

Sketch

Volume 73, Number 1

2008

Article 4

Meaning of Loneliness

Catlin Thompson*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2008 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Meaning of Loneliness

Catlin Thompson

It was a dim, cold day and clouds hovered over a barren field. Beneath the clouds resided a farmhouse in the middle of the emptiness where Ralph, his body weathered and hunched, shuffled across his kitchen. His cat, Knucks, followed his trail along the dingy white countertop, weaving between open, half-eaten cans of corn. The cat had been with him for years—it was battered, old, and walked the same way the old man did, with a slight hunch. Ralph reached the far cabinet and pulled out a brown shoebox. He stuck the box under his arm and left the kitchen. Knucks did the same.

His living room matched the kitchen. Small and unorganized. Empty food cans decorated the floor. On the west side of the room was a table that was home to his small clock that ticked in sync with Ralph's heartbeat. The room had a haze that became visible only when flecks of sunlight crept through the gritty windows. Nothing had been moved in years—a thin layer of dust blanketed every object in the room as though the entire room had been put to rest. Ralph made his way to his worn yellow plaid chair and, with a groan, the old man let himself fall back into his sturdy friend. He rubbed his head then tried to flatten down what pieces of hair he had left on his vacant scalp. His glasses were to his left. He picked them up and slid them up his crooked nose.

He removed the lid to the box and set it next to him for safekeeping. He paused as he gazed at the contents of the box. His hand trembled as he removed a picture of a young man and woman that lay at the top of the box. A cold shudder went through the old man and his nose burned as he tried to swallow the terrible force that welled in his throat. The man in the picture had a full head of hair, stood tall, and had a crooked nose. The young man could hardly be recognized now in Ralph as the old man's appearance and physical strength had escaped him many years prior.

Her name was Elly. Her dark hair countered her fair skin as it cascaded down her body onto her blue dress. The young man and woman were standing in front of an old farmhouse. This photo was from the day he and Elly moved into their first home. Ralph remembered that day. He remembered how the wind was unyielding, stopping only for a brief moment when the picture was captured. He couldn't remember how the house had looked or how the fields were thriving, but Elly he remembered. At least he tried to.

Ralph took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes tightly. He had the photograph, but he wanted to remember her, see her. How she smelled, how her hair blew in the wind, how when she laughed her eyes squinted. The

old man reached further into his mind for anything he could hold on to, but found that the only lasting image he could see of her was the one he held in his hands. It was twenty-seven years ago today when Ralph had told his wife that he loved her for the last time. It was twenty-seven years ago today the old man had first felt loneliness because twenty-seven years ago today, Elly died.

A can made a hollow jingle as it rolled across the uneven wooden floor. Knucks was chasing an old empty can of beets. Ralph gave a forced smile as though the cat was expecting recognition. He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes as his vision had started to blur. He placed the photo back into the shoebox and reached to his right to grab the lid to cover his memory.

Ralph looked at his clock to find that it was 10:15. He hoisted himself out of his chair, box in hand, and went back into the kitchen. He knew where he wanted to go but was uncertain if he had the strength. He held on to the box and swung open his kitchen door and gently closed it behind him. Ralph went on this particular walk often. Little sunlight shone through the clouds and Ralph watched as the trees were pushed back and forth by the wind's force. His walk was never long, often giving him little time for any thoughts or clarity. In the near distance, Ralph saw his church. He walked to the back to the gated fence. The old man's heart felt heavy and with his shaking hand, he pushed his way into the gated field.

Ralph made his way to a familiar patch of grass. His weak body did its best to sit between two stones. He layed the box in front of him and removed the lid. The old man shook the box a bit before he found what he had been looking for. He tilted the box to the side until a block of wood fell out. He held the piece of wood in his hand and turned it to see where carving had been done and remembered when he had started to whittle the block of wood. Elly had been pregnant and Ralph had wanted to do something special, create something special, for their baby.

He knew they were having a boy and decided to carve him a train.

It had begun to rain. As he remembered the joy of Elly's pregnancy, Ralph also remembered why the train had never been finished. He leaned forward to look at the stone to the left and saw his wife's name. A smaller tombstone stood next to Elly's. The old man wiped the stone's face to reveal the name "Jack." He swallowed again, hard, and tried to keep in his pain and his grief, but he had begun to fall apart. Ralph threw the chunk of wood back into the box; he couldn't bear to look at any more memories. He felt heavy with sadness as the rain began to weigh down his clothing. He stood up and looked back at his family as tears had begun to drip down his face mixing with the rain.

A thought, if any, that brought comfort to Ralph was the fact that Knucks

would be at home, waiting for him. As he neared the old farmhouse, a sudden terror shot through his entire body. His kitchen door was open. As fast as his aged body could take him, the old man walked into the kitchen and yelled for his cat. He staggered through his house leaving mud and wetness behind every step. Knucks was nowhere to be found. The old man's heart took a deep plunge as he stood in the kitchen doorway to cry the cat's name one more time. Nothing. Ralph felt weak and empty. He used what strength he had left and pulled up a beaten up old kitchen chair and sat it next to the open kitchen door. There he sat and looked through the rain for any sight of his companion.

The old man sat there, for days, waiting for the return of his friend.