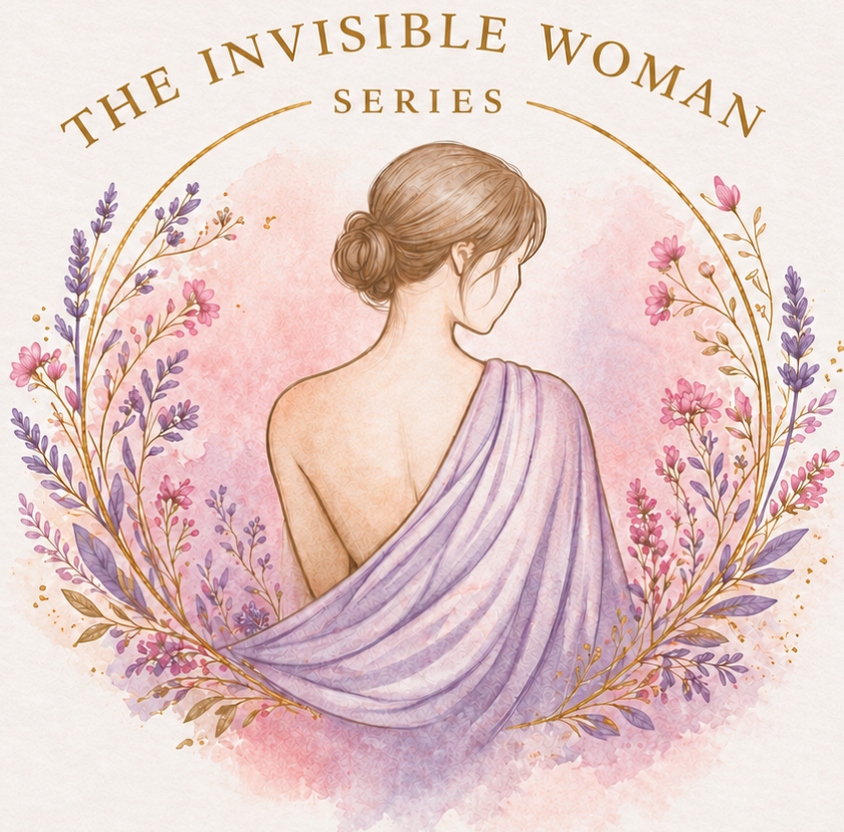


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What the Flies Carried Home

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The Summer of the Flies

No one could explain why the flies descended on Larkspur Coulee that summer.

They arrived in the dying days of July, when the canola had turned from honeyed amber to brittle sepia, and the heat was so stifling you could fry an egg on the sidewalk, which Mr. Peterman tried, with satisfying results.

They announced themselves long before they arrived, with a sound like a far-off motorcycle. The noise was a persistent, maddening drone that refused to relent, echoing the high-voltage hiss of a power line left ringing after a violent storm.

They found the jam on your toast before you did. They walked across your eyelids while you slept. The flypaper ribbons Mrs. Abernathy hung from her porch grew thick and black by supper, dangling like tiny gallows in the hot, stagnant air. The whole town smelled faintly sweet and faintly wrong; the way a fruit bowl smells on the day you should have thrown the bananas out.

My grandmother, whom I called Nani, taught political theory at the university for thirty-one years before retiring to our spare room and our tomato patch. She sat on the back step that first week, swatting nothing, watching the swarm lift and settle over the garden.

“Flies are the most honest creatures on earth,” she said.

“They’re disgusting,” I said.

“Disgusting and honest are not opposites, beta.” She pointed with her tea. “A fly goes where something is rotting. You can tell a fly a thing smells

sweet. You can paint it, perfume it, give a speech about it. The fly does not care. The fly goes to the truth.”

I was twelve. I thought she was being dramatic, which she often was, and I loved her for it.

I didn't know yet that before the summer ended, I would start a lie. I didn't know that a lamb, a tin can, and a single cord would finally end it all.

I'll tell them to you the way they happened to us, so pay attention to the threads: They are all connected. Don't ask me why. You'll have to read the story.

