

Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White

The cards fall in perfect order: king, queen, jack... diamonds first, followed by hearts, clubs and spades. His hands are steady, surprisingly so, as he flips the top one from the deck. Even now, his hands are skilled; even now, with the arthritic fingers bent in odd directions and the subtle quiver, his hands don't betray him. His hands remember. He inspects each card before placing it down, leaning forward to within inches of its face. Sometimes, when he realizes that the card he is looking at is precisely the needed card, there will be, in his abandoned eyes, a spark. And in that spark, her lost father re-emerges, awash in the cross currents of time and consciousness and wonder.

It's because of this spark that Mary called her brother, Brendan, back to Boston just before Christmas when he'd have preferred to be with his own family. It's because of this spark that Brendan is now gathering leaves on this grey and bitter December morning. Today will be their final gift as children, a Christmas gift of sorts, and there will be the leaves and an unknown woman and water and a window.

Mary looks out at the park across the street. She played tag and hide-and-seek in that park and kissed her first boy behind the big tree in the corner. He'd been a curly headed boy named Patrick, and they missed the first time they tried, his lips landing on the bridge of her nose. But Mary was a stubborn sort, and she let him try again, having committed this far, feeling she'd

gone past a point, and there was no sense in turning back no matter how bad Patrick's aim was. He connected with her chin on the second attempt, but on the third he was successful. She was eleven and when their lips met, soft and wet, she sprinted back to the house where she is now standing with her father playing Solitaire behind her.

“Dad,” she says. “I have to talk to you.”

But she doesn't. Not really. Even if he acknowledges her presence, or calls her by her late mother's name -- who passed peacefully four years ago -- there will be no discussion, no explanation, no consent. He's past that. She would like to talk to him about what she intends to do tomorrow. To lend him some residual dignity. But age – it wounds, confiscates, and undermines, and dignity must be re-defined. Her father's eyes resemble tunnels, dark with forfeitures he's no longer aware of. Once again, Mary weighs the value of responsibility, the cost of guilt. Considers how love is the tilted scale on which they are appraised.

“Mary. Mary, can I talk to you?”

It's as if she actually hears him say the words, as if he is once again the man with bushy, black eyebrows that she knew when he was driving her to college for her first year. Her eighteen year old heart had been broken that summer, and Mary had denied herself the usual teen-age consolations of music and verse and alcohol. She spent hours each day motionless on her bed, wallowing monastically in her heartache. Determined. Stubborn. She didn't want sympathy. What she wanted was to work through it, understand it and subdue it.

Her parents seemed to understand and, by the end of that summer, as she rode in the car with her father on her way to college, the subject of her break-up had never been mentioned. She turned on the car radio to avoid a last chance at such a conversation. Turned it to a news station

that she thought her father might enjoy. She smiled and looked out the side window thinking she just might escape, that the issue would never have to be addressed. But when they entered the Mass Pike, her father turned off the radio, and her heart sank. This is it, she thought, the discussion I've spent three months avoiding.

“Can I tell you a story?” he said.

“Sure.” Her father wasn't one to tell stories and Mary wondered how long he'd been rehearsing this one. She expected a story about his break-up with some 'sweet gal' who was a 'great dancer' and how badly he'd been hurt, but that if he hadn't gone through that he'd never have met her mother, and she might never have been born. Something along those lines. Mary was thankful that it was a story though, and that she could sit and listen and not have to engage.

“Thanks,” her father said, as if he knew it was a burden for her to listen. “So yeah, one day just after I'd started college, like you're about to do, I was walking to campus in Chestnut Hill. Now, I was older than most of the students, having fought in the war.” He turned to her. “The Korean War.”

“I know what war, Dad.”

“I suppose you do. Now, I had a little bit of money, and I can remember clinking the coins against each other in my pocket. I always liked that sound. And the wind was blowing, and the day was kind of damp and cold. And there were wet leaves on the ground and maybe they were rotting or something, I don't know. But they had a peculiar smell.”

