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Ellen at Night · *Rosanne Coggleshall*

TOM IS MOWING the lawn. He takes long strips, goes up the yard vertically, then crosses over.

This reminds Ellen of a ladder. From the porch she watches him, smoking. She has mopped the porch floor and it gleams now beneath her bare feet, slickly blue.

Because there are no screens to the windows of the cabin, she spends most of her time here, in the high rocker, smoking and looking out over the wide valley that leaps up suddenly to become Sunset Mountain and Sunset Ridge.

Tom slows down, wipes the sweat from his face and neck. His face is dark red, it looks angry; his long dark curls have tightened and stick close to his head. Ellen thinks that he looks almost newborn, like the photograph she has of her nephew. She looks at the paling floor, then goes in to fix a drink.

By the time her husband finishes mowing, she will be ready.

After supper they sit on the clean porch. Tom is tired, his arms ache. He drinks his brandy slowly. Ellen has scooped her hair up away from her neck and pinned it high on her head. She has bathed and dressed in a crisp white smock and shorts. Now she is drinking Black Russians and the lights in the valley seem to be boring holes into her vision. She would like, right now, to be a part of a chorus of voices, singing Beethoven's Ode or the Christmas Handel.

Tom is talking about peaches. ". . . and you can make preserves, for Christmas," he says.

Ellen says nothing. She knows that tomorrow when he drives south to find the peaches and melons he will not be alone. She knows, but how she knows is something that does not occur to her.

"Maybe I can find vegetables, too," Tom says, stretching his legs in front of him. His toes dent the screen. "Since ours won't be right for a while."

Ellen says nothing. The ice in her glass tinkles and she smiles a little.

When this drink is gone, she'll have another. Tom will go to bed. The fireflies so plentiful tonight will grow larger; lights in the valley will blaze; even the stars, the stars. . . .

"Ellen?" Tom is leaning towards her.

She looks at him.

"It's a good idea, don't you think?"

Ellen's stare turns blank.

"The peaches."

She looks out again at the sparkling darkness.

"It will occupy you, that's good. Pass the time."

"These afternoons," Tom sighs. "I hate vacations. I lose all sense of direction."

Ellen nods, a deep, comprehensive motion; direction is crucial, even in times of peace, she thinks and sips from her sweating glass.

It is the following afternoon. Ellen sits in the porch rocker, a basket of letters in her lap. Beside her chair stands a long shallow dish and a candle.

She is burning letters.

Sometimes she opens one and reads. More often she only studies the handwriting, the postmark, then sticks the envelope into the flame, holds it until she can no longer, drops it into the violet shell.

In a letter dated April, 1978, she finds Tom's words: "... can live about twenty miles from campus, in an old cabin with a porch. I will ..."

This letter she crumples, in her fist it turns small and dense. It burns badly. Three times she has to apply the candle.

When she has finished, emptied the basket of letters, she carries the ashes out into the field of lilies and columbine next to the house and scatters them. She stands there some moments, the long dish in her hands.

She sees that the cherry tree has been stripped by birds; ugly knots, blood brown, hang from invisible stems. Beyond the tree she can see the hooked top of Sugar Mountain and the straight edge of Straw. She is wearing cutoffs and when she returns to the porch she notices that her legs are splotted from the weeds and insects.

She takes a bath. Then she pours herself a glass of wine.

It is four o'clock.

At eight, Tom has still not returned. Ellen rocks in her chair and counts as the lights begin to come on in the valley.

There is one system of lights, attached to St. John's Church, that turns the high steeple into a perfect cross. Ellen watches for this.

She is drinking scotch now. In her mind, sentences tangle, sentences from the letters, sentences from songs, sentences from poems, sentences she herself might say. Each of these sentences makes absolute sense; each has heft, drops deep. But it matters little, if any, to Ellen, who smokes now another cigarette and counts the sixth light as it flashes.

She is cool in a pale cotton shirt that reaches below her knees. She wears no underwear.

Breezes from a storm that veered away late in the afternoon still play about the branches, change the high grass.

Ellen has burned some photographs, some she kept in a yellow fabric box. The remains of these she tossed into the fireplace, behind a log that was left over from a much cooler night.

