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<short story>


Prosthesis
 dan chaon

There was a man Suzanne met at the library. He spoke to her back as she was standing in an aisle of shelves, staring at a book. She was lost in thought. "Excuse me... ma'am?" he said.

His voice was gentle and plaintive, almost on the verge of cringing. She turned, and he was standing a short distance behind her--a young man with shaggy dark hair, somewhat shoddy in his dress. He had a prosthetic arm, a hook instead of a hand. She registered this immediately but composed herself almost at once. She looked at his face, as if she hadn't noticed his arm. Polite. Quizzical.

"Ma'am?" he said. "Could you help me, please?" And she noticed that he adopted a loping, submissive posture.

He held up a few napkins in his real hand. "I'm trying to... get a grip on these," he said, and slipped them in between the two prongs of his hook, which he could pinch open and closed, like mandibles. "I think I need to put a rubber band around them," he said apologetically,

"Oh," she said. He was younger than she, with a brown-eyed, scruffy handsomeness. "Of course," she said. She took a step toward him, and he held up his arm. The prosthesis extended from the sleeve of a T-shirt. The upper and lower arm was made of plastic, like a mannequin, pinkish, in an approximation of the color of Caucasian skin. The hook emerged from the wrist and was silver and steely. She smiled as she guided the napkins into the pinchers, but her hands trembled. The smooth, cool metal sent a thrum through her fingertips. She dropped the napkins and had to pick them up.

"Sorry--sorry," she said, and their eyes met.

It was said that her former lover had been badly disfigured in a fire. Suzanne's mother had called to report the news, as she often did when something horrible happened in the small Iowa town where Suzanne had grown up, and this was how her mother said it: "... disfigured ..." with a small pause before and after.

"You were friends with him, weren't you?" Suzanne's mother said, either oblivious or deliberately cruel. "He was in your class in high school."

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She felt his hand hardening against her own, and then they were in the air, plunging, limbs flailing, a blur of stars and fields rushing past them.

"Yes," Suzanne said. She was at work, very busy. She had asked her mother before not to call her at the office unless it was important. Several times, Suzanne had been forced to speak sharply to her mother, and had hurt her mother's feelings. Now, Suzanne's mother would condense everything she said into mysterious, gnomonic phrases. Then, claiming she had to go, her mother would hang up.

After work, because she could not stop thinking about it, she stopped at the library. In a medical book were photographs of people who had been severely burned. Horrible--yet she sat there staring for a long time, at the end of a long tunnel of bookshelves. A person coughed from some other aisle, a sound like a dog barking far off in the distance at night. She hadn't known what fire could do to flesh; the things people survived.

At night, her husband asleep beside her, she shuddered, imagining the curved metal brushing down the hollow at her throat, between her breasts, down her stomach.

When she got home, she found that her husband had cooked a special dinner for them--steaks, naturally, so that the house was full of the smell of it--and he had the children in bed and wineglasses and place settings on the table. He stood smiling as she disengaged her key from the door, hopeful and helpless in the stream of whatever had been happening to them lately. He did want to change things, or at least to slow what had begun to seem inevitable.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, and then, after a moment "What? Is something wrong?"

"No, no," she said. "I'm just tired, I guess."

The burned man had not been her first. Really, he was not even one that she had been particularly attached to. Both she and her husband had had many relationships before they married. Her husband would probably recognize the burned man's name, since they had gone through a period of intense self-disclosure and examination when they first married. But her husband would not recall him as a person she had dwelled upon. Which was true, she had not. Sometimes, during the act of love, she would close her eyes and the image of that particular boy would occupy her for a moment. There was a certain way that her husband would touch his mouth against her ear that would particularly remind her.

The man who had been disfigured in a fire might have once made her pregnant. There was a time, during their senior year in high school, when her menstrual period

was almost three weeks late. She had been regular for some years by that time, so it frightened her badly. She spoke to him, in a rush, after band practice. He held his glittering trombone loosely at his side. She almost started crying, but didn't.

That night, on the pretext of going out to a movie, she had driven out to the farmhouse where he lived with his parents. He was waiting at the edge of the long dirt-road driveway that led to his house. He spoke hurriedly, distractedly. "If it's in there, it's in there loose," he said. "It doesn't have to stick if we don't want it to."

