

The MARCHING FISH OF MERYTON

When you come to Meryton by train, which you certainly will because there is no road long enough to connect Meryton with the rest of the world, the first thing you will see is Old Julie's house. It is not very big, rather simple, but the one closest to the railroad. Her family built it for her after her son died in the war. They wanted her to move out to the country to recover, and Meryton is certainly the right place not to be bothered by anything important.

The strange thing is that we never knew what was going on inside that house even though all the curtains were missing. You hardly ever saw her sitting in that purple rocking chair at the fireplace which was never burning. The two fish in the aquarium that stood in the center of the room seemed to be the only other living creatures in the house, and we wondered why Old Julie would buy two big bags of groceries every Saturday.

Her house was the big attraction in Meryton because the people on the train could look inside her living room and stare at her fish. The fish would stare back at them with their cold eyes and bump against the dirty glass. I don't know why she didn't put any curtains up; maybe she didn't notice they were missing, or maybe the fish needed the light.

Tony told me once that the shower had no curtain, either. But I wouldn't believe Tony. He made me sneak into Old Julie's house to steal a chocolate from the table, saying that she wasn't home. He knew she was, and while I sneaked in he watched through the window and saw me hide behind the door when she entered the room. I was only about eight years old and terribly scared. Her steps on the creaking floorboards felt like hot thunder beneath my trembling feet.

My mother had always called Old Julie "the old witch" and told me to stay away from her. As long as I can remember there had been talk about her among the people of Meryton. Some said she never got over her son's death and that was why she had become so closed up in her ways. They didn't tell this story to us children, of course; they never really talked to us. But I listened carefully and heard all kinds of interesting things that people thought were going on in Old Julie's house.

While I was standing behind that door with my legs trembling like raw eggs in a box on a bicycle driving over the railroad tracks, I clearly recalled one

By Lili Fuhr



specific conversation I had overheard between my mother and a woman from the train. She had gotten off at Meryton just to look at Old Julie's house and came over to my mother who was working in the yard to ask some questions. I pretended I was working right behind my mother and I was lucky she didn't see me; otherwise, she would have been more careful with her talk.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Is this the house where the witch lives?" the woman asked in a way that made clear that she was from the city and we only from the country and that she had the right to ask such a bold question without ever first making a polite remark about the weather or my mother's beautiful roses.

"That is Old Julie's house," my mother replied in a surprisingly calm manner. She normally can't stand people who don't recognize her roses; she has won prizes for them at several local garden shows. But this time she somehow seemed interested in telling the woman more about Old Julie.

"She is a little crazy, you know, comes from the war, they say. The war makes nice people like her crazy. They think they're doing something good with all their fighting; then the next generation comes along and tells them they were wrong. I feel kind of sorry for Old Julie. She just couldn't get over it, losing her son, and then there was the guilt question after the war and all, you know. She couldn't make the change. I never understood how they could give her that poor little boy to take care of; you never see him out to play on the street like the other children. I always tell my husband Harry, I tell him, 'Harry, someone ought to call the

Old Julie left the room and I was able to sneak out.

That was three summers ago, and much has changed since then. The curtains are still missing because nobody wanted to go into the house after Old Julie had died. Only Tony and me sneaked in sometimes to feed the two fish. They must have been at least twenty-three years old because Mr. Harris, the owner of the animal shop in Meryton, could not remember Old

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Julie buying any fish there, and he had taken over this shop from his father-in-law after his wife was hit by the train, and that was twenty-three years ago.

They have built a road, too. But nobody was using it for a while because every time the train passed Old Julie's house it slowed down so that the people could see the closet where they had found her. That's another reason they did not put any curtains up. I personally think it was Mr. Harris's idea. He also owns the only hotel in town and thought more visitors would come to see the closet. And they came.

Tony and me showed them around to earn some money for the fish food. They all said they wanted to hear what *really* happened, but their faces told us that they only wanted to hear a good story—exciting, just enough to make them take a flashlight to bed with them so they wouldn't have to be in the dark at night with all the moving shadows in their rooms. And so we told them good stories, each a little different from the last, until we began to forget what really did happen.

Then Jim came to Meryton. That is, Old Julie's nephew Jim who lives with his brother in the next town. He came to look after the house until everything was settled with the authorities.

But I don't think they settled anything; they would much rather have left dead Old Julie and her house alone. Even before Jim actually came, people started talking. He was a slow young man, or maybe still a teenager, wearing a uniform all the time even though he was no soldier; they said because of his 'weak bones' you knew from the beginning that the military would never take him.

So Tony and me were looking for an opportunity to meet him, and on his third day in town we finally found him standing in Old Julie's living room, staring at the

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police and take that child away from her. A little boy ain't no soldier.'"

