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Palms Up, Fingers Curled

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PALMS UP, FINGERS CURLED

ABBY N. LEWIS

I sit on my grandparent's back porch,
in a chair at their glass table.

Grandpa is on my left;
my father across from him,
to the right of me at the head of the table.

Grandpa is describing the recent
abduction of a young woman.

It had been in the news a few days before.

My father had yet to hear the story—
it wasn't just an abduction, we learned;

two men had kidnapped, raped, mutilated,
then murdered the woman.

Grandfather goes into specifics,
describing how the men had tied her to the bedpost and
taken turns.

The young woman was young,
a girl really, just sixteen years old.

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Grandpa makes eye contact with me—
then with his son
as he relays the most gruesome details.

At other times during the telling,
he looks down and speaks to his
reflection in the dusty glass of the table.

His face, at those moments, has a look of incredulity,
as if even he is shocked to hear the story he is voicing.

My father breathes the word “Jesus”
at various intervals. He glances at me,
on occasion.

The things he must be imagining—
worst-case scenarios involving me
in her place.

When I first sat down
I had not known what they were discussing.

It was summer, early July.

Our entire family was over
for our annual cookout.

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I had expected the conversation to be light, airy,
like biting into a slice of watermelon.

Instead, I sit down to hear him say
one of the men had cut off the young woman's left breast.

And I don't just mean her nipple, he said.

Her entire breast.

He holds his hand out, palm up with his fingers curled,
as if that very breast was perched there in his hand.

The air around us grows oppressive.

I do not want to stay—to listen—
but I also don't want to stand

and leave so soon after having

just sat down.

So I stay. I listen.

Until my grandfather

holds out that hand,

his palm a sign of wealth—

all the years he has lived

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LEWIS

weaving a tangled tapestry

across his soft, tan skin;

the shape his palm makes, as if he were offering

his beating heart,

or if his other hand joins in,

as if he were begging for mercy—

but it is just the one hand,

golden band reflecting the sun's gaze.

I look away.