

Wounded Enough

By Ann Ormsby

Joe turned the wheel hard to avoid the blue van that shot out of the hidden driveway. The van's driver jammed on the brakes just in time for Joe's Honda Civic to recover and sail by without broadsiding it. Cassie cursed and shot the van's driver the finger. Joe laughed, his corkscrew curls floating on the breeze from the open window.

Cassie and Joe had eyeballed each other earlier that day at Kent Community College where they were both taking a class in creative writing. They were sitting next to each other, and when Professor Miller gave them a writing prompt and 20 minutes to create a character, Cassie couldn't help but notice, as she looked around the room for inspiration, that Joe's middle finger on his right hand had been cut off somewhere between the first and second knuckle. Intrigued, she stared at the beheaded digit. Was he born that way? How had the tip of the finger been severed? Distantly, she heard Professor Miller clear his throat. She tried to turn her attention back to the prompt. A grocery list, a bicycle, a dog. She couldn't think of anything but Joe's finger. She slouched down in her seat and held her blank piece of paper up to hide her face.

After the lesson was over, Cassie emerged from the classroom with her determined stride. Although she was looking down, her straight rainbow-colored hair falling like a waterfall in front of her face, she was aware that Joe was standing down the hall leaning on the orange lockers. She thought he was waiting for her. As if on cue, he fell in step with her as she walked to the door. She reached up to pull her hair back from her face, and she felt his eyes taking in her collection of earrings -- hoops, studs and jewels -- that started in her soft white lobe and climbed up the curve of her ear. Peering at him out of the corners of her small eyes, she saw his gaze travel down her neck to her green Flogging Molly t-shirt, white belt and black skinny jeans and then back to her face with its pointy little nose. She could sense from the look on his face that he liked what he saw.

"What happened to your finger?" she asked as they walked through the hallway and out into the parking lot.

"I noticed you staring at it," he said. She looked up at his smooth mocha-colored face, his startling blue-green eyes and his big white teeth and decided right there that they would be together.

"I was. I was trying to imagine what happened to it and what it would feel like," she said taking her pointy little tongue and pressing the tip of it into the center of her bowed lips.

He put his head back and laughed and his curls fluttered around his face. His laugh started out loud and ended in a high-pitched chortle. "Let's get coffee," he said, and she followed him to his white Honda Civic. They decided to go to Dunkin' Donuts and that's when the van surprised them and they reacted each in their own way.

"Geez, what's so funny?" Cassie asked as they made a sharp right, which threw her against the car door.

"The look on your face," he said smiling. She noticed that his lips were the color of nutmeg, a rich brown with shades of purple, as he pulled into the Dunkin' Donuts parking lot.

They jumped out of the car, walked up to the counter and ordered. She went to find a table.

As he carried their coffee and donuts over to her on a tray, she studied him, "So, who's black and who's white?" she asked as he placed a pumpkin-flavored latte and a cinnamon apple donut in front of her.

"My mom's white. My dad's black. I guess that makes me black."

"Why? I don't understand why having one black parent makes you black. You're 50/50. You're mocha. You're coffee with cream. You're wh-ack. You're bl-ite. Like Obama. Why is he black? I've seen pictures of his mother. She looks just like my mother. And she left him just like my mother left me," Cassie twirled a piece of her metallic pink and blue hair between her slender fingers and then ran it under her nose.

"It's the one-drop rule," he said.

"The what?" she said, her lips covered in cinnamon and sugar.

He chewed his donut before he said, "If you have one drop of black blood you can never be pure white."

While Cassie pondered this "rule" she studied Joe's beautiful face. "Wouldn't it be great if we were all tan? Then it wouldn't matter," she said in a deep sultry tone. "We could all have tan babies." Joe laughed his hearty laugh. She liked the sound of it. It made her remember the feeling she had when her mother would come and sit on her bed as she fell asleep. A little bit of happiness mixed with a little bit of security. When he didn't answer, she asked, "Are they still together?"

"My parents, you mean? Are anyone's parents still together? Are your parents still together?" Joe finished his chocolate-covered donut and started on a glazed cruller.

She noted his cynicism. "No. My dad died when I was two. Then my mom up and married an Aussie when I was 14 and she left me here with my grandmother when he took her back to Sydney. Haven't seen her since," she picked up her coffee and took a sip. "It's weird, you know, I hate her, but I miss her," she paused and he nodded his head. "So, I thought I was going to hear the story of your finger, which I have to say, is really turning me on." She locked her eyes on his and took a bite of her donut, licking the sweet cinnamon sugar from her lips in a quick little movement. She saw how his eyes followed her tongue.

He chuckled. "I stuck it, accidentally, in a lawnmower when I was 10. It was the year my dad left us and my mom said it was now my job to mow the lawn. So, I went to the garage and got the lawnmower out and was cutting the grass in the backyard when a branch got stuck in the machine and without thinking I stuck my hand in and pulled it out. Hurt so much I passed out and when my mom came home she found me lying there with my finger chopped in two. Too much time had passed and they couldn't reattach it."

Cassie listened to Joe's story and tried to visualize the little boy with the lawnmower. The sound of the engine, the pungent smell of the cut grass, the spray of blood on the metal. Suddenly, she smiled in amazement. "Wow. That is so awesome. Just like that. Gone. A body part. Just gone. You know, sometimes I think about death and I really think about one minute the person is here and the next they're not. Just gone. Like your finger. Poof. Like my mother. Bam. No more." Her cheeks were flushed and little beads of sweat had formed on her upper lip. She reached out and pulled his hand toward her. She examined the tip of the finger as if it were a priceless piece of art. She ran her finger with the lime green nail polish gently and slowly over the tip of his damaged finger.

"Okay. Cut it out," he said trying to take back his hand. She could tell he was excited. She thought that he might be wounded enough to love her. No culture to claim as his own, no family, no finger tip. In an attempt to change the conversation, he said, "Do you hear from her? Your mother, I mean?"

"I used to get a monthly check, but when I turned 18 she sent a note saying that I should take care of myself now. What a joke. Like I wasn't already taking care of myself. She'd been gone for four years. She liked to think that she had been taking care of me by sending a check. What bullshit." Cassie's small blue eyes were bright.

"Yeah, that is bullshit," Joe agreed.

"So, enough about her."

"Yeah, enough," said Joe and laughed into the silence that sprang up. She realized then that he used his laughter as a shield. Better than her own shield of anger, she supposed.

Cassie suddenly felt like she knew enough about Joe to make a move. "Who do you live with?" she asked.

"Just me and Weezer, my cat," answered Joe.

"Weezer?"

"Yeah. Like the group."

"I love Weezer," she smiled.

"They're my favorite...do you want to come over...and listen to them?" He didn't laugh as he said it and she knew he was afraid she'd say no.

"Yeah. Now?"

“Yeah. Now.”

They eyed each other over the Styrofoam cups and crumpled tissue papers and then both got up in unison, and leaving the garbage from their snack on the table, picked up their backpacks and headed out the door and got into the Honda Civic.

Late that night, after Cassie went home, she lay in her small single bed with the brass headboard staring at the knotty pine paneling and thought about Joe’s mocha-colored finger. She could feel its rubbery softness outlining her belly button. Why did his wounded finger engage her so? Why did it bother her that he insisted he was black when he was clearly a light golden brown? He would never fit in. Neither black, nor white. Abandoned. Alone. He was different from the white boys she had been hanging out with just as she was different from the white girls who lived with their mothers. Maybe she had found someone wounded enough to love her. Somehow they had found each other and she fell asleep feeling a little bit of happiness and a little bit secure.

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