

Embers of the Juniper

Gloria sat alone in their booth, number 12, the one her and Matthew had shared so many Saturdays prior. The steam from the coffee rose into the sky and evaporated into the early morning sunlight peering through the bay window she was seated against. She added two creamers, one sugar and stirred. As she brought the warm mug to her face, she delicately blew on the liquid sending tiny ripples about the surface, cooling the drink before she enjoyed it. Setting the mug down, she stared at the void across from her and let out a long exhale. The empty seat was a deafening wail.

Evading somber thoughts, she wiped her damp eyes with a napkin and looked about the café at all the patrons laughing and enjoying their eggs and pancakes, talking about their plans and shaking off hangovers. It was just like any other Saturday, but to Gloria, it was the first of many Saturdays where it wasn't. With the trial over, her new life was just beginning and she had to figure out how to calm her nerves and piece it all together. To manage. To survive. To overcome the phantoms of her past.

“Can I get you something to eat, hun?”

Gloria flinched as Harriet startled her out of her musings. Glancing over at the head of the table, her eyes met Harriet, an elderly woman, hair in an old-fashioned beehive and holding a carafe of coffee. “Oh, no, I am good with just the coffee. Thank you, Harriet.”

She topped off Gloria's coffee, nonetheless, adding warmth to her mug. As she retracted the carafe, she noticed the damp, half torn napkins strewn about the table, “long morning, eh?” She said with grit behind her statement.

“Yeah...” replied Gloria, through a forced smile, pausing between words to hold the next wave of tears at bay. “...it will be.”

They both painfully stared at each other in silence, the air thick with unease.

Harriet broke the stillness. “Well, if you need anything...” Her voice faded into the background as she took her services to the next table before Gloria could even mutter a disjointed “thanks”.

The residents of Juniper had long known the struggle Gloria was going through. Her story traveled from mouth to mouth like wildfire. A few tried to help, some kept their distance, but most, like Harriet, managed to keep things as normal as possible. The thought of going and continuing to go through what she had caused a riffle in the community. The trial was at the center of it all, stoking the flames of their small town, burning incessantly with little reprieve. Especially for Gloria.

Visitors knew of the events through what they had heard and seen in the media, but they weren't concerned about the aftereffects, no, they were mainly there for the action. They saw the smoke signals and ran to the blaze to be a part of something rare in those parts, to be a living element of history. Big city types made the pilgrimage to the high dessert to be a part of something they didn't understand, agitating ashes that should have stayed relatively dormant. To have those tales of “I was there when...”

Leeches.

The man in the booth next to Gloria was scanning the Oregonian and she happened to catch the headline as he raised the newspaper to read it for himself. “From Outcast to Outlaw”

was written in bold lettering across the header of the main page. That was all that she needed to see; it was enough to tell her one thing: Joel had been found guilty.

For the last 3 weeks, Gloria had been stuffed in a cramped courtroom watching as a handful of people picked apart her life and dismantled Juniper's small-town persona. What was once barely a name on a map had drawn national attention. Joel, a boy, not yet 18, spotted by a group of kids running from a burning barn while screams of terror were engulfed in flames, was being charged with murder. Murder. A word that hadn't been murmured in Juniper in decades.

Matthew's body was found charred and barely recognizable after the fire was contained. The local law enforcement hadn't seen a sight like that in years and had to call backup to begin to assess the scene. Aside from the body, there was only a testimony of the Sheriff's son's witnessing Joel running from the scene amidst the horrendous screams coming from the intense blaze. And a Zippo lighter. The Zippo lighter most of the town knew Joel for. The same Zippo Joel swore he had lost days prior.

The prosecution painted Joel as a thug, a schoolyard bully, who had taken his antics one step too far. He had cornered Matthew in his solemn place, just under the grand Juniper tree that sat on the hill overlooking town, tied him to a pole, beat him and set him ablaze. Allegedly, of course. The defense pleaded that Matthew hadn't started the fire, in fact, he only went to confront Matthew about a prior incident and left before the fire even started. Allegedly, of course.

A back and forth that made it difficult for Matthew to tread in without drowning.

Gloria exited the courtroom before the final verdict. It didn't matter to her. Either way, her son wasn't coming back. She only went to the trial for some sort of closure and she wasn't even sure she got that out of it.

Upon realizing the news, a range of emotions filled Gloria. On the one hand, she felt redemption. Redemption that the kid who had put her son through so much torture was getting his just rewards. Redemption that an entire family, who had been a stain on the town's good nature, was being held responsible for generations of bad deeds. A scar on the town was finally beginning to heal. But she also felt sadness. A boy, the same age as her son would also know what it's like to lose his life. He will have to spend the rest of his existence with his conscience searing at the back of his mind, plagued by a perpetual "what if". Living with his decisions, the lifelong weight he will carry would certainly be unbearable.

Gloria finished her coffee with one last lukewarm gulp and left a five-dollar bill on the table for Harriet. She put on her coat, meandered past the oblivious patrons, exited the diner and began to walk to her car. Before she entered her car, she glanced up at the ridge. It remained as it always has, an idol overlooking the city, the sun blessing it with its rays, only now, its charred remains left it black and desolate. Juni, the ancient tree the town was named after, still stood prominent, keeping a watchful eye on the settlement below, guarding her city like a proud mother tending her children.

