawled into a cramped spot in the corner, behind the toilet. *Silly Gideon.*

He was never one to demand a million and one scratches, so the moment he was satisfied, he padded his way into his strange little spot, and Eliza's eyes trailed him until something shifted her focus. There, in the wastebin, a limp piece of white fabric dangled out of the mouth, far too thick to be toilet paper. Eliza crouched down to unfurl it from the clutches of the bin. At first she wondered what her husband would be doing, chopping up fabric for some unknown project – he wasn't the type to sew, or make elaborate costumes in the garage – but then she unwound the white, and it revealed itself to be a white t-shirt. A torn t-shirt. One of the sleeves was badly gashed, barely attached at the shoulder. Someone had very clearly gone on the offensive with this shirt, and Eliza thought it made no sense – it could have been a perfectly alright shirt before it got slashed.

Without much thought, she raced back to the garden shed and tucked the white t-shirt into a plastic container labelled 'Christmas Ornaments – Garden'. She'd decide later whether she would confront him about it or shake it out of her hair. Maybe it was perfectly reasonable he'd grown tired of the shirt and out of the fury from his work, he tore into something so easily replaceable inside of icing out his wife. Eliza breathed out.

Half an hour later, the phone rang. Her supervisor wanted her in an hour earlier – she'd taken up a part-time job when it started getting too quiet to continue working the complaints desk for a gramophone manufacturer. The supervisor was a woman ten years younger than she is – it was strange, to her, to suddenly be shifting her life around this twenty-six-year-old woman's frantic changes to the schedule. Eliza now worked at an indoor playground that catered very frequently to birthday parties and what she liked to call 'participation award ceremonies.' It was a little joke she uttered to herself – these were parties for no reason exactly, except that the parents wanted to group together their children and let inanimate objects and paid-to-be-there adults take over for what the supervisor read from a manual as 'delivering the fun'.

Eliza stared at herself in the mirror, dressed in the oversaturated uniform. She ran through a series of thoughts in her head – remember the money, remember the job interview in two weeks, forget the thought that your husband might just be having an affair. Did you get petrol yesterday, Eliza? Should you buy another plain white t-shirt for your husband?

Did he even wear white t-shirts, shirts that would let his belly concave, shirts that would eventually be soiled by some dripping sauce from a burger? My husband bought his own clothing, she reminded herself, closing the front door and locking it.

She was determined to not spend the bulk of her day distracted. There were fervently rushing children that would be eager for pizza and nuggets and to be told to not climb too high up the netting over there in the corner.

When Eliza wandered into the staff room of Harvey Hippo's Playland, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She gave a quick smile and a wave to a co-worker, Todd, who had been working there for ten years now, before she reached in her pocket for the phone. There was one new message, from her husband.

*I'll be home late tonight, my love. I'll just eat leftover from the fridge for tea.*

She froze, but for an unexpected reason. She worried any response she could give him right then would have seemed insincere, or it would have seemed like she was in a grumpy state at the news that he was probably just staying late in the office. She sent him a short message – that's alright, honey, I'm just about to start work – and switched her phone off. No more thinking about him today, she thought, as she pressed her thumb to the sign-in portal.

*Now...what would Harvey Hippo do?*

Of course, no one was home when she pulled into the driveway, a slow crawl, with a sudden acute awareness someone could be lurking in the darkness wherever she turned. Gideon was asleep on a couch cushion he pawed into the middle of the kitchen, and he seemed unphased when she flicked on the light and started opening cupboards. She fixed herself a tall glass of Sarsaparilla cordial, mixed in with fizzy lemonade – she'd stopped drinking a few years ago, and she never was a coffee drinker beyond her first in the morning. The cordial tasted just sweet enough.

She carried the glass with her into the study, settling down in front of the computer. Eliza desperately wanted to confront her husband about the t-shirt – did he avoid doing yard work so much to the point that he no longer had use for a raggedy white tee? She sighed.

While at work at Harvey Hippo's, Eliza had been helping a little boy tie his shoelaces. His parents were nowhere to be seen, for he had slipped down the slide and landed a few feet from her. Eliza had been distracted, idling on the job thinking about what sort of cake to order for her sister's birthday in two weeks, when the little boy had frozen in place and asked for her help.

It reminded her of two things: she could imagine herself with a son of her own, teaching him to tie his little white laces; and that she had completely forgotten to order her sister a birthday present.

Eliza and her husband shared an account for many things – the subscription services they watched trashy reality television and fantasy dramas on; the mobile data plan; and the account where they both purchased many a thing to be delivered to their home within the next few business days. Scrolling through what she knew her sister would not immediately shove into a box and into a cupboard, Eliza felt a sense of accomplishment – purchasing gifts for other people stressed her terribly. Even her husband. She would sometimes snoop around the house before purchasing something for him, to be sure he didn't have it.

