

Tributaries

THE GIRLS ARE WORMED OUT across the floor under down comforters even though daytime is hardly over, trying to get a jump-start on the slumber party. "My parents both have perfect love-arms," Genevieve tells her friends. "Both of them can write. They write love letters to each other. It's almost sick." No one thinks this is sick. Everyone wants this. Pheenie, Marybeth, Sara P. and Sara T. all want to have the proof.

Though the girls know many two-armeds, even some who seem happy and in love, what they talk about are those with love-grown arms. "My mom doesn't have anything and my dad just has fingers growing out of his chest. He can't control them and they grab at anything that is close enough," says Pheenie.

"My grandmother has seven, but she was always married to my grandfather. She says she fell in love with him over and over," Sarah T. adds. Seven is an unusual number. Two sometimes, maybe three, but past that something important must have gone wrong. And still, the girls are greeted every morning by the television news anchors, their teeth white, their hair

unyielding and their single, perfect love-grown arms, offering no hint of uncertainty.

Sarah P. lowers her head. "My dad's arm keeps growing. It drags on the floor. It is soft and he can wrap it up and tie it in a knot."

Genevieve, putting her hand on Sarah P.'s sleeping-bag-burrowed body, says, "I wonder what mine will be like. I want to have two. I think it's better to fall in love twice, once to try it out and twice to know for sure. I want the first arm to be a stump and the second to be full grown."

"I only want one. I only want one perfect one." Pheenie shakes her head.

The girls go quiet and all the arms of all the loves they do not have yet beat silent beneath their skin. They thump and prepare.

AFTER ALL THE STUDENTS save the detentioners have left the building for the weekend, Principal Kevin again tells the story of his love. His wife's beauty surpasses the Louvre, the Sistine. Both his secretaries chirp. They wide-eye his love-grown arm and tilt their heads and wish for what he has.

"You might not know what it feels like, but I do," he tells them, "and it's terrific."

In fact, Principal Kevin stuffs his third sleeve. He stuffs it, but no one at school knows he does. The sleeve is filled with a prosthetic, a real fake arm commissioned from the lab at the hospital. It screws onto a threaded metal disc implanted on his chest. At the write end: a stump. The stump is sewn up to look like the hand has been amputated. Principal Kevin is smart

enough to know that a fake hand looks fake, and instead of giving up the whole beautiful vision, he tells a story about a kitchen fire in which he saved his wife and daughter but his third hand, his lovely third hand, was burned to a crisp.

But Principal Kevin knows himself. He is sure that if he did have a love arm, and if he *had* lost the hand to it, he would have wanted a replacement. It's the kind of man he is—everything in its place. So, attached to the very real-looking stump with big, obvious screws, is a wooden hand. It is the fakest he could find, an art class model. Against this, the arm looks especially lifelike.

When he comes to the end of the story, one he has told more than once to everyone he has ever met, he manually straightens the jointed wooden fingers and brushes them against each of his secretary's right cheeks. "The hand burned," he muses, "but the arm resisted. The arm did not even singe."

FEW OF PRINCIPAL KEVIN'S STUDENTS, his daughter Genevieve among them, have any love-arm development. The girls check constantly in the bathroom between classes, inviting each other to inspect the soft skin of their side-body for bumps. They say they are falling in love, not with the specifics of one boy, but with the idea that such a thing is possible—that they belong to a species built to snap together in everlasting pairs. They feel themselves falling in love with the entirety of the opposite gender, with their own blooming selves, but their bodies do nothing to corroborate. Their skeletons are stubborn and unchanged.

For the boys, any new protrusions would be bad for their social standing. Unless they are extremely religious and plan on a just-legal wedding, an unmoved form is an asset. Certain other anatomical parts have made some very favorable changes, but love can't break the seal. After high school this changes. Older brothers are proud of their arms. They sit on thrift store couches, where girlfriends rub lotion onto the new branches and kiss them and want to make love so often because there is proof that what they have is real, that something has changed because of it. They lie close in a twin bed afterward and put their extra arms side by side. They let the unfinished appendages warm each other up just by pressing.

DURING AFTER-SCHOOL DETENTION, Miss C lectures about Amelia Earhart because she wants to and the audience can't go anywhere. She zooms herself around the room like an airplane making swooping turns between desks. She is a two-armed, but that's not the whole story. From the waist up, she is covered in hands. Dozens. Under the cover of clothing, their fingers move and stretch and wriggle. Sixteen sixteen-year-olds keep out of her way until she drops suddenly and kneels under a desk. "Blammo," she says in a loud whisper. "I'm gone, disappeared, just like that." She does not move for a long moment. Chairs squeak. Students hiss. Miss C remains disappeared at a pair of sneakered feet. The boy reaches down like it is an accident and touches her head. He can feel her skybound heat.

When she stands up, she is rippling, the fingers twitter beneath her blouse. After the bell, in the hall, the boy sticks his

chest out and imitates with his two original hands. "Oh, Amelia Earhart, I want to jump your bones," he squawks.

