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Our Hero Was Not Crazy

by Brian Conlon

First, he shaved his knuckles, then, he plucked the hair out with tweezers, next, he tore at his skin with his untrimmed fingernails, finally, he cut off his hands with a steak knife. The first hand was easier. He simply took up the knife with his right hand (still attached) and began to saw. It stung when he first broke the skin, and the sight of the first drop of blood made him shiver. However, he was determined to get rid of that beastly hair that made him look like a caveman, a Neanderthal, someone not deserving of her love. So he sawed away vehemently, the knife beginning to cut through the bone, slowly but steadily as the blood gushed forth and stained his gray suit crimson.

He knew he might die during his cosmetic procedure, so he thought he ought to wear a suit to make it easier on the funeral director. He had picked out the funeral home the day before just in case. It was a nice place for what he could afford; there were even a few local celebrities buried there. Like George Sampo, the town's most famous poet, who authored three outstanding poems in the summer of 1968 before jumping off a bridge, high on LSD, cutting his right pinky toe on a rock, and bleeding out due to his hemophilia. Or Greg Calompton, widely regarded as the greatest construction worker in the state from 1975-1988, when his quickly eroding skills led the Governor to appoint him as the first ever Secretary General of Construction. Our hero tried to put a down-payment on a casket, but the funeral director refused to accept it.

"Only plots for sale today, sir. You don't look so bad in any case. Never too early, I understand."

It was never his intention to kill himself; he was just cognizant of the possibility, maybe even the likelihood, that despite his precautions, he just might die. But once he cut that last bit of bone away from his left arm, he somehow knew that he would make it through. His left arm was bleeding profusely, so he covered the nub with some paper towels, strapped on with two strong rubber bands, before taking up the knife again with his right hand and putting the handle in his mouth. He knew this would be difficult, but he had practiced earlier on the stiffest carrot he could find and was able to cut through that without incident. He lowered his head, already dizzy from the loss of his left hand, and began stabbing with the knife, holding his right wrist as steady as he could, while the first chunks of flesh began to tear off. He found that if he moved his arm while keeping the knife still it was more effective than trying to saw with the knife while keeping his arm still. The blood spotted his face and stained his teeth; his tongue was getting restless wanting to clear the thick salty blood. But there was nothing that it could do: the knife had to be held in place, or else who

knows what would happen. The knife began to crust over with blood and flesh and that bit of carrot he never cleaned off. He was just about at bare bone, but it had taken him over an hour and the dizziness was getting more persistent.

He knew he would pull through, as he always had. Our hero was by no means a quitter. He had been cut from his high school basketball team four times, he applied to the same sixteen colleges three years in a row until finally getting accepted by his fifteenth choice, and he had asked her out on a date forty-seven times this past year.

She said no every time, but was somehow polite about it, until a few weeks ago. It was then that he discovered his fatal flaw, the reason he was not good enough for her, and maybe, not good enough in general.

“You really want to know why? Fine, if it will get you to stop, I’ll tell you.”

“Please do, I can change you know.”

“It’s your hands, okay! I just can’t take men with hairy hands. Something about it just freaks me out. Like, I would have said yes just once to be nice, maybe even have showed up. But I simply can’t, not with those hands.”

He thought about the smile she would have when she saw him without the one trait that was keeping him from her. Their relationship was complicated; that is, he knew where she worked and she did not get a restraining order against him. These two necessary, but not sufficient, conditions led to the current gruesome scene.

He redoubled his efforts, trying to move his head up and down and his right arm from side to side. This lasted about six minutes, until he felt himself fading away into unconsciousness. He was so close (he could taste it? No, I agree, poor taste) to his goal that he refused to let himself fade. He dropped the knife, crawled over to the sink, turned the cold knob with his blood-stained teeth, and put his head under the faucet. He soaked himself till his teeth turned pink and his lips turned blue, swishing his head back and forth, until his hair dripped water into his eyes. All the while one hand dangled limply and the other lay on his plastic cutting board. He was reinvigorated and stooped back to the floor, grabbed the crusty knife with his teeth (there were other knives on the kitchen counter, but why sully another knife?), and assiduously returned to the matter at hand (unintentional, I promise).

