

The Oaten Hands

by Nathaniel Tower

His hands were made of oats.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't been a horse whisperer.

His hands were like that when he was born. No one really understood why. Neither of his parents had any body parts made of oats. Neither of them had even eaten any oats the morning the conception took place. But sure enough, when Edwin MacGrain was born on that windy November night, he slid out, covered in all the embryonic goo, with hands made out of thousands of sturdy oats, all clumped together in the exact shape of normal looking hands.

The hands were still fully functional. He had full range of motion with both hands and all of his fingers. The thumbs were even opposable. It was as if the oats had simply taken the skin's place; everything underneath was exactly the same as everyone else.

It was a darn good thing that Edwin had developed a taste aversion to oats early in his life. His mother had made sure of it. Myrtle MacGrain wasn't going to have a child that went around munching on his own hands.

"Get your oats, I mean hands, out of your mouth," she would yell at him whenever the youth had chewed on the delicious grains that comprised his hands.

"But they taste delicious and I'm hungry," the boy had whined.

"Well, let me just fix that," she said before wiping wormwood all over his hands. "Why don't you try them now?"

He did, and immediately he drew back his head forcefully, the bitter taste of his wormwood oat hands leaving him cringing for sugar.

"Now, promise me you will never chew on your hands again."

"I promise, Mommy," the boy had told his mother.

And he made good on that promise, so for twenty-two years, Edwin MacGrain lived a somewhat normal life, as normal of a life as anyone could live when his hands were made of oats.

Edwin was bullied about his oat hands in school, with classmates often threatening to feed him to the local farm animals or to pour milk on him and eat him out of a bowl for breakfast. They stopped bullying him about his hands when he started wearing black cotton work gloves all the time. Then they made fun of him for wearing gloves all the time.

Most wondered if there were other parts of his body that were made of oats as well. Although some of the ladies enjoyed the novelty of his grainy touch, they were a bit afraid that other appendages might possibly consist of oats, and they assumed that the logistics of that just wouldn't be able to work out. So, for the most part, they kept their distance.

It was his complete lack of normal social interaction that drove him to horse whispering. He stumbled upon it one day by accident really. The bullies had chased him unknowingly to a farm, leaving him as a sacrifice to the most feared horse of all, a ferociously muscular white stallion by the name of Hayman. When the beast seemed poised to strike, the cowering Edwin softly spoke, "Hey man," not realizing at the time that the two syllables he had uttered, had they been uttered closer together, would have represented the horse's name. But it was all the same to the horse. To Edwin's amazement, rather than munching at his hands, the horse simply nuzzled at his feet as he begged for mercy. When he placed his oat hands on the mighty stallion's fiery mane, the horse purred for him, and he realized that he had tamed the wild beast. It was a ridiculous scene, the boy rubbing his oats all over the menacing horse as it purred like a kitten and paid no attention to the tasty smells that emanated from Edwin's hands.

Edwin's favorite part about interacting with Hayman was that the horse made no attempt to make fun of him. For the first time in his life, he felt normal. He fit in. From that moment, he knew why he had been born with hands of oats—God had made him that way to connect him with the creatures of the farm.

His mother was a bit skeptical when he told her.

"How will you be able to work with horses with your condition?"

It upset him when she referred to it as a condition. It wasn't a condition. It was a permanent state, the state in which he had been born and would live forever, and surely she was at least partly to blame for it.

"I'm a horse whisperer," he replied simultaneously angrily and cockily, "I have full control. I don't need to worry about my hands."

After sighing, she let the boy choose his own fate. She didn't know what else to do.

He never told his dad, not that the man would have cared. The father had gotten out as soon as he realized his boy's hands were permanently made of oats. "Can we cut off the oat hands and attach real hands?" he had asked the doctor within five minutes of the birth.

"No, we can't attach real hands, but we can cut off the oat hands. We could give him hooks if you want," the doctor, who loved pirates, replied while standing underneath a poster of a scowling Blackbeard in his office.

"No son of mine is going to have hooks," the mother responded when the husband told her the idea.

"Then let's just get rid of his hands," the father told her.

