

Good Pain

Sarah skirted the reception desk at the physical therapy clinic and marched straight to the hand/arm room, her high heels clicking on the tile floor. Appointment number three meant no embarrassing struggle to fill out new patient forms with her left hand, no sitting in the waiting room knowing people stared at her, feeling sorry that an attractive woman's right hand looked so grotesque. She stopped just inside the therapy room door and with her left hand hung her purse on a metal coat hook. She shrugged off her suit jacket and placed it over the bag.

Everyday after work for the next six weeks she would come here for physical therapy in an effort to regain the use of her dominant right hand. She inhaled deeply, rolled her shoulders, and strode to one of three molded plastic chairs at the long stainless steel table, the chair next to Mike.

"Let's get this over with," she said, tucking in close to the table.

At Sarah's first session Mike, already a two-week physical therapy veteran, had introduced himself as the best coon skinner in all of Polk and Warren counties.

"Welcome back to her highness's torture chamber," he said, nodding toward a young woman in a white lab coat with "Liz" embroidered on the pocket. He looked up at Sarah, winked and smiled. Gray teeth, flecked with bits of chewing tobacco, peeked from between his mountain man beard and mustache.

Sweat glistened on his forehead, dampening the tips of dark curls that his green John Deere cap flattened against his head. He pinched a pink plastic clothespin with his thumb and puffy, scarred ring finger, moving it slowly from one metal rod of a small tiered rack to another, then back again. Squeezing and releasing. Squeezing and releasing. Grease outlined his fingernails and mapped the creases in his hands.

Sarah forced a smile. "I'm so glad to be here."

She pushed up the sleeve of her beige, silk blouse and positioned her right elbow and forearm on a wedge-shaped foam cushion.

Liz pulled up a rolling stool and sat at the table opposite Sarah and Mike. "We aim to please," she said, smiling a too-white smile and flipping through papers on her clipboard. Sarah thought Liz's blonde pony tail made her look like a high school cheerleader.

"Okey dokey," Liz said. She set the clipboard aside and took Sarah's right hand in hers, then she dabbed unscented lotion onto Sarah's palm. "Let's start today with a little massage."

Liz began kneading Sarah's claw-like hand, avoiding touching the raw edges of a triangular crater in the thick flesh at the base of Sarah's thumb. The surgeon had taken a tissue graft from her palm and attached it to the tip of her severed middle finger, then covered the depression left by the graft with a thin layer of skin from her thigh.

Liz pressed her thumbs into Sarah's wrist and the back of her hand. With warm fingers she massaged the soft tissue, working to loosen the paralysis that had, after three intricate surgeries, left Sarah's hand frozen into a hook of flesh and bone. Reflex sympathetic dystrophy, the surgeon had called it - RSD. Her body was rejecting her hand after the trauma of the run-in with a lawn mower blade. She would not have a fingernail on her shortened middle digit.

"So, what happened to the end of your finger?" Mike said. "Don't they usually sew stuff like that back on?" A clothespin snapped out of his grip and clattered along the table. Sarah stopped it with her good hand and shoved it back to him.

"I didn't think to look for it," she said. "I was in too much of a hurry to get my neighbor to drive me to the hospital. Maybe it's still in the grass catcher. I was mulching leaves. I wish now that I'd thought to look for it. If my husband had been there he'd have tried to find it. He always thinks of things like that. But then, if he'd been there he'd have been mowing and I wouldn't be here getting this lovely massage from Liz." She made an effort to smile.

"The massage is just the beginning," Liz said.

"I'm well aware of that," Sarah said, irritated at Liz's cheerfulness. She looked, for a moment, out the plate glass window opposite their table. Cars whizzed by on the freeway, their lights winking in the early dusk of late autumn. She envied those people whose lives continued uninterrupted by mutilating accidents. Her gaze moved to her hand, again.

"I can't get used to looking at this. My mother's always said I was blessed with beautiful hands. Not any more."

Liz rubbed Sarah's wrist then started down the back of her hand. Her fingers slid between Sarah's, gently separating the bent digits. "This swelling will

go down in time, and the scarring should be minimal."

"But it will never be the same," Sarah said.

"Nothin's ever the same," Mike said without looking up from his clothespins.

Sarah smiled slightly. "You know what the doctor said when he discovered I had this RSD paralysis thing? He said, '*This never happens to me!*'"

"He takes a lot of pride in his work," Liz said.

