

OLLIE'S HANDS By Dean R. Koontz THE JULY NIGHT WAS HOT. THE AIR AGAINST OLLIE'S PALMS MADE HIM aware of the discomfort of the city's sweltering residents: millions of people wishing for winter. Even in the cruelest weather, however, even on a bitterly cold night filled with dry January wind, Ollie's hands would have been soft, moist, warm - and sensitive. His thin fingers were tapered in an extraordinary manner. When he gripped anything, his fingers seemed to fuse with the surface of the object. When he let it go, the release was like a sigh. Every night, regardless of the season, Ollie visited the unlighted alleyway behind Staznik's Restaurant, where he searched for the accidentally discarded silverware in the three large overflowing garbage bins. Because Staznik himself believed in quality, and because his prices were high, the tableware was expensive enough to make Ollie's undignified rooting worthwhile. Every two weeks, he managed to sense out enough pieces to constitute a matched set, which he sold to one of several used-furniture stores in exchange for wine money. Recovered tableware was only one source of his funds. In his own way, Ollie was a clever man. On that Tuesday night early in July, his cleverness was tested to its limits. When he made his nightly trip into the alley to sense out the knives, forks, and spoons, he found instead the unconscious girl. She was lying against the last Dumpster, face toward the brick wall, eyes closed, hands drawn across her small breasts as if she were a sleeping child. Her cheap, tight, short dress revealed that she was no child; her pale flesh glimmered like a soft flame viewed through smoked glass. Otherwise, Ollie could not see much of her. "Miss?" he asked, leaning toward her. She didn't respond. She didn't move. He knelt beside her, shook her, but was unable to wake her. When he rolled her onto her back to look at her face, something rattled. Striking a match, he discovered that she had been curled against the paraphernalia of a junkie's habit: syringe, charred spoon, metal cup, half-used candle, several packets of white powder wrapped in plastic and then in foil. He might have left her and continued searching for spoons - he didn't like or understand snowbirds, being strictly a man of spirits himself - but the match flame revealed her face and thereby ensured his concern. She had a broad forehead, well-set eyes, a pert and freckled nose, full lips that somehow promised both erotic pleasure and childlike innocence. When the match went out and the darkness rushed in again, Ollie knew that he could not leave her there, for she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. "Miss?" he asked, shaking her shoulder again. She did not respond. He looked toward both ends of the alleyway, but he did not see anyone who might misinterpret his intentions. Thus assured, he bent close to her and felt for a heartbeat, found a weak one, held his moist palm close to her nostrils, and detected the barest exhalation of warm breath. She was alive. He stood and wiped his palms on his rumpled, dirty trousers, cast one mournful glance at the unplumbed bins of waste, then lifted her. She weighed little, and he carried her in his arms like a groom crossing the threshold with his bride, although he gave no thought to the carnal aspect of the ritual. Heart pounding with the unaccustomed exertion, he took her to the far end of the alley, hurried across the deserted avenue, and disappeared into the mouth of another unlighted back-street. Ten minutes later he unlocked the door of his basement room and carried her inside. He put her on the bed, locked the door, and switched on a low-watt bulb in a newspaper-shaded junk lamp beside the bed. She was still breathing. He gazed at her, wondering what to do next. Thus far, he had been purposeful; now, he was confused. Frustrated by his inability to think clearly, he went outside again, locked the door after himself, and retraced his course to the rear of the restaurant. He located her purse and filled it with the skag and other items. Possessed by a strange anxiety that he could not understand at all, he returned to his basement room. He had utterly forgotten the tableware in Staznik's garbage. Sitting beside the bed in a straight-backed chair, Ollie pored through the contents of the purse. He removed the syringe and candle, destroyed them, and

