

Big Hands

I'm vacationing in my apartment. I feel like a bit of an idiot because at 35, I still tend to forget things other people never would, for example my unused vacation days. I forget until my boss, Jimmy reminds me. He squeezes out every drop of juice, turns red at the mention of overtime, but he doesn't have the gall to cheat anyone out of time off. He's like my lousy father that way—can't help trying to get over a little, but doesn't have the sack to actually steal from me—so in a way I've been used to this treatment from birth. I've got \$300 in the bank. That's all. So I've been sitting in my beat up easy chair for six days, getting up to grab a new beer or take a leak. My chair shows stuffing where it's worn through on the arms and the front of the seat. The upholstery is a dusty rose with a raised paisley pattern needle-pointed in. I see the sun's going down out my window. I don't have a bathrobe, don't need one. I can keep my apartment as warm as I like, and I can wear whatever I want, or nothing at all. It's boxers and an A-shirt right now. And, I don't have to watch anything I don't like on television. As you know, the trouble with roommates is the negotiating. When do I do the dishes, clean the toilet, vacuum? I don't even own a vacuum. No one ever comes out of the bathroom and into my living room, turns on a college basketball game with the volume blasting, and then screams at the set so I can't think. No one asks me how my day was, which means I don't have to lie to anyone, *Oh fine, pretty good*, blah, blah, blah. Here's my comfy chair in the corner by the window, and here's my coffee table where I keep my computer. My kitchen is a mess. There's a window over the sink that looks out on a parking lot. The apartments this side of the building are \$50 cheaper than the other side because one wall—the kitchen side—faces black top and orange paint rectangles marking numbered parking spaces. The other three sides look out on thirteen feet of grass and rocks between the building and the sidewalk. I don't have a car. First I'll piss

again, and then I think I'll feel like a nice wank. Sometimes I don't use the internet. Instead I try to recall and manipulate images of a girl I've seen, someone pretty, not necessarily someone I'd hang out with, or let's face it, someone likely to hang out with me, but someone distinctive. I've been in the house all week and seen no one except when I've gone for provisions. The only one I can keep in my head is this girl who works at the convenience store around the corner, and she's so young I feel weird about it, creepy. You know how it is.

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When I was 9 my mother caught me playing with myself. She laughed. I got mad, and yelled, "Mah!" What would you do? She stood in the doorframe and told me it was alright.

"This is natural, honey," she said, "I'm *glad* you know how to touch yourself." Then she walked away and left me alone, humiliated, disgusted with myself and loathing her.

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I'm almost out of beer. I'll have to go out and get some more, which means I'll have to dress and shower. I'm peeing, leaning sideways to look at the mirror. God I look fantastic. I've been reading comic books, screwing around on the internet, and playing videogames for nearly 2 weeks. These are the last days of my holiday, and my eyes are sunken and ringed with purple. I like the scruffy beard though. I wish I could go to work like this.

Jimmy would suffer an aneurism. Sometimes he calls me to his office. He sits across from me at his Russian Mafia style black lacquer desk, looking at the back of his hand. Three kinds of heart medication stand in a row next to his pencil cup. He chews his fingernails down to where there's nothing but a tiny sliver of nail and a lot of ragged skin. Picture it. It's surprising how intimidating it can be to watch an old fat man bite his nails.

I've been wearing the same pair of boxers for four days. They smell. I know they do, and no I haven't taken them off and sniffed them. But the sweat from down there is—well, you know. I don't mind being smelly in public, in fact I kind of like it, like, *screw 'em if they can't handle it*. But there's been that cute girl working at the store 24 around the corner, and I guess I'd rather not smell this way in front of her. Even if she is pretty much a kid.

After the shower I feel like a new man. Sometimes I think a hot shower does more than just clean me. It re-energizes me. I forget, being on vacation, that I never quite feel awake until after I take a shower, and now I feel peppier and more human than I have in days, but I didn't even realize I was feeling like a slug until now. I brush my teeth because even though I'm not drunk, I bet I smell drunk. You never know for sure how your breath smells until after you brush your teeth.

