The Lady

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A new short story by Melvin Konner

of the Dying Child

I was, as they say in England—although I wasn't in England—reading the law. I was attending the Stoneham School of Law in Blandford, Massachusetts, which was, and incidentally still is, the best law school in North America. In a sense, it was nearly in England, for we have no law that is really our own; hence a certain persistent, engaging wildness.

The school was named after Lucas Stoneham, an undistinguished businessman who died in middle life, leaving a sack of books and a miserable pasture "to the benefit and succor of our illustrious college, that the young men may come to the trough and drink draughts of wisdom." To my ear, I must say, this testament made the enterprise sound rather like a pigsty. And since Stoneham himself reputedly took draughts of something different, his legacy was presumably part expiation (although one should not overlook the tax advantages that may have accrued to the heirs, even in those barbarous early days of estate law).

In any case, the school—or the University, energized in part by the recent boom in the electronics industry—was now endowed to the tune of a billion dollars. Through an admittedly dubious coupling of enterprise and luck, I, as well as several hundred others, was taking my draughts of whatever-it-was.

We—I mean my family and I—had recently moved into the ground floor of an old house at the edge of the

campus. The house was privately owned, as was the one-family house to the left. But the house to the right, a multiple-family dwelling, was owned by the University. Between us and that Stoneham house ran a path that was known to be shared. In fact, it was almost public, since it provided the easiest access from our little street to the School of Law.

In the Stoneham house there lived a blighted family. No kinder words describe them. To ordinary parents were born two sons, both afflicted with a dreadful inborn disease. This affliction, a rare form of brain degeneration, progressively disabled its victims, and ended in early death. The last phase of the illness brought forth a rage for self-destruction. A child, if not well strapped down, could be counted on to put out his eyes or savage his face. There was nothing to be done except to tie the child's arms and legs. The pair of physicians, carefully memorialized in the hyphenated, clumsy name of the disorder, had distinguished themselves by describing, not by solving, it.

One of the boys had died just before we moved to Blandford. It was late spring, and the neighbors' hushed gossip—sympathetic, to be sure—rustled gently among the other sounds of life. Crickets whistled and songbirds tested the warm air. Children yelled and threw taunts at each other beneath a waning sun, televisions flickered in sitting rooms in the evening, and men and women whispered about their neighbors' unspeakable grief.

The family, the Blainiffs, had a big yellow mongrel bitch, a wild mixture of breeds. With a bark to match its size, the dog would raise a disapproving clamor whenever someone took the path between our houses. That clamor would often disturb the boy's unstable peace, and sometimes provoke an episode of self-inflicted violence. Sadly, in her decent and unknowing animal effort to defend the boy, the dog could unleash the darkest forces within him.

At first I was barely aware of these dismal events. My mind, like my nose, was buried in Blackstone's, and I was not inclined to muse on the Blainiffs. What little time I could spare from the tedious rigors of study I penuriously spent with my harried wife and baby. I cursed, more than once, the day I gave up a promising business to step on the bottom rung of the ladder of law. Yet my mind was wonderfully concentrated on the various sentences pronounced on me by my teachers. And the time it took to do the simplest things—for example, to go from place to place—I looked upon as stolen from a precious, short supply. To lessen my loss of time, I, like most of my neighbors, habitually and thoughtlessly used the little path that best led from our block to the wider world. But, unlike my neighbors, perhaps, I was not in a truly stable frame of mind.

One morning as I was absentmindedly latching the gate that stood halfway down the path, I heard the dog bark and a woman shout. The dog was yowling, in combined anger with me and frustration with the thin strong woman yanking at her collar. The animal was charged with that anger born of slavish canine love. Her mistress had straight, long, straw-colored hair, and would have been graceful and pretty both, if she did not bear so plainly the stamp of the chances of her life.

"Don't you understand there's a sick child? There's a sick child here!" She yelled with a frustrated pain that resembled the sounds of the dog at her side.

I needed no further encouragement to turn from my intended path. At first, I could not speak, my heart pounded so. The inanities I shortly began to utter in my defense are best left unrepeated. Suffice it to say that for the better part of a minute I submitted to her invective, my mouth half open. During this episode, I found that forty or fifty seconds can be very long indeed.

I retreated. Walking slowly around the not-much-longer "long way," I tried to settle down. At first I could not quite understand what had happened. But after a few ►

minutes of calm, I reconstructed the events leading up to the confrontation. I resolved never to take the path again.