threw them into the waste can. In the bathroom, he ripped open the packets of heroin and flushed the contents down the toilet. She had used the metal cup to hold the candle with which she cooked each batch of dope; he placed the cup on the floor and methodically stamped it flat. He washed his hands, dried them on a tattered hotel towel, and felt much better. The girl's breathing had grown shallower and less rhythmic. Her face was gray, and drops of perspiration were strung like bright beads across her forehead. Standing over her, Ollie realized that she was dying, and he was frightened. He folded his arms so his long-fingered hands were hidden in his armpits. The fleshy pads of his fingertips were excessively moist. Dimly, he was aware that his hands could perform more useful tricks than locating silverware buried in mounds of garbage, but he did not want to admit to their capabilities: That way lay danger He retrieved a gallon of wine from the rickety cardboard clothes cupboard and drank straight from the jug. It tasted like water. He knew that he was not going to find release in wine - not with the girl lying on his bed. Not with his hands trembling as they were. He put the wine away. Ollie despised using his hands for anything but earning wine money, but now he had no choice. Other, more basic motivations drove him to act. The girl was beautiful. The smooth clear lines of her face were so symmetrical that even the hue of sickness could not much detract from them. Like a delicate web, her beauty caught him, held him. He followed his hands to the bed as if he were a blind man feeling for obstacles in a strange room. For his hands to perform properly, he needed to undress her. She wore no underclothes. Her breasts were small, firm, high; her waist was too small, and the bones in her hips were sharp, though even malnutrition hardly detracted from the sublime beauty of her legs. Ollie appreciated her only as an objet d'art, not as a source of physical gratification. He was a man ignorant of women. Until now, he had lived in a sexless world, driven there by hands that any lover would instantly have recognized as more than ordinary. He placed his hands at her temples, smoothed her hair, and traced his fleshy fingertips across her forehead, cheeks, jawline, chin. He felt the pulse at her neck, gently pressed her breasts, stomach, and legs, seeking the cause of her illness. In a moment he knew: She had overdosed. He also perceived a truth that he did not want to believe: The overdose had been intentional. His hands ached. He touched her again, moved his open palms in lazy circles until he was not sure where his hands ended and her fair skin began, until they seemed to have melted together. They might have been two clouds of smoke, blending into one. Half an hour later, she was no longer comatose, merely sleeping. Gently, he turned her onto her stomach and worked his hands along her back, shoulders, buttocks, thighs, finishing what he had begun. He traced her spinal cord, massaged her scalp, blanked from his mind all appreciation of her form, the better to let the power seep out of him and into her. Fifteen minutes later, he had not only remedied her current condition but had permanently cured her of her desire for drugs. If she even thought of shooting up again, she would become violently ill. He had seen to that. With his hands. Then he leaned back in his chair and slept. He bolted out of his chair an hour later, pursued by nightmares that he could not identify. He went quickly to the door, found it still locked, and peered through the curtains. He had expected to see someone lurking there, but he found only the night. No one had seen him use his hands. The girl was still asleep. As he pulled the sheets over her, he realized that he didn't even know her name. In her purse, he found identification: Annie Grice, twenty-six, unmarried. Nothing more, no address or relatives' names. He lifted a glass-bead necklace but received no images from those small smooth spheres. He decided that the necklace was a recent purchase, imbued with none of her aura, and he put it aside. In her well-worn wallet, he discovered a wealth of impressions, a fiercely compressed picture of the last several years of Annie's life: her first cocaine purchase, first use, subsequent dependence; her first time with skag, dependence, addiction; theft to maintain the habit; jobs in less reputable bars, hustling drinks; prostitution that she called something else

to satisfy her troubled conscience; prostitution that she called prostitution; finally, irrevocably, a disassociation from life and society, a solidified loneliness that welcomed the release of death. He put down the wallet. He was drenched with perspiration. He wanted wine but knew that it would not give him surcease. Not this time. Besides, his curiosity had not been fully satisfied. How had Annie Grice become the woman that the seven-year-old wallet testified she was? He found an old ring - family heirloom? - in her purse, held it, and let the images push into him. At first they did not concern Annie. When he saw that he was sensing back to the earliest history of the ring, to previous owners of it, he let his mind slide forward in time until Annie appeared. She was seven; the orphanage official had just given her what few artifacts remained of her heritage after