

The Orchard

By

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The light seeping in around the shades told Julie that the sun had already climbed well beyond the horizon. Tom's side of the bed was empty, again. At least he had slept in their bed last night. Most mornings lately, she found him asleep in his recliner, his thumb still between the pages of the book he was reading the night before. But last night she heard him slip between the sheets. With her back to him, she inhaled the faint scent of his aftershave - a smell she used to associate with sex. Part of her wanted to roll over and touch him, to see if there would be any response from this shell of a man sharing this house with her. She stayed where she was, staring at the wall, as Tom's breath evened out.

Julie never slept this late on a Saturday. Normally she was up bustling around, crossing things off her to-do list. But lately the tension between her and Tom was taking its toll on her emotions, bringing her body to the brink of exhaustion. Three days ago, the thought materialized for the first time: *I might need to leave him.*

She pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt before heading downstairs, where she found Tom staring out the back patio door. Autumn sun highlighted the shades of red in his hair and emphasized the gray in his scraggly beard; he hadn't cared enough to shave lately.

"Let's go today," he said, simply.

Julie's heart turned over, surprised by this request. Her desire to go to the orchard had been met with resistance for many weeks. She didn't hesitate. "You grab Anna and I'll get my boots." Julie also found a basket for the apples.

Tom disappeared into the living room, quickly returning with their daughter in his arms. Julie followed him out the back door and down the path, leaves crunching

beneath their feet. She stole glances at his profile, looking for an explanation. Partway up the second hill, Julie could feel the strain in her legs. Tom was breathing harder next to her. "Would you like me to carry her now?"

Tom shook his head and kept moving forward. He reached up with one hand and plucked a large honeycrisp, placing it gently in the basket. Julie did the same, enjoying the weight of the basket. "Applesauce will taste good," she ventured. She loved making homemade applesauce for Anna when she was a baby. Using wholesome ingredients picked from her parent's orchard made her feel like a good mom.

"I was hoping for pie," Tom countered.

Julie shrugged off his confrontational tone, and focused on their real reason for being here. "We should probably stop in and check on my folks while we're here. I haven't talked to them since last Tuesday."

Tom nodded as he approached the bench on which they had shared their first kiss. He sat down slowly, like a man thrice his age. Julie joined him, separated only by Anna in between them. He began wringing his hands, playing with his wedding band. The breeze picked up Julie's long hair and tangled it about her face. She tucked it behind her ear, waiting to see if Tom would say anything. He looked up to the sky, squinting and blowing out a huge breath. He turned toward Julie. "Will you do it?"

Julie nodded simply. The moment she had desired, dreaded, and needed was finally here. Wordlessly, she lifted the cover off the urn. She carefully picked it up and walked a few steps before tipping it over, little by little. Her daughter spilled out, the

flaky pieces of ash dancing in the breeze before finding a resting place amongst the blades of grass.

Julie turned around, saw Tom's clenched hands. Like a peony blossom unable to bear its own weight, Tom's head hung down. She placed the empty urn to the side and sat next to him. Tom's shoulders heaved as the first sob of his bottled up grief shook through his body; a strangled sound escaped from his throat. He lifted his head and looked at Julie. Really looked at her. Tears pooled in his icy blue eyes - eyes that held a clarity and intensity that Julie hadn't seen in 16 months. Not since the accident. Like a shade being pulled open on the window of an abandoned house, she was finally allowed to see inside. The pain was as visible as the ripe apples hanging from nearby branches. He offered it up to her.

Though she was so much smaller than him, Julie reached her arms around his strong shoulders, his firm torso. She held him as the immense waves of his grief threatened to drown them both. Her fingers dug into his flesh, desperately hoping to extract some of his burden - to absorb it, bear it for him. Tom moaned repeated apologies. Julie rested her cheek on his soft hair, whispering reassurances, not unlike she had in the middle of the night with Anna six years ago. "Shhh, shhh, it's okay, baby. I'm right here."

When it was time, Julie cradled the empty urn in one hand and held her husband's hand with the other. They made their way toward the farmhouse. Julie anticipated the smell of cinnamon rolls, a regular Saturday morning treat in her mother's kitchen.

“Remember how Anna would always lick the frosting off her cinnamon roll?” Julie asked hesitantly. “Then she’d give the rest to you and ask for another?”

“And I’d always say thank you, Anna Banana,” remembered Tom, his voice thick with emotion.

Julie watched Tom climb the steps to the back door. “One foot in front of the other,” Julie thought. Just as he had been doing for so many months. Julie hung back, raising her face to the heavens, enjoying one last moment of the sun’s warm rays. The warmth radiated through her chest with a swelling sensation that felt an awful lot like hope.