



ABANDONED THINGS

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This house feels forgotten. Like a phone number. Like a birthday.

M and I stop, park next to the old railroad tracks, get out. The tracks are very fragile, might crumble if a train were to pass over them now. For some reason, abandoned houses always seem to be by train tracks— almost like steel veins pumping loneliness, spiderwebbing out of sight and curling back to the heart of America; a thing that keeps moving from person to person and place to place. These train tracks keep the houses secluded and alive and dying.

M stretches big like, grabs her camera and straps it around her neck. Above us, stars eat up the sky and, for the first time in my life, I don't think I can count them all. This heats up a feeling in me like summer mid-day sidewalks.

Tall grass shoots up everywhere, whiskery, and the welcome mat has lost its dimples; has the effect of a soft, clammy handshake. The

gravel road leading up to the house is in disrepair, could have been spliced out of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The house is two stories, wooden; at one time it could have been painted white. It's at the top of a small hill, and it's slowly falling down the other side of it. Windows on the house are intact, which is surprising. From where we're standing, the door and the windows and the roof make a face, like pictures of houses do in children's drawings. And as I'm thinking this, M walks up beside me, says: 'Kind of looks like a face, doesn't it. That's *off*.'

'Sure,' I say, but don't explain. I turn the flashlight on and suddenly the world exists in sharp detail beneath the yellow beam. The house looks much bigger under the light, is the proud owner of stark shadows bending all over the place as the light changes.

'Creepy,' M says, looking up and around and biting her lip.

I once heard her describe a Norman Rockwell painting as creepy.

We pass through the grass, and it whips against our legs and I wonder what it is hiding within itself. I'm not afraid of snakes, just the possibility of snakes. It just stopped raining. We sink softly into the dirt, the tall grass paints our jeans with coats of rainwater.

The front door is boarded up with nails. One every inch or so, pounded deeply into the particle board, and something seems distinctly funny about this. Someone has successfully ruled a chunk of the earth off limits and useless. Something about this seems either silly or wrong, and I can't decide which.

'You think, in another hundred or so years, the whole earth is going to be nothing but boarded up buildings?' I ask, more to the boarded up door than anything. Maybe a tad accusingly. M is behind me, but she is looking through the viewfinder of the camera, her right hand around the focus, twisting intuitively. She is pointing the camera

at some dark objects clumped together on the ground. I swing the flashlight's beam over to the clumps— cans of some sort— and M jumps back, startled. 'Jesus, O, don't do that.'

'Ooops, sorry.' I turn the flashlight off, overcompensating, and the darkness that falls is perfect. A full moon and stars make the sky lastingly bright, but the house and the tall grass and the gravel road and the train tracks are all soft, muddled, without detail. Even M, crouching right next to me, is just a coagulated inkspot draped against the rest of the ink spots.

My eyes adjust and things become somewhat clearer. M is wearing a pair of really old Nikes, possibly from the seventies. She's wearing a shoulderless black shirt with a silk scarf around her shoulders. Straight black jeans, tight, might bruise her thighs if she kept her keys in her pockets. Loose red belt, mid waist. Behind her ear, she has stuck a red, silk flower.

It strikes me that explaining the way M dresses item by item is kind of like describing a Monet painting rose by rose.

Flash, click; and suddenly the world is lovestruck and bright, dark, and I blink. M stands up, winds her camera.

'What was that of?' I ask, opening my eyes to green splotches and reformed darkness.

'Beer cans.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. Some really old beer cans. You know, before they had the pop tops.'

I turn the flashlight on, and the beer cans are situated casually in a small plot of dirt with a rectangle of small stones around it. They're lying in the middle of the remains of a flowerbed.

'How does an abandoned house even happen?' I ask. It's a stupid

question and the answer is obvious.

M shrugs. ‘Things fail, they leave.’

‘Huh.’

We walk around back, where there is cut firewood; unused, tired looking, stacked carefully. The recent rain has made the wood very wet; it smells softly of musk and the air is velvet with it. A chopping block looks bored next to the stack, is thick, with deep gashes struck into its face. A rusty axe sits next to the stump.

Every object is telling stories tonight.

Origin stories.

We walk to the backside of the house, where a room has partially collapsed down the hill. It’s only held there now by a large spruce it has crashed into. We can see into the gooey insides.

I shine the flashlight into the room, which lights up eerily, reflects the yellow, looks like a box of morning. We look in, at each other.

Inside, the floor is strewn with papers, magazines, manuals. Envelopes lay on top of each other in layers of various shades of yellowing, browning. A museum of forgotten thoughts, unanswered letters. Unsurprised by their discovery.

M sneezes. She sneezes like a cat.

‘What is all this?’ She says, grabs an envelope. It is addressed to an Owen Q Gildren. The return address is labelled as ‘Association of American Horticulturists.’

