

[Home](#)

[Spring 2009](#)

[Autumn 2008](#)

[Summer 2008](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)

THE WORK OF HANDS

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The gloves--latex and opaque--were to him as a second skin. Through them, the form of his hands showed, rather small (he was not a tall man) and short-nailed. It was only when they performed the dexterous movements of surgery that they seemed in any way remarkable. Otherwise, gloveless, they were simply tools for living. When they were not in use, the owner held them close to his body. He never shook people's hands if he could help it. With something like a musician's vanity and sense of self-preservation he took care to withhold them from harm's way.

Though he was not yet forty, he had already made a name for himself in pioneering a new kind of surgery that had revolutionized his field. He was respected and lauded, used to hearing himself described as a genius and brilliant and this accorded with his inner vision of himself. He did not, however, consider himself to be arrogant. He was merely doing the best work he knew how to do and it was helping people. His work was his life.

When he was not in surgery he was making rounds at the hospital or seeing patients in his office. He also traveled frequently and widely, to give lectures and to train other surgeons in his technique. He was rarely home and his house, despite the best of furnishings, had a sterile unlived-in quality. It was kept in perfect order aside from the guest room he used as a study where no household help was allowed to enter. There, papers were piled on the bed and desk, abstracts of articles, notes for lectures and data for his ongoing studies. When he returned home, he found his own bed turned down for him by his unseen housekeeper, as if his home were a hotel.

He was an attractive man; women were drawn most of all to his eyes which were intensely dark and penetrating. But his relationships often ended in disappointment, ill-sustained by his long hours. He often felt women were interested in him only as an accessory to their lives, like a prestige piece of estate jewelry. They liked the (perceived) glamour of dating a surgeon without appreciating or understanding the demands his work placed on him and his time. If he had to cancel dinner abruptly or leave in the middle of a show he could tell they resented it and he resented their resentment. Because he had a heavy OR schedule, he had to go to bed early, "like a little boy," one of them had said disdainfully. So with the end of each relationship he congratulated himself on never having married and renewed his vow never to do so.

How could he expect anyone to understand that his work required everything of him, the fatigue of the body and the mind's fierce concentration, and moreover, that he gave this willingly day after day? He didn't believe the woman existed who could appreciate his devotion to his work and not feel like she was being neglected. Many doctors he knew solved the problem by dating within the profession, finding among nurses and staff sympathetic partners, but he abstained from any such involvements, not wanting to encumber his work place with emotion. More and more he longed for intellectual companionship, or, for want of a better word, a soul-mate. He wanted a woman to match his own brilliance, to return a scintillation, like an answering heliograph.

Since he was lonely, he occasionally dated women who, though he did not love them for their minds, satisfied his physical needs. But the union was so unmysterious and did not arouse his imagination and engage his mind, as did the mystery of the human body he had studied and knew as a physician. The physical functions laid bare could not help but give an impression of uniformity to people. Often he was possessed of a curious double vision in which the external physique of the woman and her internal organs were both apparent, as if he were lifting the film from the page of an old textbook that depicted successive layers of tissue and organs. He remembered well the first consummation for him as a young medical student. It was during his first autopsy when life was revealed to him below the skin. His hand trembled, it is true, in making the first incision, but not (as with his fellow students) from ineptitude and indecision as to the proper technique. No, it was with the joyful tremulousness of a lover. He had anticipated a revelation and was not disappointed. Every surgery for him was still a mastering of that initial mystery.

One evening at a charity art auction for the new wing of the hospital it happened that he did meet a woman who interested him. He was standing rather bored at one end of the hall when she approached him and startled him by greeting him as a fellow artist. He assured her she was mistaken; he was a surgeon. He recognized her, however, as an artist whose work was featured in the auction.

But she, smiling, continued: "We both work with our hands--surgeon means 'working with the hand' and artist used to be a word for physician but it's much more than that, isn't it doctor?" She paused and he was able to look at her more closely instead of attending only to her words. She wasn't more beautiful than other women he'd known, but there was something in her manner, her sense of self-importance that impressed him. "We work with our souls; we are a vessel for our art, our work. The difference is that you are richly remunerated for your art, while I am not." Her tone was light and bantering, but her words were serious.

"But tonight " He gestured to the pieces that had sold.

She laughed and he was charmed. "Tonight is a marvelous exception."

He lifted his wine glass to her. "I'm very impressed with your work. And grateful for the proceeds. I'll be performing surgery in the new wing."

"Yes, I know. You're the director. I was here for the speeches."

He asked for a guided tour of her work and she obliged, stopping to comment on several sculptures and paintings as well. Many of the sculptures were large and spiralling and he imagined her hands smoothing their contours, adding their print to the

moist clay or plaster. He could envision her at a canvas, the way she would stand back with her brush held in suspension, like a baton before the downbeat, before she stepped forward to paint. As he listened to her talk about her art he became more and more attracted to her. Here was a woman who had her own life's work. A woman of true brilliance. They were almost the same height and this coincidence made him feel even more that they were equals. By the end of the evening it was agreed between them (without having spoken of it) that they would leave the party together. They went to his home.

They talked until late, far later than his usual cautious hour, about their respective work. She drew him out from his usual reticence; he had habituated himself to not talking about his work with his companions. He became animated and gestured, his hands' motions now a gloss to his discourse. "What I do is like an artist's work in its exacting application. It is so intricate, so precise. Part of it is technique that can be taught, but that doesn't ensure someone can do it." And she, meanwhile, was nodding in approbation, in agreement. "I know. I give lessons myself. I even teach life drawing to medical students. I can teach the skills of painting or sculpture, but it requires talent and that," she tipped her wine glass towards him for emphasis, "can't be taught."

They talked and smiled. They sought each other's eyes. They were in collusion against the untalented, the uninitiated.

They sat close together on the sofa and her knees, drawn up, touched his thigh. He set down his glass so that he could begin to caress her, but she preempted his movement and took up his hands. She turned them over, as if evaluating them clinically. He felt almost nervous he knew she had a knowledge of the structure of bones and muscle; she would have to as an artist. She then held them up to measure them against her own. "Look! They're almost the same size." And he was relieved by her delight. Suddenly she began to kiss his hands, small close-pressed kisses that seemed to mark his flesh as hers. She withdrew her lips but still held his hands thoughtfully, possessively. He looked at her questioningly.

"Your hands do the work for your mind. They're the humblest part of you."

No other woman had regarded his hands as special, except for the thought of what they might give or provide. He gratefully returned her kisses (weren't her hands just as worthy of veneration?) and inhaled eagerly the slightly acrid odor of paint and clay that had permeated her skin and was now more intoxicating to him than any perfumed lotions. Her skin was somewhat dry from many washings with harsh soaps, but that only increased his respect and desire for her; her hands had a purpose, unlike others he had held that were soft and falsely manicured, for show. Pampered to no purpose aside from sexual.

When they took their pleasure from each other it was with an aggressive familiarity and ease usually only afforded to long-term lovers. It was almost a narcissistic act, since they were loving in each other what they esteemed most in themselves.

It would seem they were suited for each other. But she, when he thought to call, was in her studio and would not be disturbed and he, when she was free, was never home.

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