

New Roots

By Cecelia Morelli

A Rusty Fears 4 Winning Entry – Read by Ben Meredith

Content Warnings:

- Death (inc. suicide & parental death)
- Human remains
- Pain & blood
- Graphic body horror
- Mentions of: food & eating, smoking, illness & fatigue
- SFX: continuous low-pitched & high-pitched drone

My hand hesitates twice before I bring myself to knock. I hear his footsteps. The door jerks a bit before it opens. And suddenly there is Oliver

“Theo?” His eyebrows arch in surprise. He looks the same. Taller than me now but still gentler in the face. Pale in a way he had never been when we were children but just as soft.

I smile at him and when I hug him he meets me smiling. His arms wrap around me and squeeze. His cheek presses against my cheek, his fingers gently digging into my shoulder blades. The hug seems to settle over us like the creaking of a house, old and waking up to itself.

When I pull away I hold him by the shoulders and grin.

“Hi”, I say foolishly.

“Hi” he echoes “Tea?” he says in invitation, swinging the door open and stepping aside.

I follow Oliver into the house, passing shadowy corners and empty hallways. There is a thick layer of dust over everything and I trip on a pulled up section of rug in front of the door. The whole house seems equally unkempt, crumpled up paper on the tables, things dropped carelessly to the floor. When he turns and catches my eye he winces sheepishly.

“Sorry. I know it’s-”

“No! I mean it’s not like I gave you any warning.” I feel my voice strain for cheer. His mother had always kept the place a certain way, seeing it now I can’t help but feel like I’m bracing to be reprimanded.

In his kitchen I sit at a small table, this too cluttered with odds and ends. I begin picking at the items in front of me as he digs for tea in his cabinets. It’s an odd assortment of seeds and uprooted plants, corked bottles and rubber bands. It looks like the contents of a junk drawer dumped and left. When I look up he is still shuffling through his seeming empty cabinets and his mouth twists in resignation. He takes a breath before smiling apologetically at me. Taking two tea bags from a battered box and placing them in mugs.

“Not ideal but-” He shrugs his shoulders shyly and suddenly I can see the boy that I knew, his

shoulders always shrugging with his smiles and his cheeks so quick to pink. "So what brings you back?" He does not say home, he does not say here. He carefully pours the steaming kettle over the mugs.

"I - well . . ." I shrug helplessly back at him and suddenly he is laughing and I find myself laughing with him as if we were still children. Loud and obnoxious but so endearing.

"Alright" He's still smiling as he lifts his mug to his lips and I feel an urge to wrap my arms around him again. His laughing eyes catch on my hands and then sober. I look down and see

I've been carelessly fiddling with a small glass jar. A seed inside rolling back and forth with a pleasurable clicking.

"Oh no!" I tease, "Did I stumble over a cursed relic?" When we were still boys we would play a game with the priceless items Oliver's absent parents would leave behind on their short visits home.

'This bust of a young lady will cry in the night and if you catch her tears they turn to diamonds!'

'When you put on this jade ring you will see your own death!' We delighted in horrifying each other and it was in those stories that I dreamed I might become a writer.

"Mhm." He smirks at me now, his eyes looking tired.

"Well? Aren't you going to tell me what horror I've just inflicted on myself?" I nudge him to play. Rolling the small jar between my fingers, shaking it to make the seed rattle inside.

He looks at me quietly for a moment before smiling again. "You make a wish on it of course."

"A wish? Oliver that's uninspired!" He smiles again as I scowl at him. "Well than I wish-"

Suddenly the jar is snatched out of my hands. For a moment I think I see fear painted across his face but it is quickly replaced with a sleepy playful look. "Oops the wishes are all used up I'm afraid."

His voice is easy, and when I search his face it's like I imagined it the whole thing. When I look for the jar it is gone.

We talk about nothing. About his art and my travels. I glaze over the details of my studies. We pointedly do not talk about his parents and where they are. Or the failure that has brought me back with my tail between my legs.

"Can we go out to the orchard? I miss it." He's quiet and when I try to find his eyes he is looking away from me. The profile of his face somehow sad.

When he speaks again it's a croak. "Not tonight I don't think, it's getting late." It's not though. The sky is still glowing warmly, the leaves outside the window sparkle with the late sun. "Maybe in the morning."

I don't argue and follow him to a guest bedroom he tries to hastily make up for me. In the end I end up in his bed next to him, telling him about a book I will never write. Him offering to illustrate

it. We fall asleep mid conversation.

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In the morning I wake before Oliver. I am drawn to the orchard like a moth desperate for light throws itself against the glass of a store front. I carefully sneak out from under the covers, down the stairs and out the door in my bare feet. It is early, so early that the sun is not even visible, the sky just beginning to brighten from blackness into drowsy blues. When I approach the gate, I'm surprised to find it overgrown, though I shouldn't be. The fence is strangled by vicious weeds, the door sticks for a moment on overgrown grass.

My feet take me almost blind to that private little nook at the far end of the apple trees. I drop to the ground on my back, pass my hands through the grass like a caress. The sun is just beginning to paint the sky the purple of a bruise, the world waking up to color and beginning to warm again. I imagine I can feel the sun on my face and shock myself when I begin to weep.

After what feels like only a moment I wipe my face of tears. I see the sun has finally lightened the sky. I stand and don't bother to shake the grass from my hair. I walk through the trees like a museum. Brush my fingers against trunks like old friends.

