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What They Did with the Body

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What They Did with the Body

Abstract

Once the community had agreed that Mr. Reed would have to die, including Mrs. Reed and the sheriff and all the sheriff's deputies, everything was simple and easy, and the murder came quite naturally. John Taylor was chosen for the job, on account of his relative neutrality concerning Mr. Reed -- they did not want this to be a hateful act, unduly painful or otherwise immoderate -- and his ownership, legal but generally frowned upon in their town, of a handgun. The gun was a .357 caliber Smith & Wesson Model 60, which some believe to be the most widely-owned handgun in America, though 9mm models have become more popular in recent years.

Keywords

murder, body, evidence, disposal, family, town



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What They Did with the Body

by Mike Meginnis

Once the community had agreed that Mr. Reed would have to die, including Mrs. Reed and the sheriff and all the sheriff's deputies, everything was simple and easy, and the murder came quite naturally. John Taylor was chosen for the job, on account of his relative neutrality concerning Mr. Reed – they did not want this to be a hateful act, unduly painful or otherwise immoderate – and his ownership, legal but generally frowned upon in their town, of a handgun. The gun was a .357 caliber Smith & Wesson Model 60, which some believe to be the most widely-owned handgun in America, though 9mm models have become more popular in recent years.

Because of what Mr. Reed had done, it was easy to point the gun at him, and it was simple to pull the trigger. Mr. Reed was shot three times. Once in the right shoulder, once in his gut, and once in his heart.

The entrance wounds were small, and though they bled profusely this was not a cause for concern, because Don Knight owned a carpet warehouse, and his sons would replace the carpet the next day. Mr. Reed had been watching television when the murder took place. They also disposed of his easy chair, and this was simple, as well.

When Mrs. Reed came home with her children, she told them the stains on the floor and the chair were from ketchup. “You know your father, how he puts ketchup on everything,” she said, “and what a messy eater he is.” This was, of

course, a slander; for all that had been wrong with the living Mr. Reed, he ate neatly, and was scrupulous in using his napkin. His son and daughter were young, and believed what they were told.

When he died, Mr. Reed changed the channel, which he had just begun to do before the door opened and John Taylor shot him three times. Because he was alone before they killed him, no one knew what he had been watching before. In any case he died watching a slug crawl into a conch shell. The music in that moment was soothing – breathy woodwinds and cool, synthetic burbles – which the community agreed was a good thing for Mr. Reed, who in any case shouldn't be blamed for shortcomings that may well have been God's handiwork.

Mr. Reed's body became hard and cruel in death. His toes curled up in his shoes. His prick became stiff, and his guts clenched as if to strangle some live game trapped inside them. His hands squeezed themselves into tight balls of muscle. His right hand broke the television remote. When the children asked where their father was three days later, Mrs. Reed explained that he had disappeared, and that he'd taken the remote with him, which answered their next question.

There was a brief moment where Mr. Reed was still conscious, watching the slug crawl into the conch shell, feeling all the blood fall out. He did not look at John Taylor, possibly out of contempt, possibly because he could not turn his head. "So it's true," he said. "Everyone wanted me dead, and always has for as long as I've been here."

John Taylor had been struck by the same feeling often. He said, "I'm sorry Hal. There was a vote."

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It had been easy to agree that Mr. Reed would have to die, for reasons no one in the town felt bore repeating. The name of their community was Floyd, and Floyd prized discretion, so there was little recounting of Hal Reed's crimes, or those of anyone else. It was better to kill him than to talk of what he'd done. On this point even the minister agreed.

Floyd had also come to quick agreement about how the cover-up would be done. Of course they would not discuss the killing any more than they would what precipitated it, except in closed meetings at the town hall, and they would file a missing persons report, and should anyone come asking after him – which was unlikely – they would only say Hal Reed was gone, and perhaps insinuate something about a long-distance girlfriend in one of the western interior states. One of those Internet sex perverts, no doubt.

The trouble came when it was time to dispose of the body.

Hal Reed was laid out on the desk that served as a podium in the city hall, eyes weighted shut with old pennies, fists still clenched (and the left embedded with shards of the controller's plastic), packed in ice, from which thick vapors rose.

There was a crematorium in a neighboring city, but this would not be

sufficiently discreet. (Surely those places made you identify the deceased.)

