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## **Hands**

*A Story of Mothers and Daughters*

I am wearing my mother's hands.

Night class, Creative Writing, the first night. I project a copy of Langston Hughes' story "Salvation" from my desk onto the classroom screen. Along with the words, the projector shoots my hands onto the screen, like six-foot trees with knobby boughs, knuckles like branches big enough to support a tire swing.

My mother's hands. Back from her grave, beckoning me.

Gangly hands are agile hands. All of us in this Norwegian line of women who have passed hands from mother to daughter like recipes, a long rope of passage from Norway across the Atlantic to the black soil of Iowa, have used these hands, clean or soiled, through the generations, to caress babies and husbands, milk cows, pick eggs and tomatoes, stroke the broken heart of a teenage daughter, remove tiny splinters, knead bread, roll out lefse, play piano.

The lineage of solid, gardening, praying, proper Norwegian hands. Each has taken a turn at the end of my arms. These Norwegian Lutheran Minnesota hands-have grabbed hold, knobby knuckles and all, with considerable strength to survive.

At the Twin Cities Marathon Fitness Fair one year, I stopped at a booth to test my "grip strength." The fitness specialist, one of those kids who fancied himself brilliant until he flunked organic chemistry for the third time, and finally had to change his major from pre-med to exercise science, shone me a smile and handed me a turquoise rubber baseball. "Squeeze," he said. "As hard and fast as you can."

I breathed in, I breathed out. And I squeezed.

He blinked, looked at his numbers. "Something's not right here," he said. "Try again."

I squeezed.

More blinking. He got up, scratched his head, adjusted his dials. "Sorry. Once more."

I squeezed.

The air came out of him as hard as I squeezed the ball. Not as fast, but as hard. He scratched again, and printed my results.

"You have," he said, "according to this test, the grip strength of a six-foot man."

I smiled and flexed my fingers.

I needed that grip for removing a wedding ring, no, for removing two, for playing baseball and basketball, racing bikes, lifting weights, wrangling the leashes of 279 pounds of dogs at a time, and for tying on running shoes, to cover thousands of miles year after year.

Without my unfortunate knuckles, my hands would simply be long, a model's hands, perhaps, before twenty years of wrinkles and wear moved in to stay.

But models wear fingernail polish, and nail polish looks foolish at the end of these fingers, turns them into a drag queen's hands.

Every October, I paint my nails. Black. I paint my hands and face white, don a thrift store wedding dress. I'm a dead bride. My hands in white makeup lend themselves well to being dead.

I clamber aboard a hayrack at Meadowbrook Stables Halloween Haunted Hayrides and regale my rack full of riders with tales of horror. "Welcome to Meadowbrook Stables. I'm delighted you've chosen to join us tonight. Let's hope you come out alive." My job is to tell tales and to distract them at the very moment when Jason is lurking behind the next tree, masked, ready to pounce on them with his chainsaw roaring. Or when the six-foot spider is about to fall on the wagon. Best wagon screams the loudest.

One night, a man in the front row, the one sliding off his bale because he was downing his sixth can of Schells beer, grabbed my hand and said, "You're in drag, aren't you?"

"Whatever do you mean?" I cried, in my affected, Southern Belle in-character voice, withdrawing my hand like a lady. "How dare you insinuate-"

"Look at your hands! You've got a man's hands! You're in drag!"

I could have flashed him, I could have stuck out my chest, I could have punched him cold with my powerful skeletal fist; instead I rose to terrible tattered bridal height and yelled, "Sit down and shut up. And I am glad you're here because I like fresh meat on my rack!"

Another year, a world away from a haunted forest, at a teacher's conference in St. Cloud, a woman in a peasant skirt and a few pounds of crystals around her neck took my hand in her own, in the hallway, out of the blue. "Oh," she said, "You're a potter, aren't you?"

"A Harry Potter?" I asked her.

"No, a potter," she said. "You have the hands of a potter."

"A potter," I said. "I'm not." I walked away, flexing my joints, checking my fingers for traces of clay. Maybe my hands had missed their calling.

When I was twelve, my grandmother stroked my hands as we rode to my aunt's house, in the backseat of our Ford Fairlane behind my mother and father.

"I remember, she said, "when my hands were as smooth as yours. Now look." She stretched her wrinkled hand beside mine, the knuckles bulging and arthritic, the skin worn and shiny, wrinkled and dry.

"Oh, Grandma," I said and ran my fingers over her knuckles. "Your hands are full of work. I love your hands."

"Oh," she said, "but not pretty any more. They used to look like yours."

And now, my hands are more my grandmother's than my own.

Last year, I stood at the side of my own mother's coffin, absorbing every detail for the last time. It's odd how we have to gather ourselves to touch the dead, even our own mothers. The ones that fed us, calmed us, held us, read to us, and all those decades ago.

I touched her cheek, kissed her, and tried to redo her hair, those windrows of waves and the side combs from the 1940s that Mom had worn for her last sixty years-even longer than the portion of her life that belonged to me. I couldn't make her waves smooth, but I did a better job than the undertaker did.

I covered her hand with my own. I felt her knuckles under mine, gave her hand one last squeeze.

The undertaker, a woman in a plain brown suit, sidled up beside me.

"I have her hands," I whispered.

"Let's see," the undertaker said, lifting my hand, running a thumb over my knuckles.

"Yes, you do. You certainly do." She looked at both sets, the cold one, the set she knew well, had, just that morning, formed like clay into position for the viewing, and mine, alive, nimble, and able. She nodded, "Funny, isn't it, the things of theirs they leave behind?"

Now my mother is here with me, in this classroom.

On the desk, my own boney fingers point to the Langston Hughes' line, "Old men with work-knarled hands." But the fingers underscoring the words, the fingers that reach, tree-like across the screen, these hands, they are my mother's.