When I come back to the front of the orchard I notice them. A line of trees, and carefully nailed to the front of them, portraits. Oliver's paintings, folk artish and unique but always a little unnerving. I see a portrait of each of his parents. His father's dark unforgiving eyes and his mother's piercing blue seeming to follow me as I walk. There were other faces I didn't recognize, a man with a warm smile, a pale older woman with white hair. But then I saw Alice and I felt air rush my lungs. Her face flashes through my mind and I smile. Her wild hair and her cigarettes, her ridiculous laugh and her bitten down nails. When she found us kissing between the trees she only laughed and told us to "not be stupid about it alright?". I adored her. She was untouchable, she knew what she was about. She was everything I wasn't.

I examine her face in the portrait, pink cheeked and grinning, and I feel a chill run through me. Looking behind, the trees seem so still. More like a cemetery than an orchard. I scoff at myself and pull an orange from Alice's tree and peel it.

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When I see Oliver coming toward me he looks shaken, his eyes wide and his face pale. I choke on a seed from the orange and wince in apology, try to hold a slice out to him but he just stands there. When I get closer to him I see his eyes are glossy and shimmering.

"Hey, I'm sorry" I try. When I touch his shoulder he startles and knocks the orange from my hand.

"It's ok" he speaks slowly, his words like breaths. "It's ok"

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In the morning I'm not feeling well. All through the night I have felt a fist in my belly, softly scratching from inside me. Now the feeling has swelled to a buzzing wasps nest.

Oliver is nowhere to be found so I begin opening random doors. I find his studio. It's not neat

like I've always known him to be. His brushes seem brutalized, the paint on the handles chipping off in chunks, the bristles bent and shedding. His paintings are all facing the wall, the backs of them looking like exposed spines. I pull one backward to peek at its face and see an orange. The lines of it are stark and harsh, straight where it should be soft and curved. Like his portraits, it's not exactly right. It seems to pulse. Like I could pull back the peel and find a heart inside or a lung. I let go and startle at the clack of canvas striking the wall.

Pain splits down my chest when I stand up straight and I grip the edge of his desk to collect myself. My fingers brush a covered canvas and I pause. My hands are shaking as I grab the corner of the paint stained rag and pull. It's my face. It is me but distorted, wrong, my eyes seem to float over my face, my nose too small. It's horrible.

The ache building in my chest finally crests. I can't keep from bending over to hack into my hands. It hurts, worse than anything I felt before. Finally something comes up, seeming to shred my throat on the way out and in my hands in a wad of blood there are leaves.

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I find myself again in front of that graveyard of trees. The painted faces now seem knowing and remorseful.

I move in a daze to Alice's portrait jamming my fingers between the frame and the tree, until my knuckles are scraped raw and bleeding. When I can get a hold I pull against the nails with all my might. I think it might not give until it releases with a crack of bark and I fall to the ground. Looking up, still clutching her image in my bleeding hands, I see a skull staring back at me. Wisps of dirty hair hang around it and wave in the breeze in greeting. The skull itself split open by the tree, cracked at the top like a vase. The tree hugs it, molded around it, accepting the skull as its own face.

"Theo-" I hear my name choked out behind me and I jump and swivel to face Oliver.

I can't speak for the blood and grit of leaves in my mouth, the cut of branches creeping up my throat. Blood and spit bubble at the creases of my mouth, drip on the portrait of Alice still white knuckled in my hands.

He holds his hands out to me but does not touch me. The tears that have been glossing his eyes the last few days are now pouring down his cheeks. "I told you to stay out of the orchard."

I think of the glass bottle. Of the shuttered fear I saw on Oliver's face.

I choke out a splatter of bloody leaves, I heave air into my shredded lungs, the back of my eyes prickle with needles. "What-" I wheeze and tears leak red from my eyes.

"I made a wish years ago. More like a thought." He blinks wet eyes and I can see devastation on his face "I thought about my parents and I thought of the orchard and it did this."

His hands stretch out to encompass the trees. "I can't control it. It just does what it wants."

I feel something like resignation wash over me. I look at his face and he looks so afraid. He has always looked so afraid.

“I’m so sorry, Theo.” For a hysterical moment I think, well it is my favorite place.

The piercing pain in my abdomen stretches my skin, pulling my body into new shapes. It’s the roots that come first, burrowing down my legs like massive veins, ripping through the calluses of my feet to tie me to the ground. They keep growing thick ropes of roots, dripping the red of my insides to water itself.

I feel my arms raising without my moving them, stretching impossibly to scabble for the sky. Branches split the pads of my fingers growing higher and higher, coated in a sheen of gore. My body falls away like wrapping paper.

Finally with the rest of me in shreds I feel the tree grow around me, cradling my head and keeping it upright, breaking my skull under the pressure. It’s agony. I can feel my body shredded and embedded in the tree but also of the tree. I think if I could shake my branches it would rain blood. Instead of tears, blood would ooze out of my bark like sap. When my eyes clear and the pain abates I can see in front of my face an apple sways from a branch above me.

Then I see Oliver. Hiccuping in tears like a child. His arms are slumped down his sides. He approaches me and I think vaguely that he might try to hug me. Instead he reaches out and plucks the apple from the branch with shaking hands. I feel the pin prick of its loss vibrate through me like an ache. Before I close my eyes I see him, still crying, bite into it.

When I wake again I see Oliver in front of me. He is smiling at me, his face white and his lips speckled red. He is full of leaves I think.

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When I am aware again it no longer hurts. I do not see through my eyes but I still see. Another tree has sprouted too close to me but it’s ok, we can share the sun. Between us are portraits of faces I know longer remember but that are familiar. And I think I can be so happy here, under the sun, in the dapple of my own shade, in his company.

Beneath the ground our roots twist together like tangled legs. And when the wind blows a certain way his branches brush against mine as if we were touching hands.

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