

The Hand

Kara Reedy

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*** Content Warning: infant death, violence, and gore.

The drive up to Mother's house is a difficult one. I don't want to break the news to her that I lost yet another job, the third one in the past two months. A block of ice settles into the pit of my stomach, fear twisting its way up my spine. I'm devastated, and I know my mother will be upset. I can hear her now—her spiteful words echo deep in the back of my mind:

You're my greatest regret, you disgust me. I should've left you out on the side of the street. Why couldn't you have been a beautiful baby girl?

Mother's anguish over my existence has been the only form of attention I've ever received from her. I know she doesn't love me, but she's all I have: just Mother and my baby girl, Dolores. Doe is nothing like her mother or grandmother. She is sweet and quiet, and she looks at me with caring eyes. Mother was ecstatic when I came home with her—the little girl she'd always wanted.

The house has been unstable for the past few weeks now. I come home to silence every day. Doe is usually sleeping soundly in her crib, her little mobile circling her head. Up the hall from my baby's room usually sits my mother in her own room, leaning back in her old termite-ridden chair. There she sits, watching the days go by without any emotion crossing her face. Every now and then, when I pass her room, I see her staring out at the sun. She's starting to look directly into the light, making me worry about her well-being. Every time I try to warn her about possible blindness, she looks at me blankly and turns to look back out at the glare.

I fear what she might do to me today. She's never been one to shy away from violence. When I was seven, she threw a glass at me, shattering it and sending shards at my face that cut into the skin around my eyes. When I was in the eighth grade, she threw me down the stairwell in the kitchen; she said I was too nosey when she had brought home one of her *friends*. My body is littered with scars, courtesy of stupidity on my behalf and cruelty on hers. What new blemish will I be gifted with today?

I pull up our driveway, the farmhouse coming into view. The path is flanked by massive elm trees. The sun has just set, leaving a purple hue spread across the horizon to my left and the moon rising slightly above the treeline to my right. As I bring my car to a stop just shy of the front porch, I look out of my driver's side window to see the twelve-year-old maple tree standing across from the doorway. Leaves slowly float down from the branches to the ground, spreading out over the grass and soil. As I watch one leaf hit the ground, I notice a freshly covered hole to the side of the tree with a single dandelion placed gently on top of the mound. I don't spend much time wondering about the strange displacement of soil. Instead, I'm preoccupied with an intense sensation of terror pulsating from within my heart that I don't yet understand. I notice a sharp jingling sound as I pull my keys from the ignition. My hands are shaking so viciously that the keychain holding a picture of Doe clinks hard against my multiple keys. I'm shaking so much that my vision has started to blur a bit at the sides. Panic flows through me as I turn out of my seat, preparing to enter the house.

Stalking my way into the front room, passing by the beaten furniture, I step towards the kitchen. The smell of something wretched fills my nostrils, and a bleak discomfort begins churning in my stomach. I peek my head cautiously through the door to find an empty stovetop. The smell

of burnt hair and something murky filters slowly out past the sink's drain. A bump from above my head comes from Doe's room, distracting me.

"Mom? You alright?" I cautiously make my way to the steps, climbing upwards into the dark expanse of the second floor. I assume Mother has simply bumped into something above.

Arriving at the top of the landing, I realize all the doors are shut except for the one closest to the top of the stairs: Doe's room. The door is cracked open, allowing for only a sliver of light from the hallway to seep into her room. There is no sound from the other side of the door as I push through, turning on the light as I go. The scene that meets my eyes is heartbreaking and I nearly collapse from pure grief.

Blood has soaked through the fabric covering the crib, spilling down onto the ground. Droplets have splattered on the carpet, forming a small, splotchy pool. A heavy scent of iron fills the air, making my eyes water from both the pungency and heartache. I move forward, hoping to whatever higher power there is that she is alright, that the blood belongs to Mother instead, but my prayers are ignored as I begin to truly understand what has happened. There she is, lying motionless in her crib. Her eyes are open, but there is no light inside them. Doe's face is pale, and her lips are tinged blue. There is blood spread across her tiny, fragile body originating from where her right arm hand used to be. A meaty, spindly nub is all that remains; it looks as though the limb has been roughly carved off with a saw. I feel my body crumble as I sink down to the floor, clutching at the newly stained fabric. I feel tears stream down my cheeks as I turn my body to look back into the hallway.

