

BRIAN AMES

AS MANY HANDS AS GOD

HE USED TO ENJOY THE FEEL OF HER HANDS on him. Now he regards that touch as cloying – a grasping, confining thing – and at the same time believes he is unworthy of it.

“Orange,” she whispers, using, as she nearly always does, his last name, the name of his business, “you pull away, baby.”

“I can’t explain it,” he says, placing safe space between them. He looks at his own hands, the backs of them. Spreads his fingers, supposing the wrong lies in them, that they have fashioned nothing but wrong things. That he has made manifest careless decisions with them. Weighing this against his fatigue, kernels of resentment tumble there, clot in the raised veins he stares at. They breed malignancy in the fifty-four bones of his hands. Byron Orange clutches them tightly into fists and takes another step away from her.

“Orange?” she asks. The sound of his name rattles like the sound of all names that have been lost. It covers expanding air between them, but snuffs out when it reaches his ears. In the street outside, the percussive pass of something large and diesel powered. Annie has made him a lunch and packed it in a stainless steel lunchbox. Its lid cradles a thermos of black coffee. In cellophane bags are a tuna sandwich, a dill pickle, and corn chips. There is a small paper napkin folded once. She turns to lift the lunch from the counter, offers her gift of service from the side so he cannot see she has started crying. She feels him take the lunchbox,

the absence of weight in her hand. There is the screen door's sound, and the firing of his engine outside in the dark.

ORANGE TURNED HIS TAR TRUCK OVER on a slick winter morning. A veil of rain that was almost ice had been pissing down for several hours—he recalled hearing all night fat drops on the roof as sleep failed him. There had been no opportunity to react, to steer out of the slide and ensuing catastrophe. The driver of an auto—so small and low as to be undetectable—as the car revved up alongside him, had accelerated, slid forward into his lane, and had lost control. The tiny car's tires simply ceased their communion with the wet pavement. The vehicle spun once in front of him and, without any volition, Orange's hands spun his own wheel. In all of his life he had never been so hopeless as when his tar truck lifted itself onto two wheels, paused there while momentum and the center of gravity consulted physical laws, and shrieked onto its side. The windows—all safety glass—broke in a thousand ways but held their shape.

Belted in, he drew a short breath and held it. He was nearest the pavement, that is, the truck had gone over on the driver's side. Through the shattered window he could see lights of various colors, but they were fractalized in the facets of the webbed glass. He let out his breath. Took stake of himself—was he badly hurt anywhere?—and discovered that no, he was fine. His blood pumped in his head. He saw that the lunchbox had come open, the modest lunch strewn along his thigh. The thermos lay next to his head on broken glass. It would be broken inside, shards and coffee. It occurred to him to worry about a fire, and he released the buckle of his safety belt. Awkwardly, he extricated himself. The sandwich in its bag fell to his feet. Glass crunched under his work boots as he stood on the driver's side window. The bench seat to one side of him, the shattered windshield to the other, he was put in mind of the dimensions of an odd closet or phone booth. He lifted his boot into a crook of the steering column, stepped further onto the gear lever and, crouching midway on his climb out, lifted the heavy passenger-side door open as if he were emerging through the hatch of a submarine. He grasped the jamb, holding the door—which wanted to close again—open with the top of his head. His bare fingers clutched for anything that might serve as a handhold, but discovered only slippery road grit. Nevertheless, he pulled himself out and let the hatch shut next to him. He looked around in pre-dawn, the absence of light.

The agent of this disaster, the driver of the small car, had apparently regained control and sped off. Perhaps he or she hadn't even been aware of the accident. It is possible, Orange thought, that the driver, having recovered a seemingly hopeless predicament, had simply continued

on — adrenalin-charged, to be sure, and more cautiously as rain continued to fall. But oblivious to Orange's sad condition.

