

## Ditch Questions

My parents lived on a quiet country road near a small town in the Sierra Nevada foothills. The youngest of four, I could find no children my age within a mile of our house, so I spent most of my time alone. At the age of nine, I was in possession of a pocket knife to make marks on trees and a pellet gun to shoot small birds. Dog in tow, I ranged the hills and dells, becoming adept at going, under, over, or through barbed wire fences and sneaking past scattered neighbors' homes.

I liked to fish at a spot in a ditch that was along the road. There was a small pool of water that was backed up by a culvert where the little ditch disappeared under the asphalt. This was at a place where another small road branched off the little country road that I lived on. The water disappeared under the pavement and reemerged in about thirty or forty feet, on the other side of the branching road. From that water, I caught bluegills and occasional catfish, nothing longer than six inches.

In the summer, I sat on a low cement barrier by the hour, my feet sometimes dangling in the cool, clear liquid. I stared dreamily into the gently flowing waters. The nearby tree and sky were reflected at the water's quiet edges. Tadpoles wiggled to the surface and back to the mud. Water striders played and struggled with each other. I'd catch them and let them go when I didn't accidentally kill them. I saw that sometimes they would exit the water's edge and traverse the land. I spied them getting onto the road and heading for water at some other place. I wondered what it was that called them to some place they did not know.

## Ditch Questions

During the times I spent at the ditch, I examined the old, run down house across the main street that separated us. The house was bare wood, splintered and weathered gray. I could see the two upstairs windows from where I sat, windows that looked like giant, black, vacant eyes. There were no curtains, and sometimes I could see pale yellow light spill into a cloud-darkened sky. I couldn't see much of the house below the upstairs windows because the bulk of the house was covered with huge juniper bushes and gnarled olive trees. There was also an old oak tree at the corner of the house. A weed-pocked, dirt driveway came out to the road from the back of the house. The whole place looked like it had been deserted for twenty or thirty years even though there were people in there. Sometimes I could hear faint sounds, a note from a song or maybe a howl of some kind. Sometimes it sounded like an old man who was hurting from something. The house made me shiver and gave me occasional nightmares. One of the distant neighbors had peacocks, and I could hear the birds call out early mornings as I awoke. They sounded to me like a girl calling out, "Help, help," the sound high pitched and drawn out. And I surmised that the house would be a perfect place to keep a prisoner locked up in a cellar. I carried that fear with me when I went to my place down the road, ostensibly to go fishing in the ditch, but also so I could be near to that house. Because the unknown is a kind of gravity, I felt an urge to explore the place and peek into the windows.

At the ditch, I specialized in fishing where the water disappeared into darkness beneath the road. I discovered that the small fishes spent their days in that darkness, in the cool and safety of the tunnel. I attached a bobber to my line, a few inches above a hook and worm. Then I spooled the line out under the road. In order to watch my bobber, I wiggled my stomach and hips into a place on the cement barrier where I lay and looked at the world under the road upside

## Ditch Questions

down. This resulted in a marvelous change of perspective. Top was bottom and bottom was top. The water was my dark, flat sky above a concave earth. There was always a half circle of light from the other side, backlighting my bobber. The bobber would disappear into the sky whenever a fish tugged on the worm. I loved the novelty of it, and sometimes let the little fish eat my worms just to watch the bobber dance and disappear upward.

I fished or fooled around by the hour and passed time through the hot and dry days of summer. I looked at the grass or the leaves in the trees or the sunlight dancing on the water's ripples. My thoughts were musings and questions about the nature of things. I wondered about the wind in the trees and the sparkle of light. My upside down world made me wonder at things that were right-side up. Why was I me and not one of my sisters? Or my brother? Did others see green the same way I saw green? All children ask these and similar questions. And like all kids, I understood there was a gulf between ditch questions and school questions that had right answers.

One day while fishing, I heard shouting. I was surprised to see a man lean out one of the windows of the house across the street. Then there were two men, one behind the other. They were looking down on me and shouting. It was as odd as my little upside down world. They weren't really saying anything; it was like a mixed-up tantrum, half crying and half shouting. I could tell from their voices and actions that they were not normal. And I could see that they both had large, bulbous foreheads and close-set eyes. Crazy people, I thought.

Even though they were shouting at me and making menacing gestures, I wasn't afraid. Well, I wasn't so afraid that I picked up my pole and ran home. They railed and ranted for a few

## Ditch Questions

minutes before a gray haired woman pulled them back inside the window and shut it. I felt a tinge of sympathy, of being a kindred spirit who knows what it's like to be in trouble.

I suddenly had more questions than ever. I wondered at the crazy men's lives. Did they have to spend all their life inside? Did they know how to talk at all? What did they do all day? What would happen if they went to the store or somewhere? And I had never seen the woman, probably their mother, before. What did she do all day? What was her life like?