Her hands feel dry and clean, cool. She spreads them out against the night and studies them. In the darkness scars are invisible; but she can see a faint stripe where her rings were.

When Tom comes in close to ten, Ellen is still in the rocker; she doesn't hear him until he's right next to her, but she is not startled, she turns only to look. He carries a large bushel basket and he is grinning.

"Look at these beauties," he says, "and there are more and melons in the truck."

Ellen smells the fragrant peaches; she reaches into the basket and takes one and holds the solid furred shape in her hand. The peach is warm.

While Tom puts away the fruit, Ellen sees that the cross on St. John's has come on without her noticing it.

Later, Tom describes an accident he saw on the way to North Carolina.

"The flames were as high as the chestnut tree, sheer blue. It was still burning when I came back."

Two people were killed, a mother and a daughter. The daughter was six years old.

Ellen tightens her grip on the arm of the rocker.

"Where did you stop?" she wants to ask. "Where did you stop to hold her?"

Tom describes the farmer who sold him the fruit.

"He wore overalls and a clean white shirt, frayed at the cuffs. He had the sleeves down, buttoned. His back was bowed and his face looked old, like a gnome's in that book of yours. His name was Callahan."

Where did you stop?

Tom fixes her a bowl of peaches, one for himself, too. He uses the blue bowls her sister made, bowls so deep and round they seem almost spherical.

She looks into her dish and can see only the white of the cream. She drinks from her glass and holds the bowl until Tom gets up for another helping; then she slips the peaches beneath the little table beside her chair.

Across the valley, high on the mountain, red lights click on and off from a tower. Above the tower the night sky is brushed with pale clouds that skid along and disappear. The moon has not risen but a battery of stars spills through and away from the clouds. Ellen counts the stars.

"Come to bed," Tom says, his hand held out to her.

She looks at his hand and notes how steady it is. It is pale in the little light. She shakes her head.

Tom sighs and begins to say something, but does not. He puts his hand on her cheek, touches her hair, is gone.

Ellen lights a cigarette; the match burns her fingers.

When the moon appears, she is standing out in the yard. Above the cusp of Straw, it is almost too pale to recognize; it might be another cloud.

The moon is nearly full; but for an odd flatness at its upper right curve. As it rises, its light becomes more distinct. About it, orange rings form, and on its face the shadows carve themselves deeply.

From the field Ellen can see the window to her bedroom; Tom has left the light on for her and she sees his long figure in their bed.

She thinks of the peaches, cool now on the back porch. She thinks of the accident, how Tom and his friend must have seized upon it: an amulet, something to foster, to cherish. She thinks of a friend she once had, who lit her house only with candles. She thinks of winter, when cold will seal her in.

The moon seems to twist a notch in the sky. Stars might be falling, she thinks.

A week later, all the peaches have been eaten, given away, or preserved. The empty baskets are stacked in the corner of the back porch.

Ellen washes glasses; Tom has invited the Matthews over for a drink. It is five o'clock and Tom is mowing the lawn again.

Ellen takes olives and cheese from the refrigerator; she finds fresh crackers in the crisper and arranges two plates. When she has finished,

she pours herself a drink. She feels very cool, despite the heat, because she showered for a long time.

Tom passes through, dripping wet, without his shirt. Ellen hears him in the bathroom; first his jeans landing on the floor, then the long heavy whirrrrr of the shower.

“You’ve got a million berries on those bushes along the drive!” Cyane Matthews says as Ellen leads the guests to the porch.

The sunlight is heavy, a deep spun gold over the lawn and the trees.

“We almost stopped before we got here,” Andrew says.

Ellen fixes two drinks and listens for Tom. His voice is light with pleasure when he greets their friends.

The four of them sit horizontally, facing the valley that seems now brimming with the richness of the late afternoon sun.

The Matthews and Tom talk about roses. Suddenly Tom is leading them out to see his prize, the St. Cecilia; this is a large but delicate crimson rose his grandmother grafted.

Ellen stops at the door to the porch and watches the others. Cyane is so healthy; her body itself is like a flower, a robust flower. Tom walks beside her, gesturing with his glass. Andrew is a little ahead, his hands in his pockets, his head a little back. Cyane’s hair is the color of fire.

