

Catherine Sustana
Touch

My masseuse thinks she's clairvoyant, and I'm doing my best to help her. Right now she says she's getting a color from my left shoulder. The color is . . . yellow. It's yellow. Can I think of anything important to do with yellow? The longer I take to answer, the harder she rubs. The harder she rubs, the harder it is to think.

"The sun is yellow," I finally blurt out. She has passed right over the cool silver sadness of my left hand without so much as a blink.

"Good," she says in a soothing voice, easing up on the pressure. "Now tell me about the sun." In her shift from feigned clairvoyance to feigned psychiatry, I recognize a pathetic longing to be gifted. It is the same impulse that led me, when I was a child, to imagine that I could commune with animals or move pencils through telekinesis—anything seemed possible if I wanted it badly enough.

But the masseuse is too old for this. She doesn't just long to be special; she's convinced herself that she actually is. So I find myself tempted to tell her about the sun—that it is a medium-size star 93 million miles from Earth, that it radiates both light and heat. *Chromosphere*, I want to say. *Corona*. *Photosphere*. The sun, I want to tell her, is celestial.

This massage is a gift from my daughter-in-law—a luxury, she says. An indulgence. My daughter-in-law likes luxuries, and she wants me to like them too, but her generosity is tempered with selfishness, or at least self-preservation. I know what she's afraid of. What if I fall apart? What if I move in with them now that I'm alone? What if I try to tell her how to raise her children? What if I start to dote on my son, as I have seen so many other widows do? What if I embarrass myself by trying to compete with my daughter-in-law for my son's affection?

Part of me wants to be angry with her, to resent her assumptions, to be the mother-in-law she is afraid I might become. But another part of me knows her too well—that she doubts the quality of her own love, doubts her ability to offer me anything better than what can be bought. She favors disposable or perishable gifts: imported chutneys, hand-dipped beeswax candles, vinegars laced with tarragon or rosemary, all of them gathering dust on my crowded shelves. So she has moved on to services. She told me repeatedly that this spa made the top ten lists of every major travel and leisure magazine this year, afraid I might not be able to recognize the signs.

The masseuse persists. She says she's getting red from my left leg. Of all things, red. She's trying to steer me toward anger, but I think of the obvious connections she's missing: menstruation, childbirth, love. After all, it is nearly Valentine's Day—the day of heart-shaped boxes of chocolate and overpriced roses—and I could make it easy for her. I can almost hear myself say, "I've lost the man I love." But I won't give her that.

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

My daughter-in-law will be all right, but I am less hopeful for the massage. She won't last much longer at this world-renowned spa. Red is the color of complaints rolling in, of the room closing in on her, and when it happens, she will leave here indignant that no one appreciated her talents. But not yet. For now, she will rub my back, my feet, my palms. And the room will spin and glow with the colors she thinks she sees.