

MEHITOBEL

HEAVY HANDS



“Too hot,” Jason murmured through sleep-sticky lips when he felt the warm hand spread against the small of his back. The complaint felt rude, and even as he shifted on the sheet in anticipation of the hand’s withdrawal, he said, “Sorry, too hot. Love you.”

The pressure at the base of his spine increased briefly, a comforting apology, then relaxed. Jason felt a farewell skirl of fingertips along his vertebrae. He shivered, smiled, and reached behind him to pat the flank of his bedmate.

“Love you,” he had said, and as he stretched his arm over the sheet he remembered that no one should be sharing his bed. He frowned, more awake now, and pulled his groping arm back, rolled, lifted himself on his elbow.

The bed was empty.

Disconcerted, his nerves still registering a memory of the touch, Jason rolled onto his back to stifle the sensation. He allowed himself just a moment of disappointment that he was alone after all, that no sleepy girl was curled beside him, sweating and pressing a reassuring palm against him.

When he slept again, he dreamed he wandered an utterly vacant landscape. Underfoot were drifts of silken ash, and the silence made him miserable.



Jason’s job was tedious, a neverending influx of complaints: light bulb burned out in Weyerhauser Hall Room 101, broken video projector in Critique Space A, leaking dehumidifier in a dorm room, a well-endowed elephant spray-painted on the diner,

WILSON

a professor wanted a more ergonomically-sound chair, someone had wrecked the Marley dance floor with stiletto heels, there was a pizza box shoved into the toilet beside the video editing lab.

Jason took the calls, entered the work orders, called various crew supervisors for emergencies, sent orders involving purchases or any repairs that required an outlay of money upstream. His own chair was neither ergonomically sound nor fully upholstered. One caster had broken two years before; Jason had replaced it with a baseball strapped to the chair leg with an ever-growing wad of electrical tape, blue painter's tape, duct tape, and the occasional zip-tie. The air-conditioning return over his head hung at a 50-degree angle from the sagging gray acoustical tile. The tan laminate edge of his particleboard desk was detached at the corner and no amount of tape could convince it to lay flush again.

But the telephone worked, the computer worked, and if nothing else, Jason knew he'd have free air conditioning and endless coffee if he just came in to work. His job was what he did to pass the time while drinking the office coffee. That was the theory, anyway.

Well, he thought as he returned to his desk with his fourth cup of coffee, *that's not exactly true*. He did get some noble satisfaction out of helping people, even if the people he helped saw him as nothing more than a conduit, a recording device by which they reached the crew members who truly came to their aid.

Aside from the constant stream of incoming complaints, Jason's days were nearly devoid of human contact. He could rarely leave his office, lest some visiting distinguished lecturer call shrieking about the late delivery of a podium.

He'd tried to quit smoking a dozen times, but he relied too heavily on his smoke breaks for social interaction. For approximately 18 minutes a day, three six-minute Marlboro interludes, he was able to sit in the sun with Gemma and chat.

This morning, he paced on the sidewalk beside their building while Gemma sat on the curb. She flung her arm over her head, her signal to him that she needed to use his lighter. He lit his own cigarette first, then pressed his zippo into her palm.

Gemma was so furious at some office situation that she probably could have lit her cigarette with the force of her rage alone.

This was normal for her, and Jason knew that she would spend a few minutes flipping the zippo end to end in her palm while snarling around the filter clenched in her teeth before remembering to actually light the cigarette. She couldn't rant and smoke at the same time, it seemed.

"It's absolutely sick that I care so much about this shit," she snarled, hugging her knees. "You'd think I'd be used to it by now, or that I could just let it go. Or you'd think that I'd have learned by now not to do anybody any favors, because the second I'm in a good mood and do a fucking favor, it bites me in the ass. Ungrateful, lying cunts, all of them. God."

She paused to light her cigarette. Jason knew this meant she was done with the rant and relaxing now into a black brood.

"You know," said Gemma, "I have a new theory. I think they ought to include Xanax or some shit into the supply budget. Coffee, tea, water cooler, meds."

Jason laughed and sat down beside her. It was safe to do so now that the risk of her gesticulating with fire was past.

He stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles, enjoying the pulling sensation in his hamstrings and the heat of the morning sun through the knees of his dark trousers.

"Speaking of meds," he said, "know any good sleep aids?"

"Stressed out, huh? You tried yoga?" She leaned back, pressed her palms together, and hummed.

"Not my thing, really," he said, embarrassed. "Too much one-with-all-mankind stuff. And too much bending."