Straight ahead of me, a faint glow peers out from underneath the bathroom door—Mother. How could she let this happen to my baby girl? I pull myself up, slipping on the pool of blood that has dripped down from my daughter's lifeless body. I am nothing but a broken shamble of what I

used to be as I walk sluggishly to the bathroom door. A wet squelching sound follows me as the blood coating my shoe leaves footprints that will never be removed. I shove the bathroom door open, revealing the humid air of the bath, the warmth prickling at my skin. The light I saw underneath the door frame had been from three candles lit on the top of the toilet seat. The wax has melted down onto the seat covering, leaving a colorless film over the plaster. I look over at the tub to see my mother. Her entire body is submerged in the water, head to toe—she's still dressed. Her hair has been singed off, leaving unsightly boils on top of her scalp. Three red droplets spread over the surface of the water, but Mother has no cuts as far as I can tell. That's when I realized the droplets belonged to Dolores.

"Wait, so you're saying that someone killed the old lady and the baby? Who chops a baby's hand off?" Jonny looks at me, bewilderment clear on his face. He had only been half-listening to me, tired of my dramatic retelling.

"Yep. Both of them were reported as dead once the police were called. The investigation labeled the incident as a murder-suicide by the man's mother. Poor guy wound up going crazy and dying a year later in a mental asylum." I close the book of confessionals, sealing it shut for probably another decade or two. We've been looking for days through the library for something about this old farmhouse we're planning to explore. Needless to say, we found a lot more than we expected.

"That happened in 1967, a long time ago. No one has lived in this place since then. There was a fire in the barn next to the house sometime in the eighties during a party. My mom said she was there when it happened—told me that nobody wanted to go into the house, so they all stayed in the barn. Apparently, the party got out of hand, and some drunk guy accidentally started a huge blaze by lighting a match on top of a hay bale; it completely engulfed the barn. Lucky for them,

no one got hurt." I always do a little research before heading to an abandoned property. I don't want to get caught in a situation like breaking any trespassing laws, not again, at least. Every little bit of information helps when going to a new place. I'm stupid, but not *that* stupid—I always want to be prepared.

"I think it's worth checking the place out. We haven't explored anywhere in over a month. I promise I won't get you killed or anything." Joking tends to put Jonny at ease, but we usually get serious when we're actually inside a place. Jonny knows I'm his friend and won't let him get hurt. We've known each other for a long time, and we both know we can rely on one another if and when things get dangerous.

"Alright, I'm sure everything will be fine; it's not like this stuff goes wrong all that much." Jonny looks excited now, intrigue overwhelming the fear that I know is still present inside him. We'll be okay, as long as we don't do anything idiotic.

The trip between the library and the house is a long one—about an hour and a half. The scorching weather has me second-guessing the decision to go exploring; here's hoping it cools off. The leather seat clings to my thighs and every slight turn I make pulls my skin painfully. Jonny is putting his hair up into an ugly and ratted man-bun. "Too hot," he stammers out in a quiet tone. The air conditioner is on full blast, blowing into our faces as beads of sweat run down our foreheads. I hate the summertime; why can't it be cold year-round?

This road is jarring. It's probably been a few years since it's been repaved. The radio has started to play static instead of commercials, telling us just how far we are from civilization. The house isn't that much further, maybe a few more miles. I've driven this far out a few times, and

always with other people. Out here, it's just rows upon rows of decaying trees and dusty fields. No one comes out here anymore. Well, nobody but us.

The homestead is back in one of the clearings situated off the side of the road. It's had quite a brutal history, probably the craziest backstory of any place we've gone to. My mind drifts back to the baby, wondering where the hand went. Why would someone even cut off a hand? What's even the point of that? My eyes drift back to the road, snapping my attention to the main objective: getting to the house. I doubt that anyone will be out this far. Most of the people around here stay in town and avoid these parts. Maybe they're afraid, or perhaps they don't want to destroy their tires. Why should we worry? It's just a run-down shack. I know we'll be fine; hardly anything ever happens to us when we go out to places like this.

