

*Rose without a Stem*

Red and white. The colors of weddings. Of roses. Of flesh and bone. The color of the cutting board and the raw beef Eleanor slices on it. Of a dozen flags to a dozen places Eleanor will never visit. Of a few flags to places she one day will.

The cutting board is white. The handle of her knife is red. It matches the cabinets of Eleanor's kitchen, provides an accent and ties into the color of the windowsill. Outside the windowsill Eleanor's white roses haven't yet bloomed, but the red ones of the lady next door have unfurled their baby-soft limbs and blinked their newborn eyes towards the sky's evening light.

Light. White.

The earth: clay and soil and leaves long dead. Red.

The television is on in a far room, showing some documentary about lizards that Eleanor lets fade past her ears. White noise. She's humming, softly. Through pursed red lips. In tune with the cicadas that hide in her unbloomed rosebushes. She rarely sees them living, but she finds their shells when she works her garden. Red eyes, white wings. Dinner is on the stove, a stew of leftover beef and fresh vegetables Eleanor adds to bit by bit. Her husband will be home late tonight, but stew keeps well and reheats just as easily. Eleanor pauses her cutting to put another pot of water on and pulls a box of rotini from the pantry. White pasta, red broth. Eleanor returns to her meat, waiting for the new pot to boil. She finishes slicing what's left without fanfare and dumps it into the stew broth already boiling. She looks inside, and checks off her mental recipe list.

Red tomatoes. Check. Green celery. Check. White garlic. Check. Red meat. Check. Green basil. Check. White onion...

She knew she forgot something. It should have been one of the first vegetables to put in, but oh well. Eleanor opens her refrigerator to a colorful spectrum of ingredients but grabs one of the few too-dull inhabitants of the rainbow fridge. She rinses the onion briefly and brings it to her board. Eleanor picks up her knife and positions it to slice. The damp onion squelches as her blade begins its path through. Squelches, and slides. When slicing onions, there are some people who can't help but cry.

Today, Eleanor is one of them.

Red and white. The colors of weddings, the colors of funerals. The red-knife's warning, the onion-white flags surrender. And just like that, Eleanor cuts through the very tip of her middle finger.

She jolts and cries out. The knife— red on the handle, red on the blade— clatters callously on the kitchen tile. Though smaller than half centimeter, the tip of her finger rests limp and apathetic and stains her cutting board. The onion rolls halfway off. There's blood, so much blood, on the kitchen counter, Eleanor's white blouse, dripping onto the kitchen tile as Eleanor chokes on the beginning of a sob. Pain, aching burning *pain*, radiates from the wound like lightning. It strikes her heart and her lungs stutter in response. Her whole hand throbbing, her arteries roaring in panic. Pumping all the blood in her body straight to her finger, straight to the floor. Her face is sweating and ashen white, but her hands, her *hand*...

She shouts for her husband. Then immediately feels silly for it. He's not home, and it's hours yet before he'll return. It's only Eleanor's own heart and the faint TV making noise in this

house. She wishes he were here, that someone could help her. But he isn't, and no one will. But just like that, the shock seems to break. Or maybe set in finally as Eleanor stares at her finger. On the cutting board, the piece of her tiny and otherwise unnotable if not for the crime scene's worth of blood surrounding it. But even through the red, she can tell less than half of her fingernail is missing. It didn't even reach the white of bone. Her breath still hitching, eyes still puffy, she turns around towards the kitchen sink. Another thing red and white: her crying eyes. Eleanor turns the tap with her still-bloody but unwounded hand and lets the water run over the cut finger. The blood washes and pools in cycles, but it's enough to reassure her of her earlier assessment. The whole thing, looking at it now, would almost seem overdramatic if it didn't hurt so damn much.

