

A Man

by Pia Ehrhardt

A man's been in jail for six weeks awaiting trial. Lillian doesn't say his name. A man kidnapped her from the grocery store parking lot. He raped her at his house, and again in the desert, chopped her hand off with an axe and left her for dead in the brush, thinking she would bleed out, but high school senior, Doss Williams, student union president, stopped his car and saved her life. He helped her into the front seat of his Mazda, found her hand in the scrub and wrapped it in his windbreaker, then raced Lillian to the emergency room. It was warm that day. While she waited for help on the side of the road, the wind blew sand in her face. When Doss saw her she was standing up, holding her arm over her head as if to slow the blood. Doss said he couldn't believe his eyes. He thought she was wearing a long sleeved red shirt but it was a white tank top. He was returning from the florist where he'd picked up his girlfriend's corsage for the senior prom.

Doss visited Lillian every day in the hospital. His girlfriend would come with him sometimes and sit in the chair and listen, but she just stared at Lillian, too afraid to say what was on her mind: *You are fucked up for ever.* Lillian asked Doss to stop bringing her around.

The TV and newspaper wrote stories and took pictures showing Doss and Lillian together. He was 18 and she was 25, but they were treated like a celebrity couple in the small town in Arizona. At first Lillian would hide behind Doss so her bad arm couldn't be seen, but every day he built her confidence, made her not feel deformed and ruined. He watched them dress the wound, looked closely, amazed, at the way the skin began to grow over the opening and re-seal. He brought checkers to the hospital and they played game after game. She pushed her checker with her stump, scratched her cheek, swatted at imaginary flies to make him laugh. In their most famous photograph, Lillian made an X with her arms over her chest so

people could see what had happened. Good limb. Bad limb. Doss's idea. She hated their shock, and he said putting it out there would be the quickest way for them to get over it.

The doctors tried to reattach her right hand, but the damage was profound, so Lillian was fitted for a prosthetic. She prefers the days when she had no hand, because it was harder for her family and her doctors to rush back to normal. When she put on the fake one it made her mother and father feel better and their faces relaxed. They were amazed, and imagined her recovery was a full-blown display of the human spirit, but it was their's, not her's. They could get used to the idea of this if she could pick up cups again and write. While she learned to use the prosthetic, the physical therapist taught her to eat and wash and write with her left hand. She did well at these tasks. She was a model patient. Everyone stopped talking about the rape, the torture, and focused instead on the great success of her recovery, so grateful were they that she was at least alive. Winter came. Her parents returned to California and said they'd be back in the summer.

Lillian had a story, but the police wanted only the details, so she described the man - - 50s, thin gray hair, slight build and not much taller than she was, large hands with part of his ring finger missing — and answered questions about the inside of his house. The kitchen faced north, there were unpacked grocery bags on the table from Albertson's, a short haired mutt ran in and out of small door and barked while he raped her on the kitchen floor. His truck was white with thin red stripes down the sides. He didn't blind-fold her, just kept a small, black gun pressed into her side.

They caught him at a motel in southern Colorado. He'd worked as a machine tender at the paper mill but had been laid off. They linked him to the murder of a woman, a student at the junior college, whose body had been found in the river the month before.

Doss brought Lillian barbecued chicken for lunch that day and they were watching the soaps like always, but a news bulletin came on and showed the man's arrest. He had on a red wool cap, but no coat. He shuffled in leg chains between two officers. They put him in

the back of the police car but not before the man looked at the camera and smiled. Lillian began to shake. She asked Doss to turn the TV off. Doss said it was coming to an end and soon the man would go to trial and then prison and she would be safe.

The doctors had told her that morning that she'd be going home in a few days. Lillian didn't know how to thank Doss. A proper thank you would also be a good bye and she didn't want to let Doss go. His daily visits were like her morphine. She wanted to pull him in with her deeper.

Doss's cell phone buzzed in the pocket of his barn jacket. "I'm at the hospital," he said.

"Soon," he answered. "Can't it wait?"

He walked toward the window and looked out onto a parking lot. "The connection's bad," he said.

"Yeah, she's doin' okay." Snow started to fall behind him. "Tell your dad I'll pick up the venison." A gust of wind swirled flakes up instead of down.

"Love you, too," he said, softly.

The next day he brought smoothies for lunch and told Lillian he'd be out of town most of the spring. She wanted him to ask her more questions about the crime, anything. He didn't have to worry about going too far. He said, no, it was time to put this behind her, but she begged him not to do that. It wasn't behind her. It was on the sides of her, breathing next to her when she tried to sleep, inside her brain. He did ask. He sat beside her on the bed and held her bandaged stump in both hands and wanted to know: Was the blade of the ax sharp? Was the pain bad? How did she stand? Did she look at what he'd done? Doss looked embarrassed. Lillian told him. The blade was sharp and the man brought it down only once. There was no pain at first and then she blacked out. When she woke, her arm was on fire, but panic and a strange energy lifted her on her feet. She wanted to go home. She didn't look at her arm, only down the road for the first sign of the first car that came over the hill — Doss's. She drew ugly pictures for him, crime scene postcards with her in the middle of them, so he would help her carry the terror not

the memory, and be more than just her savior. She shocked him with details and made him her witness.

Doss sat quietly on the edge of the bed and listened. He said he'd kill the man if he had the chance. He wanted him to get the electric chair and be gone from this world.

They listened to a Lucinda Williams CD Doss had brought. He knew Lillian liked her. She closed her eyes and sang about how you can't put the rain back in the sky, moving her stump like a baton to the music. Doss would go to college in the fall and marry his girlfriend and visit Lillian on holidays. His new wife would stay home because this friendship was just between them. He'd been her kind visitor and now he would leave her with her life.

There is still one part of the story she keeps to herself because every night Doss prays for her, but she no longer believes. She told Doss more than the police know, but not the ending, not how during the rape the man sat up and began to weep, and screamed at the sky like someone was forcing him to do this. Lillian was praying silently for her life, but in that instant she felt pity for him, forgave him and told him she did, and that was when the man said, you're not fucking *God*, went to his truck, got the ax and cut off the hand she used to bless herself and the man.

