

Silvermesh

By

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The hospital appointment card floated into the bin like a mini Concorde. The envelope it came in had URGENT written in red letters front and back. I scrunched that into a ball and flung it with the other rubbish. It was four thirty. Katie was due home in an hour. I rolled up the dressing gown sleeve on my right arm, picked up the loaded syringe and pressed the needle against the flesh above my wrist, just past the Silvermesh join.

Silvermesh – my perfect hand, like a mercury glove. After the operation, I thought of it as my bad hand, as if the mashed remains of my bones hid under the metallic sheen. I couldn't move it, just lay watching it twitch for a week. The doctors said full sensation should return. They were right about that at least. Then it became my good hand, my stronger, better than new, superhuman hand. I could crush a three-by-four beam, yet still feel the soft hairs on the small of Katie's back rise up at my touch. Now it wasn't good or bad, just spreading.

I pushed the needle into my vein. Heroin loaded my system and I dropped back on the bed. Junkie Joe saves the Silvermesh kid again.

"Clint? You home?"

The ceiling spoke and my eyes opened. "Shit." I rolled off the mattress and swept the needle and gear onto the floor and under the bed. The strap around my bicep slipped off easily. I shoved it into the bin and pushed the appointment card and envelope to the bottom then slumped back against the dresser. The door opened and Katie came in, her long streaked hair wet on her shoulders.

"Bloody Belfast traffic doesn't know if it's coming or going. It just sits there. Like we never get rain for Christ's sakes." Her head tilted sideways. "You all right? Back early again?"

I pushed myself up. "I was tired, I took a shower."

"So I see." She sidled over to me, slipped her hands through the join of my dressing gown and around my waist. Her teeth pressed down on her lower lip. "Are you hungry?" She kissed me before I could say no. Her hands moved lower and she kissed my neck. "Are you hungry, carpenter man?"

"I'm kind of tired still."

She pulled back and tightened my dressing gown around me. "Sure." She sat back on the bed and nodded at my hand. "What's it like today?"

"No different."

"Let me see."

"Why?"

She folded her arms, giving me the “Katie don’t take no for an answer” thing. That’s how she topped the sales league every other month. The day I walked into her shop, I didn’t even need a new mobile phone. That was a long time ago, before the accident.

I offered her my hand, the gown sleeve still half rolled up my arm. She gripped it with one hand like she was going to pull a thorn out, but her other hand smoothed gently over the sleek material up to the join. Her eyes studied it and her fingers traced the wavy line where flesh began. I couldn’t imagine the Silvermesh felt the same to her as it did to me. Like it would be cold or something?

There was no ridge or reddening at the join. At a glance people used to think I had painted my hand. Then the procedure became more common. Silvermesh, the perfect solution for all your extremities, once upon a time.

“You picking at that cut?” She tapped the dot of smeared blood where I’d injected.

“Yeah, couldn’t help it.” I wanted to tell her the truth, but I needed more time. “The spreading has stopped though, hasn’t it?”

“It seems to have stopped.” She lifted my hand and kissed the smooth palm.

“Now, do you want a cup of tea before I order pizza?”

“Love one. And so good of you to go to the trouble of cooking. You really didn’t have to.” She pulled off her ankle boots, sat back on the bed and opened a drawer on her bedside table. Out came a packet of cigarettes and the joint tin she bought at Glastonbury. It was decorated with a huge ganja leaf and dancing mushrooms.

“Do you not want to come into the kitchen?”

“No, I’m going to have a smoke here if that’s all right? You’re not the only one who’s tired you know?” She popped the lid, fished out some papers and licked the end of one. “Sorry, I’m tired as well. Are you making tea?”

I nodded, not wanting to go, with my stuff under the bed, but not able to loiter either. I left her to it and walked to the kitchen.

I filled the kettle and flicked it on. Katie liked a smoke and booze and nothing else anymore, I didn’t even smoke. We’d left our party nights behind long before the accident and most of our friends wound down at the same time. But there were always ones like Joe. He got into the junk. I bumped into him a month ago, on the way back from the hospital. He’d moved in a couple of streets up. I hadn’t seen him in a few years, but that was the way with Joe. He laughed at me when I told him I didn’t even smoke anymore.

