

Two Baskets

There aren't any leaves on the trees, and it's been so windy recently that there's none on the ground either. It's almost like they, the leaves I mean, weren't even there at all--like the trees just shot up out of the ground all naked and scraggly, without anything to protect them.

I know they'll be back though. The leaves. They always do come back even if there's no evidence that they were there in the first place. They always know to come back somehow.

The sun's been bright recently but it seems like the clouds aren't happy about it, because every time he comes out to shine on something new they're all over him, trying to stop it from happening.

So far there have been no changes with the moon. I'm not expecting any either.

I've been thinking about the chickens and Earl. Yesterday--which would be the day before he left--he put all the eggs in one basket. All of them. One basket. And he broke them. All of them. So now we're all sitting around the kitchen table on the morning before he's going to catch the train to college, pretending like we were there to eat breakfast even though we didn't have any breakfast to eat at all.

If the majority of the chickens had been just a little bit more patient, had held their eggs in just one more day, then Colleen would have had to get them and then we'd have something to eat for breakfast tomorrow. It wouldn't change the fact that we didn't have anything to eat this morning, but it sure would make that fact a lot more palatable, because it would only be the chickens to blame then, and not just Earl for being a dumbass.

Mom and Dad sat at opposite sides of the table, at its two heads. Nobody was speaking, but they were the ones not speaking the most. They were just sitting there giving Earl side eyes and occasionally looking at each other, but never for very long, because as mad as they were at Earl they still didn't want to take their eyes off of him cause he'd be gone in two hours.

Noah raised his hand. He had just started first grade and loved it so much that he wished he'd started in the fall instead of this spring. He raised his hand up high, so high that his bottom

left the chair a little bit because he wanted to make sure that somebody could see that he had something to say.

“Noah,” said Mom, Dad.

“There’s a new man coming to town!”

The side eyes turned to straight eyes, then moved almost like one unit from each other to just Noah.

“A *new* man?”

“Yes, mam! He’s coming in tomorrow on the train. He’s from Chicago and they taught him music there. He can read a piece of paper and sing all of the words. He’s going to work at the school and teach us to sing like he does, and Teacher says that if the man’s popular enough then maybe the state’s going to give us money to get tubas and drums and then we can use those to sing with too. But the only problem is that he doesn't have any place to stay other than in the McMurphy’s hotel.”

“Do you think they’ll give him a good deal on a room?”

I don’t know why Dad asked this, since it was obvious by the volume of information Noah was imparting, that it was all he knew on the subject. But before he gave his nephew time to fumble for an answer he said that they, the McMurphys, better give this man a good deal on a room because half the kids in our school were McMurphys and it was their duty to make sure they all got a good education. Mom tried not to laugh at this--it was old hat to make fun of the McMurphy's fecundity-- but we all saw her smile. And even though Noah didn’t get the joke, he was smiling a little too because he thought he’d said something funny without evening knowing it.

After breakfast we all drove Earl to the train. Mom and Dad had a long Volvo with three rows of seats. The back most row folded up from the trunk and faced the rear window. Noah sat there whenever we drove anywhere, even if he was the only other person in the car.

Earl sat with him today though and said funny things about the people driving behind us. Me and Colleen tried to listen to what he was saying as best we could, but it must have been pretty funny since he never said any of it above a whisper. Noah howled and laughed and pointed

until he started coughing, and even though Mom and Dad heard the whole thing they pretended like they couldn't and just stared at what was coming up on the road ahead. If Earl wasn't leaving I think one of them, maybe both, would've turned around and told him to stop riling Noah up because he knew damn well that if he got too excited he'd start hacking up a lung.

At the train station Dad didn't get out of the car until Colleen went to talk to him. He stood with his hands in his pocket as everybody hugged and kissed Earl and told him to write and Noah told him to send lots of presents. Dad tried to give Earl a handshake but turned it into a hug once he had him within reach. He didn't let go for a while, but as soon as he did his hands went right back to his pockets, like they were birds he was trying to stop from flying away.

We sat in silence on the car ride home and stopped at the supermarket to get a pint of vanilla ice cream and a jar of maraschino cherries.

Home, Mom and Dad parked the car, walked out into the woods with the bag from the supermarket. The rest of us just sat there in the car, wondering what to do until we had to go to school again.