My mom used to take me to this dentist, the only one she could afford, I guess. The father didn't contribute much. She wouldn't take him to court, either. Come to think of it the last time I went to the dentist there was no pain at all. They rubbed this bismuth-tasting stuff on my gums with one of those long, wooden Q-Tips, and after that even the Novocain needle didn't hurt. I wish they'd had that stuff when I was little. My old dentist hurt me like hell, which I suppose was normal back in the '70s. I was terrified though. I think maybe my mother is afraid of the dentist too. She has stains on her teeth, not too bad, just a little brown showing between the teeth when she smiles. She doesn't brush every day. She's given up, I guess.

I've got my shoes on and I'm walking around my house looking for something I might have forgotten. I should pack a suitcase every time I go to the corner store, just to make myself feel comfortable. I know I haven't forgotten anything—keys, money, that's all I need—I'm just having trouble getting myself out the door. It's hard to go out there and deal with people,

sometimes. Or just thinking about being outside where people can see me—not always, just sometimes—is more than I can deal with. Maybe they’ll take one look at me and know I’ve been inside my house for three days straight. Maybe there are after-images of the porn I used, burnt onto my cornea forever. I think you know what I mean.

Christ, I’ve got big hands. We rarely think about or remember these details, do we? But they’re big, looks like they could really do something. *What* I don’t know, but something—palm a basketball? Well, I can’t quite do that; I’ve tried. But almost, if my palms and fingers are just a little bit sweaty. Sometimes I try looking at my hands the way Jimmy looks at his.

“Excuse me, miss,” I say to my fingernails, “Didn’t I ask ten minutes ago for some lemon-water?”

It’s obnoxious. I wouldn’t do it to a real person, couldn’t, probably. My hand is on the doorknob and I’ve got the keys ready, but the phone rings. I get to it fast and think how long it’s been since I got a phone call. I haven’t spoken to anyone in a week. I’ve been hanging out alone. I thought that was what I wanted. My mother’s on the line. Maybe she won’t notice I’m drunk.

“Hiya, Mah.”

She calls me her baby, and sounds mildly retarded. No, that’s not true. She sounds like she has to work long and hard to convey simple ideas, so she gives up in mid-sentence, or worse, after saying just a word or two. She seems to hope I’ll fill in the rest for her.

“Who’s that television fellow, the one with the—,” and she stops. On the other end of the line she’s waving her hand around in the air. I know it.

Is it that she can’t think, or does her brain not quite connect to her mouth anymore?

“Um,” she says, then pauses for a long time and I listen to her breathing; I hear the click in her throat when she almost manages to say the next word, but doesn’t. And then, “Hi, my baby.”

It makes me want to lay down and never get up again. It makes me want to break something. I tell her I have to go, that I have a date. Who raised me? Was it her? I used to think she was a genius and a saint. Now I can hear her sweet mind wheezing to a standstill on the other end of the wire. I can hear her synapses burning out.

“Will I meet her?” she says.

“Probably not.”

“Kenny,” she says, “Your cousin won’t let the kids play at my house.”

I don’t want to talk anymore. I’m so tired, all my fresh-showered pep is gone.

I say, “I don’t know what to tell you, Mah,” and get off the phone.

It’s a nice dusk, royal blue sky, crisp air. I’m trying to feel the niceness of it. I’ve got my favorite scarf on. It itches but it’s small and tidy looking, very dark brown. I wear a tweed sport coat and a sweater and I think it all goes well with this starved caveman look I’m sporting, unshaven, eyes dark and pinwheeling from staring at the screen so long. These are my lucky clothes. I should get a haircut. Note to self, right?

My mother is sliding to her end. The liver is bridging; do you want to know what that means? It means it doesn’t work, and there is poison collecting in and diffusing through every cell in her poor body. She didn’t mention it to me, wouldn’t ever. I found out from my god-damn cousin, who can stay better-informed than I because *his* mother has both my mother’s confidence and a big mouth.

