

Katy Van Sant
PRIEST KILLER

THERE WERE SIX OF US AT THE HOUSE when the guy walked in. He didn't knock, but that didn't matter because we probably wouldn't have heard him anyway. It was me and my twin sister, my mom and dad, my aunt (who is my dad's sister), and her daughter, my little cousin. She's only seven. At that moment when the man appeared my mom was trying to bargain with me. She was saying, "Gabe, if you eat two pieces of meat, you can be excused." I had pushed all of the meat into a pile on one side of my bowl because I didn't like how it was so chewy. We were at my grandma's house and it's way out in the middle of nowhere. To get there you have to drive for two miles up a winding dirt road, through meadows and forests with a lot of deer and wild turkeys and other animals, and you can't see any other houses from her house. No one locks their doors, or has doorbells, or anything like that. I don't think they even have locks on their doors. So when you go to someone's house, if they don't hear your car tires crunching their gravel driveway, you have to go in and call out, "Hello!" That's what everyone does. So it wasn't actually strange that he did that, that he just appeared in the big room when we were sitting at the dinner table, almost finished eating the stew my aunt made. It was winter and it was dark already.

We were spending the long weekend with my grandma, but she wasn't there for dinner that night because she had book club. Or maybe bridge club. I can't remember because she has a lot of clubs and groups and stuff. The lights were dim because you have to run a generator for electricity, and also there are solar panels, and we are only allowed to keep lights on where we are, not all over the entire house like at home. So it was kind of like he stepped out of the shadows all of the sudden. But it wasn't scary, because you just don't feel scared up there. I don't know why. Even at night, sometimes bats get into the house, or you hear noises from animals outside, and it's not scary because you know you're in nature and there's a lot going on out there. Even after what happened that day, I still don't feel scared there.

So this guy who I had never seen before appeared. My dad and aunt got up and walked over to him.

"Vernon?" My dad said.

"Hey Ben." He answered.

"How you been? It's been a while."

"Not bad, not bad. Just..."

I got up too, but very quietly, and I walked a little closer so I could hear. The guy didn't finish what he was saying. He just looked down at the ground. I noticed his clothes were dirty and he almost actually looked kind of like a homeless guy. A country homeless guy, which is different from a city homeless guy. I live in the city, but I go to my grandma's house a lot, so I know about both kinds of homeless guys. My sister came over and stood next to me, which was a little bit annoying because I was trying to be stealth and she knows nothing about being stealth. I ignored her.

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

The guy never finished that sentence. He was just standing there, like he forgot what he was saying or maybe even where he was. That's what it seemed like to me. I think that happens to grown-ups more than kids. I *never* stop in the middle of a sentence. My grandma does it *all* the time and I have to say, "Grandma! After dinner let's *what?*" Or, "Grandma! You were hiking on that trail and *then?*" So, the guy did one of those.

Then my dad says, "I didn't hear your car. Did you walk down here from your mom's? Is everything okay?"

Then the guy seemed to snap out of it and he answered.

"Yeah man, just... Yeah. Actually, I need a jump. I came to see if someone could give me a jump. I was driving, um, driving up to see my mom, and I stopped because, because there was a branch in the road and, to move it, you know, and... but I forgot about my battery, and, I shouldn't have... turned off the engine, but..."

It was like that. He was kind of rambling and talking about his truck and the battery and he was mostly looking straight down and not looking at my dad while he was talking to him. He was distracted. That's the word. Distracted. Like you could tell he had something big on his mind. I felt bad for him because he just seemed kind of sad and mixed up.

"Sure, dude, I can give you a jump, but my truck is down our fire road a little way because we were bucking wood today. I'll just walk down and get it."

"Thanks, man. I'll head up there and wait for you by the car. I mean... my truck." All the guys out there in the country drive trucks. Mostly Toyotas. Some of them scratch the OTA off of the back tailgate so it just says "TOY".

Then he just turned around and left. He didn't say anything to anyone. My dad put on his boots and Carhart jacket and left a few minutes after him. I love that jacket. I have one just like it.

My mom stood up and started doing the dishes. I cleared my plate, but I held on to my fork. I like to eat my stew with a fork and a spoon. The spoon is for the broth and the fork is to stab and eat the meat and vegetables, except for I didn't like the meat that time. So, I kept the fork because I like to hold something in my hands, otherwise I don't know what to do with them. Then my aunt started telling my mom about Vernon.

