Cold Touch Eighty-Eight

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The idea didn’t come to me right away. For the first few days of my hospital stay I was too drugged up to remember why I was there, let alone come up with a plan to grow new hands. The doctors and nurses came and out of my personal haze like the violins of Ravel’s “Pavane for a Dead Princess.” I remember small things, white uniforms outlined against white walls as they stared down at me. What a shame it was, some said. A young pianist. The irony of it all. After I came out of the blackness a few reporters tried to get in to see me. I heard them outside my door mumbling something about only wanting a few questions. Lucia, my instructor, kept them away.

On the day I got the idea, Lucia stood at the side of my bed in a dark blue dress, a half circle of pearls between her breasts.

“You know you’re lucky,” she said.
“Right. Sure. I feel lucky.”
“I’m sorry. But don’t you remember the doctors saying it was a miracle that you didn’t hemorrhage until you were dead?”
“No.”
“Miracle, they said. How controlled the bleeding was.”
“They couldn’t save my hands.”
“You’re alive.”
“Yeah. For what it’s worth.”
She smiled, reached out a hand, and drew it back with a look of horror on her face like she had asked me to clap along with a song on the radio. “I, uh, the doctors said you’d be bitter and angry.”
“I’m not. Not really. Maybe I will be, when the shock wears off.”
She sat in the chair and cried. “I... You’re so...so cold. I guess I wish you’d scream or cry.”
“I know. I want to cry. I really do, but I can’t. Not yet. Not until these become real.” I held up the gauze wrapped stumps. “I’m dead inside.”
She blew her nose and we laughed at the loudness of it. Then I got the idea. Lucia saw me smiling and asked why I suddenly looked so happy. I told her it was nothing and asked her to bring me some magazines tomorrow.

I knew the idea was crazy, but in a world where a piano player lost both his hands in a car accident when the roof chopped them off against the dash, I figured anything was possible.

So I began the next day, flipping, not so easily, through magazines. I stared at the pictures of hands, meditated, imagined them moving.

The next day Lucia brought me the sheet music I asked for. These I stared at for hours, hearing the music as my eyes trailed along the notes, quicker along
Baldassare

the allegros, lingering a bit on the addagios. And Goddamn it I did hear the music, as clear as if it was blasting into my head from a Walkman.

Throughout all this, many people came to see me. My parents, who talked so much I realized they had nothing to say, but they did their best. Some classmates from school. And, of course, Richie Webster, whose sole ambition in life was to play soft background music in douche commercials.

"Rich," I said, "do me a favor. Don’t walk on eggs around me. Talk to me. Normally."

"Sure. I got a gig tomorrow."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh. A synth-line for a local commercial. Waterbed City. You know it."

"Right."

"Hey man, you know what I found out? You know where the real money is?"

I smiled. "Where?"

"Porno movies. Remember Skelly? Well anyway, he played some wild-ass number in this movie, ‘Ellen Eats East Hanover.’ Radical tune, a triple track myxloidian, a recorder, and two electric guitars playing the same riffs an octave apart. Anyway, they paid him five-hundred for the thing."

"No percussion?"

"Uh-uh. Used a slap riff on the low E. Radical."

I thought about telling Rich about my plan, my progress. But I had asked him to treat me normally and that wouldn’t have made it any easier.

We talked for a while about music and after he left, I fumbled with the sheet music and started with some Vivaldi.

I sprouted the thumbs first, just after I went through a Concerto in E#. I felt them come out slowly, sliding gently against the gauze. Not the whole thumb, but just about to the knuckle. I knew the hands wouldn’t be complete when they came to take the bandages off for good, but I wanted them to be far enough along so they’d see what I was capable of. I wanted to be able to bang out a few notes, maybe Chopsticks.

Lucia came two days before they took the bandages off. She, and music, were what I truly loved. She was a frumpy red-head that overused words like poignant, but she knew music and she new how to teach it. I met her when I was studying at NYU. It was a shitty time for me. I hadn’t gotten over the rejection from Julliard and I spent most of my waking hours inventing neat problems with the school and the retarded clones it produced.

We had been flirting heavily, and the glances and such cut right through the teacher/student relationship. When I asked her out she smiled, admitted she wanted to go out with me very much, but could not. She was fifteen years my
Baldassare

senior, my professor, and so on. So I bet her. I bet her that I could play the Minute Waltz in half the time it should take without missing a note. She laughed and said if I could do that, she’d buy me dinner. When I finished she felt my hands.

“Jesus,” she said, “they’re ice cold.” That’s how I got the nickname, Cold Touch Eighty Eight.

After we ate we went back to her apartment and made love. By the end of my second year, we were sleeping together regularly and our relationship, at the point of the accident, was still firmly rooted in the undecided phase.

But now things were so different. I couldn’t play the Minute Waltz in twenty-six years, and I couldn’t help but worry about ‘us’.

She sat next to my bed and we talked. I told her I was excited and scared about the bandages coming off, but not why. I couldn’t tell her. Not yet. As we talked I watched her hands, long fingers, nails bitten all the way down. I wanted to touch her, run my hands along her thighs. I swore at that moment, that if my plan worked and I grew new hands, that I would make love to her with only my hands. Just to touch, that’s all I would need.

