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FICTION | FALL 2012
**Bird in the Hand**
**by Elisabeth McKetta and Yo-El Ju**

Just think about the birds, I told myself. Name as many as you love: falcon, blue jay, cardinal. Think of flight. No, not flight. Just birds. Think only of birds. This was how I tried to control my thoughts on the emergency ride to the hospital the morning the Hand was born. Think of birds, I repeated silently, do not think of hands—though swallowing hurt and made me think of hands, not birds.

It started in the early morning, when the robins were beginning to sing and the sun had just risen: I was asleep, and suddenly a hand came at my throat. *Ouch*! I tried to shout, but the sound was lost. I fought the hand’s grip but the strength of it had me thrashing epileptically around the bed.

“What are you *doing,* Gloria?” my husband Bruce demanded in his sleep. A few seconds later, Bruce’s parrot Pete demanded, “What are you *doing*?” in the same lackadaisical and impatient tone.

I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t breathe. I thought, this is it. I am dying, and my husband and his stupid pet bird are just going to sleep on through it.

Then I saw something that changed everything—the hand was wearing my wedding ring. I would recognize it anywhere, a sprinkle of tiny diamonds across a nickel band that a family friend had welded from a quarter.

“Bruce!” I gasped.

I gave the hand one final jerk away from my throat and I felt a sudden pain on my left shoulder. It made no sense, as I am right-handed and was fighting the stranger’s grip with my right hand.

At that point Bruce finally sat up, scowling as he searched the bedside table for his glasses. He peered owl-like at me for a long silent moment and then muttered, “I think you just pulled your arm out of its socket.”

After a moment, Pete said the exact same thing.

 \*

Bruce called 911; an ambulance came; the Hand kept trying, each time more viciously, to close its fingers around my neck. It stopped only after a paramedic tied it into a bind and strapped it tight to my left side. For it was my hand that was so troublesome— my hand that had awakened me—my very own hand that tried to strangle me that morning.

We arrived in a blur at the emergency room. It was metallic, machined, starched. Somebody untied the Hand and it went on a rampage, grabbing for everything within reach. Nurses in cartoon-print scrubs kept saying, “*Relax*!” and eventually one nurse wrestled down the Hand, inserted an IV, and injected a clear liquid.

The last thing I remember was Bruce’s face floating in front of me, and how he looked molted, unfamiliar; I felt surprised by the thinness of his hair, the shininess of a growing bald spot. *I should apply some powder to it*, I thought foolishly, before the clear liquid dragged me into a sleep that was thick as death.

Some hours later—or was it weeks, or seconds? — I jolted awake to a banging noise so loud and close that it seemed to be coming from inside me. I found myself lying flat in a round coffin, with a birdcage surrounding my head. I looked down and saw the Hand lying quelled by a spongy restraint at my side.

“Do not move!” a voice boomed through the headphones I realized I was wearing. The voice continued: “You are in an MRI and if you move you have to do it again!”

I closed my eyes.

Minutes later—or was it hours, or days? —I woke again, this time to human-noises.

I was in a bed, in a hospital room, and next to me stood a wide-bosomed doctor who faced dozens of student-doctors, all wearing white coats and holding notepads. The doctor was gesturing toward me and I heard her say, “For a stroke to happen in this location is extremely rare, especially as the only symptom seems to be an alien hand.”

“What?” I blurted.

The student doctors looked up all at once, and the teacher-doctor spun around. Even from the front, she seemed indistinct, doughy.

“Oh, hello there, Mrs...” she squealed, pulled out a deck of index cards attached by a ring. “Mrs. Stemple! So glad to see you are awake! It is so hard to sleep in the hospital, isn’t it? We were just talking about you, you know, just ‘doctor talk,’ nothing to worry about.”

All of the student-doctors flapped their heads, nodding in agreement.

She went on: “It looks like you had a stroke. A teeny-tiny one, right here!” She jabbed my right temple with great enthusiasm. “Except deep inside your skull, in the corpus callosum. Do you not know what that is? It’s the bundle of cables that connects the two halves of your brain. The thing is, it’s exceedingly rare to have such a focal lesion there, and such an unusual manifestation.”

