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I'm Still Here

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I'm Still Here

My window frames the view of a long brown field of grass. Nothing like a skyline, I told her; this is the country. This is a field of grass. In the morning I watch the cows graze there and a man on a tractor in the distance plowing; my binoculars bring him to me, and I can almost read his hat. This is my perspective: Linda used to look through the other end of these glasses, and that was hers. There's an old barn close by, used for nothing now, gray and deeply weathered; it leans to one side, the very picture of decay. Each morning it surprises me by still being there. I like to think that one slim crutch of a plank keeps the whole thing standing: could be. I don't know. This is just what the barn looks like to me, like any day now it won't be there anymore.

There's a two-lane county road between my house and the field, just a strip of soft, black asphalt. By noon everyday now the heat begins to rise in sheets from the road, and looking through it, through the heat, I mean, the cows and the barn and the little man out there plowing shift and ripple, like a mirage. There's a car every so often but you could count the number, this road is so poorly traveled. It doesn't go anywhere, that's the problem. It goes nowhere for the longest time, twisting through hills and trees for the most part. There'll be an occasional mailbox set back from it and an old, gutted-out mobile home, and then, as if by accident, a town appears—Bingham—with its low brick buildings, stores and parking meters, the one red light. Then the road disappears into trees again.

I have been to Bingham once, with Linda, to shop for the fruit we heard was especially good there; Bingham is famous for its peaches. We bought a basket, and ate a few. The town is small, of course, and almost twenty miles away, but at night I can see it glowing over the hills like something on fire, and it is beautiful—but nothing like a skyline. I like it still, and imagine—because it's that time of night when I don't have anything better to do—I imagine coming upon Bingham through the dark woods as a man who has been away somewhere for a very long time, and who has never seen a city or a town like that before, with its stores and parking meters, people living that way together, seeing those lights and the wonder of it for the first time. I sit at the edge of the woods looking down on Bingham until I understand it. Then I turn around and head back in the direction I came. This must have really happened once, a long time ago: somebody decided not to live in Bingham, the fruit it is famous for notwithstanding.

This is as I have done, in my own fashion. I have my view. I am a figure in the landscape. Every night, though, I give myself a chance to live in Bingham; I make my decision, as if for the first time, every night. This is only fair. It's never settled with me, every day brings the same choice with it. But for the moment I know

where I am, and for the moment I do not live in Bingham. I live, quietly, someplace else.

And believe me, it is nothing if not quiet. Everything that happens here happens quietly, the living and the dying both. There have been two in the past year, two quiet deaths, and that barn is still standing. It was Mr. and Mrs. Jemison, my next door neighbors, and good people, too easy to miss. Miss Jemison used to bring us flowers. A bunch of them would be on the porch in the morning—roses, daisies, sunflowers—like offerings, but they weren't that at all. I'll try to make it simple for myself: she had flowers, so she gave them to us. She taught Linda how to can vegetables and quilt; they would spend hours together, just talking: about me, I used to think, when Linda came back with her cheeks flushed. But now I'm sure my name was as far from their minds as the rest of the world was: they had their own there, for a time, and then Linda left, and Mrs. Jemison died.

Mr. Jemison was retired, but from what I never knew. He had been retired for so long that nothing seemed to precede it, nothing but a war and the way things used to be. He enjoyed telling me about what I didn't know, which was everything from cows to the weather, and I enjoyed learning. His honest innocence, though, was the quality I most admired in him. Linda used to scream at the pitch of her coming at night, a long, terrible, lovely scream, and the next day if Mr. Jemison and I happened to meet at the mailbox he would ask me, quietly, "Everything okay up at the house?" He thought I was beating her, I think, and when she left me here he was most likely confirmed in that, but he never mentioned it, not even after his wife died. That Linda was actually gone was a fact they never accepted, though. For a long time they kept asking me, "How's Linda? What's she been doing with herself?" That sort of thing. For them she too had become part of the view, and by the time her absence from it became apparent Mrs. Jemison died, and Mr. Jemison went a little crazy, and Linda was not talked about much after that.

I put it all in my letters, the whole business, all the dying.

What happened was this: Mrs. Jemison died and then Mr. Jemison went crazy. But it wasn't her dying so much that did it, I don't think that was everything, the whole story: it was the book she was reading when she did it, a book Linda had given her before she left. What happened was Mrs. Jemison died reading, or resting her eyes, because the book was closed; she was sitting in a chair when her heart stopped, the book in her lap with her hands, that's how her husband found her, just sitting, as if death hadn't budged her at all. Those were his words, by the way, a turn of phrase he was fond of: as if death hadn't budged her at all.

Well, there was a funeral, and then all of us went home, Mr. Jemison to his impossible empty one, and me to mine. I had him over for dinner, a game of cards or the tv, which he seemed to stare at more than watch, his mind on other things. And then, a couple of weeks later, he went crazy.

