

The Addict

The addict stepped into the bathroom stall, hoping no one saw him enter, wincing as he locked the door. He removed his gloves and frantically plucked at the Band-Aid on his left index finger. It got stuck to the ones on his right thumb. The sweat from his hands and the blood from their blotches weakened the Band-Aid's adhesive but not enough to prevent the Band-Aids from congealing as they fell as one onto the floor. Had the addict been in a more contemplative mood, he would have debated whether the Band-Aids were worth salvaging. Instead, he cursed himself under his breath for not removing them with his teeth, then thrice more for forgetting to grab his lighter from his back pocket before taking the Band-Aids off. He reached down, trembling, to the bathroom floor, picking up the clump with his knuckles so that his tip-less fingers didn't graze the bathroom's damp floor. While there, he scanned the room for feet, ready to memorize whoever's shoes he saw, if any.

Now, reclining on the toilet, the addict was free to consider how best to feed his addiction. He glanced over each of his fingers. His pinkies had gone years ago, and had been replaced by prosthetics. Each of his other fingers were still about the same length—a deliberate choice. He lit the index finger on his left hand and used that to light his middle finger. His lighter—electric, silent, and old—he had stolen from his mother sometime in his later teen years. He suspected she knew he took it, but that she was too worried about formally outing herself to draw attention to its disappearance. The addict did everything he could to protect his lighter since he knew he'd be hard-pressed to find another. "Nothing good comes from fire," they told him. They were probably right. The addict pressed his dry lips to his fingers and inhaled a deep breath of his own flesh, which, at first soft and tender, broke into microscopic black bits—euphoria.

Three or four minutes into smoking, the addict had settled into a rhythm. He would take a puff from his index finger, nod his head up, look away from the light, and sort through some aspect of his day. Then he would take a puff from his middle finger and ponder something beautiful in his life. He repeated this pattern until his anxiety subsided, the only negative thought remaining being his desire to someday find friends with whom he could share his habit.

The “habitualist” then began the sour process of cutting off the charred skin on his fingers. This was done so that if anybody ever caught a glimpse of his fingers they would think his offense was minor. His razor work was precise. He brushed the flakes into the toilet. He dabbed his raw flesh with toilet paper, though not much was needed. The blood had learned long ago not to rush to his hands. Excited, ready to face the day, the habitualist straightened his shirt and prepared to open the stall door. A voice from outside froze him.

“Hello?” said the voice, “You okay in there?”