

RUBY'S WALL SINGER

Sunlight releases me from the grip of a snake squeezing my bones into disintegration. I sit up sweaty and breathless from my nightmare. Two thoughts emerge from the dark residue of restless sleep. I have ovarian cancer and I need to hear my wall singer.

I slip my hand under the bed covers to sweep back and forth across the cool side of the bed. Evan's side. It's been three years and six months since he woke me with morning kisses. I need the warmth of his body and the strength of his spirit every day, but especially today.

The coral red petals of the single poppy flower, on my nightstand, draws my attention away from the spasms of a full bladder. I think about Grandma Leah's red front door and remember asking her, as a child, why her door was red, since most other doors were less boldly colored. With her crinkled brown hands on her stout hips, she'd responded, "Because nothing evil through this door will pass". I wish I had a red door, as I whisper, "please begin".

Upon his first note, I begin to stretch to life. His honeyed voice cuts through my tangled essence with the swift precision of a sheep shearer. I ride effortlessly upon every modulation emanating from his lips. I reach out to touch the wall separating our apartments, imagining the constriction and release of his neck as his words, like birds, elevate into flight. At the peak of a sustained dulcet note, I feel the knitting of my marrow. Since he moved in two months ago, I have awakened wrapped inside of his nourishing melodies.

Within moments, we are in sync and each beat of his tempo enables me to move in step with his rhythm. Crimson roses fold on top of big green leaves as I toss aside my quilt and swing my legs off the bed to sit on the edge. Evan's faded brown robe, on the hook of the open bathroom door, faces me, as my wall singer's lyrical rhapsody enfolds me in the euphoria of a cherished memory. *Evan and I locked in an unhurried embrace on the dance floor of a smoky jazz club in Paris on our honeymoon in 1967. He is twenty-five and I am twenty. We are dissolving into one another as Johnny Hartman sings, "For all we know, tomorrow may never come", inside the lushness of John Coltrane's sultry saxophone. I shiver at the rush of air against my ear as Evan whispers, "Ruby, our tomorrows together are endless".*

But they weren't endless. A reality I first faced with Evan when our babies, Alice and Alisha, were declared dead inside of me, seven years later. A coagulated ball of despair formed inside my uterus then and began to grow when they told me I couldn't have any more children. I wanted to be a mother so much, especially since I had never really known my own mother or father. They died in a car accident, leaving no family alive to claim me. Although Grandma Leah had raised me, just like she'd raised all the other foster kids she'd adopted, with love, warmth and wisdom, I'd felt a deep sense of being alone in the world until I met Evan.

My wall singer delivers a series of quick paced harmonious notes that send me sprinting to the bathroom. I know as sure as my doctor's appointment this morning that he sings songs I've never heard before. After flushing the toilet, I listen to his voice curl around every syllable like a mother's fingers caressing her newborn's tiny fist. I feel the love and wonder in each dip and rise of his musical journey. Without knowing him, I know when he is sad, when he is hurt, when he is joyful and when he is anxious. I know he sings to live because I live to hear him sing. I reluctantly turn on the shower.

Water cascades over me as I place my hands to feel the warmth spreading falling across my pelvis. It feels like a healer is laying hands on me. Leaning against the black and white tiles, I try to hold onto the sensation I know my wall singer is creating within me.

The towel rack bears my weight as I dry off before brushing my teeth. My reflection in the lighted mirror over the sink displays all my sixty-eight years. After capping the toothpaste, I stretch the skin around my eyes to ease the wrinkles at the corners. The movement does not lessen the dark, puffy half circles cradling them. Red moles, that appear to multiply daily, have replaced the golden-brown freckles of my youth. I pick at the tight gray curls at my temples, that defy any brand of hair dye. I reach for my make-up bag and then put it back. I am wasting time. I grab Evan's robe and walk to the bedroom closet.

I shuffle through suits and dresses until I pull out my favorite red dress with short puffy sleeves and a peplum waist. As I slip it off the hanger, I hear Evan's voice, "Uh oh, you're wearing red today. Who are you going to do battle with?" And then his laughter. I miss his laughter. It sounded like the sparkling of a million pieces of happiness.

"Bringggg, bringggg." I walk over to my nightstand and confirm what I already know, its Myra. I wait for the lighted screen and ringing to stop before laying my dress across the bed. I grab the lotion and deodorant before sifting through my dresser for underwear and stockings, while thinking about my last conversation with Myra, at lunch last week.

"Girl, you can't go through this alone. Please, let me go with you to your next appointment," said Myra, as she reached across the table and folded my hands into hers.

"I'm used to being alone. Two stillborn babies and my Evan in the ground lead me to the logical conclusion that I am meant to be alone," I replied while I eased my hands out of Myra's to let the waiter place our usual fare of coffee, ice water and Chef Salad on the table. In the silent

moments of waiting for the waiter to leave, Myra tried to bore a hole into me with her ever-twinkling amber eyes, born of her dramatic personality and supported by the joy of having a husband and three kids who adored her.

