

And The Fact It Rains

“DESPITE ALL OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS
WE OWE OUR EXISTENCE TO
A SIX-INCH LAYER OF TOPSOIL
AND THE FACT IT RAINS.”

—*Farm Equipment Association of Minnesota and South Dakota*

A week after I found my brother lying unconscious in our family’s barn, it snowed for the first time that year.

The snow was unexpected and unrelenting. For weeks it had been in the forties with no sign of snowfall, but when we awoke that day, it was to oceans of white, bleaching the whole town.

Despite the oddity of the weather, no one was found talking about it. Everyone was too busy discussing Peter Hodges, the man who seemed to have dropped out of time. *He looks the same as he did the day he disappeared*, they said, whispering between fences and over cups of coffee in the morning, *even down to the clothes he was wearing. His family—oh, they must be elated...And his sister—heard she was the one who found him. Can you believe it?*

My brother’s sudden disappearance had been a tragic blemish on our town’s otherwise unmarred history. Everyone had mourned his assumed death back when it was fresh, but now that we had been blessed with a miracle, I knew they couldn’t help but find the confusion of it all exhilarating, intoxicating. It would be gossip material for years to come.

The only one worried about the snow was Peter. Sitting in our parents’ living room, he cradled a cup of coffee in his hands and stared past our father and me at the

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window behind us. By ten A.M., the snow was still coming down, dancing in the wind in a way that would have been whimsical if only it had happened a week earlier.

“It’s not supposed to snow this early in the year,” he said. I saw his fingers tighten around the cup. He hadn’t taken a single sip, which I would’ve found weird if I weren’t so occupied with everything else. He’d always loved coffee.

“I guess not,” Dad agreed. I could see him trying to surreptitiously keep his eyes on Peter too, the same as me; the whole family was afraid that if we looked away even for a moment, when we turned back around, Peter would be gone again. His reappearance was too good to be true—it was the thing of dreams, of prayers. Something of Biblical proportion.

I was only eleven when he went missing, but every month until my nineteenth birthday, I had dreams where he returned to us. The first few years, when we were still holding onto hope that he was still out there somewhere alive and safe, he was in my dreams almost every night. In them, he called out to me, sinking into darkness, just *begging* me to go out there and look for him. *Find me*, he said. *You can still find me*.

I never did. What could a little girl do to save her brother, I thought?

The dreams didn’t stop until our hope withered, and eventually, slowly, as we decided together that he was dead, his voice didn’t visit me in my sleep any longer.

No more begging.

“The weather is weird. The plants...” Peter’s voice trailed off into silence. His fingers tightened around the mug until they were the color of the snow outside.

“Peter,” I said.

“Hmm?”

“Your...hands.”

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He looked down as if just noticing he was holding his mug for the first time. It was an expression I had never seen on his face before. His grip loosened, but the color didn't return to his fingers, leaving them bleached for a moment longer. "Oh. Yes. My hands."

From his spot on the couch next to me, Dad scratched his beard, his bushy eyebrows furrowing. The last time Peter was here, our dad's hair was dark and thick, but in the years since, it had grayed and thinned. Peter was left unchanged during his absence, but the rest of us weren't so lucky.

"We should go see the horses once the snow calms," Dad said.

Peter wasn't looking at either of us. I looked at his face, and I saw it, those subtle differences that would be left out of the gossip around town: his face hadn't aged, still the fresh twenty-year-old he'd been the day he went missing, his clothes untouched by wear or time, but he somehow still looked...different. He seemed dazed. Distracted. The Peter I grew up with was sharp, focused, the most in-the-moment boy the town had ever seen—and this Peter was a million miles away from that boy, with his glazed over eyes trained on the window behind us. He seemed mesmerized by the snow. By the world outside.

I didn't remember his eyes being brown. They were blue. Like our mother's.

Weren't they?

"Sorry." He returned to us. "What were you saying?"

Our father paused and looked at me as if I would have an answer for him. I couldn't stand that I didn't, so I looked away.

"I was saying we should go see the horses once the snow stops," he repeated, slower this time. "Like we used to."

