

*from Outside My Window*

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*John Strott*

MARK

The woods, still and quiet. 5:15. Reverent almost. That sounds like John talking. Reverent. What is reverent now? Not the church. That's for damn sure. And not Father. He's the most irreverent person I know. The way he walks around the house everyday. Mostly half-naked. Wearing only the white fruit-of-the-loom briefs we won't wear anymore. The ones we kept in the top drawer in the bathroom. With a bar of soap. And Father. His baggy sides hanging down over the worn-out elastic band. His skin hanging down. His fat. He was trim when he was young but now he isn't, though he's-- it's-- not really fat. It's old age hanging on him, there at his sides, and he expects respect, reverence, from each of us. From John and me. That's bullshit. But I won't say that to him because we have never cussed around the place or spoken foul and I won't start now. I keep wanting to though. Steinmier would. He says whatever he wants. I respect that too, but Father wouldn't. He doesn't. I know he doesn't.

Snap.

I shouldn't have missed that. How could I step on that twig? That's what thinking will get you in this world. I told John about stepping on things, warned him. All those years ago. Before going to Butler. What? Four years now. And he's working on a Master's. Education is such bullshit. He comes home, wanting to talk about Kant, and he expects that I will want to. What shit. Kant. Like Kant ever knew anything about logic. That's what John wants me to believe and he doesn't even know I can tell what he wants when he comes easing up to the porch like he doesn't have anything on his mind. What word does he like? Agenda. Like he doesn't have his agenda. I can't stand the way he wants to force me to do his bullshit things. To think like Kant. That's what he wants.

But the twig. I need to pay more attention to where I am. Walking instead of this thing with watching out for him. And Father. I'm here killing deer. That's all. If you go off with the insane you're likely to become one. John is like that. Off with them, the professors, the insane ones. Claiming they know something I don't or Steinmier doesn't and I'm sick of that bullshit. What does John really know? What do any of us really know?

Not much.

Not the sound of a twig snapping. Those professors don't know the sound of a twig snapping but they know Kant. It would make me laugh if it weren't so durned sick. Not even knowing the world. God. If I could only get John away from that. From that world. If I could get him in the woods again. Like when we were young. But maybe that's not what's good for him. I care so much for him. My little brother. But he has his own life to choose and he chooses that fucking thing in the university. That false, dead life. Like the made up face of a woman in a casket, an old woman. Made up real heavy with lots of make-up and blush and all the things that seem real attractive to a man around here but they aren't and they're artificial like the glass eyes of a stuffed deer. Yes that's what they are. Mounted glass, and he buys into that stuff.

But maybe he's got something. I'm not happy and maybe he is.

The still air. It sits around me. Trees make dark forms. Almost like tall dead wood, shaped right nicely and whittled out into a form, almost human. Dropped into the ground from the hand of God. If I could know that. Standing there so beautiful though. Regardless of my ideas about them or coming to them and they'll be there for years more. Just waiting, standing there on and on and on. If I were a part of that beauty I would rest there too, for eternity. That's intelligence. That's form. All around the valley's lip. They stand there, huge and distant. Making the whole dawn react against them, and the way they stand there is really proud and clear and works.

What a beautiful dawn.  
Nearly gone now.  
It's so light today.

No deer today. I was too loud. But that's ok 'cause I don't have my gun even if I wanted to kill one. But I know they're here and I have my blinds prepared and when the season starts I'll be back and ready.

MA

When will Mark be in? I thought he would be here by now but he isn't. The chicken will get cold. Why can't he remember the time he's supposed to get here? I always could when I was going to my folks. Even after I was married they wouldn't have accepted this. It just doesn't show any concern. Any respect. He's already two hours late in getting here, and when he does, if he does, he'll be mad if I say anything about it.

It's so easy to go wrong with children and I've tried so hard. I think even Wally's tried hard, in his own way. But what a family he's from. A family that worked him from the age of walking until the day he left for the navy. A family, an old German family, who wouldn't care, who wouldn't be able to care, for its own child. That kind of a family.

