The Offering

Dusk, and the sassafras tea had just come to a boil when Elsie said, “I never understood why you wouldn’t let us spend the night here when we were kids.” I set the earthenware mug in front of her and said, “Careful, it’s hot.”

She blew on it for a moment, then stood up and stretched, still stiff from her long drive up that morning. She looked out the kitchen window, gazing over the south pasture, the distant creek with its stretch of walnut trees. I knew that pasture was where he would approach from, but I still didn’t know how to explain. It was something she had to experience for herself.

“I didn’t know you’d even noticed.”

“Come on Mom, how could we not? It was like a four hour drive each way to visit grandma and grandpa here, and every time we’d set out extra early, earlier than a school day, drive up, visit all day, and leave right after supper. Or if it was winter, before supper.”

“It gets dark earlier in winter.”

“I’m aware, Mom. You’d always have a different excuse. *I don’t want to drive in the dark. I don’t want to risk icy roads. I don’t want to throw off Elsie’s schedule. I don’t want to put y’all out* – I remember that exactly because this is the only place you ever said *y’all*. A few times dad got so tired he tried to talk you into staying, but you glared it away, and we got a hotel not even thirty minutes down the road. It was weird.” She sat back down and blew on the tea, finally risking a tentative sip. I’d already drunk half of mine, with lots of sugar. I’d put the lancets away in the back of a drawer before she arrived. I didn’t want her thinking I had diabetes on top of everything else we had to discuss.

I wondered if, later that night, she would notice the smell or the sound first. I wondered for the hundredth time since I’d invited her up for the week if I was doing the right thing, if I was offering her freedom or servitude. Out of season, the cicadas buzzed and the frogs croaked all around the farmhouse, loud enough that it could be hard to have a conversation outside on the back porch. That’s where he would enter, though I never knew exactly when. He had his patterns, as they all did, but they weren’t rigid. There was enough variety that I could still be surprised.

“God, I loved it here when I was little. I’m so glad you moved back.”

I wondered if she would feel that way when he arrived. I wondered if she would forgive me.

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The farmhouse where we were sipping tea stood in the middle of 144 acres my family had owned since 1886, on the far western edge of Scruggs County, Tennessee. I was the sixth generation to grow up under these creaking eaves and this weathered tin roof, gorgeously cacophonous whenever the rain rushed down. I was my parents’ only child and they doted on me, while also teaching me what life on a farm meant, what devotion was demanded if one was to be a good steward. Elsie was the seventh generation of our bloodline to spend childhood days dashing through the wheat, swinging from willow branches, and huffing indignantly in the creek when water striders would slip from her grasp. Childhood days, but as she had noticed, never childhood nights.

Growing up here, I was the only farmer’s daughter I knew who read Wallace Stevens. I remember lying under the big magnolia in the west field with my high school boyfriend, trying to explain “The Anecdote of the Jar” to him. “So, it’s about a jar?”

“It’s about people, and about how we can’t help but fixate on what people leave behind.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s about a jar.”

“Look, if you were walking through the woods here and found an, I don’t know, a Hot Wheels car, that would draw your attention more than another tree.”

“I don’t know. I like trees. What kind of Hot Wheel are we talking about?” He was willfully, charmingly ignorant. We held each other tightly that last summer but held the relationship loosely. We knew where I was headed, a scholarship bobbing like a lifeboat that coming fall. I’d told him once, though only once, that he should enroll, too, but I didn’t push. He said, “Shit, Bet, we both know I’m not gonna Wallace Stevens my way outta here. I know where my next fifty years will be.” I couldn’t tell, as well as I knew him, if he spoke with determination or regret. We wrote three times after I left. I filled pages, front and back, with quotes from Simone Weil and Denise Levertov. He wrote with a brief, gruff joy of a calf being born. He died eight years ago from a heart attack, bush-hogging his back meadow.

