

## A Thing Like That

The sound of ice and frozen mud crunching beneath heavy tires filters through the glass of the bedroom window. At first the listener doubts her senses. It's the middle of the night, so if a vehicle was coming down the long narrow drive to the house, there should be headlights throwing shadows across the walls of the room. The sound persists and the three hound dogs resting on the front porch are barking at something. If the driver has turned off the lights, he's probably an intruder or a drunk who's lost or....

She hears footsteps on the stairs leading to the porch and the front door. The dogs have stopped barking, as they always do once someone has actually made it to the door. The bedroom is at the back of the house. From there, a door opens onto a back porch and a garden fenced with eight foot pine boards. The ground is still covered in snow from the last January storm. There are knotholes in some of the boards, large ones in the gate that leads out into the three acres of brush that surround the property. Maggie grabs her coat from its hook near the door, puts on her boots and places her hand on the doorknob, waiting for the person to break in. Instead, she hears knocking: rhythmic, steady, non-stop.

Maggie pictures an expressionless man holding a gun, a knife or a club in one hand while knocking with the other, trying to trick her into letting him in. Just last week a woman living alone in a suburb of Santa Fe was beaten to death in her own home in broad daylight. She slips out into the garden and unlatches the gate, thinking that she can run up to the road and flag someone down. She stands there listening for noises but hears none.

Then the gate seems to move, pulling away from her ever so slightly. This is it, she thinks. What'll the animals do without me? It could be days or weeks before anybody comes out here. Why did I buy this place in the middle of nowhere? Will anybody miss me?

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Forty years ago, in the 60's, Maggie and friends were in college. They took a lot of interesting courses with no practical application. One of them was an anthropology class on the Four Corners area of the Southwest where the Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo live. The professor was Viennese and wore dresses that tended to sport symbols, like yin and yang, across the chest. While she lectured all male eyes, and some female as well, were on the alert for nipples. Sometimes there were slide shows. The one that really caught Maggie's attention was the Ansel Adams photographs of northern New Mexico. They were her inspiration to move to the state, even though it took her twenty years to get there.

Timing is everything. Maggie's mother died in 1980. Her father sold the family home and shared the proceeds with her and her sister as required by law. She was living on the west coast of Canada where she'd moved at the height of the Viet Nam war. Her relationship was going nowhere, Christmas was coming, her group of friends from grad school had dispersed across the country, and it was then that the check arrived in the mail. \$10,000 wasn't much but it was enough to pull up stakes and head for Santa Fe.

She took the Pacific coast highway all the way to L.A. and stopped to take her sister out for Christmas Eve dinner. They nibbled on pasta with mussels and red sauce and watched couples necking in booths. Rosemary raved about her successes as a psychologist who turned

gay boys into respectable heterosexuals while Maggie told herself she wouldn't be caught dead with this person if they weren't related.

On Christmas day, Rosemary invited her social worker lover over for dinner and insisted that he tell stories she found humorous. Maggie was required to laugh in all the right places and made a bad job of it. *Saturday Night Live* circa the late 70's was her idea of funny and Mike was no Gilda Radner. The next day Maggie and her sister hugged goodbye with a telling lack of enthusiasm, each thinking they were not likely to see each other again.

Oh, they talked on the phone every few years. Invitations to visit New Mexico were made by Maggie and promises to do so were made by Rosemary, but impediments always arose. Rosemary's hatred of the desert, a client in dire need, lack of time, the beaches of Kauai, and so on. Maggie wasn't sure why she felt bad about all these jiltings, since she hadn't liked her sister from the moment she came home from the hospital, a newborn in a yellow blanket who wouldn't stop crying. This natural distaste was encouraged by their parents, who made sure Rosemary felt the same way about Maggie as soon as she was capable. Jake and Linda were so insecure that they saw their daughters as probable deserters from the cause of family solidarity, as future rebels who might reveal family secrets to outsiders, upstarts who might be smarter, more independent, and cheer each other on. Such things had to be nipped in the bud.

