

THE HILL

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I was twenty-one when I first spoke to my neighbour, John. Every morning, he sat on the small, paint-chipped bench underneath his apple tree. After that, he went back inside. I saw him around his house every now and then, but for the most part he stayed inside. My parents didn't want me to ever speak to him for reasons they never made clear. All they ever said was that John had a wife and two sons, but they moved away when I was born. My parents were away for the day, though, and in their absence, I felt a strong pull towards John—like I was waiting for him to tell me something; like he had something to say to me after all of these years and was waiting for the right moment. He had always been present in my life. I remember him watching me play in the backyard from his living room window, but as soon as he came outside, I was called inside. I knew I was in control of my own interaction with John now, whatever that was to entail.

On that particular morning, I washed my hands under lukewarm water in the kitchen. I felt the dry cracks in my hands slowly healing under the spring sun. John sat on the bench still, but he wasn't looking at anything; his eyes were focused straight and looked at what I assumed was the basement window. I remembered being a young boy, running around in our sloped backyard, noticing the loud, operatic music coming from that same window. At the time, I didn't think much of it, but now, hearing that music reminded me that John doesn't have anyone else. I stopped the water, dried my hands on a nearby dishrag, and leaned against the marble counter. I squinted through the rising sun that propelled itself through the large pine trees that haunted my backyard. John was still sitting there, admiring his window.

I forgot that I had the tea kettle running. Its violent hiss stung my ears, and I pulled it off of the stove just in time to hear the birds serenading the early morning. I never usually got up this early.

Our backyard was relatively large, and it had made a good playground for myself and my siblings. On the side of our house lay a brick path, and walking along it led to the gate, which upon entry, revealed a shed, a porch, and a large hill surrounded by newly planted trees. The trees gave us something to climb, the porch gave us somewhere to rest, and the hill gave us infinite inspiration for childhood imagination. One day, it was a pirate ship, another day it was a spaceship, another day it was a volcano, and another day it was a hammock. I caught myself looking at the hill when I noticed John move. He got up from the bench, walked across his yard, and approached the fence. I suddenly felt the tingling of my synapses as I unknowingly clasped the hot tea mug, which I had unconsciously began to fill with tea as I watched our hill.

I swore, put the mug down, and ran my screaming hand under cool water, which slowly helped soothe it like a song soothes an infant child. John leaned on the fence, and now corrected his gaze to our hill. John's yard didn't have a hill, but he had a nice, flat space that was good for soccer and baseball. I

remember seeing John pace that flat space at night through my bedroom window.

I dried my hand and kept my gaze locked on John. He wasn't doing anything, and his posture indicated that maybe he ought to go inside. As I threw the damp paper towel in the garbage, I turned my head back and saw that John was looking at me. I realized that maybe he'd seen me peeking through the kitchen window. His face was expressionless, and he raised his arm and waved me over. I waved back and didn't acknowledge the invitation. My heart, for some reason, began to beat faster. John wasn't a scary man, at least I thought he wasn't, but I'd never had any kind of interaction with him—there was no way to truly tell.

I decided, after a few moments of deliberation, to go out and see him. I could hear my conscience shaking as the voices of my parents told me not to, but I had to speak to John. I had to know why we had never spoken before. I had to know why my parents never let me be outside at the same time as him.

I shakily ran my hand along the porch door, struggled to undo the thawing lock, and finally pushed it open, which revealed the crisp spring breeze. I inhaled deeply, rubbed my eyes, and walked onto the porch.

John's gaze rested on the pine trees. He was looking earnestly at them, like he wanted them—like he longed for them. I stepped slowly down the porch steps, feeling the deck shake each time I made a movement. I slowly hobbled down the wooden path and met John at the fence.

"Morning," John said, quietly.

I nodded my head in acknowledgement as I felt my skin crawl. "Morning."

John's eyes didn't move from the hill. His glasses tinted to block the incoming sunlight. His one eye drooped a little lower than the other. His arms, though wrinkling, looked firm, and he still stood tall—taller than any other person I knew at his age. John looked like a strong man, and I didn't have any doubts that his sons turned out the same way.

"Do you need anything, John?" I asked, curiously, wondering to myself why it took so long for us to meet after all these years. He seemed like a good man. The voices in my head screamed louder now. *Go back inside. Go back inside.*

John was quiet, still. His gaze had gradually gone from my eyes to the large tree that lay behind me. I, in turn, admired his apple tree.

"John?"

John suddenly blinked a few times and looked back at me. He smiled a little smile, and I could tell that whatever he was about to say, he had been wanting to say it for a long time. His mouth opened slightly, but then it closed, and his facial expression left me wondering if he had changed his mind. He looked more solemn now, like he had just forced himself to stay quiet.

"Can I sit there?" he said, pointing behind me after a moment of silence.

"Where?" I replied, turning around quickly.

"There," John said, elongating his reach to point to where he was looking. He was pointing to the hill.

I stopped myself from responding instantly, as I didn't want to say anything that was going to harm or disappoint the old man. What would he want on the hill? Looking at the hill, yes, but sitting on the hill? I shook my head in surprise and exhaled, and the small smile I flashed was doused in insecurity. I still had no answers as to why I had been hidden from John up until now, and I became angry, but I reigned myself in.

"I don't see why not," I said, nervously. I didn't think about what my parents would say when they saw our old, reclusive neighbor sitting on our property. I just wanted to talk to him.

