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Jennifer Spiegel

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BEASTS OF EDEN

Jennifer Spiegel

Picture me. I have flaming red hair and a kick-ass body. A body that says, "Beg me." Once, when I was living in Manhattan, I was walking down the street, eating some frozen yogurt really smothered in hot fudge (just because I could) and this guy passed me on the sidewalk and said, "Man, you're so gorgeous—I don't know what to say." Okay, he was a guy off the street. Still, I remember him.

Killer red hair and a kick-ass body. My kick-ass body, however, is fatally flawed.

I have a mangled arm. It's grotesque, discolored, an anomaly, something to make you reconsider. All of your previous fantasies contested. This monstrosity hangs from my left shoulder, non-functional, mannequin-like; I think of it as raw meat, chewed-up hide left over from a rabid dog's midnight snack. A different color than the rest of my body (the red-wound color seen on most TV hospital dramas), the curves and crevices are smooth now, having healed in a twisted tree trunk fashion. It moves at my volition, but I keep it still; I keep it silenced and secretive.

I don't mean to dwell on the details. I just can't help it.

My first date after the mangled arm (another secret: farming accident or unexpected encounter involving a sliding glass door and an apologetic little brother?) is with this guy I originally gave the once-over to in my diva days. I gave him the once-over and said, "Not gonna happen." I thought, "Girlie shoes." I added, "Can't carry a tune."

We met in church (that's how I know he can't carry a tune). I've always liked the juxtaposition of my alarming good looks with the House of God. The tension between outer and inner beauty *gets* me. The Bible is filled with juxtaposition: a *crown* of thorns, a serpent in a *garden*.

I never spoke to him before the mangled arm. We lived in Upstate New York, I was twenty-eight, and I went to church

because I was raised to do that. I even left town for about six months to teach a cooking class on a cruise ship. He didn't miss me and I didn't miss him, either.

I specialize in Thai. I'm a bona fide chef. I used to be able to cook anything—hummus, Ethiopian, curry, shrimp in garlic sauce. Now, I stay away from the kitchen (working as a high school librarian). I hate the sight of blenders, food processors, and microwave ovens. All of them are bloody neon signs announcing my inadequacies as a redhead with a kick-ass body who cooks.



The boys, all of them sixteen (I look to see if they shave yet, if they have hair on their chests), try to name their new band. We're in the library at the high school they attend and at which I work. I'm anonymous behind my desk, ink pad and pencils nearby.

Diddle-dragon, Dead Beat Dad, For Crying Out Loud, Losing Sleep, Gonzo.

These are some of their suggestions.

"But none of us is a father!" Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #1 says.

"Our parents are all still married, except for Jason's and your dad pays child support, right?" Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #2 says.

They turn to the Garden of Eden in the Bible. I listen, curious about their exegesis.

"Adam names the animals," says Sixteen-Year-Old Boy #3.

"Why *hippopotamus*? Or *toucan*?" asks Sixteen Year Old Boy #4.

"In order to name something, you have to know it," #3 declares: shadow on his lip.

"That explains why your mother named you *Richard*," #2 interjects. "You're a dick."

Thus ends the exegesis.

Richard and his friends check out two books: *Of Mice and Men* and *Paradise Lost*. "Required," one of them tells me. Just in case I assume they're reading for pleasure.



This mangled arm happened after the cruise, when I was twenty-three. I hid away for a long, long time at my parents' place. I practiced using only my right arm. I experimented with long sleeves.

When I'm on the verge of emerging from my shell, I target David. It's deliberate and preconceived. Now, I'm twenty-five.

"It seems sort of clinical," my friend Meredith says. Meredith loves the Brontës. Love is something like a punch in the gut, a smack in the face. It *hits* you. It never arrives or takes the bus or sits around and waits.

"Look, Meredith, all my previous entanglements were based on washboard stomachs and warm fuzzies. They're gone—every single one of them."

"Why David?" she asks. "Why not someone who can at least carry a tune?"

"There are a number of reasons," I say. Meredith, who dates a ski instructor, gets up to make more coffee. We're in her kitchen and she knows how I feel about kitchens. I tend to watch her with envy as she does things with both hands. I'm continually amazed at how two of everything is taken for granted. One hand lifts the coffee pot; the other slides the cup over. "He has a child—a daughter—from a failed marriage."

"He must have been eleven when he was married."

