

The Light in the Window

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WHEN LLOYD CAME BACK from the woods, the echo of Lydia's words was still beating in his numbed brain. He tried to believe them; he could not believe them; he would not believe. Then he heard the roar of the motor, and the hot breath of the exhaust fanned his legs as the old taxi jerked past; and looking up, he saw the pale blur of Jimmy's face peering at him from the rear window.

Suddenly the images swung into focus. Again he saw Lydia, as he had seen her that morning before he flung himself away, down the stairs and off for the woods. He saw her standing there on the other side of the un-made bed, a pair of Jimmy's socks clenched in her hand. Now he heard her. Now the words sounded again, as if for the first—and the last—time. "I'm not coming back, Lloyd. This time, I'm not coming back."

Lloyd turned. The white storm-door had been thrown open against the house; like an empty tooth-socket, the hallway gaped blankly ahead. Lloyd plunged inside, slamming the door behind him. He raced through the house and, two steps at a time, up the back stairs to their bedroom. Swiftly, he began to strip the room of every vestige of evidence that a woman

had once lived there. Not much was left but the usual disorder and litter, some "run" stockings in the waste-basket, a few dusty *Good Housekeepings* under the bed, and on the cherry dresser the blue enameled compact that he had won at the County Fair, wide open now, its shattered mirror focussing the rays of the mid-morning sun. These, he bundled together, along with some run-down shoes, a Maxfield Parrish print, which he tore from the wall with a vicious rip, and the torn and greyish house-dress which had been white and lavender the first year of their marriage, and which Lydia wore now every morning, dumping it on over her nightgown and trailing around for hours.

Stripping the case from her pillow, he jammed everything in, plunged for the stairs, then hesitated, and flinging open the door of the opposite room, hurled the bulging pillow-case across the floor. For a moment, his eyes circled the chamber, the rusting crib between the two small-paned windows, the imprint of Jimmy's body still visible on the stained sheet, and the dent in the mattress like a tiny grave. He saw the over-sized baseball mitt on the hearth, and the worn-out pajamas still in a heap on the floor at the foot of

the out-grown crib, just as the child had stepped from them. For a long moment Lloyd looked, then slammed the door shut, reached into his jeans for his key ring, and locked it. Five minutes later, he was out in the barn, shoveling manure at the side of his brother Tom, who was blessedly silent. What they were saying in town Lloyd could easily guess, but he had no intention of going there. The embroilments and bitterness down at the Four Corners had cost him his job as Selectman, his peace-of-mind, and now his wife and child; he only thanked God that he did not have to see anyone. Few people came over back to the farm, and it did not matter to him who came or stayed away. He was completely and utterly alone.

One day a shadow fell across the barn floor. Lloyd looked up and saw the boy, as wispy and frail as a shadow himself, and almost top-heavy in the thick mackinaw that bundled him to the nose, although it was only September. From under a grey, stocking cap, limp, mouse-colored hair hung dank above eyes dark and deep as Jimmy's own, and looking even larger above the blue pits below them.

Lloyd's lips tightened. It was Withers' brat from Break-Neck Hill, a whining and puny youngster, spoiled within an inch of his life because he was sickly . . . a year or two older than Jimmy, he believed, although he looked younger. Lloyd well remembered him, lying in his father's truck like a baby, earlier in the summer, as the car swung by his truck, and Ed Withers had turned his head aside to avoid his gaze . . . He'd be damned if he'd have the child hanging around here.

"What do you want?"

"Jimmy."

"He ain't here."

"Where is he?"

"Gone away."

"Where's he gone?"

Lloyd said nothing. He turned and sat down and shifted the bucket when he was conscious again of the unwavering little shadow on the floor. Again, he turned,

sharply: "What are you hanging around here for? What do you want? Why don't you go home?" The shadow did not move.

"I want to stay," the boy said. "I want to see you milk." The words echoed others, half-forgotten, almost buried, rising now, unbidden out of the thicket of Lloyd's memories. The fall of the footsteps across the floor were the same, and the child's warm breath across his cheek . . . His nerves tightened; and he swung up and around, clamping his square, brown hand down on Owen's shoulders so hard he could feel the sharp bones pricking through the heavy layers of clothing "Forward. March," he said, the two moving forward as one, and Owen chuckling happily, as Lloyd let him go. "Now get," he said. "Get out of here. And don't come back." Owen chuckled again; it was all part of the game, and trotted happily down the hill. Lloyd stood, and all late summer broke in on him: the stitch and trill of the crickets, and the wind through the maples like a long-drawn sigh. He saw Owen starting to turn, to look back, his arm raising in farewell; and abruptly, Lloyd turned and strode into the barn.

The next day Owen was there again.

