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Chiromancy

She held his hand in hers and said he would live a long time. He had a lifeline that was practically ridiculous. *Look*, she said, and traced the downcurve with a fingernail. Truly, it ran all the way from the webbing of the thumb to the veins of the wrist and promised a vast pile of years. *I'd be surprised if you died at all*, she said, then moved her hand to the ignition, at which sign he slid from the car, felt the black snap of vertigo from the tequila, leaned down to say goodnight, and watched as she pulled from the curb and started the drive toward her husband and assorted sons.

*I could die tonight*, he thought. *I could die in a minute or two*. The only complication was the feeling that he hadn't suffered enough, and although he was no Buddhist, he recognized the dishonor in this. Under the streetlight he looked down at his own hand as if examining an object fallen from space. He could make out the bumps and squiggles, meanderings and pointless hieroglyphs, a modest chain of epidermal hills, a lone callus. I might as well be reading the entrails of a bird, he thought, or studying a map of the moon. Although his memory for the arcane was excellent, his newspaper columns laden with scraps of local history and hearsay, he couldn't for the life of him remember which mound of the palm was Venus, which Jupiter or Saturn. He couldn't recall where logic resided, or libertinage might dwell. The streetlamp threw a blue, moony light on the subject, and he thought for the first time about how naked the hand looked, how almost indecent, the opened palm of the hand.

*How many men do you marry?* she wondered as she drove, a little wobbly from the margaritas. Although it wasn't really a question, but more along the lines of saying, *Look at all the fireflies tonight*. Or, watching her middle son dress himself that morning—shoes on the proper feet, his shirt turned rightside out, thinking, *God, how quickly this happens*.

Whereas some women she knew, many in fact, felt oppressed by the presence of a single husband, the sheer mastodon weight of the man, she felt just the opposite. In these drawling Kentucky river towns, you need all the husbands you can gather, she thought. You need the one you really married, the historical husband; in her case an actual teacher of history at the junior college. The man waiting even as she drove—one boy put to bed, she checked the Toyota clock; yes, the two-year-old in bed by now, the middle son clomping morosely up the stairs, and the third, the nine-year-old, no doubt waiting up for her.

But you need smaller, briefer husbands. Husbands who sweep in like rainstorms and make the air more breathable. Sharers of harmless intimacies. Receivers of throw-away flirtations. Coffee break husbands, browsing through the gallery husbands.

And what about the sales representatives who visit the gallery once a month, crisp clockwork husbands who take you to lunch and behave as if their manners had been gleaned from old Gig Young movies?

Or the haunted Southern painter husband whose studio you visit two or three times a year? A white flurry of paint on the eyelashes. Instant coffee in the cup, oily toxins in the air. Maybe he has disheveled himself a little extra for your coming? Maybe his wife is really unfortunately away?

You don't sleep with the spare husbands, of course, though they sometimes fail to understand a point so fine. In all honesty, there is some inner debate on this. *Take tonight*, reading his hand by dashboard light, speedometer light. A small debate, she thought as she drove, her own hands prompt at 10:00 and 2:00 on the wheel like any good inebriate.

... *and what does it mean to have a hand instead of a hoof, paw, wing, fin, tentacle?* he immediately sat at his desk and wrote in his journal because what he wanted to do was drive the 20-odd miles to her farm and stand there like an imbecile, swatting the bat-sized mosquitoes and staring at the house lights. That would be proper suffering, wouldn't it? He ran a hand through his hair, dislodged a grain of margarita salt from a corner of his mustache, flicked it across the page. *And what is this contraption of 27 bones?* he wrote, remembering the number from the gallery brochure, because it was exactly the kind of sentence he could not include in the article he would write on tonight's opening, "The Art of the Hand," a traveling exhibit of images of the human hand she had booked into the gallery. It had been a little far-fetched for western Kentucky, but the regulars had turned out—the doctor's wives, the high school art teachers with their few troubled students in tow, someone from the Chamber of Commerce, decked-out members of the local art guild.

