

Wellington, Auckland, Cape Town, Durban

Maori hills behind Wanganui

Mynas walking North Island roads

The ocean hemisphere's golden morning light

One brother shears all over the world for eight months, home for four. Those Maori pros take less than two minutes a sheep

The esquiladores in Patagonia could do two hundred sheep a day before electricity

Her other brother and two sisters live her in Otago and Southland too. Their mother stays on in Auckland. More and more Maoris come to the far south

South Island latitude

Orange roughly

Peach season between Ettrick and Alexandra

The omnipresent sheep

Startled, anxious, vaguely indignant; unsettling and brazen in their numbers

Sheep dogs here leap into the lowbeds of accelerating pickup trucks, balancing magnificently

Something You Should Know About

James Ladd Thomas

The three of us were standing in the kitchen drinking beer, talking about the advantages of home schooling when Larry decided to broach the subject he had been contemplating, I can only guess, for some time. Larry said the words which not only knocked me off balance, but staggered me as if an air bag had exploded from the refrigerator door as I retrieved a beer.

"I guess I should level with y'all; there's something you should know about."

What do you think when one of your good friends says something like that to you and your wife? I can tell you what I thought: well, damn, just damn it to hell. I took that Miller bottle right up to my lips and took three huge swallows, trying to brace myself for news that had all the implications of being something that would change the happy mood of seeing an old friend.

When I look back on that moment I'm surprised at the force of the impact the actual news had on me. Larry's "I'm coming clean" declaration should have actually softened the blow since there were very few statements he could have said next. Sure, anything's possible. "I'm tired of being trapped in a man's body" is the joke you always hear, but what are the odds of that? There's always the possibility of alcoholism or drug addiction. True, he could have been ready to give the bad news of his terminal disease. His wife Legra's disease? Their son Mike's disease? And I guess there was even the possibility of a financial crisis: lost job? foreclosure? bankruptcy? But I really think most people, if given time to contemplate, would have thought the obvious.

But three long swallows of a beer is not enough time for the obvious.

"Legra and I are separated, and it looks like it might be permanent."

I looked at Fannie, nothing, silence as she stared at Larry. For a very brief moment I was staring at a sack of Dixie sugar.

"What—" Fannie jumped in, "You've got to be kidding, Larry. I just don't believe it."

"What happened?" I added.

"Well, it's hard to say. I don't think either one of us is totally to blame. I'm the one who moved out of the house, three months ago actually."

"Three months ago? And you're just now telling us?" said Fannie.

"Yeah, I'm sorry for that, but it's not something that's easy to talk about, especially with old friends. I've wanted to tell you each time we've talked on the phone lately."

Larry took a few sips from his beer.

"I guess if I was forced to pinpoint something I'd have to say life got in the way. Legra and I are completely wrapped up in our jobs, with taking care of Mike, and we really haven't been giving enough time for ourselves. It just seems like we're going through the motions of being together. We've gone to a counselor, but he listened to our story and told us," Larry chuckled, "Separation might be the best solution."

"How's Mike taking this?" Fannie asked.

"Of course he can't understand why I've moved out of the house. We never did have any knockdown fights. He gets very angry at times about me not living there. And he wants us back together, but under the circumstances he seems to be holding up quite well."

Fannie and I had been very good friends with Larry and Legra for several years. We grew up together in Wetumpka, Alabama. Gone through school together. In fact, during our senior year of high school I had dated Legra, which is an interesting aspect of our relationship. After high school we shot off in different directions—college, jobs, travels—but eventually we ended up back in Wetumpka where we found our mates, married, and began to settle down. Because we shot out of the gate at about the same time the four of us fell together, over for cards, drinks, cookouts, out to the lake, trips to New

Orleans, Atlanta. Over a five year period we became very good friends; friendships were developed that are not easily erased. Then three years ago Larry was offered an engineering job in Seattle, which he decided to take since the new position offered a large salary increase. The move was painful for all four of us, especially since Mike and Betsy, our little girl, had been born within days of each other the year before.

We hadn't seen each other for over ten months, since last Christmas when they had made their annual visit to Wetumpka to see family and friends. Larry had made this trip to see his mother who was on the downside of a battle with cancer. I had at first thought coming by himself as peculiar when he had told me on the phone a few weeks ago, but had reasoned away the oddity with his mother's health.