He was not crazy. He had exhausted all other options. The day after he was notified of his short-comings, he bought a men’s razor with seven blades, not because a notable track-star promised that “seven is better than less than seven,” but

because he truly thought independently that “seven is more than six, or even five.” That night he carefully shaved his hands from finger tip to wrist and even scrapped off a bit of forearm hair unintentionally. He did this three times, applying shaving cream on one, and then the other, until he was convinced that his hands were as they ought to be: handsomely hairless.

The next day he went to Pavlov’s Pantry, an oddly addictive bakery with strange paintings of Freud on the wall. The paintings were strictly black and yellow, unless one looked closely enough to see the blue muffins subtly floating in the background. She worked at the bakery in order to pay for the school she might one day attend, or else she worked there to subsist, or else she worked there as a type of joke on her parents, the stock brokers, or else she worked there in order to lead on our hero, or else she worked there because she knew it was as close as she would ever get to majoring in psychology, or else she worked there for the free two-day-old bread, or else she worked there in order to avoid appearing needy, or else she worked there because one day her prince would walk through the front door and order a blueberry muffin and a side of cream cheese (there had to be something mysterious about him!) and she would know him by his sharp angular jaw line. In short, she had many reasons to work there, but our hero had only one reason to go there, and that was her. He scrambled up to the counter, donning a scarf he found in the back of his closet. He thought it was left there by the previous tenant, but was not entirely sure. A scarf might be just the thing to make him appear refined, but not this scarf. The thread was bare and it was covered in colorful sailboats, there was even a gold treasure chest floating in between the red and purple boats. She snickered as he approached. He placed his hands on the counter in triumph.

“Notice anything different about me?”

“Why yes, captain. Was it a red sky last night?”

“No, maybe. Look at my hands.”

“Oh, isn’t that cute, look at the little stubble.”

“Stubble? Last night they were . . .”

It was true, even an uncaring observer could see the tiny black hairs trying to reemerge from under his knuckle-skin.

“Nice try, though. Sorry, me hardy, can’t be me first-mate with that, now can we?”

He hung his head and ordered a blueberry muffin. She asked him if he wanted butter, and he said he was not even sure he wanted the muffin.

Not defeated, our hero considered his options. He thought he might pluck the hair out with precision tweezers, but he would have to wait for it to grow back. There were infomercials on TV for hair removal systems, but he thought those products were ridiculous, and more expensive than you were lead to believe, what with shipping and all. "What's a few more days of watching my knuckle-hair grow if it will lead to her?" he thought. So he sat around his apartment, staring at his hands, daring each follicle to show itself, until a few days later he felt that there was sufficient growth to break out the tweezers.

The tweezers he decided to use had been his grandfather's. His grandfather gave them to our hero on his ninth birthday, solemnly instructing, "You will need these someday," much to the disappointment of our nine-year-old hero who would have preferred a basketball. He often wondered, even today, if those tweezers had been a basketball, would he have made the team?

The tweezers were still in excellent condition. Our hero made sure to have them professionally cleaned every three months by a local silversmith, Reginald Berman, who had developed the cleaning business because hand-crafted silver-ware was no longer as popular as it once was a couple centuries ago. Our hero was Berman's most consistent customer and had even been given a discount when he had brought in an old bracelet his mother had given him. "For you, same price as the tweezers!"

Our hero had never actually used tweezers before, other than to remove the occasional splinter he had earned during a wood-working class he took between high school and college. However, he was confident that he understood the basic functionality and could apply the same logic to hair that worked so well with wood. There is a philosophical question about whether wood and hair are logically equivalent under the skin of a human being (there is also an existential question about whether hair even exists under the skin if it fails to reach the surface), but our hero did not really consider this important, and truthfully it may not have been a philosophical question at all, but a biological one!

He carefully removed the tweezers from the white linen sheath his grandfather bought especially for them. Our hero began plucking from right to left starting with his right pinky. The first run through went less smoothly than the final one, but that was to be expected. He was very careful to make sure that if the hair was not pulling correctly he would let go and retry rather than force the issue and leave half-cut hairs that she would surely notice. Half-cut hairs were not an option; she would know, and there would be no telling how long half-cut hairs could impede his progress. The magnifying glass did not come out until the third round. He carefully scoured every pore, until he was satisfied.