Miss C sticks her head out the door. "You've got a poker face now," she tells him, "but your body will give you away soon enough."

THE HIGH SCHOOL BOYS keep rubber gloves in their wallets and inflate them when they want to try to win a girl over. They tuck them under their shirts and let the bulging, breath-warm air-fingers reach out at their dates, indicating what could be.

Of course, the girls know the hands are stand-ins. But when the boys say, *I could really develop feelings*, and they have the visual aid, and when the music pumping out of the speakers has someone singing a harmony and someone singing a melody, the drapery of their clothing is easily removed, and their desperately hopeful limbs cross and twist and hold.

EVEN PRINCIPAL KEVIN'S HOME MAIL comes addressed to Principal Kevin. On this Friday, while he waits for his wife to come home and remove his arm so that he can enjoy the evening unencumbered, he spreads the envelopes out on the table until the whole surface is covered with his name. They ask, *Please, if you could spare some money for the children*. Say, *Do you have any idea what kind of excellent interest rate you deserve?* They report the thermos used to keep the house warm, the wife's desires made known to him by her spending on the platinum credit card. A note from his daughter: *Dad, I love you and I'm at*

Pheenie's for the night.—Genevieve. He is alone with the facts of his existence and it makes him tired. Just looking at the debts and balances.

His wife comes in from her exercise class and she finds him here, wilted. He looks at her and picks the prosthetic up with his good left hand like a bone. *Look what I found, take this from me, I have been waiting.*

"You could have done it yourself," she says.

"It's yours. I want you to do it."

"We have the PTA meeting tonight," she reminds him, kissing the arm as if it were real. As if it does not whisper to her that her eyes to him are tiny emptiness and her hair a strangle of ropes and her heart a flicked, rolling marble.

"Will you go in my place? Tell them it's a headache. I just want a nap and a break." She kneels on the floor in front of him and takes his shirt off, then twists the arm to the left. The elbow bends as she unscrews, so the arm faces in all the wrong directions.

She puts the arm down on a chair, brushing the hair so it faces in one direction like windblown wheat. She kisses his cheek and returns him to his kingdom of bills. She comes back a moment later with a cloth to wipe clean the metal threads of the attachment, both innie and outie. They get sweat-damp throughout the day. A shimmer of salt crusts the edges. She dries. She oils and dries again.

She does not take care of his fake love-arm with her real one. She lets that sit against her side, the fingers spread out against her, quiet and still. It is her born-on hands she tends to him with, just as he tends to her with his.

PRINCIPAL KEVIN'S ARM needs caring for like leather does. Cleaning and mink oil. While he sits with his mail, his wife takes it with her into the bathtub and lets it float there while she washes herself, her triangles and spheres and nubs, and her own third arm, this one very real. She cleans both authentic and created with extra-gentle baby shampoo. The wooden hand is heavily waxed, and water beads, then scrambles off, as if afraid. She closes her eyes and leans back against her twisted-up hair, the prosthetic floating limp on the surface of the water, a ship stuck in a tiny, unleaveable sea.

"Good bath?" he asks, naked, from the bed when she comes out. The sun shoots off the metal hole in his chest and blinds her. She tightens her robe and turns away, places his arm on a stand by his dresser, where it stretches straight, pointing out the window at the bug-buzzing evening.

"You know you are my peach," he says to her. "Come and sit." He strokes what she has grown for him. It is elbow length but unjointed and has a hand, always carefully manicured. He pushes the cuticles back. "My love is bigger than any limb," he tells her.

"What is mine then?"

THE BOYS LIKE TO WATCH Miss C walk down the hall, all those hands and fingers moving together under her clothes, beckoning. This evening, when she makes a trip back and forth to her car, the football team turns from the field where the lowering

winter sun skates the grass pink. They watch her search in her bag for keys, which come out glinting. Her hair picks up the light the usual way, but it is her body that receives it in waves, like she is the surface of the ocean and all the water inside is angling for a peek at the great open space of the sky.

Miss C is really named Claribel. She goes into her office alone with the blinds down, door locked, grading papers shirtless before the PTA gets started. Her hands hold things for her: red, blue, green pens. Paper clips and sticky notes. Her breasts are surrounded by a ring of four hands each and look like lakes in a forest, calm, quiet, protected. While she scratches at the paper, the hands clean each other's nails. They hook fingers.

PRINCIPAL KEVIN'S WIFE also has her own name, which is Jan. She is a committed mother and she has excellent legs. Both are goals she has been able to meet. While the prom committee presents its plan for an Antarctic theme, Claribel leans over and whispers to Jan, "You've got great legs." She is a fan of this appendage, a limb that does not sprout up but comes exclusively with the original configuration, and always in one matched pair. "Your daughter is a real contributor lately," she adds.

Jan humbles her head but knows it is true. "I am proud of her. I think it's hard to be the principal's daughter."

"He's such an admirable man."

"Sure."

When the meeting is over, they go up to Claribel's office for a coffee, look out the small window at the football field. The team practices in the dark for a game they need to win. The

women talk about teaching and administration. They talk about the graduating class and where they will go to college. Jan's extra hand emerges out a lavender cuff with a pearl button.

