

Saturday morning I am out gardening, turning the back bed, getting ready for fruits and vegetables, when I find the hand. It is a large hand, mammoth, something belonging to a giant, a side-show freak, maybe a Cro-Magnon or Big Foot. I use the hoe to turn it over so the palm is up top.

I have never found a hand in my garden before. Dead birds, yes, a dead squirrel, but nothing like this. My garden is kept clean. It is my oasis from family, work, and life, where worries abate and time can stand still, providing me with the brief interlude needed to calm my busy mind. I am very careful to keep my beds clear of any pests or animals. Even my wife and daughter aren't allowed too near. I am known in the neighborhood for my roses and tulips and during the summer my tomatoes and strawberries. And here I have this human hand.

Well, time certainly stands still now. 9:47, Saturday morning. My daughter has a Little League game at eleven and after the game we will go to Skeeters with the team and have hamburgers and hot dogs. If my daughter goes off to a friend's house my wife and I will either make love or go shopping, taking advantage of our time alone. For dinner we have chicken marinating in the refrigerator. It has been, until this minute, a typical Saturday in our family.

A huge hand with fat fingers and a thumb the size of a regular penis, the lines on its palm resemble valleys and rivers, the knuckles ball-bearings. I touch at it with my hoe. The nails are manicured, reflecting the morning sun. At the wrist, where the hand has been severed, I find ants moving in and out, beginning to congregate around the edges. Ah, there they are. I will have to dose the bed with organic ant killer before spreading out the compost.

I hear a small gasp behind me. My daughter, dressed in her team uniform, has come outside. What is that? Nothing, I say, trying to hoe dirt over the thing. Is that a hand? Yes, it is. Whose hand is it?

I don't know. You don't know? My daughter is seven years old and full of questions. Where do babies come from? What is the meaning of life? Is there really a Santa Claus? A very inquisitive girl and wise beyond her years. I blame her schooling.

She holds her softball glove against her chest. My wife has put her blond hair in pigtails. The team cap looks good on her. My daughter is serious about her softball, her classes, her friends, and just about everything else. She gets that from me.

"It's so big," she says. "Is it an ogre?"

"I doubt it."

"Is it real?" She leans over and I tell her not to touch it. She puts her face close and I see her eyes take in every inch of the hand. "Wow," she says.

She looks around as if other body parts must be lying about, a foot here, a leg there, but we only have this, and I wonder if a severed hand is the best thing for my daughter to see. It might give her nightmares, a beast with five fingers chasing her through the woods, though she rarely has bad dreams. My wife is the one with the sleep terrors, horrible passages, waking me up in the middle of the night with her screams and cries. No, my daughter says her prayers, gets in bed, listens to me read from Harry Potter, we're on the third book now, and then she sleeps the sleep of dead. So do I, except when my wife has one of her nightmares, then I am awake most of the night with her.

My daughter asks, Where is the rest of the man? I don't know. You don't know? I don't know. Is he down there? She points at the vegetable bed. The hand reminds her of Frankenstein, the way the body was stitched together, and she laughs when I do an Igor imitation, hunching my shoulder and going, yes, master, yes, master, trying to change her focus from the hand.

"What are you doing?" My wife stands at the backdoor. "We need to leave soon."

"Daddy found a hand."

"He did not," my wife says flatly. "We don't have time for this. It's almost ten."

My wife is the skeptic in the family. There is a difference between being serious and being skeptical. For example, Sunday mornings my daughter and I attend church, Catholic of course, and my wife never does. She scoffs at religion. My wife says she won't condone the idea that we are born sick and if we don't get well then we are all going to hell. It sounds, to her, childish, and mean-spirited. She can't imagine an immature god. I try to explain faith but she won't hear any of that.

My wife likes the theory that we, our life, our world, our universe, might be just a hologram at the edge of a black hole in an alternate state of existence. That, to me, is unthinkable.

She makes a tut-tut sound as she comes across the lawn, the fresh spring grass bristling under her long steps, but when she sees the hand she gradually slows to a stop. What is that doing here?

We stare down at the thing in my vegetable bed. It is white, very pale, new enough that the bugs and worms haven't got to it yet. There are no spiders or maggots crawling over the skin, only the ants and ants in this part of the world can come on at any time. They are my constant enemy, those and aphids. Aphids are the spawn of the devil.

