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Cereus Things

I don't know why, but it was the two-pronged fork that made me completely drop my marbles or lose my basket or whatever it was that my mother always said happened to women at certain times of their lives. *Especially if you get married, Sally. You'll have to set fire to the house like I did. Oh, you won't have a choice. You'll drop those marbles.*

She told me many times "it" would happen to me too. And it did.

For a whole week, this fork sat on our back patio steps. I had never seen it before even inside our house. Yet there it appeared, positioned awkwardly, almost aiming at feet descending the stairs.

Nothing ever gets moved in our house. Well that's not true. Items get picked up, used for a purpose, and then set down wherever they stopped being useful. They're simply dropped like something terrible had happened to the person holding it (to my husband), so that he suddenly had to abandon the object, leave it where it landed. That is, until someone (me) found it as a clue or an artifact of the past.

It's a predilection I know he inherited from his parents. The few times we visited them, before we bought our house, they had stuff everywhere. Rooms stacked with random bills, used Q-Tips, old heaters, screwdrivers,

tubs of toys. I don't even remember all of it. But, wall to wall, floor to almost ceiling, there was just a bunch of stuff. And it didn't bother them. It doesn't bother him.

Nothing really ever gets put where it belongs in our house, not by Owen. The pink plastic ring from around the skim milk carton is one of my favorite disregarded items. Owen peels it off of a new gallon and sets it beside the sink. If I don't throw it away, there it would lie, three days later, waiting to fall into the disposal, the mouth of a nasty hell. There have been many nights I have reminded him about how things need to be put away. Put away where they belong. Where they should be.

"Doesn't it bother you? How can it not bother you?" I'll ask. He doesn't have much to say as he looks blankly at me with his eyes wide open. But when he is looking for something, say his cigarettes or the ketchup, he'll ask where it is before he's even started looking.

"Where did I put my smokes?" I can't tell if he's asking me or himself, but usually, under my breath, I add a comment.

"Well, if you would keep track of the things when you have them in your hands... If you would put things where they belong..." It never makes any difference though.

When I come home in the evenings from Rhonda's Paints and More, where I log at least forty hours a week, I like to change out of my paint-splattered green t-shirt and denim apron and then sit outside with a cold beer.

I bring swatches home and I shuffle them like a deck of cards while the dog chases fireflies. It's how I unwind. For five days, the fork was there: a carving fork with a light brown wooden handle. Outside of our house.

I first noticed it on the day I painted the living room yellow. Canary yellow, I think. Fred, the other mixer, and I are always getting to take home different gallons of paint, especially if we "accidentally" mess up a customer's

order. So about once a month, I come home with a new color—Sea Side Blue, Plum Crazy, Yellow Alive—and renew the wall colors of different rooms in my house.

I alternate between the kitchenette, living room, master bedroom, and the den. No two Julys ever have the same combinations of rooms and shades. I don't think Owen has ever said much about the current (or even past) shades on the walls. As long as the television plays "Wheel of Fortune" and he can tend to his petal babies outside, he seems pretty happy. Well, content at least.

Since we bought the house, before we were married and against our parents' wishes, he has planted numerous blooms throughout the seasons: hydrangeas, irises, gardenias (I like the smell of those the best), jonquils, and right now it's the night lilies. Usually, he scatters the seeds and sometimes forgets about watering and caring for the sprouts. So they grow, fade to brown, shrivel and die. He hasn't been forgetting about these night lilies though. But wait, he's always correcting me:

"They are called Night Blooming Cereus. Why can't you ever remember that, Sally?" He has a large area of the yard dedicated to these white horn-shaped things that only bloom at night. He even gives them each their own name. I'm not kidding. He names them: Brandi, Tammy, Missy, Brenda.

"Why Brenda?" I asked the day before the first fork day. I hadn't painted anything in awhile and I guess I was getting moody, bored as he would put it. Brenda sounded like a name for a brunette. All the other names seemed like they would be given to blonde women, like me.

"Because that one is a Brenda. She's different. Someone special," he said after he shaved off his thick beard I had grown to love.

So I stood in silence for a moment, staring at the black wisps of hair that had landed on the white sink. Of course, he didn't clean those up. I didn't really have a response to his "Brenda explanation" and anyway, he didn't

give me any room to ask for further information because he was busy guessing the puzzle for the Phrase category. The contestant had guessed an “R” and my husband was already yelling, “The answer is: When You’re Hot, You’re Hot. It’s easy, you idiot!” at the screen. His large calloused hands waved frantically in the air. And Brenda escaped my thoughts.

I had been flipping through a new set of sample hues and was trying to decide between Canary Yellow and San Francisco Saffron. One of them had been used in the den before and I wanted to do something new to the living room. I didn’t want to reuse a color.

Which one had I used before? Wait. Which one did I end up using?

Fred might remember. I always talk with Fred about paint, about how I was supposed to have become an artist. He’s a widower and he listens well. He says it’s because his home is so quiet. He doesn’t mind my constant talking. We discuss the abstracts I would have painted with oils. He knows proper names for things, like fresco and tempera. I think I even told Fred about the fork.

The first fork day, I came home before lunch, ate a piece of shepherd’s pie from the previous night, and had the two main walls of the front room complete when Owen called. The phone rang and I got nervous. He said he would be meeting his brother at the range to shoot a few ammunition rounds.

“Go ahead and eat without me,” he said.

When I share anecdotes about Owen to Fred, he never believes me that I married a man who likes to garden and also likes throwing lead with his dad’s old nine millimeter. Fred’s only met Owen once when I had a flat tire and Owen had to come pick me up. They didn’t really say much to each other. Owen probably made a joke to Fred about feeling sorry for him because he has to spend all day with me or something like that.

