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COMPLICITY

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When I was a hiccupping boy, my mother would fetch the back-door key, pull my collar away from my neck, and slip the cold metal down my back. At the time, I took this to be a normal medical—or maternal—procedure. Only later did I wonder if the cure worked merely by creating a diversion, or whether, perhaps, there was some more clinical explanation, whether one sense could directly affect another.

When I was a twenty-year-old, impossibly in love with a married woman who had no notion of my attachment and desire, I developed a skin condition whose name I no longer remember. My body turned scarlet from wrist to ankle, first itching beyond the power of calamine lotion, then lightly flaking, then fully peeling, until I had shed myself like some transmuting reptile. Bits of me fell into my shirt and trousers, into the bedclothes, onto the carpet. The only parts that didn't burn and peel were my face, my hands and feet, and my groin. I didn't ask the doctor why this was the case, and I never told the woman of my love.

When I divorced, my doctor friend, Ben, had me show him my hands. I asked if modern medicine was going back to palmistry, as well as to leeches; and, if so, whether astrology and magnetism and the theory of humors could be far behind. He replied that he could tell from the color of my hands and fingertips that I was drinking too much.

Later, wondering if I had been duped into cutting down, I asked him if he had been joking, or guessing. He turned my hands palm uppermost, nodded in approval, and said that he would now look out for unattached female medics who might not find me too repugnant.

The first time I met her was at a party of Ben's; she had brought her mother. Have you watched mothers and daughters at parties together, and tried to work out who is taking care of whom? The daughter giving Mum a bit of an outing, Mum watching for the sort of men her daughter attracts? Or both at the same time? Even if they're playing at best friends, there's often an extra flicker of formality in the relationship. Disapproval either goes unexpressed or is exaggerated, with a roll of the eye and a theatrical moue and a "She never takes any notice of me, anyway."

We were standing there, in a tight circle with a fourth person my memory has blanked out. She was opposite me, and her mother was on my left. I was trying to be myself, whatever that might be, and at the same time trying to make that self acceptable, if not actually pleasing. Pleasing to her mother, that is; I wasn't bold enough to try to please her directly—at least, not in company. I can't remember what we talked about, but it seemed to be going O.K.; perhaps the forgotten fourth helped. What I do remember was this: she had her right arm down by her side, and when she caught me looking in her general direction she inconspicuously made the smoking gesture—you know, the first two fingers extended and slightly parted, the other fingers and the thumb bent away out of sight. I thought, A doctor who smokes, that's a good sign. While the conversation continued, I got out my packet of Marlboro Lights, and without looking—my activity, too, was at waist level—extracted a single cigarette, returned the pack to my pocket, took the cigarette by the filter tip, passed it around her mother's back, and felt it being taken from my fingers. Noting a slight pause on her part, I went back to my pocket, took out a book of matches, held it by the striking end, felt it being taken from my fingers, watched her light up, exhale, close the book of matches, then pass it back behind her mother. I received it, delicately, by the same end as I had given it out.

I should add that it was perfectly obvious to her mother what we were doing. But she didn't say anything, sigh, give a prim glance, or rebuke me for being a drug peddler. I instantly liked her for this, assuming that she approved of the complicity between me and her daughter. She could, I suppose, have been deliberately holding back for strategic reasons. But I didn't care, or, rather, didn't think to care, preferring to assume approval. But this isn't what I was trying to tell you. The point wasn't about her mum. The point was those three moments when an object passed from one set of fingertips to another.

That was the nearest I got to her that evening, and for weeks to come.

Have you ever played that game where you sit in a circle and close your eyes, or are blindfolded, and have to guess what an object is just from the feel of it? And then you pass it on and the next person has to guess? Or you keep your guesses to yourselves until you've all made up your minds, and then announce them at the same time?

Ben claims that once, when he played it, a mozzarella cheese was passed around and three people guessed that it was a breast implant. That may just be medical students for you, but there's something about closing your eyes that makes you more vulnerable, or drives your imagination to the gothic—especially if the object being passed is soft and squishy. In all the times I've played the game, the most successful mystery item, the one guaranteed to freak somebody out, was a peeled lychee.

Some years ago—ten, fifteen?—I went to a production of "King Lear" played against a bare brick backdrop, with brutalistic staging. I can't remember who directed it, or who played the title role, but I do remember the blinding of Gloucester. This is usually done with the Earl pinioned and bent back over a chair. Cornwall says to his servants, "Fellows, hold the chair," and then to Gloucester, "Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." One eye is put out, and Regan chillingly comments, "One side will mock another; the other too." Then, a moment later, the famous "Out, vile jelly!" and Gloucester is pulled upright, with stage gore dripping down his face.