Lloyd did not hear him come. So silently did the little boy move, so stealthily did he slip into the barn, that Lloyd looked up startled, as the shadow again fell across his moving fingers. Because he was startled, he was irritated. "What do you want?" he snapped again. "Didn't you hear me tell you to get?"

"I want to stay," the little boy repeated. Lloyd glanced at him; Owen gazed back, unflinchingly, a smile finally flickering across the pallor of his face, lighting in the shadowy eyes like the flicker of sunlight across snow. Lloyd did not smile; he thrust aside the bucket and stood up frowning, grasping at one more straw. "Does your dad know you're here?"

"He don't care," little Owen said, and again his gaze met Lloyd's, unflinchingly, the childish face illumined with a kind of

old-man wisdom. A smile curved the pale lips. "He lets me do what I like."

That, Lloyd guessed, was true enough. Just like Ed Withers to let his spoiled brat run loose, and make a nuisance of himself with someone else; and he was the one to give him a teat to suck on. He sighed, in resignation.

"O.K. Get that stool over there. Mind your feet now, with that cow-dung," for the little, booted feet were wavering near the dark and steaming piles. "Now watch me . . . see . . ." and his hands fell into the familiar, rhythmical motion, and a shadow lay across his hands, and a memory arose and stabbed with new and renewed pain as his own fingers came down on the cold, small ones, and later as the shadowy form moved silently beside him out of the barn. Beyond them, the big house loomed dark-cut against the flush of the late-afternoon sky.

"That's Jimmy's window, up there," Owen announced, suddenly, pointing with his finger. Lloyd did not look.

"Yes," he said.

"Jimmy used to signal me good-night from that window," Owen said. "He used to lean out and wave and then he'd go back in and put the light on and off three times. But now there isn't any light in the window."

"No," Lloyd said. "There isn't any light in the window."

"Would you signal me goodnight, Lloyd? Would you play you were Jimmy and signal me goodnight?"

"No," Lloyd said. "And you get on home. You get out of here."

Owen was back the next day, and the day after that, and slowly, a new fabric was woven into the pattern of Lloyd's days. It became routine now, as the shadows lengthened, and he and the light drew in upon themselves in the great dark stretch of the barn for the boyish wavering shadow to fall across his hands. Nor was the youngster as chicken-hearted as he seemed. Embarrassment flooded hotly over Lloyd the day he bred the bull and little

Owen appeared—embarrassment and then hot defiance. Sex was an animal function of the body like any other; and because it was animal it could be sinful, and must be thwarted and controlled. But . . . the facts of life were something you had to learn and better within the barn than out behind. Do the boy good to find out about something besides the bees and butterflies and do his father good when he found out . . . Perhaps then he'd learn to keep his brat at home.

But Owen, standing beside him, looking down on the struggling animals showed neither shock nor undue concern. "Why does the bull do that, Lloyd?" he asked, quietly.

"So the cow can calve," Lloyd answered. Owen's brows puckered.

"I know where babies come from," he announced, triumphantly. "From inside the mother; from the mother's stomach. Like the kitty over there," turning towards the dim corner, where on a pile of old hay under a mow, the grey cat lay, sluggishly coiled.

"That's right," Lloyd said.

"The cow will have a calf?"

"That's right."

"But couldn't it have it alone? There has to be a father? Every baby has to have a father?"

"Yes," Lloyd said slowly. "Every baby has to have a father."

The old cat uncoiled herself, stretched, and lumbered across the barn, winding herself about Owen's legs. She purred as the boy bent down to stroke her soft fur.

"She going to have her babies pretty soon," Lloyd said, glad now to divert the child's attention from the struggle in the bull pen. "Maybe I'll let you have one." He grinned down at the youngster, whose dark eyes were widening, whose rare, sweet smile was breaking across his face. "Perhaps you could be a kind of father."

"Oh, Lloyd!" The joy in his voice, his face, his whole small body . . . Lloyd looked down at him and then turned away. After a moment, he said, gruffly: "Perhaps

you can't have it; perhaps your father won't let you have it."

"He will," the little boy said, cheerfully. "He always lets me have what I want."

Once Owen came early, and before dusk a bitter East wind had begun to blow. It was late November now, and there were spits of snow on the air and a raw, damp cold rising from the floor. Lloyd's fingers were stiff, even against the cow's warm udders; his father had stayed inside, hugging the stove, and there was no heat in the barn but the animal heat of the cows and the faint warmth seeping up from the lamp. As Lloyd turned, he saw the light flicker across the boy's face, always pale and drawn, but with a start he saw now that the lips were blue. His bucket clattered to the floor.

"Let me feel your hands."

The hands were cold as death. Lloyd stood up. "Here, youngster."

