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SHORTLY AFTER THE ACCIDENT

Shortly after the accident, we moved.
It didn’t take months to decide; there was no grave contemplation which took place, no taut squabbles. It was just an unspoken understanding between us. No words need be uttered. Only our eyes communicated.

Three eyes.
Not four.

MaryAnne’s left eye, glassy, pool-like had been gouged out, leaving a dark hollow where the socket hid behind ever-present sunglasses. No other marks were left on her fragile body from the accident. Only this one hideous reminder of that night. I had been the lucky one. When the car had swerved, it had struck the other auto on the passenger side. The steel had mangled like wax paper, buckling and whipping the right side of our Duster beyond any coherent recognition. I still shudder when some odd quirk in my mind transfers me back to that night, not as a participant, but as a spectator, watching with horror as they pull my wife’s unconscious and bloody body from the pinned position at the right of the crumpled heap which was the car. I remember being thrust hard upon the rim of the steering wheel, the force of the jolt knocking the very breath from my body, and then, slightly hazy, is the recollection of faces peering intently down upon me, trying to help, but not knowing truly what to do. Then there is that strange, dark fellow who suddenly appears, his eyes dull, his mouth smiling, as if acknowledging the fact that everything would be alright, and as mysteriously, in a shroud of black, vanishing.

All these details were never discussed. Things went on as usual. It seemed as if the accident had never happened. It was soon after that we decided to move . . .

The hills flowed, green and velvet-like, far, far ahead of us. Every so often we would come to a little lifeless town, nestled in the thick greenery of the forests which lined the divided highway, but other than this, and the few cars that passed us heading in the opposite direction, it was as if we alone journied the lovely land.

We rode in silence for quite a way. Finally it was broken.
"Ben?"
"Mmm?"
"What are you thinking about?"
"Home."
"Me too."
"I'm going to miss it, MaryAnne."
"So am I."
"You know who I really can't get off my mind? Mickey."
"Mickey Gibson?"
"Yeah." There was a long pause. "We'll never see the poor kid again. I talked with Jinny just before we left, to see if there had been any new developments."
"Had there been?"
"No. Still the same news. They don't expect him to live through the summer."
"Wow." It was a whisper. MaryAnne grasped my right hand which rested on my thigh, encasing it in hers.
"We were lucky, Ben."
"Mighty lucky."

The Welcome Lady had come and gone. A Get-Together Tea had been given. The lawn had been mowed for the first time. Life settled down; it seemed as if we had been living in Granton Ridge all our lives.

The town was a post-card dream come true. It was everything we could have asked for. And more. Our house was a small affair of white and brown; large pear trees flanked the cinder stone wall surrounding our yard. Blueberry bushes climbed the wall, serpent-like, in the back yard, which also housed, in the very center of the fine grass, a small, circular fish pond. Among scarlet and chartreuse coral, a brownish ceramic shaped castle, and hauntingly waving elodea and cabomba, swam four fat goldfish, varying in size from baby to adult. During our first week in our new home, MaryAnne could always be found, hunched over on all fours, peering inquisitively into the little pond. She had already named the goldfish: Matilda was the fattest, always the one who seemed to be in constant control (whether the fish was male or female we did not know; it was MaryAnne's hidden and meager amount of Women's Lib feelings which made her decide on a girls name for the "ruler" of the pond). Alfred was the next largest, easily identifiable by the streak of white on his left side. Polly was next, who was disfigured by a large brown spot appearing near the tip
of her mouth. Last was Benjamin (in dedication to me) who, MaryAnne said, was the cutest of all the fish. How a goldfish can be cute is beyond me, but then MaryAnne has always had a very imaginative and sometimes overworked mind.

Since, by profession, I am a writer, I had not worried about finding a job in Granton Ridge. I am self-employed, doing most of my work behind closed doors where interruptions are nil. I have already published, to my credit, four novels, the latest receiving better reviews than all three previously put together, and also appearing in the number eight slot on several best seller lists. My claim to fame was rising.

We were in the middle of our second week in Granton Ridge when I emerged from our guest room (which I had converted to a study) in anger, disgusted at myself for being unable to find the right words to type on the blank piece of paper which still sat, empty now, in my typewriter. I had to get this book off to the publishers; the book proceeding a best seller will tell the tale: rags or riches. I grunted a few words to MaryAnne, who was dusting in the living room, and slipped out the front door and into the bright morning sunlight. I squinted, marching down the front walk, almost colliding with a passer-by. I voiced some sort of an apology, turned to my right, and continued down the street.

"You'll never guess who I saw just a little while ago," I said.

Returning from my head-clearing walk, I had found MaryAnne seated in a green and white lawn chair, next to the goldfish pond, and strode up to her.

"Who, dear?" she asked softly.

"Come on, MaryAnne. Guess."

"I don't know, sweetheart."

