

Bear Hands

by Topher Qastro

Just after I sign the credit card receipt my eyes meet with the sunglasses of a guard stationed at the entrance whose head happens points my way. He places two fingers on a radio wired into his ear. I look deeply into his lens to follow the concern in his eyes. After a few seconds I realize that he might be staring at me as I stare at him, which compels me to look away at some arbitrary point: a video game store where two punk rockers sample a complimentary console. Yet as I leave Benson's Jeweler's my curious gaze wanders again to his concrete countenance. I nod to salute him. He doesn't return it.

I'm distracted by a small chime that sounds the hour. I've marveled at my recent treasure at least seven times and I've only just left the store: the latest PolyChronics timepiece. To create this gadget, the firm launched six satellites into orbit last April which cooperate to conduct a precise survey of the Earth's position relative to the Sun, beaming the exact instant to every unit on the surface (depending on their respective zones) so that their superconducting nanocomputers can calculate the truest running milliseconds in their baby-blue crystals. It will run forever because they built photovoltaic panels into the face to casually recharge the battery. The display shows the year, month, day, moon phase, moonrise, moonset, dawn, dusk, and true noon, but I didn't choose the X6500 model that shows horoscopic calendars because I am not subject to the myths and prophecies of stars. I strap this trophy onto my wrist with a beveled band comprised of zirconium carbide links, a mineral of comparable hardness to sapphire. It functions at pressures and temperatures that would destroy a bulldozer.

But as I recite these attributes, I suddenly switch into a minor state of paranoia. I see that guard in my mind. He scraped his face so clean that it didn't leave a shadow, matched the lines of his eyebrows with the frame of his glasses, yet had no scars, freckles, or moles, and a skin tone that looked sun-starved but healthy. The memory disturbs because I have never seen anyone hold their face so thoroughly emotionless. A face unmarked and unworn. Uncannily human and uncannily machine. But now I chuckle. Why has something so insignificant haunted me until here?

Wait, where am I? Every corridor of this shopping mall has the same species of plastic plants streaming down their meridian. Above their ungated chambers hangs a full-spectrum medley of neon,

yet though all brands and labels are certainly unique, not one image, not one alcove, not one sign operates as a discernible landmark to navigate me back to level E of the parking garage. Had I known the layout of everything, I would not have parked as far as I could err on this property. I proceed on this vector for a while, attentive to places where I might find a directory or a shining green exit sign. I arrive at an intersection of separate wings and find the same vibrant and indistinguishable nonsense four times over. But a large cloud of people swarms at the far end the leftward wing, so since I suppose that left would be just as hopeful as any of the other directions, I make it my course.

As I approach, clues start to appear. Tables, queues, diners with trays, the cash registers with Pepsi cups stacked in columns of small, medium, and large. Although I can't read the menus, I can smell oil and sugar. Some of these kitchens cook tacos and chips, others blend multi-fruit smoothies or fry Szechuan chicken. For the kids they have hard-shell ice cream in vanilla, chocolate, or swirl. Of course, the classic golden arches, and there, the Starbuck's twin-tail mermaid, ubiquitous logos that anchor me to a world I know. The food court: my personal oasis. Not because I'm hungry (I had coho salmon with the Board of Directors earlier) but because I remember how I passed through it on the way to the jeweler's.

Two young girls who may be sisters approach me in the distance. The older one has beads in her hair and clashes hot pink jeans with a radiant-red jacket. She grabs the younger by the forearm of her Christmas sweater, points tactlessly at me, and then pulls her to the walking lane on the opposite side of the corridor. The younger giggles while the older shushes her angrily.

The door to a men's restroom opens and a construction worker exits. He shows me a friendly passing smile, but when he looks down at my body, he exclaims, "Hey, whoa!" and escapes by backpedaling away. His hard hat clanks against the floor. I look back to see him snatch it and flee.

A slow realization falls on me. A man has matched my pace and has been watching me for longer than I've noticed. He's got a Nietzschean mustache and desert cameo coat covered in patches for anarchy on the lapels and an upside-down US flag worn like a badge on his chest. He laughs with crooked yellow teeth, "Did you just get that?" as he points to my watch.

“Yes, not long ago,” I say.

“I’ve got the same one, except I got the twelve-inch model. You know, you can’t carry metal over two-and-a-half inches in this state. Hide it or something.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask, but he leaves in sudden haste, still laughing.