The next morning our hero, scarless, returned to Pavlov's

Pantry and proceeded to wait in line for fifteen minutes. A man and a woman, both 5'8", both between 140 and 150 pounds, both wearing plaid shirts and jeans two sizes too small, both in canvas shoes, the woman donning a light pink baseball cap and the man carrying a green fabric bag, smaller than a duffel, but larger than a purse, argued loudly about who would pay for their baked goods. Of course, each asserted that they should pay, for as we all know, it is all together unseemly to claim the opposite. Our hero spun on his left leg, as their voices rose, and made a pirouette in order to face the drinks directly behind him. He was surprised to find there were now six flavors of milk and although each container of orange juice consisted of exactly sixteen ounces and was "100% pure" they ranged in price from \$1.19 to \$3.97. The male component of the couple bit his pomegranate muffin ferociously, "So what do you have to say about that?" he exclaimed. The female yelled, "This is why we're not going to Las Vegas for Thanksgiving!" For some reason this silenced the male who extended his hand to indicate, "Go ahead, you can pay." As the woman proudly handed over a five-dollar bill, the man caught our hero's eye and shrugged his shoulders hoping to engender fraternal sympathy. Our hero replied, "Pomegranate, huh?"

Our hero approached the counter tentative, but hopeful, as the couple left and she finally noticed him. He slid his hands up the glass display case, smudging the case so that the next customer could not tell whether the third rack from the left was filled with raisin scones or blueberry croissants.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Sorry, just trying to get used to these things."

"Alright, alright, let's see them."

He placed his smooth hands on the counter and tapped his untrimmed fingernails in anticipation. She took up his left hand in her latex-covered fingers and began the examination.

"Oh, I think I see one." She pulled on a short hair about an inch above his left wrist. Our hero winced, but felt a tinge of joy at the fact that his hand was in hers.

"Ah, there's another and on the knuckle too. We can't be having that. The knuckles are the hardest, I know." She grabbed his right index finger. He bit his tongue and settled his gaze on her hands, though they were yellowed because of the gloves, they were still perfect to him.

"I think I see another," she began rubbing his right pinky with her left middle finger, cradling the inside with her thumb.

"I think I feel something."

Me too, he thought.

She then let go of his hand, cognizant of the gaze of the baker who had just finished off a batch of biscuits with a sprinkle of sesame seeds. The baker smirked, made a mental note of the sound our hero's hands made as they fell onto the counter, and shoved the biscuits into the oven. The sound reminded the baker of his days in law school. It was the same sound his Contracts textbook made when he threw it against the wall, following a particularly difficult passage relating to the famous case of *Hawkins v. McGee*.^[1] During his second week of law school, the baker read *Lochner v. New York* for his Constitutional Law class and decided that working 60 hours a week in a bakery sounded much better than distinguishing cases. Though it had been sixteen years since he read *Lochner*, the baker had never once worked more than fifty hours in any given seven-day period.

Our hero rubbed his hands together, looked her in the eye and said, "I'm sorry, I can do better."

"Just give up, man," the baker murmured.

"I'm sure you can." She grabbed a brown clump of hair that had fallen over her green eyes, unrestrained by her glossy powder blue headband, and petted it back into place.

Our hero walked back to his apartment uneasily. She had never touched him before. He thought, if it were not for his meddling hands he would have long since been able to enjoy the sustained bliss which he experienced only fleetingly as she examined him. These hands had, up until a few weeks ago, been undercover, pretending to be useful, helping him with his laundry, feeding him, allowing him to easily change the television channels. He should have known when they filled out most of the bubbles on the SATs incorrectly, provided him with the illusion that he could play basketball, and cracked each other in the movie theater causing all the old ladies in attendance to unite in an emphatic "shh," that his hands had been out to get him the entire time.

He opened his apartment door, clapped on his lamp, and began to scratch at the spot she had pointed out with his right index and middle finger nails. He could not remember the last time he trimmed his nails, but they were longer than his mother's had been when she broke them playing tether ball with his father, who after losing the first few points may have been taking it too seriously. He dug his nails in until his skin gave way and the soreness of his enemy began to bloody his other enemy. He had now turned both of his enemies against each other, something that even Hitler did not accomplish (or maybe he did, but then decided to stop feigning friendship with Stalin in favor of attempting the same invasion another short European failed at one hundred and thirty years earlier). When our hero was finished his hands were a bloody mess and they

both ached terribly. There was no hair to be seen, however.