After the checkout, the bill paid with her credit card, Eliza paused. She'd sped through the process so sharply, without much thought, and something was eating at her to doublecheck the purchase. She clicked purchase history.

At first, there was the gift she had just bought her sister – a novel the whole world seems to be raving about, but one her sister would enjoy, and a towel set – but as she scrolled, trying to remind herself what else she had bought over the last few months, there it was three purchases down. Something her husband must have ordered – an exercise ball. Bulbous, blue, the colour of a tropical vacation Eliza has yet to go on. Her husband didn't seem the type of man to do yoga, or bend himself into shape atop the squishy-yet-firm sphere. Another implement for Gideon to crash into. Something to roll around the garage.

Eliza again tried to breathe, to soothe herself. She checked the date – he purchased it ten days ago, and she assumed it had been delivered already. She could hear their ads in her head – quick delivery, you'll be smiling so soon, make someone's day or something like that. Maybe it was a present for her sister, too, she reasoned. Maybe he stumbled on it while he was tired from work, browsing online. She covered her mouth as she yawned. *I'm tired*, she thought to herself, heading to the bedroom with a black water bottle under her arm.

The sharp whizz of the garage door jolted her awake. He was home, and she hadn't even cooked herself anything for dinner. The nap had been heaven sent, but she rolled herself toward the window and felt as though she had wasted her afternoon sleeping and stressing for no reason. She glanced at the time on her phone. It would be so lovely to quit that job, she thought.

Her husband slammed the door that connected the garage with a hallway that led to the kitchen and dining room. Eliza put herself in order. She would cook dinner for the two of them now, something warm and saucy and thick. Something that would clog up her stomach just enough, so she would pass right out again, in his arms.

Her husband was in the toilet when she started rooting through the refrigerator for a square of beef mince she assumed would've walked out of the freezer on its own. She had absolutely nothing planned for tea tonight, after he'd texted to tell her he could do it all on his own when she was fast asleep. Her stomach grumbled like a tiger from a children's story she remembered reading when she was little – not the first *Wizard of Oz* book, but one of the others. Her mother used to love those stories – she took Eliza to a community theatre production of the first book once, when she

was six or seven. The older woman portraying the Wicked Witch of the West had startled her nastily, but after the applause and the curtain was lowered closed, Eliza's mother whispered to her that it was all acting – that the mean, horrid, wicked woman was really very lovely after she wiped the makeup off and undressed from the stage costume. Eliza beamed and asked if she could go backstage and meet this woman – she was quick to realise her mistake in having thought someone couldn't merely be pretending to be the villain. Her mother just grinned, and held her hand as they walked back into the parking lot toward their car.

Eliza began to throw together the simplest of meals, but she knew without question her husband wouldn't complain at all. From the freezer she pulled a half-finished bag of battered fish and threw them in the air fryer as her husband rounded the corner, shirtless now.

"You're awake," he said, although it was not phrased as a question.

Eliza paused, gently sliding in the air fryer's basket. "I didn't eat when I got home, I forgot," she said, moving toward her husband. "We can eat together after all."

She wanted to watch every moment of the cooking process, so intently. If only there were a window into the basket, a glass view – her husband's voice cut into her thoughts.

"The fish won't burn," he said, inching toward her. She could sense there was something about him that seemed unfamiliar. Why wait, she thought, with one hand clenching to the handle of the basket.

"What did you buy the exercise ball for?" For a moment he said nothing at all, and she laughed softly to herself – maybe, after all this, she bought the ball herself and completely forgot about it. "The big, round, sapphire blue ball that cost \$21?"

Eliza's husband finally seemed to show some recognition on his face. The slightest little movement of his head first, his eyes beginning to twinkle...ahh, yes, he remembered now, the exercise ball he purchased ten days ago.

"Oh. Right, I forgot to tell you. You remember Sue? A friend from way back, in high school we used to be in the marching band together," he said, smiling. "She doesn't shop online anymore, after her husband was scammed a couple hundred when he thought he was protecting baby rhinos in Africa from going extinct."