Last Saturday I turned the bed for the first time this spring after the long winter. This is to let the dirt breathe. Today it would get a second hoe and then next week the planting and the spreading of compost. So the hand is brand-new, a recent addition in the last few days.

"I want to keep it." My daughter says. "Can I keep it?"

"No," my wife says.

"I'll put it in the freezer. You won't ever see it. I can take it to school for show and tell. Please?"

My wife tells her no again and then sends her inside to brush her teeth before we head to the ball field. My daughter hesitates. She really wants the hand, thinking it will become memorabilia, an heirloom, something she can keep frozen for the rest of her life, bringing it out at family events and special occasions. My daughter also has quite the imagination. She gets that from my wife. But she

heads inside anyway, stomping up the steps to the back door to show us she is angry at not getting her prize.

Alone, we stare more at the hand. This is the sort of thing that can burrow its way into my wife's bad dreams and I foresee nights where I will be woken up by shouts of 'The hand, the hand'. I kneel down and touch the skin, surprisingly soft, no cuts or calluses, except down near the base of the thumb, a dark bruise there. It didn't come from anyone who worked in a garden. My hands are a battlefield by the end of spring planting.

It is the left hand. Does that mean anything? Is it a message? My wife says, in India, the left hand path follows the trail to magic and delusion. It is, she says, in Arabia, the one they use to wipe their butts with. The mafia, if I remember correctly, sends a left hand as a sign of deliverance from evil.

My wife wants me to rebury the hand, dig a deep hole and pretend it never existed. No, I say, not in my garden. She says we should bag it up and put it in the trash. No, I say, it belongs to somebody. Nobody we know, she replies. We don't know anybody that big.

She says calling the police will only make matters worse. Right now it is just a hand but if people find out we have a hand in our backyard then who knows what else they will think. We will become the family who found a hand in their backyard. We will become the subject of conversation, rumors will start, and soon the neighbors will start thinking we are murderers or something, and we'll be slowly ostracized, no more dinners, no more Sunday barbeques, not even Girl Scouts or block parties.

I tell her she doesn't care about those sorts of things anyway. She's told me hundreds of times how much she hates doing what she calls the 'suburban crap', that living here has given her the creeps from day one, calling it some kind of temporary sentence to her soul, a long layover on her way through the valley of purgatory.

She says she's thinking of our daughter. She doesn't want our daughter to be known as the hand girl. Something like that could follow her for years, to middle school and even high school. Did I want that for our daughter?

I ask her to give me a moment to think this through. She makes a valid point, about the notoriety, it would be brutal around here, but this hand does belong to somebody and it is our civic duty to report it to the authorities. I doubt if reattachment is possible, but there is a man out there, a very large man, wandering around missing his hand. The other question, of course, is how it got here. Neither one of us wants to consider that answer just yet. Someone, a stranger, buried it here, but why, was it on purpose, specifically choosing my garden, and then why my garden, what had I done to make someone want to put a hand in my dirt, and if they did that then they wouldn't be a stranger, they would be someone we knew, and what had we done to deserve this, had we crossed the wrong den mother, the mad neighborhood dad, or it was random, a criminal driving down Addison late at night with a loose hand in his car, deciding my backyard looked like the perfect spot to dispose of the last remains of his crime, and maybe he buried the other parts in the other backyards, maybe the Johnsons have a foot, the Woods an elbow, or maybe one of the neighborhood dogs found a stray hand lying in the street and brought it over here and buried it for later. The possibilities branch out like a clump of weeds, all of them rotten.

So there is only one reasonable decision. I ask my wife to go inside and bring back a bag, one of the big freezer bags, and I will throw the damned thing in the garbage. No, I think, not yet, first the freezer, my daughter is right, hide it in the back, behind the ice cream, keep it cold until Tuesday morning trash pick-up. No reason to risk the garbage starting to stink.

My wife is holding the bag open while I am using the hoe to push the hand inside when my daughter returns with Nicole, her next-door friend, see, there it is, I'm not lying.

Her friend comes close and takes a hard look at the thing. Her friend is an aggressive little girl. The world revolves around her. She thinks it is unfair that she didn't find the hand first.

Hanna Wood, her mother, isn't far behind, and Hanna here means there is no longer any choice about calling the police. Hanna already has her phone to her ear, dialing around and telling everyone what we have in my vegetable garden.

