Fat Fingers

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My brother Jess was bound to get hurt on the saw sometime. At least that's what Joe, my other brother said. Jess was mad that night after dinner and went back to the garage to work on the chinchilla cages. "It was just an accident," Joe said later. I wasn't so sure.

It was right before dinner, before all that happened with Jess, when I first found out what Joe wanted to do. I was on the front porch drawing flakes like I usually did when I got home. Every day that summer I would cross the highway to the desert and spend my time sifting dirt through a screen of quarter inch mesh for Indian artifacts. Mostly I found flakes — the chips snapped off during tool making. I like the andesite ones the best. If you split them, they turn black, then the air dries them back to a deep blue-green color. When I'd come home, I'd see flake shapes all over the place — an upturned canoe in someone's yard, a guitar pick sticking in the carpet.

Joe walked out on the porch with his hands pushed down in the pockets of his corduroy shorts. He'd come home for a couple of days before the genetics conference in L.A. Joe was doing research on alcoholism at a university back East, using rats to find out if alcoholism can be passed on genetically. He got interested in that because of his problem and the Old Man's.

Joe leaned against the black railing and looked at the sprinkler clicking over the dicondra. I thought of Mama whispering to me in the kitchen earlier, "I can't talk to him. He's just sitting in the back bedroom with the door closed, reading and swallowing those antacid pills." She wanted him to talk about the time in March when he drank himself into a coma. "He cut me off, Virginia. Cut me right off." She wiped her eyes with a mint green kleenex. "Felt like a fool going back and forth to the bedroom trying to carry on a conversation with him. I can't force him to talk about it." I wondered when someone in the family would. "It's too late. Better to be mother to a cat for as much as he cares." She had joined a self-study group after Joe's "possible suicide attempt" and for the past few months had been talking about communicating and expressing feelings.

Joe came over and looked at what I was drawing. I showed him how you tell a flake by the fine edge on it and the slight bulb from the
blow of a rock. He picked up some I had in the bucket of water and began to scrub them with the toothbrush, not saying anything.

I'd been thinking about going to live with Joe after I got out of high school. He needed someone. I wasn't sure if I was going to bring it up then, but he started to talk about Jess anyway. He asked me if I'd ever noticed how Jess's fingers were splayed out on the ends and the way the nails were real wide but short. "Look at his hands," he said. "Haven't you ever noticed them before?"

Jess's hands are big and freckled, with red hair on the backs and between the knuckles. One time we were fooling around on the patio with darts and I threw one at Jess that barely caught on the back of his hand. He didn't say anything, just pulled it out and threw it across the yard into the honeysuckle.

Joe asked if I ever heard of someone having a frayed gene. He said they'd be like Jess — with fingers like that, fat fingers, and that they'd be slow like him. Not exactly retarded. "A dull normal," he said, squatting down and placing the flakes he'd cleaned in a row on the cement to dry.

I told Joe I had wondered about Jess and that one time I'd told Mama how embarrassed I was of him — the way he talked like he was a kid when he was ten years older than me. I was in high school and somehow I'd grown up more than he had. "All you think about is yourself, Virginia," my mother had said, slamming the lid down on a skillet of frying hamburger. But she knew.

When Jess was in school, he'd sit at the kitchen table trying to do his homework and Mama would stand over him yelling, "Think. Why can't you think? What's wrong with you?" He'd press down hard on the paper so the print would go all the way through and make marks on the red plastic tablecloth underneath. His hand would be in a fist when he wrote — almost like he was hiding his fingers like he knew what they meant.

"I can find out," Joe said, "if he really does have a frayed gene. But I'd need a blood sample. He doesn't have to know why I want it. I don't have to tell him." Joe grabbed another handful of flakes. "I'll say it's for some experiment I'm doing."

I thought about him taking some of Jess' blood, spinning it out and looking at it under one of those high-powered microscopes in his lab. "I don't know," I said. "What difference does it make anyway?" His head was tilted down and I noticed his hair was beginning to thin. He
used to lie in bed reading and twist at strands of it.