There were several citizens of Floyd who thought it best to boil the flesh away and bury the bones. Doris Crabtree said they should attempt a cremation themselves and scatter the ashes.

Paula Sharp, a farmer, observed that her pigs would eat nearly anything.

Steve Price had been researching dangerous chemicals in which the body could be dissolved, leaving only a fine white powder like baking soda.

Warren Reed, Hal's estranged older brother and a former student of anthropology, had been studying the Voodoo practices of apocryphal African cults. The growth of this interest was somehow connected to the growth of a lump behind his testicles, about which he had told no one. He suggested that they eat the body to absorb its strength, and also out of respect for the deceased.

Fat Steve, twenty-six, had lived alone in his mother's house ever since she died from sudden cardiac arrest. The volunteer firefighters of Floyd had been called after the ambulance came, and they had knocked down three-foot sections of wall with sledgehammers in order to extract her body while the paramedics smoked out back. Fat Steve shouted over the rising discord, "Having deprived this man of his life, we could at least give him a proper burial!"

For the first time in several decades, the neighbors fought with each other loudly, and in public. Owen Peachtree struck Mr. Cobb, who was kind enough to ignore it. Meanwhile flies were settling on Hal Reed's body, and his widow had begun to cry.

Mayor Osborne called the meeting to order by striking the desk where Mr. Reed lay with his coffee cup, which said, "NUMBER ONE MOM." He proposed another vote like that which had started them down this path in the first place.

Every method was put to the vote, and each member voted for his or her own method, so that no real majority could form.

"I've got a solution that should work for all of us," said Ross Reed, Hal's son

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by his first marriage, who was seventeen, paid \$75 a month to live in his girlfriend's family's basement, and wore a leather jacket to obscure his growing paunch, even when it was too warm. "Since none of us can agree on what should be done with his body, we should carve him into pieces – one for each. And each can dispose of our share as we please."

The town handyman had foreseen his tools might be needed and brought them from his rusted Ford.

Mr. Reed was divvied up among Floyd. They did their best to keep their portions equal, measuring each helping by his left middle finger, with the exception of indivisible units like the eyes, and heart, which proved too hard for cutting. His brother Warren was given four inches of large intestine. Fat Steve got the penis. Ross Reed took an eye.

The widow Reed was given the heart because it was known to be hers.

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Sally, Warren's wife, offered to prepare him a bowl of menudo and cook the intestine inside it, to disguise his brother's flesh. "I'm going to put my toe in the mulch," she said, "so at least a part of Hal can become one again with nature." She did not believe in Voodoo, but in gardening. There were soiled rubber work gloves scattered all over their home, and she liked to pour her homemade ice tea from a watering can with a sunflower painted on the side. Warren didn't mind picking leaves from her hair because she looked sweet in overalls.

Warren said, "The body should be devoured raw. Fire cooks away the spirit. It leaves with the steam." The intestine was sitting on a plate in front of him, which was smeared with some watery blood. He tried to imagine how it would feel in his mouth. Probably, he thought, like biting your own cheek – except that he would need to push *through*.

And it was going to be cold. He adjusted his bifocals. The world shifted around his eyes.

"You're having second thoughts," said Sally.

"Do you remember when I first brought you home?"

“He couldn’t take his eyes off me.”

“Later he said I should be grateful you were willing to go with a guy like me.”

“Is that why you voted against your brother?”

“Not at all,” said Warren. “It was only something I remembered about him just now.”

Their daughter came in through the front door and left her muddied shoes on the tile floor of the entry way. She hung her dripping yellow coat on the rack. “It’s raining,” she said.

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Fat Steve cradled Mr. Reed's penis in his hands. He was standing in front of his full length mirror, mentally comparing the severed prick with his own. He had to push his gut up and out of the way to do this, which inflamed his stretch marks. They were like cross-hatching, and made his belly seem full and round and three-dimensional. His torso looked like the breasts he drew on super women, in other words.

When they cut the penis from Mr. Reed's body, it was still hard. Most of the blood poured out after, though, like wine from a skin, and when it was done all that was left was some red-brown tissue with pale, hairy softness wrapped around it. Hal was not circumcised. The skin puckered around the tip of his penis head, pink and faintly purple. Another man had the balls.

