

## Cherry Tree

The weeping cherry in front of our house has bloomed its white blossoms, meaning spring has come. Early spring in Cambridge, which means rain and cold interspersed with days of warmth and sun. Unfortunately, after the first April days of sun, the cherry always blooms small white petals all over its hanging branches, a huge cloud of white in our yard, the most beautiful sight on our block for the year. And then in the next weeks the weather turns cold again. This happens every year, and I invariably wish the tree had waited to release its blossoms, to turn itself white with flowers, until after the winds and rain. If it bloomed in May, I reason, the petals would stay on its tentacles longer, instead of blowing onto the ground and sliding down the gutters in running streams of rain down the hill. But each year, the tree blossoms early, and I remind myself that Spring is here, even in the cold and the rain. For a few wonderful days, your house is surrounded by flowers.

“Don’t ever break your own heart,” my mother tells me. She sits across from me in a booth at the big Korean-sushi restaurant near her house, about a five-minute walk from my dad’s, the big house at the top of the hill, the one with the tree in the front yard. I’m living with him now, stay there while I look for a job. I have finished college, graduated with honors, moved to New York City to start a job, left it, lived on savings and worked on a novel, and moved home. In all truth, the house belongs to my stepmother, my father’s second wife, who lives with us as well. She bought it some years ago with her first husband, who has since gone crazy, sent himself to Northern Maine,

and is no longer around. But this is the house they raised their kids in, and now she lives there with another man, and *his* son—me.

“Are you listening?” my mother says. She is drunk on saki and beer, not something that happens often, but from time to time. When she gets this way, my mother tells stories. Tonight she will tell me about my father and how she left him, how she thought it was the right thing to do, had it all figured out. “I knew I could change and it would make my life better,” she’ll say. Perhaps we are both melancholy from the rain outside, the steady downpour that I can see making dime-sized stars in circles on the skylight just a few feet above my head, set against the still-light gray sky. Perhaps we have both had too much to drink, an event that has happened more than a few times since I have moved home.

“But you should never leave love,” she says.

“I know, Mom.”

“Whatever you’re thinking in your head is ideas. You lose love and it’s a part of you; all the other plans you had will change.” She shakes her head. “You know this,” she says, “Because you’re like me. You can feel it.”

“I know, Mom,” I say. I could tell her that I do know what she means, exactly, but she wouldn’t believe me; I could tell her the stories about how I’ve learned it for myself—that you let love go, you leave it, it’s like taking a piece of yourself away that doesn’t come back and while it’s gone it’s like you’re somebody else. I could tell her I know how when you’re alone it’s all different and nothing you wanted to do will work like you’d planned it; how you don’t want to do anything but sleep and wait for the hurt

to leave, but I don't. I don't tell her any of it that I know, now, after what happened with Sarah.

She shakes her head again and taps her saki shot glass against the table for me to fill it up again, which I do. I want to say something to her, something else to keep a conversation going, to keep her from telling me about my dad, but I've run out of relatives to ask after and things that have happened to tell.

The rain seems to be letting up outside and on the skylight. It means I won't get wetter walking home and that maybe I'll be able to excuse myself soon, get back to my room and my thoughts.

I want to tell her about my second year in college, the year that Amy started hanging around and I got to know her, the year I called Sarah one week before my birthday and told her to cancel her plane ticket, not to come for the weekend and visit, because I thought it was the right thing to do.

In Chicago I had three more years of college, on one hand, and a beautiful girl, Amy, who I kept finding myself alone with, whose arm touched my arm at the movies, and who once picked blades of grass off my elbow when we were laying on the grass at a poetry reading in the middle of the quad.

At home, in Boston, Sarah went to Emerson and called me every night. She didn't fear spending money on phone bills, or flying out to visit, just wanted us. And I loved her. She was beautiful, smart, and funny. My friends liked her and she liked my friends. I had my doubts whether we could stay together through three years of school with half the country between us, something else worried me about the fact she wasn't Jewish. Her family was so different from mine. A part of me doubted and a part of me

couldn't believe that a girl as beautiful as Amy existed in my life. When I told my friends that I had to give Amy the truth about Sarah, and tell her the line about "Let's be friends," they nodded, but they didn't know: they thought I could do it.

"We need to talk," I said to Sarah, on the phone.

"About plans for your birthday?"

"Partly about that," I said.

I told her because I could talk to her, tell her how I felt, and didn't realize that that was one part of love. Part of the fix of this whole thing, I understand now, is that the one you love is the one you can talk to, reason with, explain your conflicted feelings to. What I didn't know is that that talk can bring you closer, change how you can exist without that person, dig you into a well that doesn't go away in a few days or weeks, changes how you act around the rest of the people in your life and how much fun you are, how much people like you. By the time I got off the phone I had broken Sarah's heart and my own.

After that, I tried to duck Amy for a while. I still wanted to be with her, but I couldn't be around her when I was still thinking about Sarah. We didn't laugh together and for my birthday I had dinner with some other friends. That was how it would go, how it went and never really got fixed right. I kissed Amy a few times, hollow, hopeful kisses that were my way of expressing that I wanted to be with her, that I hoped she would still be with me when I became myself again, when my heart mended. But in the weeks that followed, the kisses became more hollow and then became stolen, something that I had to spring on Amy when she didn't expect it, a small thing without feeling that I held to as my last claim to what was only an idea: the thought that we could be together.

But I don't say any of this to my mother. She knows the same lesson, I gather, from what she went through with my dad. The tall, thin waitress in the white shirt leaves our bill at the edge of the table in a small leatherette case and my mom looks at it. She'll pay tonight, as she always does, whether I want to or not. She upends the small sake jug over my thimble-shot glass and dribbles out the rest of our bottle. It has gone cold some time ago, but I drink it, knocking back what's left in one gasp.

"I'm sorry," she says. "We could've ordered another bottle." My mother picks up the check and looks at it, slides a credit card into the small pocket that keeps it, lets half of it stick out of the case for the waitress to see we're ready to go.