a fire had destroyed her home and parents six months before. After that, her life was a string of depressing events: She was shy and became the target of malicious playmates; her bashfulness compounded her loneliness and kept her friendless through her formative years; her first love affair was a disaster that left her afraid of human contact more than ever before; with no money for college, she went from one clerking job to another, unhappy, confined, alone; in time, she tried to overcome her timidity with a brash aggressiveness, which achieved nothing but the acquaintance of a morally bankrupt young man named Benny, with whom she lived for a year and with whom she first snorted coke; after that, her addiction - a desperate attempt to escape from loneliness and lovelessness - followed the relentless pattern that Ollie had seen when sensing the images that permeated her tattered wallet. He dropped the ring and got his jug of wine. He drank until he mercifully escaped the depression that was not really his but Annie's. He slept. The girl woke him. She sat up in bed, stared at him where he slumped against the wall, and cried out in alarm. Ollie got up and swayed toward her, blinking stupidly, sleepily, drunkenly. "What am I doing here?" she demanded, clearly frightened. "What did you do to me?" Ollie said nothing. Silence was his savior. He found it quite impossible to speak to anyone. He may have been mute, or he may have been afraid of words. His hands were trembling, moist, and pink. He shook his head and smiled nervously, hoping that she understood that he wanted only to help her. Apparently she grasped the innocence of his intentions, for she looked less frightened. Frowning, she pulled the sheets to her neck to cover her nakedness. "I'm not dead, even though I overdosed." Ollie smiled, nodded, and wiped his hands on his shirt. Her eyes widened with an awful terror as she inspected her needle-tracked arms. Hers was a terror of life, a fear of existence. Despairing that her attempt at suicide had failed, she began to sob and wail, head thrown back, hair a golden frame about her white face. He reached her quickly, touched her, and put her to sleep. Sobered, he went to the door, peered out at the early morning light that touched the shabby concrete steps, and closed the curtains again, satisfied that her cries had not alerted anyone. In the bathroom, he splashed cold water on his face and wondered what to do next. He even considered carrying her back to the alleyway where he'd found her, to abandon her to her own devices. But he could not do that. He didn't know why he couldn't, and he didn't attempt to reason it out - because he was afraid of the answer that he might discover. Drying his face on a filthy hand towel, Ollie realized that he was a sorry sight. He bathed, shaved, and dressed in clean clothes. He still looked like a vagrant, but a vagrant by choice rather than chance. A disillusioned artist, perhaps. Or, as in certain old movies, a rich man escaping from the boring responsibilities of wealth and position. He was surprised by this fanciful turn of thought. He considered himself a man of routine and restricted vision. Unsettled, he turned from his reflection in the bathroom mirror and went into the main room to check on the girl. Sleeping, she was serene, pure. He would let her sleep a while yet. Three hours later, after cleaning the two small rooms, Ollie changed her sheets while she slept. Even while admitting the impossibility of the notion, he toyed with the prospect of keeping her asleep and tending to her for years, as if he were a nurse and she were his comatose patient. He

would be happy doing that - perhaps happier than he had ever been in his life to date. But now he was hungry, and he knew that she would be hungry, too, when she woke. He left the apartment, locking the door behind him. Two blocks away, at a small grocery, he bought more food in one order than he had ever done before. "Thirty-eight dollars, twelve cents," the cashier said. He did not conceal his disdain. Clearly, he felt that Ollie could not pay. Ollie raised a hand, touched his forehead, and stared hard at the cashier. The cashier blinked, smiled tentatively, and folded his hand over empty air. "Out of forty dollars," he said. He carefully placed the nonexistent currency in the cash register, handed Ollie the proper change, and bagged the food. On his way home, Ollie was uneasy, because he had never before used his power to cheat anyone. If the girl hadn't come along, he would have finished his previous night's work at the garbage bins, perhaps completing another set of flatware, and would have gone on to other tasks like sensing out dropped coins in subway stations, earning a buck here and there. Therefore, the responsibility for this deceit was not entirely his. Nevertheless, dark portents of judgmental disaster