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The Hand

She had been married quite a long time, almost 18 years, to a man who, in the last year or two, had begun to spend most of his time watching TV. When they were first married, when they were both in graduate school, they had started out with a small black-and-white. Eventually, after perhaps the 6th year of their marriage, her husband had agreed to buy a small colored TV. Finally, just two years ago, they had gotten another TV so that she could watch her favorite shows without having to wait for her husband to finish watching a football game.

In the last couple of years, time seemed to be moving very fast, seemed almost to be accelerating, and the more she tried to hold on to it, the less of it there was to hold. This was a frightening feeling, a feeling she tried over and over to analyze.

On this particular Monday evening, a light rain was falling. She could hear the gentle sound of the drops against the trees outside her window.

This morning the rain made her happy, since it reminded her of her childhood in the Philippines, when the yellowish glow from the low-watt bulbs made the rooms look unearthly, and everything in them blurred, as though she were looking at her surroundings from underwater. She remembered sitting at the round table in the kitchen, which was her favorite room in the house, where she sat surrounded by the bustling maids, the sound of people entering and leaving.

All day the question had been inside her, waiting.

Her husband was sitting on the couch. She could just make out part of his nose in profile. He'd come home only an hour earlier, his

hair slick with the rain. He had his face turned toward the TV, which this evening was showing an episode of *24*.

When was it that she had noticed the hand? The hand that was just a hand, nothing else, reaching out to tap him on his shoulder.

Now she recalled seeing it for the first time the Friday before. She'd given herself a shake, rubbed her eyes, looked again. Yes, there was most unmistakably a hand, reaching out just above her husband's right shoulder. The index finger was extended, pointing downwards. She anticipated the moment of physical contact and held her breath. But the hand—a woman's hand, she realized suddenly—remained suspended, frozen, as it were, just above and behind her husband.

She tried to circle around it, to observe it more closely. When she got to within a foot, she stopped, fearing she would alarm her husband, who was absorbed, as usual, in some TV show that involved many people running around and shouting.

The hand had a faint tracery of blue veins spreading, fan-like, from a narrow wrist. It was preternaturally white, a white like the bellies of the dead fish piled up in front of the stalls at the wet market back home in Manila. The pearl-colored nails were oval in shape. She mused about who the hand's owner might be: perhaps a young woman, someone 10 or even 15 years younger than herself. What was it being communicated to her husband? Why was she here? Teresa didn't know. The need to know, however, was like an ache. So palpable, she could almost feel it behind her teeth when she went to bed that night.

Later that afternoon, she had the accident. She was making a slow right turn onto El Camino Real when she felt the thud on her rear bumper. Everything in the car went flying: CDs, books, her handbag. Her head hit something—hard. She lay on her side for what seemed like long moments, looking upwards at her feet. A trickle of something wet ran down the right side of her face. From far, far

away, she heard indistinct voices. "An accident," she thought. "Something has happened."

She tried to say something. "Please help me." And, a little later, "Am I dying?" But there was no one to speak to. Her gaze was entirely directed now on a square of cracked window through which she saw—smelled—hot asphalt and, occasionally, a glimpse of running feet in heavy soled boots.

"Wait," she told herself. "Just wait."

She could taste blood in her mouth—salty, not unlike tears. Her face was wet. A hand appeared at the window. Lined and creased, with dirt along the grooves of the palm. It gestured, implored.

"I can't," she said. "Can't." Can't move, was what she wanted to say.

If only she had been able to speak.

The hand continued its pleas. It was moving faster now, up and down, as if trying to communicate a matter of great urgency.

"I—" she said. "I—" She could see her own hand, palm upraised, lying on the street. But she felt nothing, not the asphalt underneath it, which looked rough and hot, or the thing someone—a passer-by?—had placed into her limp fingers, which she recognized as a simple wooden rosary.

Finally, she managed to say, with great effort, "My husband."

"What?" A disembodied voice. A male voice.

She couldn't think anymore. She let her head drop and closed her eyes.

