

Finalist, Fiction

Hands

By Jon Wesick

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Soft Pack tried to look nonchalant with the beat-up Jansport backpack hanging from one shoulder. But carrying \$50,000 of Heavy G's money was enough to make anyone's palms sweat. If anything happened to it he held you accountable, whether it was your fault or not. There were guys who had to pimp their sisters after getting busted, because they lost Heavy G's property. The way G figured they deserved it for being stupid enough to get caught.

But taking risks was the only way to advance in the organization, and Soft Pack didn't want to be selling rocks on a street corner all his life. The exchange with the Latin went off without a hitch. Soft Pack set out on foot from the Rosemont with four kilos of product in the backpack, cut through Idlewood to avoid the Brickstone Shamrock's territory, and had just turned down thirty-third, when a tan Buick sedan pulled in front of him. The car's wheels jumped the curb so its front end blocked his path.

"Mr. Washington." A man in sunglasses and a tan sports coat got out the driver's side and rested his forearms on the car's roof. "What do you have in the bag?"

Heavy G. was supposed to have paid Agent Cantwell of the DEA off, so why was this greedy son of a bitch trying to shake Soft Pack down? If the detective took a cut of the backpack's contents, how would Soft Pack explain to Heavy G? The nine-millimeter pistol in Soft Pack's waistband called his attention like an embarrassing itch at a wedding. If he could off Agent Cantwell he'd earn a hundred street-cred points and be well on his way to becoming Heavy G's lieutenant. Soft Pack reached for it.

"You lose, punk!" The sound of a gunshot ricocheted from the speaker, the cartoon drug dealer fell to his knees, and the computer screen went black, informing Nicky Sedgewick that his game character, Soft Pack, was dead and the game over.

"Damn!" Nicky rubbed his sore wrist. He hadn't seen Cantwell's partner approach from behind.

The computer displayed a score of 650. At this rate he'd never break 1000 in King of the Hood. Nicky looked at his watch. He had time for on more game before bed.

Next morning Nicky arrived at the office in time for the weekly status meeting. As usual in software development they were behind schedule, but they'd never make up time listening to the project lead flap his jaws. Nicky tapped his feet and fiddled with his pen, If only there were some way to make a living without all this bullshit, something

with fewer hours, something more exciting! He looked around the room. Eventually his eyes settled on Jenna Helprin, the contractor who'd been brought in to write the help files. They'd gone out a few times, but Nicky couldn't stand her bratty daughter. Still Nicky admired Jenna's sleek body and the graceful curve of her breast. Love seemed less complicated, when he was younger. When the meeting broke up, he dashed to his cubicle, reached for the mouse to click his computer's login prompt, and felt a dull ache in his forearm. Nicky worked through lunch. Absorbed as he was in creating business rules for the airline reservation system, he ignored the throbbing pain in his wrists until 3:00. By then his hands felt leaden. Something wasn't right. He phoned Dr. Jordan and made an appointment.

Thus Nicky joined the silent pandemic of carpal tunnel syndrome sufferers. It was too soon for surgery. After a series of painful electrical tests the doctor gave Nicky a prescription for some pills that upset his stomach and abandoned him to his fate. Nicky developed new symptoms, fingers tingling with a thousand tiny electric shocks from damaged nerves. Often when waking from a deep sleep the numbness made his hands feel like they weren't even there. In the morning despite wearing soft splints to bed his wrists ached as if his tendons had been mashed with a wooden mallet. Unable to use the keyboard for more than a few minutes, Nicky took a leave of absence from work. He missed programming but he missed computer games even more. It seemed he'd never break 1000 on King of the Hood.

Nicky limited home computer use to a daily check of his e-mail. One morning after drinking a mug of chamomile tea and watching the rainbows of sunlight a prism formed on the kitchen wall, he strapped on the medieval wrist splints and powered up his computer. The King of the Hood icon drew his attention like a g-string worn with tight low-rider jeans. What harm would a little look do? Nicky clicked the automatic pistol on his desktop and the main menu appeared. Something was wrong! The computer displayed scores in the 1200s but Nicky had never broken 700.

It was probably some glitch. Nicky shut down the game and checked his e-mail. His inbox contained the usual ads for male enhancement, a note on his health insurance, and a political rant from Art Carlisle, who wanted everyone to write their legislators to stop Medicaid cuts. Art shook his head. No matter how much money you throw at poverty it never seems to get better. He scrolled down. One message seemed out of place.

Dude,

Thanks for registering with Bitchin' Vixens Online. Our website offers the finest hos, so log in now. Your ID is DADDY35P and your password is *LOLITA29.

Doctor Herb

Nicky logged into the website where girls, their blank features not yet molded by maturity, posed with open legs. Surely, they couldn't be over eighteen. Their breasts were

no bigger than apricots. Nicky's membership had to be some kind of mistake, either that or the work of a hacker. He needed to sort this out, but his fingers began to tingle. He shut down the computer. Things couldn't get any worse with it turned off.

