

The Boy in Question

When he shows up, the other guys scatter. Like he's a cold wind, and they're a pile of leaves, a stack of paper. Then it's just me under the net, and the basketball rolling across the court.

Later, one of the other guys, Zack or Tyler, will ask, "Doesn't he creep you out?"

But it's not like that. What I mean is—he scoops up the basketball and shoots it, not at the net but at me, he fires a pass straight from his chest, just like when we were on the team together, and it lands hard in my hands, stings my palms. He's just like he always is. It's like the taste of toothpaste or the sound of the church bells that ring every evening at five o'clock. You don't hear them. And what does toothpaste even taste like, really? It's all the familiar stuff, the stuff that doesn't change, that makes you forget something's wrong.

But then all of a sudden, you remember. Nothing makes it happen. You just go, Oh, yeah, everything's fucked up. And it's like that cold wind is inside you.

We play a little one-on-one, a little Horse. The sun gets heavy and drops out of the sky, and I say, “Listen, I should really—”

“Just one more game?” He spins the ball on his finger. When he drops it, he looks right at me.

(This is one of those moments.)

“Oh. Okay,” I say.

But when the next game is over, he says, “Just one more.”

“I gotta go home,” I tell him. “I’m already way late for dinner.”

“Luke, come on. Please?”

“I gotta go.” I jog across the court to get the ball. Keep going. Try not to look like I’m running away. I tell him, “You should go, too.”

He shrugs. “My parents don’t care how late I stay out.”

That gives me a shiver.

I say, “No, really. You should go. Like, you know—toward the light. Or whatever.”

He just gives me this look, and sort of laughs. “You totally crack me up.”

I’ve got the ball under my arm. It’s full-on dark now, no moon, just the streetlights all the way down Elm, and I already know I’m going to run from one puddle of light to the next, like a little kid. I can feel him behind me, watching me try not to run.

I don’t look back. But I hear him say, “See you tomorrow, Luke.”

After a number of complaints, the Mayor called a special town meeting. Most meetings were held at the Municipal Building, in the Chester P. Deakins room, but by six-fifteen it was clear that not everyone who wanted to attend would fit inside. At six-twenty-seven, a swarm of

folks poured from the Municipal Building, led by the Mayor himself. The town council members. The Town Clerk, Alicia Scott, with her thick notepad for taking the minutes. The librarian and the Fire Chief, the Chief of Police and several deputies, and the clerks of most of the stores. The town's only lawyer. The dentist and his hygienist. Husbands and wives, older children who'd insisted on coming despite their parents' protests. They'd left the younger kids at home with babysitters, and the babysitters held phones to their ears, twirled cords around their fingers, told each other they were *sure* they'd heard a noise, somewhere inside the house, maybe, or right outside. The little kids stared at television screens while their babysitters shushed each other and listened for the sound to happen again. Blue light from the T.V. sets flickered across the kids' faces; the children drew together on sofas, on living room floors. The crowd that drifted down Main Street, across Cherry, over to Maple Grove Road, a murmuring, solemn parade, passed the blue-lit windows of their own houses, the faces of their children behind glass, pale and strange.

I get up early of a Sunday, move slowly out of bed, not on account of the arthritis, in fact I feel pretty good this morning, but on account of the wife. If she woke up, she'd give me hell. I have heard it all before; I know what she thinks. It's just I can't help it.

By seven, I am on the stoop outside, got my thermos of coffee and my tackle box, looking for my Lazy Ike, that's the one he likes best. Don't know how things get so mixed around in there when all I do is snap the lid shut till the next fishing trip. Like them lures rearrange themselves when I ain't looking.

The screen door opens and closes. Well, now I am in for it.

"Henry." Her hand lands on my shoulder like a tiny bird. "Listen to me."

“If you say something worth hearing.”

Used to be, I said something like that to my wife, her face would go red as a barn and she'd get real quiet. Scary-quiet, my grandson called it.

“It's not right,” she says. “What you're doing.”

“You know what I think ain't right, Margaret? A woman who don't want nothing to do with her own grandson. You won't even look at him.”

She's got her hands on her hips now. Means business.

“You think I don't wish I could be different?” she says. “That I could just go along with it?”

“Why can't you?”

“It's not right, Henry,” she says again.

I lift the tray out of the tackle box. It's in here somewhere.

“Henry.”

I look out at the yard, the place where we scratched his name in the concrete when I poured the front walk. He was just a little tyke then.

“I just want to take my grandson fishing,” I say.

“You can't change what's happened.”