Orange, at first, did not discern the odor of leaking tar. Like a man who works as a chef and can no longer smell cuisine, or a sailor on a trawler no longer sensitive to spilled guts and fish oil, Orange was immune to the aroma of roof tar. He saw, instead, great billows of steam rising. In the sweep of headlamps passing across the highway barrier in the opposite direction, he saw, at the tank's orifice, tar spilling forth. It dropped onto the pavement and spread in a pool so black as to open a massive hole in the earth. Cars had begun to queue behind him, and he realized the attitude of his broken, bubbling truck blocked the way totally. He sat atop the wreck for a few moments longer. He watched his own breath make steam in the cold air. He noted that many of the blocked cars executed tight three-point turns and attempted to drive against the flow, seeking another turnoff. He imagined their drivers taking personal umbrage, incensed that some fool had shut off their route to work and thus inconvenienced their morning commute. They would be on cellular phones now, braying to answering machines or voice mail, or workmates who had arrived early and waited for them in their offices, about the idiot who had spilled over his tar truck and made impassable their street. Dumb Ass. Dipshit. Motherfucker. Orange imagined all these words — new names for him, synonyms for Byron Orange — spilling from their lips, carried on digital pulses through the atmosphere that still dropped rain, rain.

Down the clogged road he saw the lights of a police cruiser. Its siren called a single, piercing glissando at intervals to clear the way before. The oscillating blue from atop the car made Orange think of dazzling, brilliant gemstones he would never, ever buy Annie. Not now. The cop pulled up cautiously, braking several yards from Orange just at the pool's frontier. Without warning, the search lamp mounted on the cruiser's quarter panel blazed. Orange squinted into the candlepower, the light of an approaching locomotive that would soon grind him. The amplified voice that came from the light was a woman's. "Are you all right?" she asked. "Yes," he shouted, and nodded in an exaggerated manner so the policewoman could see from across the distance. "Stay where you are," she commanded. The amplification rendered the intent behind her command impossible to discern. Was she angry? Orange wondered. Would he be ticketed? He shielded his eyes from the light with one hand. His fingers were growing numb and cold breeze chilled him despite his parka.

The policewoman and her partner — a male — emerged from the car and made an assessment. They held a brief conference. The policeman

stepped to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. The policewoman skirted the tar pool and arrived smartly aside the cab. She looked up and trained a flashlight on him.

"Sir," she said, "we got a real mess on our hands here."

"Yes."

"We're going to have to get you down and talk about it."

"I can get down OK."

She nodded, then gestured at the tar. "We're probably going to have to call for a HazMat cleanup."

"Looks that way." He hadn't meant it to sound flippant.

"Well," she said, and paused. Dawn evolved, slowly, about them, so that a dull half-light informed her features. Not especially attractive, Orange thought. The corners of her mouth turned down in a way that seemed like a frown, even as she looked around. He saw — of course — that she carried a weapon. Two weapons, a baton and a pistol, at her belt. He heard her speak again.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I said come on down then."

Orange evaluated descent routes. Then, instead, he decided to leap. It was seven feet — at most maybe eight. His boots hit the pavement first, as planned. His body, however, unwieldy and frigid from sitting cross-legged atop the cab, folded onto itself and he went over on one side.

"Are you all right, sir?" Her frown hovered over him. He scrambled to his feet, not answering.

"What happened here, sir?" she asked, but before he began an explanation, she added, as if in afterthought, "Do you have a license I could look at?"

He fished for his wallet and watched the policeman set orange cones around the spill. Then the male cop stepped to the first, stalled car and gave the driver instructions. Down the way, Orange could see the lights of a second police cruiser. He looked at the tar pool again. The bubbling from the tank's cap had slowed to a torpid ooze. He wished for

everything, for all of this, that he could bend down, form his freezing hands into a ladle, and scoop the tar pool — handful by handful — back into its place.

ALSO, HIS BUSINESS WAS FAILING. This fact he kept from Annie, instead growing more anxious with each frivolous purchase she made. He would fall silent and petulant when she arrived from the grocer with flowers or an obscure single-purpose kitchen implement. Of what use is a melon-ball scoop in a household of hidden crisis? The capital from his father-in-law was consumed. Numbers with parentheses around them blemished, in far too many places, his statement of earnings. His balance sheet carried a weight of short- and long-term-debt that would stagger him when he paused to consider it. Free cash flow was a problem in that meeting payroll — his own and that of his two assistants — was always an unsure thing. Orange Tar Roofing Incorporated was a firm on a precipice. In the canyon below waited a rockslide of bankruptcy, or worse. And this Orange hid from his wife.

