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The Entomology of Village Life

Robert M.D. Minto

Buddy didn't know we were a cliché. I knew. I liked it that way. We spent our days together—me too inquisitive and his tail never ceasing to wag. My neighbor, Old Jake, who was forever pulling weeds in his garden, self-exiled from a sharp-tongued wife, was a cliché too. So was the grange on the other side of my house. Most of the men in Numidia never missed a grange meeting, mainly to regulate the village's one employee, Fernando, who mowed the grass at the park. A boy and his dog, a hen-pecked gardener, village politics—the fact that the place I remember as home could have come from the pages of a bad novelist—never bothered me.

Within this small web of places and personalities, life abounded. Some people were the moths, tied down and struggling; some were the spiders, growing fat on gossip.

One of the moths lived across the street. He was my friend Colin. Colin lived in the dirtiest house I have ever seen, where he was enslaved by lethargy. His mother cared for him and for two younger, intellectually challenged boys as well. She had a big heart but too few hands and no husband. In the winter they all huddled around a kerosene heater, wearing most of the clothing they owned, the two youngest boys licking at the snot that reached their lips from cold noses. They couldn't afford oil. Through a government program, Colin had received an old IBM computer. He spent most of his time playing Tetris on it in his room. Sometimes when I rose early in the morning with Buddy to roam the village, we would stop outside Colin's window, and I would throw rocks at it. Soon his bleary eyes would peer over the sill. Eventually he would come out, and I would drag him on adventures far beyond his self-perceived energy level.

Old Jake, on the other hand, was one of Numidia's spiders. His garden was not merely a refuge from his wife but also the epicenter of his web. At the slightest

hint of gossip, he would scurry down the street with a twine-wrapped bundle of asparagus, his specialty, to gain entry to whatever home promised the best information. With most people, Jake gossiped on a strictly business model. He would gladly regale me with his latest and juiciest stories because we had an understanding that whatever my wandering uncovered I would freely contribute to him as the keeper of the town's skeleton closet. It was Jake who told me, with great relish, the acrimonious story of how Colin's family had broken apart. Jake enjoyed the telling as much as it saddened me.

Old Jake hated abortion. But he didn't have a religious or philosophical reason (he also hated religion, and he didn't know any philosophy). One morning he told me why. He stood up from his asparagus and gestured at me with a weed.

"You know what?" He said, "Seen those hooded graves?"

"No! What are they?" I asked, holding Buddy so he wouldn't pee on Jake's garden.

"You haven't seen 'em? The graves with cages across the way at the Methodist church?"

"Oh, those. Sure, I've seen 'em."

"Do you know why they have cages?"

"Why?"

Jake shook his weed at me again, a little shower of dirt crumbling off it. "Because," he said, "if you go over there at night and listen, you can hear the spirits of unborn children screaming to get out and hurt the people who killed them."

I shivered. Buddy licked my face.

A few minutes later I was throwing rocks at Colin's window. I had to be quiet. His mother and I had an understanding that I could get him up to play with me. But because she slept in later than we did, I couldn't yell. I could only throw rocks. Eventually he staggered out of the house.

"Hey Colin," I said quietly, "want to have an adventure?"

Colin thought that was a good idea, but he

wanted to know if he should bring anything. Last adventure we got all wet in a stream, and he wished he'd brought some boots.

"Nah," I told him, "we're just going to listen to some spirits."

We stopped by my house to get a paper bag filled with swiss-and-ham-on-rye and a smoked pig's ear for Buddy. Then we grabbed our bikes and headed east toward the park, the cemetery, and the Methodist church. We left our bikes in the gravel parking-lot of the church. We could see the pastor in the big glass window of his study. He had his head on his arms, sleeping.

The hooded graves were at the far edge of the cemetery, right beside the woods that harbored our park. I noticed, this time, that the grass wasn't mowed beside them, as if they weren't properly part of the cemetery. Colin and I waded through the grass and peered past the wire mesh that caged the white stones. Because they were worn smooth by rain, any carved writing on the stones was long gone. I tugged on one of the cages until Colin nervously told me to stop. He needn't have—I couldn't budge it. It was firmly planted in the hard earth.

