

One More Thing

by Gary Percesepe

The second thing Annie Riser did after receiving her diagnosis was to find a realtor in the Yellow Pages and put her house up for sale. It was a big house in the Connecticut suburbs with ugly casement windows that were difficult to clean, and Annie knew she wouldn't miss it. She understood that Ronald would disapprove but was ready to fight that battle too.

The first thing she did was book a flight to Colorado. It was mid-winter, and the western sunshine surprised her. In Denver she rented an all wheel drive vehicle and drove to Ouray. Her husband had died twenty years before when he got caught in a spectacular avalanche while skiing in the back country near Telluride and Annie had never been to Telluride or to Colorado. Annie chose Ouray for the big mineral springs pool, and for its proximity to the backcountry where Ronald, Sr. had met his death.

Now Annie stretches her body in the hottest section of the pool and watches the passing traffic, people who seem comically white. Steam rises from the hot water and hovers over the pool as over a tea cup, and to Annie, staring at her scissoring legs, it feels as if she is living in a cloud. But when she raises her head to see the spectacular red cliffs, and the mountains that ring the pool, bathed in late afternoon light, she sees a family of deer picking their way through the foot high snow just beyond the protective railing of the pool. The deer come at the same time each afternoon. Annie wonders where they go each night.

Her cell phone rings. Annie picks up the phone, sees who is calling, then lets the phone go to voicemail. Scrolling through the menu, she selects silent.

Annie lies in the water with her feet braced at the bottom of the pool and her arms behind her head. She pulls her upper body into a series of crunches. She doesn't feel sick. Neither had Rose at Stage 3, when both women had felt free to speak of hope. But Annie

understands what is coming, what cannot be stopped, and that the third thing she did will set things in motion.

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Annie is 72. She lost her youngest child three years ago to the same ravenous form of ovarian cancer. Rose struggled but succumbed at last upstairs in the rambling Connecticut house, in her girlhood bedroom. Divorced and childless, Rose had wanted to go home to her mother's house to die. Together they had made the hospice arrangements.

An enormous man enters the hot water section. His big belly overhangs his fashionable trunks. He wears a beige hat with ear flaps that reminds Annie of Lawrence of Arabia. The fat man nods at Annie and collapses into the hot water like a descending hippo, one leg at a time, his enormous head and pink nostrils disappearing into the mist.

Annie glances at her phone. It lights with a silent call. She sighs and places the cold screen to her wet ear.

"Mom, what the fuck! You put the house up for sale? Why didn't you talk to me? Where the hell are you, anyway?"

"Are you at the house now, Ronald?"

"Mom, you understand that I am a realtor, right? You do understand that, correct? What'd you do, pick this idiot out of the phone book? What were you thinking? He couldn't even get his sign into the ground straight. Where the hell *are* you, mother?"

Annie snaps the phone shut. The third thing she had done after getting her diagnosis was to call an auction service. She gave orders to set all her belongings on the snowy lawn of her house and to accept the highest bid. Proceeds will go to the Greenwich Ovarian Cancer Fund in Rose's name.

Annie looks at the dying light of Ouray, the last bit of sunshine on the highest peak, how many miles away? How cold would it get on that peak tonight, Annie wonders, in the harsh Colorado winter. How odd it was, to be warm in the cold, lying in the mineral springs pool. Contradictions. Like Rose, healthy and strong and dying, painlessly. Bit by bit our life slips away, Annie thinks. Better to go out strong

than to fade molecule by poisoned molecule, to endure the body's cruel betrayal, or a son's disregard for his mother's wishes, his suspicion of her politics, his criticism of hospice care, his rich mirthless life in a diseased community of the living.

The phone rings again. As compassionately as she can manage she explains things to her remaining child. Ronnie, she says, about tomorrow. One more thing, she says, and pauses. She lays it out, what is coming, what cannot be stopped.

Annie places the phone in her bag. Pulling herself up by the rails she steps out of the pool, her swim suit dripping water. Looking at the darkening mountains, she climbs over the protective railing. She places her bare feet carefully in the deer tracks. She walks out into the Colorado night.