The drive was only a short jaunt north of the diner. Gloria pulled into the dirt lot and put the car in park at the basin of Juni's bluff. Dust filled the air as she exited the vehicle. The hike, one she's taken so many times before, had gotten harder as she aged, but she figured this would probably be the last time she would make the trek.

She gathered herself enough to walk the switchbacks, past the bushes, over a few rocks and roots until she got to the clearing at the apex. The ground leveled from decades of traffic from all walks of life with benches outlining the plateau that embrace Juni in a warm hug. Gloria sat on one of them and closed her eyes. She let her senses take over and listened to the sound of the birds and the wind rustling the branches. She felt that same wind swirl a crisp breeze past her face, kissing her cheek. She smelled Juni. That familiar hint of needles and Juniper. The smell only a few people recognize. Now tainted by slag and char.

She opened her eyes and looked at where the old cabin used to be. An ashy tomb of the old world that once sheltered so many hopes and dreams, so many stories and fantasies, writings and laughter. Generations of residents with lifelong tales haunted its scorched skeleton. An old cabin that slanted to one side and had nails poking from random joints. Juni's companion on the hill. The cabin where Gloria had her first kiss. The cabin where Gloria had her first beer. The same cabin that Matthew had adopted as his own, the one he spent so many days experiencing much as she had.

All that remained was the smell of death and lost memories. And a physical representation of both.

A pile of flowers, balloons, stuffed animals and writings piled up around the scene. Gloria was oddly perplexed by that notion. Of course, she enjoyed the support, but where was all this validation when her son desperately needed it? Where were all these people when Matthew needed them?

Gloria closed her eyes again and thought back to the night she was told about Matthew's death and how there was no one there to console her. She remembered running to his room

crying uncontrollably. She remembered desperately cleaning his room, making it perfect for him, just as he liked it and finding the journal under his bed. She remembered her tears staining the pages as she opened the book to read into his life.

The first page was a rubbing of her initials she had put into the trunk of Juni when she was younger. She recalled the day she showed Matthew. It was their first walk up to the bluff. She told him all about the myth of Juni and how she oversaw the town and kept them protected and how, by etching your name in the trunk, it would immortalize you forever. That was one of her favorite days.

She continued to thumb through pages of poems and writings about life and stories about Juni and the town, his friends and family. He would draw pictures of flowers and talk about his days at school and girls he was fond of. But, as the pages went on, they seemed to get darker. Pages about bullies and not feeling important, self-consciousness and not fitting in, suicide and wanting it to be over.

Then, Gloria discovered the last page:

It's nearly 4am.

I've spent the better part of an hour crying uncontrollably alone in my room.

I am broken.

I am in a deep hole that I fear I cannot get out of. I've been here before a couple of times. I've always learned to cope. To suppress. To keep a smile on.

I fear this time is different.

I fear I can't survive this one.

If I am going down, this time, I am taking someone with me.

Joel has been insistent lately. The tortures have gotten worse and more physical. They've gone from verbal harassments when we were younger to physical harm as we have gotten older. It's time he gets what he deserves for a change. It's time he suffered.

If I can lure him to the barn and pull it off, everyone wins.

Two birds, one stone.

She sat in the living room in front of the fire with the moleskin journal opened to that page over her knee. By now, she had read it about a half dozen times over a few glasses of wine and she found herself facing a moral crossroad. "If I were to turn this in," she thought to herself, "I can save this poor child's life. I know he's innocent; he knows he's innocent." She paused and watched the fire a little longer thinking about how her son felt in that blaze and what led him to that moment. "However, if no one knows about this book, then Joel will finally be held accountable for what he did to my son and countless other children over the years. Retribution for a life of agony."

Indecision contorted her conscience as she finished the bottle of wine and opened another.

"Two birds, one stone," she said out loud to the vacant living room.

The flames grew white hot as the black smoke filled her living room. The smell of melting leather and burning paper met her nostrils. Chills ran down her spine as she realized what she had done, but she had made her choice, there was no going back now.

She opened her eyes again, sitting on the bench, staring at the pile of condolences. “Would they have put all of this there had they known the truth? Would they have cared?” She thought to herself. If she wouldn’t have done what she did, Joel could be free to torment someone else. She’d be forced to watch another mother go through this. In Gloria’s mind, Joel was guilty regardless. It was time he felt justice for his transgressions.

She would never forget that page. She would never forget her choice.

Looking up at Juni and then down at her tattered trunk where hundreds of kids had etched their names into it, she wandered around the base a few times scanning up and down a few times until she stopped and found it.

She had carved “GW” in there so many years ago, just as everyone else had. It was a little overgrown and faded, but still visible. But there was something unusual. Next to her initials was a fresh set of carvings. “MW”.

Matthew.

He may be gone, but his memory will remain forever.

Juni, the large Juniper, who some estimate to be hundreds of years old, stands proud. She may be cock-eyed, arthritic and warped, but she is wise. She is ethereal. She has seen the land evolve and will continue to see it evolve long after Gloria’s existence. Her secrets are vast and her knowledge is endless. She remains eternally, through the weather and the fires, overlooking her little town and those souls living within.

Like a mother watching over her children.