

HUMAN SACRIFICE

Old Vera Bristlemeyer never socialized, never made a friend until she was too old to try. You can hear her talking to herself. Listen and you'll hear how bitter is her vocabulary, how cruel and caustic her tongue. She is a woman of impenetrable pessimism and perpetual disappointment. No one I know has ever seen her smile.

She mows her yard on Thursday mornings, soon after dawn, wearing a heavy denim jacket, sunglasses, and a wide-brimmed fabric hat. Her cracked leather shoes are black with dew. Grass clippings cling to their saturated laces.

She pushes the mower in tight concentric squares, border inward, overlapping each swatch as insurance against any inadvertently missed blades of grass. Now and then a car passes on the gravel road, spitting rocks across the ditch. Old Vera squints through the cloud of dust to identify the incompetents behind the wheel, does not return their wave. "Speed demons!" she cries, gripping the mower's handle. "Hell bent for leather!" The dust settles but her fingers still clench the metal bar. It takes effort to release her grasp, to pull off the heavy gloves, shake life into her hands. She removes her sunglasses and wipes her eyes. "Imbecilic maniacs!"

She stares severely down the road a mile or two until the rushing car blurs in its envelope of dust. You'd think they'd never heard of speed limits on a county road, never had to mow an acre littered with rocks, never had stones fly up from whirling blades to bruise their shins or gouge a hole in an oil pan.

"Where's the fire?" she hollers. Her voice is but a whisper against the reverberations of the mower. Not even the birds or prairie dogs take note of her displeasure.

Vera Bristlemeyer's yard is a huge expanse of prairie grass, punctuated with cockleburs, dandelions, and a scattering of cottonwood trees. The yard frames a tiny gray house where she lives with her aging mother. Since the tractor accident which crushed Mr. Bristlemeyer seven years ago, Vera's mother has become sedentary and censorious. She sits in the kitchen, drumming her gnarled fingers on the vinyl tablecloth, tapping, tabulating sorrows. Her fingernails are thick and brittle, a putrid yellow brown.

Vera supposes her mother is, at this moment, watching through the window, cursing a cruel fate which left her an ugly, obtuse daughter

instead of husband or son. Mrs. Bristlemeyer wonders daily, in Vera's presence, why God took the wrong ones. Vera wishes her brother, Ira, was here to help, instead of lying in a six-foot plot next to the church. He would enjoy finally hearing his mother's praise: "Ira at least knew how to mow." Ira always gave in too soon.

Vera is coming toward the house now, muttering to herself. The mower has stalled, choked on too-wet grass. She stomps onto the mud-porch, grabs a broomstick and jabs beneath the mower, dislodging clumps of masticated plants.

"I want my oatmeal!" her mother yells, watching Vera yank on the ignition cord, trying to reignite the engine. "You forgot to make my breakfast." The mower doesn't respond.

Mrs. Bristlemeyer raises a petrified fingernail to her lips and scrapes beneath it with her teeth. Saliva hangs in a spidery thread from the corner of her mouth. "Any fool knows you can't mow this early in the day," the mother says. "Ira never mowed before nine."

Vera tries the mower again, without success. A pick-up thunders past, a red Dodge with a raised chassis and oversized tires. The horn blasts and the radio blares. It's Marvin Welter, Edgar's grandson, behind the wheel—the one arrested for disorderly conduct on Independence Day. Edgar must have been mortified. A common disadvantage of having grandchildren, Vera supposes. Might have been her problem if Edgar hadn't been so enamored with Amelia McGillivray's halter tops and bathing beauty tan, forty summers ago. Vera is relieved the teenager bears no kinship to herself.

There's a dog in Marvin's passenger seat, head out the window, fur ruffled in the wind. Gravel sprays from the pick-up wheels, like Moses parting the waters. Vera stands immobile until the last flying stone settles at her feet. For an instant she has the impression that she, too, could be tearing across the country with the wind in her hair, could have a destination deserving supersonic speed. The feeling doesn't last.