Yet that was not the end of it. I could not get the woman out of my mind. She stood astride my thoughts, proud, confident, uncaring, ineffably powerful—and, through no fault of her own, the cause of my own considerable pain. And there she grew, both in moral stature and erotic appeal, as I contemplated the devastating hopelessness of her life. I had always found young mothers attractive in their exotic blend of the sensual and the maternal. Perhaps I sensed the lithe, vital body beneath the soft, protective, enveloping wing. But this young mother's air of sensual nurture was cruelly tested by her grotesquely tormented offspring. It was as if she had, by means she did not understand and through no fault of her own, found herself engaged in sexual intercourse with a knife.

I acted that day on the impulse to protect her. I could not concentrate on my assigned burden of oral legal tradition, delivered without humor or humanity in a lecture hall designed to mortify the flesh. I went home early. As I sat moodily at the kitchen table, gazing out at the spot of my unexpected dressing down, I realized there was something I could do.

I drew an index card from the shelf beside me, and wrote a message on its closely set blue lines: "A sick child lives near here. When the path is used, the child is disturbed by the dog's barking. Because of the severity of the illness, quiet is paramount. The child's mother has asked that the path no longer be used. Please cooperate." Like a man who regrets a crime deeply, but who feels impelled to commit it again to make restitution, I walked timidly down the path. With a red thumb tack I fixed the tiny sign to the worn wooden gate.

After a hurried and blessedly uneventful departure, I went back to studying law at the kitchen table. Within the next half-hour, three people tried the path. The first to read my message was a pregnant woman trailing an empty shopping cart. She nodded thoughtfully, chewing at the ends of her hair, then turned and waddled back the way she came. The second interloper, an athletic-looking law student I vaguely recognized from the lecture hall, took quick note of the sign, but kept to the path. Obviously he was very late. The third, a burly utilities man carrying a long flashlight, came down the path from the other direction. He did not notice the sign as he passed through the gate. Ironically, the dog barked only for the woman. But I felt satisfied that the sign would make an impact. When I glanced through the window's distorted glass, the card's small field of white comforted me.

My wife returned from work and then went out to pick up our baby from day care, while I drifted painfully ►

over a sea of torts. After they'd returned, I stood diapering our squalling son—he much preferred his mother, and who could blame him?—when I heard shouts outside. I peeked through the slats of the blind. Mrs. Rawls, our plump, sweet, and slightly strange upstairs neighbor was poised on one side of the gate. The mother of the dying boy stood on the other side. Both were talking at once.

I felt a warm trickle down my arm, and realized that Charlie, whom I was trying to keep from rolling off the table as I strained to see out the window, had let loose again. I cursed him silently. He began bawling. I wiped my arm absently with a napkin, hardly taking my eyes from the scene before me.

Mrs. Rawls was speaking with the air of false elegance she frequently adopted. "We have lived in this house for thirty-eight years. We have always used this path. It's difficult to walk—I can't walk around easily. I see no reason why I should change my habits now." But Linda Blainiff was already shouting.

"Didn't you see that? Don't you have eyes?" She was thrilling in her anger. She yanked the sign from the picket and thrust it into her neighbor's face. "Stoneham wrote that!" She squealed this last declaration with a crazy mixture of recklessness and confidence. To her, the tiny card, covered with my guilt-ridden scrawl, had magically emanated from the highest institutional authority. Yet my animal admiration for this pretty, plucky lady, this sacrificial victim of one of life's most brutal whims, was so deep that I was delighted to be her knight, even in anonymity. The rest of their standoff was drowned out by Charlie's just protest. I tended to him, and my attention turned to other things.

As time went by, Mrs. Rawls continued to use the path. Breathing heavily, she would walk slowly down the path, quietly unlatching and relatching the gate. By force of some arcane protective power, she rarely roused the dog's ire.

My carefully written index card did not survive a single Blandford winter. Mysteriously, an official notice printed in white letters on clear plastic appeared in its place. It read: STONEHAM UNIVERSITY. PRIVATE PROPERTY. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW. Mrs. Rawls, who clearly did not consider herself a trespasser, would give it a glance and shrug her shoulders huffily as she passed through the gate. No one seemed to know the provenance of the new highly official Stoneham sign, but rarely did anyone other than Mrs. Rawls chance to negotiate the path. And my heroic schoolboy fantasies about Mrs. Blainiff fanned the strange flames that she had sparked in me.

