Leonard Kriegel

Hands: A Story of Obsession

"Life invents itself with inevitable conditions," writes Emerson. Only not even Emerson had much to say about what happens when those inevitable conditions turn into raging obsessions. Emerson may be the most liberating of our writers but he isn't of much help to a man obsessed. An Emersonian sense of equanimity isn't what the obsessed want. Few writers succumbed to aging as willingly as Emerson did, proof enough that obsession wasn't the sort of single-mindedness the sage of Concord believed we need to pursue the independent life.

He was right, of course. Obsession is even more difficult to admit to than it is to deal with. My obsession with my hands, for instance, is not as difficult as it is laughable. I sit in front of a computer, dutifully plugging away at Flaubert's *le mot juste,* until my attention wanders and I find myself staring at the keyboard, focus having once again shifted from *le mot juste* to the flesh before me, these hands. That's how it goes with obsession. Once I am focused on my hands I stare at them intently. Soon, I begin to wonder whether this obsession marks me off as "crazy" or "insane." Perhaps it merely makes me "abnormal." Yet its shape is ordinary. My hands are easily described, for among the characteristics of obsession is that it lends itself to description. They are large hands with long fingers and ragged, uneven fingernails. Their fleshy color contrasts vividly with the flat gray of the computer keyboard, an aspect of obsession that continues to feed me pleasure even though I try not to make too much out of it. It's a minor detail of having to live with obsession.

I once believed my hands were elegant. But they were never elegant—merely strong. When they were strong the fingers worked in harmony but each finger now strives for a separate hegemony, snippily independent of the others. If my obsession offers no more than a Platonic ideal of hands that has little to do with the sensuality of flesh, I am simply voicing a truth known to all obsessed men and women. It is also true that I take greater pride than I care to admit in the sensuality of my hands. That word *sensuality* is embarrassing, yet it is why this obsession with my hands appeals to me. Like most people fixated upon the parts of the body, I view my obsession as a gift. Vanity about hands links me to the legions of men and women who strut with pride over their bodily parts. If Narcissus worshipped the reflection of his body in the water from head to toe, I choose to pay homage to the singularity of beckoning fingers.

Once one admits to being obsessed one is free to behave obsessively. And the truly obsessed are beyond shame. On a supermarket checkout line I feel not shame but pride as I eye the tabloid wars waged in the name of the male ego. In the magazine rack above the cash register *Men's Health* battles *The National Enquirer*, each ministering to the fragility threatening American men. Their headlines scream of an entire country caught up in an epidemic of male narcissism. Like the beefcake cover of *Men's Health*, my obsession with hands is both a reflection of and a commentary on the power of that epidemic. Staring at the cover of *Men's Health* I remember the worship-filled faces of fifth-grade girls at P.S. 80 in the Bronx of my childhood, recall how eagerly they showed one another glossy photos of movie stars. Am I different from the breathless girls of childhood? Like them, I am in pursuit of an idea of flesh so distant from its reality that I must fight against need even as I seek to justify it.

Loving hands is not the sort of passion most men brag about. Nor is it the sort of passion

most men grow sentimental about. Too tame as sin, too awkward as secret, it doesn't speak to an age so self-conscious about liberation that it wants even its kinkiness to be novel. And here I am, a retired academic in his sixties at his desk—and rather than contemplate the eternal or cultivate my garden I am staring at hands on a keyboard. If that isn't perverse, it is certainly embarrassing. Once one hits sixty, all passion is embarrassing. And despite what poets and gerontologists write, that is as it was meant to be. After a man graduates from the lust-filled twenties, passion should be tempered. Yet the longevity of my love affair with my hands not only continues to surprise me but continues to fill me with gratitude. If my fingers on a keyboard look like soldiers at parade rest as I stare at them I still feel the beat of love, a pull I have lived with for so long I'm not sure I can still live without it.