Why? Didn't I just tell you?

That's the whole point.

Seven That Died in a Blink of an Eye

Tobias Pell had hemmed every graduation gown in Larkspur Coulee for forty years, and in all that time nobody had ever called him brave.

He was a small, tidy man with half-moon glasses and a pincushion strapped to his wrist like a watch. His shop, Pell's Alterations & Repairs, sat between the post office and the Dairy Bar, and it smelled of steam, wool, and the lemon drops he kept in a jar for children. He whistled hymns while he worked, always a little flat. If you had asked anyone in town to describe him, they would have said *nice*, and then they would have struggled to say anything else.

Everyone was surprised when, in the middle of July, Mr. Pell filed papers to run for chair of the town council.

He was running against Harlan Voss, who had held the chair for sixteen years. Voss was a big man with a voice like a church organ and a ring of keys on his belt that jingled when he walked. The most important key opened the Commons Store, the old brick cannery at the bottom of the coulee where, ever since the drought of '88, the town kept its emergency reserve: flour, seed grain, canned goods, feed for the animals. Hard-times food. Everybody's food.

"Full and safe," Voss said at every council meeting, patting the key.
"Full and safe."

Nobody had been inside the Commons Store in years. Why would they?
Harlan Voss said it was fine.

* * *

I was at Mr. Pell's counter the afternoon it happened, waiting for my mother's dress. He had a slice of saskatoon pie on a saucer by the window, purple juice bleeding into the crust, and the flies had found it the way flies found everything that summer. They crawled across the lattice. They rubbed their little hands together like misers over gold.

Mr. Pell looked at them for a long moment. Then he folded a strip of grey felt into a pad, lifted it high, and brought it down. *Whap*.

He lifted the felt. He leaned in. He counted, moving his lips.

"Seven," he whispered. Then, louder, astonished, to nobody: "Seven! Seven all died in the blink of an eye!"

And Tobias Pell, sixty-three years old, did a little shuffle-step dance behind his counter, right there among the bolts of gabardine.

I laughed out loud. He went pink to the tops of his ears, then winked at me, and handed me my mother's dress and a lemon drop, and that should have been the end of it.

* * *

It wasn't the end of it, because I was twelve, bored, and nobody had ever leaned in when I talked before.

I got greedy because, well, for once, somebody listened, and it felt nice.

Outside the Dairy Bar, the older kids were sprawled on the picnic tables, peeling sunburn off their shoulders in great sheets and complaining about the flies. I said, not even loudly, "Mr. Pell took out seven at one blow."

Dougie Halvorsen sat up. "Seven what?"

And here is the part I need you to understand. I could have said *flies*. It was one word. It was the truth, but every face at that table turned toward me, and it felt like stepping into a warm lake. So, I shrugged, smiled, and said, “You’ll see.”

That was the lie. Not the words. The silence where the truth should have been.

By supper, Mr. Pell had faced down seven drunks outside the Legion. By Sunday, he had stood up to seven of Harlan Voss’s cronies at the zoning meeting. By the following Tuesday, he had personally beaten seven bankers in the city who had tried to foreclose on the Brandt farm, which wasn’t even true; the Brandt farm had been sold perfectly ordinarily to a family from Newfoundland that spring.

The Fall Fair committee stitched him a campaign sash of green satin with gold thread: SEVEN AT ONE BLOW. Lawn signs appeared on Main Street. People who had never spoken to him brought casseroles. Farmers shook his hand in the co-op and called him *Tobias*.

I watched him through the shop window the evening the committee delivered the sash. He held it in both hands under the lamp. He looked at it for a long, long time. I kept waiting for him to put it down, to walk to the door, to tell somebody. He was a truthful man. I had never once heard him fudge a hem measurement.

He put it on.

* * *

“There’s a story Plato tells,” Nani said that night, shelling peas into a bowl while the flies bumped the screen. “A shepherd finds a ring that makes him invisible. Once nobody can see him, he does whatever he likes. And Plato’s

brother asks Socrates the hard question: if you could never be caught, would you still be just? Or are people only good because they're watched?"

"What did Socrates say?"

