

## Goldfish

When I first spotted Elgar in 1962 juggling chestnuts for two co-eds on the lawn at IU, I thought there's one I can deal with. The day after we were married at the Indianapolis courthouse I decided we weren't going to spend our first year of wedded bliss dissecting pig fetuses. We put school on hold and rented a cake box house in central Indiana with the idea that if things went well we'd buy it and if not, well, we'd have a sorry tale to tell.

On either side of us were older couples, flag-in-the-lawn types who kept private. We were young Kennedy voters who flattered ourselves that with the littlest push we could become something outsized and important – bank robbers, oilrig blowout cappers. We had firecracker sex and on two occasions picked up other couples we met at the Slippery Noodle in Indianapolis. I was Little Miss Instigator but Elgar caught on all right with his wide sly smile. Joined together, there was a hardness to us like something laminated. We thought we were devil-come-sundown, that we'd live a million years.

It was two years before the Civil Rights Act, which settled nothing in people's hearts. It wasn't like it passed and folks took the white hoods from the top of their closet to the trash. It was all still there behind the doors. At my Freshman Intro at U

of Indy we had one non-white face out of a hundred and sixty; a cob of corn with one burned kernel.

Grassyfork Fisheries gave Elgar what amounted to a starter job checking tanks, replacing filters, toting buckets of fry, electric with jellied life. It was amazing how much you could learn about goldfish if you lived in Martinsville. April and May is when they spawn, dropping their semolina eggs between sunrise and noon into a nurse's net of Spanish moss. For the first four months they're olive-black. The hatchlings are fed a liquid diet for ten days then moved on to dry wheat flour and powdered corn. Only after this extravagant coddling does the red then the gold seep through their skin beneath the clear scales like syrup leaking under a glass-top table. The ones that don't "gold-up" are sold for pet food and bait. Imagine that was you and you knew that.

Elgar grew up on a ranch and loved horses. I was neutral on horses and fish both. I had a talent for observation but no genius that might have promised a chutes-and-ladders miracle trip out of housewifery. I wanted to be in the world, not studying about it. I was the girl you saw flinging her arms in the air to balance on a high sea wall, with her parents pleading, *come down*. Can you imagine our kids, I asked Elgar. Look out, he said.

My father taught Science and was one of three authors on a textbook that went into fifteen editions. After my quiet practical mother died of a pelvic aneurysm when I was fourteen I'd gone semi-wild, picked up a few arrests for joyriding with summer-crazed boys. My father loved and worried at me in equal measure and sent us fifty dollars a month. The Indiana summers were hot and smelled of dust and

clover and I was cavalier. I'm sorry now for what I dragged Elgar into, I wish he was here for me to keep telling him.

One summer day after not even a month of work Elgar came home and told me Connie I've got something to tell you where you might suppose I'm crazy. More than usual I asked him, dusting off the flour pilling at my wrists. The window was half open so I could cool the kitchen and smell the cat-pee whiff of forsythia on our fence plus the tar on the road. Hot fresh asphalt drove me wild, like licorice you'd better not eat. I'd put some gin on ice in a ceramic bucket the shape of a schoolhouse with a removable roof. They didn't invent hipsterism in the nineties, there's always been people who wanted to stretch their leash but weren't brave enough to snap it.

Elgar sat on a vinyl-back chair rubbing his nose and shaking his head. He had a fine face, a pinch shy of movie handsome. When it was dirty from yard work or burning trash I told him he looked like Kirk Douglas shaking his fist at God. Those eyes that contained all of him. I loosed my bib apron, all I was wearing, and sat on his lap. He said the goldfish had started talking to him.

I laughed, waited for the rest of it. He put his feet inside two black floor tiles and cupped me from behind. It started yesterday, he said. I didn't tell you, I thought I had food poisoning or something. Sunstroke. I asked Ken Withrow, he said, if I could take a break. He said to lay off long as I wanted so I got a Coke and sat on a planter in the solarium.

What do you mean, I said, *talked*?

Walking away from the display room and the hatchery, he said, it got weaker. I went out back, sat in the shade, sucked on my Coke. The sun was catching off the surface of the ponds. I didn't go to the tanks again till today, this afternoon.

I turned and sat facing him. Could it be the chemicals, I asked. Something they treat the fish with, poison in the air? He said what I breathe, they all breathe. Unless everyone at Grassyfork's hearing fish and keeping it a secret. I strolled to the minnow ponds after lunch, he said, and there was something there too. A feeling of a word being spoken.

