

Red Left Hand

by David Burton

Abraham Minkus's left hand is suddenly huge. It is edged with dripping snow from clearing off the Chevrolet's windshield and crossed by creases that his wife thinks harbor strange fortune.

"Oh no, this is a troubled hand, in more ways than one," Jeanette had said when they first met, running her fingers across his palm, "This line right here, the shorter one? It says to me there will be a bad accident one day."

She closed her eyes and Abraham had watched as she sucked her bottom lip beneath teeth stained by a piece of trick gum.

"I see a child's bicycle swarmed by bees. A stolen oil painting of a helicopter... no, no, that ain't it. Wait. A high school basketball coach will hang himself from a bridge you often think about. This man, now, he's a Navajo Indian. I can't know for definite, but you might be able to save him. This might be your destiny, to save this Indian from death."

"And the longer lines, what about those?"

But her eyes just grew sad and she shook her head.

Not long after that, Abraham's nights filled with the songs of crickets and thunderstorms. As he slept, his hair stood up from the electricity of far away power lines. He had started dreaming about a twisted, rusting span that he couldn't place, but thought might be somewhere in Iowa. There were clues — an accented voice coming through a fast food drive-in speaker, a school fight song, a dilapidated tire factory — easily followable trails leading into the dark trees of his subconscious, but he had no pretensions of being a detective.

So he had left it at that, although he did propose to Jeanette just three weeks later, and she agreed to marry him as long as he wore a glove, one that she promised to knit herself.

It was a silly, off-handed remark--the remark about knitting the glove--but it wasn't sarcastic in tone, he was almost sure of that, and for eight months it made his mind dance with imagination. It would be a glove to capture his personality. The color, the texture, the pattern, it was all a mystery yet to unfold. A boxing glove covered in Damask roses? A fingerless bike messenger's glove woven from cotton that grew wild in the cemetery where his mother was buried? A glove studded with tiny suction-cups so he'd never again drop a cup of tea and scald his foot?

But, in the end, Jeanette had never learned to knit and he had made do with a sandpaper-tough, colorless 'Raw Hyde' brand glove from the Dollar General.

Now Abraham stares at that very same hand as it pulses like a hummingbird heart, bright pink, swollen in the sudden heat of the bar. He has intentionally left the glove back at the house, right out in the open on the dining room table, as an act of defiance.

"They're like little pillows," he mutters to himself, trying to clench his fingers into a ball but finding no strength, "Hamburger mitten. Baby fist."

Abraham catches sight of a couple in the corner looking at him over their menus and he gives a half-smile and briefly raises his hand in their direction before dropping it, like a man trying to hail a cab to the office before noticing it's already occupied and on its way to some place with exciting music.

The couple look away from Abraham quickly, but not quickly enough.

It's clear that the mood has changed, that they are not as happy now as they were five seconds ago, nor ever will be, and that they'll skip the meal they were about to order and instead go home to pull out their ugliest, most comfortable pajamas from the back of the closet and hold each other tightly in bed, feeling degrees colder than they should, troubled by an emotion that's just been discovered by humans for the first time.

A bartender has mistaken Abraham's awkward semi-wave for a call to action and reluctantly slides closer.

"Cold out, huh?"

"What?"

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Grape juice."

"We have V-8."

"No grape juice?"

"This is a bar, and no one really mixes anything with grape juice, so no."

"What do people mix with V-8?"

"Rum?"

"How's that?"

"I can't imagine."

"OK, I'll have a rum and V8. That's the closest thing you have to

grape juice?"

"We have wine in miniature bottles."

"No, the rum and V8 sounds good, thanks."

Abraham downs his cocktail in one long pull. It's warm and disgusting and he wonders if it has a name. He thinks it would be sad if it didn't. Rum and tomato juice, a 'Captain Blood', like the movie with Errol Flynn which he's never seen. Abraham had read that when Errol Flynn died, his friends dug up his body and sat it on the couch in a director's house to surprise him. Things were different then. Grave-robbing's more frowned upon nowadays. He wonders if the body still had pennies taped to the eyes when the director found it, if his suit had worms in the pockets.

He notices a fading print on the wall above the door to the ladies room. It is of a beach at sunrise. He realizes with certainty that it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. He longs to live in its corners, stake a spot in the shade where he could build a shelter under trees blackened by summer lightning, where he would slowly find himself becoming obsessed with mapping the Fibonacci Sequence in seashells, discovering a labyrinthian beauty that he had never paid attention to but that was there all along. He wishes to be marooned, the only survivor of a horrific plane crash or a leisure ship torn apart by heat-seeking missiles, and spend each day straining to walk against the churning tide pools, stabbing iridescent fish with a sharpened pole, only returning to this bar after his calves have grown knotted with Olympian muscle, when his skin is the color of a burnished penny. They'd keep a jug of grape juice in the cooler then, hoping he'd drop by, maybe.

"Give me another Captain Blood."

"A what?"

Abraham taps the glass in front of him with a spoon, and the bartender nods as a flaky red residue floats off the rim into darkness.

"You waiting for a ride?"

"No."

"Well, I don't know that you should be driving, Captain. Things would be rough enough for anybody out there."

Abraham looks out the window at his olive Chevy, alone in the parking lot, as the snow drifts down and builds castles on the windshield. The tires look low, like they are sinking into the earth. He doesn't like the way the bartender had said 'captain.'

"I can walk."

"OK then."

"Can you put a stalk of celery in this one?"

"We've got candied cherries."

"That'll do."

He wonders what would happen if he went home and Jeanette had vanished and there was another family there instead. He pictures himself staring in through the kitchen as a woman he has never seen bends to pull a cake out of the oven. A birthday cake with 'Little Alice' iced on the top. Seven candles. A worried daughter upstairs is calling the cops from her bedroom, reporting a one-gloved man at the window.

He pictures himself pulling up slowly to the house and being shocked to find it lightless, scentless, for sale. He thinks about trying to join the witness protection program, about living under a secret name in tornado country.

The bartender puts an orange slice in his mouth and turns his back. He's looking at the clock.

Abraham is focused on the sunrise picture again. He thinks about a point in the future where he's building a time machine to go back to the exact moment and place the picture was taken. He squints and stares at it, watching to see if size 10 footprints suddenly appear crossing the sand towards the tide.

They don't. His future attempts at a time machine have failed.

The bartender runs hot water in the plugged sink and squirts some soap in. Everything is suddenly lemon-scented, unnaturally, and it makes Abraham think of labor strikes and radon. The snow outside is glistening like a hundred thousand fish hooks turning in the streetlight's arc. Abraham knows that his presence is making the bartender uncomfortable.

"I guess I'll get going now."

"Sure thing, buddy."

"So here's a twenty, you can keep the change."

"OK, see you then."

But the bartender still has his back turned, scrubbing out a beer mug that was never used.

Abraham reaches for the doorknob and catches his reflection in the

glass. For a second, a basketball whistle dangles from his neck. His dark, Navajo hand throbs, as if there's a fire on the other side of the door. His fingers are growing redder, deep blue rivers cross his palms.