"Don't you think it's important," Joe looked at me, "to understand why he's like he is?"

We could hear Jess out in the garage building cages for his chinchillas. I thought of his fingers wrapped around the hammer or holding a piece of wood he was cutting, and how his neck would look when he leaned forward. It's thick too. Thick like a bull's neck.

Jess spent all his time in the garage. Kept these records of exactly how many food pellets he gave each chinchilla, how much water, and the time of day he fed them. He'd put the numbers down slowly in each column. He made the columns by drawing lines that were exactly even. If they weren't perfect, he'd rip the paper out of the book, tear it into tiny pieces, then take out another sheet to put the pieces in, wad that up as tight as he could, then throw it in the trash.

"There he is," Joe said, and he turned to watch Jess walk over to the garbage cans in the alley. Joe bent down and tapped on the aluminum arm of my chair with the toothbrush. "Wouldn't you be interested to know?" he said leaning closer. "I'm going to ask him for it at dinner."

Joe stretched and rubbed his neck. He's boyishly thin, not thick like Jess. I could almost lift him. At the hospital when he was in the coma, I imagined breathing into him, then raising him up out of the bed — his freckled arms dangling as I'd carry him out of there. I thought, then, of how I used to hold on to him when he'd ride me on his motor scooter through the desert. I was five. I'd try to breathe like Joe — exhale and inhale at the same time he did.

"You could help out if Jess doesn't want to go along with it," Joe said, picking up a quartz flake and bouncing it in his hand. "You know, act like it's no big deal."

I didn't look up at him. I pretended to be flicking ants off the bottom of my foot.

At the dinner table, Jess had his fingers clenched so I couldn't get a look at them. I thought about the words "dull normal" again. About Joe looking at his blood under the microscope, and how a frayed gene would look — maybe like the edge on a dish towel that's ripped. It would seem harmless, just broken threads. I wondered if Joe would really try to get his blood.

I watched my father, waiting for him to bring up the suicide attempt. A vein by his temple moved as he chewed. I felt sorry for it
unraveling there on the side of his face. Once when I was six, I'd felt sorry for a pair of my father's bedroom slippers. He was in the hospital. We didn't talk about why he was there or why we came to look at him shaking with D.T.'s. I'd watched the floor and the way his bedroom slippers looked with him falling out of them, the toes bent up softly. He tried to kiss me when we were leaving. But he didn't know what I did. I looked away and rubbed his spit off, hard against my sleeve.

No one talked at the table until Joe asked Jess about his chinchillas and how the cages were coming along. He mentioned an experiment he was doing and that he wanted Jess to be a part of it. Joe told him he might even get his name written up in this scientific journal. That's when he asked Jess for the blood.

Jess got down on the floor to give the cat his steak scraps.

"Jess, what do you think?" Joe asked, turning around in his chair. Jess skimmed his hand over the avocado shag carpet, playing with the cat. He wouldn't say anything. "Jess, how about it?" Joe asked again.

"I don't think so," Jess said.

Joe asked him why he wouldn't, but Jess wouldn't answer him. "It's the needle," my mother said. "Jess doesn't like needles."

Joe told him it wouldn't hurt at all, and I told him it'd be okay and it wasn't any big thing.

"Then you do it," Jess said. "You go ahead and do it."

"Okay," I said. "I was thinking about it. I can do it first, then tell you what it's like. Maybe you'll think about it then?"

Jess didn't answer. He grabbed some foil from his baked potato and wadded it up to toss to the cat.

"Goddamnit, why do you have to be so stupid about this?" Joe said. Then he glanced over at me.

"I'm sick of talking about it. Leave me alone," Jess said, clenching his back teeth.

Then my mother said she'd be willing to give a sample of her blood. "No," Joe said. "I want one from Jess. I don't need one from you, or you, or you." He nodded at all of us. "I want Jess to give me it."