I realized I had an erection. That, next to the times when the nurses changed my bedpans, was when I felt most helpless.

Lucia took out some more sheet music and muttered once again that she didn’t think it a good idea for me to brood over the piano.

“Well,” she said, “I’ll leave you alone for a while. See you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure.”

She bent and kissed me. I wanted to embrace her, but I feared that the touch of my stumps on her back would send her screaming from the room. She stood at the door for a moment, digging in her purse and I realized that maybe my need for new hands wasn’t as romantic as I thought.

Money.

How would I make money if my plan failed? There would be no more playing in clubs, winking at the old women to get that extra dollar in my glass. Maybe Skelly could get me a job on a porno movie. After all, I would still have the stumps. I could bang on a piano while a silicon blonde sucked a guy with a dick like a vacuum-cleaner hose, couldn’t I?

No, I wouldn’t have to. My plan was working. I could feel it. The tingling was almost constant now.

My new hands were coming along just fine.

The day before they came to remove the bandages, in a rage of thought, my eyes scanning over some Hayden, humming the parts to myself, sweating, I
Cold Touch

sprouted index and middle fingers.
These came out rapidly, much more easily than the thumbs, and I realized that the ring and pinky fingers would be even easier because they were so thin. Only about an inch of each new digit was out, but that was enough to play Chopsticks. I could wiggle them.

Richie Webster showed up and caught me looking at the gauze, smiling. “Hey, nice to see you smiling.”

“How Rich. What’s up?”

“Nothin’. What’s with all the sheet music?”

“Oh, just...lookin’ over it.”

“Okay. Listen, remember the other day? You asked me to treat you normally? Well, here, I thought you’d like this.” He took out a copy of Penthouse and opened up to a super-super close up. “I mean is that pink or what?”

“Yeah,” I laughed.

“I mean, there isn’t a shade of that pink in the whole world. Imagine how much money you could make if you could reproduce that color pink?”

“Millions.”

“Wait, check this out. There’s a lesbian spread that’ll blow you away. This one chick...”

“Rich, that’s enough for now.”

“Okay, right, sure. I just figured it’d cheer you up, ya know?”

I smiled. “It did. Thanks. You know what I been thinkin’ about? Besides the piano and all that?”

“What?”

“Stinky pinky. You ever call it that when you were a kid?”

“Sure.”

“It’s weird, I’ve been thinkin’ about little things like that.”

“Don’t man. It’s not good for you.”

“Don’t worry. Listen, they’re taking the bandages off tomorrow. Do me a favor and come with Lucia, okay?”

“Sure, if it’ll make you feel better.”

“It will. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Huh?”

I laughed. “Don’t worry, just be here.”

I lay awake that night, running things over in my head again and again. More sheet music, more magazines, even the Penthouse occasionally. When the Penthouse fell to the floor, I debated about whether or not I should call for a nurse. I finally did and she told me to make sure I read the column by Alan Dershowitz, it was a good one. I did and she was right.
Baldassare

The ring fingers and pinkies came out sometime before dawn. I had to grunt a bit, as if I was constipated, but they came, just a little bit at a time. I was wrong about them being easier than the other fingers.

At ten-thirty Lucia and Richie came in. I almost couldn't contain my excitement, but I did. I wanted them to be surprised when the doctors unrolled the bandages. We talked about nothing and it seemed as though they were keeping the conversation away from things like the piano and baseball mitts.

Two doctors came in, one tall and grey-haired, the other young and a bit too eager to help his fellow man.

The young one said, “Well, how are you today?”

“Fine. Can we get on with this? I want to see my new hands.” I laughed.

Everyone smiled a bit and I would later realize that they thought I referred to the stumps.

The old one took one hand and the young one another.

When they were done I looked down and saw ten new fingers jutting up from the stumps like albino tadpoles.

I held an arm up and wiggled the fingers. “Pretty nice huh? What do you think of my fingers, Doc?”

They said nothing and looked at each other. Lucia moved an inch closer to Rich.

“C’mon” I said, “what do you think? Pretty neat trick, huh?” I wiggled them some more and the young one stepped toward the door.

“Listen Docs, bring me a piano. I want to play some riffs I made this morning.”

Neither moved. Rich had his arm around Lucia.

This was not the reaction I expected.

“Don’t just stand there! Okay, okay, I guess you couldn’t get a piano through the door. Just bring me a keyboard.”

The young doctor took a step toward the door; the older one came closer to me.

“C’mon,” I said, “have a heart. Okay, okay a little Casio will do. But stop staring at me! Look at my new hands!”

Lucia started crying, Rich’s mouth fell open. The young doctor stuck his head out the door and called for a nurse. Slowly he and the old one approached me, saying things like. Take it easy, Just relax, It’ll be okay.

I pushed myself up in the bed and started swinging at them. “Forget it. I won’t settle for a Casio or any keyboard. I want a piano, do you hear me. And not a baby grand or a stand up. I want a concert piano. Now bring it to me. Bring me a fucking piano!”