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Red Handed

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Red Handed

I

I wish I could hold her soft hands—
Trace the paint-chipped fingertips
And turn my own over to reveal
The nicks and cuts, my unaddressed despondencies.
I want to warn her of the scars to come,
Despite knowing she wouldn't believe me.

Every time she sees me, my best friend grasps my hand, our matching tattoos touching. The small peach on my left hand's index finger represents her Mandarin nickname, Peachy, while the tiny outline of a curled-up cat on her finger represents me. We walk, linked, while she jokes about how someone who doesn't know us might assume we are a couple. I am not particularly affectionate with my friends, but Alyssa is possibly the most touchy person I have ever met. She touches fearlessly, hugging people she has just met and linking arms with just about anyone. I'll never admit it to her, but I sometimes need that kind of touch. I need that effortless touch without the awkward tension of a budding romance, the greediness of a wandering hand, or the apprehensive pat on the back from a parent towards their ever-distant, ever-evolving, not-so-much-a-kid-anymore daughter. I doubt she knows holding my hand causes a cascade of chemical reactions throughout my brain. Her simple, absentminded act of affection causes cortisol to plummet and oxytocin to swell.¹ Stress fades away and happiness takes its

¹ Arts, East West College of the Healing. "Fun Facts About the Human Hand." *East West College*, 17 Apr. 2015, <https://www.eastwestcollege.com/fun-facts-about-the-human-hand/>.

place. She smiles, and I wonder if maybe I should hold hands with everyone too. Maybe she has unlocked some secret to serenity and happiness that I have yet to. Yet, while she touches hands and hearts effortlessly, I reach apprehensively, afraid of what other's hands are capable of other than holding.

II

I cling on to the fading fragments of her—

Her relentless devotion to others

Even as they stripped her barren, again and again.

I know she consoled herself; *they didn't hear you crying.*

Trust me, they did—they just couldn't care less..

I drift off, sounds dulling as my heart slows and the rhythm of my breathing deepens. My eyes flutter shut. In the distance I hear a familiar voice softly calling my name, asking if I am awake. I ignore his voice and instead embrace the lull of sleep, assuming he too will resign to rest. Then I feel hands. His hands. Reaching down, fumbling with buttons as he tries to undo my pants. Hands slipping under my clothes, grabbing me, while I stay frozen, trapped just barely behind the walls of sleep. I fake a nightmare and those hands retreat, dripping in guilt, knowing they were not supposed to be there, but they were anyway. Not the hands of one man, but two, three even. The second time I caught his hands to stop him. The third time I was just barely able to keep myself from hitting him with mine. These are not the hands of strangers, but those of people I thought were my friends. Hands I trusted. 73% of sexual assaults are committed by people the survivors personally knew. 28% of sexual assaults are committed by romantic and

sexual partners.² The hands of friends, lovers, and families are all stained red, marked guilty of abusing the people they promised to love and protect. Yet, many of those hands do not end up clinging to cold metal bars where they belong.

III

Now all I have left are the scars people stare at

I lie when they ask where they are from

Tell them a story that only she would star in

A character completely untouched by them.

There are no muscles in your fingers—only tendons. The 30 muscles controlling the hand’s movements reside throughout the palm and forearm. Each finger’s tendons are pulled by a different strand of muscle in the forearm; you can see them ripple like a wave as you move your fingers sequentially, one at a time. Yet, as all the muscles contract, the flexor tendons stretching to the tips of your fingers are pulled taut, folding the fingers forcefully toward your palm into a fist. The opposable thumb wraps around to secure this grasp, allowing humans a level of dexterity that many other animals lack. This is known as the Power Grip.³

I used this grip as I held my friend’s hands in a futile attempt to steady her and help her catch her breath. I held them even harder as she began to flail, trying to slam her head into the wall, to yank her hands out of mine so she could hit her head, pull out her hair, or tear at her skin. I forced her to grip my hands and arms instead, and her nails dug into me so forcefully that I will

² “Perpetrators of Sexual Violence.” *New Hope, Inc.*, <https://www.new-hope.org/perpetrators-of-sexual-violence/>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2022.