She felt movement now, around her. Someone was lifting. Or *she* was being lifted. A great groaning. How awful that sound was. Metal grinding against metal.

There was a rush of air. She opened her eyes. She saw sky. Blue. Gray. She was free! She tried to wiggle her fingers. She felt nothing. A strange lassitude came over her after the effort.

She was not going to die here, right now, on this street. She wanted to taste—ice cream. Something. Cold. Sweet. Her tongue probed

ineffectually at the roof of her mouth. Impossibly dry. Again she tried to work her fingers.

She found herself looking down at her skirt, which was stained with great swathes of purple dye. Purple dye? Hadn't this been a beige skirt when she'd put it on this morning? What did this mean? What did this all mean?

Was she dying?

Or was she, in fact, living, and was that what the purple dye all over her beige skirt was trying to tell her? That life was living. Was going on. Even though the white hand on her husband's shoulder this morning had seemed to say: Die. Die. I want you to die.

Fate, luck, chance had put her in the way of the car that had so conveniently hit her bumper. Hit her hard enough to kill her. But, unlucky as always, she had survived. She was now alive. This was the unintended consequence. This was life.

And so what to do now? She thought this even as they were putting her on the gurney (which bumped terribly over the uneven asphalt of the street, she nearly cried out but stopped herself just in time, just as the scream was about to escape from between her teeth), even as she felt the straps come down on either of her arms, saw a swaying bottle of fluid on a flexible pole affixed next to her arm.

She wondered what it all meant: the hand over her husband's shoulder, the gray clouds spitting rain, the accident . . .

She recalled her husband's last words to her, spoken only this morning, before he'd left for work: Tell your son we're not going to get him a new car. Their only child was at college in Los Angeles. The weekend before, while driving up for her birthday, he'd had an accident. His car, an old Civic with nearly 200,000 miles, was irreparable. Or so the nearest mechanic, the only one he could tow the wreck to, had said. The car was so old, so decrepit, that she'd secretly been glad at the news. Perhaps now her husband would consent to help their son get a better car. One with a more durable body that would not crumple at the first impact with another vehicle.

But all her husband said at the news was no, no, let him take the train up. We can't afford to get him another car.

Teresa had not anticipated the hurt that arose in her at these words. She herself would have given anything—her right arm—to help her son have what she knew he desired most of all.

But she had been unable to summon the right words. She had kept silent, and eventually her husband had left, toting his heavy briefcase and walking toward his car the way she imagined someone might who was only marking time.

And now this scene was playing over and over in her head, as the ambulance raced through traffic.

"What did you say?" said a young man in white who happened to be sitting next to her.

She stared at him. Shook her head.

He came closer.

No, no! She wanted to yell. Keep away! The smell of him was almost overwhelming—a smell of sweet aftershave and sweat. It brought her back, almost all the way back. To the present moment—*what was she doing lying flat on her back in this crazily swaying vehicle*—where she had no intention of staying, not if she could help it.

"You will—" she said, after a while.

"What?" he said again.

Was he completely stupid?

She shook her head.

"Can you speak up a little, ma'am? What do you want?" he said.

This time she was angry. The anger was pulling her mouth down at the corners, she could feel it. She could also imagine her face, as she stared at this young man, the lines deepening on either side of her jaw. What a sight she must be. What a fright she must look. What—

Now the man reached over and brushed something cool and wet over her face. Ahhh, she thought. *Do it again.*

But he'd sat back. Now he was simply staring at her.

"My fingers?" she asked him.

He looked at her hands.

"They're fine," he said.

"Rub," she requested.

She could see him put his hands below. But she felt nothing. Tears came spilling out of her eyes. Her mouth opened helplessly.

"You will be fine, all right? Ma'am?" he said. He was impatient with her. Because she was old. She knew this in her heart. The old were like residents of another country. Here they were treated like children, to whom everything must be explained.

What she wanted, what she had always wanted, if she'd had the sense to know this, when she was alive, *before*, was to go to that place she knew existed, if only in herself. It was so long ago, but she'd been there. She'd inhabited this magical realm with all of her being. During a time before her son was born, before her marriage, even. Sunlight moved there. And *talahib*. Wild grass. Outside her bedroom window, while she watched, in the late afternoon—birds, snakes, little boys.