plagued him. At home he prepared dinner-stew, salad, fresh fruit - and woke Annie. She regarded him strangely as he pointed at the laden table. He sensed her blooming terror, a red flower. He swept his hand to take in the cleaned and ordered room, and he smiled encouragingly. The girl sat up, propelled into her nightmare again - the cruel nightmare of being alive - and she shrieked in misery. Ollie raised his hands imploringly, tried to speak, couldn't. Blood rushed to her face as she sucked a deeper breath and tried to pull herself out of the bed. He was forced to lay hands on her and put her to sleep again. Tucking her in, he knew that he had been naive to imagine that she would be a different girl, with fewer fears and more composure, simply because he had bathed himself, shaved, cleaned the apartment, and cooked dinner. She would be different only if he helped her, which would take time, hard work - and sacrifice. He threw the food away. He was no longer hungry. Throughout the long night, he sat by the bed, elbows propped on his knees, his head held between his hands. The tips of his fingers seemed to merge with his temples while his palms lay against his cheeks. He sensed into her, sensed her despair, her hope, her dreams, her ambition, her limitations, her joys, her hard-won knowledge, her persistent misconceptions, and her moments of intellectual surety. He dwelt in the center of her soul - which was, by turns, beautifully in bloom and withered. In the morning he used the bathroom, drank two glasses of water, and helped her to drink even while keeping her more than half asleep. Then he settled into the chiaroscuro world of her mind and remained there, except for brief rest periods, all through that day and night, diligently searching, learning, and making cautious adjustments to her psyche. He never wondered why he made this expenditure of time, energy, and emotion, perhaps because he didn't dare risk the realization that his ultimate motive was loneliness. He merged with her, touched her, changed her, and gave no consideration to the consequences. By dawn of the next day, he was done. Once more he partially awakened her and made her drink to keep from dehydrating; then he put her into deep sleep and lay beside her on the bed. He took her hand in his. Exhausted, he slept, dreaming that he floated in a vast ocean, a mere speck, about to be consumed by something prehistoric swimming in the gloom below him. Curiously, the dream did not frighten him. He had expected to be swallowed up by one thing or another all his troubled life. Twelve hours later, Ollie woke, showered, shaved, dressed, and prepared another dinner. When he woke the girl, she sat straight up again, bewildered. But she did not scream. She said, "Where am I?" Ollie worked his dry lips, instantly unsure of himself again, but finally he managed to sweep his hand around to indicate the room that by now must be at least somewhat familiar to her. She appeared curious, ill at ease, but no longer possessed by that crippling fear of life itself. He had cured her of that. She said, "Yeah, you've got a cozy place. But - how'd I get here?" He licked his lips, searched for words, found none, pointed at himself, and smiled. "Can't you speak?" she asked. "Are you mute?" He

thought a moment, opted for the out that she had offered, and nodded. "I'm sorry," she said. She examined her bruised arm, staring at the hundreds of needle marks, doubtlessly remembering the overdose that she had carefully prepared and booted into her bloodstream. Ollie cleared his throat and pointed to the table. She instructed him to turn his back. She got out of the bed, stripped off the top sheet, and twisted it about herself as though it were a toga. As she sat at the table, she grinned at him. "I'm starving." Such a waif. She charmed him. He grinned back at her. What could have been the worst moment had passed without much strain. He put the food on the table and made a disparaging gesture to indicate his lack of culinary finesse. "Everything looks delicious," she assured him. She reached for the main serving dish and began to heap food onto her plate. She did not speak again until she had finished eating. She tried to help with the dishes, although she soon tired and had to retreat to the bed. When he had finished and sat in the straight-backed chair beside her, she said, "What do you do?" He shrugged. "For a living, I mean." He thought of his hands, wondered how he possibly could have told her about them even if he had been able to talk. He shrugged as if to say, Nothing much. She looked around the shabby room. "Panhandling" When he did not respond, she decided that she'd hit on it. "How long can I stay here?" By gesture, expression, and pantomime, Ollie made her understand that she could stay as long as she liked. When this was clear, she studied him a long moment