

Dancing

Rachel Robertson

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1

He hands me words like a bunch of flowers—finesse, equilibrium, divergence. They seem to scent the air with optimism. We talk into a topic, and through it. He is lyrical and philosophical; I am ironic and teasing. I take his words, though, hold them close.

We drink French wine with Thai food and his fingers itch to take notes as we talk. Then he sits at his computer and types away with his hands splayed in an odd position that must be from never learning to touch type.

Later, I find three pumpkin seeds scattered on the floor, slipped from his fingers like green confetti.

The next day he is gone.

2

My son's hands fascinate me with their long-fingered elegance, the way they flare around the knuckles. They are not my hands, nor his father's, but remind me of my sister sitting at the piano, pausing before she begins a slow movement from a Beethoven sonata.

3

Hands in my family are never still. There is always a thrumming or a drumming or a twisting or a stroking. Fingers fret thumbs, hands clasp one way then another, palms are run down the side of the body, forefingers twirl cowlicks in neck hair. It is like a mute orchestra, filling the air with movement in place of sound.

Sometimes I wonder what desperate messages our hands are telegraphing.

Hands in my family are simply decorated. The men shun jewellery; one or two modest rings are the pattern for women. The rings are usually silver with a single gem of a warm colour—pink or red or purple. Some of the women wear an engagement ring with small diamonds and some a wedding band. Always, it is kept plain.

When I wear green nail polish on Christmas Eve, eyebrows are raised.

4

Every morning, just after breakfast, our hands do a ritual dance. I lay out our equipment, slip the covers off the needles and syringe. He breaks the glass tops off the bottles of saline and powder. Smoothly, as if choreographed, my fingers glide, draw up the saline and release it into the powder, once, twice, again, drawing it up, changing the needle, handing it to him. Tap, tap, he clears the bubbles, holding it in front of the light, while I pick an area of my leg, swab it with a sterile wipe. The needle enters neatly, his hand steady as the sting hits me and I grimace. The cotton wool, some tape, the remnant glass goes into the bin, the needles in a jam jar for safe disposal. It takes us less than five minutes. I am pleased with our proficiency, as if this will help, will somehow magic up a baby.

The dance of the hands, fifteen years ago now—precursor to the boy with the beautiful fingers.

5

The man of the word-bouquet has a beard and thick body hair. I first noticed his arms when I sat next to him in a seminar and saw the march of hair down the ulna. If he had worn a long-sleeved shirt that day, we may never have become friends.

When there is no man in my life, the touch I miss most is my hands stroking the hair on a man's chest.

6

My son's father is a man of few words. He has a neat way of summing up a complex situation with a single phrase. He is never playful or profligate with words. He is a man grounded in his body, good with his hands. He is practical, not abstract.

My son and I, however, are both air-filled, impractical people. We are great talkers. Stories are my stock in trade: effect follows cause. My son's talk is rhetoric, not story. He repeats himself and others, uses questions, circles round again and repeats it all the next time. There is a kind of looping art in his way of speaking, a logic that only he understands.

7

I read in *Scientific American* that nail-biting is heritable. All through my childhood, my parents and siblings nagged me to stop biting my nails. My mother painted them with a bitter substance that was supposed to teach me to stop the habit. I couldn't stop, though; I simply tried to do it in private. Nobody mentioned that my father also bit his nails. In adulthood, my habit waned but I continued to revert to nail-biting when stressed until I first moved in with the man of few words. This was the month after my father died; again, a coincidence never alluded to.

My son also bites his nails or chews his fingers, but more often, he will hold something in his hand and fiddle with it, tossing it in the air, swapping it from hand to hand and moving it around his fingers without cease. It may be the lid of a pen, a twisted paperclip, a small magnet, or a bottle top. Very rarely does he fiddle with the squeezable stress balls that are designed for just this purpose. The constant movement drives me crazy and I often find myself removing the object from his hands and placing it in the bin. Of course, five minutes later he has picked up some other object, so we both know my actions are pointless. We both know I must just let his fingers sing their mad percussive song.

8

Four women sit around a table in a café. We have finished our morning's work and we are now chatting about personal matters. I mention my age and the youngest woman is surprised:

'You look younger,' she says. I laugh and show her the back of my left hand.

'You see,' I say, taking her own hand and turning it over next to mine, 'that's how you tell a woman's age.' The other two women put their hands, palms down, into the centre of the table and there is a moment of silence. We register that we are each in a different decade of our life and that our hands tell of this more eloquently than anything else.

The youngest woman is pregnant and she looks shocked. It is as if she only just realises that she is about to step across a milestone and become someone newly-old, a version of her own mother perhaps.

9

Not long after my son was born, I started to stand by the kettle, hands around it as it began to heat. I couldn't work out why I was suddenly adopting this habit, which I recognised as something my mother also did. At first I thought it was because I was subconsciously copying my mother's behaviours. Then I realised it was because my hands were often cold, just as my mother's hands were in my childhood. I had reached the age when the circulation no longer works as well and I was up early in the cool mornings with the baby.

Occasionally, I catch myself repeating another of my mother's characteristic hand movements, where she lays her right hand across the left side of her neck, clasping the collar of her shirt. I remember her standing, staring out of the kitchen window for long periods of time, one hand at her neck, the other flat on the sill. We could call her name or even tug her skirt and she would seem unaware of our presence.

10

My son's hands are always warm. He still lets me sit next to him and clasp palms, my fingers interleaved with his. Sometimes there is a surprise package there—a small spring or a metal button. If I ask where he got it, he will reply, 'I just found it,' gesturing with his other hand like a magician conjuring flowers.

At heart, we are both optimists.