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SHELL

By Lindsey Appell

Autumn came when Elle's windows steamed up and her kitchen began to reek of vinegar. Autumn came sometimes in August, sometimes not until November. The year Robert turned twenty-four autumn came on September 19, four years to the day since Missy was killed.

"I'm guessing your brother is out?" Robert asked, standing in the doorway, looking at the frame's ancient paint.

"Rob-Rob-Robbie-Robert!" Elle said, turning toward him with a jump. The long childhood nickname flowed from her lips like the hot vapor that hovered in the entryway. "I didn't know you were going to be in town! Of course Tim's out, what do you think? Hey, while you wait, you can make yourself useful and shell some peas."

Elle hunched over the stove, clutching her canning tongs. She smiled and her face was blotched and puffy. From heat or crying, Robert didn't know, but he tried not to wonder about those sorts of things. Not with Elle, anyway. Never with Elle.

"Smells like something died in here," Robert said, regretting his words immediately. Elle appeared unaffected. Robert sighed and wrinkled his nose at the room's pungent odor as he slid his thumbnail into a pulpy peapod. The soft crunching sound, once so satisfying in his childhood, made Robert cringe. He slid four peas into an empty ceramic bowl.

Elle laughed and turned to the table, straightening her lacy kerchief over her tangled hair. "We've been canning every fall since we were kids and now you start complaining about the smell?" Robert stared at the peas and smirked.

"I was always too scared of your mom to say anything," he said.

"Ah, well she'll be back tomorrow, don't you worry. She can start scaring you again."

Robert said nothing and continued to shell. He thought about Mrs. Kostas and wished Tim would hurry up and get back from wherever the hell he was. Elle stood by the table, still, as if waiting. Robert heard her suck in her breath, prepared to speak. Her shoulders drooped. She sat down at the table and began to shell. Terrible sappy music buzzed under static from the radio. Crack crunch clatter, the peas collected in the bowl and the radio hissed. Hiss hiss "...kiss me..."

hiss "...miss...miss...miss me" hiss hiss miss missy missy Missy...

"You cut your hair again," Elle said, suddenly sitting up straight. Robert shrugged and stood up to shut off the radio. "Thank you. I hate that station."

Robert dropped back into his chair. "It's hot," he said.

"Oh, but you used to wear it long all through the summer when you were little," Elle said, brushing her hand through his short black bristles. Robert shuddered, hoped Elle hadn't noticed. Three more pods left. Elle placed her hands, one on top of the other, in front of her on the table. Robert thought she looked like a 50's housewife except for the nails with the chipped red polish, chewed all bloody down to the quick. Plus she was never married and only had the one kid, an early college mishap. Mrs. Kostas didn't approve of that until Missy was actually born. Then the world made sense again—Mrs. Kostas became Granny Kostas. She got to be Granny Kostas for five years.

Gravel crunched and Curry barked. The chain-link fence clanged where he scratched his paws against it in excitement.

"Shut your yapper-hole, you fat little turd," Tim shouted. The screen door swung open. "Whooey, sis, what kind of poison you brewing up in here?"

Elle silently slid her finger along the inside of the last pea pod. Robert looked up.

"Well, look who it is! Robbie! You come home for the celebration?"

"Celebration?" Robert asked.

"Yeah! Hell yeah! My new job, didn't I tell you about it? Well, come on, grab a beer and I will," Tim said, motioning toward the porch.

Robert followed, not looking back at Elle. She could have been cleaning up the empty peapods, she could have been crying. Robert didn't know and he tried not to wonder. He couldn't.

"You remember the old man's brewery, the one he delivered for all those years?" Tim asked.

When he was alive, Mr. Kostas drank a six pack of beer every night before bed. The beer, quality lager supplied by the Red Lodge brewery for which he worked, earned Mr. Kostas an esteemed place among Tim's friends, though he never actively supplied them.

Robert glanced down at the lager in his hand. "The one you stole all that beer from, yeah?" Tim laughed and pushed a whining Curry away with his foot. Robert lifted the obese dachshund onto his lap and scratched his ears.

“You didn’t mind back when you were drinking it,” Tim said. Robert shook his head. He thought he heard muffled sobs coming from the kitchen.

According to Tim, the brewery never found out about his theft. Mr. Kostas, who had gone to great pains to get the job for Tim, had fired him but never reported the crime. “Anyways, I got my old job back. You know what this means?”

The kitchen radio blared in answer. Curry yapped and launched from Robert’s lap. “How does he not snap those little legs doing that?” Robert said.

“You even listening?” Tim asked. He shouted a string of slurred obscenities and Curry retreated to his dog house, tail between legs.

“Yeah, congrats. Look, I’m only in town for a couple a days. I just came by to say hi, you know, check on...everyone,” Robert said.

