

Trees Knees

by Teresa Houle

Fog hangs in the branches like spider webs shining with morning dew while yellowed leaves twirl to the ground. The birds have been chirping for hours and the chill from the damp starts to lift as the sun paints the earth.

A young man pushes a stroller filled with a sleepy child. A young woman strides alongside them, her gait leisurely. They are the first to visit the park today. The trees loom, vigilant.

"Isn't it a beautiful morning?" Randall asks.

"Of course. I just can't believe I forgot the camera," Sandra says, adjusting her toque. She watches her husband steer the stroller. Her face is proud.

Large maples, firs, alders, and Garry oaks surround them while salal stretches out, making new ground. Large stumps still alive, covered in glistening mosses and ferns, sit at the feet of other towering giants.

"Tree Knees," Randall says.

"Excuse me?"

Sandra's attention switches to Jade as she stirs and whimpers for food.

"Here you go sweetie," she says, passing banana pieces into the girl's tiny, flapping hands.

Randall's eye twitches at the interruption, but Sandra doesn't notice his annoyance.

He continues, "The original owner of this property selectively cut trees that were growing right next to other trees. The root systems have fused and the chopped tree continues to live off the live tree."

"I've never heard of that before."

"Like a parasitic twin," he says.

"I was going to say...*like lovers*. Like us."

She smiles and leans in for a kiss, but his lips find her forehead instead.

The trail winds around a loop with a bridge overlooking a high cliff near its middle. From there they can see more mist-enchanted scenery, and they can hear the birds twittering in the otherwise tranquil park.

"Do you want to stop for breakfast here?" asks Randall.

"Okay," says Sandra, making sure the blanket around Jade is snug before she sits on her heels. "Nothing like fruit salad in the forest."

Randall pulls something from his pocket.

"Before I forget," he says, handing her an envelope. "I want you to read this on the drive home. Just keep it in your pocket so I don't forget to give it to you."

"Love letters?" She smiles. "How sweet. Why can't I read it now?"

She slides her finger along the edge of the envelope in a gesture to rip it open.

Randall shifts uncomfortably and says, "Please leave it for the time being. Just enjoy being in the park on this peaceful, beautiful morning."

She frowns and stuffs the envelope in her jacket pocket.

"I know our relationship has been a little rocky since Jade's birth," she says. "But this spur-of-the-moment breakfast in the park idea is just what we needed."

Then she smiles at him and stuffs a forkful of cut fruit into her mouth.

His lips flatten nervously as he examines his sneakers. It's a look that reminds Sandra of the day he worked up the courage to ask her to marry him.

Randall points out a used tissue and an empty beer can that sits at the edge of the bridge.

"Disgusting," he says.

Sandra walks to the guardrail and bends down, gingerly, to pick up the debris. Randall, silently following, takes a large rock from his pocket and strikes her in the side of the head. She groans and staggers. Her flailing hands, searching for safety, miss the guardrail. Randall kicks her knees, sending her headlong down the cliff.

He walks back to the stroller, which was mercifully turned opposite, and gives Jade more fruit. At first, her face is frozen with concern, but her trepidation quickly melts in the presence of her strong father. He pushes the stroller to the parking lot, straps the child into the backseat, and drives away.

When the police find Sandra's body, she is next to a beer can and used tissue. They notice something sticking out of her pocket and wait for the detective to retrieve it.

“Dear Randall,

I can't fight the demons anymore. Please take care of our girl and forgive me.

Love, Sandra”

The trees of the park creak in strained reticence.

