

David Priol

TWO HANDS

Juan Osmaldo married Concetta because she possessed the most delicately wrought hands he had ever seen. Long gossamer fingers, first heard caressing his uncle's piano when they were still teenagers. He recalled those happy days fondly and often.

The room was primarily shadow except for the dull glimmer of the bare bulb hanging loosely from the concrete ceiling. Juan knew next to nothing about this square room apart from the video-camera secreted in the wall, although he often worked inside its grimy confines. Also present was one guard armed with a rifle while another, unarmed, stood ready to assist him whenever necessary.

Juan Osmaldo knew all he required about the room simply from the horrendous smell. The room was sodden with the stench of urine and disinfectant. The urine always won. Juan did not like this room, but he never complained. In reality, he never spoke at all unless spoken to; he thought this the wisest course of action.

Most of his time was spent waiting in his dingy office in the stucco building across the parade ground. Over there he would drink endless cups of coffee and wait for the black phone to ring on his battered metal desk. He would hardly need to pick up the receiver—only one office had his phone number. They did not need to explain his task a second time.

Then he would put on his jacket and march over to the main building. Inside, the soldiers on guard would studiously ignore him, but he understood this, just as he understood their fear. These men had been in similar situations and knew how quickly circumstances could change. These changes were never for the better.

After signing the register, Juan would pass through double iron doors and descend the stone steps into the basement. Without a sideways glance, he would pick up a single manilla folder from the guard station where he would spend fifteen or more minutes checking the contents before knocking on the large iron door. Inside would be the two guards and a third man. Occasionally, he would find a woman sitting there. It made little difference.

On the opposite side of a large table, the guards would have seated the man so his back faced the wall. Like statues, the guards would flank him. On the table

would be a steel box, a carafe of water and a single tumbler. Usually the man would sit head bowed, leaving Juan to view a mop of dirty hair above ragged grey threads. Many men had worn these putrid rags. Juan thought he could smell every one of them.

Juan's moves were slow and deliberate as he would pull the chair forward and square its metal legs with the table. On the tabletop, he placed the folder at a precise angle to the edge. Above it, he would place his pen, below—when he was ready—he rested his expensive Omega watch. This accomplished, he sat and quietly bided his time.

He would patiently sit there until the man finally raised his head. Some of them looked up almost immediately, others took fifteen or twenty minutes. When they did, he would open the folder and make a note on a fresh page. Usually they looked down again, sometimes they spat and Juan would need to write on a fresh piece of paper. The two guards never moved—they knew better. Nor would they speak, they knew their roles and played each scene implacably.

Juan wasn't a talkative man and asked only trivial questions—the answers already known and unimportant. Bland requests: names, addresses, occupations, relationships of friends and family. These questions lasted exactly thirty minutes. Once concluded, the door would open and another guard would carry in a tray of coffee and biscuits. The soldier would methodically lay out the table; spoons, plates, sugar, cream, everything set out on a fine white linen cloth.

After inspecting the fine china cups against the light—as if checking for infinitesimal cracks—Juan would pour two cups. He would ask the man if he liked cream and sugar. He would smile and tell the man to help himself to extra sugar; three spoonfuls, four, doesn't matter. Dunk your biscuit. We are very informal here. Enjoy.

This lasted fifteen minutes before the door opened and the entire process was reversed. Seven times out of ten the man would have bowed his head again. This time was no exception. Juan made another note in his folder. This minor task achieved, he opened the large metal box sitting on the table. From inside he pulled out what looked like a bib, a flat piece of metal and a large hammer.

Rising from his chair, Juan moved around the table and knelt before the man. The smell was appalling, but Juan held his breath as he placed the bib around the man's chin. He was so close, he could see the flecks of spittle meshed in the man's unshaven face. The man's skin was yellow and the high cheek bones appeared ready to break through rotting flesh. Juan finished tying the bib and retook his seat.

He then asked the man to place his hands on the table. Juan wrote down the man's reaction. He repeated the order. This time he was looking at the guards as he spoke. They did not move, but the man put his hands on the table. Juan placed his own hands over them as if comparing their relative merits. They were fine hands, Juan told him. Long lean fingers without callouses; half moons despite long fingernails and a lack of implements to care for them. Hands made for holding a pen, Juan said as he stroked each.

