

Raymond Carver

LEMONADE

When he came to my house months ago to measure my walls for bookcases, Jim Sears didn't look like a man who'd lose his only child to the high waters of the Elwha River. He was bushy-haired, confident, cracking his knuckles, alive with energy, as we discussed tiers, and brackets, and this oak stain compared to that. But it's a small town, this town, a small world here. Six months later, after the bookcases have been built, delivered and installed, Jim's father, a Mr. Howard Sears, who is "covering for his son" comes to paint our house. He tells me—when I ask, more out of small-town courtesy than anything, "How's Jim?"—that his son lost Jim Jr. in the river last spring. Jim blames himself. "He can't get over it, neither," Mr. Sears adds. "Maybe he's gone on to lose his mind a little too," he adds, pulling on the bill of his Sherwin-Williams cap.

Jim had to stand and watch as the helicopter grappled with, then lifted, his son's body from the river with tongs. "They used like a big pair of kitchen tongs for it, if you can imagine. Attached to a cable. But God always takes the sweetest ones, don't He?" Mr. Sears says. "He has His own mysterious purposes." "What do *you* think about it?" I want to know. "I don't want to think," he says. "We can't ask or question His ways. It's not for us to know. I just know He taken him home now, the little one."

He goes on to tell me Jim Sr.'s wife took him to thirteen foreign countries in Europe in hopes it'd help him get over it. But

it didn't. He couldn't. "Mission unaccomplished," Howard says. Jim's come down with Parkinson's disease. What next? He's home from Europe now, but still blames himself for sending Jim Jr. back to the car that morning to look for that thermos of lemonade. They didn't need any lemonade that day! Lord, lord, what was he thinking of, Jim Sr. has said a hundred—no, a thousand—times now, and to anyone who will still listen. If only he hadn't made lemonade in the first place that morning! What could he have been thinking about? Further, if they hadn't shopped the night before at Safeway, and if that bin of yellowy lemons hadn't stood next to where they kept the oranges, apples, grapefruit and bananas. That's what Jim Sr. had really wanted to buy, some oranges and apples, not lemons for lemonade, forget lemons, he hated lemons—at least now he did—but Jim Jr., he liked lemonade, always had. He wanted lemonade.

"Let's look at it this way," Jim Sr. would say, "those lemons had to come from someplace, didn't they? The Imperial Valley, probably, or else over near Sacramento, they raise lemons there, right?" They had to be planted and irrigated and watched over and then pitched into sacks by field workers and weighed and then dumped into boxes and shipped by rail or truck to this god-forsaken place where a man can't do anything but lose his children! Those boxes would've been off-loaded from the truck by boys not much older than Jim Jr. himself. Then they had to be uncrated and poured all yellow and lemony-smelling out of their crates by those boys, and washed and sprayed by some kid who was still living, walking around town,

living and breathing, big as you please. Then they were carried into the store and placed in that bin under that eye-catching sign that said Have You Had Fresh Lemonade Lately? As Jim Sr.'s reckoning went, it harks all the way back to first causes, back to the first lemon cultivated on earth. If there hadn't been any lemons on earth, and there hadn't been any Safeway store, well, Jim would still have his son, right? And Howard Sears would still have his grandson, sure. You see, there were a lot of people involved in this tragedy. There were the farmers and the pickers of lemons, the truck drivers, the big Safeway store. . . . Jim Sr., too, he was ready to assume his share of responsibility, of course. He was the most guilty of all. But he was still in his nosedive, Howard Sears told me. Still, he had to pull out of this somehow and go on. Everybody's heart was broken, right. Even so.

Not long ago Jim Sr.'s wife got him started in a little wood-carving class here in town. Now he's trying to whittle bears and seals, owls, eagles, seagulls, anything, but he can't stick to any one creature long enough to finish the job, is Mr. Sears's assessment. The trouble is, Howard Sears goes on, every time Jim Sr. looks up from his lathe, or his carving knife, he sees his son breaking out of the water downriver, and rising up—being reeled in, so to speak—beginning to turn and turn in circles until he was up, way up above the fir trees, tongs sticking out of his back, and then the copter turning and swinging upriver, accompanied by the roar and whap-whap of the chopper blades. Jim Jr. passing now over the searchers who line the bank of the river. His arms are stretched out from his sides, and drops of water fly out from him. He passes overhead once more,

closer now, and then returns a minute later to be deposited, ever so gently laid down, directly at the feet of his father. A man who, having seen everything now—his dead son rise from the river in the grip of metal pinchers and turn and turn in circles flying above the tree line—would like nothing more now than to just die. But dying is for the sweetest ones. And he remembers sweetness, when life was sweet, and sweetly he was given that other lifetime.