

# Palm

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English 413 (Form and Theory of Fiction)

Mentor: Professor Laurel Fantauzzo

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*Written for Laurel Fantauzzo's "Form and Theory of Fiction" class, this short story focuses on the concept of rejection. The narrator, Alyssa, has received bad news and arrives home knowing that she will have to tell her mother. Their relationship has grown strained over the years. Alyssa worries that it may be too late to repair it. Staggering under the weight of failure, Alyssa starts to understand the way that she rejected and was rejected by others, with her mother by her side.*

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The door to the house slams behind me like an omen. I stand there for a minute, motionless, my fingers crushing the spine of my notebook. I didn't write anything in it throughout the entirety of the meeting. The Art History department chair didn't tell me a thing worth writing down.

The *shhkk* of water hitting porcelain tells me my mother is in the shower. She must have run errands today. She can't stand being sweaty for more than a couple of hours, so she showers as soon as she comes home.

As I make my way to the bathroom, I find myself thinking about the first time I lost. I was six, and my soccer team, the Kolohe Kangaroos, didn't score a single goal. My mother brought me home and sat in our bathroom with me, patting my back as I cried and washed the dirt from my shins. She didn't leave, even when I stepped into the shower and yanked the shower curtain closed, putting up a boundary between us. As I turned on the water, my mother's palm appeared on the other side of the shower curtain.

*Laulima*, she told me from her side, *means many hands*.

*Cooperation. Everything will be okay because we have each other. See? Look at my hand, waiting to touch yours.*

After that soccer game, it became our tradition. If one of us had a bad day, the other would put her hand on the shower curtain. A fight with a coworker, a C on a test, everything was solved with our hands.

We stopped doing it when I turned thirteen, at my insistence. I told her our ritual was stupid and I'd grown out of it. That night, while I was conditioning my hair, my mother's hand appeared. I ignored it, slicking conditioner down to my split ends, and that was it.

Deep breath. I touch the partially open bathroom door but stop. She's busy. I don't have to tell her now. For the next few minutes, she can believe that I'm on tenure track, that I'll be able to pay for an apartment and not mooch off her for the rest of my life, that I'm not a failure.

I shake my head. I'm not thirteen anymore. I can't be afraid to talk to my own mother.

I push the door open. "Mom?"



Raised by a family of bookworms, I have always wanted to write and read for a living. In the future, I would love to combine my passion for reading, writing, video games, and political science—but maybe that is the real fiction here. Regardless, I am lucky to have a family who has supported me from the days of ballerina dreams to today. Ma, if you're reading this, this is for you.

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“Alyssa?” From the other side of the shower curtain, I can make out her vague shape. Her hair, medium brown in the light, is so wet that it looks black. “How was the meeting today?”

“It was okay,” I say, but my breath snags on the last word and gives me away. “Well, not really.”

“Explain. What did the chairperson say?”

My heart thuds around my chest, a rabbit with a lame back foot. The longer I wait, the longer she can think of me as her success story, a mousy little girl who struggles through high school, ends up getting a full ride to the University of Hawai‘i, earns a Ph.D. in Art History despite all the people telling her that her degree won’t get her more than a job at Starbucks, starts teaching at the university, gets tenure, and finally moves out on her own—all with the love and support from her single mother with no husband in sight. *See*, she’d tell her friends with lawyer sons and doctor daughters, *we make do*.

“Alyssa?” my mother says, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Are you there?”

“Yes.” I swallow so hard that the fear burns my throat. “I-I didn’t get tenure. The board rejected my application.”

Silence. Even the water from the showerhead seems to quiet down, giving my mother room to grieve. She thought I’d be secure, thought I wouldn’t have to worry about bills the way we did when I was growing up. Tenure wasn’t going to fix everything, but it was something, and something’s a lot better than the nothing I have now.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

My mother doesn’t respond. I edge my way toward the door, shame dripping down my neck. Then, I watch as the palm of her hand presses against the shower curtain. I take a step forward, my heart fluttering as I reach out to meet her there.



Palm by Kelly Murashige