Even perverse vanity is meaningful in a world that insists on inhabiting me whether or not I care to inhabit it. Of what value is Narcissus as he stares at his reflection and falls in love with the only perfection he can see? We moderns are impatient with myth. How should I view an overblown lover like Paris when I know that both Helen's beauty and Paris' mortality will be vanquished? Even a self-centered ass deserves a tip of the hat from those obsessed with the parts of the body. Paris was not only bold enough to defy the gods but smart enough to recognize that a man who possessed Helen already had outfought the limitations of the flesh. Love's daring is meaningless if one can't brag of it. God probably has a sense of humor but he's no Woody Allen. Troy sacked is the price of myth—no more, no less. Think of King David gazing across the roofs of Jerusalem, yearning not for God but for the murderer in his heart calculating what it will cost to bed the beautiful Bathsheba. All lovers run the risk of obsession.

Yet Hebrew scripture is as inadequate as Greek myth when it comes to justifying my obsession. Bodily parts are simply the parts of a body—pedestrian, at worst, humorous, at best. But did that prevent the Greeks from deifying the body? Or keep Michelangelo from turning a Jewish shepherd boy into God's bodily subaltern? The Hebrew prophets recognized that the body means trouble. Why else are Jews so disliked by the likes of Gore Vidal and all those literati who have so little patience with the thought that flesh, too, has its limits? When it comes to bodily hunger both Old and New Testaments recognize that we ask for trouble when we make the body an object of worship. The body isn't fully or completely formed. Male and female created He them—and yet the body is unsatisfactory as divinity. No wonder the Hebrew slaves rebelled against the burden of the Law when waiting for Moses to come down from the mountain. Do we blame them for wanting bodily experimentation? A golden calf, a bull's head on a man's shoulders—it's not as crazy as it sounds. Maybe the desire for a strange exotic God is built into tribal memory.

But if that's the case, why am I embarrassed at needing a heroic vision of hands? Is it simply that my hands and fingers exist apart from each other in the imagination? Does it matter whether I think of my fingers as soldiers at rest or as sleepwalkers dreaming of independence? How much can my battered body demand of an aging cripple trying to maintain a modicum of vanity? That I stare at hands on a keyboard with the same intensity I stare at Pissaro's paintings of the Tuilleries in the Met tells me that I am a man obsessed. Yet even obsession applauds the 19th Century's optimism. Those fashionable bourgeois Parisians milling around their benches speak eloquently of how the century transformed the common and ordinary into the resplendent and new.

Only I'm no artist—but just another writer trying to understand why, as he ages, he can't wrench free of vanity. However trivial that may seem, it fills me with dread. If I never envisioned aging this way, what choice do I have but to remain loyal to my obsession as long as consciousness allows? They're the only hands I have—and I still love them.

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Battered from almost six decades of walking on crutches or pushing into life in a wheelchair these fingers on the keyboard are no longer strong and slender but swollen and gnarled and linked to knuckles that are even more swollen and gnarled. Despite all that these hands have been forced to endure, passion asks obsession for a defense beyond reason. Whatever courage I may claim today resides not in my character but in the record of hands that have met the obligations imposed upon them through the years. Vanity insists I acknowledge how well they have served me, and vanity honors their history. From the time I lost my legs to polio at the age of 11 until today these hands have carried me through life. And I bless them for that.

If obsession doesn't liberate me from the need for decorum it does allow me to speak for vanity, to recognize how indebted I am to a love intimate enough to be memorable. Normal men don't even think about hands. What reason does a normal man have to think about what he takes for granted? But cripples have few illusions about the body. A cripple knows what he owes flesh, bone, muscle, and tendon, understands that his body has earned its accounting. As a cripple I had no choice but to obsess over my bodily parts—those that performed as they were supposed to perform and those that couldn't perform at all.

My hands defined my life as a cripple as much as my useless legs did. It is not stretching truth to write that these hands *were* my identity. And I think about them because cripples must think about the parts of the body even if they want to bury love beneath the detritus of memory. Fixated upon the broken body the cripple looks for meaning in the absurdity of his bodily parts. The body that will not work as it was designed to work remains fascinating. One perceives beauty in the ordinary even when the ordinary fails one.

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I sit in a bathtub, searching my scrubbed palms. Like a surgeon about to make an opening incision, I study the heat-wrinkled flesh. Overwhelmed by this consciousness of my palms, struck by how attached to them I have grown, I am searching for a different perspective on life. Suddenly, I am filled with a joy so intense that it could offer Koholet himself a new slant on vanity. I feel my mind begin its latest surrender to obsession. Nothing in this world can equal this fascination with my hands.