"Just out of high school," I say. "It lasted less than a year."

"Should we be sorry?"

"I'm not."

Meredith tries to add two and two together. "He's a single father. That's why you're pursuing him?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," I say. "This daughter has many implications. It means *baggage*."

"You're a little pathetic," Meredith says.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures."



I once pictured first loves and white weddings and herb gardens and strawberry patches. Everything would be new, new, new. Mr. Right would hold my hand during labor. My face would be red and there'd be no kids from first marriages and all limbs would be whole.

I have to reconsider what I want.

Before long, my clinical crush actually does become an unreasonable infatuation; this makes me feel normal. It happens before I can even say, "I have a mangled arm." Which is always the first thing I need to say. *Don't get too close. I'm fucked up.*

I think of clever ways to approach David.

"I'm not the ideal in womanhood, but I give a mean blow-job."

That won't do. We met in church.

"I'm great with kids."

He'll think I'm a user.

"Are those new shoes?"

Suggests I have a foot fetish.

"Middle C—one, two, three, go!"

I need to hide my mean streak.

"Good preaching today."

That's good. Appeal to his religious convictions.

One morning, my roommate and I are in our tiny backyard, which consists of a couple square feet of grass and fern along with three pots of flowers. We're watering stuff. Miles says, "I invited David over for dinner on Friday. He's looking at my computer. Can you be home?"

"Yeah," I say. I'm the master of one-handed plant watering. I look over at Miles, my computer-owning, church-going roommate. He's one of those guys people always want to fix up with single friends. Any day now, he'll become seriously involved with someone's single friend, and leave me empty-handed. There may be a pun in there.

"Oh, he's bringing his kid." My roommate steps over the hose and fiddles with something near the faucet. "Are you getting enough water pressure?"



I was seeing someone when the mangled arm hit me the way Meredith would have love strike. I was seeing this guy who sort of epitomized the candies-and-flowers kind of guy. The relationship, though full of lyricism, was nothing. I clung to the rose bouquets and boxes of chocolates—just to experience them, just to taste the flippancy of the casual. In our months together, my life seemed like a blurry mesh of dinners for two, full moons and shooting stars, three-day weekends in small towns, and sex during thunderstorms.

He left me immediately after the mangled arm—citing other inconveniences.

One day, prior to tragedy, we were sitting by the pool in his backyard, our legs dangling over the edge. "I'd gone over to the neighbor's to help him move a couch," he said, telling me a story. "I took the dog."

"And?" I asked, kicking my leg (which seemed oh-so-much longer back then) to send a spray of water out of the pool.

"While I was inside with the guy, the dog must have cornered the cat. Apparently, the dog attacked the cat and killed him. I don't know exactly."

"What did you do?" My leg froze in the air.

"When I came out of the house, I looked around for Fred and I called him several times. 'Fred! Fred!' I shouted. Fred came flying out of the bushes. His mouth was all bloody and, when I looked around, I saw a dead cat nearby."

I was speechless, horrified.

"Fred and I fled," he said.

"You didn't say anything?" I felt mildly—only *mildly*—indignant.

"No. It was better this way."

I was way too far gone in girlfriend-haze to protest. Now, though, the image of him, the dog with the bloody mouth, and the dead cat nearby haunts me. I keep picturing him fleeing, silently and secretly, saying, *It was better this way. It was better this way. It was better.*



When I put on make-up, I stand very close to the mirror. For the first few months, I gave up on it completely, thinking: *Why not look like shit?* Then, I thought: *This is it. I have no choice.*

I used to switch hands when I put mascara on each eye. Right hand for the right eye, left hand for the left eye. Now my right hand does it all. I twist it around, like a snake being charmed. Every vessel of liquid or color is picked up and put down. One thing at a time. I never juggle bottles or vials from one hand to the other.

When I wake up, my first thought is this: *Oh, my arm. It's mangled.*

I put my belt through the loops conscientiously. I zip my pants carefully. The left extremity is a prop by which I hang things, pull things, suspend them too. If I have to go to the bathroom quickly, I'm screwed. I must plan ahead, allowing for time with belt buckle and zipper.

I rip dozens of pairs of nylons.

I file the nails on one hand only. Like a duffel bag or a dirty towel, I thrust my right hand into my mother's palm at Sunday dinners at her place. A nail file clasped between my fingers.