He asked me how the hand was doing and I told him about the spread. Why not? I wouldn’t have left him alone in my house and Katie wouldn’t have him in at all, but he was a friend from way back and that still meant something. He nodded, all serious, like Joe doesn’t do and said he’d heard about that problem. He said he could help me.

Steam bubbled from the kettle. My bloody eyes were welling up. Stupid.

“What the fuck is this?”

Katie stood in the doorway, the flattened out letter in her hand.

“It’s nothing.” Stupid.

“Nothing?” She quoted it: “With the recent wave of rejections, it is important that all early participants in the Silvermesh program contact the hospital immediately.” She marched over and slapped the paper on the counter top. “What the hell are you doing?”

I held out my hand, the glisten gone in the dark room. “It’s stopped hasn’t it? I don’t need to go and see them.”

“We don’t know if it’s stopped. It’s been a month.”

“I know what they’ll say.”

“You don’t know that for sure, there’s maybe a treatment we don’t know about that will stop it. And what the hell are you doing lying about it, when was the last time you saw Dr. Boyle?”

“That time, a month ago. I told you what he said. If it’s spreading, amputation is the only option.”

“Then that’s what you’ll have to do.”

I stared at her. “It’s stopped. I know it has. You’ve seen it too.” She didn’t understand. She tried but she couldn’t and I didn’t want to make her. I didn’t want her to have to understand.

“We’ll manage. Together.” She tried to touch me and I pushed her back.

She stepped away. “You’ve got to go and see Boyle. It’s the only thing to do.”

“Jesus Christ, I know what he’ll say.” My hand balled into a fist and I drove it down on the paper. The counter top splintered from the blow. “Don’t you get it? He’s a surgeon and I’m a test case. He probably can’t wait to cut it off and take a look? He’ll do it even though it’s stopped spreading, just to be on the safe fucking side. Don’t you understand that?”

Katie stood still. She didn’t shout back, she didn’t cry. She didn’t deserve this.

“You’re bleeding,” she said.

I looked at my hand. It stung from the impact, like I’d slapped my palm against a wall. A trickle of blood ran from a cut on my forearm, above the wrist. The Silvermesh didn’t have a scratch on it. My legs felt weak, the adrenalin draining from my system mixed with the comedown.

“You don’t understand.” I couldn’t look her in the eye. Outside a horn blasted twice, someone’s taxi had arrived.

Katie glanced at the window as if it was for her. “We’ll talk about this later. I’m going out.” She grabbed her car keys and her coat. It was still wet, must have been a downpour.

The needle and smack looked all wrong on the kitchen table beside a bowl of oranges. It was medicine – I had to keep thinking of it like that. Heroin used to mean dead rock stars or the grey ghosts shivering in side streets. From the sublime to the ridiculous, don’t ask me which way around. Now party kids took a rap to ease the come-down, or mixed in crystal meth for the ultimate sex. There was no reason I couldn’t handle a once a day fix. But there were still dead rock stars and still plenty of hollowed out street addicts.

It was after ten when the front door opened and Katie came in. She stopped. Her eyes went from me to the stuff on the table and back to me. She shook her head and opened her mouth to speak.

“Wait, sit down. I need to tell you about this, please.”

She dropped her bag, dragged out a chair and sat. Her jacket had dried off but her eyes looked red. I told her the truth. I’d been using the smack once a day and only once, for the last month. I told her about meeting Joe and how I didn’t believe him. Then I told her I’d looked it up on the internet. There were a few places it said the same thing. Desperate success stories by others like me. I told her it wouldn’t get any worse – the drug. I told her I could control it.

“I’m sorry I lied to you.”

She sat a long time and stared at the bowl of oranges. She breathed in deeply and rubbed her face as she blew it out. Her hands spread. "The internet? Junkie Joe? Do you hear yourself?"

"I know, but I'll show you it. There's this one forum with a load of people doing the same thing. It works for them too. There's one guy had his feet and hands cut clean off on a fairground ride. He got the operation and has Silvermesh spreading from all corners. Except he's letting it happen, giving off about everyone using drugs. He thinks he's going to be superhuman. He calls himself the silver surfer." I laughed, like it was a joke that had nothing to do with me.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he's the crazy one, going on about using drugs." I picked up the plastic bag with its brown crumbs. "It is a drug, just a drug, like all medicines. But no doctors going to prescribe it are they? They can't have a load of people getting addicted after it was the doctors put us in this position."

