etiquettes
Seth Cable

By the time of Kevin's retirement party, Lauren's entire face had become a wriggling mass of those oily black tentacles. Still, though, no one felt it appropriate to make any mention of it, out of concern for Lauren's feelings.

The whole process had begun several weeks earlier, during a conference call with the primary division in Oaxaca. The meeting had been dragging on towards the end, after everyone had already put in nearly two hours of intense work. Tempers were rising; energy was flagging. In the midst of a particularly long recitation of the rapprochement figures, Lauren let fly with a gaping - though politely silent - yawn. As she tilted her head back, a long, black filament seemed to float out from behind her tongue, hang in the air for a few seconds, and then quickly retreat back inside her as her mouth snapped shut. Although everyone had noticed, no one said anything. Some weren't entirely sure of what they'd seen anyway.

Within several days, five or six of these filaments - now grown to the approximate size and shape of linguini - were permanently hanging out of her mouth, even when closed. They would flirt about in constant motion, sometimes striking objects and people as they ventured too close, but most often directly striking Lauren herself in the face. But no matter where those oily black fingers struck, Lauren seemed to take absolutely no notice at all. Not even when one was wedged below her left eyelid - stretching it like an awning over her bottom eyelash for nearly an entire afternoon - did she make any sign of discomfort or even simple acknowledgment.

It wasn't long before they began to erupt from her nostrils, then her ears, then finally her eyes. By this time, her entire mouth was choked with a swirling wad of the things, her jaw and lips permanently distended, though barely visible through the gyrating mass. Needless to say, this greatly impaired any communication with Lauren. Though she would turn when spoken to, no one was entirely sure she could accurately hear what was being said, and of course she could give no verbal evidence of her comprehension. Nevertheless, she continued to perform her office duties to the letter.

During the retirement party for Kevin, she largely sat alone. Very occasionally, a coworker would meander by, and pretending to have just noticed her sitting there, say something like:

- Oh, hello, Lauren! How are you doing?
- gw-gwaw-gw-g-g-hhhhh-gwg
- Nice. Can you believe Kevin's retiring already? It won't be long now before
  Tom's gone too, I suppose.
- nng-gw-gw-hhhh-ngw
- Did you get any of the pie?
- nng
- Oh, well. Right. Well, talk to you later!
After a couple hours of these infrequent awkwardnesses, it was finally time for Kevin's retirement to be received. While he sat in the retirement chair, with his coworkers gathered around him, Lauren stayed to the corner where she had been sitting. She couldn't see much from where she was; her other coworkers blocked her view, and the tentacles erupting from her empty sockets had rendered her blind several days earlier. Her hearing was also impaired - though she hardly noticed anymore - and so she couldn't hear the working of the retirement blade. But, the sound of Kevin's vital essences striking the side of the empty retirement trough were sharp enough for her to detect.

For the first time, Lauren began to wonder if Kevin might have had a crush on her.