“Well hell! Come on down to Stockman’s tonight. Play some pool. Come on, how long’s it been since we partied together?”

Robert looked back through the screen door. Elle still sat at the table with her back to the outside. She shuddered visibly.

“All right. Just tonight, though,” Robert said, turning back to Tim.

Robert entered through the old north-facing door, next to which stood a short, fake spruce, permanently lit with Christmas decorations. The wood paneling above the stone wainscoting was covered in hundreds of brands, all burned black into its surface, emanating 50 years’ worth of cigarette smoke, absorbed into its wooden pores. Tim was already at the bar, chatting up a waitress who looked to be just out of high school.

“Hey, Bobby boy, you made it! Jess, get us a pitcher of whatever shit we had the last time we got drunk together.”

The girl smiled shyly and bent to retrieve a clean pitcher from beneath the rows of bottles. Tim slapped Robert on the shoulder and ushered him to a nearby table. He smelled like hurried shots of cheap whiskey and he burped loudly as he sat down.

“How’s life been treating you, Rob? You still working for that garage up in Forsyth? You got a girl?” Tim grinned at Jess as she placed a pitcher of beer on the table. She brushed her hands across her denim skirt and shuffled to the back room where people who ordered food sat with their families. Laughter and arguments carried over the noise of poker machines and clanking glasses.

“Same old,” Robert said, pouring himself a glass of the pale alcohol Tim seemed so fond of. Tim shook his head.

“Man, you really need to get laid.”

“What?” Robert drank his beer and winced.

“It’s written all over your face, dude. It says, ‘I need pussy.’”

Tim laughed and halfway slid off his stool.

“You can’t even see straight, man. You don’t know anything,” Robert said, forcing a laugh.

“Shit, man. If you want good head, you should try out Cali, the other waitress, she’ll go after anything with a dick,” Tim said, gesturing toward the bar. The bad beer went sour in Robert’s stomach. Tim droned on, and Robert allowed his mind to walk about the cluttered room. The pool table in the corner was surrounded by a large group of underage hipsters who no doubt wished there was more to do on a Saturday night in September. Across from them sat a trio of middle aged women, sipping bottles of lager. One of the women wore a deep mauve shawl on her shoulders and long, beaded earrings. She laughed at something the other women had said and Robert jumped slightly.

“Hey,” he said, interrupting Tim’s monologue. “You see that woman over there, with the crazy earrings? Recognize her?”

“Naw, man—she’s old! You want something fresh,” Tim slurred.

“No, shut up. I mean, isn’t that Liza? What’s she doing back in town?” Tim stared blankly for a moment. Then recognition slithered across his features.

“The crazy babysitter?” Tim asked.

That was one way of remembering her, Robert thought.

Liza “Moonshadow” Livingston used to rent the apartment above Milo’s Grocery store and she had been Elle’s favorite person. Robert’s grandparents, based on a glowing recommendation by Mrs. Kostas, had hired her as a babysitter on numerous occasions. Even when they didn’t need babysitting, however, Elle and Robert continued to stop by her home for various afterschool diversions. Tim, of course, avoided any contact with the woman that was not absolutely necessary. When invited to visit with them, he would shake his head violently and say, “She’s weird.”

Liza was the only midwife in Estivage, though a good deal more babies were delivered at the tiny community hospital than by her enchanted hands. Enchanted, she insisted, for she had met a Higher Being while clambering over rockslides along the edge of Glacier Lake in the Beartooth Mountains. Until that moment she had merely been

a spinster X-ray technician with a passing interest in the occult.

“Moonshadow,” she called me,” Liza would whisper over tea and Oreos. “I knew it was my True Name. I knew then I had to turn toward my True Self, my True Purpose: bringing life into the world!”

The children would sit transfixed, and Robert would picture the encounter in his mind. Sometimes the Higher Being appeared in the form of a mighty cow moose suckling a calf, sometimes a ghostly shaman wrapped in bearskin—Liza never divulged the details of its appearance. She only asserted that it was “otherworldly.” At the end of their visits the children would always beg Liza to read the Tarot cards for them—something she refused for a long time.

“What would your parents think, good church-goers? I wouldn’t want them to accuse me of teaching their children witchcraft,” she would insist.

“My parents aren’t religious,” Robert would say. Liza would only smile.

“When you’re older.”

She made good on her promise, though long after Robert and Elle had stopped believing in her “Higher Being.” Robert was fifteen. Elle was graduating from high school.

“I have a present for you,” Liza said, creeping up to the picnic table with a huge smile and a dark velvet bag. Elle gave Robert a knowing smile. Robert felt his face flush and fingers go numb.

Liza pulled out her cards and began to shuffle.

“I promised you I’d read for you when you were older,” she said. She spread the cards out on the table before Elle. Robert didn’t understand most of what Liza rambled on about, but the last part of her prediction remained embedded in his memory.