What word, I asked. He wouldn't tell me. So anyway I came home, he said.

Maybe, I told Elgar at breakfast, they're a wise alien species and you're the first one on their frequency. Maybe the water is an antenna. Trying not to think of aneurysms, brain lesions.

They're not wise, he said, staring in his cereal.

Ask them questions, I said. See what they think of dolphins. I've got a good feeling, I told him, this could be a bonus. I don't see how, he said. Talking goldfish? I said he could get famous, we could both. I rowed the hairs on his neck. We could be in Reader's Digest, I said. Speak at conferences. Clean white hotel rooms. A car that starts without cursing.

Don't worry, I said as he left for work. No matter what, I love you like crazy.

That night I found him in the front room facing the window. He'd kept his distance from the display building, he said. He'd worked at the brick ponds in the solarium with the palms and lilies, the windows starry with condensation. A busload of schoolkids came through, rabby and excited they were going home with

a fish in a bag. Elgar went into the display room where a little Colored boy was staring at the tanks. Seven or eight years old, in a white shirt, khaki shorts, strap-leather shoes. The goldfish started jabbering at Elgar. *That one*, they said, *the different one. We don't like that one. Get rid of it.* I shivered hearing him describe it. Elgar said he had to lean on a table to have something solid. People are all types, he whispered at them, that boy's the same as me. Funhouse flashes of yellow and gold and a thousand voices like stones in a metal cup said, *you know what to do. Sell it*, they said. *Sell it for bait.*

Elgar worried the voices were in his own head but I'd known him two years and he was the most loving man, he'd walk outside to brush off a bug. Maybe, he said, it's cos in their world a different fish could be a predator. To hell with that, I said. You clean the little bastards' tanks, tell them to show some goddamn respect. His eyes fell to our rugless floor. There's so many of them Connie, he said. We ship them everywhere, all over America. Outside, our neighbor mowed his lawn in a straight line.

The next day, Elgar asked what it was they didn't like about the Colored boy. *We're a proud race*, they said. When he told me this I wanted to drive there and pour bleach on them. What proud race, I wanted to ask them. You're *goldfish*. Elgar said don't get involved. We don't know, he said. If it's them or it's me.

That evening we sat out on our kitchen chairs under a washboard sky with a severe crow hatching a plan up the power pole. I wrote on the back of an envelope: *lightproof mask, sack/hood, cotton for ears, flashlight.* When Elgar's head was sound- and light-proofed, I said, I could spin him a time or few then lead him by the hand. If

the goldfish got louder when he was closer to them then it wasn't mental, it was a real thing. Elgar stared at me like a head-coned dog. I'll look like an idiot, he said. We'll do it at night, I told him. An adventure. And afterwards we can get naked in the high grass. That'll show them, I said. Those fish can kiss my beautiful ass.

Curses carry far in the Indiana air. Our duplex neighbor came around the side coiling a sprinkler hose around his forearm like something he learned in the Navy. He looked up at the sky, the retreating day.

We went out after sundown. The heat from the afternoon was quitting the tarmac, radiating back to space. It was three miles to Grassyfork, past low pin oaks and fruit trees fighting to put down roots in old cornfield. The long brick display building looked like a train station in a town no one stopped at. We parked on the road and crunched on foot up the side of the gravel lot. There was a night shift, Elgar said, but they stayed inside the building playing cards. Because who steals goldfish?

The ponds stretched on like a city. Glow-worms danced above the rectangles of black water. Elgar was nervous, chatty. He'd put on a windbreaker and he hunched his shoulders in it, rubbing his hands. There must be someplace I can work, he said. I told him if it came to that we could leave Martinsville, but we had to first determine what was what. Behind us a truck passed with something loose, out in the driveway dark.

The six hundred ponds were each the size of a backyard pool, with plank walkways like storm shutters set down between. Buckets of feed with misfit lids lay in the Indian grass and sedge at the end of each row and nets on long wooden poles

dipped in the ponds like drinking snakes. I played our light over a still black surface. Hey you assholes, I told them. Elgar said, you have to throw in food to see them. I tossed some dirt and a dozen popping mouths mooched to the surface. Can you hear them, I asked. These are the little ones, Elgar said. It's low, but it's there.