The show had included paintings by minor contemporaries: abstract and photo-realistic hands, a small collection of photographs, even a mixed-media collage incorporating medical x-rays—the spectral hands of infants, the burlled, mineralized hands of the aged. And, of course, the huge Medieval chiromancy chart, the elaborately framed piece with angels and constellatory beasts swirling around an enormous human palm, every inch mapped and labeled with the Latin names of planets and emotions. After the brief palm reading episode in her car, he wished he had studied it closer.

*Let's see*, she had said, then reached for his hand, surprising him. Not that they hadn't touched before. There was a small, tame history of brushes and pecks, airy smooches of greeting and goodbye. Sometimes her husband was at her side; occasionally, another woman at his. Though not for a while now.

In a town where the ship of marital love sailed early and often, he found himself among the holdouts, the rather conspicuous land-lubbers. Though it wasn't a tiny town by Kentucky standards—the junior college, the regional mall, an outlying clutch of chemical factories, bargeworks, a spreading apron of suburbs—the unmarried life

still carried its unmistakable stigma. Like slow-witted children, single men and women were introduced, and re-introduced. The town's loose change needing to be gathered, converted to crisp currency and tucked into the vault.

Nevertheless, he had managed a bachelorhood, not so much by design, as by continually falling for firmly married women. His first married love had been his fourth-grade teacher, a woman with a Tidewater accent and a premature silver streak in her hair that had reminded him of the tail of a comet. It seemed to him now that there was never a time before this, that even in infancy, probably even in the womb itself, it had occurred to him to want only what was complete without him.

Therefore, he found himself drifting to her side during whatever social events the town could muster—occasional dinners, the local concert series, her own gallery's openings. Since the newspaper office was near the gallery they sometimes met for lunch. Lately, even meeting her on the street, he felt all the familiar apparatus start to churn—the quick tightening of the abdominals, the straightening of the spine, the annoying surge of perked up chemistry. One minute he was bouyant, almost witty in her presence, and the next minute the awareness of his own foolishness came gliding down like a thunderhead.

All of which proved to him, as he had written in other journals, that hopeless love had no instructional value, taught absolutely nothing. It was a realm to which trial-and-error did not apply.

It seemed as if such mistakes were too *embedded* to learn from. Even thinking back on them, as he tended to do, merely deepened the wayward grooves.

Not that he hadn't attempted more conventional loves—single women, reasonable women. But at some point the distraction always arrived, and not only for him. He noticed the women themselves checking the depths of mirrors and store windows, looking around in restaurants and movie theaters as if someone were missing. Hadn't they also sensed it—the paucity, the incorrectness of *two*? That perhaps the triangle, after all, was the more perfect romantic shape. Take away one side and the others flail and drift, or else snap together too sharply, like scissors.

*Take tonight, the newspaper husband.* She stopped to roll down a window at the last light before the town fizzled into long rivery outskirts. He was probably the kindest, if maybe not the smartest of the little husbands. Of course, both qualities, she realized, may have been the symptoms of love. You see these things coming. See them over the months, the extra courtesies and attentions.

She had even seen it in the articles he wrote for the newspaper, gamely promoting whatever she brought to the gallery. Praising the local watercolorists, a misty, prolific lot whose patronage helped support the gallery, but whose paintings always looked as if they had suffered minor rain damage. Praising the regional wildlife painters, whose creatures posed on branches and stones, their faces as perturbed and two-dimensional as Byzantine martyrs. *A ruggedness appropriate to the outdoors*, he had written of their work. Which qualified as praise in her book.

Certainly she saw it coming over the table tonight. The restaurant where they had stopped for drinks after the opening had undergone a recent transformation from nautical motif to Southwestern decor, a trend that had swept the country a decade

ago and finally dawdled its way into the Bluegrass. To soften the blow, they were offered enormous half-priced margaritas, salt encrusted like old spells around their rims. The walls had taken on the sheenless peach of sunset. Where buoys and fish netting had hung, there were Navaho rugs, their sharp oracular patterns lit by strings of chili-pepper lights. In the newly installed window-box was a miniature horizon of cacti, some drooping and wounded like figures from Dali, others dreamily phallic and untouchable.

