A Perfect Score

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April Powers

Third Place in “Spark” Contest

Clarence cut his thumb off with a chop saw last summer, and it hasn’t grown back yet. His mother Nancy says it never will if it hasn’t already. Mona still has faith. She has to because she and Clarence are to be married in the spring, and she can’t marry a four-fingered man. It would ruin Clarence’s perfect score on the checklist that she made at bible camp the July after fifth grade. It was written in her best cursive on a piece of red construction paper and folded into a thick square. She kept it in the back corner of her underwear drawer, re-reading it with each new love. No one ever got a perfect score, except Clarence. He was everything, but now they didn’t match, and that was number six on the list — right between “has really white teeth” and “knows how to draw a dog that really looks like a dog.”

She had to call off the wedding, or at least postpone it, until research about bone growth or a prosthetic could be conducted. They had to match, or they had to separate. Mona hated the idea, but could not trust her delusional, lovesick self to override the list.

By mid-winter, Clarence knew that Mona doubted they would ever get married, but they got an apartment on the north side of town anyway. Mona hung pictures of the two of them. She rearranged the furniture six times before deciding none of it was worth saving. She bought an entire new set. Clarence hated the new floral couches, but he loved Mona, and Mona loved the couches.

In the evenings, the couple would lie on one of the floral couches, limbs tangled together, and watch families trying desperately to connect with spirits on the other side. Clarence thought that the dead should stay dead, but Mona desperately wanted to be a mediator between the real and the spiritual world. She tried to remember tips from the show’s host, a self-proclaimed spiritual mediation specialist. At the end of the show he would stare straight at the crowd and remind them, just before the credits rolled, to “always remember the other side is listening, so be careful what you wish for.” And the crowd would spring to their feet and explode in applause. Mona always clapped too.

When the spirit world was forgotten and King of the Hill came on, Mona went into the kitchen to make a nighttime snack. She started to slice what was left of an oily pepper jack block. She pressed it against a cutting board that was balanced on the edge of the sink. In an instant, the cheese was on the tile, the cutting board in the sink, the knife in the air, and the tip of her thumb on the counter. Blood oozed from the stub.

Notes from our judge:
The strongest aspect of this story is the writer’s ability to introduce interesting and engaging characters in a short space. Developing characters, providing back story, and carrying out a plot in such a short story is very challenging and the writer is able to accomplish all three goals in “A Perfect Score.” The character Mona, in particular, is amusing, optimistic, and somewhat absurd—she goes to Bible camp, makes “perfect husband” checklists, and is desperate to make contact with the spirit world. The author’s creation of such unique and vibrant characters makes the entire story come to life.