Tuesday the man from Chicago arrived. We all liked him when we saw him. He had a great way about him. He was pale and dark haired, all dressed in grays and blacks which only accentuated his fairness. He wasn't sickly, just very thin. He had a box with a tuba in it (but he called it a *euphonium*) and a sleek leather bag full of old notebooks and crumbly sheet music. He kicked his feet up and clomped them down hard when he walked. Colleen and I agreed--when we discussed the man after school--that he moved a little bit like a donkey but we liked that about him. He didn't make jokes but he had a funny way to him that all the other teachers seemed to like.

During assembly, they stood him up there in front of the whole school and Lloyd Agnes told us, in more words, pretty much everything Noah had said over breakfast before Earl left. Lloyd told us all that the man from Chicago--who turned out to be named Andrew--was in need of a place to stay and said that if any family's with a spare room were willing to open their arms and hearts to the man then the school would probably be able to make it financially beneficial to them in some way or another. Noah brought up this latter fact at dinner.

“The new man’s here!” he said between bites of mashed potatoes and gravy.

“Oh?” said our parents.

“Yes! And he brought a *yew-phonie-yum* with him all the way from Chicago. He played it at lunch and I got to bang on a trash can next to him.”

Mom asked what he played and Noah said “Abide With Me” and in the very same breath told her that the man needed a place to stay and that since Earl wasn’t living at home anymore maybe the man could move in with them, and that Lloyd Agnes said there could be some money given to whatever family found a place for the man from Chicago named Andrew to live.

Noah’s mom took the same train that Earl took but when she took it, it was going the opposite direction, not in the direction of colleges and careers, but out towards Jackson where my parents decided that Noah’s mom should go. So our parents took in Noah last fall and ever since they’d been trying to treat him like he was as much their own child as he was their nephew. The problem was that they were treating him even more like their own child than they ever had for me or Colleen or Earl, which was a problem for them too because they hated telling the kid *No*.

So our parents agreed that they'd have the man from Chicago named Andrew because they needed the money but me and Colleen knew that they were just taking the man in for Noah’s sake.

When Andrew got to our house, Mom and Dad were ecstatic, asking him all sorts of intrusive questions and talking over one another.

“Chicago? Oh is it warm there?” they said.

“A musician! You must have travelled all around the world. Have you ever been to Venice?”

“Oh Larry, they’re going to love him down at the store. We’re going to introduce you to the whole town, Andrew, dear.”

The new man arrived at our house with a roll-a-board, his leather satchel of music, his tuba case, and a little black box (I would later learn contained his clarinet). He didn’t own many more things than what he brought to school each day.

What did he do for fun?

I'll tell you. See, Andrew held a very tight schedule. He woke every day at 5 A.M. to make himself coffee and empty the dishwasher. He'd tidy up any dishes that were left in the sink from the night before. Then, armed with both of his instrument cases, he would leave for two hours, then come home to eat breakfast with the rest of us. While he was a tidy and thoughtful man, he certainly wasn't quiet and usually woke up me and Colleen around 5:30. The donkey stomping and clanging of pots and pans was annoying at first, but the upside was that we would get to watch Andrew leave from the window and speculate about where it was he was going to.

"There's a woman," Colleen theorized.

"A *woman*? Already?" I didn't know if this was possible, though Andrew did seem awfully popular around town."

"Yes, dummy. Think about it. He brushes his teeth and combs his hair every morning. Packs a thermos of coffee (a whole lot of coffee for one man, don't you think) and brings those *two* instruments with him. He's up and out of here before anyone but the farmer's are up--and they're certainly not interested in some city boy's comings and goings."

My jaw hung open. It was all so obvious now.

"He's probably playing some steamy duets with Mrs. Singer above dad's store," she said with a smirk.

Mrs. Singer was the most notorious whore in town. Men, women, teenage boys, they all whispered and giggled about nasty things they thought she did in that apartment of her's above dad's store. There were rumors of her *entertaining* an entire circus for the night, that she'd even let them bring the lions up into abode. I heard from a boy in the class below mine that she had sixteen children, each from a different man, and that she'd trained each and every one of them to be a ruthless, cold blooded killer. He said that when the time was right, Mrs. Singer and her army of bastards were going to take over the whole town and rob us all blind. The town spoke about her with varying degrees of excitement and disgust, but no one could really put a finger on where they had heard the stories. It was always from a funny uncle or somebody's barber.

