

Memoir of a Deer Woman

by M. Rickert

Ms. Rickert's last contribution to our pages (in our December issue) left several readers wondering just who was the Christmas Witch. Her new tale might also raise a question or two about identity. But isn't that one of the things a memoir ought to do?

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Her husband comes home, stamps the snow from his shoes, kisses her, and asks how her day was.

“Our time together is short,” she says.

“What are you talking about?”

“I found a deer by the side of the road. It was stuck under the broken fence. Hit by a car. I called the rescue place but when the animal rescue man saw it, he said it had to be shot. The policeman shot it.”

He looks through the mail while she stands there, crying. When he realizes this, he hugs her. Already she feels the hard shapes forming at the top of her head. Later, she will tell him she has a headache.

He will hold her anyway. He will sleep with his mouth pressed against her neck. She will think of the noise the deer made, that horrible braying.

At midnight she wakes up. The sky is exploding with distant fireworks. From past experience she knows that if they stand and strain their necks, they can just barely see the veins of color over the treetops. It is mostly futile, and tonight neither of them rises. “Happy New Year,” he whispers.

“What do you think animals feel?” she says.

He mumbles something about Wally, their dog, who sleeps soundly at the foot of their bed.

“That deer was frightened. Today, I mean. It made the most horrible noise; did I tell you that? I never heard such a noise before. It was really mournful and horrible.”

The fireworks end in a flourish of tiny explosions. She knows what she should have done. She should not have waited for the policeman, who took four shots before he killed it. She knew that deer was dying, why did she pretend otherwise? She should have smothered it and put it out of its misery.

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New Year's morning is cold and crisp. Wally wakes them up with his big wet

tongue. Her husband takes him out to do his business. When they come back inside, she listens to the pleasant sounds of her husband talking in soft cooing words to Wally, his food dish being filled. Her husband comes back into the bedroom alone, carefully shutting the door behind him. She knows what that means. He crawls in beside her. He rubs his hands up and down her body. "Happy New Year," he says. She sinks into his desires until they become her own. Who knows how long they have? Maybe this is the last time. Later, he fries maple sausage and scrambles eggs, but she finds she cannot eat. He asks her if she feels all right. She shrugs. "My head hurts," she says. "Also my hands." He tells her to go to the doctor. She nods. Well, of course. But she does not tell him that she already knows what is happening.

She takes down the ornaments, wraps them in tissue paper, circles the tree, removing the lights. The branches brush her cheeks and lips and she nibbles on the bitter green. Her husband is outside, splitting kindling. For a while she stands at the window and watches. Wally lies on his bed in the living room. He does not like the loud noise of the axe. She raises her face to the ceiling. She feels trapped and the feeling rises inside her like bile. She brays. Wally slinks past her, into the kitchen. She brays again. It is both deeply disturbing and a relief.

When her husband comes in, carrying kindling, he'll ask her if she's all right. He'll say he thought he heard a strange noise. She'll shrug and say that she thought the tree was falling. He'll accept this as reasonable, forgetting that she is not the sort to scream at falling Christmas trees, forgetting that when they met she was at least partly wild. He drops the kindling into the box next to the wood-burning stove. "Come here, help me with the tree," she says. He holds the tree while she unscrews the stand. Dry sap snakes from the holes, she cannot help but think of it as blood.

They dump the tree in the forest behind the house. There is a whole graveyard of Christmas trees there. They walk back to the house together, crunching across the snow. A green truck is parked in the driveway. "I wonder who that is," he says. A tall man wearing camouflage clothes and a Crocodile Dundee hat steps out of the driver's side. He nods as they approach.

She knows just what her mother would have said about all of this. She would have said, "You are never going to be tame. You will regret trying. You will hurt others if you deny yourself."

"Hope I'm not disturbing you. I've got an owl that needs to be released. It was found not too far down the road. You know the Paterlys? They're in Florida now. I thought I could release it in your yard. You could keep an eye on it."

