

Free Radicals

At first, people kept phoning, to make sure that Nita was not too depressed, not too lonely, not eating too little or drinking too much. (She had been such a diligent wine drinker that many forgot that she was now forbidden to drink at all.) She held them off, without sounding nobly grief-stricken or unnaturally cheerful or absent-minded or confused. She said that she didn't need groceries; she was working through what she had on hand. She had enough of her prescription pills and enough stamps for her thank-you notes.

Her closer friends probably suspected the truth that she was not bothering to eat much and that she threw out any sympathy note she happened to get. She had not even informed the people who lived at a distance, to elicit such notes. Not Rich's ex-wife in Arizona or his semi-estranged brother in Nova Scotia, though those two might have understood, perhaps better than the people near at hand, why she had proceeded with the non-funeral as she had done.

Rich had told her that he was going to the village, to the hardware store. It was around ten o'clock in the morning, and he had just started to paint the railing of the deck. That is, he'd been scraping it to prepare for the painting, and the old scraper had come apart in his hand.

She hadn't had time to wonder about his being late. He'd died bent over the sidewalk sign that stood in front of the hardware store offering a discount on lawnmowers. He hadn't even managed to get into the store. He'd been eighty-one years old and in fine health, aside from some deafness in his right ear. His doctor had checked him over only the week before. Nita was to learn that the recent checkup, the clean bill of health, cropped up in a surprising number of the sudden-death stories that she was now presented with. You'd almost think that such visits ought to be avoided, she'd said.

She should have spoken like this only to her close and fellow bad-mouthing friends, Virgie and Carol, women around her own age, which was sixty-two. Her younger friends found this sort of talk unseemly and evasive. At first, they had crowded in on Nita. They had not actually spoken of the grieving process, but she had been afraid that at any moment they might start.

As soon as she got on with the arrangements, of course, all but the tried and true had fallen away. The cheapest box, into the ground immediately, no ceremony of any kind. The undertaker had suggested that this might be against the law, but she and Rich had had their facts straight. They'd got their information almost a year before, when the diagnosis of her cancer became final.

How was I to know he'd steal my thunder? she'd said.

People had not expected a traditional service, but they had looked forward to some kind of contemporary affair. Celebrating the life. Playing his favorite music, holding hands together, telling stories that praised Rich while touching humorously on his quirks and forgivable faults.

The sort of thing that Rich had said made him puke.

So it was dealt with privately, and soon the stir, the widespread warmth that had surrounded Nita melted away, though some people, she supposed, were likely still saying that they were concerned about her. Virgie and Carol didn't say that. They said only that she was a selfish bloody bitch if she was thinking of conking out now, any sooner than was necessary. They would come around, they said, and revive her with Grey Goose.

She assured them that she wasn't, though she could see a certain logic to the idea.

Thanks to the radiation last spring, her cancer was at present in remission whatever that actually meant. It did not mean gone. Not for good, anyway. Her liver was the main theatre of operations and as long as she stuck to nibbles it did not complain. It would only have depressed her friends to remind them that she couldn't have wine, let alone vodka.

Rich died in June. Now here it is midsummer. She gets out of bed early and washes herself and dresses in anything that comes to hand. But she does dress and wash, and she brushes her teeth and combs her hair, which has grown back decently, gray around her face and dark at the back, the way it was before. She puts on lipstick and pencils her eyebrows, which are now very scanty, and out of her lifelong respect for a narrow waist and moderate hips she checks on the achievements she has made in that direction, though she knows that the proper word for all parts of her now might be scrawny.

She sits in her usual ample armchair, with piles of books and unopened magazines around her. She sips cautiously from the mug of weak herbal tea that is now her substitute for coffee. At one time, she thought that she could not live without coffee, but it turned out that it was really just the large warm mug she wanted in her hands, that was the aid to thought or whatever it was she practiced through the procession of hours, or of days.

This was Rich's house. He'd bought it when he was with his first wife, Bett. It had been intended as a weekend place, closed up in the winter. Two tiny bedrooms, a lean-to kitchen, half a mile from the village. But soon Rich had begun working on it, learning carpentry, building a wing for two new bedrooms and a bathroom and another wing for his study, turning the original house into an open-plan living room, dining room, kitchen. Bett had become interested; she'd claimed in the beginning not to understand why he'd bought such a dump, but practical improvements always engaged her, and she bought matching carpenter's aprons. She'd needed something to become involved in, having finished and published the cookbook that had occupied her for several years. They'd had no children.

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It closer to real life, focusing on humor education, the book painted illustrations beautifully vivid. It is about every child's family will be in a modern story about the first time the children face the question: partial eclipse, Bohei, see

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