and finally said, "Could we have less light?" He got up and switched off two of the three lamps. When he turned to her again, she was lying nude on top of the covers, her legs slightly spread to receive him. "Look," she said, "I figure you didn't bring me here and nurse me back to health for nothing. You know? You expect a ... reward. And you have a right to expect one." Confused, frustrated, he got clean sheets from a stack in the corner and, ignoring her offer, proceeded to change the bed under her without once touching her. She stared at him in disbelief, and when he was done, she said that she didn't want to sleep. He insisted. He touched her and put her out for the night. In the morning, she ate breakfast with the greedy efficiency that she had shown at dinner the night before, wasting nothing, then asked if she could take a bath. He washed dishes while her sweet voice came through the bathroom door, singing a lovely melodic song that he had never heard before. She came out of her bath with clean hair as dark as burnt honey, stood nude at the foot of the bed, and beckoned to him. Already she seemed sleeker, healthier than when he had found her, though she was still leaner than she needed to be. She said, "I was so stupid last night. My hair was a dirty mess and my body odor would've turned off a bull. Now I'm soapy-smelling." Ollie turned away from her and stared at the few dishes that he still had to dry. "What's the matter?" she asked. He had no reply. "You don't want me?" He shook his head - No. She drew a sudden deep breath. Something struck him painfully on the hip. Turning, he saw that the girl was wielding a heavy glass ashtray. Drawing her lips back from her teeth, she hissed at him as though she were an angry cat. She pounded his shoulders with the ashtray, struck him repeatedly with one tiny balled fist, kicked, and screeched. Then she lost her grip on the ashtray and sagged against him, exhausted, crying. He put his arm around her to comfort her, but she had enough energy to twist violently away. She turned, tried to reach the bed, stumbled, fell, and passed out. He lifted her and put her to bed. He pulled the covers around her, tucked her in, and sat down in his chair to wait for her to regain consciousness. When she awakened half an hour later, she was trembling and dizzy. He soothed her, smoothing her hair away from her face, wiping her teary eyes, placing cold compresses on her brow. In time, when she could speak, she asked, "Are you impotent or something?" He shook his head. "Then why? I wanted to repay you. That's how I repay men. I don't have anything else to give." He touched her. Held her. With his expression and with his clumsy pantomime he tried to make her understand that she had a great deal to give. She was giving just by being here. Just by being here. That afternoon, he went out to buy

her pajamas, street clothes, and a newspaper. She was amused by his chaste choice of pajamas: full-sleeved, long-legged flannels. She put them on, then read the newspaper to him - comics and human-interest stories. She seemed to think that he couldn't read, and he was willing to play along with the misconception, since his illiteracy tended to reinforce his cover: Winos didn't collect books. Besides, he liked to listen to her read. Her voice was sweet. The following morning, Annie dressed in her new blue jeans and sweater to accompany Ollie to the corner grocery store, although he tried to dissuade her. At the register, when he handed a nonexistent twenty-dollar bill to the cashier and collected change, he thought that Annie was looking elsewhere. Outside, however, as they walked home, she said, "How'd you do that?" He feigned perplexity. Do what? "Don't try to fool Annie," she said. "I almost croaked when he grabbed a handful of air and gave change." He said nothing. "Hypnotism?" she pressed. Relieved, he nodded - Yes. "You'll have to teach me." He didn't reply. But she was not going to be put off. "You have to teach me how you conned that guy. With that little trick I wouldn't need to hustle my body any more, you know? Christ, he smiled at that handful of air! How? How? Teach me! You've got to!" Finally, at home, unable to tolerate her persistent pleading any longer, afraid that he would be foolish enough to tell her about his hands, Ollie shoved her away from him. The back of her knees caught the bed, and she sat down hard, surprised by his sudden anger. She said no more, and their relationship returned to an easier pitch. But everything had changed. Since she couldn't nag him about learning the con game, she had time to think. Late in the evening, she said, "I had my last fix days ago, but I don't feel any need for drugs. I haven't been this long without the crap in at least five years." Ollie held his guilty hands out to his sides to indicate his own puzzlement. "Did you throw away