That afternoon Nicky found a white 8 ½ by 11 inch envelope labeled Do Not Fold in the mail. The return address bore the red, white, and blue elephant logo of the Republican Party. Nicky tore off the corrugated tabs. Inside was a color portrait of Mitt Romney wearing the smirk Nicky had wanted to slap off his face for the past two years.

Dear Nicky,

Just a brief note of thanks for your recent contribution to the Republican National Committee. With the help of patriotic Americans like you we can continue his efforts to fight terror, reign in activist judges, pass common-sense environmental legislation, and repeal the death tax.

Best wishes,
Reince Priebus
Chairman, RNC

It had to be one of Art's jokes. Nicky went inside and sorted through the mail, tossing the Bush picture along with the ads into the trash. He opened the bank statement and began ordering the returned checks prior to balancing his checkbook. He stopped at number 2889, \$200 made out to the Republican National Committee. He looked at the bottom right corner. There scribbled in blue ink was his signature.

The check wasn't the only strange thing in Nicky's bank statement. There were several deposits from WSA Properties, an outfit Nicky had never heard of. The amounts varied, but the total came to several thousand dollars. Nicky glanced back and forth between the balance printed in sans serif numerals and the customer inquiry number. It sure would be nice to have some money coming in especially since the Workers Comp people were balking about paying his claim. He set the statement down. Best not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

That evening the phone rang.

"Mano, it's Deke." The caller's voice sounded like a dagger being sharpened on a whetstone. "A new campaign came down from Central. Topaz wants everyone to give it Code Blue priority."

"I'm sorry," Nicky said. "You have the wrong number."

The line went dead. Nicky stared at the receiver. Mano, that was Spanish for brother. Wasn't it? Nicky hung up and went to bed.

That night tapping sound woke him. Nicky sat up in bed, blinked to focus his eyes, and looked at the alarm clock – 3:00 a.m. The clacking sounded like a computer keyboard. A burglar? Careful not to make any noise Nicky tiptoed out the door. The

ghostly light of a computer monitor illuminated the hall from the entrance to his home office. Nicky inched closer, paused by the doorway, and took several deep breaths.

“Ha!” He jumped into the room and scrambled for the light switch. But something was wrong. His forearms ended at nubs that couldn’t turn on the light. Two hands, separate from his body, typed at the keyboard.

When Nicky woke in his bed both forearms felt leaden and achy. He probed his wrist with a finger to search for a seam but found no indication his hand had ever left his body. Must have been a nightmare. Nicky got up and wrapped icepacks around his wrists to deaden the pain. He felt too tired for his appointment at 9:00, but at least his physical therapist was cute. Denise was blonde, in her twenties, and had an overbite that gave her a sexy lisp. Nicky checked in and wandered into a large room equipped with weight machines and a dozen therapy tables. A therapist had one of the patients bending over a large red ball. Denise was finishing up with her 8:00 client. Gus had Nicky put his hands in a box the size of a dishwasher and rub his hands in warm circulating sawdust. Nicky did his hand stretches and let his mind wander.

“So, how are your hands, today?”

“What?” Nicky had trouble hearing Denise over the machine’s vacuum-cleaner sound.

“How are your hands?” Denise turned off the machine. As always she wore khaki shorts that highlighted her athletic legs. Her freckled skin glowed with a natural, summer-camp sexuality.

“A bit sore,” Nicky said.

Denise jotted a note in Nicky’s chart and walked him through a new set of exercises. After a half hour she had him climb onto a therapy table, while she dipped her hands into a jar of massage gel.

“I had a great weekend.” Denise worked her lubricated thumbs into Nicky’s aching tendons. “Jerry and I went to Phoenix.”

Nicky closed his eyes and relaxed into her touch. He imagined shorts hiking up her thighs to reveal the pale blue crescent moons of her panties. Occasionally, he felt a soft breast brush his shoulder.

“Keep you hands to yourself!” Denise’s slap knocked Nicky’s head to the side.

“But I...”

“If you think I’m some kind of massage parlor hooker, then you can just find another therapist!” Denise stalked out of the room.

While therapists and patients stared, Nicky gathered his things and ran for the parking lot. A message was waiting for him on his answering machine at home.

“Mano, you’re in the shit now, man. Nobody shafts Topaz and gets away with it.”

Three days later the FBI arrived. They displayed their customary lack of manners by pounding on the door at 5:00 a.m. Bleary-eyed and in his underwear, Nicky answered.

“Daniel Sedgewick, we have a warrant to search these premises.” One of a half-dozen identical FBI agents handed him a typed document.

The other five agents all clean-shaven, Caucasian, and wearing blue nylon jackets with gold FBI lettering shoved past and fanned out into the house.

“Perhaps you’d better sit on the living room couch,” Nicky’s minder said.

“Do you mind if I put on some pants? They’re on the chair in the bedroom.”

One of the agents brought Nicky’s jeans.

“What’s this all about?” Nicky pulled on his pants and zipped up under the agent’s watchful eyes.

“It’s in the warrant.”