"That the unjust man ruins his own soul whether anyone sees it or not." She split a pod with her thumbnail. "A reputation is a kind of invisibility ring, you know. It hides the real person behind the one everybody imagines. And the person inside starts to disappear."

"Mr. Pell didn't lie, though," I said, too quickly. "He never said seven *men*."

Nani looked at me over her glasses for one second longer than I was comfortable with.

"Machiavelli told his prince it wasn't necessary to have good qualities. Only to *appear* to have them." She went back to the peas. "People have been agreeing with him in private and condemning him in public for five hundred years. The trouble with a borrowed reputation, beta, is the interest. It always comes due."

* * *

It came due fast.

In the old story, the little tailor's boast sends him out to face giants, and he beats them by cleverness: he squeezes a lump of cheese and pretends it's a stone, he hides in the branches and lets the giants think he's carrying the tree. The thing about tricks, though, is that they work on giants. They do not work on flies.

At the candidates' forum in the Legion basement, Harlan Voss leaned back in his chair until it creaked and said, with a smile like a closing door,

“Since you’re such a hero, Tobias, why don’t you do something about the flies?”

The room laughed. Then the room went quiet and waited, because the flies were not funny. Two dairy herds were off their milk. The bakery had closed its doors for a week. The Kowalczyk baby had an infection the doctor said was probably from something a fly had walked through.

And Mr. Pell, who had never squeezed water from a stone in his life, adjusted his green satin sash and said, “I have a plan.”

He did not have a plan.

He set out forty jars of vinegar and dish soap along Main Street. The flies drank the vinegar and multiplied. He hung strips of foil from the eaves because a man on the radio said the shine confused them. It did not confuse them. Night after night I saw his shop light burning past midnight, his small shape bent over the counter, not sewing, just sitting, with the sash folded beside him like a flag on a coffin.

The giants in our story were never Voss, or the bankers, or the seven drunks at the Legion who did not exist. The giant was the story itself, and it was getting bigger every day, and it was eating him.

* * *

You have probably decided by now who the liar is.

The little tailor with the borrowed legend. The man in the satin sash who let a town believe he was something he wasn’t. And he did do that. He will tell you so himself, before this is over.

But Mr. Pell never said *seven men*. He never said anything at all.

I did.

I stood outside the Dairy Bar and let a silence do my lying for me, because for one afternoon, people leaned in when I talked. If you are keeping track of who started all this, start with me.

Why? Oh my, just like that, a Fly Went By

A rumour is an engine: It doesn't much care what fuel you put in it.

In July, the engine in Larkspur Coulee ran on glory. By mid-August, it had switched to fear, and it was moving faster.

The flies were worse. They came in clouds now, thick enough to black out a window. And because people needed somewhere to point, they pointed at the Brandt place, which was not the Brandt place anymore. It belonged to the Kearneys, who had come from an outpost in Newfoundland after the fishery dried up, and who kept a small flock of sheep on the north quarter.

"Sheep bring flies," someone at the co-op said, and somebody else nodded, and that was that.

Nobody had visited the Kearneys. Nobody had brought them a casserole. Their daughter, Lidia, was in my grade. She talked with an accent the boys liked to imitate, and she walked slowly, carefully, as though she were listening to the ground. At recess she sat alone by the fence and knotted bits of baler twine into shapes I didn't understand. I had never sat with her once. I would like to tell you that I didn't notice her, but I did.

I noticed her every day.

* * *

It started on a Thursday evening, at the bottom of the coulee, with a sound.

Clank.

A pause.

Clank. Clank.

Dougie Halvorsen was flying through the cannery lot on his bike, pedalling so hard you'd thought he'd stolen it, when a sudden sound stopped him short. From deep behind the old brick walls came a hollow, metallic walloping. As he described it, it sounded slow and heavy, like some huge, immoral wrongdoer dragging his chain. He did not stop to look. He stood up on his pedals and flew.

Mrs. Abernathy saw Dougie fly past her hedge, white as milk, and she scooped up her poodle and ran.

