

Memory Lane

By V. A. Jeffrey

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Orly Geesum was an old man who lived on the edge of Memory Street. Actually, he lived at the end of a long, winding road up a small hill just outside of the street proper, called Memory Lane. The road name 'Memory Lane' was written on a flat piece of wood, a makeshift sign Orly had made himself years ago. His house was older and creakier than he was and it used to lean over to one side. Why? Nobody really knew.

"It didn't always lean over like this." Is what Orly said any time somebody would ask. The house sat within a wide, thin ring of toadstools. Sometimes for all the dang fog you couldn't see it. Not on the worst days. But on the better days it was there. Like the old man himself.

Orly Geesum died yesterday. The funeral was going to be held at the old Church of Signs and Wonders, just on the other end of Memory Street. Today his nephew was holding the wake and many folks in town were dropping by to eat, drink and reminisce with the family. Not that there were many to reminisce with. Orly Geesum was the youngest member of the Geesum family of the old generation. Most of them had passed on. The only family member there in the house was his nephew, Ben.

I've seen many people pass away from this world. But this passing was more bittersweet than most.

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Ben was nursing a glass of whisky. A few others were talking quietly around the dinner table.

"Want a glass?" He asked.

"I'll take one." He got up and poured some whisky in a glass and handed it to me.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Ben. I used to visit your uncle after school. He made the best bbq this side of town." I said, feeling obligated and foolish as the words tumbled out. I immediately wondered if that was the wrong thing to say. Ben just nodded silently. His eyes were fixed with a sad, lost look.

"Thank you," he finally said.

"What will you do with the house?" I asked. He shrugged.

"Not sure yet. This house has ghosts. Memory, you know? Ugly as it is, it has history. I mean all houses got history but this one is special. But who wants a house that leans over? Somebody will just tear it down and build something else in its place."

"You don't want to move in?"

"No. This house has reached the end. Like my uncle. It's uninhabitable now."

"Still, you can't let them do that, Ben. There must be some kind of ordinance or law against destruction of historic buildings and places." He threw me a grim smile.

"I said it's got history but it ain't historic."

"I'm serious, Ben." I said.

"I don't think anybody will see it that way. I only wish." I was silent for a moment. Then:

"I remember coming here when I was kid to eat supper. Then I'd go home and eat dinner." Ben smiled.

"Yep."

"Maybe you could build something else in its place, then. I don't think he'd be offended if it came to it. It'll create some excitement around here." I paused. "There was adventure in his blood. In yours. I remember a thing your uncle used to say: "Don't keep a thing around past its usefulness."

"That's true. But nobody in my family ever really did much or went anywhere. Not even uncle Orly. I think Grandpa Lester was unique."

"Speaking of him, it reminds me many years ago when Uncle Orly told me a story, among quite a few, about his grandfather, Lester Geesum and the fog."

"I remember that one. Tell me what he told you. That story shifted a bit every time he told it. And he didn't tell it often."

"Well, it was over twenty years ago. . ."

. . .

Indeed, it *was* over twenty years ago. Even back then Uncle Orly seemed to be at least a hundred years old to my young eyes. I was about nine years old at the time and I was coming home from spending a summer day at the pond. My friends had cut across some backyards and went on home. I passed by Uncle Orly's house. Again, like always, fog or not, he was barbecuing. He waved at me. Pacer, his old hound dog greeted my arrival with a short bark but did not stir from his comfortable spot near the fire pit.

"Hi, Mr Geesum!" I said. "Can I have some?"

"Come on over. Get it before the fog rolls in again." He said. I looked around and sure enough I could see that gray-white wall high in the sky getting ready to descend.

"It's gonna be real bad this week. Won't see nothin' much for a while when this one comes down." I sat down on the back step watching the fire.

"It's no fun because I can't do much outside when it comes. But its always like that. Since forever." I pouted. Orly made a snort of disbelief.

"Always? No son. It wasn't always like this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the fog. Wasn't always like this. I mean, it was always like this since I was a kid, but there was once a time when there was no fog at all."

"Really?"

