

I GROW OLD, I GROW OLD

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Kingfishers of a Feather

AFTER CYRIL'S SECOND AND FATAL heart attack, Ruth returned to her childhood home across the causeway, which had been built decades after she left the north shore. Every morning, even ones shrouded in fog, she found her cane, which, of course, Prune, her widowed sister, had half hidden, and slowly walked to the side of the gravel spit most protected from the ocean winds. She sipped a thermos of Earl Grey tea, munched arrowroots and, fog permitting, watched a pair of kingfishers perched on low branches or poles in the water. If she was lucky, they swooped over the choppy water in crested flashes of blue and white, a red patch smudged across the female's breast. Prune, who was eight years younger, her Old Age Pension cheques not yet started, teased that only ancient people used canes.

"But, we ... sorry, *I* am old," replied Ruth, which Prune called folderol; nobody need feel elderly nowadays, at least not until they were packed off to nursing homes. Prune said nobody on the north shore would send a relative to a nursing home. Not yet, Ruth silently predicted. Ruth enjoyed being old and back home, even though this dilapidated house hadn't been her home for half a century. Sheep no longer grazed on the pasture that sloped to the channel and Prune had raised a family, now scattered around the globe, in their mother's house, where as a girl Ruth had unthinkingly assumed she'd raise hers. She mourned Cyril, they'd had a good marriage—her canny father had said Cyril would always be a good provider, a strong endorsement from someone who'd reached manhood during the depression—but knew if Cyril were still alive she'd be confined in that Ontario gated community. Even its river seemed trapped; you could row from one shore to the other in less than a minute.

Ruth's real first name was Alcyone, her mother's choice, but pronounced pretentious by Ruth's grandmother, who never warmed to her son's wife, a wisp judged too flighty for farming. Choosing a name from Greek mythology instead of a down-to-earth family or biblical name reeked of instability, perhaps blasphemy. Ruth's dreamy mother, burdened by housework, farm work, church socials and loneliness, had succumbed and used Ruth, naming the children who followed: Matthew, buried in a Belgium war grave, Luke, who'd left for the Boston states, and finally Prunella, a family name imported from Kent by forgotten pioneers. Ruth's mother died not long after Ruth left with Cyril for his engineering job in northern Ontario's mines, her lovely loving letters addressed to Mrs. Alcyone McClellan. That amused Cyril; his reaction shamed Ruth.

She'd waved desperately as the train left, but Cyril, leaning out the window, muttered a good-natured good riddance and confidently predicted they'd build a fine life. By his lights, and half of Ruth's, they did, although she shuttled reluctantly from Sudbury to Thompson to Calgary to Toronto, even once to northern Chile, loving the pelicans that streamed along its desert coastline, and finally to a gated community bounded by oceanless Ontario farmland, where they'd half shared his retirement years. He golfed, she gardened. Cyril fancied himself a stout oak; Ruth believed that constantly uprooted oaks wither.

Her first love, over a half-century before, had been Martin, only thirteen, but ahead of Ruth because he'd skipped two grades. With the seriousness Ruth cherished he explained the origin of her odd first name. His class was studying Greek myths and he loved telling her about Hector and Achilles' heel. "There's a lesson in every one of them, especially Narcissus for me," he earnestly said. His teacher had lent him a book with myths not found in his textbook, which he hid from his parents, in case myths were sinful. Alcyone, daughter of the god of the winds, had flung herself into the sea because her husband Ceyx drowned; why and how he'd drowned Ruth no longer remembered. Alcyone's devotion stirred the indifferent gods' compassion; they transformed Alcyone and Ceyx into kingfishers.

Martin always insisted that, of course, there is only one God. The mythical gods—they're metaphors, he explained, although, of course, Ruth knew that already—to ensure their loving kingfishers and their descendants would prosper, ordered the winds to cease blowing for a fortnight; that's what the English called two weeks, Martin explained, seven days before and after the winter solstice. That, he said, was when the kingfishers mate on the ocean. His religion and Ruth's naïvety did not easily accommodate speculation about sex. Breeding kingfishers provoked blushes.

Ruth's mother had loved Martin, fearing his religion's narrow vise would crush his curiosity. "If he could escape to where he'd learn about things as beautiful as in his Bible, Martin could be an artist," she'd say sorrowfully. Her mother-in-law gibed that only an erratic woman would think to view a boy through the reflections of her own eyeglasses. Gifted boys, if nominated by God, proudly chose preaching over frivolity.