When I go to the movies, I carry the drink or the popcorn—not both. When I eat the popcorn, the other hand is lifeless in my lap like the paper napkin covering my purse, all salty, all wrinkled.



I go to Meredith's apartment for hot-tubbing. We drink wine coolers. My toes are polished. There are six of us in the tub.

Everyone tries not to stare at my arm. I pretend not to care. Again, I have to think, *This is it. I have no choice.*

Here I am, able to sit without fat rolls appearing on my stomach. I'm witty. I'm educated. I used to be a lot of fun at parties. None of that matters anymore.

I sit in the bubbles, sipping my wine cooler, and being very quiet. I whisper over to Meredith, "I think I'm being boiled alive."



Friday night arrives. Miles cooks. I work on the cleavage. If I seem body-obsessed, it's because I am. I'm afraid no one knows its real importance. Moralizers and fat people often lament society's obsession with the body and decry its cultural importance. But they don't know. They don't. Body *is* significant. One must use what one has. You gotta work it. We don't have hips for nothing. Immediately after the advent of the mangled arm, I knew I could never allow myself the luxury of a fat ass. What would people think?

Miles makes stir fry like a good single man. David arrives, daughter in tow. Her name is Rebecca and she's seven.

Rebecca. She's a little nymph, she's angel food cake, she's stars around distant planets. Fantasy incarnate. Here is a pretty little girl, done with things like potty training and bad manners. She even knows how to swim. Short, skinny, cute, with pigtails.

It didn't really hit me till a few days after the mangled arm. I was still in the hospital when I realized: "Oh my God. I may never have children." Suddenly, I had a maternal instinct. Suddenly, I had this goal. All I wanted was that which I had previously scorned: a white picket fence, a man equipped with a love of prime time television and Tom Clancy novels, and a baby with diaper rash.

Rebecca says things like *no thank you* and *yes please*. She's been coached on the arm. Her eyes avoid intersecting with any raw or

exposed meat. She doesn't want to touch it. She sits to my right.

I sit across from David. I check him out. Once upon a time, we would have been considered physically incompatible. I'd be considered a better-looking woman than he is a man. My mangled arm evens things out.

David is neither attractive nor unattractive. He's exceptionally normal. Wispy brown hair, not terribly piercing green eyes. Broad shoulders. Inoffensive. I tend to be drawn to slashes across cheeks and birthmarks like moons on upper lips. He, though, has the face of a weatherman; it tells me it'll be sunny on Friday with a chance for showers on Monday. In between, a mystery. There is something comfortable about the reliability of regularity.

Miles fiddles with the wok in the kitchen, muttering things like "water chestnuts" and "chopped mushrooms." He never asks my advice, for which I'm thankful. David and I discuss education and managed health care, while Rebecca leans into him on the couch.

"Rebecca goes to a private school," David says, having told me all about his HMO.

"Which one?" I ask. "I probably tried to get a job there."

"Rosewood. How are you liking this librarian thing?"

"I like books." I stare at David and Rebecca. David speaks into my eyes. Rebecca's eyes travel and hop, like insects touching down on peanut butter and jelly at picnics. She looks at my arm, looks at the coffee table, looks at her dad's knee.

"Is that why you changed careers? You liked books?" David asks.

He doesn't think about the question, really. I don't feel like explaining. "Yes, I like books. 'You can't judge a book by its cover.' That's something about books."

David surprises me then. "I agree, but sometimes it's the name that makes me judge. I've heard it's good—*great*, even—but I can't get past the title: *The Catcher in the Rye*. It's the name. I'm instantly bored. I'd never pick up *Gone with the Wind*. I might, however, read *The Sun Also Rises*."

I think of Eden. Animals in the garden: the emphasis on the

naming, not their beastliness.

I think about this man and his child. I'm absorbed by the image. I think about how David and I are still kids ourselves. He can still eat whatever he wants, and I can still walk around without a bra. But while I was play-acting unrequited love, he was changing shitty diapers. When I was wearing bandannas on overnight hikes in South American rainforests, he tried very hard to get peaches and sweet potatoes into a wet, little mouth. When I made the rounds at poetry readings in coffee houses wearing go-go boots, he worked two jobs. I am mesmerized by these truths.