"This, this is handleable, isn't it?" Eleanor asks aloud only because she knows no one will listen. She snorts. "Of course it is. It's your literal hand." She switches off the faucet and gives her palm a determined glare. "We can do this, and it will be just fine, perfectly okay." Eleanor mumbles these phrases like a mantra as she quickly wraps a paper towel over her fingertip to stop the again-rising blood from pushing out onto the floor. She rushes to the master bathroom, briskly taking the stairs leading there two at a time, bracing her non injured hand on the railing for balance. She enters her bedroom for half a second before she reaches the bathroom, and Eleanor is immediately surrounded by a sea of white tile and porcelain. She can feel a headache forming from it, so she glares pointedly at the yellow painted walls in irritation. She keeps her eyes on the walls as she makes her way over to the sink in the corner of the room. The medicine cabinet sits on the wall next to the sink's mirror, which Eleanor also pointedly avoids eye contact with. It would be nice if someone else was here to soothe her nerves and tend to her wounds, but Eleanor is an adult and has been for a while. It would be nice, sure, but she

doesn't actually *need* anyone to kiss her better. "We can deal with this," she whispers again.

Opening the medicine cabinet with more aggression than is warranted, Eleanor snags the first aid kit and lets it clatter down onto the sink counter, and the tears nearly begin to fall again.

A red cross, on a white box. A red paper towel, unwrapped and placed onto white marble. A small red bottle of antiseptic, poured onto a white gauze pad. Placed onto the red wound. Tears falling as eyes instinctively clench at the sting, before opening to cut a strip of white bandage to wrap around it. There, that should do it. See? It wasn't that bad. Eleanor pops a red ibuprofen from another white bottle, and feels heavy and far away. Almost robotically, she places the first aid back into the kit before returning the kit back into the cabinet. She throws away the dirty paper towel and wipes the lingering stains from the counter with her good hand and a little bit of water. She rinses off that good hand again and heads back towards the kitchen. She never finished dinner, after all. Eleanor's vision is fuzzy around the edges from her still-puffy eyes, and in contrast to her weighted limbs her head feels oddly light. Her good hand clenches the handrail until she's white-knuckled, praying it keeps her from swaying as she slowly moves down the stairs. She passes through the living room, past the television with its bug-like antenna and staticky chirps and feels an odd sort of kinship with the alien device transmitting signals from somewhere far away. But it's unimportant. There's still dinner to finish and a kitchen to clean and a husband Eleanor isn't sure if at this point she will be awake to greet.

Her kitchen is the same as she left it. It looks like a murder scene from a bad movie, and Eleanor almost laughs at the ridiculousness of it. Her finger still aches, but the pain is easier to ignore. Her stew on the stove has simmered a little low, but it's a quick fix to add a bit more water to the broth. The pasta still has another minute or two before it's fully cooked. She ignores the counter with her fingertip for the time being, and sets about cleaning her blood from the

floor. It hasn't yet dried, so it wipes away easily with a little multipurpose cleaning spray. She busies herself checking again on the pasta, before deciding it's cooked enough to be added to the stew pot, and sets about doing just that. It's a quick task though. And Eleanor can't ignore her finger forever. She turns toward the cutting board with a sigh. This time, the wretched piece of her seems to sit innocuously on the board. If Eleanor wiped away the blood, the bit of her finger would be so tiny and irreverent that it's hardly worth noting. She has the vile, reflexive thought that if her flesh had ended up in the pot, that either her or her husband would swallow it and neither would be any the wiser. Her stomach briefly coils in revulsion, and Eleanor squeezes her eyes shut to dispel the thought and the ill feeling it brought on. She sighs, rubbing her temple with her uncut middle finger, before picking up the remaining onion and promptly throwing it into the trash. The stew will be fine without it. Then, after a brief hesitation, she does the same to the piece of her fingertip. She picks up the knife from where it slid across the kitchen floor after being dropped and snags the cutting board before dumping both into the sink. There's a few red spots where the knife had laid, and Eleanor wipes those away before doing the same to the blotches on the counter where the cutting board just was. She opens the small cupboard under the sink and grabs one of the gloves she uses for chemical cleaning and slides it over her injured hand. It's awkward and rubbery, and it somewhat chafes on the wound, but at least the waterproofing will keep the bandage from getting wet. She runs the sink again, and this time when the water flows, it slides over her yellow gloved hand and the red of the cutting utensils rinses down the drain, and nothing bubbles up to replace it. Her cutting board turns back to white.

