

“Familiar Green”

L ibby
Keller

“It is a curious thing, the death of a loved one. We all know that our time is limited, and that eventually all of us will end up underneath some sheet, never to wake up. And yet it is always a surprise when it happens to someone we know.”

Horseradish Quotes, Lemony Snicket

We all have been exposed to death. It is not a foreign concept of which we have no knowledge or understanding. As children, we hear about death. We accept it; however, when it happens to someone close, we have difficulty fathoming the permanence of death. We begin to question our own lives as we comb our psyche for answers. It consumes us until we pass our grieving while unknowingly awaiting the next victim. I, too, did not know one so close to me would be a victim in the hands of Death. I pushed the idea aside and insisted I still had time because no one loses their best friend at the age of nine.

As the sun tried to break through the barrier of the morning fog, a crisp



condensation blanketed my family's car. I peered out the window to watch the passing scenes of the neighborhood. Blurred visions of nature passed and greeted us as they began to wake. Today my family and I would venture out for our weekly grocery run. As Dad sat behind the wheel, trying to find a radio station playing his style of music, I would stare at the window as houses, cars, and people moved past my eyes in a blur. The patterns of these unknown shapes mimicked the past few months. Nothing was in focus. Nothing was clear.

On the way home, my focus suddenly shifted. My eyes fell upon a lone automobile parked on the side of the road. A two-passenger vehicle resting upon a cracked and broken piece of blacktop. Suddenly, the sun rays broke through the fog and kissed the car's pastel shade of paint. The car's color reflected upon me. The color of green gently hugged my body and covered me in its warmth. I squinted past the bright reflection, only to see a small, innocent child standing next to the car trying to open the passenger door. Small droplets of rain began to fall on my window as I watched the child look up to the sky. Then, the whirlwind of green was gone.

As we pulled into the driveway, I continued to see the car, but it was quickly fading from memory. I shook it out of my head as I looked out to see my mother standing on the front porch. My mother's green shirt radiated off her light skin. As always, my mother was there to help.

The significant height difference between my parents was apparent. He towered over her like a titan. Mom was like Jack from *Jack and the Beanstalk*. He would look down from on high only to see my mother's smile. The smile she carried, even as she struggled with the cans of Campbell soup, while trying to reach the top shelf. She huffed as she stretched her arm, reaching as far as she

could, standing on the tips of her toes. Eventually, she succumbed and asked my father for help.

As days, weeks, and months passed, I stared at the car every time our family ventured out. It sat in the same spot, showing no signs of wear. One day, I noticed a change. A slight appearance of dirt crept up the tires. Fallen leaves were strewn across the hood, hiding the vibrant green paint. Droplets of rain rolled down the car, leaving traces of water that looked like tears. It seemed as if Mother Nature cast her fury upon this lone vehicle.

Returning from another grocery run, my mother stumbled out of her bedroom to the front porch and insisted she could help. Her nurse pleaded otherwise. My mother's green shirt was now stained from her constant vomiting. She grabbed the lightest bag and shuffled over to the cabinets. Instead of stretching out her arm, she just stared. She stared at the shelf and the box of cereal in her hand. I peered closer and noticed two streams of water pouring from her eyes. I felt a tug on my arm and followed my brother and sister out of the kitchen.

"I thought this was supposed to make her better," I said.

"It is, but the chemo is going to make her really sick before she's healthy again," my older brother replied as he glanced towards my sister.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" I asked. I received blank looks from my siblings, who were both too fearful to admit the truth. Fear and trepidation roamed throughout our home sometimes creeping into our hearts and minds. It lingered until the day she passed.

As I stood next to my mother's body, eaten inside and out by cancer, I began to ponder and marvel at the love I had for her. It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

I was only nine. I wasn't ready to lose my best friend.

Driving home from her burial, I looked for the car occupying its usual place on the street. The car that once used to live on the patch of cracked blacktop was gone. I refused to believe it.

Just look once more.

As we neared its home, I placed my headphones over my ears. John Lennon's voice broke the silence: "Close your eyes. Have no fear. The monster's gone. He's on the run". I squinted. The car appeared. The familiar green had quickly, for a moment, brought me back to my best friend.

As time passed and days turned into years, the car was my green reassurance in dark times. The car's warmth showed me a possible future where I would succeed. I could no longer imagine my future with my mother, and I began to accept these terms.