The truth of it though was that Mrs. Singer was a shut-in. She was a widower and had been made childless by a car accident which she didn't talk about much. Her apartment was

small, certainly not capable of housing sixteen trained killers let alone an entire circus. Dad delivered her groceries daily (she demanded that her dry goods be the freshest available) and she'd always disclose some interesting detail of her past under the guise of shooting the breeze.

Mrs. Singer also bred rodents; weasels, mice, rats, chipmunks. Just small ones; it was as much a way to make money as it was for her to keep herself busy. Dad made deliveries to the pet store for her. She had a whole row of cages at the opposite side of the room from her bed. They faced the window and if you stood on the roof of the library across the street on a just right sunny day, you could see them all in glorious color, squirming around and being cute. Dad liked to remind me, that while the rodents looked just wonderful from this vantage point, they smelled awful in person --a smell which would sometimes waft down to his store. The smell did not do Mrs. Singer any favors with the town and nearly as soon as it showed up, was dubbed--likely by one of the gross, frustrated men at the pool hall--*the astringent musk of sex and adult desiring*.

Mom and Dad defended her though whenever people began to point fingers and whisper. They'd been trying to have her over for dinner for ages, but she always declined.

The long and short of it is that Mrs. Singer is a very nice lady and why people say such nasty things about her, I have no idea. Coleen knew this just as well as I did, so she was half joking when she suggested that Andrew was fooling around with her.

See, one of the few true things people said about Mrs. Singer was about her musical talent. She had been a big deal some years ago, having become famous for tootling on a flute on national television. It was a country themed variety show where she made her first appearance, dressed in all manners of a farmer's daughter even though she had been born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. They didn't call her Mrs. Singer on TV though, they gave her a country name, Ana Lee Bundren, and they didn't let her speak a word because it would shatter the whole illusion they'd built up; all they let her do was play her flute.

It was part of a sketch starring the show's host, Mr. Roy Clark and whatever B-Lister was the guest that week. The guest played an orchestra conductor, Clark was a 1st chair violinist, and Mrs. Singer played his cousin--a hillbilly girl who'd flown in from the boonies that morning to try out for the orchestra. See, the joke was that she could play anything by ear but couldn't read a lick of music. Clark fired off a Paganini Caprice (24th?) and she followed along, note for note,

like it was nothing, but then when they handed her a sheet, she just froze up and let a long stream of spit roll out of her instrument for comic effect. At the end of the sketch, as written, she gave up on joining the orchestra, and instead her and Clark played a medley of fiddle tunes, starting with “Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine” and ending on a spirited rendition of “Orange Blossom Special.” Though she was not born for the stage, she carried herself quite well on television; the gag with the spit was hilarious and her musical illiteracy was thoroughly convincing despite her years in conservatory.

Dad loved retelling his tenant’s story, especially the climax.

“They gave her a two-year contract,” He’d say, pushing himself back from the table.

“She was part of the studio band, had to rehearse three, maybe four times a week, tops. Sometimes they’d pull her in for a sketch. She had it made. But this Roy Clark guy, well, he had a bit of an ego. He couldn’t handle the thought that anybody played better him, especially if they were a woman. He’d have tantrums, throw around instruments, punch walls. Real piece of work that guy. So this orchestra sketch was Mrs. Singer’s first time in front of the camera, and right before going on the director or whatever told her to make some mistakes when she and Clark were playing the fiddle tunes. Nothing too big, he said, *just a couple of wrong notes*. A couple of wrong notes! Can you believe this shit? He has the balls to ask her if she would fuck up on live TV, just to boost this bigwigs ego! She was dressed up like it was goddamned Halloween and now they were asking her to just plain play bad. You know what Mrs Singer did next?”

And always, always, always, *always*, I said no. Even though I had heard this story maybe thirteen times. I always said no because I loved hearing dad tell it. He’d gotten so good at telling this story it was almost easy to forget that none of it even happened to him.

“She went out there and played that flute like hellfire and fury and by *God* she played it so hard and fast and so loud that it blew the toupee right off Roy Clark’s big head. She kept playing after the cameras cut out and kept playing as they told her she was fired, right there on the soundstage, and kept playing as she watched that Joe-schmo director rip up her contract and stomp on the pieces. She just waltzed out of there playing a million notes a minute, happy as a clam.”