"Yeah. Jack Daniels and cable do it for me. Sit there for two hours staring at reality dating shows and you'll be so ashamed of yourself and all humanity that unconsciousness becomes your best friend."

"You're a tender soul, you know that, right?"

"Tender as your mama's asshole," she affirmed, then laughed and elbowed him in the bicep, "Oh, wait, that's YOU!"

Jason could never think of a comeback, not around Gemma, especially not after she touched him. Her touches were whacks on the shoulder, little kicks against his instep, a poke in the ribs, but they were touches nonetheless, and he knew he failed at hiding his pleasure when they came.

Gemma got to her feet, brushing the sidewalk grit from the back of her full, fashionably-distressed skirt. She scrubbed her hands through her short cocoa curls and squinted at the sun. “It’s hot as hell already. I’ve got to go meet the fire marshall and see if we can come to some sort of compromise about increasing the capacity of the fitness center, and I’m going to be a total sweat-bomb by the time I get there. Wish me luck. Hey, you up for happy hour today?”

“There’s an hour when you’re happy?”

“I’d tell you to fuck off, but I’m on the clock. It would be unprofessional.”

Jason stubbed his cigarette out on the pavement and stood. “Yeah, happy hour sounds cool. Good luck at the meeting.”

Gemma adjusted the lanyard that held her ID badge, settling the badge over her pale cleavage, and dug her car key from her pocket as she turned and headed for her car. Jason watched the swing of her skirt for a moment, thinking of the badge and envying the fire marshal, then took the long way back to his office, walking behind the building, through the overlong summer grass.

He spied a fat puffball mushroom, creamy with brown spots, like a fire-blistered marshmallow, and paused in his stride. He raised his foot to give it a good stomp, and felt Gemma’s small, familiar hand grasp his elbow and squeeze.

Jason, assuming she needed a light for the road, turned.

Gemma wasn’t behind him. No one was behind him. He was forty feet from the parking lot, with the office building to his left and a chain-link fence to his right, and no one was there.

Frowning, rubbing the fresh goosebumps from his elbow, Jason decided that the very next work order he entered would be a request for an ergonomically-sound desk chair and a padded wrist-rest.



Jason took a late lunch and drove to the strip mall closest to the office. He entered the drugstore. It was very dim inside, a common Southern tactic to make the customers feel cool and shaded from the heat. Once inside, people were reluctant to

leave, and tended to browse for greeting cards and cosmetics that they hadn’t planned to purchase. The shops made money from those that dallied, and saved on their cooling bill, bumping the thermostat up a degree or three without anyone noticing.

The sleep aids shared a shelf with the stimulants, Sleep-Eze immediately beside No-Doz. Jason examined each box, squinting at the warnings and instructions. They all seemed about the same, so he chose the drugstore’s discount brand and moved on to the single grocery aisle to grab a frozen burrito, which he’d nuke in the office microwave.

As he headed for the checkout counter, he passed a display of overpriced box fans. He stopped. His apartment had central air, of course, but he imagined the fan blowing hard against his face, cooling the sweat on his throat, thrumming white noise, blowing phantom hands away. He set his burrito and the sleeping pills on top of one of the packaged fans and carried the box to the check-out.

The drugstore did not have an automatic door, so Jason had to bumble his way past the anti-theft towers and through the door backwards, the plastic pharmacy bag hooked over his finger, both arms around the giant fan’s box. He emerged from the darkened store into full sunlight and was blinded, disoriented. He could not see over the fan and tried to walk sideways, but missed a step and stumbled.

“Whoa,” he heard from beyond the fan, and he planted his feet and braced himself, the toe of his loafer just past the edge of the curb.

“Wow, guy, thought you were going to take a header right into the road!” Jason looked over his shoulder at the speaker, who had passed behind him. It was a tall, broad man wearing a uniform, the security guard from the drugstore. “You need a hand with that?”

“No, thanks,” Jason mumbled, embarrassed and a touch guilty. Guards and police always made him feel guilty — not because he may have done something, but because he knew he never would, and would never measure up against men and women so bold and solid.

He considered buying a liter of Jack from the package store,

but decided against it. Gemma was a bit harder than he was, and if she recommended Jack, Jason's equivalent ought to be chamomile tea.

Jason crossed the street to the parking lot, set the fan on the ground behind his car, and unlocked the trunk. He'd forgotten that his trunk still held the boxed barbecue grill and bags of charcoal he had bought on impulse just before the Fourth of July. He had seen the grill on sale and imagined having a small get-together on his apartment patio. By the time he had arrived home, though, those moments of hopeful confidence had passed, and he'd reminded himself that if he threw even a small party, no one would come. He'd abandoned the grill to the trunk, preferring to forget about it, rather than be confronted with the reminder of his solitude by returning it for a refund.

