

GEORGIA and VIVIEN

“Remember the hermit, Albert LaCroix?”

Georgia had just raised her glass, and her words sounded to Vivien like an ironic toast. They were sisters, Irish twins their father would say at a time in their lives when eleven months meant a whole grade in school and Georgia took her role as big sister very seriously. Vivien nodded, puzzled why Georgia would mention a man who had been dead for nearly forty years.

“From the way everyone pronounced his name we thought it would be spelled L-E-C-R-O-Y”, Georgia continued. “Today on the way to the hospital Dad and I drove by the spot where he lived, and for the next hour he was all I could think about. Now it’s just a bunch of birch trees.”

“Well, he died,” Vivien reasoned, “and you subconsciously connected his death to Mom.”

“Everyone dies. It has to be more than that.”

Vivien thought so too, but she was too exhausted to care. When Georgia heard the news, she caught a plane that same day and got a good night’s sleep in her old bedroom. Vivien needed a day at home to arrange rides for her children to lessons and practices and for her husband to move back into the house. Then she had to leave Rhode Island at 4:00 to reach the hospital in time for the doctor’s rounds.

“I was ten that summer and you were nine,” Georgia continued, “and we rode our bikes everywhere.”

When she was looking for a space in the hospital parking lot, Vivien heard her the toot of Georgia’s text. *Hurry!* She ran all the way to the I.C.U. and met her father and sister in the doorway. At first her mother had the peaceful look of someone dozing off while watching television, but then she saw the tubes and lines, the bag of urine clipped to the bedframe. The doctor never blinked as she explained that a coma was not the same as sleep, that her mother’s body was alive but her brain had been ruined by the stroke. After her father’s call, Vivien knew

her mother would never go home, but she nodded each time the doctor paused as if she were swallowing new information a little at a time.

“We were so stupid and silly,” Georgia said, raking fingers through her short gray hair, “so easily shocked.”

“Meaning me,” Vivien corrected, “the one easily shocked. You found LaCroix revolting, but you were obsessed with him. I just wanted to leave him alone.”

“But that hair. And his ice-blue eyes!”

“Eyes like a husky,” and immediately Vivien regretted how Georgia had drawn her in, a quick glass of wine and early-to-bed now a vain hope.

Georgia’s fascination with LaCroix had frightened Vivien when they were children. Encounters were rare, mostly when the girls were on their bicycles and passed him walking. When he faced them Vivien stared straight ahead, but she could feel the heat of his eyes and a warning from her bladder. When they passed him going the same direction, Georgia would whip her head around defiantly while Vivien pedaled furiously. On hot days he wore no shirt under his overall straps, and his arms hung from his shoulders like broomsticks.

What they knew about him was gossip at school and the little their parents would add. He was *lost*, their mother said, meaning he deserved compassion, but to the girls he seemed just the sort of man parents warned their children about. The Dustcomb community tolerated the man. LaCroix had erected his shack on land owned by the Grinnells, and they let him be because he took nothing but water from an abandoned spring and dead limbs from trees behind his shack to burn in his woodstove. In winter, Will Grinnell would periodically use his bucket loader to dump firewood at LaCroix’s door, and once a week a woman from the church would deliver a carton of canned goods. These acts of charity were so private that no words were exchanged, and the only citizen who ever talked to him was Alva Graham when she rang up a six-pack or a bottle of wine for him at the cash register of the general store. This went on for three years until one day he dropped dead on the floor of his shack. It wasn’t clear how long he had lain there when Elsa Grinnell walked from her porch with a bag of zucchini and discovered him. It was August and he had left his door open for air, and what she saw first were the soles of his boots.

Just a week before LaCroix died Georgia had erupted furiously when she saw her mother packing a box of food to leave for LaCroix.

“*SpaghettiOs!*” she barked, taking a can from the box. “You won’t buy this for me, but it’s okay for him?”

“I don’t need to open a can to feed you, honey.”

“But I *begged* you to get this for me this after I had some at Claire Willett’s.”

“Home-made is better, Georgia.”

“Then why don’t you give *him* home-made?” Georgia dropped the can of SpaghettiOs back into the box and ran upstairs to her room.