His smile now stretched from one ear to the other and he would undoubtedly be standing by now, his chair toppled over at his feet.

One day, tired of guessing, me and Coleen decided to trail Andrew. We kept a safe distance behind him, gently hidden by the lack of a morning sun. That day, like all the others, he left with an instrument case in each hand. He sauntered down the unpaved road to town, his donkey walk propelling him forward with each step, but he didn't stop when he reached the road to town (eliminating the Mrs. Singer theory). Instead he cut into the woods and walked along a trail that Coleen and I knew well since we had been appointed its caretakers.

When Earl was young, young enough that I wasn't around and Coleen was still a toddler, he discovered a creek full of bullfrogs. In the summers, with no one to play with, Earl would isolate himself at the creek right after breakfast, building elaborate structures out of sticks and mud. He never built dams and he never missed lunch or dinner--always arriving punctually right before plates hit the table. When we were of age, old enough not to tattle, Earl took us to his creek and we played like we had never played before. We played with sticks, poking and stabbing each other then building castles from our retired swords; we threw mud, we skipped rocks (though never very far) and we caught bullfrogs.

But now Andrew was here. This outsider, let me tell you. First he comes to town, all smiles, music, warm hand shakes, and now all of a sudden he was bastardizing this sacred place with his presence. He had a little stool out there and a log setup besides it like a school desk, and as soon as he sat and smoothed out his trousers, he unpacked his instruments and sheets of staff paper and began to work. I think, though I am still unsure of what he was doing, that he was composing. He would pick up the little tuba and blow some big, deep, notes out of it, then he would scratch something down, then he would play some higher, hollow, notes on his clarinet, scratch those down, pick up the tuba... ad nauseum. It was weird. But it was beautiful at the same time.

You could have taken a dump in a paper bag next to this stream and it would still make just as good of a postcard as the stream alone. That's the nature of the spot. Don't ask me why. But it was more than just the stream. Andrew had a poise when he was playing music that he was

so lacking in every other aspect of his life. He sat straight as a tree, looking almost put together. His eyes were shut as he played, not tightly, but as if he were in the first few minutes of a deep sleep. Sometimes he would put down the clarinet and the notes would still play. They'd hang in the air like curtains and go from clean and crisp to wispy and out of key. But they were still rang out, as if by magic. Standing there by that creek, as the first flashes of sun hit the trees, we were privy to something no one should ever be privy to; someone believing that they are entirely alone.

Someone believing themselves to be alone always acts differently from someone knowing they have an audience. Things come out of the woodwork; they act in ways that nobody should or would act in front of other people. They do the gross things that everyone does but everyone's ashamed of too. A person believing themselves to be alone can make things that seem impossible, play music that can never be replicated, and they do it all without an audience, only for themselves. People are just amazing that way.

Of course the clarinet wasn't really magic though; it was just the well-timed moan of a bullfrog, and of course, as we found out some hours later, Andrew had known we were following him from the moment we left the house. On that beautiful morning, the only thing we were privy to was learning where Andrew spent those two hours between waking and breakfast.

I don't know if it was because we spoiled his hiding place or because his secret was out, but the next morning Andrew didn't leave for the creek or anyplace else. He parked his stool in a corner of the yard, near the chicken coop.

I learned with two baskets in my hands that Andrew really had been composing out there by the creek, that he was working on the score to a musical, that he hoped to see it on Broadway someday. I asked him how he got so good, if he was born that talented,

"No," he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "I just played my scales a lot."

When Earl wrote us last week, he told us about his classes, playing football, and his new girlfriend, but this most recent letter, he wrote to just me. He asked *me* how *I* was, that was the whole of the letter. He also asked about Noah, about Aunt Helen. He asked about the chickens.

He didn't tell anything though, just asked. At the end of the letter he asked about the new man that Noah was so excited about.

My letter started with *Dear Earl*, then it went on and I told him everything I'd been thinking and feeling and doing. I forgot that he asked about Andrew until I was almost out of paper, so I added, in my tiniest handwriting:

P.s. The rumors are true; a new man did move to town. He is very nice. We rented him your old room. Mom and dad love him, the whole town does too. I think you and him will get along well when you come back for Christmas.

In even smaller handwriting, I added a post, postscript, telling him that I had taken to getting the eggs with two baskets now, that he ought to try it sometime. Just busting his balls. Then I wrote that I loved him, and signed it, making it all official.