

Juniper's Tree Excerpt

The summer Juniper died, the tide stayed low for a long, long time. It wasn't until early October that the waves crept towards the boardwalk again, quietly at first. By Christmas, they made a habit of bashing their large wet bodies melodically against the rock in the sea wall, so violent the ocean became cruel to look at.

The news of Juniper's death came and passed quietly in those low-tide months. No one in Falmouth paid much mind to her absence. When guilt compelled them to ponder the thought, they often got lost in wondering why. Perhaps it was the boys. Or maybe that damned mother of hers. Or, perhaps, her father. Sometimes, they'd think it was drugs, but they knew Juniper was not easy enough for that, so they chose to forgo their curiosity entirely. They never found her body, but they knew she was gone long before she really was, so they didn't bother trying. Especially not after I told them what I'd seen, how the ocean had swallowed her whole.

In Falmouth, they like to bury troubles like the ones Juniper had. If they paid more mind to her disappearance, perhaps they would have given a halfhearted reason why she made her choice. But I knew. I knew it was that ghastly habit of Juniper's, the nightwalking habit, that killed her.

It started when the aftermath of autumn's tongue soaked the sidewalks in a damp coating of danger that weighed heavily on the dark. That night, and every night afterward, her feet hummed in a swift symmetrical rhythm, certain of their verse. Their even melody conducted her body through the door, down the steps, and across the road to the street lamp, and quickened in the ambiance. In the night, the silence inspired a raw sweat to amass on her forehead. It was the quiet that stirred a hunger in the hilt of Juniper's belly. It was the quiet that kept Juniper walking.

Juniper liked her perfume soggy, so that black oak and vanilla were the only residue of her nighttime musings. Some nights, she hummed along with her footsteps. Some nights she made no sound at all. A sticky plaster of gloss and blush made her face look younger than it was, and she liked it that way. All that fussing made the flies desire her, and she spent a great deal of time swatting them out of her path.

She made a point of waving her hands about when the odd driver would pass by so he could see her fingernails in his headlights, always neon green. Sometimes, when she'd share the nighttime with another walker, she'd dip her hands deep in her pockets until they turned a corner and the sidewalk was hers again.

All the while her footsteps never slowed.

She told me she liked nighttime walks because she could look inside the houses with the lights on. Some nights, I liked to walk with her so I could hear the stories she told about the people in the light houses. Sometimes we'd see couples fighting or kissing. She had lots to say about them. She'd talk about how the girl got hungry and ate the boy's dinner and how the boy was hungry and it got him all angry when she ate that food and how he loved her anyway so he couldn't stay mad for long and that's how they got to kissing all sloppy like that. She'd talk about her boys too. I'd talk about mine. We'd talk about what they did to our hearts. And then we'd stay quiet for a minute or two until we found another house to talk about. She liked watching the families best. But she always kept quiet while we walked by their houses. Their porch lights drowned in her chestnut eyes and made them dimmer somehow, made her sockets sink. But she always smiled as she watched, and she turned her head ever so slightly as we passed so she could smile a little more without me asking why.

Juniper refused to go unnoticed. Her beauty was quick. Something you could just about grasp but not quite, not all the way. Her hair was pretty and all; she kept it short and blond with little golden streaks in the front. She had that Sunday kind of hair. The kind that makes you want to stay in bed all day and watch the sun come and go through the slits in the blinds. The kind that was messy and it was meant to be like that. The bedroom kind of messy.

Her face was real pretty too. Everything was even, symmetrical the way nature wasn't supposed to make it. So perfect it made you want to put your palms on your cheeks to hide your face when you looked away.

She made a great commotion showing off her legs, the way her calves indented and her thighs left plenty of length for gazing. And when she walked about in the daytime and she'd catch eyes on those legs, she'd make sure the sun saw them too so that they turned buttery and gold. Her arms were really something, all muscled and long like she spent her whole life running and that's how they got that way. But I think the boys liked her hands the most. They were always raw and callused, God knew why. But she liked to show them off more than anything. She liked to pick at the calluses and wave them around in the air and point at them too. Ponder them. She never put rings on. She wanted every inch of that hand-skin looked at, wanted people to envy that thin, ragged beauty. Except for the strangers on the sidewalk in the nighttime.