Hanna Wood is a lawyer, so is her husband, they are both Baptist and they live in the next house and they both like to play bridge, and I think that pretty much says it all.

#

11 is my wife's most magical number. Then 19. Another is 5.

5:11. The time my alarm clock goes off in the morning.

5/19. The day we married.

5. Jasper Johns, her favorite painter, his favorite number. When we were young and lived in New York the Museum of Modern Art held a Jasper Johns retrospective and I think I followed her to the show about twenty times before it ended. We had to buy two copies of the exhibition book and now one sits out on our coffee table, its pages worn, thumbed, stained, and the other is on a shelf still in its plastic shrink-wrap.

5. The amount of years since we have moved here, and they feel like years and not seconds. Time in this city has not gone by in a flash.

We have no friends here, no one really to talk to. We are considered interlopers. The people from New York. Of course our daughter has many friends and we do sometimes go to her friends' houses and make uncomfortable, halting conversations with the parents while the children play together.

19. How many chairs we have in the house if you don't include the sofas, couches, and the chaise lounge. At night, when she can't sleep after a bad dream, my wife will sometimes get out of bed

and wander around the house and count the chairs, going from room to room, beginning down in the kitchen, as a way to calm herself and make the world normal again. Some nights she miscounts and I hear her voice in the darkness of our bedroom. Seventeen? Eighteen? And she will have to return downstairs and start the process all over again.

My wife says she might be a cabalist, the way she sees numbers and letters as mystical and full of meaning. Her letters are J and W, on occasion V.

11. The day my daughter was born.

11/11. The night we met at a dinner party on the Upper West Side. It wasn't exactly love at first sight. I thought she might be unstable and she thought I was fuckable.

11/11/11. We flew back to New York and stayed in the eleventh room on the eleventh floor of a hotel on west eleventh street.

11. The amount of inches of the dildo she keeps hidden in the bottom drawer of her dresser. She knows I know but we both pretend it doesn't exist.

Or we used to pretend.

One morning, this last Christmas season, my daughter, who knows why, opened my wife's bottom dresser drawer and saw the head of the dildo peeking out from under the stack of sweaters and picked it up and brought it down to the kitchen table where we were finishing up breakfast.

"Look what I found! It's a penis!"

"Yes," my wife said, "of sorts."

"I know all about penises." She cradled the thing in her arms like it was a doll. "I've seen lots of them."

I asked her where. At school. At school? Who has been showing you their penis at school? My teacher. Which teacher? Mrs. Abrams, she teaches science and she showed us drawings of penises and

vaginas, I have a vagina, and she told us how mommies and daddies make babies. I said I really must talk to the school more often.

She held the huge rubber toy at me. "Is it yours, daddy?"

"No," I said.

"It's mine," my wife said, matter of fact, and reached across the table and took the dildo from my daughter and put it on her lap as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"But, mommy, you don't need a penis."

I told her to run upstairs and change out of her pajamas. She stopped at the door and asked if she could have the penis. She wanted to show her friend Nicole. She'll take good care of it, she promised, she won't lose it or anything. No, I said, go on and change.

We still do pretend it isn't around, though I am sure it is still here somewhere. It's not in the dresser drawer anymore, or anywhere else I look, and I am not about to ask.

#

Half the neighborhood is in my backyard by the time the cops arrive. There are the Johnsons, Troy and Michelle and their twin boys, and the Shaws, Vance and Velma, and their brood, and the Whites and the Bolgers and some even over from the next block, and of course the Woods, Hanna and her husband John, the lawyers, and Hanna is already starting to talk about the legal ramifications. The rest of them, there must be twenty or more by now, mingle around and whisper under their breaths, many of the mothers hold their hands up to their kids' eyes so they can't see. Aww, mom, I hear over and over.

My wife has her told-you-so look on her face. She blames me for not being quick enough to get rid of the hand. She is fuming inside. And I don't blame her. Already I hear someone say they always thought we were a bit odd.

People are taking phone-pictures, sending them out who knows where. They ask me to kneel down by the hand so I can be in the frame. They ask me to pose like I was when I found the thing. They ask my wife and daughter to stand by me for a family portrait. My wife refuses, naturally, telling me to put down the hoe and stop acting like a dunce. This is getting bad enough without pictures of us going out around the world.

