

LET FREEDOM RING

a short story

1.

“The Fourth of July,” said my friend Jeff. “Just whose freedom are we celebrating, anyway?”

“Everybody’s,” I said, “as best we can.”

“Migrants? Descendants of slaves? Immigrants with barely a toothbrush to their names?”

I taught art to some of these descendants, in junior high.

“Philadelphia,” said Jeff, continuing. “The Declaration of Independence. Didn’t you say you once worked on a movie about it?”

“I mostly remember stenciling numbers on the tops of barrels. They were on screen for two seconds, tops. And an old carriage with torn leather seats. The art director sent me out to buy twelve yards of dark blue fabric. I did. He said it was the wrong hue. The carriage never got used in the movie, anyway. Not a bad gig for a summer job, junior year.”

“I was operating a machine that flanged the rolled edges of tins, for fruitcakes.”

“And here we are.”

“What are you saying? Time, the great leveler?”

“Isn’t it? You’re a lawyer now, with a host of clients. The injured come in all colors, yes?”

“I wear bitterness under my cap, that I have to keep under control. You don’t, if I’m not mistaken. Anger management, they call it. Ha! It’s an energy expedient. Plus I’m still more likely to get pulled over, for going two miles over the speed limit. Yes, sir, no, sir, you’re right, sir.”

“One invitation to or 4th of July picnic unleashes all this? I’ve known you for how many years now, and now this? Why now?”

“One of my clients was stabbed. Twice. By a white neighbor who didn’t like the way she took her garbage cans out. In the eyes. She’s blinded now, for life,” said Jeff.

I let out a long breath, and reached for his hand. Sometimes there was nothing to do but hold someone. His hand gripped mine, tightly, strength overflowing.

The diners around us chatted on at their own tables, cackles arising at times above the din. Our meal hadn’t arrived yet.

Some silences were longer than others; this one bespoke of bags of cotton too heavy to bear, backed up toilets with no landlord in sight, and a cashier’s hand pressing change too firmly into a waiting palm.

Change; what was it, after all? History doomed to repeat itself? A newborn, opening its eyes to the light for the first time? An orangutan, re-inventing the art of hanging upside down? Lynchings - fewer and farther between?

Jeff’s grip on my hand was loosening, gentler now, and for a moment we simply looked into each other’s eyes – the precious life to behold, the very wonder of our being.

Our server appeared. “Sorry for the wait,” he said, “it’s a busy night. What can I get for you?”

Peace? True freedom? Kindness? Not on the menu. We placed our orders, returning the server’s smiles.

“It gets hard these days,” said Jeff, “knowing what’s real. I mean from human to human – I’m not talking Artificial Intelligence, or virtual reality. Like the server’s smiles just now – real, or just a plea for tips?”

“I had a co-worker once – not a teacher,” I said, “who said to me that she trusted no one. I felt sorry for her – because without trust, there’s no reality. Plain and simple, only not so simple.”

Jeff nodded a little, slowly.

“So,” I added, thinking it was time to change the subject, “are you and Cynthia coming to our picnic?”

He was lost in thought, maybe even brooding. Maybe it wasn’t the right time to try to lighten things up, after all.

“Things do recycle,” said Jeff, not looking my way now, “and I don’t mean just plastic water bottles. It’s like déjà vu’ on a large scale. You know you’ve been there, said that, felt that before, but you can’t quite pin it down.”

I was listening, grateful for his strong voice that carried over the restaurant crowd.

“Only it’s not just one individual’s sense of repetition, but an entire society, a whole cosmos doubling back on itself, trying again.” He paused.

“And that’s what counts,” he continued, “the trying again, the chance to get it right this time.” He leaned back, as though digesting his own thoughts.

Like manna from heaven, the food arrived then.

Jeff breathed in the aroma at first – a man who knew how to savor the moment at hand – and at dinner here, he wore no cap to put a lid on his self-mentioned bitterness.

This was the Jeff I had known all these years, ever since high school. He’d been captain of the state championship debate team. Going to law school had been, for him, almost a foregone conclusion. If I ever got injured, he was the one I’d want on my side.

We toasted. “To life!” he said.

“Hear hear,!” I said, and we clinked.

For a few minutes then we ate in silence, the sounds around us almost a welcoming envelope.

A voice to speak with, eyes to see with, and what freedom we had – it was time for gratitude, though neither of us said so out loud.

The potatoes were perfectly done.

2.

Fruit salad with kiwi and starfruit, homemade chocolate layer cake with white icing and red and blue sprinkles; these are a few of the things people brought to the picnic.

The day was clouded over, but we frolicked regardless. A friend brought her guitar, and we made up call and response lyrics, around and around in a circle.

We held hands and praised the skies, the clouds, sun, somewhere else, and we danced, in solos, two's, three's and more.

“Sun!” we shouted, “come out, come out, wherever you are!” And it did!

