



Hands

nonfiction

Alaina Symanovich

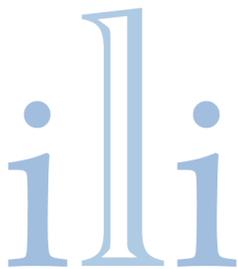
I played the boys in my preschool like cards, picking up hands and laying them down purely for the adrenaline rush. You could call me the Queen of Hearts, I guess, if you're assuming this is that kind of story, if you're thinking I made the first move.

Kelton, Jared, Josh. Kelton's cheeks blazed red no matter the season, making him look sickly and frail. He could sprint okay, but he never beat Jared (Jared, with the wily white hair, blond and thick like buttercream icing). Josh fell somewhere between the other boys, his rotund cheeks pale, his chaff-colored hair limp, and maybe that's why I struggle to pull him from the recesses of my memory. The other boys' faces rise like flotsam in my mind, interrupting my present with remnants of our shared past, while Josh stays lost in the murky undercurrent.

In those days, speed mattered. The boys would toe a line in the dirt beside the jungle gym, shake out their shoulders, tense their rosy quadriceps, assume the postures of men. When I yelled *go*, they would break away like snapped rubber bands in one spectacular synchronized motion. They pushed their hearts as hard as they could, fighting to reach the orange slide first, fighting to play my boyfriend for the day. I made my mother beam when I related the endless saga of my playground romances, stringing the stories like Christmas lights over our idyllic world.

She gloried in my triumphs, still rehashes them in moments of nostalgia, still giggles too boisterously when someone drags up the subject at family gatherings. She revels in me, the daughter who held the ever-winning hands, the daughter who coolly shuffled and reshuffled boys' attentions, never troubled by a high stake or an upped ante. Maybe she harbored hopes about the parade of boyfriends to come: some blue-jeaned, some khaki-ed, some brunette, some just forgettable. Maybe she imagined my wedding dress: a halo of tulle cascading from an embroidered bodice — or, no, something sheer and lacy, revealing a long sheath of back — or, better yet, something strapless and sparkly and designed for dancing. Maybe she planned to play an elaborate slideshow at the reception, a rolodex of me from my Queen of Hearts days to my reign as the queen of one king. To winning the one hand that would count most.

I can't tell you the exact moment when I decided to fold, but I can tell you about the hand that forced it. Strength, elegance, married together into maddening temptation. A



hand you can't refuse, a hand only an idiot would overlook, a hand whose caress you fantasize about at three twenty-one a.m. until your heart and lungs throb with the agony of your desire. A hand powerful enough to send you leaping off the edge of grace, uncertain of your safety, unaware of the depth of your plunge, unafraid to lay yourself bare. The hand your eyes savor as it pens impeccable cursive or tousles unruly hair or claps you with an innocent high-five, its tendons winking impishly at you because they see, they know, even if Kayla never will.



Alaina Symanovich is a graduate student currently pursuing her MA in Creative Writing from the Pennsylvania State University. She specializes in lyrical prose, especially creative nonfiction. She draws inspiration from the short stories of authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Flannery O'Connor, and Alice Munro.