The next morning he checked for hair on the crusty mess that was once his hands, then his enemies, and now wounded, but still holding him back with pain and itching. He did not find any, but was not convinced that these hands would be less repulsive than the hairy ones he had hopefully discarded. He decided to wait for his hands to heal, until it was possible to determine if the hair had been vanquished once and for all. During the following three days his hands healed remarkably well, while our hero restrained from picking the scabs that tormented him (another indication that they were still out to get him). He saw it on that third day, a dark coarse blackness poking through his still red left knuckle pointer finger.

This is where Truman held back MacArthur, where Lincoln unleashed Sherman, where Napoleon continued on towards Moscow. Would he cross the threshold and vanquish his enemies, or would he recall the troops and cut his loses? He felt like he did the third time he was cut from the basketball team; though the coach had said, "Don't try out next year," he knew that he could make it. We already know what he decided, so no more war metaphors for the time being, we'll rejoin our hero where we began this digression, right after he had been reawakened by his faucet.

The paper towels where his left hand once hung were soaked through and the blood was dripping slowly onto the kitchen floor. He continued to saw at his right wrist with the crusted-over knife, his face re-slathered with the blood which was alternately dripping and flowing out the end of his right arm. The bone was chipping away, but far too slowly, the dullness of the blade and the weakness of his jaw were combining to ill-effect. He needed a new approach, or maybe some music. He had a radio in his kitchen, which he switched on with his nose, rotating the knife with his tongue so that it was parallel to his lips. "Georgia, Georgia, the whole day through," sang the radio. No, this won't do, he thought and spun the dial with his chin, "greekisthenumberonegrehshehpaaperbackwrischeegreshpa rtybythebaysponsoredbygreeshee," replied the radio. His blood was dripping on the kitchen counter and his frustration with the radio inspired him to slam what was left of his right hand on the edge of the sink. The hand limply draped over the partition that separated the traditional drain from the garbage disposal. He twisted his arm so that his hand would face sideways. His arm moved but his hand did not. Our hero noticed this and continued to twist his arm around and around, his hand not moving, hoping this would help loosen the joints and bone that were standing in his way. He smashed his hand against the sink repeatedly staring through the displaced blood and sweat that dripped from his forehead, as the bone began to crack and a few stray pieces flew off, one striking the radio. He turned the knife so that it was at a 45-degree angle to his lips and began stabbing and prying at the cracked bone, until

a little more than half of it released from his arm and there was only a thick sliver holding the enemy on. He smashed it again against the stainless steel, now nearly purple with blood; another crack appeared in what was left of his wrist. His eyes fluttered, he could see victory hazily mixed with blood, bone, and flesh, jabbed his head downward, stabbed at the crack and moved his head back and forth until the bone finally let go. His enemies lay vanquished in the sink and yellowing on the cutting board, and our hero lay in a bloody heap on his kitchen floor.

Our hero fell with a thud that resounded through the floor of his third-floor apartment and echoed into the apartment directly beneath him. Fortunately, the second-floor resident, Professor Randolph Butler, happened to have been rocking in the white plastic rocking chair he had been given by the students of his “American Furniture: From the Straw Bed to the Memory Foam Mattress” class. The title was somewhat misleading as the class focused principally on chairs, and though Butler did not know it, the gift was more of a practical joke designed to alert Butler to his over-emphasis, than a token of his students’ legitimate affection. Butler stopped rocking, lowered his corncob pipe onto the nightstand his wife let him take in the divorce, and hastened downstairs.

Butler was certain the noise came from directly overhead so he walked up and knocked on our hero’s door. He had never properly met our hero, though he did let him into the building once, when our hero had been fumbling for his keys. After banging on the door gingerly to no avail, Butler turned the knob only to be treated to the gruesome scene. The professor did not bother to traverse the blood-stained floor, instead opting to shut the door in horror and dial 9-1-1.

When our hero woke up he was tied down to a hospital bed with thick brown leather straps. He had needles in both arms and could vaguely feel the liquid seeping in. He was sure he did not die because he was no longer wearing his suit and he had seen in a movie that when you die you keep the same clothes on.[2] There was a middle-aged nurse with dyed strawberry blonde hair, reading *A Farewell to Arms* sitting by his bedside.

“Where’s my suit? No insurance . . .” he mumbled.

The nurse heard him and exclaimed, “He’s awake!” She shut her book and placed her hand on his forehead. “Stay calm sir, the doctor will be right with you,” she reassured him in her “patient voice”.