“He'll be here any minute, now.”

She stands up and opens the screen door, then hesitates. “Don't you let him inside this house, Henry Simmons.”

I don't know where that Lazy Ike run off to. Well, it'll give us an excuse to try something else, one of the lures I never got the chance to show him before.

He comes up the walk ten minutes later. Right on time, same as always.

“Hey, Grandpa,” he says, and shakes my hand, like a man. “You ready?”

I hand him his fishing pole. “As I’ll ever be. Let’s catch us some fish, kiddo.”

At the back of the crowd, moving slowly with the aid of his beechwood cane, was Dr. Tinwell, who still practiced medicine after fifty years and who had set the broken bones and stitched the open wounds and taken the temperatures of most of the town’s children, the boy in question included. Up ahead, the night janitor opened the doors of the middle school, and the crowd filed in. Tinwell paused to let the younger folks go on inside while he turned his face to the sky, the rustling leaves, the first stars of the evening. He’d come out to the meeting because it had seemed important. Something had to be done. He caught a whiff of hyacinth on the air, although the season for flowers had long since passed. The scent reminded him of Beverly—he hadn’t thought of her in years. *His gal*, he’d called her, back when they’d planned to marry after he came home from the war. (Her letters had stopped coming, and then the letter from her mother: *I’m at a loss for the words, grieves me to tell you, it came on so suddenly. She asked after you more than once.*) The last of the crowd had funneled into the school, and the doors had fallen shut, and he felt no particular pull, now, toward the brick building and all the worry inside.

He had stitched that boy’s forehead, once upon a time, after a fall from a tree. Had told the child to be brave because in the end, there would be a reward. Afterwards, he’d given the boy a candy, and said, See, there, that wasn’t so bad.

The evening was warm despite the breeze, and the ache in his joints was inexplicably gone. The scent of hyacinth was stronger still. All at once, he felt years younger. He thought he might take a walk. Let the folks inside the school fret over what couldn’t be helped. He had somewhere else to be.

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What worries me is what it means. I pull the curtain back and watch them shake hands, and wonder how Henry can touch him. It's not like one of those awful films, those terrible things you see commercials for on television, blood and gore, lifeless shuffling people with their insides hanging out of their bellies, or specters flecked with the dirt from their own graves. He looks like I remember him. Except there's something wrong. You look at him, and something flickers at the edges of him, faster than you can register. It's less about what you can see, and more about what you feel.

I ask the pastor how I'm supposed to handle this.

"Shall we pray?" he says. "Ask the Lord for patience, and guidance."

That's not what I'm after. What I want to know is this: If he's here, where does that leave heaven, and hell?

The pastor shakes his head. His sermons are so illuminating, so well-crafted and full of knowledge. He doesn't say anything now. Just shakes his head.

Where does it leave *me*?

Just shakes his head.

I ask the pastor if he's seen my grandson.

"No," he says too quickly.

Most people wanted to know if something could be done. No one liked the way he just showed up, without warning. In the park. During story time at the library. On doorsteps. The Mayor suggested preventative measures. Like what? asked Joe Briskovich, the writer who lived on Silver Street. He had come to the meeting mostly for material. He'd already decided he

wouldn't mention to anyone how the boy kept slipping into his office each morning while he tried to write. How the boy said nothing, just stood in the corner, but was somehow all the more intrusive for being absolutely silent. How now the boy managed to work himself into every story, and how no matter what Joe intended to write about, it always ended up being about the same thing: the silent, burdensome boy in the corner of the room.

No one could come up with any solutions. NO TRESPASSING signs could be ignored, and anyway, Frank Holt pointed out, it wasn't exactly like you could carry a NO TRESPASSING sign around with you everywhere you went. Someone suggested that if he showed up, you ought to just tell him to go away. Someone else said that wasn't the point; nobody wanted to deal with him, period. A third someone proposed a law. But who would enforce it? Heads turned to the Chief of Police and his deputies, all of whom suddenly became very interested in the tops of their own shoes. The lawyer pointed out that it wouldn't be right to make a law that applied to only one person. The dentist said, Person? The librarian suggested that the Mayor declare a state of emergency. But what does it mean? asked Harold Culp, a farmer from the outskirts of town.

A state of emergency, said the Mayor, is a governmental declaration that—

No, no, Harold interrupted. I want to know, what does it *mean*?

He never just comes in like he used to. He stands at the door and knocks, like a visitor. Down the hall, in the bedroom, his mother stirs. All she does these days is sleep.