*It's not a good town for the lonely*, he had said, in the middle of a gossipy rundown of the guests at the opening. Or maybe it was *good time*. Whichever, it was a subject they had touched on before. A boring and necessary part of living where they lived—this moaning about the limits, the insularity, as if somewhere existed a place where the lonely lived happily, possibly danced in the streets. *Why do people stay here?* he had asked, meaning, of course, *Why do we stay?* meaning they were in this together—the wrong place, the wrong life. She watched him lean toward her, fetchingly rumped in his all-day white newspaperman's shirt, sleeves shot to the elbows as if he were about to wash his face in the margarita.

It was amazing how it all still worked—the scraggle of mustache, the showing of the naked forearms, letting the candlelight glaze them like honey-buns. Even the inevitable migration of the goblets until his stood rim to rim with hers. Had she actually heard the small grinding sound of salt on salt?

Not that she was really worried about herself. You can deflect the husbands, she knew. Sometimes talking about her sons was enough. Occasionally, even bringing out the photographs. She could see, however, that along his particular evolutionary branch the defences against blind love had not been well laid. And although she wasn't worried, it did occur to her that it might be a bad idea, drinking tequila so close to the birthplace of bourbon, that there might be some sort of curse involved.

And it was strange, she thought now, following the Toyota's beam along the pocked and cratered county highway, how you can see it coming, slow and blatant as a moon, and still not quite get out of the way. See it sagging in his shirt. See it tugging like a moth at the corners of his mouth. How the words of such a man become a gradual unfurling, a laying out, the man spreading the weather-beaten map of himself on the table as if you might actually choose to navigate in that bleak direction.

*Carpal, metacarpal, phalanges*, he wrote, exhausting all the bones he knew by name. The *vestigial nails*, he came up with, although he could have sworn there was some purpose in the raking of hers across his palm tonight, an event that had sent an old fashioned romantic shiver, like a tiny arrow of Novocaine, into his teeth and gums. *Drummers and twiddlers*, he scribbled, watching his fingers. *Hapless fondlers and probers*, he wrote because like countless others he had tumbled into small town journalism from the ark of literary ambition. The obligatory half-finished novel. Long Wolfian meditations stashed in folders and accordion files.

In this way he knew they were alike. He had seen some of her college paintings on his one trip to the farm for an open house soon after the gallery opened. There had been a certain Munch or Roualt quality about the paintings, a sober, almost charred cast to the subjects as if they had been unearthed from volcanic ruins. He was no

expert, but it seemed obvious she had invested too much to graciously abandon. Even though she ran the gallery well, gave the town more occasion for art than the town knew it needed, he recognized in her what he felt in himself—the shirtsleeve efficiency, the cultural boosterism of the thwarted. Hadn't she admitted this?

But he presumed too much. Blabbing about his own loneliness, implying a kinship there as well. Why invent this drama? Why insist upon playing the ancient role of the town bachelor, tapping at the lives of married women for the sound of something hollow? In whose life would there not be something hollow?

He looked down at his fingers again, the ridges, whorls, arches and vague deltas of the fingertips, the swirling patterns that could identify criminals and dead men, even long buried men, he knew, although he no longer covered crime. Even a burned man, a coroner had once told him, if not burned to an absolute cinder, could be known by the ashy loop and flourish of a single fingertip.

She reached to roll down the opposite window of the Toyota, nearly spilling the car onto the gravelly roadside. There was a new rush of air, a heightened sound, almost a *racket* of crickets. Porchlights were scattered, and fireflies shone everywhere except in the sweep of headlights. *Look at all the fireflies*, she actually spoke the words. But to whom did she imagine speaking? The little newspaper husband? Her real husband, husband of record, who not only taught history, but existed as an almost sedimentary force in her life? Their marriage had begun so long ago now it seemed like a pact made by ambitious children. Their nights and years drifted down and hardened. Then more nights after that. Finally, you had this dry land appearing, a kind of mutually created continent. No fear of drowning, no shudder of waves. Only occasionally did the question nag. Another life? A small debate?