Fat Steve's penis was nearly as long as Mr. Reed's, but they hadn't been so careful to cut it at the root. There was more of it, he knew, in Mrs. Koch's share. Fat Steve had been circumcised. Some women like that better, while some do not. They never tell you which in advance, any more than they will really tell you what the biggest one they ever had was.

In a few days he would bury the penis in a shoe box. He would not mark the grave or say a sermon, because they could not risk a gravestone.

Anyway, he didn't know any prayers meant strictly for the penis.

It was hard to suppress his erection. There was a girl coming. As far as he could tell it would be a date. He set the penis on his bed, on a paper plate, so it could not ooze onto his blankets. It reminded him of making Play-Doh snakes in preschool, of rubbing the purple clay between his hands until it was long and fragile.

He dressed in brown slacks, a white collared shirt, and an argyle vest. It was his own home; he wore sandals with velcro straps over fun Mario socks. The table was draped with a maroon cloth and piled with various candles. There were Michigan craft beers sweating in an ice bucket. Someone knocked on his door.

He ran to the door because it was raining. "Come in," he said. There were two girls on the other side. His date, Joanna Dillard, and a fat girl named Pamela. Their faces looked molten and waxy with all the water beading on them. They were framed by the heavy black chemical smoke of the latex factory. "Come in."

"Pamela's depressed," said Joanna. "She feels bad for Mr. Reed. I told her she could come along. I hope that's alright."

Pamela nodded. This submerged her walnut-shaped chin, and made her neck divide into several dozen folds, which did not improve her appearance. There was a faint pink ring around her mouth – perhaps misapplied lipstick.

"Sure," said Fat Steve. He wasn't really shocked to discover this was not, had perhaps never been, a date.

"That's a lot of candles," said Pamela.

"I didn't know how to choose. There's all sorts of scents and colors. Banana and strawberry, lavender and vanilla, things like that." Fat Steve pulled a third chair up to the table and cleared a space of several candles so that she could eat. "Do you like beer?" he asked them.

Joanna said she did, though not for the taste. Pamela only sniffed and nodded again.

Fat Steve twisted open three beers and set them on the table. “I made us breakfast for dinner, because that’s my favorite dinner. Come into the kitchen and you can serve yourselves.”

There were eggs with cheese and sausage in them. There were fat sausages that burped hot air and brown grease when stabbed with a fork. There were buttermilk biscuits and honey and jam. When Pamela came to the hash browns she burped once, immediately swallowed, and flew to the washroom.

Joanna followed Pamela. Fat Steve followed Joanna.

They found Pamela kneeling at the toilet, clutching her arms around herself, shivering. A bloody spit string hung from her lip. The toilet was full of red water, which had also splashed on the tile floor and the outside of the bowl.

Joanna knelt to rub her friend’s back. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “There, there.”

Pamela lunged forward and sprayed blood from her mouth. It hit the seat, which was up, and ran down the back of the toilet. It poured from her mouth and down her chin.

“What’s wrong?” asked Joanna. “Are you okay?”

Whenever Pamela seemed ready to answer, another stream of gore came rushing out. Gore and other things: granola bar, fruit candy, Cheeto dust, cashew crumbs, carrot chunks, soda pop, Redvines, Nutter Butter sandwich cookies.



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The citizens of Floyd disposed of the body in their own ways and in their own time. People did not ask each other what they had done with their shares, though sometimes the information was volunteered, or so public as to be inescapable. Joanna Dillard stomped her quarter of his right lung on the pavement of the outdoor basketball court in front of several other teens, including her sister. She stomped and stomped until the lung was pulped, and then she stomped until it was only a gray stain on the cement. Some felt that this was too far, while others did not. This was the virtue of each person acting on his or her conscience – they could all judge for themselves where the line of decency fell.

Joanna came home to a message from Fat Steve. She thought he should have used her cell phone's voicemail – it would have been more discreet. He said he enjoyed their evening together. He hoped Paula wasn't worrying about what she did in his bathroom. He had cleaned it all up and everything was fine now. He hoped they would be able to get together again some time soon. He wanted to hear all about her university applications.

