

3

The Juniper Tree

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The night Robin Ross was dying in the hospital, I was waiting for a man to come pick me up—a man she had once dated, months before I began dating him—and he was late and I was wondering whether his going to see her with me was even wise. Perhaps I should go alone. Her colleague ZJ had called that morning and said, “Things are bad. When she leaves the hospital, she’s not going home.”

“I’ll go see her tonight,” I said. I felt I was a person of my word, and by saying something I would make it so. It was less like integrity perhaps and more like magic.

“That’s a good idea,” ZJ said. He was chairman of the theater department and had taken charge, like a husband, since Robin had asked him to; his tearfulness about her fate had already diminished. In the eighties he had lost a boyfriend to AIDS, and now all the legal and medical decision-making these last few months, he said, seemed numbingly familiar.

But then I found myself waiting, and soon it was seven-thirty and then eight and I imagined Robin was tired and sleeping in her metal hospital bed and would have more energy in the morning. When the man I was waiting for came, I said, “You know? It’s so late. Maybe I should visit Robin in the morning when she’ll have more energy and be more awake. The tumor presses on the skull, poor girl, and makes her groggy.”

“Whatever you think is best,” said the man. When I told him

what ZJ had said, that when Robin left the hospital, she wasn't going home, the man looked puzzled. "Where is she going to go?" He hadn't dated Robin very long, only a few weeks, and had never really understood her. "Her garage was a pigsty," he had once said. "I couldn't believe all the crap that was in it!" And I had nodded agreeably, feeling I had won him; my own garage wasn't that great, but whatever. I had triumphed over others by dint of some unknowable charm. Now I was coming to realize that a lot of people baffled this guy, and that I would be next to become incomprehensible and unattractive. That was how dating among straight middle-aged women seemed to go in this college town: one available man every year or so just made the rounds of us all. "I can share. I'm good at sharing," Robin used to say, laughing.

"Well I'm not," I said. "I'm not good at it in the least."

"It's late," I said again to the man, and I made two gin rick-eyes and lit candles.

Every woman I knew here drank—daily. In rejecting the lives of our mothers, we found ourselves looking for stray volts of mother love in the very places they could never be found: gin, men, the college, our own mothers, and one another. I was the only one of my friends—all of us academic transplants, all soldiers of art stationed on a far-off base (or, so we imagined it)—who hadn't had something terrible happen to her yet.

The next morning I dressed in cheery colors. Orange and gold. There was nothing useful to bring Robin, but I made a bouquet of cut mums nonetheless and stuck them in a plastic cup with some wet paper towels holding them in. I was headed toward the front door when the phone rang. It was ZJ. "I'm leaving now to see Robin," I said.

"Don't bother."

"Oh, no," I said. My vision left me for a second.

"She died late last night. About two in the morning."

I sank down into a chair and my plastic cup of mums fell, breaking two stems. "Oh, my God," I said.

"I know," he said.

"I was going to go see her last night, but it got late and I thought it would be better to go this morning when she was more rested." I tried not to wail.

"Don't worry about it," he said.

"I feel terrible," I cried, as if this were what mattered.

"She was not doing well. It's a blessing." From diagnosis to decline had been precipitous, I knew. She was teaching, then suddenly the new chemo was not going well and she was lying outside of the emergency room, on the concrete, afraid to lie down inside because of other people's germs. Then she was placed in the actual hospital, which was full of other people's germs. She'd been there almost a week and I hadn't gotten in to see her.

"It's all so unbelievable."

"I know."

"How are *you*?" I asked.

"I can't even go there," he said.

"Please phone me if there's something I can do," I said emptily. "Let me know when the service will be."

"Sure," he said.

I went upstairs and with all my cheery clothes on got back into bed. It still smelled a little of the man. I pulled the sheet over my head and lay there, every muscle of my body strung taut. I could not move.

But I must have fallen asleep, and for some time, because when I heard the doorbell downstairs and pulled the sheet off my face, it was already dark, though the sun set these days at four, so it was hard ever to know by just looking out the windows what time it might possibly be. I flicked on the lights as I went—bedroom, hall, stairs—making my way down toward the ringing bell. I turned on the porch light and opened the door.