But whose fault was anybody's choice? Who was really to blame? The decision to return to his hometown after college had been mutual, hadn't it? The idea of the gallery had been hers. There was the unused studio space above it, east light every morning of the year. That had been part of the plan, hadn't it, to paint in the mornings? Doesn't everyone have a plan to paint in the mornings?

You marry a man, after all, who is the very soul of patience. A man who frowns and laments over the essays of the local junior college students, their ideas so faithfully cribbed from *Encyclopedia Americana* he knows the language by heart. And in summer, isn't he practically a house-husband, if such a thing is possible in these latitudes?

But still, does any woman fail to give up more than the man she marries? Fail to put more of herself aside? Isn't every husband's diaper changing, skillet wielding, even *fathering*, just a bit of a favor? Doesn't he, the man waiting even at this moment, possibly up to his elbows in dishwater, doesn't even he wear it like just the tiniest stain on his sleeve?

She was thinking like her friends now. The ones with husbands hunkered over their remote controls. Big boys sitting in front of their dinner plates waiting for the loaves and fishes, the manna to fall.

She couldn't pretend it was the same for her. Yet, she had wanted to touch the smitten man tonight, as if that were the solution to anything. If only there were more of the body, she thought. If only there were some neutral place, a kind of *home free*.

Maybe a third shoulder, a small safe plane of the brow, some bland appendage you could touch without everything going damp and rhythmic.

He reached across the desk and unfolded the brochure from the opening, a small map-like pamphlet written by someone referred to as an “art anthropologist.” “It is the hand that separates man from the other hominids,” the brochure read, as if this were a good thing. Specifically, it was the thumb, the famous opposable thumb that did the separating, that made man such a stellar mechanic. Capable of flexion and rotation, it was the thumb that made painting itself possible, the writer went on to say. All art, in fact, even writing, sprang from the suppleness of the human thumb.

He picked up his pen and watched the dip and wiggle, sure enough the words spilling forth. So relentless, he thought. *Such a hoarder, such a perfect tool of desire*, he watched the hand confess across the page. It occurred to him that even the writing of this proved the point, this attempt to nail down the measliest scrap of time. Every little drifting moment some poor fool has to stitch across a page.

*A paw would be better than this*, he wrote. *A fin, a flipper*. He thought of the afternoon he had spent at the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago researching his annual summer travel piece for the paper. After watching the dolphin show—the hoop-jumping, tail-walking, the grinning and chattering of the animals, he had taken the stairs to the underwater observation windows. There were three of them, bottle-nosed dolphins—gliding, slowly ascending and dipping, grazing against one another in a kind of barreling dance, occasionally even brushing the thick observation glass. He remembered how, even in that small space, they had seemed unbelievably serene. He tried to describe it now, scribbling past the margins of the journal—how the dolphins would rise, momentarily weightless, then suddenly drive as if the notion of gravity had just occurred to them, as if physics were a matter of whimsical choice. Even trapped as they were, the dolphins moved through the water with something he wished he knew—almost a grace, not the easy athletic sense of the word, but the grace of old hymnbooks, the kind used in Appalachian funerals.

Remembering them now, he was sure their serenity had something to do with their lack of hands. With those blunt gray flippers, what could the dolphins ever be tempted to cling to? Not even their own children could they hold. Wouldn't that be a kind of happiness? Whatever the creatures reached for simply turned to water, propelling them forward and away.

The night air swept through the car, almost chilly. She thought of him walking to work that morning and wondered if he had left his car behind for tonight's possibility, the lift home, the stopping for drinks. Strangely, it made her think of her eldest son, a solid girl-hater at the moment. The mere mention of girlfriends sent him into a fit of such vehemence even his younger brothers seemed puzzled, though they tried to imitate him. Yet, she suddenly envisioned her son on a night like this years from now, sitting across from a woman, wanting something that no amount of common ground, no quantity of spilled pathos could gain for him. How do you prepare any child for that?