³ *How Do Hands Work?* Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG), 2018. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK279362/>.

have scars even when the scratches fully heal. In the moments she broke free, I pried open the grip she would secure on her flesh, hair, and anything she got ahold of, loosening her fingers bit by bit until her hands were back in mine. And I held her in that power grip for almost thirty minutes as her friend called the ambulance, hoping the paramedics would take over before my grip slipped. It was hard handing her over—at first the EMTs didn't restrain her, not understanding the severity of her breakdown and merely holding her hands gently as a gesture of comfort. She wrenched her hands free and once again showered herself with fists and claws. I helped them regain their grip on her hands until she was strapped to a stretcher and wheeled out of the room, and I kept my hand on hers until they told me I couldn't ride with her before closing the ambulance doors. I didn't fully notice the scratches covering my arms until my friend pointed them out as he picked me up. They remain stinging reminders of what happens when a person loses their grip. My hands were too tired to hold the steering wheel, so I resigned to letting him hold my hand instead as he drove me to the hospital, and he kept holding it in the waiting room as I waited for them to release my friend.

It was not the first time I experienced the use of the power grip from one person towards another. I remember the grip my ex had on my arms as he begged me not to leave. The grip he used to rip the phone from my hands as I dialed 9-1-1 after he had smashed his bedroom mirror and punched a hole through his door. He pinned my hands to the ground and cried into me, between sobs promising he wouldn't hurt me but claiming he couldn't bring himself to let me go. The bruises that surfaced the following day in the shape of his hands said otherwise. Eventually, exhaustion took over, and he collapsed, allowing me time to loosen his grip and, with shaky hands, dial the numbers. I remember staring blankly at the hands of the cop who scribbled my version of events into his notepad, and how those hands did not write anything when I told the

cop that my ex would commit suicide if left alone. They left him alone. Though the bruises healed and the memories grew more distant, the matching ring Riley gave me remains on my hand as a reminder, while its counterpart resides with him in his grave.

IV

I still grasp onto myriads of nostalgic memories
Desperately clutching her blushed cheeks
Not yet bruised, or stained by tears—
Relentlessly reaching into my mind's abyss
Trying to save a girl who no longer exists.

I am tired of using my hands defensively. Protecting my belongings, protecting others, protecting myself. I hold my purse close to my side in crowds, pull my shirt up or my skirt down, and put my keys between my fingers as I walk on the street at night. I pat my pockets before I leave my room, not for a wallet or phone, but to make sure I have a knife or pepper spray just in case. I use my hands to tie my sneakers tight, in case I have to run away, for whatever reason. I try not to break my nails, not because I want an intact manicure, but because I want to be able to scratch the shit out of someone and mark them as my attacker. I remember developing these habits as young as ten, after the catcalling started and the news stories of another girl missing began altering my understanding of the world. From thereon out, I saw the world through the lens of a woman. Prey. A potential victim. A news story, podcast feature, or Netflix documentary just waiting to happen. Now at the age of twenty, I am exhausted from the constant paranoia. I see how others who have had life handed down to them use their hands to create, to build, to climb in life. I wish I could do that without constantly worrying about others using their hands to

tear me down the moment I lower my fists. I wish I could use my hands to get what I want, to create for myself rather than constantly defend myself.

V

Even now, I see the world through her eyes sometimes;

Finding art in its chaos and violence.

I still stop to admire the glittering broken glass

She used to collect, without the fear of getting cut.

