The Accountant’s Hands

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Jonathan leaned down on the sink. His accountant’s hands pressed against the crusted, milk white ceramic basin. He stared down at the flecks, ranging from bacteria brown to malaria gray. In the mirror, he could see his open pores were half filled with sweat. Jonathan pulled down on his suit coat, snapping at the wrinkles. The blue merino wool blend draped over his arms with the loving touch of the forty-two year old tailor whose shop was just six blocks from where Jonathan lived. The fabric rolled back and forth between his fingers, reassuring him of the quality of the fiber. He reached into his left pocket and pulled out a comb. Jonathan raked his hair into position and then turned his neck from side to side to examine his hairline around his ears.

He began pacing back and forth and started trying to go through the breathing exercises he and Dr. Collinsworth had been practicing twice a week. Inhale slowly, deeply, exhale all the anxiety and tension from the muscles. He remembered he wasn’t supposed to be pacing and stopped next to the window. Frustrated that the bathroom had frosted glass that stole his visual escape, he turned and surveyed the three stalls, two urinals and two sinks that comprised the restroom of the nursing home.

The room had damp floors and smelled like the bathroom on the third floor of his middle school where all the other boys had pissed on the radiator in the winter. He tried not to think of how many unwashed hands handled the chrome puddle of a door-knob that he would have to use to exit. He began pacing again and wondered how long it would be until someone else would open the door to come in.

He stopped again by the sink he had washed his hands in. His arms were locked straight down by his sides. Only his right hand moved. It pumped back and forth like a piston as he slapped his thigh, with his thumb hitting the front of his leg and the other fingers hitting the back. Jonathan imagined talking to, touching and hugging the residents of the home and his hand moved faster. He thought of the folds of skin that came to rest at women’s ankles and grimaced at the idea of men with small thick hairs, sprouting like weeds from the tops of their ears.

He grabbed a paper towel and began to walk toward the door, one foot planted before the other was lifted so each step
was very singular. With the brown disposable safeguard carefully layered between him and the orchestra of diseases that blocked his escape, he was able to turn the knob and open the door.

“Get out of my way!” A small entanglement of thin gray hair was beneath his nose. It smelled of a recent perm and yellow mustard.

He stepped to the side of the door.

“Ah shit, get back in the bathroom.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Move your ass back in the bathroom!” The old woman followed her command by punching her walker down six inches to the right of her line of travel. The worn and stained tennis ball that covered one of the walker’s legs slammed down on to Jonathan’s foot.

“Ow, I’m sorry but,”

“I don’t care.” Each of the old woman’s breaths was short and wheezed with the extra effort it took her. “Move your ass.”

Jonathan held the door open for the woman, the paper towel still in his hand. The movement of the walker and the woman reminded Jonathan of a hermit crab he had seen on TV. The metal crutch snapped forward, and her feet half walked, half dragged after the walker. Jonathan continued to watch her.

“Close the damn door all ready.” The old woman parked her walker perpendicular to one of the stall doors. She steadied her right hand on the walker, and her left hand grabbed the handle and jimmed open the stall. She then worked herself in front of the toilet, shuffled around to face the sinks and mirrors, and then stopped.

“Well don’t just stand there. Get over here.”

“You know this is the men’s room?”

“I’ve gotta go now.”

“Isn’t there a nurse or attendant that’s supposed to help you?”

“That lady’s worse than you look. Besides, I don’t know where she is.”

“I really don’t think...”

“Hey, listen. I saw the community service sheet by the front desk and you’re the only person in the place I don’t recognize. Which means if I complain that you were harassing me, no one would think a sweet old lady to be lyin’.” She took in two faster breaths that seemed to be driven by her pumping her head slightly
Jonathan walked up and stopped just a few inches away from being within arms’ reach. The old woman undid the drawstring of her Easter-pink sweatpants and let them fall to her ankles. Her orange and yellow floral print shirt hung down to her thighs and showed everything she had eaten for lunch since Tuesday. Her veins gave her legs the color of dirty mop water. Jonathan tried not to stare at the mole on her calf that looked like an enlarged photo of one of the cancerous moles on a poster in the hallway of his dermatologist.

“If you just stand there like a pervert, I’m gonna shit all o’ the floor.”

Jonathan turned back around headed for the sink. He grabbed two new paper towels from the dispenser. With three long strides, Jonathan was back in front of the old woman. She looked at his hands. “You’re not something anyone would want to touch either.”

Jonathan began to lower her to the seat, his paper safeguards carefully layered between his hands and her armpits. As he helped her, he looked at the graffiti on the wall to his right. Black squiggle read, “on this toilet I proved I can still get hard at seventy-nine. I love Nurse Lindsay.”