She wished she really understood chiromancy. All she knew she had learned from

the huge medieval chart in the exhibit, just enough to follow the main lines—heart-line, headline, lifeline. Just enough to act on the impulse, to predict love and a long life for him in the car tonight. Maybe it was just as well she didn't know more. There had been that moment in front of his house, the distinct feeling that if she had held his hand any longer, if she so much as rested a finger in the soft middle, it would have closed on her. It would have closed exactly the way her own infant sons' hands had once grasped and held whatever foreign thing wandered across them.

He read back over what he had written in the journal. The words already seemed absurd to him, inflated boozy snippets. This is why they don't serve drinks at the office, he thought. *Hands? Dolphins?* What did dolphins have to do with this? And what did he know about them anyway? He had watched for fifteen minutes through a pane of thick, smudged glass. Who could be sure what any other creature felt? Maybe it was even worse for them. Maybe the dolphins' famous smile was no more than a blubbery mask. Maybe all that bright chatter, the chirping and coded clicks, were not the sounds of merriment at all. For all anyone knew, the dolphins could be crying something as human as *hold me*, as they sped through the oceans and zoos, inconsolable.

He slapped the journal shut. If he had a wise friend, he knew what such a friend would say to him now—In love? You're in love with the idea of it, some phony painting of love: the womanly farm, the domestic trappings, the ready-made passel of sons, the eternal tricycle overturned in the drive. Look at what you've written, the friend would say. You haven't even mentioned her name.

But he had no such friend, nor did he particularly want one. What *had* he wanted tonight? What had he expected? After the months of conversations, lunches, small confidences, did he really think she took his hand out of anything but consolation? Did he imagine she might continue reading his palm all the way up the wrist, run a finger along the inside of the elbow, maybe trace the blank shell of an ear?

He reopened the journal. *Blank shell of an ear*, he wrote, apropos of nothing, then flicked off the lamp and sat there, let himself think of her, his hands on the desk in front of him like depleted puppets, or the hands of someone posing for a portrait in the dark.

The fireflies were even thicker as she entered the bottomland near the farm. They seemed almost as constant as stars, the new ones sweeping into the sockets of the old, the flickering nearly cancelled by the car's movement. A few had even dashed against the windshield, their green chemical wreckage fading in slow leaks and pulses across the glass.

There must be thousands of drives like this every night, she thought. *Fireflies, porch-lights, headlights*. Drives like little divorces. The wind wrestled a tiny wrapper along the floor, almost swept a torn page from a coloring book out the window. She took a hand from the wheel and gathered her hair, held it in a fist at the base of her neck like a girl on a date in a movie. She felt odd; not drunk, or guilty, almost happy in fact, as if once again she had discovered the secret of marriage in this subtle polygamy. The strange sense that even at this late hour of entrenchment—joint mortgages, in-

surance policies, children nestled in bed—you *could* still ruin your life. There was that slim possibility, that remnant weight of decision. And was it too perverse, too roundabout, to think that what could still be ruined, could still be valued, or even saved?

*Let's see your fortune*, she had said to him in the car. And now it seemed she reached for his hand simply because something had to be reached for, and better the hand than the cheek, or the fleck of salt in his mustache, which she might at least have mentioned, or brushed away, or in another life, even tasted?

*Thousands of porchlights, thousands of little divorces*. Though some, of course, are harder than others, she thought, turning from the asphalt onto the long gravel drive. And what can anyone say about that moment of absolute wavering? Which for her, she realized now, had come, not over the margaritas, nor even reading his palm in the car, but just after she pulled from the curb, and halfway down the block looked up to suddenly see him—little reversed man in the rearview mirror, looking down into his own deciphered hand, the hand she knew he imagined moving over her, under her, the hand she had said would live so long.