

Put Your Lips Together

Abandoned. The crumbling farmhouse, crouched in the landscape like some desiccating arachnid, is miles out of town. Too heart-sick to leave, the young man's surviving by eking out supplies. Silence, like viscous pondweed, is blanketing oxygen and light.

Thirty-seven days since they took him away. *Eight years too late*, he thinks. The old man, unravelling, unable to care for himself, had clung to life like a limpet. At the start, the Doc had told him straight, *'He'll never get better, but if you put him into a facility, son, he'll sure as hell get worse. Truth told, I wouldn't leave an ailing parakeet in one of those places. 'Course, it's up to you...'*

So about then, when the old guy was still part-lucid, they'd struck a deal. 'Come live here, then when I'm gone, you'll get it all.' The old carcass, skin and bones and iron-filing whiskers had cackled. 'I won't last long. And forgive me if I'm wrong, sonny, but that's the best offer you'll get all year.'

Insight hasn't deserted ya, then, the boy thought. He was a boy then, nineteen. Now he feels ancient, older than the lone twisted apple tree out-back. It, too, is dead now, bare; no rustling leaves disturbing the hush. That's what loneliness does to you.

Day thirty-eight. He stirs in the night and hears a low wind whistling through a window crack. It's been hot for days; he's had the window open, but at night, with the bugs-- He mustn't have closed it right shut. Half-awake, he finds the noise calming, reminding him of something. Sleep reclaims him before he remembers what.

Day thirty-nine. He wakes with a niggling brain-itch and searches for his phone (he hasn't needed it for weeks). He looks up *How to Whistle* on Google.

1. *Wet your lips and pucker them.*

2. *Blow air, softly at first. You should hear a tone.*
3. *Blow harder, keeping your tongue relaxed.*
4. *Adjust your lips, jaw, and tongue to create different tones.*

Grampa's whistling had been the last thing to go. When he could no longer talk or feed himself or communicate that he needed to pee, he kept on whistling. At first, real tunes, then just noise as if the whistling mirrored the blood pulsing through his veins. Finally, only rattling breaths.

Now the young man puckers his lips and blows, but nothing comes out.

Back to Google: *'Why can't some people whistle?'*

- *Lots of non-whistlers think of whistling ability as a genetic trait, like blue eyes. But there's no evidence of any factors, genetic or otherwise, that might prevent someone from learning.*

He contemplates messaging them, flagging up their error. *Bud, once I send you the 'evidence' of those 'otherwise factors', you'll hafta start whistling out your other end...*

He wanders through the house and stops in the doorway of the old guy's room, gazing at the stained and lumpy covers on the iron-framed bed. He hasn't been in here since they took him away, but something's pulled him back. He stands stock still and holds his breath, hoping for what – a sound, a signal? Of course, there's nothing there.

His eyes are drawn toward a small wood-framed image on the wall, but he doesn't go across. He knows full-well what it shows: a picture of all of them, Grampa, Gramma, his Ma, and him a baby in her arms. That was the start of the time they'd all lived here together like one normal, happy family. *Seven years before that bastard blew into town and stole ma and me away.*

Something clicks. In his mind, clear as a film clip, he sees Gramma and him in the kitchen, holding hands, dancing. She's singing: *'Whenever I feel afraid, I whistle a happy*

tune... ' He's laughing. It'd been her favourite song - and his. And until right now, he'd somehow forgotten.

Day thirty-nine. Humming Gramma's tune, he reconnects with Google and sees a new post:

'I don't know if I have a problem or I need to see a doctor but no matter how hard I try, I can't whistle. Is there a disease which doesn't let you whistle?

- *No, of course not. Some people just have trouble whistling.*

He snickers, *Dumb fucker*. But he's pleased he's not alone.

Still humming, he shoves things into a bag and grabs the keys to the old Chevy.

Time to move on and find himself some company.

What was that old line? *Just put your lips together...?*

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