Nicky stared at the document but couldn’t decipher the legalese. It must be some kind of mistake. He sat on the couch and watched agents carrying sealed evidence boxes out the front door. The ice pick of need stabbed his bladder. When he was about to ask to use the bathroom, someone yelled, “Got it!” from the office. Moments later an agent carried Nicky’s computer from the back.

“Hey!” Nicky stood. “You can’t take that!”

The minder placed a restraining hand on Nicky’s shoulder. “Daniel Sedgewick, you’re under arrest for violations of the Narcotics Control Act and the CAN SPAM Act of 2003.” He began reading Nicky his rights.

“What are you talking about?” Nicky asked.

The agent raised his voice to drown out the question. Once finished with the formalities he handcuffed Nicky’s hands behind his back and escorted him toward a beige unmarked car in the driveway. Clutching her bathrobe at her chest, nosy Mrs. Green stood next to Horace Smith, the gay wrestling coach, to gawk at Nicky’s downfall. Nicky turned away from his neighbors’ stares. Being arrested was bad enough, but did he have to be humiliated too? The FBI agents seemed pretty pleased with themselves. Jerks! They put Nicky in the backseat and got in front.

“Suspect in custody,” the agent in the passenger seat said into the radio. “Should be at the detention center in forty-five minutes.”

The driver shifted into gear, turned onto Encinitas Boulevard, and turned left on the Coast Highway.

“That was pretty clever selling crack on the Internet,” the agent on the right said. “Never would have caught you, if you hadn’t been sending spam too.”

Nicky’s weight pressed the handcuffs’ steel into the hands cinched behind his back. His fingers went numb, and soon his hands felt like they were no longer attached. He leaned forward to get the blood flowing.

Something brushed his leg. Nicky looked down and saw his left hand crawling crab-like on the seat. The right joined its partner and made for the gap in the wire mesh that separated the back seat from the front. Nicky wiggled his arms, and the handcuffs

slipped off. He reached for his detached hands, but his arms ended only in nubs that were no good for grabbing.

Having escaped confinement the wayward hands fell on the driver and wrapped their fingers around his throat.

“What the?” The driver let go of the steering wheel to pry his attackers loose.

The car swerved. The other agent grabbed for the wheel, but he was too late. Nicky’s face smacked into the wire mesh barrier, as the car rammed a telephone pole. His bruised neurons replayed Abbot and Costello’s “Who’s on First” skit in its entirety. He wished they’d wrap it up. It wasn’t that funny. A blaring horn brought his awareness back to the crashed car. His face hurt, and liquid sprayed from his nostrils when he exhaled. Two gunshots sounded. Nicky looked up at the FBI agents’ bodies slumped in their seats. His wayward hands worked the door open and scrambled down the sidewalk past yoga studios and Italian restaurants toward freedom.

The police apprehended Nicky’s hands trying to slip into Mexico at the San Ysidro border. Their trial lasted eight days. Although the defense attorney argued the pistol discharged in the crash, Nicky’s fingerprints on the grip left no doubt as to who was at fault. It only took the jury two hours to find the hands guilty of homicide. After the murdered agents families testified at the sentencing hearing, Nicky spoke as a character witness.

“In the thirty-five years I’ve know my hands, they’ve always been responsible and law-abiding. They’ve stayed up with me to point at equations in textbooks during late-night study sessions, worked twelve-hour days, written checks to the Red Cross, and even bathed injured seabirds during the Seward oil spill. Medical problems and the influence of violent video games caused their recent behavior. If anyone’s responsible for the deaths of agents Baldrige and Cooper, it’s those profiteers at Gansta Software. Please, have mercy on my hands.” Nicky wiped his damp eyes on his sleeve. “I don’t know what I’ll do without them.”

After hearing all the testimony Judge Wopner arranged his black robe and sat up straight as if preparing for the TV camera. He began by addressing Nicky. “Young man, I have a great deal of sympathy for your plight, but mandatory sentencing guidelines have tied my hands.” He turned to where Nicky’s hands rested atop the defendants’ table in their orange gloves. “For the murder of agent’s Ray Baldrige and Ray Cooper I sentence you to death by lethal injection.”

Onlookers gasped. As reporters left to file their stories, Nicky hung his head. Oh why couldn’t his left hand have turned state’s evidence and testified it didn’t know what the right was doing? Now he’d lose both of them. Nicky stood and moved toward the defendants’ table, but the marshal was already leading his hands away.

On a chilly October night two years later after the appeals had run out Nicky joined a vigil. Since he could not hold a placard, he could only register his protest by his

presence among the church and Amnesty International members outside the concertina wire at San Quentin. At 1:15 word came down that the death sentence had been carried out.

The furnishings in the room Nicky shared with a recovering alcoholic at the homeless shelter were spare, just two cots and a wooden cross on the wall. The transistor radio spouted a caustic wind of Rush Limbaugh's invective. If no one came to change the channel soon, Nicky would get down on the floor and pull the power cord with his teeth.

Father Dave entered and turned the radio off. "You've got a letter, Nicky. Shall I open it for you?"

Nicky nodded.

Father Dave tore open the envelope and fished his glasses from his shirt pocket. "It's from Worker's Comp. They say your claim has been denied."

END