“Ruby, you act like some old-time widow doomed to wear black for the rest of her life. Staying to yourself. Never going out, except to that God-awful job. How long have we been friends? Fifteen years or so? You know you have me and you have God. You need to come back to church. You haven’t been to church since Evan took sick. Look, we have a new preacher who always brings a blessing in his sermon. Anyway, I miss sitting next you on Sunday mornings.”

“Myra, life just happens to you. That’s it. That’s all. No preacher is going to speak on that because folks would stop going to church. I used to think we had some control over what happens to us, but at the end of the day free will is a fantasy and prayers an even greater farce. Either God forgot about us or is a needed figment of our collective imaginations,” I said before looking out of the huge bowed window to avoid Myra’s growing glower. A young bearded man, wearing headphones and sagging pants, swayed to the music flowing in to his ears as he passed by the window. I closed my eyes and drew in the sound of floating piano keys, striking percussions and the breeze of a flute that always seem to invisibly accompany my wall singer’s acapella offerings.

“Girl, you’re sleepwalking. It’s been three years since Evan passed. You done sat in grief so long you’ve created a space for this thing inside you to manifest. Ruby, you need to get some passion back into your life. Come back to teaching part-time in the evenings. You loved teaching and students loved you. You need to leave that godforsaken government job. Stuck in a cubicle all day for pity sake. Retire already!” I watched me as she cut into her salad like it was an overdone T-bone steak.

“My good government job paid for Evan’s expenses when he was dying and it is will pay for mine. If we had both stayed professors, he would be in a pauper’s grave and I would be... Well, anyway, what will be, will be. Que sera, sera, right?” I said as I pushed away my half-eaten salad and cooled coffee.

“And I know what I know. You’ve got to grab life and shake it to let it know you mean business. Shake it until the sweet juice pours out over that growth inside of you and blows it to kingdom come.”

“The only sweetness in my life is my wall singer.”

“You’re what?”

“This man who moved in a month or so ago, right after I found out about the tumor. Since that day, I wake up every morning to his singing and Myra, it is beautiful. It’s like Evan’s arms are wrapped around me.”

“You never mentioned this before. How old is he? What does he look like? Have you bumped into him in the hallway? Have you knocked on his door? You know like being a one-woman welcome wagon? Hi, my name is Ruby and I love your voice. You’re still a good-looking woman.”

“I don’t know how old he is or what he looks like. And I’m too old for the foolishness your thinking up right now. I just listen to him sing. It’s like he’s my magic charm or something. No pain. No worries. Just joy inside of a growing connection that I don’t want to jinx.”

“Girl, meet him. March your behind over there and knock on his door. Oh, and bring one of your pies. Lord, wish I had a piece right about now.”

Fully dressed, I pause to savor the last drops of musical coffee wafting through the walls before walking down the hall to the living room. I wonder, what if I did knock on his door to tell him how much his music means to me?

Drawing open the living room curtains releases dust particles that dance inside the sunlight flooding the room and banishes any notion of meeting my wall singer. With age comes increasing invisibility, as does the shadow of imminent death, both evoke an abhorrence from the vibrantly living, who still believe in endless tomorrows.

The clock by the front door, lets me know I'm going to be late. I snatch my purse off the credenza by the door and accidently brush a framed photo of Evan. It was taken during our 30th wedding anniversary celebration in Jamaica. His eyes are closed under a broad brimmed straw hat. His smile is so wide I see the significant gap in his top front teeth. He is lost in the Calypso music playing in the airport. I'd come out of the bathroom that day of our departure and stared at him for a few seconds before pulling out my camera. I wanted to capture that moment of his bliss. I wanted to stop time.

Evan and I tried to dismiss the escalating ticking sound by believing in the promise of miracles until the very end. Together we sought opinion after opinion hoping the next one would change the unsettling reality of our parting. I correct the positioning of the photo while remembering how I held his cooling face, kissing him as his life force pushed out across my lips. I close the door behind me and walk a few steps before stopping to linger at my wall singer's door. "Thank you", I whisper, before heading to the elevator with slow steps that magnify my indecision of wanting to die to be with Evan or wanting to live and then I ask myself, for what?

Upon entering the doctor's office, I check in with the young receptionist, who looks up from a multitude of papers on her desk to ask if I have an appointment. I try to image any other

reason be here before answering yes. She tells me to sign in and then asks me if anything has changed. I want to say everything, but say nothing has changed regarding my insurance, employer, or residence. The perky blond woman, with a tad too much make-up for 9:30 in the morning, tells me to take a seat and that I will be called shortly.

There is only one seat left in the small, dimly lit waiting room. The table next to it is askew with magazines of every variety. On the top of one messy pile is a French music magazine with the face of John Coltrane on it. Evan letting me know he is with me in spirit.