"So you're going to be a junkie the rest of your life?"

"No, I can handle this. One hit a day is stopping the spread, is that so bad?"

Her eyes said it was worse than bad. "I don't know."

"Neither do I, but let's try this." I held up my hand. Sometimes, in lamp-light like this, it sort of looked bronze, as if there was a statue somewhere missing a right hand. "I can't work with one hand."

"You can carve with your left."

It was a repeat of how we talked when the hospital gave me the option of Silvermesh.

"I make furniture, not sculptures. You know that."

She nodded, then after a moment her fingers stretched out, as if she was about to grab for the needle. She pulled her hand back into her body and closed her eyes. "Okay then." She opened them and pointed at me. "Once a day, and we check you every morning. If it moves even a millimeter more up your arm, that's it, you go and see Boyle. Promise – now."

Tears formed in her brown eyes. The bag of smack was still in my grip. I set it on the table and covered it with my hand.

"I promise."

The shops were shut by the time Joe had sorted me out so I stopped at our local to get Katie some cigs. The place was quiet but the barman served three people who came in after me.

"Hey, packet of Silks over here," I said.

He looked over, then past me at the widescreen blaring out news, then nodded to me as if I'd just come in. My arm itched at the elbow but I wouldn't rub it in here, I had enough paranoid shakes as it was. I caught my reflection in the mirror and looked away, over to the widescreen. I'd seen the news three times already but couldn't pull my eyes away. It was the item on the death of the silver surfer. Multiple organ failure, once the Silvermesh invaded his torso. Six months ago he thought he was going to become immortal and tomorrow he'd be yesterday's news. The old guy next to me at the bar avoided my eye, coughed and moved away.

"It's not contagious, you know?" I held my hand up and tugged my jacket sleeve. He shrugged and took a seat at a table. Three guys in Rangers tops at the next table stopped drinking and stared at me.

"There you go." The barman said and put a packet of cigs on the counter.

I took out a fiver and slid it across to him. He looked at me like I was the last drunk of the night then picked it up.

“Keep the change, eh?” I shoved the packet in my jacket pocket and left.

I opened the front door to find Katie in the hall, two suitcases by her feet on the pile of overdue bills and the letter from the rental agency serving notice. So this was the day. It wasn't exactly a surprise. I'd been broken her promise and plenty others in the last six months, but the reality of it hit me in the gut. Or maybe it was shivers from the need.

“Katie.” It croaked out of me.

Lines formed across her forehead. She picked up her luggage and bowed her head away from me as she pushed past. I grabbed her arms. She wriggled away and knocked me against the wall with her cases.

“I can't do this anymore. You fucking do this, but I can't watch you.”

I let go of her. “All right, go then. See you about. Been a nice one.” I flicked up the back of my hand.

She spun, knuckles white from gripping the case handles. “That's your way now isn't it? Run away.” She shook her head but didn't leave.

Maybe I could make her stay? What was there to stay for? “You're the one running.”

“That's what you think?”

She dropped the cases, grabbed my hand and yanking the jacket sleeve up. Her nails dug into the Silvermesh of my forearm. The fold of my elbow above the joint was a mess of scabs and fresh wounds. She let go and the four thin indents left by her nails smoothed out.

“Enjoy your death. Maybe you'll be lucky and the junk will get you first.” She lifted the suitcases and struggled for the door handle.

“Wait.”

She shook her head, walked out and slammed the door behind her. I felt like crying but held it back. If she came back in, I didn't want her to see that. Outside, the car started. It idled for what seemed forever, before it pulled away. The tears emptied into my system and anger surged to the fore.

My jacket sleeve had slipped halfway to my wrist. I clenched and unclenched my hand. It wasn't even mine anymore, just an alien thing wanting to colonize me. I fed it every hour and still it advanced, ready for the last defenses to fall so that the full invasion could begin. I peeled off my jacket and ran through the house, out to the garden, to the tool shed.

