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## Rick's Wax Hands

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RONIT FEINGLASS PLANK

## RICK'S WAX HANDS

I left Rick at the fair and my heart won't stop going fast. My body was shaking but I walked away, through the wind, out past the field. I didn't turn around. Outside, the storm is still whipping all the trees around; the branches jerk and swirl like crazy tentacles. It's getting dark in my room and he still hasn't come for me.

The storm started just an hour after we opened today. I had nine people standing in line when wrappers and used napkins from the garbage cans blew past our display table. But Rick was already in a bad mood, even before the weather turned. I could tell by the way he shoved my flowers to the side of the table when we set up.

When Rick's in a bad mood, he stares at me with this look while we work and I'll know I've done something to upset him. He might not say anything the whole rest of the day. When he's upset, he goes far away inside and there's nothing I can do to bring him back until he's ready. Sometimes he drops me off at my place and drives off to his house. I can't sleep those nights. Rick's all I have anymore.

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I know how to stake that canopy. I've been doing it since Rick first said I could help him. He says fifty-year-olds aren't girlfriends, but I'm not his wife and I'm not his friend so I'm his girlfriend. After we were together a year, I asked him why not let me manage the customers waiting in line. He thought about it over winter and then said I could give it a try. I hugged him for so long when he told me. I promised I would never miss a fair, no matter what; I would always be there to help him.

This is how it goes when we work: I stake the four "Rick's Wax Hands" canopy poles and then I set out the wax hand displays by price. Rick goes and has his coffee and cigarette and focuses for the day because he's the artist. No wax-hand artist in the whole Pacific Northwest can do what Rick does. That's what he told me when I first met him and it's true.

He can dip all kinds of people's hands into the paraffin, from crying babies to adults. Even couples while they hold each other's hands. He wraps his fingers around their wrists and guides them down into the warmed vat. And

then he pulls their hands out of the gray-white wax, smooth and dripping and perfect. When the wax hardens up a little, it's time to slide the new, hollow hand off the real one. The wax hands are as fragile as newborns and Rick is so gentle with them. I stop breathing a little each time he slips a new wax skin off somebody's hand and dips it in a vat of color.

Today, just before everything happened, I was talking to a couple about the double dip. Their three kids were waiting with an old man across the path, stuffing handfuls of kettle corn into their mouths. They all kept looking up at the canopy. I followed their eyes and saw the green canvas rippling, the poles kind of swaying. I tapped Rick on the back but he said not now, he was starting a dip.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said the next man in line, a farmer it looked like. He asked if it was extra to get three colors on his hands; he was surprising his wife for her birthday. I said not at all, he could get up to four colors. When I spoke, I could see him listening to me, like it was important. He looked at my eyes in this steady way the whole time.

66 And then I saw half the canopy sink behind him. The other side tilted forward, and it was as if the whole thing was coming for me, like in a dream. It felt almost like the ground was rising up beneath me because of how close I was suddenly to it. And then it collapsed.

The first corner of the canopy landed in the paraffin vat. Then the second pole buckled and the rest of it fell crashing onto the wax display table. I was still watching Rick's stuff fly everywhere when the second metal pole hit the farmer on the head.

I saw how red Rick's face was when everything got crushed, and my heart was racing. I thought all these things at once: "the hands—the wax—that farmer—Rick." The farmer was holding his head; I rushed over to him right away. I put my hand on his back and asked him if he was okay. He stood there rubbing his head, staring at the ground, and didn't answer.

I looked over to Rick for help. He wagged his pinky finger with the ring on it to call me over. I rescued a wax thumbs-up hand and a peace-sign hand from the ground on the way. Things were a mess, but that didn't mean everything was ruined.

"Look, these two are still in good shape."

But Rick wouldn't look back at my eyes; he set the wax hands down and we worked on one of the fallen poles. As we drove it back into the wet ground, he kept his eye on the people walking on the path. He stretched his mouth

into a stiff smile only if somebody turned to watch us. When the pole was back in the dirt again I put my hand on Rick's shoulder. He jerked away.

"Go back over to that guy with the head and apologize."

"Oh, I did."

"No, Joyce, listen to me very carefully. Can you do that?" His breath smelled like his last cigarette and Certs.

"Tell him *you* didn't follow instructions when you set up the canopy. Tell him that you are very sorry and that it's your fault."

"But, honey, I staked those poles like always. Like always."

"I am not going to get sued for some concussion because you can't do anything right."

The wind was gusting and two of the couple's kids were crying, but they still wanted a double dip so Rick turned back to them.