"No son of mine is going to live without hands."

"Well no son of mine is going to have oats for hands. I want a divorce."

She gave it to him. Had she the papers with her then and there, she would have signed them. What kind of man wouldn't stand by his wife and son in this time of need? Men stayed in relationships when their children were born mentally retarded or without limbs or with heart conditions or with thousands of other much more serious ailments. This was just oats for hands. Maybe, in some strange way, this was a blessing.

And by the time Edwin MacGrain had turned twenty-one and discovered his gift, he realized it was indeed a blessing, and that in itself made up for the years of torment as well as the years with soggy, crumbling hands.

Although Edwin MacGrain felt that he had accomplished something when he discovered his gift, he quickly learned that the profession of horse whispering was not much in demand anymore. It had gone the way of the gasoline pumper and the scrivener. There were simply more technologically advanced ways to get the job done. Modern medicine and training techniques had created horses that didn't need anyone to whisper to them. In fact, most horses found the whole idea of having someone feel their face while whispering nonsense to them quite annoying. Some horses would buck and kick when they felt strange hands upon them no matter how gentle the whispering was. But Edwin's touch was different. No horse could resist the roughly gentle touch of his oaten hands. If Edwin could tame Hayman, then Edwin could tame any equine.

Edwin MacGrain felt his best opportunity for employment was through the classified ads of the neighborhood newspapers. In small towns with closely-knit communities, everyone seemed to favor neighborhood journalism over the sharp tongues of the big city writers. For a small fee of ten dollars for a week, he posted his advertisement in every neighborhood newspaper within a one hundred mile radius:

*Horse Whisperer Searching for Employment
With my soft oaten hands and soothing voice,
I will tame your horse, guaranteed.
Fee: \$50 per hour plus travel and meal expenses
If interested, contact Edwin MacGrain.*

Below the description, he posted his mother's phone number, which was the only phone he had ever known. He wondered if he should explain more about his hands, but he figured it was best to just wait until the calls came in.

After a week, the phone still hadn't rung. No one seemed to need a horse whisperer, either that or they just didn't believe that he could do the job, or possibly even the fee was too high. The following week, he put out a similar ad, another ten dollars out of his pockets, with his fee lowered to \$25. The week went by and the phone still

did not ring. He tried one more. The fee this time was listed as negotiable.

On Friday of that week, he finally got a call. Bixley Drowley was the man's name, and he informed Edwin that he had several horses that needed taming. His voice was strange, deep and husky with an accent that Edwin had never heard before. The man seemed to pronounce every sound hard, stressing syllables that normally weren't stressed.

"Edwin Mackgrain please," he had said when Edwin picked up the phone.

"This is Edwin," the young man replied professionally, his oaten hands tightly grasping the phone.

"This is Bixley Drowley. Got some horses that need taming. What you charge?"

"Name your price, sir."

"Bullshit, son. I need your fee. You tell me, I'll pay it."

"Alright. Twenty-five an hour," Edwin said timidly.

"Bullshit, son. That isn't your fee. Any sensible horse whisperer with any bit of talent charges a helluva lot more than that. What's your fee?"

"Fifty dollars an hour," Edwin said with a little more confidence.

"Bullshit, son. I won't pay less than one hundred. I need to know that I am buying something that is quality. So what's your fee?"

"One hundred dollars an hour," Edwin said firmly.

"Bullshit, son. If someone tells you they won't pay less than one hundred, you better charge them more than one hundred or you ain't getting all the you can out of them. You need to charge me as much as I am willing to pay."

"How much are you willing to pay?" Edwin felt this conversation was quite twisted.

"I'll pay up to three hundred an hour."

"Then I'll charge you two hundred fifty per hour—"

"Why won't you charge me my max—"

"Plus travel and food."

"Good deal, son. I accept. You be at Drowley farms tomorrow by the time the sun rises."