I decelerate as the human traffic thickens. Adjacent to the April’s Smoothies stand was the hallway for restrooms and the exit/entrance. But, hold on. Something feels unbalanced about my environment. Somehow I know that eyes turn toward me before I see them, that people talk before I hear them, that this scene is somehow amiss, and it worries me without knowing why. Then the details become tangible. From the nervous lull that had spread through the crowd, the hum of whispers rises. People turn to me. Muffled gasps. The scattered crowd slows. Families dining on fast food leap to their feet. A halo expands around me. I look around my immediate area, searching for the source of the commotion. The plane of tile is unremarkable, the oak benches are partially occupied by abandoned backpacks, and the immortal flora doesn’t sway, ergo the white eyes of the mass gape unmistakably at me. My briefcase falls from my right hand and my laptop clanks through the leather against the floor. I retreat backwards without looking, then forward after I collide with a trash can. The perimeter of shoppers parts for me as I pace through the arena they’ve created. Somebody’s walkie-talkie babbles in a staticky voice, and a balding man with a white shirt and a gold-threaded stitch-on badge swims to courtside. He juts his chest towards me.

“How you doing, sir?” he asks in slight condescension.

“Fine,” I say, but I am no longer fine.

“All right, sir. Did you just buy that knife?”

“Knife?” I ask, “What knife?”

“The blade, sir. Would you put it in a bag or something until you get home?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “You must be mistaken about something or... something. Excuse me.”

“Sir, I can’t let you leave like that,” he says, strafing into my intended path.

Stunned, I laser my eyes at him, “Get out of my way.”

He freezes for a second, studying me, then broadcasts to the crowd, “Everyone back away from this man,” he says, “Give him space.” He walks backwards with his arms outstretched to usher the spectators. He tries to tell a mother quietly, “You should probably get your children away from here.”

His radio squelches again. Amongst the noise it says something about, “...officer....”

“Roger,” he says, “Contact with suspect, he is armed with at least a knife, request backup.”

Once more, the grind of poor reception from his speaker.

“Ten-four.”

Picture me motionless in this crowd, the placid core of this storm: silk pearl shirt, obsidian tie with diagonal silver stripes, Armani suit, no shopping bags and holding a briefcase—no, damn it, lost, somewhere on this floor—surrounded by an a herd of mallrats, at the head of which is a pudgy guard—here are two more, both younger, one with a military haircut—and the trio forms a front facing me.

The eldest security officer says, “Sir, I need you to put down the knife.”

One of the younger security officers communicates something to the other by jerking his head. They both move opposite directions along the rim of people, flanking me along both sides. I recede from them, holding both in my peripheral vision.

“Wait for the cops,” commands the elder one.

A civilian in the crowd holds something in the pit of his leather jacket.

The guards coax me with five preset phrases. They sing an offbeat chorus of:

“No one's gonna hurt you.”

“Take it easy.”

“Put down the knife.”

“Don't do it.”

“Don't worry.”

“What's going on?” I ask, “What's the problem?”

All three radios sound in unison. The former soldier to my left has a perfectly clear speaker, on the right it's slightly worse but tolerable, and again the same crunching of the elder's off-key frequency,

and they play in unison, “Officers proceeding to wing A-G.” The distant sounds of sirens' howls amass in a daunting cacophony. I stroke my jacket, pat my pockets, my belt, twist my head to check my shoulders, then reveal the soles of my polished shoes, but my search fails to detect any contraband on or within my strictly professional demeanor.

“Hey!” they say, “Take it easy.”

“Keep your hands where we can see them.”

“He'll hurt himself,” says a baritone voice.

“I don't know what this is,” I say, “but I'm not staying here.”

I take one step and the guard screeches, “Don't come any closer!”

“Let me go,” I demand, “This is absurd.”

“Move! Move!” An officer rushes to the front row, tall and built like a running back, shaved his head two days ago but kept the mustache, bright red ears, black outfit, and a surly utility belt. Didn't know they still let police carry batons.

“Hey buddy,” he says, “Can you tell me the problem is?”

I pause, then answer, “I truly cannot.”

“Okay. Why do you have a knife in your hand?”

My hands. I half-believe it, or perhaps I believe both mutually-exclusive options fully, when I hold them in front of me. Had I acquired some blade or artifact and strutted about with it as if immune to penalty? I am innocently guilty? I exhibit my soft, uncalloused palms, the weathered creases of a billion exercises that form my lifeline, my fate line, my fortune, an acute benign mole below my left index knuckle, the fingerprints that stamp my identity on all that I touch, and then I flip my hands to scrutinize their backs, revealing only my homogenous tan which conceals the slightly paler shade of a ring (invisible to those who remain unaware of its origin and presence). Moreover, I show a fresh manicure and familiar veins, an image burned into permanent memory after decades at the steering wheel, playing the piano, or typing on a keyboard, and I never needed deliberate concentration or a mnemonic chant to know how the system of teal rivers, the topography of muscles and tendons, the