Seven years later, I still wonder what might have been if she never left. Every weekend, my father and I continue our shopping ventures to the grocery store. However, this time I'm the one who is driving. I purposefully slow down when I pass the green car still parked on its home. Now, I decide how long I will rest in the green reflection. My comfort. My nostalgia. My mother. I let John Lennon's voice fill the car with words I heard on the day of her passing. "Every day in every way, It's getting better and better". The moment I pass the car, I can't help but allow the smile on my face to grow. I don't stop it; I let the pure bliss take over and remind me of her. I allow myself to not feel guilty for moving on because I'll always see her as I pass my familiar green.

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“My Virginity is a Piece of Cake, and You Can Eat It”

Hollie
Keller

I lost faith in Christianity the same night I lost any cravings for cake. I sat underneath a white tarp at an all-girls church retreat. Bulbs were strewn all over the black bars giving the illusion of purity. It was midnight.

Exhaustion played across the faces of the young girls as the rain echoed off the gray exterior of the tarp. Icy rain water poured between the overlapping corners. Thick odors of wet wood wafted quietly beneath the tent while we waited patiently for the leader to arrive. A fuzzy moth, pink and yellow, dozed on the tarp, offering me some company. There were fifty-some girls in attendance, but none of them sat with me.

There were murmurs of the ritual for that night; some called it the virginity talk, others the purity talk, and some didn't dare to speak of it at all. While the boys from the previous retreat got to hunt, fish, and traverse the woods, we had to cook, clean, and suffer through "the talk".

The leader entered bearing a cake. Her hair was slicked back in a wet ponytail, a saccharin smile painted beneath her nose. The leader was winsomely breathless was deceiving; she seemed to breathe forth wisdom and knowledge, but the cloying scent of manipulation and shame filled the air.

The cake of choice was a sickly-sweet vanilla whose resplendent icing battled the lightbulbs above for dominance. The cake

represented virginity, purity, and all holy things.

We were innocent.

The cake embodied each of us, served on a fancy platter for the world to observe and taste, a feast for cake-lovers and binge-eaters alike.

The leader began speaking about her first love, a young boy. She dipped a finger into the untouched icing, swirled the slender digit, lifting it upwards and scooping out a sliver of icing. The leader's finger dove into her gaping mouth. She began to mutter platitudes about their relationship as teenagers, with



cake from the pan and shove it toward her maw.

"I believed I was in love when I was a teenager," she told us, "So I gave him my virginity."

She tore into the cake and threw a sizable chunk across the room. It landed on my bench with a wet smack, waking the moth and startling me.

The leader's hands ripped at the virginity cake. A profusion of tears oozed from her black eyes. Fistful after fistful was flung, each piece meant to make us feel just as dirty and ashamed of ourselves as the leader was of herself. The leader sobbed until a deafening silence took over the room.

A young girl tugging on her pigtails cried out to Jesus, "Please don't send me to hell, please Lord!"

Last year, she had been raped by her father.

Another girl rocking back and forth nervously screamed toward the heavens, "Forgive me for my sins, I'll do anything!"

This girl, we all knew, had been groomed by her uncle.

A swarm of cries echoed into the night as the leader wept with them. The others leapt from their seats and joined them, and together their tears spilled onto each other like in the movie *Midsommar*. Disheveled faces and tousled hair took the pain from the two girls and claimed it as their own. They didn't tell the girls that it wasn't their fault; instead, they reinforced that they were going to hell. In the maelstrom, the leader threw the rest of the cake at them as they wailed.

A volcano of emotion tremored inside me. Nothing was left of the cake but the empty silver pan. The leader roamed the tent picking up clumps of cake and attempted half-heartedly to cobble the cake back together. What once outshone the lights above us was now stained brown and green, cut through

with streaks of grass and dirt. Some black ants were already deviling away the spoils to a destination that was unclear, but the leader's message was very clear: virginity and purity were a woman's responsibility, not a man's.

The cake was now little more than a sugary anthill slumped in the center of the pan. The leader's face swelled with pride. She had given the young girls knowledge of the Lord's gospel.

An almost angelic exclamation passed the lips of the leader, "Bless the Lord, oh my soul!"

In an instant, all hands under the tarp shot into the humid night air. The girls' voices clashed together as they recited the words of *10,000 Reasons* like an incantation. Their voices paralyzed my shivering body, and anxiety clawed at my throat.

