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Questions That Only Mom Can Answer

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“Questions That Only Mom Can Answer”

My name is Richard Olson. Today's date is October 27, 2002. This recording compiles the various recollections of what happened 10 years ago this day, the day of our family's personal tragedy. No one could have seen it coming: each of us kids were so wrapped up in our own lives that we couldn't have prepared for something this earth-shattering. My older siblings were wrapped up with starting their own families and my younger siblings were still busy with college; meanwhile, I had moved out to Lincoln to start my internship with the *Nebraska Review*. During that times I worked nights in a canning factory, ensuring that liquidy measures of corn got pressed into metal cans so that they can be shipped all over this illustrious land. So why would I or any of my siblings be paying attention to what was happening back at home? I rest my case. I've done my best to gather all the information that I can of what happened that day; the majority of the information being from my father, the rest coming from the community of Custer County Nebraska. Yet, even though every person I've interviewed has something to say, no one has proof of what actually happened to her.

The day itself had started with more excitement than usual. According to my father, it had all started when he went in to check on the cows in the barn. He had made himself a bowl of oatmeal, as my mom, Naomi, had not prepared breakfast that day, and discovered that she was no longer there. Just poof. Gone. Without a trace. His first-class heifer, his prized dairy cow, was missing. That's why he had gone off the farm out to search the stretching landscape of Custer County, Nebraska for a speck of a rowan pelt. When he had discovered that the cow was missing, he quickly told his two workers to handle that day's work without him. He told them to explain to his wife what had happened and that he would run the errands outside of the farm

today, hooked up his transporting trailer onto his *then* new 1989 Dodge Ram pickup truck, and drove off. I asked him why he didn't go to talk to mom himself like he normally did and he just shook his head. Looking down into his hands, calloused and weathered by years of farm work, he said, "It was happening more and more often those days, I didn't even bother to give it a second thought. It was only after she'd been gone a year that I realized that during the last few months she was still with me, I had been living with her like I would've with a stranger."

His intuition told him that the cow could have only got so far, and that would be to his neighbor and rival Johnson's farm. "That heifer was the most mellowest, little thing that you'd ever seen." I nodded, even though I was his son, I never understood the fine mechanics of cow behavior. I didn't hide my confusion very well, as he raised his eyebrow and explained, "See, if she'd gotten farther than the Johnson's in just a few hours, well I'd be damned. So more or less, I wouldn't be surprised if she appeared nice and cozy in one of his stalls. Would be even less surprised if she didn't have to walk all that distance and instead just hitched a ride." My father never accused anyone of anything. He always made statements. He had "entertained" Johnson with a small tour of his farm that summer while their wives were in the kitchen working on dinner. Johnson just kept returning to the heifer out of all the other cows in his field: commenting on how healthy her coat was; how you could see it in her large, liquidy eyes; how she was the bovine of all bovines; on, and on, and on.

My dad never really liked Johnson, but my mom was close to Johnson's wife, Sophia. With a distant look in his eyes, my father said, "For Naomi, I was willing to do anything for. But I stopped doing it for her and started doing it outta habit 'fore I knew it." When I went to visit Sophia the only piece of color she wore was the bright blue smock that was covered in an array

of oil paint drops that glinted almost mockingly at the older woman's pathos. Otherwise her facial expression paired off with her collared black shirt and slacks remained crisp and stoic, unfazed by the cruel colors she painted. It gave me the feeling that there was nothing left alive in this place, not the canvas that she had been last painting upon nor the swinging for sale sign that was sure to be up there for many years to come. "Yes, your mother knew me," she said thoughtfully, her eyes softening before focusing on me again, "but I never knew your mother. She was always a mystery, even to me. Of course, unlike the other women I didn't care too much for rumors and had no need for maliciousness. I was totally devoted to my Johnny—." And here she cracked up and got emotional and asked that I come back another day. She never returned my calls, so I figured the color must've eaten her. I wonder if my father would one day just paint and paint to no end in order to fill up the space that my mother has left unoccupied. But I figure that he would rather die than set up an easel and don an apron.

My mother was unlike any of the other women in our township, even the entire county. She didn't have many friends within their community, but then again, she was fine with that. She wasn't a recluse; she was a supportive member within the church, making the best pecan pies for the bake sales, and was the top bowler on the Garfield Township Tigers. She *just* didn't want to be friends with *just* anyone. And the people of the community *just* didn't want to be friends with her.

I managed to track down one of my previous Sunday school teachers who I remembered kept a close track to all the whereabouts and whatstoknow of the community. She had just remarried her third husband, wearing yellow polka dot dress that appeared to be straining to hold not only itself, but her newly, reformed marriage together as well. She recognized me as

she was walking out from her city hall ceremony as I stood on the other side of the stairs taking in the scene with several other onlookers, who were most certainly there to complain about the state of the roads. She was more than willing to speak to me, crushing her body into the handrails to get closer to where I stood on the other side. “I’ve heard many a story about yer mother,” she said leaning in, which was unnecessary as she was not trying to whisper, “If you wanna know why she didn’t have friends, hah! Good luck! I’ve heard some say that they were jealous that she had appeared out of nowhere, swooping in and snagging the most eligible bachelor in a 100-mile radius before anyone could spell Missouri. Buncha people said that she was one of those Vietnamese immigrants moving in cause of the war, or she was from the Niobrara reservation up north— no one knew and she ne’er confirmed any of the rumors.”

