

Chapter 1| Empty Hands

The hands were all I could focus on. My hands. Empty hands. I looked at them as I perched, almost bent in half, on some tattered blue fabric chair in the sterile waiting room. The smells of that room filled my nostrils. Antiseptic, sweat, stale coffee and tears, yes tears, combined in an odor that burned into my memory. But the hands held my attention. They were the only things that were even real. I wanted to use them, to control them, to direct them to hold onto just anything. But they couldn't. Nothing was there. She had gone. There was no one to hold, no hand to hold, and the loss was more than my mind could comprehend or even bear.

So I stared at those hands. Hard hands, strong hands, capable hands, useless hands that could not and would not move. I saw a tear drop into the right palm. I didn't know from where it had come. But it was no matter. I stared at those hands. Function and form had lost all meaning. I had never been in such absolute loss about what to do.

I stretched my head toward the ceiling and suffered to release a long cry of anguish. All that I could allow, all that my heart would bear to hear were sobbing torrents of muffled agony. My stomach churned and I gasped for breath. The sound of soulful torment was mine and I didn't care who heard. But no one did. The late hour was succor for the lonely few and none were close to comfort my torment. I sat in my misery in that barren room with naught but the glow of a flickering forgotten fluorescent light. Time slowly passed while I sat totally abandoned, occasionally weeping, and often begging some unknown entity for relief.

When substance began to reappear and the mind could function, I stood and headed for the pickup. It sat as a silent sentinel under a lonely streetlamp waiting for a single occupant. There were things to do. Terrible lonely things to do. It was best I got to it.

That is the last memory of my prior life. The chapters had been read and the story closed. It had been a good 30-year tale that I could not and would not repeat without Molly. She had been the protagonist in that story. When she died, so did the narrative. Without Molly the nature in me returned and I moved on. I was no longer living for love. I was looking for a life.

What does an older man do in life? The future of youth was not on my side, but immediacy of age had not taken hold. A sharp mind, wry body, and the experiences of time all sat in perfect congress within me. When nature opens all options, where do you go?

The immediate offerings that proper society imposed were mentor or advocate. Or a reliance on preserving some temporary memorial to the life you once knew while you sat isolated and alone at the evening dinner table. A stud put to pasture without the benefit of a mare. You had done your duty, earned your retirement, so pick up your golf club membership and leave the world alone. But don't forget to write the occasional check to support someone else's dreams.

Nature had not granted me patience nor allowed a sedentary existence. The allure of world travel never befell me. Maintaining memorials was fit for others. My actions would not be judged by friends or strangers. So on a cold morning I closed the back door one last time. My breath hung before me as I fingered the worn key in my hand. I listened as the key fell into its proper place and the tumblers within performed their duties. I turned to look deeply at the life I

had, then looked no more. I placed the key under the mat, threw the knapsack over my shoulder and headed to the pickup. The ride would be long, but I had the time.

I reached for the knapsack again when I reached the destination. It had lain on the passenger side for the three days it took to arrive. The pickup rattled to a stop on a street that was best described as derelict. The neighborhood had never been a good part of town. The old brick buildings abutted the torn sidewalks. Most the windows were covered with ancient, rotted plywood. Those that weren't had the glass inside the panes shattered from vandalism. In its best days this was a warehouse district, and these were not its best days.

I fished the manila envelope out of the knapsack, pried the torn edge with my fingers and shoved my hand inside to find what I was looking for, a worn crusty old key. The thing was no bigger than the one I had laid under the mat three days ago, but it was a different key to a different life. Grabbing the pickup's door handle, I unlatched the door and shoved it open. Standing outside the pickup, I surveyed my new surroundings under the glare of a cold sun.

My new abode was half a city block long. The entrance to the building was a worn metal door just opposite the passenger side of the pickup. What little history I had learned about the building was that it was built for distribution and storage for a grocery chain that had long ago gone out of business. Besides the metal entrance door were a pair of garage doors fronting the street with a phalanx of windows rising to the third story. I noticed a few birds escape an upper story window to get an aerial view of their new landlord.

Looking down the street, first one way and then the other, I realized I was the only active tenant in the area. There were no streetlights at either intersection and the stop signs barely hung on their posts. Piles of garbage and neglected dirt were spaced up and down the street. Other than that, it seemed the area had been abandoned of all human involvement. For mid-morning on a weekday, I found this particularly to my liking. Directly across from my building was another of similar disrepair. In fact, I hardly discerned a difference or space between my building and all the others on the street.

