

Even Things Familiar Seem Strange

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It had just turned fall when Larry McDonough's father held him naked like a raw chicken over the 35-foot water well. That was ten years ago now. Maybe twelve. The sun was falling like a red hot candy, past Larry's ankles where his fingernails scratched something in code. Was it Morse? Did anyone hear it? That's the thing with quiet screams; they resound off the moist tree bark, the soggy back-porch additions, but they go unheard really. Each evening when the sky crashes into the mountain, no one around here winces, but the pink light on Larry's face as he arched back, collar bones as thin and heavenly as angel wings, made even the nightcrawlers turn away.

I saw Mr. McDonough kick the screen door open and a plastic toy -- a scooter? a ball? -- flew across the night like something disappointing. We could tell by the loud voices that Larry was in for it. He walked onto the porch with his father's lips next to his ear. "You no good piece of shit." And Larry just stared ahead at the yellow light of the harvest moon. Thunder acts like that, makes you stop for a minute, caught up in the foreboding. It rumbles closer and closer so that soon it's in your backyard, under your blankets purring warm and loud next to your face as if it's a friend, someone to be trusted. Eventually though, the storm either comes or doesn't, and the sound, no matter how terrifying it was, does leave you, alone and uneasy.

At least that's the way it happens in real life. There's something horrible on television, ER or Law & Order, and then the next day it's in the newspapers: mother drops baby from roof. It isn't as if we weren't warned. It isn't as if we don't think about horrible things all the time.

So with Larry, none of us was surprised, when we saw him by the well. It's just that what we anticipated, had even come to hope for, no matter how awful it might've been, became even worse. I remember standing in the woods and feeling Billy Emerson take my hand that night, holding it as if he meant to. His silver ring cut into my little finger as we soaked up the tension, just like it was pretend, a television special to shut off and forget before saying good night. But Larry couldn't turn the channel. He tripped over a metal dish and fell, dry dog food following him off the steps and onto the dying grass. Shielding his face from his father's hand, Larry tried to stay down, but Mr. McDonough pulled him up again, dragging Larry like a garbage bag towards the cement hole.

And Larry never cried. Even when his father ripped off his underpants and threw the elastic waistband into the water, snapping the fabric against his son's ass before gently dropping the white circle down the hole. Even when he jerked away from his father and stood alone in the middle of the leafless backyard, not even his palm covering himself, did Larry lose it. Mr. McDonough looked at his son's face and then his groin, smiling and shaking his head, before hurling chewed saliva first at Larry and then into the water, the spit falling like a foreshadowing.

He was a theatrical man, Mr. McDonough, and some people said that the whole thing was just for effect, nighttime drama for the neighboring families, sitting around their living rooms, windows cracked, TVs turned low, juice glasses pressed against the flimsy walls.

We weren't knowingly waiting for a spectacle. We were the neighbors' kids, hiding in the woods until their friend came out. That's what we did when the evenings finally turned cool against skin burned from too much summer: hang outside. Perhaps that's what eventually got Larry into trouble, too much free time. Perhaps, because of our silence, we contributed to Larry's fate and Mr. McDonough's innocence. When Mrs. Millington, the librarian, lost her husband, no one remembered the bad things, the time he tied her to a chair and burned her hair off so that she had to wear a scarf for the whole summer. After the layoff, he just had too much time on his hands, poor soul, is what the minister's wife said. But did anyone suggest a hobby, wood-working, stamp collecting, car repair? Did anyone say Thank God when he finally killed himself, driving into the steel water tower the day before Christmas? Mrs. Millington certainly did. She noticed a miracle when it happened.

What we noticed that night at the well were the bones of Larry's knees. They were dark red as if the blood in between the cartilage and muscles had soured and gone off; milk turning. Innocently enough, we've all experienced it, folding back the cardboard peaks of our milk cartons and smelled a cow curdling, rotting in our coffee, its thin ears folding over into moth dust. Mr. McDonough looked just as shocked as he held Larry by his hair, searching for some part of himself that was

familiar, recognizable, unspoiled. Instead, he spit in his son's face and slid the tin cover from the well. He paused then, gathering phlegm in his throat, listening to a rustle in the woods, a shifting from day to night. All this time, Larry was pinned to his father's side like a butterfly to a wall.

There's nothing like restraint to strengthen someone. The closer Mr. McDonough pulled his son, the harder Larry pushed away so that at first, they looked like friends hugging; it was only if you were very close would you have seen the uneasiness between them. My fifth grade teacher, Miss Brenner was the same way with that cat she found. A loner tom, an orange-and-white stray who came to her drainpipe looking for water and she mistook those dry licks on her hand, that summer thirst of the cat, for love. First, she set out water. Then, tuna with oil dripping down its side, the neglected cans piling up in the sink next to her own single-serving soup tins. I would drop off left-overs my mother had wrapped up and watch Miss Brenner set that red bowl on her paved stoop. She then hid indoors behind the burlap curtain, waiting for the cat's visit. In the evening, the tom would come and eat the tuna, then the milk and finally the water and dry food, looking up occasionally at Miss Brenner, not all hidden behind her window frame. Their eyes would meet, cat's and lady's, but it was always the cat who looked away first, searching for something lustful.