“All right, give me a little privacy. Close the door.”

Jonathan got up and closed the door. When he got out, he pulled a quarter from his pocket and placed it in the grove on the backside of the lock. After twisting it around, he shook the door, and nodded approval. He then examined the door and decided it better to just drop the quarter than to hold on to it.

“Quit that! I can’t go if you distract me.”

Jonathan turned and paced in the direction of the exit.

“Don’t even think about leaving yet.”

“Oh, no. I was just waiting here.”

“Well don’t walk around either. I don’t like any noise when I go.”

Jonathan stood still. He tried to think about the last symphony he attended. He started to visualize himself there. He began to feel the vibrations of the music in his ribs. The opening of the concert was broken by the groans of the woman, and the music of her spittle rapping lightly against the door.

“Now you’re too quiet out there. You’re creepin’ me out.”

Jonathan began to pace once again. With each step, he
landed his heel against the tile and then flopped the rest of his shoe down. Click, Slap, Click, Slap, Click, Slap.

He stopped at the sink, wrapped his fingers around the hot water knob and the thrust his hands beneath the stream of water. His right hand flew up to the soap dispenser and commanded three squirts of the antibacterial liquid to fall to his palm. Jonathan washed both sides of his hands and then began to inspect each fingernail. First, he ran a nail around the cuticle, and then worked soap up and under the nail to wash away thousands and thousands of life threatening organisms and the terror of the thought of the woman in the stall.

“All right, I’m done.” The hinge of the stall door whined. Jonathan saw the old woman in the mirror, staring back at his own reflection. Radio static ran in their locked gaze that carried the same sound as the water running in the sink.

Jonathan reached up and grabbed two paper towels again and used them to twist the knob and shut off the water. He turned around and faced the woman.

“Well?”

“I’m sorry, this isn’t easy for me.”

“Yep. And if it was easy for me, I wouldn’t need you.” The old woman’s shoulders were hunched over more than before and it seemed that her face was ten years older than the antiquity it had shown when she had gone into the stall. “I’m ready to leave now.”

Jonathan began to walk toward the woman. His steps were much slower and softer than the quickness his feet had possessed when he had been pacing. Jonathan positioned himself just inches from her knees. Below him she sat with the skin on her thighs and face stretched over and down the bones like a heavy tar.

“Are you ready?”

The old woman nodded in agreement.

Jonathan separated the two paper towels and held one in each hand. He hiked his pants up a bit and squatted down bending at the knees. He positioned each hand under the woman’s armpits. He was careful to touch her with only his fingertips and Jonathan made an effort to keep his fingers close together so he would never, even by accident, wrap his hands around the woman’s arms.

Jonathan began to lift her up and the woman looked away as if she was witnessing something horrible or pathetic happening on a movie screen. The old woman seemed much heavier this time
and Jonathan found himself trying much harder than before.

Between his fingers and the woman’s shirt, Jonathan could feel the paper towel beginning to rip at the water spots. The polyester fabric felt frictionless and her skin felt like a soft water bed mattress trying to balance on his fingertips. The old woman started to fall forward toward Jonathan. He stepped back, a dishwasher trying to balance a wobbling stack of plates. Jonathan threw his weight around slightly and kept working to keep the woman up, but his efforts lasted only long enough for the woman to develop a reaction on her face. Her body hit the ground with a cold winter slap.

Jonathan took two steps backwards. He held his hands out, frozen in their pose that held up the old woman. Her white tennis shoes, that had never been outside of the building, pointed toward the windows. He looked at her with her sweatpants around her ankles. Her oatmeal colored underwear had slipped away from the pink cotton and the undergarment had worked halfway up her shins. The skin of around her knees shaped itself like pools of mercury where she made contact with the floor.

Jonathan flashed to the sink again.

“Heeeelp.”

He squirted five, six dabs of soap into his hand. He quickly ran the right hand over the left.

“Help me up.”

Jonathan turned the water on and scrubbed his hands. The soap running off his skin and swirling down the drain. He snapped his wrists to get the excess water off his hands.

“Oowww.”

Jonathan turned around and saw the old woman, still on the floor. Her body was still in a sitting position only her ass was the highest point in the air. He noticed a few gray hairs and took a step closer to see an entanglement of wires between her legs. Jonathan quickly turned back toward the sink. He went to grab another paper towel but stopped. He looked back at the old woman one more time before he shut off the water and headed out of the bathroom. From the hallway, he could barely hear her voice.