

Scales

I think I am the distant son of the nephilim, those quirky demons that conceived in the Hebrew women hooved, polycephalic, and scaley babies and then skulked off back to the underworld. Read your Bible, folks.

My mother has soft hands; the softest. My father must have had two heads because my mother said he had two faces. I have these twelve toes and fingers with a thin silky webbing between each. Six and six and six and six. They are cracked and dry and skin flakes from them.

I'm curious, now as a newly-ordained adult, why I wasn't teased as a child. I guess it's because I stayed in the same class with the same kids through high school. I grew up with extra digits, and the other kids grew up with a boy with extra digits, so they didn't bother it much. Sometimes they would ask questions. Always, when we would play, I would be Godzilla and the other boys would save the playground

from me. It wasn't mean, though. My hands were a convenient prop. Mean would have been not letting me play with them at all.

I invent the very best ice cream flavors. Strawberry coconut, blueberry vanilla, and cinnamon walnut are my favorites. The Shiner Bock, we don't make here, but we order it from a company in Austin. It's pretty exotic for our coastal college town. It's probably the most popular because all the college guys pick it. I think it's just because it is made from beer, but honestly it is disgusting to me. It's no cinnamon walnut, really.

With my left hand, the more sinister of the scaley team, with a pinkie that juts off sharply to the side when I get a cramp from scooping ice cream all day in my mother's shop, I hand a pretty girl in cut-off shorts and a bikini top a sugar cone with strawberry sherbet. She looks at my hands, which in any other shop would have to be covered with latex gloves. Sometimes I wear rubber mitts that fit my hand, but not usually. She smiles and asks if I swim well. I say like a fish.

This is a nice question. So much nicer than some others have asked.

"Is that contagious, bro?"

"How do you jerk off?"

She wears her long blonde hair in a braid down the side. I don't know her. She must be a new fish. Maybe she came here for school. She doesn't tip, but she smiles at me and I think that's just as well because she's not upset or repulsed like some have been or overly rapt like the others. She's only smiling at what I said. And she's not sorry for me.

It's eczema, really. The scales that peel on my neck and arms. It's completely unrelated to the translucent skin between my digits. But the two conditions seem connected in a way that alludes to more than a dualistic misfortune and a general mocking of me by the universe. I've been told I will outgrow this point of view. At nineteen, I have not.

My girl, my mermaid, works at the restaurant next door. I think she likes the blueberry vanilla in a waffle cone best, but occasionally she will order a scoop of cheesecake with brownies mashed in without a cone at all. When summer ends, she still comes in every day, but she usually wears a sweater over her bikini top. Once, she left her nametag on. I guess her name is Ruby.

Sometimes she tells me my eyes are nice. Sometimes she asks if all my clothes smell like waffles. I always say yes even though I've never actually tried to smell them. She says she loves the way fresh waffles smell. I agree even though actually I'm indifferent to it now.

One night, when she asked this I tried to improvise and I asked her what her clothes smell like after work. She looked down, smiling, when she picks her head up again to answer me, she doesn't look me in the eye.

"I don't actually wear clothes at work."

"Oh, of course."

The restaurant next door is called Sandy's. It's a beach-themed burger joint with a neon sign over the umbrella awning shielding the turquoise door depicting a smiling "dude" holding a beach ball. He probably has blue eyes hidden behind his

large purple sunglasses and his hair, or at least the neon which represents of it, is blazing yellow. It's not the vague nostalgia to no particular summer of the fifties, or vinyl-upholstery on the booths, or how the tables are made from surfboards that grants the place any notoriety. It's that the servers are required to wear bathing suits to work.

Anita Leed, who works at Sprinkles part-time with me and is majoring in Women's Studies at the same campus where I sell scoops in the SUB on Tuesdays, worked there for a few weeks. Really, Anita ought to not tell people that.

Aside from the occasional, principled chubby girl, like Anita, threatening a lawsuit or some other retribution for being passed over for employment, the place generally employs knock-outs. I expect the chubbies are usually women's studies political science majors and don't last very long. Even a nice guy wouldn't tip a girl like Anita as much as he would a girl like Ruby. Anita does much better at Sprinkles.

Sandy's Grill is about ten miles from the beach, so if anyone wanted the beach, they could really just go to the beach. Still, I felt like an ass for mentioning the clothes thing to Ruby because I could tell she was embarrassed. I crumbled in some extra brownie and kept my head down while the radio played whatever summer pop song was charting for the millionth time that day.

We don't talk about her job again. Instead when I see her, I ask things like, "How do you stay so skinny eating ice cream every day?" and "Aren't you tired of that flavor?" She doesn't answer me, but smiles and I suppose that is good enough. Sometimes, we're alone so I try to keep talking, but often it's really busy. Locals, not just to San Marcos, but also to the entire Texas Coast pretend winter doesn't happen.

We wear shorts and eat ice cream in January because if we lost summer, we'd lose ourselves. I'm sure it's cold enough for sweaters and jackets sometimes, but we keep our feet in sandals and our heads in the sand. We still find our way to the beach whenever we get the chance.