minutiae of ripples on my skin, the sensitivity of fine nerves, how the entire interdependent network wraps around the dozens of tiny bones to form a united biotic whole. These intimate hands—empty. Nothing. Bare as the virgin moon. I don't carry a knife, I didn't smuggle one in my pocket, and I didn't hide it under a pant leg. The gleam of my watch? I wonder. It doesn't show under my cuff, so I expose it by lifting my hand and letting gravity peel away my sleeve. The fluorescent and incandescent lights shimmer within the grainy black beads, but my feral instinct warns that despite pacific gestures and plain evidence they still expect contention, so this object interests them not. I hold both hands at head-level, palms out. The cop reaches to his hip and disengages the latch for his holster.

“Easy, now,” he says.

“Officer,” I say, “I'm not holding a knife.”

“In your right hand,” he says, “That knife.”

Still nothing.

“That's got to be about eight inches, which is way too long to carry in public. The serrated teeth near the rubber hilt would rip a person even wider when you pulled it out. The curve of the other edge causes the blade to slice at an angle. When sharpened, it could slip through bone with an average man's force. You can't carry a weapon like that around in public, sir.”

“In this hand?”

I wave my right hand above my head. The mass collectively yelps.

“Jesus!” he exclaims, “Stop that!”

The mother that neglected to remove her offspring vanishes.

“This guy's nuts!”

“Shoot the fucker!”

“Crazy son of a bitch!”

The cop lifts his Glock from the holster, but, after a moment, rests it in hand at his hip. The guard urges into the receiver on his shoulder, “We need a medic. The guy's attacking himself with the knife. Get some more people down here.”

“There's nothing in my hand,” I assert.

The officer is crouched in a defensive position as he slowly creeps toward me, speaking slowly and steadily, “No need to hurt yourself. How about you just drop the knife? We can talk about this.”

“I don't have a knife!”

More badges filter into the foreground, enough to mask the civilians. It's an all-male force, and although some were skinnier and some fatter than Officer Linebacker, they were all about as tall.

“Ten-four. Suspect surrounded,” say the radios, “Armed with a knife. Self-inflicted wound on his left hand. Send medic. Repeat: medical attention required.”

“What are you—” I look at my left hand. Severe slash across the back from the base of the thumb to the ring finger, grazing the pinky. I don't feel it until I see it, but within a second it climaxes; it starts as an itch, right in the bottom of the valley, then a weak ache fills the entire crevasse, until little needles blossom from its depths, and as they blossom they fuse so that the wound floods with spikes, and at last the gash becomes one enormous and unbearable sting as piercing as if the edge continued to fillet my skin. I scream. I growl. My right hand still empty. What the fuck. Stop the bleeding. Apply pressure. Right hand covers left. pressure pressure pressure pressure...

“No!” the police shout, “Don't do it!”

“Fuck!” I grunt.

“Easy man,” they say, “Don't hurt yourself worse.”

The salt from my sweaty palm sharpens the pain. I clench my teeth so hard I'll crack my jaw.

“Everyone back up,” I order, “Just—just back up.”

They back up only a little, but now they all have their guns drawn. Those directly in front negotiate with theirs lowered, but the police on either side of me aim for my cerebellum and ribcage, and will fire unless I drop a knife that I don't hold. Blood on my trousers, on the linoleum tile, on my cufflinks, on my bleached sleeves, already drying on my zirconium carbide. Stinging drowns my thinking.

“Drop it!” they say.

One hand's lain the other, holding the spill.

“What's your name? Huh? Do you want to tell me your name?”

The last spectators are shepherded into the havens of fashion and beauty stores. They only evacuate as far as they legally must: into hallways beyond the range of (un)armed madmen. Many remain within eyeshot here on the ground floor. Others rush upstairs. The upper promenade has become the VIP balcony to this scene. The non-living pupils of cameras and cell phones form a ring above me. I'm already streaming. The world can watch me live in this pit of silver shields, uniform even by the square of their jaws. I figure the event horizon is the extent of my physical reach. Once they creep that close they'll engage, lest I steal a life. I want to see the videos. I want to see this knife.

“Drop the weapon,” they say again.

“You can have it,” I say, offering my nursed and nursing hands to him, “Come get it. Take it from me.”

They glance at each other. I turn to see that those behind me have shortened their distances.

“I see you. Come on. I'll let you arrest me. No struggle.”

The anticipation of bullets in my torso is tactile, giving me a dissonant tickle from my skin to my heart.

