

The Coral Castle

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“Ed died, Sis; he left a note on the castle that said, ‘going to the hospital.’ Supposably he caught a bus up to Miami and died right there all by himself.” Lindley whispers into the receiver. In the distance, I hear the nagging shouts of her teenagers.

“Did they note the cause?” I ask, pressing the phone closer to my cheek.

“Tuberculosis, we gather. I’m thinkin’ that’s why he moved down here, to heal it under the sun and all.”

I picture Ed Leedskalnin, the old ghost. I can see him sitting on the bus, a bag of bones being jostled by the rumbling of the road. It used to scare us how the skin of his face rippled like tossing ocean waves. I think when we looked upon him as children, we were distressed to find, for the first time, that a face can tell you so much about sorrow.

Lindley and I stay on the line rehashing the rumors we remember from childhood. We use words and phrases like ‘supposably’ and ‘well I heard,’ like we always do when talking about Ed Leedskalnin. No one knows how he managed to construct the Coral Castle. In the small town of Homestead, many speculations circulated about how Leedskalnin moved 10-ton blocks of coral and nestled them together, with no one to bear witness except God and the stars. One time, little Johnny Davis told me that he saw it with his own two eyes. Ed Leedskalnin, supposably, grew two large antennas, used laser beams to lift the rocks, and flew them back to the castle. *Oh hush*, I’d yell at him.

The secrecy of Ed Leedskalnin wasn’t just for the wonderment of school kids. At Mamma’s sewing club, one bug-eyed Mrs. Charles whispered that Leedskalnin sang to the rocks until they levitated. Mrs. Anderson chimed in with “I saw the little guy walking down the road with a witching rod. When Tom pulled over to see what in gods’ grace he was doin’, he just said, ‘when I know it, I’ll find it.’”

The mystery gave us something to prod at. In the summer of 1940, it seemed that the castle had sprung from the earth like a ghost from its grave. The mythos of Leedskalnin worked like a poltergeist corroding the consciousness of everyone in its vicinity. Perhaps, that’s why certain details about that summer come to me in dreams so vivid that when I wake, I forget that I’ve grown. I forget that my hands are wrinkled and worn. I forget that I can’t climb into bed with Mamma and Papaw because, like the castle, they are another piece of stone waiting to be visited.

Maybe it was the candy-brained age of thirteen, and the lullabies of frogs that we fell asleep to. Maybe it was our hometown’s white shacks and thatched salmon roofs. Maybe it was the way we laid on our backs, gossiping as the Spanish Moss

swung above us in the afternoon light. Either way, it was an era of clandestine truths that bound Missy, Lindley, and me together. Anytime we thought we gained some thread of understanding about the world, it was immediately knocked down with an opposing rebuttal. So, we stretched our arms out like seagulls and hung in the air. Occasionally, we'd swing down and dip a toe into the ever-turbulent ocean of adulthood, but for the most part, we hung, salty air whipping through our white feathers.

If I close my eyes, I can hear the milky voices of jazz singers crackling through Missy's kitchen radio. I remember the coolness of the countertop as I watched her and Lindley flap their dresses and wag their fingers. Lindley bounced her knobby knees around Missy, who swayed softly, trying not to shake the already curving parts of her body. They were everything to me, and I suppose that was the only truth we were sure of.

Our greatest misfortune was the ever-watchful eye of Missy's brother Wayne, and his best friend James Gunther. They were man-like to me, although they hadn't surpassed seventeen. They came crashing in and made their presence immediately known as a boy of that age often did.

"Wait till mamma hears about this," Wayne said, turning off the radio.

"Wait till mamma hears you been runnin' around when you're supposed to be workin'," Missy shouts back. James, the largest of the two, leaned against the back corner.

"Well then," said Wayne, grabbing a chair and straddling it. "I won't tell ya what we been cooking up tonight."

"Whatchu cooking!" Missy cried.

"Naw, you tattler. You'll tell mamma and ruin the whole thing," taunts Wayne.

"I won't. I swear it." We join Missy and crowd around him, dog-eyed and impatient.

"Well, we're goin' down to catch ole Leedskalnin," says Wayne.

The three of us gasp like a great Greek chorus. Missy slaps him "Knock it Wayne, that ain't funny!"

"I'm not foolin' witcha. I heard he moves things with his mind. It's what the gypsies do, and I reckon he's got a bit of gypsy in 'em." Wayne turns to James who nods in agreement. "I also heard he got a mean-lookin', coffin-like contraption that he locks little girls in like y'all."

