

Intolerable Impositions

by Rae Bryant

She gnawed her arm off in the morning, before he woke. There was no way around it. Her forearm lay trapped beneath his thick neck, stubbled except for one irritated spot of skin, below the hairline where an infected pore rounded, tipped with puss. She had seen it the night before, the infection. She saw it in the dim bar light, pulsating, but the blemish did not matter after two glasses of cabernet. And besides, he presented so well from the front—pressed, suited, hip-but-not-too-metro tie, square jaw, and straight white teeth. His hair was thinning. Inconsequential.

So they left the bar together.

After a tolerable sexing—topside, bottom side, behind, over the edge of the bed—he turned his back and asked if she would find the ingrown hair on his neck because it hurt him, and he had no one to do it now that his mother had passed away three months ago. In the dark silence of their after-sex, he explained how his mother cleaned the area with hydrogen peroxide then extracted the infection, fishing inside with tweezers and a needle to find the offending hair. He spoke with soft words: “She could always find it so quickly. Now I have no one. Would you mind? The tweezers and the peroxide are in the bathroom cabinet.” It was a test, though he did not admit it. She had known other men like him—men who searched for a dedicated intimate, a partner, un-squeamish. It was their way of telling the keepers from the one-nighters.

She begged off the immediate task. “I’ll do it in the morning,” she said, smiling, as if the task did not disgust her.

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She woke before him. The bulbous infection lay millimeters from her nose, an inch from her forearm. It would touch her if he rolled backwards, toward her. As long as he lay motionless, she was safe.

Pulling her arm in small increments, she worked it from beneath his neck, but each time her forearm moved, he moved, so that he inched himself backwards, forming into her an intolerable spooning.

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She had not consented to affections. There was no contract between them for this cuddling, nor was there provision for lovemaking, only sex implied, and she cringed at the familiarity of his back and buttocks and legs where they contacted her skin. It may have been different if he faced her. He was much prettier from the front.

So she rolled to her back, letting only her side and arm touch him now. She considered pulling the arm outright, facing his awakening before leaving a fake phone number. She considered pushing on his right shoulder so to roll him onto his belly, which may have released the arm, but still, it was risky, and would likely wake him that way, too. After endless scenarios imagined—pulling and pushing and facing the man she now loathed for no other reason than the cyst upon his neck—she considered loving him. She could simply stay and wake by his side then share eggs and coffee and the *Washington Post* before returning to bed again, but the venture brought the inevitable task of extracting the hair and the puss, and she found herself glaring at the thick, heavy neck with hatred. Only one thing to do.

It took her the better part of an hour to gnaw through the bone. The flesh was easy—soft, pliable, seasoned with skin creams and the experience of her near thirty years. The blood, however, threatened to give her away. It pooled on the mattress beneath them, and he nearly woke from the wet.

As she snuck out of the bedroom, she turned to watch the sleeping man who now clutched her forearm. He pulled it to his chest and hugged it like a child's teddy bear. She remembered mornings when, she too, clutched forearms to her chest. It wasn't so bad. At least they had left her something before leaving. She tied off the left sleeve of her coat then moved out of the apartment and into the hallway, missing the forearm already, but resolved to leaving it. Waking him and his cyst would certainly turn into the day, the week, a year and before long she might consider him more than a fancy.

He would fill her life with a series of cystic burdens. He would seize her entirely. A single forearm was well-worth the escape.