A girl whipped her head back towards me and tugged at my shoulders to get me to stand. I tried to smile at her but couldn't. I wished for nothing less than to be dead. The dreary hymn blurred into an amorphous pile of vanilla batter and was flung far from my consciousness in sodden pieces. Eventually, the confection turned to mush, and the sweet breath of my soul floated off in the air.

I don't eat cake anymore.

“The James File”

Reed
Keller

“In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.”

--Erik Erikson

James fidgeted before he sat down in the patient’s chair. He sweated profusely and glanced at the richly paneled walls as if he were making sure he were in the right place. He studied my glass and asked if he could have a drink. I quickly handed it to him. He emptied it in seconds.

“Look, I know the last time I was here we agreed my mind was playing tricks on me, but I saw him again.”

I figured that he was just going through another phase—so many phases that his file had overflowed into a plurality of files--but something in the tone of his voice convinced me that this time was different. With James’s approval, I pressed *record*.

“Whenever I glanced up from the printer yesterday I saw all my coworkers talking to the new hire. I dropped what I was doing and ran over to greet him, only to realize that he had my face. My face! People were calling *him* James.”

He grasped the back of his head tightly with both hands.

I told him to calm down.

After all, the last session that he’d pressed his head in his hands like this did not end prettily.

He relaxed.



“As soon as I saw him I quit...I didn’t think twice.” He exhaled loudly. “I waited in the parking lot after work until he came out and got into his car. Once he drove off, I followed him. I followed him for about a half an hour through the Hills to his house. I parked about fifty feet away from his house in front of the megachurch at Rock Creek.”

James had a smirk on his face, as if he were proud of his achievement.

He continued, “He got out of his car and went in. Through the massive window in the living room, I could see him with his family. I admit I was jealous. How could a fake version of me have a better life than me?”

He started to shake with anger as the words slipped from his mouth, although his voice did not increase in volume—as if he were consciously channeling his display of frustration through his body language instead of his voice. At this point, I became increasingly worried for the man that James followed home.

“I became jealous as I watched him interact with his wife and daughter,” he said. “I decided the next day I was going to confront him. I was going to make him *give* me his life, the life I never had.”

I felt like I needed to interrupt him.

“James, do I need to call a lawyer?”

“Jesus, Doc. What kind of person do you think I am?”

He chuckled, as if the temptation to kill were impossible.

“You know, Doc. You and I are so alike. I did just what you’d do—I took a drive. I drove it off. I drove straight home that night,” he added, “and I thought about what I saw. I laid in bed all night, I couldn’t sleep until—”

The timer rang.

“Time’s up, James. I have a heavy line this afternoon. Tell you what, I’m going to

pencil you in for tomorrow. This can’t wait. Come see me at 9. You’ll be first in.”

James sneered and walked out. I felt terrible about cutting him off. I was as invested in his story as he was. I didn’t know if I’d even see him, to be honest. He was so inconsistent.

I laid in bed that night, unable to sleep, un-layering the many layers of his file, but as expected, James didn’t show up in the morning. In fact, he never called or made an attempt to show up all week. The appetite of curiosity welled inside me and ate at me all week. Eventually, I reached a point where I couldn’t focus on my other clients. People would come in and talk to me and all I could focus on was wondering what went wrong with James.

After work one day, I decided I’d had enough of sitting around hypothesizing. So I drove to the church that James had described the last time he was here. I went on a Thursday night so that I wouldn’t be interrupting a service. The exterior was massive and afire with radiant light, like a furnace. Behind the stained glass windows, a fierce red glow cast beams through the glass and onto the street below. Directly across the street was the house that James described—the big window into the living room and all. It was an otherwise nondescript house, but it looked vacant. The glow from the church bathed the house red. Against my better judgement, I trudged toward the house, telling myself that I was crazy for doing this and that I probably wouldn’t find a thing.

As I stepped towards the front door, a wretched smell struck me. It almost sent me sprawling backwards, as if someone had punched me. The aroma was like the last defense line of the house, as if the glow cast onto the building was not sufficient to ward unwanted visitors away. Eventually, I regained my courage and stepped up to the door. This time, I didn’t hesitate. I thrust open the door

and took a giant step. I would not be afraid of a house. Kids were afraid of houses--and of boogeymen and monsters in closets. The only thing that had scared me lately was the alarm clock.

