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Opening Extract from...

What Dies in Summer

Written by Tom Wright

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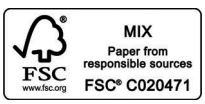
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1 | Mothers

I DID WHAT I DID, and that's on me. But there's no way to make sense of what happened without figuring L.A. into it too. That was the thing with her—she never tried to change anything or anybody, but nothing she touched was ever the same again, including me. I think one reason was that whatever she did—and don't get the idea I'm forgetting she was a girl—she did absolutely balls-out. No warnings, no explanations and no particular interest in whether you understood or not. The way we got her in the first place was a perfect example.

Supposedly I have a touch of the Sight, which Gram says is some kind of throwback that crops up in her family every so often. In my case it's unpredictable and generally useless, but this time it was dead on, flashing inside my head like heat lightning just as we were finishing the breakfast dishes in the kitchen. Something was wrong on the front porch. Nothing dangerous or necessarily spooky, but definitely out of whack. I dried my hands to go out and take a look.

It was the first Saturday in February, summer as gone as it ever gets and Oak Cliff just beginning to wake up under a frost blanket that looked like diamond dust. Thin orange blades of sunlight stabbed through the bare crape myrtles along the driveway and angled across

the frozen lawn and the porch, outlining L.A. where she sat scrunched down inside her old Cowboys jacket with her back against the wall and her arms locked around her knees. Her face was almost dead-white except for her raw nose. She was shaking and rocking and staring ferociously at nothing, the pale poofs of her breath trailing away through the slatted light like miniature smoke signals.

Two of the St. Mary's sisters, out unnaturally early for some unknown reason, had stopped on the sidewalk across the street and were eyeing us like a couple of penguin detectives. Because of their tendency to appear only at the most awkward times it was certainly no surprise to see them now, but it shook me a little anyway. The presence of witnesses in ambiguous circumstances always did unless I was ready with a good solid cover story, and at this point I was still trying to rough out some sort of explanation for L.A. being here that clearly ruled out guilty involvement on my part.

L.A. was my only cousin, in fact the only kid I was related to in any way as far as I knew, which was one of the reasons I didn't have a baseline of normalcy to measure things like this against. What I did know from hard experience was that with her in the picture the sky was the limit when it came to how much trouble we could actually be in here. For starters, I had no idea why she would run away from home, but naturally my first thought was that it must be the problem with her folks, my aunt Rachel and her husband Cam, who could get pretty nasty when they were drinking. Which, when you got right down to it, was all the time.

But I didn't really get it, and right there you have the difference between being smart and being intelligent. I probably have enough IQ for most routine purposes, but being smart is another thing entirely. That means having the knack of locating the center of gravity of a

thing, finding the balance point of meaning and importance in it, and that's exactly where I generally mess up. But it didn't take a genius to recognize how out of the ordinary this situation was, and even at that moment I think I knew L.A. had just taken us across a line we were never going to come back to.

Even though I knew better than to think she would ever make things that easy, I still took another look around for some clue that might make sense of this situation—Aunt Rachel's car disappearing around the corner, L.A.'s bicycle, tracks through the frost, anything. But except for the ever-watchful sisters and the plumes of their breaths, there was nothing to see but the silent, sparkling neighborhood itself.

I helped L.A. up and got her inside.

"Good Lord," said Gram as we came in. She dropped her dish towel on the counter beside the sink and came over to us.

"She must have been out there a long time," I said. "Look how hard she's shaking."

"Well, what in heaven's name," said Gram. She brushed L.A.'s dark tangle of hair back with her hand to get a better look at her eyes, saying, "What is it, dear? Are you hurt?"

L.A. shivered on, saying nothing.

Gram gave her the expert parental once-over for cuts, bruises and broken bones, saying, "You're cold as a frog, young lady." She examined L.A.'s fingertips and *tsk*ed. "But I don't believe it's hypothermia just yet."

She got the blue comforter, wrapped L.A. in it and sat her in the window chair at the kitchen table, then heated milk for hot chocolate. I went to the cupboard for a cup and the bag of small marshmallows and got a spoon from the drawer, L.A. vigilantly tracking our movements from inside the blanket like some kind of captured night animal.

When Gram set the chocolate in front of her she stared at it for a minute without moving. Then her hands came slowly out from the folds of the comforter and she picked up the cup to take a sip, then set the cup back down, making no effort to wipe off her marshmallow mustache.

