

# ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

## *Annealed*

### I. How I lost my fingerprints

THE FINGERPRINTS WENT BEFORE THE SPLIT, in the jewelry class, back before I knew better. Back when I'd imagined that all I needed was a hobby to occupy my time during those evenings when my husband was in North Carolina on a business trip with his business partner. During those mornings when I'd wake up in a bed built for two and find only one.

It's embarrassing to admit. In the jewelry class, we took torches to copper. I'd nearly finished the pendant for a treasure box necklace. The pendant could hold a tooth or a button or some other small object, like a miniature shadow box. And I loved the cherry red torch-glow of the little half-shell vessel I'd made. I loved how luminous transformed ore could be. Copper: mother to all those pennies and water pipes, mined from the center of the earth to form the shape of my choosing.

Our instructor had told us how torched heat travels into the interior of the metal, extracting from it the hardening effects of hundreds of hammer blows. And when I turned off the torch, the idiot in me—the one who fails to pay attention, follow instructions, read signs, take advice—reached for the red-hot pendant to douse it in water. As though it hadn't undergone a good three-thousand-degree Fahrenheit flame to realign itself, as though the instructor hadn't urged us dozens of times to don gloves, wear goggles, constrain hair, use the tongs provided at every workstation. And thus it came to be that two of my fingertips and the thumb on my left hand got singed, prints seared forever into copper.

It takes but a few screaming moments to get down to raw.

It's the build-back that's the most painful.

### II. Cell division

IT WAS A MONTH AFTER I lost my fingerprints that my husband left Somerville on business to North Carolina and never came back. Except for the

bed, which cannot be cut in two, the apartment contains half of the objects it used to. In May he paid three men to place his half in a rented truck and drive it from Massachusetts to Rocky Mount. It took a day. What remains is kept as he left it. It sits in anthill clusters in every room. Some days I think there's a pattern in these piles that I have yet to discover, some coded message in the chaos he left behind. Other days, I shuttle to work and from work, and I don't see piles at all. I don't see much of anything.

For three weeks straight, I came to work with old bandages on my fingertips and a box of hankies, a sagging bra and no coffee. At the start of the fourth week, my boss pulled me into his office to talk about taking a break. To talk about washing my hair. I told him I didn't see what typing had to do with washed hair. He said what he wanted was for me to heal my fingers so I could do my job effectively. You see, I type for a living. Hunt and peck on copy can get you fired.

Or close to it. Just yesterday, after the scabs came off, he sent me home. He sent me home in the middle of a meeting, after the scabs fell to the floor in three sturdy flakes, like torn-up bacon. He sent me home after I stopped typing for a moment to pick them up and, without quite realizing it, put one in my mouth.

To fill the silence that followed, my boss invited me to his office and insisted. He said the leave would help put my "house in order." By "house," of course, he meant "mind." And he meant "order" as in "sort," but it felt more like a command: Leave. You can't ever suggest mental illness in a professional setting. People lose jobs. I guess for some, metaphor works best. Like how my husband says "business partner" to mean his girlfriend.

It can be confusing if you don't see the pattern. It takes a while for me to catch on. So many gray areas for my gray matter. When the brain sings, my husband used to joke, it is a gray aria.

I've been singing a lot these days: Do-Re-Goddamn-Me.

Goddamn him, too.

But what does it matter? With no job to add to no husband, the sole tether of my Tuesday is my appointment with the burn doctor. I discover the filters for the coffee under a pile of mail and then drink all eight cups with extra sugar. I find today's *Globe* outside with all the others, skip straight to the style section that claims the eighties are back, and I look through my closet for an era-friendly pale yellow midi stretch and a pair of saddle shoes with striped socks. I pull from a paper bag long destined for Goodwill a too-tight Bangles T-shirt.

The Bangles. It is all I have: my sole sonic sartorial link to the eighties. And with the thought that this could be a day of firsts, I put my panties in my purse instead of on my person, and leave the house. The burn doctor is not amused.

Nor is he amused when I show him my uneaten twinset of scabs and start talking about my work leave. About what he thinks it means to get a "house in order."

"If it's just about housework, I can almost handle that," I tell him. "But what I learned from my mother is a clean house brings no ease, just an appearance of it."

"Most people need order," the doctor says, and hands me a card with the name of a therapist, "to make functionality feasible. Some just need a housekeeper."

The burn doctor is not interested in my scabs. Or the copper pendant in which they are kept. Or my Bangles shirt. But he spends a good twenty minutes examining my damaged hand, praising its progress. With the scabs gone, the pads of my fingertips are uncommonly smooth and free of ridges. The tips feel tough and numb from the scar tissue, unless you press hard on them. "It's hardly skin," the doctor says. I'll have to be careful until it grows back. "If it grows back," he reminds me. Then he gives me three green banker's finger pads and some ointment. "For protection," he says. "I hope you find the help you need."