I moved to the entrance to my building and placed the key in the lock. With a bit of effort I was able to unlock the door and begin to pull it open. Years of neglect had left the hinges rusted and dirt shoved between the bottom of the door and the concrete. With some considerable labor accompanied by the sound of metal scraping against concrete, I was able to move the door enough to get inside.

My first look revealed it was a warehouse. It was a vast open space from one end of the building to the other. Interspersed along its length were steel supports for the floor above. Opposite the street entrance were more garage doors. I assumed they lead to loading docks adjacent to the exterior yard and alley. On the right of the loading dock doors rested a large enclosed freight elevator. To the right of the elevator sat a couple of neglected offices with windows facing the floor. A quick glance revealed stairs at either end of the warehouse leading to upper floors.

I moved to the single door that served both offices. My movements kicked up small dust storms while my feet crunched on various offerings of the native inhabitants. I was glad I was wearing my boots. I reached the door and began to open it when it burst forth. A piercing guttural scream followed. I was forced to the ground by the weight and force of my attacker.

My god this thing stunk! That was all I could think of as I struggled to remove myself from its grip. Struggling for my life from an unknown assailant and all I could think of or notice was the smell. It seems incredible, but by the gods did it smell! I believe just the stench alone forced me to react and extricate myself from underneath my attacker.

My hands had cushioned my fall. At the release of this duty I took my right fist and pummeled it into what I considered the head of this monster. Another scream emerged from this beast and its eyes looked upon me in rage. They were dark hollow eyes. Eyes that had seen death and want. Their darkness was surrounded by the red of pain and hurt. They gave my attacker the look of a demon. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the glint of a rusted knife slicing towards me. This had become real very quickly.

I reached up with my hand and grabbed the limb that held the knife. I jammed my knee into the mass of filth that covered me and received a satisfying guttural moan from my assailant. This moved the attacker just enough so that I could position my foot on the body of filth and kick. The assailant flew off and I quickly stood up to gain what leverage and advantage my body would afford. I stood crouched with my hands readied before me as I awaited the next round. I heard crying, a woman's crying.

The mound of filth before me rolled into a small ball and began to cry uncontrollably. I was at best confused. I circled the mound not once but twice trying to discern what it was. I was also trying to figure out where the woman was. It was only in the second circuit that I was able to determine they were one and the same.

"Hello?" I said.

The mound just kept crying.

"Uh... Hello?" I said once more.

"Go away!" Her sobbing voice came from under the filth.

"Uh... No?" I replied.

"Well then get it done and go," came the voice.

"Do what?" I asked.

The filth stopped cringing and a flap opened, revealing the hollow eyes I had seen before. They looked me over from head to toe. The look seemed to relax the mound of filth a bit, but it was still defensive. It scooted across the floor to the nearest steel pillar and sat in a heap, its eyes still fixed on mine.

"You don't look like one of them," the mound said.

"I suppose not," I replied in continued confusion.

"What are you doing here?" the mound asked.

"Seems I should be asking you. But if you must know. I am looking over my new property," I replied.

"Oh shit! You're the owner. Damn." exclaimed the mound.

The mound stood and its outer shell fell from its body. The shell removed revealed it to be no more than a heavy blanket. Lack of care and a good washing had turned it into a mass of rotting fabric combined with untold remnants of human and animal waste. The combination allowed the blanket to fairly stand on its own.

What was under this mass of stink and offensiveness was even more surprising, if nonetheless odorous. A woman of undetermined advanced years stood before me in at least four

layers of castaway clothing. Apparently, what was readily available in the local trash was hers for the keeping. A threadbare cloth jacket was the outer level, with a sweater of indistinguishable color under it. Under that was a sweatshirt emblazoned with some local sports club logo. The mismatched tennis shoes on her feet matched everything perfectly.

“Look, I didn’t mean nothin’. You don’t have to call the cops.” the woman said.

“Don’t intend to. What’s your name?” I asked.

“You can call me Marge,” she responded.

“Name’s Edgar.” I replied as I adopted a more relaxed stance.

“Why not?” Marge asked.

“Why not what?” I responded.

“Why not call the cops?” Marge asked.

“Don’t want to. Got more important things to do,” I replied as I headed towards the office door once again.

I really wanted to get away from Marge’s stench. Besides, it looked like she had more problems than could be handled by the cops. Marge moved to get between me and the office door.