He leaned deep into the trunk, itself barbecue-hot, to shove the grill to the back, and his Polo shirt pulled free of his waistband. He felt a teasing hint of coolness on his perspiring skin despite the midafternoon heat, and then he felt the firm pressure of a hand against his bare flesh.

Jason closed his eyes and braced himself against the lower lip of the car's trunk. He felt the hand spread its fingers, then close them again, flex and relax. This was a loving hand, a calming hand.

He opened his eyes as he turned, first looking over his left shoulder, then his right. He was not expecting to see anyone there, and seeing no one, he was perfectly calm.

The hand slid against his skin. He felt the heel of it settle into the valley of his spine, then felt the gentle drag of nails as it moved back and forth. Then the sweet pressure lifted and was gone.

The loss of the touch, imaginary though it was, saddened him.

His new chair would be delivered next week, and these phantom muscle spasms should clear up soon, he figured. Lumbar support, posture control, core support, and a seat that avoided some pressure points while stimulating others, along with five working casters that would allow him to shift position without worrying about detaching his duct-taped baseball — his confused muscles should be satisfied and attending to normal business soon enough.

But he had liked the feel of that comforting hand against his back, a supportive, loving touch, and he would miss it.

Jason loaded the fan into the trunk, shut the deck lid, and got into the car. His elbow was still sore from the clutch-spasm he'd had that morning, and he grimaced at the thought of leaning his arms on the bar at happy hour. He had the feeling that Gemma wasn't much of a booth girl, however.



He stopped off at his house to change before meeting Gemma at the bar. She'd said she had to run by her house and let her dog out before she could meet him, so he knew he had a bit of time. He carried his box fan into the house, ignoring the barbecue. He took one of the two chairs from the dining room table, which he never used, and set it next to his bed, then set the box fan on it and plugged it in. He sat on the edge of the bed, laid down, sat up again. He turned the fan down to Lo, then up to Hi.

He liked the sound of it on Hi. On Hi, it was a steady hum that would distract him from the sound of his own breath at night.

He thought maybe he should get a pet. Gemma had seemed so responsible and matter-of-fact when she explained about her dog. Maybe having an animal to wait for him, to rely on him, would be a nice thing. Maybe it would curl up with him at night.

Jason sighed. The notion of having a pet was like his barbecue fantasy: he didn't dare adopt one, for fear that it would avoid him. He imagined a little orange cat huddled hissing atop his fridge, or a potbellied bulldog puppy cowering under the coffee table, just waiting for its chance to run out the door and escape the dull bastard and his dull-bastard dog treats.

He had to snap out of this vortex of self pity and meet Gemma, who was clearly in a masochistic mood today, wanting to hang out with the dull bastard. Or perhaps it was a sadistic mood; maybe she was eager to tease him in front of an audience.

Enough.



He beat Gemma to the bar. In fact, he seemed to have beaten everyone to the bar; he was the only patron. The bartender was a heavysset blonde who looked harried despite the lack of business. She sliced limes with astonishing speed, and didn't look up when Jason pulled up a stool nearby. Four limes later, she used her knife hand to sweep her hair from her brow. Jason flinched, expecting her to zip the blade through her eyelid, and she said, "I won't get any on you."

"What?"

"Juice. What can I get you?"

"Oh," he said. "Something cold, please."

She huffed. "You think that's doing me a favor, but honestly, I'm here to get you what you want, not something cold. Ask for what you want."

Jason didn't really do bars, but he'd watched enough television to expect bartenders to be good listeners and dispensers of wisdom. "Ask for what you want" struck him as an incredibly profound statement.

He wanted: an ergonomically sound chair. A thank-you at work. A phone call from someone just because they had been thinking about him. A pet. A reason to pull the barbecue from the trunk of his car and fill it with the additive-free charcoal he'd so carefully chosen. He wanted to listen to music at the office. He wanted to know what music to listen to.

He wanted the imaginary hands to stop touching him, and a real hand to touch him instead.

"I want a shot of Jack, straight up," he said, "and a Pabst."

"Good man," said the blonde, slapping the knife down on the rubber drain mat and turning to the back-lit pyramid of liquors.

Then she was gone as hands slipped over his eyes, GUESS WHO, and he instinctively shut his lids.