Later, when the Matthews suggest they go to Houghton for dinner, Tom insists they stay there.

“I’ll fix ratatouille,” he says. “We have ham, too.”

Ellen watches Cyane’s face. A faint blush reaches to her temple. Andrew looks baffled and agrees.

Ellen does not help with dinner. She sits on the porch with Cyane. Andrew is busy in the kitchen with Tom, making his famous broccoli salad.

Cyane says, “You’re quiet tonight, Ellen.”

Ellen looks out at lights just coming on on the mountain.

Cyane repeats, “You’re quiet.”

When Ellen again says nothing, her friend touches her arm.

“What is it?” she says.

Ellen stays very still, looking out.

After a while, Cyane moves her hand and goes inside. “I’ll see if I can do anything,” she says as she leaves the porch.

After dinner and two bottles of wine, the two couples again sit on the porch. Ellen sits on one end of the row of rockers; Andrew on the other. Tom and Cyane are in the middle.

Tom is still laughing at something Andrew told him about broccoli and the bucolic mode. Cyane teases him about being literal. Andrew is smoking his pipe. Ellen watches the cross, then watches the red airplane lights, one of which is loose and flickers.

“What do you do with ‘pine,’ I wonder,” Cyane challenges Tom. “What do you do with the word ‘pine?’”

Tom says something no one can hear because he is laughing.

Ellen rises and goes out into the yard, then walks over to the field. The half moon is as orange as a cantalope; it seems to hold no shadows. She can hear voices and laughter from the porch. Fireflies spangle about her like insane direction lights.

She wonders how it would be to live on Sugar Mountain, to look down and see the gatherings of light. She wonders how far she'd have to walk to be free of light, even the stars, even the moon. Ellen unbuttons the second button of her shirt and whispers something even she does not understand. When she walks back to the porch, she can see that the others are sharing a joint. The stark glow of the cigarette leaps from place to place. Ellen does not go in.

She hears the Matthews leaving. Cyane says something, she hears her name, “. . .Ellen”

From her cover beside the smaller cherry tree, she can see the lights of their yellow Volvo. Tom is standing next to the drive, hands on his hips. When the car is out of sight, he too is invisible but she can hear his steps.

He comes round the house slowly. He steps carefully as he is barefoot. “Ellen?” His voice is rough. “Ellen?”

She leans close to the trunk of the cherry tree; the branches dip down to conceal her. One of her hands has found the bark and holds to it, as if for balance.

Ellen can see the red airplane light rattling on and off, on and off. She cannot see the cross. Her mouth feels dry and small.

Tom calls “Ellen? Where are you? They're gone.”

He listens, then walks to the back door and goes inside. She can see the light in the kitchen go dark.

Tom comes out again, in an hour or so, but Ellen has moved now; she kneels in a small clearing in the dense woods just beyond the driveway. His voice comes to her faintly, like staticked messages.

She tenses, slows her breath. When she is sure he has gone in, she edges quietly around the border shrubbery to the back porch. She finds

the scotch where she left it, on a table there, and takes the bottle with her to the field.

The winking light seems to change its rhythm, "Yes, no, no, yes."
"Maybe, maybe, maybe," Ellen whispers.

She wishes for rain.

The moon is high overhead when Ellen leaves the yard.

Tom is sleeping in his jeans, on top of the quilt.

Silently Ellen gathers kindling and a few small logs from the woodpile on the back porch. She lays the fire carefully, constructing a steep tepee of twigs and branches, reserving the heavier wood.

The fire catches at once; the kindling is so dry it is dusty. When the flames deepen and steady, Ellen takes off her shirt and jeans and lies down on the flowered rug, parallel to the fire. For a long time she watches the colors play. She has finished the scotch and outside a mourning dove begins its call.

When the sun rises, the fire will be a cold blue wedge, supported by uncertain golds. Ellen's eyes will still reflect its rhythms and though the chill will have obviated its warmth, she will not restore it.

She will lie there, eyes open, hands at her sides, until the fire is altogether dead and sunlight has sectioned the living room into areas of light and shade.

She will lie there, perhaps, until Tom wakes and finds her.

Or, perhaps, she will rise before, when the first battery of birds has shattered the stillness and all of the remnants of night have scattered.