The house that was to have been built there had never been built. So a pile of rubble had been left in the vacant lot—a small hill of rubble. Then, the rains had come, and the grass had come, and after that the birds, and still after that the snakes, and last of all were the little boys with their slingshots and their makeshift pellet guns and then the bringing of small animals to her, the daughter of the big house next door.

Once, they brought a downy chick. "Where is the mother?" she asked her *yaya* to ask them. The *yaya* asked. The boys only covered their mouths with their hands and giggled.

And when she was in high school and had to do science projects, when she needed specimens to dissect in the lab, they gladly brought her black snakes which she poured into glass bottles, covering their inert forms with formaldehyde. Once the little boys brought her the carcass of a puppy and she almost screamed. White and still, its

long silky white hair matted with mud. That, too, she eventually put in a bottle and stuck in the freezer, behind the milkfish and the frozen cow innards.

The boys—their soft, whispery voices, their large dark eyes—had looked at her with awe. All because she wore the uniform of the girls' convent school and spoke in perfect English. Because she had a *yaya* and lived in a two-story house with a tiled roof.

The *yaya*, a girl of 16, had come straight from the provinces. She never questioned what Teresa asked her to do. She was supremely patient, and kind, and Teresa had never understood why in the end her mother had fired her. Teresa had seen the *yaya* sobbing as she packed her meager things into a plastic case, so perhaps the girl had committed some great shame.

That was a long time ago. In fact, until this very moment, she'd forgotten all about the *yaya* and the boys who brought her animals. She'd grown old, and had left that sleepy island, that small city — was this why she had grown old? Yes, perhaps —and it had been a long time since anyone had looked at her that way. Maybe not since she had taken up residence in California. But now she suddenly remembered the *yaya's* name: It was Juliet. A smile broke out on her lips. Yes, her name was Juliet.

Why was she thinking of this now, while lying in the madly swaying ambulance, while looking at the profile of the young man who was looking, seemingly bored, out the window? She was a carcass on a gurney. She had known this feeling many times before, and now it had truly happened.

They released her from the hospital after a week. They wheeled her to her husband in a wheelchair. He looked down at her with something like impatience. Slowly, gingerly, she lifter herself into the car. The air was hot; dust speckled her eyelids. She felt as if little

needles were stinging her eyes. She clutched at her husband's arm but after a while she released her fingers.

He drove her home. She looked out the window, at the bare trees of a cold day. It's November already, she thought. Neither of them spoke.

"Can you make it up the stairs by yourself? I'm late for work," her husband said. She nodded, yes. He helped her up to the front step but then turned to go. Slowly, very slowly, she ascended the stairs. Now and then she stopped to rest. She became short of breath. Her weakness frightened her. She stopped halfway up.

In bed at night, sometimes, after her husband was asleep, she would get up on one elbow and look at him. Her husband's eyes were closed, his breathing even, but now and then he would shudder, and this shudder was so deep, so seemingly from somewhere mysterious and hidden, that it made her afraid.

In the morning he would give no indication that he was aware that anything had passed between them in the night.

Since the hand had appeared, it usually lay on her husband's chest when he was sleeping. She hated the sight of it, like a white dead thing, in the moonlight from the window.

Now, where was her husband now? He was far away, in a glass building next to many other glass buildings, so many close together that it was impossible for her to tell them apart. In these buildings, engineers worked, and technicians, and other people associated with industry, and they were all very busy preparing reports.

Even if it was a beautiful day, and there were many, in this part of the country, no one, she was sure, would be able to leave for more than an hour, to have lunch. She thought that it was a great waste, a great pity. She would hate to die after having lived for years in such a life.

And now the thought came to her that her husband would not even know whom to call, on her behalf, if some further mishap befell

her. Unless she told him. There was her son, of course, and her mother in the Philippines, but who else? And what if she were hurt in such a way that she could not speak, could not get the words out? Her husband would have to look in her wallet, or her checkbook, and even these would tell him nothing.

