

Tiger-eyed

by Halsted M. Bernard

"Goddamned General Tso and his goddamned chicken," you breathe, a half-smirk curving the softly rough words. I love to hear you talk, even when you are swearing at a dead, fictional character in a dive Chinese place.

"Goddamned," you repeat.

I am fiddling with a burst blister on my left middle finger. It is a rounded rectangle and despite how much it hurts I push at the deflated flap.

You are looking at me, waiting for my faithful repetition of your curse, a solo Greek chorus. I pull at an edge of the pink skin, and say nothing.

"Did you hear me? Stop that!" Your hand tackles mine, bending my pinky back.

"Ow," is all I give you.

This is how we play, how we have played for many years. My therapist would be indignant; she would shake her ringleted mane and emphasize the ugly words she has taught me: *dysfunctional*, *codependent*, *enabling*. The tiger-eye beads around her neck would wink at me like a nervous uncle sharing a secret with a child. They roll on her sternum like marbles. At night, on her nightstand, they whisper my secret to the patchouli-scented room. How long have they known? Strung by a child in a country I cannot find on a map, the tiger-eyes match each other unevenly: similar shapes with different refractions of yellow and black.

You decide, "You're not listening to me." But I am. I always have been, through your endless tirades of which way toilet paper must be hung, through your dissatisfied grumbles over the way I take left turns, unsure and gentle like a lizard inching into sunshine. Each time you vent, you scoop a little more out of me. I watch the end of me coming; you are sure I am infinite, a hungry, insatiable child.

The night we argued in the Target parking lot, when all I wanted was to buy bookshelves and shampoo, you watched me cry and pronounced, "It's no big deal." At once my mind plucked apart where that phrase must have originated: deals between businessmen stuffed into three-piece suits, chomping cigars, fists full of money and stock certificates and martinis. Big deals, those men made. This was not one of them, certainly, I could see that. But when had I become a businessman in a transaction?

I know now when it was. It was every day I spent with you, every day I deferred to your roars, your charges, your assaults. There is no violence without a subject, and I laid down and bared my belly. No wonder you took to scooping me out. I refused to defend myself against you, sure that no one professing such love could take more than he could give.

My therapist leaves a message during dinner. She wants to know where I was today, where I am. The frown in her voice is so patient, like a mother's, and I hate her for it. As you hold my hand across the table to keep me from picking at my wound, I see that hand grasp the beads from around her neck, and pull. I pull, and they spill, clacking across the slate floor, and for a single moment I am smiling.