With time, these flames subsided to a slow, cool, near-mystical burn. My studies absorbed me wholly, and I eked out passing grades, despite being steeped in the soupy emotions of family life. Charlie was learning to walk, and often tried to climb the wheelchair ramp outside the Blainiffs' house. His efforts on the ramp made me nervous. I was not superstitious about the illness; it was very far from my conscious mind. Instead, Charlie's own exuberance, his marvelous, stumbling, redheaded, grinning sense of life made me fear for him. Once, when I let him try a few paces on the ramp, I fancied I saw the curtains rustling at the Blainiffs' window. After that, I kept him well away from there.

One day, the Blainiffs received a steady flow of visitors—tearful, reserved, and darkly dressed. Linda Blainiff emerged in black, a black lace mesh covering her yellow hair. At the top of the stairs, she hesitated, turned, and moved slowly down the long ramp, yanking her elbow away from the elderly relative who reached for it. Leaning on the rail, she seemed to bend her whole body around a large, hollow space near her belly. I'm still ashamed to say it, but even in that guise, I wanted her.

Some years later I was—how do I put this?—not quite myself for a time. When I was released from the hospital, a genteel institution filled with old New England screwballs, the Blainiffs' ramp was no longer there. I had speculated on its significance before; the ramp had been left standing for years after the death of the second boy. It was harder now for me to understand its absence. What had given closure to this long, harsh, passive act of mourning?

But I was too distracted then to realize that the mourning had not ended. Rather, I heard only that the two vessels of grief, Linda Blainiff and her husband, had moved away. I had no idea where, nor would it have been fit for me to try to find out. My hands were full. I was no longer in a downtown corporate suite. After my unfortunate episode, I worked in the lower echelons of the public defender's office. I struggled there to demonstrate that, despite my infirmity, I could be some sort of asset. My wife and son started school the same year. Mrs. Rawls had died, and there was a large rent increase. By mid-October it was bitterly, angrily cold, and the freezing air rushed in beneath the door and around the windows. The cost of oil was colossal. Paint peeled. Case after case, each a mockery of justice, awaited my attention, though I was working up to 15 hours a day. ▶

On the evening of October 31, I sat up alone at the kitchen table. Charlie was away at a Halloween pajama party. My wife was at a friend's house studying for an exam; on the last such occasion she had stayed until morning. Children, grotesque, exotic multicolored elves, paraded past my door for hours. I was not prepared for them. I proffered an apple here and there. Some were taken, and some were declined with suspicion. But one child recoiled from my hand as if it were a snake. She played a witch, and was arm in arm with a warlock. They glanced at each other through horrifying masks, and no matter what I told myself, I could not completely subdue the fear they caused. They let out a raucous, unnerving cackle that drifted out into the night. Clouds covered the sky, obliterating the stars.

While rummaging through a drawer, I found a box of pennies. I hoped to sprinkle them liberally into the shopping bags of the demons and elves that would arrive. I wished they were shinier. I waited, but no other children came. In my tense, weakened state I imagined the cackle of the last pair, that tiny witch and warlock, resonating eerily through the night world. I now seemed to be the object of a dark, cosmic derision.

It was midnight before I finally admitted no more children would come. I sat at the kitchen table, rubbing at the red maple surface until the tips of my fingers were hurt and raw. The stain at which I absently worked was still in the wood; around it lay a flaky mixture of dirt and sloughed skin. A dozen legal files sprawled before me, untouched. Our kitchen window looked into what had been the Blainiffs' den. A faint light shone there, possibly from another room. Perhaps it was simply the reflection from our window.

I then heard a strange noise, rising faintly from the path outside, or from a point above it. At first it sounded like a cat's wail, but in my fatigue I soon became convinced it had a human origin. And as I heard it repeat and build, it seemed more and more familiar. I felt as if it were Linda Blainiff who wailed, keening as if her sorrow had no end.

At last the tears came. They had not come before. I cried myself to sleep, and my own sobs blended with hers. My own sadness echoed the night's mournful darkness. When I woke, the sound was gone. Swallows, stragglers in the long migration south, called to each other as they swooped over the rooftops. Smoky shapes still covered the sky, but the sun was certainly rising and through a forbidding sweep of cloud it bathed the city of Stoneham in a soft, unearthly, milky light. ■

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