The Lutheran pastor saw Mrs. Abernathy running, poodle and all, and he turned his bicycle around and pedalled hard the other way.

The two volunteer firemen sitting outside the hardware store saw the pastor go by at a speed no pastor should go, and they jumped into the pumper truck and drove *away* from wherever he'd come from.

And Harlan Voss, chair of the council, keeper of the key, saw the fire truck going the wrong direction with its lights on, and he threw his own pickup into reverse so fast he took out the WELCOME TO LARKSPUR COULEE sign.

Dougie ran because of the noise. Mrs. Abernathy ran because Dougie ran. The pastor ran because Mrs. Abernathy ran. The firemen ran because the pastor ran. Voss ran because the firemen ran. Each of them believed the person ahead knew what was back there.

By the time the sun went down, half the town had decided there was *something in the cannery*. A bear, said some. A wolverine. A man with a grudge. A sick ram from the Kearney place, foaming at the mouth, bringing the plague of flies with it.

I ran too. I want to be honest about that. I ran three whole blocks, my heart slamming in my ears, before I stopped under the streetlight by the Legion, out of breath, with a terrible question sitting in my chest.

It was Nani's voice, of course. *Seeing other people afraid is not the same as seeing what they're afraid of.*

* * *

I walked back up the chain.

"What did you see?" I asked Voss, who was standing beside his dented truck.

"I didn't see anything. The fire boys were running."

"What did you see?" I asked the firemen.

"Nothing. Pastor Lund came by like his tail was on fire."

Pastor Lund had seen Mrs. Abernathy. Mrs. Abernathy had seen Dougie. And Dougie, sitting on his front step with his knees pulled up, said in a small voice, "I didn't see it. I just heard it."

Nobody had seen anything. An entire town had been chased across itself by the back of the person in front.

I went down into the coulee alone.

The smell reached me before the building did: sweet, then sour, then something underneath that made my throat close. The flies poured out of the cannery's broken roof vents in black ropes, twisting up into the purple sky like smoke from a fire deep inside the belly of the beast nobody could see. The front doors were chained, Voss's big padlock gleaming. But around

the back, the loading dock door hung open, its bottom half gone soft and black with rot.

Clank.

Closer now.

Clank.

And then a voice, hoarse, very tired, with an accent the boys liked to imitate. “Hello? Is somebody there? *Please?*”

* * *

She was half-sunk through the loading dock floor, where the boards had rotted out from under her. Her left leg had gone straight down into the drainage channel beneath and wedged there to the knee. Beside her, a lamb bleated, its back hoof jammed tight inside a dented tin can.

Lidia Kearney had been banging a second can against an iron pipe for nearly two hours. Her knuckles were bleeding.

“She got out of the pen,” Lidia said, nodding at the lamb. Her voice was perfectly steady, which somehow made it worse. “Followed the smell down here. Got her foot stuck in a can, and when I came in to get her, the floor went in.” She almost laughed. “I’ve been knocking for help. I heard people come. I heard them *running*.”

Everyone in Larkspur Coulee had fled from the sound of a girl asking for help.

Then I looked past her into the Commons Store and understood where the flies came from.

The reserve was there, all of it, in long rows that went back into the dark. The canned goods had swollen; the tins bulged like they were holding their breath, and some had burst, leaking black syrup down the shelves. The flour sacks were moving. The seed grain had sprouted, rotted, and sprouted again in grey-green, furry heaps where rain had come through the roof. Whatever the town had put by for hard times had been rotting in the dark for a very long time while a man patted a key on his belt and said *full and safe*.

The flies hadn't come from the Kearneys' sheep. They had come from us.

* * *

I couldn't get her out. I yanked and pulled, and she gasped, and the jagged edges of the boards bit into her leg with teeth, so I stopped.

Then a flashlight swung across the loading dock, and a small, tidy man in half-moon glasses came picking his way through the muck in good shoes. Mr. Pell. He had seen me walking the wrong way past his shop window, he said later, *toward* the noise, and he had thought: *Well. Somebody ought to go with her*.

He was still wearing the sash.