“Are they gone?”

“There is no one else here, but me, and the doctor if you’ll just hold still.”

“My hands, where are they?”

“Sir, the doctor will be here any minute and he will explain.”

Our hero tried to lift up his arms, but the leather restraints did their job. The clean-shaven doctor walked through the door and began to bob and weave as if he were a boxer. He jabbed his left hand twice and followed it with a roundhouse that likely would have missed any well-trained fighter. The doctor had just received the news that he had correctly diagnosed an inflamed liver, a feat he had been unable to accomplish in six years of practice.

“Let’s see, let’s see, ah, right, the miraculous Mr. . . . do you have his chart, Gretchen?”

Gretchen pulled out a folded piece of yellow paper she had been using as a book mark and handed it to the doctor.

“Right, do you want to know how many stitches you got? Just guess, let’s have some fun!”

“I, well, never really thought about it . . . six?”

Both the nurse and the doctor broke out in hysterical (well maybe not hysterical, but any laughter at a time like this seemed inappropriate enough to deem hysterical) laughter.

“Did you say six?” cried the doctor, pumping his fist exuberantly.

“So more, I guess . . . I don’t care, tell me.”

“Oh no sir, one more guess, there is some morphine in it for you. I promise.”

“Sixty-three.”

“Don’t go to Vegas, my friend. How’s two-hundred and forty-seven sound?”

“Where are my hands?”

“Yes of course, your hands. They are in a plastic bag, Ziploc, I think, on ice.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Sir . . . how should I say this, Gretch? I’m no good at this part, really. You tell him.”

“But you’re the one with the degree, Dr. Flemming.”

“Yes, yes of course, but all the more reason. I’m an academic, you know, removed from society, can’t empathize with the common man, fly like a private jet, sting like a two-hundred dollar bottle of single malt scotch, you get the idea.”

“But I’m a woman. You know sentimentality and all that, I just don’t have it in me.”

“You know, I’ve been called womanly, even by my wife!”

“Just tell me!” our hero croaked, his voice cracking.

“Alright, alright, Gretchen, just tell him already.”

“Sir, your hands are on ice. I mean, there is no hope of re-attaching them. I think you can take them home, we’ll have to check your insurance.”

“I don’t have insurance. I don’t want the hands. When can I leave?”

The doctor answered, seemingly relieved our hero did not want his hands, “Oh no, that’s out of the question, I’m afraid. You’re still dangerously low on fluids, plus there are certain psychological questions, the police were interested. There was a fireman who seemed curious about what type of ax you used.”

“Where’s that morphine?”

“Gretchen, put some morphine in the IV for our friend.”

Our hero faded away and spent the next few days strapped to his bed, except for the occasional supervised trip to the bathroom that made him remember why the alliance between himself and his enemies had been so advantageous. On the third day, he was given a multiple choice psychological test, which he passed (I told you he was not crazy). Gretchen filled in the bubbles on the Scantron sheet, after dictating the questions and possible answers.[3]

The volunteer police department never really looked into the incident, despite the forensic analyst’s insistence. The police relied on the psychological test and officially listing the incident as, “a momentary fit of semi-suicidal poor judgment.” The fireman never visited either, using his contacts with the police to find out that the ax was in fact a crusty steak knife (how could a one-handed person cut off his hand with an ax anyway?).

Though our hero had been in and out of consciousness due to a steady dose of morphine, he was constantly thinking of her

and how she would finally embrace him when he next walked into Pavlov's. "Now that your hair is gone, I'd love to go on a date," she'd say and kiss him on the cheek. They would go to a fancy restaurant that night and she would at first order a salad, but he would convince her to get the steak instead, "You only live once," he'd say, and this would be sufficient to change her mind. He would try his best to cut his steak, but she would see him struggling and offer to cut it for him and maybe even (this only happened in about a quarter of his day dreams) feed him.

On the ninth day in the hospital, our hero, laying in his bed half-conscious, was approached by a prosthetics salesman with a sharp jaw line. Gretchen had stepped out for the time being and our hero was no longer strapped down, due to the fortuitous results of the psychological test. The stranger in the tweed suit jacket, carrying a black leather duffel bag, extended his right hand, "The name's Perry Storm, a pleasure to meet you. Oh, I'm sorry I didn't realize your condition."