He led her out to a field where bales of hay were stacked up like blocks, almost as high as houses. He showed her a stairlike passage that led her to the top of the haystack and they stood there at the top. A half-moon glowed over them. The ground was about ten or twelve feet below.

"If I held your hand," the boy said. "If we jump together," the boy said. He looked at her and his eyes were bright with assurance. "Okay?" he said.

They leapt together. She felt his hand hardening against her own, and then they were in the air, plunging, limbs flailing, a blur of stars and fields rushing past them. She landed hard on the soles of her feet and fell forward on her hands, crouched like an animal.

"Okay," he whispered, as he pulled her up. "Again..."

The next morning, in her own bed, she woke up and she was bleeding. A cramp clenched just above her groin. The sheets were already dirty.

Her husband was concerned as he poured the wine. He could sense troubled thoughts in her expression and assumed that it must have something to do with him. She saw how his eyes attempted to find something underneath the vague, hedging conversation. He wanted the wine, the steaks with their crisscrossed grill lines, the delicate potatoes in their skins, to mean more than they did. Sometimes it seemed that he suspected life of holding some mysterious significance that he could not quite figure out. This bothered him more than it did her. He said her name, hesitantly, and when she lifted out of her thoughts to look at him, he wasn't sure what to say.

"It's good," he said. "The food?"

"Yes," she said. "Delicious." He watched her put a piece of steak to her mouth.

What she ought to tell him she cannot tell him. It makes no sense. Or else it makes sense in the wrong way. She has just turned forty, and there is a growing unease that they could name and analyze and discuss.

There is a picture on her desk at work. It is of her father holding her first child, who, in the photograph, is a drooly infant of six months. The child, Michael, leans against his grandfather's thick shoulder, his mouth open in a one-toothed, loose smile of sleepy comfort. He clutches his grandpa's finger in one absent fist.

The grandfather, five years dead, no longer exists, and the child, Michael, a fourth grader whose face is only vaguely recognizable in the soft, plump cheeks of the infant, has already long disappeared into his own thoughts and feelings: He likes shells and stamps, he is affectionate, not much trouble, but of course she will never really know what he is thinking. The current Michael has very little to do with the photograph she has on her desk. She often folds her hands in front of the photograph and observes it, aware of a sort of emptiness opening around her, spreading like ripples around a stone tossed into a still pool.

For several weeks, perhaps almost a month, she was in love with the man with the prosthetic arm. That is to say, she began to think of him regularly, a slow romantic ache opening up inside her. She saw his brown, deerlike eyes, his mouth, surrounded by dark stubble. She felt the cold smoothness of that hook against her hand. At night, her husband asleep beside her, she shuddered, imagining the curved metal brushing down the hollow at her throat, between her breasts, down her stomach. She traced the path with her finger. She was at a loss to explain it, the power of this image.

Eventually, she knew, it would pass. She would never see the man again, though for a while she even went to the library regularly and walked through the aisles. She found herself replaying the small scene in her head. She held the napkins in her hand, and hooks clamped over them. She looped the rubber bands over the hook. Their eyes met. Something might have happened, then.

After a while, she knew that this would fade. Her life would change again. Even now, there was an infinity of paths she could take.

Her husband was feeling blue. He came up behind her and put his arm around her waist while she was standing in the kitchen. "I love you so much," he said. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"I know," she said, as he pressed his lips against her ear. "Ditto." She closed her eyes, enjoying his touch.

What if they'd never met? It made her stiffen a bit, because it seemed so governed by chance, so improbable. How many small, offhand choices had led her to the college where they met, had led her to the room where they first looked at one another, had led her to be sad and in need of someone who thought she was beautiful? She thought, if they had not jumped off that haystack, would there have been a fire? Would there, instead, be a grown-up child, another husband, another life? How many people were forever different, how many people ceased to exist every time she turned one way rather than another? Surely, if it were so random, she could not be held accountable?

But she couldn't be certain. As her husband held her close, she could feel the pulse of other choices, other lives, opening up beneath her. Her past crackled behind her like a terrible lightning, branches and branches, endless, and then nothing.

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