Potholes litter the road ahead, forcing me to dodge one every few feet. The entrance up to the farm is just to the right of me, a rusted mailbox being the only indicator of the hovel's existence. As I turn up onto the path going to the farmhouse, the radio makes a high-pitched scratchy sound—some sort of strange feedback. I'm not too worried though, radios do that sort of thing, right? Rocks crunch underneath my tires, kicking up dirt behind me as I drive up the track.

The path leading up to the house is lined with trees bending inwards towards us, almost like a cage closing its claws around us. The world around us is silent and the trees are still. There aren't any birds, and I don't see the poofy tails of squirrels or the skittering tracks of deer; it's just eerily still. Weeds engulf the path up to the house, though it's hard to tell with the number of dead leaves covering the pavement. The clearing in front of us opens up to the house and overgrown fields block us in. The sun is just starting to set, its radiance slowly burning out as the air cools ever so slightly, bathing the hemisphere in a violet wash. I look to my left and see the rubble of what used to be the barn, scorched and crumbled. Burn marks rake across the old wood planks that

had once been the upstairs flooring, a remnant of the fire set all those years ago. I turn my car around so that the hood is pointing out back to the road—I want to be able to make a quick escape if there is any danger while we're here. Something about this place is making me feel uneasy.

“Hey, can you pass me the flashlights? I am *not* getting stuck inside a dark room without one.” I was turning off the engine, untangling my phone from the cords around it. Jonny just rolls his eyes at me.

“We'll be okay; it doesn't look like it gets very dark inside. Did you grab extra batteries from your house?” Jonny is sifting through the glove compartment, wrenching out two flashlights. Incomprehensible receipts spill out onto the floor beside his boots.

“Yeah, they're in the trunk. Let's hope we don't have to deal with any rats; they always steal my cheese puffs.” I climb my way out of the driver seat, heading to the trunk to grab a few things.

The trunk houses the mixture of snacks Jonny stashed away, an assortment Cheetos, potato chips, and candy. He also brought his Switch. Sometimes, these overnights get boring, so we gotta be prepared, just in case. Most of the time we end up asleep halfway through the night—we aren't very good at being explorers.

The main reason I'm so fascinated by this place is because of the tree out front. Ivy creeps up the sides of the trunk, and the entire base is cloaked in thick foliage; it's clearly been quite a long time since leaves have decorated every branch. Some bits are dead up at the top, giving off a skeletal form. What amazes me the most about the tree is that it looks eerily like a right hand from some angels.

The farmhouse goes up what looks like two stories and has slated sides, yellowed with age. The front porch is fenced in at the sides, hiding the door from view. We step up onto the stoop, dancing around nails and missing floorboards. The door is wide open in an admittedly uninviting

way. We venture forwards, cautiously peering around what looks to have maybe been a parlor room at one point—there isn't any furniture to give us any hints. Beer bottles and plastic wrappings litter the floor. People have been here, but the scraps look old, which eases a bit of the tension from our shoulders.

We enter what looks to be the kitchen. There is a table with two chairs, and a kitchenette with all of the cabinet doors swung open. There are a few surviving china plates and dishes strewn about, as well as a few canned goods set on top of the cabinets. It's a little odd that there is anything left at all, let alone cutlery and cans. That's rare in a place as picked over as this. We shift to a set of stairs situated in the corner preparing to try moving up, when Jonny hears a noise.

"Hey, what was that? It sounds like someone is talking outside." Jonny walks over towards a window that looks out into a field. As he looks into the area behind the house, I feel a vibration in the ground. Looking upstairs, I see aged wallpaper peeling down from the walls. Out of the corner of my eye, a shadow moves awkwardly. *Probably just a bird flying around*, I think to myself—*not a big deal*.

"Is anyone out there? I didn't hear anything." I tiptoe over to where Jonny is looking out. All I see is an empty field overrun with weeds and grass.

"Nah, I think I just heard an animal. Probably a deer or something." Jonny looks back towards the stairs. He doesn't sound very convinced, especially since we didn't see any signs of wildlife on the drive over.

"Let's look upstairs. I wonder if there is stuff still up there." He makes his way to the stairwell, looking up, clearly trying—and failing—to play off his discomfort.

