

ONE FINGER

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Honorable Mention, Short Story

GRAY'S psychology professor told her class that eighty-four percent of the time men spend quiet and dreaming, they are under a full erection. She considers this standing in front of several rows of toothbrushes in Safeway. They are positioned before her, red smooth shafts, rigid with superiority, their white heads bristling. She wonders what it would mean now if she found herself in need of a toothbrush or worse, if someone else found her in need of a toothbrush. Gray tells herself that she already has one, blue with soft short bristles, an independent woman's tool. A man in a black t-shirt and gray sports jacket edges in besides her and boldly pulls one tall red brush from the shelf. As he steps away he gives her bare legs a hard look before turning toward the selection of razors and cool green face gels. Gray hesitates then she too removes a red toothbrush and tosses it into her basket next to a pink variety box of Tampax. It is best to be prepared.

II

Three weeks after facing the legions of Safeway's dental hygiene products Gray is talking to a man at college. He carries two new business books and a very crisp black folder. She wonders if he notices how much he laughs between his words and how often he raises his hand, almost touching her shoulder, as if he keeps forgetting that she's given him no reason to. Gray reminds herself that she has nothing to worry about; she is prepared. The red toothbrush is in her medicine cabinet and still trapped within its plastic packaging. She knows that protection is necessary. So when he asks if she would like to have pasta and naked shrimp with a margarita at a little restaurant parallel to a large impersonal corporate bookstore, she has no logical excuse to say no.

III

He takes her out again and again, mostly to sushi bars where striking Japanese women serving cold beers and little ceramic bottles brimming with warm rice saki. He shows her how to eat the bits of soft uncooked fish and their supporting mounds of rice without dropping a single grain, telling her it is all about using the right kind of pressure. Gray uses the wooden chopsticks because it makes him smile, but the fat sticky rice always comes apart between her uncultured fingers so she takes to ordering rolls. The tiny ornamented boats and prayer sized teacups make Gray feel gargantuan in her long tall body with her hands so large that they can envelope one of those Japanese girls' shoes between her palms and fingertips. But he doesn't seem to notice her, in this way, and so she keeps following him from one ebony bar to another.

IV

She soon finds out that fish isn't the only thing he likes raw as they take to undressing hastily behind his almost shut apartment door pulling themselves up against walls. He tells her that he likes her best on the bathroom counter tops so he can watch his hands over her skin in the mirror. Gray was almost resistant the first time he pulled her into his clean tiled bathroom, afraid that she would see a red toothbrush, aggressive in its height and naked from its plastic cover, posted near the sink. But the counter was bare, save a box of quilted Kleenex, so she cradles his hips over the sink every time he wants to expose her. She has learned to always wipe off her v-shaped mark off the smooth gray counter and to never sit on his leather couch without her underwear on. Every night when she goes home Gray removes her red toothbrush from the medicine cabinet and holds it rigid in the casing to remind herself that she is in control.

V

Gray dreams at night, of opening the package and using the toothbrush and squeezing toothpaste onto the rigid bristles, some of the paste falls into the full sink and turns into koi that swim in circles, pulsating the water. He is there in a black suede shirt pulling the fish from her sink and slitting their bellies, parting the silver and orange scales over lumps of starched rice. He offers them to her, but she sees that they are now children's fingers; jerking her hand back she knocks some fingers to the floor where they turn into a confetti of little white larks. Gray tries to catch them as they soar upward but misses and is left with the one finger that did not fall.

VI

The next morning she goes to Safeway and spends forty dollars on pregnancy tests and a magazine. In her bathroom she sets the tests up in accordance to their time requirement, sits on the toilet and wets each strip. While she waits for colors to appear Gray waters her plants and then realizes that she should have just bought four of the same test, her psychology teacher would tell her she was conducting bad science. But the results came back unanimous in a row of pink dots and blue duckies and she worries no more about bad science.

VII

Gray waits till the sushi is almost in his mouth when she tells him that she is pregnant and is not surprised when he doesn't miss a movement and the sliver of tuna arrives safely on his tongue. He chews first, slowly working his jaw over the bit of muscle, making sure to swallow each bit before opening his mouth to speak. He says that it is not a problem, he will be more than happy to pay to have it snipped and scrubbed clean from her womb. Then he smiles at her, Gray smiles back and picks up a California roll with her fingers and eats it while he flashes his hand up for the waitress to bring over the check. She lets him pay for dinner and drive her to the parking lot of her apartment complex. He tells her to call him when she has it all set up, she nods and gets out, gently closing the door.

VIII

Inside Gray pulls the phone jack out from the wall and goes into her bathroom. The red toothbrush is smaller now in her cabinet, she peels the plastic apart and removes its sulking body. She runs the head under the cold faucet water and then brings it up to her mouth and scrubs her teeth until her gums ache from the pressure of her lips when they close. She fishes the packaging out of the trash and reseals the red shaft inside. Tomorrow she will buy herself another blue toothbrush and a tiny yellow toothbrush with bristles soft as lark feathers.