I dig into the stack of papers, find a hardback book buried beneath the papers. It’s a Stephen King book— *Pet Cemetery*. The pages are dusty, dirty, yellowed, but the spine still has some stick in it, gives the book the impression of being old and never finished. I open it up to the middle and a playing card— ace of spades, used as a

bookmark— falls out from the pages.

M brings the camera up to her eyes. ‘Hey, O, so...how ’bout you shine the flashlight up in the right corner of the room.’

‘Like...this?’ I point the flashlight into the corner of the room and the rest of the corners are tinged with shadows.

‘Good. Perfect.’ She looks one-eyed into the viewfinder; her left cheek bunches up with her closed eye.

Click.

An old car title is lying, opened on the floor. It’s for a 1964 Volkswagen Beetle that was purchased in 1975.

‘He drove a bug,’ I say, over my shoulder.

‘Yeah?’ She stands up, looks behind her, says these words to the woods; ‘I wonder if he was a tall man.’

I open another envelope. Divorce papers. Unfolding them under the beam, I say, ‘Looky here.’

‘Huh,’ she says, looking over my shoulder. Then she takes a step back, thinks, then takes another step back, then another. ‘Just stand there, like...you are. Looking at the papers, alright?’

I say, ‘Alright,’ read through the papers.

Owen Q Gildren’s wife, Kara Gildren, divorced him for infidelity in 1977.

‘Our boy Owen was a ladies man,’ I call back to M, who is kneeling down and pointing the camera up and towards me. I try to look as if I don’t have a camera pointed at me.

‘Yeah?’ She lowers the camera, looks at it, adjusts a knob, brings it back up to her eye, fiddles with the focus.

I look over the legal documents, and I really don’t look as if I have a camera pointed at me because I hardly notice it. The papers have it. They’re smudged with dirty fingerprints, are curled at the

edges and the paper is brittle, but somehow—

Click; and everything is shadow.

M stands back up, winds her camera.

‘You ever wonder what makes people cheat on one another?’ I ask her. She looks at me strangely, as if I’ve just asked a very insensitive question. But then she shrugs, says, ‘Boredom.’

‘Yeah?’

She is walking down the path back to the front of the house.

‘Sure, boredom. Most of the time, at least. Boredom. Boredom’s more powerful than love.’

‘You think?’ I follow her down the path with the flashlight pointed at her feet. ‘You ever cheat on anyone?’ This is probably a jackass of a question, but I don’t even think of that until it’s asked and she’s silent.

But she does answer finally; frankly, without emotion. She says, ‘Once.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Well...I mean, I’ve only had the chance to really, you know, classically cheat on someone one time.’

‘Uh...wait, define this classical set up.’

She stops at the woodpile, stoops, brings her camera up to her face.

‘*Well*,’ she doesn’t look up at me, ‘this isn’t something that always comes up, but I’ve only made love with someone I loved...umm...once.’ *Click*. ‘I mean, I’ve had sex more than that, but never with someone I loved.’

‘Ahh. Okay.’

‘So, it was during that relationship, the relationship with the one person I loved— or something— when I cheated. I mean, not big

cheating. Just, like, everything...but. You know? But I felt kind of guilty.’ She points the camera back at the axe.

‘Did he find out?’

Now with some emotion: ‘Does it matter?’

‘I guess not.’

Click.

She stands up, walks to the front of the house and stops again to take a picture.

There is a trash pile a few yards away, I slowly walk over to it with my hands in my pockets, calling over my shoulder, ‘I’ve never made love when I wasn’t in love.’

‘Huh.’ She doesn’t look away from the camera. ‘So you’re kind of like, an impulse-fuck virgin.’

‘I guess. What am I missing out on?’

Now she looks my way, kind of surveys the moment with her thoughts. ‘You won’t know what you’re missing until it happens.’

Click.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I don’t know if I could. I don’t know if I’d want that.’

‘Well, have you ever kissed someone you didn’t love?’ she asks, now looking around the other side of the house.

‘Sure.’

‘Have you ever felt up someone you didn’t love?’

‘Once or twice.’

‘Then what’s the difference?’

Click.

I’m at the trash heap, poking around with the flashlights beam. There’s a bunch of warped two by fours lying around, cardboard boxes. A toilet. Tyres. There’s something symmetrical about the trash,

the nature of its angles, how it's arranged, its make up.

I think, *It almost looks like a skeleton of some crazy monster, too awkward to survive. The monster of a person's past.*

Click.

'I don't know what the difference is,' I finally say back to her. 'But do you remember that one girl that L was kinda sorta maybe seeing for a little bit? H? Remember her?'

'Not too well,' she says, and she sounds as if she's a very long ways away. The way things sound when they're a long ways away in dreams.