"But why does it have to be Jess?" she asked.

Joe got up from the table. "Why Jess?" she asked again, looking up at Joe.

"It's too much to go into."

"What do you mean?" She straightened in her seat.
Joe cracked his knuckles against the back of the chair. "There are just some things I'd like to take a look at," he said.

"What things?" my father asked.

"Shouldn't you tell Jess about it? Shouldn't he know?" my mother asked.

"I don't know." Joe looked at Jess on the floor. Jess had his head down. I thought of a picture that I'd seen in the newspaper. It was this retarded man at an Easter egg hunt. The man's head was fat, and his hair shaved up the sides. He wore a kid's cowboy hat and was looking down into an Easter basket grinning.

"Joe," I said. "Stop it. It's not important."

"What's going on here anyway?" my father asked.

"Joe, will you please tell us what this is all about?" my mother said.

Joe leaned into the table and looked past me. "He has some interesting characteristics. His fingers are unusual."

My mother sat back in her chair. "Is that it? Is that what all this fuss is about?"

"It might mean something," Joe said.

I gave him a dirty look so he'd shut up. He looked away. "You know how he had trouble in school," Joe said. "How he's always been slow? There might be a reason for it." Then he told them about frayed genes and how it wasn't like being retarded, but the person would just have some trouble.

Jess sat there and watched the cat bat the ball of foil around. His neck and face were turning red and his neck strained in his shirt. "Well it's a hell of a thing to say in front of Jess," said my father. "There is nothing wrong with him. Nothing at all. We could have done without all this. Jess, he's full of shit. Don't listen to him."

"What's wrong with knowing?" said Joe. "I could find out for sure if he'd give me a blood sample."

"What does it matter? What difference does it make now anyway?"

My mother looked out the sliding glass door at the oleander alongside the patio.

"You think you can look at your brother's hands and tell somethink like that?" My father tossed his napkin down and it dropped off the table. "It doesn't mean a damn thing."

Joe tensed up straight, then turned around towards Jess. He grabbed for his hand, but Jess pulled it away in fists like he would hit
him.

"Look." Joe pointed down at him. "Look at his finger tips. Haven't you ever noticed them?"

Jess scooted back and knocked over the potted fern behind him. "Get away," he yelled and Joe moved over by the kitchen doorway. "It could mean he was born with a frayed gene," Joe went on. "And we could find out. You don't have to hide from these things, you know."

My mother got up to get the vacuum to clean the dirt up from the plant. No one spoke while we watched her pull the vacuum out of the closet and unwind the cord.

"You think you have all the answers?" My father started in. "You think you know it all?" He began to yell when the vacuum went on. "Well I'll tell you something. At least Jess never tried to kill himself. At least he was smart enough not to try and kill himself. And don't blame it on some gene I gave you. It wasn't me who poured booze down you until you went under. Don't blame it on me." The vacuum motor was winding down, but he kept screaming.

"Jesus Christ." Joe stood there with his arms crossed. "You don't know what in the hell you're talking about."

Then my father went on saying he'd never do that to his family, no matter how bad it got. And that Jess wouldn't be stupid enough to do that either.

"That's enough of that," my mother said, slamming the closet door. "I won't have any more of it. That's enough." She told everyone to sit down in their chairs to finish dinner. Jess looked at me. I pretended I was trying to see the clock on the wall behind him.

"Now let's talk about something else," my mother said. "Forget this whole mess even happened. Erase. Erase." She made like she was holding an eraser and wiping off a chalkboard. "Jess has joined a single's club." She smiled and looked over at him. "Meeting a lot of girls?"

"Leave me alone," Jess yelled, as he went out the door to the garage.

"It was just an accident," Joe told me when we stood in the driveway after my parents had driven off to the hospital with Jess.
“Jess just goofed up. He was upset, that’s all.”