Ruth's mother respected Cyril, even though she feared his ambition would rip Ruth from the north shore, but Cyril was an engineer's engineer. Poetry, which Ruth's grandmother condemned as affectation, was a stranger to him. This made him foreign to Ruth. As the years conveyed her from bride to mother to school trustee to widowhood, she wished she'd remained an Alcyone. Her father, whose elbow bent reluctantly after being kicked by a balky crankshaft, had been right when he'd said lovingly, but with a hint of warning, "Ruth, you're your mother's daughter."

One morning Prune hid Ruth's cane, ordered her to don her Sunday best, and be in the car in half an hour, which Ruth resented on the stifling drive. Prune shushed her and herded her into a rural church. "That's his wife," said Prune, pointing to a solid woman. Whose wife? Oh! Martin! Seated beside the minister behind the pulpit. A half-century had diminished him: his red hair was thin and white, his wiry strength frail, his once strong hands trembled slightly. He remained seated during the hymns and when he rose to preach his small voice could barely be heard in the back pews. But it was heard; oh, how it was heard. Everyone leaned forward. No one rustled a sleeve or a Bible's page. He preached beautifully.

When he finished, Prune whispered that the minister resented Martin's infrequent forays into the pulpit because attendance dou-

bled. Martin no longer preached new sermons, relying on notes in boxes accumulated over five decades. As Martin and the minister moved down the aisle to the door to shake hands with departing worshippers, Prune whispered that elderly parishioners could still cite bits of sermons that he'd preached on days special to them.

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," Ruth whispered to Prune and moved forward to shake Martin's hand. "I very much enjoyed your sermon, Reverend Steward," she said.

"How long has it been, Alcyone?" Martin asked, both his veined hands holding hers. Ruth was shocked; his question was not rhetorical; he no longer preached fresh sermons because his sputtering brain denied him that facility. He really was wondering if he hadn't seen her for fifty years, thirty, ten, perhaps last Sunday.

"Alcyone? What an odd, I mean, lovely name," said Martin's wife.

"Too beautiful a name for here," said Martin. Regretfully? Indifferently? Addled? Not Martin. No, not Martin. Surely, even life couldn't be cruel enough to douse Ruth's firebrand.

"The firebrand," his teachers had snickered, mocking his intensity, red hair and religious fervour. How had this remnant of her Martin managed to preach so magnificently?

After lunch the sisters walked arm-in-arm to the spit, where they sat on a rock, vainly waiting for the kingfishers. Ruth confessed she sometimes wished she shared Martin's steady faith; she feared becoming nothing.

"He doesn't believe a word he preaches," Prune laughed.

Ruth was shocked. "Of course he does. We don't, but you can't fake his passion. Yes, yes, there's a portion of vanity, always was, in Martin. But he believes what he preaches."

"Only an old girlfriend could believe such folderol," teased Prune.

"Then why was the church packed? Why did you go?"

"His preaching wafts me back like ice cream on my birthday."

Prune's endocrinologist had forbidden sweets. Did Prune mean to imply that Martin's enticing preaching was unhealthy?

Her grandson drove Martha over to visit Prune and Ruth, but waited in the car, overlooking the beach where the tide clattered stones. The three women chatted, circling something loathsome Martha desperately wanted to say. Emotions flitted across her puffy face. A preacher's wife who so often exposed her emotions must have created more than a few problems for Martin, thought Ruth. Martha clearly wanted to ask a favour she feared receiving. Her inability to say what she'd come for became embarrassing, then irritating, and after a third cup of tea was refused Prune walked Martha to the car. From the veranda Ruth watched unwelcome words trickle past Martha's lips. Prune hugged Martha and the grandson gunned off with Martha barely aboard.

"Martha asked if you'd visit Martin from time to time, by which she means frequently," Prune announced. "She says his memory's not what it was, her way of admitting he's forgotten most things. But not you. He remembers Alcyone. Sunday released a tide of memories. Martha hopes more visits will summon more."

"Why couldn't she just ask me herself?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, Ruth. Cyril was only your husband; Martin's her life."

Prune believed Martha loved Martin so fervently that she'd hack off an arm to grant him snatches of happy memories as his life sputtered to its close. She'd willingly gulp the bitterness of knowing that her constant comfort beckoned fewer blushes or memories than a brief handshake with a pretentiously named girl from high school.

"Well, you and Martha are kingfishers of a feather," chuckled Prune.

"Martin's not a hypocrite."

"Of course not. He practises what he preaches. He just doesn't believe it."

"Prune, you're your father's daughter," Ruth replied, and Prune smiled at Ruth's complaint, considering it a compliment.

