

NOVELLA EXCERPT: BACKYARD - Archana Apte

Jenni's comments

- Good first line

Riss is dying: her roots are shriveled, her <sup>bark</sup> branches peeling, and her whole countenance sickly under the autumn sun. Why? Because seventy-year-old Bob McKeon, in his ~~strange~~ <sup>grief</sup>, refuses to <sup>tend</sup> water his apple tree. Apparently ~~the~~ <sup>T</sup> very sight of it triggers painful memories of his beloved wife <sup>Kathy,</sup> planting the sapling, ~~and~~ naming it Riss, and carving "B + K" in the bark like a twelve-year-old, <sup>she'd sold</sup> ~~and~~ selling the apples at the town farmers' market, <sup>every year.</sup> ~~and other such sentimental idiocy.~~ There was ~~one~~ <sup>one</sup> time in June, ~~when~~ Bob, wearing wrinkled overalls and lugging a watering can, opened the screen door, took one look at Riss, and ~~started~~ <sup>bawled</sup> 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.

How does this honor Kathy?

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 <sup>(past tense)</sup> learned what an "emblem" was from Emil the rat, who <sup>(present tense)</sup> hoards human junk in the garage and <sup>(present)</sup> 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 <sup>even</sup> 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 <sup>a neighbor's</sup> ~~someone else's~~ backyard so <sup>they</sup> ~~his neighbors~~ wouldn't see the desecration of Riss. Low blow, Bob McKeon. Low blow.

Be consistent with verb tenses. although these might be fine after I read them again.

Why is Bob only neglecting Riss is not the rest of the plants? Yes Riss is responsible for Kathy's death in some way??

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Anyway. It's September, which means Riss should be fruiting. She's not,  
~~obviously~~ Instead, Riss <sup>watches as</sup> ~~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 <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>lives</sup> ~~lives~~. Thanks to him,  
Riss may never seed an apple tree, and all <sup>the</sup> ~~these~~ <sup>animals</sup> who seek solace in her branches will  
clutch gaping maws in their hearts and faint from too much sun on their heads.

<sup>Don't know what this means.</sup> 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 <sup>built</sup> ~~invented~~ a  
bird feeder that prevents squirrels from eating from it, <sup>Bob also</sup> ~~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 <sup>haha</sup>

"Riss! Hey! You listening or what?"

Brox's chattering snaps the tree out of her thoughts. The squirrel <sup>grins</sup> ~~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--" <sup>These are inside Bob's house. Then they'd have to somehow create carbon monoxide.</sup>

"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 <sup>branches</sup> ~~head~~  
<sup>ache</sup> ~~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

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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.

(They can read?)

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."

- Don't use so many exclamation points

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

They know about murder cases?

"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.

Riss is the main character but Brox has all of the ideas. Give Riss more of a role in what the plan will be. Brox + Emil are just helpers.

Do you want the reader to side with Riss? If so, you have to make her more sympathetic. She's not likable yet.

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~~ <sup>Once</sup> in June when

Why "Riss"?

Move

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 <sup>beneath</sup> behind Riss because she loved the apple tree so much. ~~To further honor his wife's memory,~~ <sup>Because it was too painful</sup> 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. <sup>He explained that</sup> ~~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.

Julie

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wind choice!

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 <sup>were</sup> 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

commz direct address

JULIE

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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."

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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 *to what end?* plantkind, but until then, she can focus on bringing down Bob McKeon.

CLEVER PREMISE: PERSONIFICATION OF RISS. PLEASE ELABORATE: HOW LONG KATNY TENDED RISS. HOW OLD WAS SHE WHEN SHE DIED? HOW DID SHE DIE? (IN THE SECRET GARDEN, MRS. CRAVEN TENDS ROSES IN HER GARDEN AND IS KILLED BY A BRANCH OF A TREE FALLING ON HER.)

Ed

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really like this  
- very clever

powerful beginning

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is this honoring her memory?

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.

\* what is this an example of? how does it connect to Emil?

\* I really like the narrator addressing the reader! It's like somebody reading a book aloud to an audience and occasionally interjecting her own comments.

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negative  
positive  
needs + transition

Brox

her?

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I've read this 3 times & I'm still confused -  
Is this an allegory? If so, I can't clean the inferences -  
Are we to assume things on a literal level where, as  
in Disney, non humans speak & interact? OK but Revenge?

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Riss. Low blow, Bob McKeon. Low blow.

Wonderful  
Authority  
to the  
voice

Too many  
AIDs

Doesn't  
make  
sense

Important - Not all stories are for all people. There are  
different audiences & beginning authors have to understand this  
& become discerning in not reaching particular readers -

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I'm having a difficult time with this story so far  
SORRY—

Sue

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Comment [s1]: watch pronoun usage-sometimes not clear who/what your pronouns refer to

Comment [s2]: Love that last line!

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Comment [s3]: not sure who pronoun refers to

Comment [s4]: sentence is a little long/confusing

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I loved these pages! Great wit; well-written; engaging. Fun characters. Looking forward to reading more. My only advice is to watch your pronoun usage; sometimes it wasn't clear who your pronoun referred to.

Keep writing, Archana!