Some think the hand has grandeur, nobility, an icon from the past age of giants, and others, the more religious, wonder if it is a portent announcing the end of the world. Didn't Revelations say something about the hand of Satan? Hanna Wood worries that it might affect our property values. Who would want to buy a house in a neighborhood where hands are found in backyard gardens?

The hand of God, the hand of Fate, now various conspiracies dot the conversations, bouncing around willy-nilly without any direction. It becomes a portent, a symbol, a message from beyond. Saint Gabriel is the left hand of God and Gabriel appeared to Mary before her virginal conception and Gabriel will blow his horn to announce the return of Christ. Everyone agrees we are at the End of Days. It is a common belief in our neighborhood, the fantasy that we are so favored by God that we will be around to witness the great apocalypse. Who wouldn't want to experience the last moment of secular existence? It would be a 'holy shit' to the extreme. At my side my wife rolls her eyes, wisely holding her tongue, keeping her holographic ideas to herself. Openly espousing the thought of an alternative existence would, in this subdivision, be grounds for an actual stoning.

When the cops finally show the crowd separates to let them through. In our neighborhood the police are respected, to a high degree, seen as the protectors of our affluence from the ravages of the rest of the world. There are two of them, both young, and they walk up and lean over and stare down in my bed for a long time.

"Yep, it sure is," one says. "Anybody 'round here missing a hand?"

General laughter. Yes, you can feel the thought, the police can be funny just like us. Isn't that nice?

This encourages him and he starts saying things like, Can you give me hand? and All hands accounted for?, bringing more laughter, though dwindling. He's not as funny as we want him to be.

The other asks me the routine questions. Name, how long we've lived here, what I do for a living, how I found the hand. He writes down my answers with quick, easy strokes in a little notebook. Do I know whose hand this is? He raises his head to the crowd. Does anybody have a clue?

"How about you, little girl," he bends down to my daughter, "do you know?" She shakes her head shyly. He smiles. "So, no arms and legs hanging around the house?"

"No," she says quietly, then a light bulb goes off and her eyes get happy. "But my mommy has a penis!"

"Your mother has a what?"

"A penis."

The adults laugh a little, a bit nervous. You don't hear the word penis around here much, or anything sexual. It isn't that type of neighborhood.

"She does not," her friend Nicole says. "She has a vagina."

Vagina, of course, is worse than penis. There are more than a few gasps. Vagina is a word used behind closed doors.

"She does, too." My daughter is angry at not being believed. "I've seen it. I held it, didn't I, daddy?"

"I'm sure she does not," the cop says, but he glances over at my wife as if he needs confirmation.

"She does. It is a penis and it's this big," she exaggerates her arms way out, "and it's made of rubber."

Most of the adults understand now, some probably won't ever, and there is a hush like we are waiting for a whistle to blow. The cops snigger into their hands and try to catch a quick look at my wife out of the corner of their eyes. My wife stares straight ahead and a funny smile comes across her face and then she shrugs as if every woman in the neighborhood owns a dildo, maybe two or three. So she's been caught out, no big deal, and it's charming and funny how she carries off the nonchalance and composure embedded in her silent agreement that she does in fact sometimes use an extracurricular object for her pleasure and enjoyment.

But she and I both know there is a very good probability that she has the only dildo within a ten block radius. Oh, there might be a vibrator or two stuck in some drawer somewhere, unused for years, but the idea of any of these women standing around in my backyard having a sex toy the size of a horse is beyond comprehension. These are mothers and lawyers and accountants, team moms and brokers and entrepreneurs. Sex, for them, is their own business, between them and their husbands, in bed, an adult activity kept secret.

"Disgusting," Hanna Wood says. "There are children here. The children don't need to hear this."

She seems to speak for all the mothers. They nod behind her in agreement, their heads bobbing up and down, stepping forward as if they are about to attack.

"Disgusting," Hanna Woods says again.

"We don't use it together," I say. I have no idea why I say that.

"Spare me the details," she waves a hand. "I don't want to hear it."

The men, though, they are a different story. With them my wife has reached an even higher level. Before, she was the beauty of the neighborhood, eye candy for their imagination, and now she is the beauty who uses a dildo for masturbation. Talk about an ultimate suburban wet dream, one of the top three for any of them, and they watch her, unable to hide the fantasies coursing through their minds, and I don't doubt she'll be in their thoughts the next time they go after it alone.

