



FINGERLESS

a novel by

I A N D O N N E L L A R B U C K L E



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When we arrived at the hospital in Spokane, Victor was unconscious, his room shut tight. Shasta was still occupied getting her Mom set up in the Oncology ward. My parents were on the road. Gracie, Victor's hairdresser girlfriend, had left me a message asking for more details. All of us separated by time and activity, but at least I could communicate again. I called Gracie back and explained what little I knew. She was sorry, so sorry. At the end of our brief conversation, she asked me to let her know if there was anything she could do for me, and I said: "Likewise."

I'm sure I looked homeless and pitiable, roaming the halls with half-naked Jilly in my arms. She was sleepy, content to rest her head on my shoulder unless I stopped moving. Every so often I passed by Victor's room. Its door remained shut and the space behind it was silent. The nurse's station was right close by. I

traded polite smiles with the clerks on duty on each revolution.

Shasta texted to say she was at the main entrance and to come by with Jilly. Jilly brightened up as soon as she saw her Mom. I couldn't say I was sorry enough times as I handed over our half-naked toddler, sending with her a wafting of leftover puke. Shasta just smiled and shook her head at my apologies, deflecting them. Her hair looked limp, and the impression carried over to the rest of her.

"Are you guys going back?" I asked.

"I got us a room for the night."

"Oh. Can I help you pay?"

One, two, three, and her last little shake of the head ended it, divided us into a new round. "Are you going to be all right?"

I shrugged. "My parents will be along in a bit. He still hasn't woken up yet."

Shasta shifted Jilly's weight. "OK. OK, I think we're going to go to the hotel. Call if you need anything, though."

"Thanks. Bye, sweetie," I said, waving at Jilly.

"Bye bye, Eeta," she said in four bright tones.

I stood alone in the waiting room for a few minutes, gaze unfocused. A special kind of silence filled me up, the silence of other people's lives going on

around mine without intersection. It was getting dark outside and I became gradually aware that I was studying my imperfect reflection in a bank of double-paned windows. It was like being in a fun house, but not knowing if the tweaked angle or bend of the surface was intended to make me look my best or most monstrous.

My phone was free of messages. I roamed back toward Victor's room. The halls were bright and wide, but I still hugged the wall, trying to stay out of the way of anyone who looked like they belonged.

The ward clerk caught my eye. "You don't have to wait outside if you don't want to."

"Thanks," I said. She smiled and bent over her paperwork. Now I felt almost obligated to go in, to sit in the dark beside his bed, to see him wrapped in bandages like an invisible man. "Thanks."

There's a point, I think, at which imagination and memory are pretty much indistinguishable. The further into the past you trace the more they commingle and become fused. The future, though, is strangely clear, a thing of imagination only. A dimension of a single quality unfelt. The difference between the expectation of the needle and the wound of the puncture.

I stood there on the tip of the needle, tracing the artificial wood grain of Victor's door, unsure of which

direction to fall. Come on memory; invalidate my fantasy.

The brushed-nickel handle was cold and smooth. The door, swinging inward, took more of my weight to get moving than I had expected. The result was an awkward step-shuffle which nobody saw. The lights were off in Victor's room, but the Venetian blinds were angled open allowing in the halogen-white glow of the streetlights just outside. His body was indistinct, draped in white cloth so that he looked to me like sand dunes on a beach. The hissing, hushing of the respirator was the sound of the waves. We had taken a family vacation to Hawaii once, back in middle school, after fire season had ended and Dad had some time off. I remember snorkeling and tagging along with Mom to one of the many little boutiques because she hadn't packed a bathing suit she liked. I remember trying on a bikini in the dressing room while Mom was busy hounding the staff.

Victor had disappeared from our hotel one night, and Dad got so angry I thought maybe the spirit of the volcano had stolen into him, human sacrifice the only way to calm him down. I wasn't volunteering. I said I'd search the beach while Mom and Dad went out in their rental car, but as soon as they were gone I slunk back inside and stole a tiny swig of Jim Beam from the mini bar.

