

HANDS

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When I am still young enough to be told when to go to bed, I sit on the green leather in the living room every night before my birthday and cry. My mother takes me in cold hands.

Someone has died. Someone who was nine has died and turned ten.

Into the bedroom she ushers me, under the covers with the stuffed rabbit whose fur is missing in quarter-sized patches across his belly, his foot, his face. My mother scratches my back and takes her voice down a rhythmic path: "*X marks the spot, with a dot, dot, dot.*"

Smooth fingernails etch patterns into my skin. The pillow swallows my face, and it smells like the lavender lotion on my mother's neck.

"Who loves you?" she says.

I know the answer; it's always the same: "You do."

I close my eyes and am in the front yard again, tapping the cicada shells on the Bradford Pear tree with the metal teeth of a rake. My sister, balancing on the tree's bent roots, looks up at me. She is a foot shorter and has the thin, breezy curls of children who have not yet turned five. I hand her a rake and she whacks at the flaking cicada carcasses.

In the fading light my mother drags her pointer finger across my back.

"*With an exclamation point, and a big question mark.*"

Under the Bradford Pear my sister begins to scream. Stamps her feet on the ground. Tears fling from her face. "*Hannah, stop screaming,*" I say, and then I feel it too, little bullets the size of pine

needles shooting up my back, through my shirt, my pants. Hannah has already run inside and I follow her. "*Sarah didn't believe me,*" she's telling my mother. Our mother takes off our shirts and gets the baking soda out of the cabinet. These are yellow jacket stings.

I press my fingernails into the cushion of my palm. Slow fingers reach the tip of my neck and pirouette back down my spine.

"*Cool breeze.*"

Our mother cakes wet baking soda onto our backs like beach sand, and we press our heads into her shoulders. Our grandmother comes over. There is one yellow jacket still hiding in the blinds, and she uses a broom to kill it.

A narrow sleeve of breath snakes through my hair.

"*Tight squeeze.*"

Our mother and grandmother take us to our beds, rubbing our backs with their baking soda-chapped hands, saying, I love you, *I love you, big girl*, and electric fingers massage my neck, the muscles around my shoulder blades.

My mother's weight disappears from the bed. The eager springs of the mattress quickly replace the hole where she had been, filling it in like water. I wonder if Hannah ever thinks about the cicadas and yellow jackets, or if something like water has filled the memory.

"Do you want your door left open or closed?" my mother asks me.

I open my eyes to a crack of light from the hall flipping onto the carpet. Slipping farther under the covers, I listen to sock feet retreat down the hallway.

The hand has heavy fingers that crawl across piano keys. It plays "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" on a baby grand. Deep chords.

"Your mother and father walked to that at their wedding," my grandmother says.

Speaking from the kitchen, head probably bent over a kitchen sink, she is a faceless woman making lemonade. *Two scoops of sugar? Or one?* When she stands over my plate, slicing oranges with juice-splattered hands, that is all I ever want to be, and when I face a

backyard audience from the cushioned springs of a trampoline, I can count the number of rings on her left hand. Now, though, if I had to draw a picture of her, I would probably forget the eyes. This is the difference between the concrete and the remembered, between the hopeful and the assured.

My grandmother taught me to play “Heart and Soul” in the second grade. I was the base, the left hand man, wrapping short fingers around carefully carved and painted slats of black and white. Her fingers fluttered across the melody, her lips forming the words *I fell in love with you, just like a fool*. The notes crossed each other in certain folds. With all its bouncing, overlapping pieces, it was a song that people played together and could sing in quiet houses without cringing from overuse. Hardly anyone played it anymore. When I sat on the piano bench with her side against me and our elbows knocking, I could tell that it was a song that really meant something.

Those were the days of backseat car rides and drawing finger art in the fog on the windows. In the afternoons I took piano lessons from a lady in a room filled with floral furniture and stale-smelling carpet. It smelled like it had been wedged between closet doors for days and she slapped it on the floor right before I got there. Against the wall that hid the kitchen was the upright piano with chipping wooden keys. I played the notes for “Merrily We Go Along” for the third week in a row, trying to make it faster and therefore more impressive. This was what I would play at my recital a few weeks later, and everyone sitting in those fold-up chairs in the recital hall would have to clap. I was the first to go onstage and the youngest beginner, playing a song that required only three of the fingers on my right hand.