And they watch me, too, and I hear the 'lucky dog' and there is something else, the unspoken question, why does she need sex toys, flowing across the backyard. Something, it implies, is wrong with me and our marriage for my beautiful wife to possess, and presumably use, such objects for erotic pleasure. I must not be able to fulfill her, and if I cannot be man enough then maybe she has been scouting around for someone who is able to satisfy her needs, perhaps a man with very big hands. And you know what they say about a man with big hands. The enormous thing my daughter described could be a life-size replica of another part of the man found in my garden.

I read it all in their eyes and half-smiles. The officers are also grinning. Yes, I want to say, we, like most couples, I assume, have our difficulties in the bedroom from time and time and, yes, when those problems do occur it usually is on my end, but they are rare enough that I haven't asked my doctor for a Viagra prescription just yet. And yes, I want them to know, I am absolutely fine in the size department, even if I am a bit crooked.

"Well," the cop blows his breath out, "okay. Umm."

#

Our late arrival at the ball field hardly comes unnoticed. The game practically stops as we make it to the stands, a silence descends, and everyone watches us while we take our seats. The coaches turn, the kids, the parents around us, even the umpire gives us the once over. 'Hand' is whispered over and over.

It is only the top of the second. Softball games for seven year old girls last forever. A five-inning game can go on for two hours, with the hundred walks and thousand errors. But my daughter does play well, the star of her team, shortstop her position and clean-up her batting order. As I said, she is serious about the game, and I can tell she is mad we are so late.

While we watch I field a million questions. How, why, what, where, who. The coach tilts his ear in the dugout so he can listen to my explanations. Again and again I describe finding the hand, adding

tidbits about how I go about my spring gardening, highlighting this year's planned fruit and vegetable crop. Tomatoes, of course, and lima beans and black-eyed peas. A new strawberry type, designed to stay small and tart. But no one bites and the conversation keeps returning to the cops and the hand, their questions becoming more and more aggressive. No one can understand how I cannot know whose hand it was in my garden. Surely I must have some idea of the owner.

And when we return from the ball field, my daughter a hero with a two-out double in the last inning, we find a local television van parked in front of our house and the reporter and her crew on our lawn. My wife refuses to be interviewed. But you are such a beautiful woman, they tell her, and she really is a pretty girl. The camera will absolutely adore you.

There is also a police van and the CSI team is in my backyard, busy digging up my oregano and my dill, my bulbs and my seedlings, tearing apart my line of rose bushes, while they search for stray body parts, and I stand and watch them as they destroy all my hours of hard work in a matter of minutes, and I feel like one of those strange people you see on television who are sobbing after a tornado has decimated a trailer home park and they have seen a lifetime of memories ripped from their grasp in the blink of an eye.

Later we are the lead story on one station and second on the other. Neither mentions our name but they do say the two thousand block of Addison and our address is plain to see above our front door when the camera shows our house, and all night I hear cars slow down out front, curious to view the place where the hand was found. Some stop and take photos, the flashes going off like fireworks at the curb of our property.

#

Tonight we lay side by side in bed after making love. Both of us struggle to catch our breaths. It has been one of our best sex sessions in a long while, certainly the best since before the Easter holidays, a real reap and sow. It is as if we had forgotten how we like to do it. My wife shifts and curls against me

and places her head on my chest. At first I think she is crying but it is really gentle laughter. She says our life has become absurd.

Later I hear her rise and I know she cannot sleep and that she will begin her insomnia ritual of counting the chairs in our house, beginning with the breakfast nook and then to the formal, followed by our den, our living room, and our study, and she will slowly make her way up the stairs, careful not to touch the step that creaks, and turn to my daughter's room for the chair at her desk and the reading chair by the lamp and finally our bedroom and the twin chairs at the bay window.

I fall asleep, I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I know my daughter is at my side, saying, Daddy, daddy, daddy.

My daughter wears her Yankee nightshirt, from when we went to the city to spend a weekend and saw an afternoon game at the stadium. It engulfs her small frame like a sack made for potatoes. She jabs her finger into my shoulder to make sure I am awake.

Mommy, she says, mommy is screaming.

And my wife is screaming, a breathless, frightened sort of yell. I can hear her all the way upstairs and it is a big house. Downstairs I find her standing at the open front door and down on our welcome mat I see a severed right hand. It is the other's twin. And now I wonder if we might not find a better place to live.