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## **Jasmine**

by Judy Fort Brenneman

I went to Mansfield May 8, the day after my dad died.

Ted, Kyle, and I flew in late Saturday night, rented a car in Cleveland and drove to the house. Mom and John had set the memorial service up for Wednesday because Mom thought that would work better for Ted, but he had to leave before then; we'd figured the service would be Tuesday, maybe even Monday. But it was Wednesday, early afternoon and afterwards everyone (and the number of people, especially at the beginning, made it feel literally like everyone) came out to the house for reception-pot luck, mountains of food, somebody brought beer, Ted and I supplied wine, and everybody told lots of stories about themselves, and about Dad, and about things unrelated to anything I knew or cared about, and finally late, late afternoon, after I'd already had too much wine—or maybe not enough—people began to clear out and chairs started getting folded and garbage thrown away and little clumps of people reluctant to leave clustered out front, on the sidewalk near the new plants, in the grass, by the car doors in the drive.

I wandered from the dining room, where I'd refilled my wine glass, through the kitchen and family room, aiming for the last remnants of tables and chairs on the back lawn. As I passed through, John called over that Jasmine wanted to talk to me. Or did I just sit down and she appeared and said that John said it would be okay if she talked to me? I think the second one is what actually happened—in fact, I'm sure it is. I talked to John afterwards.

So Jasmine sat down on the brown folding chair across the folding table from me—those old, old metal chairs that pre-date me, maybe even pre-date Dad, always stored in the shop classroom—or were we sitting on the newer folding chairs, still metal but tan putty color and broader? Such details escape, are the things that wine lets slip from my notice; the dulling of the senses that makes it possible to even sit at the table in the long green grass of the backyard that stretches so far, balanced as the third point of a triangle formed by the apple tree, the maple tree, and me.

The table was brown laminate, the folding kind often used in school cafeterias. Jasmine sat on the west side, facing the back of the house and me; I sat on the east side, my back to the house, looking west toward the fields and forest that eventually gave way to the interstate highway.

She said, "John said it would be okay to talk to you about something, would it be okay?" I knew the way we always know what she wanted to talk about, and I shoved my bleary-eyed weariness under my mask and made my eyes focus on her, ready to hear the story, ready to be whatever it was I was supposed to be to this step-niece I didn't know.

I can't tell you what she looked like; I have a hard time pulling her face into focus. I have the impression of a skinny girl, barely tall enough to be counted as an adult even though she was seventeen or maybe eighteen already. The impression of limp, slightly stringy brown hair falling to narrow shoulders. Mild acne not quite covered by make-up; too much eyeliner, and too dark, around eyes that seemed to have a hard time lighting on anything for very long. A T-shirt with horizontal stripes? Something knit or jersey anyway, too tight as if outgrown, accentuating her thinness. Bony hands, fingers that never stopped moving, shoulders hunched forward, her fingers fussing with napkins that littered the table, finally getting the nerve up to ask me if it was okay if she smoked; she'd already pulled out the cigarette and the lighter was on its way and her thumb flicked the end two, three times after every draw of breath, knocking ash off before it had a chance to accumulate, the smoke coming out in short bursts instead of long lazy tendrils, but still just as hard to dodge if you're downwind.

She was so short that she looked like a child, probably she still was a child but neither of us really knew that anymore. Even if she sat up straight, which she never did, she'd be close to a head shorter than I am, even when I'm slouched forward. I leaned into the table and rested my elbows and forearms on top, pressing my ribs into the side. And I said of course she could talk to me, could talk to me about anything.

I didn't want to hear what she said. I was too tired of trying to help, too tired of putting my anger aside, too tired of defending myself against the people who didn't believe me, or who did but didn't think it should make any difference now that I'm so old, or the people who believed me but didn't care, or the people who partly believed me and believed it must be mostly my fault, and it must have been only me because nobody else ever said such things.

But the one thing, and maybe the only thing, I've learned is that it doesn't matter how tired I am, and it doesn't matter who does or doesn't believe. All that matters is that somebody listens and nods their head at the right time and tells you that you're not crazy.

