

LOVE AND POLAR BEARS

She decided, spontaneously, to dye her hair.

She was in an airport, on her way home, bought one of those tiny packages of Crystal Light, in the latest trendy health flavour, Pomegranate Acai, and mixed it into her Evian. She was surprised when it came out blood red, when the colour dripped and stained her hands from the tips of her fingernails to the inside of her palm. It reminded her of being in high school. When she was 16, she dyed her hair with Kool-Aid. She'd wanted to look just like Monique Powell, the singer from the ska band Save Ferris. She used a tub of Cherry Kool-Aid, and it turned her hair fire engine red. She wore a huge zebra fun fur purse slung across her waist, and bright silver, steel toe boots. She figured she looked tough. She smoked cigarettes sitting in the lower branches of trees in the park across the street from her high school. Her friends were good students, and refused to smoke or cut class with her, even once. She learned to stop telling them what she was doing. She didn't want to drag them down with her. She didn't know what her future held then, but she didn't suppose that she was destined for the kind of greatness that they were. They were already picturing themselves in law school or med school. She knew she'd be lucky to get into university. If she got there, she had no idea what she wanted to study. She was only really good at drawing and writing poetry, and she knew that those weren't real jobs. She had no idea what she'd ever be if she grew up. Some days she wondered if she'd even live to be 21. She considered it one day, in the gazebo, sitting with the stoners, passing a joint around. She decided that if she lived to be 21, she'd throw a huge party, and travel the world. She'd actually think about things and make decisions about her life.

She was 27 now. She hadn't thought about those days in a really long time.

She decided to dye her red again, right there and then. She bought eight more packages, two

more bottles of water and ducked into the airport bathroom. It didn't take her very long. A few minutes and she had some fire engine streaks, and some blood red hands. Crystal Light worked better than Kool Aid, she discovered. You needed less of it, and it wasn't full of sugar, so it seemed less likely that bees would follow her around now.

She wanted to look like a different person. If she returned home with one of those rubber noses and fake mustaches, or better yet, if she could get reconstructive facial surgery like on those MTV reality shows, she'd probably feel better. She stared at her face in the bathroom mirror. She'd never liked it that much anyway. She'd have liked higher cheekbones, fuller lips, teeth with no gaps in them. Darker, thicker eyelashes would be nice. Eyebrows that took care of themselves. Naturally perfect skin. The kind of face a man could love. The kind of face a man would want to see every day, the kind he'd be afraid of losing. She wished he'd felt that way about her.

When she had the energy, she wished for a lot of things.

A friend told her that all everyone wanted to be was the hero of their own story. If the guy's staying with the woman he was with when he met you, he's obviously cast himself as the virtuous one, and her as the heroine, the one worth being with. You are obviously the villain here, temptation, the whore. She'd sighed, rubbed her swollen eyes to keep the tears from coming out again. Look kiddo, her friend had said more gently. I know you. Your other friends know you. We know it's not true. But this isn't your story. This is his. Hers. Theirs. You stepped into it, by mistake. In your version, you can be the one who only wanted to give, the one with the good heart. The one who only had the best intentions.

She bit her cuticles when the tears fell. When her index finger bled she got a Band-Aid.