I’d spent forty years teaching English Lit in small colleges and universities, at first moving as far away as a job would take me. Over the years, without a spoken intention, we drifted back closer and closer while still keeping an appropriate buffer of miles between our home and the farm. I wanted Elsie to be close enough to know my family and to experience the beauty of this place, but I didn’t want her to feel trapped by it. At the end of each visit during her childhood, I hated to see the yearning on my parents’ faces, and on Elsie’s. They loved each other and would have loved more time together. She and my mother had a special bond, spending hours hulling and shelling walnuts from the stand of trees next to the creek. None of that softened my resolve. We packed up and went every time, daylight still visible in the rearview mirror.

After my mother died last winter, my daddy having passed away the prior spring, I moved back to the farm, shocking Elsie and all my colleagues. It was the first time I was glad my husband was gone. It was one less person who needed an explanation.

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It was the sound that she noticed first. If it had been the smell, he never would have gotten so close. Her screaming woke me at two a.m., though it was a shallow sleep I readily rose from. I’d been tossing fitfully all night, anxious for what was to come.

Her screaming was reaching a hysterical pitch when I opened the spare bedroom door to find her huddled on the floor in the corner, immobile, unable to run. I understood. We expect people to behave rationally in extreme situations, never noticing that we don’t even behave rationally on a random Tuesday. She held one hand over her mouth, but it did nothing to stifle the volume, as she pointed at the shape lying on the bed.

The buzzing was as loud as her screaming, loud enough to reverberate painfully in the small wood-paneled room. The stench was overpowering, especially if you were used to lilac and lavender bath salts, unaccustomed to the residue of rotten flesh. The form lying on the bed, his back to us, was the silhouette of a seven-year-old boy, composed entirely of flies, thousands of them, crawling over each other, spastically flitting in tight circuits, close enough to maintain the shape, to be a unified whole. I knew from experience there was nothing bodily underneath that jittering surface, having plunged my hand inside one rash night when I was eleven. It was simply open space wearing this writhing armor of flies, moving in unison, now turning over to face us, now sitting up on the side of the bed, as I said, “It’s okay, Silas. You haven’t done anything wrong.” After all these years I still didn’t know if he could hear me. I just knew he couldn’t say anything back. I looked down at Elsie and touched her shoulder. “We should get some cocoa.” I helped her to her feet and led her out of the room as the shape dissolved into the air.

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She was still shaking when I set the mug down. “What the fuck, Mom?!”

“That’s Silas, honey.”

“No, that’s a big fucking cloud of flies!”

“Silas is your five times great uncle.”

“Are you losing your mind? Is this Alzheimer’s? You’re only sixty-eight. No, shit, I saw it, too, I *smelled* it, God, you’re not crazy. I mean, you might be crazy, but—” She was rambling.

“Silas died when he was seven. The family’s best guess was that he fell in a sinkhole. They searched for him for a month before his mother finally agreed to a funeral. They never found him, but obviously the flies did. That’s how he’s always appeared, as far back as I can remember.”

“Mom, this is insane. What’s going on?”

“What’s always gone on here, every night, almost as long as we’ve had the place. Look out the back window, Elsie. I can’t say for sure, but most nights she’s out there.”

She stood slowly, still holding her cocoa in trembling hands as she took small, tentative steps toward the window. The moon was nearly full in a cloudless sky, and I knew what she was seeing when she said, “Oh my god, what is that?”

“That’s Silas’s mom, Geneva. She’s looking for him, which is what she does most nights.” I couldn’t count how many times in my youth I’d looked out into that field and seen Geneva, desperate need etching her face, forcing her way forward into nothing. “We should get some sleep. There’ll be a lot to talk about tomorrow.”

Elsie protested halfheartedly, casting for answers as she finished the cocoa, but her mind was ready to shut down. She wanted me to tuck her in and stay with her until she fell asleep. It took a long time. I was happy to do it, grateful to have those moments together. I was glad to comfort her once more before I had to tell her the whole story.

