



Hands Off

August Roulaux

Harold had loved and lived a long life. He was older now and decided to marry. Not that old, thirty-five. But he felt old. And that is all that matters. Watching his friends march down the aisle one after the other over the years (he always in the wedding party, never the best man), the long shadow of his bachelorhood growing and growing, he began to feel a kind of panic and dread. It was a typical case. Man gets older, less attractive, the cheeks

begin to sag oh so slightly; the hair recoils backward in full retreat, the forehead devours all. In the face of this, man begins to wonder: getting less action at the bars, fewer and fewer women seem interested and even when they are it is an eye-darting impatient interest, not the consuming fire-loined interest of old. Fear sets in. There he finds himself in the middle of the night, looking into the darkness of his empty bedroom. Oh no.

The wedding was in spring and outside, in a modest little green grove. There was a makeshift chapel, really a small wooden pavilion (painted white for the occasion). His parents showed and told everywhere, so relieved, how they never thought this day would come. She was an accountant, worked for a construction company. Nice girl, pretty and very polite. On that wedding day, everyone commented in whispers and even to her about her most elegant hands. They were already before that day the envy of all. Attention was drawn to them all the more so as a result of the ring ceremony, when Harold carefully and rehearsedly placed the large diamond

ring on her long, tanned fingers. So lengthy and lean, they were hand-soap-commercial kind of fingers. With milky soft skin, and the nails stretching out over the fingers and manicured. Think of the perfectly feminine hands and there you have hers.

People were by and large excited about the wedding. Harold's friends liked Susan a lot. She was likeable. The best man dropped the ring and so there was a bit of a bustle at that moment but other than that it was a pretty uneventful event. All of the usual rituals were present but nothing out of the ordinary. And everyone gathered in their groups at the reception, gathering round to see Harold put the cake in Susan's mouth and then to see Susan, with her well-admired hands, put the cake into Harold's mouth. And then they gathered round to see Harold find his way up Susan's dress, grope and grapple and come out with the lace garter, then toss it over his shoulder, to the poor saps.

He got to know a lot of the people in that group, the garter-catching group. Every wedding there they would

be. And then of course one would be married off, and the group would wave *bon voyage* to another of its own. Now finally it was his turn to say "Sorry to leave you, guys; it was fun." Lewis Grange caught the lace. He was a banker, in love with his secretary, a young dark-haired hunk from Newark. Lewis never wanted to go up but his mother always made him, hoping that one day he would snap out of it. Harold, when he was a bachelor, felt a sense of comfort knowing that even if he never married he could always count on Lewis Grange to be there, waiting to catch the garter with him. It was a bit of a surprise when Harold saw Lewis with the garter. Everyone murmured to themselves about how that was a waste of lace. Uncle Rick told Lewis on his way back to the table that hey, they are doing amazing things in Massachusetts these days.

That was the wedding. The people all left and on the way home in their cars they talked about how nice of a couple they were and how well they thought the marriage would work out.

Things went on nicely from there. Harold and Susan bought a house. Susan did some gardening when she wasn't working and Harold set himself to some repairs. They lived in a nice neighborhood with nice lawns and snooty women. Harold was a scientist of sorts and got a job with a prestigious drug company a year or so into the marriage. Even though they both worked long hours, Harold and Susan still had time to be intimate with each other. It was enjoyable for the both of them. Harold loved Susan's hands roving over his back and chest, her pants and gasps. Harold loved it when she moaned, feeling quite proud of his part in the matter. He was like a boy blowing soap bubbles, triumphantly watching them float along, in awe of his work, as if to say, "I did that. Look what I did."

It was interesting to some extent as well for the snooty women next door who, usually during a rousing game of bridge, could sometimes hear them in their newly-wed love and, when that was the case, would think, oh that must be a nice couple.

Harold would go into work with a firm step. Everyone at work thought of him as a young vibrant man. Women even seemed to be interested again. The old looks came back. Of course he would have none of it. He had a woman and didn't need another.

Seeing this, the friends at work were in agreement: "She must be good, Harry." You couldn't imagine, he would say. When you can satisfy a woman, Harry would lean over and whisper, like an old man imparting his wisdom to unenlightened souls, I mean really give a woman complete satisfaction, to the point of near death, then at that point you don't need to be going around, searching all the world for all the women in the world. It's right there and you know it . . . They nodded in awe.

Guys at work with woman problems were now coming to him. Even calling him at home. "What do I do, Harry?" He was calm and measured with them. Here is what you need to do, he would say, and then he would give them a few precious stones of advice. "Thanks so

much, Harry," they would say. Happy to help, he would say.

A spring afternoon Harold came home early—he knew Susan had the day off—and he found her in the garden. Soon, predictably, they made their way into the bedroom. At the end of it, they both growled and moaned and yelped and squealed and all seemed just as it always was. But for Harold things were very different.

During the act, the prelude to the act really, while Harold was performing his preparatory magic on Susan, she reached down and with her long admired hands began to rub herself. At first he thought she was just going to scratch her leg or something, and then he wasn't sure for a moment what she was doing. Her hand gyrated in a grotesque way, of which Harold was never before privy. He thought of a dog that had narcolepsy he saw once on a television show.

Harold was internally beside himself. He stopped for a moment. Then she stopped. He started again.

