

The Ripple Effect

Studies say that the first sign of insanity is having delusions and bouts of paranoia: Terry would disagree. She knows that it starts in a small, dilapidated row boat in the middle of a lake.

The whole mess had started years and years ago, long before she was born. Her grandfather was working for the government, and one day he simply quit out of the blue to utter confusion of his family. After that day, he went down a thirty year long rabbit hole of independent research and investigating. The content of which no one knew of except for his wife, Terry's grandmother.

She remembered the stays at Grandma and Grandpa's lake house twice a month, where she would find herself slipping out of her bed late at night to grab a cold drink of water in the kitchen. There was not a single occasion where she could not recall seeing the thin sliver of warm light sneaking out her grandfather's study as she tiptoed down the hallway. She didn't dare get too close, having been reprimanded by her grandmother too many times to count for being caught starting to twist the knob. This did nothing to stop her late night imaginings of what could be behind the door, however. The lamp always stayed on until the first morning rays of sunlight lit the room for it, and only then would her grandfather exit.

These visits, nonetheless mysterious, were some of the fondest of Terry's childhood memories. In fact, most of her best memories were focused around her grandfather himself. He seemed to be there with her in all of her waking moments. Whether it was splashing around with her in the lake, making her laugh at his interpretation of a fish until her sides were sore, or telling her dramatically narrated ghost stories around a crackling fire, always placing a comforting hand on her shoulder when her brown eyes went wide with fear, which warmed her more than the blazing fire ever could.

“Ripples make waves, Terry,” he would always say to her. He was known for his love of fishing, and in return, his water metaphors. Actually, he had said it to Terry so often that even though five years had passed since she had really seen her grandfather, Terry could recall his voice and those words with stark clarity. He would say it at odd times, like when she was eating her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and it was that last thing he said to her before “I love you” when tucking her into bed.

Her grandfather did a spectacularly good job of hiding the whole situation from her. Terry never questioned why both of her grandparents never seemed to leave the lake house or why they had a different last name than her when they were from her dad’s side of the family. Every time her urge to ask questions arose, they took advantage of her childish innocence and directed her to a new toy or freshly baked cookies until any and all questions she may have had were long gone. The younger version of Terry was alright with this. Nothing you didn’t know would hurt you, the saying goes. It was very wrong.

It wasn’t until she was fourteen that she grew suspicious of the whispered conversations that would end abruptly the moment the creaking of the old floorboards would announce her entrance into a room. Her grandfather’s eyes, once so full of joy and a charismatic light in her childhood had dimmed, a poorly masked grimness swirling in them instead, which he was no longer able to hide even from her. She had attempted to ask both her grandparents about it once at dinner - a place where she knew they couldn’t avoid the question without suspicion.

“So...what’s the big family secret?” Terry had asked, an injection of humor in her tone to stave off both her own nervousness and the adverse reaction she knew might be coming. Her grandmother’s face immediately went as pale as the white tablecloth and her grandfather sucked in a sharp breath, hand clenching around his fork. He had then snapped at her to drop it. She

remembered being silent throughout the rest of dinner, eyes fixed firmly to her plate with food that would never be eaten. He had never snapped at her before.

The twice monthly visits became once a month, then once every other month, then once a year, and then finally...they stopped altogether. Her grandfather died about three years after that in a boating accident. Her grandmother followed a week later due to natural causes. She had inherited the lake house after that.

Two years passed before Terry plucked up the courage to face the cabin. The once tidy lot was in disrepair, the yard growing out of control in the absence of its former caretakers. Strangely enough however, when she had opened the familiar chestnut door to the entryway, the dust seemed disturbed. In fact, there was barely any dust at all for a house that had not been stepped into for two years. Confused, but not suspicious, Terry had hauled her luggage up the front steps and into the house, taking residence in the now childish looking bedroom she had always stayed in, not bothering to lock her car behind her. She failed to notice the week old set of tire marks beside it.

Her sleep had been troubled that night, the usually calming sound of nothing but singing frogs and chirping crickets for miles and miles not doing its job at sending her into an undisturbed slumber. So Terry found herself swinging her legs over the side of her bed and starting towards the kitchen, a routine she was used to but now unfamiliar with. Rubbing her itching eyes, she almost missed the door she had so often passed in her trips down the hallway. It was firmly shut. No light was spilling from underneath the gap. It was so far removed from the usual sight that greeted her in her normal stays that she paused. Then curiosity won over.

Looking left and right down the hall as though her grandmother would still come out and berate her for lingering by the once forbidden doorway, Terry moved forward and grasped the

handle, the metal cold underneath her suddenly clammy hand. She turned her wrist, and with a gust of humid air she was suddenly seeing the inside of her grandfather's study for the first time.

Terry's shoulders dropped in disappointment. It was surprisingly normal. She's not sure why she was so let down. Maybe she was expecting something resembling an office from the CIA. But besides a few pictures and knick knacks adorning the walls and the simple desk in the corner of the room, there was nothing all that interesting to see.

She found her feet carrying her over to the desk, hoping that there would be some more evidence found in the small drawers, but the first one was as unexciting as the room. Solid wood stared back up at her. The other was found to be no different, and Terry was about to slam it closed in defeat before her eye caught what looked to be a divot chipped out of the wood in the darkness. She leaned in closer, squinting to try and make out what a second glance looked somewhat like a series of scratches. Jogging back into her room, she grabbed her phone and returned, flashlight armed and ready.

Terry aimed the beam into the drawer at the series of marks, and she stiffened in surprise. It was a luna moth. Her mind immediately traveled back to her bedroom.

There was a painting that hung there that was stylized, and unless you knew exactly what to look for you would most likely assume it was some rendition of an abstract looking bird, but Terry knew better. She had gone through a phase where she was obsessed with insects and her grandfather had surprised her with the image on the wall during a summer visit.

Convincing herself that it was all a strange coincidence, she backtracked out of the office, shutting the door behind her, before returning to her bed, water long forgotten. Terry lied there for hours willing herself to fall asleep, trying to push images of empty offices and moths out of her mind until finally she gave into her own stupidity and found herself standing in front of the

small frame that contained the luna moth artwork. Feeling incredibly naive as she did so, she curled her fingers around the edge of the frame and pulled it away from the wall slightly and used her other hand to feel underneath. She retracted her hand sharply with a gasp.

There was a hole.

That's when everything changed.

That's why she found herself one week later rowing in the lake, hands aching and heart beating out of her chest, heading towards an entanglement of downed trees and rocks towards the middle of the water, a place that Terry knew was undiveable. A worn briefcase sat at the bottom of the boat, its very presence mocking her. It was the only thing left to show after decades of tedious research collected by her grandfather. Something that he had instructed her to dispose of in a letter that she had found in the wall, lest it fall into the wrong hands. She sang softly to herself, repeating the chorus over and over again of a song she had just heard on the radio. Her hair, usually so neat and tidy, whipped wildly in her eyes in an echo of her spiraling thoughts, blocking her vision but not setting her mind off its course.

After a few more agonizing minutes, she arrived, sweating despite the chill in the air. She looked up from where her gaze had remained fixed to the case during the journey and froze. She could just make out an all black car parked in the drive. With more calmness than Terry felt, she picked up the briefcase by its broken handle, and held it over the water. Not removing her eyes from the figure who had just emerged from his car and was staring at her as her boat bobbed and shifted on the lake she only had a single moment of hesitation.

Ripples make waves, Terry.

She dropped it.