

Cousin (from The New Yorker)

by Rick Rofihe

Cousin, you're a rough diamond—you're diamond-hard, hard to follow. Even for me it's not easy to keep up. Sometimes you go slow, so you don't lose me completely; sometimes when I act like I almost want to get lost, you drop back to get me; and even though you're always letting me know, again and again, that I'm closest to you, and most like you—Cousin, even with all that, I barely understated what you say and do.

How did it go last night when I came over to your house and wanted to watch the news on TV? You said, "Maybe not tonight. Come on, I'll show you a good place to watch the sun set." So we got in my car and I drove where you told me, up one paved road, and one dirt one, and then, because my car was too low to get through, we got out and walked up an old logging road until we came to a clearing where there was a stand of trees, mostly birch.

"Now, Cousin," you said. "I heard somewhere that on the night of the full moon in July the birch tress give up their bark. It's just like the tides." You talked about how it all comes together—the time of the year, the pull of the moon, the warmth in the air, the wet in the trees—and said that when the moon was high, if I just touched the bark it would fall into my hands. And then you said, "I'd stay here myself, Cousin, but my son wants something to drive tonight—and you know those trucks. I'd give him my car, but the wife should have that. So you stay here, and then he can use your car."

"You want me to stay here all night?" I said.

"Besides, my wife wouldn't sleep well if I were out in the woods," you said. "You, Cousin, you're perfect for this. You, no one will miss."

Cousin, you're like life, you are *rough*. Then, as you walked away, though all I could think of was your son with my car, what I yelled after you was "I'm supposed to spend the night out here doing that? And how can removing the bark be good for the trees?"

And you, still walking, said, "It is not so much that you *remove* as . . ."

And then I couldn't tell what you said, so I called out, "What did you say?" And I guess you said it again, but you were farther away, so I still couldn't make out that last word.

You must have stopped and turned around long enough to shout back one more thing, because I did hear you say, "And not now. You have to wait for the moon."

Six trucks, Cousin, and not one of them working right. The Chev with no muffler. The red Dodge that won't start and the blue one that won't stop. The Japanese thing you can see through. The Ford—all right I found you that Ford, but you agreed, so we both can be wrong on old Fords. And that jeep-style heap—good engine, but not much of a transmission left to get power to the wheels, so, because the tires were good, we put the wheels on the Chev.

Cousin, you want what you want from me and you know how to get it. Like last night, you must have known that hearing about tides in the trees would be something I'd like. But that other time, when I really wanted something from you—I'm not saying I didn't get it, but, since you have your own ways, you weren't easy to follow.

"Just because you want to talk about her doesn't mean we're going to," you said. And I would have left it at that, for a while, anyway, but then you said, "We could go see her stone." Somehow I'd never seen it. It was a hundred miles inland and I'd always stayed around home whenever anyone else went. So we got in one of the trucks that were working then, but at the end of the driveway did you turn left to go inland? You didn't say anything, and did I say one word as you turned right to drive the other way, toward the shore? First down a paved road, then a dirt one, and then, where I was sure

that all the roads ended, we took an old hauling road the fishermen used.

When we stopped and got out, I noticed that, although there wasn't much of a beach, there were some big, sharp, dark rocks at the high-water mark that sheltered some larger, light, rounded, smooth ones on the land. Even with a storm out at sea those sharp rocks would take all the force of the waves that came in, and keep the smooth ones mostly dry. I saw right away that, if you wanted to, you could lean into those smooth rocks, or up against them, and be held half standing as you slept in the sun. Those smooth rocks there, surrounded by sparse grass growing up through the sand, were the ones you walked toward and around, Cousin, looking at each of them until one stopped you. You ran your hand over it and said, "Here it is. This is it. This is the one." Then you showed me a heart shape that had been carved into it, with your sister's initials and someone else's and the year inside.

"O.k., Cousin, I get it," I said. "A rock is a stone. But that year is before my time and kind of early in yours—whose initials are those with hers?"

"Just some local guy she was seeing."

"So they'd come here, like on picnics?"

"Cousin. Cousin. They'd come here at night."

