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The Ancient Ones

Beverly Sellers

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THE ANCIENT ONES

Beverly Sellers

THEY COME WHEN LEAVES GIVE WAY IN NOVEMBER – my mother’s elderly aunts, both beyond the grief that encircles our house. One smaller with sloping shoulders, drawn-back hair that frames a face creased with lines and knowing eyes. The other taller, erect, with pensive eyes beneath a high forehead, dark hair pinched in a knot at the back of her neck. Each dressed in black crepe with matching lace on collars; their shoes black too – black as tar – with low stacked heels and shoe strings laced up on top, the kind worn by those their age.

Their purpose? A death – my mother’s youngest sister; a member of my family since her own mother’s death years before. Last week she turned nineteen... just nineteen. So sudden, her death. An accident.

In times of loss, women in rural communities appear armed with an ability to cook and quote scripture. I hear one say to other in the kitchen “She’s gone to meet Jesus.” They speak in whispers as they move bowls of cream potatoes, English peas, and fried chicken onto the round table there in the kitchen; wipe hands on flour-cloth aprons and move back to the sink. Wash . . . dry . . . wash . . . dry. Back and forth they go. Put food out; take food up.

Men in wool gabardine suits with awkward-fitting ties gather in the front yard grouped in circles like men do after Sunday preaching or funeral services. Unlike their wives, they talk in deep-toned whispers, laughing low like they don’t want anyone else to hear.

Mourners enter the living room of our house, offer condolences. Women weep as they pass the open casket, turn to embrace another, say a word . . . smile slightly. They put their names in a book on a table. It seems strange to me – a child. I am six, going on seven.

Two women – one on each side of my Momma – enter from the next room. They support her as she moves towards the casket. Her face reflects more sadness than I have known; her eyes are red, filled with tears. I watch – afraid – but do not speak. Unknown to me, a new baby will join our family soon when Momma goes to the hospital to pick it out. For now, she returns to bed. I do not want to go to the casket and do not want to be led there. The young one lies so still.

In the kitchen a woman says, “She’s home.” I am not sure what that means. Her home is here . . . here with us, her family. What does that mean?

They will know, the ancient ones, my mother’s elderly aunts. They have wisdom and can sense what is what. I go to find them.

“Come here,” the straight-back one says.

The other one fiddles inside her crocheted purse and pulls out a stick of gum in a yellow wrapper and presses it into my hand.

"Which of your Momma's girls are you?" the older one asks, her hands folded in her lap.

"Becky," I answer.

"Ah, Becky," repeats the straight-back one. "You favor your Momma, child."

The older one complains, "My feet hurt. Weather's going to change."

"Yes, norther's coming. Tomorrow."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"We know. We Know."

"Look at her eyes," the older says to the other. They gaze into my eyes as if they are searching for something lost.

"She's special – her Momma's eyes."

"Mercy me, yes. Her Momma's eyes."

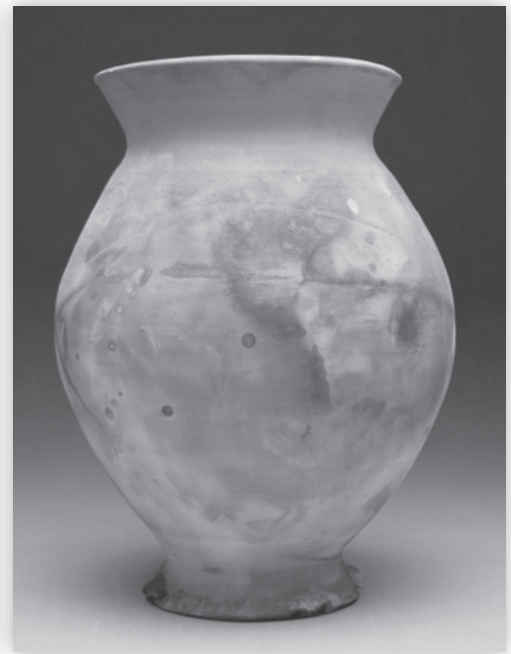
"Make a wish, child."

"A wish?"

IRON Tomiko Ueda



UNTITLED Tomiko Ueda



"Yes, a wish."

I close my eyes then open them.

"Did you make a wish?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, that's it. It will come true."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"We know. We know."

The straight-back one cups my chin in her hand, a hand with purple veins like worms from the ground. She looks at me a long time.

"Do not forget your family, child. Do not forget where you come from. Will you remember?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good, child. Good. She says and drops her hand from my chin. "You may go."

I find my cousins in the tree swing in the front yard.

The talcum from the old ones lingers in my nose as I turn to see them on the front porch. They wave. Then, I see them no more.

They knew. They knew. I am not afraid, anymore.

ABANDONED

Molly Boyce

time in a bottle

retelling my life,

washed up by a storm

found lying on far shores

now for the whole world to see

my fond collection of sand

in abandoned shells

GUARDA ESPIRITUS JARS Eunice Bridges

