

TREE OF LIFE

Part I of III: Being here

The woman sitting across the desk from him was ravaged by grief. They were all ravaged by grief, in one way or another. But each one wore it differently. The things at the bottom always came to the surface. They couldn't help themselves, nor could they disguise what they truly felt. It was like a mask turned inside-out. There was self-indulgent grief and there was grief that smoldered hot and bright, furious as a supernova. There was grief that yammered and grief that sat deaf and dumb. There was a species of grieving that advertised itself like a whore and a grieving that hid itself away. Hard and brittle grief, soft and pliable grief, ugly grief, sultry grief, crippled grief, the lacerating self-blame of the ascetic, the wallowing funk of poets. And, too rarely, there was this wild, unsullied suffering that was so magnificent to behold, a grief that bloomed ravenous and corrosively erotic. He loved all the varieties, the shaded palettes chosen by character and fate, and it was his job to follow the trail of their suffering to its most intimate source and spin that pain into arguments for a cure. What, exactly, did they believe was lost? What had death taken away? The toughest to break were the ones who could answer that question without hesitation. Like Mrs. Black, who sat stoically before him, hands clasped in her lap. A single tear rolled down her cheek. The dignified widow.

He fingered the box of tissues across the desk. It was a gesture he'd made a thousand times. Mrs. Black shook her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She straightened herself and sniffled.

"This is never easy," he said.

"He just keeps pacing the room," she said. "He's all jumpy. He won't stay still. Why can't he stay still?"

The man nodded. "That happens a lot, actually," he said. "We call it perforation. It's just a phase, like childbirth. Like death itself." He picked up the pen on his desk and, turning it lengthwise, read the words inscribed on the green barrel: Optimique. Take Shade in the Tree of Life. He cleared his throat. "This might help," he said, waiting until he caught her eye.

"Yes?" she said.

"What would he be doing now?" he asked. "I mean, if he was *here* here?"

"He'd probably be laughing his ass off right now," she said with a smirk.

The man smiled. "Good, good," he said, thinking: You two were made for each other. "What that tells me is that you haven't fully committed yourself to the life vision yet. What that tells me is that it's not him pacing the room but you. He's not being himself yet. That's the dissonance you're experiencing, the disconnect. You're still exhibiting reluctance. And that's perfectly okay. It happens. But the pills, you see, are merely an aid. You have to meet



the drug halfway. Meet it with faith. With belief. In order for this reality apparition to manifest itself in your personal world, you need to allow your husband to exist as he is. As you know him to be. Nobody else can do that for you. The difficulty you're having, you see, is spiritual, not chemical."

She began crying. "I just don't..."

"Take your time," he said. His eyes fell to the split of her blouse, the soft collapse of her breasts that distressed the delicate fabric.

"It's just so hard," she continued. "I see him, but I know he's not here. He's not really real. I can't wrap my head around it. It's like it's just a magic trick. Once you know..."

"Of course," he said. "That's not unusual. Keep in mind you're only in your first week of treatment. Give it..."

"Treatment?" she said.

He chuckled and shook his head. Grief had brought her up sharp, vigilant. "I'm sorry," he said. "It's just a turn of phrase. But you're right. You aren't sick, and this isn't medicine."

She shook her head. "To be honest, I barely remember coming in here last week," she said, brushing back her hair. He noticed the urgent wisp of gray at her temple. "Jesus. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake. I'm being selfish. This is selfish, right? It's completely selfish to not let go."

"As opposed to what?" he said, shifting slightly in his chair. "Love is totally selfish and totally unselfish at the same time, really. Without a self, we experience nothing. We have no basis from which to perceive and define and take hold of real-time reality. And yet, when we're in love, we give generously of that same self. We share our reality with another person. We sacrifice ourselves. It's a kind of giving up, right? Our selves intersect and, paradoxically, we let go of ourselves. Out of gratitude, commitment, desire, a longing for connection, the making of memories and meaning. Really, what is more selfless than bringing someone back from the dead? It was an act of grace for Jesus, right?"

"My God," she said. "That's ridiculous. No one is coming back from the dead. He's gone."

"I disagree," he said, setting the pen down. "If you think about it, reality is just a contract, an agreement we make with ourselves, and nothing is more persistent and real than memory once you completely surrender to your experience of it as a manifestation of subjectively recorded real-time events and the affective emotions those past events evoke. It's all just chemical reactions..." — *to be continued*

This is a new column introducing original works of short fiction by local authors. Tune in next week for the second installment of "Tree of Life" by Rick Levin.



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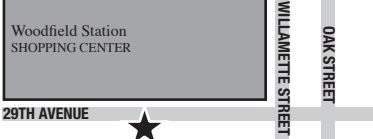
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