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2nd Edition

SPOOKY

TALES

IN OUR TOWN

Chapter 1: A New Beginning

In our town, you prayed for a boy when you first felt that kick in your belly. Mama said she cried the day I came out of her, she was so happy I'd been blessed as a son. Every birthday was a celebration for us, whole family coming around with sweet cakes and rye whiskey, friends and neighbors filling our back porch. My grandfather would bring his guitar, only played on special days since his hands were lost to arthritis. We'd stay up until the stars showed, everyone drinking, my uncles pouring out baby drinks for us young ones in tin cups, everyone laughing in the bonfire light, coyotes howling in the blacktop mountains behind the

fence that separated our backyard from the edge of the tree line. Birthdays were a cause for joy, a reminder that sometimes God listened to your prayers, didn't always make you suffer.

Birthdays for my cousin Lyla were a different affair. She was three and some years older than me. She'd babysit when my parents would go out dancing, as if those three years between us meant much more than the fact she was a head taller and always beat me at hide and seek. She had long strawberry hair our Granny would brush out in front of the TV for her. Lyla loved watching quiz shows, so sharp she'd always know the answers before they came up on screen. I half-believed her when she'd wave her hands in the air in front of her face and tell me she wasn't smart, just psychic. Granny would always shush her and say we shouldn't joke about such things, but she would wink at Lyla and smile. When I was really small and couldn't sleep she'd sing to me, old songs about apple trees and drowned lovers, songs her mama sang to her. I could never remember the words. Some nights I'd lie awake in the dark and try singing to myself but the sounds got stuck in my chest, buried too deep to dig out.

Lyla was also the only one my parents would let take me swimming in the creek round the back of Grandfather' farm where nobody could bother us. My uncles offered time and again but mama always refused, laughing and pouring another beer to pacify their pride, saying they were more likely to drown me than show me how to float. Lyla was the one that taught me to swim, hands ever-patient and holding my head above the water when I went under for too long.

“Swim, Wren. You got to swim!” she would say as she pulled me to the surface.

On her birthdays, the women would go over in the early morning, sitting around her and her mother, overlapping arms in their cotton print sundresses, offering what little comfort they could, sipping berry wine and praying occasionally, hands all tangled in the wooden rosaries they carved in the winters. Mama would be up the night before baking, sweetbreads and whiskey dough. My daddy always told me to stay out of the kitchen on baking days. Baking days were just for mama, when she'd get out all her grief and pour it into the food she made for her sister, each dish an apology, a comfort, an acknowledgment of loss. We men and boys would go over in the evening, sitting silent and smoking around Lyla's old man and her stepbrothers,

In Our Town

tobacco passing between uncles and cousins and all the things that went unsaid. On Lyla's birthdays, everyone was drinking for a different reason, bittersweet.

In our town, birthdays were a reminder of another year gone. Another year closer to the day they would die. In our town you were only safe once you turned eighteen, down to the hour. In our town once there was blood between your legs, you only had so many summers left.

Chapter 2: Dark Secret

In the old days, my grandfather told me it used to just be once every six years. The town would go down to the lake on the last Sunday of the summer, dressed in white or the closest you could get, everyone lining up along the banks to wash their hands clean in the water. And then a name would be drawn. Somebody's daughter. Sister. Lover. Cousin. A girl next door, a girl you had grown up with. Someone with dreams about seeing the world outside the state lines, someone with favorite songs and best friends and promises to keep. The girl would walk into the lake and would be held by her mama for the last time, the woman she was grown from dipping her low into the water so she shone in the sunlight, skin dripping. She'd smile for her daddy, despite the tears he'd catch with his hands, so he'd remember her well. Then she would start to swim, out into the middle of the water until she reached the other side, the one always lost in the mists even in deep summer. Nobody had even seen the other side, even from the boats. It was

something you stayed away from, the current always tugging you back, a warning. And she'd never be seen again.

The thing was, it wasn't the old days anymore. Granny told me things started going wrong in the gaps between those six years, just after my parents and uncles and aunts had graduated high school. Lambs being born with the skin around their eyes green, blind from the moment they came into the world. Dogs howling for days on end until their lungs collapsed and they died from exhaustion. People waking up with dead moths covering the floors of their hallways, piled so deep you couldn't see the carpet beneath them. At first, people just came to accept that something in the trees was changing and for whatever reason was throwing things a little off balance. Then the rains stopped. People began to worry, but put it down to a dry spell and nothing more, despite the fact that the rain came every October without fail, and had done so since people first lived here back in the days of candlelight and wagons, before the trees were tamed.