I was in my room after dinner when it happened. I heard the saw going out in the garage, then Jess yelling and come running in the back porch. The first thing I saw when I went to the kitchen was Jess lying down on the floor with one of his tennis shoes half way off. It looked like he’d just fainted and had knocked over one of the kitchen chairs when he fell. My mother was stopped over him, tying her apron around the cut on his hand. Blood was on the floor. Someone brought in a stack of bath towels, and she began wrapping up his hand with a blue one. My father was trying to wipe the blood up with paper napkins. “For Christsake, stop it,” Joe yelled. He jerked the wad of napkins out of his hand. “Just get out of here. I’ll take care of it.”

In the driveway, I noticed a streak of blood on Joe’s sleeve. “Blood all over,” I said. “Did you get a sample?” I wanted to tell him this was all his fault.

“You’re going to start sounding like them.” He looked down at Jess’ tennis shoe he had carried out. “The hell with this family.” He threw the shoe down in the ivy and went back in the house. I picked it up, twirled it by the worn shoe lace, watching it spin while I tried to decide what to do.

When I finally came inside, I walked past Joe’s bedroom a couple of times before I looked in. The door was part way open. Joe was sitting at the desk with his back to me. He looked frail now like he used to in the morning when he’d sit hunched over the table shivering. His sweater would be too big on him.

“You know it’s your fault. Why’d you have to say it in front of Jess? Didn’t you even think about that?” Joe covered something on the desk and drew it in closer to him. He looked at me over his shoulder. “I didn’t cause him to do that. You know it’s a lot more complicated than that,” he said.

“You never should have said anything in the first place,” I said. “I’m sorry it happened to him.” He looked at the shoe in my hand. “But he shouldn’t have gone out there and started working when he was so upset. Come over here. I want to show you something.”

I stood in the doorway. “Come on, come on,” he said, waving his hand. I kicked a shirt on the floor out of my way. He put his arm around my hip and brought me in closer.

“What?” I said.
He looked up at me. “I did get a sample.”
For a second I didn’t know what he meant. I saw the white slide wrapper crumpled on the desk. It didn’t look like blood on the slide. The color was flattened out and you could only see a few pale streaks of red.
“I probably won’t be able to tell anything from it anyway,” he said tapping a slide cover into place.
“You wouldn’t do that.” I stepped back from the desk where I could see all of him, the way his lips opened and shut as he breathed through his mouth and how his knuckles looked big as he fingered the slide. “You wouldn’t after what you did.”
“It was all over the kitchen,” he said. “Why not? Doesn’t it make sense?”
“You make me sick,” I said. “You had no right taking his blood. Not after what happened.”
Joe leaned back in the chair. “No one has to know what I find out, not even you.”
“Why do you have to know? What difference does it make? Mama was right — what the hell does it matter now about Jess?”
“I still think it’s important to know,” said Joe, looking down at the slide.
“I never should have gone along with you,” I said. “Jess knows what I did to him too.”
“Blame me if you want,” he said. “You didn’t do anything to Jess.”
“I went along with you. Why’d you have to tell me about it anyway?”
He hit his knuckles against the desk. “I thought I could talk to you. You’re smarter than they are. I didn’t think you’d be afraid of finding out something like this.”
“Why don’t we just forget about it? Forget the whole thing,” I said. “Fine,” he said.
A piece of ore was sitting on the window ledge above Joe. I knew how easily the slide would smash into splinters under it, then into chalky fine powder as I ground it down.
“Let’s just get rid of it,” I said.
Joe looked out the window at the neighbors getting in their car. “Would you do it for me?” I said.
“I want to find out.” Joe slipped the slide into a small wood box he had and put it in his brief case on the bed. “No reason to be ignorant.”
The brief case snapped shut.  
“That’s it?” I said. 
Joe sat down on the bed and pulled at one of the nubs on the pale yellow spread. The shadow of wisteria growing outside the window moved around on the gray brief case. “I’d never come and live with you,” I said. “I don’t know why I ever wanted to.”
“You wanted to live with me?” he said.
“I was thinking about it.”
He picked up the brief case and set it upright alongside the desk, then went over to his opened suitcase. “Why don’t we talk about it?” He started digging under some shirts and pulled out a little bottle of Dewars Scotch — like the kind you get on airplanes. “Would you like a drink while we talk?”
“I don’t want to talk about it. I thought you weren’t supposed to drink anymore,” I said.
“I do just a little,” he said walking in the bathroom. “Do you drink?” He came back with two yellow dixie cups.
“What do you think is going to happen with Jess?” I asked.
He poured the Scotch. “Try some.” He handed it to me. “I’m sure he’ll be okay. He’ll be out working on those cages again in no time. Things will go back to normal.”
“I don’t think he’s going to forget,” I said.
“I’ll tell him I was wrong, or something,” he added, his voice too loud. “Don’t worry about it.” He went back in the bathroom. I took a sip of the Scotch, shivered at the taste and took another sip, then set it on the dresser.
“You don’t care how anyone feels, do you?” I said when he came back in the room. “You don’t care about what you did to Jess.” It looked like he was about to say something. “Why did you try to kill yourself?”
Joe laughed. “I didn’t try to kill myself.”
“Did you think about me when you did it?”
“Why would I want to kill myself? It was an accident.” He started going through his suitcase again.
“I don’t believe you. You didn’t care if you saw me again or not.”
“You’re sounding very silly and very young,” he said.
“I thought coming to live with you would help you.”
Joe stood up and twisted the cap off a bottle. He was watching my reflection in the dresser mirror as he dipped a finger into his drink. “I
could understand that,” he said, watching the mirror until I turned to look. He walked over by me.