LaCroix was quickly buried in a remote corner of the Congregational Cemetery, not quite a potter’s field, but definitely an area reserved for charity cases. The congregation ordered a modest headstone engraved with his name and no dates since neither were known. A few days after the burial his shack caught fire and burned to the ground. When the ashes cooled, Will Grinnell used his bucket loader to bury the metal and glass that survived the blaze and then smoothed the site. By July of the next year brush covered the clearing, and the path he had worn from the road disappeared.

“To be honest,” Georgia continued as she split what was left of the wine between their glasses, “I’ve never forgotten him. I never consciously think of him, but suddenly something will jog my memory. This morning, for instance, when we drove by the spot where he lived, not really a surprise as you said, but once or twice a year he shows up in California like a ghost.

“You see him?”

“In my head. He trips a memory. Sometimes I’m in a meeting and for no reason at all I’m thinking about him, and sometimes it happens when I’m alone, and for a few seconds I’m back in Dustcomb as a kid. Then my phone will ring or someone speaks and I’m back, breathing like I’ve been running. ”

“And afterward, you feel what, guilty? We were not kind to him.”

“No, I feel nothing. I’m dealing with whatever interrupted the vision, the phone call or a ping from my screen or a question someone’s asking me, and the ghost is gone, *poof*.”

Vivien frowned. Georgia was a master of this trick. The minute she showed weakness or a fear of any kind, she'd catch herself and stiffen and then retreat with some glib words. Georgia would be remembering LaCroix the same way she did, with remorse. As kids they had been aloof and occasionally cruel, suspicious of all adults and especially LaCroix. But as a grown woman and mother of two children Vivian understood that like the body, the soul develops over time, and that simple truths are never as simple as they seem to the young. Even as a nine-year-old in the thrall of her older sister, she had sympathetic thoughts about LaCroix she kept to herself, intimations of what she would later understand to be loneliness and despair. No wonder she became a social worker.

“Georgia,” Vivien said for the record, “we broke into a dead man’s home and poked through his stuff.”

It had been Georgia’s idea. They had been curious and had questions. Did he cook his meals or eat straight from the can? Did he wash? No, they decided. Where did he go to the bathroom? Surely the woods behind his shack. But there was so much they didn’t know, and with LaCroix dead and buried, Georgia wanted to take a look.

“I knew it was wrong,” Vivien continued.

“You were a priss, wouldn’t do anything adventurous without a push. And it wasn’t so wrong because LaCroix was creepy. Rules didn’t apply to him. I see from that look you think I’m rationalizing.”

“My *look* is amusement because you just admitted you made me do it?”

“I gave you courage. It was exciting, right?”

“Yes, it was, but that’s something else. I wouldn’t have done it on my own, and I don’t think you would have either.” Would you have?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not, but we did everything together.”

“So you’re saying I gave *you* the courage to do it.”

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They had been out on their bicycles the afternoon after LaCroix’s funeral. They spent an hour on the playground swings at the elementary school, then rode to the river to cool off, where they

waded at first and then decided that their shorts and tops would dry quickly if they went under. An hour later they were riding two abreast on their way to the general store for Creamsicles. They passed the Grinnell farmhouse and waved to Elsa who sat on her shaded porch snapping beans. They rounded the corner, and as they approached the path to LaCroix's shack, Georgia slipped behind, riding slower at first and then using her brakes to stop. Vivien kept riding even after she heard the squeak of Georgia's brakes. Thirty yards, forty, fifty her sister trying to lure her into something dangerous. In her pocket she had the quarter and dime she'd need for a Creamsicle and she could ride ahead and wait for Georgia on the bench outside, the Creamsicle softening so she could use her tongue to slowly taste both flavors at once, but in a slow arc she reversed her direction.

When they were certain they could hear no cars from either direction, they scrambled their bicycles across the ditch and up the short hill to LaCroix's shack, then laid them down out of sight. After crouching low while a single car passed, they pushed the door open and slipped inside. Their first sensation was smell and not at all what Vivien expected, not body odor and stinky shoes, but a kitchen smell, something cooked in onions, familiar and not unpleasant, just a second or two until their eyes adjusted, the single window facing the hillside providing all the light they needed.