Then the cows started milking blood, and the dirt started turning black, swallowing anything planted. And then the babies started being born without their legs, or their arms

or their eyes. My uncle Jonah was born legless, momma's youngest brother. Grandfather says it didn't matter because he could drink like a man standing up. I liked Jonah best. He was always loud, laughing and cracking jokes that had everyone clutching their sides like their ribs were about to spill their organs on the floor. He had a voice like Johnny Cash and you could tell Grandfather was proud when he sang along with his guitar, because when Jonah sang everyone would forget about his legs a while. But he could be quiet too, could convince birds down from the trees to eat out of his hand. Sometimes I'd catch him looking real sad though, watching me and my cousins playing tag, or watching his brother's dance with their wives.

So Granny said that six years became four years and it was okay the first time. But then the lake started to dry up. And things started washing up on the shore, baby bones and drowned rabbits with too many eyes. Deer started getting bloodthirsty, running out of the woods with their eyes white and teeth sharp, stealing chickens. People had to stop fishing out on the water because when they would drag up their nets they would be full of snakes. They would toss them back, but a few always made it to shore. One of them found their way into church and bit the preacher right on

the wrist. The preacher bashed its head in with his bible. Old folks started sleepwalking at night, lining up on the edge of the lake and waking in the morning with no memory of walking there barefoot, feet all cut up and muddy.

So four years became two years and it was okay the first time too. But people started getting scared to bring their babies into this world and so parents stopped having kids. People started seeing things in the mist. Then the dreams started. My best friend Tommy's dad was one of those that had the dreams. I went with him to the cemetery a couple of times to visit when we were kids. Tommy always brought one of his power rangers or a race car to leave on top of the grave in case his daddy got bored in heaven, even though there wasn't actually a body down in the ground. Tommy said he didn't know what the dreams were about and that his momma wouldn't tell him. Granny wouldn't tell me either but she said the dreams made thirty people real sad, and that they couldn't stop feeling sad, so they all swam into the lake one day and they didn't stop until they reached the bottom.

So two years became once a year. And the rains came back, and people started sleeping better, and people started fishing on the lake again. And the flowers grew a little

brighter and the air a little warmer, and the high school football team suddenly won every game. The mini-mart that had been on the edge of closing down suddenly sold fruit so good people would drive in from towns over to buy it, cherries like drips of blood, peaches soft enough to be skin and everywhere over town the apple trees heaved with offerings. And yet, families lived in constant fear of having a daughter, like all of them were walking around with hunting knives twist deep in their spines that they just had to bear. Little girls grew up walking around with grief so heavy it would break their back if they had understood what was coming for them when they grew up.

Chapter 3: Love Me Forever

It was Lyla's fifteenth birthday and she was nowhere to be seen. Her momma Clara was crying on a lawn chair, sipping some lemonade she had pressed with me and Lyla the night before, hands sweet with sugar and rind. Clara was my momma's younger sister but she looked years older, lines pressed into her face from years of holding all that sorrow just beneath the surface. When she laughed though you could see her true age, smile lines softening around her eyes as she grinned, hair coming loose from the tight braid she normally pulled it back in. Lyla loved to make her laugh, was often the only one that could.

Momma and her sisters in law sat around her, long-legged and stretched out in the afternoon sun, a couple of my baby cousins tugging at the bottoms of their frayed jean shorts for attention or hanging off their hips. Daddy sat with my uncle Red, Lyla's father, hand resting on his plaid-clad shoulder. None of her friends had come to her birthday

party and she had run off, heartbroken. The year before last summer, Sky, Lyla's best friend since the first day of school had her name pulled. None of her friends could face another birthday party that could be any of their last before they headed out across the water, so it'd been a no-show. Candles and cake lay melting untouched dripping off the pine table Red had made way back when, and there was more than just lemonade in Clara's glass.