He won't leave his kids with my mother because she can't help falling asleep sometimes. She left the kids in front of the TV for 6 hours once, while she took a nap. My cousin's wife came to pick them up and had to lean on the buzzer for 10 minutes before my mother woke up and got to it.

The girl at store 24 wears a nametag, "Irene." I dislike that name, reminds me of my stepfather's sister, a fat bull-terrier. Fat women should be jolly. This Irene is rail-skinny. I get the beer, a twelve pack of cheap crap, and I find a bag of jalapeno flavored tortilla chips. I snag some toilet paper too.

At the register I say, "Hey, how's it going, sugar?"

Now it occurs to me these particular items I'm buying are funny. Junk food and cheap beer give you the runs, right? And then there's the toilet paper. Maybe I am drunk, because I wouldn't normally call Irene "sugar."

"Can I get a pack of Marlboro Lights too?"

"Sure can!"

Why is she so perky? I hate this kind of fake friendliness; I'd rather she be rude than grin at me and pretend we're old chums. It's disgusting, but it's all there is I guess. And she's so pretty. Her blonde hair is fine, limp and clean. She is papery pale, her arms and hands so thin it seems a miracle they can move, press buttons on the register, count nickels and quarters. She's not wearing makeup, but her lips are deep red next to her bloodless cheeks, and the shadows around her sunken eyes make them huge.

"I'm on vacation this week," I say.

"Really?"

"Yup."

“Going anywhere?”

“Yup, going back home to my chair and these beers.”

“Sounds like a blast,” she says, “That’s twenty-two fifty.”

She’s got on the tiniest engagement ring I’ve ever seen. It’s like the setting has a pinprick in it instead of a stone or even a chip.

I press upward with my thumb as I push the money into her palm, so our hands—just for the briefest fraction of a moment—touch a little bit longer and more forcefully than usual. Her skin is like skim milk. It *feels* like skim milk, cool and fine. I can see networks of veins deep under the surface of her arm as I press her palm with my money. This looks good to me, something about how fragile she must be, how easily she’d bruise. Think of how gently a man would need to touch her. It’s no desire of mine to, say, squeeze her arm and leave a mark there, by accident; it’s just the way I imagine she looks under the convenience store clerk’s costume, her body and skin. She recoils, as you’ve guessed she would. Shoves my bills into the drawer, pulls out what may or may not be the right change, and drops it onto the counter instead of into my hand.

“Well, have fun,” she says. There’s a sharp tone in her voice now. Disdain. Apprehension.

“You know it. You too.”

I’m nervous all the way home. I don’t want to make eye contact with anyone. Should I feel guilty, exposed? When I get in I drop the beer, chips, and my jacket on the living room floor and go to my desk, in my bedroom. I find the letter from my brother in there and read it over. His handwriting is even worse than mine. He’s living on the West coast now, cleaning pools.

He's got his own truck. We used to sit around and drink, maybe drag the bars, and we didn't say much. We just looked and nodded. There's nobody left in Watertown anymore, just me.

I'm in the chair again with a fresh beer, and I'm smoking. That's another great thing about living alone; I can smoke in my living room. I'm pretty drunk, actually. I might have to go to bed soon. I sweat in my sleep sometimes, very heavily because my dreams, which I barely remember, are terrible and strenuous. That much I do recall. Tonight I'll sleep fine. I'll drink the dreams out before bed.

* * *

I fell asleep in the chair, must have been four or five this morning. I wasn't up for the long walk to my bed. Today I don't feel like making coffee, or brushing my teeth, or looking in the mirror. My neck hurts a little. It's half past 3. This is what happens when I drink all day and night. I thought it'd be great, a luxury to live without a schedule for a couple weeks; everything I did would be when I felt like it and no sooner or later. But my head's muddy now. I don't know when I want to sleep, or eat, or anything.