I needed to pee. Get blind, I told him, and headed with my skirt bunched in my hand to where the ground began to rise to the low breasty hills. The fish moved in tight curls under the lilies and duckweed. There were trees on the hill, pear or cherry, clumped like cows at dusk. The town stood below us a ways with one tall finger of a church pointing at the stars.

As I walked back, tucking myself in, a man's voice called out to ask what was I doing. A dim flashlight stroked through the air into my face. I'm a facile liar; I said my husband thought he might have dropped his wedding ring in a pond. I said I thought if I looked with an electric light I might catch the glint.

The guard had army hair and a shirt with rolled sleeves. His ears were close to his skull; with the building lights behind him his head was a frowning tulip bulb. He was only an inch taller than me. He crossed his arms. They glint too, he said, and spat. What, I asked. The fish, he said. You're not gonna see no wedding ring. What are you doing with your shirt there?

A muffled voice came from behind him: *Connie?* I was hoping Elgar would have heard us and laid down, but he had cotton balled in his ears, more cotton and gauze over his eyes and a flour sack on his head. The guard played the light over Elgar, standing with his hands out like a scarecrow. *What's this* he asked me, his voice trilling high. I started telling him something but he yelled again: *what's this?*

Elgar turned from side to side, listening to us, listening to the fish.

Sir, I said. It's a private romantic practice we have. Trying to sound embarrassed. Something my husband and I do. I hoped he'd be shamed, feeling he'd walked up on something he shouldn't out in the grassy dark. I thought he'd tell us scram and don't come back. But he reached inside his coat and pulled out a fat silver gun and the evening began for real. I expected him to say okay then, how about you do your thing right here in front of me? Let me see it. He had that look, I could tell in five seconds what kind of man he was.

He took a step back like something just occurred to him. He glanced at Elgar and back at me. Oh no, he said. I see what you're doing. You can just walk it, he said. In front of me, nice and slow, don't think of running. Running? I asked. He can't see. I have to take his arm or he'll fall in the ponds. That'd be a pity, he said.

I walked through the black grass to Elgar and shouted, *Honey it's a guard with a gun. He's taking us to check what I told him about our little romantic game.* I asked if Elgar could unwrap his head, but when I put my hands to the sack he pointed the pistol at me. *Hey,* I said. Leave it on him, he said. I want them to see this. Don't think I won't shoot you cos I will. What you think they pay me for? He took the long strides of a short man as we headed to the parking lot light.

The guard pointed to his car by the hoses. I asked aren't we going in the building? He was ten years older than us, banty-looking, like a man waiting on a corner for another man to show up and decide something for them both. He took handcuffs from his glove box and clipped Elgar's hands behind his back. He noticed his ring. If your husband's wedding ring fell in a pond, he asked, his voice full of



sarcasm, what's this then? I said I was sorry, that was just a story because I was nervous. He said we'll see about stories and husbands, and snapped the cuffs. When I protested that wasn't necessary he told me to think hard on *necessary*. He made Elgar duck in the back seat and pushed me after. He put a fish-smelling towel, wet at the fringe, around my head, making me choke. Elgar roared inside his bag what are you doing to her? I'm okay, I shouted. I hugged him around the waist, pinning his arms tighter. We're okay.

There were left and right turns and a corduroy straightaway then slowing and more turns. Mister, I said, he's my husband, Elgar Woods, he's worked at Grassyfork a month. He works with Ken somebody, Walker or Walter. He didn't tell me to shut up, he just drove.

After five minutes the car slam-stopped. The guard said you step out you'll wish you hadn't. Elgar breathed hard and paddled his shoulders around. What's he look like, he asked. A tough little guy, I said. Beaky nose, short dark hair and flat ears, a twisty mouth. He could be thirty. I don't know, Elgar said, his voice shaking. I don't see what he wants. My time sheet's in the building, he said. My name's in the paybook!

Another man came out, complaining to the guard. The two of them walked us across more gravel and up steps to a banging screen door, then a hard floor and a foul dog smell, into a room with a waft of glue or paint. They put us on a low hard couch and the guard pulled the towel off me.

