

## **“Clouds are patchy at the end of a raging storm.”**

### **Larry L. Franklin (1942–)**

It was the summer of 1998, two years into therapy, when memories were tested and reality was uncertain. Larry returned to the site where he had spent the first eight years of his life. The countryside was just as he remembered: beans thick and heavy from the morning dew, and cornstalks standing straight like soldiers in the rising sun. A beautiful day to search the archives of one's mind.

Granted, the farmland in Central Illinois didn't make the list of the Seven Wonders of the World. Most people would argue that Mount Everest in Nepal or the Grand Canyon in Arizona were in a different class, but don't tell that to an Illinois farmer who calls a handful of dirt “black gold.” As farmland goes, it's the heart of the watermelon. To walk barefoot across a field and feel the warm soil push up between your toes, or to hear corn grow during the night, is spiritual for those who care to feel. That's what had caused the Franklin brothers—Wendell, James, Henry, and Paul—to move their families to Central Illinois in the early twentieth century. (Woodrow, the other brother, would have moved but he had to go to war; and the lone sister, Iona, joined her husband in Missouri.) All four brothers dropped their plows into a field that soon became their home.

The Franklin brothers, as they were called, shared a similar physical stature: five feet seven to eight inches; broad shoulders; a solid but lean build with a chiseled face; and full lips that, when parted, displayed a healthy row of teeth. Being farmers, they had outdoorsman appearances and boasted farmer's tans. Remove a shirt and the gold-colored skin was offset by a chest as white as a fish belly. Wendell, the strongest of the lot, showed off the biggest smile. He was the father of Larry, and that's whom this story is about.

Wendell, his wife Gatha, and their sons, Keith and Larry, lived in a two-story house surrounded by corn, beans, and the seasonal stand of wheat. The place seemed to have a life of its own, where the evil seemingly mutated into a living entity they called home—passive when outsiders stopped by, and alive when no one could see. The nearest town was DeLand, just a mile or so down the road, and to say it had a population of two hundred was a stretch. Just the necessities—a small bar and grill where you could buy a hamburger and drink a cold beer, a church, a bank, a school, and a welder who could piece together anything—could be found in DeLand. For something more, you drove a few miles north to Farmer City, or fifty miles east to

Champaign, home of the University of Illinois, or you traveled some two hundred miles north to Chicago.

Although it had been some forty years since Larry last visited this place, it had consumed his thoughts for the past two years. Sometimes in bits and pieces, maybe mere recollections, and other times unsettling chunks of memory. This trip was to be a test of sorts—to validate his memories, to check his sanity.

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The weathered white house was just down the road. Except for a new tin roof, the red barn looked the same. The machine shed, with boards faded a light gray, looked older than he remembered; but he wasn't surprised the outhouse was missing.

He pulled into the driveway. To the left was the familiar grove of hickory trees that had grown to the size of a large man's waist; to the right, and at the end of the sidewalk, was the two-story house that didn't flinch when Larry looked its way; and up the five or six steps leading to the front porch, he noticed there was only one door when he remembered two.

Without knowing who lived there, Larry approached the door. Two knocks, then three, and the door opened. A woman pushed the screen door slightly ajar. "I used to live here some forty-five years ago, and just happened to be in the area," Larry said. "Would it be possible for me to look around?" The part about just being in the area was untrue. He had struggled with the planned visit for the past six months. And the idea that a woman might not let a stranger into her home had never entered his mind.

"Yes," she answered. "That would be fine. But the house is a mess. I need a few minutes to pick things up. You look around outside and that will give me a chance to make the house presentable."

Larry left the porch, stood in the front yard, and slowly turned as his eyes scanned the landscape. Every angle, every view evoked a memory. *There's where the outhouse stood*, he thought. Spiders in the summer, freezing temperatures in the winters, it was not a place to sit and think. Do it quick like a race car in a pit stop, his parents once said. There was the time he remembered when his father made him clean the outhouse. Barely seven, he didn't have the strength to lift a full five-gallon bucket, let alone one loaded with human waste. His father pushed the outhouse on its side, exposing a three by five foot hole dug to a depth of two and a half feet, and he then instructed his son to scoop the shit into a bucket and dump it into a manure spreader where it would soon become fertilizer on a nearby field.

Over there, some fifty feet in front of the house, sat the well they had used years ago. A hand pump was attached to the kitchen sink, which even on the hottest days delivered an endless supply of cool water. After heating buckets of water on top of an old steel gray woodstove, his mother emptied one bucket at a time into a galvanized tub, raising the water temperature to just the right level for their weekly baths.

Larry returned to the front porch. The screen door swung open. “I forgot to introduce myself,” she said. “My name is Jean Borders and I live here with my husband and two children. Both of our children are students at the University of Illinois.”

“That’s where I went to school,” Larry said. “I graduated in 1965.” That bit of information created an immediate bond as they talked about how much the campus had changed, where her children lived, and where Larry had lived while on campus. Larry entered the house. “Didn’t there used to be two doors leading off the front porch?” he asked.

Jean looked startled. “Why yes, the outside door leading to the kitchen was closed off years ago.”

Even though the house had been decorated and redecorated over the past several years, nothing escaped Larry’s memories. The two stood in the family room, which had a large opening that led into the kitchen. “Didn’t there used to be a single door leading to the kitchen?” Larry asked. “I don’t remember this large opening.”

“You’re right,” Jean answered. Still looking a bit surprised, she continued. “Several years ago we decided to open things up. Removing the door and opening the wall seemed to be a good idea.”

