

Joints and Connectors

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Edward Rudolph Schakowsky III was a freshman and forever late to school. His parents were divorcing and his mother had recently begun taking medication. The label read: *Take twice daily or as needed for nerves*. Edward hated this particular bottle of medication. Everyone was always encouraging him to get up the nerve to do things.

Cross-country. Soccer. Choir. And then there was his mother, busily suppressing her nerve, a thing that made her pupils dilate and her sense of humor vanish into those dark centers of her irises.

Since it was the first year of the divorce and the first year of high school, Edward's lateness gave him butterflies, although he suspected by the time he was a junior or certainly senior he would stop caring altogether and accept his tardiness and his split home. Other kids had far more to deal with, he suspected, but Edward felt set apart. He, quite literally, had no friends. Even his teachers did not seem to like him—a circumstance he thought particularly shameful since they were certainly paid to pretend they liked him. Mostly, he blamed his own tardiness for his lack of popularity at the school. His tardiness was chronic and could not be helped. He tried to explain this to his teachers—he did not see how it was so hard to understand. It was like Lenny Darling's allergies or Alyssa Salthmon's footy smell. They could not help it nor could Edward. He was not a natural born slacker, not even by teacher standards. Time just passed differently for Edward.

Once at school, the bells usually kept him on task, but whenever, there was room for error, Edward would slip.

The slippage was causing more and more people to roll their eyes at Edward, to pat him on the head or back and say, "Poor Eddie."

Edward's poor sense of time made him late to school on that cold Thursday when the parts were first discovered. He was the one to find the first piece—curled in the field like one of those puffed up, natural Cheetos rip-offs his mother insisted on buying since the divorce.

Edward knew right away what it was so the analogies came after his initial thought: "It's a finger."

It was after that still that he marveled at the fingernail itself—clearly a man's—and thought how curious it was that even detached from a body nervousness could still be so clear. Its telltale mark in the ragged edge of a clear fingernail.

Headmistress Phillips knew right away that this was going to be a problem of the unsolvable kind. Other unmentionables had certainly been found in the athletic fields—undergarments, drug paraphernalia, love letters, condoms (used and new)—but body parts found in the fields were always attached to students so did not have to be called in, pondered over or boxed. Who would pick up the finger? Headmistress Phillips supposed it should be her, as principal with no assistant it was probably her job. Hers or the janitors, but she could not find the janitor. Her assumption was that the authorities would want to be the first to touch it. She'd seen *CSI* and *Law and Order*. The finger would be measured. Its angle in the grass noted. Photos taken. She'd called the local police station.

Sheriff Henry had answered her call, saying, "Really? Box it. We'll be out."

Headmistress Phillips supposed she should have come up with a hundred questions. Is this normal? Have there been other calls regarding fingers? Was one reported missing? Instead, she fumbled and said, "Should I put it on ice?"

"Not unless you're gonna drink it," Sheriff Henry said, laughing at his own joke before hanging up on her.

Headmistress Phillips found herself wishing she'd tried harder to be friendly with her staff. She was young for headmistress, 35, and had set about proving her abilities in a way she was now realizing set her out on her own. She had no friends at the little school and so was on her own with Edward, the finger, and the only two faculty members who seemed to do what she asked.

She was still in her office, hand on the hung-up receiver. The finger had morphed in her imagination. Become heavy in an unnatural way. Bloated. Grotesque. She'd stationed the two faculty members on either side of the finger and had left them there, as if she thought the finger might flee. She had sent young Edward to the nurse's office, containing him so that the rumors would wait at least until it had been determined who would do the picking up.

Headmistress Phillips was rising from her desk when Edward appeared in her doorway. He was shaking a bit, his body whole but seemingly bloodless in a severed kind of way.

"Nurse Helen left me all alone."

Eddie the III whispered his secret to Helen the moment he was abandoned by the principal in Helen's office.

Helen was the school nurse but only worked at the small school on Wednesdays and every third Friday. Helen secretly hated children and attempted to hide this hate with a demeanor that bordered on the kind of sugary sweetness that made people feel nauseated. School nurse was not the kind of adventure she'd pictured for herself when she'd gone into nursing, as it involved far too many back rubs for ashamed teens while repeating the phrase: "It's okay, Dear. Just let it alllll out." Helen whispered this for Teen A, B or X so that they might vomit into her trashcan instead of on the floor. Helen had become compulsive about buying new trashcans—disgusted by the memory of the slosh that they housed—and had finally found an office supply store that allowed her to repurchase the exact same can over and over without the school becoming the wiser for it.

Eddie had come in pale with Headmistress Flips on his back—the kids called her Flips because she tended to flip out over seemingly minor problems while the larger problems went by unnoticed.