my tools, the skag?" He nodded. A while later, she said, "The reason I don't need dope ... is it you, something you did? Did you hypnotize me and make me not want it?" When he nodded, she said, "The same way you made the clerk see the twenty-dollar bill?" He agreed, using his fingers and eyes to do a comic imitation of a stage hypnotist hamming it up for an audience. "Not hypnotism at all," she said, fixing him with her piercing eyes, seeing through his facade as no one had done in years. "ESP?" What's that? he asked with gestures. "You know," Annie said. "You know." She was a more observant girl, a much brighter girl than he had thought. She began to nag again, but not about the con game any longer. "Come on! Really, what's it like? How long have you had it, this power, this gift? Don't be ashamed of it! It's wonderful! You should be proud! You have the world on a string!" And so on. Sometime during the long night - later, Ollie could never recall the precise moment or understand what single telling argument she used to finally break him down - he agreed to show her what he could do. He was nervous, wiping his magical hands on his shirt. He was excited about showing her his abilities, felt like a young boy trying to impress his first date - but he also feared the consequences. First he handed her a nonexistent twenty-dollar bill, made her see it, and then made it disappear. Then, with a dramatic wave of his hand, he levitated a coffee cup (empty), a coffee cup (filled), the straight-backed chair, a lamp, the bed (empty), the bed (with Annie in it), and finally himself, floating off the floor as though he were an Indian fakir. The girl whooped and hollered with delight. She persuaded him to give her a ride around the room on a broomstick of air. She hugged him, kissed him, asked for more tricks. He turned on the water in the sink without touching the faucet, divided the stream into two streams that fell on both sides of the drain. He let her throw a cup of water at him and diverted it in a hundred different sprays, keeping himself dry. "Hey," she said, more flushed and excited than he had ever seen her, "no one is going to tramp on us again, not ever. No one!" She stood on her toes and hugged him. He was grinning so hard that his jaws ached. She said, "You're fabulous!" He knew, with sweet anticipation and awful dread, that one day soon they would be ready to share a bed. Soon. From that moment his life would be changed. She

still did not fully understand what his talent meant, what a wall between them his hands might soon become. She said, "I still don't understand why you hide your - talent." Eager that she understand, he forced himself to confront hideous memories of childhood that he had long suppressed. He tried to tell her, first with words that wouldn't come and then with gestures, why he hid his abilities. Somehow she got the gist of it. "They hurt you." He nodded. Yes. Very much. The talent came upon him without warning when he was twelve, as if it were a secondary sex characteristic accompanying puberty, manifested in modest ways at first, then increasingly strong and demanding. It was the sort of thing a boy knew must be concealed from adults. For months he even hid it from other children, from his friends, confused and frightened by his own hands, in which the power seemed to be focused. Slowly, however, he revealed himself, did tricks for his friends, performed, became their secret from the grown-up world. But it wasn't long until they rejected him - subtly at first, then with increasing vigor until they beat and kicked him, knocked him in the mud, forced him to drink filthy water, all because of his talent. He could have used his power to protect himself from one of them, perhaps from two, but even he could not protect himself from a gang. For a time he hid his powers again, even from himself. But as the years passed, he learned that he could not conceal and deny the talent without causing himself physical and psychological damage. The urge to use the power was a need stronger than the need for food, for sex, for the breath of life itself. To refuse it was to refuse to live; he lost weight, grew nervous and ill. He was forced to use the power then, but refrained from exhibiting it in front of others. He began to understand that he would always be alone as long as he had the power - not from choice, from necessity. Like athletic agility or a cleverness with words, it could not be successfully hidden in company: It flowered unexpectedly, startling friends. And whenever he was found out, friends were lost, and the consequences were more dangerous than he cared to face. The only sensible life for him was that of a hermit. In the city he naturally gravitated to the life of a vagrant, one of the invisible men of the concrete jungle - unnoticed, friendless, safe. "I can understand people being