“What are you looking at?” I said.

“Look at your face.” He turned my head gently toward the mirror. “You’ve got a nice face. Did you know that?” He ran a finger down my cheek.

“Don’t.” I turned away.

“Relax,” he said, grabbing the back of my neck. “Why don’t you just relax about everything?”

“Don’t do that,” I said moving out of his reach. “I don’t want to be touched.”

“Have some of your drink. You’ll feel better. Believe me,” he said. “I don’t want the drink. I want to know why you wanted to kill yourself.”

“Don’t be asinine,” he said. I watched him in the mirror stretch out on the bed and shut his eyes. I thought of him in the coma. I had wanted to shake him, to snap the wires hooked to his arms. I would have run my fingernails deep into his skin until he’d hurt, until he could hear me calling for him. Even now, that wouldn’t be enough.

Joe lay there holding the cup of Scotch on his stomach. His eyes rolled under his pale lids. “You didn’t care how I felt,” I said. I waited for him to tell me again it was an accident what happened to him. And to Jess, just an accident. No one to blame. I waited. His face looked relaxed. His lips, soft, a little open as if he were about to sleep. I felt the slight weight of Jess’ shoe in my hand and suddenly wanted to throw it at him. I wanted to see Joe’s eyes open, the way he would look at me. I wanted to see blood come quick to his mouth from something more than just that shoe in my hand.

I ran out of the room. He didn’t look up. I left the house and went down to the garage where the table saw was still going. If Jess had lost a finger, I thought, I probably would find it right there in the sawdust.

I noticed the record book on the bench opened to a fresh page of even lines. Jess had dripped blood on it. Big splotches that wouldn’t soak into the slick paper. I ripped out the page and tore it up.

I wondered if Joe would walk in. He’d be leaving the next day. After he was gone, I’d still go in his room and look around for anything he had left.

I started thinking about when Joe and I used to ride on that motor scooter in the desert. Joe would wear his shirt that was light pink with
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silvery threads — the kind Elvis Presley wore, he’d say. It would shimmer out there in the sun. I’d feel his back, hot, through the shirt. If I could breathe like Joe, I used to pretend, the ride would never be over. I could be with him and the desert would keep on going.

Goddamn Joe anyway. I stood there. Blood was on my feet and the wood shavings kept sticking.