"Good god, I need another beer," I said as I crossed the kitchen on my way to the refrigerator.

"I just don't know what to say, Larry. What do you say? I'm, I'm, I'm stunned. Bring me another beer, too, Danny."

I brought the two beers over, opened both, gave Fannie hers, then made the suggestion that we move out to the deck in the backyard where we could sit down. We walked out and each sat in a chair by the round, wooden picnic table. Fannie sat between us. Larry pulled out his pack of cigarettes, shook one out, then offered the pack to us. We declined; we had both quit two years ago.

Larry lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, blew the smoke up towards the late afternoon sky and said, "Ain't life a bitch. You just never know when something's gonna come along and upset your house of cards. We seemed to have it all."

"You did have it all, Larry," Fannie said looking at her beer bottle sitting on the table.

"Sure seemed like it, didn't it?"

"No, no," Fannie said shaking her head while still staring at her beer, "you had—" she paused for a moment. I looked at Larry; he was watching the trail of smoke floating up from the cigarette stuck in his right hand. "You had what everyone wants."

"Oh, there were good times, all right. But there were a lot of valleys. It never was perfect."

"Perfect?" said Fannie.

I twisted in my seat. I thought of how we could now toss Larry and Legra onto the ever mounting pile of our family and friends who had surrendered to the urge of cessation. Was it that much easier? better? We seemed to be one of the few to resist. Maybe my perspective was askew.

"Oh, Fannie, you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, Larry, but I'm afraid I really don't know what you mean."

I sat back in my chair, placed my heels on top of the table, then took a drink of beer.

"I know, I know, life's not perfect and all that, but there's only so much you can take."

"So much what?" Fannie asked. "I'm afraid I still don't follow you, Larry. Please don't take this the wrong way, but I'm just trying to understand."

"God, Fannie, so much shit."

"Shit?" Fannie shook her head again. She was still staring at the bottle. "I'm still fuzzy about this. You and Legra separated because there is only so much you can take, so much shit." She finally turned her head and looked at me. "Do you understand this?"

I looked at Fannie for a few seconds. Then I looked over at Larry, who took another long drag. After a few more seconds I looked back at Fannie. I shook my head and said, "I'm not sure Larry understands."

"Goddamn you two, we were just going through the motions. I wasn't happy. There wasn't anything exciting about our life," Larry said as he snuffed the cigarette out on top of the table. He quickly shook his head. "It was time to move on. Life was boring. I wanted something more."

I looked at Fannie again and saw the glassy eyes. I didn't know what to do. I felt disoriented, an emotion I had not felt since my father's funeral. Another chunk of my foundation had suddenly been broken off. Was this the question of adulthood? Is the foundation you build to survive solid enough to withstand the constant hammering of life's disappointments,

failures, injustices? Now, as then, I wanted to awaken in my childhood bedroom with Bob, my Airedale, licking my face, the smell of bacon frying in my mother's kitchen, and the sound of my dad scrubbing his golf clubs on the front porch.

"I'm sorry you guys, I didn't mean to get so upset. It's just that I guess I'm still a little touchy about it. I really do love Legra, which makes it even tougher."

Larry grabbed his beer as he leaned back in his chair, then took another swallow. Fannie began scraping under her left thumb nail with her right forefinger. I looked out over our backyard and noticed a mockingbird land in the grass twenty feet from the edge of the deck. He gave a quick survey of the area, then quickly flew off.

I thought of how Truman, our family cat, kept bird landings in our yard short and focused. No time for dilly-dallying. Land in the enemy's territory, make the reconnaissance, then stealthily depart. The enemy could be close. Then I caught myself; Truman was no longer on watch. He had vanished from our home three months earlier, no signs, no traces. A victim of a car, dog, or simply time to move on—he had simply appeared at the back door two years earlier. We didn't know, the result was the same. Three months had passed and still I expected him to walk by.

The mockingbird flew back to the same spot in the yard.

"You wanta go pick up some more beer?" asked Larry.

"Good idea. We'll be back in a few minutes. Do you need anything?"

