
Approaching Zero

Carolyn Roy-Bornstein

Most people, I imagine, would like to see Christmas go on forever. For me, it can't end soon enough. My parents, endlessly grieving for GiGi, seem to notice me even less than they do during the rest of the year, if that's possible. My friends have all kinds of happy traditions. Hot cocoa. Fireplaces. Sleigh rides. Me? I have to light candles for my dead sister Guinevere at Notre Dame Cathedral and watch my parents wrap a present for her to put under the tree. It's as if they believe that Santa might actually bring their little girl back. Stuff her down the chimney and set her under the tree to surprise us all on Christmas morning. But in the morning, there's just me. And I see them try to wipe the disappointment from their faces along with their tears.

I was only seven when GiGi died, so my memories of her are spotty. She was five years older than me. My mother had had trouble having children, first conceiving them, and then bringing them to term. Her two successful pregnancies, me and Geeg, were interspersed with many years of miscarriages and even one later loss. A boy. A fragile boy with blue skin and soft pink nails and covered with downy fur. A boy who had slid out of my mother before he was done forming. Tears would fill her eyes as she spoke of him. How his little heart had thumped tragically in his chest, not strong enough to sustain him. And how she had kissed his head, her lips surprised to meet so little resistance, his skull's growth arrested before it could knit itself together and cover up his still-forming brain.

Like some mothers tell their children bedtime stories, ours would tell us the tales of where she was when each bag of water burst or each little life was squelched. She catalogued her losses like a teacup collection, each one different from the next in some small detail.

I remember learning in biology class that when women miscarry it often means there is something wrong with the child. Some genetic mistake. Too many chromosomes. Or too few. I thought of all my mutant siblings flushed down the toilet or lost in bed and wondered whether I, too, was flawed in some invisible way. A defect not lethal but damaging nonetheless, its injurious effects perhaps not fully realized until one was well into one's teens.

And now, here I sit, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Go on, Mallory. Open it.”

Mom is staring at me with watery eyes and rapt anticipation. I pull at the thin green bow and gently unloose the red tissue paper. I remove the white top from a small square box. Inside is a gold locket. Well, half a locket. It's shaped like a heart but it's broken in half with a raggedy edge ripped straight through the middle. I flip the busted organ over between my fingers. Engraved on the back are three letters: t e r. Mom is now tugging excitedly at her own tissue-covered box and pulling another gold locket from it. She swings it energetically in front of my face like a deranged hypnotist.

“See? Guinevere has one, too.” She pushes her half of the bum ticker into mine to reveal the word Sister, the Sis on Geeg's half, the ter on mine.

“Don't you just love it?” Mom slips the locket into the pocket of her apron with a pat. She then begins tidying up, putting the ribbons and paper and boxes in a trash bag and heading to the kitchen, as if we're all done here. I look at all the other unwrapped presents under the tree.

“We'll go to the cemetery later today,” she calls from the kitchen.

Dad is sitting in his easy chair which has been wedged into a corner to make room for the Christmas tree. He looks as inconsequential as rain in a monsoon. He gives me that look that says, ‘I know she's crazy, but what can I do?’ and goes back to his crossword puzzle.

“I hope they don't steal it like they did the bracelet,” I say.

My father drives our aging Volvo into Mount St. Mary's Cemetery under the arch with the wrought iron letters welcoming all souls and inviting them to rest their weary wings under the sycamore shade, which always reminds me of The Little Engine that Could wanting to stop and rest his weary wheels. The irony of having my sister buried in a cemetery with the same name as my high school is not lost on me. It's as if Mom and Dad chose it so they could continue acting as if Gigi were still alive. “Yes, we have two daughters, Guinevere and Mallory, both at Mount St. Mary's.”

Gigi's grave is not hard to find. It looks like a dump. Mom brings various offerings to commemorate every holiday large or small. Tiny flags for the Fourth of July. Bunnies at Easter. A gold bracelet for her Sweet Sixteen. (That's the one that was stolen by marauding teenagers.) There's even a purple lei from my last birthday party that Gigi missed on account of she was dead and all. Soggy Teddy bears and deflated balloons hang morosely from metal hoops designed to hold bird-feeders. Sometimes I think it would be nicer to have actual feeders here than this junk. Then there would be something living and sweet and beautiful instead of all this detritus.

Mom is out of the car first, the gold locket in her hand. Dad stays behind the wheel, inhaling his Chesterfields deeply. He leans his seat back and closes his eyes. Mom won't let him smoke at home, so this is the closest he can get to actual relaxation.

Mom waves her hand at us.

“Turn off the engine, Henry. Mallory, get out of the car.”

I follow Mom over to the grave site. At the top of Gigi’s stone is a small statue of the Virgin Mary, her hands shoved fervently heavenward in a “V.” Mom kisses her fingers, then touches the Virgin’s head, makes the sign of the cross and drops to her knees. The weather is warm for December, but still small lumps of dirty snow clutter the gravesite. Mom lands in one of them.

This is when I feel most invisible. When Mom is praying for her other child. I may as well be a gravestone myself. Mom’s shoulders predictably begin to shake and I know her tears are falling onto the soggy earth below. I find myself wondering if salt is good for hydrangeas.

After a while, Mom gets to her feet. It seems to take her longer each time. It’s as if a small piece of her seeps into the ground every time she comes here, aging her bit by bit. She slips the crooked gold heart over Touchdown Mary’s upturned face and kisses the Virgin again. She walks through me like a ghost and gets back into the car. I slip into the back seat and shut the door.