#

We slept late. I rose first, frying bacon and eggs in my grandmother’s old cast iron skillet, brewing coffee, and getting one of the lancets out. I sat at the table, trying for the thousandth time to figure out the elusive order of words that would explain this place to someone who didn’t grow up embedded in it, who wasn’t raised amongst its impossibility. Elsie joined me around noon, wiping sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand with the exact same mannerism she had at two years old. She said, “This is where I say I had a crazy dream last night, right?”

“This is where you have a strong cup of coffee while I heat the food back up.”

I warmed a plate for her as she sipped from her favorite mug. She had purposely sat in a different chair, turning her back to the window. “Mom, I don’t even know what to ask.”

“I know. Eat up, then we’ll take a walk and I’ll tell you everything.”

I was pleased to see she had an appetite. She’d need the strength. As expected, when her eyes wandered to the lancet on the table, she began grilling me about my health, which I assured her was fine, though I’m not sure she believed me, physically or mentally. When she finished, I pocketed the lancet and we stepped out the back door. We were going to the old well.

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Fall leaves crunched underfoot as I led her across the back pasture, though plenty still blazed orange and red on the branches. I began the story, the one I’d protected her from for three decades. “The first thing you should know is that you won’t see just Silas and Geneva. There are over a dozen of them here, all family, going back to the late 1800’s. We can’t communicate with them, or them with us, as far as any of the family has ever been able to tell, but they do seem to enjoy being close to the living. That’s likely why Silas curled up next to you last night.”

“Mom, Jesus, assuming any of this is real, you could have warned me.”

I stopped walking and looked at her. “How would that warning have been received, that warning about the sentient, ghostly cloud of flies?”

She looked back. She had the same hard expression as me, as my mother. It gave way to a resigned smile. “Fair enough.” She picked up an acorn, rolled its smooth potential between her hands, and we walked on.

“The first one to appear was Bertha. I’m not going to count how many greats of a grandmother she is to you. She was the first of the family to die on the farm, we think from a stroke, but who really knows back then.” I led her up to the waist high well, stone smoothed by a century of weather, moss-covered and cold. It hadn’t been used for its original purpose since before I was born. It was used for something else.

“You’re going to want to ask me a lot of questions that start with why, and I’m so grateful for the fierce, inquisitive person you’ve become. But please listen, so we don’t waste too much of our time together on why’s. I spent years wondering myself, but each seeming answer just pulled back the curtain to reveal another mystery. I don’t know why. I just know what is.” I took out the lancet. I pricked my finger, a practiced motion, no longer flinching in the least. I held my hand over the well and squeezed out a drop of blood. I wiped my finger with an alcohol swab and said, “This is what we do, what we’ve always done. This is what it means to be a steward of this place, and of its people. I’m going to need to sit down shortly, so we should get back to the house.” I turned and walked briskly away from the well, her trailing behind me, dragging her thousand why’s.

#

The fatigue, after months of this daily sacrifice, wasn’t debilitating anymore. That first week after I moved back to the farm, after my first offering, I could barely walk the distance from house to well each morning, once my blood had spread into the groundwater, into the soil. I’d grown stronger with time. By now it just felt like the strain and ache of a hard day’s work, a bone-deep weariness that passed within a few hours. I explained this to her on the walk back so, seeing my exhaustion, she wouldn’t be more alarmed than she already was. She cut us each a piece of the stack cake I’d made yesterday, and we sat at the table. She was relentless, bless her analytical mind, digging for answers I’d never had.

“I told you, Elsie, I don’t know why. I don’t know which family member learned how to do this, or how. I just know every generation has done it, and it’s worked.”

“What do you mean it's worked?”

“The offering is what lets the family, the ghosts, or whatever you want to call them, stay. A drop of our blood gives the land what it needs to nourish them, to let them continue being here. That’s why, after my parents died, I came back. I was the last person alive who could make the offering.” Of course, that wasn’t true.

“And if you don’t?”

“Then they can’t stay. You know I loved my life away from this place. I tried another way right after your grandmother died, when I was determined to stay in the city. I took a vial of blood, put it in a dropper bottle, and hired a local man I’ve known for years to administer one drop in the well each day. I told him it was a new water treatment. I know he’s trustworthy and he did exactly as I told him. It didn’t work.”