Victor made it back before Mom and Dad. He had been with a girl he met in the courtyard. I don't remember what Dad did when they returned from their search, but I can vividly recall the silent anger on Victor's face the day we left as he took the blame for the bill for my sip of whiskey.

Not much of his skin was visible, but what little I saw around his eyes and lips was misshapen and dark. Every one of his muscles seemed paralyzed, the only motion coming from the mechanical rise and fall of his diaphragm.

I looked at the foot of his bed for a chart, but this hospital had gone electronic. No bits of data left loose for those curious or in need of distraction. A whiteboard on the wall showed that Becky was the RN, and Norene was the CNA. A monster of a TV perched on a metal shelf above the bathroom door, old metal dials on the front making me think maybe it had been picked up cheap in a yard sale. The wallpaper gave me the same impression.

Two chairs and a folding cot had been set in one corner. I pulled one of the chairs over to Victor's bedside and sat down. For a few minutes, nothing changed. Not even my thoughts had much motion. Tears came to my lids, then took their sweet time, refusing to spill over, feeling like nothing so much as a sneeze that just won't come. Victor's hands were bandaged like mittens, flat down at his sides. I wanted

to hold one. My thoughts slowed so much they went back in time, all the way back to the night of Shasta's party.

I had gone home in the pre-dawn cool, gray light seeming to brush my skin like a sweet breath. I had unloaded a weight, or at least had shared some of the lifting. The lights were all off in the house, and as I let myself in the front door I could smell the stale scent of a full night's sleep.

As I tiptoed into the kitchen for a glass of water, Victor's voice had come out of the gloom. "Dad was up until three waiting for you." My heart leapt, startled, and refused to come down.

"You got home early, then." I twisted on the kitchen faucet a fraction.

Victor strolled in from the living room, wearing his PJs. I could still smell cigarette smoke on him. "I got my lecture already," he said.

I filled up a glass and took a big swallow of lukewarm water. "And?"

"Grounded." He shrugged. He held a mug loosely in one hand, then tilted it toward me. I filled it up for him from the now-cool tap. "You're gonna get worse."

"We were just up talking," I said, rote lying.

"Whatever." He took a sip of water, swirled it around in his mouth, then spat it cleanly into the sink next to me. "Awful lot of talking."

I had a moment, there, where telling him everything would have been as easy as opening my mouth. The words were already there, piled up behind my lips. A featherweight momentum could have carried them out. Instead I took a drink, noted the grease of lipstick—hers or mine—on the rim of my glass, and turned away.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

He had chuckled, snorted, whatever.

In his hospital room, carrying nothing inside of me but hot courses of regret, I knew he would have understood. We passed our childhoods like ships at harbor, moored together at night, by day navigating different seas entirely. He knew somehow every inch of me and when I did finally come out to him it was as if he had already known. That night, in the kitchen, maybe he already did.

“I’m sorry,” I said to his bound-up face. Still couldn’t quite get the tears to flow, but an errant speck of dust did at least startle a sneeze out of me.

Two sharp knocks at the door, and then Mom strode right in, Dad behind her with his hands in his jeans pockets.

“Get the lights, hon,” said Mom. “Oh, sweetheart.” Her voice dipped as the harsh fluorescents blinked on. She came to stand at Victor’s side opposite me. For a moment, we all looked at the blinding white bandages. Then Dad said: “Hey, kiddo,” to me.

“Hi.” The respirator hissed and I thought for a moment I caught that old-memory smell of Victor’s high school cigarettes. “I haven’t seen the doctor yet,” I offered. Nothing. I backed out of my seat and stood up. “You want a seat, Dad?” He shook his head. We all stood around, dumbly still, our breaths gradually falling into sync with the rhythm of the respirator.

“Look at all this,” Mom said. “We can’t afford this.”

“It’s fine,” Dad replied, not taking his eyes off where his son’s dark throat disappeared beneath the gauze.

“Don’t tell me it’s fine.” It was a trademarked mother mutter, plenty loud to hear, quiet enough to claim she was talking to herself.

“I’m going to get a cup of coffee,” I said. “Let me know if the doctor comes by?”

Mom nodded absently. Dad said: “Yeah.” As I slipped out the door, I heard Dad’s voice again. “Be OK, son.”