But I knew where to find her. I walked to our grandparents' farm in the low slung sunlight, kicking up dust trails with the tops of my sneakers, scattering the June bugs still sucking on the flowers even though June was long gone. The farm was empty except for the cows. I lowered my head as I passed them, white-bellied with their long eyelashes keeping away the flies. I hated the way the cows watched you pass, eyes all-knowing as they stood so still, all of their heads turning to watch you go. Granny said sometimes it was best not to look at the cows, just to let them get on with their business. She told me I had nothing to worry for as long as I didn't turn around once they were behind me. They didn't take kindly to that. As I walked I could feel them watching me in the heat, grass a hush around my legs

as I walked through the fields and past the barn with its peeling red paint.

Lyla was floating in the middle of the creek, hair around her head like strings of bloody flowers. She looked so peaceful with her belly up to the sun, eyes closed and trailing her hands through the lily weeds. I called her name and she didn't move. Behind me, something rustled in the tall grass, maybe a snake or a rabbit. I called again, voice drunk up by the fields. She was dead I knew, kicking my shoes off and running out to her, ready to push the water from her lungs, bring her back. I fell into the water, throwing my shirt behind me, yelling her name. She flipped over and turned to face me.

“Wren! Calm down. I was just daydreaming,” she half-smiled, pushing her hair from her face.

I splashed her, sending an armful of the creek over her head.

“You scared me!” she laughed, splashing me back, both of us fighting until we could hardly breathe for laughing and the water in our mouths.

“Everyone's looking for you at the party,” I told her. She shrugged and turned to float belly up again, toes stretched

out to kick at the butterflies skimming the surface. I joined her, drifting.

We spent the afternoon together, swimming and daydreaming and trying to catch the tiny fish that lived in the mud with our hands. As the sun went down behind the barn and the creek turned cool and green we lay out on the bank in our underwear, letting the sunset warm us dry. Lyla turned to me. The lights in the farmhouse were on, porch lit and beckoning us home.

“You got to promise me some things, alright? When I’m gone-” I cut her off.

“Where are you going? Can I come?” She didn’t reply, just carried on as if I’d said nothing.

“When I’m gone I need you to promise me you won’t ever go swimming with anyone else. And if you try out for the football team, shower when you get home okay? Don’t ever drink and drive or your daddy will kill you. Be nice to girls but don’t start dating until you’re out of school. Don’t let them get in your pants either. Trust me on that one, us high school girls got nothing to lose. Kiss your mama goodnight, listen hard to Granny when she tells you stories because most of them are true than you could ever know. Make

Jonah teach you how to get birds in your hands because he never had the time to teach me and now I'll never get to know." She smiled, but it wasn't in her eyes. Her voice wobbled a little towards the end. "And tell my momma about me every once in a while. You don't have to do much, just sit with her sometimes and talk. I don't want her to forget."

She jumped to her feet then and ruffled the hair on top of my head, messing it up like she had done since we were little. She ran off into the purple dark, long-legged with her hair out behind her. It was the last time I ever saw her.

The day Lyla was chosen, I was in church with all the other kids who weren't allowed down to the lake on the last Sunday of summer. Me and Tommy and his cousin Beth were seeing who could run the fastest, racing down the wedding aisle, sunlight streaming through the high glass windows in golden lines, zigzagging between us. Beth was sad that day because her best friend Leanne was allowed down to the lake for the first time, and she was real worried she wouldn't come back. So I'd let her play tag with us, even though Tommy said girls couldn't run for shit. I was going to go slower and let her outrun me so she'd feel better. Beth proved us both wrong, beating us every time, so fast

we didn't even have to let her win, could barely keep up as she paced through the pews, hair flying out behind her as Jesus watched us from the cross above the door.

When my dad came to pick me up, I asked him where mom was as she always came to get me on church days. Daddy said she was with Clara and Granny and when I asked why he said he'd explain when we got home. We drove home in his pick-up and he let me choose the music the whole ride home.

The house was empty when we arrived, followed by a low sinking feeling in my back teeth I always got before a storm even when the sky was clear. Dad sat me down on the porch and opened two beers, pouring half of one out into the grass before handing it to me. I wondered absentmindedly if the beer would get the worms chewing on the soil drunk. I wondered if they would be too drunk to get home. Dad explained that Lyla had gone. I told him I knew, that she'd told me last week she was going away. Daddy started at that, shoulders jumping like a coyote backed in a corner. He smiled with tears in his eyes, sipping his beer.

"I'm not surprised. That girl always knew what was going to happen. Had your Granny's witchy ways about her." He grinned, shaking his head and brushing a stray tear away

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