"Yep. My grandfather, Lester Geesum, bless him, was a traveler and an adventurer. He fought in the civil war, for the Union. After that he traveled. He got tired and married a girl and settled here. Back then, from what he said, you hardly saw fog unless it was in the fall."

"What made it come?" I asked. The old man straightened up and threw me an intense look, raising a brow.

"That's the thing, ain't it? My grandfather was determined to find out. For years this place was like any other town. Then one day it came. Just descended down like a blanket and never truly left. It happened the year I was born. There were a lot of strange things that happened that year. Like that summer. That summer was so hot some folks died. Hotter than hell, it was. Then that fall, the fog came. I was the youngest child. I had a twin who died when we were both born. That year many women in the town had stillborn children or miscarried. People said it was something in the water that made that happen.

Knowing my grandfather, he was dauntless. Nothing ever got him down and he was determined to figure out what was going on. He was a man ahead of his time, you know. He figured it was something that had to do with the increasing industrialization of the land. Pollution was bringing it, he said: "*Cause something ain't right about it!*" My grandmother was something of a mystic and swore up and down there was a witch somewhere in the woods that brought it. She made my mother wear red strings around her wrists and they tied them around my wrist too. She would throw salt across the doorway and put up horseshoes and all manner of charms about the house.

Grandpa, having talked with many townsfolk over the fog and hearing all kinds of odd and disturbing accounts eventually organized a town meeting over the situation. Everyone was in consternation as to what it all meant and what to do. Strange things were being reported at the meeting. People seeing things they weren't supposed to see."

"Like what?"

"Like the Fair Folk."

"Fair Folk?"

"Yeah. Fairies and other sprites. Or things that shifted in and out of view as if they stood in some other time and place and could only be seen for a moment. Whole houses or landmarks nobody had ever seen in the area before. Grandpa Lester gathered together a team of hunters to go with him and investigate the phenomenon. They gathered that the fog came from the north. He recalled there was a small island north of here and he said that he had once thought he saw a factory on the island when he first came here. He thought the fog was not a natural phenomenon from the weather, nor did he buy all the superstitious explanations from grandma or other people. He thought that it came from a large, polluted body of water or from the factory smokestacks somewhere north. After all, why did so many women lose their babies? And why was the previous summer so hellish? It ain't never been that hot before and never was since. So, after the meeting adjourned it was decided that Lester and these few brave men would make an investigation. He told my father to stay home with my mother and make note of anything strange.

On their first foray north they were gone for about five days. They came back empty-handed and more confused about it than ever. I remember the night when they came back. They'd found no answers and they sat around the fire all night talking. The next morning grandpa wouldn't tell me much other than they found nothing. Except willow-the-wisps one night.

"Don't tell your ma or grandma about that." He told me. And I didn't.

The next week they left again, north. This time they walked along the sea, so they went real far that time. Came back eight days later. Nothing. After a third trip in which they were gone for twelve days the other men gave up, empty-handed and resigned to the fog. But grandpa didn't. "Boy," I remember he told me half-jokingly: "if I have to do a sun-dance, I will." But the other men wouldn't go with him. Grandpa accused them of being lazy cowards which, naturally, didn't sit well with them. It ended in a fight which landed Grandpa Lester in jail for a couple of days. After that, he was on his own. Undaunted, he waited for a sunny day. We got one, months later. It was the first day of spring. Grandpa had grandma fix him a large knapsack of food to last him a long while.

"I might be gone a longer than twelve days, Caroline," he said. Grandma was used to it as he was always off on some adventure when they were younger. None of us thought twice about it. She gave him a charm to keep. He kissed her and said goodbye to all us children and grandchildren and then Grandpa Lester was off again, whistling as he went.

As the sun slowly warmed the ground and the leaves and buds began to come forth and the air was fragrant with new blossoms we spent our days getting the garden ready for growing season, spring cleaning and looking forward to grandpa coming back with news. On warmer spring days sometimes we slept out under the starry sky. Me and my friends would swim in the pond in the woods behind the town like you all still do today when the fog isn't around. Then, one cool spring day the fog came back, thick as smoke. The days tuned into weeks and the weeks turned into months. We got worried. No news from grandpa at all. After eleven weeks grandma panicked. She got the police involved and had a huge search going to find grandpa. But no one ever found him.