He knocks again. I'm in the kitchen, spooning ice cream into my mouth. I don't even taste the stuff anymore.

He'll knock all night, if I let him. I think of that old story, the one I read in grade school, "The Monkey's Paw." The frivolous wish for two hundred dollars, the death of the son. The second wish, summoning the dead son to the doorstep. The lesson was: Don't mess with fate.

When I open the door, it's only to stop the knocking.

Well, there he is. In his ratty jeans, holes in the knees. That stupid tee shirt he liked to wear. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. Tugs on his ear, the way he always did when he was thinking. In the story, the father fears that the son will come back wrong. That when he wishes his son alive again, what he will find knocking at the door will be an abomination, a zombie, a dead-eyed *thing*. But what if he had not undone his second wish with his third? What if he had drawn the bolt, opened the door? He never considered the possibility that his son would come back to him unchanged—every gesture familiar, every freckle in place. He looks exactly as I remember him.

"Can I come in?"

When he was six, he fell out of the tree in the back yard, busted his forehead open on a rock jutting from the ground. Ten stitches. It left a scar.

("Wish!" she cried, in a strong voice.

"It is foolish and wicked," he faltered.)

He gestures at the carton of ice cream in my hand. "Hey, leave some of that for me, will you? You know caramel fudge is my flavor."

("The first man had his three wishes, yes," was the friend's reply. "I don't know what the first two were, but the third was for death.")

There. Above the right eyebrow. The same scar I remember.

"Come on, it's cold out here," he says. "Stop standing around. Let me in."

He grins, and shows me that tiny gap between his two front teeth, the one that remains despite the braces, the endless orthodontic bills.

The story's all wrong, the way it goes. The true story, the ending that would feel right, would be the one in which, desperate, fully aware of the wrongness of his actions but unable to stop himself, the father runs down the hall, pushing the wife aside, and flings the door open. Sees his son. Unchanged. Takes him in his arms. Ignores the stench of the grave on the boy's skin, the grit of dirt in his hair. The nagging thought in his mind that when you are given an impossible thing, something else must be taken away. He draws aside, his arm around his son's shoulders, *come in, come out of the storm, come home*. The real story would not end with the deserted street, the cold wind, the wife's despairing wail. It would end with the father's words.

This is my son. This is my son.

They asked the pastor to come to the front of the gym. The Mayor stood behind the makeshift podium on the stage where the high school students would perform *Our Town* later that fall and spoke into the microphone the janitor had hastily set up. Come on up, Pastor. The crowd shifted and parted and looked around. Even the ones who'd stopped going to church years ago, even the ones who'd never been, felt a burst of optimism: Maybe it was as simple as this. The pastor would say a few words, a quick prayer, perhaps, flip through the pages of his Bible. Ah, yes, here it is. An explanation. Some direction. Even if it was something terrible—the end of the world, say—there was still time to do something. The lights were still on. The sky had not turned to blood. There's still time, Ed Nolan thought, wringing his hands, remembering the lessons he'd learned in Sunday School as a twelve-year-old boy. Yea, though I walk through the valley, and For God so loved the world, and We see through a glass darkly.

Pastor?

The door off the side of the gym swung closed.

She sleeps, and dreams: He is always a baby again. She never preferred one age more than another; she was never the kind of woman who became disinterested the moment he was out of diapers. But in her dreams she drifts down the hall to find him in his crib. Wide awake, not fussing but smiling, cooing, reaching his tiny hands out to the mobile that turns above him. The soft glow of the nightlight, shaped like a butterfly. The sigh of the fan in the corner. That part of the room, where the rocking chair stood, that always seemed swathed in shadows.

Before he was born, they had a cat. A Maine coon, a massive tom who used to sit in her lap and purr, who would lick her bare toes with its sandpaper tongue. The cat had been hers in college, then it had been theirs, their child before they had a child. Then she'd gotten pregnant, had delivered and brought him home from the hospital, and something changed in the cat. It sat outside the closed nursery door, waiting, and when she opened the door, it darted inside and leaped onto the railing of the crib. Stared down at the baby lying there, and growled. When she thought she had closed the door tightly, it managed to paw its way into the room. She would find it looming over the baby, a vulture, a shade. A cat could steal a person's breath, her grandmother had told her when she was a child. There were scratches on the baby's cheek, maybe from his own nails, which grew faster than she could remember to trim them. Maybe.

Then one day, the cat disappeared.

She dreams, and the cat pads into the room. It cuts across the carpet between her in her rocker and the baby in his crib. Leaps, agile as a knife, onto the railing. She rocks in her chair.

