

Arm

by David Abrams

As I was going into Wal-Mart, a man with a useless arm was coming out. I'd never seen anything like that arm—a dangle-flesh, rubbery thing with no purpose. Made me stop where I was, halfway in the door, and turn to look. Even made me go blank for why I was there in the first place. Julie needed mozzarella and oregano and I'd planned on picking up more beer and Oreos, but after seeing that arm, I forgot everything on the list. Jules and her half-made lasagna were waiting for me back at the house and she was probably getting more and more pissed by the minute, but can you blame me, man?

That arm demanded you look at it flapping and turning in the wind which came down off the mountains around Butte. And I guess that was the point—stare at the arm and feel a little bad about doing so. That arm could have raked in a lot of money if the dude had a bell and a kettle.

He was with a woman, gabbing to her about a movie he'd seen last night for the third time. Or maybe they'd seen it together because she was nodding and saying, Yeah, yeah, yeah. She clutched a rustling Wal-Mart sack. A bag of fragile potato chips pushed up, trying to escape past the plastic handles.

The man wasn't carrying anything in his good hand except a cigarette, which he used to stab the air and make his point about Harrison Ford. He was really into this movie, man, and I could tell it would be no fun to watch movies with this guy because you'd miss important lines of dialogue when he turned to talk to you in order to make his point.

You'd say Yeah, yeah, yeah, just to get him to shut up.

As I watched, the good arm snapped up and stopped a pickup truck

when the two of them went across the striped crosswalk. There was no question the good arm had the power to stop things, cigarette or no cigarette. This arm was the *authority*, man.

At his other side, the floppy arm turned one way, and then the other, like a three-foot flaccid penis coming off his shoulder. The skin on the arm—exposed to the cold because he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt in January in Butte, Montana—was dark and mottled red.

He really should have taken better care of that arm, bones or no bones. He'd be carrying that thing for the rest of his life. Unless he had some sort of operation.

At that point, all the standard jokes came to mind: arms reduction treaty, lay down your arms, armed and dangerous—the usual things you'll stand in your kitchen and laugh about together, but then also feel a pinch inside because this is someone's *flesh* we're talking about, man.

I wondered why he hadn't already gotten rid of it, why he kept it around.

Julie would say the answer to that was obvious: To give people like me something to talk about. Jules would be right. As always.

I should point out that the useless arm was on the side away from the woman. They both ignored it like it wasn't even there.

They reached their truck. When the woman opened her door, I saw an empty baby car seat between them. As I watched, she put the sack of groceries into the seat and gently buckled up the potato chips.

They pulled out of the parking lot with a lurch and a roar, reckless

and scattering people and their carts.

Here's the thing: the one-armed man drove. As he dodged his way to Harrison Avenue, he kept talking, his jaws chomping the words, teeth snapping. His mouth was a machine.

(Like Julie and I have seen—when that thing happened between us a couple of years ago—it is possible to talk something to death.)

The woman, she just pressed her forehead against the cold glass. When they passed in front of me, her eyes met mine and in that glassy stare we connected. Don't ask me how it happened, man. It just did.

I saw and understood everything: the story behind the empty car seat and the reason she stayed where she was, useless arm and all. It was like I could see the whole funnel of their lives. I could see who was swirling down and who was reaching up for help with one arm.

The man was still talking and, as she stared at me, the woman was saying Yeah, yeah, yeah.

