

LOOKING GLASS LIVES

by
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PROLOGUE

The well is repaired. Amity Pritchard's well. My well. Two men came this morning from Scituate to repair it. No one from this town would come, even though Burt Wayland promised to do it months ago. I wasn't surprised he never showed up.

No one from Nansquett will ever come onto this property again. At least, not while I'm alive. Probably not after I'm dead either. The last time I ordered from Millicent's by telephone, the delivery boy left my order way down at the entrance to the road, off Atwood Avenue. He wouldn't dare step foot on the property. If I hadn't been wandering down at that end, I would never have seen the three wild cats—thrown out of houses in town—trying to get into the loosely closed cardboard boxes he'd left there.

At the end of the property; just as in Amity's time. How the circle is closing in on her and me, making us one. I'm often down there, all around the property now that the weather is milder, trying to come closer to her, trying to bring us even more together. How little remains to keep us from being the same entity! Very little now. Especially since Amity's well has been repaired and is ready to be used again. The last act of the drama ready to be repeated. Closing in. Like a snake

biting its own tail—that Gnostic sign of infinity, that abolition of time and space, as Reverend Pritchard understood so well, that containment of all there is. And soon the two spirals of our lives will be joined, and we will be one: I, Roger Lynch, and she, Amity Pritchard—two no more.

All this has taken a long time to understand.

The affinity between us has been present a long time—more than half my life, since that summer years ago with Grandpa and Chas. Especially with Chas. He too had a role. As did my wife, Karen. And Amity. And her sister, Constance. And Captain Eugene V. Calder of the Union Army. All of us—Chas, Karen, and I—in it for years before we even suspected. I think only I ever really knew for certain. Did Chas? Even if only in that split second when so much is supposed to be made clear, before his life was smashed out of him? Karen should have known then. That afternoon before they left me, I as much as told her we were living in the grip of the past, not only our own past but something that didn't really concern us, something that could be altered. Did she understand me? I thought she did. The way she looked at me, so sadly, her intelligent agate eyes roving around the breakfast room as they tended to do whenever she understood and wished not to. But no. She would never have left me if she had understood what was going to happen to her and Chas. Or would she? So in love with him—despite him, despite herself...so in the grip of this thing we were all in, that time no longer mattered. The past and present and future were always fairly inconsequential in Karen anyway. That's what I loved about her first—how out of time she seemed.

They were never important at all to Chas. So little was important to him. Which was what I loved about him: his ability to enter into fantasies so quickly, so intensely, they

became more important than reality. How, fifteen years later he came by, just as Karen and I had moved here, into the old Pritchard house we'd bought to restore, and how he just started in again, as though no time at all had intervened between my going and our coming back. As if back then, that summer I came to Nansquett for the first time, first came to feel Chas's power—and Amity's, always Amity's too—had never ended. As though it were not merely a dress rehearsal as I came to think of it, but one continuous chunk of action, despite the length of years that had to pass before it could all be played out. As I have only recently come to understand that this—my coming time—is to be the continuation of a time even earlier than fifteen years ago: of Amity's own time and Constance's and Captain Calder's. And the act that is to be repeated, will be repeated as though it had not occurred once already. That's why I had to have the well repaired. It alone needed to be mended. Only the well could possibly set the scene for the final act of the drama. Amity's drama. Mine, now.

The men who came from Scituate to repair the well knew a great deal more than they let on. Standing in the foyer, burly and indifferent in their work clothes, one of them said they had stopped in Etty's dinette for breakfast before coming here. Blurted it out, really. That was said so they wouldn't have to accept my offer of breakfast, of coffee even, so they wouldn't have to come any further into the house. The other one—the darker, heavier one—nudged the first when he said that about stopping in the dinette, as though I weren't supposed to know about it. They just had a job to do, was his opinion: his firm, dense typically-closed-into-life-as-I-am-closed-into-death New England opinion. He didn't want to know any more than that. I could tell. How he stood in the foyer, peering about as though he expected bats or ghouls or I don't know what

to fly down out of the ornate ceiling molding, as though he expected the stained glass skylight above us to suddenly shatter, sending shards of glass to impale him.

Of course they must have known something about me—even about Amity—by the time they drove up to the house. Etty would have seen they were strangers and asked what they were doing, coming over from Scituate. It's rare enough that she sees strangers here in the autumn. In summer, of course, it's different, what with all the summer residents and their visitors.

Oh, the Pritchard place, she would have remarked, when the men told her where they were going, she speaking casually, yet not hiding her surprise. He's repairing the well, she would have asked, in the fall? I thought people fixed wells only in springtime. But that Mr. Lynch wouldn't know any better, would he? He isn't like other folks here in Nansquett. A stranger here, really. Only moved here two years ago, although his family always had a summer home here, for over a century. On the other side of the river. Old Ralph Lynch built it. Guess you've heard of him, even in Scituate. Big man in the county a dozen years ago, even up at the statehouse for years, right through the Depression. Built that big house there in the 'teens. I was just a little girl then. You can see it if you turn around. There, that one, with the dozen dark painted gables and the big porch wrapping three-quarters around the bottom floor. In summer you can only make out the third-floor windows, because of all the foliage. No, that's not where Mr. Roger Lynch lives. He's farther up, off Atwood Avenue. Didn't he give you directions? No, the old Lynch house has been turned into a summer hotel for people down from Providence. Filled up every summer now that rents have gone so sky-high on those boxy little cottages around the river they call villas. Villas, my eye! No, sir, the current Mr. Lynch lives up at the

Pritchard place. Bought it and restored it to look as it did over a hundred years ago. Bought it, lived in it, and scandalized the town from it in less than eighteen months. Not really a stranger to Nansquett though. His mother would bring him and the little girl up to visit the grandfather once a year. Why, I believe he even spent a summer here, when he was a boy. So, he isn't really a stranger. I recall him coming in here for a sandwich and a soda. With his cousin, Chas Lynch. You know Chas Lynch, don't you? A shame about him. Mr. Roger Lynch always did seem to have one foot in this town and the other somewhere else, in New York, I suppose.

