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A STORY

Mark L. Keats

He called right when I had finished meeting with a student, and though I usually checked the number before answering, this time I hadn't because I was expecting my wife to be calling about our dog, Miles. "It has been a long time," I said to him, trying to place the voice. He'd caught me off guard. I closed my eyes and thought a moment. I knew I'd have another student knocking on the door to discuss their midterm grade so I'd have an excuse to get off the phone if needed. Even with the name Steven, I had to think hard about it. Only students with that name appeared in my mind. "A long time, indeed," the voice repeated. "A long time."

Steven said he'd happened upon my story in a literary journal, one of a few his ex-wife still had subscriptions to but that sometimes made their way to his mailbox. She was a writer, too, apparently. I stood up as he spoke and looked out my office window and saw some students walking. I imagined them heading back to their dorm rooms to rest. When I focused on them, it was hard not to think of them as children with endless possibilities now with declared majors and goals. Future trajectories. How much life would have been different, I thought, if we'd had children.

It was in thinking of the students as children that Steven finally emerged. He was someone from childhood, a neighborhood friend. I scratched behind my right ear, felt the closeness of hairs along my neckline. It had to have been almost four decades since I'd last seen him in the neighborhood; but there he was: summer tan, red baseball cap and tennis shoes, the ones with a kangaroo. A childhood memory, faded. I'd moved with my mother and sisters right before I was to begin high school because my parents had suddenly separated and decided no one should remain in the family home. "A clean slate," my father had said. And so it was sold and we went our separate ways, though I'd occasionally see my father at Thanksgiving or Christmas until he died. Naturally, I'd lost touch despite promising not to.

Though Steven normally forwarded the magazines and sometimes even handed them to his ex-wife in person instead of using them to light his fireplace, as he told it, he was surprised to see a name on the cover he'd recognized. "Of course I

looked you up online. But you know, you were always either reading some book or telling stories when we walked to school, so I had a feeling it might be you,” he said. “Then I read your bio. Not too many Asian guys with such an Anglo last name, right? Anyway, I really enjoyed the story,” he said, then, “I know it’s a strange request, but I wanted to talk to you about it. If you had the time.”

He’d be in the area next weekend for business after visiting his daughter, a freshman in college. As he talked, I thought of possible reasons not to meet him, and I imagined my wife shaking her head at the situation, even laughing a little, then mouthing the word “purgatory” to me. But I had a hard time saying no without a legitimate reason, which meant I had a hard time lying to people, even strangers. But it’s probably also fair to say I was also a little intrigued. What had life presented Steven? One thing, clearly, was a child, fatherhood. And so I agreed. As we set a meeting time, somehow it seemed as if I wasn’t talking with someone I’d once known in grade school but some strange version of him because I hadn’t seen or spoken to him in over three decades: the ones where so many of life’s vast transitions take place.

Though I remembered a version of him, it was just that: a childhood memory. Now it was an adult voice. He continued speaking as if we’d never had a long interval in our friendship, as if we’d not grown up, taken the paths we’d taken—as if I’d spoken to him just last weekend at our kids’ soccer game. “Sure, sure,” he said, as I told him my wife was on the other end. “And thanks for agreeing to meet. See you then,” he said.

“Who was that?” my wife asked.

“An old friend.”

“Would I know him?”

“No, he’s from a long time ago.”

“Oh, okay. Well, Miles’s doing okay,” she said. “Better than yesterday. He actually just walked to the window. It was very slow. But—oh, I wish you could see him. It makes me so happy to see him move some.”

“Are you going to be okay?” I asked, and walked back to my chair.

“Yes,” she said. “I think I’m getting better with the idea of him not being with us.

It's just."

Someone knocked on my door, which was cracked. I looked up.

"Sorry," I said. "A student."

"Of course," she said, then added, "Please, don't be late tonight."