He did not make a speech. He knelt in the rot and the flies, opened his coat, and took out his shears, the good German ones he'd had since his apprenticeship, the ones no child was allowed to touch. He cut Lidia's bootlaces. He cut the leather of the boot, careful as a surgeon, and worked her foot free an inch at a time. He sliced his own palm on the broken boards and didn't seem to notice.

Then he pried the can off the lamb's hoof with the tip of the shears, and the lamb bolted into Lidia's lap.

Her ankle was swelling fast, purple as saskatoon jelly. Mr. Pell looked at it, then down at himself. He pulled the green satin sash over his head, folded it lengthwise, and bound her ankle with it, firm and neat, the gold letters SEVEN AT ONE BLOW disappearing into the mud.

"There," he said quietly. "Finally good for something."

Lidia looked from him to me, then out at the rows of rot behind us.

"Everybody thinks the sheep brought the flies," she said.

"Everybody thinks a lot of things," said Mr. Pell. He looked at me, not unkindly, but for a long moment, and I felt my face heat in the dark.

He knew. Of course he knew. He had known all along who had started it. And he had never said a word about that either.

The Fly caught in The Thread

The Harvest Supper was held, as always, on the second Saturday of September in the community hall, and as always, the whole town came.

Long tables under fluorescent lights. Perogies swimming in onions and butter. Platters of ham, bowls of creamed corn, pans of squares, nine saskatoon pies in a row. And the flies, everywhere, a moving black lace over every dish. People ate with one hand and waved with the other. Children were stationed at the ends of the tables with tea towels, snapping. Nobody could taste a thing.

After supper came the candidates' speeches. That was the custom.

Harlan Voss went first. He stood at the podium in his good shirt, keys jingling, and did not look at the corner where Lidia sat with her mother, her ankle in a cast propped on a chair, crutches leaning beside her.

"The Commons Store," Voss said, in his church-organ voice, "is full and safe."

I could see the words leave his mouth. I could see a fly land on the microphone.

Then it was Mr. Pell's turn.

* * *

He walked to the front without his sash. People noticed. A murmur ran down the tables.

He took off his half-moon glasses, polished them on his tie, and put them back on.

“I killed seven flies,” he said. “In July on a saskatoon pie. That’s the whole legend.”

The hall went so quiet you could hear the flies.

“I never fought seven men. Never beat seven bankers. I’m a tailor. I let you believe the rest because, for the first time in sixty-three years, people looked at me like I was somebody. That was wrong of me. I own the lie.” He folded his hands. “I’d rather lose this election as myself than win it as somebody I made up.”

I was standing before I knew I was going to.

“It’s mine too,” I said. My voice cracked straight down the middle. “He didn’t start it. I did. I told the kids at the Dairy Bar he got seven at one blow, and I didn’t say seven *what*, because I liked how it felt when people listened to me. I’m sorry.”

Nani, at the end of our table, did not smile. But she put her hand flat on the tablecloth, palm down, which in our family means *I’m here*.

And then Lidia Kearney reached for her crutches.

It took her a while to get to the front. Nobody helped. When she got there, she leaned on the podium and told them all of it, steadily, in the accent the boys liked to imitate: the lamb, the can, the floor, the two hours of knocking while the town ran away. And then what she’d seen behind the loading dock door. The swollen tins. The moving flour. The rot.

“The flies aren’t from our sheep,” she said. “They’re from your food.”

* * *

Since then, I’ve read that a swarm can turn in an instant, every fly changing direction at once. So can a room.

Every head in the hall swung toward Harlan Voss.

“Is it true?”

“Sixteen years, Harlan!”

“My dad put seed in that store!”

“Recall him!” “Lock him out!” “Take the keys!” Somebody threw a dinner roll. It bounced off Voss’s chest, rolled under the pie table, and a nebula of flies took to the air.

Voss didn’t shout back. That was the thing I remember. The big man just sat down slowly in a folding chair, as if someone had let the breath out of him. And then the truth came out of him in pieces, the way rot comes out of a wall. The roof had started leaking in 2017. They hadn’t had the money to fix it. He’d meant to tell the council, but it was an election year, and he’d said *“full and safe” so many times, and every year he didn’t say it, it got harder*. By the end, he told us, he couldn’t make himself go inside anymore. He’d stand at the padlock, key in hand, and walk back up the hill.