* * *

Edwin woke excitedly the next morning two hours before sunrise. He wanted to be sure to give himself plenty of time to arrive at the Drowley farms before the sun peeked its head above the horizon. There were no mountains or hills to delay its arrival, so Edwin had no room for error. He wasn't sure exactly what before sunrise meant as far as time, and he didn't want to cut things too close, so he figured he would just arrive about an hour before the newspaper said the sun would rise.

As he drove down the two-lane highway, he wondered if he should have covered his hands. Even though he had indicated in the ad that his hands were oaten, it could still be quite the shock to see someone standing before you with hands made of oats. To his knowledge, he was the only one of his kind, but he was also pretty sure that no one outside of his immediate community knew about the condition. The Drowley farms were almost an hour away, and news about something like that probably didn't bother to travel very far. It just wasn't that important. As he neared the farms, he decided it was best to keep his hands uncovered. Drowley needed to know immediately what he was dealing with. Besides, Edwin was not ashamed of his hands. They were a gift.

An hour before the sun rose, the faint light of its rays began to emerge, and Drowley was awake and waiting on the wooden porch when Edwin arrived. Drowley, a tan man with a grisly beard, greeted him immediately. "Well hello, Edwin," he began, pleased to meet the young man that could tame any horse. "I'm glad to see you are—what the hell is on your hands?"

Edwin looked down embarrassed but offered no answer.

"Well, son, speak..." Drowley suddenly seemed unpleasant in every way imaginable.

Edwin thought about hopping back into the car and speeding away. This was the first time he had really traveled away from his

home by himself, and he was quickly realizing that he had made a mistake. "Th, the, these are my hands."

"What?"

"These are my hands." Edwin held his oaten hands high for the man to see.

The man studied them closely for a moment, grabbing him by the forearms but being certain not to touch the hands. Drowley's grip was strong, certainly not the grip of hands made of oats. "So your hands are made of oats?" he said in disbelief while still studying the grains that had clumped together over the bones and tendons of Edwin's hands.

"Yes sir."

"That's the kind of thing you should probably tell someone before selling your services to them," Drowley said as he released the boy's forearms causing the oaten hands to crash against Edwin's waist. The impact caused slight cracks that snaked their way around his hands.

"I did tell you," Edwin responded timidly while staring at the damage that had been inflicted upon his hands. "The ad said that I had 'oaten hands'."

"I didn't think that your hands were made of oats. I thought it was just some cute medafore, or whatever. Aw, hell."

Edwin shrugged but did not respond. He saw nothing to respond to.

The two stared at each other silently for a few moments before Drowley broke the silence. "How'd they get like that?"

"I was born this way."

"Well, no shit. Was your daddy a horse or something?"

"Wouldn't know," Edwin responded spitefully. "I've never met the sonuvabitch, but I don't think him being a horse would give me oaten hands. Maybe if my daddy had been a box of oatmeal..."

"How the hell could your daddy be a box of oatmeal?"

"How the hell could somebody live his whole life with hands made out of oats?" Edwin responded, holding the backs of his hands right before the eyes of Drowley.

"Good point. Let me show you to the stables. You sure you can work with horses with those things?" Drowley asked as he led the way to the stables.

"Ever hear of Hayman?"

"You mean that vicious beast monster of a horse over at the Fardley place?"

"Yes sir. I tamed him. I tamed him with these oaten hands."

Drowley stopped in his tracks and turned to the boy. "Well I'll be a sonuvabitch. You really can do this job. Good thing I am paying you so damn much money."

Edwin didn't know how to respond to this. After all, Drowley was the one who had refused a lower price and suggested such a high one. All Edwin did was shrug.

Drowley resumed the walk and showed Edwin to the rotting stables. The stables consisted of four horse pens, each one a tiny cage filled with feces and shredded hay. The four horses that occupied the pens immediately perked up from their naps when Edwin entered. They could smell his presence.

"Well, here they are. That one's Shadow, that one's Horsearama, that one's Milk Breath, and that one is Skinny Man," Drowley said as he introduced the four identically brown horses. Edwin did not see a single identifying feature on any of the horses other than the fact that they were separated into different cages. "Basically, they are all wild beasts, and you need to tame them so that I can ride them."

"Sounds good," Edwin said with his hands hidden underneath his shirt.