I'd built the shed and wired it up myself. Those were the days before I became a self-pitying piece of shit. What a self-pitying thing to say.

Most of my tools were sold to pay for the drug since I lost my job. But I kept one thing. I almost yanked the door from its hinges and flicked on the light.

The mitre saw was under the bench, its circular blade in the raised position. I lifted it onto the table top, plugged it in and laid my perfect silver arm on the metal base. With my elbow just below the blade, I could slice clean through, above the joint. I flicked the on switch. The blade's jagged edge became an unbroken circle. 4000 rpm made a hell of a racket at twelve o'clock in a cul-de-sac.

I reached across with my left arm, my real arm, my real hand on the handle above the hinged blade. One quick press and hold--it would be over before I knew it.

Someone once told me that Belfast had the best doctors in the world for violent ligament damage. It was all the kneecappings and punishment beatings in the bad old days. I felt the power of the blade in my hand. How many times had I cut with it? Hundreds? Thousands? Just one quick press and hold was all it would take.

I pushed down but pulled my arm back as the blade hit. There was a screeching sound and sparks flew from the blade as it sank into the Silvermesh. A burning sensation spread up my arm, like a hundred Chinese arm burns. I cried out and pressed down. Acrid smoke rose from the motor, I used all my strength, still unable to saw through. There was a clattering sound and the motor stalled. The blade stopped immediately, stuck halfway through the arm.

The blade lifted easily and I threw the machine to one side. There was a deep groove, like a line traced in butter. It filled out again, leaving no trace. Every day I hoped it wouldn't get any worse. Every day I hoped there would be a call from the hospital to say they'd found some way of dealing with it. But they didn't call.

I had enough gear in my pocket to hold it back another night. I would go to the hospital tomorrow morning.

I woke on a bed full of sweat. My body trembled, withdrawal sick but worse than it should have been. This was how it was each time the Silvermesh jumped. My heart raced with the hope that I was wrong, today, of all days. I pulled up my sweater sleeve. Overnight it had spread to an inch above my elbow, if I didn't get another hit, a bigger dose, it would jump again. That was the pattern. I wouldn't even make it to surgery.

My wallet had a cash card but my account was cleaned out and the joint account had been cancelled. I dragged myself off the bed, over to the dresser and pulled the top drawer open by mistake. It was bare, Katie's stuff gone. I shoved it closed, opened the one below and grabbed a pair of white sports socks I never wore. Inside was thirty pounds. There should have been fifty and I couldn't even remember when I raided it. It was enough -- Joe would sub me the rest, he was an old friend. Scrub that, I was a good customer.

My jacket lay where I'd dropped it in the hall and the door was open a crack. A pang of hope rose in me that she was back. It faded quickly. The door mustn't have shut properly when she left. Katie's face came to mind, not the way she was last night, but back in summer, before everything. I pushed back the memory, grabbed my jacket and opened the front door.

Joe lived three streets up. I knocked on the white framed door, and Joe opened it. His thick beard made it hard to know if his smile was genuine or at your expense. There was a constant watery film on his lower eyelids. He said he only ever slept for thirty minutes at a time, day or night, like Winston Churchill. Joe talked a lot of shit and looked as opposite to Churchill as a man could get.

"Clint." He pushed the door open and swept his hand in a courtly gesture of welcome. I ducked into the dank hallway and he shut the door behind us.

"I need a rap. It's jumped again."

"Yeah?" He sounded like he needed another twenty minutes sleep. "Better get you sorted then, hadn't we?"

I followed him into the living room. You could tell by the room that Joe was a dealer not just a junkie. A brand new plasma screen and a stack of hi-fi separates sat apart in one corner, superior amongst the tat and grimy brown sofa and chairs.

He took an old cigar box from a shelf and rested it in his lap. It looked like something I imagined Churchill actually would have owned. He held out his hand.

I dug the thirty out of my pocket. He looked at it, sat back and put the box on the sofa beside him.

“Now, Clint, you know asking for credit only offends.”

“Jesus, don’t fuck about. It’s above my elbow. I’ll get you the rest later.”

“Let me see it,” he said and rubbed his beard, his nose high in the air.

“What? Stop messing about.”