Despite an eye that checks out checkout counter beefcake I know that a man's body doesn't belong to him alone. God made the worship of the body out of bounds not because of jealousy but because of how inadequate the body was as a symbol of worship. It's like writing about sex: either make it humorous or it is a Lawrentian squall. Like a house occupied by a benevolent enemy, the body is on impermanent lease. *Men's Health* may pledge it fealty but the readers of *Men's Health* understand that such pledges are merely vanity run amuck. Beefcake thrusts one toward an unwanted, unimagined destiny. What choice does one have but to accept the limitations not only of one's own body but of all bodies? Some clichés bear repeating: the elephant is bigger, the gorilla is stronger, the lion is swifter, the insect is more durable.

Nor is it merely to the bodies of animals that the bodies of humans are inferior. Why focus on hands if I want to praise my bodily parts? Wouldn't it be better to sing of Beethoven's deaf ears? Of Einstein's pickled brain? But hands are where obsession has pitched its tent. And we do not choose the obsessions that torment us as much as they choose us. Where else search for vanity if not in these hands that have served me so well? Joints thickening, bones turning brittle, fingernails jagged and untrimmed—does it matter as long as these hands are still recognizably mine? As if parsing *Finnegans Wake* I probe each line in the quiescent flesh of palms in the water. An

aged man is but a paltry thing, said Yeats. Paltry or not, I take pride in what I am dependent on, just as I did when I was a crutch-walking adolescent in the Bronx. I never cared about the mysteries of the flesh. What I wanted was to rejoice in the idea that life was sometimes no more than flesh against flesh, body against body, hand against hand.

As a *chaida bocher,* I thought Jacob the most human of the patriarchs. He was human and appealing in a way that neither Abraham nor Isaac seemed to be. Yet had I been Jacob I would have asked to wrestle with God Himself rather than some angel subaltern. In God's grip I might have felt even greater pride in my hands. What better way to explode into that immensity of strength than to be neither a blasphemer nor a worshipper but the opposing contestant in a hopeless if noble struggle? Does one feel shame in losing to God? God is beyond the trivia of winning or losing. It would be enough for God were I to note that the intensity of my passion for my hands first struck me on a hot August day in 1951 when I was 18 and about to enter college. The prospect of returning to that normal world from which polio had evicted me seven years earlier was more frightening than I could admit even to myself. Crutches jammed against the corner of the red vinyl booth in H&M's Luncheonette on 206th Street, I sat across from my friend, Frank Cavaluzzo. We were about to lock hands in a vise of flesh, bone, and muscle, our pledge to those comic books and pulp magazines that ministered to the needs of young men in the America of 1951. Even back then I knew that what we were doing was an example of the kind of masculine vanity that I should probably have avoided. But for some reason I couldn't even verbalize my future seemed linked to this contest. In 1951 it was still acceptable to grab for one's manhood through displays of physical prowess.

That Frank had just been discharged from the Marines added to the anticipation I felt. When I suggested that we arm-wrestle (he was reputedly the toughest arm in the neighborhood) he reluctantly agreed. There was nothing in it for Frank. But he had conditions. "We do it the way they do it in the Corps," he insisted. I had no idea of how they did it in the Corps but I watched him take two cigarettes from a pack in his shirt pocket, light each of them, then carefully place them on the tin ashtrays on the table.

Of course, I would lose. I knew that and so did Frank. Six years of walking on crutches had given me strong hands and my arms and shoulders were powerful and well-developed. But the virus had destroyed both my balance and lower back strength—and the outcome of most physical contests is to be found in the balance and lower back strength of the contestants. In 10 years a resurgent feminism would ridicule such male strutting out of existence. But male vanity flourished in the plebeian Bronx of 1951, when male vanity was still rooted to the physical. An eighteen-year-old cripple frightened of what the future held in store needed to demonstrate his strength and his determination. Win or lose, our match promised that I might yet be welcome in the world.