Fannie turned to me and slowly shook her head. As we both got up to leave I noticed Larry giving Fannie a side glance. We walked through the house and out to the driveway. Why had he delayed telling us? Had he expected Fannie's reaction? I tripped walking down the front steps. Larry caught me by the arm before I hit the stone walkway.

"You okay?" he asked.

I straightened up. Larry placed his right hand on my shoulder.

"Maybe I'm not ready to leave the home. That lobotomy affected me more than I thought."

Larry laughed, then gave me a friendly shove.

We took Larry's car, actually his mom's, an old Granny Smith apple green Delta 88 that had a front seat like a sofa.

"Man, what room. It's been awhile since I've been in your mother's car. What's the seating capacity? An even dozen? You know, you could do some screwing on a seat like this."

Larry cranked the car and began backing out of the driveway.

"You're right about that. Legra and I have humped all over this car. Inside and out. Ol' Kathleen used to let us borrow her car all the time when we first got married. Both our cars at the time were clunkers. Remember that damn Pinto I had? Piece of shit. I think I would have been better off with a go-cart."

"I thought it was a go-cart. Let me have it, Larry. What's goin' on with you two, man? Have y'all just had enough of each other?"

Larry pulled out his pack of cigarettes from his front shirt pocket, knocked one out, pushed in the lighter, then stuck the cigarette in his mouth. I was glad I had given up the habit, but I still found pleasure, a feeling of comfort and security, in seeing someone go through the ritual of smoking.

"Hell, Danny," he lit his cigarette, then shook his head as he placed the lighter back in its slot, "I wish there was an easy answer, but there isn't."

"You didn't have a little chickadee on the side, did you?"

"No, that would be easy to explain. I've always been able to fight those urges."

Larry had driven, almost instinctively, to the neighborhood grocery store, located just a few blocks from our home. He wheeled into the empty parking lot.

"What's the deal? Why's the store closed?" asked Larry.

"I forgot to tell you, Curry's Market went out of business a couple of months ago. One of those big super-duper grocery stores opened up on Pine and Adell and drove ol' Curry down to his knees. Couldn't compete with their prices. It's one of those big Kroger stores, a damn warehouse full of food."

Larry drove through the empty parking lot and stopped the car a few dozen yards facing the store. He left the lights on.

"Well, I'll be damned." He let out a deep breath. "Wetumpka will never be the same, will it? Curry's has been here, what, 50 years?"

"Yeah, something like that. There was a little ceremony on the last day it was open. The mayor came down and gave Mr. Curry a plaque; the paper took his picture and ran a full page story on the store. Fannie and I brought Betsy down. There was a good size crowd. I even saw a few of the elderly women tear up. Kinda sad, you know. I guess some people wouldn't understand why people'd get so torn up over something like this."

"It feels like part of Wetumpka's gone. A lot of my childhood memories are tied to this store. Remember when we'd go scavenging for bottles to bring down here and turn in for the deposits? Came down here all the time as kids to buy cokes and popsicles. I bagged and stocked shelves for ol' man Curry during my junior and senior years. That's how I finally nailed Dale March. Remember her? She was a cashier here. A body that would melt steel."

"Oh, yeah, I remember her. You were the chosen one. You know, that was when Legra and I dated."

"That's right. Legra was crazy about you."

"She was wanting to get married. I wasn't ready for that kind of shit."

"Maybe that's me now."

"What?"

"I don't know what I'm saying."

We sat silently in that old Delta 88 for a couple of minutes.

"So marriage isn't for you?"

"First tell me where this damn Kroger is again."

"The corner of Pine and Adell. There used to be an old U-TOTEM store there on the corner."

"Okay, I know where you're talking about. Is Discount Beverages still open?"

"Yeah. You wanta go there?"

"If you don't mind. I need to go somewhere that's stayed the same."

"That's fine. They've got colder beer, anyway."

Larry pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards the small package store.

"To tell you the truth, Danny, I'm the one who walked out. Legra had nothin' to do with it. I just wasn't happy, man. For me, we've lost it. I'd come home and maybe say ten words to Legra before I went to bed. No fights, just nothin' to say. I just couldn't see myself living the rest of my life like that. You tell me what I'm supposed to do."