The previous weekend had altered life for us as we'd found out our dog of nearly ten years had to be put down. This was not a dramatic thing for someone who had already experienced this, perhaps even in childhood, as I had twice. But my wife, who had been deathly afraid of dogs as a child and who had overcome that with Miles, had not and so it had proven difficult to let him go. "A week at the most," our vet, Dr. Mira, had said, when we asked how much time we might have left with him. "I'm sorry," he added. "Miles is really a wonderful dog. But you don't want him to suffer unnecessarily." My wife nodded and I thanked him, shook his hand. I could only imagine what it must be like for Dr. Mira who had been the only vet Miles had seen all his years of life. I imagined him going into his office and sitting, maybe standing by his window, hands behind his back, and peering out, existing in a kind of momentary blankness before taking a sip of water or tea and preparing himself for his next appointment, the news being either very good or very bad.

"A week," my wife repeated, looking at Miles in the backseat, his body curled as tight as it could be, as if he were cold, instead of with his head hanging out the window. As the three of us drove home, she looked out the window and said it again. "A week. One damn week."

When I got home that night, I told my wife about my meeting with Steven. She was already upset that I was late, something I'd promised not to be, but she sat and listened. Nodded.

"Why would he want to meet you now?" she asked. I shrugged my shoulders at her. "And why on earth did you agree?"

"He said he wants to talk about one of my stories."

"Ah," she said. "A fan."

"Doubtful," I said and sat down by her and Miles. "It's hard to really know why he wants to meet. He has a daughter too, adopted from China."

"China?" she said. "Interesting. It seems as if everyone has adopted abroad these days."

"Some people exhaust all the options," I said. "They'll be damned if they won't get the chance to be a parent."

"Well," she said. "Miles has been quite enough for me. He growled today. Right after we got off the phone. He saw a squirrel. It wasn't very loud, but I heard him and it was wonderful."

"Is that so," I said, and bent over to rub Miles's belly, where I could feel so many of the tumors engulfing his body. It made me think of my lipomas, which seemed to increase steadily each year and worried my wife. My hand paused a moment and my wife said, "I know. There's so many of them now."

His tail thumped twice slowly. As I moved my hand from his belly, a clump of hair came off. In that moment, I had to bite my lip, suppress a memory of a childhood dog. We didn't have much longer.

"A few more days," she said and she got up and went into the kitchen. I heard ice cubes drop into a glass.

I stood up and put the hair in my pocket. I went into the kitchen and looked at her. "I'm sorry I'm late."

She took a sip of her drink and looked at me for a moment before closing her eyes and nodding her head some. "We've still got a few more days."

I nodded, then looked back at Miles, at our only child. He hadn't moved. When he was younger, he would follow us everywhere. If you got up to stretch even, he'd get up, look at you earnestly, and wag his tail, expecting something was about to happen.

I wasn't sure what we'd do next. If we were younger, it might be easy: after a required interval, we'd get another dog, establish a routine, and ignore, for a time, that we'd be confronted again with this same dilemma years later. But we were older, without children, though we'd tried for years and suffered enough false

hope: five miscarriages in roughly a decade. We decided we couldn't afford the cost of IVF. Adoption, too, was off the table, not just because of the cost. "I will not raise another person's child," my wife had said after the last miscarriage when I'd mentioned it, when I thought we both still had a strong desire to be parents despite what our bodies were telling us. I'd thought we, at least I, was better equipped to parent an adopted child, having been adopted. For adopted people especially, I thought, having a child was finally a way to see oneself: to see, to touch, and to feel a blood relative. But I came to understand my wife's point. And I thought that people had adopted children for the wrong reasons, often times, though it never appeared that way to them, selfish ones. When we'd discussed it again, I couldn't say my desire for a child was not selfish in some ways. And so we had settled on a dog, a rescue, despite my wife's phobia. We had decided to parent and love in this way.

I got up and went to the bathroom to splash water on my face and think again about Steven, our collective childhood. The more I thought about him the more I remembered that we hadn't really been great friends. The friendship had been more geographical. I looked in the mirror and saw my familiar face: Asian, male, nearing fifty. Without child. What was there to talk about? We were complete strangers whose lives had taken vastly different paths. Was there something there that might tell me why he was calling now? I thought but nothing readily came. It was just a story. But, it was also too late to say no.