"Your nails look nice," Claribel remarks. "I have too many hands to take that on. It would cost me thousands of dollars."

"That would be quite a project," Jan admits. A flock of black-birds rushes by and they call out to one another. Jan can see her car in the parking lot waiting to take her home, where she will find her husband on the couch, devouring popcorn and laughing loudly at the commercials, and this thought makes her stomach sink. "You know what? I'll do them for you," Jan says. "Your nails. Let's do them."

Claribel resists the way people do. "No, no. There are too many," but already she is unbuttoning her shirt from the bottom up.

WHEN IT IS FINALLY DARK, the girls take their clothes off and go in the pool, splash in the hot blue of that gathered liquid. Their skins are a wet slick. Their hair goes pointy and water falls from it in straight beaded lines. "I want to love you guys forever," they say to the half-lit faces. The new breasts reach out to sniff at the world they will inhabit.

The girls get into the bathtub together, all five, because it is a big one and they are cold. They wash one another's backs with soap that smells like lilacs. Legs slip against legs. The names of the boys they want to love fall out of their mouths.

Dry but not yet dressed, Genevieve takes out a permanent marker. She draws parallel lines down the center of her chest

and then the five loopy fingers of a hand at the end. She writes *Cole P.* inside the wrist. Pheenie turns away and says, "Draw one on my back." Pretty soon they are covered in the outlines of limbs ending in digits. Some drawings are realistic, the arcs of knuckles and nails. Some are more like paws, round and imprecise. The girls sleep in a pile, the scent of the marker sharp on their skin.

In the morning, the original drawings will be printed again on whatever skin was pressed there; even their cheeks will be ghosted with imaginings of love.

As the shirt comes open, the fingers beneath stretch themselves out, crack their knuckles. Claribel lies down on her back hands.

"Who is this hand for?" Jan asks, filing the first nails.

"That's Abe Lincoln and next to that is my father. Those were the first two. They grew when I was eighteen and I went to Washington for the summer. I sat on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and read his biographies. I watched the lump grow to a ball, and then a wrist. The fingers started the same way, lumps and then balls." Jan massages a jewel of lotion in the palm. "My father called to tell me he was leaving to live in Kentucky with a new woman. *I love you even though I don't love your mother*, he told me, and right then, all at once, this hand erupted out of my chest."

They go on. Eleanor Roosevelt, Tom Sawyer. Ms. Earhart. A younger cousin who died in a flood. Men whom she knew for weeks sometimes, hours sometimes, before an appendage began where they touched her and they took their coats and left. "Some of them did not know I loved them. Many of them were dead. I

have never known which ones were real, or if all of them were. I have hands that showed up without my ever knowing who they were hoping to touch or hold."

Jan thinks about this, about her body's agreement to tell the same story she does: love right away, love still, love always. "I think it's wonderful that you have loved so much," she says. "You've given your whole body over to it. We award medals for much less useful acts."

Claribel nods her head and feels the twitter of something beating beneath her skin wanting to exist. "But I have proof all over me that no one is alone in my heart. Everyone wants to be alone in someone else's heart. In the end, I am alone in mine."

As Jan works, Claribel's fingernails become red squares like windows into the coursing, blooded tributaries beneath, as if Jan has painted her way inside.

GENEVIEVE KNOWS that her father's arm is a fake. He likes to take it off when he gets home. He likes to eat his dinner without it in his way, to hug his daughter unimpeded. She does not admit this to her friends, because they believe that what her parents have is the lucky thing everyone hopes for. But it is the lie that Genevieve loves. That he built himself what did not come on its own. He said yes, and though his physical form stayed silent, he created a voice for it. Made it sing the notes of his song.

"MY HUSBAND'S ARM IS PLASTIC," Jan says, and the painted nails wink at her.

"Oh my god. But he talks about it all the time."

"I know."

"He must love you though."

"He must. But he also must not."

"Climb on," Claribel tells her. The many fingers reel her in.

"How I used to hold the kids on my feet?" Jan asks. She climbs on, laughing and nervous. Claribel lies on the mattress of her back hands, and Jan rests like a platter on the front. Their bodies are held apart. Air travels through the tunnels. Fingers dig themselves in. Jan puts her three arms out like wings to steady herself.

Outside, boys crash into each other and land in heaps.

"Here I am, held up by everyone you've loved," Jan says.

"See that?"

When Jan begins to tip, Claribel tells her, "It's only because you are looking that you can't balance. Close your eyes. Close your eyes, because we've got you."

ALONE THIS EVENING, Principal Kevin takes his arm into bed. He lays it down and rubs up against it. He is naked. The hand stays open in a lazy wooden cup. It will only hold what is given. He takes it into his own, places it over himself, moves it around. "I love you," he says out loud. "Do you know that? I love you."

If you say so, he feels the hand tell him. It is cool on his most delicate skin.

"We all do," he tells it. The hand is boss-able. If he wants to grind into it, it is grinded. "We all do," he repeats. "We all love."