"Of course. Like we used to."

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I knew he was only adding that for our sake. He didn't remember anything. In the week since he'd returned, he hadn't regained a single memory from before he went missing. I'd started to worry if he would ever regain them, but the doctor told us to give it a few more weeks before we despaired. *God works in mysterious ways, but He's given him back to you once*, she said. *We shouldn't be quick to assume another miracle won't happen.*

But I wondered if this miracle hadn't come with a price. If maybe his memories had been the cost of his return.

When the snow finally calmed, we dressed in our warmest clothes and headed out to the stable. Mom worked most of the morning. She would never admit it, but I knew it was because she was still unsure how to handle this new Peter. Nobody else really knew either, but she had been the most torn up by his disappearance. Maybe this was her way of coping with the shock of his sudden return, the re-opening of an old wound. When we got to the barn, she excused herself with nervous fluttering hands, her eyes glued to the white ground as she mumbled something about heading back inside. We politely ignored the behavior. None of us said anything about how quickly she rushed away.

"I guess you don't know," Dad said, moving past Peter to stand next to Juliet, who was only one of three horses on our farm.

Peter blinked between Dad and Juliet. "What don't I know?"

Dad again looked at me for help. This time, I delivered.

"Your horse—Glyn," I said. I found myself speaking slowly, feeling foolish all the while. "I guess you don't remember her, but...she died four years ago."

"Oh."

I couldn't detect anything from that *oh*. It was worse than his eyes.

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“How?” he asked.

“She broke her leg,” Dad said.

“Oh.”

I understood then why Mom was so anxious to get away.

“Was I close with her?” Peter looked up at Juliet, who snorted and reached out for Dad’s attention. He obliged her, patting her neck gently.

“Very,” Dad said, smiling. It was a sad smile. A fond kind. There had been many sad smiles since the weight of Peter’s amnesia fully hit us, settling in our stomachs like rocks to the ocean floor. “She was the only horse you would ride.”

“Did you bury her?”

“Of course.”

“Can I see her grave?”

I looked at Dad to see what he thought of this request. He seemed thrown off, like this wasn’t the route he anticipated Peter taking. But he nodded, pressing his lips together in that sympathetic half-smile he always did when he wasn’t sure how to show support any other way.

“Right,” he said. “Come on. We’ll take you to her.”

#

The three of us made our way through the snow to a hill on the side of our family’s property, where all animals who passed while in our care were buried. Our dog Sherri was buried here, along with the rabbits and birds, wild *and* domestic, that Sherri had killed in her time alive.

And there was the largest grave: Glyn’s.

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She was the only horse of ours to need burying. Her death had been like a final blow to us. When she passed, even Mom cried. It was like we'd lost the only piece of Peter we had left.

By the time we got to the hill, I was beginning to feel the cold. I'd worn as many layers as I could, but it still proved to be insufficient. I was shivering as we arrived at the top of the hill, but Peter, who was wearing less than me due to the great amount of his clothes we'd thrown out in the past decade, seemed unfazed by the weather. His hands were still pale white.

We arrived at Glyn's grave—a patch of land underneath a large oak tree, marked with a headstone our aunt made.

"Here she is," Dad said, stopping in front of the stone.

Peter didn't say anything, but from the corner of my eye, I saw as he began to weep.

It was the first time in ten years I had seen my brother cry, but it wasn't crying he'd ever done before. His face didn't contort. There were no theatrics, no scrunching of the nose, no heavy sobs or hiccups or labored, uneven breathes. He cried silently as he stared at the stone. The fat tears dripped down from his cheeks, steady and unending and unexpected like the snowfall, some sliding onto his nose as he stood with his head bent. I watched them land on the headstone, leaving small dents in the snow. He made no move to wipe away any tears.

Dad set a hand on my shoulder as if to comfort me, but I couldn't understand what for. It wasn't me who was sobbing in the open air, cheeks and nose red from the cold, eyes puffy from tears and the freezing wind. With his eyes bloodshot, I noticed just how brown they were. Just how brown they should not have been.

