

2003

Hands

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Published In

Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2003). "Hands." In R. P. Clair (Ed.), *Expressions of ethnography: Novel approaches to qualitative methods* (pp. 175-176). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

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Hands gripping the pay phone receiver, stretching the skin taut across my knuckles, I ask, “How bad is it?”

When my father hesitates, travelers’ boots seem to cease clopping on the airport tile floor. “He could go today,” Dad says.

Holding my composure, I tell him, “I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay. See you--”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he replies. “See you at the hospital.”

I walk briskly to the ground transportation counter. “Hastings,” I tell the man. “I’m in a hurry.”

His double snap signals a driver, who nods and hustles over to grab my bags. The hailer opens a back door for me. Climbing in, I tell the driver, “Regina Hospital, please.” We speed toward the airport exit.

As urban interchanges and road signs whiz by, I sit twirling and pulling dry skin from my lips. At last, we cross the bridge separating the Twin Cities from Hastings and ascend the long,

¹ Cite the published version as:

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steep hill whose summit holds Regina. The driver pulls up to the entrance and fetches my suitcases. I lay 55 dollars on his open palm and rush inside.

“Intensive care?” I query, moving past the receptionist.

“Third floor,” she responds. I scurry to make the next elevator.

Once upstairs, I pass through double doors leading to the ICU. “Harry Tillmann?” I ask the staff nurse.

“Across the hall, 367.”

I enter quietly, thinking he may be asleep. His weary eyes open immediately. “Oh, ooohhh, Lis,” he says through a foggy oxygen mask.

I gently settle on the edge of his bed. “I missed the wild Wisconsin winter,” I tell him, grooming his patchy white hair with my fingertips. “Florida’s much too mild in January.”

“*Right*,” he says, smiling a bit. He blinks away tears, and we sit together, him gasping for breath with his fluid-filled lungs, me caressing his unsteady hand, sliding my fingers along the spaces between his.

I stare at the 80 years ingrained in my grandfather’s hands. Culinary hands that kept enlisted men fed in the second World War. Supple hands that stroked my grandmother’s raven hair. Strong hands that repaired the old dam restraining the eager Mississippi. Calloused hands that constructed my father’s childhood home on Elm Street. Proud hands that cradled his three boys, and later, eight grandchildren. Paternal hands that carved holiday turkeys. Nurturing hands that cultivated the garden soil that burst open every spring in symphonies of crimson and marigold. Tired hands soothed by sweating glasses of lime Kool-Aid. Forgetful hands that rattled the cup of Yahtzee dice for one too many turns. Aging hands stained with the burgundy of exploded blood vessels. Incurable Parkinson’s hands that played invisible pianos as he sat in his napping chair, watching “wrestling.”

From behind me, I hear, “Lis?”

“Dad!” I respond, standing up.

My father approaches and pulls me to him. We then drag chairs to opposite sides of the bed

and sit down, each taking one of my grandfather's quivering palms.

I glance across the bed. Neighboring the crooked pinky my father broke playing basketball, his \$15.00 wedding band glistens under the florescent lights.

I look from his hands to my grandfather's to my own. Wide nails, unruly cuticles, short, stubby fingers, prominent veins--Tillmann hands, to be sure. No Sally Hansen models here.

My grandmother shuffles in. She leans down, and I kiss her waiting cheek. We steeple our palms and begin to pray.

* * *

Four days later, I clutch the side of the mahogany bed as my father strokes the satin that envelops his father's body. Looking down, I see them. Scrubbed clean. Caked with foundation. Folded, one into the other, and wrapped with an onyx rosary. I reach over. Mine, atop my father's, atop his. Perfect, enjoined, hands.