

Liam Fleming

Aunt Jenny

“I heard a hissing and something white flew across the street. I saw two spots of phosphorous - the eyes of the beast. There was a white cloud, like escaping steam from an engine.”¹

At some point in the eighteenth century, Jenny Leeds got fed up. Frustrated; tired, she clenched whatever sweat-stained fists she had and asked into some darkness that her next child would be a devil. Which is exactly what happened.

Because when Jenny sat and shrieked in some cottage tucked away in the pines, she delivered something that made the midwives go white. Some - infant - with the head of a dog and the wings of a bat that fled the room and took to the skies with a shout.

My parents met at a party. My dad was fourteen and chubby. He had braces and loved to watch girls close their eyes and sway whenever he played Bryan Adams on the piano. His friend yanked his hand in a corner, demanding that he *meet Janine. You'll love her. She's great*, and pulled him across the room and into a kitchen where she huddled with her friends over the central island and talked. My mom said *hi* quickly and looked away.

Where my dad was young and troubling, my mom was anything but.

¹A Woodbury resident recounting his run-in with the Jersey Devil.

People like to argue over what the Jersey Devil looks like, but it's almost always unsettling. Like beyond a-face-only-a-mother-could-love. When Joseph Bonaparte caught it while hunting, he described it as a kind of donkey with wings.

And as far as loving mothers go, it's interesting to think of Jenny hearing tales of "The Leeds Boy" stealing chickens from neighboring farms or lighting on rooftops or startled suburban women running out to find their very own state beast gorging on the sides of their dogs.

It was never clear who the father was, but that's how legends go. Some say that he was a rugged farmer from up north, while others swear he was a British soldier, painting Jenny as a cursed loyalist during the Revolution - her beastly offspring becoming some kind of punishment from both the heavenly and the founding fathers. Smaller circles like to describe Jenny as a witch living in the woods, with the father being the Devil himself.

Which is fun to think about, but not as compelling as what Jenny probably was - a young mother before a task too big for herself.

I like to think about my parents in high school. They were dating and they were young and for brief points here and there they were in love. And it's easy to picture - my mom leaning against a locker with a copy of *Wuthering Heights* held to her chest, her hair a little bit blonde while my dad is shorter, angrier. He's wearing a leather jacket and long, black boots as his arm drifts in the empty space inches from hers. They are both vibrant and cool and everything is draped in that old photo-album light that defies reasoning. Neither of them have acne.

When I was seven my dad took us to go “devil hunting” in the pine barrens. It was a bit of a drive, so my brother and I watched trees cut and bend the sunlight through the car windows. Conner was five at the time, so when he got tired of the woods he decided to sit and would not - so help him God - get up. My dad decided to play his game and drove the car out of sight for a few minutes to pretend he was leaving. When he came back he found Conner completely unphased, laughing and dipping his sneakers into mud puddles. On the walk back to the car we found hoofprints in the sand. They continued for eight feet and then vanished.

And this made complete sense. The week before my grandfather came into my third grade class to talk about the pine barrens. He said that the forest drank from rich aquifers hidden under the ground, and was filled with cranberry bogs and could be bigger than the Grand Canyon. The “pines” kept itself in check with yearly forest fires, and was home to cranes, turtles, and rattlesnakes.

Before he left he gathered a twinkle in his eye and explained that charting our family history he was able to forge a connection between our family and a group of “Leeds” men and women that lived in what should be Galloway nowadays. When he left kids put shards of paper that said “Devil Boy” in my desk like valentines.

I think both my mom and dad assumed the worst when she stopped having her periods. And started throwing up. Every teenager’s nightmare circling somewhere under my mom’s chest.

If I had to make it up, my mom took my dad in her old VW bus and parked it in the lot behind the church - the brakes were going by that point so she had to pump her foot on the floor like she was shifting gears on a bike. She turned to my dad to tell him she didn’t think she was

“just nauseous” anymore and that she was really, really scared. My dad, seventeen at the time - never one to understand fear - must have been shaking.

And I don't think that's too far from the truth, because I know he was nervous. He told me they drove to CVS to buy a handful of pregnancy tests that they went through in a friend's bathroom. They all came out positive.

So my mom found herself unable to open her mouth when she came home with a copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. She sat on the couch in the living room and opened the plastic grocery bag to show it to her mom. Holding the book my grandmother stared, and thought, and breathed slowly before going upstairs to tell my grandfather. The two of them came back waving an old baby-rattle, probably yellow and loud, to show that they were on board.

In 1909 schools across southern New Jersey shut down completely for a week in January. The devil was on holiday, racking up nearly a thousand sightings from Collingswood, to Woodbury, to even Bristol, Pennsylvania. My winged foster cousin leaving footprints in the snow on rooftops, growling in alleyways, and even attacking stray taxi cabs. The state, which would look at this all as a supernatural warm-up after Orson Welles convinced the radio that aliens were attacking in the thirties, was in complete and utter terror.

And no one really knows why this happened. It was out of character for an urban legend to be so local, so *known*, and it still is. As a kid, hearing my mom's dad tell me this and jostle his knee at the dinner table, I figured the Leeds' Devil was just acting out in some way. Maybe he was hungry, angry, in puberty. Maybe he really missed his mom and couldn't tell you why.

My grandfather used to make jokes about inviting the Jersey Devil to family reunions, and I would lie and think about it in bed. I made a plan to somehow convince my dad to the deepest, hairiest part of the pines, and we would find a nice patch of grass and sand, and I would leave a hand-written invitation there - maybe even in cursive, which hurt my hand to write but looked pretty - and when we went home we would leave space for him at the dinner table, where he would climb in from the window and sit, right next to me and my brother, and we would all smile and sigh. Like old, old friends.

I think that if there's a theme here, it's in unwanted kids. Or maybe unplanned kids. It's hard to tell the difference, but I can assure you it's there.

My mom was invited to walk at graduation, but she had finished her classes over the summer, and chose instead to sit in the stands and watch her classmates throw their hats in the air and smile. On the day I was born the doctor opened the door to let in my dad and all of my mom's friends who carried party hats and pieces of cake and passed me around gently. There's a photo tucked away somewhere, of my mom holding me with my dad sitting exhausted on a chair in the corner. Her face is so close to mine and the corners of her mouth are tucked to show straight, white teeth. Our foreheads are touching, and my face is blotchy and pink.

And maybe cursing your unborn child and letting it fly across the pines doesn't give you the best reputation as a mother. And maybe Aunt Jenny courted Hessians and Loyalists on some shore, or shouted incantations in the woods. Maybe she really did dance with the Devil, their eyes meeting in that unnatural, breath-hitching way across the witch's fire.

But I'd like to argue that there had to have been at least one point where Jenny held her son like my mom did. The tip of her nose pressed against his snout, and the midwives gasping while she strokes the matted, bloody hair behind his ears - listening to his cries and responding with coos of *there, there now* and *it's okay* in a voice so low she can barely hear it.