Eliza's husband takes another step forward. "We were chatting, and I offered to buy the exercise ball she'd mentioned wanting, I could easily drop it off at her place after work once it was delivered here." Eliza paid close attention to the slow browning of the fish. She didn't want overcooked fish, or a husband that she had no faith in. Or a lying husband, true. She would believe him if it killed her –

"Why didn't she go into a store, or find one that would order it for her?" Eliza had to harness the tone she spoke in – I mustn't sound accusatory, she thought, gently tossing the basket. She had made brief eye contact when she'd spoken, enough to not seem detached from him. Scammers were all around. Todd from work, at Harvey Hippo's, had said he was sent a new card just five weeks ago, because a text message scam had compromised his security. It terrified her. She never clicked links that seemed shady or suspicious, but Sue's husband...well, he must have been the naive sort, then, Eliza thought. She hadn't ever met him. Sue, she remembered from a few dinner parties – a charmingly ordinary woman, medium-length brown hair, didn't like wearing skirts or dresses very much. Eliza's husband told her the last part on the drive home.

"It was easier this way," he uttered, "I was right there, with phone in hand."

Of course, that made sense – a friendly purchase, to ease someone's mind. One day Sue would return to online shopping – it was a marvellous carrot-in-front-of-the-donkey.

Soon, when dinner was served – the fish looked lonely on the plate, because Eliza hadn't bothered with any chips, so a quick garden salad was arranged – the husband and wife sat down at their circular dining table fit for four people. Eliza and her husband always ate facing each other, so as to give each other enough space. It wasn't so much to engage a conversation anymore – their days of courting were over, and the pair could begin a conversation in just about any arrangement. For a few weeks they took to eating at the breakfast bar, side by side, his elbows gracing hers every so often. Sometimes she would brush against him, just to feel the tickle of his arm hair, just to remember that he was real, this living, breathing man that she crawled into bed with every night.

She remembered she had forgotten about the white t-shirt, all scarred up and tossed limply in the wastebin in the toilet.

It was pointless to ask him aggressively.

“Do you need another white shirt?” Eliza questioned, knifing through the pointier end of a piece of fish. The fish seemed to squelch out, *eat me*.

“I'm putting on too much weight, love,” he answered, after he finished chewing through a cherry tomato. He set his knife and fork down on the table.

Here comes another story, Eliza thought, a strange new emotion tightening her shoulder.

“I was leant over, making the bed, and I felt the sweat on my back, love,” he said, fanning himself for effect. “So, I reached back, plucked my shirt a few times, thinking the back-and-forth movement would cool me down.” He laughed, as if reading the punchline in his head before getting it out of his lips.

“I was completely tangled up in the sheets a minute later, trying to slip the quilt inside the cover...I torn my shirt slipping and sliding around on the bed, I probably looked like a drunken fool.” Her husband concluded his tale, and Eliza looked at him in silent consideration. Normally she made the bed – fitted the sheet, slipped the cover on, wiped her brow as she collapsed into it for a quick nap. But she had asked him recently. She was so exhausted from work. Those children – then, maybe, it all made sense. He could have torn out of the shirt from the heat.

Eliza suddenly forgot what season it was.

It was unseasonably hot all year around, really – the news liked to deal in *hottest since* and *chilliest since*, but Eliza hadn't glanced at a temperature in weeks. She existed in whatever the score was – that is, was it bearable? Yes? Terrific.

Perhaps it was the *hottest since*, and there was no denying her husband had put on some weight lately. The thought of that alone eased her, somewhat – if he was having a cruel affair, some weight gain was not a traditional symptom of it. Perhaps if he suddenly took to using an exercise ball to shed the pounds...

They finished dinner chatting about ordinary things – how was Todd at work, how was work, love, why on earth was I more concerned about that co-worker of yours that called in sick last week for accidentally frying his washing machine, and himself a tad. *He's not in hospital, love*. Eliza's husband had an uneventful day at the office. His boss' assistant had brought in cupcakes, but no one was sure what the occasion was – they presumed, eventually, that it was her birthday, but no one in the office was a very good singer at all.

Eliza laughed her head off. Her husband stared at her, perplexed.

How on earth was she supposed to fall asleep?

A million ideas plagued her – she counted them, rounded up a little, sure, but there were at least *almost* one million. Ideas about whether he spoke the truth or bullshitted her. Ideas about what she should do, too. If she would do anything.

She tried to see the button with some strange peripheral vision she was conjuring up. Maybe she could study it under a microscope. She almost shook herself free of the pillow, cautious a moment later, as if she might've woken her husband from his deep slumber. He slept as if under a curse from a fairytale story, she wouldn't wake him like this.

The button, the t-shirt, the exercise ball for Sue. In her mind, she tried to button up the white shirt around the ocean-blue ball, naked Sue sprawled out awkwardly upon it like a sea star named Frederica. If she let herself tumble into sleep, would she dream something even worse? Something more sinister and manipulative than that. Her husband slobbering over a menagerie of women, and men, and the genders in between. She would notice the moles and the birthmarks and all the genitals. This shudder seemed somehow less unexpected. Maybe she was getting too certain of the idea that her husband was cheating on her.