Eleanor was right, wasn't she? This— it wasn't so bad, was it? See? Her kitchen is just as pristine as it was when she began, and the minute change in the length of her middle finger is

hardly noticeable. In fact, wasn't the documentary in the other room saying something about lizards earlier? They regrow their entire limbs, and while humans definitively *don't*, well. Eleanor thinks back while she puts away the dishes and cleaning supplies to the voice of the narrator droning something about humans having minor regeneration capabilities, particularly in the tips of their fingers and toes. And it's not like she lost an entire finger, right? So it should all work out. The bleeding will stop, there's nothing a doctor could do that Eleanor hasn't done already, so in a few weeks her finger would return to normal. It was honestly a little bit freaky, but Eleanor has always been a little squeamish about the human healing process. She's never felt entirely comfortable looking at scabbing, pus, and scar tissue. She was okay enough with blood, however, as evidenced by the now cleaned kitchen around her, and she startles into a real laugh when she remembers just how much her husband isn't in comparison. He always complains of feeling queasy and does his best to look away, even from happenings as silly and mundane as bloody noses and papercuts. She turns off the stove and places the lid onto the stew pot. It was probably for the best he wasn't home yet after all. He would have made such a big ordeal of this, would have insisted on ambulances or urgent cares— and, really, as much as the kitchen scene may've looked dramatic before Eleanor took a sponge to it, it hasn't even been ten minutes, and everything is back to its place. Honestly, if anything, Eleanor only feels a little embarrassed. She cooks every day and has for the last ten years, yet she hurt her finger while cutting a damn onion of all things. She usually takes a quiet, smug pride in being able to do so without crying. Just the other day, the women of the neighborhood were exchanging strategies to survive dinner preparation. It came back to her now, and Eleanor started laughing to herself again.

*“Have you tried holding a slice of bread in your mouth?” suggests Carol-on-the-Corner, and Eleanor fights back a snort at the image that comes to mind. There are five of them sitting on*

*the porch of Eleanor's next-door neighbor, Mrs. Maggie Peterson, because old Mrs. Maggie is a busybody who ropes herself into the personal lives of the entire neighborhood. Eleanor had been looking forward to entering her home after work but couldn't in good manners ignore the woman's shout for her to come over and say hi to 'the girls.'*

*"Never helped for me," says Diana-Down-the-Road, "but sometimes I'll set out one of those small little fans? Noisy as hell while cooking, but it did the trick."*

*"Did it truly?" asks Patty-with-the-Porch-Petunias. Diana-Down-the-Road raises her eyebrows and nods her head conspiratorially.*

*"But get this," Mrs. Maggie turns towards Eleanor, "Elle, dearie, your husband works late, doesn't he?" Eleanor feels her eye twitch as the women all turn their heads towards her.*

*"About half the week, yes, it varies based on when he's called in. Why?" And Mrs. Maggie grins, teeth white but a little crooked.*

*"Because this trick always worked for my little girl, who used to cry if she was even in the same room as the onions being cut, but you'd gotta make yourself a bit of fool first. Best to do it when no nosy boys are hangin' round. But trust an old woman on this, it's the one trick I saw that worked for everyone." Eleanor would do no such thing, thank you. She opens her mouth to wave off the need, her eyes don't water from the onions after all, but Carol-on-the-Corner gasps in exclamation.*

*"What is it? What's the trick?" Mrs. Maggie's crooked grin grows even wider, somehow. She leans her head into the circle of them and all the other women follow and do the same. Pausing first for the suspense, Mrs. Maggie cups her hands to stage whisper:*