The room was dark-carpeted with closed curtains and a lamp on a pole pointed at me and Elgar. The guard stood next to two other men: a tall one, older,

bald, who stayed in the shadows, and a younger, thick-set one with a beard, wearing a bathrobe, whose mouth didn't close all the way. Pity, the bearded man said, looking down to talk. His throat made a clicking sound, he lifted his hand and adjusted it sideways like straightening a bicycle seat. I've seen em do it this way before, the tall man said in a quiet voice. Caught after dark. Thinking if we can't see the face. Anyhow now we'll see, the guard said. He was excited, giving the others darting looks. Now we'll see what goes on right here in River City.

Elgar under his hood said *what do you want*, till the guard jumped forward and hit him in the head, knocking him into my lap. *Don't*, I shouted. He has earplugs in, he can't hear you! The tall one said something and the guard ordered me to sit him up. I'm sorry honey, I said, pushing my nose in his ear. I'm so sorry.

The bearded man opened his legs obscenely. Under his robe he had nothing on, he hung off the chair-edge. This is a sundown town, he said, looking down to talk, then up again. When he swallowed his throat clicked and he shifted the cartilage with his hand. Perhaps you knew that, he said, looking down, but you two thought you could be clever. I said I don't understand, we live here, we haven't done anything wrong. We're a venerable association, the bearded man said. Go on then, let's see.

The guard pulled the hood off Elgar and saw the gauze. *Jesus, look at this.* Elgar shoved his head down to his knees. I uncovered his eyes, took the cotton out of his ears and dropped the white puffs on the floor, thinking I could kick them under the couch, leave evidence. His lovely dark hair was twisted like drain water,

how it looked when I poured the rinse jar over his face in the bathtub to make him stick out his tongue.

The guard stood back and said lift up so we can see you, boy.

*White*, the tall man said from behind the light. He left the room in one big move. The bearded man swore, closed his robe and asked where did we live. I told them. He raised his hand and moved his throat. The guard put the towel and bag back on us, walked us to his car and ten minutes later we were standing among the still trees at the bottom of our street.

It had rained. The tarmac breathed fog. The guard said, don't talk to anyone, you're not careful you'll dig yourselves a hornet nest. He took the cuffs off. I was the one without a jacket but Elgar was shaking. The car turned, the guard drove off slow to show he didn't care. We uncovered our heads. We'd lost the flashlight and I was missing a shoe. I couldn't remember where we left the car.

The next day in the grocery a fat-faced woman gave us a sneer like we'd pissed on her dog. Our neighbor gave Elgar a nasty look when he went to post a letter to the State's Attorney. Elgar's face looked the same no matter what. His face didn't change any more.

On Monday he turned in his notice. I wanted to confront his boss, the night guard, the manager. He said no Connie you don't get to decide this one.

We lived with my dad in Bloomington for a month. Normal didn't come back. Elgar was too shaken-up and couldn't pretend it was just a thing that happened. He'd sit in a chair looking out a window and say everywhere, Connie, they ship them everywhere. Then we broke up, simply and sadly over one long weekend like

something cut along the grain. His parents lived in Montana. My father drove him to the train. I never saw my husband again.

I stayed on with office jobs and my father's help, but after a bad romance with a married man, and the murder of a black girl selling encyclopedias in Martinsville three months after Bobby Kennedy, I left Indiana for good. Thirty-four years later a woman told police she'd watched her father stab that encyclopedia salesgirl, Carol Jenkins, with a screwdriver in the front seat of their car on Morgan Street. For no reason, she said, at all. She'd been seven. Her daddy gave her a dollar for every year she was old not to say anything.

For a long time I missed going on fast drives in the countryside with my husband, tapping my feet in between power poles. I missed being that person with two sets of cutlery and slim reaching hands. I missed seeing the world like it was just a picture of the world.

Ozark Fisheries, inventors of the goldfish mailing container, bought Grassyfork in 1970 and closed it to the public. The long brick building was saved from demolition in 2012 when a businessman bought it for an office. My father phoned me when copies of *The Crusader*, the Klan paper, showed up at the bottom of folks' driveways in Martinsville in 2010. A disgrace, he said. When I heard about it I felt a complex urge to go back there, book into a motel and walk the streets and parks, those glow-worm hills, in case Elgar heard the news too and had the same idea. As if that time had come around again, swept by on the cycle of history, and we could return to it with no consequence and both be young and careless for one more

evening. On my last day in Indiana I put my suitcase in the trunk, coaxed the car to start and drove away with the sunset in my mirror turning gold.

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