

Dad with six fingers.

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To tell you my story, I have to begin with my father. His name was Carl. For a long time, he worked for the government in a secret building underground. I think his office was in the sub-basement of a skyscraper in Manhattan. But he never told me exactly. He also never told me what he worked on. I am pretty sure he worked in a science lab discovering important and amazing things, secret things that the government wanted to keep for its own use.

One day he came home with a giant acid hole in his shoe. The entire front half of his shoe was gone. He seemed happy about it. Whatever had melted his shoe must have been an exciting discovery.

When I saw the damage, I was worried about his foot, but he said that he always wore Kevlar underwear, especially socks, because you never know when you might drop something nasty on your foot.

“Dad,” I said. I was only seven at the time. “Should I wear Kevlar socks too? What if I spill grapefruit juice on my foot?”

“Don’t worry about that, Jem,” he said. Jem was short for Jeremy. “The compound I spilled today is a lot more interesting than grapefruit juice. In fact it burned right through the bottom of the flask, which is how I spilled it.”

“What was it?” I said. “What were you trying to make?”

“Oh, never mind that,” he said. “Tell me about your day at school.” He always changed the subject whenever I got too nose-y about his work.

A year later he came home with an extra finger on his hand. I didn’t even notice at first, because it grew very naturally next to his pinky finger just as if it was meant to be there. I saw him looking at his hand in satisfaction, curling and uncurling his fingers, but I didn’t see anything wrong. At dinner, we sat down to eat our hamburgers together. When he reached for the ketchup bottle, I finally noticed.

“Dad!” I said sharply, dropping my hamburger onto my plate. “What happened to your hand?!”

“Noticed, have you?” he said, grinning.

“You have an extra finger!”

“That’s true,” he said, grinning even more. He had a handsome face, a narrow straight face with

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a high forehead and black hair that was beginning to disappear on top. He didn't often remember to get his hair cut, and it usually hung down around his neck and got mixed up with his collar. He had a fiery gleam in his eyes that probably looked slightly insane to people who didn't know him. I liked him best when he was grinning, because a dozen wrinkles would appear on his cheeks out of nowhere, bracketed one within the next like parentheses, and his face would look mischievous.

"It's not a bad match to the other five," he said, holding out his hand for me to see.

"Do you have one on the other hand too?" I asked.

"Nope," he said, holding up both hands for comparison. "Just one, today. But Jem, I bet if you had an extra finger, you wouldn't have dropped your burger like that."

"Dad," I said, making up my mind about it, "it's totally gross."

His eyes opened wide and he looked at me with mingled hurt and astonishment. "What do you mean, *gross*? It's fantastic! Don't you understand?"

I had to admit, it was pretty remarkable. Not too many people could grow an extra finger like that. My dad was a genius; I was sure of that. All the same, I liked to bait him sometimes. I liked to make fun of him just to see his reaction. I didn't want him

to get really upset, but I wanted to tease him a little. So I said, "Dad, people aren't *supposed* to have six fingers on their hands."

"Not supposed to. . . . People aren't. . . ," he sputtered, sitting back in his chair and staring at me. Then he leaned forward and began to talk very fast and earnestly. "Jem! How can you say that! Where's your imagination? Do you think Leonardo said, 'gosh, people aren't supposed to fly, so I'll just give the whole thing up'? Do you think he said that? Do you?"

Leonardo da Vinci was my dad's primary hero. Everything came back to Leonardo sooner or later. Dad even had a picture of da Vinci framed over his bed. It was a copy of a charcoal drawing that the artist had done himself, looking into a mirror when he was an old man, and the face was lined and hairy and strange. The eyes were the same as my dad's eyes. Thoughtful, deep, and slightly insane. I used to think it was a picture of my grandfather; and in a sense it was. The spirit of Leonardo had helped to shape my father's mind.

"Everyone else," my father continued, "all those ordinary people with little brains, they said that people weren't supposed to fly. Only birds were supposed to fly. They thought Lenny was crazy. Why would he want to turn himself into a bird? But no. He wasn't crazy. He invented the helicopter. Did you know that?"

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“Yes, Dad, actually I did know that,” I said, realizing that I had started him up a bit more forcefully than I had intended. But he didn’t even hear me. He kept right on going. I was doomed to another dinner lecture on Leonardo, so I picked up my hamburger and decided to make the best of the meal. My dad did have a point. It is not easy to pick up a large juicy burger in a large bun, with lettuce and pickles and tomatoes piled inside precariously. An extra finger might have stabilized it better.