Joanna poured herself a tall glass of milk. Her parents wouldn't be home from work for several hours, which meant her sister was down stairs with Ross Reed. There was \$75 in dog-eared cash on the kitchen counter, left by

Ross for her father to discover. She pocketed the money. This was the third time she stole his rent. As far as she could tell, no one really cared, which was typical of her family. Probably her sister was sucking Ross Reed off right now. Or maybe – and this was worse, way worse – Ross was eating Joanna’s sister out, working his tongue and lips on her like she was made of cotton candy, which was just about how her pubes looked ever since she gave up shaving (against Joanna’s advice).

Joanna wondered when Floyd would meet again. At the meeting where it was decided that Mr. Reed would have to die, he hadn’t been invited. He stayed home to watch television. Of course Mr. Reed must have known there was a meeting coming, and no one had asked him not to come. He stayed home anyway. It was possible he didn’t know what Floyd would say, or how they would come to vote on his life. She thought it was more likely that he had some idea about all this – his last words to John Taylor seemed to suggest as much – and had concluded there was nothing to say in his defense. Joanna knew what that was like. She had felt, for as long as she could remember, very much the same.

Joanna decided she wanted to tell her sister all about her day. She went downstairs and into the basement without giving any warning beyond the sounds of her bare feet on the wood steps. Ross Reed and Joanna’s sister, Diana, were watching television by the time she could see them, which was all they ever did when Joanna was around. Ross was rolling his father’s eye around in his hand. The colored ring around its pupil was blue like a beer can. Earlier that day, he had stripped the nerves with his pocket knife, leaving only the glassy sphere, and the grime that accrued on its surface.

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Ross balanced his father's eye on the tip of his nose. It quivered, and rolled up the bridge of his nose, then slipped back down. He was continuously surprised by the weight of it.

Diana had a fistful of Mr. Reed's nerves. These had been pulled out of his body like the long white worms that threaded through the bloated bellies of starved African boys. Diana couldn't decide what to do with hers until Ross knew what to do with his. In the meantime, she worked it between her fingers, imagining static electricity from the nerves explained the tingle in her skin. They felt like coarse hair.

Ross said, "Joanna."

"Ross," she said.

Ross was trying to think of a way to ask her how it felt to stomp his father's lung into a fine paste. There was no polite way of asking. He rolled the eyeball over his knuckles like he was doing a coin trick.

Diana said, "You should knock before you come down here." And then, "What do you think I should do with my share?"

“You could see if they’ll burn.”

“That’s a good idea. You don’t want to leave anything identifiable.”

Ross Reed offered his lighter. It had a polished chrome case, into which he had carved the sign for anarchy. Diana spread the nerves out on the coffee table, on a mirror they kept there, which they liked to say was for cocaine, though it was really for fixing her makeup after they smeared it. She flicked the lighter open and held the flame to Mr. Reed’s nerves. The flame licked her fingernail several times before the nerves took. They were like kindling, and the fire spread quickly throughout them. There was a sizzling sound, and sparks popped from the nerves, which glowed from their insides.

“Pamela would hate this,” said Joanna. “She won’t say what she did with hers.”

“What did she get?” said Ross, who dropped the eye in his pocket.

“It was his liver,” said Joanna. “Not the whole thing, I mean, but a big piece.”

“Well she’d better get rid of it,” said Diana.

Ross Reed said, “My dad was a fucker. He liked to wrestle. He would get angry or horny or something, or he would say I was making a fool of myself, and then we had to fight about it. When I was a little kid I thought it was funny. His secret weapon was tickling me. All he had to do was tickle me and I would fall over, and then he could work my back over with his elbows. He called that Chinese Massage. Sometimes he would sit on me and fart. He thought he was so funny. I guess I encouraged him. I did laugh.”

Diana warmed her hands over the burning nerves. Joanna sat down between them on the couch and pretended not to notice the way her thighs touched theirs, or the warmth that rolled through them. She was conscious of not having shaved anywhere for seven days.

She checked their faces to see if they felt what she did. There was nothing.

“It got more serious as I got older,” said Ross. “One time I punched him in

the cheek. The next time he gave me a black eye. His knee got put in my stomach. I dug my nails in his thigh. He pulled my hair. I actually broke one of his ribs after that. He told the doctor we were playing football. I felt awful, even though really it was his fault. My step mom made us stop after that.”

“That’s fucked up,” said Joanna. Her sister was sweeping the ashes off of the mirror and into his garbage pail, which was overloaded with soda cans, strawberry Gogurt tubes, Snickers wrappers, fun-sized M&M pouches, and pieces of broken glass from a lamp he’d thrown the night before against the wall. The broom that stood in the corner still glittered in its bristles with grains from the shatter.

