

Spring on the Fritz

When her teenage son John-John (never Just John) disappeared into a gorgeous spring... my mother's best friend went on the fritz with a commitment that astonished me. My mother, a teacher, even back then weary, drove out to the country house to bring her best friend back to earth, and took me along for the same reason doctors need nurses: for company... or, perhaps she wanted to impress charity upon me, or a warning. Needless to say, I had always admired my mother's best friend's ability to shirk, to giggle, and to wail alone in her big bad house. I found her expressiveness feminine and refreshing. But I was, myself, a child. Trusting most the adults I could see myself in easily. The day we arrived was a warm spring Saturday, and the salt on the road was dry. The blue of the sky made me mad...

We let ourselves in. My mother's best friend was in a frenzy upstairs. We established ourselves in the kitchen and my mom, alias Rosemary, put on the coffeemaker. The mugs hung from a rack over the sink. From upstairs came calls to which neither of us could not properly respond... "I didn't know he listened to Prince!" ... "What do you think *these* are for??" ... "*Self-portrait?!?*" ... I was sent to spy.

My mother's best friend (short, busy, mousy) went into John-John's room and took his black-marble magnifying glass, went through his personal letters, and, looking at them closely in the sun on the sitting-porch downstairs, burned holes in them. Without stopping for breath she peered through his old dictionaries for an underlined clue. She piled her son's laundry in a basket at the head of the stairs... She, having spent her life sniffing his shorts to see if they were dirty, was a woman of every time, which is to say, a tragedian. It was 2012 and no-one had any savings left...not even my mother.

My mother's best friend's personal tragedy? You'd have to ask her to find out... She lived in a ramshackle ranch-house with great southern-facing presumptuous windows, on a hill, in no town... just her and her hubby and John-John.

I have my suspicions about her tragedy, of course I do...it would be irresponsible not to wonder...we're not dead yet... It could have been anything, a lack of career, an exceptionally boneheaded child. A broken tailbone, a foot that was smaller than the other. But I suspected that her marriage to the earnest chemist ("hubby") was what she had decided to blame. Always in life she had been happy, once, before.... before whatever it is that happened that she decided to blame. I could tell that much just by looking at her: that her happy had fled her sure as dust flees the broom. I could always read people very well, even if I couldn't put the knowledge into words as a child, and not being able to name the feeling and the knowledge of others in words gave me no shortage of angst.

And my mother never told me what was wrong with her best friend, just referred to her with that sigh that all government employees perfect very quickly, remember she is and was a teacher. And she would never tell me outright what was wrong with me. My mother, who never broke the seal on her own lips, loved her best friend. Her best friend's name was and is Winifred.

When John-John called Winnie on the landline from a motel in Colorado sometime midafternoon that Saturday, having taken spring break into his own delicate hands, she barely spoke to him longer than three minutes. I was sitting at the kitchen with her, watching her twirl one finger in her blond-ish, hanging-there hair. She was the baby of the family, the youngest of seven, and her cheeks were warm and inflamed. The light coming in the kitchen window sat atop her hair. The moment hurt to notice, there were no lies. My mother was drinking a medium roast Kwik Trip coffee and critiquing Winifred's decorative navy pillows from the living room. John-John was, allegedly, in the company of his greatest chums, one of whom possessed a sprinter van.

Winnie listened to her son, who was in college but also still a teenager, how unfortunate for all involved, and she issued some standard instructions, there was also the admittance that she missed him and

wished he would come home, and she hung up and went downstairs to the deep freezer where she had frozen a cat. Picking it up by the stiff tail, she set it on the counter where she wouldn't forget it again and also got some Trader Joe's orange chicken out of the fridge for dinner later, and then she produced a shaft of fingerling prosciutto-dill cakes because at Winnie's we only ate ridiculous things. She busied herself distributing coffee. I had recently taken it up. Also chunks of nutty dark chocolate.

The cat was a tabby.

"He died in the winter," she explained, with her back to me punching in numbers at the microwave. "And I forgot to bury him until now."

I looked at the cat. It looked scared. Not at peace. "Of what?"

"He got his comeuppance," said Winnie.

Winnie smirked when Rosemary scolded her about the cat.... My mother truly was outraged and disgusted and spoke to Winnie with her hard voice like she did to all people that disgusted her, that is to say, like a second-grader... Winnie had better scrub her nails... But being scolded seemed to make Winnie happy. She was gregarious and egregious with an aliveness that did not suit her and seemed almost promiscuous. Perhaps men were afraid of her. I was in love with her...

For that reason I did not see her again for at least two years. Besides this, I was busy being in high school.

I came out to see her again when I discovered sex. This I figured was pretty impressive, and Winnie was someone I knew I could impress. Besides, Rosemary could not know that I knew, firsthand, about monkey business. But someone must know. And none of my friends could help me with the real question, which was, where could I get more of it? And in a reliable, regulated way?

These ideas would lead me down a seductive path. College loomed.

It was spring again, a Sunday as graceful as tracing a hand in the sky. I drove myself and regrettably, this involved using the parking brake. The ramshackle house stood still and celeritous swallows circled it. It was morning; that is the only thing I don't regret, that I made it out there, against all odds, in the morning. I remember because at that time I still wore visors and running shorts and tennis shorts everywhere for all purposes, just in case there was an opportunity to move, and I readjusted the angle of my green softball visor obsessively in the rearview as I was parking. And I remember the solemn ticking of the clock as I came in through the mudroom, and I remember thinking, *My god, this is an empty house.*

Winnie wore a matching pajama set printed with little brown dogs. She was not and never was beautiful, but her face was very expressive, very alive. Presumably John-John was all right?

Yes, he was.

And her husband, the chemist?

He wasn't.

Without Rosemary there half the conversation was missing, but what to say, I didn't know. I rushed to entertain my host. Over coffee, expecting sympathy, I confessed I had lost my virginity. In a garage, though she didn't ask. She was unconcerned with my safety. This made her a great short-term friend of mine.

Her living room was strewn with clothing. She was packing her life into a suitcase the size of a desk.

"It's the kind of thing adults do to fight the sadness," she explained. I noticed bikinis. Where was she going?

At first she didn't remember. Ah, Cocoa Beach. Cocoa Beach, Somewhere.

I approved of this. Although I made her spell it out for me. "D-i-v-o-r-c-e."

“At least he’s not dead,” I said.

That was not the thing to say.

I felt painfully that I was still in high school and accordingly, stupid.

Winnie laid out to me her plan: she was going to Florida, she was traveling by herself, she was fighting the sadness. That made me happy for her, but I loved her less for it. Already I felt myself detaching. Well, what’s the point, I thought... She doesn’t need me, she’s got all of Florida...

I pitied her. Maybe the trick to not being lonely was to not be alone. This too was a seductively destructive idea, but one had to try it on for size.

We drank more coffee. It made me ill.

Then on Monday Winnie left for fourteen months even though John-John returned home to the ramshackle house on the hill, having wearied of booze and college, at the tail end of that spring. They had grown apart, perhaps, but she still left, and sold the house while she was gone, too. John-John had to get gone.

I always thought Winnie was the master of death because she wouldn’t let things die. Cats, marriages, etcetera. Quite the opposite. Until she left that house once and for all, she never had the courage to walk away from anything in her life. In her throat was a warning she could never eke out.

By the time I saw Winnie again, I had graduated college and she was not wise, and neither was I, and in fact, no-one would ever be again. That brief understanding we shared- poof. Cleaned up like a car crash. And she was no happier now than she had been at the beginning, when she started off with the hubby and John-John... but she was happy in the middle, somewhere, I think...

