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Little Man Crying

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Jody Nelson *Little Man Crying*

I don't get many chances to go back to Minnesota. I hadn't been there for the last four years; I'd almost forgotten how it felt. My grandparents have a house on Red Lake. The air is always clear, and most of the time, except for a few weeks in July and August, it's cold...



I love the feel of the guest bed. The mattress is firm, and the sheets are always cool. The pillows are thick and soft, and you can sink your head in until you're buried. The same quilt comforter that's been there for the last twenty years hasn't lost its freshness. The walls of the room aren't painted. It's just wood--shiny and enameled and glossy. It reflects the light from the reading lamp on the bedside dresser. The gray concrete floor is covered by a deep and rich, white imitation-fur throw rug. There are storm windows that you can barely reach from the bed if you stretch, and they can be opened or closed by pressing two plastic inlays together and pushing up or down. Usually there's a soft breeze blowing in from off of the lake.

You can't see the lake from the house. There's a long path, maybe a half mile, that you have to follow through thick evergreens before you can see the water. The house itself is surrounded by trees. I knew the names at one time; my grandfather used to take me around the yard pointing to each one.

"Poplar," he'd say, and laugh deeply as I stammered over the word. "Elm. Birch. Walnut." And of course, the evergreens. The evergreens were giants, dwarfing all the other trees by twice their length. Most of the branches were beyond reach, but some grandfather could boost me up to and I would pull and heave, and finally scramble on, collecting sap on my clothes and hair and hands. He'd laugh, calling me "Rocky the flying squirrel," and I would hang on and swing myself over the branch, feet dangling, arms popping, until my hands didn't have the strength to hold on any longer, and then I'd let go, and find myself falling down, staring up at the huge evergreen looming above, only to be caught in his strong hands.



I walked the last mile to the house. I left the car on the side of the gravel road, and I didn't lock it. I wanted to surprise my grandmother. The evergreens make a tunnel that can carry the sound of an engine for miles, it seems. I also love the walk. It was cold, my breath clouded out behind me and I was breathing deep as I always did when I first got there. It's like I trying to absorb the entire area through those first few breaths.

My grandmother lit up when she saw me. Her arms shot into the air and she waddled towards me calling my name. She never pronounces the "d." It comes out as "Joey, Joey." No matter how many times my grandfather would correct her, it was always "Joey." I had to bend over to hug her, and she nearly crushed me in her arms. She's a very strong woman. Her hair is fine and white and smells like hair spray. She cried as we went into the house.

"You're hungry," she said, and of course she was right. She made a huge omelet, thick with cheese and full of green peppers and diced onions. I tried to make coffee but she scolded me back into a chair.

"No. You sit. I make." She has a thick German accent that I've never encountered anywhere except in the cinema.

The eggs were delicious.

"I'm on break, Grandmother," I explained. "I'll be here for a few days."

She nodded as if this were no surprise. She didn't eat, but she had coffee with me. She's an excellent cook. I miss that.

"How is school?" she asked while I was unpacking.

"Hard."

She nodded. "You stay at it. Make us proud."

I couldn't say anything.



The path was thick with shadows. A small line of direct sunlight cut through the fir branches to the ground, but even at noon it was dark in the woods. I hoped to see some deer. I thought that would mean something. What, I didn't know. I didn't see any. I didn't really think I would anyway.

"The woods are alive," my grandfather said. "Everything around you is alive and is just as important as you are."

"What about rocks?"

"Rocks are a different story," he said, laughing. He threw one and we watched it skip out across the lake. Once, twice, three times. I lost sight at seven.

The path ended on Wooder's Way. That was a different trail, even smaller and less defined than the one I'd taken from the house. It used to be a big road to the lake, I guess, but it had been shut down for some reason. Wooder's Way, I don't know if that was its real name or just what my grandparents called it. It led down to Red Lake if you went left, or to the bridge if you went right. It had been fifteen years since I'd gone right. I went down to the lake.



I had to stop in town because I told grandmother that I needed some paper. I didn't really; I had enough. But I wanted to go see him. He's buried in a small cemetery outside a church. There's a faded white wooden fence enclosing the church yard, and very little parking space. Most cars park on the drive

I thought I'd feel something, looking down at his stone. but I didn't. I just stood there a while, casting a shadow over the words, and wondering if there was a God.



The lamp clicked off sometime after midnight. I sat completely still, startled for a moment, until the empty silence of the house told me that the power was out. The humidifier had shut down, and the penetrating hum of the refrigerator died also. I heard my grandmother shifting in her bed in their room down the hall. I waited, but she didn't get up. Outside, I could see light fog snaking its way through the tree trunks. The moon painted the ground silver, and the dark water

pump in the back yard poked its head out of the mist like a sentry caught napping. I couldn't sleep. It would be pointless even to try.

The flashlight did me no good in the fog. All it did was take the soft haze and make a bright solid wall of it. It was a big light with a long handle, though, and I felt a little more secure with it in my hand.