After Steven recognized me at the coffee shop, we shook hands in the way people do that reflects a particular kind of cordialness but not history. We ordered coffee and sat outside and began with pleasantries, then moved onto more specifics. For nearly a decade, he'd taught English abroad in many Asian countries, fell in love once or twice, then moved back. He'd gotten married. Tried for kids, several miscarriages, too. And then an adoption. A girl from China, Chloe, with her mother now. Then business school. An affair, a separation, a divorce. I nodded at each new piece of information, and came to see the collage of Steven's adult life before offering limited details of my own based on his questions.

"Those magazines," he said, "They just kept piling up—all she did was read all day and look at me with such disdain when I came home." He drank from his cup. "I mean, I know I was travelling a lot for work, but I was doing it for us."

"Relationships are tough," I offered, unsure what else to add. I wasn't exactly sure how he could tell me such intimate details about his life after so many decades. It

felt like meeting someone for the first time. I took a sip of coffee, held it in my mouth a moment before swallowing, then held the cup in my hands.

“You said you wanted to discuss that story I’d written?”

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said. “But, it’s just, I was so curious as to how the story ended. I mean,” and he leaned forward some as if he were going to confess something. “Did they get back together?”

“Well,” I said, and put my cup on the table. I still wasn’t sure what he wanted. It was just a story. And not a very good one the more we talked and I thought about it.

“No, no,” he said, before I could say anything. “I get it. A magician doesn’t reveal his secrets, right? It’s just—” he said, and leaned back. He put his hands behind his head a moment. I could just barely notice graying at the edge of his sideburns. Despite that, he looked rather young for a man in his late forties. Very few wrinkles in the usual spots. He reached into his jacket and produced a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“You mind if I smoke?”

I shook my head and felt the stubble forming around my mouth, scratched my head, thought about all the gray it now held. When I was adopted at three, my mother had said I’d had three gray hairs, one, she surmised for each year of trauma. Along with marking my height on the doorframe, she’d kept track of my gray hairs whenever I visited for a holiday. It seemed the second thing she’d do after asking if I’d eaten yet. Even in the hospital and then closer to the end, after she’d lost all of her own hair, counting the gray hairs on my head seemed to bring her a moment of respite which my sisters always found amusing.

“That story seemed so real to me. I read it and was like, this is me and Emma. This is us. This is really fucking us. I just couldn’t believe it. It made me really think about how I’d messed up.” He stopped and put a cigarette in his mouth. “It got me thinking if only we’d been able to have a kid naturally. Maybe things would have been different.”

When he said this, I wondered the same thing. Is that what keeps a relationship going? Children. The family unit. But then I thought about his adopted daughter, that seemingly failed relationship, his infidelities. His separation and divorce. I

thought about all the absences he'd mentioned. And I didn't know if having a child would have brought my wife and me closer in ways; I didn't know if in the experience of parenting, of drawing lines, either one of us would have seen something surprising, something latent. But I could imagine a child as testing and pushing limits, forcing revelations on both sides.

"Would it have changed things?" I asked.

"Maybe. But," he said and leaned in some. There was a clear pause and I could tell he was processing the question, perhaps one he'd never thought about much.

"Probably not. Chloe is a good girl. She really is. I just," he said. "I don't think I was quite ready to be a parent, you know? I'm glad she's in college now."

I nodded, but before I could merely agree socially, say something like, "Exactly," he chimed in.

"Shit, I'm sorry man. You said you didn't have any kids. That was rude of me."

"It's okay," I said. "Really."

"What I mean is, I don't think the adoption mattered much to me. Just having another person to take care of, to be responsible for, that was a lot to handle back then. Is that why," and he paused again. "Do you think that's what Emma was upset about?"

"I don't know. It's just a story," I said.

"Fiction. It's—"

"I know, I know," he said, cigarette still in his mouth. I imagined Steven to be a social smoker; he didn't have the telltale signs of being a daily smoker. "But it's just so, you know, what's the word—uncanny. It's uncanny." He finally lit his cigarette, exhaled.

I nodded, taking in the smell of tobacco and recalling my father, dead at forty-five. Emphysema. Though whether it was related to smoking unfiltered cigarettes or dealing with asbestos was hard to say. A combination of both most likely.