“You should bury that too,” said Diana. “Do what you will with the eye, and then bury that memory. Say it into a hole and close the hole up.”

“Do you think people like me?” asked Ross. Diana and Joanna pretended not to hear.

They watched television for several hours, saying very little, ignoring the smells their bodies made, until the girls’ father was due home, and then they went upstairs to pretend to do their homework. Through their windows they could see the latex factory, and its many various smokestacks, and the heavy black plumes like long apostrophes that it poured into the air, and the smoke shadows on the dead land that surrounded the factory. The pink teddy bear she liked to squeeze between her thighs was sitting on her bed like it was waiting for her. She knocked it to the floor with the back of her hand, and took the other, wholesome bear (the mint green one, which she only held like a baby) to her desk.

There was a folded piece of yellow notebook paper hidden in a seventh-grade social studies book beneath several others on Diana’s desk. She excavated the paper and unfolded it, smoothing the creases. There were several names written on the paper in a very small hand. It was a list of people Diana thought should die. She had written Ross’ name at the bottom to see how it felt, and then erased it, but the pencil’s impression remained.

Beneath that shadow of a name she wrote her own.





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The next day Ross Reed took the eye to a concrete bridge that stood over the highway that split Floyd in half. The bridge was covered with graffiti and fliers for basement bands. He waited until a sixteen-wheeler came. He dropped the eye so it hit the windshield, which made the truck swerve. All the way to the gas station he thought about what it would be like to see an eye burst on your windshield. Maybe like the sky was looking back.

At the gas station Ross bought a pack of cigarettes. He flashed a homemade ID so the clerk could say it wasn't his fault if the sheriff took an interest. He spent the rest of the afternoon leaning against the back wall, smoking his pack, and remembering his father for the last time. At 3:30, when school was getting out three blocks away, he went back into the gas station and bought a dozen eggs. He cracked four of the eggs in his hands and let the yolks fall to the tar, where they sizzled and fried. They were yellow like congealed snot or thick sleep in your eyes.

The gas station was on the north side of the latex factory, near the highway. Ross could not see the smoke, but felt it behind him, just over his shoulders like a scrutinizing giant. He could feel the factory workers making condoms, latex gloves, and balloons, stretching the material over metal molds shaped like long dildos and large, featureless hands, which stood out from rotating half-spheres in wild clusters. There were people

that said the town smelled wrong. If this was so, or had ever been, he couldn't find the scent anymore.

There were and always had been little white squares of paper on all of the pumps, over the credit card slots, with notes that said they were temporarily out of order, and the customer would have to go inside, with cash.

Some of the other kids came to smoke and talk about themselves. Not Diana, who was, apart from her association with Ross, one of the good kids. She was planning to go to college, probably with her sister, and Ross was supposed to come along and live with them. Of course that would mean leaving Floyd. Now that Hal was dead, this was easy to imagine, and it seemed very simple.

His uncle Warren drove by and waved through his window. His face had a certain kind of glow that Ross thought he recognized.

When he was at the gas station Ross Reed liked to be called Double-R. He pulled wild moustache hairs from his lip and twisted them between his fingers. Everything smelled like gas and rotten egg.

The other teenagers talked about school work they hadn't done, or had done poorly. Hal Reed was not explicitly mentioned, and already Floyd's youths found it easy to discuss other things, sometimes including who they thought should be killed next. There were no explicit criteria, though there must have been some shared understanding about who deserved to live, as conversation quickly coalesced around certain people, though none were specifically named.

Then it was dark. The air went sweet and sticky like it was all laced with soda syrup. Ross bought himself another pack of cigarettes. He couldn't smoke through this one so fast – he was nearly out of cash, and he was thinking of seeing a movie with Diana. He rounded up three other people, some of whom he might have called friends, and they went to egg Fat Steve's house with what was left of his dozen.

While they egged his house, which happened sometimes, Fat Steve dug a hole in his back yard. He laid a shoe box down inside. It was like he was burying his penis. He felt numb and weird between his legs. If this was a

seed, he wondered, what kind of plant would it grow.