Martha never lingered with Ruth and Martin. She'd leave a pitcher of water, a pot of tea, a few arrowroots after she'd learned about what Prune called Ruth's addiction, and bustle out, although not far, perhaps to the kitchen, perhaps knitting, perhaps, Ruth suspected, for a forlorn weep. Martha's reluctance to witness Martin's joy prevented her from staying; her need to be assured he was

happy prevented her from straying too far. She returned periodically to freshen the tea, bring more arrowroots and quickly kiss Martin on his forehead, hurt that her intrusion irritated him, particularly if he was summoning poems he and Ruth had been forced to learn at school. They prompted each other, delighted by the treasures they dredged up. Martin loved declaiming:

Oh, magic sleep! O comfortable bird
That broodes o'er the troubled sea of the mind
Till it is hushed and smooth.

Ruth's favourite was: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." How times change, she thought. A teacher who taught students biblical verses nowadays would find herself before a Human Rights Commission.

One day Martha took her arm and confessed she loved that verse about charity too. Apparently, Martha intermittently eavesdropped, or perhaps had overheard while bringing more arrowroots.

"My favourite is: 'A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach in the spirit'," confided Martha.

Why was Martha blushing?

Prune said that Martin had always preached from a small page, upon which he'd jotted a few points. Parishioners often asked for copies but Martin refused, saying his notes were indecipherable and, alas, preaching is to be heard, not read. A sermon on paper's a dry dreary thing. Dry dreary things are sterile.

Ruth said that was false modesty, sure that she'd hear Martin's voice in her head if she read one of his sermons. After all, she could still hear so many things he'd explained during her girlhood.

Although Martin's memory retained only a small portion of remembrance of things recently past, some distant memories seemed chiselled into his brain. Not all; many of his memories about their teenaged years were rent, although Ruth learned that some of the tears were in her own memory. Amid the rags were garments of astonishing clarity. He reminded Ruth of how Ceyx, the mythical

Alcyone's husband, had drowned, and Ruth instantly recalled the afternoon he'd first recounted Ceyx' death. Ceyx' brother had died and, fearing hostile gods, he'd consulted an oracle. Alcyone, the daughter of the god of winds, begged her husband not to leave, knowing how impossible furious gales are to tame. He was adamant and she begged to sail with him, dreading her lonely fears more than gales.

Martin's memory sometimes deserted him here, but he struggled on, regained access to his boyhood, and Ruth believed that over many tellings she heard the whole myth and its variations: the rebellious gale, the thunder's defiant roar, the swelling sea, shoals, lightning illuminating the black skies, terror, Ceyx thinking of only Alcyone, thankful she was safely ashore, the mast breaking, water surging over the rudderless ship, Ceyx' vain cries for help and, as he lost his grip on a plank, his pleas to the waves to bear his body to Alcyone for burial.

Slowly—Ruth wept—the sea bore Ceyx to Alcyone, who leapt onto a barrier, enfolding his body in her arms, which had become wings, trying to kiss him with her beak. Soon beak kissed beak. Love had transformed them into kingfishers, crested, blue and white, the female with a red patch on her white breast.

Ruth began to believe that Martha and she might become fast friends, particularly after Martha gave Ruth a mimeographed ill-bound book containing a dozen of Martin's sermons, saying, "Prune's not a believer, but you are."

"I thought Martin preached from notes," said Ruth, clutching the sermons gratefully and not wanting to soil Martha's generosity by confessing she believed less than even Prune.

"I prodded, well, maybe nagged's the right word, Martin to gather his notes after he retired," replied Martha. Her glow rendered this solid greying serious woman briefly beautiful, giddily youthful.

Visits to Martin kick-started Ruth's memory. Her black cane was gnarled, not unlike the cane of Mrs. Matheson, who'd been what was called crippled in Ruth's childhood. Later, long after Mrs. Matheson had passed away, she'd have been called handicapped

and now she'd be called differently abled. The community meant no malice by calling her a cripple and would have readily admitted Mrs. Matheson was differently abled. They sought her teacup and palm readings, but mostly her jolly, yet acerbic, counsel. She'd been a polio victim, a disease now eradicated. She'd read Ruth's teacup a few days before Cyril's proposal. Prune said teacup leaves weren't worth the water to soak them. Ruth remembered only one prophecy Mrs. Matheson found written in her palm: you will travel great distances to find yourself at home.

