

NOVELLA EXCERPT: BACKYARD by ARCHANA APTE

Riss is dying: her roots are shriveled, her branches peeling, and her whole countenance sickly under the autumn sun. Why? Because seventy-year-old Bob McKeon, in his strange grief, refuses to water his apple tree. Apparently the very sight of it triggers painful memories of his beloved wife planting the sapling, and naming it Riss, and carving "B + K" in the bark like a twelve-year-old, and selling the apples at the town farmers' market, and other such sentimental idiocy. There was one time in June when Bob, wearing wrinkled overalls and lugging a watering can, opened the screen door, took one look at Riss, and started bawling enough to water her without the stupid can.

Bob buried Kathy McKeon behind Riss because she loved the apple tree so much. To further honor his wife's memory, Bob refused to even look at the tree afterward and left Riss to rot.

Thanks to Bob, Riss is a disgrace to the McKeons' carefully tended flowerbeds and perfectly painted white fence and manicured lawn—their emblems of suburbia, if you will. Riss learned what an "emblem" was from Emil the rat, who hoards human junk in the garage and occasionally updates Riss on human culture. For example, a common food item used at cookouts is "applewood smoked bacon," strips of pig cooked with a special wood that apparently is not from apple trees but of course made the perfect excuse for Bob to strip Riss of some of her wood in mid July. The worst part was he held the cookout in someone else's backyard so his neighbors wouldn't see the desecration of Riss. Low blow, Bob McKeon. Low blow.

NOVELLA EXCERPT: BACKYARD by ARCHANA APTE

Anyway. It's September, which means Riss should be fruiting. She's not, obviously. Instead, Riss gets to watch the deciduous trees turn all kinds of reds and yellows and oranges, while she withers away. The time for action has come: Bob must die for neglecting his wife's memory and needlessly endangering lives. Thanks to him, Riss may never seed an apple tree, and all those who seek solace in her branches will clutch gaping maws in their hearts and faint from too much sun on their heads.

Okay, well maybe the last part was a bit much. But at any rate Riss has an ally: Brox the restless red squirrel harbors a special hatred for Bob ever since he invented a bird feeder that prevents squirrels from eating from it, and then chased out Brox's entire family when they stole the tulip bulbs last fall. To be honest, Riss thinks Brox overreacted to the Great Squirrel Exodus of 2013, but if misdirected anger gets her an ally she's not going to complain--

"Riss! Hey! You listening or what?"

Brox's chattering snaps the tree out of her thoughts. The squirrel is grinning upside down at her, a gleam in his dark eyes. "Remember yesterday you said you gonna get the snakes to disable his carbon monoxide alarms and kill Bob that way? Well that's a stupid idea, because--"

"Ahem," Riss raises an eyebrow. (Kathy carved Riss a face that moved when she wasn't looking.) "Kindly don't swing so quickly, you're making my malnourished head spin."

"Sorry Reesie!" Brox plops onto a branch and wiggles in excitement. "I just thought that he'd notice broken alarms right away—you know how obsessive he is about

NOVELLA EXCERPT: BACKYARD by ARCHANA APTE

his house nowadays. So I was thinking we could put rat poison in his food instead! When he's not looking, of course! It would be much easier than figuring out human electronics, although I think Emil has a copy of every users' manual in the house."

Riss chuckles, a low murmur shaking her branches. "Rat poison? I don't think that would kill Bob. Might make him sick is all."

A withering leaf lands on Brox's nose. "Well, I'm sure Emil knows something! Maybe he has human poison too! Or varnish, some sort of toxic cleaner. I dunno. But I like this idea." The young squirrel's face hardens. "Agonizing, hard to figure out in a murder case, simple."

Brox has always been a bit too focused for his own good. He led the Tulip Theft of 2013 despite being too young for such a position, and Riss likes his fire and clarity of focus.

"I think this is the best idea so far," the tree concurs. "Why don't you find Emil and we can iron out the details?"

As he salutes with a "you got it, boss" and scampers off, Riss realizes she needs his quick feet too. A brilliant mind rendered useless by a stationary body can really bring a plant down, you know? It's atrocious. One day Riss will find a way to mobilize plantkind, but until then, she can focus on bringing down Bob McKeon.