

Simple Things

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The simple things

On a nice Sunday morning the sun shone in through the large window of the small living room of a small suburban house. The rays landed on the dinner table. A small cloth covered the small centre part of the wooden table in a perfect circle, with a small plant placed strategically in the centre of the cloth. The placement had nothing to do with compassion for the thirsty plant, but only for the aesthetic appearance of symmetry and simple beauty.

Mr. Herman Diedel liked simple beauty. He believed simplicity was close to divinity and he shunned therefore everything difficult and complicated. He enjoyed the sight of the rays falling through the window and landing on the table where the plant was situated. It was a small plant with green-reddish leaves. It didn't need any special care, only love and water. It was simple, just like the rest of the room.

The table was accompanied by four chairs that nobody ever sat on. On the opposite side of the room stood a small desk with a bookshelf overhead, gathering dust. Most of the books Mr. Herman Diedel actually read were collected in the small bookcase next to the table. Almost all of the books in there were collections of horror stories and some of the Victorian classics which had ultimately jolted the genre into the mainstream. Next to the bookcase was the couch for the odd visitor the man might receive, and the big easy chair where Herman himself liked to recline. The white walls were covered with paintings of landscapes both by day and by night.

Some of them, his visitors had thought uncomfortable and creepy, especially one displaying a huge frog-like monster eating small mammals. It seemed to stare into the room, fixing its evil, yellowish eyes on the spectator and failed to let them go. It was this repulsive quality of the painting that had attracted him to buy it in the first place. It gripped him when he first saw it and had never let him go.

He liked horror stories, especially the short stories that spoke of graves under ancient oak trees and ghosts wandering in long abandoned houses or of man overcome by something of his own design. It gave a certain logic and justice that was often lacking in real life. He never really liked books on politics, history, literature, art or any of the great human sciences, because it rested too heavily on the opinions of others and situations which were ultimately unimportant. He had come to believe that man itself was only a footnote in the development of the earth and unimportant on the whole.

The house stood in what most people would consider a good neighbourhood. It was on the south side of a small provincial town in the north-west of Holland. The city itself stood out from the countryside as a sudden conglomeration of houses in the middle of the flat and dismal *polders*, those stretches of land reclaimed from the salty water of the North Sea. Usually encapsuled in silent mist coming from the sea, pelted by rain and storms coming off the coast of Scotland and wreaking havoc on the buildings man had erected for its purposes. Most people kept to themselves here and that was just the way Herman liked it.

The rows of similar houses were placed so that it gave way to a small playing field in the middle, not unlike a courtyard in one of the ancient castles. It had nice, green, lush grass and was an excellent place for young children to play their games in the evenings or afternoons after school. It gave the whole area a sense of peace and quiet that had instantly appealed to him. Even now, with the sun high in the sky and white, puffy clouds hovering over the roofs of the houses, the ground still wet and the roofs still dripping with water from last night's thunderstorm, the kids were out in the early Sunday morning with their footballs and their small bikes while the parents were still sleeping in their beds, enjoying a few hours of rest before the inevitable brunch.

Herman could hear their screams and laughs and other sounds of enjoyment and it was the only sound that came to him as he sat in the big easy chair, looking up from his book and watching the rays of the sun play around the small plant in the middle of the table. It gave him the same feeling he used to get when his parents took him to church and was slowly lulled to sleep by the mumblings of the ancient priest, before they took him home and he himself could play and laugh and scream on the deliciously idle Sunday.

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Presently something started to draw his attention away from the book or the shadow play in the room. On the little playing field outside, the usually

undecipherable yelling of unfinished words and general outings of pleasure by the children had grown into something more distinct and much louder. At first he tried to ignore it, but the noise grew so loud that he could scarcely concentrate on his book and started to draw him back from the wonderful fantasy world of the Sunday morning. He put his book aside and got up to see what would justify such a disturbance.

From his window he could overlook the entire playing field and had a direct view of the row of tall houses north of the field, perfectly similar to his and one another, different only in curtains and gardens, each displaying a small family car in front and small hedge to divide each property.

On the field, the children were crowding around one particular area. Herman guessed it was the location of the ball. The sun was crawling just above the row of houses opposite from his and shone directly into his eyes, making it hard to see just what was going on. Probably the game was coming to a close and the minds and hearts of the children got heated with the tension. Maybe somebody had just made a particularly difficult play or shown an unusual degree of talent for the game. Whatever it was, judging by the sound, it was still going on. Some kids were standing in the periphery, cheering the others on, but most of the children were in the shapeless bunch fighting for the ball. With no referee or parent nearby, the scuffle continued unabashed.

As Herman stood watching, he smiled at the harmless horseplay of the children, even if it had distracted him from his reading. He smiled as he watched the children kicking the unseen ball and the other children

laughing, shouting and cheering for the members of their team.

He was just about to go back to his chair and his book, when his eye suddenly fell on a slightly disturbing detail of the scene. It was just a small detail in the overall picture and it seemed strange at first that it would upset him so. But something in his gut jumped up and something in the back of the head kept tugging his attention. It was a leather football that lay forlorn in the field.

But certainly, Herman told himself, there would be more than one ball brought by the kids. They couldn't run the risk of being without one when they came to the field, so they probably each took a ball from their houses and later decided on which one to use for the game. Why then, was the presence of this ball so disturbing to him?