“I haven’t seen it in a while, that’s all.”

There wasn’t time to argue. I took off my jacket and shoved up my sleeve like he’d asked me to roll over and beg. He had.

“Man, that’s wicked shit. And it’s strong isn’t it? You could crush bone with that thing, couldn’t you?”

“Fuck you, Joe.” I pulled down my sleeve.

“Here.” He handed me back my money. “It’s not enough.”

“I’ll get you the rest.”

“You’re going to need more than fifty. Jesus, I never saw anyone shoot like you and not turn blue five minutes later.” He lifted the cigar box and stood. “I’ll give you what you need, but I’ve got a little job for you first.”

“I haven’t got time for this.” I stood up to face him and tried to ignore the cramps in my gut.

“Shut the fuck up.” He pointed at my face. “It won’t take you long, and you’re going to do it. Otherwise you’ll be the next silver surfer.” He smiled, his beard not hiding his pleasure. “Come and see this.”

I followed him to a bathroom. Inside, a young guy sat on the bare rim of a baby blue toilet. His ankles were taped to the bog with industrial tape and his hands were tied behind his back. His head jerked up and he tried to move backwards. It must have hurt because he moaned through the black sock stuffed in his mouth.

He was naked to the waist and there was blood on his chest from three deep cuts on his left shoulder. The blood had dried in places and mixed with a life-size tattoo of the red hand of Ulster over his heart. Underneath was the Loyalist battle cry: “No Surrender.”

“All right, Eddie? Had a good night, son?” Joe looked at me to gauge my reaction.

I just stared at the guy. I wasn’t about to argue for an innocence he probably didn’t deserve. But he didn’t deserve this either. Nobody deserved this. “C’mon, Joe, what the fuck’s going on?”

Joe ignored me and grabbed my Silvermesh arm. The guy’s eyes widened. “You’re going to like this, Eddie, wee present for you.” He turned to me. “Show him what you can do, hit the wall there.” Joe stepped back.

I knew Joe was buying from the heavy mob, but I never thought he’d joined up. A ring of piss spread down the guy’s leg like he’d held it in all night. It stank. My hand balled into a fist, the Silvermesh felt indestructible. I’d call the police when got out of here, I just needed out. I punched a hole through the plaster wall on the left and broke an upright strut like it was balsa wood.

“That’s the way,” Joe said. “Bionic fucking man in the house.”

The guy moaned through the sock and looked away.

“We finished now?” I turned to Joe.

His eyes glistened and he shook his head.

“Do his caps.”

“What?”

“Do his fucking kneecaps. Then you can have a nice wee sleep.” He wagged the cigar box at me.

I turned to the guy on the toilet. He stared at his feet and whimpered. My hand was still balled into a fist. If I punched too hard I would rip his leg off. I flattened my palm out.

“Fucking do him!” Joe said, and the guy looked up.

I pulled my arm back, twisted around and jabbed Joe in the right leg. It felt like I’d pushed my fingers into jelly.

He fell to the ground screaming, his lower leg stayed straight as if disobeying orders. He dropped the box and scrambled for his boot. I fell on him, pinned his arm with my knee, and gripped his throat with my Silvermesh hand.

“Don’t move,” I said, and he stopped. “Good.” I punched him in the face with my left hand, then again, and again, and again. He blacked out and his body went limp beneath me. I released his throat and lowered my ear to his mouth. He was still breathing. I grabbed the cigar box and slumped back against the wall. The guy on the toilet struggled, his eyes pleaded for release.

I went to the kitchen, cooked up and came back. Joe was still out and the guy was quiet. He watched as I lifted my sleeve. The Silvermesh hadn’t spread any further. I injected. There was a rush but nowhere near a high, as if the Silvermesh swallowed this one whole.

I staggered to my feet and the guy shifted and groaned for help. I went to the living room, found a phone and called a taxi. Then I called the police and tied Joe’s arms behind his back.

When the taxi arrived, I got in and closed the door.

“Royal Hospital, quick.” I held out the thirty pounds, and the driver took it without answering.

The taxi’s acceleration made me nearly puke so I lay sideways and closed my eyes. There was faintest wail of police sirens behind us and for a moment I was back in time, in the ambulance, after the accident.