She sighed, too loudly, wondering if she was going to have to listen to him describe the weather for the next two hours. Maybe that's why he never tells stories, she thought.

Her father laughed, unoffended. “Give me a chance, Mary.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“I’m going on, I know,” he said. “But it seems important, you know, the leaves, the smell, the cold, all that. Because just before I got to campus, I walked past this open window, and there was this girl’s bare leg hanging out of it. And there was loud music coming from inside her room, a trumpet song, and I can still remember the name of it, ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White.’ Don’t know where they got that from. Where do they get song titles from?”

“I don’t know, Dad.” She spoke to the window.

“Doesn’t matter. So yeah, you know, I was walking by that window and saw this girl’s leg, and a lot of her leg it was, and I just stopped. I can remember it like it was yesterday, me standing there wondering why this girl’s pretty bare leg was swinging there. Was it for me? Did she know me? It was so cold, and it didn’t seem to make sense. You didn’t see a lot of bare legs in my day. Not in winter and never hanging out a window. It was just hanging there, so easy, so free and – now I hope you don’t mind your old man saying -- even sexy. And right then, right then, Mary, I realized that I could do anything in the world. I could talk to this girl and ask her why her leg was hanging out of the window and would she like to go to a movie. Or I could tug on her foot and pull her into my arms. I was on my way to college, college for God’s sake – I didn’t think I’d ever go to college – and I could study anything in the world, science or religion or history. Or I could run away and join the Merchant Marines. There were no adults around and no more missions or orders to follow. Nothing. I had a little money in my pocket and there was

nothing in the world but this girl's leg and just... possibility. Right then, the whole world was just possibility. I'm not sure I've ever felt that way again.

“So that's it, Mary. That's all I have to say. I've thought of that moment many times since then, and it's my hope, now that you're going to college and will be on your own, that you have some moments like that. That you have as many moments like that as you can. You've had a tough summer, and I just want you to try and have as many moments like that as you can. Can you promise me that? Mary? Just that?”

She continued staring out the window, away from her father, afraid to turn back, afraid to let him see how he'd gotten to her, and that this was perhaps what she needed to hear, the sort of wisdom she'd been looking to find all summer. She wiped away the tears with her sleeve, hoping her father wouldn't notice. If he did, he didn't mention it, merely turned the radio back on.

As far as Mary can recall, that's the only story her father ever told -- her one-story father who's just now finishing another game of Solitaire and coming to what is, for Mary, the astonishing part. Because somehow her father knows to scoop up the cards in reverse order, row by row, ace to king, spades first, then the clubs, the hearts, the diamonds, the sequence never varying, so that when he lays them out again, they'll be in the right order. The cards will be perfect again. And she wonders how, in the chaos of his mind and memory, he knows how to do such a thing, wonders what determines the things that go or remain.

Brendan walks in the door stomping dirt from the bottom of his boots. When their father became ill, Mary and Brendan made an arrangement. She would leave her job as a news producer for a local television station and move back home, and Brendan, who made good money working for a bank in Charlotte, would pay the bills. It'd worked for both of them. Until

recently. Until she could no longer provide the care her father required and asked Brendan to return home before Christmas.

“Let’s do it,” he says now.

Half an hour later, Mary is in the back seat of Brendan’s rent-a-car with her father clothed in layers and tightly strapped next to her. She has a bottle of water in her pocket and they are all headed to Chestnut Hill, on the west side of Boston, where her father attended college. He’d resisted when they pulled him away from the card game and made it clear by going rigid that he wanted to stay. Mary wondered if they weren’t being cruel. The cards might be enough for him, perfect game after perfect game, each one as extraordinary as the one before.

Her father is mute during the trip, his head bobbing slightly as they drive. This will be their last trip as a family, and Mary thinks it fitting that it’s being taken on this road, Route 9, which had been the central corridor of their lives for so long. She looks at the back of Brendan’s head, his hair just beginning to thin. He’d been the wilder of the two children, often getting into trouble for drinking and staying out late. He didn’t drink anymore and was the father of twins, a boy and girl, who were sophomores in a large Charlotte high school.