She thought of a movie she saw a few days before, a medieval thing where a king

BY
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BOTH

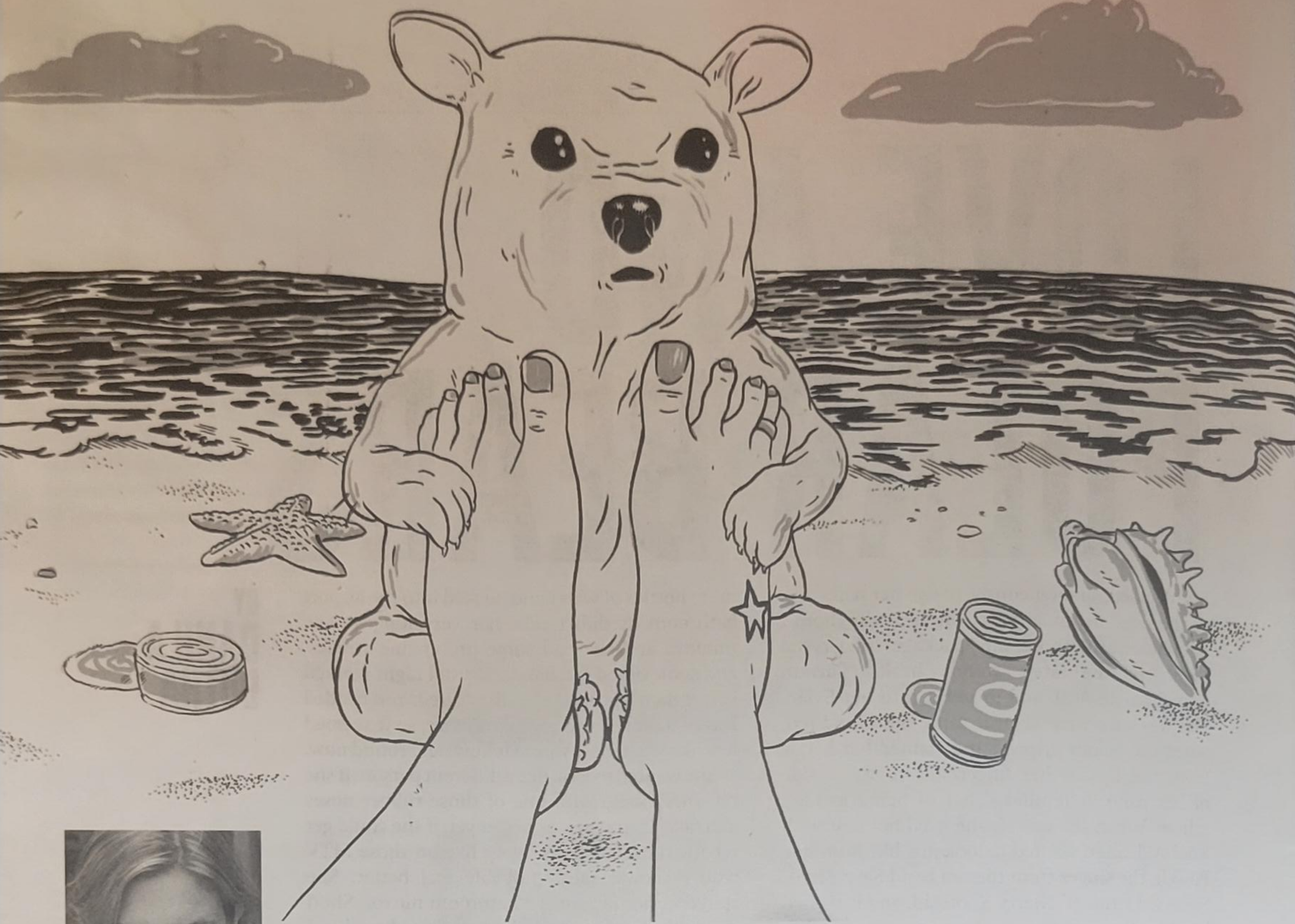
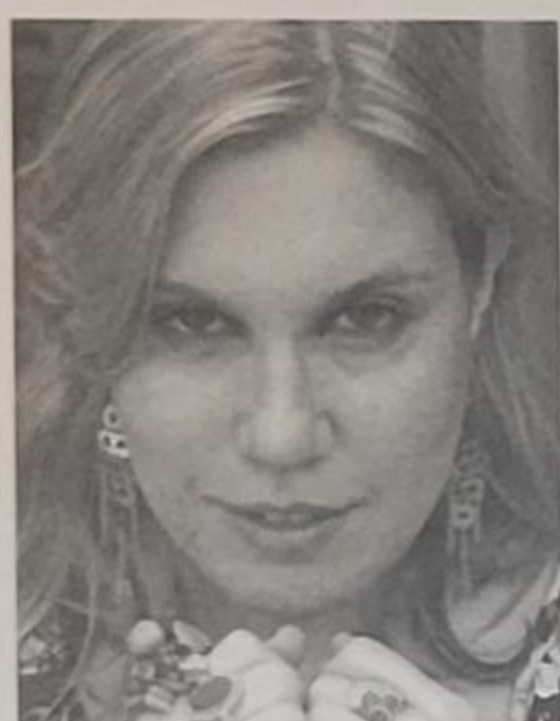


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propositioned a girl who worked for the queen. The girl protested, but the king charmed her. When his wife found out, and confronted him, the king insisted that it was the girl that came onto him. Her mouth had dropped. She hadn't known that men actually said those things when cornered.

Maybe all of this was the oldest cliché in the book. Her cheeks had burned. She felt as dumb as she had in Grade 11 science. Of course she'd ditched that class. It had taught her not to participate in things she knew she had no chance of conquering.

She stared at her shoes. She sat in the airport lounge until they called her and the other passengers onto the plane. Her hair was still damp, and she shivered.

Her flight had been delayed for three hours.

The snowfall was dizzyingly white. There was nothing pretty or individual about each snowflake. They fell in clumps, like feathers from a giant duvet. Soft, but in numbers too large to count. Out of control, like the rest of it. Her window was small, but big enough to see.

She couldn't wait for global warming to kick

in. She pictured herself on a beach, in a not too revealing bikini, with a baby polar bear at her feet. Maybe they'd learn to shed enough skin and change their diets to stay alive. She pictured its skin feeling as smooth as a seal's. She pictured them eating food from a can, or dry food like dogs, people keeping them as pets. Evolution, adaptation.

We all learn to adapt, she thought. We learn to discard our hearts, and our skins, like useless layers we no longer need to survive. We learn to expect less. We learn that what we want, and what happens, often have no correlation between them. Life just happens, whether you like it or not.

She pictured the bear with his eyes shut, beads of sweat running down its forehead. She was sure, that like the bear, it would eventually kill her too. We're not meant to survive these kinds of things, my friend, she thought, and shut her eyes as the plane took off.

Still there was a part of her that always refused to give up on love completely. A tiny spark of hope that no one could control or crush, not even herself.