These words went through my head a lot but I just couldn't figure out that part about the little boy. I had never seen a boy in Old Julie's house. Even when I was hiding in her living room I heard no sound but the marching of her feet on the floor and the bumps when the fish swam against the aquarium wall. After a while



aquarium. He stood there with his body bent down straight like a chess table and his arms close to his sides. His pants seemed way too short for him because you could see his ankles sticking out for more than an inch. His face was very close to the glass wall, and whenever he looked to the right, the two fish would follow his eyes; when he looked to the left, they would swim back.

We just stood there with our mouths open for at least four minutes before Jim turned his head around a little and looked at us.

He had light blue eyes like a fish, and when they wandered over to the couch in the corner of the room, we rushed over there and sat down. He kneeled on the floor in front of us with his back straight and his eyes wide open. Then he said:

“I have a gun, a big gun.”

Silence. No one moved, not even the fish.

“I can march like a soldier; I am a real man, Aunt Julie says . . . said.”

The light blue eyes looked from me to Tony and back. “Get up!”

I sprang up as if something had stung me on my behind. That was when he noticed my skirt and my dirty untucked shirt, I think. He seemed confused, as if he was ashamed to be in the same room with me. He stepped nervously from one foot to the other and rolled his eyes like a wild cat. After a while that seemed like an eternity to me, he too stood up, correctly and without using his hands. When he saw the respect for such a trick in our faces he sat back down and did it again, but without a smile.

He went over to the radio and searched until he found a station that had a military band playing. To the beat of the music he started marching around the aquarium, leaving out no corner of the room. After a while Tony joined him, and I left them to their boys’ game, though they were a little bit too old, I thought jealously, to play soldier.

Jim stayed for three weeks, and every day Tony went over to Old Julie’s house to march around the aquarium. I just watched them through the window. Then the brother called from the next town and said he needed Jim back on the farm for the harvest. He took the two fish with him. The house was closed up and the trains passed at normal speed again.

Tony acted mad for a week before he started hanging out with me again. We never talked about the whole thing until I saw that article in the newspaper last week. My mother tried to hide it from me, I guess, but I found it when I brought out the garbage bags. I called Tony and told him to meet me at Old Julie’s

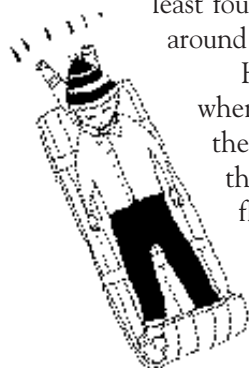
house.

We kneeled down in the shadows under the curtainless window and I showed him the article. It said: SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD JIM BARNEY WAS ARRESTED FOR AN ALLEGED ASSAULT ON HIS BROTHER, CLIDESTOWN RESIDENT TOM BARNEY, LAST MONDAY NIGHT. JIM HAD BEEN LIVING AT BARNEY’S FARM FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS AFTER RUNNING AWAY FROM HIS AUNT, MISS JULIE BARNEY OF MERYTON, WHERE HE GREW UP. THE YOUNG SUSPECT IS BEING HELD AT ST. MARY’S HOSPITAL IN CLIDESTOWN, WHERE DOCTORS ARE IN THE PROCESS OF EVALUATING HIM. CONTRIBUTING TO HIS DISTURBANCE MAY BE CERTAIN EXPERIENCES FROM HIS CHILDHOOD WHEN . . . There the article was cut off.

I looked at Tony. Finally he whispered, “Do you think he came back and killed her?”

“No, he was probably too afraid of her. But I never understood how she could have locked herself in that closet with the key outside. I asked my mother, but she only told me to be quiet, and something about justice and irony. Being stuck in a closet with nothing but fish food . . . no room to move . . . doesn’t sound like the best way to go.”

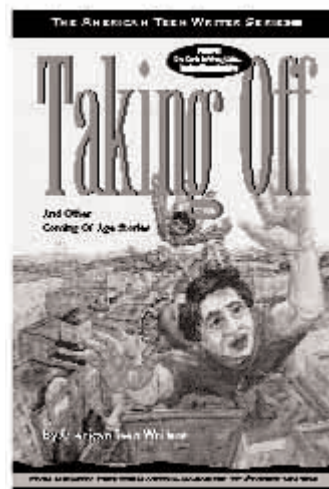
We sat there for hours talking about Old Julie. Times change a lot, I suppose, and so do people. Maybe Old Julie did not notice the changes, just like she never noticed that her windows had no curtains. Everyone could look inside. But no one ever seemed to have seen poor little Jim marching around the aquarium. Or did they think he was a fish? ★



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