The finger pads look like condoms for a well-hung squirrel. This is according to the girl on the skateboard outside the doctor's office. She has seized my palm on a street corner near the T stop to study them. She thinks they are jewelry. Her name is Juniper, she tells me, and she wants to know where I got them. She says, "Cool," when I tell her that I lost my skin in a jewelry accident. I am about to board the Red Line home to Porter Square when I notice a second skateboard under her arm. I think of the anthills that await me and ask her to teach me to ride.

"Now?" she asks.

"Why do you have two boards?" I ask.

"One for each foot," she says. She looks down at my yellow skirt.

"I can see your pubes," she says.

"I don't have a problem with that," I say, even though the red spreads from my neck across my cheeks.

"I think maybe you do," she says. The streetcar leaves and traffic starts moving again. Juniper looks up at the Don't Walk sign, willing it to change.

“So how about that lesson?” I ask.

“Do you have any money?” she asks. I search in the bottom of my purse and hand her a twenty. We split a stick of Juicyfruit gum.

### III. The failure of diagrams

TOO MUCH TIME IS WASTED doing the things we think other people want us to do. The solar calculator I keep in my purse tells me I have spent almost a third of my life in a cubicle. Nearly a decade contained indoors, wearing sweaters and square-toed shoes, married to a man with business in another state. Fending off other men who didn't care about the ring on my finger. Until I quit when I was sixteen, my mother had me on the beauty pageant circuit, convinced that looks alone could get me into college.

Sometimes I hate my mother for her assumptions. And sometimes I think she's right.

Sometimes I wish I could run a diagnostic on my life, inputting my demographic variables (U.S. Census data, political views, Nielsen ratings, credit rating, geography), my skills (social, technical, and sexual), and my past mistakes (see above) that could tabulate a best-shot diagram for future optimal living. I'd get back a customized list that would indicate what to keep and what to purge:

Jarred pasta sauce: Purge.

Pat Sajak: Purge.

Artichokes: Keep.

Sea glass: Keep.

Coconut popsicles: Keep.

No doubt the diagnostic would show that—in spite of my propensity for physical injury—skateboarding without underwear with a sexy girl racks up dozens of points, like nailing a quadruple Lutz. The judges would have to give a ten in all categories: Never attempted. Daring act. Danger element. Wardrobe change. Unconventional transport. Divergent sexual dynamic.

But as Juniper spots me across the vacant basketball court, her hand pulling mine on our twin boards, her left foot supplying the momentum for us both, I realize points don't matter to this kind of joy. To diagram it is to negate the qualities that make it so. Still, I panic when we pass the foul line. I cannot turn and I cannot stop. At the lip of the court she leaps,

fearless, onto the lawn. I follow. She has taught me how to fall. The grass catches us, turns our scraped skin green. She rolls on her back, closer to me.

I ask her to tell me about herself. She says she is twenty. That she travels solely by T and by board. That she dyed parts of her hair green last week because she wanted to be one with the trees. That she'd just come from Jamaica Plain to ferret out the best deal on her weed. She shows me her bag of buds as if it were a prize, tucked next to a four-pack of Phillies in the zippered fuzzy ear of her Hello Kitty backpack.

"Those JP lesbians are always game to split a deal for girl favors," she says.

She snaps a match against her board's deck and lights a blunt. I'm her second girl today, she tells me, as she sits upright, leans in. But her first kiss.

Mine, too. I couldn't give a shit about the other girl. I want Juniper, I realize, but not quite in the way her actions suggest she wants me. Still, currents strong and bright flash in the spaces between us, uncapturable but present, like the glow of sparklers trailing at night. They are fueled by laughter and sensual sighs that originate in the inner part of the knee and travel upward. They cross and surge. They push outward, up the torso and into the lungs. In the ebb exhales carbon monoxide. In the ebb is damp hands and saliva pooling in the bottom of the mouth. Between the ebb and the surge to the next flow is the tense rush of hot blood that gathers at my very base.

"You ever done this before?" she asks.

"Done what?" I ask in a way that she understands to mean No. Too often sex is the default activity for what is, at its core, an attraction of character. But right now I want whatever Juniper can offer. I want her to see evidence of my wanting in the placement of my hands against my stomach, how my green knee falls lazily toward the lawn. How I let my fingers push gently through her uncombed hair, braided in places and honeybrown at the roots. I try taming her green locks like I might a child's. And compared to me, she is a child.

Or is she? I feel heat in my chest and wonder about her breasts, packed in purple pinstripes as though all muscle, no bounce. Unimaginable, even when I was her age. Growing up, my friends and I would inherit our mothers' old hand-me-down underwires, loose and slack and silky soft and nearly gray from overuse, the adjustable straps twisted and frayed from the wash. Today, the bras are pink and lacy black and tennis white and plaid and posies. Today, the bras seal in, contain, bustle up and solidify all that is

soft beneath. Maybe this is what her bra does, why she is ten years younger than me but seems so much older.

