

ONE WINTER'S AFTERNOON

Story from 'The Shark and Other Stories':

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Dr. Leonard Fuller M.B., B.S., F.R.A.C.G.P., huddles from the chill into his astrakhan overcoat, hands clenched in pockets, breath pluming before him like a spirit. Directly facing him is a faded weather-board cottage, poor but squarely confident somehow, on a cracked concrete base surrounded by a bare yard pocked with rubbish and spare ashy tufts of grass. This is unexpected, the bareness, solitude. From a stock of working class cliches he had imagined a cramped terrace, squeezed between like: squalling babies, talk-back radio, sharp domestic squabbles in a foreign tongue, spicy kitchen smells ... We always assume the proletariat more vital for some reason, Dickens and Dostoevsky probably the prime culprits. He, of all people, should have known better.

For it is very much a working class suburb, but also an old industrial zone, so he has driven past untidy waste stretches and this property is adjacent to one of these, a half-built derelict estate. On the other side, fifty yards distant over a tangle of rusty barbed wire, a decrepit gothic factory slumps silently, windows all eerily vacant like eye sockets.

A factory like the one he worked in forty or so years ago when he'd known this suburb pretty well. Doesn't look like much has changed, now it all gradually comes back to mind. One of a sequence of endless lousy jobs, somewhere near, Taubman's Paints, scouring out recycled vats, dangerous industrial labour, stripped to the waist, poisonous air, hot as buggery. Supporting his older unmarried sister and her boy, and his pickled war-invalidated father, all dead now, while powering through a Medical degree five nights of the week. Where on earth had he found the energy, the drive?

Belief and enthusiasm now seem relics as distant from him as these presently before him. He digs the ferule of his umbrella into the footpath, uproots a dead weed. Not a cloud in the sky, why did he bring the bloody thing? He feels down, enervated, unusual for him, but probably simply because everything looks so drab and he had such a late night.

'You must come! Don't you care?'

The flatness of the place seems entirely at odds with the shrill urgency of the young female voice on the line that persuaded him out of the fug of his office. He hardly ever makes house-calls now, particularly from the second surgery, and on such a raw day. But Pollock was tied up with the insufferable Mrs. Macallister, the caller was insistent, and actually he has nothing much else to do.

The thought of his assistant makes him conscious of a slight foulness on the back of his tongue. Too much red wine (definition of an alcoholic: a man who drinks more than his doctor), though in this case a pretty justifiable over-indulgence in a vain attempt to ameliorate the dull convivialities of the previous evening. Dinner at the Pollocks was becoming almost a weekly event. He does not like Pollock, brash, opinionated, ambitious, and his perky arriviste wife. Of course, he himself had been much the same at that age, and this is perhaps why.

Other unpleasanties of the evening now crowd in on him. After he thought it was all finally over, drifting off on the electric blanket, his wife had turned to him, the most astonishing thing, they had not made love in well over a decade, and what with this and his over consumption, he'd had to suppress a reflex to vomit. What on earth was she thinking? Had parvenu Pollock turned her on? Parvenu Pollock's priapic prick, bit of a medical legend from all accounts. That last girl, he had to let her go. Pity. To be honest, he wouldn't mind a shot himself at the young wife, enjoyed her bending to the oven

when he went out to freshen his scotch, imagined hiking her skirt. Fantasy alright, but in real life you had to endure the bloody conversation.

Not that he can endure any conversation these days. His wife at least respects this, days on end when they literally do not pass a word. What is conversation anyway when you break it down but exchange of information? And what information could they possibly have to exchange after all this time? Yet they had both been great talkers once, sitting up half the night, all that nonsense: politics, religion, literature, matters long since exhausted. These days he never even picks up a newspaper, let alone a novel. People saying the same things over and over to one another down the years. Why on earth do they do it? What is the point? Sometimes he feels that it is only silence that makes life bearable. He could break with her of course, with them all for that matter, but even that seems far more effort than it is worth. Too much fuss, he has always hated fuss. Easier just to keep plodding on, line of least resistance.

Gingerly opening the gate on its single hinge, the picket fence is also half collapsed, a good kick would do for it, he picks his way fastidiously up uneven paving past yellow papers and crusty dog turds. The front door could also use a lick of paint; he raps the knocker firmly, importantly. The sound is swallowed, but definitely would have carried. Waits. Nothing. Raps again, louder. Nothing. A third time. The breeze picks up, grit in his eyes and teeth. Must get that bridgework done, he's as bad as some of his patients in postponing the inevitable, old men always the worst. He couldn't possibly have made a mistake; he glances back at the gate. Thirty eight, same as his own house. He hears the woman's voice again, the exaggerated articulation, the hot edge of panic. Wrong street? Maybe there are two. He crosses back over to the Mercedes, glossily conspicuous, tossing the umbrella onto the back seat where he has left the street directory. Street and directory correspond.