He slept on a cot of sagging canvas and crisscrossed legs, on top a tangle of blankets but no sheets and no pillow. Was that his choice, Vivian wondered? A drowned fly floated in a pan of water on the wood stove. Beneath their feet they could feel a layer of grit on the plywood floor as they moved about in the tight space. He had driven nails into the walls to hang things: a flannel shirt and a wooden spoon, a frying pan with spotty Teflon, a spiral notebook with a pencil on a string, a flyswatter, and a roll of paper towels. On the sill a box of kitchen matches. They said nothing as they took it all in, a stovepipe streaked with rust poking through the ceiling, beer bottles in cartons neatly stacked, and paper bags filled with cans.

“Huh?”

Georgia rumped her brow as she lifted an empty Sterno can for Vivien to see. At Thanksgiving their mother used Sterno to keep buffet dishes warm when she was feeding a crowd. Vivien shrugged. Plastic crates served as tables. On a shelf they found a plate and a bowl, a fork and a

spoon, and Vivien pictured LaCroix sitting on the cot eating his supper and wondering what he would do the next day. The order in the shack perplexed them. It looked like the way they would arrange a playhouse, but LaCroix actually lived here. His home.

It was too hot, the metal roof ticking and the window inexplicably nailed shut. LaCroix would have opened the door for ventilation, but they had closed it tight to avoid suspicion. Vivien noticed a glint from the shelf above LaCroix's cot and she kneeled on his blanket for a closer look. It was an antique hand mirror with a scrolled handle, the silver tarnished where it framed the glass, but the handle shiny from LaCroix's fingers. What did he see when he looked into it? Vivien saw her own face, flushed with heart.

"Let me see it." Georgia approached with her palm out. "He stole this. We should tell someone."

"Tell who? We'd get caught."

Georgia made a face at Vivien, tossed the mirror onto the bed, and headed for the door, saying it was time to go.

When they were sure no cars were coming, they raised their bicycles and walked them down the hill to the road. They were standing over their bikes side-by-side and ready to go when Georgia saw the mirror tucked into Vivien's waistband..

"Hey!" she said, pointing first to Vivien's stomach and then to the shack, "Take it back."

"I can't go back up there."

Georgia frowned, then held her hand out for the mirror.

"Hold this," she said dismounting and tipping her bike so Vivien could take the handlebars, and she dashed up the hill and back into the shack. For Vivien the wait was excruciating. At first she heard just the twitter of swallows, then a tractor. Grinnell in his hayfield, but he could pull out into the road with a wagon of hay and see her. A minute passed, maybe two. Georgia was taking too long, a car would see her and stop to ask what was wrong. But none came and she suddenly flew down the hill, jumped on her bike, and started pedaling so frantically that Vivien never caught up all the way to the general store.

At the store they paid for their ice cream, and until they were sitting on the bench outside so close that their thighs touched. Behind them the breeze stirred paper notices pinned to a bulletin board.

“That was mean,” Vivien protested. “I wanted to keep it.”

“Mom would find it, and what then? I was protecting you.”

Georgia was right. Vivien could hide nothing. When Georgia took the mirror and left her on alone the road, she wanted only to be somewhere else. Only when they were safe and it was clear they had escaped could Vivien think about the mirror. If they had escaped with it, having the beautiful thing would have made her careless.

The sisters never talked about LaCroix or the mirror again. The next day at dinner their father shared news that LaCroix’s shack had burned to the ground. The fire was fortunate, he said, a good ending to a sad story. The girls exchanged a glance, suddenly freed from Albert LaCroix.

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“Yes, I suppose that’s what I meant,” Georgia continued. She had just returned from the kitchen with a new bottle of wine. She held it over Vivien’s glass waiting for her nod.

“I was bossy. I made you do things, and that made me feel strong. It still does. Last time we were here together you said I was domineering.”

Vivien smiled. Was this the beginning of an apology or the first volley of a new skirmish? It wasn’t Georgia’s fault they were so different. Their lives had followed different arcs, and as they progressed from kindergarten to graduate school, the gap between them widened. Then two decades of work, Georgia in the tech business, Vivien in social services gave them nothing to talk about.

“It’s always for your own good.”

