

MARY CORINNE POWERS

GRIT

1.

THERE IS A WOMAN. She is neither young nor old. She has a mole on her left earlobe, from which grows a single hair. As luck would have it, it's a white hair — nearly transparent, invisible to all but the most careful scrutiny. Nevertheless, it is too stiff and bristly for her to leave alone. She fingers her earlobe, ever searching for that hair; it is a mannerism for which she is known among her friends and coworkers, though none of them know that a single spiky strand is the source of her droll habit.

She plucks the hair out religiously, although it involves quite a feat of bathroom gymnastics on her part. Perhaps her ears are set too far back in her head. Perhaps incessant tension in her neck and shoulders has decreased her range of motion. At any rate, she must sit on the vanity counter with her feet in the sink, find the best angle for her neck and chin, sweep her long hair over her right shoulder and out of the way. She tugs at her ear with her right hand, running a finger over the hair. She rolls her eyes to the left until she feels she is staring up her own nose, trying to see her earlobe in the medicine cabinet mirror. With her left hand she stabs with awkwardly-wielded tweezers. It can take as long as ten minutes to finally grasp and extract the invisible intruder.

Her triumph at such moments is palpable, if short-lived. She brings the tweezers to her eye and studies the silver-white hair. She touches its tip and recognizes the texture against the pad of her index finger.

She repeats this ritual every two weeks or so, plucking out the hair as soon as it re-emerges. One day, she realizes that it must have been over a month since the last time she tweezed the hair. Her earlobe is still smooth. It never comes back.

Even after the hair is long gone, she continues to rub her earlobe. She cannot be sure if she is exercising vigilance against another encroachment, or lamenting the loss of the first. She wonders: when the transformation from irritating grit to smooth jewel is finally complete, how does the oyster feel?

2.

A WOMAN IS SWEEPING her kitchen. Sun streams through the window over the kitchen sink, prisms in on the section of warm terra cotta that she stabs at with the broom, *schwup, schwup, schwup*. Her neck and back bend over her work — not much, a reflection more of concentration than of effort, just a slight tilt into the metronomic swing from the elbows, *schwup, schwup, schwup*.

She knows that she sweeps these same tiles at least eight times a day. It is baffling to her, a mystery, how there can be so much dirt. How is it possible that each time she sweeps, she generates a new little pile of untidiness, a new collection of nonspecific debris? She can coax the detritus into her dustpan, tilt it into the trash, stand the broom against the pantry wall — and an hour later when she wanders back into the kitchen in spite of herself, when some murky compulsion drives the broom back into her hands, *schwup, schwup, schwup*, there's another little pile of mysterious dirt.

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She thinks of medieval biologists, notions of spontaneous generation. She thinks of the malicious imps of Celtic legend. She thinks of Hercules, hacking at the many-headed Hydra while his attacker doubles and redoubles itself in the face of his heroics. She sweeps.

It was more understandable when she lived at the beach. Lovers and dogs wandered in and out of the cottage all day, tracking sand, depositing grit between slats of the painted wooden floor, between bedsheets. But she has been five states inland for months now. And her bare feet are the only ones that pad over these big clay squares.

She sweeps up the puzzling debris, *schwup, schwup, schwup*.

With the passing of time she has found that such mysteries are more disturbing, unsettling, than they are intriguing. She makes up her mind not to think about it. She begins instead to plan her noon meal: a salad with the pears she bought yesterday, slivered walnuts, crumbled feta. Perhaps she will spread fresh pesto on the sourdough and grill it.... But as she stoops to urge the newest sweepings into the dustpan, she pokes a tentative finger into the pile. Sharp and stiff, but flexible, like fishing line. They are tiny nylon bristles. They are broken tips from her broom.

3.