I write these little stories sometimes. They're all about sex. In my mind the women are people I meet, really pretty girls I'd like to have, but couldn't possibly. I save them to a file named *love-letters* because that's funny. Don't you think? No, there's no story in there about Irene. There's one about a friend of my ex wife's. I've got her stripping on a coffee table. And, oh yeah, the most fucked up one is about an aunt. My father has a sister, and she used to be smoking hot, a blonde. Real long legs, and perfect breasts—they came to a point, back when. I saw them once. She walked from the shower to her bedroom. The towel fell and we looked at each other for a stretched second before she bent for the towel, padded away and closed the door behind her.

I'm playing computer games. This is what I meant to do this week. I didn't plan to drink and masturbate as much as I have.

Jesus, it's half past 5, time for happy hour around the corner. I'll go down and have a couple rounds at the bar. I should get out of the house. I go to my cupboard and look for the scotch; there should be some scotch left, fortification for the journey. There's about 3 fingers left. I don't bother with a glass. I bring it to the living room, my chair. I browse some personal ads online and sip my whiskey for a while. Lord, these people are desperate, some of them. Some of them I don't understand why they're posting ads at all.

"Stefanie," one says, "Giving this one more try: 34 y/o, no kids, divorced. I'm just looking for an honest man who can love me for who I am."

Her picture is amazing: she's standing by the duck pond in the Public Gardens, wearing a pink tank and a short denim skirt. She's got great legs, thick and strong, but long too. She's got ripe tits, and a pretty smile. I wonder why she needs to put up a personals ad to find a guy. God, her hair is great. It looks like the kind of hair you'd bury your face in and just inhale for long minutes at a stretch. Well, the resolution isn't great, but it looks like she has a lot of good, thick hair and you can just tell she always smells amazing, all over. I wonder how she could be lonely. If I see her on the street I'll say hello. No I won't. I'll never run into her anyway. She can't possibly be a real human being.

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I'm on my way out, locking the door. The phone's ringing inside. I won't run for it this time. There's something less perfect about today's dusk than yesterday's. It's as blue and crisp and it doesn't look like rain or anything. But I don't so much like the look of this evening. The walk takes less than 5 minutes. I live less than 5 minutes away from a bar.

Patrons here are mostly young boys and settled men. It's a lousy combination, a bad dynamic. The décor is too done up, burnt umber and local "art photos." The jukebox is full of happy trash. I'm sitting at the end of the counter near the register, so it's busy where I am, but this is where the television is least intrusive. I don't like baseball, it's boring. Behind the post that supports half the rack of glasses and tumblers and snifters, the TV's showing a game. The season's winding down, goddamn Sox. I don't get it, why people are so wrapped up in this pap. The guy next to me is holding a baseball, fingering it, rubbing his thumb over the places where dirt is permanently ground into the skin, touching the frayed part of the seam, where it just might come undone if someone hits it right. He's got small hands but they're thick and sturdy looking. He's clean-shaven, orderly haircut, pale green polo shirt.

I don't like football either, which I've always been too slight to play, and hockey is amusing but too surreal to take seriously. I don't like hot dogs or fish sticks either, which makes me feel left out sometimes.

"My kid just pitched a perfect game," this guy says, "This is the ball."

He's holding it out so I can touch it if I want to.

"Congratulations, must be proud," I say.

I don't want to feel up the ball. I don't want to talk to him about baseball either, little league. I've got almost all of my second pint in front of me. I drink two long gulps, put it down, pat my pockets.

"God yeah," he says, "You got kids?"

People with children are often suspicious of me, both men and women. Is there something about my face that makes it obvious I don't have kids, not even the kind I'd only visit a few times a year? These parents, they don't trust the childless. They don't like it for some

reason that's impossible to know unless you've got kids too, and then you won't say. I don't want to talk to this guy.

"No."