Headmistress Flips, in her tense way, had said: "Edward is not well. Do not let him leave the area."

Helen had noted the way Flips' usually perfectly parted hair had wisped up and zigzagged unruly. From this Helen surmised that the woman had been outside in the wind and cold. Her brown high heels had grass and dirt clinging to them, and Helen imagined Flips must have really pounded down those heels to come away with any evidence of the school's frozen grounds. Something minor was certainly up. Perhaps Eddie had spray painted a goal post orange or skipped first

period or masturbated under the bleachers. Even though Helen had guessed something unusual was occurring, she did not at first pay much mind to Eddie the III when he whispered, "I found a finger."

Poor Eddie, she thought, and gave him a little pat on the head.

"Me too. I find them each and every morning without fail. All ten in fact." She wiggled them at him in her falsely cheery way and reached for her trashcan.

"No, no. A finger. Out in the field. Just the one. All by itself." Eddie wiggled the appropriate finger back at her so she would understand.

"Whose is it?" Helen asked, thinking of the hand it could be mended to. This could prove interesting. This could be an event, a challenge. A chance to do something other than mouth wiping. Helen's heart beat faster.

"How would I know?"

"A finger always has a source, stupid boy." Helen was pretty sure she only thought the "stupid boy" part. "How was it severed?" Was it a quick slice, a slam, or a pull and cut? If it was clean, they could certainly save it. She could keep things tidy for the EMTs and then the emergency room could surely do the repairs. If it was maimed by the mower or swallowed by a dog and regurgitated then there was only the matter of stopping the bleeding at the point of previous connection. Perhaps it would rest on her shoulders to reattach the appendage. Helen's heart kicked a little faster still.

"It's all on its own. Just out there. A man's finger," Eddie the III was still whispering, and Helen shivered despite herself. She understood two things: There was no point of origin for the body part, and Eddie was now going to puke.

Helen held the trashcan and was relieved to hear more retching than actual substance. When Eddie was done, she offered him a coarse tissue and walked out into the hall.

She pictured the finger like a small animal. A still-bald gerbil, a bird in the nest, or one of the rabbits she'd accidentally mowed over that fall, their tiny bodies glimpsed just before the blades hit and whirled—too late to stop it.

Helen made her way outside, crossing behind tennis courts so that she could change her mind without being seen by the two faculty members she'd glimpsed standing guard.

Helen walked carefully behind the short, fat building that housed a variety of objects, objects which Helen had been promised at her job interview would cause injury—balls and nets and bats and hockey sticks. She was instantly cold and aware of her short sleeves. She was thinking of her goose pimpled arms and frozen nose hairs when she recalled for the first time in a long time a make-out session with Tommy Green behind her high school gym. Tommy was older than her but somehow still in her grade and had the singular ambition of reaching down her pants. She felt bad dissuading him so had let him, despite her queasy stomach. She was recalling the shame of vomiting on his shirt front when she stumbled and looked down.

A woman's leg. From the knee down, mistakable for a prosthetic if it had not been quite so pale.

"A neat separation from the body. Delicately done," Helen thought.

It rested there on its side, bent ever so slightly, toes painted red and foot pointed as if still hoping to hang on to her shoe. The leg did not look like anyone Helen knew, not that Helen knew too many people.

She felt briefly on her own leg where the cut would hit. Helen walked around the building and started toward the two faculty members she assumed were guarding the finger. Headmistress Flips had appeared from inside the school, followed by Eddie the III.

"I've got another!" Helen shouted, realizing after she'd already yelled that they would assume she'd found another finger, but she didn't suppose it mattered. Helen was already imagining the delicate stitches she would make to attach leg to torso, finger to hand.

Dizzie was not supposed to be outside. She was supposed to be in English 10, but the class was full of mean girls who had not done the reading. The teacher—who Dizzie actually liked just fine—was too desperate to get "everyone on board." Dull. Dimwitted. Delirious. Disasters.

Dizzie was on the verge of an OCD diagnosis. OCD. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder—she'd looked it up on the web ten times after being offered this possible explanation for her odd behavior—a need to retie her shoes over and over until they were exactly the same tightness or her inability to resist repeating phrases over and over until she had their rhythm memorized.

Dizzie's real name was Isabel. Dizzie came from her need to spin in front of certain objects. Curbed mailboxes and telephone booths and bookstores, to name a few. She'd spin until unable to spin and then fall, collecting her nickname on the way down. These quirks did not interrupt her life but rather added to her character, or so she liked to think.