In the night, the woods were no longer friendly. Silver shadows and midnight silhouettes floated beyond my vision. Crickets chirped their haunting song, and the branches swayed and brushed together in the light breeze, making an almost hypnotic backdrop of sound. An owl hooted twice, then was silent. Somewhere towards the lake I heard an outboard motor running, but even that didn't put me at ease. I felt jumpy, nervous, as if there were spirits dancing all around me. I turned right on Wooder's Way, and the fog thickened.



"His poems," she said, and set down a huge picture album. Where there should have been pictures, she'd carefully laid out my grandfather's poems behind the clear plastic shield. The paper he'd written on had faded to a brittle yellow, and the ink which had once been dark black was now gray. There were hundreds of them.

I'd never seen the book before, but I knew he'd written a lot. I leafed through the album when grandmother left the room. I think she was afraid one of us would cry. Some of them had dates on them. One of them was written on my birthday. He'd written me a poem, and no one ever told me.



The fog was thicker down by the bridge. It was impossible to see the river. I couldn't even see the bridge frame until I was ten feet away. The beams jutted out from the ground up into the fog like columns. There were crossbeams connecting the two rows, but there was no roof. It didn't look like there ever had been one, but Grandfather had told me that at one time there had been one that you could climb up in and hang down by your legs and wave at the people who drove by under you. I had a hard time picturing him hanging upside down when I was a child. Later on it wasn't so difficult.



"Trout!" Grandfather yelled. "Big one, too!" He sloshed over to where I was grimly fighting the fly reel.

"Keep it tight. Little man. Don't give him too much line or he'll cut loose on you."

I was mesmerized by the rod, mysteriously dipping and snapping in unison with the line, which was racing back and forth across the river under the bridge.

"That's it," he murmured and I could feel him close at my back, ready to take over if my muscles gave out. I was determined they wouldn't. At one point, I slipped and fell to one knee, almost losing the entire rod. Water rushed into the too-large hip waders that he'd double belted around me, but then he caught me up with one steady hand and I knew the trout was mine. It was the best tasting fish I ever had.



Little man, little man,
Crying in the sun.
Little man, why do you cry?
Your life has just begun.

4-2-69

It was just a short little phrase, he'd scrawled it out and probably forgotten it, but it was written for me. No one ever told me. No one.

✦

In the center of the bridge there was one beam that extended out beyond the guard rail about five feet. I could barely make it out against the night sky and the fog. I stared at that beam for a long time. I stared and stared and stared, trying to figure it out. That was the one. I decided. I thought of him, slowly edging out there with the rope in his hand. I thought of him and the fish and the poems and the trees. I thought of his stories and our long grown-up talks while we were out walking. After a while, I looked down into the fog and listened to the river's soft flow and this time I did feel something. I felt empty.

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There were a lot of grown-ups at the funeral; I recognized some as relatives and some as people Grandfather had introduced me to in town. He'd always introduce me as a man and have me shake hands with grown-ups who would solemnly return the gesture. It made me feel important, and my chest would swell with pride whenever he'd introduce me to someone new.

I was eight years old, and this was the first time I'd been to a funeral. I vaguely understood that something bad had happened to Grandfather, and the people gathered together in couples and trios, speaking in low harsh whispers that would always halt when I got near, confirmed my belief. I didn't understand the word "dead." I don't remember anything anybody said, except for my mother who cried so hard my father had to take her outside for a while. I stood by Grandmother, unsure of what to do or where to go. She didn't say a word to anyone, just nodded when people would come up to her.

Once she looked down and patted me on the shoulder and I saw that she was crying so I hugged her. Then my father came and told me that he had to talk to me outside. When we got outside, my mother scooped me up and held me against her chest. She cried, and I felt embarrassing tears welling up in my own eyes. I couldn't understand why, but all of a sudden they were running hot and salty down my cheeks, and some were getting in my mouth, so I buried my face in her chest where my father wouldn't see me crying also.

"You can never go to the bridge again," my father said. He held me at arms length, and I wasn't crying anymore. "You can never go there." He didn't make any threats; he didn't have to. His face was so stern and so terrible that I knew I never would. My mother just sat in the front seat waiting for us to get in the car. She was silent the entire ride back to the house.

✦

When I got back Grandmother was awake and the lights were on. She was in the kitchen, and there was boiling water to make hot chocolate with. I sat down next to her.

"I went to the bridge," I said, feeling like I'd betrayed her somehow.

She nodded and got up. She went to the stove and poured some water into a mug with the top of a spoon sticking out it.

"I had to, Grandmother."

"Here," she said, handing the mug to me. "You drink. You feel better." I took the mug and set it on the table as she sat back down and patted my arm. I felt like I should say more, but I couldn't think of the words. So I drank my hot chocolate.

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"Life's like that line, Little man," he said. "You will never know for sure what's there under the water until you get it to the net."

I left two days later with a box full of jarred strawberry preserves for my mother. I was glad that I didn't have to drive by the church on the way to the highway. I didn't want to see it. I didn't know if I'd be able to return anytime soon. I couldn't decide if I really wanted to.

I hugged my grandmother and she kissed my cheek.

"Thank you, Grandmother."

"Yah," she nodded. "You have a good trip. Keep up your grades."

"I will ."

She sat on the deck watching me until I was around the bend and lost in the trees. I didn't have to watch her to know she did.