"So sad. He used to be such a fun-loving guy. We all used to hang out together at the bottom of the dirt road at that little shack. The school bus left us there and we'd wait for a ride up the hill. Sometimes we'd be there for over an hour, just talking and messing around. So, Vernon and his brother were a couple of years older than me. I remember they had some kind of tough situation at home. I think their dad took off and their mom was partying a lot. They were in high school when I was in middle school, and I thought they were so cool. And they actually were cool, now that I think back on it, because they were nice to us little kids. Not all teenagers are like that, you know? But now look at him. He looked terrible."

Next thing that happened was my grandma came in. She took off her boots in the "mud room", that's what it's called, because it's the first room

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

you come into, and if it's winter you probably have mud on your shoes. I think that's why they call it that. She comes up into the kitchen and says, "Do you guys remember Vernon Anderson?"

My aunt answered. "He was just here! Vernon was. He was acting kind of weird. Ben went out to help him jump his truck. They must be above our driveway around the bend, otherwise you would have seen them."

"Vernon was *here*?" My grandma kind of almost yelled it and she looked different from normal.

"Yeah. He said his truck battery died. Why, what happened?"

So then my grandma looked over at us kids, and I knew it was one of those grown-ups-only things. *Another* thing that we weren't allowed to know. I got ready to go stealth again. But she just turned around and walked toward the laundry room. Then she called to my aunt and asked her to go out and turn on the generator because she was going to do a wash. You have to run a generator to do laundry because the other electricity for the lights and stuff isn't strong enough. So my aunt got up and I realized this was probably a sneaky move by grandma to talk to my aunt about this Vernon guy without us kids hearing. That had to be a big coincidence that Grandma had heard something about him from whatever friends she was with at her group, and then him showing up at our house. Something was afoot and I was going to find out. At that point, it didn't occur to me to worry about my dad out there with him. I was too focused on hearing about grown-up stuff that I'm not supposed to know.

I slinked toward the laundry room. I walked *very* quietly. Not on my tip-toes. I don't know why they say that in books about tip-toeing when you want to be quiet. Tip-toeing doesn't make you quieter and it is actually worse because you can lose your balance. I got to right outside the entry to the laundry area. There's no door. My grandma and aunt were just on the other side of the wall from me and I could hear them.

My grandma said, "They're saying he killed a *priest*!!!"

"What?? Vernon? He was such a sweet guy when I was in middle school." My aunt said.

"I know. He was my student, you know. Supposedly it happened in Bridgeville, but the Sheriff is out looking for him around here because they know he's from here. They say he *stole* the priest's car and took off in it. If Ben's out there with him, we have to go get him."

"Oh my God! What should we do?" My aunt says. "But why would he kill a *priest*? Did the priest molest some kid he knows?"

"Jeanette said this was a very *beloved* priest. But I guess that doesn't mean he's not a molester. It's hard to think of Vernon as dangerous, but..."

"Oh God. I mean, are they sure it was him? How do they know it was him?"

"Sounds like they're sure."

"Should Angie and I go up and look for him?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

"Jeanette said he's got a drug problem. Real bad. People have seen him in town talking to himself and stuff."

"Oh shit."

This is when I think I started like hyperventilating or something. And things got blurry. I couldn't believe my dad was out there with a priest-killer, maybe dead too by now. And they just kept talking. I burst out of stealth-mode. I might have been crying.

"He's going to kill Dad!" I ran to the kitchen. "Mom! That guy is a murderer and he's going to kill dad! We have to do something. He's out there alone with him." Okay, yes, I was full-scale panicked now. My sister rolled her eyes at me because they say I'm always over-reacting and having freak-outs. That made me so mad. She does things that seem small, or that no one even notices, but to me they're really huge. And she *knows* that. Now I was double upset. I ran to my mom. I had to get her to do something about it.

"Calm down, honey. Dad is fine. He's just helping the neighbor. That's a good thing. It's good to help your neighbor."

Oh my God! That made me quadruple upset. Now they were focusing on me and acting like I was nuts, when my dad was probably getting murdered by a priest-killer. There had to be a way I could get them to understand. My mom was holding me around the shoulders really hard like a straight-jacket. I couldn't move my arms. I hate it when she does that. I was wriggling around and trying to get out, but she was stronger than me. Sometimes I get so mad. And scared.