“What happened?” Her fork had been stalled halfway to her mouth the whole conversation. It hung there in midair, liable to go in either direction.

I sighed. “It means they were going to be ripped away, that whatever this relationship is was falling apart. That first night of the droppered blood, the neighbors said they heard red foxes screaming all around the place, said it sounded like hundreds of them. You wouldn’t know, growing up in the city, but red foxes sound like a person in lament. The next day there was a localized hailstorm, not on any forecast, centered on this farm. Two huge sinkholes opened in the north field. I drove here in a rush that next night, and I heard the foxes as I pulled in the driveway. But it wasn’t foxes. The family, all of them, were kneeling or lying around the well, wailing. I’d never seen them all gathered together. I’d never heard them make a sound in my sixty years. They were flickering, like a lightbulb when it’s threatening to go out. I hurried to the well and pricked my finger. I felt an overwhelming fatigue, like I’d put up a whole season’s worth of tobacco in one moment. I collapsed and woke up the next morning at the well. Everything was as it had always been. That’s when I knew I had to move back. The place doesn’t just need our blood. It needs our presence.”

She’d barely taken a bite. “Finish your cake, Elsie. It’s grandma’s recipe, your favorite.”

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Dusk was coming on again, a dusk that held an entirely new meaning for my daughter, one I’d hidden from her since the moment she was born. I didn’t know exactly what she was feeling, no matter how hard I’d tried to imagine over the years what her reaction would be. I’d carried this place and its secret in my blood, as natural as breathing, for as long as I could remember. I’d felt its inexorable pull and fled from it, only to return, hand extended. “They’ll be coming any time, now. I want you to see some of the others.” She sensed the sadness in my voice.

“Mom, do you even *want* to be here?”

“I honestly don’t know. Some days I do, some I don’t. I know you always thought this place was perfect when you were young, and now you probably see nothing but a cloud of flies bearing down, but the truth is more than that. So many of my colleagues romanticize Wendell Berry, thinking they could leave the city behind and take up the noble rural life, but none of them would crouch down in the muck and birth a bloodslicked calf into this fractured world. All farms are sacrifice, Elsie, this one more than most. But it’s not just sacrifice. You need to see the others.”

#

We stepped out into the coming darkness, October air crisp in our lungs. I took her to their most frequent haunts, and fortunately most of them were keeping to their patterns. As we walked, she wrapped her arm in mine and said, “How do you know they even want to be here? Maybe they want to go on. Being an empty ball of bugs can’t be pleasant.”

“I’ve wondered about that, too, but every life has some suffering. A hard life isn’t a life without meaning, if what they have now is life. Despite what’s walking toward us, you’ll see it’s not all bad.”

She turned to follow my gaze, and saw a young woman stumbling through the field, intestines spilling out into her cradled arms, face distorted with panic and pain. “That’s Trudy. There used to be panthers in this area. She was thirty-two.”

Elsie was appalled, pulling her arm away. “Mom, that’s it, you’ve got to end this. This is a fucking sickness. It’s torture. Maybe they were wailing at the well that night because that kind of dying hurts, but it’s what they need to do.”

I didn’t answer. I strode on towards the barn. I walked inside, and scaled the ladder to the loft above, Elsie climbing after me, still protesting. As she joined me, standing ankle deep in fragrant hay, I pointed to the pile at the edge of the open doors, bathed in moonlight, where a teenage girl, gingham dress askew, lay in the hay, deeply kissing a stout young man whose overalls she had worked halfway down. They were silent, but their faces were pure joy. “That’s Trudy, at sixteen. That’s Josiah, a farmhand from the next hollow. They got married a year after this.” I pointed out the loft into the distant pasture. “He planted that big magnolia over her grave when she died.” We looked back down at them, so passionate it was hard to accept it would ever end. “Let’s leave them to it.” We climbed out of the barn, and she followed me back towards the house. We passed Geneva near the old smokehouse, still searching for Silas, frantic in her grief, hands wringing in mute agony.