Like Wally's story about boxing in the barn:

I was out there with Pap. We were standing without shirts. The light filtering into the manger between the wooden slats of the barn and it must have been that lack of light or something about the shadows because when I punched he missed my fist until it hit him squarely on the mouth. His whole mouth moved then. It was all so slow. His mouth moving and his bottom lip almost going at a counterangle to his face. And all of it slow. It all took place so slow. Like somehow god was slowing the film, giving it to me frame by frame. And Pap's face recovered from the blow in an instant. It was no longer angry but hurt and he started to swing at me; he shouldn't have, because we were just playing for fun and we were

not really fighting. That was all the entertainment we had then. No televisions, nothing like there is today and he was angry and it was as though his whole chest exploded in rage at my punch, at me. But I didn't mean to hit him as hard as I had and he hit me again and again and neither of us talked the rest of the night and I would have slept in the barn if it wasn't for Ninno coming out there with a slice of pie wrapped in her apron and asking me to come in and then laying it out, right there on the floor of the barn between the straw and the mud. Then she turned right back around and went in the house.

I guess that violence he grew up with is one reason I've let so much of it go on in our house. With me. Like when I lived with him on the farm. When we were trying to have a normal family and live together but after eighteen years I couldn't take any more of it and Wally still doesn't understand how I can hate and love him like I do for the violence he's done to me. Just like he can't explain the love and hatred he had for his father and I wonder sometimes what his mother Ninno went through out there on the farm with a man like Wally's father loose and raving around her like the worst of the animals and not being able to do anything about it except maybe cooking, baking. And probably even that was something to please him. And Wally grew up watching all of that. A part of it. Himself a part of the whole German darkness, no longer in Germany with Hitler but right here in Indiana, moving itself into a different country. But Wally still must be responsible and, though he never examines it, he just goes on acting. Not thinking. Like he's past the age of ever considering what he's doing. Past the age of ever coming to any understanding of himself or Moe or us or the boys because he can't. He's past that time in his life.

And I think of his mother. Of Ninno. Off in a nursing home which is being paid for with the money that comes from her own bank account. The account which started when the coal company, when Amax, bought their ground. That money sitting there all those years just waiting, as if it knew someday it would get called to pay for the sins of Wally's father. Knowing it is black money and all Wally's relatives want it; they only care as much about Ninno, about mother, as they do about getting their hands on the money themselves. That's why Jim and

Erma have kept her in that filthy, smelling trailer, the mobile home they bought with part of the coal money, until now. Now they've seen she will outlast it. She'll live past the money. She'll live past the money that his whole side of the family wants. Now no one will get it, and she's in a nursing home because no one will take her in except Wally. And not even that deranged woman would come stay with him in the farmhouse. Even at her age. At ninety-three. She still knows better than that. Without heat in the winter and without air conditioning in the summer. Wally keeping it just like the outdoors in there, not caring about temperature, except to stay alive. My oldest son is living in that and only the Lord knows how he will turn out.

Chum worried about that. About what the boys would think of Wally and what they would do when they got old enough to leave home. But I guess it's obvious with John because he's been away at school for so long it's clear he won't ever come back. Ever. Even on holidays he's slow in getting here, always with a reason. A paper for class. An extra day at work. He always has an excuse and I both blame him and I don't. Doesn't he think I've tried. And even his father's tried but we're only human.

But John has forgotten. I fear that's how he deals with his past. With his family. He forgets how things are and how they were. Especially with his father. John seems to get along much better with Wally than me now and I have this feeling that it's because John forgets things and he reads so many books. I think he reads them to forget things. Because he doesn't want his mind here. He wants it off with the poets and *their* stories and not his own.

Like those times in the closet. I couldn't believe he had forgotten that. The times Wally would push me in there, holding my head like a sack of feed. Pushing me in there and half-shutting the door behind him. Our bodies held up only by the pile of dirty clothes in the closet and the rage inside his father. And John coming into the front room of the farmhouse, seeing his father on top of me, hitting me with the back of his hand. Sometimes when I close my eyes I can still see that hand, big and hairy, thick with hair, coming at me. And Wally's rage so strong I thought it would consume both of us inside the sound of the sharp *slap slap* of his hand. Seal us up together there, inside the sound, like being closed up inside the center of the earth, without air or light. Only prayer. John would hear



Hemingway  
House.

