

Jason M. Jones
Man with the Sliding Pins

I.

At the outset, it sort of tingles, then goes all ghostly, even though it's still there. Started with segments of digit: top half of a big toe, two-thirds of a ring finger. The opposite of phantom pain.

It proceeds with intensive anxiety, a fundamental surge of inevitable loss, separation, an unhinged joint.

There's little blood for such extreme lacerations, the platelets like worker bees cauterize the flow, and then a loose limb, pendulous and swinging from sinew, snaps, as a cartoon piano dangling from a window on a frayed rope.

It's like invisible pins unfastening, renegade angels extracting their tips with the claw of a microscopic rusty hammer.

I trust you understand my concern.

Showing up at the hospital in this condition, expecting them to reattach the tissue, might prove grounds for committal.

I can see it in the nurses' eyes.

They believe I've done this to myself.

II.

When I came in, after that first frightening incident, they asked me how it happened. How did this happen, they said, voices ripe with concern, and that first time, I told them the truth. I don't know I said, and they started inventing scenarios, posing them as questions.

Were you in an accident? they asked.

Were you attacked by something?

Hedge clippers? Gardening implements? Power tools?

They assumed some blunt trauma to the head, concussion, so I went along with that, realizing they'd diagnose me as crazy otherwise, and though I knew little of how a concussed person would act, I tried faking it, willing my pupils to widen and stay wide as they shone light into them, thinking that this is how I'd heard it's done, though I never bothered to confirm it later on.

I'd been in denial, which I knew more about than concussions, for nearly seventy-two hours and arrived with my left hand held together with duct tape. The nurses—in this case all women—looked at me with pity, and I liked that. My wife had left early on that week and I'd gone on something of a bender and this is why I imagined what was really happening wasn't.

You poor thing...!
Those puckered lips scrunched to the side, eyes all wide and wet.
I'd plunked a few of the fingers the tape wouldn't hold
down into a mason jar filled with vodka that I kept on the seat
beside me and once the doctor told me that he was helpless to
help, I stole a couple quick sips when he turned his back.

III.

Take ten fingers, ten toes, and count backward. Regressive,
degenerative. Nineteen, eighteen. A cuticle comes undone,
the hard shell like an insect's exoskeleton sliding off, molting,
reverse growth unraveling to shriveled pink flesh underneath.
Thin red lines spread across the irregular fissures of knuckle,
pruning like rotten fruit.

My wife had accused me of giving up.

You used to have so much promise, she'd said. But you
pissed it away and now you just sit there watching TV every night.

And she was right, of course.

Both about giving up and the TV.

She's like my conscience that way.

I knew it all inherently, but I couldn't put it into words
until she did it for me.

I accept defeat too easily.

I'm leaving, she'd said. And I sighed, accepting this as well.
I did nothing to research my condition, but I passed the medical
establishment's barrage of psychological tests and they released
me, chalking it up to unexplained phenomena, an anomaly.
They wanted to study me, but I declined out of modesty.

When the initial wounds healed, I named them
my nubbins and this was good. Despite the absence of one
opposable thumb, the larger portion of both index, subdivisions
of nearly every other wiggly, and whatever was left of my
ambition, my sense of humor was intact, and to avoid absolute
loneliness, I tried to think of names for each stump, based on
the characteristics that particular stump exhibited.

I could still type and use the telephone, which meant I
could still work, even though I had to move my hands differently
and that took a toll on my wrists. And then, walking without my
pinky toes, prosthetics were required to keep me upright: two
flesh-toned slivers of plastic the size of cashews were attached
like clip-on ties to the outer edges of both feet. Nevertheless, I
wobbled like a cat with clipped whiskers and reconciled myself to
using handicapped parking.

IV.

After a while, I broke down and looked up leprosy.

What I missed most without my wife was the option of sex, not that we'd been active on a regular basis, but the possibility existed.

Masturbating without fingers was difficult.

Nubbins Nick, James, Tyree, and Jackson Muldoon danced across the keyboard with their wholesome counterparts to access a cornucopia of useless information.

I had to make sure I wouldn't lose the option of future amorous endeavors if ever they arose.

I worried I'd feel a tingling, the unraveling, down there, more concerned I'd lose my manhood than become a stump-sporting street scamp sucking loose change from the sidewalk, flimsy cardboard sign bemoaning my plight propped before me.

Then I wondered how I'd maneuver a marker.

I couldn't hold a pen.

I didn't endorse checks anymore.

I discovered that leprosy's a rare disease few suffer in the modern age.

Likely this wasn't the problem.

Nevertheless, I decided to renounce masturbation.

V.

