

Parts

by David Ackley

He would carry body parts separated from their owners out to the burn pit well away from the cluster of tents-- the surgery among them-- in a white enamel basin covered with a white towel like the host in its salver.

The parts needed to be hid so as not to scare the ones at risk of the same, and to be burned so the amputee couldn't ask for it back. Some thought they should have had the say, that the doc had robbed them of their hand or foot or leg. Or as if they wanted to rescue it for later sewing on by someone better. Or something. Who knew why? But some did want their missing parts back.

Others turned their faces to the tent wall and cried. A few just shrugged. One actually started to laugh and waved his bandaged stump at Phil. That was the weirdest, the one he'd remember as casting doubt on the whole business.

The burn pit was behind some bushes, and still smoldered with the last batch, though the bones were now ash. To do this work, to live through the war you had to stay empty—of hope, dreams, memories—of feelings in general. But his mind started to drift before he realized it. Under the towel was what had been a hand, missing two fingers and a thumb, sawn off a few inches above the wrist, blackened, puffed and packed with brown mud.

It was an odd one...if there was any such thing as normal. Last night, there'd been a fire. The guy pulled the pin on a grenade, and held it with the safety lever in his grip, something hit near him, he dropped the grenade into his slit trench and it sank in the mud. He was a new replacement; an oldtimer would've jumped out of the hole. When he was groping around for it with his hand, it went boom.

Besides the hand, there was a slurry of blood, dirt and alcohol, cold and thick as pond bottom, which he'd swept off the table into the basin with his own latex-gloved hand.

The memory of that thing that had been a hand would have been for its touches, tender, rough, exploring. It might have hammered nails, Bang, into a piece of pine board making a house for his family. It turned a page, the slithering touch of paper. It lay quietly for a moment on smooth skin and then began to move, fingertips relaying to the brain, heart and genitals, that friction which turns to liquid quickening.

He saw as in a flicker of pages, an infinity of touching. The palm cupped on the fine hair of a small boy, and the rounded skull it padded. Dog nose, warm and wet. Snot even, blown through your fingers, wiped on rough denim. The numbing water, reached into through the ice hole to pull up a trout. The wood duck, its pulsing neck under the feathers. Small itself in a large leathery grip, warm, powerful and safe.

Only a hand; the guy had got off light he tells himself to make peace with the cascading touches.

Christ, how would you thumb a ride to work, broke-down on a long dark road?

Without realizing it, he had stopped before reaching the burn pit as if the hand hung in the air, palm up and out, giving the universal sign to pause. Think. Ask why.

He was on all fours, not knowing how he had got there, the basin, still covered, thank god, between his outspread arms. He breathed in and out, the cold foreign air with its particular smells of cordite, stale wine, harsh tobacco, unfamiliar trees—and lifted himself back on his haunches. The acrid, calcide tinged smoke from the burn pit came into his throat as coarse and hard as cinders, making him cough in spasms.

He stood, picked up the basin and looking off, dumped the remnants into the embers. He walked over and picked up the gas can.

How did it feel, taking up the slack in a trigger? He couldn't remember, the memory gone along with the desire. What would come of all the missing touches? Maybe nothing, *what is* closing over *what isn't*, like the dirt he'd throw over the burn pit, over the flesh and bone gone to ash, before the unit pulled up stakes and followed the brigade to their next engagement.

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