There was an uncomfortable silence after he lit up. I thought I might have offended him in some way. But I still wasn't sure what he wanted me to say, what

he'd perhaps driven all this way to hear. I'd written many, many stories, published fewer still. I'd never really known of anyone outside my small circle of friends to read my work or have this kind of reaction. Even the ones who'd read my work, most of them writers, too, never asked questions such as this.

"Would you humor me?" he asked.

I nodded.

"If you had to keep writing, do you think they might get back together? Is there any chance they might make it work?"

I pictured my wife and Miles on the sofa watching television. His head would be on her lap and she would be rubbing his ears. A familiar scene. Most likely, he'd be asleep, the rising and falling of his stomach, the heat radiating from his paws indicators of his life. If she were lucky, he'd whimper some in that sleep, move his paws in a way that suggested dreams, the past, a memory where he was young and healthy and moving fast and hard toward a tennis ball or a squirrel. She'd keep an eye on the clock, wonder if I would be late yet again, then sort of close her eyes and nod to herself once the time of my supposed arrival neared and finally passed. Perhaps it was ideal that we didn't have children, that I couldn't fail a child through promises, even small ones, I couldn't keep.

I wanted to lie for Steven. I wanted to give him hope or the semblance of it. Isn't that one of fiction's potentials: that it allows us the possibility of change through seeing it in a character?

"I don't know," I finally said, and I really didn't. Once I sent a story out and especially once it got published, I moved on, stopped thinking about the tiny world I'd created and, as I thought all writers did, tried yet again to get a story right.

"It's okay," he said and gave a half smile as if to indicate he wasn't disappointed in my response.

"I'm sorry, I really don't know," I said, again thinking about my wife and Miles at home, wanting this conversation to end, wanting not to be late again, though understanding that that was how time operated for me. He looked at me silently, as if taking in all I said, as if, in some way, I was communicating the answers he'd sought from me.

"Possibly," I said, as a way to offer him something for driving all the way to see me. As I said that one word, I was reminded of something my wife had said when we first got married and our plans were routinely interrupted by various family members needing my help. "Your problem," she'd said to me, "is that you can't say no to anyone, even if they ask too much of you. Your mother, your sisters, a stranger." Of course, I'd disagreed then, said, "That's not true." But, as I sat with Steven and tried to think of what I could give him, I realized she'd been correct. "Even if you believe you've gotten over the malaise of gratefulness to your family, your actions say otherwise. It's your purgatory."

"Possibly," I said again thinking about the characters I'd written about. "But it wouldn't last. It would just be another cycle."

He nodded.

"Some people, some relationships," I said. "They just don't work. Long term. And children—that won't solve the problem either. In the end, what does it matter if Emma becomes a mother or not. That identity will not replace the deeper issues at stake."

He nodded again, lit another cigarette, and exhaled. "You're right," he suddenly said. "Goddammit you're right."

We sat and he continued talking and speculating about the future, about the things he could do, the places he could visit. He didn't mention his daughter in these possibilities and as he continued to talk, I wondered about her life, what she really thought of Steven as her father, how adoption had brought her to this family, these circumstances. I wondered what her major was and if she had mapped out her future already. I wondered what experiences we might share having both been adopted to this country.

As Steven continued to talk, I thought we would most likely not meet again; we would not suddenly pick up where we'd left off, become good friends, confidants. He would most likely not read my work again. This would be it. What he would do next, I didn't know. As he continued talking, it seemed as if he really wasn't sure what he would do next. He mentioned so many things. "Perhaps, I'll go abroad again," he said and I nodded. He had options, for sure, as I believed all white men did when life didn't go the way they wanted. But like us, he was at a crossroads, one where, because of our age and experience, would be harder in so many ways to renege on once we'd finally decided on some kind of action.

At the coffee shop later, my wife would admit she did not want to be in the room when Dr. Mira euthanized Miles. And I would nod at her statement. But in the end, she would relent, wanting to provide, as she would later say, “A familiar presence to Miles among all that sterility.” Dr. Mira would nod, understand the indecision through decades of experience, let us both hold Miles’s paw as it fell limp on the metal table once he’d inserted the needle. My wife would then say, “So quick. The life rushed out of him so quickly.”

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