The cafeteria was half-full, but the diners were scattered in ones and twos around a collection of tables sized for families. The air was far from still, with clinking silverware and the hollow chock of heavy ceramic mugs against Formica. No conversation, or none pitched so it could be overheard.

A girl younger than me stood behind a cash register. “A cup of coffee, please,” I said.

“It’s free.”

I smiled to thank her, got a bit of a smile back as change. I filled a styrofoam cup from the push-button dispenser nearby then found myself a seat alone at a table for four.

Be OK.

Dad had a lot of experience with that sentiment, fire and rescue having been a major part of his life since he was old enough to volunteer. He lived with his scanner on, the patterns of tones familiar to our whole family. We could sleep through a fire call, and wouldn’t miss a second of dialogue if a car crash interrupted one of our shows. Victor’s accident had been outside his jurisdiction, otherwise I’m sure he would have been first on scene.

When I was in grade school, he got a call I wish I could remember better.

As soon as the police forwarded the call, Dad and his buddies put together a search party. A mother says her baby is missing, so we go find that baby, that was the reasoning. It took them only an hour or so to find the kid, whose name doesn’t come to mind. His mother took him and moved out of town not much after all this.

The kid had found a storm drain down the street from his house and wriggled in through the gap where the grille joined to the curb. Erosion and the city’s cheap concrete had made a pocket just right to explore

under the sidewalk. When the search party converged, it was Dad's buddy Uncle Scott who took on the job coordinating. He had a baby girl back home, not much older than the missing kid.

They tried just reaching in and pulling on the kid's legs, but he was wedged in good. Plus he kicked at his rescuers like a billy goat, making it hard to get a solid hold on him. Dad managed to get both ankles in his grip, but even the slightest tug made the kid wail, a shriek that drove right to the core of each dad and mom within earshot. They found out later that a bent-off chunk of rebar had caught right under the kid's ribcage, so that when Dad pulled it kind of hooked under the bone with I imagine a sick relentless pressure.

That was after two hours on the scene. Then it started to rain. Not an April drizzle, but a sky-sweeping burst of thick, heavy, dirty drops. The kid's head was angled down in the path of the drainage.

Uncle Scott called in everyone he could and even press-ganged some rubberneckers to sandbag the area, to divert the gutters so they flowed across the street. Dad led up that team. I remember his fingernails the next day, cracked and grimy. While they built makeshift dams and channels, Uncle Scott and one of the paramedics kept up trying to free the kid. They removed the grille and knocked out enough of the asphalt around the drain so they could almost get

down to the kid's level, but all it really gave them was more room to maneuver. They still couldn't reach him, couldn't move him, and couldn't shut him up. The thickened sky brought night on too soon.

Through all this, Uncle Scott had done his best to keep the Mom at a distance. She did all right for the first couple of hours, but she lost it when the clouds burst. She broke free of whichever friends or family had been with her and launched herself right into Uncle Scott. Her voice pitched all over the place, a hopeless little boat in a big angry sea, up and down on waves. Her son heard her, and no doubt made some noise himself, trapped, scared, and buried. I would have broken, and I mean snapped clean in half. I would have done nothing to calm the storm. I can put myself there, in the middle of that panic and thudding heartbeat moment, and I can see myself fail everyone.

Uncle Scott just took it. He glanced at Dad; their eyes met for an instant. Then he took the kid's mom aside and let her cry and let her offer suggestions and let her pulse slow down against his while Dad picked up the slack and kept as much water as possible out of the drain system.

They outlasted the storm, but it took survival of six more hours before they finally got the kid free. Ended up jackhammering the next slab of sidewalk over and digging in, patiently, from the side. Some-

times Uncle Scott did the digging, sometimes he was down there with the kid, arms up to his shoulders in the eroded hole, checking a brace on the rotten concrete and muttering good thoughts so the kid could hear, if he was even still awake.

Three in the morning, they got him free. Their excavation made enough room to maneuver, freeing him from the iron rebar hook, scraping him something awful against the rough cement, but finally pulling him out into fresh air and warm hands.