Then the clouds rolled back in, and the rain started in. No one ran for cover; instead we got soaked in the rain, clothes glued to skin, and still we sang on. “Rain, rain, keep on coming! We need you – today – not some other time.”

The grass shone, flowers dropped from the hanging plants on the patio's edge and we wore them in our hair, ears, buttonholes – any opening of joy we could think of.

And later, as we sat cross-legged, dripping, we chanted, “Long live the bees, long live the bees – we need you, stingers and all. We love you!”

We smiled. We laughed. We hugged. We rolled into each other's arms. Here we all were, high on the glistening, grateful, for the light.

3.

The assignment I gave my students the next day – the start of summer school – was to think of anything that might be upsetting, and then create a collage, or a drawing, of what made them feel better.

Magazine clippings and scraps flew everywhere. There was a charge in the room, almost an overflow of emotion, and then later, a calm.

All except one little girl, who sat at the table, head down, still.

I wasn't sure whether to let her be, or try to interrupt with a suggestion for getting started. Then she looked up at me. Her lips were trembling.

"Ms. Lockweed?" she said. Her name was Helen.

"Yes?" My instincts were not to push.

"My daddy's dying."

We weren't supposed to hug students. I was on the verge of breaking school rules. Another teacher had, and was sacked.

Little Helen said, "He's in the hospital, and he has – I can't remember the name of it. It's the one named after a baseball player who couldn't play anymore. It's called—" Her tears started to come. She was eight.

One of the boys called out. "Lou Gehrig's disease."

Helen said, "Yes, that's what he has," through the tears. "And he can't come home and a neighbor dropped me off here because my mother is working, and what if they forget about me and nobody comes and gets me?"

How I wanted to hug this child.

One of the ten year-olds said, "I bet your dad will be o.k. My dad had stomach cancer and he came home. He has a feeding tube, but he still plays ball with me."

The tears now, in a flood.

Then she said, "So how am I supposed to make something that makes me feel better." It wasn't a question.

A time for gentleness. "Helen," I said, "there's a time to just sit quietly – just as you were doing – and not make anything at all." A pause. "Or maybe try to make something about what you're feeling right this very minute."

The tears were slowing.

Another student looked up and said, "Is it o.k. if I do that, too?" This from Sam, age eleven.

"Of course," I said, evenly. "I gave only suggestions for getting started. Your collage – or drawing – can be whatever you like."

One of the boys said, "I want to be a race car driver, only my parents don't want me to. So I found a picture of a really hot car and I'm drawing myself behind the wheel. They're from Japan and they want me to be a doctor. At home I have to speak Japanese."

“How lucky you are” I said, “to be bi-lingual.”

He shouted back, “I am an American!”

A strike-out for the teacher. Tears and shouts and boundaries, all.

Helen had picked up a blue magic marker now and was drawing a page full of circles, of tear drops – or were they raindrops, or a completion of a life. She did not look up now, engrossed in her drawing. What would catharsis be for an eight year-old?

And sure enough, the neighbor did come by, even a few minutes early, to pick her up. “She’s been through so much,” whispered the neighbor to me. We watched as Helen crumpled her drawing into a tight little ball and left, without it, as if leaving it all behind her was a way out of the hurt.

Then again, I was no child psychologist; sometimes I too flew by the seat of my instincts, trusting them, with nothing else to hold onto even for myself.

One of the nine year-olds had pasted a photo of a sailboat into his collage, then folded the page into a hat he wore on his head and proclaimed, “I am a sailor!”

Another little girl drew flowers all over her page and said to me on the way out, “I’m going to put these flowers on the grave for Helen’s daddy.”

“Yes,” I said softly, “beautiful.”

I tried to see the beauty in everyone, though in some cases it was a real stretch. I had trained myself to see rings of white light encircling my legs, then torso, then arms and ‘round

my head, when I needed to calm myself. And then, if even that didn't work, I was ready for a good stiff drink.

4.

In fact, I did end up meeting Jeff for a drink that evening. We were tired, and neither of us said much.

He'd won a difficult settlement out of court that day and was exhausted. I was wondering how much longer I could go on teaching, exhilarating and demanding, both, as it was.

"Some days," said Jeff, "it really takes it out of you."

I only nodded, and let out a loud exhale. I told him I'd had a dream that morning wherein a friend was in a movie and her line was, 'I'm still trying to get the hang of this breathing thing.' Onlookers had crowded in the way of the camera; the scene had to be filmed all over again.

"Some kind of déjà vu' in a dream?" Jeff suggested. "Maybe I've defended the same clients before? Over and over? How do we break out of the cycle of repetition, the same mistakes over again? What does it take to make lightning strike to break us loose from the pattern?"

I reached for his hand and let mine rest there.

"This," he said. He cupped his other hand over mine as we sat. "This." He paused. "Just this." Another pause. "Thank you."

FIN