“What?”

She sighed without answering, and instead plopped on the side of the bed as if we were boarding school friends. She asked me to close and open my eyes, stick out my tongue, smile, and remember three objects. I did these tasks to everyone’s apparent satisfaction.

Then she asked, “What is your name?”

“I thought you already knew my name?”
“I need to hear you say it.”

“Gloria Stemple.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“The hospital. City Memorial.”

“Great!” she squeaked, and the others nodded in agreement. “Do you know today's date?”
“September 9th, 2010. No, it must be the next day. September 10th. It’s Friday.”

Ludicrously, many of the students wrote this down.

“All-righty!” the teacher-doctor said to her scribbling coven. “Patient is oriented times three.”

I was losing interest, but she kept going. “Whose hand is this?” she asked as she untied the little hospital leash and lifted the Hand.

I chose my words carefully. “It’s a hand. With my wedding ring.”

“No! No!” She squalled wildly. “This is *your* hand.” She shook it violently in my face, and I felt shocks of pain in my left shoulder. “Your stroke disconnected your arm from your body. Well not literally. It disconnected the connections that the brain has...” she stubbed her finger into my head again, “with the hand. The stroke cut off just a small part of the cables, up here, so that you have some control over your arm. Maybe you can feel it too, I don’t know?”

Suddenly, a grinding pain made me grit my teeth and look down. She had taken out a small hammer and was mashing it against the nail of the hand. “See, it’s your hand! I’ll do it again while you watch.”

“Don’t!” My right hand instinctively reached to cover the throbbing left hand.

Satisfied, the teacher-doctor turned back to the group. “So that’s why it’s called ‘alien hand.’ The patient doesn’t recognize it as his,” she glanced at me, “or her, hand.”

She turned back to me. “We’ll leave you alone now, but I’m sure many of the other doctors and students will be excited to drop by and see your ‘alien hand’ later!” She giggled.

*Do I have a choice*? I wanted to ask, but didn’t. I felt sick at my own helplessness. In the hospital, and at home, it seemed that everybody walked and talked over me. Even the lowliest of the low—even the scribbling student doctors. Even Pete the parrot.

 \*

I spent eight nights in the neurological wing, being examined. I had a roommate who was mute all day for the doctors and her family, then spent all night wailing, “Halahala halahalahala SHIT halahala, halahalahala, SHIT!”

I don’t think she knew I was even there. I felt too embarrassed to tell her family about her outbursts. Her family members were all tiny, like her: white haired and wispy. My first night in the hospital Bruce stayed with me until dinner and then left in a hurry. He said, “You know how nervous hospitals make me, and somebody had better feed Pete.”

I spent the night awake playing with the bed motors. I finished the book next to me, one of Bruce’s. He had brought it in the ambulance in case there was much time spent waiting at the hospital. *Birds of the Yucatan* was a relic from over a decade ago—we bought it thinking we’d go to Mexico for our honeymoon but in the end we stayed home so that Bruce could cram for his optometry exam. To cheer me up, Bruce brought home an African Grey parrot, Pete, instead.

The book’s pictures were in black and white, the text sparse and mainly in italicized Latin. Still, I read it cover to cover.

That night lasted forever, with footsteps up and down the hall, squeaky doors, and my roommate’s wailing. Once I slept briefly and dreamt of the birds from the book, grotesquely thrashing their wings against a window, broken feathers spraying. I woke in a cold sweat, dazed, before hearing my roommate’s mournful cries and remembering where I was.

I relayed my roommate’s nighttime song to the doctor that came in the next morning. “Yeah, she has aphasia from a stroke. It’s pretty common for people like that to swear.” He shrugged as if to say, *no biggie*.

I was beginning to see I was among seriously neurologically damaged people. It was terrifying to think I fit right in. I realized where I stood in the mental health pecking order when my roommate got to go home before me.

Finally they discharged me with a hand sling, an expensive invoice that my insurance thankfully covered, and a few instructions to give my hand some exercise and attention. Just like a dog, or a toddler.