"Oh hush," sighs Missy, but she crosses her arms protectively. I'd say I did feel a slight chill creep through the window, although it might've been fear playing a cruel trick on my mind. The hairs on my arms stood up all the same.

James chimes in with his gravelly voice "Say, why don't you girls come with us and see for yourself."

Wayne rolls his eyes, "Naw, they're too chicken."

"I'll go, I ain't chicken" Missy nods her head at the syllables of her words.

"Missy you're still scared of the dark; you'll chirp too much." For this Missy

lands another slap on his arm.

James twirls a piece of grass betwixt his teeth as he stares intently at her. “They gotta grow up sometime.” I picture our yellow gull-like feet dipping a little further into the water.

That night, the moon shone so bright it made the passing clouds look translucent. We moved in silence. Our shadows stretched across the town square and the sleeping shutters of our neighbors. The plan was to meet the boys at the tree line outside of town. The lush and sunken terrain of the Florida forest towered over us like a daunting black mass that grew in height as we approached. At the tree line, a muscular white speck of a boy was waiting for us. One boy twirling a piece of grass betwixt his teeth.

Lindley grabbed Missy by the hand “I know that ain’t Wayne up there.”

“Aw yeah, he uh, tattled about the radio, and I tattled about work. So, he dinnin wanna come an get in any more fits with mamma if we was caught.” Missy said sheepishly. Lindley and I exchanged knowing glances.

“If we are caught, our mammas will ship us off to the convent for runnin’ around with strange boys in the night!” Lindley pointed her finger, frustrated.

“James ain’t strange, he’s James! C’mon, aintcha a bit curious?” Missy’s eyes darted to me for help. Brief images of schoolboys gathering around me at lunch as I tell the story of our triumph flashed through my mind. I wonder what Johnny would have to say about antennas then!

“Curiosity killed the cat Missy,” said Lindley.

“But knowledge brought it back to life.” I squeaked. Their heads whipped my way.

“That’s right, Sis” Missy nodded her head and marched toward the tree line. Lindley stuck her tongue out at me as we turned to follow her.

We trudged closely behind James, who knocked branches out of the way. The air was dusty and sweet with the smell of mud. Lindley and I jumped at any slight sound of rustling, and Missy turned to look at us wide-eyed and giggling. Suddenly, James held up a hand, and we came to an abrupt halt. He extended one long muscular arm and pointed a steady finger, and there it was. The monolithic gray walls of the coral castle sprung from the Earth, as if James had summoned it with his index.

The walls were porous and appeared to change color in the moonlight. They faded from blue to gray to periwinkle. When we placed our small hands on the castle we were humbled by its grandeur. Its coolness liberated us from the muggy oppression of the forest.

“All right,” James waved his hands for us to gather around, and we crouched like footballers at practice. “I say Missy and I follow it around thata ways,” he points east, “and you two head thata ways” he points west. Missy twirls her hair in

fascination with the idea of being chosen. I thought about my mamma. I looked at the blackness of the forest and remembered how far I was from her.

Lindley raises her voice, “You think we’d leave her with the likes of you!”

“Shhhh you idiot,” James reprimands. “Listen, there’s a secret way round the back. We’re bigger ‘an you, so we can head first and give it a look-see. Got it?”

I pulled Missy’s hand from her hair and dragged her just out of earshot. “I don’t feel too good about this, Missy; we’re ‘posed to do everything together.”

“Not everything,” she giggled, eyes fixed just over my shoulder on James. I pulled her chin and directed her gaze to me.

“Please, I don’t like nothin’ bout this.”

“Dontcha fret, Sis; I’ll holler for ya if something happens to go awry.” She looped her fingers through mine and squeezed them tight. She smiled at me the same way she always did when sharing a piece of her lunch or collecting seashells for Lindley or grabbing oranges that were too far from my grasp. Her smile, which I still see in my dreams, was just as pink and sweet as the hibiscus blossoms and, as I would come to find out, it was just as fleeting.

To this day, I struggle to explain the sheer audacity that faced us when the pinkish-gray walls parted, and we saw, for the first time, the miracle of Ed Leedskalnin’s castle. The Coral fixtures laid around the fortress like a funhouse for Titans. Lindley and I immediately forgot how covert the operation and skipped like sprites from monument to monument. There were upwards of twenty crescent-shaped rocking chairs, a heart-shaped fountain, a heart-shaped table, and a replica of the planets lined up, just as they would be in space. The spheric rocks towered over us. The whole place unfolded like a pop-up book. Mandevilla vines wrapped their pink arms around the rocks and swam in the moonlight. Pokey vibrant plants spotted the palace like the living residents of an underwater reef. In the air was an inscrutable sentiment that Poseidon and his trident might be waiting around the next artifact.

