

A Forest

by John Riley

Her awake dreams were chains of gold and diamonds, thick cypresses and roses that showered down on her. Her sleep dreams were full of the cold passion a fox feels for the hen. They buzzed like millions of flies. Inside her sleep dreams she was a pilgrim who had lost direction. Everything mattered and nothing was childish. She woke mornings with no will to live a bold life. Her awake dreams murmured like a new child. She rode through sleepless nights like an egg on a velvet spoon and at first light rolled out of bed convinced life was worth living.

She wore lime fingernail polish, blue on her toes, and her father was dying of liver disease in a room with dust on the windows. The arrangements for his care had been haphazard. He was a proud man, and sly, and thought strongly he should die in his house. A nurse checked in but he was often alone. When the pain rolled across his face she tried to stand straight but always ended up turning away. She hated his pain so much sometimes she hated him. Shakespearean bile clumped in her throat.

She could tell him about her night dreams but when she tried to tell him about her awake dreams the words twisted into lies. Telling him the truth was out of her reach. She stacked up the images in her mind and tried to play them straight but they tilted like a gambler's luck. She wanted him to know about her awake dreams. If that door was opened his death wouldn't leave her fragmented.

In the final days his skin was the color of bananas. His torso had shriveled. The sheets on the bed were yellowish too and she thought he was fading away. She could hold his hand and thought that was encouraging even if it made blood pump through her wrist.

On his last night she made one more effort. She hadn't been

sleeping. Her mind was full of fresh air and swung like a bee over clover. She held his hand in one of hers and with the other rubbed his cold ear. That's where the passage way is she thought and aimed her words there directly. But with a blast the lies rushed to the front. Her whispers came out as buzzes. Scampered into his ear like bugs. Truth was too far in the rear she realized, and instead of telling him about roses and rides and soft, dark trees her words twisted and writhed until everything she said wiggled into "I love you, Daddy."