In the production I saw, the blinding was done offstage. I seem to remember Gloucester's legs flailing from one of the brick wings, though perhaps that is a later invention. I do remember Gloucester's screams, and finding them all the more terrifying for being offstage: perhaps what you can't see frightens you more than what you can. And then, after the first eye was put out, it was lobbed onto the stage. In my memory—in my mind's eye—I see it rolling down the rake, faintly glistening. More screams, and another eye was tossed from the wings.

They were—you guessed—peeled lychees. And then this happened: Cornwall, lanky and brutish, stamped back onstage, tracked down the lychees, and set his foot on Gloucester's eyes a second time.

Another game, from back when I was a hiccupping boy at primary school: In the morning break, we used to race model cars on the asphalt playground. They were about four inches long, made from cast metal, and had real rubber tires, which you could roll off the wheels if you felt like simulating a pit stop. They were painted in the bright colors worn by the racing marques of the day: a scarlet Maserati, a green Vanwall, a blue . . . perhaps something French.

The game was simple: the car that went the farthest won. You pressed your thumb down onto the middle of the long bonnet, pulling your fingers up into a loose fist, and then, at a signal, transferred the pressure swiftly from a downward to a forward direction, sending your car off into the distance. There was a certain technique involved in obtaining maximum propulsion, the danger being that the knuckle of your middle finger, held a fraction of an inch above the playground's surface, would scrape against the asphalt, tearing skin and costing you the race. The wound would scab up, and you'd have to adjust your hand, dropping the knuckle of the fourth finger into the danger area instead. But this never produced the same velocity, so you quickly went back to the usual, third-finger technique, often ripping off the newly formed scab.

Your parents never warn you about the right things, do they? Or perhaps they can warn you only about the immediate, local stuff. They bandage the knuckle of your right middle finger and warn against getting it infected. They explain about the dentist, and how the pain will wear off afterward. They teach you the highway code—at least, as it applies to junior pedestrians. My brother and I were once about to cross a road when our father put on a firm voice and instructed us to "pause on the curb." We were at the age when a primitive understanding of language is intersected by a kind of giddiness about its possibilities. We looked at each other, shouted, "Paws on the curb!," then squatted down with our hands flat on the edge of the roadway. Our father thought this was very silly; no doubt he was already calculating how long the joke would run.

Nature warned us; our parents warned us. We understood about knuckle-scabbing and traffic. We learned to look out for loose carpet on the stairs, because Grandma had once nearly taken a tumble when one of her brass stair rods, removed for annual polishing, hadn't been replaced properly. We learned about thin ice, and frostbite, and evil boys who put pebbles and sometimes even razor blades into snowballs—though

none of these warnings were ever justified by events. We learned about nettles and thistles, and how grass, which seemed such harmless stuff, could give you a sudden burn, like sandpaper. We were warned about knives and scissors and the danger of the untied shoelace. We were warned about strange men who might try to lure us into cars or lorries, though it took us years to work out that "strange" did not mean "bizarre," "hunchbacked," "dribbling," "goitered"—or however we defined strangeness—but merely "unknown to us." We were warned about bad boys and, later, bad girls. An embarrassed science master warned us against V.D., misleadingly informing us that it was caused by "indiscriminate sexual intercourse." We were warned about gluttony and sloth and letting down our school, about avarice and greed and letting down our family, about envy and wrath and letting down our country.

We were never warned about heartbreak.

I used the word "complicity" a bit ago. I like the word. To me, it indicates an unspoken understanding between two people, a kind of pre-sense, if you like. The first hint that you may be suited, before the nervous trudgery of finding out whether you "share the same interests," or have the same metabolism, or are sexually compatible, or both want children, or however it is that we argue consciously about our unconscious decisions. Later, looking back, we will fetishize and celebrate the first date, the first kiss, the first holiday together, but what really counts is what happened before this public story: that moment, more of pulse than of thought, which goes, Yes, perhaps her, and Yes, perhaps him.

I tried to explain this to Ben, a few days after his party. Ben is a crossword-doer, a dictionary lover, a pedant. He told me that "complicity" means a shared involvement in a crime or a sin or a nefarious act. It means planning to do something bad.

I prefer to keep the term as I understand it. For me, it means planning to do something good. She and I were both free adults, capable of making our own decisions. And nobody plans to do anything bad at that moment, do they?

"Would you really want to read a book by a comedian that didn't have wide margins?"

We went to a film together. I had as yet no clear sense of her temperament and habits. Whether she was punctual or unpunctual, easygoing or quick-tempered, tolerant or severe, cheerful or depressive, sane or mad.

That may sound like a crude way of putting it; besides, understanding another human being is hardly a matter of box-ticking, in which the answers stay the answers. It's perfectly possible to be cheerful *and* depressive, easygoing *and* quick-tempered. What I mean is, I was still working out the default setting of her character.