Unlike the boys, I was partial to her eyes. They were chestnut, but sometimes, when the sun hit them just right they turned green for a minute or two, usually accompanied by an open-mouthed smile, a silent laugh, and then they'd go chestnut again, like they were never green in the first place. I loved her differently than the boys did anyway.

The first time Juniper fell in love hurt her so much I prayed I'd never have to do any business with that ugly, vile thing. His name was Johnny. Sweet like honey brown like meat.

Johnny Honey-Brown. He was young and stupid and kind. It ended the way young things end; time and kisses on different lips. After Johnny Honey-Brown was when the nightwalking started.

I remember that day (the day it started) with the same haze and fluidity as the memory of my own first heartbreak. It was four pm in that little green room of hers. We were lying on her bed, feet up on the wall, looking at each other. Not talking much. “Remember that time we climbed the tree”, she chuckled.

I remembered.

“Alllll the way to the top,” I turned to smile at the ceiling. “Your dad was ready to kill us.” The ceiling was all dusty, and I wondered for a moment or two how a ceiling could get dusty like that.

“Nah,” she said, getting up from the bed. She lowered her voice, “He liked when we were dangerous. He’d always tell me it kept us young.”

Her dad always knew how to spin things just so. Little kids couldn’t help but flock to him. Maybe it was because he never seemed to age.

“Do you think it's love? That makes us old?” I asked.

She started folding her laundry with one hand and mussing her hair with the other.

“Rosie, it’s all that bad that makes us old. Trauma and grief and all that losing.”

“But how do you know all that? We’re too young to know all that.”

“My dad told me”, she shrugged and kept folding.

“Well, when we get all old and gross at least no one can say we didn’t have fun,” I said because I didn’t know what else to say.

I rolled over on my stomach and put my hands on my chin.

“Let’s never get old ok?” she asked, her eyes turning green in the four o’clock sun.

“We couldn’t if we tried,” I tousled my hair once or twice and rolled over on the bed again, keeping my eyes on her as I did. “So Juni Juni Juni bug what’ll it be tonight?”, I asked. I suppose I got a little ahead of myself because I said, “We could swim in the fountain like we used to do. Or... or we could go dancing nowhere special just out in the street if you want. Remember we used to do that? Stumble around like we were drunk when we didn’t know what drunk was? We could climb that tree again. We could go for a drive and watch the little kids get their first kiss? Just like we used to do. Want to?”, I breathed it all in one breath, “It’ll keep us young,” I reasoned when she said nothing at all.

But Juni just held up a bag of pot and I spent that night watching the milky aftermath of her lips on the bong churn in a stagnant pirouette beneath the porch light. Because she’d rather do that than any of those other things. Because if she did those things she’d have to talk about him. Yes, that was the night it started.

Every time I was around Juniper, it felt like taking a big gulp of something and holding it in my mouth for a while because it was too big to swallow. Nostalgia, I supposed it was. A big gulp of nostalgia. Every glint of her eye whispered a “remember when...,” every stifled giggle was a reflection of another, louder laugh that happened sometime in the past, years ago. Being with her made me remember things. Being without her made me remember nothing but the tree.

The big old evergreen had long branches that thumped at the top of her roof. From the outside, it looked like the branches were wrapping their arms around the house, holding it close, protecting it. From the inside, the thumping was insidious, perpetual. There was no escape from the noise. There was nothing to do but grow accustomed to it. Though, even for someone who visited as frequently as I did, the thumping was an imposition. Juniper hasn’t lived there for

years now, yet I could swear that phantom thumping remains ever-looming in the depths of my head.

Juniper lived on Stoddard Road, where every house looked the same. Every house but Juniper's, but only because of that big old evergreen. We were six when we first tried to climb it.

Juni had a natural aptitude for agility. She climbed effortlessly- gracefully even, scaling limb after limb without looking down, an artful mess of slender body parts, the branches swaying under her movements like they would when caught in a light breeze. I took my time at the stump, and with each step, I gently pressed my foot down on each new branch twice before trusting it with my weight. Still, I was clumsy.