After the recital I found myself in black tights buckled into the backseat of my mother’s car, clutching the program between short fingers. The words were etched in black ink into the space next to my name, the name of the song that people would remember when they thought of me, the name which meant to me that I was stuck. It was the first song in all the beginner books, and everyone knew that. I wedged the program between the seat cushions, hiding the names of all those who had done it better.

In my grandmother’s living room I pump out the chords on the

baby grand. This is the song of progression. This is the song that means I have moved from here to there. I imagine my mother walking down the aisle to meet my father: white veil, big puffy sleeves atop her shoulders. They would have kissed. How did one kiss in that day? In public. How did one kiss in public in that day?

The melody peaks and slows. A surge of passion. The corners of lips curving and parting, the tension in cheeks falling: the courtesy of restraint.

The quick and heavy wind from a metro whizzes by. All the people of the city my mother warned me not to face alone hurry past like they are counting footsteps, checking off faces with quick steps like they are boxes on a medical survey. I have brought one jacket and a pair of gloves. I pull everything tightly around me.

For the first time in my life I boarded a plane by myself, sat beside a man whose jacket smelled like a sweatshop. He had glanced at the book on the life of St. Francis that a friend had loaned to me that was sitting in my lap. I introduced myself as we snapped the seat buckles into place. “Tell me,” he said, “do you think there’s life outside of earth? I mean, do you think that we’re the only ones that exist?”

“I really don’t know,” I said. “I guess I haven’t given it much thought.”

“There’s no way,” he said. “All those Christians out there, thinking we’re so special that we’re the only ones in the universe God would’ve made. Think about how big the universe is. That’s impossible.”

“It’s a pretty big world out there.”

“You believe in God?” he said.

“This book is about the life of St. Francis more than anything,” I said. “He had a pretty interesting prayer life.”

“That doesn’t mean everyone has to think so,” he said.

“I wasn’t implying that it did.”

All the trees of the Appalachian out the window rotated beneath us as we flew over North Carolina, all their canopies merging unobtrusively into cropland and then the crisscross of city streets as we approached DC. In an instant I was thrust back into my childhood,

dropping plastic cherries in a blue bucket for a board game called Hi Ho Cherry-O, slapping red tokens onto the black squares of a checkerboard. I opened my book and tried to forget myself there, aware the whole time of the scrutiny of the bearded man beside me and his questions: *Do you believe in God?*

In the underground tunnel of the metro I grip my bag around my shoulder, fold my ticket in one hand. Instead of feeling accomplished like I thought I would, I feel like my feet are sinking into the cement. This ticket is the only thing buying my way from this road to the next: a little stub with the time printed on it. The hand that holds it is so different from the way that it was, dry and knobby now with a thousand fine lines etched into the skin like transparent maps.

The hand rests its fingers across a black-panted knee. A cool draft whistles through the slats between big-blocked cement: *Do you know?* it asks. *Do you know who loves you?* Behind station windows trains glide past, dozens of metro cars with glazed-over doorframes and faces inside that never stop holding their breath. A quarter, a ticket. The train stops, slides the door open: Get in quick. It will not stop for you.

The summer before my third year in college I kissed a boy in the grass beside a muddy lake. Was scared I had strawberry between my teeth. I braided a Hispanic girl's hair in an old Lutheran church building and watched the boy play piano in the sanctuary. Light fading in through tinted glass. Dark shadows under the pews.

A week later I took the girl to the pool and bought her macaroni and cheese in a restaurant with covered booths and plastic menus. Then I dropped her off at the house with her mother and brother, a deep red curtain draped over the doorway between the kitchen and living room. The girl sat across from her mother on the sofa, propped an elbow on the armrest.

"How do I say, 'I love your daughter'?" I asked. "How do I say, 'I would love to take her out one more time before her birthday'?" They laughed against the cushions, their hands over their mouths. *Muchas gracias. Mucho gusto.*

Against the bushes in the Wal-Mart parking lot a man with a toothless grin played the guitar. His white beard was so long it tickled his

knuckles when he played. When I drove past him, he opened his mouth, flashing a wide, crooked grin.