"Well, he doesn't have to make presentations, fold laundry, and cook food with one hand. Especially his left hand. I can't even dress myself. People aren't staring at *him* in the grocery store then looking away. Believe me, this did *not* happen to him."

Sarah sighed, again, and tried to relax into the comfort of the therapist's strong, warm hands as they kneaded, slowly, from her inflexible wrist toward her rigid fingers.

Liz examined Sarah's middle finger, the purplish swollen tissue and little circle of black dots, the remnants of dissolving sutures. "We can start you on interferential tomorrow," she said.

"Interferential?" Sarah's forehead wrinkled.

Mike grinned. "They stick your hand in a tub of water with electricity running through it. You'll get a charge out of it."

"Does it hurt?" Sarah said.

"Everything here hurts," he said. He struggled to pinch open a green clothespin. He hadn't strength enough yet to squeeze the more resistant blue ones. "It's punishment for doing stupid things like putting your hand in the mower."

"Cut it out, Mike," Liz said. "You'll scare her. It doesn't hurt at all." She patted Sarah's hand. "You just sit with your hand in a pail of tepid water that has a small electric current running through it. It tingles a little, but that's all. It stimulates your muscles. You'll open and close your hand in the water for fifteen minutes."

"I can't open and close my hand," Sarah said, her voice small now, almost childlike.

"You only do as much movement as you can tolerate," Liz said.

She worked her way up Sarah's fingers toward her once manicured nails, beginning with the pinkie. First the relaxing kneading, then pressure in an attempt to straighten the bent digit. She pushed firmly until Sarah winced, then groaned. Liz held steady for an eternity. Finally, when Sarah thought she could take no more, Liz eased up.

After that, she flexed Sarah's finger inward until she groaned again, then held that position. At Sarah's first session Liz told her not to stiffen and gasp when she pressed. She should work *with* the discomfort, breathe into it. Sarah tried to breathe deeply and relax, as much as she could with the pain shooting up her arm. What Liz called discomfort, Sarah called pain.

"Physical therapy is just a euphemism for torture, isn't it?" Sarah said through gritted teeth.

Liz smiled and continued to push.

"Think of it as good pain," she said. "It helps you to improve strength and flexibility. If you can work through enough good pain, you may regain most of the use of your hand. Nothing good ever comes easily."

Sarah snorted. "Bad things certainly do. A split second lapse in judgment,

and WHACK. Three surgeries later I get to come here five times a week to learn to wave bye-bye again."

Mike looked at the clothespin in his hand. "I'm here to learn to hang laundry, a chore I've always managed to avoid."

Sarah smiled in spite of herself. Liz moved on to Sarah's ring finger.

The clomp of cowboy boots in the hall preceded Billy's arrival in the therapy room. Shaggy blond and eighteen, he sauntered in wearing tattered jeans and smelling of cigarette smoke and Axe cologne. He clapped Mike on the shoulder with his good hand.

"Hey, Mike. Howdy, ladies." He tipped his cowboy hat at the women.

Patients in Liz's physical therapy group did not shake hands.

Billy sat on Sarah's left side and Liz packed his roadmap-scarred left arm in hot packs. Now three of them sat opposite Liz at the long table, just as they had at Sarah's first session when she asked Billy what high school he'd graduated from.

"Didn't," he'd said. "High school and me didn't get along, if you know what I mean. I got a job at BeeZee Manufacturing. Had payments to make on my pickup and high risk insurance. I couldn't afford to stay in school."

"How did you hurt your hand?" Sarah had asked.

"Fucking industrial stapler. I looked over to say something to this guy on a forklift, and my hand slid into the feeder and got pulled up into the machine. Crushed my arm clear to the elbow and punctured it with twelve industrial sized staples before the emergency stop kicked in. It was a bloody fucking mess. I ought to sue the bastards."

At Liz's direction, Mike switched from pinching clothespins to squeezing a plastic hand gripper whose tension was created with over-sized rubber bands.

Billy flipped through the pages of *Hot Rod* magazine with his right hand while his left arm snuggled in hot packs. Sarah wondered why she didn't get hot packs. Liz continued to ply Sarah's reluctant fingers.

"Enough," Sarah squeaked as a flash of hot pain shot through her hand and up her forearm to her elbow.

Liz held steady and smiled. "We're making progress, Sarah." She turned to Mike, "When you've done fifty reps squeezing the gripper you can move on to therapy putty and marbles. Why don't you try the tougher pink putty today? Pass Billy the clothespins, will you please? Billy, start with green and do all your fingers, then move on up to blue."