“Everyone else,” my father raged, his eyes beginning to bug out, “said he was crazy. But he didn’t care. He invented the airplane. Did you know that? And the bicycle. He drew a bicycle in his notebook, gears and all. And the windmill. And the light bulb. Did you know that? Did you know that he—”

I almost dropped my burger again. I had never heard that one before. “The *what?*” I choked. “It can’t be. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb.”

“Ah ha!” my father said, realizing that he had got to me. It was a game to us, to see if we could spark a reaction out of each other. “So he thought, old Eddie did. But there it is, in one of Leon’s notebooks. A drawing of a light bulb. I saw it myself.”

“It’s impossible,” I said. “There wasn’t any electricity back then. That was five hundred years ago.”

“Well, okay,” he admitted. “Maybe it was a drawing

of a bat brain. I think it might have been. But it sure looked a lot like a light bulb. And you can be sure, if he had lived another ten years, he would have invented a nuclear powered spaceship. He was working on it, you know.”

“Come on, Dad. He was not.”

“The point is,” my dad said, “there’s no limit to imagination, except the heavy-duty cinder block walls people put around it themselves out of sheer silliness. So *don’t* tell me a person’s not supposed to have six fingers.” He crammed his burger in his mouth and glared at me as he chewed.

The next day his extra finger was only half as long as a normal one. I saw him staring at it anxiously. The day after that, it was gone, and he was quiet and moody for the rest of the week. He obviously saw his experiment as a failure. I didn’t ask him about it because I knew he felt bad and I didn’t want to make him feel any worse.

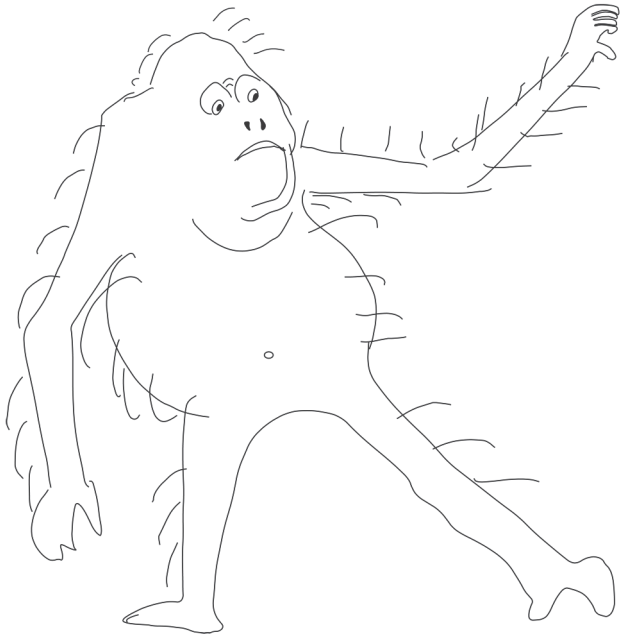
After the incident with the finger, nothing very strange happened for another few years. At least, nothing strange that he brought home from work. Probably lots of strange things happened in his secret lab. Then when I was ten years old, Dad came home from work and called out to me while he was taking off his jacket and boots in the front vestibule. It was a snowy day, and he had walked about two blocks from the nearest subway station.

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“Jem!” he said cheerfully, banging the snow off his boots. “Don’t panic! Don’t be afraid! Might be a bit of a shock at first. But you’ll get used to it, I’m sure. Can you hear me?”

I came running from my bedroom. I didn’t know what he had done to himself. Had he lost a foot for real? Had he grown fingers all over his face? I was worried because I knew that just about any calamity, the kind that would devastate most people, would probably excite him. His voice had so much enthusiasm this time that I expected a major disaster.

I pulled open the door in the kitchen that led to our vestibule, and then I froze. My dad was not there. Filling the vestibule, looming seven feet tall and five feet wide, stood an orangutan, its orange fur standing out all around it like the corona of the sun, a clump of snow on its head, its beady black eyes glaring down at me out of a wide, hairless, wrinkled, hideous gray face. Its lips sneered back, exposing its yellowed fangs, and it said, “What do you think?”



Dad's new look.