Eliza slept for a couple hours, dreaming of Gideon saving up enough money to afford a new invention that would give him his perfect eyesight back – and then, two hours later, destroying them into oblivion as he crashed into yet another plastered wall, so comfortable in his transition into lazy, messy kitty cat. It phased her to no degree that her cat had found himself a paying job.

She flung her arms out, patting around for her phone. It was a blanketing sort of dark in their bedroom, still, and Eliza only wanted to know the time. 2:59am. She let out a quietened sigh. Beside her, her husband snored, likely in a blissful sleep – probably dreaming about the next sloppy blowjob he would receive, she imagined, as she pushed back the covers and thought of the sweat, and the torn shirt, and a magpie slamming itself into every wall of the study, desperate to flee.

There had been similar thoughts once.

It was two years into their relationship – two years before they got engaged, too. Somewhere around the middle of that time where Eliza hoped and prayed she had found a man that would one day see her clearly and make her a wife, and a mother, and eventually a grandmother – it was a dream of hers, since she was very little. Some girls had such grand visions of their wedding day – the white gown, the first dance, a cheesy speech so well-delivered all in the crowd was dabbing at watery eyeballs. The focus was not so for Eliza – and their wedding had been small but respectable, for it was an appetiser, at best.

But two years before their engagement, Eliza suspected her loving partner of cheating on her. She was too broke to afford any sort of therapy beyond maxing out a credit card, which she had already done by the time the little frightening had truly registered in her brain. *He's never loved me*, she thought, pouring herself a glass of double sarsaparilla. The usual spiralling. She had no licensed professional to warn her how damning and dangerous this line of thinking was.

He had left his computer on the kitchen counter of her apartment, opened to a logged in email account. His, of course. Her partner surely had quite the problem with digital junk mail – she'd chuckled to herself, thinking he needed a little virtual 'No Junk Mail' sign. But in amongst the discounts and the coupons, there was an email addressed to no one Eliza knew – with a crude, flirtatious title. She'd felt too sick in her stomach to read the email.

She had the stamina back then to follow the scent.

Sometimes her cousin would peer in through his windows, searching for another woman sprawled out on the bed, fingering herself while he went and showered.

A month and a half later, after finding the email, she followed him from work when he had called her to say he wasn't going to make it for dinner. Eliza had slaved in the kitchen for a few hours, preparing something he would salivate over the moment he stepped foot in her apartment. Now he was cancelling, and she knew why. She tailed him for a few blocks, before he parked in an underground carpark and headed for the elevator. She could never follow him up so close. It exhausted her. She waited in her car, counting the other cars around her – there were four red ones, two blues, an extraordinary number of white cars, and absolutely no yellow ones. She was rereading a licence plate when the elevator dinged open.

A man and woman wandered out of the elevator. His arm was wrapped around her waist; she laughed at something he said, leaning in then to kiss him on the mouth.

Eliza watched them glide through the underground parking lot toward his car. She realised then that her seatbelt was still clung to her chest. She hadn't unbuckled, hadn't even considered what her forward motion would have been. She began thinking of excuses he would mutter – this is my sister; we grew up on a commune that supported *very* close bonds with your family. This is a colleague of mine; I just stopped by her apartment to drop off some files and she suddenly began to choke on a gumball, and then she tumbled down the stairwell, so I am taking her to the hospital to be sure she will not choke again, and that she does not have a concussion.

Eliza was frozen. She watched them drive off.

How many times would she let that man lie to her so unconvincingly?

How many times would she let her husband lie to her so unconvincingly?

Eliza stood in the garden shed, the button in one hand, the torn up white shirt in the other.

The exercise ball in her mind, for she was out of hands, and if she hopped into her car to speed toward Sue this early in the morning, she was worried someone would be wrapped around a tree, and not her husband.

It was not the thought of her simple, ordinary husband cheating on her that terrified her. Perhaps she would find another husband soon enough, after the divorce. But then, what did terrify her? Something must.

Eliza tiptoed into her husband's study and found a ream of paper, unopened. She tore through the wrapping, her eyes shining at the sight of untouched, unblemished white. She found a pen her husband liked, although he was fond of any pen, really. An implement to write, it was a creative pursuit. He fancied himself creative, skilled at it. He must have.

On the first page, Eliza scrawled out the first of her thoughts – I saw a high-speed police chase through the front window, and I wanted to be a part of the thrill, a part of the action.

She thought about writing another, and then another, defacing every blank piece of paper. The idea was cathartic, and perhaps some therapist would have cheered her on for it. But one bizarre story was enough. She left it slipped underneath the bedroom door.