

Two Laptops: A Short Story

By

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|

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1.

Something has changed in my life. With my face, I should say. I don't know when it happened. My features look like they're slowly sliding off — some to the left, some to the right. Bits even seem to be heading north. It's not like I spend my days

thinking about this migration, but sometimes I'll see the change in a photograph, catch it in the mirror. In horror, my face will scramble to right itself, the eyes moving back in place, the nose straightening, the lips losing their droop.

2.

But of course everything is changing. Cortright, my fourteen-year-old son, wants to become a rock star. He can't carry a tune and has no rhythm. He's tried to play guitar, keyboards, drums, trumpet, violin. He doesn't like being called Cortright anymore, nor Cort. He hates his name and wants to be called C-Love. Better yet, he says, don't call me anything. He's a strange kid, but it could be worse.

3.

After my wife left me, I took a Mediterranean cruise by myself. It was unseasonably cold, and I rarely left my cabin, even for meals. I had never been on a cruise before, but I thought that countering the dramatic change of Linda's departure with another dramatic change — i.e., being at sea — was a good idea. Something along the lines of two wrongs making a right. It was a terrible idea. I don't know what I was thinking. I must have been out of my mind.

4.

Linda left me for Cortright's old piano teacher, a woman. I don't know how I feel about this. Well, I feel bad, but the precise nature of the badness is elusive. Had I been holding her back? Did Linda always favor women, and if so, why had she agreed to marry me in the first place? Maybe it meant that I had feminine qualities. I don't think I do, but it's possible.

5.

I for one have felt some attraction to Cortright's former guitar instructor, also a woman, incidentally. She always wore an old tie-dyed shirt, the pattern in front like the *Spiral Jetty*. Her favorite group was Moby Grape. She was just over half my age but looked and moved like an old hippie.

6.

When it was clear that Cortright had no musical talent, we stopped the lessons. We thought maybe he would want to do sports instead. This was also a failure. One day, he said he liked computers, so Linda signed him up for a class at the community college by the airport. I gave him my old laptop. He mostly watched YouTube, teenagers covering songs he liked, shooting emotional glances into the tiny laptop lens.

Once when I was home sick from work, I logged on and saw that he'd been leaving negative comments on these performances. By negative I mean nasty. He was leaving them under the name CLove2012. This was back in 2010. Is something supposed to happen in 2012?



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7.

Linda and her companion live on the same block as me. In fact, they're more or less across the street, in the brownstone right next to the one across from my building. They have no curtains. The angle is such that I can only see some of their furniture. When the lights are on. The lights aren't on all the time.

8.

It's not that I look every night. At first I did. I looked every hour. All I did was look. I rarely saw Linda, but when I did I became all pulse and thought I'd faint. She looked so beautiful in this miniature form. Years had been taken off her age. Meanwhile, my face was shifting, creeping out of symmetry.

I didn't know what to do. It all felt illegal and thrilling. Once Cort walked into the room while I was at the window, standing in my boxers.

"That's not Mom," he said. He switched off, living one day with his mother, one day with me.

"What?"

"Where you're looking. She's on the second floor."

The second floor was doused in drapes.

"Are you sure?"

"Those are the Chung-Ruizes. The mom is a doctor. The dad is a doctor, too."

"They have kids?"

"A little baby named Raoul."

"So I was spying on Dr. Chung-Ruiz. Does she look like Mom?"

"Not really," my son said.

I felt my face shift a little more.

9.

When Cortright — I'm sorry, I cannot call him C-Love — is staying with Linda and the piano teacher, he brings his laptop with him. He has a small room there, filled with all the instruments he cannot play. Sometimes he'll Skype with me. The picture is unstable and the sound gets scratchy and so we hang up after a few minutes.

I don't know whether the problem is with their network or mine, or whether we're on the same network, or even really what a network is. But Cort's face will go metallic, bits of it gray and bits of it green, and big chunks of the image will fall out, so it looks like I'm seeing his skull.

At the same time, I'm breaking up in front of his eyes. Although the way he describes it, it's just that the room I'm in is getting brighter and brighter until I disappear into the walls.

10.

Last night, I came home from work and turned on the news. My son was already in his room, lost in music. I wanted to check e-mail, even though I'd checked it just before leaving the office a half hour before, not to mention on the way from the office to the subway, twenty-five minutes earlier, and on the short walk from the station to my apartment, three minutes ago.

There's no one I'm expecting to hear from. I suppose I'm waiting to hear from someone I'm not expecting.

CNN hummed in the background, mixing with Cort's acid loops. I placed a frozen burrito into the microwave and entered a random unit of time. My computer was on now, but it wasn't showing my usual desktop. I was looking into a space I'd never seen before. Linda moved from one side of the screen to the other, disappearing as she exited each edge. She was saying something, but I couldn't hear. She didn't look particularly beautiful or luminous, different in any way. She didn't look happier or sadder. She looked absolutely the same. Then the scene corroded, bits of gray and bits of green.

Cortright emerged from his lair and said he'd left his laptop at his mom's place, that he was going over to get it. I told him his dinner was in the microwave; he should eat before it got cold. I wanted to buy some more time, to look at Linda exactly as she was. This was something I wouldn't be seeing again.

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