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Maggie's friend Peter, a gay writer from Nova Scotia, had seven siblings, six of them brothers. One was a peeping tom who was a few bricks short of a load and always leaving town on the bus in broad daylight clad in pjs. Either Peter or the RCMP managed to retrieve him every time but then Peter left home for the west coast, partly to escape the responsibility. His

parents constantly worried about what would become of their problematic son once they were gone while Peter worried about the safety of his sister who was only 15 when he left. He used to tell Maggie that she and Rosemary should force themselves to see each other just because they were family and didn't have to be alone in the world. Look at me, he'd say. I have to force myself to stay away to avoid going nuts. At least your sister isn't a pervert.

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Why am I thinking about Peter and Rosemary, Maggie asks herself. Should I grab the gate and try to latch it? No, that'll tell him I'm still out here. Should I try to climb over the fence and head for the road? Is there something I can grab to smash his head in? Why didn't I get a tire iron or a baseball bat to keep next to the bed?

Dad used to say that nobody would ever love me the way he did. I never believed that but here I am alone without a song or a prayer or someone to give me a leg up. If I get out of this I'll join the Sierra Club or volunteer at the soup kitchen. A person should have some addresses and phone number to fall back on.

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When Maggie was in fifth grade, the Irish nun who taught her class scared her into wanting to join a convent. There didn't seem to be any alternative, aside from an eternity in hell or purgatory, and the job offered a number of perks. God would be her personal protector. She'd never have to worry about clothes. Her unruly curly hair would no longer be a problem and she'd never have to wear the big gold hoops in her ears that all the kids made fun of. Most of the time she'd be praying or scrubbing floors or just being quiet so she wouldn't have to think up things to talk about at the dinner table. Her parents would get to visit her only once or twice a

year and they wouldn't be allowed to raise their voices or come close enough to touch her. Cloistered nuns were always behind a screen.

One other girl in Maggie's class, Frances, wanted to be a nun and she was the one who actually did it. She joined right out of high school and Maggie always thought that was a shame. Frances was quiet, shy, tall and pretty. She never got to try on the world to see how it fit. Maggie, on the other hand, recovered from her fifth grade fear and went on to be labeled boy crazy by her sixth grade teacher, the nun who dented the blackboard with Tommy Michael's blond head because she could. Maggie felt sorry for him. His daily persecution at the rough hands of Sister Augusta, aka Disgusta, made him seem like a hero. He never uttered a sound, maybe just to get Sister's goat. The head banging must have hurt and once she got older Maggie wondered if there was any brain damage. She switched to public school after sixth grade and never saw him again. Her family moved to the burbs. Different neighborhood, new people, no more walking to school and meeting Tommy or any other boy behind the huge elm trees that lined the street to St. Brigid's Elementary. No more trading cat's eye marbles for a look up the pleated skirt of her navy blue uniform.

The public school was no more educational than the Catholic one when it came to sex. It took Maggie and her new friends two years to figure out that fathers had something to do with making babies and Maggie didn't see or hear about a penis until she was 13 and babysat the next door neighbor's newborn boy one Saturday night. She didn't see another until she was 24. It belonged to a guy named Syd who worked for the same newspaper that hired Maggie fresh out of grad school. Syd was Canadian and a couple of years older. He also had a girlfriend he planned to marry but that didn't stop him from going home with Maggie at the end of a graveyard shift. She slipped into a floor length turquoise nightie and posed in the doorway of the

bedroom. She could never remember the transition between that and being in bed with Syd on top of her. Nothing really happened. As it turned out, she had an exceptionally tough, scarred hymen that had to be surgically opened in order for Syd to make a successful entrance at a later date.

