



# *LOWLANDS*

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brothers and sisters, we need 'em.

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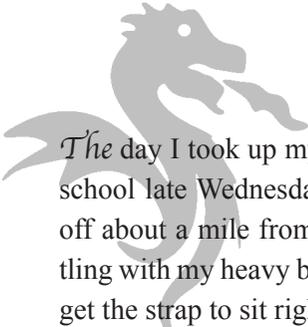
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## 1. *The Girl*

1.



*The* day I took up my part in this tale, I was walking home from school late Wednesday afternoon. The school bus always let me off about a mile from my house, and I walked from there, wrestling with my heavy brown book bag the whole way; I never could get the strap to sit right.

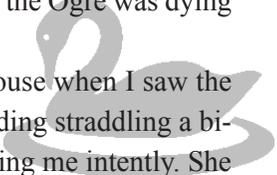
It was early March. I know the exact day, because I was keeping a diary at the time, in a manner of speaking. I tried to keep a diary a few times when I was young, but I didn't really have the interest. I only tried at all in imitation of my sister, who kept volumes. Within a few weeks, my entries always dwindled to cryptic notes. Within a few months, even those ceased. By a stroke of luck, however, all this happened during one of my rare active periods. Just a word here and there helps me remember, and helps me keep things in their proper order.

My entry for the day was this:

“Saw fuzzy-haired girl on the way home from school”

I was almost home when I saw her. It had been a good walk, despite the heavy book bag. The last holdouts of pockmarked dirty snow had almost all melted away, and you could smell the earth, even in Queens, as the spring shoots broke through. With the approach of Spring, the icy grip of school began to weaken on our hearts. This was the real living myth of youth: the Ogre was dying again.

I was only a couple of blocks from my house when I saw the fuzzy-haired girl looking at me. She was standing straddling a bicycle on the sidewalk across the street, watching me intently. She





had dark hair and freckles, and a long nose. I thought she looked foreign. She had a keen pure expression that didn't look American; we tend to be puffier and more diffuse. The bicycle looked old; so did her clothes.

It embarrassed me to be stared at so unambiguously, so I turned away from her and applied myself to walking. When I looked her way again, she was still staring at me. She narrowed her eyes and nodded faintly. She seemed to have satisfied herself of something. She hopped on her bicycle and rode around the corner without a backward glance.

When I got home, I found my father raking leaves in the back yard. He had been away on a business trip. That was new for him. He worked at the academic division of a mid-size publishing house, and they were trying to expand, capture new markets, move into electronic publishing. So they poked my poor father out from behind his desk, and sent him forth. A man less suited for the role of salesman I have seldom seen. I knew it even then. As soon as he got home, he must have jumped into his old clothes and lost himself in dirt and old leaves. We were the only people on the block who still raked leaves. As far as I knew, we were the only people in the city who raked leaves. Everyone else had crews of Mexicans with gas-powered leaf blowers. My father and I raked and bagged whatever we found the time for in the fall. Then we let the remainder sit for the winter. When the last snow melted in the spring he went out again and cleared the wet old leaves. We had a big oak in the back yard, and its tough leaves lasted the winter quite well. We didn't have much of a lawn.

I liked raking. I loved the smell of the wet spring earth, and the sound of the flexible rake tines, and the look of the furrows they left. I heard my father singing to himself, and I knew the song:

*Cosher Bailey went to college  
for to gain some extra knowledge  
Studied barmaids at the station  
and forgot matriculation*





*Did you ever see, did you ever see, did you ever see  
Such a funny thing before?*

“Hi, Dad, how was your trip?”

My father made a movement of his head, as if to say “it was a trip.”

“Glad to be back. It wasn’t bad though, as such things go. The crocuses are up.”

Years ago, someone planted crocuses in our yard. It might have been a previous owner, it might have been us. No one could remember. We never touched them, but they gradually spread throughout the yard. Every year we had a regular sequence of bulbs and wildflowers that made their appearance. They were the only plants that did well under the shade of the oak.

When I went inside my mother was already working on dinner. I got home from school late, usually after 5:30, and we tended to eat fairly early, so she had often started dinner by the time I arrived. She would have been singing, too, though I don’t remember the song. We were the only family I knew that sang as a matter of course. None of us had any pretensions, or any voices to speak of, although people always talked about my grandmother’s voice and how she used to sing.

I had to wait before going up to my room, because my grandfather was heavily descending our sagging old wooden stairs, one careful step after another.

“Hello, James,” he said when he saw me. “Out on liberty? Sorry to make you wait. They’re right, ‘The legs go first.’ I haven’t been walking enough. Now that the weather is getting better, I should start walking again.”

I never minded waiting for my grandfather. “Maybe we can go down the park on Saturday,” I said.

When I got upstairs and out of my school clothes, I lay on my bed and listened to the sounds below me. I used to like listening to my family gather, and my mother bang pots. My father came in from the yard, and went with my grandfather to listen to the news





on television, where I knew they would maintain a relentlessly skeptical commentary. My sister would play the piano until dinner was almost ready, then she'd come in and set the table. We almost always ate together as a family, which was another thing that set us apart. My sister was a couple of years older than me, so she would go out with her friends sometimes, but she usually ate with us. She had a new set of high school friends, but I don't think she liked them very much, so mostly she stayed home and practiced music or read old novels.

So I lay, and I listened, and looked out the window at the birds flying and settling among the empty branches.