“I was afraid,” he said. “Every year a little more.”

A lie protecting a lie protecting a lie. Nani had a word for that, and it wasn’t a political science word. It was an old one, older than Plato, from the language her grandmother spoke.

Karma. Not punishment, she always said. Not a cosmic scorecard. Just this: what you set moving keeps moving, until somebody is brave enough to stop passing it on.

The room was getting ready to pass it on. You could feel it, the way you feel weather. They were going to take all that fear and shame, pour it onto

Harlan Voss, and call it justice, and the cannery would still be rotting in the morning.

Nani stood up. She was not a tall woman, but she had lectured to three hundred undergraduates at eight in the morning for thirty-one years, and she knew how to stand up.

“You can swat him,” she said. “It will feel very good. You will get seven at one blow. And next week there will be seventy more, because you will not have touched the thing that is rotting.” She looked around the hall. “You do not fix rot with a bigger swatter.”

Nobody said anything. Then somebody said, “Then what *do* we do?”

And Nani looked at me.

* * *

The summer before, while visiting my cousins out east, I stood in a dim room at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, at a spider exhibition, holding an audio guide to my ear. It told an Anishinaabe story. I had thought about it all summer without knowing why.

I walked to the front of the hall. My legs were shaking. First, I said this was not my story. It belongs to the Anishinaabe people, who have been telling it for a very long time, and I could only tell it the way I had heard it. Then I told it.

Once, the people’s food kept spoiling before they could eat it. A small, slow, six-legged, pot-bellied creature called Manitoosh was going hungry because it lived on flies and could never catch them. It hid in dark corners. It threw grains of sand. It even let itself down on a thread it could spin from its own body. And the flies only laughed and darted away.

For years, nobody understood that the people's trouble and Manitoosh's trouble were the same trouble.

Then the people held a feast for Nanabush, the great spirit, to talk about their hard times. And the flies swarmed the food, and the Manitoosh and its brothers and sisters leapt and scrambled to catch them and failed. And Nanabush, who had been watching, took pity on the little creature. He said: I know you can make a thread. Why not use that thread to make a trap?

So Manitoosh went home and wove, back and forth, criss-cross, all night until it was exhausted. And in the morning, there were two flies caught in its net. It ate, and then it ran to teach its brothers and sisters. And the people watched and learned from Manitoosh how to make nets to catch fish. Because the little creature had helped the people, Kitche Manitou gave it an extra pair of legs and a new name: Net-Maker.

I stopped. The fluorescent lights hummed.

"Nobody realized the troubles were connected," I said. "That's us. The flies, and the store, and the rumour about Mr. Pell, and the rumour about the sheep, and the Kearneys nobody visited, and Mr. Voss being afraid. We keep treating them like different problems. It's one problem."

* * *

This is the part of the story I did not expect, and I was the one telling it.

Everyone in that hall turned, slowly, to look at the corner. At the girl in the cast, with her lamb-scraped knuckles and her crutches leaned against the wall. Slow. Careful. Listening to the ground. Six limbs, if you counted the crutches, which Dougie Halvorsen did, out loud, and for once nobody laughed at him, because Lidia laughed first.

“Extra pair of legs,” she said. “Guess I’m halfway to Net-Maker.”

Then she said the thing nobody in Larkspur Coulee knew, because nobody had ever asked her. Her grandfather had mended cod nets on a wharf in Newfoundland every day of his life. She had been knotting since she was four. All those bits of baler twine at recess, the shapes I didn’t understand, they were net knots. Sheet bends and clove hitches. She’d been practising the only thing that made her feel like she belonged anywhere.

“You can screen the hall,” she said. “You can screen the store’s vents while you clean it. But I can’t make it alone. A net’s not one thread. It’s all of them, crossing.”

Mr. Pell was already on his feet. “I have thread,” he said. “Forty years of thread.”

