

Silver Season

By Andy Solomon

At first, I am confused. When you called, you said to meet you where we first made love. Now the woods are gone, only the fringe oaks are left. The elms are all cleared away. But they would be dead now, of course. It is best they have been cleared away before they died.

Once, squirrels played here. I see no squirrels now.

I arrive before you and wonder where you will appear. It is Sunday, a bit past noon, and all here is as quiet as it was twenty-five years ago on an October night. The spot where I first made love with you is now a high school.

Your car turns from California Road into the school lot. I have not seen you in twenty-three years, but I know it is your car. I used to tease you that you drove like a man. Your dimples would deepen and you would say, you bet. We were in your car that night, the green '62 Impala, and when you turned off California Road and eased into the woods you said it was time to be a woman--you were now eighteen. It was time, too, for me to be a man. But it was years before I understood that that night did not make me one.

It is a silver car now, and a Subaru, and your hair is short but still you wear bangs and have mischief and adventure in your grin. Your daughter has just finished college and left to have her life. And we are back in this village where we scraped our knees as small children and where you used to sing to me on summer nights. After twenty-three years I have driven five hundred miles in one night to meet you here.

You lock your car. You say nothing as you get in beside me and look over and up and I see slips of wrinkles beginning around your eyes. Your hair is still chestnut and your eyes look greener even than I remembered them. The little wrinkles strike me as beautiful, but it hurts that I was a country away, no part of your life, when they began. We have lost many seasons. Maybe all of them. Your smile yanks my stomach quickly throughout my body and I find I cannot talk although I know I can grin, and cannot stop.

I have a special place, I say, a short ride from here. A place I never took you. My father took me there one Sunday when I was six. White ducks swam in the stream and waded onshore and we fed them bread and I fell asleep with my head on his lap. As he drove me home, I thought I might never

spend a happier day. I remember how you loved him. The three of us went to baseball games, then drove across the city to the all-night coffee shop and we felt like a family. You would not have wanted to see the way he died last year in Florida, I think, but I know you would have wanted to be there to hold his hand as it grew colder. I think soon I will tell you about it. I wish I had known where to find you, wish I had known that the man after me was gone and no others had followed him. I thought of that stream where the ducks are when my father died. And I thought of you. Now, at last, we can go there.

Still, you say nothing. But your smile remains, and that says enough. You touch my cheek. I love the softness of your fingers, softer now even than they used to be. I think I can love better now. While you were miles and years away I learned that we lose everything and must love it fiercely and swiftly before it is gone. I am not certain I can do that even now, but I know it is the only way. If we don't, we let the value slip out of our lives. I need to tell you I've learned that.

The Cross County Parkway has changed. It would be hard to love this winding road for the first time now, and I must landscape it with remembered birches and spruce. Why have they stripped the trees everywhere?

But the Bronx River Parkway has not changed. Some ducks, we find, are still there, prettier, less swaggering than they used to be, now far outnumbered by Canadian geese and mallards. And the twin willows are still there. I am sure they are the ones I lay under with my father, only they look smaller. I take your hand and lead you to them, feeling your hand fit as naturally into mine as if I'd held it every day of my life. I want to hold your head in my lap a while, then put mine in yours. We must earn our way back to that.

So, you say, no one ever asked you to marry them. I thought you might never marry.

I could have asked them too, I say.

You answer, that was not your way.

You are right. It was not my way. Now it might be my way, only I do not love anyone and the season for children has passed.

We are not alone at the stream. A woman, maybe twenty-five, wearing torn jeans and a yellow blouse, plays with a little girl, also wearing yellow and blue, the colors of summer. On their blanket is a plastic bag filled with bread. I think the little girl will never forget this day, or if she forgets this exact day will never forget that there were such days.

On the other side of the water are four teenagers, two boys and two girls. One boy says something and the girls both slap him in play. The other boy looks away as if concerned about something that is not really there. The first boy seals the top of an open bottle of 7-Up with his hand and shakes it and sprays the girls' tee-shirts. I chuckle, almost sadly. Then you touch my hand, sitting beside me, and I look at you and feel it, brief but sharp in my stomach, the terror. I remember what I would have had to give to keep you then, and I wonder if, even now, having never given it to anyone, I could give it even to you. Yes. Yes, I think I could. It would cost more not to give it.

Tell me about the years, you ask.

I tell you, and am struck once more by their emptiness. Your leaving for Phoenix. My finishing Princeton, law school, and moving to Ohio to practice with a friend. I have helped many people get divorced, get or sadly lose their children, draw up their wills. Soon, what felt like a huge Shaker Heights mortgage felt manageable, and eventually small. I have done some good for many people. I have been to every continent but Antarctica, sometimes not alone. Now that you are here again, though, I feel I have been alone for twenty-three years.

Was he good to you, I ask.

He was a good man, you say, a good father. He is still a good father. He is probably still a good man too, you suspect, but now he is a good man with a twenty-four year old lover. She was his assistant, even a guest in your home, and when he went to Dallas she went with him. Not in your place, you insist, as you no longer wanted it. You did not know that until he was gone. You had shared some good years and made a happy daughter and you got over your anger quickly. I loved him, you say, almost as much as I loved you.