Byron Orange labored over the books late at night, as if his work ethic or power of will would change the facts. His father-in-law, a brilliant businessman, had encouraged Orange to take evening classes in business management, so that his decisions regarding tar roofing would be fiscally informed. “Understand the numbers,” Annie’s father advised. Then the distinguished, successful man offered a slogan: “The data will set you free.” His father-in-law grinned, as if this bumper sticker, fortune-cookie scrip were the sum total of all the ages’ wisdom. The man clapped Orange on the back and shook his son-in-law’s hand vigorously. Then he kissed his daughter — standing in their presence as regarded and silent as a coat rack — on the forehead, and departed Orange’s home office for a Rotary meeting.

Orange thought of this now: *The data will set you free*. He looked, again, at his ledgers and the numbers blurred into Cyrillic forms. The columns merged in gray, cascaded onto their plinths. The balustrades of bookkeeping snapped under the weight of his accident, the spilled tar, the fines. “Beat the data and it will confess,” he muttered, and it was like blasphemy. He closed the ledger, opened the top drawer of his desk and placed it, with the calculator whose keys his fingers had been poking half-hearted, inside. He closed the drawer and laid his hands on the desktop and studied them. He thought of killers’ hands, how evidence of skin or fiber is retrieved from under fingernails and a story of homicide is built around these unlikely things. Under his fingernails was packed roof tar. He folded his arms and laid his head on them.

BYRON ORANGE DREAMED that he was a god. He was not the Christian god, the Sistine hand-extended god, the god who's got the whole world in His hands. Not the god whose hands wipe away every tear at the End of the Age. Rather, he was one of the gods of India or Pakistan or Vietnam, or somewhere where women go wrapped in dyed sheets and are veiled and do not carry sidearms or batons or write citations. He was a variegated god whose arms sprung from his back where wing roots would have blossomed had he dreamed, instead, that he was an angel. There were many arms and, at the ends of them, many hands. He was a god who rode on the backs of henna-dotted elephants. There was incredible, elaborate, design that articulated his deity, and his dozens of hands, scores, no, hundreds of hands, were the agency of his omnipotence. He was marveling, in the dream, at these hands and the synchrony and beauty and utility of all their works. Some of the hands built wonders, others sustained civilizations. A group of them wrote out profundities, and he marveled at how the balletic collaboration of muscles and tendons formed symbols on thick sheaves of papyrus. Flexors bent his fingers. Extensors straightened the digits. He executed, on pages, intricacies, machinations, whole epics.

But the dream shifted and suddenly there were stumps fanned out—the ends of the wrists now flung toward the world and the universe, gnarled and blackened things like burnt hands or the hands of lepers: carpus, metacarpus, phalanges dissolved into ash. Everything they had held or fashioned collapsed. And the entropy was absolute.

God must have many hands, he thought upon waking, if he is capable—as the Bible asserts—of numbering each hair on each head of each human being.

IT WAS EXCRUCIATING WHEN HE TOLD HER. All of it spilled out of him in a rush, as tar will from an upset tank, hot and reeking and black and slippery. Annie wanted to put her arms around him, to sit on the sofa and cradle Orange's head as he confessed, but he remained a safe, sullen distance from her.

"Here's how it is," he began. "I can't keep it together."

Annie was silent, only her eyes pleaded for elaboration.

"The truck," he started again.

"It wasn't your fault," she blurted.

"No — that's not it. I know that. The thing is, I can't buy a new one." His voice rose in pitch. "I can't make it happen." He held his palms up as supplicants do.

"Please," she said. "Talk with me. Help me understand. I want to understand."

He told her about the accident fines, the failing business, his embarrassment with regard to her father. He admitted that he must file for protection from his creditors. That he had let his assistants go, that Orange Tar Roofing Incorporated lay in shambles. He would not look at her as he confessed these things.

His wife stood silent for some time. Then she crossed the room and sat down on the opposite end of the sofa from him. There was not a trace of fear or defeat or brokenness in her manner, but, rather, an obstinate resolve.