There stood Isabel and Pat. "We've got the gin, we've got the rickey mix," they said, holding up bags. "Come on. We're going to go see Robin."

"I thought Robin died," I said.

Pat made a face. "Yes, well," she said.

"That hospital was such a bad scene," said Isabel. She was not wearing her prosthetic arm. Except in pieces choreographed by others, she almost never did anymore. "But she's back home now and she's expecting us."

"How can that be?"

"You know women and their houses," said Pat. "It's hard for them to part company." Pat had had a massive stroke two years before, which had wiped out her ebullient personality and her short-term memory, but periodically her wounded, recovering brain cast about desperately and landed on a switch and threw it, and she woke up in a beautiful manic frenzy, seeming like the old Pat, saying, "I feel like I've been asleep for years," and she would stay like that for days on end, insomniac and babbling and reminiscing, painting her paintings, then she'd crash again, passive and mute. She was on disability leave and had a student living with her full-time who took care of her.

"Maybe we all drink too much gin," I said.

For a moment there was just silence. "Are you referring to the accident?" said Isabel accusingly. It was a car crash that had severed her arm. A surgeon and his team of residents had sewn it back on, but the arm had bled continually through the skin grafts and was painful—the first dance afterward before an audience, a solo performed with much spinning and swinging from a rope, had flung specks of blood to the stage floor—and after a year, and a small ineffectual codeine habit, she'd gone back to the same surgeon and asked him to remove it, the whole arm, she was done, she had tried.

"No, no," I said. "I'm not referring to anything."

"So hey, come on, come on!" said Pat. The switch seemed to have been thrown in her.

"Robin's waiting."

"What do I bring?"

"Bring?" Pat and Isabel burst out laughing. "You're kidding, right?" Pat said.

"She's kidding," said Isabel. She felt the sleeve of my orange sweater, which I was still wearing. "Hey. This color looks nice on you. Where did you get this?"

"I forget."

"Yeah, so do I!" said Pat, and she and Isabel burst into fits of hilarity again.

I put on shoes, grabbed a jacket, and left with them.

Isabel drove, one-armed, to Robin's. When we arrived the house was completely dark, but the streetlights showed once more the witchy strangeness of the place. Because she wrote plays based on fairy tales, Robin had planted in the yard, rather haphaz-

ardly, the trees and shrubs that figured most prominently in the tales: apple, juniper, hazelnut, and rosebushes. Unfortunately, our latitude was not the best gardening zone for these. Even braced and trussed, they had struggled, jagged and leggy; at this time of year, when they were leafless and bent, one couldn't say for sure whether they were even alive. Spring would tell.

Why would a man focus on her garage when there was this crazed landscaping with which to judge her? Make your excuses: no jury would convict.

Though why would a man focus on anything but her?

We parked in the driveway, where Robin's own car was still parked, her garage no doubt locked—even in the dark one could see the boxes stacked against the single garage window that faced the street.

"The key's under the mat," said Isabel, though I didn't know this and wondered how she did. Pat found the key, unlocked the door, and we all went in. "Don't turn on the lights," Isabel added.

"I know," whispered Pat, though I didn't know.

"Why can't we turn on the lights?" I asked, also in a whisper. The door closed behind us and we stood there in the quiet, pitch-black house.

"The police," said Pat.

"No, not the police," said Isabel.

"Then what?"

"Never mind. Just give it a minute and our eyes will adjust." We stood there listening to our own breathing. We didn't move, so as not to trip over anything.

And then on the opposite side of the room a small light flicked on from somewhere at the end of the far hallway; we

could not see down it, but out stepped Robin, looking pretty much the same, though she had a white cotton scarf wrapped and knotted around her neck. Against the white, her teeth had a fluorescent ocher sheen, but otherwise she looked regal and appraising, and she smiled at all of us, including me—though more tentatively, I thought, at me. Then she put her finger to her lips and shook her head, so we didn't speak. She walked toward us.