The structural changes gave the house a more modern appearance. In the past, each room resembled an individual box, sealed off by closed doors. “It certainly opened things up,” he said, walking across the room. “I remember a kerosene stove that stood in this corner. It was vented through the wall into the flu that was connected to the living room fireplace.”

At times, Larry felt like he was giving Jean a tour of her home. “That’s interesting,” she said. “That was before we moved in. We’ve lived here twenty-three years and my husband’s parents were here before us.”

As Jean talked, Larry’s thoughts reached back when this house had been browbeaten by a host of memories, a time when the walls moved slightly in and out and a raspy, high-pitched sucking sound of air was accompanied by the low drumming of a heartbeat—ra-dommm, ra-dommm, ra-dommm.

Larry imagined his childhood family moving from one room to the next. Keith sat in a corner, looking through a stack of comic books; his mother sat at her sewing machine, making Larry a shirt from a recently emptied chicken feed sack; and his dad walked through the house dressed in his usual attire: white T-shirt and work pants. The memories appeared like images replayed on a black-and-white video, and each room gave up a story.

He came to the main bedroom, where Keith and Dad slept together in a double bed. Larry's mother had told him that Keith and his dad began sleeping together when Larry was four. That was to protect Larry from the things that his brother did. "It was your Dad's idea," Larry's mother had said. Even in summer, this room was always cold. He felt an uneasiness and moved closer to Jean. The two of them walked to another room.

The kitchen was less threatening. He remembered his family sitting at the table. Except for an occasional slurp, a metal fork scraping the last morsel of food from the plate, a glass being set back in its place, a scoop of milk-white gravy being poured on mounds of potatoes, and his dad clearing his throat, no one spoke.

"Let's go upstairs and I'll show you the children's room," Jean said.

They walked up the winding staircase, constructed with oversized banisters and cherry-stained wood. "I let each of my children decorate their own room. Each room turned out different, but nice," she said. Betty's room was a pastel color, with a ruffled bedspread and childhood stuffed animals lying about. John's room was blue, with model airplanes and a photograph of Michael Jordan hanging on the wall. Larry struggled to give Jean his attention while an unknown force pulled at him, suggesting he get off the second floor. As a child, Larry had a fear of the upstairs but didn't know why.

They moved down the winding staircase. "Jean, I can't tell you how much this has meant to me. Would it be okay if I looked in the barn?"

"Yes, that would be fine," she said. "Take all the time you want. I'll stay here and do some work in the house."

Larry walked toward the barn, wondering what it would be like to see the site of his most vivid nightmares. As he entered, he remembered himself as a seven-year-old boy, with Keith, his thirteen-year-old brother, and two neighborhood boys, John and Randy. Keith was a good five feet five inches tall and stood a head and a half taller than Larry. They both had blond hair, but that's where the similarities ended. Larry was shaped more like a small rectangular box about sixty pounds, while Keith was leaner. Larry had his dad's blue eyes and thick lips, while Keith took on some of his mom's features—his eyes were greener and fixed. When Keith was

mad, his thin lips turned in, like two dried-up worms, one on the other. John was one year shy of Keith but was about the same size. He looked up to Keith and would do anything to gain his favor. Randy wasn't much bigger than Larry but was two years older and big enough to be considered one of "them."

Larry mimicked the actions of the three of them at every opportunity, like in the summers, when his dad and Uncle James took the boys to the fields where they cut cornstalks out of the soybeans. After Keith, John, and Randy had sharpened their hoes to a razor's edge, they charged down each bean row while cornstalks flew every which way. With blistered hands and a hoe that stood twice his height, Larry continually dropped behind.

And there was the time when Wendell and Uncle James took the boys to Champaign to pick out ball gloves. The boys rode in the back of the pickup, while the men sat in the cab. Keith, John, and Randy laughed, joked, and talked about who was the best baseball player ever, who was the toughest fighter in school, and how Sara James was growing some nice tits. Larry listened and learned.

Wendell parked the truck and they walked into the biggest sporting goods store Larry had ever seen. Wendell ushered them over to the baseball gear where Keith, John, and Randy knew just what they were looking for. While Keith was discussing his choice of a first baseman's glove with Wendell, John and Randy both chose outfielder gloves that were big enough to snag the hardest hit ball.

"Come on, Larry," Uncle James said. "Let's fix you up with a major league glove. You look like a catcher to me, built low to the ground. How about a Roy Campanella catcher's mitt?" Larry pulled the mitt down from the shelf and began ramming his fist into its pocket. "Before you go to bed tonight, I want you to rub some olive oil in the pocket of your catcher's mitt. After you've done that, push your baseball deep into the glove's pocket. Take some string and tie the glove closed until it smothers the ball. Bytomorrow morning your glove will know how to catch any ball thrown its way."

Some memories were clear and no interpretation or analysis was required. But others appeared as images that were less defined, accompanied by a strong sense that something terrible was going on. Larry remembered the physical structure of the barn that he could describe it in the minutest detail. But some of the happenings were less clear, leaving him to squint as he struggled to make out the face of a character, or to wipe the blur from his vision. The distorted images were always accompanied by fear, related anxiety, and the clammy feel of a cold sweat. The hayloft—stinging pain of his naked body being thrown across a bale of hay, hot

breath on the back of his neck, screams from three jubilant boys gone wild. Now that time has become his friend, the memories are clearer, the dark clouds are patchy at the end of a raging storm.

He walked back to a house now awakened from a decades-long coma. Jean sat on the front porch. “Well, how were things in the barn?” she asked with a curious tone.

“It certainly brought back a lot of memories,” Larry said, as he thanked her and drove away.