"First of all, my father can go to hell," Annie said. It surprised him, the way she spat it, the defiance that it came enveloped in. "And I don't give a damn about the business," she added. He looked up into her eyes and saw that she was earnest, that these declarations were true and zealous and emanated from the core of her.

"What I do give a damn about is my husband. That is what I care about. You, our marriage. Us. It's falling apart, Orange."

Byron Orange's guts split in half and he felt raw heat rushing to his face and head and neck. "You don't understand," he snarled. He bolted up off the couch and stood pointing at Annie. "You don't know the first thing about it. I'm a complete fuck-up, totally. There's nothing that won't turn to shit if I touch it. You can't just sit there and tell me you don't believe this, that you don't know this about me."

While Orange raged, she sat with her fingers laced in her lap. His invective slammed into her. Some of what he shouted — no matter how determined she was to keep reason and calmness in her own soul and demeanor — raised wounds on her flesh. His rage bloomed and roiled like an atomic cloud, but it wasn't really him shouting now: the words derived from his hopeless anger. Even so, some of what he said hit hard. But she let him continue until he was spent. Their living room was quiet except for the sound of an auto passing outside.

Then she stood and said, "Come here."

But Orange would not move. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, recalcitrant.

"Come here, Byron, right now." And this time, she let neediness creep into her command. She saw that he appeared uncertain, breached. The use of his given name. "Please, baby." His chest rose and fell as he panted — his arms fell to his sides and his shoulders dropped with them. Still, he did not come. She must cross the room to him. There was nothing left to do. The only possibility of his redemption was in the notion that she might make a final attempt. It was unfair — it *is* unfair, she thought. *I have been with you every step of the way, through all of it, yet you reject me.* Annie wanted to strike him, to beat his face in, and she wanted to hold him and draw her husband close to salve his defeat. To cross, for good, the space that separated them. This she did, took a step and another, and arrived close to him. Annie lifted her arms to gather Orange, and he lifted his own reflexively to push her away. But she had anticipated this and pushed his arms back down, and then drew him to her so that their bodies came together as they used to, when they slow-danced in high-school and later, early in their union, at the American Legion hall. "Don't push me away anymore," she whispered. "Ever again, no. Don't do it. Don't lose me. Don't lose me."

And she felt all the springs in his body uncoil, tension unbinding in the hard meat and sinew of him. It flowed out of his feet onto the carpet. Annie's hand cupped the nape of his neck and pulled his face onto her neck. "Say something, Orange. Whisper it."

"I love you," he said. "I'm sorry."

They danced with no music.

FOR THE SECOND TIME THIS NIGHT, Annie and Byron are making love while raindrops tap lightly on their rooftop. Earlier — for the first time in months — they had indulged a frantic, urgent coupling. The starvation and near death of intimacy between them had produced the need to feast. There was no other way, at first, for them to sate themselves and consummate reconciliation. The bed lamps had remained on illuminating their forms in collision.

Now they move slowly, in great, deep pleasure. They have killed the lamps, abandoning light for gentle darkness. Their flesh cycles as he moves in her. He kisses every part of her neck and mouth and ears, and he tastes her sweat and moves to suck lightly all the skin of her breasts. She wraps her legs around his buttocks, crosses and locks her ankles. She finds his right hand and takes his fingertips in her mouth.

She grips his fingers between her lips and moves her tongue across them – it is exactly the same as the soft, warm, moist fit of her vagina around his penis.

The sheets under them are damp and hold in their heat. The scents of sex and her perfume rise and commingle. Annie's back arches and her hips rise to him. Her hands clench his biceps. Although it is dark, their eyes are locked, and they each see that far at the core of them is love that forever eschews abandonment of any sort. At precisely the same moment they come together, and it seems that they are washed by a high tide that bashes the shoreline, again and again, with foamy, delicious waves. When the waves subside, she finds that Orange is still hard and moving, again, at the fork of her legs. She is delighted and eager, and accepts him there – in this and in all ways – with joy.

Later, in the moments before fatigue settles down and sleep may soon come, they still touch one another. It is as if their hands refuse to cease caressing, having remained aloof and immobile and unpracticed for so long. Orange's hands stroke her skin. Annie's fingertips flit across his body like moths. Orange closes his eyes.

His wife's hands cover him like a blanket.