"You came" were her first hushed words, directed at me. "I missed you a little at the hospital." Her smile had become clearly tight and judging.

"I am so sorry," I said.

"That's OK, they'll tell you," she said, indicating Is and Pat. "It was a little nuts."

"It was totally nuts," said Pat.

"As a result?" whispered Robin. "No hugs. Everything's a little precarious, between the postmortem and the tubes in and out all week. This scarf's the only thing holding my head on." Though she was pale, her posture was perfect, her dark red hair restored, her long thin arms folded across her chest. She was dressed as she always dressed: in black jeans and a blue sweater. She simply, newly, had the imperial standoffishness I realized only then that I had always associated with the dead. We pulled up chairs and then each of us sat.

"Should we make some gin rickeys?" Isabel asked, motioning toward the bags of booze and lime juice blend.

"We wanted to come here and each present you with something," said Pat.

"We did?" I said. I'd brought nothing. I had asked them what to bring and they had laughed it off.

Robin looked at me. "Always a little out of the loop, eh?" She smiled stiffly.

Pat was digging around in a hemp tote bag I hadn't noticed before. "Here's a little painting I made for you," she said, handing a small unframed canvas gingerly to Robin. I couldn't see what the painting was of. Robin stared at it for a very long time and then looked back up at Pat and said, "Thank you so much." She momentarily laid the painting in her lap and I could see it was nothing but a plain white blank.

I looked longingly at the paper sack of gin.

"And I have a new dance for you!" whispered Isabel excitedly at Robin.

"You do?" I said.

Robin turned to me again. "Always the last to know, huh," she said and then winced, as if speaking hurt. She clutched Pat's painting to her stomach.

Isabel stood and moved her chair out of the way. "This piece is dedicated to Robin Ross," she announced. And then, after a moment's stillness, she began to move, saying lines of poetry as she did. "Heap not on this mound / Roses that she loved so well; / Why bewilder her with roses / That she cannot see or smell?" There was more, and as, reciting, she flew and turned and balanced on one leg, her single arm aloft, I thought, *What the hell kind of poem is this?* It seemed rude to speak of death to the dead, and I kept checking in with Robin's face, to see how she was taking it, but Robin remained impassive. At the end, she placed the painting back in her lap and clapped. I was about to clap as well, when car headlights from the driveway suddenly arced across the room.

"It's the cops! Get down!" said Isabel, and we all hit the floor.

"They're patrolling the house," whispered Robin, lying on her back on the rug. She was hugging Pat's painting to her chest. "I guess there have been calls from a neighbor or something. Just lie here for a minute and they'll leave." The police car idled in the driveway for a minute, perhaps taking down the license number of Isabel's car, and then pulled away.

"It's OK. We can get up now," said Robin.

"Whew. That was close," said Pat.

We all got back into our chairs and there was then a long silence, like a Quaker wedding, which I came to understand was being directed at me.

"Well, I guess it's my turn," I said. "It's been a terrible month. First the election, and now this. You." I indicated Robin, and she nodded just slightly, then grabbed at her scarf and retied the knot. "And I don't have my violin or my piano here," I said. Isabel and Pat were staring at me hopelessly. "So—I guess I'll just sing." I stood up and cleared my throat. I knew that if you took "The Star-Spangled Banner" very slowly and mournfully, it altered not just the attitude of the song but the actual punctuation, turning it into a protest and a question. I sang it slowly, not without a little twang. "O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave, o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?" Then I sat down. The three of them applauded, Isabel slapping her thigh with one hand.

"Very nice," Robin said to me. "You never sing enough," she added, ambiguously. Her smile to me was effortful and pinched. "Now I have to go," she said, and she stood, leaving Pat's painting behind on the chair, and walked into the lit hallway, after which we heard the light switch flick off. The whole house was plunged into darkness again.