I brought the man with the hurt head my resting stool for him to sit on, and I told him what Rick had said to say. I picked up the other fallen pole to re-stake it. But it was wet from the rain, and I couldn't get it to stay in the ground by myself.

"Ma'am, why on earth are you the one staking the canopy?" the man asked.

I stared at him. I was thinking of an answer when he got up and walked over to Rick.

Rick was holding the couple's hands together over the paraffin vat. That's when the man with the hurt head asked Rick for his business card, and Rick, without turning to face him, told him he didn't know what had happened to them in the storm.

"Well, I need you to find me one," the man said again.

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm out."

They talked loudly. The man asked for Rick's phone number, and through clamped teeth Rick said he could get that at the grounds office if it was so important to him. The man turned away.

He came over to me and spoke in this quiet way, his deep-set blue eyes on my face.

"What's this guy's last name?"

"Evans."

"Where you all live at?"

"Fall City."

"I'll be in touch. Thanks, lady. "

I couldn't help but answer. The way he talked to me made me feel different from myself. I watched him walk toward the office, near the entrance to the fair. The leaves on the trees were fluttering around wet and shiny like dark cellophane. I set the pole back down.

That's when I saw it. The smallest cracked orange wax hand from a toddler lying on the ground. The stubby fingers reaching out, one fingertip missing. I couldn't leave it lying there that way.

I felt Rick watching me when I bent down to pick it up. He was shaking his head as I stood up. He flipped his hair off his forehead with his pinky finger, but the wind kept blowing it back into his eyes.

He looked at me like I was a dog. "Hey, Joyce!"

My heart stopped for a second when I heard him. Then he said, "I have an idea, Joyce." I pulled my black sequined cardigan around me tighter, tried to smile.

His mouth twisted and his eyes turned narrow and he screamed, "WHY DON'T YOU FIND SOMEBODY ELSE'S LIFE TO RUIN?"

I felt my lip trembling. I couldn't make it stop. I wished the canopy would collapse again so Rick would quit. I felt the smoothness of the toddler hand in mine and pressed my fingertips against it.

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It is dark now. No matter where I sit, the draft from outside comes in through the cracks of my window and finds me. I can feel a cold pinprick of air drilling into my cheek, my forehead. And the rushing wind sounds won't stop building up and settling down, building up and settling down. Then it's quiet, quieter than before it even started. It's so quiet I think it will break me open.

I couldn't look at Rick staring at me like that. I had to turn away. I reached under the tablecloth for my purse. And then I walked away. I walked all the way to the parking lot. There weren't many cars left and I could see clear across the dirt field to Rick's truck. I'd ridden with him that morning.

I stood there holding the toddler hand. It was cold outside and I couldn't hold the hand carefully and keep my sweater from blowing wide open. But I didn't want to drop it into my purse, it would get crushed.

The couple passed by, and in the husband's cupped hands I could see their clasped wax hands, dipped in red, white, and blue. Their three kids and the old man trailed behind. The toddler was still crying; snot shone on her

lip. The mom jammed her into a car seat with quick, hard movements and slammed the door to their old GMC. I watched their taillights as they left the parking lot.

And then I started to walk again. I walked with my head down against the wind until I was out of the field. I kept going until I got to a gas station.

I found a trucker there and he let me sit in the cab out of the wind while he gassed up. I watched the road for Rick's car. I saw a woman in a short violet coat leave the gas station with her daughter. She was holding a coffee cup in each hand but when the little girl stopped, the woman stopped, too, and bent down to talk to the ponytailed girl. With her eyebrows raised and her chin tucked to her chest, she explained something to the girl in a patient way. The little girl looked up, her mouth open while she listened, and then she held on to the end of her mother's jacket and they crossed the rest of the way.

If my daughter had grown up, I would have tried to be like that mom in the violet coat, patient and calm. My baby would have known I loved her. Maybe I'm still punishing myself, loving Rick. But it hardly matters; I have lost that, too. I have lost everything.

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I haven't left the old sofa in hours. The moon has moved up far away. It's tiny and cold in the sky. I can hardly make out the little orange hand I'm holding, but I can feel it. Each section of each tiny finger. I close my hand into a fist around the little wax fingers. I don't want to cry anymore. I press against the soft wax and it gives. I squeeze and my fingertips move closer to the edge of my palm. I press and squeeze and I feel a wax finger fold into itself. Another finger folds. The middle caves in like an ice cream cone. The space inside my hand changes and my own fingertips meet my palm. My hand closes completely, as if there is nothing at all inside it.

It is almost morning; there are no cars on the road. I carry the balled hand just outside the front door and see some of my daisies still blooming in the cold. I choose one that still has all its orange petals and I bury the softened wax beside it.

I'm not waiting anymore.