## 2.

My grandfather and I drove down to the park for our walk Saturday morning. It was little more than a mile from our house. We made a long slow circuit along the main path, around a wide field, muddy from the melted snow and the early spring rains. There were a few little ball fields next to the path, but it was still too early for the Little Leaguers to be out practicing. It was an overcast day, and the only other people in the park were dog walkers. I remember a big Great Dane galloping through the mud and slinging its head around as it turned to run back to its master. My grandfather told me it was a harlequin. Once it passed close, breathing heavily, but it paid us no mind. Its master was sitting on a park bench talking into a cell phone. We could hear him clear across the field. My grandfather had a horror of cell phones, and regarded each new technological advance as a fresh calamity. "They have **pictures** now?" He would say in dismay. "They can get the Internet through their **phones**?" My sister and I kept him informed of the latest outrages.

His legs felt strong, so we left the park for our customary detour. My grandmother's old home was just a few blocks from the park. It was the house she had left to marry my grandfather. He liked to come by and visit it from time to time, although anyone connected to them had passed on long ago. He would stand on





the sidewalk and point things out with his black walking stick, and tell me things he had told me before. This time, though, he stood in silence, for the house was gone. Builders had come in the winter and torn the house down, and we were left looking at the damp plywood fence protecting the construction site, and at a series of construction permits under plastic, tacked to the wood. My grandfather peered at the permits for a while without reading them. Then we both looked through the gap in the fence where the gate was padlocked shut. They hadn't yet begun on the new foundations. It was all mud; we were standing in it.

"Isn't that something?" said my grandfather. "Isn't that something? They took it down. There was nothing wrong with that house. It was still a good house."

"They're probably putting up another McMansion," I said.

"It was a good house," he repeated. "I'm glad I didn't see them tear it down."

He looked up the street for a moment, and then back at the house.

"Well, that's another one gone. Let's go back to the car."

When we were sitting in the car again, he asked me, "Are you in a hurry? Do you mind if we take a drive?"

So we drove through the neighborhoods, and visited the places that my grandfather remembered. Our family had lived in the area for a few generations, and there were landmarks scattered all about: schools, homes, stores, a parish hall where dances were held. It was not a happy drive, for my grandfather mostly showed me sites where buildings had once stood. Bakeries were gone, German butcher shops, Italian fish stores. A block of apartments was squeezed into the plot where once Mr. Weeks had lived. The only thing my grandfather could tell me about Mr. Weeks was that he was an elderly man who lived around the corner, and that he was a real gentleman. That didn't seem like much to remember, but it made an impression on my grandfather even after all these years.

We started for home eventually, and had almost reached it when we made one last detour. We turned into a little network





of narrow streets that ended in dead ends, walled off from the through traffic.

“I wonder,” said my grandfather, peering at the houses as he drove slowly past. “I was in one of these houses once, a long time ago. After we became engaged, your grandmother took me to a gathering around here, in one of these big houses. I didn’t know anybody there. I wonder if I’d recognize the house.”

“It doesn’t look like they’ve torn anything down here, anyway.”

“It was one of those two houses. That one, I think. Yes, that one. Still standing. It must have been fifty, almost sixty years ago.”

My grandfather had stopped the car and was looking up at the big dark house. I looked too, trying to be companionable, but it didn’t mean anything to me.

“There was a girl who played the harp. You didn’t hear the harp much back then. I suppose you don’t hear it much now. She had black hair, long black shiny hair.” Then he shook his head. “I’ve kept you out long enough. Let’s head home.”

As we pulled away I kept looking back, expecting to see a face in the window. I thought I saw a curtain move on the first floor, but that was all.

### 3.

*We* went to church as a family too. We went to a Polish church around the corner, because it was close and because for a long while they were the only ones who still said a mass in Latin. They also repeated the gospel in Polish, and sang Polish hymns, and made periodic announcements about various Polish festivals featuring exotic Polish delicacies, but that didn’t bother us. Eventually the parish got younger and the Polish content dropped and the Latin went with it, but by that time it had become a habit to go there.

That Sunday, we sat on the right side of the church about half-way up. My mother preferred to receive from a priest, so week to week she would move us around from left to right depending on





where she thought the celebrant would be standing, but the priests were on to such games and used to mix it up to discourage gamblers. More and more they turned the whole thing over to their deputies, the Eucharistic ministers, so my mother finally accepted defeat and just took the most convenient open pew, though she would still cross lines when the opportunity presented itself.

When mass had ended I was walking to the back of the church down the side aisle, but my sister seized me by the elbow and turned me around. She walked me up the aisle and led me out the side entrance.

“Mrs. Breen,” she explained. “Talking to the parents.”

I was grateful. Mrs. Breen was a grammar school teacher, whom I had always found to be an unusually insistent “pain in the tail” as my grandfather would have said. She taught me in the fourth grade, and I thought that it was understood that we had barely tolerated each other, but she had maintained an unseemly interest in my doings ever since. Many’s the time she had waylaid my mother and me when we were out shopping on the main avenue. I thought that simple decency dictated that, after an interval of a few years, teachers and their former pupils should meet as strangers, but apparently Mrs. Breen didn’t see it that way. I had done well in her class, and she had jumped to the conclusion that I was smart, and that I should do something with myself. I disagreed.

To make matters worse, when I tried to explain my position to my parents, my mother was moved to pity by my thorough but accurate and necessary catalog of the woman’s flaws. She therefore extended all kindness to Mrs. Breen, and indulged her in conversation far beyond the modest demands of courtesy. So my sister had done me a favor.

We stood on the sidewalk by the side of the church. People were walking away in all directions, some cutting across the street to the parking lot on the other side.

“Did you see them?” My sister nodded to a knot of people already at the end of the block, about to cross the street “catty cornered,” as we say. “I’ve never seen them before.”