A WOMAN DIGS UP THE IRISES in her yard. The bed hasn't been tended in several summers; there are weeds growing from among dried leaves. The irises are the only things still living that were ever intentionally planted there. Irises are hardy, they are survivors. The plants that her mother put in years ago (yes, this was her parents' home, but she lives here now) have multiplied at a staggering rate. The clumps of rhizomes are easily two feet across. She digs up sections and drops them into a tub without separating their entwined roots.

She carries the tin bucket into the kitchen and spreads a layer of newspaper across the floor. Kneeling, she takes up a snarled clump. This late in the season the flowers are spent. The green fronds have dried to yellow husks that whisper when she tugs them, but glide off the tubers without resistance. When all the leaves have been removed she shakes the knot of rhizomes over the pot, tapping them against her open palm to loosen as much of the rich-smelling dirt as she can. She thinks of the word *fecund*.

She does not wear gloves. The dirt is cool. The bulbs feel hard and heavy in her hands, like knobs of gingerroot from the Asian markets in Portsmouth Square. In penance for past neglect she is painstaking with them, working to unsnarl the roots without snapping even the smallest cord. She insinuates a finger between two bulbs, works at the root fibers twining them together, loosens more dirt trapped between them. When a piece of root snaps under her gentle tugging, she flinches; she feels it along the side of her face like pain, like a physical injury.

When she is finished she is amazed at the dozens of separate rhizomes laid out across the newspaper — enough for four flowerbeds, or five. She gets brown paper grocery bags down from the pantry shelf and

fills three of them with the irises. She brings “bulb dust” in from the potting shed, a noxious toxin in what looks like a baby powder canister. She ignores the label’s admonitions to wear gloves, wear a mask, ventilate well. She shakes the dust liberally, recklessly, into each of the bags. When she has stashed the bags of bulbs in the potting shed to rest until spring, she rolls up the newspaper and discards it in the trash under the sink.

4.

A WOMAN STANDS IN HER KITCHEN, holding a broom. She opens the cabinet above her head and pencils “stored irises” on the gardener’s calendar thumbtacked to the inside of the cupboard door. It will be getting cold by month’s end. She reminds herself to ask the neighbors where they order firewood. She studies the date on the calendar and realizes with a start that tomorrow it will be nineteen months exactly since she’d last seen the ocean, since her jaw was broken, since she had left him for the fourth and absolutely last time.

Sometimes, if she bites down hard or thrusts her chin forward suddenly, she feels a pop, a twinge that radiates from in front of her ear, the point where her lower teeth hinge to her skull. She touches the place with her finger. The bones have knit together again. There is no permanent damage. There is only the occasional twinge.

She is perversely grateful for those pains, in the same way that she is grateful for the single act of violence that broke the bone and brought her here. That act had crystallized for her, for both of them, a litany of vaguer aches – dissatisfactions and recriminations too elusive to name or remedy, but too disturbing to sustain the once-precious pretense of happily-ever-after.

The trip to the emergency room was the punctuation they both had needed. The X-rays proved that it was over. She signed the lease to the beach cottage over to him. He helped her load the futon, the books, the boxes into her car. When he took the front door key from her she looked

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hard at him and saw, not anger or anguish, but a disappointed resignation that somehow hurt more. She wondered what showed in her eyes at the time. Whatever was there, he didn't notice.

She hadn't even cried until the rest stop in Sparks, Nevada. She'd watched the other travelers as she stretched her legs in the parking lot. A blonde girl with a dirty scarf in her hair changed her baby on one of the picnic tables. Her husband drank a root beer and frowned into the engine of their monstrous pickup truck. She watched a chocolate lab chase a Frisbee across a sand-colored patch of earth behind the restrooms. The man who whistled the dog back was young and short and entirely unfamiliar. But the cars rushing by on the interstate made a shooshing sound like ocean waves, and just for a minute, something about that dog's ecstasy, tearing back to his owner with the Frisbee flapping in his mouth, broke her heart.

She shuts the cupboard. Absently, she fingers her earlobe, smooth as sea glass to the touch. *I do not miss you*, she says, but not out loud. She sweeps the floor.