"Oh," he says, and starts telling me how I'm missing out. I'll give him this: He's more patient than other people with kids. He's saying things like "it's so fucking hard," "greatest joy you'll ever know," and "pop-fly," and he's giving me friendly backhanded little taps on the arm ("know what I mean?" *tap*, "great hustle" *tap*, "smell of fresh mowed turf" *tap*...), beaming at this dirty baseball in his stubby hand. It takes him a long time to realize I'm not saying much of anything. He's going on and on. Finally, I guess my "oh really?" and my "must be great" aren't doing it for him; I'm not delivering my lines with enough feeling and he's looking at me while he talks now, instead of gazing at the ball. And, while he's looking at me, his smile is turning squinty and false.

I finish the beer and say, "Gotta use the can," but I don't. I'll go outside and smoke.

On the sidewalk I'm having my cigarette. I'll take my time before going in, and by then maybe Mr. Baseball will be talking to someone else.

No.

Here he comes. He scans left to right as he opens the door, finds me. He comes over, looking at my cigarette like he wants one too. Goddamnit, he's still holding the ball.

"Thought you had to use the can," he says.

I wave my cigarette and say, "First things first, you know. Priorities."

He's shorter than me, but stronger, bigger in the chest and arms. Most guys are. I'm feeling the beer, the way it burns off my small hangover.

"Bum a smoke off you?" he asks.

I give him a cigarette. This is friendly, right?

“So, what,” he says, “You don’t like kids?”

What, is he pissed at me? I wonder how long this guy’s been at the bar. When did the little league game get out? Did his wife—or ex-wife—take the kid home without letting them bond for a minute? I tell him I’m not a big sports fan, no offense. I take a long drag, trying to look thoughtful so he doesn’t mind me stepping backward. He’s muttering. Jesus, first he bums a smoke, now he’s getting cranky with me. He cracks a smile that looks uncomfortable, like he doesn’t know how he feels.

“Guy doesn’t like kids *or* baseball. ‘Kinda guy is this?’”

He points at me, right between my eyes, at the middle of my brain. He’s pointing with two fingers, holding the lit cigarette between them, too close.

What did I do? Maybe he’s angry because I don’t answer as he’d like, don’t speak his language—the kids, the sports, whatever. I don’t understand. I don’t actually want to be out at a bar. I recognize this. I don’t want to be with people, but I don’t want to be by myself. I look at this fellow, and to me he’s frightening. His hair is dusty blonde, hiding the grey nicely. I don’t know how to read him, and I don’t have the energy to figure it out. What I want from other men is the silent head-bob that says, “Yeah, you and me are guys.” That’s all. I want a woman who’ll smile at me. There’s nobody in the bar who’d have me; I looked. I want someone to take me to her apartment and have sex with me, soft and easy, with a lot of kissing and hugging, then I want her to wrap herself around me while we sleep. But everybody I run into is a clod or a snob. They don’t make any more effort than I do. I don’t want to talk to any of them, don’t want to hear their stupid chatter about traffic and hair and jobs.

“People like you, buddy—” he says, and puts his hand on my shoulder.

He's got this look on his face that I can't tell if he's angry, irritated, or just nothing at all—drunk. I don't know what he sees when he looks at me. The hand on my shoulder scares me. What's he think he's doing? Do you want strangers putting their hands on you? I step back, and I mean only to push him away, but accidentally give him a light poke in the throat with my fingertips. I missed his chest. Necks are full of bones and cord, but they have surprising give when struck with even a little accidental force. We're both stunned. There's a stretched out second during which we look at each other and there are no thoughts on my side, just a pink flash behind my eyes, or in them. I don't know.

For no reason I can think of, I remember a man I knew a long time ago. I knew him only a little, worked in the same office. But we went for a beer and he told me about his wife's new boyfriend, and their trial separation and the rest of it, and then he started crying, right there at the bar. I watched his bald spot glinting in the dim lights. He held his hands over his eyes and pressed the balls of his palms against the tears. I couldn't figure whether I was supposed to pat him on the back or look away or what.