*“Swimming goggles.”*

It’s ridiculous. This whole evening has been. But Eleanor can’t help but picture herself in the kitchen, wearing swimming goggles. Her hair in disarray and her vision blue from the colored lenses. Rewrites the image of herself panicking over the cut to one where she looked like she stepped out of a commercial for those little kiddie pools in summer. They’ve just started popping up again with summer fast approaching. There’s still a yellow patch in Eleanor’s yard from where she let Mrs. Maggie set one out for her grandkids since Mrs. Maggie didn’t have the flat space for it. And that reminds her with a sigh that she still hasn’t finished all her spring planting yet either. Eleanor looks out the kitchen window towards her garden but is startled to realize the outside is fully dark. It really has been a long evening, hasn’t it? The weight from earlier eases back into her shoulders, as if having been waiting for the acknowledgement. Only now, Eleanor recognizes it as the tiredness from faded adrenaline. Her husband will be home sometime this night. Late, he said, but since his boss didn’t like to let him go home until ‘the day’s work was done’— regardless of whether or not it was only a day’s worth of work— she had no real estimate for what time he’d walk through the door. She still had blood on her blouse and had yet to change out of the clothes from her own workday, and suddenly it seemed imperative to fix that immediately. But first, she’ll eat. She fixes her own bowl of stew and eats quickly, hardly tasting much more besides the warmth and spices of it. She’s still trying not to remember her thought from earlier, and it’s easier than she expected. When she finishes, Eleanor places the remaining pot into the refrigerator for keeping. She grabs a sticky note from the junk drawer at the edge of the kitchen cabinetry and writes a note to let her husband know where dinner is and how exactly to reheat it. But it’s late, and he won’t be upset if she turns in for the evening. So Eleanor grabs a plastic sandwich bag for her hand and goes upstairs to do just that.

She strips when she reaches the bathroom. The red-and-white bloodied blouse will be a pain to clean, and may even require a professional, but that's a problem for the next day. She takes makeup remover to her face, and it too comes away red and white. Her lipstick smears off with her mascara and a white powder that set her foundation before that too rubbed off. She looks even more like she was crying, her face now matching her red eyes from the scrubbing. But Eleanor smiles, tired and amused, since she feels the farthest from tears that she has since the events of the evening began. She wraps her hand in the plastic bag before stepping into the shower to rinse off the rest of the day's grime.

Eleanor has always found it soothing, the process of becoming clean. It isn't that long before she steps out of the shower again. Wrapped in her towel, she tosses the bag into the bathroom trash, the same one the bloodied towels from earlier were in. She'll deal with that in the morning, too. She doubts her husband will notice. Looking at the bandage on her finger, Eleanor figures she should check one more time before bed that the bleeding has stopped. The bandage is all red, but she hasn't seen any of it drip beyond that, so she takes that to be a good sign. She figures she should replace it anyway to avoid staining the sheets. She does just that, unwrapping the gauze and rinsing away the dried blood trapped beneath. She notes there's still a small well of blood pooling from the wound, but not anything significant. She feels the last few muscles in her injured hand untense. Yes, all will be well by morning. Eleanor reapplies a fresh round of antiseptic cream and clean bandages, tossing the dirty ones as she goes. She picks up her clothes from the bathroom floor and brings them to the hamper in the master bedroom. She breezes through the rest of her nightly routine before ducking under the covers of her side of the bed and letting her eyes close as she hits her pillow. She sinks into the mattress, exhaustion wearing at her. Her hand still throbs, but Eleanor is far too tired to do anything but ignore it. She

forgot to turn off the television, but she can barely even hear the muffled sound from where she is. Her husband will get it when he comes in. Her thoughts weave to the earlier documentary, and sleep weaves into her thoughts.

*“Regeneration is surprisingly common in the animal kingdom. There are hundreds, if not thousands of species with the capacity to completely recover parts of a lost limb. Even our species as humans have the potential to regrow portions of our fingers or toes in smaller scales. But to regrow entire limbs lost is still a natural wonder that belongs to only a few. The lizard famous for this, the green anole can regrow an entire tail...”*