Our hero looked on skeptically, his forearms were still both heavily wrapped in gauze and there was no mistaking that his hands were gone. He simply wanted Perry to go away and let him return to his date with her (she was just about to offer to cut his steak).

"Perhaps I can interest you in a certain product I happen to sell. Are you aware that one out of every ten Americans when asked if given a choice between losing a hand, just one mind you, and death, chooses death? And would it surprise you to know that those same Americans, that is, us, you and I, when ten of us were asked to make a choice between their spouse's life and their right thumb, over seven of us chose the thumb?"

"I didn't know that," said our hero, trying to somehow ignore this loud intrusion.

"I can see you're a busy man, you've got a real American lifestyle. Always on the go, places to go, people to meet, hands to shake, babies to kiss, that type of thing. I understand all too well the complexities of modern life. What did Camus say? Something about the moon, Caligula, a poet. What I am trying to say is you and I, we have one thing in common, and that one thing is we need a hand, or even two."

"I'm going to call the nurse if you don't leave. How'd you even get in here?"

"I have my ways, yes, and I know your nurse anyway. Gretchen, her and I were in a reading group at one time, it ended badly. We read *Ethan Frome*, get it! We did though. In any case, I sell fake limbs, including hands, interested?"

"I just want to get out of here. I don't have insurance." He thought, for the first time, that perhaps she would prefer him to have prosthetic hands, and he would need the services of this

salesman. "Leave your card if you want."

"Good, playing hard to get. You don't need insurance, necessarily. I see how it is. I'll leave my card, but don't expect me to give you a two for one deal or anything. Perry's got to eat as much as the next guy."

With that Perry placed his card on our hero's lap and took off for the cafeteria. Gretchen walked in a few minutes later.

"Sir, though it is my opinion and the opinion of Dr. Flemming that you should probably stay a few more days, the hospital has decided that you are free to go."

Our hero walked home that night, for the hospital was less than a mile from his apartment, and though his legs had atrophied from the nine days in the hospital bed, there was really nothing wrong with them. It took him about a tenth of a mile to realize how to swing his arms to avoid grazing his well-padded wrists against his thighs. It still stung whenever the ends of his arms touched anything. The pain was a dull one and it gave him some unexpected joy, reminding him of the reason he had put himself through this entire fiasco: her.

When he arrived at his apartment and unlocked the door by holding the keys in his teeth, forcing the key through the lock with his tongue, he was surprised to see his apartment had been cleaned. There was no sign of the stained tile floors, the purple sink, or the flesh and bone on the cutting board. "That was nice of them," thought our hero, without knowing exactly who "them" was. Our hero decided to sleep, but could not bring himself to do so without a healthy dose of painkillers, anticipating the pure joy that would come with his trip to Pavlov's Pantry in the morning.

Dressing yourself without hands is not an easy feat. However, as you know, our hero does not give up easily (or at all in most cases). After he had undressed and showered, (I will not waste your time with how he actually accomplished this), he opened his drawer with his teeth, pulled out his boxers and dropped them on the floor. He squirmed his way into them, sticking his feet through the leg holes and scooting his way through. He got up and looked over at the stick of deodorant sitting on his dresser and wished he had invested in a deodorant spray. He took off the cap with his teeth, turned the dial with his tongue (which was surprisingly strong), knelt down and rubbed his underarms against the stick. The t-shirt was not daunting, though it hurt maneuvering his arms through the holes. His right arm wrapping did not fit and he had to pull the shoulder fabric with his mouth until the sleeve snapped back. Fortunately, he had a pair of stretch waistband pants that could pass for khakis due to their faux zipper. He put these on in much the same way as his boxers, holding his arms at his sides and painfully pulling them upward. Socks

were a hassle; he slipped them on and strained his neck to draw them up with his teeth. Sliding his arms through his black nylon wind breaker was painful, but necessary, for he wanted to shield his arms from her upon first sight. He owned a pair of loafers, and slipped them on as if he still had hands.

Our hero arrived at Pavlov's Pantry and could see her precious face through the glass window, unclouded by any waiting customers. Thankfully the door was a push open and he could lean against it casually to get inside. Our hero approached the counter, visibly shaking, not so much from uncertainty, as from anticipation of the joy she would soon bestow upon him. She saw him out of the corner of her eye while she was counting the register.

"Hey there, it's been a while. What would you like this morning?"

