

The Palm Reader

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Once, you hid in the space between the water heating unit and the wooden side gate while a woman shouted your name from the back door. She wanted you to come inside and she said that dinner was ready. She wasn't your mother. You held your breath, gagging on the heater's gas, hoping your silence would be enough to protect you. She stomped around the corner and lifted you by the armpits. You struck her across the face and screamed, knocking the elastic from her bun. Her hair rolled down and it had the same grey streak your mother's did, and underneath the yellow apron she wore the same blue shirt your mother wore to your ninth birthday party last week.

For a child with prosopagnosia, the inability to recognise faces, every day is the first day of school. You made friends with the black girl Peony and the shortest boy Jacob and you never, ever, called anyone else by their name because you knew you'd get it wrong. You still called the teacher 'dad' in year seven and when your classmates gave the relief teacher fake names you didn't know why everyone was laughing. Patricia never spoke to you again after ninth grade because when she handed you a rose and asked you to come out to a movie you looked down at her yellow new shoes and asked, "Sorry, who are you?"

You learned sign language when your brother was born deaf and you realised that the back of a hand is hairy, that it has freckles and that there are characteristic little wrinkles on each knuckle. Your boyfriend's blue veins and the little scar from an ingrown hair

began to articulate the things he didn't say, and you read him like a book. You remembered your mother by the burn across her wrist and your father by the rigidity of his arthritis. When you placed a wedding ring on your boyfriend's finger it was like a halo over his head and when he put the ring on your finger you could see yourself smiling clearer than when you look in the mirror.

Your husband's hands were destroyed by a falling window. It was wet season and he was a volunteer teacher in Fiji; when it began to rain he tried to pull the pot plants in from the balcony and the glass shattered as it slammed down onto his knuckles. En route home he stopped in Singapore, where insurance covered the prostheses grafted onto his wrists. He could store small objects in his fingertips and his new grip strength could crush an apple easily: it was the polished red type of prosthetic espoused by tech-heads as "the next step forward." When he came off his plane and picked you up by the armpits you just stayed still and pretended to remember the man wearing your husband's clothing.

You asked Peony, "Is it the same to kiss someone after they've had a face transplant?" It wasn't. On the second night that he was home you told him you missed your train, and you walked around the block for half an hour. You were more comfortable talking to him over text and when his cold fingers touched your body during sex you wanted to put your clothes on and walk out the door. One time when you were drunk, you asked him "Why didn't you get a reconstruction?"

And he said, "because then I couldn't do this," and he tied a chewed-up lollypop stick into a knot with three long fingers like it was something that should turn you on, as though they weren't a stranger's cold fingers probing you. You began to masturbate to

the old photos of him, when he had his real hands, when you could hold his hands like you were holding his heart.

It used to drive you wild when he rubbed your thighs under the table at family dinners. Whenever you rode the train together you'd draw circles on his palm with your thumb, and when he was stuck on an essay you'd squeeze his fingers with reassurance. That was over and you began to gaze at the ceiling while he kissed you from neck to thigh, leaving little red roses in his wake, and you wondered if you were the one who had disappeared. You noticed people on buses and in supermarkets with the same red hands and sometimes they made your stomach sink. The other times, you felt something like intimacy for the stranger, something that conspired to make you guilty.

On your third date, when you were still teenagers, it was a winter night and the roof gutters overflowed into his father's garden. The home was built so that during a storm you could leave the windows open and it was like sitting in the midst of a waterfall with blankets and hoodies to keep you safe. You asked him to take his mittens off and he did, so you kept his hands warm to say thanks. When you bought a house together he never wore leathery gloves while gardening and you always remembered to kiss each scratch. You had so much history with his hands, and he came home with a pair you'd never met before. The first party you went to after the accident was Peony's birthday and he crushed four apples before her friends got tired of the trick. One of Peony's friends you couldn't recognise whispered into your ear, "He must do amazing things to you."

You caught him crying two nights later. At first he was distraught that you'd forgotten him, and then he seemed to remember that he was drunk and that he could be angry

instead.

"I've done everything to deal with your disability. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

And you knew he was right, and that you were wrong, and that you were shallow and vain and selfish, and that you should be at his feet begging him to hold you and that you should shut up and look him in the eye, and that you could find him in his hands again, if you tried.

Your brother got married. One of the guests had the same prosthetic model as your husband so he pulled you a little closer, not letting you lose him in plain sight. You caught a taxi home drunk and when you tried to have sex you fumbled and he mistook it for disgust. He kicked open the back door and grabbed a chisel from the shed and a hammer from the tool box. He sat at the white marble dining table and positioned the tip of the chisel where the fingers begin to separate on the back of a real hand and brought the hammer down. He'd forgotten to disable the pain faculties of the prosthetic and he dropped the tools reflexively, holding his dented fist and cursing. You tried to stop him but he was too strong and he continued: evenly moulding each side with the perfect ambidextrousness of modern prostheses, he sculpted himself anew. With each strike, another cloud of red paint flakes spayed across the table and at the end of the gruesome ritual he emerged as something new but completely your husband.