"I'll basically leave you alone with them, and you come get me when they are tame. If they aren't tamed by noon, come see me for lunch." Drowley didn't wait for Edwin to respond, departing from the putrid smell of the stables as soon as he finished speaking.

Edwin went to work immediately, entering each pen, placing his oaten hands upon each horse until their menacing eyes transformed into beautiful black mirrors that accepted his presence as if he were a part of them. His work was quick and magical, and within a few

short hours, the horses would have eaten out of his hands without eating his hands, no matter how tempting it might have been.

When he entered Drowley's house only three hours later, the man assumed that Edwin was throwing in the towel. "Can't do it, can you boy?" Drowley asked.

"Actually, I'm finished. They're all ready for a ride. Even Skinny Man."

Drowley dropped the mug of coffee he had been sipping. "You're pulling my leg, ain't ya boy. Just like you were about those oaten hands. Let me see your real hands."

"These are my real hands," Edwin said with a laugh. He was proud of his hands. They had just earned him over a thousand dollars. "May I have my money now?"

"How 'bout we have lunch first?"

"Whatever suits you," Edwin replied with a smile.

The two sat down to a meal of scrambled eggs and burnt bacon. Before Edwin had even swallowed his first bite, Drowley began to rain questions upon him.

"You were really born with those?"

"Yup."

"How do you wash your hands?"

"I don't. They'd crumble and get soggy. Besides, germs don't really accumulate."

"Interesting. Aren't you ever tempted to eat them?"

"Aren't you ever tempted to eat yours?"

"No, why the hell would I do that?"

"I don't know. Why the hell would I eat my hands?"

"Because they are made of oats."

"I hate the taste of oats."

"I guess that makes sense. I don't really like the taste of human flesh.."

"Have you ever really tried it?"

"No, I suppose not, other than when I used to chew on my fingers as a child."

"Well, then it's a damn good thing your hands weren't made of oats."

Edwin and Drowley continued the exchange for hours. It turned out, much to both of their surprises, that Edwin was quite normal and that he really was quite proud of his malformation.

"Shall we go look at those horses?" Drowley finally asked.

"Let's do it."

Drowley was quite satisfied with the behavior of his four stallions, and the two walked back to the house after only a few minutes to retrieve Edwin's pay. Drowley handed Edwin twelve hundred dollars, which was more than the agreed upon rate, and told him that he really appreciated the help and that he would recommend him to all his friends.

"This is more than we agreed," Edwin said.

"Well, I've got one more job for you, if you don't mind."

"Sure, anything," Edwin replied with a renewed confidence.

"Alrighty then. Can you take this bucket of milk to them?"

Drowley held out a wooden bucket filled with several gallons of milk.

"Absolutely," Edwin said as he grabbed the bucket from Drowley's hands. Edwin held the bucket by the bottom with both hands. He wanted to ensure that the weight was distributed evenly so as not to put any unneeded pressure on the oaten hands.

The moment Edwin entered the stables, things seemed different than they had been when he had entered. The smell of milk mixed with the smell of the oats, and the four horses reverted back to their wild ways, exiting their pens ferociously and causing a general commotion that knocked the bucket out of Edwin's hands and sent him sprawling to the floor. His hands landed first, crumbling from the impact and soaking up the milk rapidly. Almost instantly, the four horses swarmed him and began furiously licking and chewing at his hands. His cries of pain went unheard, and he lay there helplessly as the horses ate until Edwin thought his hands were no more. After a few minutes, everything went black.

When Edwin came to, his hands were bandaged and he found himself in Drowley's bed.

"Am I okay?" he asked the tan farmer.

"I'm not sure. Your hands were pretty badly injured." There was general concern in Drowley's tones.

"I need to see them," Edwin said through anticipatory tears.

Without a word, Drowley began unwrapping the bandages until Edwin's hands were clearly visible. Edwin's eyes clouded with tears as he stared at the pale human flesh that had been underneath the oats all this time. It had taken him twenty-two years to figure out what to do with his deformed life, and now he wondered what he could possibly do without his oaten hands.