He read that book is what happened, the book she died with. I'd never known him to read much before, nothing but the paper, but that book he must have read one hundred times. He always had it with him, and whenever we got together he showed it to me. He had certain passages in the book, the novel, underlined in red ink, whole paragraphs bracketed. What he would do is show me something on a page, and then he'd ask me to read it. "You've got book smarts," he said. "What do you think?" His eyes would narrow, waiting for my judgements. "Fine,"

I said. "It sounds fine to me." "What do you mean 'fine'?" he said to me once. "*Fine*. What's that mean?" Because this wasn't the kind of answer he was after at all, and it took me a long time to understand just what it was he was after, too long. What he was reading for was the part that killed her, the words that made her heart stop. He told me, finally. It was the book that did it, he was certain. The book had killed his wife. Oh, it was safe for us to read, he said; you and me are made of stronger stuff. But not Mrs. Jemison. It was not a book for her. She hurt to see a moth die, he said, and Linda should've known that. Then he would look as though he'd just remembered who I was. Where *is* Linda, anyway? he'd say. Then he would go off and read some more. By the time he died, which was only a little while ago now, the book was almost entirely red with his markings. He died in his sleep, the book on his bedside table.

Something else he said: Death follows death. He said this not long after his wife died. He knew this, and I imagine Linda did too, in her own way, a long time ago.

I put all this in my letters and she wrote back to me, I wish you'd left out that part about the book.

And I wrote back, Linda, I know that.

My window frames the view of a long brown field of grass. In the morning I watch the cows graze there, and a man on a tractor in the distance plowing. And the barn. The mailman walks into this picture limping; one leg is shorter than the other, he will be the first to tell you. He waves at me from the road, waves at me, sometimes, holding a letter. I am long past pretending the mail means nothing to me, and we have become something like friends since the Jemisons died, when his route was almost cut in half. Mrs. Jemison used to bring him iced tea on the hot days, a service I think he expects of me now.

I walk out to meet him, watching him eye the envelope, touching it all over with his fingers. I say hello, but still he doesn't give it to me. He's reading the postmark; he's waiting for me to reach for it. The letter, please. Finally he hands it over, and we look at it together for a minute.

"Never been there," he says. "Imagine."

Then he and I talk about the weather, or something else I know nothing about.

Inside I read it. Twice, three times, reading for a code, for something the words aren't saying. Then I read the others in the order they came to me, like chapters. Her life now is as large as the world—she is everywhere. As the postmark changes so does the way she signs her letters. Linda. Linda Josephine. Linda Josephine Lawrence. Your pal, Linda. Lovely Linda. Jo. Joe. Linda Joe. Love. Linda. Sincerely. Yours. Thinking of you. Wish you were here. Linda, Linda, Linda.

My window frames the view of a long brown field of grass and that barn, still standing. I'm thinking of what isn't, of all of us. Mr. Jemison told me some things. I learned a lot from him. Cows have two stomachs, for instance, and a bull is the one without teats. All of them, he said, are as dumb as wood. Before a storm comes they like to fornicate; all of the animals act strange. Notice, before a storm comes there's nary a bird on the telephone wires, and the squirrels move real fast. These

are some of the signs that a storm is coming, and then, if something in him kicked he knew it was going to be a big one. Now Mrs. Jemison said she could smell one coming two days away, but Mr. Jemison said not to believe her; no one can smell a storm two days away he said. Still, there are things you can smell in the wind. And this, one of the last things: he told me that the most quiet time of the day happens at five forty-five in the morning. He was sure of it. I know, he said, because I listen, and I couldn't dispute that.

All of this I put in my letters to Linda, all of it simply to ask her, What are your skylines to this? You call that a view! Cows have two stomachs, Linda, and know, please, know what they do in the rain. The cows, Linda, the cows! Listen, Linda: what is there to listen to where you are? What is it you're listening to? Where I am, here, I can hear the sound the dead make sleeping, and a twig snap thirty miles away.

This is one way to live a life, Linda, just one. In all fairness, though, let me tell you: last night I stood for a long time looking at Bingham, and the rest of the world. I felt like something on fire. I was thinking about the time you and I took the new quilt and a bottle of white wine into that barn with us, trespassing and whispering so softly, knowing, the both of us, that the sound of our own voices were enough to bring it down on top of us. But that's why we were there. We used our clothes for pillows and we drank, until you wanted me. "But careful," you said. "One false move and we're goners." There were no false moves. We came out of the barn alive, and surprised to be that way, too. Alive, I mean. Living. Which is the other way to pass a life, living, to scream at the pitch of it all as you did, and as you still do, somewhere else now, as if it mattered where you did it. As if that were the point, Linda.

Me? I'm still here. For the moment I do not live in Bingham, with its low brick buildings, peaches and parking meters. I'm nowhere you've ever heard of, reading Linda's letters, reading for the part that kills me, the words to make my heart stop, quietly dying.