

## First Place, NZSA Northland Open Short Story Competition

### *Pista's Hands*

by Gail Varga, Tutukaka

Ildi, my mother, always found the torture of leaving things unsaid more bearable than the terror of saying them: I was a skinny, empty kind of little girl, storyless, my Eastern European social and domestic history unspeakable.

Then there was Pista, my grandfather. He was Pista the hard, Pista the mountain builder, Pista the sayer of all things sweet, all things ugly (all things that should not be said), *Erős Pista* the unforgiving, Pista the determined goer alone, Pista speaker of terrible English, 'I-never-want-die' Pista. Pista of the loving, demonstrative hands.

Over years and years I spent weeks and months, and a very long time besides, my own small hands in dialogue with Pista's massive old hands while his mouth said the words of all the stories that made me. With the conviction of his hands he fleshed out the skinniness of my youth and filled in the emptiness of my little girlness. I miss his hands.

Huge hands on thick, workhorse wrists, they were, of course wrinkly. Blotched by ages of summer and usually a little purple in hue, they were soft, the skin on the underside smooth. Fingers of amazing strength and girth hung apart from one another from the mass of knuckle, spanning the air, hugely encompassing, a gold band still about his ring finger from his 'schoolgirl-size wife'. The fingertips had a soft, frog-like look as though so much usage had squashed them. The nails were very flat, often dirty and cut down close at each side, left almost pointed in the middle (for Pista's kind of practicality). These hands told of the man he was before his shrunken old age: Big, Mighty. I was always and forever in awe of them. And these were the hands that cared for me. I miss them very much.

I miss the hands that drew my face toward his kiss each time we met, gentle about my head, sure. 'Hello, darling!' his mouth would say (Pista, lost in his failing fiction of we're-anglicised-around-here). '*Szia kedvesem!*' said his hands (as he rightly meant in his heart).

'Any road...' He would settle. His hands patiently awaiting the unfolding of his own tale. At rest together there was something gentle and controlled about the way they related. I felt and saw all the heavy work they had done and yet they were not dissatisfied. They were content to be still and quiet. This was Pista at his best. Not trying. In these moments he was noble, proud, poised. His great aura of power was about him, as if hewn from rock.

I would sit by him and we would each give a hand to be together until the story was over. This day it was the story of his father's death on 'crackers day' (fireworks day) at the end of a hot Budapest June in 1908, just days before Pista's birth. This was a great and typical Pista-story, me-

story. His father, István, was crossing the road taking a basket of oranges to the coffee house belonging to his mother-in-law. Someone had laid ‘crackers’ under a nearby ox-cart that was delivering kegs of liquor to a drinking house. Pista carefully described the cart with his voice, continued the story with his hands. His free hand threw the kegs to the ground onto the cushions left by the driver, tried to rein in the oxen, lost control of them. The other hand gripped mine in an excited response. The climax came when ‘the cows gettèd vild’, István and the oranges were mown down and the road workers came with baskets and ‘shovellèd up his mincèd body’. Pista’s hands had seen me through this trauma many times before and the story affirmed (again) that we are survivors, we two. I need not fear.

There were many doing days we spent together as well, of course. I was Pista’s practicality in his latter years. His eyes were blind, so his mole-like, seeking hands would describe the task, and together we would feel for the solution. He would throw his hands open to send out the sparkle of his delight at my abilities, our achievement. I miss very badly those hands that let me know that whatever I wanted to try, I could do it. Sewing and carpentry and gardening and organising and fighting the battles of being us with whosoever said we could not be so. We could do it. I could do it. Pista’s hands told me. Pista’s hands had known and seen and done and come through and they had a truth I respected beyond anything, even beyond fear.

But Pista was angry too. ‘No!’ He would explode in an enormous, rumbling fury, beating his fist on the table, his small plastic tubs of pens, torch bulbs, paper clips, batteries and rubber bands jumping with fright. The anger at his father’s death, the anger of giving his pay to his mother from his first job, aged six, the anger of queuing for bread to eat, the anger of his friends and colleagues disappeared in cattle trucks to God knows where, the anger of an ill wife who would not have him, the anger of his country destroyed, diminished, the anger of betrayals by people who should not. All this was in those fists, and more, every time. Those fists were mine to love as well. This was my story too. I accepted it. (Flinchingly).

It was for me that I laid out his body when he had left it. I did not know where he had gone but I wanted to explore whatever remained a last time, so I washed him. As I washed him I also accepted him in a final-last-time kind of way. I accepted his unseeing eyes, the irises in two colours, his funny beard, his peeling tongue, his toothless mouth, hanging, his dropped shoulder from the dislocation that never really went back, his bruised stomach from whatever had eventually ruptured within, his sternum-to-vertebral-column scar from when he had his lung removed, his long, thinned pubic hair, his impotent ‘fiddle’ and his wizened ‘plums’, his slack anus, not used for a week or two, his lumpy, stiff knees on his skinny, useless legs, his hoof-like toenails on his feet, bad with sores. This was all well. I washed his hands, each finger, and each finger. His hands, my hands, too cold. He was ring-less since the swelling became bad. I lamented that he had died

without his wedding ring but was glad I was not left with the choice of robbing it, wrestling it from his body.

I miss his hands. After I have missed them, I miss them again, and more. I left them at his funeral when I packed all about him in his coffin with roses and placed just one in his hand. 'A rose for a rose,' he would say, making a gallant flattery out of cutting me a flower from his garden. Roses were his favourite. They embodied him with their thorny aggression and sateen elegance. Now I left him with himself.

Afterwards I looked over all the things that Pista had handled in the last part of his life. They smelled of his skin. Papers... I came across his certificate of naturalisation, an object of great pride to be considered with reverence. I was bewildered. I was shaken anew. His hands had lied. Pista, aged forty-eight, had been a reasonably short man. This could not be so. My Pista was a giant, a mountain builder, a force, a law. His hands told me so. They were the truth. Some frailty in me quivered. My shaken world teetered.

I took all his family papers with his ashes to Kispest. He was not in that little box, I knew that. Was he in the papers? I wondered. I studied them carefully with Aní. Pista always enunciated the word 'shock' as if he had just been cut down. He almost lost his teeth with this word often. When I say I was shocked when we looked at István's death certificate I mean it in a Pista way: I was *shocked*. My own teeth could have fallen out, sound as they are. His father, István, had died on 'crackers day' 1908, from an overdose.

What about the oranges? I had smelled them for years. I caught their bright colour in the grey street and the blue sky. What about his blood in the dust? It was drying, blackening. What about the clatter of the ox-cart? The wet, flaring nostrils of the oxen? The fear? The truth? My fear. Was I left with it?

In the softness of loss I missed the hands that could make me sure again. The hands that would touch me and I would know. I slipped on Pista's ring. He had fleshed me out and filled my empty places, but I could not flesh out his hands, nor fill his ring. Understanding the truth of Pista's hands in me was a whole other beginning story.