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Ross Reed came home to find Diana was gone, and so were her sister and parents. There was a cold Totino's pizza on the counter, mostly eaten. The post-it note beside it said, "Had to go out. We'll be back before late. Feel free to use the computer."

Ross went up to the second story and into the master bedroom, from which he could see the town hall. Most of the cars were gathered there in the parking lot like bodies in graves, and the windows were lit up yellow like construction paper cut-outs. If there was smoke in the sky – and there must have been – it was impossible to see against the night. He understood why he had not been invited, and was glad not to be there.

* * *

A week passed. There was another meeting.

It was easy and simple for Floyd to agree that John Taylor would have to be killed. It was needless to talk about why. John, who had seen the necessity of Mr. Reed's death, but expressed neutrality as a personal matter, was also neutral concerning his own life, and thus allowed to attend the meeting. The most rousing speech was made by Ross Reed, who was himself scheduled to be murdered within the week by Mr. Taylor, though officially

he did not know this. Without pointing to the character flaws of him on trial, or his sins, or even his name, Reed alluded to them all, and in so doing summoned such a feeling of loathing and pity in Floyd that none could deny the necessity of what they would do later, while John was asleep.

“What is it to kill another human being,” said Ross, “if not to destroy yourself?” He paced the center of the hall. He was not wearing his leather jacket, only his best Iron Maiden T, which rode up on his gut with each wild motion of his arms. “What is it to own the weapon, but to plan the act? How is planning another person’s destruction unlike undertaking it yourself?” He turned now to look at his mother. “In short,” he spat, “what’s the difference?”

He repeated himself: “What’s the difference?”

At their next meeting they would talk of Fat Steve, who might come or might not, and would not change or challenge the outcome. Theirs was a reasonable community, and careful, and when something needed doing they did not shy from the task. It was agreed that they would not go too far, that most of them could go on living – but given their perfection of the method with Hal Reed, and the goodness of the outcome, it was certain that they would do with other miscreants and slugs as they had done with him, and that Floyd would be better off for it. The important thing was that they were scrupulous, discerning, and the process democratic.

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The widow Reed told her children to come to the table. She poured Dominic a glass of milk, and filled Doreen's sippy cup with apple juice. "Kids," she called again, "come on. It's your favorite."

"Just a second Mom," called Dominic, from the living room.

Mrs. Reed laid out three plates, two sets of silverware, and Doreen's plastic airplane spoon. She put the spaghetti pot next to the children's origami Thanksgiving centerpiece, which was one year old and still resembled a turkey. She stirred the meatballs in, breaking them into bite-sized chunks with the serving spoon.

She checked the night through the open blinds. She flicked them closed. Things were quiet here without Mr. Reed and his son. She felt old tonight, and counted out the years she would have left if she still had half her life, and counted out the years if she had used two thirds. Her fingers were tight and swollen from all the old rings she still wore. They still stank of the liquid wrench she had used to pry those rings off.

It would be three years before she could change her name without it looking suspicious. It would be several more before she could annul the marriage, because legally her husband would never die. It had only been

three weeks and the children no longer asked after their father.

Mrs. Reed went into the living room. “Slowpokes,” she said, “what’s your mischief?”

Doreen stood naked in the center of the room, simple and easy as a candle’s flame. Her arms were stiff at her side and her eyes focused on something just beyond the walls of their home. “She’s taken off her clothes again,” said Dominic. They were scattered all around the room.

“I can see that,” said the widow Reed. Dominic was pulling her underpants up her legs.

“Sometimes she can be so ignorant,” he said. It was the family euphemism. He meant she was being retarded again. He was not supposed to say it that way – was not supposed to blame her, under any circumstances, for what was God’s handiwork.

When Doreen was dressed they would gather at the dinner table. Dominic would feed Doreen with his own silverware while she made the airplane spoon fly. Mrs. Reed would tell them all about her day, and the jokes she heard at work, and Dominic would smile knowingly at her, as if they shared something.

As for Mr. Reed’s heart, that was his widow’s business.

Mike Meginnis has fiction, poetry and essays published or forthcoming in The Lifted Brow, Hobart, The Collagist, elimae, Smokelong Quarterly, Kill Author, The Contemporary Review of Fiction, and others. He currently serves as a managing editor of Puerto del Sol, and co-edits Uncanny Valley (uncannyvalleymag.com) with his wife, Tracy Bowling.

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