Small, icy, wet hands, the fingertips gentle at the bridge of his nose, the palms flush against his hot temples. He opened his eyes as he brought his own hands up to his face and felt his lashes brush against the invisible fingers. But he could see, the hands hadn't blinded them. He rubbed his eyes through their touch and tried to look normally at the bartender, but the weird pressure and pull against his lashes made him flinch flutter his lids. The

blonde turned back toward him and he wrenched his head toward the door, hoping she'd mistake his crazy blinking for interest in something passing on the street. At the moment, a Budweiser delivery truck was parked outside the door, blocking all view of passersby. Not worth the intensity of his butterfly eyes, but something to see, he supposed.

The hands withdrew and he scrubbed at his eyes again just as the bartender set his drinks on the scarred wood of the bar. "Start you a tab?"

"Yeah, that's fine," he said, "thank you." Jason lit a cigarette and eyed the Jack. He'd bought it for Gemma, but this business with the invisible hands was getting, well, out of hand. He had spent most of the day telling himself that the sensations were actually muscle spasms, but now he thought that he was quite possibly fucked in the head. He picked up the shot, inhaled, and threw the whiskey down his throat as he exhaled. His next breath was smoke and the hot memory of the liquor. He relished it, still holding the heavy little glass in his hand.

The bartender looked toward the door, grinned, and then gave Jason a conspiratorial look, holding a finger to her lips, shush. She crouched and walked in an odd, theatrical ninja-slink around the end of the bar, behind Jason, and past the row of stools toward the door.

Gemma was at the cigarette machine there, her back to the bar, her hair tousled, the nape of her long luminous neck bowed as she examined the selection. The blonde reached for her, slipped her hands over Gemma's eyes from behind, and crowed, "Guess who, babycakes?"

As Gemma turned and embraced her friend, Jason set the shot glass on the bar. It rattled as his quivering fingers released it. He reached for the PBR to occupy his hands, and froze, as a chip of ice let go of the lip of the can and slipped through the beads of water, down the side of the tallboy, and came to rest on the cardboard coaster.

Gemma slung herself onto the stool beside him and the blonde upended a canned Guinness into a pint glass.

"Kate, this is Jason," she said. "We work together."

“Nice to meet you,” Kate said, wiping her hands on a bar towel and extending her right for a shake. Jason clasped her small, cool hand and shook it, trying to match the feel of her hand to that of the phantom fingers that had covered his eyes. It was difficult to tell; palm to palm is far from palm to temple, but he suspected they were the same.

“You too,” Jason said. “Nice place.”

Gemma accepted her drink and said, “It’s been here for years. You should get out more. In fact, I don’t think you get out at all.”

Jason shook his head. “That’s unfair. You don’t know me well enough to say that.”

“Who does know you?” She turned on her stool so she faced him, leaned her elbow on the bar, and crossed her legs, hooking her black waxed lineman’s boot over the top rung of Jason’s stool.

“People know me,” he said, staring at his beer can. “Plenty of people.”

“Listen. I hate everyone as much as the next guy, but I’m told that humans are social animals. You’ve got to get on that train, you know.”

“What do I owe you for this therapy session? I’m afraid our time is up.” He tried to speak with a jocular tone, but failed, sounding as cowed as he felt. He didn’t want to talk about this, and didn’t want to be drawn into talk about himself. He was too tempted to say something about the hands, and if they ventured into personal territory, he might have a lapse in judgement and tell her all about the caresses.

Gemma shrugged. “You get my point. I won’t bug you about it.”

And she didn’t. They spent the rest of happy hour chatting sociably with each other and with Kate. As other patrons entered, Gemma called them over and introduced them to Jason. He shook hands with Jack, Steve, Jessamine, and Santos; was clapped heartily on the back by a skinny boy named Crash; hid his shock as Diamond Lil snaked her tattooed arm around his waist and pressed herself against him.

“Jason, Diamond Lil. Lil, Jason,” Gemma said with faux gravity.

“Charmed,” Lil said with a slow, coquettish roll of her shoul-

der. She pulled away from him and gave him a hint of a curtsy, then extended her hand in clear expectation of a bow and a kiss.

Jason’s stomach twisted. Diamond Lil’s honey-colored eyes were hard, hot, and fixed directly on his own. He wanted to look to Gemma for help, but sensed that this was some sort of test. He suspected that this meeting was in fact the real reason Gemma had asked him to happy hour, and the thought annoyed him.

So he took Lil’s hand in his and leaned over it, his gaze still locked on her eyes. “The pleasure’s mine,” he said, and brushed her knuckles with the barest of pressure. As he released her hand, he made sure to caress the chunky silver ring that encircled her thumb so that it spun against her skin.