My own conclusion has been this: at the end of the day, people want information. It doesn’t change how they live or anything; they just want to satisfy their thirst to *know*. And if you get in the way of fulfilling that desire to *know*, then they fill in that information as they please regardless of *who* you show yourself to *be*. Because my mother never gave them the satisfaction of knowing, they never truly gave her the satisfaction of actual community with them. Regardless of the community’s bias and judgment, my mom was a great mother to me and my four other siblings. When I asked mom myself where she came from— I think that I was 13 at the time when she told me this— but she laughed at me and said something to the extent that she came from somewhere that had the exact same plains as around our house, but not nearly as close, but not entirely that far away. Then she would always tell me to ask less questions and study more like my other siblings.

Dad didn't mind who she was or where she came from: if she wanted to tell him, she would. If she didn't want to share it with him, that was fine. It was her decision on what to share with him and he kept on living just fine with or without knowing all the details. He had always been very single-minded, plodding forward no matter what. Perhaps that's what made their relationship so successful. Yet, now he wished that he had asked more, if only he had pushed a little further, if only— he mumbles these things to himself when he's sleeping on the couch. Yes, if only we knew who mom was, perhaps it would make this all a lot easier.

But back to the events of October 22. My father eventually found himself talking to Johnson, being led on a thorough tour through Johnson's barns. "Johnson may be an asshole, but he was a proud, conceited asshole that cared about his reputation," my dad said chuckling, something that I rarely see him do when I visit. Satisfied in his dissatisfaction of not finding the cow, he got back into his truck, but Johnson stopped him before he could leave. When pressing my father for what Johnson said to him, my father ruefully shook his head, "I never paid no mind to what Johnson ever said, but this is the one time that I wish I did. But he said something to the extent that if I could lose such a high-quality heifer so easily, I should be careful of what other important things I could lose. I didn't think much of it at the time but seems too prophetic for a bastard like Johnson." I don't think Johnson had thought much about what he said either. Johnson was an asshole, but he was like my father in many ways, except unlike my father, he died protecting his wife when their car spun out on black ice a few years later. My father never got a chance to redeem himself like that.

Giving up on the cow search for the day, as it was late noon by then and Nebraska nights come quickly, he decided to run and do the groceries while he had the chance. He'd call up the

local radio station and ask to put an ad out for a reward to anyone who found the cow when he got home. The only place to shop for any kind of decent food was at the general store: while it was Mr. Miller who owned the store, Mrs. Miller and her confidante Mrs. Anderson all hung out there waiting for the next gossip to sweeten the taste buds that had been burnt off their tongues from smoking 2 packs a day since they 16. Their merchandise was really information, selling the thing on the shelves “most definitely came second.” My father continued on: “I should’ve known better. I should’ve just bought what I needed and gotten outta there.”

The most bizarre interview I had to conduct in the course of my investigations was with these three. Whether this was because the rumor they decided in all seriousness to tell me was straight out of a sci-fi drama, or just because they had the audacity to say whatever to whoever they pleased, I don’t know. Things started simply enough. When I confronted the trio myself, I found that they were still waiting for customers, sitting in their smoky, break-corner as they have for the past 40 something years. When they realized that I was around for more than just a quick hello, they were lightning quick to jump on the opportunity to have a new pair of ears listening. “You know she was never a ‘normal’ woman, Richard,” said Mrs. Anderson exuding the smoke she had just inhaled from her Marlboro out of her mouth like a toaster burning a bagel. She shrugged and tried to look apathetic, though her eyes glared at me like a vulture’s when it spots some roadkill. “We look out for one another: your father and us go way back. If we see something that’s off, then we’re gonna let him know.”

Mrs. Miller nodded. “He just needed to see what everyone else was seeing. He was getting older, she was still the same age. It was almost as if she were draining the life right outta him— I don’t mean it actually, Richard, don’t look so fierce. But only if you were here to

see it; if you weren't in Lincoln you woulda known what everyone else was talking about."

Mr. Miller nodded and puffed out, "It was simply outrageous. Spooky even. Your mother was good alright, very pretty, oof." Mr. Miller received a kick from each woman under the table before continuing. "But yes, she was just not cut out to be here. She was never really one of us and your father always was. It wasn't right for him. I think she realized that some sacrifices had to be made and probably left that very morning."

"Why, Mr. and Mrs. Miller, I beg to differ. Obviously that woman was a ghost." At this point I may or may have not laughed in her face. "That is well and all Richard, but you children don't understand. While there's the side where average people like you and me live on, there's another plain of existence where the other live on. Those Indians sure knew what they were talking about. Have you seen skin like that on any other woman who should be over 40?"

