

Different Time, Different Place

by M. Stone

I pulled into my parents' gravel drive and caught sight of Doreen standing on the porch next to my father. My foot came down hard on the brake, an involuntary reaction that made Dad frown. "What the hell, Livy?" he said in lieu of wishing me a merry Christmas as I got out of the car. "Didn't I teach you to drive better than that?"

I shrugged, trying to appear casual. "Guess not." I sneaked a glance at Doreen. She held a toothpick between her teeth, and I suspected she had several more in her pocket, along with a roll of mints. "Piss poor substitutes for a cigarette," she once told me, "but better than nothing."

Our porch roof shielded her from the late afternoon light, but I knew if she stepped into the sun, it would dance upon her auburn hair. She was our closest neighbor, and I thought back to the days I'd spent at her farm this past summer mucking the horse stall, gathering eggs, shelling beans, canning tomatoes. In return, I was able to escape the smothering atmosphere of my own house, avoiding my parents' nagging and their pat answers to questions I hadn't bothered to ask.

Even now, living in a dorm at the university several hours east of here, I could close my eyes and recall the copper halo Doreen sported when we traversed her fields together.

"Where's Mama?" I asked Dad as I made my way toward the porch, eager to be inside. Since Doreen had no family to speak of, Mama always set an extra place at our table for her at Christmas. I used to enjoy sitting beside her, breathing in the faint scent of wood smoke that clung to her clothes, but now the proximity made me squirm.

"In the kitchen cooking," Dad said. "We weren't expecting you for another hour or so." The sound of the ringing phone set him in motion. "Gotta answer that. Y'all come on inside."

After he disappeared into the house, Doreen nodded toward the road. "Take a walk with me, Livy."

I looked at my shoes, at the stump of a dead hickory Dad had chopped down last spring, anywhere but at Doreen as she waited for my answer. "I should say hi to Mama."

"Nothing gets by your mama," Doreen said. "You go inside with that look on your face, she'll know something's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong," I protested, finally meeting her stare.

She gave me a lopsided smile and plucked the toothpick from her mouth. "Then take a walk with me."

Though the temperature was dropping with the sinking sun, Doreen seemed comfortable in her sweater as we headed for the road. I pulled my coat tighter around me.

"You look well," she said.

I cleared my throat, tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm okay."

"How's school?"

"Fine."

Doreen stopped and turned to me. "I know you're angry," she began, but I held up a hand.

"I'm angry at myself for being so stupid."

She took a mint from her pocket and focused on removing the foil wrapper. "You aren't stupid. Not in the least."

My face burned as though I'd stood too close to a bonfire. For months I'd tried to outrun the memory of my last evening here before I headed off to college. Doreen had taken me into town; she'd wanted to treat me to a nice dinner as a way of saying goodbye, and to thank me for all my help at her farm. On the way back home, we rolled down the windows of her truck and breathed in the August air, heavy with coming rain. The gloom brought on by storm clouds made the oak leaves glow in contrast. "I have so much energy coursing through me, I can barely stand it," I told Doreen, then looked over at her. "Have you ever felt that way?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Once or twice, I reckon."

Her wry tone made me laugh, and I went on laughing until my cheeks hurt and she joined in. As we grew quiet, I placed a tentative hand on her knee. Doreen kept her gaze fixed on the road, but when I leaned to press my lips against her throat, she said, "Hey, hey, whoa now, easy," as if I were her skittish blue roan mare. I shrank from her and saw that the leaves had lost their brightness, succumbing to encroaching shadows. As soon as Doreen pulled into my drive, I bolted from her truck without a word.

Now we stood before her farmhouse, hunching our shoulders against the December wind. "I've missed having you around the farm," she said, her words strained from an emotion I couldn't identify, "but you're where you belong."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you know how condescending that sounds?"

"Well, you're eighteen and I'm forty-five, so I figure I got a right to be condescending every so often." I heard the mint clack against her teeth, caught a whiff of wintergreen in the air between us. "How many times did you tell me that you wanted to see a city skyline instead of these same old hills every day?" Doreen pointed at her house. "I ain't going anywhere, Livy; I plan on dying here. But this..." She threw her arms open as if to embrace the fields. "This ain't for you."

"But what if it was?" I asked. I had to know.

She studied the bare trees surrounding us. "You'd still be eighteen, and I'd still be forty-five."

I started for my parents' house, but when Doreen called my name, I froze, not daring to breathe. "Different time, different place," she said, "the answer wouldn't have been no."

We walked down the road in easy silence, and I stayed at her side, inhaling her familiar scent. The waning sun set her hair aglow. I closed my eyes and saw copper.