“There ain’t nothing in there,” Marge said anxiously.

I moved past her and through the office door. It led onto two offices, one on each side. Between the walls separating them appeared to be a small restroom. But if I thought Marge had been the definition of stink earlier, these rooms topped it. Marge, for lack of a better term, had made herself a nest that encompassed both rooms and the restroom. I grabbed my breath and turned towards the vast warehouse to get some oxygen.

“My god that smells. You live in here?” I asked incredulously.

My comments made Marge suddenly aware of herself. She became smaller and moved away from me.

“It’s what I got. Better than living in a box on the street,” Marge replied defiantly.

“Well that’s got to be fixed,” I replied moving away.

“You can’t kick me out. I got nowhere to go!” Marge cried as I moved away.

“Who said anything about kicking you out?” I responded.

“You just said --,” Marge replied.

“I said it needs to be fixed. I don’t care if you stay. But you and where you live can’t smell like this. You have to clean up if you want to stay there.” I replied.

I had no idea why I was going to allow her to stay. She hadn’t figured into my plans at all. She could be a problem, or at best a distraction. Still, I had enough to do and didn’t need the offices right now. There seemed no need to add another burden to the life she apparently had. She’d probably leave anyway as soon as the place got busy. Besides, if her being here got too much of an issue, I could move her out later.

I moved away from the offices and the stench to the back wall next to the offices. There, as expected, I found the main circuit breaker. I flipped the switch and the electricity came alive.

“Paid the bill?” Marge asked.

I knew she was following me. Her smell announced her presence everywhere she went.

“Yeah. Any others squatting in this building besides you? Anyone I should know about? Don’t need to get into another scuffle,” I said.

“Just me. No one else,” Marge replied.

“You been on the other floors?” I asked.

Marge was curious and was following me about. I was seriously thinking of turning the fire hose on her.

“Been on all of them. Just a big room on the top floor. Some restrooms and showers on the second floor. Guess that was the employee locker room. None of the showers or toilets work. Water’s been turned off.” Marge replied.

I moved to the pipes just to the side of the electric box. With a strong pull and more than a few grunts I was able to turn the tap on the main line. I could hear water rushing through the pipes.

“Got water now.”

I walked over to the stairs close to the pipes. I was following the pipes with my eyes, checking for leaks or problems. I was glancing at the electrical lines as I followed the pipes. My steps were heavy on the stairs as my work boots made their presence known. Marge followed. I appreciated that she finally tried to keep some distance between herself and me. My eyes were no longer watering from the smell.

The second floor was just as Marge had described. Close by the stairs was a room about the size of the two offices downstairs. It was a stand-alone structure with a couple of sets of doors in front. Two led to restrooms, one for men and one for women. Both were designed in utilitarian décor with nothing but the essentials. There were enough stalls and urinals to accommodate about a dozen at a time. The doors on either side of the restrooms led to his and her locker rooms. There were two showers in each room alongside a stand of lockers fronted by a bench.

I looked into each stall and regretted it every time. The tanks worked as the water filled them up, but the toilets were filled with ancient excrement. The only saving grace was the filth was so old it didn’t stink nearly as much as Marge. The showers seemed to have served as toilets when the toilets themselves failed to take any more deposits. Every locker had various items stuffed inside, from old rags and newspapers to ladies’ undergarments. It was going to be hell to clean them and make them work correctly.

“I’ll clean ‘em up.” Marge said.

“What?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her right. Frankly, she had been standing farther away from me and in my concentration on the job at hand I’d forgotten she was there.

“Get me some cleaning tools and I will clean it. I’ll do it for a hundred.” Marge replied.

“Tell you what. You throw in the office and yourself, I’ll give you two hundred. But it’s got to be done today.”

“Done.” Marge replied.

I swear she smiled and looked happy. Seemed odd, considering she would be cleaning shit.

“I’ll finish looking upstairs then head out to get supplies,” I told her.

“I’ll go get some things from the office and meet you back here when you get back from the store,” she said.

“Fine.”

I was pleased to be free of her presence, if only for a couple hours. I moved to the stairs again and headed up. The third floor was just as I'd expected and as Marge had described. The only thing she'd left out was the inch of bird crap covering most of the floor. Still, that could be cleaned up and the windows repaired. I headed back downstairs making a mental list of what I needed to begin to put this place in order. I had no idea if what I planned would work or what the problems would be. But it was something new to do. I wasn't feeling that old anymore.