Vivien had heard this over and over from Georgia, the idea that she had been too soft, that she still was too soft for this predatory world and that Georgia stood as her watchful angel.

That morning at the hospital Vivien had to fight irritation with her mother’s doctor, who thought she was bringing the younger sister up to speed. The doctor was doing her job, which included

training a shadowing resident. Her words sounded textbook, but what tormented Vivien more than the doctor's tone and more than the fact that she already knew from her father what the doctor would say was Georgia's smug sureness that she was the sister in charge. To fight her irritation, she stopped listening and wondered about her mother's soul. If there really were such a thing as a soul, would it remain in her body after her brain had melted down or would it get a head start to wherever souls go after the body dies.

Two days earlier Vivien had been meeting with a client when her father called from the hospital. He left a message, his voice so calm it could have been a sprained ankle that brought her mother to the ER. She waited to call back until the kids were asleep, and then it was too late to do everything she'd need to do to come the next day. Nothing would change, her father assured, come the day after tomorrow, so she spent the next day canceling appointments, arranging rides for her children to piano and ballet and tai chi. And for Leo to come back home and watch the kids.

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Mid-morning at the hospital while their father stayed behind, Georgia and Vivien had gone for coffee in the hospital cafeteria. They argued about the next step and how to deal with their father although nearly a decade earlier their parents had met with a lawyer to update their wills and to sign advance directives. They had involved Georgia and Vivien in the process, an awkward drama for daughters of healthy parents, but when it was over, they all were grateful, particularly Georgia, a tech executive who believed the future could be planned. Vivien believed in planning, but she trusted intuition and good will more than words on a page. As she divided a plum Danish in two, she urged Georgia to be patient. It would be better if their father believed he was making the decision to withdraw treatment.

“But he's incapable,” Georgia protested. “He talks to her like he thinks she's coming back.”

“That's grief. He needs time to accept, maybe just another day.”

“No, he needs our help.”

“We will help, but our lives will be pretty much the same when this is over. He –“

“Stop playing social worker!”

Vivien took a deep breath, and then another. This was a familiar turn, the moment in every conversation when Georgia couldn't repress her contempt for her sister's life. For her husband Leo and their two average kids, for Vivien's manner and her use of jargon.

"I just think Dad needs to believe it is his decision."

Georgia raised her palm to stalemate the argument. They ordered a coffee for their father and returned to the I.C.U.

Then that evening the sisters prepared a pasta dinner, using sauce from the freezer made by their mother. Their father helped. It was mid-August, ten days before he would start a new school year, and as he sliced bread and rinsed lettuce for a salad, he hummed. Vivien recognized denial when she saw it and expected to see tears by dessert. When he left the kitchen for the dining room with the bowl of salad, Georgia whispered, "What the fuck?"

They ate quickly, all three ravenous, all three edgy about the decision that lay ahead. Vivien stiffened when she sensed her sister was about to begin, and Georgia countered with a sly smile. Gotcha. Then their father surprised them both.

"It's time. I've known we'd have to pull the plug since my first conversation with the neurologist, but I wanted us all here. I wish I knew how long it will take."

Both sisters reached for their father. Vivien smiled, and Georgia announced that they both would stay until it was over, and they finished their coffee and dessert in a relieved silence. After they had dried the last dish and put it away, after their father had excused himself for the night, Georgia took from a cupboard shelf two glasses they had just washed and suggested that she and Vivien finish what was left of the wine.

And as Georgia poured from the second bottle, Vivien knew they both were a little drunk. When was it that she had stopped resisting Georgia's will? Long ago, but never completely, never on personal matters, but she had learned early that with most things there was more dignity for her in surrender than a pyrrhic victory. After dinner she had hoped to call Leo and say goodnight to the kids, then go straight to bed where she could fall asleep thinking about her mother. But now Georgia wanted to talk about a man who had been dead for forty years.

After the fire, talking about LaCroix became taboo for the sisters, but Vivien never forgot about the strange man. As a college senior majoring in psychology, she took in her final semester an elective in folklore. In place of an exam the course required a small thesis, and for her research Vivien returned to Dustcomb on weekends and for her entire spring break to interview old-timers. By then the two sisters had drifted so far apart in their education - Georgia a business major on the West Coast, collecting credits toward an M.B.A. even as she completed her undergraduate degree - that they never said a word about the classes they were taking. Georgia never learned that Vivien had written her entire thesis on Albert LaCroix.