Dizzie liked her OCD. Felt sorry for it when others criticized it too openly or tried to medicate it. Dizzie had an affection for objects;

this was a piece of her disorder she had not yet confessed and also the piece she adored above all others. Objects on the side of the road troubled her the most. Last week, a child-sized pillow had appeared in the gravel on the side of the highway. Dizzie had spent the week feeling sorry for it.

"It must be missing its owner," Dizzie thought. "It must weep feathers and fear being run over." She'd been contemplating plots to get her mother to pull over and offer the pillow a ride, but she had the good sense to know that at age 15 this would no longer be a cute, childish game but an oddity—further shame would be heaped on Dizzie's OCD. The pillow had finally disappeared that morning, moved on to a home, she imagined. What had first felt like relief was now displaced with a new worry. Every bump in the road, every dip and hit on the drive to school made Dizzie think of the pillow, and how it might feel under tires. Had they hit it? She imagined it bruised under the wheels of their mini van. Contents fluffing out from ripped cloth. It was a terrible image, and although Dizzie could not quite explain it, the pillow had begun to look like a baby. Pillow and baby were one and the same and she sat tense in the backseat of the van waiting for the wails. She did not like to let the OCD out but had felt forced to ask her mother this morning over and over: "What was that? Can we go back? What was that? Can we go back?"

It was really the baby she was thinking about and not the mean girls when she raised her hand to use the restroom a third time. (Her teacher was used to her compulsion and treated her too kindly as a result.) She knew the shortcut to the highway and could find ways to peer through the barrier built to keep out sound so that she could make sure there were no baby bodies in the road.

So focused was she on her mission she did not see the headmistress; the school nurse, who had held Dizzie's hair back more than once; Ms. Danley and Ms. Stein, standing a measured distance apart; or even the nervous freshman, Eddie something. She did not notice them and so did not wonder at their distraction or why they did not question her sudden presence.

Instead, she stopped near the soccer goal post, distracted by a pale object she'd almost stepped on. On the frosted grass lay the rough, white ear of what was, she assumed automatically, an adult male.

Before she thought of anything else, Dizzie knelt down and touched the lobe. It was surprisingly soft—like lamb's ear.

She thought: "Poor thing must miss its other half." Dizzie's heart ached.

After touching it, Dizzie had to touch it again and then one more time, always the lobe. It lay on its side, not actually looking in anyway severed but more like the ground had grown an ear as a potato grew eyes. It looked like something she might have found on a beach. A creature soon to be dried up or a seashell. Touching the lobe for a fourth time, Dizzie felt the urge to spin coming on. It wasn't with her yet, but she knew it was coming, pulling at her left side. The Headmistress' voice, however, distracted her, shouting across the field—"Dizzie Ann Ludlow! Get inside!"

"But Dr. Phillips! I found something!"

The two faculty members who stood guard over the finger heard young Ms. Ludlow holler. They both knew the Ludlow girl, although

neither Jean nor Norma had her in their class. Jean taught freshman science and Norma taught junior history. Jean and Norma were lovers—although they thought no one knew this—and so they had between them an unspoken understanding of things that could be communicated with just a glance at the other. When the Ludlow girl hollered, Jean could see even from their distance that she was fighting the urge to spin and shot a glance to Norma that confirmed they both noticed it.

Headmistress Phillips was one of the only people who knew about their affair, or this is what the couple thought. Norma had tested the waters by telling the headmistress. The headmistress had cleared her throat and said, “Well, good for you ladies. Not the sort of thing to tell the parents but good for you.” It had been awkward after that, and Jean and Norma decided that even in 2005 their relationship would remain a well-kept secret.

The only other person that knew was Ms. Ludlow. She had walked in on the couple. They had not been kissing or even touching, but it was the moment after Norma had whispered something dirty to Jean. Dizzie, they were certain, had not heard the phrase, but had seen the look they’d shared. They’d broken from that look to see Dizzie’s expression of wonder. Dizzie had stumbled backward then, saying: “Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me.” She shut the classroom door three times quickly to match her apology.

Dizzie had few friends so it seemed the student rumor mill was quiet on this one, but neither Jean nor Norma wanted Dizzie reminded. Norma nodded to Jean, and Jean nodded back, releasing her from guard duty.

Norma was, therefore, cutting across the field—moving toward Dizzie just as Edward and Headmistress Phillips angled toward Dizzie.

The day was building to something that Norma and Jean did not understand, but the distance between them that they kept for decorum's sake was stretching thin—like elastic pulled too many times to come back to its own shape. The two women were snapping away from each other. Jean felt it and moved forward too, away from the finger, imagining the band that attached them to each other sagging around her feet.

