

The Mosaic Thief

by Cynthia Hawkins

When Jim first handed me the cleaned-out coffee can with all of my pieces inside I bit down on one like a prospector testing gold. The feel of Scrabble tiles without the letters, the heft of bone, each one a variant shade of beige. My tongue assessed the fine grit of something vaguely tasting of shoe sole.

"Don't eat it!" Jim said.

"I'm not eating it." It left a tinge of worn leather on my lips, and then I set the square back down.

"Why would you do that?" he asked.

"I'm not eating it. I'm not doing anything." Just like I hadn't been nudging my fingernail into a piece of stale gum, right at that very moment, stuck under the tabletop and relishing the way the gum softened its resistance. Which I had been. "So. What is it?"

He leaned closer. "I know how much you like old art and stuff."

"Old art."

"Yeah. You know. That book you have," he gestured with a jerk of his chin to the coffee table in the adjacent room. "About the Romans."

That book wasn't mine. It was something I'd bought for a quarter at a garage sale for my landlord, but then she died. She'd fallen through the floor of her attic with a cashbox in her arms. It had a great frayed spine, that book, where the cloth binding had split, giving way to the cardboard underneath, a great fringe of string to work into little knots between my finger and thumb. Little knots for hours.

"Oh, right," I said.

He'd been backpacking from country to country, filming a documentary on how, for example, the same gesture might be crude in one region and a sign of welcome in another. He'd said the film would demonstrate how we're fundamentally hardwired to

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misunderstand each other. He'd even gotten a grant to do it, but right then, as he wrapped a hand over my knuckles and squeezed, he made it seem like the whole point of the film and the grant was this can.

I stirred my hand amongst what Jim explained were the unhinged remnants of a mosaic he'd bought on the sly from some man who'd kept them hidden in the springs of his car seat. I stirred, and a thread-thin itch sprung from the bend in one finger and traveled up, twined in the veins of my arm, too deep to reach with anything except maybe one touch of my tongue to one small tile. That should do it, I thought. I thumbed one into my palm and covered my mouth as if to cough. Disguised it in my lifelines. Pushed it between my fingers like a coin in a vanishing act. My tongue met the ancient grit again in the shelter of my hand. Jim's eyes narrowed. And then

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"God, I thought you'd be grateful." He hung his head. "It came all the way from Tel Aviv."

Tel Aviv. It felt more like Spain, maybe. Maybe someplace high up in the mountains with trees propped like the gnarled spines of windswept umbrellas. Really, I just wanted to know what it should look like. And why, of all the many things about me worth knowing, he'd think of a wrecked, twenty-five cent book that belonged to a dead landlord when he thought of me.

"You understand, don't you, that you don't even know what it's supposed to be," I said, taking the can up in my embrace and angling away from him. "Mosaics aren't puzzles."

The can with its tiles was roughly the weight of a bag of cat food and seemed to get heavier the further I walked with it from Jim still sitting at our kitchen table. It had grown to the density of a canon ball somewhere across the den, and by the time I'd reached the bedroom I was on all fours scooting it across the threshold. Then it felt like Tel Aviv.

When I'd sat back on my heels for a breath, a part of me flickered out like a spent bulb or a dead pixel on a computer screen. "Jim!" I called. I tried to poke a finger in the space, but it butted up against

nothingness. Lamplight winked right through. "See this?" I said to Jim coming into the room where I sat in a puddle of my clothes, running a hand over the empty spaces in my abdomen. Bit by bit I was traveling away, we thought. Maybe I'd join myself, all together, in Toronto. Or in an industrial coffee can. Or in the closet. "Check the closet," I pointed.

And while Jim rummaged around looking for me, I gave the tile tucked between my fingers another lingering taste. Then slipped it under my tongue. Then spit it out and fitted it into one of the gaps that had materialized in my shin. It popped right in. I kept going, haphazardly at first, and then I got creative with the shading.

By the time Jim turned again from the closet, I was replacing the missing pieces of me as soon as the spaces were made.

"You aren't in the closet," he informed me. Then his brows scrunched together when he discovered the piecemeal silhouette of my mosaic knee.

When I moved I made the same sound the tiles had made shifting in their can when he'd first pushed the can into my outstretched fingers. My tongue raked along the new grooves in my wrist. My fingertips drew small circles across chiaroscuro ribs. And there was no more itch.