The missing sections were still there in spirit just as my wife was still there as a disembodied voice in my head. I lost my entire left foot when the company I worked for decided it was cheaper to replace us with high-functioning chimpanzees. They argued they could keep them in cages and feed them bananas and save on the overhead. There were no regulations governing primate employment, and I lost my left foot in the aftermath. My skin, like the seam of tight jeans on a fat man, split. Threads popped around the circumference of my ankle; the bone broke cleanly at the joint; and there she went.

You used to have two left feet, my wife whispered, and now you have none.

She was always a comedian.

I named the stump Esmeralda, and I'll admit she liked the boys but took a particular shine to Jackson Muldoon, who knew how to stroke her perfectly, a small circular outcropping of bone and gristle hitting her pleasure center. I hoped they'd have children, but my hopes were in vain and Esmeralda abandoned her post up to the knee.

Using a shovel as crutch, I lobbed both her and the foot toward a brown plastic garbage can outside near the garage, but I missed and watched them mock me from the ground, jittering

wildly like laughing lips: tee-hee! tee-hee!

I couldn't go back to the hospital, as much as I might have yearned for the nurses' sympathy. There were people out there who didn't feel whole unless they lopped off a limb, and they suspected I was one of them. So I took the shovel, sat in my yard, and dug a hole where I laid Esmeralda to rest, marking the ground above her with a heavy stone.

Poor Jackson Muldoon was devastated.

VI.

To think that the greatest concern most men my age have is their hair falling out! I've thinned somewhat, but no one seems to notice except me.

I have a bald spot, I said. A bald spot on your brain, my wife replied.

Now I have other concerns and respond to the most obvious first: I can't continue to walk around with the help of a shovel. Folks would find that weird. Instead, I set about building an artificial leg, tinkering in my basement workshop.

I soldered six coffee cans together, end-to-end, reinforced them with thin steel rods, and filled them with sand, lining the top rim with a soft latex adhesive so the metal wouldn't dig into my skin and chafe. I then bolted all this to a black steel-toed boot left over from my younger, wilder motorcycle driving days and slid the whole works over my stump.

I might limp like a pirate, but I don't care. It beats the shovel and the boot is made from quality leather.

Unlike fingers, legs are easy to replicate, and though I won't be running a marathon anytime soon, I'll certainly scare those neighborhood kids off my lawn.

Come spring, my azaleas will bloom.

As far as one-legged divorcees are concerned, I've attained momentary satisfaction.

VII.

One afternoon, not long after I buried Esmeralda, I discovered a flyer for a support group aimed at helping people who couldn't cope with separation. It didn't specify what they meant exactly, but I figured I'd fit the bill and went to a meeting and met a woman named Jane.

At first she looked like my wife and then she didn't, but I had to flip her over for that and still she felt the same inside. She enjoyed the offset thrust. We didn't talk much and when I was with her, I didn't stress out about the tingling, but my wife, like the most loquacious color man in all of sports, offered constant

commentary, narrating our nighttime trysts, and I had to end it.

The voices in my head, I explained to lift the burden from her.
She was a nice girl and I hoped she didn't take it to heart.
Soon enough, she'd find someone new in those sessions.

I was too embarrassed to admit my wife had planted the seed of doubt. Our therapy was supposed to preclude such neuroses, but it's hard to maintain a relationship with so much missing. People look for lovers to complete them, spiritually speaking, but I'd settle for some spare body parts, a willing toe transplant, and neither my wife nor Jane would ever understand the simplicity in this.

VIII.

Perhaps there should have been children for my wife and me. Perhaps I should have been more versatile, studied more, far and wide, been able to adapt to other positions, found myself a career. The old lament and the young mock or ignore their lamentations and now I lament. We speak of starting over, but I don't speak of starting over. I've come to accept this. I've learned to cope. Day by day, I'm shifting.

I expected to be an outcast. I expected derision, taunts, nicknames, cold stares, snickering and mocking. Instead, people say hello, real polite, and walk past, carry on.

I collect disability.

I took up masturbation again, and tried recounting my days of passion and glory and discovered I never had any.

There are worse things.

I bought a comfortable chair and an anatomy textbook and I sat and learned the names of the bones I'd shed and left behind, though with twenty six in one foot alone, I'd bore you listing them here.

The tingling had even gone away for a while, but a couple days back, I felt it in my right wrist while shaving. I dropped the razor and glanced down to see the nubbins all in a panic. Nick, James, and Tyree bobbed up and down, flailing about, but Jackson Muldoon was calm. He gave me a look that said, Here it comes, and with respect, I offered a gracious nod. Thanks for sticking around as long as you could, it said. He'd been my favorite, and I was glad he didn't make an ass of himself like the others.

If you have to go, you might as well make a dignified stand.
We all amount to nothing in the end.

Crippled and torn, however, I take comfort in the fact that there's still something I can do on the fly, something I do better than anyone else around.

I buried him next to Esmeralda.