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The Man in the Well

I was nine when I discovered the man in the well in an abandoned farm-lot near my home. I was with a group of friends, playing hide and go seek or something when I found the well, and then I heard the voice of the man in the well calling out for help.

I think it's important that we decided not to help him. Everyone, like myself, was probably on the verge of fetching a rope, or asking where we could find a ladder, but then we looked around at each other and it was decided. I don't remember if we told ourselves a reason why we couldn't help him, but we had decided then. Because of this, I never went very close to the lip of the well, or I only came up on my hands and knees, so that he couldn't see me; and just as we wouldn't allow him to see us, I know that none of us ever saw the man in the well—the well was too dark for that, too deep, even when the sun was high up, angling light down the stone sides like golden hair.

I remember that we were still full of games and laughter when we called down to him. He had heard us shouting while we were playing, and he had been hollering for us to come; he was so relieved at that moment.

"God, get me out. I've been here for days." He must have known we were children, because he immediately instructed us to "go get a ladder, get help."

At first afraid to disobey the voice from the man in the well, we turned around and actually began to walk toward the nearest house, which was Arthur's. But along the way we slowed down, and then we stopped, and after waiting what seemed like a good while, we quietly came back to the well.

We stood or lay around the lip, listening for maybe half an hour, and then Arthur, after some hesitation, called down, "What's your name?" This, after all, seemed like the most natural question.

The man answered back immediately, "Do you have the ladder?"

We all looked at Arthur, and he called back down, "No, we couldn't find one."

Now that we had established some sort of a dialogue, everyone had questions he or she wanted to ask the man in the well, but the man wouldn't stop speaking:

"Go tell your parents there's someone in this well. If they have a rope or a ladder..." he trailed off. His voice was raw and sometimes he would cough. "Just tell your parents."

We were quiet, but this time no one stood up or moved. Someone, I think little Jason, called down, "Hello. Is it dark?" and then, after a moment, "Can you see the sky?"

He didn't answer but instead told us to go again.

When we were quiet for a bit, he called to see if we had gone.

After a pause, Wendy crawled right to the edge so that her hair lifted slightly in the updraft. "Is there any water down there?"

"Have they gone for help?" he asked.

She looked around at us, and then she called down, "Yes, they're all gone now. Isn't there any water down there?" I don't think anyone smiled at how easy it was to deceive him—this was too important. "Isn't there?" she said again.

"No," he said. "It's very dry." He cleared his throat. "Do you think it will rain?"

She stood up and took in the whole sky with her blue eyes, making sure. "No, I don't think so." We heard him coughing in the well, and we waited for a while, thinking about him waiting in the well.

Resting on the grass and cement by the well, I tried to picture him. I tried to imagine the gesture of his hand reaching to cover his mouth, each time he coughed. Or perhaps he was too tired to make that gesture, each time. After an hour, he began calling again, but for some reason we didn't want to answer. We got up and began running, filling up with panic as we moved, until we were racing across the ruts of the old field. I kept turning, stumbling as I looked behind. Perhaps he had heard us getting up and running away from the well. Only Wendy stayed by the well for a while, watching us run as his calling grew louder and wilder, until finally she ran, too, and then we were all far away.

The next morning we came back, most of us carrying bread or fruit or something to eat in our pockets. Arthur brought a canvas bag from his house and a plastic jug of water.

When we got to the well we stood around quietly for a moment listening for him.

“Maybe he’s asleep,” Wendy said.

We sat down around the mouth of the well on the old concrete slab, warming in the sun and coursing with ants and tiny insects. Aaron called down then, when everyone was comfortable, and the man answered right away, as if he had been listening to us the whole time.

“Did your parents get help?”

Arthur kneeled at the edge of the well and called “Watch out,” and then he let the bag fall after holding it out for a moment, maybe for the man to see. It hit the ground more quickly than I had expected; that, combined with a feeling that he could hear everything we said, made him suddenly closer, as if he might be able to see us. I wanted to be very quiet, so that if he heard or saw anyone, he would not notice me. The man in the well started coughing, and Arthur volunteered, “There’s some water in the bag. We all brought something.”

We could hear him moving around down there. After a few minutes he asked us, “When are they coming? What did your parents say?”

We all looked at each other, aware that he couldn’t address anyone in particular. He must have understood this, because he called out in his thin, groping voice, “What are your names?”

No one answered until Aaron, who was the oldest, said, “My father said he’s coming, with the police. And he knows what to do.” We admired Aaron very much for coming up with this, on the spot.

“Are they on their way?” the man in the well asked. We could hear that he was eating.

“My father said don’t worry, because he’s coming with the police.”

Little Jason came up next to Aaron, and asked, “What’s your name?” because we still didn’t know what to call him. When we talked among ourselves, he had simply become “the man.”

He didn’t answer, so Jason asked him how old he was, and then Grace came up too and asked him something, I don’t remember. We all asked such stupid questions, and he wouldn’t answer anyone. Finally, we all stopped talking, and we lay down on the cement.

It was a hot day, so after a while, Grace got up, and then Little Jason and another young boy, Robert I think, and went to town to sit in the cool movie theater. That was what we did most afternoons back then. After an hour everyone had left except Wendy and myself, and I was beginning to think I would go, too.

He called up to us all of a sudden. “Are they coming now?”