That's how it usually starts, with disinterest. In our family, it was my father who first started roaming, sleeping with the town clerk and then the school superintendent so that soon everyone knew about the infidelities. This was before my father confessed, when rumors were simply other people's jealousies.

My parents told my sister Darlene and me that they were very much in love. Even love strays, they said.

Miss Brenner would tell the people at church the same thing about her and the cat. The feeding ritual continued and each time, Miss Brenner would get farther. The cat would let her pick him up and hold him, a quick hug and a chin scratch, and then finally hours of stroking. She would sit the tom next to her on the couch while she watched television. Soon, she made a bed for the cat, an old box cushioned with a soft blanket and rubber toys; Miss Brenner rarely let the animal outside.

And then one evening, the cat got up, stretched, licked his tail and jumped through an open window. It was spring and the lilacs were full and heavy on their slim stems and Miss Brenner sat outside beneath them, whispering “here kitty,” her thin black hair out of its daytime bun, her nightgown loose and slipping from her wide shoulder bones. The next night, she did the same thing. Set out more food and waited. But the cat never returned. Later that month, she mentioned this to one of the ladies from church. The cat was seen hanging around the Reeger's place, the woman told her, all dressed up with bows around his neck, sitting in a wicker basket the kids found at the dump.

I'll never forget the look on Miss Brenner's face when she learned that her cat was happy down at the Reeger's. It was a similar expression that my mother had when my father couldn't lie anymore and had to honor us with the Truth. He presented it as if it was a treat, something we'd been wanting for a long time and now finally deserved. He told us that he was in love with another woman,

someone important to him, but not to us. He assured us that nothing would change and our family would be the same as always: happy and honest. This was the age of open communication, he said, and that the important thing was that he loved us. Susan Smith loved her children. She told the jurors with her hand on the Bible that by killing them, she was in fact saving them. Neither those children, my mother, Miss Brenner nor Larry looked thankful.

Was honesty, then, what Larry was considering as Mr. McDonough pressed him close? Given a choice, Larry would have left his home years ago and never returned, if he knew the truth about his father.

But Mr. McDonough never gave Larry a choice. The doors to their house were never left open. Unannounced leave-takings never went unnoticed; Mr. McDonough would stand at the end of the driveway, his back against the mailbox, waiting in the dark if Larry was late getting home even from team practice. The car keys always hung idle on a nail. Except for this one evening, when Larry came back and saw his father sitting on the porch, his belt already in his hand. Larry then took the keys from his pocket and, still warm from the ignition, threw them to me.

Billy Emerson and the others watched as the three keys and chain landed in my palm. They stared at my hand and then back to Larry who was staring at me, whispering, “Go on, Emily,” so that no one was mistaken whom he meant. I ran to their garage, envisioning the freedom, that Larry must’ve felt when he looked out into the woods and threw. As his father rubbed Larry’s chin back and forth against the metal porch railing, I rolled the car out of the driveway.

The glass and pebbles crumbling beneath the tires were the only sound anyone, who testified later, would say they heard. I pulled onto the street and waited for Larry to run. This was just before his father grabbed him by his scalp skin and walked him the few hundred yards to the well.

So there *was* a reason for this. Larry had taken the keys without asking. With Miss Brenner, I never could look at her again without wondering if she hadn't brought on the abandonment herself. And with my father, it was hard to watch him kiss my mother's cheek and not see the town clerk's and the school superintendent's faces next to hers. But are we responsible for our passions? Supposedly Larry had just wanted to see some girl he met over the summer. It was a girl from over the state line, rumor had it, too far to hitch, so he needed the car to kiss a girl he loved before she left for college. People said that Larry brought this on himself. And perhaps Mr. McDonough didn't want his son to make the mistakes he made. At least that's how my mother explained it to us at dinner the day after the incident with Larry. She told the story about the McDonough parents that we had heard so many times it had become absurd, too outrageous to be true. But the way she spoke of Mr. McDonough and Mrs. McDonough, young and in love with other people, the way her head lowered so that she no longer saw my father at the other end of the table, but could stare instead at her hands fingering the fringe of the tablecloth like the damp hair hanging down the nape of her own lover's neck made me believe her. People intentionally do this: tell stories that reveal more than they meant to, and then coyly change the subject. That dinner, my mother got up

quickly from the table and cut dessert. She looked stunned, but relieved as if the secret of her affair, and her own infidelities, was now everyone's responsibility, not solely hers.

Miss Brenner, whom I saw years later at a rummage and bake sale, had the same expression. She sold me one of her lemon tarts and with my change, she said that she never did see it coming, the tom's betrayal, but that as long as he was happy, she too was happy.

This means that even if Larry had done something wrong, which none of us knew for sure as we watched the two men hovering over the well like they were searching for the answer, a photograph or love letter that would finally settle the matter, even if Larry was guilty, was that the issue that angered Mr. McDonough when he threw his only son into the well? And similarly, was it their affairs with new people, men and women with whom they had no history, children, mortgages, bad times, was it these other relationships that sucked the family out of our house? When first my sister and then I ran away, would my mother blame the town clerk? Likewise, would Mr. McDonough, when asked, in a courtroom under oath, for the reason why he killed his boy: car keys?