I led Elsie into the farmhouse through the back porch as I said, “Oh good, she’s here.” I nodded, and Elsie peeked over my shoulder into the living room. A woman of at least eighty sat in the rocker, her face creased with laughlines. She tapped her foot and sang silently as she pieced a quilt. “That’s Geneva. That quilt is on the bed you slept in last night, though it’s pretty worn now. She made it for one of her seventeen grandchildren, though I can’t remember which one.”

As we stepped back into the night, I paused on the threshold and said, “These ghosts— they’re not just stuck here, frozen in one frame. There’s more to their life, then and now, than their worst moment. Come on, there’s more to see.”

We took our time, covering a sizable piece of the farm, and Elsie saw most of them, the good and the bad. We finally headed toward the creek, which I had been saving for last, which I had been dreading. I didn’t know if I wanted her to be there or not. I didn’t know if Elsie would be elated, or if she would never speak to me again. As we walked through the field, I pointed out Chester, fifty years old, raking hay near the fenceline, then shortly afterwards we strolled alongside Chester, twenty years old, fishing pole over his shoulder, whistling silently as he headed towards the creek before blinking out into the blackness.

Elsie stopped abruptly and took my hand. “Why didn’t you want me to know about this?”

“Oh, Els, I’ve been trying to figure out how to have this conversation your whole life, or whether we should ever have it at all.” I was tearing up, but I’d promised myself I wouldn’t, that I would be as strong for her as I’d been for those who came before, that I wouldn’t add any more weight to the inevitable gravity of this place. I went on. “In our family, making the offering was a given. It wasn’t a choice. It was simply what we did. My mother and daddy did me a great kindness by pressuring me as little as they did when I left, by honoring my decision to keep this from you.”

A brilliant blue form caught our eyes. A little girl ran across the pasture near us, features so distinct you could see the glorious summer sweat on her glowing forehead as she chased ethereal fireflies, whooping and cheering silently each time she caught one. I turned back to Elsie, and we continued towards the creek. “I thought I made my choice when I left, but here I am. I tried my best to break away, but after growing up here, this place was marrow and muscle. It was memory I couldn’t move without. I thought if I gave you more distance, gave you years and miles away, you would have a chance. You would have a life of your own.”

We stepped slowly down the bank, and there she was at last, standing on the other side beneath a walnut tree. Elsie had started to ask another question, but stopped short and choked it back. The woman across the creek held an old milk bucket halfway filled with walnuts. She smiled at someone next to her, gently extending her arm at waist level as though reaching for something shorter than her that we couldn’t see, as though reaching for a child.

Elsie was crying. I said, “That was her chasing fireflies, too. She would have been about six then. I’m sure you know how old she is here.”

Elsie’s breath came in huge gulps, crying mingled with laughter, grief mixed with wonder. I wrapped my arm around her and said, “Look how happy she is.” We stayed until my mother turned to walk back towards the house, still talking silently to the unseen child by her side, and faded away.

#

We slept late again the next day, waking around noon to a cloudless fall blue sky. The kitchen felt too dark, so we drank our coffee on the back porch. Elsie said, “I want to give the offering today.”

“Sweetie, I don’t know if you should. It’s so exhausting, and I want—”

“Mom, I want to do it. I need to know what it’s like.”

I stared past her at the well. I hated it, but she was right. She needed to feel the weight, needed to understand at least part of the price before she came to some ignorantly romantic decision when one day I was gone. I nodded and went inside to get the lancet.

As we walked toward the well, she said, “Do you think what they have here, these fragments, is life?”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m past judging anyone’s life.” I had come to understand that I would die one day not knowing if I was here because of charity, serving these people I loved, or because of greed, unable in my need to let these tethered souls go. I lived my days here bound in that mesh of selfishness and selflessness that accretes to us all.

I opened my hand and offered her the lancet. She needed to do it for herself. She nodded, untwisted the cap, and made the sacrifice. She reached out into open space, into the years past and to come, and let the drop fall.

END