

## Chinese Finger Cuffs

I see penises. All the time. Everywhere. An endless parade of penises, a disorganized phallic army, some slouching, some crawling, some marching at attention, all unwanted.

I lie. Maybe not lie, just embellish. I don't really "see" penises. I mean, I've seen penises, plenty of them. I once overheard my college roommate call me "walking Chinese finger cuffs, built to trap fraternity dick." I'm not Chinese, but that's a whole other thing. First, the penises.

I guess it would be more accurate to say I imagine penises, but I don't like that word, "imagine." It implies effort, like I'm trying to imagine penises. I am not. They just appear in my head, as fully formed images, so real I can almost smell them, not that I'd want to.

Like the other day, I'm behind the counter, and this guy walks up. He's wearing a gray hoody and he's got the hood up, even though we're inside and it's warm out anyway. He looks vaguely "ethnic," something weird, almost white, like Armenian, and before I can even ask him what he wants, there it is in my head, a rumpled uncircumcised member tucked snugly in boxer-briefs, a grower, not a shower.

The girl next to me is hovering, mouth-breathing all up in my space. I should forgive her. It's her first day. She's just trying to learn, she's supposed to hover. But I hate her so much. Not just her. Everyone. And everything. Think of it like the title from that movie I'm supposed to like because I'm Asian: I hate everything everywhere all at once. And not in a cute or clever way. I'm not the funny disaffected girl too cool for everything and I'm not the grumpy old white guy with endearing eccentric hate. My hate is exhausting and personally disruptive and has conquered three therapists.

I'm busy imagining a penis and hating everything, so the guy's just standing there all expectant. Why can't anyone just order a cup of coffee unprompted? Instead he asks where I'm from. Arlington, I say. No, I mean, he says, before trailing off. I know what he means.

After he's ordered, Jayna, standing infuriatingly close to me, says, I hate that, I get that all the time. She's Han Chinese (I didn't have to ask) and she might have the most punchable face on the planet. She goes on a long rant about how asking where we're from implies we're "other," "different," "unusual." No one ever asks a white girl where her "family" is from, she says, with air quotes.

I don't disagree, but I hate her anyway, the smug way she delivers this sermon, and how hypocritical it sounds, how it reminds me of how hypocritical I am. The first thing she said to me was, "Oh my God, you're so pretty, your skin is so perfect." Yeah, I caught the undertone. Right back at you.

She walked in like a porcelain doll, all miniature and adorable, smelling like Herbal Essence and innocence. I should have been happy. It's always easier with a woman, usually no penis to see. I avoid crowds, it's overwhelming to be around so many men. Here a penis, there a penis, everywhere a penis. Like Russian dolls, open one, find another, then another, and another, except they never get any smaller.

Jayna has a big round face and a diminutive body, like a bobblehead. She'd fit in fine in the Xianyang Palace a hundred years ago, bound feet reduced to nubs. It's okay. It's not racist because I'm Korean. Half Korean. My mom is from Seoul, my dad is white.

I know working in service isn't a good decision when you already hate people, but as a college dropout, my choices are limited. And I am desperate for money. I can never go back home.

It's slow after the morning rush and Jayna asks me if I'm going to answer my phone. It's been buzzing nonstop. It's just my mom, I say, which is a lie. Asian moms, right? Jayna says.

This isn't the Joy Luck Club, I tell her. We're just coworkers. We don't have to be friends.

You're so funny, she says.

I hate Jayna so much, but then I hate myself for hating her, so I soften and tell her, it's just the usual shit: You never call. Are you eating? We can't change the password for the wifi. Your father is asking for you, he doesn't have much time left. I don't say this last part, but I think it. My mother sent it in all caps a few weeks ago. She writes in all caps a lot, though: DON'T EAT BOK CHOY FOR THREE WEEKS. SALMONELLA IN SUPPLY CHAIN.

My phone buzzes from a blocked number again. Jayna can see the screen and asks if my mom is trying to trick me. We have a customer, I say.

He's wearing a neatly ironed pink polo shirt and the front of his hair salutes me in perfect gelled formation. His strong jaw almost makes him handsome, but his eyes are too close together. Then I am seeing his penis, a lanky rod, the skin raw from the suction of repeated attempts with a penis elongation device.

It's a relief when Jayna and I switch to making drinks. The less interaction with customers, the better. Of all things, Jayna has a natural gift for this. I never tell her anything twice. She seems to intuit the function of every device. She makes a perfect tall medium roast hazelnut caffe latte with oatmilk and I bring it over to the counter.

Brad, I call.

A man walks over and looks at the cup. This is hot, he says, I wanted a nitro cold brew.

He's got an unruly beard and he's wearing an orange knit hat that looks like the head of a penis, and it's a relief, because instead of seeing his penis, I see his whole body as one large penis dressed for Halloween in an orange traffic cone costume.