When I remember it now, I feel like I did hear the shot. My mom was holding me and I was trying to get free and all I could think about was the priest-killer stabbing my dad in the woods and it sounded like a crack and a boom echoing through the trees, and it was just something I heard, but I didn't connect it to my dad because I was focused on getting free from my mom's arms. I wiggled my whole body as much as I could. I tried jumping and slumping, but she is really good at hugging me. My mom is really strong. I feel bad about this, but I think I tried to bite her, but she kept her hands too far down my chest.

Next thing was I heard the front door open and close. My grandma said my dad's name really loud. Then I heard his voice. Oh man, what a relief. He was alive. I looked around and for some reason I felt the way you feel when you first wake up in the morning. Like, where am I?

"See honey? Dad's fine." My mom finally let me go and I ran to him and hugged him around his waist. My grandma and aunt had just finished hugging him. He put his hands up, like saying *Give me a second*.

"Oh my God!" my dad said. "You're not going to believe what I just saw." He took a few breaths like to get ready to tell us. "When I got up there to help Vernon there were a gazillion Sherriff's around this little car he was in and they were all pointing their guns at it. It was like in the fucking movies! I had slowed when I saw their lights through the trees and stopped when I got around the bend. I don't even know if the cops ever saw me because they were all focused on him. He was sitting in the driver's seat and one was shouting at him to get out of the car with his

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

hands up. So the door opens and he steps out with his hands up, but he had a knife in one hand."

Everyone was quiet, listening to my dad. "I stayed in my truck and watched through the windshield. They start walking towards him and yelling at him to drop the knife, and then he suddenly takes off running up the bank trying to get into the trees. It was crazy! There was no way he could have gotten away."

My dad stopped talking and my aunt got impatient.

"So what happened, Ben?"

"And so they shot him." He said. "It looked like they got him in the butt. He went down and they were on him. Once that happened, I put it in reverse and backed down to our driveway to come back. I don't know if they killed him or not, but I don't think so. I saw him reach back to his butt cheek right after I heard the shot."

Everyone was quite, feeling bad for Vernon even though he was a priest-killer. I was still hugging my dad around the waist. Then I heard him say to my mom, "What happened to you?" I turned around to see that she had blood dripping from her hair down towards her eye. She saw that we were looking at her forehead, so she reached up to feel and ended up smearing the blood around. I got kind of disoriented, because how could the priest-killer have gotten my mom and not my dad if I was with my mom and he was out there with the priest-killer. I felt woozy.

"Oh, it's nothing." She said. "It was an accident. Gabe got scared and was kind of flailing around with a fork in his hand. He didn't mean to hurt me." My dad took put his hands on her cheeks and looked closely at her forehead. And then he kissed her there, which I thought was kind of gross and weird because he probably got her blood on his lips.

I knew it was an accident, what I did to my mom, but when I saw her with the blood all over her forehead right after I had been imagining my dad getting stabbed by the priest-killer, I don't know. Sometimes this thing happens to me where I want to beat myself up because I know I deserve it. So that feeling was coming, because just like they were saying how the priest-killer used to be such a nice kid, I was the priest-killer. I was a nice kid, that's what everyone said, but look what I did to my mom. And look what happened to the Priest-killer.

Then suddenly, my dad was holding my hand and walking with me to the stove room. He was telling me that it was getting cold and we should put some more logs on the fire and he needed my help. We put the logs on and then we were just sitting there looking at the flames through the glass. I guess we were both thinking about what happened. After a little while my foot started bouncing and then he started telling me these riddles he likes to tell me about having different sized buckets of water. Like you have a you have a 5-gallon bucket and a 3-gallon bucket and you need 2 gallons. What do you do? That one is easy. You just fill the 5 and dump it in the 3 and you'll have 2 left in the 5. But he gives me really hard ones where your dumping back and forth and stuff. I love figuring them out in my mind. After that I felt better again.

That night I fell asleep to the sounds of the grown-ups talking in the

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

big room. I could also hear the frogs croaking and chirping down at the pond. Their sounds echo up the hillside every night. They all do it together off and on, like when wolves howl at the moon. They start and then they stop. Then they start up again. One frog, the boss frog I call him, starts it and they all follow. I don't know how they know when to stop. It's one of the many things I like about my grandma's house. The frog chorus that puts me to sleep at night. But that night I had to strain to hear them because the grown-ups were being kind of loud. I could hear their voices, but not what they were saying. I wondered if they were talking about the priest-killer. Or about me.