Mr. Baseball steps back and I see I could possibly land a kick between his legs. Maybe with the roomy pleated khakis he's wearing I'll miss and be screwed because he'll get his breath back and rub me all over the pavement. But I get him, square and hard. He's bent over and I give him a sort of slap-push in his face. I've never won a fight before in my life. There's blood on my hand, and falling onto the sidewalk from his nose. Did I slap him in the nose? Did I just have a fight? I think about the times I've had the shit knocked out of me, and this makes perfect sense. I never hit anyone first until today. I could never believe it was coming to violence, that they would actually strike me, that they wanted to hurt me.

“Why did you do that?” he chokes. “I was fucking kidding!”

“Like fuck you were fucking kidding,” I say. I’m shouting, already getting hoarse and choking on my words.

“I don’t give a shit about baseball and I don’t give a fucking shit about your kid,” I scream. I hear how fucked up that sounds but it’s true. Why *should* I care?

Why, I want to know, did he follow me outside and put his finger in my face, why talk to me that way? What was it he wanted? My finger is in his face while I’m asking these questions, and he’s shrinking back, shuffling away on his ass on the sidewalk. This is new.

And then we’re staring at each other. I’m looking at him, the trickle of blood from his nose and over his lip. He’s crying a little. So am I. Inside the bar, everybody’s watching through the big picture window in front. I see Irene sitting at a booth, holding hands with some chubby boy. He has acne and a sideways baseball cap, and he too is watching me. He squeezes her hands and shakes his head. I disgust him, Irene too, both of them. The chubby boyfriend has his phone out and he’s dialing. Irene looks from his hands to my face, and her aspect is righteous.

Mr. Baseball’s still on the sidewalk. He’s moved so he can lean against the building. He’s stopped crying. He’s got his cell phone out and he’s dialing too. He was in my face, and I hate people like him. He called me “people like you,” and I hate people who do that, who even think it. What kind of person am I? I never met this sonofabitch in my life. He tells me his little story, like I’m his buddy, and when I don’t ooh and ahh the way he wants me to he gets pissed off enough that I’m scared, scared and feeling this “how dare you” feeling.

“Yes,” he says, “Give me the police.”

He gives the address and cross streets. I look at him. I don’t know what to think. Two drunks yell at each other and one ends up hurt. That’s how it goes, and he started it all.

I still feel like crying but I'm not anymore. I say, "I'm sorry man."

He snuffles and looks up. His eyes are weird, still wet, but hard. I don't think he's scared of me now, if he was scared of me before, even for a minute.

"Why did you do that?" he says.

"You were going to—" I start to answer, but the look on his face gives me momentary vertigo. It very convincingly implies I've made a bad mistake.

I start walking fast, back to my apartment. I'm going to make it home. I'm not going to get arrested and I'm not going to court and getting sentenced to jail or fines or whatever it tends to be. Picture me in jail. Ridiculous. I'll come back to this bar. It's in my neighborhood. I never saw that guy there before, and I won't see him again. If I do see him, I'll send a beer down the bar for him, maybe talk to him to say that whatever happened today is finished. He won't even remember. I'll sit on my stool and drink my drink and then leave. But it's my neighborhood and this is no big deal and it's *my* bar.

I am safe in my apartment. I can never go back to that bar, or Irene's store 24 either, I guess, shouldn't even walk by them for a long while. Maybe I'll call my brother. When I pick up the phone, the dial tone is intermittent, which means I've got a voicemail message. It'd be great if someone had called me. Some work friend or something. But it's my mother again.

"Did I tell you your cousin won't let the kids visit anymore?" she asks.

I put the receiver into its cradle and sit down in my chair. I am so very tired, the idea appeals to me—of sitting here in my chair, shitting and pissing myself until I'm dead. But I won't do that. A few days from now I'll go back to work, keep my head down and hope not to be invited down the hall into Jimmy's office.