I am sitting in the back of calculus class trying to pay attention to Ms. Abernathy talking about approaching zero, but I’m drawn instead to Doug Fram’s shaved head as it nods to the beat of whatever the rappers are rapping into his ear buds. Doug is the baddest bad boy at Mount St. Mary’s High School, a fascinating compilation of contradictions. Like the Star of David tattooed on the back of his neck. And the fact that his rap sheet and his list of straight A’s in AP classes are probably of equal length. I stare at his skull trying to penetrate it with my thoughts, willing him to turn around, lean his head back. Notice me. But like Ms. Abernathy’s number coming inordinately, frustratingly close to zero but never quite getting there, so it is with Doug and me.

“Mallory?”

I swear I hear my neck crack as I whip it straight up and look Ms. Abernathy in the eye. When I realize she’s waiting for an answer, I burrow into my math book, scouring the pages for clues. She is clicking her chalk on the blackboard like a NASCAR driver revving his engine at the start gate. The bell rings.

“We’ll start class on Monday morning with your answer, Mallory,” she calls above the din. “So be prepared.”

Doug Fram swivels his bald head around and smacks his gum in my face. I breathe in the spearmint scent mixed with stale nicotine and imagine him kissing me.

“Yeah. Be prepared,” he says, then gets up and lumbers toward the door. That’s three more words than Doug has ever spoken to me. I sweep my books and papers off my desk and into my backpack and hurry to catch up to him. He is with his friends. True thugs. All leather and piercings and ridiculously spiked and colored hair. Doug is not like these freaks. I can tell from his good grades and his religious accoutrements.

Or at least I like to think so.

“Hey Dude. What’s with the shadow?”

Spider Lee, one of Doug’s thug friends jerks his pointed hair at me. My heart is grabbing at my ribcage, rattling it like a prisoner. I have a fireball in my throat refusing to be swallowed. I’m sweating rivers. I try to tilt my head to the side checking my armpits for BO but I make myself dizzy from the quick move and step back into the bank of lockers with a clang. Doug takes a step toward me.

“You all right?” That’s it. I can die right here and now. I try to send a message to God to signal as much but it just comes out a raspy, “Ugh.” Doug’s posse quickly surrounds him.

“C’mon, Man. We gotta rumble, ‘member?”

He lets Spider Lee grab him by the shirt and walk him backwards toward the fire exit at the end of the hall. I watch as they go. The crowds in the hall are thinning as kids slam their lockers shut and classroom doors begin to close. My next class is on the other side of the building but I can’t tear myself away from this spot, from this moment, with Doug’s eyes still on mine, walking backwards, watching me.

As Spider Lee opens the side door, the fire alarm sounds. Spider ducks out the door and I start to turn to go. But Doug is now yelling something at me, pointing to his watch. I can’t hear over the alarm. So I run toward him.

“Party at 7, man,” I think I hear him yell.

“Where?”

“Tattoo’s house.”

And he is gone, yanked into the sunlight by Spider Lee, leaving me in the dim yellow light of Mount St. Mary’s annex.

I’ve always been afraid of the dark. I went through a period right after Gigi died when I would sleep with both my overhead light and my bedside table lamp on. The darkness reminded me of my sister’s coffin. If I woke up and my mother had turned my light off, the first thing I would do is reach my hand straight above me to make sure nobody had buried me while I slept. Then I’d open my eyes as wide as I could, like a surprised clown, trying hard to see. I’d sit up and look toward the bottom of the door where there was often a crack of light if my parents were still up. If neither of these things worked I’d fear I was blind or dead and I’d scream and scream until somebody came and turned a light on for me.

A few years later when I was nine or ten, I was afraid of the dark for different reasons. It was about that time that we learned about the concept of infinity in math class, and I would lie awake at night trying to imagine time before I was born or after I died until I freaked myself out and had to get up and watch TV or eat a sandwich. Do something real and concrete and utterly of this world.

I am in the dark now but my eyes won't open and I can't lift my arm up to knock on my coffin's ceiling so, naturally, I think I am dead. But then I hear a rhythmic beeping that mirrors the beating of my own heart. It's like background music for my pounding headache. A theme song for my hangover. My tongue is thick and dry and feels like something foreign gagging me. I hear Mom crying and Dad saying something far away.

Like the memory of a bad dream triggered by some unrelated sight or sound, the events of the night before come flooding back to me, one painful scene after the next. The party. The booze. The acrid smell of marijuana. The metallic taste of Doug's tongue ring in my mouth. The scratchy wool and cold leather of the coats against my back as he laid me down across a king size bed upstairs. Then the scenes tumble and blur like celluloid film caught in a projector. The other boys. The pain. The blood.

I feel Mom's hand in mine, scratchy and thin. It squeezes and squeezes me like I'm lemons or wet laundry. I hear Dad's throaty cough.

"Dad," I think I'm saying to him. "Dad." I feel a weight on me and smell my father's Chesterfield breath and hear him sobbing. I slowly open my eyes. My mother has her eyes stitched to mine. She looks stricken, like she's just been knifed. My eyes ache for her. I could cry blood. I wish I were dead now. Or at least blind so I wouldn't have to see her looking at me like this. Is this the same look she gave Gigi when she saw her in her coffin? Like she wanted to jump right in there with her? Is this what I wanted? That look?

"Mallory," Mom croaks.

I drift in and out of sleep, or consciousness. I don't know which. My parents are always there. I can smell my mother's perfume and hear her softly blowing her nose. Whenever I wake up, she is there. I have her full attention now. Like there was never anybody else. I cannot speak. I can only stare. Into Mom's watery blue eyes. The color of hydrangeas watered with the salt of sorrow. Eyes that hold the tears of all the lost babies. That hold me, the only one left. And in that moment I understand her grief. I understand that I am not lost or unseen or taken for granted. I understand that I am not approaching zero, but rather, I am the sun, the moon and the stars toward which my mother reaches whenever she thinks of the lost ones, of Guinevere or the boy with the blue skin. I am the only one left. The first. The last. I am infinity.