

FIRST PERSON //

These Hands

■ BY SARAH STANKORB

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We were packed into the rec room at my great-uncle Lawrence's farm for my grandmother's funeral. Eighty years old, Lawrence was mostly bedridden, so in folding chairs and at his bedside, we gathered to tell stories and look at long-faded pictures. We sang hymns the older generations knew by heart.

As one wavering hymn rose from our ranks, Lawrence's eyes began to well up with tears. Sitting next to him on the edge of his home hospital bed, I felt the bed frame shake. His weeping was quiet, respectful. But as the rest of him filled with emotion, his legs began to tremble uncontrollably. I recognized the symptom—when under strain, my own unstable nerves give way too.

The hymns grew louder, mournful. I glanced at my mother. Over the previous five years, she had magicked a reserve of strength I hardly understood as she cared for her disappearing mother. Grandma had first broken hips, but then as the dementia set in, forgotten my mother completely, lost the ability to speak, and finally had been reduced to that most unforgiving state—a barely functioning body, eyes open but vacant, a dreamy void.



But then, finally, at the memorial, I saw my mother begin to break at the edges.

Her hands never stop moving—even when I held her hand as a child, I felt the restless jump of its tremor in mine—but as we sang, her arms began to jump as if plucked by strings. I saw her grief in her waves of uncontrollable, jerky gesticulations.

I glanced down at my own clasped fingers, and noticed with surprise that they rested tremulously atop a leg that was keeping its own time.

There we were, in vibrating togetherness—all awash in life's commonest tragedy—and with the signs of our inheritance most apparent, undeniably connected. Our brokenness had a sort of healing quality. This was it. This was family.

I don't know the genetic marker for our movement disorder, and I don't know why I inherited dystonia while my cousins didn't.

So on the day my son was born, I not only studied him carefully as any new mother would, wondering whether he would keep breathing if I looked away, how someone so small could possibly cry so loudly, I also kept watch to see if his hands might tremble or if his voice would quake like mine. In my imagination, I see this baby become a little boy who doesn't understand why he can't run as fast as the other children. I see him being teased for a funny voice that he can't control. My heart breaks over and over for these tiny fictions, and I understand why my own mother so frequently apologizes for giving me the condition I have.

I love my own mother no less for the genetic gifts she has passed down to me. It's a mixed pot of bad nerves and good temperament. I recognize with that everyday horror that I am turning into my mother—with her silliness, her rages and her shaky hands.

Our son has my husband's hands—they are meaty, shaped for work, all the way down to the fingertips—but then, they are also mine. They are my mother's. And that middling space, that slope between father and mother, might mean the difference for him. I touch those delicate fingers with mine and know he is ours. And with a ghostly recognition, know that, years from now, when my own mother is gone, I will see her in his fingertips. They will be his, and they will be ours, and in their movements, I will see the shadow of a strong and quiet legacy. ■

