

MY MOTHER'S TOUCH

By Lauren D. Yee

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You've come here to stare at me. To gape and point and go home with the smug comfort that you'll never end up like me. Just as long as the glass is between us. You wouldn't be saying those things if we were sitting in a room together, just the two of us, palm to palm, with no glass and no idea of what the creature might do next. A rather frightening idea. You might be scared, fluttery. If I ever got as close as to touch you. But that's the only thing I ever wanted—for her to take my hand and hold it. And did I get it? No! But I am getting ahead of myself.

I was born on the 13th. I have been told often that my mother cried for days after I was born. You see, the doctors could not get me out the natural way, the normal way, so they had to take their pretty knives and cut open her smooth white belly, slashing it down the middle. For years she used to cry whenever I asked her how I was born. She would say that if she had known they were going to cut her open, she would never have had a child in the first place. When she was younger, my mother was a pretty thing, the type that construction workers would see and lick their lips at. They could just taste the pretty honey dripping from her small white fingers.

I've never had that trouble. You see, my mother kept all her pretty genes for herself, hoarding them so that when people looked at us side by side they would wonder what accident had caused such a beautiful woman to give birth to such an unsightly creature. I only had to take one look at her tiny pale fingers and know mine would never be like that.

"Keep your hands to yourself" was what she told me when I was five. I had been finger painting and I reached up to her. For a hug. For warmth. And as soon as my yellow-and-red-painted fingers touched her blouse, she screamed and pushed me away. After that, my mother never touched me again. I was dirty; I would stain her blouses; soil her skin.

Sometimes I would annoy her just so that she would pull back her hand and slap me with the smooth flat of her palm. I still remember the feel of her cool skin against my cheek, stinging a little. But most of the time my mother kept her hands to herself. She would shudder whenever she had to take my dry, spidery fingers into hers. This continued for years and then, one day, there was the fire. It started innocently in the kitchen where she was cooking. But fires can be tricky things and soon the entire room rose in smoke. My mother raced out of

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the house, clutching her apron for fear that the flames, just like my fingers, might dirty her dress.

And it never occurred to her that I might still be up there, sleeping in my room. Sleeping as the flames crept under the door and sucked at my skin. A firefighter pulled me out. But too late. Always too late. I'll never forget the feel of the fire licking against my back as I lay there in bed. Like death by a thousand cuts. Only I survived. I think my mother cried when they pulled me out of the house. I had survived and she would have to continue to live with this monstrosity.

I stayed in the hospital for two months while my skin slowly rotted away under the bandages. After the accident, instead of becoming numb, the sensitivity in fingers increased, and I hungered for a warm palm against mine. A warm body that would hold me and keep me from falling.

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