She knows this isn't right. There is the open door, and there is the cat lowering itself into the crib. This, or that. She should try to wake up.

Instead, she goes to the crib. Lifts the cat into her arms. Snaps its neck. Returns to her chair.

Minutes later, the cat comes back. Slinks across the floor, leaps into the crib. She'll stay as long as it takes.

Above the crowd, the clock on the scoreboard ticked away. One minute, five, seven. Feet shuffled. Hands dug into pockets.

They'd voted. They'd made some sort of decision, although no one could say for sure what it was. Looking through her notes, Alicia Scott, the Town Clerk, couldn't find what she'd written down, how the vote had gone, who'd moved and who'd seconded. She flipped through the pages, more frantically the second and third time, sweat on her brow. Pages tore as she riffled through them, and she heard herself gasping, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Few people heard her. Ed Nolan, who stood at the skirt of the stage, heard, and thought, It's all her fault, all of this. The dentist's hygienist heard and whispered, There, there.

Well, the Mayor said. The word echoed through the gym. Any questions before we dismiss?

A hand went up. Harold Culp.

Yes? Go ahead, Mr. Culp.

It was more statement than question: We're just going to have to live with this, Harold said. Aren't we.

He makes me superstitious. Like when I was a little girl, walking home from school, picking flowers, stepping carefully on the sidewalk. He loves me. He loves me not. Each one is a petal, each one is a crack. You say to yourself, If I pluck the last petal, if I step on a crack, this will be the truth. He will. He won't.

Please don't be there.

Because he'll be up in my room when I get home. Every day. He'll sit on my bed and ask if there was algebra homework, ask if I want to see a movie, and he'll be the same as he always was, except not really. He's a stone in my throat.

There are whole stretches of the day where I'll forget. I laugh at jokes. I take notes in English. Yesterday in gym Luke Fisher got hit in the face with a hockey puck and bled all over the place. The blood on the hardwood floor was so fresh, it looked almost black.

I think it's unfair, the way he just comes in, even when, especially when, I don't ask him to. If I could shrug him off like a heavy coat, I could get on with things.

My dad can't look at me.

So I step on a crack. He will. Pluck the last petal. He won't.

He's a hole in my lungs. I open my bedroom door, and there he is, perched on a corner of my bed. He looks up and smiles.

There you are, he says. I've been waiting forever.

For a long time after Harold Culp spoke, no one moved. Then, slowly, they began to drift toward the exits. First the Ennis family, then Joe Briskovich (who was eager to get back to his desk), then Ed Nolan. The Hunters, the Lovejoys, the Spanns. Alicia Scott stood from her chair on the stage, and her notes spilled from her lap. The Mayor left by the stage-door exit.

A few people lingered. Then they, too, turned and left. Only Frank Holt stood against the tide of his exiting neighbors, gaping. Is that it? he hollered. This is *bullshit*. We got to do something! Aren't we going to *do* something?

We have got a game, Ellie and me. If you sit on the stairs in front of the library long enough, he will come by. We know he's not supposed to be here, but nobody says we aren't allowed to talk to him. He is not like other big boys, they don't pay us any mind, but he will stop and say funny things like, "Hello, little ladies," or "Do you want to see something scary?" and then make a face that isn't scary at all.

If we ask him to change, he will. That's our game.

We say, "Red shirt," and he wears a red shirt. Or we say, "Old man," and all of a sudden he doesn't look like a big boy anymore but like our grandpas, who are also gone away. You don't see him change. He just is whatever you want him to be. We say, "Ghost," and he changes back to looking like he always does, except you can see through him, right to where the library drop-box is, behind him. If we try to reach through, he slaps our hands away, and we giggle.

Once, Ellie asked him, "How come you can do that?"

He said, "Because I'm not here."

Outside, the air had cooled considerably. Husbands put arms around their wives. Mothers held their children's hands. Friends strolled side-by-side, listening to the crickets chirping, not saying much, maybe commenting on the change in the weather, maybe observing that winter was on its way.

Yup, it's coming all right.

Nothing you can do about it.

Behind them, the janitor turned off the lights of the school building, came outside, and locked the doors.

I'll have to bring the potted plants inside pretty soon.

Have to put up the storm windows.

Find the snow shovel.

The breeze picked up, and most people caught the whiff of decaying leaves on the air.

Batten down the hatches.

That's all you can do. Get ready, best as you can. Am I right?

The crickets went silent.

Am I right?