Coltrane was there when Evan and I first met in his classroom at Morgan State. He was a graduate student teaching a jazz appreciation course that I'd selected as one of my "care about" classes, the first semester of my first year in college. His eyes were a hazy green that turned gray when he was frazzled. Tall, muscular, and a beautiful shade of brown that garnered him the nickname, among female students, "MCK, Milk Chocolate Kiss". I ran into him at an off-campus deli for jazz night a year later. From then until his death we were inseparable.

The movement of a young couple, with confused eyes, brings my mind back to the present. They are walking towards the door to the examination room. I look across the tiny space and see a woman clutching a sick bald child against her breast. She is reading from a precariously placed Bible on the edge of her lap. I watch her lips move swiftly over the words like fingers over Braille. At times, she stares up at the ceiling as if pleading with God. Most people would be bargaining with God in this place of dissipating hope, but I have nothing to offer. There isn't anything I can give God that hasn't already been taken.

"Ruby Butler," calls out a nurse with harried eyes and a deadpan expression. After stopping in the hallway to take my vital signs, she leads me to a room with an acrid smell and the customary feel of sterility.

“Please replace your clothes with this gown. Tie it loosely in the front. You may keep on your socks, but nothing else. If you get cold, we have blankets next to the examining table. The doctor’s will be with you in a moment.”

I wonder how many times a day she says the exact same thing, as I sit to take my shoes off. Absurdly placed angels and nymphs on the walls watch me as I lay my red dress, underwear and stockings across a waiting chair. I put on the gown, then hoist myself up onto the examining table, trembling from the cool air circulating around me. It smells like the breath of death. I mindlessly follow a water spot on the ceiling until the door opens and a group of men and one woman enter. She instructs me to lay down.

I’m straight as a plank, while they poke and prod me, as if I were already a cadaver. They look at the illuminated ghoulish black and ghostly white diagnostic films with stolid eyes. They talk in tones and words that are low and mysterious, as if I’m an interloper. The exposure and exploration of who I am reduced to stark images and masked dialogue springs tears in the corners of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Instead, I close my eyes and will the flourishing notes and curative lyrics of my wall singer into my consciousness.

At the end of my invasion, the woman doctor reaches out to touch my hand before she leads the rest out of the room. Seconds later the nurse reappears telling me to get dressed and come to the consultation room. I try, for several moments, to get up, but I can’t move until I grab the words of his song this morning, “So try, just try. Don’t give up, it’s not what it seems.” He moves me to the moments next without even knowing I exist.

The doctor, who touched me, guides me towards a red leather chair at the end of a large oblong table. I look out into the faces of my firing squad without a blindfold. They look back at me with humanized smiles before telling me the tumor in my ovary has disappeared. And just like

that the clock slows its ticking. I try to become ensconced in their excited energy, to gauge the authenticity of their words, to believe the upward turn of their lips, the potential truth in their eyes, but the explosion of colors and notes flood my senses, renders me limp and mute. They release me with the codicil that I must come back for a follow-up appointment in three months.

I walk past the somber faces of patients in the waiting room gaining equilibrium with each step. A mixture of poignancy and joy keep me teetering. I will wait longer to be with Evan and the girls, but for now I have my wall singer.

The homogenized music surrounding me in the elevator is drowned out as I replay the doctor's pronouncement again and again. It's gone. They did not understand how or why the growth had disappeared, but it was gone. "It's a miracle," said one doctor. "Although, highly unusual, it happens sometimes," said another. "Thank God," said another. I thanked Evan and my wall singer. There would be no chemo or surgery or countdown to death to endure, at least not today.

In my car, my tears flow, as gratitude swells in side of me so strong that I know I must tell my wall singer that he is a gift from a God I had stopped believing in.

Finally, in front of my apartment building, I look up to his windows next to mine wondering if he is looking out, wondering if I tempt fate will the cancer return.

I walk from the elevator to his apartment door and stand with shifting feet and an anxious heart. I hear music, different from my wall singer's early morning fair, but familiar. A shudder of calm envelops me and I knock.

The lock clicks, and again, fear grips me. Will I be an unwanted nuisance? Will I jinx myself? I look down at the hem of my red dress and defy my doubts and worries.

He opens the door with questioning eyes before saying hello. He is so tall with skin the color of fire-roasted chestnuts. Long ebony locks flecked with gray lay against his chest rising and falling with each breath he takes. I stare up into his golden-brown eyes for a glint of our bond, while searching for the words to tell him what he has done for me, what he means to me. As he waits for me to speak, I recognize the music streaming out from behind him. It's Johnny Hartmann singing "For all we know, tomorrow may never come".

"My name is Ruby Butler. I live next door to you and..."

"I'm sorry is the music too loud? Usually no one is home this time of day, so I raise up the sound when I play my favorite albums," he says in a baritone so deep and luxurious that I have the sensation of being inside a rainforest, moist, warm and inviting. He smiles at me while waiting for my answer.

"I know that song," I hear myself say, while listening to Myra laughing in my head and feeling Evan's hands gently pushing my shoulders forward. "It means a lot to me, just as you do. May I come in and explain?"

He opens the door wider.