

TREE OF LIFE

Part III of III

(for Parts I & II, visit EW online or the June 28 & July 5 issues)

Mrs. Black stared at him. Her upper lip quivered. He reached to pick up the pen again, then decided against it. Instead he folded his hands on the desk. "Anger is just faith looking for conviction," he said, "and fear is the price of metamorphosis." There was kindness in his voice. It was a familiar line, right out of the book. But he really did feel for this woman, whose grief was now like a caged animal — a magnificent beast of the jungle whose dignity is inseparable from the coiled violence it turns on threats against it. "No doubt you're familiar with the stages of grief," he said. "Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Acceptance. The fact that your husband is beginning to exhibit a real-time persona indicates to me that you're moving into the transitioning phase. One of the miracles of Optimique is that, therapeutically speaking, it compresses the grief stages, often causing them to overlap. Sometimes there's a kind of accordion effect. We've termed this prousting. It can be somewhat disorienting at first. But in the end, all this compression does is help settle the bargain in your favor."

"Good lord," she hissed. "You sound like a drug dealer."

At this he smiled. "You have no idea how many transitioners limning on the arrival of acceptance have said that to me. It's like the last gasp before enlightenment."

Finally he grabbed the pen again and began tapping it gently against the desk. She was more beautiful to him than ever, this woman. The man softened his face and dropped his eyes for a moment. "I understand your concerns," he said, "but I offer this as a counterpoint. Yes, technically speaking, what you're taking is a drug, if by drug you mean a complex chemical agonist that acts like a spur upon the chemicals already present in your brain. But, mind you, this isn't the twentieth century. The dark ages of pharmacology are far behind us, Mrs. Black. This is a new era. We've taken the hard lessons from the wholesale application of serotonin re-uptake inhibitors during the era of anti-depressants and applied that knowledge to hard lessons learned from our pioneering experiments with amphetamines and hallucinogens, and what we've arrived at is a sort of sublime synthetic knowledge represented by a sublime synthetic pill that offers a sublime spiritual solution to an ageless mortal quandary. A pill, mind you. Really, it's nothing short of a miracle. To



call it a drug, in this sense, is really a misnomer. Drugs, historically, are agents of oblivion. Optimique is the exact opposite."

"You really believe this shit, don't you?" she said, turning again to the wall.

"I believe it works," he said.

"My husband says you're an evil son of a bitch," she said.

"Good," the man replied, grinning. "He's gaining autonomy. That's a good sign. He's ready. Now it's up to you. Don't hold back. You need to commit to your vision. This isn't a hallucination, any more than life itself is a hallucination. Your experience is real. It's real to you. It's up to you to make it really real."

"My god," she said, "you're just repeating yourself. This is insane. What are you doing? You're hypnotizing me, aren't you? How long have I been here? How long have we been talking?"

He continued to tap the pen on the desk. "The funny thing about time," he said, tapping, "is that it only exists in retrospect. You don't move through time. Time moves through you. In this sense, every moment is eternal. Every moment exists forever. How long have we been talking? We've been talking forever. We have always been here and we will remain here, in this room. This will never go away. Your husband will never go away. As you exist, he exists. Loss is an illusion, Mrs. Black, and you need to stop fighting. Nothing really passes. You pass through. Fear is the by-product of your adherence to the illusion that you can conquer an illusion. It's finally time to believe what you have always known, Mrs. Black, and what you have always known is that your fight against pain is actually the source of your pain."

"Oh my," she said. Mrs. Black heaved a deep sigh. He leaned forward, watching. She was almost there. The plateau. He set the pen down. "Oh my," she said again. He waited. She closed her eyes.

"Mrs. Black?"

"Yes," she said.

"I need you to listen to me," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"We can't unknow what we know," he said.

"I don't want to die," she said.

"Now tell your husband," he said. "Tell Ben."

She turned to the wall. "I'm sorry, darling," she said. "I'm so sorry." ■

This is a new column introducing original works of short fiction by local authors. This is the final installment of "Tree of Life" by Rick Levin.

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