I guess I'm still a boy deep down inside; I've always loved games. But, clearly, MaryAnne was in no mood to play games. A shadow from one of the pear trees sliced across her face, darkening it, and for the first time I noticed the lines, small but distinct, streaking out from behind the dark glasses. It kind of shook me. MaryAnne had always been the picture of youth. Everyone had said that. But still, there were the lines, set there, I suppose, to prove that everyone must grow old.

I smiled down at her. "Jonas Brink."

"Who's Jonas Brink, Ben?"

"He's my old sixth grade teacher. Humm ... old Jonas Brink."
Good ol’ Jonas Brink. I could have sworn he was dead. Just goes to prove how people lose contact with each other. Boy. Jonas Brink.” I felt myself slipping into a well of nostalgia.

At ten minutes to six, MaryAnne called me in to supper. Over baked ham, cauliflower, tossed salad, and hot rolls, MaryAnne repeated the happenings of her day. Washing took up her morning, but in the afternoon, around two, while I was still on my walk, Lois Norman, a neighbor on our left side, stopped by to visit. Over a cup of coffee, Lois excitedly told MaryAnne of the “new arrival” who was due here on Friday. Nothing was really known about the mysterious person, yet everyone was anxious for Friday to arrive. “You will be coming, won’t you?” Lois had asked MaryAnne.

“Of course, we wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“It won’t be as grand as your arrival, but it’ll be something,” Lois explained.

MaryAnne told me all this in an unusually excited tone. Lois must have instilled in her the same feeling which had captured the town, for when I stopped at Sam’s Pub, the local hangout for married men who had left their wives at home, it seemed this was all the men could talk about.

Like measles, I too caught the disease. I found myself lying awake that night, puzzling over Granton Ridge’s soon-to-appear new arrival.

When we reached the square, on Friday afternoon, the welcome was already in progress. A large crowd had formed in the center of the square where a black car had been parked. A small gray flag had been magnetized to the car, a cross appearing in the center of it. Our new arrival had come, and was being greeted by the townspeople. Hoots of laughter and shouting could be heard over the buzz of the crowd.

Like an amoeba, the crowd moved slowly from the parked car to the side walk, to the entrance of the local hotel. Slipping out of the crowd, heading in our direction, all smiles and poise, came Lois Norman.

“You’re late,” she scolded. “You missed his arrival.” She sighed. “Oh well, no use crying over spilt milk, as they say.” With her lovely pale hands she shooed us in the direction of the mob. “Go on then, go on. Meet the nice young man. Go on.” And with that, she turned from us, scurrying across the square toward the drug store.
I turned to face MaryAnne, catching the reflection of myself in her glasses. Smiling, I said, "Well, let's go meet him." We advanced on the group, squeezing in here and there when an opening presented itself. The laughing continued.

We were approximately in the middle of the crowd when the young man came into view. He had ascended the several steps to the entrance of the hotel, and he smiled widely as he surveyed the group. His pinched face was of a sick pallor and his pale lips curled back grotesquely. His hollowed eyes rested on me for a moment, and I felt MaryAnne's nails dig into my arm as Mickey Gibson, with a quick and decisive movement, raised his arm up, forming an arc, as if waving directly at us, then disappeared into the shadows of the hotel.

When we arrived home, Lois Norman was waiting on the front steps. As I looked at her, I suddenly noticed what I hadn't before—her skin. It was of the same pigmentation as that of Mickey Gibson. My heart lurched.

"Well, what'd ya think?"

MaryAnne and I exchanged looks. "Interesting," I faltered, still in a daze. Hesitantly, MaryAnne invited Lois inside for some lemonade.

We were standing in the kitchen, Lois propped up at the refrigerator, MaryAnne slicing a lemon over the sink, and myself staring out the window at our fish pond, wondering at what I had seen today. It hadn't truly penetrated my brain as yet. Lois was speaking, but I wasn't listening. It seemed as if this were a television show, myself a viewer and participant, the volume having been turned down. I turned, saw Lois' thin, lifeless lips moving at a rapid pace, but no sound erupted from them.

When MaryAnne opened her mouth, the vacuumed silence broke.

"Ohh," she said under her breath.

"What is it, MaryAnne?" I asked.

"It's nothing. I've just gone and cut myself." She pressed a bit below the wound, waiting for the small bulb of blood to appear. It didn't. "Ben," she said, her voice suddenly quivering, "would you be a dear and get me a band aid. They're in the bathroom."

Our eyes met.

"Sure," I said, and wheeled around, disappearing from their view around the arch of the kitchen.
As I walked down the shadowed corridor which led to the bathroom, I knew what hideous thing awaited me. It hung, clear and deadly, on the wall, and I knew I must not look into it, for in its reflection I would see what I did not want to, but inevitably would: eyes glassy and staring, empty for all eternity; the eyes of a dead man.