

HER VANISHED LIFE

by Michael Paul McCusker

In early August a young woman was found dead in her trailer home in Ilwaco, Washington. She had been dead for three days and was in her bed underneath a blanket. An autopsy revealed no injuries or immediate signs of disease, though it was learned she had been very sick when she was a child and had almost died, and the absence of any poisons in her system ruled out suicide. The medical examiner told police that there was no reason she should be dead and compared her death to the mysterious and inexplicable killer of children known only as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS, in which the body for no apparent reason shuts down and dies.

Her name was Tami Hedgepeth. She died just a few weeks short of her twenty-eighth birthday, which would have been on August 28. She had lived in Ilwaco a year and worked in a fish cannery. No one, not even her coworkers, knew very much about her. She kept to herself and rarely spoke to anyone. She had no friends or lovers. She was hardly noticed except on her last day of work she uncharacteristically got angry and abusive and hit another woman with a fish. Police who found her body said she was clothed in her work garments and that there were no signs of violence in her trailer, which was immaculately clean, its walls papered with photographs from National Geographic magazines. An Ilwaco deputy who tried to unravel her life at first refused to believe that she could will herself to death, but eventually he thought that somehow she had.

She spent most of her life alone and without discernible purpose or pleasure. She was born in California to middleaged parents and her

Kevin Pope



closest sibling, a sister, was eight years older. She was not liked by her family and spent most of her childhood alone in her room away from them, even eating alone. She left when she was fifteen or sixteen and spent the rest of her life wandering from place to place, keeping mostly to towns along the Pacific Coast, seldom making friends or doing anything more than what she needed to subsist. She never applied for welfare or any form of public assistance, perhaps because it would require involvement and investigation. Her behavior was generally quiet and withdrawn except periodically she would get upset and explode like she had at the Ilwaco cannery, and afterward she would leave wherever she was without taking any belongings she had accumulated. Towards the end of her life she never had anything more than she could stuff in a pack. If

she bought a pair of pants or shoes she got rid of the pair she owned. Her family said that they expected her to die in her wanderings and claimed after her death that they were not surprised and had long ago given her up for dead.

I knew her when she was twenty and my secret nickname for her was "The Amoeba" because of her inertia and silence, which I did not realize was a form of catatonic depression. She did very little but sit quietly and stare at nothing in particular for entire days. Sleep was a compulsion with her. I believed at the time that she felt I would take care of her if she shared my bed. Finally, I wished she would leave.

A woman who suffered severe depression for several years offered me some insights about the silent despair of Tami's life from her own experience. She told me of terrible, empty loneliness and her inability to alleviate it. She said that she had wished every day for three years to die and suggested that Tami might have succeeded in wishing herself dead. Only faith in a supreme being made her able to overcome the same sort of death, the woman said, but even now it was a continual struggle to maintain her faith. Tami, The Amoeba, bereft of faith and everything else that sustains life, died alone, so hopelessly deep within her despair I wonder if she noticed that she had died. I think the doctor who performed her autopsy might have the explanation about her in reverse, that she never felt there was any reason she should live.

My small part in her life probably mattered very little over eight years, but on the ledger of who was sensitive and helpful to her and who contributed to her sorrow, I was among the latter. I am presently more interested and moved by her death than I was by her life.

The last time I saw her she stood in rain and shouted at me that I should love and care for her because she loved me. She was incredulous that I did not reciprocate her feelings or wish her conditions. She pleaded for me to not abandon her. I said no and walked away from her.

After she died her body was reduced to ashes, which might have pleased her.

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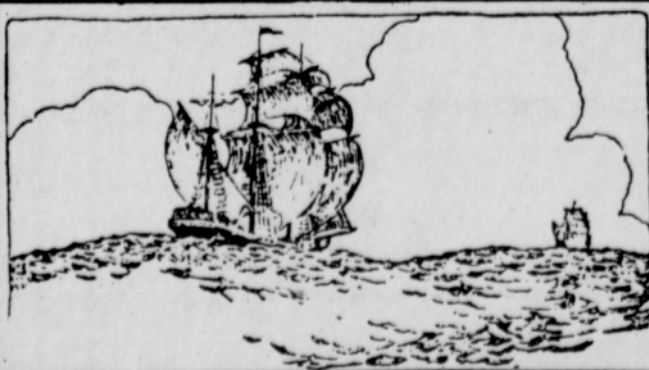
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