"Maybe you two were just in a slump. Go back to the basics. Of course, don't ask me. There isn't one way of doing anything. Look at sex, even. If it's gettin' old one way, try somethin' else. Course, shit, man, I don't know. I'm just spoutin' off. I just hate to see you two split. Jesus, doesn't anybody stay together anymore?"

"You two."

"I guess."

"You guess? Don't tell me you two are having problems."

"No, we're doing all right. It's not perfect by any means, but what the fuck is, Larry?"

Larry put his cigarette out in the ashtray as we drove into the Discount Beverage parking lot. He opened his door, but before he could step out I grabbed his shoulder.

"Can I make a suggestion? Let's not talk about this shit anymore. This is bringing me down." And it was. I knew we would get deeper into it sooner or later, but at this moment I just didn't feel up to it.

"Good idea. I've got a feeling Fannie's gonna grill my ass, anyway."

We got out of the car, walked to the entrance, and as I opened the door for Larry a young woman we had gone to high school with walked out. She was Tina Joiner, a dark-haired looker in school, a girl who filled the fantasies of many teenaged boys. Larry had even dated her a few times when we were seniors. The last I had heard she had moved out to California a few years after graduation.

"Well, hey Tina," said Larry.

"Hello, Larry, Danny. I haven't seen you two in years. Someone told me you and Legra were in Washington."

"Yeah, we're living there. Are you still out in California?"

"Well, that's sorta true. I've come back to stay for a while, sort some things out. How 'bout you, Danny? You and Fannie still livin' here?"

"Yeah, we're livin' over on Oak. You oughta come over sometime. I know Fannie would like to see you."

"Why not tonight? Danny and I are just makin' a beer run," Larry said with a wolf grin. Another customer came out the door, so the three of us moved over a few feet to let him pass. I could see where this was heading and I wasn't too comfortable with it.

"I'm on a beer run myself." She held up her sack. "I told my mom I felt like drinkin' a few cold ones, so here I am."

"So why don't you come on over to Danny's house. We're just sittin' around talkin' about old times."

They were both giving each other the eye. I couldn't believe it. This was too much for me to handle. Nothing excessive, just small, languid stares suggesting interest.

"I don't know, I'd feel like the odd one out with you two married couples."

Here it was. The moment of truth. The true state of his marriage would have to be revealed. If he told the truth. I didn't want to hear the next words oozing from his mouth. I wanted Legra to walk up, say "Hi" to everyone, throw a bucket of water on these sparks.

"Oh, don't worry, you won't be the odd one out. Legra's not with me. To be honest, we're not together right now. We're separated."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Larry. I hope it's not permanent."

"Looks like it might be. But that's another story. Why don't you follow us back to Danny's."

"I'll tell you what, let me go home and check with my mom. She's living by herself so I need to get back."

"Okay. Try to make it."

"Our number is in the book. We'll be there," I said as I opened the door once again.

"See y'all later."

As we walked into the store I turned to Larry and said, "Are you kidding me? You're still married, right?"

"Easy, Tonto. I've already been out on a few dates. You act like I'm cheatin' on Legra. We've been separated for months. Things aren't the same, Danny."

We stopped in front of a cooler door.

"Are you jealous, man?"

"Jesus, Larry." I shook my head as I opened the door and pulled out a twelve pack of Miller. I knew there was a vein of truth in his accusation.

"What?" Larry asked as he spread his arms like wings.

"Let's just get the beer and go."

"Goddamn it, Danny. What do you want? We're splitting, breaking up."

I looked right into Larry's eyes and found myself wanting to crawl through to the center, right through his pupils, wanting to pull the old Larry out.

"Let's go."

We walked to the register, where Larry paid for the beer, then out to the car and got in.

"Quick, give me one of those. I need one, now," said Larry.

I opened up the carton and handed Larry a beer. He started the car, pulled out, then headed back to my home.

"Look, Danny, I'm sorry to give you bad news. You had to be told sometime. People change, man. I had to face the truth, move on, you know. I guess we had ridden that wave all the way up to the shore."

I rolled down my window, put my arm on the door and looked out. We drove through my neighborhood, passing the other homes on our way back. A few had a light in every window, others just a window or two, and still others the front porch light was the only one on. And a couple were completely dark on a Saturday night at nine o'clock.

"I mean that, Danny. Things just can't be helped sometimes."