 \*

Pete was waiting in his cage for me when I got home. I had to take a taxicab because Bruce was seeing a patient and couldn’t get out early. Bruce came home a few minutes later while I was unpacking my bag.

He had replaced his old glasses with a pair of expensive thin lenses (iThinsoclear TM) that he sold through his office and used to think were ludicrously overpriced. He dropped his keys in the bowl, and next to them he set a book I had never seen before: *Cultivating your own BRAND of Celebrity!* He patted me in an aunt-like way on my safe right hand and then sat in an armchair by the window with his book. This wasn’t unusual. We spent most evenings reading the books I got for free from the bookstore where I worked.

But this night, I felt too sad to read. I felt annoyed that Bruce was reading instead of trying to ask questions about the Hand. I had no answers but I at least wanted him to ask.

So, instead, I harassed him. “What is it you’re reading, Bruce?”

He covered the book up with his hand. “Uhhh, this is just something for work.”

“Cultivating your own BRAND of Celebrity? How would that help you at work?”

Bruce sniffed. “Why did you ask if you already knew the answer? The thing is, I bought this book because I thought my work image needed a face lift – uhhh, an update, you know? I am going to take the iThinsoclear...” (he touched the side of his glasses) “...line to the next level.”

“Right. Good plan. Well, keep me posted,” I said, hearing the barb in my voice. I left the room and turned on some classical music so I wouldn’t have to hear Pete parroting back fragments about face lifts and celebrity.

I still had the Hand tied down in a bind to its side, and as I unpacked toiletries in the bathroom, the Hand began to stir. “No!” I told it sharply. “You stay.” It stirred again, rising erect, and I had a flash of sympathy for men and their uncontrollable parts. Then it began to thrash and my throat tingled. All of a sudden the Hand pulled free, leaving its little bind broken on the bathmat. It shot across the bathroom counter and grabbed a toothbrush. But instead of doing anything violent, the Hand began tapping the toothbrush against the mirror in a rhythmic, slow beat. I had seen kids in the bookstore do this sort of thing, treating the whole wooden world as their xylophone.

“What are you doing?” Bruce hollered from the living room.

“Come here and look!” I called back.

He peered hesitantly into the bathroom. “Weird,” he said, giving a little sniff and returning to his book and his chair. I took the toothbrush away from the Hand, gave it a rinse, and shoved the Hand into my jeans pocket.

Later that night I was putting the house to bed and preparing to feed Pete, when Pete looked straight at me and said, “She’s lost it! ... Lost ... it...”

I dropped the bird seed bag and charged into the steamy bathroom. “Bruce!” I yelled into the shower noise. “What have you been saying about me to Pete?”

“Nothing. Shut the door, Gloria, it’s freezing!”

I held the door open wider so that he could hear Pete’s soliloquy: “She’s lost it ... lost it ... cuckoo...”

“Gloria, you’ve gone mad! Shut the door. I don’t gossip about you to Pete.”

Seconds later, I heard the avian echo from the living room: “Gloria, you’ve gone mad! Shut the door. Shut the door ... gossip ...”

I shut the door. The Hand wrenched out of its pocket and began knocking fiercely on it, a long series of crazy knocks on different parts of the door.

“No!” I told it, grabbing it and putting it back into the pocket, just as Bruce was starting to complain. I took the Hand and myself to bed before we could cause any more disturbances, and I made sure to double-knot the Hand into its bind before turning out the light.

 \*

Having an alien hand brought a new sense of age and disability with it. I was forty-six; my body had always done what I asked.

Simple things now seemed nearly impossible. In particular, I had come to dread going to the toilet. What might the Hand do? Each time I concentrated on my right hand through the process of pulling off toilet paper, wiping, and holding down the flush handle. Meanwhile, the Hand would do impish things such as pull on my ear or upset a basket of soap seashells. Even reading became impossible, after the Hand stealthily de-paged my Virginia Woolf novel, leaving only the dedication and biography. At least once a day, I gave myself into the relief of a big cry, hiding in the hall closet in case Pete caught on and decided to mock me.