Ruth interrupted Martin's joyful regaling of a high school oratorical contest to ask about her favourite of his sermons. He'd preached on the biblical verse: "He that endureth to the end shall be saved." Surely, a jogging of his memory might retrieve images of his manhood as beloved shepherd of his flock. No! He slumped sullenly in his rocking chair. Perhaps more jogging might help. She read him a verse on which he'd based another sermon: "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

He abruptly ordered her to shut up. "I haven't believed for ... for ... for longer than I can remember."

Her Martin couldn't have said that.

"Why did you continue preaching?"

He was silent; perhaps he didn't recall, perhaps the decades of struggle were too arduous to recall, perhaps his reasons had changed so often that recalling them baffled him. "For years I condemned myself for loving the sound of my own voice. I did. But that bauble was easily renounced."

Again he fell silent. Ruth desperately wanted to return to innocent oratorical contests, but dared not.

"My sermons gave people courage. And they were beautiful. But I didn't believe a single word."

Surely, this was senility, not Ruth's Martin, speaking.

"A wholesome tongue is a tree of life: but perverseness therein is a breach of the spirit," Martha screamed. His confession of disbelief stunned her and her furious spatula was poised to strike him. "All that work, my wrists and arms ached, all that work, and for what: a hypocrite! You're what St. Paul loathed, a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal." She repeated her indictment, lapsing into choking snorts and gasps, spitting out: wrists, perverse, sounding brass, tinkling cymbals.

Martin struggled with his memory, perhaps to mount a defence. Martha, temporarily calm, asked Ruth to leave. Martin wasn't at his best today; the rain was fraying everyone's nerves. As Ruth gathered her scarf, coat, boots and cane, Martin replied feebly, "My every word was drenched in charity, by which St. Paul meant love. I was never a tinkling cymbal."

Martha's spatula struck his mouth.

As she drove away, Ruth wondered what Martha's aching wrists meant, but decided not to ask Prune. Describing Martha's pain seemed brutal.

Shortly after, Martha moved Martin to a nursing home; Ruth was surprised that Prune uttered no criticism, saying only that Martha had suddenly declined, which was true. When Ruth visited Martin, a receptionist asked her to wait until the Reverend Steward's wife left, but Martha never left before visiting hours closed.

"She spends the whole time on her knees praying," reported the amused young receptionist, and told Ruth she'd find the modern metal canes way better than her old gnarled stick.

A few months after Martin left for the nursing home, Martha, despite her growing frailty, managed to douse the fire that swept through her basement before it caused real damage. She lost only a few bits of furniture that would have gone to the dump sooner or later and, Prune said, boxes and boxes of Martin's sermons.

"Most of the sermons were only notes," said Ruth.

"No, they'd all been typed up," replied Prune.

"Martha torched them! That's vandalism."

"Don't prattle about things beyond your understanding," ordered Prune sharply, so angry she wouldn't explain for two days. She was, indeed, her father's daughter.

During the early years of Martin's retirement, Prune explained, arthritic Martha had dragged boxes of notes up to her kitchen. She'd bought a small tape recorder and cajoled Martin into preaching into it from his notes, after which she typed the sermons, later seeking a publisher. They gently explained, to her disbelief, that

the market for sermons, if it ever existed, was small and dwindling. In the end Martha and some volunteers mimeographed a dozen favourites, bound them with glue and staples, and sold them at church benefits.

"Martha taught herself to type in her sixties. She refused to buy an electric typewriter, too expensive. Fortunately, the commercial teacher lent her one from the high school during vacations. Martin was right," explained Prune.

"Right?"

"On the page his sermons are sterile."

"They are not!" protested Ruth, infuriated that Prune might have a point.

Ruth (alone except for Prune) and Martha (her children and grandchildren clustered about her) stood on opposing sides of the grave during Martin's burial. The minister had preached on one of Martin's favourite biblical verses: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." How beautiful, everyone said, but not Ruth, who wondered if Martha was slyly suggesting to her community that Martin had been a tinkling cymbal. Perhaps not; perhaps Martha had accepted Martin's explanation that love had induced him to preach what a community, withering because of the depression, a world war, the Korean war, depleted fishing stocks, rocky fields, and children taking off for Alberta oil fields, needed for sustenance.

Or perhaps Martha's grief needed the solace of the beautiful words her beloved husband would never again preach.

Ruth sat on the spit alone, wondering if the swift emotions sweeping through her were the same as those she'd observed mesmerize her mother so thoroughly that one time she forgot to feed the chickens.

A female kingfisher, followed by a male, swooped by. "People and sermons are mirages," she cried to them, hoping the breeze would not batter her words. "Only you kingfishers are real. Remember Greek gods created you. They created you so astonishingly beautiful."