"This is Kevin," she tells her husband. "He came to help with the deer yesterday."

Her husband stares at her blankly.

"You know, the one I found? That had to be shot?"

“Can’t believe that guy couldn’t shoot between the eyes,” Kevin says, shaking his head.

“Oh. Right,” says her husband.

“Where’s the owl?”

“I was just passing by. I’ll come back tonight. If that’s all right?”

“Tonight?” her husband says.

She tells Kevin that it would be great if he came back later, with the owl. He doesn’t look at either of them. He nods at the snow, gets into the truck. They watch him back out of the driveway.

“He’s kind of strange,” her husband says.

She shrugs. Her bones ache, her head, her hands and her feet, and it takes a lot of effort for her to understand that her husband is not being mean, just human. They walk back to the house, holding hands. Who knows, she thinks, maybe this is the last time. Already by nightfall she is wearing mittens. She tells him her hands are cold. Again he tells her to go to the doctor. She tells him that she has an appointment the next morning. This is love, she reminds herself. She smiles at her husband while he turns the pages of his book.

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“Stage three,” the doctor says.

“There must be some mistake.”

“You can get a second opinion.”

“What are my options?”

“I say we hit this with everything we’ve got.”

“Are you sure that’s my report?”

“I know this comes as a shock, but I recommend that you address it quickly. The sooner the better.”

“Chemo and radiation?”

“Yes. And then chemo again.”

“The magic bullets.”

“You could think of it that way, but you might want to choose a different image. Something soothing.”

“Like what?”

“I have one patient who thinks of the treatment as flowers.”

“Flowers?”

“It soothes her.”

“What kind of flowers? Flowers that’ll cause my hair to fall out and make me throw up? What kind of flowers would do that?”

“This is your disease, and your body. You get to decide how you want to treat it.”

“But that’s just the thing, isn’t it, Doctor?”

“I’m sorry?”

“This isn’t my body anymore.”

“Why don’t you go home? Take the weekend to think about your options? Get a second opinion, if you’d like.”

She rises from the chair, stomps out of the office on her sore, hard feet. The waiting room is full of women. One of them looks up, her brown eyes beautiful in the soft pelt of her face. She nods slightly. She smells like salt.

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When her husband returns from work she is sitting at the kitchen table, waiting to tell him the news.

“Oh my God,” he says.

“It hardly hurts at all.”

“How long?” he asks.

“Nobody knows, but it seems to be happening sooner rather than later.”

He pounds the table with his fist, then reaches for her hand, though he recoils from the shape. “But you’re a woman.”

She is confused until she sees where he is looking. She touches the antlers’ downy stubs on the top of her head. “It’s rare, but females get them too. Nobody knows why. Kind of like men and nipples, I guess.”

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“I’m thinking of writing a memoir.”

His mouth drops open.

She shrugs. “I always did want to be a writer.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think I should start with the deer being shot, what do you think?”

“I think you need medicine, not writing.”

“You make it sound dirty.”

He shakes his head. He is crying and shaking his head and all of a sudden she realizes that he will never understand. Should she say so in her memoir? Should she write about all the places he never understood? Will he understand that she doesn't blame him?

“It isn't lonely,” she says.

“What?”

She hadn't meant to speak out loud. “I mean, okay, sometimes it is.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“There's a memoir-writing group that meets every Wednesday. I e-mailed Anita, the leader? I explained my situation and she was really nice about it. She said I could join them.”

“I don't see how this is going to help. You need medicine and doctors. We need to be proactive here.”

“Could you just be supportive? I really need your support right now.”

He looks at her with teary blue eyes that once, she thought, she would look at forever. He says, his voice husky, “Of course.”

She is sniffing, and he wipes her nose for her. She licks his hand.

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She continues to sleep with him, but in the morning he wakes up with deep scratch marks all over his body, no matter how thickly they wrap her hooves in layers of cloth and old socks and mittens. “They're like little razors,” he says. “And it's not just the edges, it's the entire bottom.”