Is it any wonder, then, that I offered my heart to my hands? Losing legs forced me to embrace the power of arms. In my hands and arms I was to seek redemption. Maybe that was simply a cripple's narcissism. But isn't narcissism healthier than acquiescence to one's fate? And why shouldn't it be part of one's push for liberation? Right hand entwined in Frank's, sweat beading neck and brow I hunkered down, Emerson's idea of compensation stirring in my heart. (I hadn't yet read Emerson but compensation was a lesson one learns early in one's life as a cripple. Emerson merely reinforced what experience had taught.) Vanity is a gift of circumstance to all who are condemned to live with loss. With useless legs, choices are limited. I could either live with my physical limitations or I could accept the servile humility of Tiny Tim. If life really did invent itself with inevitable conditions, as Emerson said, then maybe it was possible that the cripple who survived understood life's attractions better than normal people did. Nothing, it turned out, would serve my future better than these hands eager to substitute for dead legs. As

Frank pressed my hand down toward that cigarette, passion kissed vanity. My hands were the keys to a livable future.

Narcissus eyes his reflection in the water and we condemn the pitfalls of his vanity. Yet is the story of Narcissus merely an indictment of vanity? At 18, I begged a God I claimed not to believe in for hands that might lend my life grace. Maybe it was vanity that blessed a cripple in a nation where youth is the narcotic of choice. We expect aging to liberate us from vanity, to free us from all those myths we once considered appealing. Do I actually believe that hand-wrestling Frank created a viable life for me? I don't think it now and I didn't think it then. But resurrection demands power. And in that Bronx luncheonette, I discovered the power of hands.

I used to think that a cripple needed only toughness to survive. Being tough meant that he possessed what Emerson describes as a "resistance of circumstances." It proved to be less difficult than I thought to re-mold my body by compensating for the loss of legs and I set about the task of rehabilitating my body between my 17th and 19th birthdays—years in which life was extraordinarily rich. It was a period in my life when imagination allowed me to trust my instincts and to trust my hands—and to trust them with the kind of absolute faith aging grinds down in a man. Young men can make a game out of enduring pain but the game has long since lost its appeal by the time young men become old men. Endurance may be a virtue at 18 but at 60 it is no longer proof of one's courage. Like much else in life, it is no more than a question of habit.

To endure pain and accept loss was a test of character that molded even my literary tastes. It was why I admired writers like Hemingway and Crane, who reinforced the sense that to endure in the face of adversity was a proof of virtue. In *The Long Walk Home,* my first book, I speak of Hemingway as "my nurse." For he helped get me through a difficult time in my life despite shortcomings that are now readily apparent even to me. I remain deeply indebted to him, for he taught me that loss doesn't necessarily mean the end of dignity. Neither he nor that famed "code" he created are today fashionable in a nation whose citizens are urged to "let it all hang out." Hemingway is dismissed as adolescent, which he was. But only an adolescent can provide that clarity of need and perception that we ourselves need in adolescence. Reading those stories in which stoicism lies embedded like shiny pebbles in a stream convinced me that endurance was a prize I could snatch from my physical trials.

But a young man's stoicism has little to recommend it to a man in his sixties who has cast aside any desire to make a game out of his ability to "take it." I no longer believe that my only choice is to be brave in the face of adversity or to die, and physical pain is more difficult to endure as I grow older. The idea of showing others how tough I am is as quaint as driving an Edsel or collecting baseball cards, while toughness strikes me as being as insufferable as the awful whining to which Americans now seem addicted. Nor do I still believe that pain will simply drift away, like morning fog in San Francisco, if one is "brave" and/or "manly." Pain is just another aspect of aging, as inevitable as it is uncomfortable. One has to deal with it. And deal with it I do. But it has no other significance and does not provide one with spiritual capital.