If she needed to be brought again to the hospital, someone might notice her ring and say, "She has a husband." How would they find him? Would he eventually come, looking disheveled and confused, and be angry with her? She could imagine him sitting across from her and asking, "What have you done *now*?" in that familiar, exasperated tone of voice. Even though he could see her lying with tubes affixed to both arms and perhaps her throat. The hand might still be with him, and she knew by now that no one else could see it, only herself.

Hours later, it really did happen the way she had imagined, with only slight differences. That is, her husband did come home, looking fairly disheveled, and he did sit across from her on the bed, and that very same question she had imagined he would ask did come out of his mouth: "What have you done now?" And yes, there it was, hovering behind his shoulder, the hand, the hand which now bore a faint trace of scent, not "White Diamonds" exactly, more like "Charlie" or "Je Reviens," something girlie and cheap.

Her husband's face was guarded, he was wearing a green sweater spotted with rain. His hair was wet.

He was talking about the accident now, asking how did this happen, how did you manage to get yourself into such a situation? Really, it was too funny. She had slipped, she had knocked her head on something sharp, there was a swelling above her right eye. This was the face she presented to her husband when he arrived home, later that night.

She had to keep looking over her husband's shoulder, she couldn't help it. She wanted the hand to go away but it was resting on her

husband's shoulder and playing with the hair at the back of his head.

Can't he feel it pulling? Doesn't it tickle his ear?

She couldn't answer him, of course—there was a tube in her mouth hooked up to a large machine. The tube was stretching her lips apart and flattening them and she imagined she must look ugly. The doctor had held a whispered conversation with her husband—right in front of her! But in a voice so low she couldn't make out the sense of the words. Now something leaked out of the corners of her eyes but her husband didn't seem to notice.

He was rubbing his forehead and saying, "I will have to call the insurance agent. The car—completely totaled . . ."

And yes, she knew this was a terrible thing. The money, the insurance, the higher premiums . . . She couldn't help it, she was so easily distracted. It might have been a movement out of the corner of her eye, some gust of wind shaking the trees by the side of the road. Or a girl's red sweater, flashing brightly as she sailed by on a ten-speed. Something that looked like happiness. Yes, she was so easily distracted.

When she looked up again, the chair where her husband had sat, seemingly just moments before, was empty. The room had a strange light; eventually she recognized it as sunlight streaming weakly in through the drawn curtains. She thought: I must have fallen asleep. A whole night must have passed, therefore, in this strange state. Now it was morning. Her husband had probably gone home. An image flashed through her mind: her husband getting into his white car, impervious to the light rain speckling his graying hair. And now it would be close to the time for his alarm clock to go off. He would be getting up soon, getting his things together to go to the office.

It seemed amazing to her that she had managed to fall asleep, in that state, in that place. Where she knew no one.

She recognized in herself a terrible thirst. But there was nothing within reach—no glass, no water. Mingled with the great thirst was a feeling of abandonment. She knew this feeling; it had been com-

mon enough throughout her marriage. The sight of the empty chair bothered her. She turned her head to avoid looking at it.

And then she saw the little thing. How could she have forgotten—? It was close to her now, snuggled on the sheets by her right hip. It lay quite still.

She looked at it again. So still it could have been a spider, resting there. There was nothing she could do.

She groaned. The sound, so deep, startled her. A machine with blinking red lights began to beep softly. She stifled any further noise.

She determined to get up, right that instant, to undo the tracery of tubes that fed her veins with a colorless liquid, to escape the softly beeping monitor. "All right," she whispered. Manfully she threw her legs over the side of the bed. She positioned her hands, palms downward, on either side of her. As if preparing for a final effort.

A young nurse was standing at the foot of the bed, staring at her.

The nurse's expression was cold, even hostile. She said nothing, however. The nurse might have been made of cardboard, so stiffly did she stand there, a clipboard cradled in her right arm.

The hand beckoned her forward.