'Well, H and L and me were talking— and this was when he just met her— and we were talking about the spirituality of sex. And L was talking about how he didn't see sex as a terribly spiritual thing. He just saw it as a, you know, kind of an act, for pleasure, right? Like...like bowling. Or, not bowling, but *something*, alright?'

'Sure,' M says, *clicks*.

'Okay, well, then H...she says something like, "I think sex is a very spiritual experience," and L says, you know, in L's patented, macabre innocence, "But H, I *know* you. You're kind of a slut.' And H looks at her hands and she says, "Okay. I'm a slut. But that doesn't mean that sex doesn't change me every time. Because it does.'"

Click.

'Oh,' M says. 'That's kind of nice.'

I say, 'Yeah,' then I totally forget why I brought that memory up in the first place, but I feel exactly how I had felt after that conversation with H and L. Curious and alive and warm. And for a moment I don't feel like talking.

A frog croaks somewhere. Crickets tune up.

Click.

I step to the other side of the trash heap, and there, beneath a couple of rain stained two by fours, is a tiny piano. A child's toy. The sort of piano that would have only known a few songs; *Mary Had a Little Lamb* and *Chopsticks* and *Heart and Soul*. Childhood songs. Pounding, fervent, repetitive songs.

Simple songs that sound like heartbeats and thoughts in a dark room.

Click.

I turn the flashlight off, and the piano looks very dark and sad. It's stuck deep within the skeleton of the trash heap; look's like its centre. Maybe its heart.

Click.

Sure. The piano looks like what remains of the monster's heart, beneath the ribcage of two by fours. Beneath the rotting cardboard skin, rubber cartilage, porcelain bones. And the moon gives its white keys some shine, gives the black lacquered wood a swallowingness.

I wonder what it sounded like new.

The thought hits me, that Owen and Kara, whoever they were, must have had children.

I wonder who got the children after the divorce. What the children thought about the divorce.

What they thought about their parents falling out of love.

And then— thoughts are like those cartoon buttons labelled 'never push,'— the ones no one can resist pushing. And of course I picture my parents— two of the most in love people I know— falling out of love, which is the loneliest thought I can think of. And this thought seems strange and gristly and it makes my stomach tense up.

Click.

Like picturing them without their senses of humor. Completely

different rhythms in everyday actions; tying their shoes, making toast.

And unnatural smiles, like mannequins.

And forced laughs.

M is walking towards me; she is looking up at the sky, her hands holding the camera swinging around her neck. She's kinda frowning, says: 'I don't know what it is.'

'What's that?'

'I don't know. Something. I'm really missing Q tonight.'

'Who's Q?'

'Q is...you know; the only person I made love to that I loved.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah,' she says, looking back off into the woods. Then she *hmmm*'s, says, 'Hey, hold still, pretend I'm not here.' She stoops and focuses and *clicks* and I'm blinded in white and the chirp of crickets.

'You gotta see this,' I say, pointing down to the trash heap, hoping I'm pointing in the direction of the piano. I can't see it that well, the flash having reset my night eyes.

'Yeah? What is that?'

'It's a piano.'

'A piano? In there?'

'It's a little piano,' I say. She takes a step and she's standing next to me. Then she trips for a second, falls into me, then straightens out, grins a little. There's a cheap thrill in touching her, especially if by accident. I'm kind of thinking about kissing her, slipping my hand into hers, but I know I won't.

Now we're both looking at the piano.

For a moment; crickets, frogs, cicadas, moon-tampered darkness.

'Huh,' she says, strangely unimpressed. 'Sad.'

Then M turns around, starts walking back to the car. I stay

behind, staring at the piano like how kids stare at statuesque crocodiles at the zoo on summer days. Expecting it to do something, knowing it won't. I turn finally, follow M to the car.

Now it's M's turn to ask a stupid question, which she comes through beautifully on; 'I wonder what makes us miss people,' she says as she walks. 'You know, and it feels like they're touchable—like...just a few feet away, but you can't touch them. That's what it feels like when I miss— I don't know. I wonder why.'

'I dunno,' I say. Then, quietly; 'Sometimes I feel like that when I'm just a few feet away from them.'

'Oh,' M says, but I mumbled it and I'm not sure that she heard me.

On the drive home, we listen to a Pat Benatar CD that has showed up in my car somehow. *We Live for Love* is playing.

We drive on a road with deep forests on either side, and the tops of the trees meet in the middle above us, form a sort of canopy. We don't say anything, but M takes a picture out of her window every so often. We *flash* along. We see deer walking along the side of the road.

Driving, I stare ahead, wonder if Owen Q Gildren loved the person he cheated with. If he ever misses his ex-wife. If he ever stopped missing her.

How it changed him, his sense of humour.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/13/abandoned-things.html>

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