As I age I suffer not from the illusions I once imposed on myself but from the illusions the culture insists upon imposing on me. How fed up I have grown with octogenarians hurdling barriers and smiling for the television camera. I do not want a Rabbi Ben Ezra reincarnated as a graybeard jock. Life is not about winning or losing or proving one's endurance. That I still push my wheelchair two or three miles through the streets every day doesn't change the world. Nor does it define me. I am defined not by how tough I am but by my habits and my passions. I'm tired of jokes about Viagra and I'm tired of vitamin megadoses that are urged on me by physi-

cians working as television pitchmen. I will never feel 18 again and I don't think I want to feel 18 again. What I want are hands that, if arthritic and banged up, will still rally to my needs because that is what they have been doing for 57 years. I want the power of habit and the appeal of my obsession with these hands. If there is any miracle to aging, it is in how flesh, bone, muscle, and tendon still insist on doing what flesh, bone, muscle, and tendon have always done. I'll sing of Viagra when it proves as beneficial to the aging imagination as it is said to be to the aging penis. Why delude myself about the end with some chemical fix? My hands have managed until now without Viagra and without illusion, too. Stiff and arthritic, veins thickening, calluses blending into palms, knuckles scarred from the singularity of a cripple's life, I still bless these weary but undaunted mechanics of my hope because they still feed needs they have been feeding since polio took my legs in the summer of 1944.

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l e o n a r d k r i e g e l

Maybe my obsession with hands dates not from that time I lost my legs to a virus but from the day of my birth. In *The Haggadah* my stiff-necked ancestors insisted we recite on Passover, I am always struck by the portentous phrase "all the days of your life." Like all portentous phrases it demands not analysis but worship. The departure of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt is the ostensible text—but any teacher will recognize the "real" text as what is owed to the self when a man must acknowledge the debts he owes the past. "All the days of your life" means all the nights of those days as well, which is why the phrase stands at the heart of the greatest of all liberation stories. We are prisoners of the obsessions that mold us. Love, John Dewey once said, is just as real as physics—only you can't put it in a box and label it. That holds true even when the object of love is the body that must adapt to its limitations because it has no other choice. It is either adapt to it or die, accept change or shrivel up and disappear.

At 11, a virus took my legs and spared my arms in a quixotic act of mercy that turned me into a man obsessed with his hands. It doesn't seem strange that I still dream of wrapping my hands around a baseball bat or spreading fingers across the laces of a football. I don't know whether I ever really believed that my hands were special before the virus. I do know that my passion for my hands is consuming. And I don't care if hands aren't romantic or sexy in the way that the bare calves of a woman in her 30s are sexy. Among the consequences of living as a cripple is an awareness of the body that normal men and women will never know. They do not understand what is owed to the body the way we cripples do. For those of us forced to live with what has been taken away loss imprints need even upon imagination.

Rodin carved the hand of God shaping the universe. And what greater homage to hands forced to labor for the sake of need could an artist give us? Consummate passions must be consummately acknowledged. Yet how does one compare a love for hands to the love of Abelard for Heloise or Antony for Cleopatra? Is praise of hands merely a way of avoiding the bleak prospects of aging? "Let others praise you," my mother would chide when I was a child. She never met a cliché she didn't like, but that doesn't mean she didn't have a point.

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Mark Twain was once so filled with charitable fervor by a church sermon that he couldn't wait for the collection plate to pass. Unfortunately, a collection plate not passed is like a song not sung. Even a man as generous as Twain needed some sort of impetus to give. The pastor droned on, Twain's charitable impulses diminished, and by the time the plate was passed he took a nickel from it. Passions not spent may never be spent at all and, like charity, praise is best when

short and direct. "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "all is vanity." It strikes me that the Preacher was giving us the metaphorical finger with that line, but he will still get no argument from a man confessing a passion as patently absurd as my obsession with hands. No man obsessed with his hands is in a position to argue against the power of ennui. "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be," Rabbi Ben Ezra says to his wife. Well, it's still grow old or die, together or apart. Even an obsessed man understands that.

All that can be said for Emerson's "inevitable conditions" is that if a man is lucky loss may offer him the chance to make up for what has been lost. F. Scott Fitzgerald understood that as well as anyone, yet he still wrote the dumbest line in all American literature, "There are no second acts to American lives." To write that in a nation whose citizens demand not only second but third and fourth and even fifth acts to their lives is to ignore the reality one is part of. Americans are as addicted to trying on new personae as Imelda Marcos was to trying on shoes. The Sage of Concord wasn't the only American to find compensation attractive. These hands on a keyboard have not only served me well but have served me for all the days of my life—and for all the nights of those days as well.

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