The sun touches the top of the cottonwoods now, and Vera is hot. She wipes the perspiration from her forehead, adjusts the collar on her jacket. The melanoma served Amelia right, she thinks without remorse. Going around half-naked, skin as dark and tough as hide. What did she expect? Vera watches until the pick-up reaches the highway, turns left and disappears behind the trees at Frinkel's place.

Ira should have known better, too, working in the hot sun day after day the way he had, in short sleeves, refusing to wear a cap. Stubborn idiot. Why Mama always considered him the smarter one is a continuing mystery.

Vera's mother still sits at the kitchen table, hollering about her hunger. Vera can hear her rasping voice, yelping through the screen. "I need to eat!"

Vera tromps into the kitchen and grabs a soup kettle from the cupboard. She fills the pot with water, brings it to a boil, and dumps in an entire box of oatmeal. Then she slams the pot on the table in front of her mother, along with a wooden spoon, the sugar canister, and a carton of milk.

"Oatmeal is served," she snaps. Her mother's eyes widen with surprise. "I need a bowl," Mrs. Bristlemeyer whines, but Vera is already out the door.

The mower starts readily this time, with barely a cough or sputter. Vera puts in an uninterrupted hour of work. She counts her miseries as she circles the yard, and there are more than enough to fill her time. The list of troubles rolls off her tongue like water over the Pipestem Dam.

Then it hits.

Vera is maneuvering the mower around the northeast corner of the house—recalling how typical, how unremarkable it was that Father never got around to enlarging the house, after talking about it for all those years—when she hits the rock. It flies up, out of nowhere, shattering her glasses. Blood courses down her face. Slivers of glass riddle her right eye and cheek. She marvels at the bright redness of her blood, at the vividness of the pain.

In the house her mother lies on the couch, asleep. The oatmeal pot sits on the kitchen table, nearly full, swimming with milk. Vera can think of no one to call, so she folds a bath towel against her face and drives herself the fifteen miles into town.

Later that afternoon, bolstered with stitches and white gauze patches and a week's supply of pain killers, Vera trudges to her yard with a dilapidated bushel basket.

Crawling on hands and knees, she encircles the grass in the familiar, evertightening concentric circles. Every rock and stone she hands is tossed into the basket. There are more than she had even imagined there might be. Too many to carry at once. The decayed basket bulges, can't be budged.

Vera redistributes the rocks in several smaller containers. Then she does something she hasn't done in forty years—she climbs a tree. The cottonwood nearest the road has accommodating branches, is not even an actual challenge. Vera scales it with the empty bushel basket first, and secures the basket between two high branches that reach out over the road. Then she makes several additional trips, bringing the smaller containers of rocks and stones, and dumping them into the bushel basket.

By the time she's finished, Vera feels dizzy and nauseous. She sits in the tree, leaning back against the scratchy bark. You can see for miles, from the top of that tree, even with one eye closed. The panorama is calming, peaceful. Vera watches the semis going north and south on Highway 281. She counts them. Twenty-one. The wind blows against her face. She wonders if she has a fever. She can hear the crickets and the grasshoppers. Several birds flutter by, confused by her alien presence in their terrain.

Then she sees a car turn off the highway, heading her way. The car is going too fast, she can tell. It swerves a little, going over the second mile bridge. A trail of dust follows, lingering heavy in the humid afternoon air.

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Now the car is close, close. Vera doesn't recognize it, can't make out the faces in the front seat. No matter. She stands up in the tree, checks her balance, and grasps the bushel basket with her fists. "You've no right," she yells. "No one had the right! "

As the car speeds under the cottonwood, Vera heaves the basket, and the contents crash down. But her timing is wrong. The car hurtles past the tree, is already descending the hill to the west, unimpaired and unaware. The rocks and stones thud against the road, landing in a scattered heap. Vera thinks they look like an esoteric altar, a monument to despair. The dust cloud from the vehicle leaves a wispy trail of white above the road, a lingering sacrificial smoke. From her viewpoint in the cottonwood the rocks are very, very small.

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