“Do you let your kids go to parties?” she asks.

Brendan catches her eyes in the rear view mirror and smiles. “No. No drinking, no dates, no parties, no late nights.”

“What do you say when they ask you what you did?”

“I lie, Mary. Flat out, I lie.” He thinks about this for a moment. “Isn’t that what they say? First, you lie to your parents, then you lie to your kids.”

You don't have to lie to Dad anymore, Mary thinks, but she doesn't say it. She doesn't know how to say it in a way that doesn't sound offensive to one or the other of them. She doesn't want it to sound offensive. She wants it to sound true, which is what it is, but she's not sure how to do that and so says nothing. They arrive in Chestnut Hill and park on the side of a two-lane residential street.

"Give me a minute," Brendan says.

He walks down the street and enters the screened-in porch of a brown two story house.

"You okay, Dad?" Mary asks her father, but he doesn't respond.

Brendan returns and they help their father from the car, Mary holding their father's head down so he doesn't hit it on the top of the door. On the sidewalk, Mary takes her father's left arm and Brendan grabs his right and they start toward the brown house, arm in arm in arm. They seem like something out of the Wizard of Oz, Mary thinks, following the yellow brick road.

"Around the side," Brendan says as they come to the brown house.

Brendan leaves Mary and their father on the sidewalk and walks to the front door. He rings the bell once, then returns.

"There it is," he says, pointing to a small pile of leaves.

Slowly, they walk toward the pile. Mary is disappointed with Brendan. She'd expected a bigger pile for some reason, as if that would matter to her father, as if the number of leaves would make any difference. When they reach the pile, a window on the side of the house opens and a short haired woman with hoop earrings sticks her head out.

“Ready,” she says. She’s wearing a Boston College sweatshirt and her voice is high pitched.

“Let’s do it,” Brendan says.

The woman ducks back inside and a few seconds later ‘Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White’ begins to play. Mary has heard the song only once in her life, right after she planned this outing and called Brendan to explain what she wanted to do and say that she couldn’t do it by herself, couldn’t do it without him. Reluctantly, he agreed. Since he’d stopped drinking, he almost always agreed, Mary had noticed.

As the girl swings her bare leg out of the window, Mary removes the bottle of water from her pocket. She dumps the water onto the leaves and, indeed, a faint odor rises, not much, but maybe enough.

“Dad,” Mary says. “Dad.”

She drops two quarters, three dimes and a nickel in her father’s pants pockets. She takes his hand, his hand that remembers, and places it into that same pocket. Brendan puts his hand over their father’s pocket, trapping her father’s hand, and then moving it so that the coins jingle.

“Look, Dad,” she says. “Look.”

Her father is distant and empty, and she needs him to focus, just this once, this one last time. Mary removes his coat thinking that the cold might shock him into some sort of awareness. Then she takes his head in her hands and points his nose at the leg dangling out the window. As she feels the weight of his head in her hands, she begins to feel foolish. She wonders again if this

isn't a big mistake. That maybe she's doing it merely to mitigate her own guilt, and the whole thing is for her sake after all. She wonders why she thought it would work in the first place.

Mary crunches some wet leaves with her foot and is about to call the whole thing off when she feels it, a tremor of sorts, then a tightening of muscles and, gradually, the lightening of the weight in her hands as her father, ever so slightly, lifts his head toward the girl's leg, still swinging playfully. Mary remains behind her father and can't see his eyes, and so will never know if they spark, but she feels his head rise and knows he must be aware of something. Something. She looks at Brendan, her wild and dutiful brother, and together they release their grip and back away from their father, who remains.

Tomorrow she will surrender him to the nursing home and they will both begin new lives -- but that's tomorrow. Today there are trumpets playing and wet leaves on the ground and the bare leg of a pretty young girl in the window. Today it's almost Christmas and her father's war is over and there's a little bit of money in his pocket as he stands alone and for the last time on the broken precipice of possibility.