Lindley slapped me on the arm and pointed to a tower so large I was surprised we couldn’t see it from the tree line. The head of it was shaped like a flower with the pistol missing. The moon crept slowly into the center. It matched the circular frame like a puzzle piece to its place. Then, the tower worked as a kaleidoscope, casting a silver glow about the castle until all we knew was bright and white. We turned our arms over and over, perplexed by the witchcraft. We let out a confused laugh. Lindley’s smile was bleached and unknowable, along with the rest of her features. In a flash, the moon left the spotlight and we were overwhelmed with the dark truth of night. Suddenly, we heard a clap and we felt a shake so large I thought Earth’s tectonic plates had collided. Then, we heard a scream.

I remember running. I remember darkness. I remember the dampness of Lindley’s hand and the coarse desperation of her voice as she called, “Missy!” It was a deep womanly cry as if a piece of her called to us from the future. “Missy!” Our bodies were knocked into the rock configurations that snuck out of the

black. Then, as our eyes adjusted, we saw a petite gray body scuttering backward on the ground. We dove down to meet her, patting her and checking for injury.

“Holy hell, Missy! Are you okay? We need to leave.” Lindley turned to go but Missy remained, eyes locked on a shaded corner of the castle wall. From the crook emerged the lesser god himself. He was thin and brown like a Dade County Pine. He swayed a little and one got the impression that, like the pine, it wouldn’t take much to chop him down. Next to him, I noticed a coffin-shaped rock, and above it, etched into the substratum, read, “the repentance corner”. Ed stepped in front of it protectively and met my gaze. His cheeks were crevassed like the impressions of mollusks that once cemented themselves to the coral walls. If you were to run your fingers across the lingering indentation, you could imagine the life once lived under the veil of the ocean. Ed gasped. I thought he might speak. Instead, he lifted one branch-like arm and pointed toward the exit. I nodded mindlessly and grabbed the girls with an unknown force.

Again, we ran; we ran for years; we ran hard. We ran through the forest, branches whipping us as we passed. We ran until we collapsed against the frayed wooden walls of Missy’s house. Lindley turned, breathless, and grabbed Missy by the shoulders. “Where the hell is James?” Missy shook her head. Lindley jostled her with force. “What in god’s name is goin’ on?”

“I don know” Missy’s lip quivered. I pushed Lindley out of the way and knelt in front of her. I rubbed Missy’s back as she wiped tears from her eyes. “James was tryna- I don know. He was fussin’ with me an’ he was lookin’ like he wanted somethin’ from me. So, I pushed ‘em...” Her voice trailed off and her face went blank “And It was all light. All kinds of light.”

Just then, a bird began to sing. Lindley and I spun like a whip to face the noise. The robin, harmless and twirling, started his song a little later than he did the day before. Perhaps a warning that autumn was upon us, or a reminder that, even in the Florida Keys, the tides of life will take you. So, we sat, and we watched and the green arms of the early sun stretched into the blue of morning.

For years we never spoke of it. Even when they started searching for James, and even when they didn’t find him. The pounding of our fear was too loud to gossip under the trees, so the Spanish Moss hung above other golden-skinned girls. I’d pass them on my way to school; their voices audacious, their smiles bold and white.

To some sort of luck, I suppose, the boys didn’t prod too much at lunch anymore. Little Johnny Davis, who wasn’t so little, hung his head when his cheeks turned pink at the sight of me. It was around that time when Mamma made me join her at the sewing club. I noticed how her lips quivered when she wanted to speak and didn’t. It reminded me of the shape of Lindley’s mouth whenever someone mentioned Leedskalnin. What secrets, then, did those women hold behind their needles?

As for Missy, she stopped coming around altogether. We'd see her sulking in the window, waiting to be called into the kitchen for chores. When Wayne left to find work at the packing plants, Missy got married to some pastor and disappeared out west. I have one brown image of the two of them, with their stone faces and weather-beaten bodies lonesome in the Texas clay.

So, I can call Lindley, and we can rehash the past. She can say through the static, "It was a time", and I can agree that it was. And I can sit with my windows open as it rains, and I can let the smell remind me of those dense summer nights. And I can see my reflection in the window as the raindrops fall, and I can say it looks rippled and it looks uneven. And funnily enough, I can admit to myself it reminds me of Ed Leedskalnin.