I look at the girls in their wet tee-shirts and try to believe the sudden thrill I feel comes from that. At forty-three I cannot stop playing games completely, but now I play them mostly with myself. I am ripened some and think I could give you what you wanted if you still wanted it.

The mother in yellow gives bits of bread to the little girl. She shows the girl how to hold it out to the ducks. A duck takes bread from the mother. She speaks to her daughter, and the little girl holds out a piece of bread. Three ducks scoot toward her and quack demandingly. The little girl runs away. The mother runs after her and catches her and kneels on the ground and holds her. She leads her back to the ducks. Soon, the little girl does not seem afraid.

Once, I thought the white ducks almost magical. Now the variegated geese with their many lines and tones seem far more interesting.

We sit cross-legged, Indian-style. When I look at you, you are blurry. My eyes must be wet. It is windy today. After a moment, you clear.

Why did you leave me, I ask.

You left me, you say.

No, I stayed right here.

Just your body. The rest of you left me, you say. I always thought I'd be devastated if you left me. But you left, and I lived through it.

I'm glad you learned you could live without me, I say. But it does not feel true. I wish you had never learned that.

You pick up a dandelion and hold it at the side of my mouth, the side nearer you. I turn toward you and blow the dandelion bare.

You were too brave for me, I say. We would sit in the car in the woods after love and I would tell you things about me that I thought were true and you would go past my truth to deeper places in us both and you were never afraid of the monsters that sometimes lurked there. Wise, you said, was just another name for slicing through the layers of self-deceit. You made me see myself honestly many times, and I found too much pain in that. You knew that. You had the courage to look honestly. I shrank back. When I tell you this, you say you are glad I know it now. It is not too late.

I stretch my legs out. The afternoon sun brings light streaks to your hair. I cannot tell if they are gold or silver through the glint. Our closest friend from high school practices law three miles away. A full partner. Five years ago he said I would always be welcome to join him if I ever came home. The word "home" confuses me. Can such offers stand after five years? It is hard to believe they would.

The prettiest thing I've seen in all my life was you in a black dress dancing with me on a New Year's Eve long ago, and I have been to all the continents except Antarctica.

I loved dancing with you that New Year's Eve, I say.

You smile. You say, I still like to dance. Do you?

I'm not sure, I answer. It's been years. We used to dance at the club where Mark played guitar. He said he always began to play better when we came in. But he always played well. The next year

he went to Southeast Asia and his name is on the wall in Washington. Too few people know how he played guitar. I am glad we will never forget it.

When we'd leave Mark's club we would drive up the parkway just past us now. Your hair would blow about, splayed and floaty in the breeze. You wore black eyeliner beneath the thin white. We would get to the diner a little past midnight. You would order a grilled cheese and I two eggs with pancakes. And endless coffee for us both. Endless quarters for the juke box. You would talk of the houses you would design. I wondered if we would live in one. You would stretch your slender legs under the table and put your feet on either side of me and I would take your shoes off and rub your feet and one night I pulled you onto the floor. You pretended to be angry. You said I had mangled your backside. I made up for it later, parked down your street where I rubbed it a long time until you said it was all better and you liked me again. And when the sun came up I took you home.

We could go to the diner when we leave the stream today. Somehow, though, I fear it might feel too sad.

I ask about your daughter. You show me her picture. I knew it would not be a graduation picture but one you had taken yourself. Her hair is black and her eyes brown, not your green, yet something in them echoes the eager pair I used to gaze at in a diner. Maria. You picked her name. I have never seen her but she could have been mine if I had been brave.

Have many boys loved her, I ask.

Many have wanted her, you say. A few may have loved her. No one has been willing to pay the full price. You are not at all unusual.

I sense, staring at her picture, that she would be worth any boy's full price. I know I would feel that if she were my daughter. A man in Dallas has been very lucky and I feel no anger in my envy.

The mother and daughter and the teenagers are gone. Except for an elderly couple we are alone. She works crossword puzzles while he reads a newspaper. Every few moments she touches his leg. Sometimes he pats her hand.

Do you know when I knew for certain I was in love with you, I ask.

I always knew, you say.

Yes, but do you want to know when I first knew?

Yes.

One night, I say, I was lying on my bed listening to music. I think it was *Conversations with Myself*. The room was dark. You still loved me. We had been out all night the day before. I felt sexy and thought of you. I realized that when I felt sexy I always thought of you. I grabbed my notebook, and in the dark I wrote You know you are in love when the woman you fantasize about is the same one you sleep with. I meant to show it to you. I meant to do a lot of things.

Do you know when I first knew I was in love with you, you ask.

No. When?

The night we had the awful fight about Elaine. It is so silly to think about now. You said she looked better in blue than I did, she with her wavy blond hair. I wanted so much to always be beautiful to you, and that night was the only time I didn't think I was. I slammed the door in your face. I knew you wouldn't call that night. It was so late and my father was terribly fussy about calls. Then in the morning I found your note taped to my window. I knew you must have gotten cut on the rosebush, and when I saw you you had scratches all over your arms and even one on your cheek. When I saw them I knew I loved you. The scratches were still there when we made love the first time.