He was pretty proud of that move. *Test that, ladies*, he thought with triumph. And he hoped that Gemma had noticed. He wasn’t as shy as she thought.

Diamond Lil arched a brow and said, “So, Jason, what brings you here?”

“Gemma made me come,” he said.

Gemma laughed and said, “Oh, now you’ve given her an opening!”

Lil snickered. “I could run with both of those, but I’ll refrain. It’s nice to meet you, Jason. Good to see you out. Gemma’s mentioned you a few times. The problem with interesting men is that they refuse to visit uninteresting places, like this one. They don’t realize how much we need them.” She squeezed his arm. “I’m serious.”

He believed that she was, and in fact felt a bit chastened. So he was hiding his light under a bushel, was he? Isn’t that what they say?

They talked about lights and bushels, and about what, precisely, bushels might be. They argued about units of measurement, and Gemma insisted that the word was “bushes,” but of course landscape designers hide lights under bushes all the time, to nice effect. Were the bushels flammable, they wondered? If so, wouldn’t hiding one’s light under said flammable bushel then cause a conflagration, thereby causing the light to actually intensify exponentially?

And eventually the tone of the bar shifted as the format

moved from punk-rock happy hour to the 80's Bingo Night, and they paid their tabs and said their goodbyes and went home.



Jason was surprised at how much he'd enjoyed himself. He really liked Diamond Lil (so named, she'd explained, because it was her lucky suit of cards) and felt as if he'd truly spent a night out with friends. He'd carried himself with confidence that he'd forgotten he had, and friends and strangers had laughed at his jokes. The conversations throughout the night had been engaging, silly, sometimes thoughtful. He'd even liked a lot of the music that the bartender had played, and had a list of band names in his wallet.

Warmed by the alcohol and the high of companionship, he ran the shower at a cooler temperature than he usually preferred. He wanted it to feel like rainwater. He undressed, and flirted with himself in the mirror. He smiled at himself to see how he'd appeared to others that night, and he approved. He pretended he was listening to Lil when she'd told him about the functional extinction of the Baiji dolphin, and liked the expression on his face then, too. He looked interested, and decided that an interested person is an interesting one. He then caught himself looking smug, and was amused to think that he was, at 30 years old, witnessing his face do something he'd never seen before. Fascinating.

Jason stepped into the shower and luxuriated under the falling water. He got his bar of soap good and lathery, and soaped his face, enjoying the spicy fragrance.

And a hand gripped his cock.

He gasped, sucking soap into his throat. He looked down, coughing, his eyes stinging as lather ran into them. Of course there was no point in looking, he'd already known there would be no hand there, no confident hand clasping him firmly, squeezing, pulling and releasing. No practiced hand renewing the pressure as he hardened in response, no soap-slick palm flattening against the underside of his cock and slipping from head to balls and back again, no fingers spreading to cup his balls on the downstroke and

looping into a tight ring at the head.

If this was all in his mind, he thought, it's still good. Good, good. Was that extra pressure he felt the metal of a broad, smooth thumb ring? He thought it might be. He closed his eyes and braced his hand against the shower wall, visualizing Diamond Lil's dragon-inked arm running with water and spiced soap bubbles.

The hand adjusted its grip into an overhand hold, the thumb ring rolling, rolling, rolling up and down under his cock as the fingers curled over. He imagined Lil on her knees now, looking up at him, watching her own hand as she worked him expertly, then looking past his cock to his face above, her eyes as hot and eager as they had been when she introduced herself. He imagined her other hand slipping between her own legs, and the hand on him was so earnest, so powerfully interested in its work, so good at this grip and slide and sweet, tight twist, that his thighs hardened and his balls seized and he spread his left hand against the tile, reached his right to catch Lil's wrist, and came hard into the shower spray.

Jason caught his breath and rubbed the water from his eyes. He finished showering, trying not to think about the phantom handjob, and what it might mean. This had been one hell of a pleasant daydream, but it had been undeniably physical, tactile. What if it happened in public, at work? Granted, he hadn't made any effort to stop it just now, but if he had tried, would he have been able to banish the sensation of the hand? He feared he wouldn't. When the fingers like the bartender's had covered his eyes, guess who, he had wanted that to stop, but they had stayed as long as they'd wanted to. But he thought that the hand that had touched his back in bed the night before had withdrawn upon his request.

The hands were certainly a product of his own imagination. Was his mind strong enough to resist itself, he wondered? If the part of his mind that was generating these hands didn't want to stop, what then?

He toweled off and did not bother wiping the fog from the mirror. Ten minutes ago he'd admired himself. Now, he didn't want to see his face, guilty and confused and a little scared.