Are you Brad, I ask him.

This isn't right, he says, and he lifts the cap and dips in his finger. I wanted cold brew, he says.

Are you Brad, I ask him again.

Just then Brad comes over. Brad wears glasses and has a mustache that is probably ironic. His penis is large and mishappen, but he's proud of it anyway. I know this is Brad because he says, I'm Brad, is that my coffee?

Jayna appears by my side. She glares at Orange Penis, never taking her eyes away while she says, sorry Brad, I'll have to remake your drink, someone put their finger in it. Orange Penis mumbles something in lieu of an apology and walks away. For a moment, hate makes way for an unfamiliar rush of affection: Jayna's a badass. Then I'm not hating her, but hating myself for not being her. Because of course I hate myself most of all. A fortune cookie once told me that all hate springs from self-hate and my

self-loathing gushes from a well of immeasurable depth. Like my mother texted a few days ago when I refused to answer her calls: I GET IT! DOCTOR PHIL SAYS HURT PEOPLE, HURT PEOPLE.

My phone buzzes again from a blocked caller and it is all too much. I take off my apron and stride out the back door without a word, trying to look purposeful and dignified rather than crushed and hopeless. I can find another job.

I am pacing unfamiliar streets desperately trying reach customer service for my phone carrier. After a soul-crushing fight with an automated menu and eleven minutes on hold, I hear a human voice.

How can I help you, she says.

I can't find any option to stop notifications when blocked numbers text or call me, I say. Is there some kind of setting to turn those off and can you help me do it?

Yes, I can help you block a number, she says.

No, no, the number is blocked, I tell her, I just don't want to see any notification when the blocked number tries to call or text.

You should not be receiving any texts or calls from a blocked number, she says. I can show you how to block a number correctly.

No, I know how to block numbers, I'm not receiving the actual texts and phone calls, I'm getting a notification that buzzes and says we blocked a text or a call from a blocked number.

Yes, she says, that's the notification so you know a text or call was blocked.

Exactly, yes, I say.

She pauses here. For a long time. I can almost hear the absence of a sigh. So, what's the issue then, she asks. And then I see it, a hated penis painfully strapped and hidden against her leg as she saves money for a long-dreamed about surgery. I am a coil of barely suppressed rage.

I try and explain that it is the notifications themselves I don't want. That the notifications are almost as bad as receiving the unblocked text or the call in the first place. That every time I see the notification, I'm forced to think of that person and their penis. I don't think I say that last part, but I'm not sure. I am shouting and crying and hating. I hang up.

Jayna calls me that night. I forgot I gave her my number. You left your sweater, she says, I'll bring it in tomorrow. I'm not coming in, I say, I'm fired.

No you're not, she says. She explains how they told her that everyone knows I'm struggling with mental health. That I need to walk out every once in a while, but that I'm normally dependable, if unfriendly. That maybe it would be different if they weren't so understaffed, but that I'm still employed and everyone's expecting me to make my shift tomorrow. She says all this in a conspiratorial tone, bemused, two Asian girls who can't believe how dumb these white people are, like she's my little sister.

I had an older sister once. Or have. I don't know. She disappeared when she was 13. I was six years old and should remember her more but somehow don't. A feeling, some images, a handful of moments, not all of them good. I can remember her cutting the hair of my favorite American Girl doll and then threatening to shave the rest bald if I told anyone. Once she offered me an M&M if I could go five minutes without crying and then pinched my inner thigh so hard that it bled. The M&M was delicious.

My parents never talked about her after she was gone, not once that I can remember. She was simply there and then she wasn't. Any pictures of her vanished at the same time. I used to wonder if I invented her, but I can remember how my dad changed afterward. Suddenly he was gone all the time for work. When he was home, he wouldn't talk to me, would barely even look at me. For a while. I didn't understand it then. I would later.

Last year I found my sister's birth certificate in my parent's house by accident. No father listed. Different last name.

I bided my time. I pandered to my mother for a month, texting her to clarify recipes, calling to compare daily step counts, showing her the Ken Jeong special on Netflix. One day when my father was gone, I cornered her in the kitchen, demanded answers, what the fuck happened to my sister. I begged. I raged. I cried. I appealed to her heart, I applied emotional blackmail. She was impenetrable.

Ancient history, she said. There was nothing she could tell me, she said. It was better for me not to know anything, she said. She is simply protecting me, she said. She has always just tried to protect me, she said. She was certainly always protective, but it was never me she was protecting. I haven't spoken to her since.

I have not looked for my sister myself. I can't even picture her face. It's easier to rage at the world for its unfairness than to do something about it. I don't want anything to undermine the grievances fueling my hate. It is all I have left.

