

Nov 3, 2020 3 min read

[Kelp Original Fiction] The Hammer and the Flame

Updated: Dec 16, 2020

by J.R. Angelella

My father complained of having flame-shaped hands. He hated that he didn't have hands like his father, my grandfather, which were, according to my father, hammer hands. But, unfortunately, he, my father, had flame-shaped hands and would often wear gloves to hide them away.

God, I'm like a woman, he'd say.

And so, as I developed into a woman, in the very ways my father saw a woman to be, with all that a woman does to become a woman, I made sure of one thing—never to wear gloves. I never wanted to hide my hands.

Now because of my father and his abhorrence of his flame-shaped hands, I had hoped, as did my father, that I would grow up to be spared the shame of such a sight. But that was not to be so. I prayed for hammer hands, like the hammer hands of my grandfather—the hands of a pugilist. My father prayed I'd have flames like my mother—the hands of a doll. Quiet hands. To display wedding rings. Showcase antique watches. Manicured nails. Soft skin.

Sadly, I found my own hands to be like the hands of my father.

Flammable.

Oh, what sins of the father for a young girl to bear.

I can't even tell you how many hours of my life have been spent staring at the flame of my hands, wishing for hammers. Caring not for manicures and diamond rings, but for radial saws and trenching shovels.

These are not things for a young girl to enmesh herself with, my father would say.

I can't tell you how many hours I've spent looking at other people's hands. If I talk to a person long enough, I lose myself in the reality of their hands. Their contours and genetics. It's all about conception and gestation, son.

The shape of one's hand is directly related to the amount of testosterone a fetus is exposed to in the womb. Science is such a funny thing. When a baby arrives early, as did my father, as did I, there is less incubation,

less exposure to testosterone, and therefore flames develop. A baby arrives late, as you did, my love, the fetus roils, awash in the virility of strength and stone, born to the world with hammers.

Thus, you have the hammers and we have the flames.

Ours—the hands of history.

Yours—the hands of hope.

I arrived early, my son. Impatient with my own pursuit of destiny. A fire to begin. But was met with weakness and fear.

You arrived late, my son. Patient and bold with concrete for eyes. While I may pass through the fog of history, making my way without a map, my time measured out in the cautious steps of fragile men, your hammers have been sent to absolve me from this ancient sin.

J.R. ANGELELLA is the author of the irreverent and twisted coming-of-age debut *Zombie: A Novel* (Soho Press). His award-winning short fiction has appeared in *Hunger Mountain*, *Literary Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Coachella Review*, *Southampton Review* and elsewhere. Recently, his screenplay *Nemesis* won the award for Best Dark Comedy Short in the *Houston Comedy Film Festival*. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing & Literature from Bennington College and teaches writing in both the English department at the University of Maryland, College Park and the Electronic Media & Film department at Towson University. He lives in Baltimore with his wife, the novelist and editor Kate Angelella, and their dinosaur-obsessed son Geno. Find him on twitter: @jrangelella.