"When will we hear the spirits?" Asked Colin.

"When the sun goes down," I told him, "I think." We took ourselves over to a big oak tree on the edge of the woods. We could see the graves. The tree had several nice boles to sit in. I told Colin the rest of what Jake had told me. We agreed that abortion was a very bad thing and probably the people who did it deserved to be eaten by the spirits of the children they'd killed. But Colin doubted that the spirits could really do that.

"Don't you believe in spirits?" I asked him. Of course he did—he went to the Presbyterian church.

"But I've seen one, too." Said Colin. "I was in my room when we lived in Florida. That was before we left my dad. I slept upstairs in the attic there, just like here. I was lying in bed when I heard something coming up the stairs and scratching at the door. Then the door opened and a big white shape came in and stood beside the bed. I closed my eyes and prayed, and when I opened them the shape was gone."

I told him it was probably just his dad. Or maybe his mom.

"No," he said, "because I got really cold when it came in, and I felt like I couldn't move." We were silent, I imagining, he remembering.

"Then why don't you believe that we'll hear the spirits?" I asked him.

"Why don't you believe in the ghost I saw?" He asked me. I saw his point. But somehow his story just didn't seem as vivid and gory as the idea of murdered unborn children out for revenge. That story, now—that was enough to give me nightmares.

Suddenly I noticed that I couldn't hear Buddy. He had been nosing around the trees, scratching at the dirt, sniffing at mole-holes, snapping at dandelions. I looked around and saw him standing, stiff. He was staring into the woods. As I turned to follow his gaze I heard a moan.

Colin jumped. We looked at each other. The moan again. We looked at the hooded graves, but there was nothing to see.

"Did you let it out," asked Colin, "when you were pulling on the cage?" Then something else occurred to him and he added, "And didn't you say we'd hear them when the sun went down?"

The moan again. It seemed to be coming from within the grove of trees at our back. We turned toward the sound, and I started to worm forward on my belly into the trees. "Stay," I told Buddy. Colin obeyed the command as well for about ten seconds, and then he started worming forward too, grumbling quietly. The earth was slightly damp, covered with crunchy leaves, but we were small and had practice sneaking.

As we neared the sound, it became more frequent, and gradually we heard a sort of ragged breathing joining it in unholy duet. It didn't sound like the vindictive whining of child spirits.

We came to a place where we could see something through the trees.

We saw a zebra-striped car with spinners on the wheels. On top of the car, awkwardly straddling a dark-haired girl, Old Jake's grandson, James, was doing his best to make her moan louder. The ragged breathing was his contribution. He jerked up and down, and I could see the silver flash of the car's antenna between them each time they separated. Colin and I were mesmerized for a few seconds before comprehension struck. Glancing wildly at each other, we squirmed quietly away.

When we reached the edge of the wood, we stood up and made our way silently back to our bikes. Somehow waiting for the wailing spirits of the unborn had lost its appeal. I glanced at the Methodist church and saw that the pastor had

woken. He waved at us out the window. We pedaled quietly back to town. I imagined that even Buddy seemed subdued. When we reached Colin's house, he stopped and laid his bike on the grass. We could hear his mom talking to his brothers inside. It was a familiar sound but a strange sound just then.

Colin began to walk up the lawn, back to his Tetris. He stopped and turned around.

"What are you going to do?" He asked me.

I thought for a moment. Then I told him.

About an hour later, I finished telling Old Jake the story of what we had just seen. He was watering

his tomatoes, and as I told my tale, I noticed that one of the plants was nearly floating even though he was staring right at it. I finished up, and he went right on watering that one plant. He glanced over at me.

"That's very interesting." He contemplated the drowning plant again, "But this isn't something to get around town, you know. You wouldn't tell anybody else would you?"

I thought for a moment. Then I smiled.

Somewhere, a spider was about to become a moth.

Editor's Note: Robert Minto, a sophomore at Dordt, wrote this essay for Dr. Jim Schaap's Advanced Expository Writing class.