

November Is The Month Of Dying

by Aline Carriere

Two weeks after All Souls' Day, he trudges through the overgrown pasture behind the farmhouse, his head bent, intent on his footing, a shovel his walking stick. Nestled under his arm, the little white dog puffs labored breaths into the icy Vermont air and snuggles closer. The trees are still losing their leaves; they swing out from nearly naked limbs like suicides diving and floating, blanketing the yellow grass with drying corpses. Wild tracks weave a delicate pattern through a snowy veil, crunching under his weight. He stops, looks up and scans his surroundings, where his wandering has led him; searching for a suitable spot for a grave before the ground freezes. Surely forty acres is enough to hold a body no larger than a hare.

A twig snaps and he catches movement out of the corner of his eye. He spies a doe craning her neck as she pulls crab apples from gnarled branches. He sighs, feels the cool sweat beneath his heavy parka, and decides he'll need to take it off to dig, when he digs, even though it shouldn't take long. The sun rising low in the cloudless sky blinds him through the scanty trees. "Not here," he says, his words vanishing on the air. The doe bolts away. He adjusts his bundle and resumes his pilgrimage.

As he plods to the indeterminate resting place, memories niggle at him like the space left by a missing tooth. Blotting out the unbidden past, he concentrates on muscle and steady steps, but his mind shifts and the thoughts return unwittingly as though sensing an overriding need to again justify his mission. The seizures had struck without warning. At first he didn't believe it, didn't want to admit what was happening as he watched the small white body jerk and flail. Finally, he had picked her up and cradled her tight against his chest — the little thing, huffing and heaving and spitting like she

was rabid. When she quieted, he put her down and she limped around in circles disoriented and collapsed, her legs giving out. The dog was his daughter's. She'd wanted a little white dog with floppy ears and he had obliged, giving her the Maltese puppy for her ninth birthday. That had been twelve years ago. Now his daughter was off at college and he was left alone with the dog on her last legs; on no legs at all. He shakes his head, again vowing to be quick and humane, and pushes through the last of the young trees.

At the edge of the clearing flowing with battered down phragmites like waves on a gold sea, he pauses again and takes a deep breath; the chill air filling him with regret. "It's a nice place," he says to the dog, more to himself, as though she would have room to run and stretch. He plants the shovel in the earth and places the little dog on the ground, her body so small his hands encircle her torso, fingers touching. She wobbles then waddles, sniffing, exploring. She bumps into a sapling, barely rooted, and tumbles. Besides robbing her mind, the tumor had blinded her. She gets up. She always gets up. He can't fathom what keeps her going. Watching her, he recalls when his daughter found a tiny rabbit lying in their driveway, its hind leg crushed, bone exposed.

"Can't we do something?" she'd asked wide-eyed, pleading, at that age where she still expected her father to know everything, be able to do anything.

"We can make it comfortable," he'd said knowing the rabbit would be one of many failures that would replace his myths with disappointment. His heart aching more for himself than for his daughter or the rabbit, he'd gotten a box and blanket.

"Will it be all right?"

"There's nothing more we can do."

"There's nothing more I can do," he echoes to the dog. She stops at the sound of his voice and turns in his direction, her palsied face looking up with vacant eyes.

They had watched the young rabbit take its last breaths; eyes open, panting, sprinting as though to some finish line, then in the next moment it stopped. He'd found it difficult to take his next

breath as though with the rabbit's death he'd been reborn into a new, changed world.

"We're none of us good at dying." He crouches and picks up the little dog again, brings her up to his face, dangling, like a puppy. He looks at her, really looks at her and sees the little dog that's been underfoot for twelve years, always in the way. He'd always wanted her gone, until now. She seems to look back at him with trust, but he knows he's just projecting, anthropomorphizing. Dogs didn't think like that, did they?

Transfixed, he registers a distant rustling and a flash of color; his mind unable to make the connection until it's too late. The rifle report reverberates, amplified in the cold air, but the man feels the bullet pierce his chest before he even hears the sound; the shot signaling the start of hunting season for white tail deer. Stunned by the fall, the little dog shakes herself and hobbles beside the man's body until she collides with his outstretched hand.