He went to his shop and came back with three cardboard boxes. Every spool he owned. Cotton and polyester and silk and button twine, navy and scarlet and wedding white, the green and gold left over from a certain satin sash.

And Lidia, on her crutches, taught the whole hall to tie one knot.

The Kowalczyks tied. The pastor tied. Mrs. Abernathy, poodle in her lap, tied. The firemen tied, badly, and redid it. Dougie tied. My mother and Nani and I tied. And when the first long line was ready to be strung across the big hall window, Lidia held it out, not to the would-be chair or the town’s hero, but to Harlan Voss, sitting alone in his folding chair.

“You’ve got the key,” she said. “You know where the holes are. Better start there.”

He looked at the thread in her hand for a long time. Then he took it.

* * *

“This is what power actually is,” Nani said to me that night, as we stood on chairs pinning crooked, many-coloured netting over the windows while a hundred people worked around us. “A philosopher named Hannah Arendt said it. Power is not something one person holds, like a key. It only exists when people act together. The minute they scatter, it’s gone.” She tugged a knot tight. “Harlan thought power was the key on his belt. Tobias thought it was the story on his sash. It was never either one. It’s this.”

The nets went up over the hall that night. In the following week, the whole town went down into the coulee with shovels, gloves, masks, and wheelbarrows, and hauled the Commons Store out into the light: every bulging tin, every crawling sack, every sprouting heap. It was the worst-smelling week of my life. We burned what had to be burned, composted what could be composted, and stretched Lidia’s nets across the vents and the broken roof until the new roof went on.

The flies did not vanish in a single morning, the way they do in stories. They thinned, day by day, as the rot left. Flies go where something is rotting. When there was nothing left to rot, they went somewhere else.

* * *

Then came the harder part: deciding how not to end up here again.

Nani took over the Legion basement for three Thursday nights and taught the whole town, whether it wanted to learn or not, about a woman named Elinor Ostrom. Ostrom spent her life studying farmers, fishers, and villagers around the world who shared things, pastures, forests, water, and fishing grounds, without wrecking them. Everyone had always said shared things were doomed. Somebody would cheat, or hoard, or let it rot. Ostrom

went and looked and found communities that had kept shared things healthy for hundreds of years. And they had a few things in common.

We borrowed every one of them.

We wrote down, plainly, what the Commons Store was and who it was for: everyone in the coulee, newcomers included, from the day they arrived. The people who used it made the rules, at open meetings, not one man with a key. There would be three keys, held by three different people, rotating every season; one always had to be someone new, and one always had to be under twenty. Anyone could walk in, inspect it any day, and report what they saw. The first slip would be a conversation. The second, a debt paid in work. Only after that, anything heavier. Arguments would be settled on Mr. Pell's shop porch, over tea and lemon drops, before anybody called a lawyer. And the county, after some grumbling, agreed to recognize it.

We called it the Keepers' Circle.

The first rotation of keys went to Lidia's mother, to me, and to Harlan Voss.

People argued about that. A lot. But Nani said a thing on the third Thursday that I have never forgotten.

"You don't end bad karma by handing it back to the man who started it," she said. "That's just passing it along with a different return address. You end it by refusing to pass it on. And then you watch him, carefully, the way you'd watch anybody, and you give him a way back."

When the election finally came, it was the strangest Larkspur Coulee ever held. Tobias Pell withdrew. So did Harlan Voss. And the chair went, by acclamation, to Mrs. Edna Abernathy, who had once run three blocks with a

poodle under her arm from a sound she never saw. She opened every council meeting for the next six years with the same question:

“What are we afraid of? And has anyone gone and looked?”

What the Flies Carried Home

The hard times came, as they always do, without asking whether you're ready.

In January the gas plant west of town shut down, and a third of the families in Larkspur Coulee lost a paycheque in a single afternoon. Two weeks later, a blizzard closed the highway for nine days. The grocery truck couldn't get through. The wind howled down the coulee and found every crack in every house, and the cold was the kind that makes your teeth hurt when you breathe.

And the Commons Store was full.