Her shaking eventually stopped, but she still had nothing to say. She'd never been much of a talker in the first place, but now she was silent as the grave. For me this went straight past weird and all the way to the outskirts of scary, her just looking at me like that with those big wild eyes.

Gram on the other hand was a regular female, meaning there was pretty much no silence in her. She got Aunt Rachel on the phone, skipped her warm-up and went directly to the fastball, popping them in high and tight: "immature," "irresponsible" and "self-indulgent," just to name a few. It wasn't hard to picture Aunt Rachel at the other end of the line—pretty like Mom but a little taller, darker and drunker, probably wearing her usual boots and jeans—pacing back and forth, smoking and running her hand through her hair as she yelled back at Gram. Early or not, if she didn't already have a drink in her hand it wouldn't be long before she was into the vodka.

Gram summed up: "As usual, Rachel, you've contrived to make the worst of a bad bargain. But at least Lee Ann is safe here with us, and that is a deal more than I can say for her in your care."

Because of her excessive intelligence and her Yankee education, Gram actually talked like this all the time. To me the most impressive thing about it was the accurate way her words nailed you without leaving any room to maneuver or defend yourself. Aunt Rachel was no slouch herself as a yakker, but she couldn't keep up with Gram,

especially when she was sozzled, and when the dust finally settled the verdict was clear—L.A. was ours.

Gram was big on the idea that the best strategy against fear and confusion was counterattack, her method being to lock in on what had to be done first, do it no matter what, then move on to the next thing, and then the thing after that. Now that L.A. was more or less okay for the moment and wasn't going anywhere, the next order of business was retrieving her clothes and stuff from Aunt Rachel's house, including her dog Jazzy, a bug-eyed little shag that Gram called a shit-zoo. But L.A. refused to go with us, shaking her head energetically when Gram tried to persuade her by pointing out—pretty reasonably, I thought—that we needed her there to make sure we got the right things.

"Come on, L.A., it'll be okay," I said.

She just backed away, one eye on the hallway, staking out her line of retreat.

"Oh, well," said Gram, grabbing her purse.

We ferried everything over from Aunt Rachel's in the Roadmaster, L.A. brightening up a fraction when she saw me climb out of the car with Jazzy under my arm, running up to snatch her from me as I came around the camellias from the driveway.

Gram and I lugged the stuff down the hall to what used to be the sewing room, where there was a spare bed. As we worked, Gram explained that in ancient times in China dogs like Jazzy were officially designated as cats to allow them to enter the Forbidden City, where apparently only cats were allowed to go.

Like a lot of what Gram said, this had the peculiar effect of filling my mind with odd ideas and new angles on things while actually seeming to leave me more ignorant than ever. For instance, I couldn't

understand how a place could be called a city if nobody could go there. Or at least nobody but cats and certain funny-looking little undercover dogs. But maybe it wasn't that you couldn't go there exactly—maybe the city itself was forbidden in some way, possibly by reason of having been built against orders or out of illegal materials. I wanted more information about this, but I didn't ask Gram, for the very same reason you don't blow up the dam to get a glass of water.

With a little scrounging around we found a nightstand and dresser and some old but kind of nice-looking lace curtains for the window. Fresh sheets on the bed, a few knickknacks here and there, and just like that it was a girl's room.

Gram squared off against the unknown, put her hands on her hips, said, "There," and the deal was done. Whatever L.A.'s reason was for being here, this made it fully official. Whatever was coming, we were going to face it as a family of three.

2 | Adjustments

I DON'T MEAN to make it sound like everything just snapped into place, though, because it didn't. L.A. never really got all the way back to being her old self again and there were certain things I had to learn, like being more careful than ever about touching her when she wasn't looking. What I got in return was her remembering not to make any sudden movements at the edge of my vision, which gives you some idea of how we got through those first days.

Meantime, I was gradually coming to terms with the possibility L.A. was permanently done with talking, even taking a certain offbeat pride in my ability to handle the idea. I doubted there were very many guys out there who could even grasp the concept of a speechless girl, much less get comfortable with it.

But then Dee Campion whispered to her.

Dee was a friend of ours, one of those kids who's always around but doesn't usually say much and never really seems to be completely in on things. At the time I didn't understand how much he and I had in common, and for a while I wasn't sure what to make of him. Gram called him a "gentle boy," something I never heard her say about anybody else. He was an artist. His specialty was watercolors, things like

apples, onions and wineglasses, and he painted them so well that I couldn't distinguish what he did from straight-up magic. He was thin and blond and seemed to catch more light than other people, which made him look beyond ordinary, maybe a little tragic, like a saint or a doomed poet. There was just something about him, and whatever it was made me feel like a bear at a tea party when I was around him.