She kept flicking her cigarette with her thumbnail, like punctuation as she talked. She caught my eyes once or twice, but mostly her eyes kept moving, never resting on anything for very long. "He would pull me back into his bedroom when she was in the kitchen." Flick flick. "He always tried to grab my breasts," flick, "he wanted me to take my shirt off." Flick. "He'd grab my arm and pull me into the room, and I told him I didn't want to" flick flick "and one time up at the boat, me and my girlfriend went up there with him and John and he tried it with my girlfriend and she told him to get the fuck away from her and if he ever tried again she'd. . ."

Furious flicking; I watched her hand wave the cigarette around like a dancer in too-tight quarters, the quick jerk down and up on the burning end as her thumbnail with its chipped polish released the other end. What did her girlfriend threaten? I can't remember, only that he never tried anything with the girlfriend again, flick, quick white movement backlit by damp green grass, and I can see him lurking in the doorway of his bedroom, can see Mom shooing them both out of the kitchen, know what she looked like as she headed to

the family room, him following close behind, closing the door between the kitchen hallway and the family room—a habit developed when the new part of the house was added on, its huge family room and two bedrooms, with air conditioning so you always had to shut the door between the new part and the old part so you didn't waste the air conditioning or heat up the back, a habit that stayed even through winter and into cooler summers when electricity cost enough that the air conditioning was hardly ever on—and the door closed and she walked into the family room, probably barefoot or wearing sneakers that pressed down into the red shag carpet, his black work shoes with heavy soles following, then walking around her as if on an innocent errand, perhaps to fetch a sweater from the back bedroom, and she would pause in the middle of the room, looking around for something to do or perhaps trying to decide what chair to sit on or which sofa looked best—or safest, if her instincts were well-tuned—and before she could decide as she's drifting past the green chair with the narrow wooden arm rests, past the floor lamp that has the little table fastened to it, an ashtray and old issues of *Reader's Digest* cluttering its edges, maybe veering away from the white sofa with down cushions that belonged to Mimi and Grandpa, maybe heading over toward the Ma and Pa recliners or even hoping to get past them to the window seat, with its foam cushion on the hard wooden storage locker that's built into the wall that hides the basement stairs, and the old marbletop table with its cool white and gray surface and heavy curved legs that descend from a single pedestal to feet splayed like toes going in four opposite directions, she never quite gets there, because he's reached out his hand like one of those sea creatures that hides in its cave on the ocean floor looking like an innocuous bit of seaweed flower until you swim by just a fraction of an inch too close and bam, it's got you and that's it, you're gone, no escape.

And she tells me and tells me and tells me and I hear her and see us always plotting our escape and never quite making it and feeling so tired, and wondering if I can get up the energy to be angry with him all over again, even though he's finally dead and we've escaped or at least I have, that damn him when I confronted him two summers ago he implied that he always took himself away from his grandchildren when the urge to molest came over him, and damn me for forgetting that when he implies something he's lying—never trust him unless it's a direct, straightforward statement and even then demand proof—and why the hell am I supposed to be the protector of her and everyone else, where the hell were her mother and John and Evie who all know, and why am I the only one who feels responsible for her, who feels that I should have remembered her and worried as much about her as I did about Katie, who's four years younger. I don't even know this girl, I'm not even related to her, she's only my brother's stepdaughter, maybe not even legally adopted, and she doesn't know me, either—hasn't even seen me since she was probably seven, but I'm the one she talks to, I'm the one who listens, who tells her that she'll be all right and that he was a god-damn bastard and I talk to her about therapy groups and about things to watch out for in your whole life, things like bad relationships and thinking that the way things are is the only way they can be and that things can only be bad, because all of that is just the way you protect yourself, keep yourself from going crazy, and then she crushes her cigarette out on a gold-tone disposable ashtray and tells me she thinks she's pregnant and I ask her about prenatal care and choices and quitting

smoking and I think I'm going to sink into my chair, slide under darkness, be numbed by wine and sleep and weariness.

But she finally leaves and I find my brother and try to talk to him, try to help him understand what he must do, what he's up against, and I wonder if he understands any of what I say, wonder if he can even hear me.