"Well, I'm glad we did that," I said on the way back home. I was sitting alone in the back, sneaking some of the gin—why bother ever again" with rickey mix?—and I'd been staring out the window. Now I looked forward and noticed that Pat was driving. Pat hadn't driven in years. A pickup truck with the bumper sticker NO HILLARY NO WAY roared past us, and we stared at its message as if we were staring at a swastika. Where were we living?

"Redneck," Isabel muttered at the driver.

"It's a trap, isn't it?" I said.

"What is?" asked Pat.

"This place!" exclaimed Isabel. "Our work! Our houses! The college!"

"It's all a trap!" I repeated.

But we did not entirely believe it. Somewhere inside us we were joyful orphans: our lives were right, we were zooming along doing what we wanted, we were sometimes doing what we loved. But we were inadequate as a pit crew, for ourselves or for anyone else. "It was good to see Robin," I continued from the back. "It was really good to see her."

"That's true," said Isabel. Pat said nothing. She was coming off her manic high and driving took all she had.

"All in all it was a good night," I said.

"A good night," agreed Isabel.

"Good night," Robin had said the last time I'd seen her well, standing in her own doorway. She had invited me over and we

had hung out, eating her summery stir-fry, things both lonely and warm between us, when she asked about the man I was seeing, the one she had dated briefly.

"Well, I don't know," I said, a little sad. At that point I was still sitting at her table and I found myself rubbing the grain of it with one finger. "He seems now also to be seeing this other person—Daphne Kern? Do you know her? She's one of those beautician-slash-art dealers?" All the restaurants, coffee shops, and hair salons in town seemed to have suddenly gotten into hanging, showing, and selling art. This dignified, or artified, the business of serving. Did I feel I was better, more interesting, with my piano and my violin and my singing?

"I know Daphne. I took a yoga class once from her, when she was doing that."

"You did?" I could not control myself. "So what's so compelling about her?" My voice was not successfully shy of a whine. "Is she nice?"

"She's pretty, she's nice, she's intuitive," Robin said, casually ticking off the qualities. "She's actually a talented yoga instructor. She's very physical. Even when she speaks she uses her body a lot. You know, frankly? She's probably just really good in bed."

At this my heart sickened and plummeted down my left side and into my shoe. My appetite, too, shrank to a small pebble and sat in stony reserve in the place my heart had been and to which my heart would at some point return, but not in time for dessert.

"I've made a lemon meringue pie," said Robin, getting up and clearing the dishes. She was always making pies. She would have written more plays if she had made fewer pies. "More meringue than lemon, I'm afraid."

"Oh, thank you. I'm just full," I said, looking down at my unfinished food.

"I'm sorry," Robin said, a hint of worry in her voice. "Should I not have said that thing about Daphne?"

"Oh, no," I said. "That's fine. It's nothing." But soon I felt it was time for me to go, and after a single cup of tea, I stood, clearing only a few of the dishes with her. I found my purse and headed for the door.

She stood in the doorway, holding the uneaten meringue pie. "That skirt, by the way, is great," she said in the June night. "Orange is a good color on you. Orange and gold."

"Thanks," I said.

Then, without warning, she suddenly lifted up the pie and pushed it into her own face. When she pulled off the tin, meringue clung to her skin like blown snow. The foam of it covered her lashes and brows, and with her red hair for a minute she looked like a demented Queen Elizabeth.

"What the *fuck*?" I said, shaking my head. I needed new friends. I would go to more conferences and meet more people.

"I've always wanted to do that," said Robin. The mask of meringue on her face looked eerie, not clownish at all, and her mouth speaking through the white foam seemed to be a separate creature entirely, a puppet or a fish. "I've always wanted to do that, and now I have."

"Hey," I said. "There's no business like show business." I was digging in my purse for my car keys.

Long hair flying over her head, bits of meringue dropping on the porch, she took a deep dramatic bow. "Everything," she added, from behind her mask, "everything, everything, well, almost everything about it"—she gulped a little pie that had fallen in from one corner of her mouth—"is appealing."

"Brava," I said, smiling. I had found my keys. "Now I'm out of here."

"Of course," she said, gesturing with her one pie-free hand. "Onward."

for Nietzsche Keene (1952–2004)