Then he took the flat piece of metal and rested it gently across the man's left hand. He might have been handling a rare piece of crystal, for he carried out the task so attentively. Again he waited. The man was no longer looking down; their eyes melded. Juan read the rear and anguish and shrugged lightly, as if to say this was unavoidable. It was. Reaching to his right, Juan took up the hammer and waited for the man to pull his hand away.

The man didn't move for a moment, until he saw the hammer rising above shoulder height. The only noise was the metal plate clattering onto the metal table top. The sound seemed to last an eternity. Still the guards did not budge. Now Juan poured himself a glass of water and slowly swallowed the contents. When it was empty, he placed the cup on the table and told the man to put his hand back on the table. Again he placed the metal strip over the man's hand.

The four of them heard the sound of the hammer smashing downwards. They listened to the man's scream as if he were attending a music recital. Even the man appeared detached by shock, despite the agonised expression shrouding his face. He tried not to look at his hand, but failed. Juan told him to put the metal back on his hand. The man stared in disbelief. This time the unarmed guard moved forward and completed the task with a minimum of fuss. The man jerked away until the guard whispered into his ear.

Thus, Juan repeated the task. On the third and fourth occasions bones could be heard cracking under the extreme pressure of the hammer. At this point, Juan took a piece of silk from the box and placed it into the man's mouth to silence the screams. Breathe through your nose, he told the man kindly. Then he returned to work. As on every previous occasion, Juan rationed the man to fifteen blows. Fifteen blows in fifteen different parts of the hand.

When this stage finished, Juan would allow the man to sit quietly for twenty minutes. After that he would remove the red silk material from the man's mouth and push the pad and pen over to the man. Nine times out of ten the man (or woman) would begin writing. Rarely would they stop for two or more hours as they related every detail of their recent existence.

On the few occasions when they refused the opportunity to write, Juan would be forced to repeat the exercise on the other hand. Once set on this course he would never stop before administering twenty-five blows. The unarmed guard worked much harder during these sessions.

If memory served Juan correctly, four men and two women had chosen this option, to their cost. In the end they proved their courage, but achieved nothing. Juan knew that these people had not survived. Their very courage had demanded their permanent removal—quietly and with a minimum of fuss. Sudden disappearances were easily explained and martyrs were actively discouraged.

Survivors were too shamed by guilt to make a fuss of their wounds. Would their comrades sympathise with their betrayers? Juan did not think so, but he did not give it much thought. He did not deal with these prisoners and, knowing the men who did, had no desire to entertain their fate.

Therefore, when the man had inked the pages with information and Juan felt satisfied that he had omitted nothing important, Juan returned the tools to the metal box, removed the soiled bib from the man's neck before closing the folder. The guards, recognizing their cue, would stand the prisoner up and march him back to his cell.

Juan would leave the room, listening to the clank of the metal door slamming shut before signing the register upstairs. Then he would screw up his eyes in anticipation of the bright sunlight outside. He would stand in the dusty parade ground momentarily allowing the sun to heat his bones. Then he would spend forty minutes making out a report before despatching it to his immediate superior's office.

At home, he would kiss his wife's cheek and ask about her day. She would chirrup about the cost of food or their son's Confirmation. If that did not gain her husband's attention, she would complain about his sweat-ridden shirts or why he sometimes got specks of blood on his shirt-cuffs.

Juan would only smile as she went through a long list of complaints. He knew that when she had finished this daily ritual that she would walk over and kiss him softly on the lips before helping him to remove his clothes. Sometimes on those rare occasions when their son and daughter were away, she would lead him through to the washroom in the backyard and gently bathe his body. He liked this very much and would stand very still as she soaped his body before taking the ewer to rinse the soap from his body.

After she had finished, he gazed at her long fingers, surprised at how much they had changed over the years and equally surprised that he had failed to notice. He told her that he would buy her some very beautiful gloves. Patent leather gloves just like all those very fine ladies from the town wore to Church every Sunday.

Moving languidly, Juan hid Concetta's hands inside his own elegantly shaped hands. Momentarily stopping to admire their fineness, he also considered what colour those wonderful gloves should be. He felt unnerved by his indecision until Concetta said she preferred red. He let the matter rest as he took her two hands in his and led her inside the house to enjoy the meal she had cooked.