“Yes,” Wendy said, looking at me, and I nodded my head. She sounded certain: “I think they’re almost here. Aaron said his dad is almost here.”

As soon as she said it she was sorry, because she’d broken one of the rules. I could see it on her face, eyes filling with space as she moved back from the well. Now he had one of our names. She said “They’re going to come” to cover up the mistake, but there it was, and there was nothing to do about it.

The man in the well didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Then he surprised us again by asking, “Is it going to rain?”

Wendy stood up and turned around like she had done the other day, but the sky was clear. “No,” she said.

Then he asked again, “They’re coming, you said. Aaron’s dad,” and he shouted, “Right?” so that we jumped, and stood up, and began running away, just as we had the day before. We could hear him shouting for a while, and we were afraid someone might hear. I thought that toward the end maybe he had said he was sorry. But I never asked Wendy what she thought he’d said.

Everyone was there again on the following morning. It was all I could think about during supper the night before, and then the anticipation in the morning over breakfast. My mother was very upset with something at the time. I could hear her weeping at night in her room downstairs, and the stubborn murmur of my father. There was a feeling to those days, months actually, that I can’t describe without resorting to the man in the well, as if through a great whispering, like a gathering of clouds, or the long sound, the turbulent wreck of the ocean.

At the well we put together the things to eat we had smuggled out, but we hadn’t even gotten them all in the bag when the voice of the man in the well soared out sharply, “They’re on their way, now?”

We stood very still, so that he couldn’t hear us, but I knew what was coming and I couldn’t do anything to soften or blur the words of the voice.

“Aaron,” he pronounced, and I had imagined him practicing that voice all night long, and holding it in his mouth so that he wouldn’t let it slip away in his sleep. Aaron lost all the color in his face, and he looked at us with suspicion, as if we had somehow taken on a part of the man in the well. I didn’t even glance at Wendy. We were both too embarrassed—neither of us said anything; we were all quiet then.

Arthur finished assembling the bag, and we could see his hands shaking as he dropped it into the well. We heard the man in the well moving around.

After ten minutes or so, Grace called down to him, “What’s your name?”

but someone pulled her back from the well, and we became silent again. Today the question humiliated us with its simplicity.

There was no sound for a while from the well, except for the cloth noises and the scraping the man in the well made as he moved around. Then he called out, in a pleasant voice, "Aaron, what do you think my name is?"

Aaron, who had been very still this whole time, looked around at all of us again. We knew he was afraid; his fingers were pulling with a separate life at the collar of his shirt, and maybe because she felt badly for him, Wendy answered instead: "Is your name Charles?" It sounded inane, but the man in the well answered.

"No," the man said.

She thought for a moment. "Edgar."

"No, no."

Little Jason called out, "David?"

"No," the man in the well said.

Then Aaron, who had been absolutely quiet, said "Arthur" in a small, clear voice, and we all started. I could see Arthur was furious, but Aaron was older and bigger than he was, and nothing could be said or done without giving himself, his name, away; we knew the man in the well was listening for the changes in our breath, anything. Aaron didn't look at Arthur, or anyone, and then he began giving all of our names, one at a time. We all watched him, trembling, our faces the faces I had seen pasted on the spectators in the freak tent when the circus had come to town. We were watching such a deformity take place before our eyes; and I remember the spasm of anger when he said my name, and felt the man in the well soak it up—because the man in the well understood. The man in the well didn't say anything, now.

When Aaron was done, we all waited for the man in the well to speak up. I stood on one leg, then the other, and eventually I sat down. We had to wait for an hour, and today no one wanted to leave to lie in the shade or hide in the velvet movie seats.

At last, the man in the well said, "All right, then. Arthur. What do you think I look like?" We heard him cough a couple of times, and then a sound like the smacking of lips. Arthur, who was sitting on the ground with his chin propped on his fists, didn't say anything. How could he—I knew I couldn't answer, myself, if the man in the well called me by name. He called a few of us, and I watched the shudder move from face to face.

Then he was quiet for a while. It was afternoon now, and the light was changing, withdrawing from the well. It was as if the well was filling up with earth. The man in the well moved around a bit, and then he called

Jason. He asked, “How old do you think I am, Jason?” He didn’t seem to care that no one would answer, or he seemed to expect that no one would. He said, “Wendy. Are they coming now? Is Aaron’s dad coming now?” He walked around a bit, we heard him rummage in the bag of food, and he said, “All right. What’s my name?” He used everyone’s name; he asked everyone. When he said my name, I felt the water clouding my eyes, and I wanted to throw stones, dirt down the well to crush out his voice. But we couldn’t do anything, none of us did—because then he would know.

In the evening we could tell he was getting tired. He wasn’t saying much, and seemed to have lost interest in us. Before we left that day, as we were rising quietly and looking at the dark shadows of the trees we had to move through to reach our homes, he said, “Why didn’t you tell anyone?” He coughed. “Didn’t you want to tell anyone?” Perhaps he heard the hesitation in our breaths, but he wasn’t going to help us now. It was almost night then, and we were spared the detail of having to see and read each other’s faces.

That night it rained, and I listened to the rain on the roof and my mother sobbing, downstairs, until I fell asleep. After that we didn’t play by the well anymore; even when we were much older, we didn’t go back. I will never go back.