A couple of months after that Maggie found out she was pregnant. The doctor said the fetus was large for its age, and healthy. She decided to keep it. She started writing poetry about her expanding belly and the life form it was hosting. She quit her job and moved to a log cabin on Bowen Island off the coast of British Columbia, fulfilling a childhood dream. Syd came to visit twice. The second time he punched a hole in the wall of Maggie's cabin because he thought she was seeing someone else. He couldn't keep his hands from shaking when he was trying to hold a coffee cup, and he barely said a word. After he left, Maggie stopped writing and decided to have an abortion. The woman who took her home from the hospital stayed overnight. She talked and cried for hours about her own abortion, which left Maggie no opportunity to figure out how she felt about what she'd done. The next day she was too tired to think about it, and after that, well, time passed.

A year later she got a letter from Syd, who didn't know anything about the baby. Can I come to see you, he asked. After I last saw you I was mugged and until six months ago I was in a coma. When I woke up all I could think about was you and what a jackass I'd been.

Maggie cleaned up the cabin, bought a few large leafy plants and stocked the kitchen for his arrival. He never showed up. She wondered, though not seriously, if he had been hit over the head again and gone into another coma. The two friends who lived a couple of miles down the country road from her place, a bass player and a paralegal in love with the bass player, joked

about the presence of brain injured men in her life and wondered if her father might qualify as well.

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I've been praying for this moment, Maggie's father said when she called to wish him a Merry Christmas. She hadn't done that in years. Syd's failure to appear put her in a mood to make contact with a family member, even if it was Jake. Maggie's mother died of breast cancer at 54, on Maggie's 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. Not long afterwards, Jake joined a small born-again church and married one of its members. Josie knew nothing about him except that he owned a successful bakery, built multi-tiered wedding cakes that never collapsed, bought a new Lincoln every year, and wore a large diamond on his left pinky finger. Maggie wasn't invited to the wedding since she wasn't a true believer.

When Josie died of liver cancer, Jake turned to Bible thumping on a street corner far from the bakery every Saturday, even though he'd never read the book and had no intention of doing so. He got what he needed to know from Preacher Bob at church services and passed that along to whoever would listen. On Maggie's birthdays, he enclosed \$50 in a sappy Hallmark card signed Dad and Jo, even though she was gone. Beneath the signature was a P.S. Are you ready to accept Jesus Christ as your lord and savior yet? Maggie didn't have much luck with birthdays.

She never understood why her father became a born-again. As far as she could tell he considered himself to be master of the universe. Those who failed to agree were shunned until they came to their senses. The exception was Linda, Maggie's mother. She seemed to have carte blanche as far as taking Jake to task was concerned. She called him names throughout their 30 years of marriage, favoring words related to procreation as well as farm animals. No one but

Maggie, Rosemary, and their father were privy to these outbursts. Anyone outside the family would never have believed such words could come from petite, quiet, beautiful, refined Linda.

One Christmas Jake gave Linda a mink stole. They were still in style in the 60's and nobody threw paint at those who wore them. Who knows what happened between the unwrapping and the episode five minutes later. All Maggie knew was she felt bad that her father was being called a son of a bitch on Christmas after spending so much money on her mother, even if he was one. Jake went out for a drive and whatever else happened that day is a blank for Maggie. Did Linda make dinner? The usual was chicken cacciatore, stuffed flank steak rolled up and held together with colored toothpicks, mashed potatoes and salad. Dessert was Jake's department. Whenever Linda made icebox cake or gingerbread with lemon sauce he was offended, further evidence to Linda of his failure to measure up.

The last Christmas Maggie went home she was a junior in college. She came bearing gifts and left with nothing but her coat and wallet. At the tail end of a long shouting match in the kitchen between her parents, Jake swung around and walloped Maggie across the face in an attempt to appease Linda, who had been unhappy with her daughter since she turned five. The diamond on his finger scratched her cheek.

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The gate stops moving. Maggie decides to flatten herself against the fence behind a couple of large Russian olive trees. Thick clouds cover the moon and stars. Maybe there is a god, she thinks. Maybe Linda is making up for lost time up there, she thinks, scanning the dark sky.