I return with the instinctive precision and let the foam seep into my scales and pass over my fingers until it feels like there's no webbing between them at all. I go most nights after my shift. In the moonlight where no one can see me, my back sheds its skin flakes, as the salt scrubs my infirmity away. I am temporarily anointed.

Tonight, when a guy holds the glass door open for her, my immediate inclination is that they are not together. In the months she has been coming in to Sprinkles, she has always been alone. I think she's the kind of girl other girls dislike on sight. I think she is the kind of girl that men are too afraid to be rejected by. Her quietness will always be mistaken for rudeness. Her awareness of her own beauty will always be mistaken for arrogance.

He has a red beard. It's wild and untrimmed. He wears square-toe boots and light blue jeans. He's wearing an insulated vest over a long-sleeved shirt. A black cowboy hat. In it, he towers over me. He holds a toothpick between his lips. It angles up and down there as speaks, mumbles something toward Ruby which I cannot hear.

Then, more clearly, in my earshot now, he says, "Well, babe, what's good?"

"I don't know."

"You work next door to an ice cream shop and you never come in here?"

“Not much.” She looks at me. I’m in on it now. Whatever this is. I think about the new banana orange sherbet I wanted her to sample. Not now.

“That’s how you keep looking so good.”

Ruby smiles at him. Then she looks at me, asking me with her desperate eyes to go along with it. I stare into them, painfully wondering why until he breaks the silence. Clenching my jaws to each other and my left hand tightly on the ice cream scoop, a cramp begins to climb up the length of my arm, but I don’t loosen my grip.

“I’ll tell you, I think I’ll have the Shiner Bock.” His drawl is thick either from beer or breeding.

“Would you like to sample it first?” I ask.

“Is it any good?” He’s not looking at me.

“It’s not for everyone.”

“Nah. I think I’ll take some chocolate then.”

I hate nothing more than plain ice cream.

“Any toppings?”

“Can I have some chocolate sprinkles?”

“Sure.”

“I think I want blueberry vanilla.” Ruby says this casually, as if a passing whimsy encouraged her to try something new. She looks at me, her slender finger kindly directing me to her selection. In case I am unaware of where it is; where it has been these months she’s asked for it by name or merely by nod each night when she comes in.

“Well that sounds kind of weird. Are you sure that’s what you want?” He touches the back of her neck and sweeps her braid to the side.

“I think I’ll like it.”

“It’s pretty good,” I mumble, lifting the aluminum scoop in and out of the warm water.

“Could I try it please?”

“A sample spoon?” I ask.

“Yes, please.”

The sample spoons are so flimsy they often crack when I’m plunging them into hard ice cream. It’s not as bad with the sherbet as with the regular ice cream and the light and sugar free flavors are inexplicably butter soft to cut into, but the chocolates and vanillas always crack a sample spoon right in half. I go through three brightly colored miniature spoons before I finally get a lump. While I’m doing this, he places his mouth on her neck. Instead of what he says, all I hear is her giggle.

I hand her the spoon. She takes it and tastes it tentatively. She pretends to consider whether she likes it.

“Yeah, I’ll take a scoop in a waffle cone,” she says finally.

“Can you put mine in a sugar cone?” the cowboy asks.

I scoop his first. I hold his cone out to him, and he stops me.

“Hey man, what about the sprinkles?”

“Oh sorry.” I shake my head. “been a long night.” I empty several spoons of sprinkles onto the little scoop. Am I being generous or malevolent? Does it matter if he can’t tell?

I hand it to him. He takes it from me and glances at my nametag.

“Thanks, Aaron.”

I remember to ask Ruby if she wants strawberry syrup on hers. I don't add it automatically like I normally would. I worry for a half a second that even mentioning the syrup indicates a level of familiarity that she wants me to conceal. He doesn't seem to notice anyway. His mouth caressing the chocolate ice cream with the same care and sensuality that it had her neck just a minute before. I wonder which was sweeter.

She nods, then looks away. At least she's not looking at him.

I hand her the cone and her fingers graze mine. I drop the scoop suddenly into the warm water. It splashes onto the front of my shorts. At the register I total the scoops up, and I don't charge for the sprinkles.

“Seven, sixty-eight.”

Ruby reaches into her pocket. Cowboy grabs her arm.

“Aw, come on. I got this. I spilled a beer on you.”

“Thank you.” She smiles. She smiles at him.

“My pleasure. It's why I waited two hours for you to get off. So I could make it up to you.”

She doesn't answer. She doesn't look at me. She looks at her feet in sandals and grins.

I take the card from his hand. A bank from Dallas. I guess that's where he's from.

“Hey man, your hands. What is that?”

“Syndactyly.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah.”

“Can you feel things with them like everyone else?”

“I think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“How can I know what your hands feel like?”

“Deep, bro.”

I grin and swipe his card. When I hand it back to him, he’s looking at Ruby.

Ruby is looking at my hands. Maybe she’s looking at the card.

He takes the card and slides it into his wallet. It’s a bulky leather thing with a metal cross on the corner. They walk away side by side.

His hand is in the back pocket of her cut-offs, his index finger and thumb outside of it, gently rubbing her ass. Wearing her like a glove.