And then, as I looked at that large smooth rock and its angle, I was wondering whether she'd been heaven or earth, her back against the sky or the rock; either way, it must have been nice. Maybe there'd been the spray from the waves hitting those sheltering rocks, and the heat of the day must have been deep underfoot in the sand. Pretty, on a clear night with the stars and the moon; even if the fog rolled in, it still would be nice.

Heaven or earth, Cousin? And the guy? Anyway, he was there. And since she was there, it must have been, had to be, nice.

Cousin, thank you for taking me there. I don't think I said anything then. I just walked around that rock and listened while you talked about her, talked and talked as you sat on that sparse grass that grew in the sand.

As you said then, she wouldn't have adopted those two kids if she'd expected to die. First the girl, then a few years later the boy. I wonder if she was planning to take another one, or two, or more and more. Right up to when it happened, everyone said wasn't it something how happy she was, and how good she was at raising those kids. Because whatever it is in people that wants to shelter and care for, in her it was something those surgeons could never cut out.

She always looked so good on the outside, and while we all knew, even me, that she wasn't all right inside, we always thought that between her husband and those kids and the doctors, between all those hands outside and inside, she'd find a way to steal another year every year.

It wasn't so common then, Cousin, but with the inside taking the outside like that, cremation made sense. As she'd said once, if her body was going to give her so much trouble, it was the only way to give it some back, to someday get rid of it for good. And they say that from the time you returned until the burial, and even though her husband was also around, you kept that urn with her ashes with you; you wouldn't let it out of your sight.

You and her husband had flown back with the two kids and the urn. And, first thing, you'd decided to go and get the kids haircuts and one for yourself. In the barbershop, you lifted the boy up into one of the big green waiting chairs. You put him all the way back into it, and his feet hardly came over the seat. The girl climbed into the next chair, but even though she sat on the edge as she swung her legs, the leather soles of her blue-and-white oxfords barely scraped the floor.

You put the urn up on a shelf, next to the bottle of hair tonic. Now, not everyone knew yet—you'd just got home, and the obituary wouldn't appear until the next day. The barber looks at the kids and

says to you, "Sister in town?" And you nodded at the urn and said low, right into his ear so the kids couldn't hear, "She's in the jar." The guy nearly fainted! But I know that the joke was not really on him but was one just for her. And she would have laughed, Cousin—she loved to laugh. And, young as I'd been, I could make her laugh—do you like to laugh, Cousin? Me too, I like to laugh.

Now, the boy, no, there's no way he'd remember anything of her, just as he'd remember nothing of his first mother. But the girl—do you think there are things she might recall? Even one thing, or a little bit of one thing?

And then there's the husband. It's true that it was hard for us when they first got married, because it meant her moving away. But we'd liked him because he was special to her. Cousin, the day long after, when I went to see him, I think he was looking for something of her in me. And I think I was a disappointment to him. Not because there wasn't anything of her but because there was, and, of course, it could only be some little thing.

Yes, he's remarried and all, and has more family. Still, it must not be easy for him, being the only one around there who really knew her. Because to know something people around you don't know can put you outside of them. And then you can't get back in.

It wasn't so bad walking down that logging road this morning. And the minute I got to the dirt road a guy on his way to work gave me a ride into town. He went out of his way and drove me right to your house. And I saw your son there, washing my car. He said to go on inside, that his mother had left me some coffee. Anyone miss me? Anyone come by looking for me? Any mail for me? Any calls?

Cousin, if somebody leaves you out all night in the woods, don't lie face up. Not if you're alone. There are only so many stars you can stand, and even with all of them you don't get enough light. Even with the full moon in July, there's just not enough light. So it's really a time to let gravity take you. Turn yourself over, and gravity makes it feel as if the earth presses back.

Cousin, I see you, and, rough or not, you are a diamond. I see you and see through you. And just as with the bark that fell into my hands last night, it's not that I want to remove. I want to receive. But do I ever get the urge to put my hands into something—like dough, or like clay? I never do, do I? And do you ever?

It was last night when I thought about it, Cousin, and now there's something I want to know. A hundred miles inland, where you didn't take me, where the stone with her full name and full years are, and where you finally had to let it go, what's buried there? What's in the jar? A fifty-fifty mix? Sand and ashes? Or is she, all of her, outside and inside, at the base of that rock near the beach? Where we went with one of the trucks. Where I saw you—I saw you!—dig your hands deep into warm sand.