“I’m going to stop and listen to him one day,” I said to the boy who sat in the car with me.

The summer days clicked by like camera shots, and those two promises I didn’t keep. The little girl and the bearded guitarist, I never saw either again. And they reminded me of the things that I’m missing, the things I’m forgetting, all those silent birthdays, shivering red curtains, a hopeful musician howling at a lot full of cars.

In the beginning I was a small body whose legs were tucked into pajamas with the feet in them and in the end that is now I am fully grown and walk in the side door at the retail store so I don’t have to look at the man who is ringing the Salvation Army bell. I can feel the money in the corners of my pockets, thrice folded bills and gas station quarters that I won’t give up. Like I don’t have loose change to spare. Like a five dollar bill hasn’t been sitting beside a grocery store receipt in the cup holder of my car for over a month now. I have resolved to buy a navy dress instead of giving to the Salvation Army pot and I must dispense this information to no one. I slip into the department store, unnoticed.

In a dream I find my cousin at her daughter’s sixth birthday party, the walls decorated in lights and her lips are lights. I walk to her and she cannot talk to me; she is cutting a white cake and holds her daughter’s hand so she doesn’t put a finger in the icing. A short-gaited man walks over to me, digging his hands out of his jean pockets, puts one of his arms around my waist and says so low he has to put his lips on my ear, “Can you go and get my wallet out of the car?” His breath is hot on my neck. This is my husband.

I toss the dress onto the counter for the woman behind it who scans the barcodes with a red laser gun. These are the people that have told me not to get my hopes up, tossing receipts into crinkly plastic bags, tucking the tags underneath shirt collars so that at least my things will be folded when I open them up at home. I watch their hands move across the keypads, skin stamped by unassuming scars in the narrow shapes of pine needles and caramel colored spots from the sun, and I can’t pretend that I don’t know what they are saying. The beginning is much like the

end, you know, and all the forgotten fallacies in between: a load of trash that grew heavy because nobody took it to the road for pickup, a stain on the carpeted stair someone never wiped away. But as I take my plastic bags and pull them a little higher to my chest so they won't whack my knees when I walk, I can't help but think that that may be wrong. What if this life will be so great we won't even know what to do with ourselves in five years? That we'll fall in love over and over and begin to caress the faces of walls we hadn't realized sheltered us?

In hushed memories on my way out the sliding doors and into the parking lot, I face the little girl and a ceramic bowl of macaroni and dig my fingernails into the cushions of my palms. I see the smoky jacket of an airplane passenger on a flight to DC, the chipping keys of an upright piano, and the marble-eyed rabbit I slept with until I was eighteen. I can hear my mother's hushed laughter now as she tosses her fingers through my hair: Who loves you? Blades of sunlight cut across all the edges of the asphalt, and part of me wonders if the things that haunt me are the very things that may one day forgive me and I should rather open my hand than cut it off. The bearded man has stopped playing his guitar, but I hear someone picking up where he left off. I think it's behind the radio static. I think it's inside my throat.

As I ride home from Charlotte with the one I had almost loved, I press my fingers to the window glass and sing somebody else's words: "We will overcome the apathy that has made us."

"Don't you love that?" I say. I'm looking at skyscrapers as I say it, all their lights shooting in a million different directions, piercing the sky, piercing people and all the lives that pass through the windows behind which I cannot see. People are stowing away information in there, stowing away their own lives, and I know it's their eyelids and not streetlamps that are blinking at me like lights.

When I get back I will have somebody's covered couch to sleep on, somebody's downstairs sink to use for brushing teeth and taking off this silver powder I have put on my eyes. Somebody will find me in the morning before she pours cinnamon-coated flakes into a bowl with milk; I will not even be the first to open my eyes. My "hello" will be a response to the offer of an extra blanket, another steady step in the rhythm

of being neither first nor last but always pushing each other into movement.

I look at the boy. He is chewing the end of a red gas station straw, letting the end hang across his bottom lip.

“Don’t let it bother you,” he says. “It’s just the way people are.”

He wraps thick fingers around the steering wheel. The window pulls my head away, back to the lights.