I climbed three-quarters of the way up the tree before a stray twig sliced open my foot. Juni was long gone, but I could hear her laughing and calling my name. My blood poured out on the branches, but I kept climbing, kept chasing her laughter. Juni's father came out and saw us at the top of the tree and saw my bloody foot and he was laughing too. Laughing and laughing a little too much. I never thought too hard about all his laughter. I just watched the branches sway and bat against the black shingles on the roof. Because if I looked down for too long my fear would get the better of me. We climbed down the branches at dusk and Juni's father held my foot in his hand as he wrapped it with gauze.

He cooked us chocolate chip pancakes for dinner that night "to make it feel better", he said and he let us spray whipped cream in our mouths straight from the bottle. He was so kind, always so kind.

I've always been a little afraid of heights since then. Maybe that's stupid because I got hurt in the tree, not falling from it. Juni never got hurt, not until later, when her feet were firmly on the ground and she was much too old to climb trees.

We lived together the summer after our sophomore year. A lot of bad happened that summer. It was the best summer of my life. After that, things got worse. That was the summer Juniper loved Dash.

The funny thing about Dash was that he always had somewhere to be. Just like his name. He was always running. Running on the roads, running from home to home, running from bed to bed. And everyone loved him for all that running because he knew how to spin it just so. He was tall enough that men respected him and charming enough that women fell in love with him. He had a little trick he did where he twirled them around once or twice, scooped them up again, and remembered their name. They couldn't help falling for him after that. The trouble with Dash was he never knew when to stop running. He ran right into Juni's arms and right back out over and over again. But Juni liked to run too, and she ran fast. She never chased him, she just ran with him every time he'd run away and then they'd run together until they got lost and tired from all that running and then they'd just kiss instead and fight and do it all over again. But Dash made her look tired, made her lose a little bit of her light. Dash was like wintertime, the way he stole all that green.

The other thing about Juniper though, it was never the boys that broke her. They were just fun. It was her own mind that broke her. A lot bad things broke her too, but the boys were easier to talk about, so everyone blamed it on that.

The night she slammed her fists on my door so hard her hands bled, I thought maybe it really was Dash that broke her. I didn't ask what was the matter because I knew she'd been out with Dash. "Where is it," she rasped. Her eyes were still pretty with all that red. Red like roses, red like she'd been peeling at them with her fingernails, clawing at their sockets like roots. I tried to drape my arms around her, tried to fit her in the vacancies in my chest and hold her there. She

pushed me away. My back crumpled into the doorframe and I sank to the ground, watching. “Where is it?” she said again, her voice malicious, tender. I watched her from the floor as her feet dragged her to the kitchen, humming noisily as they did. “Tell me where it is. Where is it? Where is it where is it where is it tell me where it is just tell me where it is please just tell me please.” I didn’t know where her drugs were either. I just sat there and watched her. I cried too. She opened the cabinets and pushed the plates on the ground. She broke the glasses after that. And the bowls. There were shards of glass on the counter. On the floor. In her hands. She just sat on the floor then, right there on the glass. I stood up and walked to her, held her, rocked her until my feet were raw and bleeding and her eyes stayed shut. Maybe it was the drugs that made her tear this house apart. Maybe it was that pretty sick little blonde head of hers. But it was the sleep whispered, “He’s not in my life anymore.”

The glass littered the floor for a long long time. Neither of us could clean it up. If I cleaned I’d know it wasn’t Dash her nightmares made her whisper about. If she cleaned she’d have to pull the glass from her palms. I’m not sure she ever pulled it out. I think she just kept it there. Just let that hand-skin grow right on top of it. I kept my shards deep in my feet too. Just like Juniper.

After that summer, nightwalking became Juni’s ritual. She didn’t drink much water, barely ate, she read sometimes, laughed sometimes, drank sometimes, she hated being alone, she never seemed to breathe. Nightwalking helped. It kept her full, quenched, eased the loneliness. Breathed for her. Kept her head quiet.