I then began to focus on the trees in the yards. A few were beginning to lose a few leaves, which were accumulating in the yards, driveways, and streets. Every so often I noticed the needles sticking out from the evergreen pines.

A squirrel ran out of a yard and into our path. Larry quickly mashed his brakes, swerved, and just missed hitting the squirrel.

"I thought I'd got him."

"Me, too. I hit one the other day. I braked and swerved, but sometimes there's nothing you can do."

The cold air from outside was making me shiver. I rolled up my window. "Damn, it's cold, and it's only October." I took a long swallow of the cold beer.

I thought of a beach trip the four of us took several years ago. Our friendship as couples was only a few months old. We drove down to Destin, Florida, the panhandle, for a few days of sun and fun. A Saturday afternoon after a day on the beach. Larry and Fanny hunting fresh seafood as Legra and I showered and began, as promised, dinner preparations. Finishing my shower I walked into the kitchen for another beer wearing nothing but a sunburn. When I heard the door open I was bent over grabbing a beer. Legra walked into the kitchen carrying a sack of salad supplies. Half out of jest and half out of carnal inquisitiveness I just stood looking at Legra with a beer in my hand. Thinking she would melt with embarrassment I was taken with surprise when she didn't flinch. Instead, she just stood there with a rifle stare. We were quick, efficient, but passionate. We had started on the counter, but technique had required us to move into the bedroom.

We never took the chance again, but there were always stares, brushes, tentacles of desire in conversation. Naturally, waves of guilt, but they were smothered with the euphoric memories of passion and sensuality, memories of teenage lust and an enduring attraction, memories that had not just persisted for weeks or even months, but had soaked into the grains of my being. Sometimes late at night, at dawn, or even just sitting in my office I found myself once again standing nude in front of a

refrigerator with a beer in my hand. I wanted to hold her, tell her everything would be fine. Let her know that I cared for her. I always had. In many ways I loved her. But I knew these were emotions that would never be followed through, regardless of reasons—propriety, passivity—an embrace engorged with guilt.

When we drove into the driveway I noticed Fannie sitting on the front steps. Her legs were folded up with her chin resting on the shelf of her knees. Larry turned the car off.

“Look who’s on the front steps there, Mr. Midlife Crisis. I don’t think Fannie is finished gnawing on your ear about leaving Legra.”

“My ear? It’s my ass that’s bloody. Maybe I should just drop you off and slink on back to my mom’s place.”

“Oh, come on, Larry, she won’t bite. Fannie’s just having a hard time dealing with this. You know, kinda like me.”

I got out of the car, but as I closed my door I noticed Larry was still sitting behind the steering wheel. He hadn’t even opened his door. I placed the sack of beer on the hood, thinking this could act as an anchor, then walked around to the driver’s window. Larry rolled down the window.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’t know if I’m up for another round.”

I rested both hands on the top of the door, then peered in at Larry’s face. The light from a street lamp was just enough to see Larry’s eyes. He was looking directly at me, though I couldn’t tell where the stare was actually aimed.

“Larry, get out of the car. This isn’t easy for any of us.”

He turned his head towards Fannie.

“What are y’all doing?” she called out.

I raised my head towards Fannie. “Larry thinks you’re going to shoot him in the head for leaving Legra. I told him that’s ridiculous. The worst thing you’d do is set him on fire, maybe no more than a public flogging. And there’s a good chance I could put him out before the burns became severe.”

“Damn, Danny, you wanta jump right into this thing, don’t you?”

“What’d he say, Danny? Is he afraid I’m packin’?”

Larry opened his door and got out. I put my arm around his shoulders.

“What do you think we should do with the car after we bury the body?” I said to Fannie.

Larry smiled and shook his head.

“That big old thing? It’d be like hiding a trailer. No need to worry about that, though. I’ve decided I’m going to shoot you both. The true cause of all life’s problems is the penis. Everyone with a talleywacker must die. Only then will sanity become a reality.”

The two of us walked by the front of the car where I grabbed the bag of beer.

“Maybe you’re better off, Larry. I’m sure you’ve had to endure such feeble verbiage. The horror, the horror.”

I dropped my arm as we walked down the sidewalk to the stone walk. We stopped several feet from Fannie who was still sitting on the front steps.