“I will deliver your first child! Isn’t that exciting?” Elle smiled politely.

“But, no. Huh, this doesn’t make sense. Two thresholds, here and back...”

“What?” Elle asked, amused.

“Well, it appears that I will be there at the beginning and at, well, at the end of your child’s life.”

Elle raised an eyebrow.

“Ah! But no matter. Surely I will be there in spirit, once she’s old and ready to cross over. And I, as the midwife who brought her in to the world, will help guide her out.”

“Her?”

“Well, surely. Someone like you could only give birth to a

beautiful baby girl!” said Liza, smiling broadly, as though proud of herself.

“Whatever you say,” said Elle, laughing. “Thanks for the reading, Liza.”

Liza was not there at the end. She had moved to Seattle by then. But she flew back for the funeral. She wore layers of silky black fabric with silver embroidery, and when she entered the church, she sighed deeply and laid a ring-covered hand on Robert’s arm.

“Such a tragedy. I never dreamed I had the power to predict such things,” she said to Robert, shaking her head.

Elle stood at the entrance of the church, pale and hollow-looking. She made a sudden, snake-like movement toward Liza, and slapped her once favorite person across the face. Liza’s lip was split open, and Mrs. Kostas attempted to apologize for her distraught daughter. Robert stared. Liza was still, then nodded, and left the church. She understood, Robert thought. Perhaps for the first time in her life, she really understood.

“Oh shit!” Tim said, slamming his hand onto the table and spilling his beer. “She’s the one Elle bitch-slapped at the funeral, isn’t she?” He laughed loudly at the memory. Robert felt a bolt of electric energy shoot through his brain.

“She’s not doing well, is she?” he asked sharply.

“What, Elle? Hell, she’s fine. A little crazy, like she always was, and Ma keeps saying she’s not ready to leave home yet. Ready if you ask me. At least I wouldn’t have to eat her cooking anymore.” Tim giggled and called Jess over to refill the pitcher. Robert was well aware that Tim thought of himself as a regular comedian, and that alcohol only intensified that particular delusion.

“Come on, man, what the hell is wrong with you? It’s the anniversary of Missy’s death and you’re acting like it’s New Year’s,” Robert said, pushing away a proffered beer.

“Huh? Whoah, whoah. Look, I know it’s not easy, okay? But we can’t just mope around for the rest of our lives. Elle’s gotta get over it.”

“Get over it? Jesus fucking Christ, she was her daughter!” Robert stood.

“Yeah, one she didn’t even want. She just got stupid and knocked up. If it were me I woulda—”

Blood and saliva splattered the skirt of a passing patron. The crunching of Tim’s jaw brought to Robert’s mind the sound of Elle’s crisp peas. Nausea followed anger closely, but the scuffle was brief. In

the aftermath, Robert could see Liza Moonshadow clutching her chest with her pale hands.

“Knock it off!” shrieked Cali. Robert tossed a few bills into the lap of a bleeding and half-conscious Tim. Cali, checking the face on the bills, promptly stuffed them into her pocket. She began to clean up the table as Robert left the bar.

The old house, the one he'd grown up in, was empty save for the refrigerator, an old TV and the four-poster bed his grandparents had slept in all their married lives. Sitting on the floor, Robert switched on the TV and stared at his swollen knuckles. Once his grandfather's estate was settled Robert could be rid of the town for good. The house smelled like mothballs and faded memories. A terrible talk show host interviewed a jilted lover who wept profusely for the studio audience. Robert had lost the remote, but he wasn't really watching anyway.

Elle had been afraid, at first, to tell her mother about the pregnancy. She came home for spring break that semester, though she was supposed to be in Seattle with friends. Robert had just hung up the phone after conspiring with Tim about a campfire and a keg when he saw Elle's anxious face peering in the kitchen window. The grandparents had gone to bed early, so Robert quietly slipped out the front door to meet her.

“Elle, ah, what are you doing here?”

She had looked at him with desperate eyes, shaking violently in the early spring chill.

“I...” she started, before choking on a sob. Robert felt a strange combination of embarrassment and deep sadness and could only think of how beautiful she looked even unshowered and tearful.

“I need a place to stay,” she said, finally.

Without asking for an explanation, Robert had given up his bed and rolled a sleeping bag out on the floor. Just as he was beginning to ignore Elle's close proximity and the sound of her breathing, she whispered, “I'm pregnant.”

He hadn't answered. He was too afraid. Afraid that underneath any attempts at comfort or sympathy the sickening and bizarre feelings of betrayal would leak through. He could only listen.

“I'm listening,” the talk show host said. Robert opened his eyes and remembered his throbbing hand.

Quiet steps on the porch and the sound of the tinny doorbell roused Robert from his trance. He rose stiffly and walked to the door. Elle stood outside, looking tired.