Once, when I had been home about a week, we tried to have friends over and Pete insulted me the entire time. When I spilled a tray of olive dip because the Hand picked a fight with my right hand, Pete went into a gleeful chorus: “Clumsy! Clumsy! She’s lost it ... Gloria, you’ve gone mad ... shut the door, shut the door ... I don’t gossip ... it’s freezing!” Finally one of the guests shut him up by draping a coat over his cage.

Furthermore, I resigned from my job at the small bookstore where I worked. I didn’t want to, but they were a small business and I knew they could not afford the liability of an employee whose hand might grope a customer or rip out pages from the fresh hardcover books.

“Why don’t you look for a job,” Bruce reasoned, “where you can work from home and don’t have to see anybody? Or you could be a telemarketer, like at a call center. That way nobody would be bothered by your hand.”

Here is how I entertained myself during those weeks when I was at home, supposedly looking for a job: I went for long walks by myself. I tried, and failed, to read. I rode the bus to the end of the line and back. It was good discipline having the Hand around people and willing it to behave. I always gave it something to chew on, usually a balled-up sock.

For I had given up on the bind. Any bind that my right hand was able to tie, the Hand was able to fight off. And it seemed better behaved, anyhow, when it was free. I noticed the Hand often gravitated toward things that made noise. One day, a few weeks into my new housebound life, I decided to just watch the hand, and wait, to see what might happen.

It grabbed my toothbrush, as it often did, as well as an envelope of microwave popcorn. First it tapped the toothbrush rhythmically on the bathroom counter, then it dropped the toothbrush in the toilet and began shaking the popcorn like a maraca: shake, shake ... shake, shake. There was a beat to it.

The Hand, it was clear, was making music.

It occurred to me for the first time that this hand was connected to my right brain, my creative brain, and perhaps it was looking for some sort of artistic outlet.

By the time Bruce slipped home from work, I had made the Hand a guitar out of two rubber bands and an empty oatmeal tin, as well as a xylophone out of popsicle sticks taped to the kitchen counter. The Hand was happily plunking away on its new instruments.

Bruce watched me warily as he dropped his keys and wallet in the bowl next to the door. “So this is what our government pays people on medical leave to do?”

Then he went back to reading *Cultivating Your Own BRAND of Celebrity*! as he now did every day. He had started wearing a beret and plaid vests, in addition to the expensive new glasses. I followed him over to his chair. He peered up at me. “Yes?”

“My question, Bruce, is exactly what BRAND of celebrity you are trying to cultivate? What is going on with you and that book? What changed while I was in the hospital?”

“Gloria ... it’s complicated,” he said, heaving a faux sigh. “The book’s point is that people like us should cultivate the image they want to project. Like my new glasses—that’s part of my image, see. So you feel stuck with your hand, but you can help yourself if you just try to remake yourself. Here, listen to this advice Herbert Marker—that’s the author—gives: ‘Pick three of your favorite celebrities and choose one external gesture from each to make your own composite power figure.’ Now doesn’t that make sense? Oui?”

*Oui?!* None of this made sense to me. For Bruce’s three celebrities, he had chosen a pastor with the habit of steepling his fingers; an Irish golf player who wore plaid vests as his trademark, and a former, now dead, president of France who had more young girlfriends than he could count.

Bruce left his book on the side table and went to bed early, so that he could wake at six and do a routine of pushups and squats before going to work—something he learned from the Irish golfer. So I was left awake by myself to think things over and do my physical therapy for the rogue Hand—which, I thought with amusement, was turning out to be a musician of its very own BRAND.

 \*

The next morning, I took the bus to the toy store and bought the Hand a rattle, a squeaky rubber giraffe, and a pink set of castanets. Armed with these things, I took myself to the Wild Bird Sanctuary, where I sipped a Styrofoam cup of hot Lipton broth on a park bench and watched a flurry of green and yellow songbirds eating birdseed. I looked at the falcons, too, and I watched a fierce kestrel eating what looked like a mouse for breakfast.

The kestrel was clearly the bully. I watched him swarm around the smaller birds, pecking at their heads and tails. He reminded me of Pete.