“Set down the knife, first,” says the elder negotiator.

“Here,” I say, and extend my open palm to them, releasing the flow from my injury, “I don't have a knife and I'm not going to hurt anyone.”

I spin around. My hands are extended, one dripping, the other viscous and vacant, offering my pouring blood. They don't accept. I dare not raise my feet except to pivot another direction. No provocation, no aggressive gesture. Just me, hostage and captor, and as both parties losing.

“I can't drop the knife,” I say, “You need to take it from me.” I descend to my knees. Hands over my head. The shrieking cut soaks my sleeve. “I surrender,” I plead, “I surrender.”

The squad's eyes oscillate between me and their captain. Sweat drips over a horizontal scar from his left brow to his temple. He licks his lips. He opens his mouth to speak, but swallows his

unchewed words. The police around us step in place as if advancing but tethered.

“Keep your hands where we can see them,” he stalls.

My arms feel heavy. The wounded one doubly. It takes triple the effort to hold them up. Trickles dive under my shirt toward my shoulder.

The captain snaps his fingers. He points thrice: once each to two subordinates, then once at me. The selected officers sheath their pistols. They shuffle their feet as they approach with their hands forward. The men on the sides also pussyfoot a little closer, weapons still raised. Six meters out. Five meters. Four—

My right leg spasms; involuntary, spontaneous. It kicks out and now I'm knelt on one knee. The whole ring recoils. Everyone revives their guns.

“Hey!” they scream.

Little muscles in my foot twitch erratically, like aftershocks of that strange enchantment. My left deltoids cramps and releases. I awkwardly writhe. I place my left hand under my other armpit. Pressure on the wound. Pressure. Pressure. Pressure.

“Drop the knife!”

“Don't move!”

“I am not fucking around!”

I fling my right hand to rid it of an absent knife. I wipe it on the ground, painting the grid of granite with five strokes of blood. Then I use my Italian shoes to scrape my palm. I think about biting the illusion out of my grasp, but my left hand alerts me that this uncontrolled blade should not go near my face or neck.

“Let it go!”

“Stop that!”

“What're you doing?”

My mind dizzies and my balance tilts. I stumble. First left, then far right, bracing myself with my un(h)armed hand, then my cognition lapses and I fall backward, landing uncomfortably on my

wallet. From here they appear taller, larger. Climb to my feet. No. They yell. Stop. Here. Sitting now. Arrest me. Idle threat now.

“Not yet, let's see what he does,” I hear.

I hear the slide of a semi-automatic.

I resign control of my eyelids. I roll to my back. My stomach torques. My mouth tastes of the prelude to puking. These nauseous feelings lighten briefly, but then return stronger than before. Again they soften, then strengthen, in and out, so that this holistic sickness within me proceeds in waves, as if to tease me with hope and sobriety before churning my guts worse.

“Calm down,” they say.

Eyes foggy, teary. Voices lose tone. Legs and arms flap and flop.

“Don't do it,” they say.

Am I moving?

They say.

They say.

The sickness transitions into numbness that marinates into my deep tissue. Consciousness somersaults like a drunken spin, kneading my ill stomach with its false motion. Mind swerves, drifting in a shifting aim while draining its own weight. I dispel from my body; my soul secedes. The only awareness of reality I retain comes from two needles that pierce my chest.

From forth these prongs, an entrancing hellshock of hand-held megavolts.

Hypervivid frozen thought. Bodywide constriction.

Click click click click

It stops, and as I try to—

Blast zap stop stop stop truce truce truce mother fuckers let go of the fucking button you cunts
argh fortheloveofgod stop stopstopstop

It stops. Remain immobile.

“Hit him again.”

“No, don't—” Ggrrllggrl owowow no no stopunclemarcywhateverstopstop

Release. Fear more. Wait. Moving fingers not worth energy. Labor to breathe. Immersed in a dull sore. Half-open eyelids and overexposed retinas hurting from the rose and gray clouds in the skylight above.

“Suspect is disarmed, incapacitated, and secured,” they say.

Masculine arms roll me onto my stomach, prod elbows into my back, and yank my hands behind me. The handcuffs clip over my watch and strangle the circulation from my wrist. They grab a handful of my gelled hair and smash my nose against the stone tile. I cannot evade. I cannot defend. I can't even care. Limp as the dead when they lock me in an arm bar and raise me to my feet. I can't but let the toes of my Italian shoes drag as they haul me toward the entrance. The once-frightened crowd cheers as they carry me by, but quickly relent this jubilee after I pass.

As we approach the patrol car parked outside, someone wonders aloud, “What happened to his hands?”