

Home Away from Home

A Short Story by Jackie Manthorne

“I’m not going,” you say, your pale, watery eyes staring me down. We’ve been through this so many times before that I’m not surprised.

“No, I’m not going,” you repeat stubbornly before I can reply. Your voice is rough, audibly shaking with an unfamiliar, nearly forgotten forcefulness. “So you may as well talk about something else, something not so boring.”

“But —” I begin. I don’t really want to keep pushing you, but the family expects it. I’m their last (and only, or so they tell me) hope. Go on, it won’t be so hard, they said. You and Aunt Ruth understand each other because you’ve got so much in common, right? Yeah, sure, right. We’re both lesbians and that’s enough to make the rest of them think we’re identical twins. Never mind that there are forty years between us, that you came out all alone while the women’s movement and gay liberation cushioned my transi-

everything I need right here.”

I look at your dusty furniture, at the plants you forgot to water, at the bits and pieces of half-eaten, rotting food littering the table we’re sitting at, at the open pill bottles strewn carelessly over your kitchen counter, at the smelly dishes and pots and pans cluttering your dirty sink. No matter how hard you try to reassure me that you’re perfectly capable of caring for yourself, of remembering when to eat and what pills to take with each meal and when to put out the garbage, no matter how sad it makes me feel that I have to disagree with you, I know you can’t stay here alone anymore.

“Auntie,” I persist urgently; I have to get through to you today, I just have to.

“Oh, you, why don’t you just go way and leave me alone?”

“I can’t,” I reply, shaking my head as I wonder when you last

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tion, that generational differences sometimes confuse both of us and that across the decades, words don’t necessarily mean what they should.

“I’m really not going,” you interrupt adamantly, and this time your deep-set eyes flash at me.

“Look —” I say, starting all over again. Look, I know all about your ageless stubbornness, your traditional differentness, your reputation as the family rebel. I know, because I’ve been given the same label, and it fits me just as well as it’s always fit you.

“No, you look,” you interject.

“Look, Auntie,” I try once more, thinking that this isn’t getting us anywhere; sooner or later one of us is going to have to stop interrupting the other.

“No, you look,” you tell me, your renewed, forceful anger making me wince.

“Auntie,” I scold, letting my bubbling frustration boil over.

“Don’t you Auntie me,” you retort. “And anyway, I’ve got

slept. But I know it won’t do any good to ask, because you won’t remember.

“I won’t leave. I won’t go into that place,” you repeat, your words quivering.

“You have to,” I reply, my voice louder and harsher than I want it to be. Oh Auntie, what can I do? Grace was nearly fifteen years younger than you and she wasn’t supposed to die before you, but she did. And now there is nobody here to help you remember, to help you get through the days and nights and even to tell the difference between them as your contact with reality fades. Nobody in the family can take you; so many of them are getting old too, and the rest of them haven’t got enough money or enough space or enough love. And the doctors tell me that even if I do take you home with me or move in here, before long there’d have to be someone with you all the time. I can’t do that, even if you wanted me to, which I don’t think you do. I feel guilty, even though it’s not my fault.

"If Grace was here —" you say with a sigh as you reach for the framed photograph of the two of you which has stood at the back of your tiny kitchen table since Grace died three years ago. The glass in the frame is grease-stained, and you wipe at it ineffectually with your dirty fingers.

"I know, I know," I say as we both inspect this grainy, black and white photograph, taken over thirty years ago, shortly after the two of you met and fell in love. You were already over fifty then, and she was thirty-five, but in that photo you both look as lusty as teenagers. I wish I'd known you then, while you still had fire in your eyes, while your life was in tune with the times.

"I'll help you pack," I tell you.

"I'm not going," you say, although most of the stubbornness has disappeared from your voice.

"The house has been sold," I remind you.

"Who sold it?" You respond violently, and the framed photo of you and Grace clatters noisily to the table as you clutch my arm with your surprisingly strong fingers.

I have forgotten how much you lose, how swiftly and irrevocably you forget. "We sold it a month ago, Aunt Ruth," I say softly, rubbing your dry, wrinkled hand.

"Did we really?" You titter as you release my arm and turn your attention back to the photograph. "Oh, I hope this isn't broken. So careless of me!"

"No, it's not broken." I pick it up and put it gently in its accustomed place.

"I'm so glad," you whisper. "Because I won't have anything else to remind me."

I know you're afraid that you'll leave what's left of your mind here in this house. I know that you think your memories will desert you, will prove as disloyal as your fleeting intellect, will leave you floating in a dayless, nightless, timeless, thoughtless vacuum until you won't even recognize the difference between life and death.

"I'll help you pack," I repeat. "You can take things to help you remember, like your photo albums and all your old letters."

"A home away from home," you retort bitterly, and then you turn away from me.

What can I say? Of course it won't be home, how could it ever be home for you any more than a place like that could ever be home for me? I know I'd hate it just as

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much as you probably will; maybe that's why the family thought I'd be the best person to send in to do the dirty work. God, the truth of old age can be so tasteless.

