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LANCE LARSEN

A Feeling in Your Head

To her credit, and perhaps to my own arrested artistic development, my mother saved none of my creations from childhood. She kept no box packed with all things Lance: no pipe cleaner animals, no doily Valentines or pudgy hand impressions in plaster, no compositions titled “My Favorite Animal” or “If I Were President,” no stupid limericks copied from the board about the boy who said ain’t and fell in a can of red paint. In fact, the only evidence that any higher learning took place my first two years at Washington Elementary fell into my lap—or more precisely, into my cereal bowl—during Christmas break, thirteen years later, when I was home for college. There, where I intended to pour my cornflakes, I found “Hope”—a child’s composition my father had unearthed the night before cleaning out his office. I took it in: misspelled words, labored printing, words bunched together like cars after a train wreck. The paper had a pulpy tooth to it, with a faint dotted line to keep baby letters in their place but allow a few privileged tall guys (d f h k l t) to stand straight and flex their muscles. Here is the composition, in its entirety:

I hope that the war going on in veiknomb will stop
real soon. I hope that my uncle won’t get hurt
in veiknomb. thoses are two seteces yousing hope.
Hope is a word something like the word wish.
hope is a word that you can not draw like you can
draw a tree. It is a feeling in your head.

And there, in the upper right hand corner, my name. Back then I hadn’t yet learned from recess taunts that Lance rhymed with “dance,” “romance,” and “pee your pants” or that Larsen was as common as chewed gum—check any phone book. Back then the alliteration of the capital l’s made for a delicious mouthful. Back then, Lance Larsen sounded regal, not as it does now, like the name of a minor character in a Hollywood soap, someone that betrays his best friend then dies in a car wreck, but has great hair till the end.

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But when did I write this essay? If it was first grade, picture tiny, bird-like, wizened Mrs. Pew (*pee-You*, we pronounced it behind her back, holding our noses, as if something smelly had escaped into the room), and behind her, a bank of windows facing my house. If in second grade, think of sleeveless, buxom, unmarried Miss Welch, whom I associated with delicious grape juice, windows looking west toward the train yard. But in both cases, trees. My school had plenty of those. Giant oaks circled the playground, branches tossing—a kind of hope.

Hope was everywhere, in fact. Hope walked me to school, hid inside the spiked pods of fallen chestnuts, bubbled up cold from the drinking fountain, rose with us when we covered our hearts and made promises to a limp flag, circled the room like an agitated hummingbird above our motley voices. Saying names of classmates out loud, this too was hope. George Gregorias: from Greece, who spoke not a word of English, and was so out of touch with Idaho that he wore sandals and shorts to school. Donna Gibbs: from an even bigger and more friendly country called Texas, where people rode horses and drilled for oil and spoke as if they were in old-timey movies: “Hi ya’ll,” Donna said, “my family and me—we just moved here.” Grant Somebody: who gobbled paste and couldn’t follow the simplest instructions, like how to cut a round pumpkin from square paper, but more than once pulled out his wankeroo in class and dribbled urine to show girls how boy plumbing worked, then scuffed away the evidence with his shoe. Most remarkable, though less notorious, was Todd Hunter—who drew soldiers just before a bullet sent them to their great reward.

But the hope I mentioned in my essay—“I hope that the war going on in veiknomb will stop real soon. I hope that my uncle won’t get hurt in veiknomb”—was different. You had to ask for it in dinner prayers. I mean kneel-down-together-as-a-family-while-the-food-gets-cold prayers. Not to be confused with quickie blessings over breakfast and lunch. Dinner prayers took forever, and there was always the chance someone would walk past our kitchen window and see us on our knees getting religious.

I hated that and adopted two strategies to cope. First, I kept one eye open, just in case someone came to the door. That way I could jump up and pretend I was retrieving a fallen fork. Second, to distract myself, I dropped tiny spit bombs to the carpet below.

Entertainment, Idaho style. When I closed one eye and opened the other, the drip switched positions. Blink quickly, and the elongated drop jumped back and forth. During my experiments in depth perception and the elasticity of saliva, I didn't listen so much as let the prayer wash over me: *bless the sick and afflicted, bless the widows, bless the missionaries, bless Grandpa Mac and his arthritis, bless Uncle Jim and let no harm befall him in Vietnam...*

Befall, befall. In Vietnam, bullets could befall you, missiles, booby trap bombs, shrapnel, even knives. If my uncle didn't come home, my Aunt Karen, a no-nonsense woman with blonde beehive hair, would be left alone to ride herd on my three cousins. But prayer could cancel all that dangerous befalling. When we blessed the food, the words stayed in the room. When we prayed on our knees, the prayers curled upwards, like steam from a vent, like the soul leaving a wounded body.

