



Larry's Story

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Hello.

Welcome to my story.

Today I'm going to tell you the story of a man called Larry. Larry smokes American Spirit cigarettes and is a wine cooler alcoholic. Larry's favorite flavor is strawberry watermelon; his second favorite flavor is tropical breeze. They remind him of fishing with his widowed grandmother at the lake when he was a boy. Every time

he sips a bottle he smells water and compulsively slaps his arm for mosquitoes.

Larry hasn't been a boy for a long time.

He was majoring in marine biology and had an internship studying whales on the coast when he met Karen at a Rolling Stones concert. He had never met anyone like Karen: darkly beautiful, unconditionally generous, riotously funny, wickedly inventive.

Larry pledged his undying love and allegiance to her when they married.

Karen has a phobia about water and fishes; she wouldn't even take the kids to an aquarium so instead they went to dry places: museums, libraries, camping in the desert.

Larry owns a hardware store where he sells hammers, nails, faucets, door knobs, and other things that make a home a house.

Well, that's how the story starts anyway. But you're probably not even reading this story. Probably you're reading something crisp and snappy, clean and

professional, designed to reflect some facet of you in your ordinary life; you'll relate to it. I'm sure you'll enjoy that story. This story is a different story, and if it's anything like my other stories, it's not even a very good one.

But maybe Larry isn't that different from you. Larry you see, sips on his wine coolers one after the other, as he works in his hardware store, as he's sitting on the couch watching the latest reality show Karen is obsessed with, and he thinks about fishing on the lake, and he smells the sea all around him like it's baking in the oven, and he hears a water breeze calling his name, and he dreams of following it, even if he has no idea where it might lead.

And I sit here, and I write Larry's story, knowing that I'm going to give up, that Larry's story is the last story I'm ever going to write. No one likes my stories. No one wants to read them. All those years with Karen, Larry could have snuck out of the house any foggy dawn and driven to the lake, or to the coast, and fished, watched

whales, or dipped his thirsty fingers for what he'd find in a tide pool. But he didn't. I could go on writing stories no one would read. But I won't. No one likes being lonely. Larry smokes American Spirit cigarettes and drinks wine coolers; maybe I'll take up bowling.

Anyway, this is my last story, and I'm nowhere near being done with it, so instead of complaining about my own problems, I'll tell you more about Larry's.

Larry woke up on his fifty-second birthday, took a hot shower, wove his hand through the streams of water that fell on him, then leaned his face into it and let the water drip down his wrinkles and whiskers.

Karen knocked on the door like she did every morning, a knock that meant, "If you don't hurry up, you're going to be late."

Larry toweled off and pulled on a pair of jeans and a thick, itchy shirt.

He wasn't going to be late, but it was his birthday, so he went to the refrigerator, opened up a red bottle and tipped it back into his mouth. Karen looked away and

pulled a roast out of the refrigerator.

As he drank his wine cooler, Larry heard his grandmother's laugh. He licked strawberry watermelon off of his lips and kissed Karen on the cheek. She coughed.

Larry drank the rest of his wine cooler, set the empty bottle on the counter, and went to work.

The hardware store was decorated in black crepe paper streamers and silver balloons that hung limply off the shelves.

"Happy birthday," Shelly said. "What do you think?" Shelly was just out of high school. She loved tools; was a drooling, bouncing puppy for them, so Larry hired her.

"It's nice," Larry said, "How old do you think I am?"

Shelly laughed. "As old as the hills and just as dried up."

"Great."

Shelly followed him to the front counter and kicked the back of his foot. "Just kidding. That's something my mom used to say. It's kind of funny."

Larry bent down, opened the mini fridge behind the counter and took out his second red bottle of the day.

“See,” Shelly said, “You’re not dry at all.”

“That’s right,” Larry said, the lake licking his toes. He took in a deep breath, but all he smelled was wood and wrenches. Not much light came in through the windows of the hardware store and the light that did just brought out all the dust.

“It’s been pretty slow this morning,” Shelly said, pulling imaginary nails out of the counter with the back of a hammer, “Maybe we should close up and go fishing or something. I’ve been dying to use this cool old fishing pole I found.”

“Yeah,” Larry said, tipping his bottle up in the dusty air, “that’d be nice, but we’re here now.”

“I guess,” Shelly said. “That would be pretty messed up, since we’re the only hardware store in this town, if someone needed paint, or pipes, or whatever, and we weren’t here to give them what they needed.”

“Exactly,” Larry said. “We have a responsibility.”

The store stayed pretty slow. Shelly managed to sell a set of screwdrivers to a minister. Larry showed some decorative drawer handles to a woman with a baby, and then he made a pair of keys for a smiling and nervous couple, but that was it, and at a little after three Larry decided to call it a day.

“Don’t worry,” Shelly said. “I won’t close up early. Just in case.”

“Good,” Larry said. “And clean up all this birthday crap before you go.”

“You’re welcome,” Shelly said. “If you have birthday cake, will you bring me a piece tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

Larry liked Shelly. She was so clear and unrelenting about her love for tools and the hardware store that it made it easier for him to work there, and she didn’t care about his wine coolers, and the times he chain-smoked, lighting one cigarette on the end of another.

I’m sure I’ll find something, when this story is done,

when I stop writing. There are a lot of fanatic bowlers. Maybe it won't be so hard to forget that I hate bowling and learn to love the love on their faces.

So anyway, Larry went home. Karen's car wasn't there, but her roast was in the oven. Larry could smell it all around, like each piece of furniture had been dipped in its juices.

