

The Day My Hands Fell Off

T.J. McIntyre

Because they were unused, because they had remained idle beyond the allotted time, because my chubby fingers had long since grown useless, my hands fell off. The Department of Utility came along behind me and swept them up in a street-sweeper.

"Shit! Come back here you son of a toaster!" I yelled after the stainless steel contraption as it hovered away down the grass-covered eco road. I waved my bleeding nubs in front of my face. A cascading torrent of crimson sputtered from the bleeding and exposed remnants of my arms' circulatory system.

"Calm down Chester," my girlfriend said next to me. Angel was patient as always. She glowed in the twilight. Her bioluminescent make-up lit up the night around her. She fluttered her fleshy feather-covered appendages, fused to her back, from the local body mod shop. A soft breeze came off her artificial limbs, cooling my temper.

"But my hands?"

"Were useless to you, I know. Maybe now you'll have a tougher time stuffing your face."

She came over to me with a smile on her face. A splash of my blood stained her white mini-dress. Red dots appeared on her pale skin. Ignoring my thrashing, she patiently tied my veins and arteries together in a fleshy knot.

Wiping a spurt of blood from her brow, she looked up at me. Her eyes had no pupils, no irises. They were soapy white. I missed her green irises, but she said that this modification had completed her. I had my reservations. I'd thought she was fine before.

Those pale eyes pierced me.

"We'll find you something better," she smiled.

"But I liked my hands."

She released an irritated sigh and looked at me. I saw the worry in her eyes. "Then why the fuck didn't you use them? You know the Department of Utility lets nothing go to waste."

"But what about your wings, huh? You can't fly. What purpose can those possibly serve?"

Looking hurt, she turned her back to me.

"They calm strangers."

"But I'm no stranger."

"Familiarity breeds contempt," she said with a sigh and walked away.

I followed Angel into the night. Department of Utility vehicles swept through the streets. I looked at each one, hoping to see the one that took my hands, but they all looked the same. I knew it was futile. Once taken, appendages were never returned – at least not to the same owner.

We reached our destination: The Mod Shop.

"Jelly should be in. She's the best in the business, you know."

"No, I don't."

"Well, she is. Look at these wings of mine. She's the reason they're so lifelike. I've seen others that hardly move. Mine have fully functional joints at several points. She connected them right into my spine. I can control them as easily as my own arms."

"Are those arms actually yours?"

"Of course they are! Stop being such an asshole! I'm trying to help you."

"I know you are." And I did. But she knew me, knew how uncomfortable all of this made me. I was what they called a *retrofreak*. I was proud to say I had not undergone a single mod. Every part of me was mine. My kind are a dying breed.

I never understood what Angel saw in me. At first, she had been like me. Still an untouched child. We had grown up together, logged into the same training webs, gone through the same network programming. We were both Americana Patriot 3.0's, and moved into careers with honors. She created training programs, and for a

time, I had worked the hardware. But that was before I grew jaded.

Angel went the route of all our friends, getting her first mods as soon as legally able. Myself, I liked what I saw in my reflection. I was ugly as Hell, but real. It bothered me that I could no longer recognize any of my childhood friends. None of them resembled the children on our childhood photo blogs. I guess that was it. I guess I didn't like change. I quit working. I sat around and slept, ate, and grew fat.

I'm still on probation for overeating. Maybe taking my hands was an additional punishment? But I knew that wasn't it. I had grown idle. Unpatriotic, even. I didn't want to change. I didn't want to progress. Not when the progress made no sense to me. It seemed like a regression.

But still, Angel hung out with me. She didn't leave me. She was my Angel long before her modifications. In fact, she said the nickname I gave her was the reason for the modification.

I guess that's sweet.

In its own fucked-up modern way.

"Holy fracas! Is that you, Chester?" a high-pitched voice squealed from behind me as I entered The Mod Shop.

The bizarre joyful face staring into mine was not familiar. A tall gangly figure with extended arms and legs. It looked like a human spider, which seemed to be the point. Mandibles moved and clicked in expectation of my response.

"Good to see you...uh..."

"It's me, Greg Polk, remember?" He leaned around to see Angel walk in behind me.

"Sally? I see you're still Chester's Angel."

Angel beamed at our old friend. My jaw dropped a little.

"Greg?"