As we creep up the stairs, we hear a fluttering sound. We barely have time to duck as a bird flies past us and out through the window we were just looking out of. I stifle an embarrassing sigh

of relief, thinking to myself, *I knew it was just a bird, no reason to worry*. We step up onto the landing, taking in our new surroundings. Every door is open, except for one at the end of the landing, furthest from us. The door looks odd. It's a darker color than the others and has scratches going upwards in long strokes. There is a dim light coming from the other side, just visible through the gap between the door and the floor.

"We should probably check that one out, just in case someone is in there." I slowly move to open the door when it suddenly cracks open, ever so slightly. I freeze, waiting for someone to open the door, but no one does. I figure that maybe my weight shifted the boards causing the door to pop open. I continue towards the door, pushing it open to find a bathroom, a very moldy and disgusting bathroom. The toilet is overflowing with all sorts of vile waste. The tub has a deep brown stain along the bottom and something slimy hanging off the side. My mind flashes back to the man's mother, and I quickly back out of the room, closing the door, the stench of rot sticking in my nose.

"Ok, now I know why the door was closed. That was absolutely disgusting, man." I walk back towards Jonny, my fingers pinching at my scrunched-up nose.

We begin to search through the rest of the rooms, one-by-one. There are three bedrooms upstairs and one bathroom, although I'd prefer never to go anywhere near that bathroom ever again. Only one of the bedrooms has a bed inside. Surprisingly enough, the bed frame still has a mattress on top. Unfortunately, the mattress is heavily stained and is currently serving as a home for what looks to be a family of raccoons. We decide not to disturb them, moving on to the other rooms.

Eventually, we settle on the room closest to the staircase. It is the only room that looks remotely clean, and we can lock the doors in case of emergency. I decide to call the room the

“Baby Room” because of the singular picture hanging up next to the door. The portrait is of who I assume to be little baby Dolores, sitting with a teddy bear in a frilly dress. She looks happy and it only makes me feel even more horrible knowing what happened to her. I try to push past the unease at being in the same room that the killing had occurred, instead opting to focus on setting up for the night.

Midnight rolls around, and boredom has set in. We've been sitting up here all night, playing games on Jonny's Switch, and munching on the assortment of snacks. The air has cooled significantly, adding a slight chill around us. We've heard a few noises here and there, but nothing that really worried us. There are definitely rats in the walls; they've been clawing inside the paneling for hours now, searching for their next meal; it's starting to grate on my ears, but I doubt moving to a different room would curb the annoyance. More than likely, the rest of the house is littered with all matter of pests. We haven't really talked all that much, remaining mostly in silence. Silence can sometimes play tricks on the mind.

"Hey, did you just hear that?" Jonny is looking at the door, alarm clear on his face.

"Nah, I didn't hear anything. You're probably just hearing stuff again." I am far too preoccupied with the cheese puff I'm munching on to worry about imaginary talking again.

"I swear, I can hear footsteps coming from the hallway. We didn't really check the ground floor. Maybe we should look around?" Jonny is standing now, holding his flashlight at the door in a defensive manner.

"Do we have to? I'd really rather not stumble around in the dark." I wouldn't admit it to Jonny, but I am definitely still on edge—this place takes on a different aura when the sun goes down.

"Oh, come on. It'll only take a couple minutes. Besides, we've been sitting for hours, and my legs are numb." Jonny is acting pretty anxious, inching closer to the door in a way that insinuates that he's waiting for me to jump up and join him.

"Okay, I guess it couldn't hurt to check." I stand up, clutching onto my flashlight. We'll just walk around the house as quickly as we can. I don't want to stick around too long outside of our makeshift panic room.

We open the door, looking out onto the landing to search through the dark as best as we can. Everything is pitch black now, almost like the night has swallowed up the house. We switch on our flashlights, illuminating the upstairs. Shadows bounce across the walls and ceiling, shifting through the floorboards as the light moves. The light reflects off something in front of us. It takes us both a few seconds to realize the smell. I recognize it first, lifting my flashlight up to point towards the bathroom door. The door's wide open, even though I know I closed it.

It wasn't particularly windy tonight, but I figure the door could've been pushed open if a strong enough gust had blown through. I'm not too bothered by it, but Jonny is visibly shaken, shrinking back a bit. I take the lead going towards the bathroom, a false sense of fearlessness surging through me. I have to hold my breath to avoid the stench of what can only be described as death. I look around inside the bathroom and see everything is still in the same position. Nothing has changed, except for what looks like a few leaves that have blown in.