Hands are the instruments through which we express our passions and interests. As a hand dances lightly across piano keys in a concerto, it passes over a keyboard or page, bringing forth thoughts into words, into art, into meaning. I have found my fingers aided me in such endeavors, from prancing on the piano, playing notes on the clarinet, and pressing strings on the viola to wielding pencils, etching in charcoal, brushing paint on canvas, and forming clay into figure. I always admired my hands' ability to create art, even using them as a muse at times. Artists complain constantly about the difficulty of capturing the human hand, yet I found it comforting. My hands were right there, right in front of me, and I could stare at them and contort them into poses as I drew them. I can capture the bones giving them structure, the veins running like rivers just under the skin, the folds, scars, and wrinkles forming canyons and crests. I found a beautiful irony in my hands' ability to portray themselves. I love them even more for allowing me to express emotion. When I can't voice my words, my hands do the talking, somehow perfectly portraying what my lips fail to say through music, art, and writing. Though, I have found emotion can overpower the hands too. As adrenaline races through my blood, my hands tremble at a time I need stability, and the words, notes, and lines come out blurry. Years of

classical training and talent are rendered useless by our hardwired fight-or-flight survival instincts. Regardless of how humans evolve, base animal instincts prevail.⁴

VI

She was enchanted by the endearing eyes of strangers—

But captivating creatures are the most dangerous ones, I've found.

I stare at the massive paw pads pressed against the glass with fur sticking out between haphazardly, just barely concealing the hint of claws beneath. Five small ovals surrounded the oblong palm-like pad, with one extra oval off to the side—almost like a thumb, but not quite. I placed my hand against the glass, trying to spread my fingers to line up with the pads, knowing that the inch-thick bulletproof barrier would block any actual touch, but still wanting to feel a connection. Alas, the massive black and white fur ball chewing on bamboo on the other side seemed blissfully unaware of my presence or that of the other children crowding around the exhibit. I felt so far away from her despite being so close, and I wished I could reach through and hug the bear, indifferent to my parent's warnings that I would be mauled. I pulled my hand away and admired the swirling pattern of my palm print that remained over the panda's black paw before sprinting off to catch up to my family as they left.

Though Giant Pandas don't actually have opposable thumbs, one of the bones from their wrist called the carpal bone has evolved to be enlarged and act as a false thumb.⁵ Pandas are still able to move their fingers and grasp as humans do, but with a lower level of dexterity. They

⁴ "Understanding the Stress Response." *Harvard Health*, 1 Mar. 2011, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/understanding-the-stress-response>.

⁵ Ross, Heather. "10 Animals with Opposable Thumbs - And Why It's So Rare." *AZ Animals*, 14 Oct. 2021, <https://a-z-animals.com/blog/10-animals-with-opposable-thumbs-and-why-its-so-rare/>.

evolved hands to handle bamboo sticks and lift them to their mouth. Humans similarly evolved hands for gathering, and yet, look at what we have done with these hands. We built towns, cities, countries, societies, yet we destroyed our planet in doing so. Humans have wiped out nearly 60% of animal populations within the last fifty years by destroying ecosystems and overhunting.⁶ The very animals we evolved from, the animals that handed down our hands 70 million years ago which we used to build the world we are living in today, are suffering at our hands.⁷ Those who gave us life became our victims. We repeat this pattern within our own species. The women responsible for creating life have become victims in our society. Like animals, we became prey to the greed of men. To them, we are simply tools—means to an end. We are to be handled however they please. Humans will continue using our greatest tools, our hands, to create selfishly through destruction, until the only thing left to destroy is ourselves.

VII

Unburdened

⁶ Carrington, Damian, and Damian Carrington Environment editor. “Humanity Has Wiped out 60% of Animal Populations since 1970, Report Finds.” *The Guardian*, 30 Oct. 2018. *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/30/humanity-wiped-out-animals-since-1970-major-report-finds>.

⁷ “Nature’s Masterpiece: How Evolution Gave Us Our Human Hands.” *Discover Magazine*, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/health/natures-masterpiece-how-evolution-gave-us-our-human-hands>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2022.

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I lie when they ask where they are from

Tell them a story that only you would star in

A character completely untouched by them:

The unburdened version of me.

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