The first chamber I visited was the living room, which was to the left of the front door. There were toys thrown about on the ground, some near the table in the middle and others near the leather recliner and couch. I stepped over the toys and walked to the massive window James had talked about. Through the living room window, I could see my car. But when I looked through the glass, it seemed as if time were warping and changing before my eyes. I remember shouting in surprise, but my voice sounded far away, as if noise was of no consequence. I watched my car turn from black to green and back again. Perhaps it was the church light. The surrounding houses also changed colors. Some even changed size and shape. Was I still observing the outside world through this window, or was I observing something kaleidoscopically real yet not of this earth?

I ventured away from the living room because other than the window nothing was out of the ordinary. As I got closer to the stairs that jutted from the wall behind the living room, the smell got worse. But I soldiered on. I wasn't satisfied with a reality-altering window. I knew that I was making an irrational decision, but like a gambler, I craved the visceral if not intellectual payoff that the house might offer.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I kicked something limp. I thought to myself that it was just a rolled up rug and stepped over it to find the light switch. But when I flipped it on, I recognized that it wasn't just a rug. It was a person, and that person was James.

"Are you okay?" I shouted. I flipped him over to see if he had a pulse, but when I saw the blood that soaked the front of his t-

shirt, I knew it would be of no use. He was dead. He appeared to have been dead for at least a week--swollen, rancid, and abuzz with bottle-flies. All around me were the markings of conflict: bullet holes, casings, an over-turned chair. From a gash in his forehead, he appeared to have been struck with the chair then shot in the chest multiple times. I sprinted down the stairs, past the living room and through the front door back to my car. As soon as the keys were in the ignition, my foot was on the gas pedal. I sped home.

Returning home, I called the police. They investigated the house that James visited. I expected an extensive interrogation, but after I turned over a copy of James's files, all 570 pages, the authorities left with nothing more than a word of thanks and an awkward nod of the head that they would "be in touch." Aside from that dismissive exchange, no police had talked to me since. Odd as this seemed, I had no updates. Not a headline appeared, no obituary, no word of funeral arrangements. Apparently the nature of the case demanded maximum discretion.

A few weeks passed.

And then matters unraveled. When I was driving the boulevard shortly thereafter, a man on the street caught my eye. Usually at a red light, I drank in the scenery--the boutiques, the shoppers, the green sway of the palms. I relished these small moments in life. But this man--I could have sworn that he was me for a second--the face, weight, clothes, hands, wing-tips, you name it. Smiling outside a retro western establishment, he had a small family with him--a wife in stylish jodhpurs, a young girl astride a hobby horse. I became jealous of the man. I only saw him for a moment, and then just like that, he was gone. He disappeared into the crowd like a phantom, an image slipping the frame of a three-way mirror.

I drove to the office with that image pasted in my consciousness and thought of James—his solitary nature, his weakness for introspection—not to mention the wherefores of his murder, the seeming apathy of the police. The James that I had talked with a month ago and that I had spoken to was the James that I knew. The other James whom James encountered by his account had a normal life, a normal family, and for all intents and purposes was also James. So which was the real him? And now that I seemed to have seen myself, which one was I? Was I the real me, or was the real me the fleeting gentleman that appeared on the street? I had much work to do and a long night ahead to puzzle through it. Turning over the possibilities in the dark was already getting the best of me. The questions made me incredibly thirsty, if not dizzy.

And then there was a tap at the door.

I asked who it was.

"It's just me, sir," said a voice not unlike that of the cop who nodded awkwardly my way. Perhaps the authorities had gotten to the bottom of James before I had. I exhaled heavily at the prospect.

"Help yourself in."

My guest's white shirt was radiant in the glow of the office lamp. I was satisfied at last that he'd bothered to follow up with a personal call. He nodded familiarly, placing the thick file on the corner of the desk--and atop it a little paper cup.

"This isn't the James file," I remarked.

"The James file. sir? It's your Sunday newspaper. The *Times*." He was no longer nodding--instead glowering, with eyes of suspicion. "And this time, James," he added, jiggling the paper cup, "swallow your pills. I'll be checking beneath your tongue."

So I motioned to the glass on my desk and asked if I could have a drink. I emptied it in seconds and took a seat in the patient's chair. Then I opened the James file one last time,

grasped the back of my head tightly with both hands, and pressed.