He swung him up under his arm, under his blue and black plaid mackinaw. How light, how frail the child was, "not long for this world," his father would say, he thought as he ran up the path to the house. He deposited Owen before the coal stove, cautioning him to "get close," and "hold out his hands," the old man glowering silently at them from behind. From out in the summer kitchen, Lloyd brought in a bucket of milk, dipped out a cupful and put it on the stove to boil. Then he raced up the back stairs, halting suddenly before a door that had been closed, a cold and empty room that a child had once filled and made warm.

He hesitated only a moment. His stiff fingers closed around the key ring, fumbled for the key. The door swung open; he clicked on the light. He looked neither to the right nor the left; he knew what he wanted to find. Swiftly, his hard hands moved through the drawers of the scarred blue chest — a child of six could hardly wear the clothes of a child of four, but there must be something left, something here. There was—a moth-eaten knit muffler of green, with a red stripe in it, a

sweater, equally holey and stretched out; perhaps it would cover the narrow chest. Lloyd dashed down the stairs with his finds, only to discover his father trying to force the milk on the child; who, in turn, was turning his face away. He was not hungry, he said; he was tired; he wanted to go home.

But he was still blue with cold. Lloyd piled more coal on the fire, rubbed the thin, wafer-like hands in his, heaped the new clothes on top of the layers he already had on. A glint of color came into Owen's cheeks; he consented to drink the milk, if only Lloyd would hold the cup for him. He was acting babyish — a moment now — Lloyd feared, and he would be crying for his mother.

It was colder than ever outside. It took several minutes for Lloyd to finish cranking the truck, and to warm up the motor enough to get the car in front of the house. Little Owen shrieked with delight at the clattering monster, but unlike most youngsters had no desire to ride in the back. He was shivering still; he cuddled up to Lloyd and clung to him as they rattled down the hill and over toward Withers'. The snow was coming down fast now. It whirled bleakly into the headlights; it was wet and treacherous beneath the smooth tires. What a long hike this was, Lloyd thought, as he shifted gears for Break-Neck Hill; what a strain for a fragile youngster who trotted over to watch him day after day and only God knew why. He wondered if Ed Withers had ever walked it.

At the gate he started to brake the car; then thought better of it and drove through. Halfway to the door, they met Withers' car, head-on. Lloyd halted. Owen scrambled down into the blinding snow—silhouetted a moment against the headlights, a dim, shadowy little figure. He raised his arm in farewell. From the opposite car, something was shouted; Lloyd could not tell what, in the roar of the motors, and he did not wait to hear. He backed down the hill, and with some difficulty crawled up his own.

Owen never came back again.

The first day or two, Lloyd thought nothing of it. The raw weather continued, and the boy had obviously taken cold. But the days stretched into a week, and the shadowy little figure was ever beside him, haunting his thoughts, more with him than he had been when he had come every day. At night, Lloyd stood sometimes for minutes staring out from the kitchen at the lighted window Owen had told him was his, and one night an impulse struck him. Swiftly, he moved up the back stairs, unlocked the locked door, and looking, straight ahead, out the uncurtained window, clicked the light on and off three times. Nothing happened; the light across stared blankly at him. He waited; and suddenly the light in Owen's window went out—on again—and out—and then on. It stayed on, and he wondered.

But Owen did not come back.

Had the seething bitterness of the town robbed him of even this innocent companionship, Lloyd wondered, as he went about his chores, his ears waiting for the echo of footsteps, his eyes fixed on the opposite hill, watching for that little shadowy

figure. But he did not see him. And nights, when he was unable to sleep, prowling around the kitchen, thumbing through the old Town Reports, counting the votes that he had won and the votes he had finally lost, his eyes were drawn, as if by a magnet, to that light in the window.

For it never went out. Sometimes strong, sometimes shaded, it was burning. It was burning at eleven or twelve at night, when Lloyd went to bed, and sometimes even at one or two in the morning. Lloyd began to suspect now, and asked his brother, Tom to make some inquiries in town. Yes, Withers' boy was ill, rheumatic fever, so they said, a fearfully hard attack, and he hadn't the strength to stand it, poor little chap!

And Lloyd hadn't the strength to go and see him.

To enter that house . . . to face those faces . . . those unspoken accusations . . . challenges . . . hatreds . . . he could not do it. He would not. Yet the thought of the boy haunted him by day and by night; the lighted square of that window was burned on his consciousness. One morning, past two, he turned on his own light, and once again crossed the hall and unlocked that

He Was Old

He had eyes like red-husked onions
drying,

Strong and concealing a white sheen
Like the heat of summer layering,
Slipping down the shine of leeks
And onions and the smells of green.

He had sunburned eyes. He had eyes
Like white doorknobs on old corner
doors

Where winter tightens the splintered floors
And suddenly summer cracks the winter
cold,

Netting the knobs with cracks. He was old.

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