He returns to the front door and smashes the knocker repeatedly into its base, bangs the ball of his palm on the wood, shouts into the wind, making a spectacle of himself, if there were anyone around to see. He stops, and the sudden contrasting quiet spooks him. Maybe something serious has happened. He makes his way around the house to the back, which appears weirdly as same as the front. An empty dusty yard, no back fence, the old night-soil lane exposed. A fly-screened back door bangs erratically in the wind, the inside door is latched back open. He enters.

The kitchen. Worn linoleum, dirty curtainless windows. He calls out again. No response. But everything seems orderly, plates and pots and pans neatly stacked on open unpainted wooden shelves. But it also looks dusty, unused. He handles a saucer, an old cheap willow pattern from his youth. There is no food about. The sink is dry, slightly stained, slightly foul. He turns the tap. A hollow sucking sound, but no water. He crosses to the 'fridge, again a design he remembers from the past, the modular-shaped top, once ludicrously thought to be modern, even futuristic.

It is not running, he opens it, it is empty, the stale air carrying a faint but sharp tang of mould. On the bench there is a toaster, one of the ancient type that opens either side, and a pale green electric jug meshed with fine hairline cracks, black bakelite lid, dry as the sink. Some equipment for living, but where is the life? Sunlight flowing from the windows seems to pin down the various objects as though they are permanent fixtures. He has a ridiculous intimation that the house is watching him, waiting to see what he will do. The hangover again.

He ventures up a carpeted corridor, 'fifties floral, maroon, whoever designed these things? Musty. There are two bedrooms, one on either side and he pokes his head into both of them. The rooms are neat, again orderly, beds made with faded pink tufted-chenille covers, no clothes around, no

bric-a-brac, presumably also unused. Beyond the bedrooms, at the front of the house on either side, are the living room and master bedroom. From the living room he can see through sagging venetian blinds over to his car. Shabby lounge, a single ornament on the mantelpiece. Incredible! It looks to be an exact replica of a Dresden miniature he bought for his wife on their honeymoon in London thirty years ago, now long lost. Memory plays tricks, but still, it looks uncannily the same. He turns it in his hands, a young girl in peasant costume, pointed black shoes, bright blue dirndl, and the face, yes, unmistakable. He bought the figurine because the face was so much like his wife's. And she was once like this, slim, bright, laughing. Another age. He had been so much in love; there had been nothing else. Impossible to believe. He realizes that for some reason while he has been holding the girl, examining her, he has also been holding his breath, and he now lets it out between his teeth with a long slow whistle. Upon which he finds he is on the verge of tears. Absurd.

He steadies himself and, model still in hand, enters the main bedroom. Here the air seems denser. Again, all is orderly and empty, except the covers of the bed are drawn back in what is comparatively wild disarray, and there is a large dark rust stain on the mattress sheet. He walks over and fingers it. Stiff. Old dried blood, although a strange discolouration at the edges makes it appear fresh, moist, where it blends into the cotton. He brings his fingers to his nose and for some bizarre reason smells his wife on them. A totally perverse olfactory illusion. Then from no motive he can credit, at that point or later, he places the figurine precisely in the centre of the stain. Suddenly the door knocker booms, scaring him half out of his wits. A surge of panic momentarily grips him. He races to the door and wrestles with the lock. How does the bloody thing work?

'Hang on!

Finally it gives. The cold blows in. No-one on the doorstep, or in the yard. Kids probably. He quickly looks over to the car. Nothing. Unless they are coming around the back. He re-locks the door and retraces his steps down the hall and out the back door. No-one. He returns to the front. Better give it away. A prankster? Or something else. Something sinister? Something, definitely, but what? He pauses. It is there right before him, but he just cannot get a grip on it.

Silly nonsense no doubt. The westerly picks up, cutting through his coat. He walks back down the path and pauses again for a moment at the leaning gate, trying to think what, if anything, he should do. He waits, but nothing further happens and nothing comes to mind. If the call was genuine and the woman wants him, she'll ring again.

Now the sun has gone and the pale winter light is dimming in the open sky with a bleak, brief radiance. He looks across to where that light is focussed, watches the broken shapes of abandoned buildings slowly blacken, coalesce, disappear, as the world itself slowly turns.

Queer business alright. The sealing kiss of the driver's door is comforting, final. Ignition, heater, radio. The car glides down the long street, takes the first corner and with a squeal of tyres accelerates away.

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