She blinks her large brown eyes at him, but he doesn't notice because he is pulling a tick out of his elbow. That night she sleeps on the floor and Wally crawls into bed with her husband. He objects, of course, but in the end, they both sleep better, she, facing the window where she watches the white owl, hugely fat and round, perched on the bough of a tree, before she realizes it isn't the owl at all but the moon.

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Near the end she stops trying to drive; instead she runs to her memoir-writing

workshop. Her husband follows in the Volvo, thinking that he can prevent her being hit by a car, or shot. He waits in the driveway while she meets with the group.

Anita tries to make her comfortable, but lately she feels nervous coming all the way into the house. She lies in the doorway with only her nose and front hooves inside. Some of the others complain about the cold and the snow but Anita tells them to put on their coats. Sometimes, in the distance, they hear a mournful cry, which makes all of them shudder. There have been rumors of coyotes in the neighborhood.

Even though they meet at Anita's house, she herself is having a terrible time with her memoir. It sounds self-pitying, whiny, and dull. She knows this; she just doesn't know what to do about it, that's why she started the workshop in the first place. The critiquers mean well, but frankly, they are all self-pitying whiners themselves. Somewhere along the way, the meetings have taken on the tone of group therapy rather than a writing workshop. Yet, there is something, some emotion they all seem to circle but never successfully describe about the pain of their lives that, Anita feels certain, just might be the point.

After the critique, Anita brings out cakes, cookies, coffee, tea, and, incredibly, a salt lick. Contrary to their reputation, and the evidence of the stories told in this room, people can be good.

The deer woman hasn't shared what she's written yet. She's not sure the group will understand. How can anyone understand what is happening to her? And besides, it is all happening so fast. No one even realizes when she attends her last meeting that she won't be coming back, though later, they all agree that she seemed different somehow.

She is standing at the window, watching the yard below. Six deer wait there, staring up at her. He weeps and begs her not to go. Why does he do this, she wonders, why does he spend their last moments together weeping? He begs her not to go, as though she had some say in the matter. She does not answer. The world shatters all around her, but she is not cut. He shouts. She crashes to the ground, in a flurry of snow and hooves. He stands at the window, his mouth wide open. He does not mean to hurt her, but she can feel his breath pulling her back. She runs into the forest with the others, a pounding of hooves and clouds of snow. They do not stop running until they are deep into the night, and she can no longer hear her husband shouting.

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After she is gone, he looks through her basket of knitting, projects started and unfinished from the winter, before her hands turned into hooves: a long thin strand of purple, which he assumes is a scarf; a deep green square, which he thinks might be the beginning of a sweater for him; and a soft gray wasp nest, that's what it looks like, knit from the strands of her hair. Underneath all this he finds a simple, spiral-bound notebook. He sits on the floor and reads what she wrote, until the

words sputter and waver and finally end, then he walks up the stairs to the attic, where he thrusts aside boxes of books, and dolls, cups, and papers, before finally opening the box labeled “writing supplies.” There he finds the cape, neatly folded beneath deerskin boots, a few blades of brown grass stuck to them. The cape fits fine, of course, but the boots are too tight. He takes them downstairs and splits the seams with the paring knife, laces them on with rope. When he is finished, he makes a strange sight, his chest hair gray against the winter white skin, the cape draped over his narrow shoulders and down the skein of his arms to his blue jeans, which are tied at the calves, laced over the deerskin, his feet bulging out of the sides, like a child suddenly grown to giant proportions. He runs into the forest, calling her name. Wally, the dog, runs beside him.