Finally summer came, which turned into fall. Grandpa Lester never came back. Grandma, heart-broken at first, thought he'd run off and abandoned the family but soon thought better of it as it wasn't in grandpa's nature to do such a thing. She finally accepted that maybe he was just lost and couldn't find his way back again.

"Lost in the fairy-fog," she would always say, sadly.

This conjured up all sorts of frightful scenarios in my mind and threw the rest of the family into turmoil. How could they bury him? How could we have a wake and stand vigil over Grandpa Lester's body with no body to stand over? What about his soul?

All sorts of things ran through everyone's minds. After a year we finally had a memorial for Grandpa

Lester. Everybody in town came which was at least some small comfort."

"He never came back? Ever?"

"No." Orly shook his head slowly, his eyes seemed to mist over. He turned quickly, wiped his face, took up a paper plate and grabbed a couple of spare ribs, put them on it and gave it to me.

"There you go. And be careful of the fog, son. Don't ever go too far out there when it comes or you'll be lost. Like Grandpa Lester."

Suddenly, I didn't feel like eating. I looked around at the rolling, swirling mists. It was like a wall; delicate and mysterious; hiding some force or place no one could see. But it was what it was. If the dauntless Lester Geesum couldn't change it, who could? I ate my ribs in silence. Orly's old hound dog came and sat down on his haunches beside me, gazing expectantly at my meal.

"Quit worrying the boy, Pacer. You'll get your supper soon enough." Uncle Orly turned back to me.

"You'd think that dog goes hungry around here the way he acts." I quickly chewed all the meat off one of the rib bones and gave it to the dog. Pacer snapped it up and began gnawing happily, doing his best to get at the marrow as quickly as possible.

"That dog is just like my grandfather. Always wanting to get to the heart of a matter. Too bad it cost him. But that was the thing, wasn't it? No one knew what it cost him. No one knew if he died or simply disappeared into some other place."

"Maybe you should have named the dog Lester, Uncle Orly." I said. Both Uncle Orly and the dog suddenly glanced at me briefly. Then Pacer went back to his bone. Uncle Orly just smiled.

And that was the account as it was told to me.

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Ben gazed at his uncle's body in the casket. It seemed he was merely resting and would rise any moment.

"I think of him as being on a long journey. He did love traveling. Uncle Orly said as much. Sounds about right too. That's the way I heard it told, most of the time. Mostly. I miss that old hound dog." We both sat and drank and reminisced about Uncle Orly's cooking, his old hound dog Pacer and his antics and how over time the house started leaning over, looking as sad as him. It was as if the house remembered a time no one else did and pined for Lester, lost in the fog.

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The next day was the funeral. Everyone came to pay their respects. There was a short sermon and Orly Geesum was laid to rest in a small plot near the church. Ben eventually sold the house to a developer who had plans to demolish it, which made me feel even more melancholy.

The next morning I got up and had my usual morning coffee and I took a jaunt down Memory Street. I went to the store and bought a few things and decided to pass by the old house just to see it once more. I took my iPhone with me to take a picture. But when I hiked up Memory Lane, the house wasn't there. I retraced my steps thinking I'd gone up the wrong road. No, I had gone up the right road. Right in front of me was the ring of toadstools. The wild riot of blackberry bushes were there also, the winding, unimproved road with the potholes were there. The house should have been there. The fog ran in river-like currents through the air. The house was gone. Mystified, I took a picture anyway.

This wasn't the first odd thing that came and went with the fog. We are used to it here. Old things, especially, drift in and out of sight. I guess the fog claims them. Like many things in life it's a mystery. And life goes on. It made me feel a bit satisfied that no one would be able to destroy it.

At the same time it also deepened my melancholy. Because with Orly Geesum and his old leaning house went the oldest living memory of the days before the fog.