When Vivien began recording her conversations with the Dustcomb elders, she had no idea where their stories would take her, but, strangely, when everyone she talked to seemed to have a piece of the Albert LaCroix story, he was resurrected in her imagination as a tragic figure. She learned that LaCroix's great grandfather had been a ruthless timber trader in Canada. He made a fortune in the 19th Century and passed it on to his only son. LaCroix's grandfather had none of his father's sense for business, but he did enjoy living like a royal. He was able to conceal the ruin of his empire until his death, and it took just a year or two for LaCroix's father to steer it into bankruptcy and ruin. LaCroix's father was a weak and gloomy man, and the day his only child Albert was born, he went to his study and blew out his brains with a pistol he had inherited from his grandfather. Vivien was able to make only a rough sketch of this history from what she learned from Dustcomb old-timers, but the detail came after a trip to Montreal near the end of her spring break where she spent two days in a public library reading microfilm. The story seemed to end with LaCroix's birth and what remained for her was an 18-year gap until the time LaCroix joined a Dustcomb logging crew. It might have seemed that the boy, like his great grandfather, was starting at the bottom as a logging hand, but after just one year he was drafted and sent to Korea to fight. All Vivien knew for sure about the missing 18 years was that he had become an American citizen.

Edna Roberts, her eyes blurred by cataracts, told Vivien that LaCroix had been so skilled and efficient in the woods that he was immediately rehired when he returned from the war a year and a half later. Before the war he had been so quiet and reserved, some of the men believed he

masked a superior intelligence, but when he returned from Korea, his remoteness was troubling to them. Gradually they learned that after a brutal battle where his unit was overrun and nearly everyone slaughtered, he had become a prisoner of war. This happened just 11 days after he landed in Korea, and he spent a year in a prison camp along the Yalo River until he was released in a prisoner exchange shortly after the ceasefire in 1953.

LaCroix returned to Dustcomb in the midst of a building boom. Sawmills had to operate six days a week to keep up with the demand for lumber, and there was work for loggers year-round except for spring, when the ground was too soft to skid logs. For 6 months he rented a room from an old widow in exchange for repairs, and by then he had saved enough for a down payment on a bungalow that had once been a summer home. For the next two years he lived there alone, keeping to himself and making payments to the bank every month. Every day he was the first to show up for work until one day he didn't come at all. No one knew what happened, but it was soon clear that he had left Dustcomb. After six months of missed payments, the bank repossessed his bungalow. Thirty years passed and with it nearly all memory of the logger Albert LaCroix until people noticed a squatter's shack not far from Will and Elsa Grinnell's farmhouse. Gradually, word passed among those who had known him that LaCroix was back. Now in his fifties, he looked like he had spent three decades in a war prison.

When her spring break was over, Vivien returned to campus aware that her obsession with LaCroix meant she had learned nothing about folktales. If anything, his story was the antithesis of a folk tale because there was no moral, no illumination or lesson in what she learned from the old-timers other than the fact that a person who drinks Sterno to get high will eventually end up blind or dead. Most frustrating of all, she was unable to learn anything about the mirror she had wanted for her own after LaCroix's death. With no material for a thesis, she turned to fiction and wrote a tragic short story based on what she had learned about LaCroix. Throughout the story, almost like a character, ran the motif of a silver hand-mirror that once belonged to the hero's paternal grandmother.

She should have failed the course, but her folklore professor gave her a merciful C. Vivien graduated with her class, and the same week three thousand miles away Georgia graduated

Summa Cum Laude. For her carelessness Vivien felt no embarrassment, and for Georgia's success no resentment. It was as if deep inside her a switch had been turned.

"It wasn't stolen," Vivien asserted. She had just filled their glasses although she knew she already had drunk too much. "LaCroix was sentimental. The mirror had been his mother's, his grandmother's before that, and he just kept it. We thought he was a pervert, but he was just a sad old man." Vivien spoke slowly at first, as if she had to unearth her words one at a time, but after a few sentences she found a rhythm. She told Georgia everything about her research when she was just twenty-one, what the old-timers had said about LaCroix, and how she had turned his story into something she could believe.