At one point a tiny bird, a little green parakeet, made a flying dash for the kestrel. To my astonishment the kestrel saw the predator in the little bird and it flew away, squawking. And only came back to its top-dog perch once it remembered its size, I suppose. By that time the parakeet had flown off and hidden itself in an imported palm tree. All of the other parakeets were twittering around looking very excited.

Then the Hand began doing something strange—sort of flapping in the air, twisting and undulating as it were trying to flamenco dance.

“Hey look,” said an employee sitting on the bench for his lunch break. His conductor hat was pulled low over his eyes and I could not see his face. “This happens to people all the time. They come here and start wishing they could fly.”

*That’s it!* I gathered the Hand’s toys and ran back to the bus stop. His words gave me an idea. *I think the Hand thinks it’s a bird.* That would explain the flying, the musicality.

“Hand, what is your name?” I asked aloud while we waited for the bus. In response the Hand squeaked the giraffe to the meter of “‘Twas the Night Before Christmas.”

The bus dropped me down the road from an ice cream shop, known for its huge collection of children’s stuffed animals. I bought a strawberry cone so I wouldn’t look suspicious and ate it facing the shelves containing the stuffed birds. “Well?” I whispered to the Hand. “Here we are. What kind of bird do you think you are?”

The Hand was quiescent—waiting, thinking—and then impulsively it grabbed a brown bird with a long, pointed beak: a starling.

 \*

There was a really good-looking man, younger than me, who was cleaning out the eagles’ section at the Wild Bird Sanctuary when Starling and I arrived there for our bird watching the following day. I watched him for a moment, and felt a little thrill when he finished his job and came to rest on the bench next to me. He had a falcon on his shoulder. The bird kept pecking at the brim of his conductor hat, until finally he took the hat off. I recognized his hat.

He met my eyes, nodded, and focused on the bird. “Don’t go wandering, Jess. This is your spot.” Then he spoke aloud, as if to himself. “The falcons are all named Jess. It gets confusing.” And then, he recognized me. “You! You’re the one with the hand that wanted to fly! I remember you. How are you?”

He brought the falcon over to me on his hand, like a gift.

“Today I’m great,” I said, pushing the three toys deeper into the pocket where Starling sat. I did feel great. I was telling the truth.

“That’s great to hear. Most people answer that question without nearly so much enthusiasm. So what brings you—oh, hey, what are you doing there?”

Before I looked down, I knew. *I knew!*

Starling had lost her giraffe and in the excitement of meeting a stranger, I had not noticed.

And now Starling was spidering up the man’s leg, grabbing and twisting the fabric of his khaki pants, dangerously close to his groin. I tried to stand, to pull away, but the Hand held fast. I wished I had feathered wings to hide my head in.

I brought my right hand to pry each finger individually. I struggled, hunched over his legs, while Jess the falcon watched predatorily. I met her eye and felt her disapproval.

Suddenly Starling let go and began flying in the direction of the falcon. “Get Jess away,” I cried, “before she grabs it!”

The man looked immeasurably confused.

“She as in ...?”

I stood up and walked ten feet away. “Stay there,” I commanded him.

“Ohh-kay,” he said with uncertainty. Jess returned to preening herself. “What just happened?”

I reached down and found a pinecone and handed it to the Hand. The Hand, to my relief, relaxed.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I—I had a stroke and now my hand does strange things. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ... anything.” I was looking down, flushed. But when I looked up at him, he looked back with clear eyes.

“You had a stroke?”

“Yes.”

“And now your hand does crazy stuff?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t grab... I don’t really touch... I’m sorry. It’s called Alien Hand Syndrome. I know how crazy that sounds. Sorry.”

He absorbed this for a long moment, then his face broke out in a smile and he started laughing, laughing so gleefully that he had tears in his eyes. I saw a flash of how I must have looked, grappling with a handsome bird handler’s crotch on a park bench. I burst out laughing too.

“So,” he said, conversationally, once we calmed. “What other trouble has your rogue hand gotten you into?”

“None this embarrassing.”