"I hear you got in a brawl," she said as Robert opened the door.

"Something like that," he murmured.

"Can I come in?" she asked, smiling. Robert moved to the side as Elle stepped onto the grey carpet. Her hair was damp—she had washed the vinegar smell away. In its place was the faint scent of soap and the peppermint lotion she religiously rubbed into her heels. "Wow. You sure have cleaned the place out. Are you really going to sell it?"

"Yeah."

"Huh."

They stood in the empty room, watching each other, for a long moment. Elle cleared her throat. "You, ah, got anything to drink?" she asked.

"Just tap water. I guess there's an old bottle of gin in the freezer."

"Gin," Elle said. Robert gave her a look but poured out two small Dixie cups of liquor. The gin immediately began to soak through the waxy paper. Elle sucked it down quickly and shook herself.

"Good," she said, shivering.

"It's terrible," Robert said, tossing the cups in the plastic bag he had hung on the door of the refrigerator for garbage.

"You're right. It's bad. Can I have another?"

"No."

Elle glared, then smiled, then laughed. "Okay, you're right. What did Tim do to piss you off, anyway? You used to be so patient with him."

"Nothing. Just got on my nerves, is all," Robert said, kicking the carpet. Dust scattered.

"Robbie, you don't punch people for no good reason. I know you." Her smile was beginning to falter.

"It's not a big deal, Elle."

"It's bigger than you're making it out to be. Come on, tell me," she said.

"Look, it's really not important," Robert said, not looking her in the eye.

"I'm not some fragile glass doll!" Elle said suddenly, color rushing to her cheeks. Angry tears filled her eyes.

"I don't think—"

"Dammit! I'm a grown woman! Not some sick little...little girl!" Her shivering increased.

"Elle?" She wasn't looking at him. She wasn't looking at

anything in particular. She stumbled and braced herself against the wall. Robert watched her, confused.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“For what? Why are you apologizing?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Elle. Elle!” Robert gently shook her shoulders and stepped back. Gradually she straightened up and seemed to focus.

“Robert?” she said.

“Yes, it’s me. What’s wrong?”

“Robert. Do you love me, Robert?”

There was no answering that question. Not with words.

“I...” Robert could only stammer.

Stepping forward, she gently positioned her head under his chin. She grasped the thin material of his T-shirt. His lungs turned to ice. The paralysis passed and Robert lowered his mouth to the top of her hair. Elle gasped as though realizing where she was. She gripped Robert’s arms and looked up, her face was the dark light of early morning.

As a child, Robert found his feelings often conflated with Elle’s to the point that they were indistinguishable. She was like an older sister, a model of all that was good and beautiful. When older boys began to notice the subtle curve of her thighs and the way her face flushed in the wind, Robert felt his desires at last diverge from hers—she would no longer be the map by which he chose his path. He could at last separate her happiness from his need to see her happy.

Surely this was what fulfillment felt like. Elle’s mouth tasted like juniper berries, bitter from the gin, but her breath was a Chinook. She ripped at her own clothing, vicious in her eagerness to be liberated from it. Robert stood at arm’s length, dizzy with shock. The numbness reached his fingertips as he traced the angles and curves—each new, yet familiar—that he knew only from the shadows of his dreams. Awe engulfed him as they fell together through years, exploring patterns of scars that connected them and pushed them apart. Elle answered Robert’s sighs of relief with the tiniest murmurs, each a shattering blow aimed at the hollow walls of the house.

No words. Not with Elle. They weren’t needed with Elle. Even the thin bed sheets were too much. They lay on top of the blankets with the window open. A strand of hair rested at the corner of Elle’s mouth and her dark eyebrows twitched and knotted while she dreamed. Robert listened to her breathing against the nothing in the air. The street light cast a pinkish glow on the room, and shadows

of moths flickered against the wallpaper until he slept, quietly and deeply.

The morning came, damp and cool, and Robert blinked his eyes in the faint light of the dawn. Elle's side of the bed was empty. The quilt curled and wrinkled where her legs had twisted in and out of its folds. Robert lay in silent wonderment and loneliness. The TV was still on, manic cartoons faintly playing in the living room. Robert cursed and rose to turn it off. The early morning light made the room appear somehow larger and more alive. Something about the house itself, Robert thought, felt different. Movement in the back yard caught his eye, and he went to the window.

It had rained. The brown patches that outnumbered the sections of overgrown grass were turned to mud. Water dripped from the elm leaves that framed the window.

Elle's toes were caked with mud and in her right hand she held a fistful of old dandelions. She sat with her legs stretched before her, naked and watching the sky. The sun, glowing copper, rose over her shoulders and tangled hair, burning her away into a silhouette—a spot of light at the back of Robert's eyes.