"Aw, I was just getting comfortable," he said.

"You ain't here to be comfortable," Mike told him.

Mike returned his gripper to a wooden box and opened a tub of what looked like Silly Putty. He pried the pink goop from its plastic dish with his good hand and pressed six marbles into it, then he mashed the blob onto the table. With his wounded ring finger he struggled to pull a marble free of the pink elastic mound. He gritted his teeth, his face reddening. The muscles in his neck bulged.

Sarah watched Mike, listened to his strained breathing while Liz pressed on her thumb. She gasped, then exhaled heavily. She wiggled her jaw back and forth in an effort to stop gritting her teeth, and forced herself to unclench her good hand. "If I thought there was a reason for all this pain," she said. "It might be easier to bear."

"I know why this happened to me," Mike said. He sighed as a blue cat's eye finally pulled free.

"It's 'cause I'm married. Seriously. We was pickin' corn and I was workin' in the truck, shovelin'. When we took a break, I put my hand on the side to hop

out to the ground. Caught my wedding band on a piece of metal up there on the top. I was hangin' there by my ring. Damn near pulled my whole finger off."

Sarah shuddered. "God. That makes me queasy. How'd you get down?"

"Father-in-law grabbed me 'round my legs and held me up while my brother-in-law got on the truck bed and pulled my hand loose. My ring was all stretched out. The finger swelled so fast and so bad they had to use metal shears to get the ring off."

Sarah recalled her own accident, a quick thwack of the mower blade on the end of her finger as she tried to shove the loose grass catcher back into place with the palm of her hand. She had instinctively gripped the fingers of her right hand in her left and rushed to the kitchen to run cold water over what she assumed was just a cut. When she turned on the faucet with her elbow, she noticed a glistening white shard of bone and knew her wound was more than a Bandaid could repair. She didn't remember feeling pain, then. That had begun after surgery, only to be intensified in physical therapy.

"Did it hurt?" she said, watching him struggle with the marbles.

"Not right off, but when we was in the truck headed for the ER it begun to throb like a sonofabitch. I liked to pass out. I told my wife if I hadn't of been married it never would of happened."

"Mike's right," Billy said. "Marriage causes most people's problems. I ain't getting married, even if I have to."

Sarah winced and breathed more deeply as Liz put the final squeeze on her thumb.

Mike dug for the next marble. "My wife knew I was only kiddin'. I shouldn't of been wearin' that ring doin' the kind of work I do. Too many weird things can happen."

"Did you save it? The ring?" Sarah said.

"The wife has it. She wants to have it melted down and made into a necklace of some sort. Says it'd be bad luck to throw it away."

"I wonder if my husband would save his ring."

Billy moved the blue clothespins quickly from one rod to the next then back. Sarah glanced at him, then looked again.

"Aren't you using the wrong hand, Billy?"

He shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "It's easier."

"C'mon, Billy," Liz said. "You won't get strength back if you don't work at it."

"If I get better I'll have to go back to that fucking machine. I know how this works. You keep track of my numbers on that clipboard, and as soon as the insurance company thinks my numbers are good enough you kick me out of here and I'm back at that dumbassed job." He switched to his other hand and picked up a pink clothespin.

Sarah glared at him. "Don't you want to get better? Don't you want your life back?"

"I dunno." He fingered the clothespin in his mangled hand. Then he said so quietly that Sarah could barely hear, "I don't know what I want, but I don't think I want *my* life."

Liz told Sarah to open and close her fingers all at once, as if making a fist and releasing it. Her most concerted effort resulted in a movement of only millimeters.

"Good work, Sarah. I can see improvement from last time."

"I'm glad you can, because I don't and I'm working awfully hard here for very little gain. I did my exercises at home just like you said, and I certainly don't see progress. I just want this to be over, the sooner the better."

Mike stopped digging marbles for a moment and looked at her. "So you can get your life back?"

"Of course . . . if I can. Well, most of it, anyway. I mean . . . Justin's home more now. I always said I wanted him home more . . . I'd like my hand back the way it was, but that's not going to happen. I just don't know what I did to deserve this. . . .Well . . . actually," she sighed, as if she just realized it herself. "I *may* know what I did."

Billy stopped with the clothespins to listen. Mike paused in his marble plucking and arched an eyebrow. "So, let's hear it."