She takes my left hand and asks, "So what's with this green thumb gig?"

"Does it matter?" I say.

"No. Just trying to figure you out," she says.

"Impossible."

"Not really," she says. "A jewelry accident?" She removes the banker's pads from my fingers and thumb and studies the ridgeless skin beneath. She touches each of my fingers with her pinkie. To look at this girl, you'd think she has never once thought about cubicles. I don't ask. To ask would make her mind travel into those closed spaces of offices: a world of overdressed bodies and the objects of production: all of it partitioned, sectioned, clusters of people and plastic on overdrive.

"My husband left me," I say.

"Good for him," she says.

"What the hell?"

"Good for you, too," she says. "Why stick around if you're not happy?"

"But I was happy," I say. "We were. I thought."

"If you aren't sure, then you probably weren't," she says.

"Thanks a lot," I say.

"Except pain, how can you be sure about anything?" She gives my pointer finger a good pinch and I cry out. The burn doctor would not be amused.

"I like a look of agony," she says, "because I know it's true."

"What do you know about it?"

"Plenty." She reaches again for my fingers, but I have tucked them into fist. "Want to see the scabs?" I ask. "They're in my purse."

"No."

Juniper returns my hand to my stomach and moves hers under my skirt to gauge my reaction to her mouth on mine. Her fingertips are inexplicably cool as they web around my inner thigh. Her other hand braces herself against the grass. A human lean-to, she is, a small balancing act just toppled from a skateboard.

"Making sense of anything is like trying to get to the end of Pi. It's impossible," I say. She uses both hands now to pin me in the grass and I enjoy the resistance of my shoulders against the pressure of her touch before will myself to it. But I find myself thinking about my lost fingerprints. Of

the green pads that are no longer on my fingers and are now on hers.

"You think too much about shit that doesn't matter," she says. "Husband or no husband. Let it go. You don't need any of it. Just feel."

At this point, I'm too stripped to know what I need. Whether I'm getting to my core by moving my hips against a pair of sticky fingers in a public park, or if in doing so, I'm adding to the fray of amalgams. What would all of this look like to a passer-by: the green grass, the skateboards, my mouth on Juniper's neck and her hand up my skirt? I can just hear my mother: Oh, so you're a lesbian now? Or a cop: You're under arrest for sexual misconduct. My husband: Finally!

"What's so funny?" she wants to know. Her fingers press against me. My giggle turns to gasp as the wisdom of extremes hits me: pain or pleasure is where the purity resides. Wholeness exists in the creation and the ruination. And I have never failed to create my own ruin.

"You sure you don't want to see my scabs?" I ask.

"I have already seen them," she says.

#### IV. Physics and chemistry in a park

IT'S A STRANGE FEELING to have finished an orgasm; it's the relief from the relief of isolation, a restoration of back to normal. Only it's the relief from the nexus of pleasure, saturated and candy-sweet.

And how unfair is it that the person who has given you such pleasure takes with her everything else: no keys no money no T pass no newspaper no trashy romance novel no underwear no list of Things to Do no credit cards no copper vessel necklace no scabs no calculator no business card for the divorce lawyer no pamphlet on birth control no green banker's pads no way of telling what will happen now that the effects that have made me have been stuffed into a Hello Kitty backpack, on the smooth shoulders of a beautiful twenty-year-old in a purple bra with green hair and fingers that smell like me, blunt-high on her skateboard.

The park here has leather-bottomed swings. I rise from the grass, clutching the blunt, and place it between my lips. I sit on the swing, and pump it until I soar. Then I let go, return to earth stumbling and climb to the top of the nearby slide. There I spy the roundabout. The sweat from my thighs makes the aluminum squeal on the slide down. I approach the roundabout, test the sturdiness of its red metal railings before I grab one

and start to run. I run for nearly a minute, training my eyes on the corrugated metal platform, the sandy footprints of children, and stiff, black gum too viscous to be a threat.

I hoist myself onto the platform and lie on my back, clutching the iron pole. And because the sky holds no clouds, it seems fixed, and the world is a blur of trees and grass and parked cars and jungle gyms. My head feels heavy every time I raise it. So I close my eyes and let the spinning soothe me, pressing into mudra my now-naked finger against my now-naked thumb, pushing from my mind the piles I must contend with at home. Pushing from my mind the unopened mail and the likelihood that the spare key is locked inside the apartment. Instead I wonder what of me Juniper was feeling before she fled. Then it occurs to me that I never once had that thought about my husband. But I think about it now, and as the roundabout slows, I move my left hand under my hemline to discover my undoing. I reach in deep and reclaim what remains of all that I have lost.

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