How much more did Etty tell the men from Scituate? Filling up their coffee cups as she spoke, so they wouldn't notice the time passing, even cutting a jelly doughnut in half and putting it on their plates (without charge)—a small sacrifice just for the thrill of telling someone new what she and everyone else in Nansquett haven't gotten sick of gossiping about yet. The only real gossip they've had for a hundred years, I'm sure. Since Amity's time. That's the way it is in these small, hidden-away New England coastal towns: towns located off the new highways that connect cities, towns without suburbs. If you fart in Nansquett, Grandpa Lynch used to say, everyone knows within the hour; and furthermore, everyone knows whether it stunk or not.

Not that Grandpa ever cared. He'd grown up here and moved away to Providence. After he sold his newspaper, he came and lived here for years and loved the town. Taught me to love it too. Mother never cared for it, though she'd been here for years. It was what she'd escaped from when she moved down to New York to work at the World's Fair in '39, displaying the first television sets in the General Electric Home of the Future. All Mother wanted was to get away from Nansquett and to stay away. To meet Father and remain in New York.

And that's what she did, until Janet and I were old enough to travel easily, and Grandpa was getting so old he began to want her company. So she would pack us into the big new Plymouth station wagon and drive up on holiday weekends. The station wagon was a dream, with wooden side panels inside and out and a third seat facing the rear of the road, which Janet and I would take turns sitting in, watching the other cars behind us—a seat that folded flat for storage. No, Mother never much liked it here, even though she was good about coming up to see her father. She would drive over to Point Judith where a few of her old friends had married and moved to, and she would spend afternoons with them, playing canasta or bridge with them and the other wives of the Coast Guard officers who would drive over the state line from Groton.

I sometimes think Mother only came up to Nansquett to show off to the townspeople. To show off her Town and Country station wagon—a new model every year. To show off her New York clothes and New York manners and New York husband and children. Also to show off by going away again with great fanfare. She never loved the town the way I came to. I don't think Karen did either—crazy as she was about the house we restored and lived in. I sometimes think Karen remained here only because of me and later because of Chas.

Chas. I'll never really know what he thought of Nansquett, even though he alone of all of us lived here all his life. He must have cared for the quiet and hot blooming smell of the town in summer, the patterns of branches and bushes shadowing the streets. Yet how eager he was to get away, as soon as Karen wanted him to. Not that they ever got too far, not even outside the town limits: just as far as the highway entrance off Atwood Avenue.

Did Etty tell the men from Scituate all that? She might have. What difference does it make? They came here anyway,

even after she chewed off their ears about us. They had a job to do, as the heavier one—the frightened one—said, and they did it. Stopped only once to have lunch, eating in their car down below the terrace, outside the garage that once had been stables. Looking out of their front windshield at the bleak November day, they would have had a good view of the Pritchard place: leaves turning, dying, everywhere, for thousands of square yards around them, the silence of the woods, the gray light sharpening every twig of tree, every architectural detail of the house—Amity’s house, my house—restored to look exactly as it did in 1865.

From the second-floor sitting room, I watched the men eating in their car. Sipping tea from my lovely old china (found in the cellar, along with so many other beautiful old things), I could see them clear the decades of debris out of the well, then drop down a rope ladder and shimmy down it into the well shaft. I saw them repair the broken sections of the wall at the bottom of the well, almost twenty feet down, then install new plumbing; and I saw them come up again and put in new side drains here at the ground level so the well wouldn’t overflow after storms. They did an excellent job, a professional job. Hardly speaking to each other, except to call out “Here!” or “Push now!” or “Harder!” or “Give me that.” Silent men. Like most of the men around here. Like Grandpa used to be, fishing. Silent. Until they have something to say or until they feel comfortable, when they begin to talk and will go on for hours.

I wonder if Etty told the men from Scituate about me and Chas? That’s probably why they wouldn’t come any farther into house beyond the foyer, why they wouldn’t even come in to use the lavatory, pissing behind the garage like dogs, like wild animals. No. She couldn’t have told them. No one in Nansquett could know that about Chas and I. Or did everyone

know, all the time? What difference does it make? They repaired the well. Soon the circle will close in completely.

As the men worked, wet leaves from around the well stuck to their boots and trousers, right up to their thighs, as though determined to decorate the dull gray corduroy the color of this November day with patches of shiny yellows and deep reds and orange-browns. Looking like the pants kids used to wear in the '60s—colored patches on old denims. Comic and unaware, the two silent men worked on, their decorated trousers looking wonderful. Until they finished repairing the well, looked down and saw the leaves and brushed them off roughly. When they came to the foyer again to get paid, the leaves were gone, but the spots from where they had festooned the men's legs and thighs were still damp, as though shadows of colors still remained.

Even so does the past mark us, fleeting as the dampness of a fallen leaf, yet strong enough to be felt. Or deep as a well. Amity's well. My well now—and my future.

I do not fight this future anymore. Not since Chas and Karen left or tried to leave and discovered too late that leaving was a very particular action in the play they had allowed themselves to become enmeshed in.

I am reconciled now. I accept. I submit. I am even eager to embrace the future—and the past. Amity's life becoming my life, finally; Amity's story, my story. More so than I could have dreamed possible fifteen years ago, when I first heard of Amity Pritchard.