Turkey vultures circled overhead. No one had noticed them—so busy were they staring at the parts they'd discovered on the ground. The vultures made their nests in the trees every fall. Their big, ugly bodies made uglier by their big, ugly heads. They squawked and weighed down the evergreen branches until the tree limbs cracked. They made poop piles that had no distinct odor but stayed for weeks, months if uninterrupted. The vultures always left before the first freeze, but this year they had stayed on, a few of them dying and flopping through tree branches to land big as Thanksgiving turkeys on the ground.

From their view, the scene on the athletic field had begun to look like an under-populated football game. From higher up still, one could see the people only slightly bigger than ants, the body parts invisible.

Distance made their antics nonsensical but even from a great height, Edward Schakowsky the III could be heard shouting, "Holy fuck! It's an arm!"

All movement stopped, but Headmistress Phillips yelled: "Language, Edward!"

And Dizzie yelled: "Does it belong to this ear?"

Norma and Jean yelled in unison: "Don't touch it!"

Helen called: "Can it be fixed?"

"Where are they coming from?" Eddie whispered. Eddie was noticing how the arm, severed at the shoulder and wrist, was delicately female. It had a tattoo of a butterfly on the inside just below the crook of the elbow that stood out brighter for the now translucent skin.

Eddie was beginning to feel a bit hysterical. It was his second body part of the day, and he'd surely missed two periods—although perhaps it was only one or more, like three.

When Headmistress Phillips began to move again, she stood beside Eddie. She broke everyone's trance and reached out to Eddie, her hand warm on his cold shoulder.

"You okay?" she asked.

Eddie shook his head no, hoping this would keep her hand on his shoulder. He had not realized until it was there that he felt quite as lonely as he did.

Eddie was aware of the group gathering around the arm. Dizzie had snuck up faster than he'd expected so saw him nod no. He thought this was perhaps why she felt so free to say: "Hold onto my upper arm so that I don't start spinning, okay?"

Eddie wrapped his hand around Dizzie's upper arm.

Ms. Danley and Ms. Stein were now next to Dizzie. They stood in front of the wrist end of the arm. Nurse Helen was at the shoulder. Jean and Norma were holding hands but looked scared and unaware of each other. Eddie wondered if teachers always held hands, a thing no one discussed, but then he saw Dizzie reach for Ms. Danley's hand

and stopped wondering. The comfort of holding onto each other was making this particular circumstance bearable.

"The cops will be here soon," Eddie heard Headmistress Phillips comment with shaky authority. He watched Nurse Helen reach and place her hand between the headmistress' shoulder blades, as she'd done with him. He could tell she was rubbing a slow circle there, absently.

They stood together in silence, the circle closing when Ms. Stein, looking from her hand clasped in Ms. Danley's to the space empty next to her other hand reached out for the nurse's quickly, almost anxiously. And then they stood together. Linked. Edward stared up at the sky, and he was suddenly certain he could hear their collective heartbeat, clicking steady like the minute hand on a clock. Marking their moments together and this gave him the strength to say: "Maybe they fell here. From the sky."

Although he did not know quite what he meant, everyone tilted their heads up and so did not seem to need an explanation. They watched the vultures circle and held onto each other.

Headmistress Phillips started thinking about the clean up that was going to have to take place, not just the picking up of parts but the talking to the kids, the parents. Emotional clean up was the worst kind. Damage control. She thought of how she'd be on her own to take care of it all. Alone in front of a large assembly hall.

Norma thought of Jean, and Jean thought of Norma. New to loving each other, they were still able to see one another as individual, treasured puzzles made up of legs and fingers and arms and ears and toes.

Norma had no trouble imagining these severed body parts as two lovers—lovers so intent on devouring each other that they'd gone too far and bitten through to bone.

Nurse Helen began to feel let down. None of these parts could be put back together. She stared up harder than the rest at the sky, praying for the attachable bits, the joints and connectors that would give her a greater purpose.

Dizzie stared up to God. Here was Adam. Here was Eve. God would drop more parts when he saw fit, but even those, Dizzie knew, had separate needs and personalities. It would be her job to gather them, make sure they found each other. She imagined, if handled properly, they would take root, grow with sturdy green stalks and reach for each other, make their own garden.

The turkey vultures saw Sheriff Henry's car coming from a long way off, before he'd even turned on his lights. They began to swoop. Low, then lower, working their way toward the ground.

The group heard the sirens, aware of the noise all at once, as if listening with a communal ear. They were too shocked to feel relief or regret. Unaware of their own seams and limbs and limits the little group began to pull apart, lost again in their own thoughts, their momentary meeting broken. Each body spiraled off in its own direction, an unwelcome isolation so cleanly cut that none of them felt it yet. □