It was a cold December afternoon; we arrived at the cinema in separate cars, as she was on call and might be bleeped back in to the hospital. I sat there, watching the film yet equally alert to her reactions: a smile, silence, tears, a shrinking from violence—all would be like silent bleeps for my information. The heating in the cinema was underpowered, and as we sat there, elbow to elbow on the armrest, I found myself thinking outward from me to her. Sleeve of shirt, sweater, jacket, raincoat, pea jacket, jumper—and then what? Nothing more before flesh? So, six layers between us, or perhaps seven if she was wearing something with sleeves under her sweater.

The film passed; her mobile didn't pulse; I liked the way she laughed. It was already dark when we got outside. We had walked halfway to our cars when she stopped and held up her left hand, palm toward me.

"Look," she said.

I didn't know what I was meant to be looking for: proof of alcoholism, her line of life? I moved closer, and noticed, with the help of passing headlights, that the tips of her first, second, and third fingers had turned a pale-yellowish color.

"Twenty yards without gloves," she said. "It just happens like that." She told me the name of the syndrome. It was a question of poor circulation, of the cold making the vessels constrict and cutting off the blood supply.

She dug in her pockets for gloves: dark-brown ones, I remember. She pulled them on a little haphazardly, then meshed her fingers to push the wool down to the base of each finger. We walked on, discussing the film, paused, smiled, paused, parted; my car was parked ten yards beyond hers. As I was about to unlock

my door, I realized that she was still standing on the pavement, looking down. I gave her a few moments, decided that something was wrong, and walked back.

"The car keys," she said without looking up at me. There wasn't much light, and she was digging in her bag, feeling as much as looking for them. Then she added, with sudden violence, "Come on, you fool."

For a moment I thought she was talking to me. Then I realized she was angry only with herself, embarrassed by herself, and the more embarrassed that her inability to find her keys and also, perhaps, her anger were being witnessed by me. But I was hardly going to dock her points. As I stood there, watching her struggle, two things happened: I felt what I would describe as tenderness, were it not so ferocious; and my cock gave a sudden spurt of growth.

I remembered the first time a dentist gave me an injection; he left the room while the anesthetic took effect, returned briskly, slid his finger into my mouth, ran it around the base of the tooth he was going to fill, and asked if I felt anything. I remembered the numbness that strikes when you sit too long with your legs crossed. I remembered stories of doctors pushing pins into a patient's leg without the patient reacting at all.

What I wanted to know was this: If I had been bolder, if I had raised my right hand against her left, laid palm gently against palm, finger against finger, in some lovers' high five, and if I had then pressed the tips of my first, second, and third fingers against hers, would she have felt anything? What does it feel like when there's no feeling there—both to her and to me? She sees my fingers against hers but feels nothing; I see my fingers against hers, and feel them, but know that she feels nothing.

And, of course, I was also asking myself the question in a wider, more alarming sense.

I thought about one person wearing gloves and the other one not, about how flesh feels against wool, wool against flesh.

I tried to imagine all the gloves she might wear, both now and in the future—if there was to be a future I was present in.

I'd seen one pair of brown woollen gloves. I decided, given her condition, to equip her with several extra pairs in different colors. Then, for colder days and nights, some warmer, suède ones: black, I imagined, to match her hair, with heavy white stitching along the fingers, and beige rabbit-fur lining. And then, perhaps, a pair of those mittens like paws, with a lone thumb and a broad pouch for the rest of the fingers.

At work, she would presumably wear surgical gloves, thin latex ones offering the thinnest possible barrier between doctor and patient—and yet any barrier destroys that essential feel of flesh on flesh. Surgeons wear tight-fitting gloves, other medical staff looser ones, like those which deli workers wear when peeling slices of ham from the rotating blade.

I wondered if she was, or would ever become, a gardener. She might wear latex gloves for light work in well-tilled soil, for sorting out rootlets and seedlings and delicate foliage. But then she would need a stronger pair—probably a mixture of thin leather and some striped, canvassy material—for heavier work: pruning, forking the ground over, pulling up bindweed and nettle roots.

I wondered if she had any use for those gloves with cut-off fingers. I've never seen the point of them myself. Who wears them, apart from Russian sleigh drivers and misers in TV versions of Dickens? And, given what happened to the tips of her fingers, all the more reason not to.

I wondered if the circulation to her feet was curtailed as well, in which case: bed socks. What would they be like? Big and woolly—perhaps some ex-boyfriend's rugby socks, which would fall loosely around her ankles when she stood up? Or close-fitting and female? In some newspaper life-style supplement, I'd seen gaudy bed socks made with individual toes. I wondered if I'd find them a neutral accessory, comic, or somehow erotic.