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Every morning until Maggie was five, Linda would open her bedroom door and smile. No words were spoken. The little girl would poke her arms out from the under the covers and begin another fine day alone with her mother. If it was summer, Linda dressed Maggie in a starched pinafore and cowgirl hat and took her to the corner drugstore for strawberry ice cream cones. We'll have breakfast later, Linda would say, taking Maggie by the hand and leading her along the sidewalk. In the winter they'd stay home and have pork chops with canned beets for breakfast. Then Maggie would sit in the big stuffed chair in the living room and watch *Ding Dong School* on the console TV that had red and gold doors with Japanese ladies in kimonos carved into them. Her mother washed clothes in the wringer washer or ironed or read her true romance magazines. Sometimes she smoked a cigarette and blew smoke rings for Maggie.

Then Maggie was five and the smiles stopped. Rosemary was born, kindergarten started, Jake came home from work at noon instead of five o'clock. Grandma Grace, Jake's mother, brought hot dogs and dandelion greens she picked for dinner a lot. Scottie the terrier disappeared, along with Maggie's tricycle.

Once, when Maggie was eight, Linda smiled again. She got Maggie into her coat and kissed her on the forehead. It was October. Jake was in the backyard raking leaves before it got dark. I know you'd rather be with your father, Linda said, smiling. By then, Maggie had forgotten what it felt like to have her mother look at her that way. She was a little scared and a little sad as she went out to play in the leaves. Her father seemed far away in the sundowny light. She felt suspended between two worlds and understood the meaning of limbo, a place she had been learning about in religion class, for the first time.

Of course limbo had other, less lonely meanings. Maggie was allowed to go to one party when she was in eighth grade. Joyce Charles, the rich girl in her class, had a party every summer and that year her mother called Linda to make sure Maggie could go. It was a warm night and all the kids were outside taking turns at slithering under a horizontal pole, legs first, without touching it. As the pole was lowered closer and closer to the ground, wriggling under it required more and more elasticity. When it was Joyce's turn again, the strain on the seam of her khaki shorts was too much and it split open, revealing her pink underpants. Everyone laughed and Joyce ran into the house. Maggie was happy the limbo was over and secretly glad to see Joyce brought down to earth with the other mortals.

Maggie started reading science fiction that summer, which gave her another way to view the universe and the creatures in it. Earth could be seen as a blue speck populated by not very smart humans who could be conquered easily by reptiles from outer space, for example. Maggie got her interest in ETs from her father. He wasn't a reader but he took her to all the sci-fi movies made in the 50's. *Them*, about giant ants, was filmed in Alamogordo, New Mexico. They saw it at the drive-in late one night and all the way home Maggie was afraid that the insect sounds she could hear were the ants chasing their car down the road. Then there was the one about the vacuum cleaner salesman who always wore sunglasses until the lady of the house let him in. Once they were face to face behind closed doors he'd whip off the glasses to reveal that he had no irises, only large white orbs. Simply looking into those orbs would fry the victim's brain. Then he'd drain her blood and throw her into the furnace in the basement. Everyone seemed to have a coal-burning furnace in the basement. Maggie wondered what the husband and kids would think when they came home to no trace of the mother. Would they find pieces of bone in

the furnace? Would they wonder why the house was so hot in the middle of summer? Would they hate her for leaving them without a word?

Maggie's sci-fi phase lasted a couple of years, until she read everything in that section of the small local library. Then she switched to books on dogs, cats, horses, and different European countries. Where do you think you're going, her mother said one day. Maggie was sitting in the stuffed chair reading about Belgium. Why don't you get books about where we live? Europe was the place where Maggie's father went to get shot at in World War II and Linda wanted no part of it in her house or in her daughter's head. For her, Germany was much scarier than any giant ant or alien blood sucker could ever be.

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Maybe that's why I was so interested in learning German in high school, Maggie thinks, still flattened against the fence adjacent to the gate in her backyard. It's only natural to be attracted to whatever your parents hate. It was also like cracking a secret code. If you can speak someone's language you can find out what makes them tick.

What were you so afraid of, Maggie says to the sky. You didn't even like daddy or me most of the time. Who were you really and where did you go? If you're up there, now would be a good time to show yourself.