"No, well, see." He lifted his arms onto the counter exposing the bandages and, incidentally, the fact that he no longer had hands.

She looked up from the register, at first nonchalantly, expecting to see some other version of his hands, possibly laser surgery, maybe even skin grafts (I guess he had not exhausted all his options). "What happened to your . . . your hands?"

"I, well, you know, I cut them off." He smiled sheepishly, hoping to alleviate her shock, trying to pass off the fact that he cut his hands off for her as some kind of a joke. "No more hair."

She smiled in return, the way people smile when they are with a group of acquaintances telling inside jokes they do not understand. "You cut off your hands for me?"

"You said, remember, you said that guys with hairy hands freak you out. Well, you know, I tried to change my hands, but it didn't work, so I got rid of them."

She could now see the earnestness in his eyes and it frightened her. "Wow, that's great, problem solved, I guess. How . . . never mind. Are you going to get a prosthetic or just leave them as is?"

"I'm not sure, which would be better for you?"

"I think it'd be easier for you to get a good pair of fake ones. I saw a special on TV the other night, they can do wonders."

"I was thinking about it. I know this guy who sells them, not sure how good his are."

“You should look into it.”

“I will . . .” He looked down and was about to walk away, riding the high of his conversation, but he forced himself to stay. “Since my hands are gone, well, you know, there’s no reason . . . so would you like to go to dinner or a movie sometime?”

She ran a hand through her hair and unsuccessfully tried to exude sympathy through her green eyes.

“No, I’m sorry, but no. I really can’t.”

“But my hands, they’re gone. You said that was the reason . . .”

“That was a reason, yeah. You’re a really nice guy and all and it was really sweet of you to try to change yourself for me, but . . .”

“But what? What can I do? What do I have to do?”

“You, well, your jaw line is not particularly sharp. Perhaps a goatee might help.”

“A goatee? I cut off my hands to get rid of the hair and now you want me to grow hair?” he said, showing a hint of irritation.

“I never told you to cut off your hands!”

At this, the baker who had been eavesdropping moderately, finally understood what our hero had done to himself and unexpectedly entered the conversation.

“You cut off your hands for her?”

“And now she wants a goatee.”

“I don’t want anything. I just, like, suggested that it might make his jaw line appear sharper and I like men with sharp jaw lines.”

“The man cut off his hands and you can’t give him a date?”

“I never told him to cut off his hands.”

“It’s true, she never told me . . .”

“Not one date?”

Our hero looked into her eyes, hoping to transmit all the love he felt for her through them. She looked away nervously scratching the skin behind her ears, looked up again, caught his eyes, and shook her head from side to side as if to say,

“There is nothing I can do about it.”

The baker came out from behind the counter, patted him on the shoulder and held the door for him. “Get some rest, don’t do anything crazy,” said the baker.

As our hero was walking home he thought, “Perhaps a goatee,” and imagined how she would touch his face to determine whether or not his jaw line was sharp enough.

[1] *Hawkins v. McGee* is a seminal US contract law case in which a primitive (the case was in 1929) plastic surgeon was sued by a patient for his promise of a “one hundred percent good hand” The plaintiff was able to recover the monetary difference between a “one hundred percent good hand” and the useless one he was left with. Our hero had never read this case (or any case, I suppose), though the skin grafting technique of Dr. McGee may have been of interest to him.

[2] This was the same movie our hero cracked his knuckles in. He went to the movie by himself. It was not a documentary.

[3] Though it is of little importance what these questions may have been, here is question 8: “If you were to be left in a room by yourself with a knife, a pad of paper and a box of chocolate donuts, which of the following activities would you most likely do first: a) eat a donut; b) cut a donut with the knife; c) pat a donut with the paper so as to eliminate some of the grease and then eat the donut; d) cut yourself with the knife; or e) eat the paper and throw the knife at the donut, as a type of game.” Our hero chose the sanest answer: “a.”

Brian Conlon is a short story writer from Rochester, New York. He graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Rochester with a bachelor’s degree in History and Comparative Literature in 2008 and *cum laude* from Harvard Law School in 2011. His fiction has recently appeared in *Prime Numbers Magazine*, *The Greenbag*, *Lowestoft Chronicles*, *Knee-Jerk*, *The Write Room* and *Precipitate*. He currently resides in Rochester, where it was recently discovered that a now-defunct camera company had a semi-secret nuclear reactor.

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