I continued to go to the ditch almost every day that summer. I pondered as I held small lives, wet and wiggling and squirming, pulled up from the darkness below the road. I was changing how I felt about the fish, and if they were not too hurt, I released the catfish or bluegill back into the water. Around this time, I put away my pellet gun as well. My change of heart had to do with the crazy men, but I wasn't sure why.

One late afternoon at the end of August, I was surprised by the sudden appearance of the two men across the road in front of the house. I had never seen them outside before. They were shouting at me, but not like when they were in the window. I could see both of them jumping about and flailing their arms and shouting things in gibberish. They obviously wanted something. I had the fleeting thought that they might come across the road and grab me, but they stayed where they were. They were very pale, with salt and pepper stubble on their faces, sparse hair, and flannel shirts beneath suspenders. They looked at each other as often as they did at me. I could see they were trying to tell me something. Were they yelling at me for something I did? That didn't seem to be it. They looked scared, too. "What do you want?" I called over.

## Ditch Questions

They were trying to say something. But they couldn't speak. That is, they couldn't use words, but they were communicating that they needed something; that much I gathered. The taller man looked like he was beckoning me. I walked into the road and stopped, mostly because of the smell that was noticeable from the middle of the road. I had smelled it subconsciously the whole time I was at the ditch that day. I had been close to a pile of rotting apples in my various excursions, and I guess I thought I smelled that from somewhere, but as I crossed the road, the sickly sweet odor was magnified and took on the distinct smell of decaying meat. I was terrified.

Both the men got very excited that I was coming toward them. I knew they did not wish me harm. How did I know that? I've often wondered. How do we sense so many things? Maybe we all have some way of sharing thoughts. Maybe that's why I think about a person on the other side of the country, and he or she calls me later that day. At any rate, even though I knew everything from their faces and the smell of death, I found myself walking the rest of the way over to them.

They were childlike and timid, afraid of me as much as I was of them. I sensed that they were being brave, and that helped me to be brave. I followed them as they pushed through the trees and bushes to the side of the house. There was an old car parked in a wide dirt area. It was pointed down the driveway that went around the back of the house. An old and frayed piece of rope was hanging from a tree, but there were no other signs of life, no old tools or a wheelbarrow or chairs or anything. It was just a wild tangle of trees and weeds and brush around a wide spot to park the car.

## Ditch Questions

The men led me to the side door up three wooden steps. And this is where I should have stopped. I knew what was inside. And the smell was causing me to get sick to the stomach. But we are creatures that demand to see and feel things no matter what. Intuitively knowing the truth is never enough for us. So I held my breath and went inside.

The house was quiet. I walked through a mud porch with an old washing machine and stationary tub on one side. The floor was covered in gray and brown linoleum with bare wood showing through a couple of worn spots. The men went before me and led me to the living room. When my eyes adjusted to the dark, I gasped a shallow breath. There lay their mother. She had been dead for some time. She was stretched out in the middle of the floor, bloated, still, and gray. She looked ghastly beneath the dim amber rays that shone down from the ceiling light. The tallest son looked at me. Words were unnecessary. The smaller son sent up a howl of sorrow. I wanted to howl, too. I wanted my world back as much as they did, but that could not be.

Their mother was mostly on her stomach but was puffed up and so was halfway on her left side. Her eyes were open, but they were no more than dried, wrinkled orbs. Her left arm was beneath her body, and her left hand was to her throat. It was an open hand, not grasping as if she had been choking. It looked like a gesture of surprise, like when my mom would see something bad, put her hand to her throat, and say "Oh, dear." Her mouth was open. I could see her black tongue and some of her lower teeth. That looked scary to me. Her open mouth would haunt my dreams for many years.

I looked up at the two brothers. They stood close together and were looking back at me. I started to say something, but I could feel my mouth filling with saliva. I had to vomit. I turned

## Ditch Questions

and ran to the door I entered and just made it to the top of the wooden steps. I threw up. The taste of vomit and smell of death stayed with me, and I vomited several more times on the way home. I washed out my mouth while my mom made a phone call to the police.

I never saw those men again. I wondered if the cops took them away. I imagined them being accused of killing their mother, but I knew the brothers couldn't have done anything like that. Several weeks later, I was listlessly fishing at the ditch and saw a fat man and his children at the house. Three children, all younger than me, were playing hide and seek in the yard. The man came out to the road, looked up at the house, and then he turned around to me. He didn't give any more thought about me than he would have if I was an old dog. I guessed they were relatives. They disappeared after one more day, and I never again saw anyone at the house across the road. I fished at the ditch a few times the next summer, but it was not the same. I quit fishing there. As a matter of fact, I gave up fishing altogether.

The house must have been too run down to live in because it was never inhabited again. Empty of living souls, it slowly fell apart, eventually collapsing into a pile of wood and roofing. It was bulldozed and the lot cleared, the way is still is today. Almost 60 years have gone by, and I still wonder about the lives of the people that lived in that house... and about the circumstances of my own life.