jealous or afraid of you," she said. "Some of them ... but not everyone. I think you're great." With gestures, he explained what little he could. Twice he grunted, trying words, without success. "You read their minds," she interpreted. "So? I guess everyone has secrets. But to hurt you for it ..." She shook her head sadly. "Well, you don't have to run away from it any longer. Together, we can turn it into a blessing. Us against the world." He nodded. But he was deeply sorry to have misled her, for at that moment the mesh occurred. Just like that: Flick! And he knew that this time would be no different from others. When she learned about the mesh, she would panic. In the past it had happened only when a relationship had progressed to intimacy. But Annie was special, and this time the mesh occurred even before they made love. The next day, Annie spent hours making plans for their future, while he listened. All day he enjoyed planning with her, for he knew that soon there would be no more joy to share, none at all, nothing. The mesh made joy impossible. After dinner, as they lay on the bed holding hands, the trouble began just as he had known it would. She was quiet, thinking, and then she said, "Have you been reading my mind today?" It was useless to lie. He nodded. "Very much?" Yes. She said, "You know everything before I say it." He waited - cold and frightened. "Have you been reading my mind all day long?" He nodded. She frowned and spoke firmly this time: "I want you to stop it. Have you stopped?" Yes. She sat up, let go of his hand, and looked closely at him. "But you haven't. I can almost feel you inside there, watching me." He dared not respond. She took his hand again. "Don't you understand? I feel silly, rambling on about things you've already seen in my head. I feel like an idiot hanging out with a genius." He tried to calm her and to change the subject. He croaked at her like a magic frog with pretensions to princeliness but then resorted again to gestures. She said, "If we both had the gift ... But this one-way thing makes me feel ... inadequate. Worse than that. I don't

much like it." She waited. Then: "Have you stopped?" Yes. "You're lying, aren't you? I feel ... yeah ... I'm sure I can feel you" Then the terrible realization came to her, and she drew away from him. "Can you stop reading my mind?" He couldn't explain the mesh: how, when he had come to care for her deeply enough, their minds had blended in some mystical fashion. He didn't fully understand it himself - though it had happened to him before. He couldn't explain that she was now almost an extension of him, forever a part of him. He could only nod in acknowledgment of the dreadful truth: I can't stop reading your mind, Annie. It comes to me like air into my lungs. Thoughtfully, she said, "No secrets, surprises, nothing I can keep from you." Minutes passed. Then she said, "Do you begin to run my life, make my decisions, push me this way or that, without me knowing? Or have you already begun to do that?" Such control was beyond his power, although she would never be convinced of that. Breathing rapidly, she succumbed to that naked fear that he'd seen often before in others. She said, "I'll leave right now ... if you'll let me." Sadly, he put one trembling hand to her head and gave her deep but temporary darkness. That night, while she slept, he sensed into her mind and erased certain memories. He kept the wine jug at his feet and drank while he worked. Before dawn, he was done. The streets were bleak and empty when he carried her back to the alley where he'd found her, put her down, and placed her purse beneath her. She was still purged of all desire for drugs, and in possession of a new self-confidence and a profound sense of her value as a person that might help her make a new life. His gifts to her. Ollie returned home without taking a last look at her clear, perfect face. He opened a jug of wine. Hours later, drunk, he unaccountably remembered what a childhood "friend" had said when he first displayed his power: "Ollie, you can rule the world! You're a superman!" He laughed out loud, now, spitting wine. Rule the world! He couldn't even rule himself. Superman! In a world of ordinary men, a superman was no king, not even a romantic fugitive. He was simply alone. And alone, he could accomplish nothing. He thought of Annie, of dreams and love unshared, of futures destroyed. He continued to drink. After midnight of that day, he returned to Staznik's Restaurant to check the garbage for discarded tableware. At least that was what he intended to do. Instead, he spent the night walking swiftly down a succession of dark, twisting alleyways and side streets, his hands held out before him, a blind man trying to find his way. As far as Annie was concerned, he'd never existed. Never.

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