The red light on the answering machine was blinking, but Larry didn't want to bother with it. Karen would take care of it when she got home; it was his birthday, and besides he never got any important phone calls.

Larry looked around the house. He didn't really know what to do. Karen wasn't there; somehow the house didn't seem real without her, like it wasn't grounded, like it was floating five feet above the ground.

So Larry did the only thing he could think of: he lit a cigarette with his Rolling Stones Zippo and went to the fridge for some tropical breeze.

There was no tropical breeze, no strawberry watermelon, or any of the other flavors he sometimes

bought: fuzzy navel, cantaloupe cooler, sour margarita, or strawberry daiquiri. There was nothing in there but food, a birthday cake, cans of diet cola, and bottles of water.

Larry closed the refrigerator door, sucked hard on his cigarette, and squinted.

He sat on the couch staring at the turned-off television, chain-smoking his American Spirit cigarettes.

The phone rang.

"Hello?" Larry said.

"Hey honey, why haven't you called me back?" Karen said.

"When did you call?"

"Shelly said you left early. I left messages on the machine."

"Oh I didn't check them."

"Anyway could you check the roast? If it isn't burnt, it's probably dry as a stone."

"No problem," Larry said. "Hey, do you know what happened to all my wine coolers?"

“Oh that,” Karen said, “Yeah, I threw them out.”

“Why?”

“You really should have checked the messages. Anyway, so Michelle came out to surprise you for your birthday and she went into labor.”

“Here?”

“Her water broke in the taxi on the way over. Brian called. I went straight to the hospital. I forgot all about the roast.”

“But you threw out the wine coolers.”

“I don’t want them around the baby.”

“But Karen,” Larry said, “That’s my one thing. I need those wine coolers.”

“No more smoking in the house either.”

“Fine. No more smoking. But I’m going to pick up some more tropical breeze.”

“Come on, Larry, get over it. How long has it been since you’ve been to the water? Can you even remember the last time? It’s not a part of you anymore. You have a granddaughter now. What’s better than that?”

Larry muttered something about her being right, and that he’d be right over as soon as he got the house cleaned up.

He hung up the phone, turned the lights on in the slowly darkening house, and that’s when he noticed it.

Water was leaking through several parts of the ceiling, showering the couch, the coffee table, the carpet.

Larry squished his way to the window. It wasn’t raining.

It was worse in the kitchen. The roast, it turned out, wasn’t dry at all, it was soaking wet.

The sink was full of water and it wasn’t draining.

The linoleum was slick. Water dripped down the walls. Larry slid over to the refrigerator. When he opened the door, food, birthday cake, and diet cola cans rode a cold and foamy wave out and across the floor. Small fish flipped over his feet.

Larry ran upstairs as dull red crabs clicked and skittered down them.

The wet carpet sucked at Larry's shoes, seaweed hung from picture frames. The bathtub and bathroom sink were teeming with small multicolored fish. Sea urchins and anemones were scattered over the floor, and then Larry went into his and Karen's bedroom, to take off his shoes. As soon as he opened the door, he saw the dolphin on the bed, smiling and laughing at him in greeting. Karen was going to be upset.

The bowling alley is pretty loud even from the bar, all that heavy rolling, and thunderous crashing of pins, or else I'd write more. It smells pretty funny in here too, like grease and old shoes. Anyway the story doesn't get more interesting from here. I've never been good at proper endings.

Well, so Karen did come home, and she was upset when she found Larry bathing in the bathtub of fish. She could hardly manage to make it upstairs to yell at him, water made her so uncomfortable, but she forced herself to. She threw a lobster at Larry's head and told him to clean up. He said he didn't feel like it. It was his

birthday after all. Karen said he had a choice to make. Her or this, she said as she gestured at the watery house, her face pinched with disgust. Larry held up a clown fish and smiled. He told her that he did choose. A long time ago. He'd clean up right away. But he never could get the place cleaned all the way, and every now and then it'd happen again.

So I guess that's it. There's a decently attractive guy with a ponytail, and some nice looking biceps bowling in the center lane. He has a purple bowling ball. Maybe I'll go talk to him as soon as I finish my beer. Oh hang on, there's someone tapping on my shoulder.

"Excuse me," a man says. "Is that seat taken? All the other chairs are filled up."

"No, go ahead. I'm getting up soon anyway."

The man comes from behind me and sits in the empty seat at my table. His hair is a little longer than I imagined it, and he's going bald in the center, but he's clutching his red bottle. "Mind if I smoke?" he asks. I shake my head, and he takes out an American Spirit,

and holds the open pack out to me. I take one and thank him.

“What’cha doing?” He gestures at my notebook with his cigarette.

“Writing your story actually,” I say, and I know I’m blushing. “It’s the last story I’m ever going to write.”

“I’m flattered,” Larry says. He’s blushing a little now too, and he takes a long sip from his strawberry watermelon wine cooler to hide it, I think.

“Don’t be,” I tell him. “It’s not very good. That’s why I’m here actually. I think bowling is going to be a better use of my time.”

Larry taps his accumulating ash into a thin tin ashtray. Something is squirming underneath his collar. Larry laughs and pulls it out: a minnow. He drops his cigarette into the ashtray, holds up the minnow, and strokes its belly with his index finger.

“Mind if I read it,” he says.

“Read what?” I say.

“Your story. Your very last story. Can I read it?”

Larry puts the minnow in a glass of water that was there before I sat down and he stares at me. He’s waiting for my answer, but the cute guy with the ponytail is putting his purple ball in its bag, now he’s sitting, bending down, taking off his shoes, soon he will be leaving, and it will be too late to catch up with him.