

BLISTER

BY RINA PALUMBO

I

It's TOO HOT to sleep. My feet still hurt from the too-tight boots I wore on that too-long hike through the too-muggy forest. My lips still burn from your kisses. Through the open window, I hear the night noises that terrified me as a child trying to fall asleep in my father's house. The heavy air mutes their cries, and you are here instead of him.

I close my eyes against the primeval sounds and ancient memories. I slow my breath to calm my heart. But I still can't sleep.

I get out of bed, damp from sweat and humidity, and pull a T-shirt over me. I immediately know it is one of yours, larger, softer, and older than any I own. As I slip it over my head, I feel my body wanting to hold yours again.

A sharp pain forces me to look down at my foot, where a blister has erupted on my toe. It feels hot and tight, forcing me to limp as I walk from the bedroom into the living room.

You have fallen asleep with your book on your lap and your head back against the sofa, exposing that soft spot at the base of your collarbone that I have to resist the urge to kiss.

I turn the lamp off, slowly, so the click does not awaken you, but you stir, dropping your chin down slightly, and then your heavy sleeping head falls onto your chest. Now it is the back of your neck that I want to kiss.

Instead, I walk into the kitchen, pull a cold can of beer from the fridge, and move out onto the back porch of the cottage. I pull the tab, the crackle releasing the concentrated air in a hiss as I sit down on the warm wooden steps.

You told me that love, when it is real, is less about speaking and more about listening. I listened to you.

“What am I going to do?” I asked you.

“You do what you need to do,” you had replied.

“What do I need to do?”

You looked at me as if I should know the answer. But I don't. Here's what I do know. I know it's too hot to sleep. I know I have a blister on my foot. I know I am wearing your T-shirt. I know you are sleeping on the sofa, your book in your lap. I know I am sitting here, on the top step of the stairs of the back porch of your cabin north of the city. But I don't know what I need to do.

If I tell you how I feel, I risk losing you. If I never say a word, I will lose you. That's the problem. Whatever I do, I lose. I feel as if the center of my body is hollow, like something has been scooped out, leaving me incomplete. I feel unfinished and unattached to the parts that matter. Even the heavy air I breathe seems to be lacking some vital element. The extra molecules that sustain me have evaporated. What I need to do is brace myself for the loss of you. I take a sip from the can and watch the darkness.

II

As usual, you went to bed before I could. I have a book review to finish and fell asleep reading. I awoke with a start; in the seconds it took for my eyes to adjust, I knew you had turned the lamp off. I knew you would be on the porch.

You look so small, almost childlike, facing the dark. This is the end of us; I'm not sure if you know that. I'm not sure if I know how to tell you. I walk up behind you and kneel down, pressing your head against my chest. I lean in to kiss your forehead, surprisingly cool.

“Can't sleep?” I say as I sit next to you, shoulders touching. You glance at me and smile, though you can't hold my eyes. You hand me the can of beer and I take a long sip.

We sit together in silence listening to the night sounds.

I look down. “You should let me take care of your blister.”

“What? It's just a blister. No big deal.” You slide away from me, taking back the can.

“It’s easy to take care of—you sterilize a pin, lance it, and drain it.”

“It’s OK,” you say, moving further away from me and finishing the beer.

“What did you plan on doing? Just letting it break? That’s how infections happen.”

III

“I don’t plan.” I press down on the blister with my fingernail. It hurts, but I don’t care. It splits open. The raw, red skin underneath stings as the clear liquid seeps out. “See? Just needs a Band-Aid. Couple of days from now, I won’t feel a thing.” I stand up and go inside.

IV

I watch as you leave. I sit and listen to the low sounds and sharp cries emanating from the too-hot night.

When I come back inside, you are asleep. I see my T-shirt on the floor and your bag packed and ready.