"I have to go, don't I?" You mutter more to yourself than to me as you pick at the crumbs on the tablecloth, squeezing them between your fingers, making them smaller until they disappear entirely.

"Yes," I reply. Why don't I feel relieved now that you've said it?

I wonder if you've realized that there are going to be men living on your floor, maybe right in the next room. I wonder if you'll chafe against the rules, the regularity and the blandness of the meals, the restrictions against smoking in your room, against staying up late, against not taking your pills. Will they call you "uncooperative" behind your back and talk down to you when you complain?

I wonder what you'll do when some chirpy young thing half your age wants you to make quite useless things out of paper or wool or string in the recreation room twice a week. Or when you're exhorted to sing hymns with the ladies from the local parish who will come every week to entertain you with their off-key voices, or when the staff chases you out of your room to attend parties and flirt with the old men. I wonder what they'll think when you start flirting with some handsome old woman instead. Will they be shocked and tell you that you should know better? Will they suggest counselling and call in the social worker?

"Did I hear you say the other day that I was going to have to share a room?" you ask.

I try to catch your eye, but you won't look at me. You've always been so damned proud and surrender certainly doesn't come any easier with age.

"Yes," I tell you.

"Well, why can't I have a room of my own?" you bluster. "You know I like my privacy."

"You can't afford it." I reply gently. And neither can I. I found you the best, Auntie. It's not much, but at least you'll get fed regularly. They have an exercise program, their rules are more flexible than most, and they won't refuse to take you back if you have to go into the hospital temporarily, or if you become even less clear and you require more care.

"I have my pension," you inform me rather curtly.

"These places cost a lot," I respond defensively. And this place is better than the rest. Why, it's been painted in the last couple of years, the rooms are large and bright, the bathrooms clean, the staff seem to care about the people staying there. But you don't want to know about all that; you want your privacy, you want what's familiar. You want what I can't give you, and I don't blame you.

I sigh as I get up from the table. "Where do you want to start?"

"What?"

"Packing."

"What about my private room? I worked all my life, paid my taxes, didn't depend on anybody else for anything. I don't see why I have to start sharing a room with some strange woman at my age."

You're right, of course. But no one thinks that old women need privacy. After all, what could they possibly need it for?

Put two of them in a room together, even three; that way they won't have too much time alone to get depressed, to get upset, to question the unnaturalness of their dispossessed state.

"There's not enough money," I say again.

You look up at me to see if I'm telling the truth. "Well, is she at least cute?"

"What?"

"My roommate, stupid. Is she good-looking?" you ask as you stand, your bones unwinding stiffly.

We stare at each other across the generations, you in your eighty-second year, me just past forty. You were a wonderfully strong and brave lesbian in your prime when I was born. Now I am a not so strong and not in the least brave lesbian feeling as if my prime has eluded me, as if life has speeded by so swiftly that I can all too clearly see how well and how soon my feet are going to fit into your footprints.

"I don't know," I reply truthfully, trying to recall what your roommate looked like the one time I'd seen her.

"Well?"

"She was old," I tell you finally.

You roll your eyes. "They're all old!"

I grin. "So you'll fit right in, won't you?"

That was a mistake; your eyes cloud over and withdraw.

"Auntie —"

You wave me off with your long, fluttering fingers. "I know I'm old."

I grab your fingers and pull them to my breast but somehow it's not enough. What I really want to do is hold you close and tell you how much I love you and how badly I want to protect you from this

final indignity, this unjust uprooting, this cruel invasion of privacy. I want you to be able to enjoy the final years of your life. I want to stop this invalidation of how you've lived. The hell with your fading memory; there must be other ways of remembering.

"Auntie —"

You smile just a little through your tears and come into my arms and I hold you gently. My breathing synchronizes with yours and we stand there for what seems like forever. I stroke your thin shoulders and wonder if you are remembering those days when it seemed that you would always have the world at your feet and a woman at your side. The pictures in your photo albums are filled with women, with handsome, vital, intense-looking women. How many lovers did you have? Were you and Grace faithful to each other

for all those years? Were the women who streamed into your house at all hours of the day and night just friends or were some of them your lovers, her lovers, both you and her lovers? Why don't I know these things the way I know so many other things I don't want to, like how many times my oldest sister's husband cheated on her or every last reason why my brother's wife dislikes me?

"If I don't go —"

"Let's pack," I interrupt you. I am suddenly so tired that I wonder if it could wait until tomorrow, but no; by then you'll have forgotten so much of this conversation that we'll have to start at the beginning again and I'm not sure I could stand that. Maybe if there's a pile of boxes cluttering up the living room you'll remember more. Maybe I won't have to keep hurting you like this.

"You pack then, and I'll watch," you say lightly.

"Okay," I agree.

"You can tell me what you want and what you don't want."

"Oh, I want it all, I've always wanted it all," you reply imperiously as you pull away from me, and I know that you're not joking.

I ache so badly that I want to explode but I don't. Instead I pour you a sherry and add more when you tell me that it's not enough. And then I sit you down in one of those stiff, overstuffed chairs in the dusty living room and go out to the car and get the boxes out of the trunk.

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