

Gathering

by Kelly Spitzer

In the office supply store on Union, Jeremy, the stock boy, shelves tubs of rubber bands. Tub with an easy-access pop-top and a see-through container. If Hendy saw these tubs, she would think these particular rubber bands resembled anorexic gummy-worms, all curled around each other in a mess of red, green, blue, and yellow. But Hendy has no reason to enter the office supply store. She steals whatever she needs from the store room at work. And anyway, these aren't the type of rubber bands she is after. They are too small. They snap too easily, disintegrate too quickly. She wouldn't even use them to bind strands of her hair.

Sometimes, after the doctor has reminded her yet again to exercise, Hendy walks across the street to the park. The park is a full city block of turf and dog poop. Two paces in, there is an oak tree with a bench underneath. It is the lone tree, the sole bench, and the only park in the city.

Every time Hendy sits on the bench, she finds an abandoned colony of thin, blue rubber bands. They are left by the man in apartment 2B, a unit two doors down from her, but a man whom Hendy has never seen. Every afternoon, he orders lunch from the deli around the corner. Sometimes it is General Tso's, other times macaroni and cheese or fried chicken with potato salad. Each container comes with a fork, secured to the meal with the rubber bands in question. Though they don't suit her needs, Hendy slides them over her fingers anyway, and later, after the sting of suffering nerves has worn off, she slips the rubber bands into her pocket.

Once, long ago, Hendy thought she'd found the perfect candidates—long, red rubber bands designed for toy guns. She stole a handful from her nephew, snuck them out of her brother's house by rolling them up her wrists and onto the heft above her elbow. When three days later the indentation was still there—a strawberry licorice twist tattoo—she decided they'd do. One by one, she placed each rubber band on her tongue. They tasted sour and dirty, like the

lid of a pickle jar dug out of a garden. With the help of two diet cokes, she swallowed them. But they passed. Each and every one of them passed.

Still, Hendy keeps every rubber band she encounters. She slides them off of rolled newspapers, pilfers them from desk drawers and cash registers. Once home, she stores the rubber bands in empty cereal boxes—Captain Crunch, Coco Puffs, Frosted Flakes featuring Tony the Tiger. In her fridge, they spill out of her leafless vegetable bin, perch next to the butter. She lays individual favorites under packs of bacon, links of sausage, patties of burger, which she buys, unknowingly, for a family. Economy size, they say on the label. She cooks the contents all at once, though nobody but her graces the kitchen table.

If Hendy bought her own tape and staples, if she actually walked not just *to* the park, but around it, or across it and back, and *then* sat on the bench, she would know that there are Jeremys and men in apartment 2Bs.

If she saw Jeremy, she could tell him he looks like her brother did when he was his age, that the girls compared him to Tom Cruise in the movie *Taps*. Jeremy would smile and blush because he's never had a girlfriend, and instead of going into the employee room and huffing solvent during his break, he might flirt with the new checker on aisle three.

And if Hendy met the man on the bench, the man who lives in apartment 2B, she might discover he didn't have an "in case of emergency contact" either, and though neither of them ever went anywhere, they could offer to feed each other's fish if they ever did.

What's more, if Hendy followed her doctor's orders and didn't eat like a "child," she would know that the rubber bands she is looking for exist in a supermarket produce aisle. They bind lettuce leaves and broccoli stalks. Bunches of asparagus. They are lavender with black printing, or the blue, blue of a summer sky. A sky which rain cannot touch and lightning cannot break. A sky that gathers.