"And Mom and Dad?" Georgia was curious, but it seemed to Vivien in an ironic way.

"I told them I was collecting folktales. They were busy. They thought it was cute, and before long I was back at school."

"And you told me nothing."

"Why would I? Imagine what would you have said to me. 'You don't *know* this, Vivien. You're making things up!'"

"Christ, you're right. That's exactly what I would have said."

And then they were both laughing, and kept laughing far longer than the humor of the moment or the excuse of too much wine. When they were done, they needed to wipe their eyes.

"Well," Georgia said, looking up. "I have a confession too. I lit the fire that destroyed his shack."

"What? You're just saying that. You can't stand the light on me even for a second."

"But it's true. You mentioned the Sterno, and that's how I did it. When I went back with the mirror, I saw the can and got the idea. I pried it open, lit it with a match, and set it down on the floor under his bed almost touching the blanket. We were well out of sight by the time it really got going."

"Why would you do that?"

"Don't you remember that everyone thought it was for the best when his shack burned down?"

"And you figured that out beforehand? Bullshit."

“I think I did it because it was exciting and I knew we wouldn’t get caught. I was pissed off at you for being such a pussy and pissed off at LaCroix for being a bum. And at Mom and Dad for giving him food while he spent his own money to get drunk.”

“Weren’t you righteous?”

“I was. I was a monster, but it turned out to be the best thing.”

“People said that because they thought Will Grinnell set it to clean up after his squatter.”

“And not some angry kid. I said I had something to confess.”

“This is incredible, Georgia. What you were thinking when we were eating ice cream outside the store? I was still scared that someone had seen us and we’d have to answer for just breaking in. You must have been terrified.”

“That’s the strange part. I wasn’t scared at all. We had gotten away with it, and my anger was gone. I felt calm and peaceful, and I wanted you to feel the same.”

“Then why are you bringing it up now?”

“I’m not sure. This business with Mom has stirred up all kinds of thoughts, but I already told you I think about LaCroix. It’s not quite guilt that I feel, more like something’s incomplete until I say it out loud. We were pretty bratty as kids, and I was the queen of brats. I should be saying this to Mom before she dies, and this is the best I can do.”

Vivien said nothing for a minute. She was confused by her resentment for the way Georgia had reshaped a memory she had held for forty years. She was suddenly 9, straddling her bike on the side of the road and holding her sister’s by the handlebars, and trembling with fear. A car would appear and stop to ask what was wrong. Or Will Grinnell would pull onto the road with a wagon of haybales and see her standing where Georgia had left her, and he would know. When she finally spoke, she said she was exhausted and needed to go to bed.

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At the end of a two-day vigil their mother’s kidneys failed, and she died. They were all there holding hands when she stopped breathing, and for a minute or two they were as still and peaceful as she was. Because they had already made all the arrangements, Vivien started out for home in late afternoon with the hope she would arrive before her children fell asleep. It was mid-

July and there would be light in the sky all the way. Crossing the border into Massachusetts, she knew that the numbing fatigue of the past four days would eventually turn into sadness, but she needed to hear the innocent chatter of her young ones and feel the warmth of her husband's hand on her back when she kissed them goodnight. In two months they would all drive to Dustcomb for a memorial service and the scattering of her mother's ashes.

And what about Georgia? Vivien knew so little about her sister's life, no names of her friends or colleagues at work, and to be fair, she had not told Georgia that she and Leo were in the midst of a trial separation. She knew Georgia was not alone because she had alluded to a man at one point, but so vaguely that Vivien had known better than to ask. There had been other men, one she traveled with to the Mediterranean and the Far East, but the personal life Vivien was able to imagine from the little Georgia was willing to share never amounted to more than a rough sketch. The morning after her confession about the fire, Georgia was back to her old self, and at the hospital after their mother's heart had stopped, she took charge and signed all the forms as if her father was too distraught. That night they had stayed up so late talking, Vivien had scored a touch with what she knew about LaCroix's mirror, and for a few seconds Georgia had to pause to catch up.