

Prologue—Clare’s Hands

Clare Washington is a fifty-year-old product lead, an engineering manager for an innovative computer company, working on the integration of software with the operating systems of laptop devices. She “rides herd on people . . . tracks the tasks, the deliverables” answering only to the manager of product managers. Clare’s road to high-technology work was circuitous, as she explored her identity and molded her own beliefs through different kinds of employment.

Born after World War II, she trained to be an English teacher, largely so she could relocate to the West Coast. She worked her way through college as a secretary, learning skills that directly support her current managerial work. After attending a college nestled in the countercultural communities of Oregon, she became a practitioner of *shiatsu*, a Japanese technique of body work—that itself draws on ***kanpo* (traditional Chinese medicine)** and Western traditions—to balance bodily functions. Her hospice work in Oregon paved the way for Clare to move to the San Francisco Bay Area. A lesbian activist, she worked with patients with HIV until too many of her own friends were dying. “I had death in my professional life and death in my personal life, and it was just too much.” She bought a house-cleaning business, which gave her the flexibility to be “present for my friends who were dying.”

Clare’s introduction to the high-tech world began in customer service. She then took management courses on work styles; she went to Toast-

masters to hone her communication skills. She earned an M.A. in human resources and organizational development. She views herself as “a planner,” and built on that foundation. She continues to define herself as one who has “a route in my head. I am going to do this, then this, then this! . . . I’m the kind of person that likes to make dates.”

She consciously built a network of politically and socially compatible people, who “operate similarly in the world” and also share an “experience of repression in the world.” These people came from working-class families or had a **GLBTQ** affiliation. Gay Pride month is a time of community action and activity. She continues to explore her spirituality, creating sacred places in her house or finding them at the beach.

Her office is outfitted with the latest ergonomic devices, positioned to fit her body perfectly. In front of her are bottles of pills—antacids for stomach pain and blue-green algae for energy. She has a mirror, which allows her to see behind her back, and brings her office into harmonious *feng shui*, an East Asian practice of arranging architecture and objects to harmonize energies. In her office is a statue of the Hindu deity **Ganesha**, the remover of obstacles, “good for a project manager.”

She knows her work is physically demanding. She wakes up in the middle of the night thinking about work, and about the burden of “working long hours.” Clare does not like asking a coworker, who is a single father, to come in at 1:30 A.M. to do testing for a few hours, but “I need him to do that.” She is upset thinking about his two children, ages eleven and fifteen, home alone. She suspects there is alcoholism and drug abuse all around her, but no one talks about it.

Work has had a huge impact on her own life. Clare had once worked on what was at that time a relatively new kind of personal digital assistant. Her team had developed a fifteen-ounce handheld device, later abandoned by the company, that, ironically, Clare herself could not hold. Clare had developed severe **carpal tunnel**. Later, at her home, Clare told me about the changes that had taken place because of her disability. Once she camped with her friends; she does so no longer. Once she had been an avid reader of novels, now she reads only magazines. She does not surf the web for

pleasure, but looks at her hands, saying, “I really can’t justify using them for my personal pleasure when I need to save them for work.” She opens her drawer and shows me the prototype for the PDA, the one she cannot hold. She holds up her hands, stares intently at them and says, “I save these for [my company].”