“I’m sorry about my reaction, Larry. I was shocked at the news. Still am. It’ll just take me awhile to get used to you two splitting up.”

Larry finished off his beer, pulled another out of the sack and replaced the empty. He twisted the top off and tossed it into the sack.

“You two don’t know how hard it’s been. You see, I’ve had to face the fact that I walked out on my family. Do you really understand that? I left my family. I left the woman who loves me. I know I sound like the killer who feels he’s the victim. I do feel I made the right decision, but I also know the pain I’ve caused. My son goes to sleep at night and gets up every morning without me in the house. I’m not there when he wants a hug or when he wants something explained. I also think he’ll never understand why I left. And I know everyone will think I’m selfish, that I’m willing to destroy my family for the sake of my own happiness.”

Larry stopped talking and took a couple of long swallows of beer. He then sat down on the stone walk, brought his legs up and crossed them. He placed the beer bottle directly in front

of him, leaned back and supported himself with his arms and slowly raised his face up to the half moon. I walked the fifteen feet up the walk, up the five steps, set the bag of beer on the porch and sat down next to Fannie.

"From the outside I know that's the way it looks, but nobody knows what's going on inside me but me. I've gone through it all a million times trying to understand the whole mess, but there aren't any easy answers. Why can't I be happy with Legra? Really, I just don't know. I want us to be like it was when we were so in love with one another. But it's not. Danny, people change. We all want to lock into that moment of happiness when we find it. Wrap our arms around it, sink our teeth into it and hold on with everything we've got. We try to will our way to happiness. Like when we were kids, but I don't think it can ever be like that again. I don't believe all that shit about if you want to be happy just be happy. I tried to hold on but we melted away. Am I a pessimist? Do you think I'm just trying to justify my actions? Am I just an asshole trying to make myself feel better?"

"Hell, we're all assholes, Larry," I said.

"Maybe if I could believe that it would make what I'm doing easier to chew and swallow. I know I do believe in love. It's why I left. I don't want to be together unless it's for love. I don't know. Maybe I'm just afraid to grow up. Maybe I'm just trying to show you why I left so you won't be so mad or disappointed."

Larry brought his knees up and wrapped his arms around his legs. I looked over at Fannie. She stared at Larry, who was looking down at his beer bottle. I heard a neighbor's dog barking a few houses down the street. I was just about to say something when a white Ford LTD pulled up and stopped in front of our house. Tina Joiner got out of the car and walked up the driveway carrying a six pack of beer.

"You made it," I called out.

"Yeah, I needed to get out of the house. Momma just about kicked me in the butt to come over here. Said it would do me good to see old friends. Anyone need a beer?" She held out the carton of beer bottles.

"Not me, Tina. Fannie, I'm not sure if you recognize her, but this is Tina Joiner. Larry and I ran into her over at Discount Beverages."

"I was beginning to wonder who this stranger was. It's good to see you, Tina. God, I haven't seen you since high school. What's that been? About fourteen years ago?"

"Yeah, fourteen years and ten thousand lies."

Tina sat down next to Larry. Kind of close to Larry. He turned to her and gave her a warm as toast smile.

The four of us sat there and talked about old times: teachers, ball games, friends and classmates. We laughed, hooted, mocked, and teased. And it was no surprise when Larry and Tina got up off the stone walk, loaded up in the Delta 88, then drove off with their hands waving out the windows.

"I called Legra right after you two left for the store. She said she had been trying for a long time to get Larry to tell us. She wanted to know what he had said, how he had explained his leaving. When I told her he had said that they had just grown apart, there was a long pause. She started crying and said she had tried everything. They had even left Mike with some friends a few times so they could get away together for a weekend. But nothing worked. He just seems very unhappy."

"So she thinks it's over?"

"She wants him to come back, but she doesn't think he will. Did he tell you anything when y'all went to get the beer?"

"He said much more out here right before Tina drove up."

We sat there for several minutes without speaking.

"Do you think we'll stay together, Danny?"

"I used to think we'd always be together. But I'm not so sure about that now. Every sinking relationship I see seems to pull my faith further down. I do love you, Fannie, and I hope I never lose you."

"I love you, too, Danny."

"That's about all there is, don't you think?"

Fannie shook her head. "But you always hope for something more."