Although when we got in our old pickup truck, Owen laughed and said, “I thought I had something to worry about with Fred. Boy was I wrong. You never told me he was old, bald and ugly.” I just rolled my eyes and smiled. I always told him I wasn’t attracted to Fred. But he liked to make me think that he had something to worry about. Like somebody else would want to snatch me up. I think he knows it makes me feel good. I can’t make those kinds of jokes about his job. I don’t think he works with any women, except for the care he gives those white things that come alive and open up in the dark.

I don’t think Owen had been working the first fork day. He works odd hours for the Illinois State Department of Transportation. Sometimes he is up in a little bucket and is attached to a truck when he’s working on light poles. Other times, he drives a riding lawn mower in the little places between highway lanes.

I used to worry about cars. Those speeding cars. They move so fast and people don’t pay attention to those signs, even though they say things like, “Fines Doubled in Work Zones” and “Hit a Worker, Go to Jail.”

“Sally, listen,” he would say after I cry and tell him how I don’t want to be a widow. I go on and on about one random day I would be adding magentas, yellows, and blacks together in chemical formulas and I would get this phone call. I dreaded phone calls for the first few years of our marriage.

“I’ll get this phone call. A voice will ask if he is speaking with Mrs. Morrison. I would have to say yes, even though I would know what he would say next: I’m sorry ma’am. I hate to inform you...your husband has been... Those are the only words I would be able to hear, Owen. Think about it,” I would make my fingers into the shape of a phone, for emphasis.

“Sally, listen. I do my job. I do it well. Please. You have other things to worry about. Please don’t add this to your anxiety list.” He always calls it my anxiety list. I don’t know why. I didn’t, I don’t have a list. I mean, I keep a running grocery list and a to-do list, but I’ve never even heard of an anxiety list.

I meant to mention my anxiety list on the first fork night. When I had finished with the two walls, the San Francisco Saffron accent walls in the living room, I cracked a beer and went to sit outside.

I decided on San Francisco Saffron after all, I think. Not the Canary one. I mean, I didn't want my living space to be named after a bird. But no matter the color, the fumes begin to get to me. You'd think I'd be used to them and in fact, I do actually enjoy the smell. It's sharp. It's powerful. But two walls in one day is my limit.

So this fork remained. Not on the ground or on the patio table, but on the steps. At first I didn't notice it. I tilted my head back and let the cold bubbles fizz down my throat. And then I saw it.

This two-pronged fork. Outside.

Why would there be this devil-looking thing out here? Owen hadn't grilled anything in awhile. Could he have been using it for those girls? For Brenda? I didn't see any dirt on it. There existed no evidence, no good reason why this thing would be there. This fork. I was going to ask him about it. I was going to tell him that he was adding items to my anxiety list.

I would have related it to the way I feel when he throws his dirty clothes in random places around the house. He likes to drape the sweaty fabric over the tops of open doors. I don't understand it. We've had many fights about this. I know it's a left-over effect of his parents. Or it's proof of what my mother always told me about marriage.

Something always happens, she would say. And then she would warn me. I would drop my marbles, the few that I got from her and not from my dad. If she were still living, she would tell me it always begins with clothes. It happened that way for her. She would remind me all the time. She found a shirt, two sizes too small for my dad to have said that it belonged to her. And then she knew. And then she dropped her basket, lost her basket, dropped her marbles.

For awhile I resorted to leaving notes pinned to those dirt-covered shorts. *Please put me in the hamper. I want to go in the wash.* But it never helped. It never changed. In fact, the first fork day there was a set of day-worn clothes on the bedroom door knob.

I went inside early, after my two beers because the mosquitoes were especially vicious that night. I had been so excited about the new color (that took me so long to pick), Canary Yellow, no, San Francisco Saffron, so I only noticed the laundry when I came inside. And by the time he came home, I had forgotten about what was outside. The fork slipped my mind.

Then after the first fork night, I had evening shifts at Rhonda's for the rest of the week. His girls, those cereus things, began expanding, taking up the whole side of the fence and reaching up the steps. They reached out at ascending feet. I know they never would grow thorns, but there was something almost evil about the way they wanted to touch me when I came home.

I thought they were jealous of all the splatters of color I wore. The yellows and purples on the bottom of my jeans passed by the flowers as I stepped up those stairs.

They were jealous. I know it. After all, they only wear white. I get all the colors I want. And Owen wears grass stains from all over the city.

He could have been anywhere in our city when I came home on the fifth fork night. He didn't even give me the nervousness of a phone call. I came up the steps in the back, passing those cereus blooms, the pointing petals, the wide mouths. Concentrating on what they could possibly want to say to me, wondering if there had been a new gallon of milk opened or if shorts would be hanging in some random place and waiting for me.

Then I noticed the fork. Five days later and that fork still sat on the steps. Brenda and Missy or whatever Owen called the flowers almost covered it, but I saw the silver. The sharp silver points.

I thought about the night my mother made the fire in the living room, set the room on fire, I mean. Coming down the stairs to the heat, the white flames, I remember running outside wearing ripped pajamas. But it was dark outside, so she said it would be okay. She said my dad wouldn't get to come home. The heat reached us in the yard like it wanted to touch us.

It was definitely sharp. I touched the miniature pitch fork with my index finger. A small drop of blood ran down to my wrist. Maybe next I would use crimson in the bedroom, at least one wall. That's a good name, not after a flying animal or a city, not after someone special who I didn't know. My blood landed on one of the white petals. One drop of color.

I used the object. It could have belonged to Satan. The fork worked well. One by one, those two parallel lines of metal ripped, dug, pulled. Roots, pieces of white silk, pollen in the air. Samples of flowers, like swatches absent of color burst through the dark sky. Calyxes and foliage flew up like flames. Cereus petals rained and marbles dropped.