"Well, the day before my accident I went to Justin's office to pick him up and take him to the airport. He had a deposition to take in Chicago. I was waiting in his reception area when this leggy paralegal struts into his office with papers for him to sign. She reeked of perfume from Victoria's Secret. Well, she saw me when she went into his office, and she gave me this snippy, 'Hello, Sarah,' in that fake, singsongy voice of hers.

"It's so obvious she's got a thing for Justin. And she's really not even his type. She's always chomping on a piece of gum and he can't stand it when I chew gum. Anyway . . . when she came out, she backed out his office door, smiling and laughing with him like they shared some secret or something, then she marched off in the other direction so she wouldn't have to look at me, like I wasn't even there. Her little rear end wiggled at me all the way down the hall. The stench of her perfume hung in the air after she'd gone. I was so burned I

gave her the finger. Honestly . . . I've never done that before in my life, but she deserved it, don't you think? And there was no one there to see me do it.

"So, there you have it, don't you see? It all makes some kind of weird sense. The very next day I cut off the end of that bad finger in the lawnmower. And Justin was out of town, again. I was alone. Don't you think that's strange? Don't you think it means something?"

"Shit," Billy said picking up a blue clothespin. "If people cut off parts of their hand for flipping someone the bird, I'd have lost both my arms by now."

"Well, it just seems too coincidental," Sarah said.

Mike looked at her, his brow knit, his eyes narrowed. "You think you're being punished for flippin' that blonde the bird?"

"It certainly feels like punishment. All this *good pain*."

"I know it's frustrating, Sarah, but you are making progress," Liz said. "It just takes time."

"Frustrating doesn't come close. I can't even hook my own bra. Justin helps me dress now. I'm not used to having him pay so much attention to me. He's home in the evenings, too, fussing around, helping with chores. Like he's trying to make it up to me. Like he's done something wrong. I've always complained about his being gone so much, but . . . I don't want him there because he feels sorry for me, or worse yet, because he feels guilty. If he feels guilty, what does he feel guilty about?"

"Maybe he likes taking care of you," Liz said.

"It's not fair. One little split second of not thinking and BAM! - here we are."

"Fair or not," Mike said. "Them's the cards you got. Now, how you gonna play 'em?"

"One-handed, it seems," she said, tossing her head a little.

"At least you got one hand to use," Billy said. "I saw this movie once about this guy that didn't have any arms and he held a pencil between his toes and drew pictures with his feet. He held a spoon that way, too, so he could feed himself. Damn. It was somethin'."

"I don't need a lecture from you about attitude." Her hand worked faster, tiny, quick little movements. "I don't cheat at my therapy. I don't really cheat at anything. I just think there has to be a reason for all this. I don't think it's too much to ask to make some sense of it, of the pain. If I hadn't given that woman the finger, if Justin had been home, if I hadn't wished him home, if I'd been a better wife. I . . . I don't know."

"I know why this happened," Mike said, softly. He lifted his scarred left hand in the air. A tiny bit of pink putty stuck out from under the grease-lined fingernail of his ring finger.

"Cause you're married?" Billy said with a smile.

"No, no. So my wife could take off my boots and unzip my pants and give me nice, hot bubble baths. I never had it so good. Maybe there's things about this you could enjoy."

Sarah's bottom lip quivered as she lifted her trembling claw in the air. "And this happened so I could learn that I don't, after all, want my husband home helping me with my underwear? I don't think so. All this good pain is good for nothing."

"If you think so," Mike said. "Then, I guess it is, but I bet you can do stuff one handed now that you never thought you could do. Can't you?"

"I can button my coat one handed," she said. "But I never wanted to . . ."

“And just think of all the stimulin’ conversation you’d miss out on if you wasn’t here.” He grinned at her, and she had to smile just a little.

“Yeah,” Billy said. “And I saw this other movie about this surfer girl who got her arm bit off by a shark. The shark ate it so they couldn’t sew it back on. That would *really* suck.”

Sarah looked at him and shook her head.

Liz handed Sarah a microfiber cloth. “Time to dust,” she said.

Sarah stood, placed her injured hand on the cloth and her good hand on top, then she pressed, bending her stiff wrist as far as it would go, putting weight on her fingers to straighten them. She moved the cloth in a circular motion, clockwise then counter-clockwise.

Liz picked up her clipboard and pen, then she looked at Sarah, her eyes kind. “Maybe what you’re feeling is grief. Just like the pain in your hand, it will pass, but you have to work through it.”

“Maybe,” Sarah said, breathing hard with the exertion, her eyes welling with tears. “Whatever it is, I ought to be damned good at dusting by the time I’m through here.”