She started. He stopped. She stopped. He started. She started. Things were spinning in Harold's head. Susan's crinkled brow and pursed lips, her eyes closed in a careful kind of meditation, were to him like something out of a horrid snuff film. He felt ill afterwards, thinking about it.

"What is it, Harry?" she asked, caressing his fuzzy chest.

She doesn't even know, Harold thought to himself. She is just going on like nothing happened. As if we could just go on.

Later, Harold was convinced, and evermore so, that she did know. If only deep, deep down inside. Harold swore, and he was willing to bet a lot of himself on it, that if she were put in a situation where knowing it would mean something to her, as it meant something to him, then she would find a way, then she would summon herself up and face it. It was only her laxity, her lack of care for others, her selfishness, that made it so she couldn't, or wouldn't, know.

Harold now saw Susan in a much different light. She was still the center of his universe, whereas before it was a centrality based on something that made Harold smile and hold his head up high and run red lights, thinking nothing could hurt him, now it was a centrality that made his stomach burn and churn and toss over itself, that made his teeth grind down to a fine powder. He knew he had been wronged. And in the worst sort of way. He meditated on that wrong, like a monk in the desert. He dipped himself in that wrong, covered himself with it, and bled all over it in agony.

At work, things changed. No longer did the guys come to him for help. From the women, nary a look.

Harold wondered if he might not have been better off with Lewis Grange and the wedding-garter men's club. The more he thought about it, the more he couldn't believe that Susan would do such a thing. And the more he couldn't believe it, the more he wanted to do something about it.

Although he had been avoiding it, staying up later

regularly watching infomercials, one night when Susan was not tired from her work, they ended up in bed together, awake. Harold tried to get out of it, but it was just too awkward to say no. She just kept saying, “Come on, where’s my big boy.” But this seemed to him nothing but mockery.

Susan again did a very good job of keeping her hand to herself. There before him, her long elegant fingers jostled for position, wiggled like an experienced violinist’s on a trilled note. It was like a sleight of hand trick, where they flaunt the fact that they are taking your money and there isn’t anything you can do about it but just sit there and watch like a buffoon. Harold thought it icing on the cake that, getting herself all worked up, she had the audacity to yell “Oh, Harold!” when it was quite obvious that “Oh, Susan!” would have been much more fitting.

One time and perhaps you could overlook it. And there was probably something—way down—in Harold that tried to say: “It was an accident. She got caught

up in the moment. She didn’t understand what she was doing.” Now that too was out the window. It was unequivocal.

His fate sealed, Harold lay awake in bed. He thought about who this woman was, who it seemed she was turning out to be. It was amazing to him that you could meet someone and think you know them and then—wammo!—one day they reveal themselves to be something totally the opposite of what they had been presenting themselves to be up to that point. To see her, doing that, it brought out a whole other context to bear on Susan.

No matter how much he tried not to think about it, there was in some sense no escaping it. It would hit him at various moments—mowing the lawn (he then took out Susan’s prized cucumbers), watching television, in the shower—the kicker was when, trying to be the better person, he bought Susan a laptop that would be useful for her at work and home. She loved the gift, no problem there, and promised to pay him back that

night (he tried to be happy about that). The keyboard had on it a built-in mouse pad, the kind where you drag your finger across a square and it registers as the cursor. Harold watched as Susan perused the various technological features of the state-of-the-art wholly up-to-date model. He was happy that she was happy and perhaps even forgetting about what had been bugging him so. But then of course he caught sight of her fingers, at work on the mouse pad, moving swiftly in a manner all too familiar to him.

She asked him why he was so irritable. “I love the gift, Harry.” She said, kissing his ear.

“I know you do.” He said. He knew all too well.

That night, the inevitable. She was waiting for him in her finest nightwear. Lace and light perfume. Again, she yelled—more loudly than he could ever remember (the snooty women could not hear themselves bid)—“Oh Harold!” when it would have been just as, if not more, appropriate to yell “Oh Susan!”

He wanted to yell too—“Oh slut!” “Oh whore!”

“Oh cunt!”

No matter how much time he devoted to considering it, and he was devoting more and more to it each day, he still could not understand how she could do such a thing. What kind of a person would do such a thing.

The fact that she was apparently unaware, at least superficially, was the worst part. What kind of a person could do such a thing and pretend as though it was not even happening. That’s what got him the most. She was making a fool of him twice over. The act itself was betrayal enough, but then to betray the betrayal he couldn’t stomach it.

Finally, one night she had nearly shattered the mirrors and opened the electronic garage door with her “Oh Harold!”’s that should have been “Oh Susan!”’s. She was laughing with joy afterwards. But Harold knew what she was really laughing at. He could do nothing but glare at her. Her hands covering her face. Laughing at him.

He went to the kitchen. He had bought her a Japanese

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stainless steel butcher knife—from an infomercial one night up late trying to avoid her—she loved it and used it to slice up her prized cucumbers (what was left of them). He came back into the bedroom. Susan asked him if Bigboy was ready to go again. “Give me that hand,” he said in the same kind of wild, paroxysmal voice with which she had called his name mockingly so many times. All five perfect-for-hand-soap-commercial fingers had to go. As the blade dropped each time, Harold screamed in ecstasy, “Oh Susan!”

The snooty women next door heard it while in their kitchen playing bridge, and they wished they could have that kind of sex life.

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