

MATT BELL

The Present

THE MORNING OF our anniversary, Emily handed me a present wrapped in purple and gold. I tore the wrapping away to reveal a gift box filled with thin, crinkly tissue paper. Inside was Emily's left hand, cut off cleanly at the wrist. The fingers were curled inward, each nail polished red and filed immaculately. I looked up and saw that she was bleeding, staining the sleeve of her pink fleece bathrobe.

I asked, "Have you been bleeding this whole time? Why didn't you say something?"

Emily said, "I didn't want to ruin the surprise."

I nodded, appreciative. I liked surprises. "What am I supposed to do with it?" I asked.

"Anything you want," she said.

I said, "I think I'll use it as an ashtray. Your palm really is the perfect shape for one." Emily wasn't pleased, certainly not then, and not later either, after she had returned from the hospital, when I showed it to her full of ashes and spent cigarettes, her hand not spilling even a single gray flake.