This is how it went for months. Each evening we'd pray my uncle safe. Each morning I'd go to school and copy Todd Hunter's war drawings. He knew how to draw every kind of scene: cavalry, Civil War, WWI, WWII, even Vietnam. Whether his fighter men were on horses or in trenches or on the back of an Army Jeep firing a machine gun, which is how I pictured my uncle, Todd made the dying real. Bazookas, shock waves, explosions, puddles of blood, gashes, limbs blown off, fallen comrades, the right kind of helmets: these helped. But bullets were the key. First freeze them in air, then draw dotted lines to show trajectory—and the waiting victims.

I never drew my uncle.

Safer that way, safer not to put him and bullets on the same page.

Drawing was the opposite of hope. It was a lot like knowing the future but not being able to stop it. With drawing, you could see catastrophe before it happened: who would walk away missing an arm, who would never walk away.

On winter Sundays, we entered the church for sacrament and sermons in afternoon light, then exited in darkness, as if our praying brought on the gloom, our singing caused it to lick at the chapel windows, our amens led it to press down on the station wagon my father maneuvered through the streets like an elegant hearse. "Abide with me; 'tis eventide. The day is past and gone; The shadows of the evening fall; The night is coming on." I sang this hymn and then carried it in my blood, and by the time we reached our

driveway, which was long before the car warmed up, I'd feel the need for home like a fever.

We didn't lock our front door in those days, so I'd bound out of the car, always in a race against something, always the first to enter the sputtering warmth of the front hall. One night I flipped on the hall light, then headed for my room.

But froze mid-stride.

There in the living room, obscured by shadows, in my father's chair, sat a figure. Hands on armrests, feet casually crossed at the ankle. Was he sleeping? Was he dead? I could barely make him out. What did he want with us? Did he have a gun? Was I supposed to warn my mom first or bravely confront the stranger? What approach would always-cool, always-three-steps-ahead Mannix the private investigator take? Would this shadow intruder vanish when I flipped on the light, as they sometimes did in *The Twilight Zone*?

"Hey, there," the man said from the darkness.

I jumped back into the hall and bumped into my mother.

"A robber," I said. I hissed it.

"What are you talking about?"

"In there," I said, jerking my thumb toward the living room. "What do we do?"

Without hesitation, brave as Ginger the wonder girl spy of many disguises on *Mission: Impossible*, she flipped on the lights. In that silence, they looked each other over. If atoms ever reverberate between stares, they ricocheted off each other that evening, or rebounded, or did whatever atoms do under such circumstances. Then my mother smiled.

"Jim," she said, "you're back." And walked across the room.

He stood up then, my uncle, laughing a little and holding a bottle of homemade strawberry jam.

"It got cold outside in the truck," he said, "and I couldn't ignore the hospitality of an unlocked door."

They hugged each other, jam still in his hand, and my mother wouldn't let go of him. Then my dad and my two sisters and me got in on the act—as if trying to cancel the years he'd been deployed.

What had it been like in the jungle?

When I stepped away, I looked him over. No uniform, but his hair was still cut short. He'd been a star quarterback in high school, had pictures in the yearbook to prove it. He looked about the same, but a

little older. No blown off leg, no missing arm, no jagged scar running along his jaw. His forearms as tanned and muscled and hairy as ever. He had walked across the room without even a hint of a limp. And if there was shrapnel stuck forever in his body, he didn't show it.

"How about some waffles?" Mom said.

We entered the kitchen, all of us, and my mother got out the waffle iron, and whatever murkiness I had felt in the car leaked away in the bustle of our bright, warm kitchen. My parents and Uncle Jim talked the way adults do when they haven't seen each other, small talk, sentences started and abandoned, certain words rusty, questions zinging back and forth.

During supper, I looked Uncle Jim over again—his five o'clock shadow glowing dark, as if a second face lay hidden beneath this one. He looked at his plate the way you might read a map, then laid on a patina of butter, slicing with purpose, fork, knife, switching back and forth, as if his hands were detached from the rest of him. He swirled each piece of waffle in a smear of jam, chewed, then returned his fork for more—a prolific eater. I kept thinking of the other man, back in the living room, the man that occupied the room *before* my mother flipped on the light. Except for watching matinees at the Chief Theater, I almost never sat in the dark. How could he do it without getting scared? Like being wrapped in a cape when I got my hair cut, a cape that cut out the light. I could move my toes inside my shoes, flex my fingers, the usual things, but in the dark everything turned secret. Was that hope? A feeling in your head. Not anything you could explain. Letting the dark wrap your face and the air settle on your skin. Cars driving by or silence, it didn't matter. And if you closed your eyes—did that change the feeling? It took guts and patience to sit there alone, to keep sitting. In someone else's house, in someone else's darkness, no special hurry to it, waiting for someone you love to turn on the lights.