I walked back to the gate, unhooked the lock, and let John slowly walk through. Upon entering our backyard, John started to glow. His eyes widened, and I saw a jump in his step that looked as though it had been hibernating like the animals who, only now, were returning for the spring. He looked youthful, he looked excited, and somehow, I could feel myself being happy, too. Had I done a good thing? I couldn't think of any reason the hill meant so much to John—there was no way to be sure if I had done something virtuous. I ignored my thoughts, and I followed John as he took one step on the hill. He sat down slowly and braced himself for when his knees cracked.

John was crouched on the grass, and he ran his hands through the dirt, taking deep breaths as he did it. I sat down beside him, and looked around my backyard. Across from the hill was the porch, beside it was the path, and in front of that was the shed. In-between it all, though, was a glorious terrain of thick, green grass. I could smell the dirt rising below the snow; I could feel the insects crawling about under my hands, and I could sense the change in the seasons.

John turned his head to face me after a long moment of contemplation.

"My family has been gone a long time," he said.

I shook my head. "How long?"

John exhaled and raised his eyebrows, "about twenty years."

I went quiet. Twenty years, and there hadn't been a sight of either Mark, Leonard, or Jane since then. I wondered what had happened that caused their family to split up, but I was too cautious to ask. I sensed fear at the base of my stomach. Who was John *really*?

John continued to be silent, and I pointed to the apple tree. The bench glistened in the sun.

"Any good ones?" I asked, trying to make casual conversation.

John shook his head and leaned back further into the grass. "No, not this year," he said as he pushed his glasses back up, "they're all rotten. The last time I had a good apple was when my family was still around."

I nodded, acknowledging the disappointment behind bad fruit. Fruit that takes its time to be born within the earth all of a sudden, upon its entry into human life, dies. I could see the dwindling prospects of good fruit present in John's eyes.

I looked over at John again and moved a few inches away from him. My heart was still beating, and I could feel my forehead beginning to sweat. If John was going to get to the reason as to why he wanted to see me this morning, he had better get to it quickly.

Suddenly he spoke.

“Your parents probably tell you a lot about me,” he said.

“Well, not really,” I replied, coldly.

John exhaled deeply, and I could sense his frustration. He looked down at his feet, curled his upper lip, and looked up to the sky. He grinned.

“You mean, your mother never told you about what happened?”

My heart began to beat faster.

“No. She’s never talked about you.”

“How about your father?”

“No, not him either.”

“Figures. He wasn’t too pleased with what happened. Did they at least tell you that you’re my—”

Suddenly I heard a car door slam in my driveway. My parents were home. John stood up quickly. He shuffled a few steps away from me, curling his toes in the dirt. He remained calm and spoke with earnest.

“To me, sitting out there on my bench only does one thing. It reminds me of everything I’ve lost. Here—” he revolved his hand around in the air, gesturing to my backyard “—there’s nothing but life. All I ever wanted was to have this moment with you. To let you know that I was, and always will be, around.”

I nodded slowly, but kept my eyes fixated ahead of me. I sensed myself becoming calm. Empathetic, almost. I was madly confused, though—John didn’t exactly spare time for details, but I could hear my parents coming through to the backyard.

John tapped my shoulder, and I was startled as I saw him smile.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” I said.

“For coming outside.”

John got up slowly and I watched carefully as he marched over to the gate, swung the door open, and paced his backyard. He did a few loops, picked a rotting apple off the tree, and flung it over the fence, so it landed in his neighbor’s yard. Pain seemed to escape him, then. Life looked as though it had never been more present. As I lay confused and interested upon my hill, I sensed that John, in sitting with me, had risen above something that had kept him down for so long. I didn’t bother to demand answers, then. He had told me enough.

I drifted down into the grass and listened to the birds serenade my sleep just as my parents came into the backyard and called my name. They looked around the backyard for John, but he had disappeared inside his house.

I found out the next morning, in a fit of tears, frustration, and resentment, that John was my father.

His family left him because of me. Because of what him and my mother had done together. He pleaded to be able to stay as our neighbor, to watch me, waiting for the day when I would be told the truth. He wasn’t to speak to me. He wasn’t to interact with me. He just had to watch. We could have moved away, but that was not an option. My parents shuffled into their bedroom before I could ask why.

A week had passed since my talk with John. On Sunday, I walked up to his front door and knocked three times. From John's front porch, I could see the hill in our backyard. I suddenly felt a pain in my heart. The hill, where I had spent my whole childhood, was merely a viewing gallery for John. I understood now why he never spoke to me, and why he had wanted to sit there so badly. I understood now what our talk had meant to him.

I knocked again, and this time a young man opened the door. He looked like John, and I presumed it was either Mark or Leonard, one of his two sons.

"Yes?" The man said.

I stumbled with my words for a moment. "I live next door."

The man in the doorway stayed quiet. "You must be here to see my father. I take it you know now?"

I shook my head slowly.

The man opened the door a crack and looked down at my shoes. He looked tired, like he had just traveled a long way to be here today.

"My father is dead. He died last night."

I exhaled deeply and squinted my eyes. I nodded back at the man in the doorway—I didn't bother to learn if it was Mark or Leonard—and I walked down the veranda steps onto the street.

"Hey," the man called.

I turned around and faced the doorway.

The man stayed quiet for a moment, then waved his hand in the air. "Nothing."

I walked back inside my house and slumped onto my bed.

John's funeral was three days later, and I told my parents I was going, even if they weren't. It was a private funeral. The guests looked at me in a strange way, like they had seen me before. I ignored them and focused my attention on John's casket being lowered into the ground. I felt disappointed, angry, and sad, but for reasons I may never come to understand for a long time.

John was not buried in town. Instead, he had requested a burial further out—one with the perfect view.

The view upon a hill.