He picks her up from school every day. Demands that she buckle her seat belt and take the lollipop out of her mouth. He brushes her hair. Puts in barrettes. Tells her to stay still and keep her gum in her mouth. He teaches her about vowels and consonants. Spells "d-a-d" and "w-o-w" for her. As she plodded through "r-e-b-e-c-c-a" and its phonetic ups and downs, I sat on some man's bed and smoked pot. I leaned back on pillows and cushions and I said, "My head is spinning."

"Then sit up," the man with whom I was smoking pot said.



After dinner, we talk. Rebecca sits next to me, so willing to be kind to strangers. She doesn't lean into me, but she shares my chair. "I saw your cats," she says.

"They're not really mine. They belong to Miles."

"Let's go find them."

I take her by the hand and we head into the bedrooms.

I get on the floor, peering under beds for cats who have no desire to be held. "They're not here," I tell her. I look at the disappointed child. I've ruined her day at the beach, rained on her wedding, mangled her arm. "We'll check again in fifteen minutes, okay?"

Sitting across from David, I twist my ankle in perfect circles. The light from above the dining room table skids over the smooth skin from my knee to my ankle. In absurd internal thought, I

think how my mangled arm must be envious of my long legs. I try to will David to give them a look. He doesn't.

"I think it's time to check again," Rebecca says.

"We have five minutes," I say. "We don't want to make them crazy."

"I think I can get them, though."

She follows me into my room and checks out the decor. I still have stuffed animals on my bed and pictures on the wall of people I never speak to. This room is a relic.

"Nice room," she says. *Who the hell taught her to say things like that?*

"Thank you." A child with whom I can converse.

I grab the bra dangling from a chair in my room. I figure I can throw it onto the floor and lure Smudge and Crackle Pants out from under the bed. This bra is hitting the ground.

Throwing it under the bed and dragging it out slowly as if I were fishing, I tell her, "Smudge and Crackle Pants aren't budging."

"We'll give them another five minutes," she says, in frustration.

The kid is obsessed.

This goes on all night. Smudge makes a brief appearance, back claws extended, not particularly desirous of any little girl's attention. David doesn't check out my legs even once.



Rebecca pees in her pants at the end of the evening.

I guess she was having such a good time that she forgot to excuse herself and go to the bathroom. It happens. I've done it.

Afterwards, she heads into the toilet for an ungodly amount of time.

"Where's Rebecca?" David asks.

"In the bathroom," I tell him.

When she's gone for over fifteen minutes, I head down the hall, wondering if she's taken it upon herself to retrieve Smudge and Crackle Pants. I see the light on under the bathroom door and return to the living room.

I only figure the whole thing out after they've left. Clues like her refusal to sit down after she returns from the bathroom, a trickle of liquid running from under her dress to her sandal, and the strong, pungent smell of urine are sure giveaways. Miles knows, too, but we don't discuss it.

I admire her. I admire her deeply for the way she disappears into the bathroom, wanting to handle it quietly and privately. I respect this. Already, she understands the privacy of mourning and loss. She knows discretion. Only later will she tell David and then the two of them will handle it gracefully, between themselves. He will tell her to get in the shower. He will get her new panties. Rebecca doesn't cry or say, "Dad, could you come here?" She thinks, "I have peed in my pants," and she moves on.

When David and Rebecca leave, Rebecca says, "Thank you for having us over."

This blows me away.

Miles sends them off with warm chocolate-chip cookies he got in a wrapped-up tube at the store. He opened it, sliced it, and baked it. This is his specialty. We each have ours.



David calls me, and I'm shy on the phone. "Are you free this weekend?" he asks.

I never fantasized about being someone's stepmother. I envisioned lengthy trips to the Islands. Which islands, I wasn't sure. We'd spend months and months abroad, drinking cocktails with umbrellas in them, dancing to local bands, and snorkeling in clear water filled with fluorescent fish. Getting home in time for his joint-custody weekends wouldn't be an issue. I never wanted to tell a man to bring his daughter along on dates. I never wanted to suggest miniature golf or animated movies about barnyard animals, Greek myths, or old wives' tales. I didn't want to be confined to living in one state. I wanted to paint the town red and I wanted to do it with both hands.