The mother cried and cried as if she had been apart from her son forever, instead of just a few feet away and separated by six inches of poorly man-made rock. Uncle Scott had big hands that swallowed the mom's when he gave them a final shake and sent them off to the safety and reassurance of the hospital.

That night, or morning I guess, Dad put an arm around Uncle Scott's shoulder and asked, "Are you gonna be OK?" Probably a nod or a grunt was what he got back. Good enough. Dad came home and slept until almost noon, getting up once at nine to yell at me for having my cartoons on too loud.

After that night, Uncle Scott came by to visit more often, all beered up. I saw him cry one of those times, sitting on the couch with Dad, fingers up over his eyes to hide the tears but deep red wrinkles cutting out into view and stretching into his crew cut. His wife left him for her own sake.

Then one Sunday morning in July, Dad got a phone call he didn't talk much on. He left the house in a hurry. Game shows on the TV playing to an empty room. He came back at lunch time to tell us that Uncle Scott had passed on, catching us kids one after the other with the news instead of rounding us up like for an announcement. Then he took Mom and left us home alone. Victor went out to the back porch to smoke a stolen cigarette. I took one of Mom's Mary Kay mailers into the bathroom and played make believe with all the colors.

Uncle Scott had been enough of a churchgoing guy that the memorial at Our Lady of the Valley drew a good crowd—all of his fellow parishioners plus everyone associated with fire and rescue. The place was packed, but it emptied out fast. Tables full of Safeway cookies and coffee snagged us hangers-on. Mom held onto Dad with one hand, a styrofoam cup in the other from which they shared sips. I sat on a metal folding chair and nibbled the edges of a crispy macaroon, listening to everyone.

Among the talk of relatives taking the chance to catch up on each others' lives, I caught strings of two conversations from different ends of the room.

"Outta nowhere," said a woman to my left.

"I remember that Fourth of July, two, three years back," said a man to my right.

“Must have been fighting it for a long time. I’ve got a cousin with the bipolar thing. It’s pretty rough on her family. Just didn’t think Scottie had that kind of trouble, you know?”

“You remember? Worst was that house with all the junk in it. The packrat.”

“He hid it pretty well until Cora left.”

“Scott said there was something toxic in the baby’s room. Toys from China or something. Wasn’t much hope.”

“I didn’t see her today. Did she come?”

“Or I think it was twins. Anyway. Didn’t make it. Made me mad, you know? On the way back to the station, Scott told me to let it go. Just like that. Just let it go. I dunno.”

“I kind of hoped she wouldn’t, but I kinda hoped she would.”

I wanted to get up and grab the hands of the woman and the man and tug them together and say: “Talk to each other.” It was an impulse I didn’t completely understand then, but I think I do now. They were each trying to get at the same conclusion from different directions. In my scrambled brain, too young to get the concept of depression or to realize I was on my own collision course with the stuff, I felt as if I were listening to two kids in class trying to work the same math problem without success. I didn’t know

the answer either, but I sure as hell wanted to find out what it was, if for no other reason than to put my curiosity to sleep.

I sipped at my coffee. Be OK. Uncle Scott reached out and took hold of the kid's damp, cold ankle and could feel a pulse. Dad laid a hand on the foot of Victor's bed and listened to the respirator and the IV pump.

The coffee left a bitter lump in my throat. I went back to Victor's room.

"Any word?" I asked.

"A nurse came in," Mom replied. "The doctors will be around first thing in the morning."

I nodded. "I guess I'll go find a place to sleep. You guys OK?"

"We're fine."

As I turned to leave, Dad's voice found me gently. "Goodnight, Lita."



Shasta answered on the first ring. "Hello?"

"Can I stay with you tonight?"

Her motel wasn't far. Walking distance. I felt underdressed for both the weather and the big city, but Shasta answered the door in her pajamas and I felt OK. She gave me a long hug. Jilly lay curled like a shrimp in the middle of the room's queen bed. I col-

lapsed on one side of her. Shasta took the other after switching out the lights.

More than once, if my drowsy memory can be trusted, I woke to Shasta's fingers soothing my shoulder and cheek.



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