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Jake almost never talked about the war. All Maggie knew was that he was a mess sergeant and almost got shot one morning as he was walking up the street of some small town in Germany to check out the bakery. When he was discharged he went to baking school in Ohio on

the GI Bill. He specialized in cake decorating and bread making. Then he went home to upstate New York, married Linda, and found a job making donuts in a rundown coffee shop whose owner never paid the bills. Linda worked at a china factory and between them they made ends meet. Once they had Maggie, though, Jake had to get a second job loading railroad cars at night, so Linda could stay home.

Maggie still has pictures of Linda in those years before she stopped smiling. In one, she's wearing slacks, Jake's old high school football sweater, and black tortoise shell glasses, her long dark hair swept back from her forehead in the pompadour style of the late 40's. In another, she is ironing in the kitchen, an ash tray on the table next to the ironing board. Maggie is sitting on the linoleum floor. Scottie the dog is in her lap and she's laughing, her face turned up toward her mother, big dimples in her cheeks. In another, Linda has Maggie by the hand and Maggie is straining in the direction of a deer at the zoo. Linda looks serious but not mean. Maggie looks like she is on a mission and very impatient to accomplish it.

Then there are the pictures of Jake, Linda, and Maggie at Lake Erie, the last summer before Rosemary was born. Linda is wearing a white swimsuit and posing like a bathing beauty on a beach towel. Jake is far off in the water, only his head and a foot above the surface. Maggie is playing in the sand. Her legs are buried and she's busy with her plastic pail and shovel. Who took that picture, Maggie wonders whenever she looks at it. A stranger on the beach? How did he or she get those three people who were so far apart into the same picture?

Except for a trip to the White Mountains to see Santa and the North Pole when she was about eight and Rosemary was about four, there were no other vacations and no more photos that included all of them. As the kids got older Linda's hair got shorter, her facial features sharpened,

and she wore skirts and dresses instead of pants and sweaters. Polyester in colorful prints replaced monotonal wool and cotton. Her favorite pjs, though, were a pair of bright red baby dolls that showed off her still perfect legs.

Meanwhile Jake was stopping for a beer or two at a bar down by the railroad tracks after his shift was over and flirting with the ladies. Maggie learned about this years later from Jake's younger brother. Apparently Italian men with curly brown hair and green eyes were in demand in that part of town and Jake liked playing to an audience. According to Larry, Jake would disappear into the back of the bar, where the restrooms were, for about twenty minutes every night. When he came back to his table, a fresh beer in hand, he was a little flushed and musky smelling. Larry, who was still in high school at the time, would never say how he came by this information.

Once Linda hit 30, she went through a phase of threatening to leave Jake or see a shrink or at least go away for awhile on her own. One night she even grabbed a suitcase, put on her coat, and headed for the front door. Maggie was doing her homework at the dining room table and had a clear view of the scene. Jake stepped between Linda and the door and grabbed the car keys from her hand. He looked at Maggie as though he expected his eleven year old daughter to do or say something to defuse the situation. When she didn't he went out and drove away. The suitcase turned out to be empty.

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So far there is no sound and nobody has come through the gate. Maggie inches her way along the fence, having taken off her boots so that her feet soften the surface of the snow instead of crunching against it. When she is close enough to reach the latch, she extends a hand and then

withdraws it quickly. Nothing happens. The gate doesn't swing open. An arm doesn't come through and grab her.

She tries a second time, and a third, finally working up the courage to get the latch in place and run back into the house, her heart skipping beats. She grabs the cell phone from the coffee table, goes back to her room, locks the doors, calls the State Police. It's twenty minutes before they show up.

Maggie's pretty sure she's never seen the man hunched in a corner of her front porch, shielding his green eyes from the cop's flashlight with a large hand and surrounded by the dogs sniffing his pants. Most of his face is covered in a gray beard. His wavy whitish hair is long, reaching past the frayed collar of his red flannel jacket.

"Is that a diamond you've got there," the cop asks, moving toward the man and shining the light on his pinky finger. "Now where would you get a thing like that?"