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There are sightings. An old lady, putting seed into the bird feeder, sees him one morning, a glint of white cape, tight muscles, a wild look in his eyes. Two children, standing right beside their father waiting for the bus, scream and point. An entire group of hunters, who say they tracked him and might have gotten a shot. And an artist, standing in the meadow, but artists are always reporting strange sightings and can't be relied upon. What is certain is that wherever the strange man is sighted, words are found. The old lady finds several tiny slips of paper in a bird nest in her backyard and when one falls to the ground she sees that it is a neat cut-out of the word, “Always,” she can't fathom what it might mean, but considers it for the rest of her life, until one afternoon in early autumn she lies dying on her kitchen floor, no trauma beyond the business of a stopped heart, and she sees the word before her face, as though it floated there, a missive from heaven, and she is filled with an understanding of the infinite, and how strange, that this simple word becomes, in that final moment, luminescent; when the father searches the bushes where the children insist the wild man hides, he finds nothing but scraps of paper, tiny pieces, which he almost dismisses, until he realizes that each one contains a word. Frightened of leaving the children too long with madmen about, he scoops some words up and returns to the bus stop, listening to the children's excited chatter but not really hearing anything they say, because the words drag his pocket down like stones, and he can't believe how eager he is to go to work, shut the door to his office and piece together the meaning. He is disappointed at what he finds, “breath,” “fingers,” and “memory,” amongst several versions of “her.” It is nonsense, but he cannot forget the words, and at the strangest times catches himself thinking, “Her breath, her fingers, her memory” as though he were a man in love; the hunters follow the trail of words, but only the youngest among them picks up and pockets one torn paper, which is immediately forgotten, thrown in the wash and destroyed; the artist finds a neat little pile, as though the wild creature ate words like sunflower seeds and left these scraps behind. She ties each word to colored string and hangs them as a mobile. Sometimes, when the air is just right and the words spin gently, she believes she understands them, that they are not simple nonsense; but on other days she knows that meaning is something humans apply to random acts in order to cope with the randomness of death.

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Anita, from the memoir-writing group, goes to the house, uninvited. She doesn't know what motivates her. The woman wrote nothing the whole time she'd attended, had offered no suggestions during the critique; in fact, Anita began to suspect that her main motivation for coming had been the salt lick. But for some reason, Anita felt invested in the woman's unknown story, and feels she must find out what has become of her.

What she finds is a small house in the woods, by all appearances empty. She rings the doorbell and is surprised to hear a dog inside, barking. She notices deer tracks come right up to the porch, circling a hemlock bush. The door opens and a strange man stands there, dressed in torn boots, dirty jeans, and a cape. Anita has heard rumors of the wild man and doesn't know what to say, she manages only two words, "Memoir" and "writing," before he grabs her wrist. "Gone," he says, "gone." They stand there for a while, looking at each other. She is a bit frightened, of course, but she also feels pity for this man, obviously mad with grief. "Words?" he says. She stares at him, and he repeats himself, ("Words, words, words, words, words, words?") until finally she understands what he's asking.

"She never wrote a thing." He shakes his head and runs back into the house. Anita stands there for a moment, and then, just as she turns to walk away from this tragic scene, the man returns, carrying a handful of words. He hands them to her as though they were ashes of the deceased, gently folding her fingers over them, as though in prayer, before he goes back inside.

She shakes her head as she walks away, opening the car door with difficulty, her hands fisted as they are. Once in her car, she drops the words into her purse, where they remain until a windy day in early Fall, when she searches for her keys in the mall parking lot. A quick breeze picks the tiny scraps up and they twirl in the sky, all the possible, all the forgotten, all the mysterious, unwritten, and misunderstood fragments, and it is only then, when they are hopelessly gone, that Anita regrets having done nothing with them. From this regret, her memoir is written, about the terrible thing that happened to her. She is finally able to write that there is no sorrow greater than regret, no rapture more complete than despair, no beauty more divine than words, but before writing it, she understands, standing there, amidst the cars and shopping bags, watching all the words spin away, as though she had already died, and no longer owned language, that ordinary, every day, exquisite blessing on which lives are both built, and destroyed.