Plus we didn't actually see eye to eye about much of anything, so even watching TV with him could be kind of an obstacle course. He was polite about it but you could tell he had no use for sports, whereas I didn't care much for stuff about romance, relationships and other female ordeals. If I ever did get him to watch a game with me, he tended to ignore the count and the infield adjustments and veer off into speculation about things like whether the team colors agreed with a particular player's personality or how the guy's relationship with his father might have affected his batting average.

But even though Dee wasn't the kind of kid you'd ever think of offering a smoke to or going out to hit grounders with, there was still something kind of likable about him and I considered him basically okay. In fact, he was one of the favored few allowed in on the secret of Gram's supernatural once-a-month raisin cookies, and this month when the day rolled around he dropped by.

But this was no ordinary cookie day, because after a little polite munching and idle chitchat with Gram and me, Dee got up and without any fanfare walked over to the green chair where L.A. was sitting in her usual stony silence. No cookies for her. Just that thousand-yard stare in the general direction of the TV, like the rest of the world didn't exist. Dee leaned down so that his lips were by her ear and whispered something to her that lasted about as long as the Pledge of Allegiance. When he finished, they looked at each other for a couple of beats, then

he lightly touched her arm, went back to his place on the couch and reached for another cookie.

As much as I wanted to know what he'd said to her, I knew I never would, recognizing this immediately as one of those little loose ends the universe was always dangling in front of me, especially where L.A. was concerned. I took the only sensible course, telling myself it probably wasn't that important anyway, and tossed it in the same mental bin where I kept questions like how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

But then the next night when I was studying for my U.S. History test, flipping through the pages without finding what I needed to know, I said more or less to myself, "What the hell's the Missouri Compromise?"

And without looking up, L.A. said, "Missouri washes, Kansas dries."

I almost jumped out of my socks. I watched her and waited for a while to see if there was going to be anything else, but she'd said all she was going to for that day. Still, I took it as a breakthrough. And sure enough, the next morning at breakfast she spontaneously asked me to pass the milk, and by the end of the day she was talking again, not exactly a mile a minute, but almost back to what passed for normal with her.

As far back as I could remember, Aunt Rachel had never stayed at home longer than a few hours at a time, meaning she constantly needed a babysitter for L.A. And since Gram never turned her down when it came to taking care of L.A., and did it for free, L.A. was always overnighting either at our house when I was still at home or later here at Gram's. So even though she and I were technically solo kids, we were used to each other, and now that we had no place left to

fall we did what it took to get along, including wrangling out a morning bathroom schedule and getting the chores divided up more or less equally. I wouldn't call it wall-to-wall harmony, but we did manage to hammer out some kind of mutual deadlock on most points.

Then Gram started getting serious about L.A. going back to school. "We simply have no alternative, dear," she said in that law-of-nature tone of hers.

But L.A. shook her head and went silent again. It was their first major standoff, and it got me thinking about whether truant officers actually existed in reality or were just another parental figment like the tooth fairy. I'd never personally seen one or heard a reliable eyewitness report and wondered what the uniform would look like and whether they'd carry special undersized handcuffs and nightsticks and arrive in small paddy wagons painted in cheerful colors.

But I wasn't truly worried, because of my experience with Gram's rock-solid belief in education and the unbreakable will behind it. There was also the simple reality of L.A. being a girl, with the kind of backhanded, diabolical intelligence that implies, plus her well-established history of dazzling teachers and showing me up in class. In other words, school was her natural turf, and I knew she couldn't stay away from it forever.

Sure enough, less than a week later she gave in, coming out of her room at seven-thirty that morning dressed and ready as I was about to leave. We hoofed it over to Lipscomb just like nothing abnormal had ever happened, and that was the end of her educational strike. This returned us to a certain level of regularity at Gram's, and by the time school was finally out for the year L.A. and I were back in the old groove, kicking around town like we always used to, like we owned the streets and summer was just for us.

I guess it's proof of how unreliable the so-called Sight was that it didn't tell me what was coming. I've wondered a thousand times how things might have turned out if it had only given me a heads-up about what was going to happen, and what I was going to do, before this summer was over.