Not *full and safe* the way a man says it with his hand on a key. Full the way a thing is full when a hundred people have hauled the rot out of it with their own hands, and stocked it, and checked it, and argued about it on a tailor's porch over lemon drops. Full and real.

Every family in the coulee drew from it that winter. The Kowalczyks. The Halvorsens. Mrs. Abernathy and her poodle. The Kearneys, no longer "the new family," just the Kearneys. Mr. Pell, whose shop had no customers when nobody could afford a hem.

And Harlan Voss. His wife was in hospital in the city that February, and his truck had been repossessed, and he was too proud to come, so he didn't. Lidia went to him instead. It was her family's turn holding a key. She pulled a toboggan of flour and tins and seed potatoes up the hill through the snow on her healed ankle, knocked on his door, and set it on his step.

"You helped clean it," she said when he opened the door. "It's yours too."

I saw him through the window afterward, sitting at his kitchen table with his big hands around a can of soup, not opening it, just holding it above his head, the way Mr. Pell had once held a satin sash.

That's how it works, I think, when people stop swatting at it. The bad stops where somebody refuses to pass it on. The good keeps moving, hand to hand, thread to thread, until it comes all the way back around to the person who once didn't deserve it, and finds them in a bad winter, and feeds them anyway.

* * *

I am grown now. Nani has been gone for some years. Mr. Pell's shop is a bakery, and in its window, in a frame, hangs a mud-stained strip of green satin with gold letters on it. Beneath the old words, in neat white thread, he embroidered new ones before he died:

SEVEN FLIES. THAT'S ALL.

I think about that summer more than any other. I think about how easy it was to let a silence lie for me, and how much it cost a good man, and how long it took me to stand up and pay it back. I think about how a whole town ran from a girl asking for help because it was easier to be afraid together than to go and look alone. And I think about how the answer was never a hero with a belt, or a man with a key. It was one thread from every hand in the room, crossing.

Here is what I know now that I didn't know at twelve.

Being real costs something. Being fake costs more, and it charges interest.

A steward is not the one holding the key. A steward is the one who goes down into the dark and *looks*.

None of us is the whole net. Not the tailor, not the newcomer, not the man who failed, not the kid who lied. But every one of us is a thread somebody else is counting on, especially the ones who feel like they don't belong. Especially them.

* * *

This morning, the first warm morning of spring, a fly woke up somewhere in the walls of my house and came buzzing against the kitchen window, bumping the glass, bumping, bumping, trying to get out into the light.

I watched it for a while. Then I opened the window.

Flies carry what they find. That's what Nani taught me. They go where the truth is, rotten or sweet, and they take a little of it with them wherever they land next.

So be careful what you leave lying around in your house. Be careful what you say, and what your silence says for you. Be careful what you keep under lock and key and call *full and safe*.

Because sooner or later, a fly will go by.

And it will carry whatever it finds in you out into the world, to land on someone else's table.

This story is what the flies carried to me.

Now it's yours. Go and look.

References

This is an original work of fiction by Brittany Molenaar that draws on three source stories and several works of political theory. Larkspur Coulee and all its residents are invented.

A note on the Anishinaabe story. The Manitoosh and Nanabush story belongs to the Anishinaabe people and their storytelling tradition. Wren's version summarizes the account presented by the Royal Ontario Museum, which broadly identifies it as Anishinaabe and does not name a specific community or storyteller. Out of respect, the story's own events are not altered here; the twist lives in how the fictional town hears it and acts on it. Readers who want to learn more are encouraged to seek out Anishinaabe storytellers and knowledge keepers directly.

Where each idea appears. “The Brave Little Tailor” (Grimm & Grimm, 1812/2004) shapes Part One. *A Fly Went By* (McClintock, 1958) shapes Part Two. The Manitoosh story (Royal Ontario Museum, 2018) shapes Part Three. Nani's references draw on Plato's Ring of Gyges (Plato, ca. 375 B.C.E./1998), Machiavelli's advice that a ruler need only seem virtuous (Machiavelli, 1532/2006), Arendt's account of power as acting in concert (Arendt, 1970), and Ostrom's design principles for governing shared resources (Ostrom, 1990).

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