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Some Feeders Hang Like Puppets

Adria Curts
Cedarville University

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Some Feeders Hang Like Puppets

It's almost nothing the way the birds fly from one feeder to the next, like the grassy breeze, precise and calm. Dad put up the feeders the morning after Sherman left our house. I was ten years old that summer, and my sister was six. We could have gone on forever that June and July dressing up in our long skirts and running through our neighbor's pastures. We talked to the birds, too. I remember one week when I read a story about a woman who was so calm that chickadees would eat out of her hand as she lounged on the porch drinking 7-up. I practiced sitting calmly on the porch for a week and talking or singing to the birds, but they never came close. Only the hummingbirds would swoop in front of my face, and I would swat at them, thinking they were wasps. That summer, weeks didn't have Mondays and Tuesdays; they just had Sundays and Wednesdays – church days, with the pastor on his summer stool in front of the congregation, wearing a dress shirt and no tie. I don't know if my sister and I cared to talk to anyone outside of our family that summer except for church friends and eventually Sherman. We filled our days with planting our own herb gardens (both of which did not produce more than three sage plants in the end) and acting out scenes from movies in front of the video camera. Mom was scarce that summer, going to work all day, then coming home, cooking and doing laundry. We were usually only aware of her when things got heated between her and Dad. Things got heated when Sherman came.

I was out on the trampoline that day, the day Sherman came, probably practicing for the summer Olympics. The Olympics were a big deal at my house; we all sat around the television, and my grandma and grandpa would come over and eat

Some Feeders Hang Like Puppets

hot chicken sandwiches and chips and dip with us while we watched track and swimming and the favorite of us two girls –gymnastics. I had to be ready for the performance this year. The American team was depending on me. By this time into the summer, I was getting restless with little Emmy tagging on and copying all of my movements. Besides, flexibility and rhythm came much more easily to her, and the moves I would work on for whole afternoons, she would watch once and do perfectly. That summer I convinced her that the Americans needed her for tennis. I saw her bouncing a ball off the brick wall and hitting it for two days straight. She told me that she had broken four records already. (I wondered whose records.) I was in the air doing toe touches when I saw Sherman drive up. As usual when an alien car came down our driveway, I ran to find Emmy and we crawled around to the side of the garage to spy.

He pulled up in a white '82 Ford Fairmont that chugged and spat and lawnmowed its way into our drive. "Smiley Steve..." A man with bowlegs growled. He had silvered Paul Newman hair and rosacea cheeks with broken veins. He was red all over. "Smiley," he yelled, "come out here and see ol' Sherman!" After two steps toward the house, he stumbled and scooted to the porch. Emmy and I giggled. I didn't know if we should be laughing at a drunk man or not. We watched him sit on the cement steps awhile, apparently forgetting why he even came. Then I saw his eyebrows get frustrated. When he turned, his eyes were dark. He got up and walked toward the cows across the street. "Whatcha starin' at, ya big fatso peoples. Ahaaa ahaaa!" He was exceedingly pleased with himself for being able to rip on the cows. He reached out his hand to touch one, and the heifer backed away. "Gee, Smiley,

you've changed. Ahhaa ahaa!" He roared again and caught his balance. I could feel Emmy's arm getting scared as he walked back towards the house. She tensed up, getting ready to dart for inside. "Wait, Em. He can't see us."

I heard rustling from the house. "Sherman Davis." My dad came out the front door half-smiling, half confused. "Anna," he called back to Mom, "Guess who's here?" I don't remember if Mom answered or not. "Sherman, how you been?" Sherman stood up slowly, chuckling and grinning. He held his arms wide to my dad and just laughed. My dad hugged him and patted him roughly on the back. "God, Smiley, we had some good times. You and Anna and the baby, and me and Julia and the kids. You know, I ain't doing so well now."

"I know all about it, Sherman. Do you miss her?"

"Coursssy do." He started laughing for no reason again, and then he bubbled into tears. I almost wanted to cover Emmy's eyes from seeing a grown man carry on and cry the way he did. His hands lifted to his cheeks and he pressed them, squeezing in his mouth as wetness trickled over his fat fingers. It was indecent, and I was entranced.

Dad ushered him into the house and, against Mom's wishes, called us in to meet him. I heard them arguing while Sherman sat in the living room. "Anna, he is my friend. You just don't leave your friends drunk and out in your driveway when they obviously need something."

"Steve, you know what your problem is? You think that you can just save everyone. Why are you playing saint tonight? We both know men like Sherman. I do not want my girls being exposed to...I'm sorry, but this trash." Dad was silent for

a while. "Talk to me." Still, silence. Mom just kept going, exaggerating so that Dad would speak up. After a while, you learned to listen to only half of what she had to say. She would pick and prod and pull until she got a response out of any one of us. "Next thing you know, he'll be staying over night, eating all the food, teaching misbehavior of all sorts to the girls. And you," she nearly growled, "you'll be sitting back, not saying a word, just letting people walk all over you."