"Hogwash, just that hereditary stuff kept her looking good," claimed Mrs. Miller chuckling and shaking her head. The other woman simply shook her head in return and took another drag, letting out a lazy cloud into the air that one can only perfect from years of smoking. "What can I say? She couldn't have been something alive, she woulda had at least a wrinkle or two, a few gray hairs at least, no matter what the hell ethnicity she coulda been."

"Well she sure aged a lot better than a certain two ladies I know," murmured Mr. Miller under his breath. Both women whipped their heads toward him, but he was already blowing out another cloud into the hazy store. The conversation simply died after this. The scent of cigarettes clung to my clothes the rest of the day, so I soaked a good hour to try to get the scent to leave my skin and their shrieky laughter out of my head. What they said was true. My mother did indeed age well. But that meant nothing, did it? She wasn't a ghost; she was real

and physical and warm and loving— no ghost can give birth to a child... it simply makes no sense. Regardless, they had overstepped their boundaries by saying that my mother was some sort of threat to our community as if having a good head of hair and healthy melanin.

My father didn't share what they said in their own conversation, but I could gather that it must have gone just like mine had, except it feels like it was more than just that. Of course, their information is largely biased and shows no real evidence. When my father did return in the late afternoon, he discovered that she was no longer there. Just poof. Gone. Without a trace. At first, he thought that she had gone out to trace down the heifer herself, but her car was still in the garage: she never went out driving by herself. He went out to find his workers. When he found them in the office, they told him that they had gone around the farm to give her his message, yet never found her, and couldn't get a hold of him. Perhaps if there cell phones in the 90s things would have been different— no, speculating won't help. By then, the sun had set, and he knew for certain that something was wrong. I'll—, I'll continue to the end, though the following events hurt so much to think about again.

What played out next was something you'd expect to see in an episode of *Law and Order*, but hope to never see in person yourself: a missing person's report went out that escalated over the next few days; newspaper and TV reporters would show up at our door wanting to know every detail of our lives; law enforcement questioned suspects, and after the first initial month proved to be unfruitful, the media coverage and statewide interest died down leaving my father, my siblings, and I to pick up what was left behind. But nothing was left to pick up. Sure, we were finally all together to pool our resources and bump our heads together

for ideas, but it seemed that it was too late for anything else to be done. She had vanished—and soon, my family’s hope of finding her did as well.

There’s a part of me that blames myself for these things happening. Sure, I was 24 at the time, so I was young and ambitious and self-centered. Yet, I don’t want to excuse myself. I don’t care how you explain her disappearance and all, I can’t make heads or tails of that, but I do know this much: this happened because of us. Her own family let her down, like no matter what, she made time for us. Every night she would call us to make sure that we were safe. All of us kids are guilty, in our own homes we would hear the phone ringing, but we wouldn’t pick up because it was too inconvenient for us. I remember one time I was playing a video game and I didn’t pick up, and in the message, you could hear my father saying, “Ah, just leave them alone; they don’t need their mother around anymore.” It hurts to think about how I failed to even return a little phone call. We needed her then, we still need her now, but we never treated her like we did and now she’s gone. We made time for her when we felt like it, but she made time for us daily because she always felt like it. The thing is, is that we should’ve surrounded her with love and cared for her as she did for us, but instead we just went about getting invested in our own lives and being busy doing our own thing. All of us did. Even dad who was there with her. We’re responsible for this and we need to get to the bottom of things. We need answers.

While my father and siblings decide to either brood over the events that I’ve just shared or just continue on with their lives, I can’t do that. Perhaps that’s just the questioner that’s always been in me. The side that always asked mom why the Sunday school teachers talked behind her back, why some of the kids at school never talked to me, why people driving by would say I was a son of a witch. The side that wants to know why she always said to me that

things don't always happen for a reason and that I don't have to answer to no one cause it ain't none of their business. That's the side of me that wants to discover the answer behind the secretive smile she would give me whenever I gave these questions. Perhaps this is why I've been working for the past 10 years to find her, even after the rest of my family has become numb to all this.

Right now it's 1:30 pm. While I was skeptical with the words of those I interviewed, yes even you dad, I realized that hearing what everyone has to say, isn't going to help me understand Mom. It was about a year ago that I saw a news article saying that blood testing can be used to identify not only ethnicity, but can also help you find unknown relatives. At any moment there is going to be a phone call telling me to come to the hospital to receive the results of my blood test. This test will match me to someone out there that shares the same DNA as I do. It's been about three months since they took my blood tests to be analyzed in a lab, and I can't believe that this moment is finally here. I've been anticipating this moment for so long, but now I can't help but wonder what those results will say. And then where do I go from there? If I do discover who my mother really was, what do I do then? If she has family, should I reach out to them— she must've never mentioned them for a reason. But what if the rumors are true? What if the lineage on my mother's side is a blank slate like she never existed at all? Yet that is impossible, or is it? What if she's even beyond what anyone could have ever imagined.

The phone is ringing. Should I pick it up or not? They don't teach you these things in church or school. Did Mom leave home so that she could be left alone? Or did she leave because she wanted us to pursue her? What would Mom want me to do?