The thing that he found strange wasn't the presence of the ball itself, but more its position on the field. For if the ball chosen to play with was indeed in the midst of the pile of the children now fighting over it and the one he saw was just some rejected toy, then why, he wondered, was it not on the side, next to the pile of sweaters and jackets the kids had removed before commencing their play? Why was it laying there idle exactly between the two goals, as if it could be kicked at any time? And a more important and disturbing question came to his mind at the same time: what was it that the kids were kicking with so much enthusiasm?

As he looked back to the children on the other side of the field, this time shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand, he was just in time to see most of the kids lunge forward into the mesh as if to grab something of

the ground. The next thing he saw was more horrible than he dared to imagine.

One of the little girls, a sweet thing with curly blonde hair and usually with a delightful smile and big eyes, swung around towards him and held something in her hand, throwing it back on the ground and kicking it towards the goal to the right of him. Most of the children, their screams now elevated to a high and disturbing pitch, spouting half-words and general loudness, running after the rolling thing and leaving a horrible scene for their only spectator. For what lay there around the northern edge of the field, was hardly recognizable as such, but certainly enough so to curdle anyone's blood. Shapeless and broken as it was by the violence the children had inflicted upon it, it was clearly laying in a pool of its own blood that had coloured the green grass red, showing various hints that had indeed been, at one point, a human body, now reduced to a mere sightless pile of flesh of bone. The thing the kids were now chasing after and kicking with so much mirth and laughter was the head.

Mr. Herman Diedel, paralysed with horror, stood in the window, watching this damnable spectacle as the kids played out their travesty of the football game. The head rolled and he could clearly see the whites of the eyes that had rolled back in their sockets, the blood from the neck leaving a red smear on the green grass as it rolled towards the goal. Eventually it was one of the boys who kicked the head with all his might and landed it in the left-upper corner of the net, invoking even more screams and cheering from team-mates and protest from his competitors. The head fell to the

ground and lay idle on the grass, it's mouth open and it's eyes turned horribly towards the blue sky. It had clearly been one of the other children.

The boy who scored this horrible goal, was greeted by this team-mates with enthusiasm. He was padded on the shoulders and back, copying perfectly their heroes from television. Most of the members of the opposite team took their sweaters out of the pile and went off, still discussing the unfairness of that ultimate goal. Someone took the ball from the centre of the field, but nobody concerned himself with what was left of their playmate, the head in the goal and the mangled body on the side, still dripping with blood.

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Mr. Herman Diedel beheld all this with astonishment and kept staring into space until the field grew quiet again, not really seeing, but replaying the horrible event over and over again in his mind, telling himself it couldn't be so.

The kids dispersed to their homes, waking mum to make them brunch or reclining in front of the television.

Herman sank back in his chair, still trembling, uncertain of what to do. He picked up his book, still laying on the arm of the chair. He watched the sun still touching the plant and realized that hardly any time had passed. Slowly everything grew quiet again and as he continued to stare at the

plant and the sun, he could hardly believe he had just witnessed what he had. He felt but one emotion that he had never felt when he had read one his books and that was horror. He wasn't even afraid of the children nor did he feel pity for their unfortunate victim. What he felt was a pure disgust for the scene that had just unfolded in this otherwise beautiful neighbourhood, on this otherwise perfect morning in a place where nothing much ever happened. The horror was intensified by the innocence of the children who apparently saw nothing wrong with their actions. And the more he thought about, the less likely it seemed that he could trust his eyes. He had to confirm.

Gathering all his courage, he slowly raised himself from the chair again and turned towards the playing field. The sun was out, the grass was green. Two kids where still playing, kicking a ball towards the very same goal where minutes earlier the deciding goal had been made. But the head was gone, the grass showed no signs of discolouration. On the northern edge of the field no mangled body was to be found nor was there any signs of cover-up. The whole scene was a perfect example of mundane suburban life.

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Slowly Mr. Herman Diedel turned back to his chair, looked at his collection of horrible stories in the bookcase and at the one he had been reading in particular. It dealt with a small village, terrorized by violent

children. He flung it on the floor with a sudden, brusque movement. It slid a few feet and stopped before disappearing under the bookcase. In the shadows underneath the bookcase something stirred. In the darker corners of the room yellow eyes stared at him and a strange low muttering sounded on the very edge of the audible. The painting of the giant frog seemed to spread out until it covered the whole of the wall and the small plant had grown suddenly to gigantic size, covering the entire table and showing no signs of stopping until it had encapsuled the entire room. It's tentacles moved and lashed towards him. And maybe it was just his imagination and maybe it was his overwrought mind and maybe it was even real, but he was sure he felt something heavy being placed on his shoulder. His heart thumped and his vision became dark and blurry. He was afraid to turn around, afraid to even move.

“Oh, dear,” Mr. Herman Diedel said, no longer recognizing his own voice, and he began to wonder why things couldn't just stay simple forever.

Word by the author

This story was originally intended for 'Beneath Dark Waters' which was just a themeless blob of notes when this was written in early spring of 2008. As time moved forward and the collection started to take shape, it became more and more apparent that this story didn't quite fit in with the others. I blamed it mostly on the fact that the rural theme wasn't there, but I still believe it was something more. It lacked a certain elegance and punch. Striking it from the book didn't really bother me, because I knew it would make for a better book in the end.

It was conceived shortly after settling down in Venlo, Holland as my girlfriend went out for shopping on a nice spring Saturday. We were living in a big rental house facing a green playing field at the time. I just sat at the computer, smoking a cigarette, watching some children play outside in the first feeble rays of sun. It was one of those stories that just came out. I always felt the tone was wrong, but it did give me the strength and faith to go on. I rewrote it in the winter of 2009/2010 to fit this web site.

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