Dad looked at her squarely. "Somehow he was good enough to walk through these doors when Julia and the kids were still with him, though. Right, Anna?" His look was consistent. "He's the same person." Dad called loud enough for everyone in the house to hear, "Girls, come to the living room. I want you to meet my friend, Sherman."

Sherman stayed the rest of the day and into the night. He told us stories about living out west and about when Dad and him were younger and used to have all kinds of adventures. He swore in his stories, and my dad had to tell him to watch his mouth in front of the kids and wife. "Sorry, Smiley, but you know it's true. There was always something different 'tween you and me. Guess you just know how to pick everything better." When he first saw my little sister, he couldn't stop looking at her. He told my mom that Emmy looked like a papoose because of her dark hair. My mom just politely smiled and pulled Emmy up onto her lap. She looked over and glared at my Dad.

"Come here, little Indian. Come give Uncle Sherman a hug," he said, leaning towards her and Mom.

"You're not our Uncle," I said. He was sort of creepy.

Against my mom's judgment, he ended up staying the night because it was raining and the front left window in his car wouldn't roll up. Dad told him that he couldn't have any alcohol in the house, though.

"Who needs alcohol in a place like this," he grinned. Dad brought him food throughout the evening and talked with him about high school. Emmy got bored, and Mom put her to bed, but I stayed up to listen.

"You just tell me, Steve, why that whore ran out on me and took the kids!" he yelled out of nowhere. Dad looked at me and nodded his head toward the kitchen so I would get up and leave. I got up but sat down on the other side of the hallway out of sight so that I could listen in. They conversed like a song. It would get real quiet, and I knew that Sherman was crying and my Dad was just sitting with him. Then they would get going on a memory and their voices would raise and chuckles would spurt out, then spill. I had never seen my Dad talk and listen for so long.

"Sherman, it's nice having you here like this."

"Yeah, Smiley, you and I are like friends who was always friends," Sherman laughed.

Emmy and I tried to remain low-profile the next day. We spied on him and hid flat against walls when he walked around corners. Sometimes we heard him ask Dad where that Indian daughter of his ran off to. Emmy and I would turn our faces and look at each other with wide eyes. Soon we got bored and ran off to the fields with the birds and cows and trees. That evening, when we came back for dinner and Mom told us that Dad was at the grocery store getting tomato paste, I told Emmy to

go outside and wait for me, because I had to ask Mom something. Mom was washing dishes and I pulled on the back of her shirt so she would turn around. “Addy, I’m trying to get the kitchen ready for dinner.” I faced her and tried to make my eyes look soft and innocent so that she would give me a moment. “Mom, why did Sherman come here?” I paused.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that too. I think that your father is a good man and people are always coming to him because they know he’s generous. Sherman probably doesn’t have a friend left in the world but your daddy right now.”

I searched her face, “Then why don’t you want him here?” Her face cringed up and she sighed. Before she said anything else, we heard the Fairmont backfire.

“Emmy,” I called, circling around to the front of the house. I froze in my tracks. I found myself staring numbly as Sherman pushed Emmy into his car. His hand was over her mouth. He said, “Don’t you be ‘fraid. We’re going home, papoose.” He started swerving off down the road, and I bolted after them.

“Emmy! Emmy! Eeeeeemmy!” I screamed and ran. I heard the door slam behind Mom as she ran out of the house toward the commotion. The white car swerved and pattered straight into our neighbor’s mailbox, then landed in the ditch.

“Emmy!” Mom flew past me and grabbed Emmy out of the window. She grabbed my hand, held Emmy, and backed us away from the car and from Sherman. I felt her shaking.

“Leave now,” Mom commanded. Sherman sunk to his knees on the grass. He placed his hands on his cheeks and squeezed. “Smiley, I’m sorry,” he pleaded to

the ground. "I'm so sorry...Oh, Smiley...Julia took my girl with her, you know." He cried more.

"Go," Mom repeated. He got into his car and tried to start it, pumping the gas pedal and cursing. "My God, I'm sorry," he kept repeating, until the car started and tripped and swerved off down the road. He didn't look back. Mom stood like a brick house with Emmy in her arms, holding my hand, until his car was gone. I hoped he would go far and never come back.

No one talked to Dad that night. In the morning I got up and saw him filling the little seedy cages with bent poles and jagged wire in the yard. Some feeders hung like puppets from the big tree. Dad held the seed bag steady as he poured. I didn't know how his arms could look strong and soft and weathered at the same time. I went out to the yard to stand beside him. His eyes were squinty that morning, and his hair was ruffled. "Sorry 'bout what happened, Addy." I didn't say anything. I just hugged his arm. He looked at the feeder. "Sherman is my friend."