What else? Might she ski, and have a pair of puffy gloves to match a puffy jacket? Oh, and, of course, washing-up gloves: all women had them. And always in the same, brashly unconvincing colors—yellow, pink, pale green, pale blue. You'd have to be a pervert to find rubber gloves erotic. Make them as exotic as you like—magenta, ultramarine, teak, pin-striped, Prince of Wales check—they'd never do anything for me.

No one says, "Feel this piece of Parmesan," do they? Except perhaps Parmesan makers.

Sometimes, alone in a lift, I will run my fingers lightly over the buttons. Not enough to change the floor I'm going to, just to feel the bumpy dots of Braille. And to wonder what it must be like.

The first time I saw someone wearing a thumbstall, I couldn't believe that there was a real thumb underneath it.

Do the slightest damage to the least important finger, and the whole hand is affected. Even the simplest actions—pulling on a sock, doing up a button, changing gears—become fraught, self-conscious. The hand won't go into a glove, has to be thought about when washed, mustn't be lain on at night, and so on.

Imagine, then, trying to make love with a broken arm.

I had a sudden, acute desire that nothing bad ever happen to her.

I once saw a man on a train with a hook for a hand. I was eleven or twelve, alone in my compartment. He came down the corridor, looked in, saw it was occupied, and passed on. At the time, I thought only of pirates and menace; later, of all you couldn't do; later still, of the phantom pain of amputees.

Our fingers must work together; our senses, too. They act for themselves, but also as pre-senses for the others. We feel a fruit for ripeness; we press our fingers into a joint of meat to test for doneness. Our senses work together for the greater good: they are complicit, as I like to say.

Her hair was up that evening, held by a pair of tortoiseshell combs, then pinned with gold. It was not quite as black as her eyes, but blacker than her linen jacket, which had a fade and a crease to it. We were in a Chinese restaurant, and the waiters were paying proper attention to her. Perhaps her hair looked Chinese. Or perhaps they knew that it was more important to please her than to please me. Or, rather, that pleasing her *was* pleasing me. She asked me to order, on the ground that I often came here, and I chose conservatively, sticking to what I liked. Seaweed, spring rolls, green beans in yellow-bean sauce, crispy fried duck, stewed aubergine, plain boiled rice. A bottle of Gewürztraminer and tap water.

Following her into the restaurant, I'd noticed that she was wearing scent, but, if you asked me to name it, I would be at a loss. And my descriptive terms are hardly sophisticated: nice, nasty, subtle, sexy, overpowering, rancid—that's my vocabulary exhausted. Anyway, restaurant smells soon took over as a mound of glistening spareribs passed our table on the way to another destination. Perhaps you smell Chinese food more than other cuisines because you lift the bowl nearer to your mouth than any table-bound plate ever gets. That night, even the plain rice had something characterful and earthy about it.

The background music was presumably the result of market research: a mixture of easy-listening Chinese and unobtrusive Western. Ignorable, except when there was an overfamiliar number. I suggested that if "Lara's Theme," from "Doctor Zhivago," came up on the tape, we should make a run for it and plead duress in court. She smiled, and asked if duress was really a defense in law. I went on at what might have been too great a length about this, then we talked about professional areas where we overlapped: where law came into medicine, and medicine into law. Then we talked about smoking, and the precise point at which we would want to light up, if smoking hadn't been banned in public places. After the main course and the vegetables, before the pudding, whether or not we had pudding, we agreed. A cigarette could be digestive, useful for tamping down. We each considered ourselves light smokers. Then we talked a little, though warily, about our childhoods. I asked how old she had been when the ends of her fingers had started turning yellow in the cold, and asked if she had lots of pairs of gloves, which made her laugh, for some reason. I was about to ask her to describe them, but thought she might get the wrong idea.

And, as the meal went on, I decided that it was going to be all right—though by "it" I meant only the evening, nothing more. Neither of us was suddenly going to yawn, or want to leave, or stop making an effort—not that it felt like an effort. And she must have felt the same, because when it came to pudding she changed her mind and said that she would have one after all, but nothing sticky and filling, so she had the lychees. And I decided not to tell her about that game from long ago, or about that production of "King Lear," but thought, Well, if we come back here again—not on the next date, but later on—then maybe I'll tell her. And I hope she never played the game with Ben and had to handle a mozzarella.

Just as I was thinking this, "Lara's Theme" oozed out of the speakers. We looked at each other and laughed, and she made a gesture as if she were going to push back her chair and rise, and maybe she saw alarm in my eyes, because she laughed again and then, playing along, threw her napkin down on the table. The gesture took her hand more than halfway across the cloth.

But she didn't get up, or push her chair back, just went on smiling, and left her hand on top of her napkin, knuckles raised, fingertips pointing toward me. And then I touched her. ♦

JULIAN BARNES