"It's okay. I'm pretty sure it was just the wind." I close the door behind me—pulling especially hard in an attempt to ensure that the door is actually shut—as I walk back over to where Jonny is.

Jonny relaxes a bit, still poised to bolt at any sign of danger. We slink down into the kitchen. Everything has remained in an orderly sort of disarray. As we head towards the door leading out

into what looks to be a living room, a crashing sound draws our attention back to the kitchen. A dish has fallen from the table, covering the floor in jagged little pieces. We must've been moving around too much. Jonny looks at the broken parts with disdain, wary of the new obstacle. Neither of us really question the collapse of the china, simply moving on and assuming gravity was just doing its thing.

The only other room on the first floor is a little sitting-room situated just behind what we assumed was the parlor room by the kitchen. There's a couch set up in the back corner of the room; it's placed in front of a back door held shut by the rear of the seat. The sofa is torn up almost beyond recognition. The stuffing is spilling out, exposing rusted springs that stab out of the cushions. A lamp is fixed just off to the sofa's side, a blown bulb still twisted in the center of the shade. An ancient TV is pushed up against the wall, the antenna bent slightly down, above it hangs a family picture.

The portrait is of four people. There's a newborn infant up front, cradled in the arms of an older woman. The elderly woman is shockingly frightening to look at. Her skin is leathery, and black dots riddle her face, spreading out from the bridge of her nose. She looks as though she has never been inside, away from the sun—I'm willing to bet that she was a farmer back in her day. Her eyes send chills spiraling down my spine in a frosty rush—a deep onyx, sparking roughly from the flash of whatever camera was used to take the picture. There is a glint of red twisting in between the edges of her corneas. Even her smile scrunching up at the corners of her cheeks looks like it was drawn on as if she were never smiling in the first place. She pulls the focus within the picture, sitting in a ratted chair in the center. A couple is standing behind her and the baby. They are almost unnoticeable, hiding behind the shroud of the woman in the foreground.

The couple look like the parents of the baby, sharing the same features. The man looks solemn and depressed; his face drooped and sagged. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes, appearing utterly hopeless—I can't help but feel sorry for him. The woman standing next to him appears utterly ordinary and out of place within the portrait, with her curled, frizzy hair and gaudy makeup. She looks like a picturesque model torn from the pages of a magazine from the eighties.

"Hey, Kyra? Do you think this door could lead to a basement?" Jonny's voice snaps me out of the trance I'd stumbled into while staring at the photo. He's pointing at a door that's poorly nailed shut just beside the TV.

"Maybe. Did you wanna check it out?" I'm not exactly keen on walking through a basement, but I am curious about what we might find. I've never been to a basement that wasn't worth exploring.

"I'm curious about what might be down there; it's not often that we go to a place and find a part that's undisturbed." Jonny uses the heavy end of the flashlight to undo the loose nails. He barely has to use any weight to knock them loose since the nails are practically dust at this point. Jonny inches the door open, shining his light down into the hole as I step over join him at the head of the staircase. Staring into the abysmal basement, we come to a soundless agreement to venture forth. The darkness swallows us whole as we take the first few steps.

We slowly sneak our way deep into the dark expanse of the basement, each step resulting in the stairs creaking loudly. The cellar looks untouched and a thick layer of dust clings to the air. Cobwebs are strung up in almost every corner of the room. Insects scatter about, both moving and not. A window on the cavern's far left side catches my eye; it's far too small to allow even a glimpse of light into the desolate space. The most unnerving bit about the basement is the

windowsill. Dozens of insects lie motionless against the windowpane—the creatures look like they died trying to escape from something.

Perhaps we should have taken the insects as a warning. Standing there, staring at the dead creatures, we don't notice a shadow crawling up behind us. The door to the basement slams shut, and we are thrown into darkness. We quickly turn around, intending to run, but we can't move an inch. There, standing in front of us, is the elderly woman from the portrait above. Her deep-set eyes stare at us, her face sprayed with little black freckles. She is pale and gangly, a frightening being to behold. And there, in her arms, is a little girl missing her right hand. Jonny and I faint, falling unconscious before our bodies even touch the jagged rocks serving as the floor of the cellar. All we can remember when we wake up are the woman's eyes and the child's missing appendage.