The elderly man puts down his newspaper and stretches and yawns. He stands up. The woman puts away her puzzles and rolls onto her hands and knees. She tries to stand but has difficulty. The man reaches down. She takes his hand and with his help stands easily. They walk to the edge of the water. Each walks along the edge, separating, always coming back together.

Do you want to know why I had to go away, you ask.

I am not sure if I want to. I say nothing. Words scare me now. No one's words could ever hurt me the way yours could. I seemed to always be doing something wrong and not knowing what it was. I think I've come to know over the years that it was always the same thing, something to do with not risking enough, not entrusting it to you, being a coward. And it was my not really being with you, just asking you to be with me.

You look at me and I know I can hear about why you had to go. You are back now, at least for today. Tell me, I say.

It was the last night at the diner. I told you that I had heard there are two types of marriages: those where the wife quotes the husband and those where the husband quotes the wife. You said that sounded silly.

I don't remember, I say. But even as I say it the night is coming back to me.

You say, I remember very well. You said that made it sound like all love affairs had to be unequal, but certainly a man and a woman could respect each other equally.

Yes, that's true. I still think so, I say.

I think so too, you say. But I realized that you had never quoted me.

Yes. Yes, I did, I say.

No. You whistled. You said I was a good dancer. You said I had beautiful feet. You said I made you happy. But always, I quoted you. I loved you, but I couldn't stay anymore. Soon, there would have been nothing left of me. You'd have had none of me left to love, just a reflection of you.

But we made love that night. I remind you that we did.

I still loved you, you say. It seemed a sad and beautiful way to say good-bye.

I look at the elderly couple. They must be at least seventy. I wonder why I feel I am closer to death than they. Then I understand why.

I am filled with terror, I say. I could not have said that to anyone else I have ever known.

Yes, you say. I know.

It isn't the same terror. It is the other side of it, the price of not doing what used to terrify me. I feel a wave of exhaustion even thinking of it.

Yes, you say. I know. Being alone is new to me. Perhaps that's why I am not scared yet. Perhaps I will be. It is not new to you.

I don't know if it will scare you, I say. I think nothing can scare you.

Things can scare me, you say. I am not twenty years old anymore. Being alone does not scare me, though, at least not as much as being alone when another person is with you.

Was it like that at the end?

I suspect it always is, at the end, you say. It's over, no need to talk about it now.

Yes, there must be something else to talk about. There is everything else to talk about. Perhaps about our coming here. About dancing. How you feel about the houses you've built. Maria. About how to make fewer and less costly mistakes in the last half of life. I ask, where are you staying tonight?

With my mother, you say. I'll be with her for a week.

In a week, my partner would have to handle many of my wills and divorces. He could manage. I can stay here a week. Many weeks. I watch the elderly couple brush leaves from each other's clothes. Even that brings them close before they walk to their car. I think of them dancing next New Year's Eve. I wonder if they have a special diner or baseball team or coffee shop. No doubt, and many other special things. I say, I haven't seen your mother in a terribly long time. Is she well?

Pretty well, you say. She asked me to send her love.

Are you too old now to be pulled under a diner table, I want to ask, but I know that isn't the question I'd be asking. I'd be asking the ones behind it. Did we die, or did just part of our time together die? Will I ever be really alive? Which do I ask, then, the diner question or the ones behind it? I say nothing.

The ducks wade into the water.

I think of dying a lot now, I say.

Silly, you say. Think of living.

I've just started, I say. You're with me now.

I'm here for today.

Only today?

Today is the only day I want to think about, you answer.

I glance toward where the sun is setting and suspect it is time to leave the stream. We have been here all afternoon.

Only, where do we go?

I ask, it's getting late, may I take you to supper? Oh, but your mother? She must be expecting you.

You reach for a sandal. You run a hand through your hair and look at me and smile. Your smile makes organs inside me begin to tremble.

I gaze at you silently. I think of my living room, how big it is. My house is always neat. A woman cleans it three times a week. Almost no one comes to disturb the neatness. I go to ball games with my partner now, and sometimes his sons. I go to the gym three times a week and play tennis, and they know my name in several restaurants. My life is neat and comfortable. I was never brave. After you left, my life took on more and more of a grey neatness. It could have been much worse. It could have been much better.

I stand. I reach down and take your hand and you stand easily beside me and I let your hand go. I don't want you to give any sign of any kind. No taking my hand. No kiss. No invitation. No move to leave. As I look at you I know you understand this.

Do you think the diner is still there, I say.

I imagine, but it is probably changed now, you say.

We could take a look, I say.

Yes.

And if it's not there, I'm sure there are new diners, I say. I take your hand. We walk between the willows toward the car. I will hold onto your hand as long as I have enough courage. Even now the fear is rising on both sides of me. I see a wave of neat grey. It is neutral, but it is still the wrong color for this season. I grip your hand a bit tighter.

You smile at me and your lips brush my cheek, as if you could hear the silent urging inside me: I will not be afraid, I will not be afraid, I will be brave until I die.