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Coral Smart
Meal of bones

After clearing the table, I collect the chicken bones from another dinner onto one chipped plate. The gristle is apparent on mine, chewed to the nub on my husband's, and merely licked on the boys'.

The corner nook was supposed to have a kitchen cubby table we never got around to buying. I settle into that corner, sitting cross-legged with the plate on my knees. The first bone is one of my own; even now I'm afraid of other people's germs. I gnaw on the joint clamping and releasing, twisting the bone held firm by my molars, waiting for the first break, the splintering of bone I can feel on my tongue, digging into my cheek. The bone snaps smoothly, the broken ends mutely raw. I chew—testing the edges with my teeth, searching for that jagged piece that would neatly snag in my throat, saliva pooling in my mouth from the incomplete swallow—to feel the gag reflex swimming over me again and again, the only thing moving down my throat the esophageal blood. But the first wing goes down without a hitch. I must have broken it down too much.

The next is my husband's. I snap the bone in half with my hands, hoping this tactic will yield sharper results. Slivers of bone appear above my clenched fists. Scooping them into my mouth I let them wander around, scraping the insides of my cheeks, nicking my tongue. I maneuver them with my tongue into the back of my mouth. I use my fingers to shove them in farther and one catches.

I cough and choke, trying to breathe around the bone. It is much more painful than I had imagined. My breath whistles around the fragment. I try to focus on the taste of blood, something I had anticipated. A salty taste lines my throat, intermingling with saliva. I lean back against the wall, trying to relax, enjoy the moment with control. The plate shifts on my knees, the bones rattle.

I focus on the overhead bulb with the vining globe. I try to pull together my last thoughts. Blackberry picking with my brother, scars from the thistles lining the patch and thorns from the bushes that

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pierced my gloves. Walking the trestles under the bridge spanning the Oswego River. I was with people I grew to hate but it didn't matter then. Something that would have made this life worthwhile. But nothing rises to the challenge. When I try to focus on something it becomes clouded, leaving me as I am, a lonely wife staring at a cracked light fixture.

I hear the TV volume spike up as a commercial comes on. Footsteps from the other room move in my direction. I haven't fixed on a good memory to leave with, so I yank the bone out of my throat, filmy strings of blood and spit trailing out of my mouth. I wipe my mouth and chin on my sleeve. My husband comes into the kitchen, empty beer bottle in hand. He tosses it in the grocery bag hanging over the pantry door and opens the fridge for another. I slip the plate off my lap onto the floor and slide it towards the wall, hidden by my bulk.

He turns with another bottle in hand, sees me sitting here. A familiar cockeyed smile crinkles across his face. The bottle spins a little as he sets it on the table. He crosses the room to me, kneels down. His hand stroking my face postpones my intended meal. His eyes scrutinize mine, looking for something. I keep my face blank. He shrugs, takes my hands in his. I stand up, pulling him with me.

I make his body turn with mine so he can't see the plate of half-eaten bones. My fingers fumble, unbutton his shirt, reveal his raised collarbone. I wrap my left leg around his right knee, pull him closer, suck on his exposed chest. A noise from the living room turns his head. I put my finger to my lips, walk him into the bedroom.

I trace his eyebrows with the tip of my nose, he unbuttons my blouse. I hold my breath, waiting for his tongue to delineate each section of my body, the haggard figure-eight around my breasts, the v of the thighs, the slack of my belly button. After, I roll away from him, lounge in the warmth of his arm draped over my waist, kiss his wristbone.

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