I think about the rules for our first date. No walks in the woods. I need a certain level of comfort to tread on difficult terrain, just in case I need to suddenly grab onto some bark or drop to my knees on some acorns, pine cones, or a patch of thorns. Dinner must be a one-utensil-only event. A fork *and* a knife must not be required. Forks. Just forks. Salads are always good. Steak is very, very bad. No dancing. I hate the thought of a lifeless limb dangling in the breeze, Madonna singing in the background. Ugh. No horseback-riding. And absolutely no sex. I don't do sex. Such vulnerability horrifies me, makes me more mangled than I already am. Salad and a movie. He'll carry the popcorn.



He picks me up at eight.

"Do you wanna know why I asked you out?" he says over pizza—a slightly treacherous meal, depending on the company, pizza temperature, napkin availability, and chosen toppings.

"Why?"

"Because Rebecca told me you used your dirty bra to lure the cats out from under the bed."

"It wasn't dirty. It was clean. I could have worn it again."

"Even better. That's a fine thing to do."

We eat a lot of pizza. We see a movie. We go to a coffeehouse. He orders an éclair and two cups of decaf. "Tell me about your arm, Kara," he says. This throws me for a loop.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, cautiously.

David bites into his éclair and wipes yellow sugar from his mouth. The naturalness of this act tells me where Rebecca got her naturalness in the presence of strangers. "What are the emotional consequences of having had this thing happen to you? What really happened to you?"

No one asks that. There is always conjecture, silence, false

modesty. No one ever asks anything close to *What the hell happened?*

"The emotional consequences," I begin. I stop. "I spend a lot of time asking 'Why me?'" I set my spoon down next to coffee cup. "If I hear one more person say, 'Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' I may have a near-death experience."

"What else do people say?"

Cigarette smoke, coffee beans, chess boards, folk guitar, scary hair, and off-kilter fads fill the room. It's dark and black and purple like a bruise and sweet like cheesecake and bitter like espresso and sad like a love song and melodramatic like a college relationship. The coffeehouse has a name: The Cheshire Cat.

"They tell me I need to be strong. Stronger than this." I put a finger in my mouth, like I'm trying to gag myself. "They suggest that strength can overcome anything." I sip my cooled coffee. "I *hate* that. Do you think I ever wanted to be strong enough to overcome *this*? I wasn't so miserable working on cruises in the Bahamas. It wasn't a bad life."

"I may be about to say something trite," David says.

"That could be dangerous. Maybe you shouldn't."

"I think you should name it. Right now."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, possibly insulted.

"Put it on the table, so I can see it in the light. Maybe we can name it after someone."

"No." I *am* insulted.

"Come on. I swear, I won't touch, taunt, or tease."

The table is a dark oak. Rings from saucers stain its surface. We've brushed away cookie crumbs and cupcake papers.

He wants to see my arm, put it on display. This goes against the grain. It isn't a once-in-a-lifetime Monet art exhibit. Nor are there any stirrups, like at a gynecologist's office. This isn't a medical exam, a possible remedy. He wants to draw attention to that which I'm quiet about.

I don't exactly hoist it onto the table, but I shift a little, so he might better see the appendage.

"What would be a good name for it?" he asks.

"I don't know. I've only named pets and a few stuffed animals."

"You gotta name it," he says.

"Some things don't have names, David. They don't need them," I say. "There's *The Artist Formerly Known As Prince*, you know."

David leans closer to my dead limb. "People name stillborn babies. They name male genitalia and old cars. Books have titles. Books are your favorite."

"This is no beloved car."

"Nor is it a stillborn baby. It's just a reality."

"I hate it."

"You choose," he says. "*Marsha Brady* or *Farrah Fawcett*."

I stop and consider, suddenly wanting to play. "*Marsha Brady*." I pause. "What kind of name is that?"

"We once loved Marsha, didn't we? Now, her absence doesn't kill us."

"I'm not the same without my arm."

"Don't be silly."

"What if I had chosen *Farrah*?" I ask.

"We all had those posters, remember? Gone now." He smiles. "You lost the teenage boy demographic." He pauses. "That's all."



In bed that night, I think about names. I am *Kara*. I live with *Miles*. I had dinner with *David*. His daughter is named *Rebecca*. Miles has two cats, *Smudge* and *Crackle Pants*. There are *hippos* and *toucans*.

I think of Rebecca peeing in her pants and quietly handling it.

There are lions and grizzly bears, caterpillars and salamanders. My arm is named *Marsha Brady*. Maybe when I dress up, I'll call it *Farrah*.