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FICTION

The Body Confesses

 Jennifer Sears   04/03/2018

We were so young, my sister and I, both of us still wearing dresses that showed our grubby knees. I don't know why we joined the crowd that followed our father, who was acting again on one of his "feelings" when he led us to the abandoned factory where the girls had been shot six days before.

"Top floor," said one of our father's faithful, pointing toward the corner window. "That's where it happened."

My sister and I clutched at each other, those details of death disrupting our childish certainty in the body's survival.

Our town was small, population five hundred nineteen before subtracting those three girls found kneeling execution-style. "Just children," people said when their father was found that same day, nursing a Beefeater in a bar two towns away. "Just children," they said as big city reporters and camera crews invaded our county lines to "document sites" and "determine facts," certain some context could be found.

Rural isolation, they decided, showing shadowy footage of our fields. Economic "drought." (Had we ever known "rain"?) Those girls we knew became evidence of the country's increasing "blood thirst" ignited by availability of guns. The reporters left, ignoring our father, a pacifist who asked: if dogs with such thirst must be shot, should the whole country just be "put down"?

After they'd gone, after the prairie silence became ours again, only then could our father receive his "feeling." It must have been the deepest moment of sunset as we followed, because I remember how the evening light stained the bleached-white boards on that building halfway to scarlet as our father stepped forward and stretched his arms toward the factory door.

Good God! someone shouted. For with our father's gesture, a stranger staggered from that darkness, his vest hanging open, his face ravaged by exhaustion.

My sister and I ran away with the others. When we looked back, only our father remained, his arms still open, offering his heart.

"The children," we heard that man confess, as if he knew he stood before a man of God though our father wore no cross or vestments. (People always said our father could draw out and divine a man's soul the way others witch for water.)

Instead of taking our father's hands, the stranger fell to his knees, having lived alone for six days with that unfathomable sin. And for a moment we saw, in that rapture of pink light, the prostrations of a lonely old man who, like so many who come irrevocably undone, had chosen to ruin those who might have offered him love.

"The children," he wept. For them, our father forgave.

The body confesses, our father said, years after that surrender. He said, the soul is an organ, a fleshy thing, desperate to stand itself upright in the end. And though our father has long left this world, I still see him in that open lot, reaching for that stranger (who later pleaded guilty, the children's father released to his innocence and gin) stumbling toward forgiveness.



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