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Peter was still crying as he bent down and wiped away snow from her gravestone. He made sure to clean off every inch, and then moved on to the area surrounding it, revealing green grass underneath that had somehow survived the sudden cold. When he got to the base of the tree, he slid his hands across the gnarled skin, contorted and sliding into the ground, wiping away snow as he went—and for a moment, he did nothing, his palm against the bark, tears falling steadily. He seemed to be having a conversation with...someone. Something.

Dad and I watched as he leaned forward, eyes closed, and pressed his forehead to the bark, resting it there gently. I was reminded of the times he would do that with Glyn, smiling fondly as she snorted, reprimanding her when she ignored his greeting in favor of searching for some snack to eat. I wanted to ask if he remembered her—if that was what this was about—if maybe his memories had finally returned to us along with his body. But I was scared for the answer.

I said nothing.

Dad and I stood to the side, watching him quietly as if not to interrupt. Peter sat there for another few moments, his chest rising and falling rhythmically, his shoulders relaxed. I just started to wonder if he had fallen asleep when he opened his eyes, pulled away from the tree, and went back to clearing away snow as if nothing had happened. I thought with sympathy that his effort was pointless—the patches of green he'd uncovered would only be drowned in white again in a few minutes.

But we stayed on that hill for another twenty minutes, and by the time we left, it was still green, as if the snow knew to avoid anything Peter touched.

#

That night, for the first time in three years, I had that dream again.

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Eleven-year-old me, standing on the edge of darkness. Twenty-year-old Peter in that darkness below me. I called out to him, asking, *where are you? How can I find you? How can I help you?* but he would not answer me. He just kept saying my name, *Virginia, Virginia, Virginia*, until I finally said, *I miss you. Come back to me. Peter, come back.*

The blackness shifted at my plea. Slowly, the dark unfolded, revealing Peter's body in the barn, lying unconscious where I found him. I tried to run to him, but I could not move, and then Peter opened his brown eyes and stood. He made his way towards me, and every step he took was followed with earth, murky soil that grew vibrant green behind him.

He stopped in front of me. This was my brother, but this was not *my* brother. This was—something else. I got the sense that I was walking into the divine.

Virginia, he said, and then the shadows swallowed him, and when they left once more, he was lying at the base of the oak tree, the roots budding out of his skin. During the dream, he didn't call for my help even once. He looked...at peace.

Standing over his decaying body, I asked, as an entire community had for years, where he went when he disappeared.

#

The second time Peter Hodges vanished, the newspapers were quiet.

Maybe it was out of respect. Maybe it was because everyone already knew by morning. Maybe it was too horrible for even them to write, to accept. Whatever the reason, it was never printed that Peter was not in his bed the next morning. That he was not anywhere in the house or on our property. That he had, it would seem, gone missing once more.

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Tragedy again passed through the town's lips, a somber game of telephone that filtered down to the bare basics: Peter Hodges was no longer with us for the second time in a decade. Oh, how cruel fate is; how mysterious the workings of our God who will take and give and take again. How unfortunate the Hodges.

Neighbors theorized the nature of Peter's disappearing the same they had the first time. Maybe he ran away, they said, never quiet enough that we would not hear; maybe he'd gone insane while away all those years and he'd finally snapped one night. Maybe he'd wandered outside for some fresh air and gotten lost in the cold. Maybe he'd died of hypothermia. Maybe he was hit by a car. Maybe he'd hitched a ride somewhere we'd never find him. Maybe we *would* find him.

Maybe, maybe.

But we—the Hodges—we knew better. The knowledge sunk into us as we slept, and we knew when we awoke that morning where he was. I cannot speak for my parents, but I knew it to be true even before I was welcomed back to consciousness: Peter was gone.

We did not find his body. We did not need to.

An agreement passed between us, silently, and at breakfast, Mom said, "I think it's time we buried him."

It was an odd choice, our neighbors would later rely to family and friends, *burying an empty casket on a hill like that, not even in a cemetery, under a tree...yes, their own yard...* But we had long since learned to tune them out. It would never be printed, but the three of us knew: Peter had returned.

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Home, he told me. *I went home.*