I remembered him. He had been a short red-headed child. Freckles had covered his face. He was portly but not from overeating. He had never enjoyed being offline enough for physicals. Greg had been one with the system and hated to leave the networks behind. But he had been a good guy. We snuck in to peek at our first sex web together as teenagers. We had even taken our first virtual toke together one lazy afternoon.

The figure before me was a far cry from the chubby ginger boy of my memories.

"Chester, you look exactly the same. No... wait... I'm sorry." The mandibles imitated a smile. "I see now. You had them modify you to be fat. What'd you decide on that for? Why no hands?"

"What can I say? I got taste." I smiled and hoped it didn't look as sarcastic as it felt.

"I'll say you do. The natural look suits you." The figure that had been Greg nodded its arachnid head. "I'm not so sure about the fat, though? Maybe you should take in

the tubby a bit?"

A giant fly ran outside squealing. It laughed a feminine laugh which could barely be heard over her buzzing wings. "Well, there goes my date. I got to make sure the old web's ready." Greg tossed a lanky elbow into my ribs. "I'll see you around. We got to catch up alright?"

"Sure." I said grateful to see the thing that was once my friend walk away.

Angel smiled at me and led me further inside the building. Saws hacked, blood flowed, bones and skin were grafted and formed like wet clay in the hands of sculptors.

The modifiers worked in silent concentration.

The scene sickened me.

Looking away, I whispered in Angel's ear. "The Department of Utility takes my hands, but what about Greg back there? How can his form have any function?"

She gave me her most patient smile and patted my arm. "You see that girl with him? They pleasure each other with their forms. Their fantasy is made flesh."

"But what purpose is there in that?"

"It makes them happy."

"My hands made me happy."

Angel let out a sad laugh. "No they didn't. Nothing makes you happy. Let's look and see what's available."

Angel brought me over to a clear case. Various organs and appendages sat freeze-dried on glassy shelves. She pointed to a massive blunt penis and smiled.

"No, sweetheart. What I have isn't good enough for you?"

She laughed. "No, you're fine. I just think it's funny that the former owner let something like that go to waste." Her laughter was musical and made me feel a little more at ease. But just a little. The shelves continued to disturb me.

There were massive crab claws, fleshy contraptions called dragon maws which were capable of sending out massive flames, extra mouths, and eyes on stalks. There were extensions and appendages of all shapes and sizes from various species, both real and imagined. I fought an urge to vomit as I looked through the case.

Angel, on the other hand, looked no different than she did when deciding on a piece of furniture to buy.

"Let's go," I said, tasting bile in the back of my throat.

"But you haven't picked anything yet."

"And I'm not going to."

She pleaded with me. Tugged on my arm. Her eyes darted around at a frenetic pace. "This is your chance to progress. To become updated. You've become outmoded. Please."

I shook my head.

She brought her voice down to a whisper. I felt an electric current as her soft lips caressed the peach fuzz on my ears. "Please, Chester. You don't know what you're doing. This is your last chance. I've held them off for so long now. I thought this would change your mind."

I pushed her away from me and looked down at her. I looked at the eclectic mess around me. It still shocked me that they all thought I was the freak.

I looked over to where a young mod was having his first procedure. He was being sawed in half. The lower body of a horse stood next to him. He had chosen to become a centaur.

I could only shake my head. "I'm sorry, Angel. This isn't for me. I want to go."

"Oh, he's not going anywhere this time," said the deep voice of a stranger.

A large individual came over. The towering figure was covered in furs and looked like a feminine version of Sasquatch.

"So this is the guy, huh?" a baritone bellowed.

"Yeah, Jelly, this is him."

"Still refuses to change?" Jelly asked.

I looked from Jelly to Angel. Angel no longer smiled.

"Yeah. I thought the hand thing would work, but you were right. I'm going to miss him." Tears were in her eyes. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and turned around. She began to cry.

As Angel walked away, Jelly said after her: "You did the right thing, sweetie. The patriotic thing. He's completely outdated. Don't worry, it won't hurt him. At least not too bad."

Several pairs of strong arms gripped me. I felt myself being poked and prodded.

Jelly nodded her head approvingly.

"You're a little soft, but I'm sure someone will be able to put your parts to good use."

I was carried screaming to the operating table.

T.J. McIntyre writes from his home in Alabaster, Alabama. His stories and poems have appeared in numerous publications including *Sand: A Journal of Strange Tales*, *Escape Velocity*, *The Birmingham Arts*

Journal, and *Flashshot*. In addition to writing, he also publishes *Southern Fried Weirdness*, a publication specializing in Southern speculations.