

## Fingernails

When he left for good, the first person I called was my mother. After ten minutes of listening to her talk about the usual inequities of sewing circle politics and reverse racism, I finally worked up the courage to tell her that my world was crumbling around me. She invited herself over for tea, so I put the kettle on and took out the overflowing pile of trash in the kitchen.

“Your fingernails look disgusting” was the first thing she said to me.

“I know,” I replied, gnawing at my shredded cuticles. My mother promptly swatted my hand away like I was a dog trying to sneak a table scrap.

“You can’t just replace old habits with new ones,” she pursed her lips.

“I know.”

I didn’t.

Her words echoed throughout my brain for the rest of the day, and every time I craved the acrid taste of nail polish to replace the slight hint of peppermint he had left on my tongue, guilt surged throughout my body in waves. I walked to the 7/11 across the street and bought a pack of cigarettes so I could learn to loathe the taste of menthol.

I grew up with the idea of relationships being the means to an end. I mean, in a perfect world there are only two ways they *can* end:

1.) You get married, and you cry.

2.) You break up, and you cry.

In both those scenarios, crying is inevitable. In fact, it’s expected. When a relationship ends, it’s supposed to be an excuse to flaunt your broken heart like an engagement ring, just like getting engaged is an excuse to flaunt your engagement ring like an engagement ring.

But we don’t live in a perfect world, and relationships don’t always end in tears, harsh words or slammed doors. Sometimes they end peacefully, with an awkward hug and a handshake for good measure. Imagine making a settlement in the most underwhelming court in history, except the only contract you sign is the one that promises that the two of you will remain friends. You sign that contract with your own blood, and as you bleed quietly onto the page you plead with your eyes for him to stay. You never were that good at communicating, so he looks at you and for a second you think he might change his mind. “I’m glad you’re okay with this,” he says.

You’re not.

You can't cry, because you haven't lost as much as you could have. He's still there, he's just not *yours*. Since the memories aren't tarnished, there's no point in burning old photos or deleting old statuses. Without a falling out, there isn't any fallout leftover to rebuild yourself with. So, you spend the rest of your days trying to put yourself back together, stealing bits and pieces of other people's identities in order to put on a façade of being whole. You aren't you; you are the collective experiences of everyone you've ever encountered. The single, mismatched sock that has yet to be devoured by the dryer. But being incomplete is better than letting him know that he took the only parts of yourself that you actually liked.

You realize that if there's anything worse than a bad breakup, *it's a good one*.

I smeared the blood from my fingernail across my wrist, imagining I was conducting a much more sacred ritual. In my mind my mother looked at me, a lifetime of disapproval built into the creases at the edges of her mouth.