I meet Jayna for a drink. I hate the bar immediately. Everything on the menu is a deconstructed version of something else, every drink is local, every employee is smug. The bartender is paying too much attention to us. He keeps retying his ponytail so he can lift his arms behind his head and show off his tattooed muscles. I see his tiny penis, the shaved pubis and pierced shaft failing to make it look any bigger.

Have you tried the BLT taco chicken bites? He asks. They're fire.

He's practically leering at Jayna, which is nice. Let her imagine some penises. I usually get a lot of attention from men. My college roommate said it was because guys watch too much porn and they all have Asian fetishes. Sure she was jealous, and casually racist, but maybe not totally wrong.

I have tried and failed to un-remember the chiseled lacrosse player gripping my hair from behind and instructing me to beg him in Chinese for his come. Don't come inside me, I said instead, in English. Just say it, he said. Seriously, do not come inside me, I said. He told my roommate I was "a bad lay."

I liked Patricia Meehan at first. Her family called her Pat when they dropped her off, but she reinvented herself as Trish the second they left. She was loud and brash, with a delicious laugh. Her neck and face got all red and splotchy when she drank, which was often. She hated how much attention I got from guys, especially the ones she liked. There was always a look that lingered too long, polite chit chat that was too eager, an "accidental" drunk dial.

By the end of the year, as I was flunking out (to our collective relief), I began to see it, one of the first I ever saw. She would be changing clothes, white cotton underwear barely restraining an unshaven pubic mound, and the image was just there: A micro-penis and an unknown Y chromosome, hidden for

the first 13 years of her life by the failure of normal male sexual development in utero, a rare genetic disorder, revealed only when the testosterone began pumping in puberty, awakening the micro-penis, a baby's pinky finger rising from the ashes of her girlhood, useless for a man, devastating for Trish.

The bartender asks where we're from. I worry that Jayna is going to lecture him, tell him that we are not all the same, do not all look the same, are not all from the same place. Sometimes I wonder how much we can blame them.

The only NBA player I can name is Jeremy Lin. I am obsessed with Naomi Osaka. Once my mom got so happy watching Wheel of Fortune when Jason Chang won the largest prize ever that I asked her if we were related to him. No dummy, she said. He's not even Korean.

Jayna says she's from Sri Lanka, that her parents were gypsies, and it is the least I've hated anyone in months.

The bartender thinks she's flirting. He brings us two reimagined vanilla bean rum shooters, "on the house." I'm too smart to drink something I didn't watch come right out of the bottle, but Jayna is already drinking it and then I am too.

Should we do karaoke, she asks after our third shot. And I can't tell if she's joking about Asian stereotypes or if she really wants to sing. This is the drunkest I've been in months, and I don't like it.

What's happening with you, she asks, really.

I have something to do, I say. I'm sorry.

I walk out. I call my mother. I am coming, I say. To the hospital. Right now.

I walk into the room, and it feels like a cliché. There are machines chirping and monitors monitoring, and my dad is laid out in those undignified reverse pajamas, doing the whole Darth Vader thing through breathing tubes in his nose. The blocked cell phone sits by the bed.

His bare feet are exposed, the gnarled toenails making a compelling argument for fungal cream. Capillaries have burst all across the bridge of his nose, and his old adolescent acne scars are flushed red.

I don't have to imagine his penis because I've seen it many times. In the usual ways at first, changing at the pool, that sort of thing. A short, ruddy thing, in a nest of curly hair, a purple mushroom poking out. Slightly unsettling even then. Later, I saw it angry, rigid and red, a blue vein crawling up from the scrotum to a swollen bulb at the top. I have felt it in my hand, and in other places too, and everything's all jumbled up, and confused, and somehow that makes it worse, not better, like I can't even trust my own unwanted memories, and I just want to unfeel it, unsee it, undo it, undo everything.

He looks at me with wet blue eyes and reaches out a hand. It hovers for a moment, conspicuous, before he lays it down. I'm so glad you came, he says. I love you so much, he says. I made so many mistakes, he says. I'm so sorry, he says. I never wanted to hurt you, he says. I was weak, I was sick, I hate myself, he says.

His voice is weak, his breath is mushrooms growing on gym socks.

I lean in close, holding onto my hair so nothing of me touches him. My mouth is close to his ear, intimate, like he used to like it. You are evil, I say. This suffering is less than you deserve, I say. I'm so

glad you'll be dead soon, I say. I do not forgive you, I say. I hate your fucking guts and I am happy you'll be rotting in hell, I say.

I feel nothing. There is no satisfaction, not that I expected any. Maybe it will come later. Or maybe it will be regret. I don't know, and I don't have time to linger. I leave him there, walk past my mother, avoiding her eyes. I know in my heart I will never speak to her again. I have nothing left to say to her, and right now, I have something else to do. I have a sister to find. I have good news for her.