“Any idiot can face a crisis.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s by Chekov. He said, ‘Any idiot can face a crisis. It is the day-to-day living that wears you out.’ I’m Mitch, by the way.”

“Hi, Mitch. I’m Gloria. I love Chekov but have never come across that quote.”

Then I remembered my bird manners. I nodded at the falcon and pointed to the Hand. “Jess, this is Starling.”

We said goodbye as soon as we said hello. Mitch had to go back to work. “Stop by again,” he said, grinning. “I want to hear more of the adventures of Starling.”

 \*

When I got home, I repeated the Chekov quote aloud into the empty air of the apartment. It reeked of unemployment.

“Cookie!” said Pete. “Day to day ... idiot ... wears you out. Crisis! Crisis!”

Hearing it come from Pete’s beak, it occurred to me that Chekov is right—it is the living that wears, the chores, the tiresome marriage, Pete’s old jokes. Not the Hand. Starling I was learning to live with, her challenges were giving me a strange new courage. But in the rest of my life, I felt like I was dropping feathers in every corner—the job, gone; the marriage, going. My sense of control over my life, long gone.

I went over to the bird cage. “Hi Pete.” I said.

“Pretty Pete! Huhhlo! Wears you down wears you down!”

Pete was beautiful. He preened his glossy gray feathers and hopped out onto the higher platform in the cage, tittering all the while. I poured a handful of his seedy bird mixture and he balked. “Cookie! Cookie!”

“Sorry Pete, but this is your dinner. You are a bird and this is what birds eat. No cookies tonight.”

Pete stared, reptile-eyed at me. He pecked twice violently at the seeds, then suddenly flew out of the cage, up to my shoulder, and bit my ear. “Wears you down. Idiot! Idiot! *Je ne sais quoi?* Idiot wears you down! Cookie! Uhh Pretty Pete!” He took off around the room, barely missing the ceiling fan. His wings were clipped so I knew he couldn’t go far.

“Pete, you are insane! Go back to your cage. Pete!”

“Cookie! Cookie! Cookie! Wears you down. Uhh Pretty Pete! COOKIE!”

Then something happened that I will never forget, no matter how hard I try. Pete landed within Starling’s reach, and Starling grabbed Pete around the neck. Pete throbbed, sensing danger. My right hand worked hard, trying to pry Starling’s fingers off the bird’s neck, but Starling’s grip was too fierce.

“Every day wears you down.” My voice. Starling squeezed harder.

“Pretty Pete!” Bruce’s voice, but choked. Pete was thrashing and shaking off feathers that surrounded him in an aura like smoke.

*Crack.* Suddenly, it was silent.

Starling dropped the dead parrot onto the floor.

 \*

I picked up my cell phone several times because I couldn’t decide whether to call Bruce at work or run away.

Pete was made up of all of the worst qualities of my husband. His worst words. What would the hand do next? I thought of all the potential weapons in the house and I knew in a chilling moment: I could kill Bruce. Did I want to kill Bruce? In momentary flashes, perhaps I did—times when he humiliated me and Pete did too, leaving me helpless and desperate. But no—I didn’t. Not in any deliberate way that required action. I didn’t want him to die, I wanted him to be happy —but in a way that didn’t make me so unhappy. And I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life alienated in a prison or asylum—either a real one, or the one I had been living in at home.

There had been Bruce. There might be Mitch. There would no longer be Pete. But there was still me. And there was still, today, this Hand. The Hand and I. We were not murderers. We were also not caged. Starling and I were going to be okay.

I would tell Bruce, and then I would bury Pete. Then tomorrow we would get up early and take the bus out to the Wild Bird Sanctuary, where Starling and I would try to fly, do our best to make peace with the bird kingdom for the act we had committed.

Bruce answered on the third ring. “How’s Pete?” he asked.

With the phone on speaker, I squatted down and picked Pete up with my right hand, the reliable hand, the good hand that served me well but offered no surprises. The dead bird weighed more than I’d expected. “I’ve got him here in my hand, Bruce, and I’m afraid I have some bad news. You had three roommates, and all three of them have now flown.”

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