1993.1.

that, see that, and he would hate his father for it. But now he scares me too, because he's forgotten the reason he started Tae kwon do. I could tell from the surprise on his face the last time he was home. The last time he came to Evansville. When we talked in the laundry room and we somehow started talking about the farmhouse and the dirt and he brought up the size of the closets. We both froze then, and I could see remembrance in his eyes as sure as I could see his truck in the drive. I thought, Dear Lord, don't let him remember, but he did. And it was odd, too, because he was so detached about it, so clinical. Like he was talking in a class. Giving an answer to a professor, saying Yes this is so. Using his mind and thinking, but not feeling, maybe.

Chum worried about the boys and I do too. But I don't know who to worry about anymore. Them or me. I worry most because I'm alone. Even without my John who was always with me, at my side.

#### *FATHER*

Two wars I've been in. The Korean and the Second. And Pap was in the First. The things he must have seen. I still remember him sitting in the kitchen. He would have his hands on the table I bought for Jim and Erma at mother's auction. He would look at me and talk about those years; they were so real to him that I almost wondered if he wasn't still living them somehow. Rubbing his hands together, talking into the air, at me really, telling about dodging into holes the artillery made in the ground. Telling about running from one hole to the next. Praying to God that he could make it. That he could find the hole soon enough. That he could spot it with his eyes and that his legs could carry him there over the rough terrain. He was even in the Argon Forest. He was there when it was empty, dead of life. Even the trees were dead. He said they were like toothpicks in the earth. No leaves. No bark. Everything touched by the fighting, by the bullets, by the shelling that went on. It's incredible that he could come back from something like that and live here normally. His mind was so strong. His will. It must have been to go through that.

That's like me, though, and Bill. I'll set the photo down by the lamp. It looks new there in the light.

I'll give it to John when I see him. Sara and I will go up there soon. Two weeks. Maybe. I should call her tonight and find out. He's started to ask me about the war. And we get along so well now; I don't know why really. If it weren't for this darn thing with Mark. It's funny how children turn out. I always thought John would be the rebellious one. The one who most likely wouldn't even get through school. But he got his degree at the same time Mark graduated. The exact same time. And Mark is nearly two years older. John even, come to think of it, got his diploma three weeks before. And Mark didn't even go to his own graduation. But he was sure happy to go up to John's. We did push Mark hard to be a doctor, I guess. But if there's one thing I'll say for his mother, it's that she wanted the best for her children. She didn't want them to end up like all the blacks and be on welfare. Having others supporting them. She wanted them to have the best education they could get. If we pushed Mark too hard, it was only because of that. Who would have imagined he would turn out like he did. Hating me, not going on to be a doctor, and staying out here on the farm in his old room. Why, he won't even let me get in his refrigerator. But he'll sure look through mine when I'm not there. He thinks I don't know it, but I can tell when he's been in there. And leaving his clothes all around the house. Mad if I even comment on them, let alone touch them. He would sure go crazy then.

Is the stove coming on?

And Mark won't even talk to me like I'm a person. After all I've done for him. Bought him two vehicles. A car and a new truck. Well, each of them new. What doesn't he get that he needs? He has it all. That's the problem.

Salt.

And all that staring he went through. Dad would've kicked me in the head if he caught me staring like that. Holding up my fingers all the time, just looking at them, going off into some kind of trance. Staying like that for who knows how long. Out by the barn or in the back bedroom. For hours sometimes. And



when I'd say something to him to get his attention he'd get so angry. Like I was the one.

No, not enough. A little more.

....Pap telling me how of a morning he would get up and shake the dust off his clothes. Brushing it off of his arms. Pretending like it didn't exist, I guess. That would probably be the only way to deal with it. To deal with the colored dust they were breathing. He told me that some of the men who went into battle wouldn't wear their masks because they didn't want to and they died. Right there on the spot. Colored gas in their lungs. Can you imagine that? I never want my boys to go through something like that. It would kill me. I told John when he was home about Pap and the stories he told me about the dust and gas during the war. We didn't face that in the Second. It was more like the Japs trying to sink our ship. With their insidious one-man or two-man submarines. Coming underneath us in the water. And it doesn't matter how big a boat you're put on if the hull goes. All the time we spent waiting. And knowing either a kamikaze pilot or sub would be coming for us. Invisible. Except for radar. We should have been able to pick them up on radar. At least that's what we were told, but who knows? And then when you found them you would have to shoot them before they got to you. Mark would really have done some staring then, if he had been through that.