

SINGLE BLACK ROSES

Richard Rimrodt

I can tell Jill's going to say something even as I'm hoping I'm wrong.

“So what's going on with the single black roses?” she asks over the top of her double chocolate chip Frappucino.

We're sitting at our usual outside, post-workout table at the Starbucks on Tamami south of Bonita Beach Road. It's a Friday morning ritual we started over a year ago after finishing at the gym.

Rather than meet Jill's steady gaze, I fiddle around trying to get the top off my Mocha. While I realize it probably seems somewhat oxymoronic to spend an hour and a half at the gym three times a week and then head to Starbucks, we do limit ourselves only to Fridays. I hope that doesn't say something bad about us.

“Morgan, you got another one, didn't you? When?”

“A couple of days ago,” I acknowledge reluctantly.

“Morgan! So how many is this?”

“Four, maybe five.”

“The same single black rose, stuck beneath your windshield wiper?”

I nod, wishing Jill would stop, but knowing she won't. It isn't like this is our first conversation on the subject. I'm beginning to wish I'd never told her.

“Still no note, no card, no indication who's leaving them?”

I shake my head. “Nothing. It’s always the same.” To avoid her hostile glare, I glance toward the parking lot where two older guys in shorts and T-shirts have stopped to check out Jill’s caramel brown Porsche Carrera convertible setting in the bright sunlight with the top down. The car’s spotless and shiny, standing in sharp contrast to my six-year-old Kia parked next to it which is badly in need of a wash.

“You haven’t called the sheriff, have you?”

“What would I tell them?”

“You tell them some pervert’s leaving these stupid roses on your windshield and you want them to investigate. They need to find out who’s doing this.”

“You don’t know it’s a pervert, or even a guy.”

“Morgan, please stop fooling around,” Jill pleads. “Some guy’s harassing you. I know you. You’re just going to wait ‘til it gets worse and something awful happens, right? You’re a single woman, living alone. Somebody’s putting black roses under your wiper blade so you’ll be sure to see them. You don’t think that’s a little strange?”

“They’re just roses.”

“They’re black roses!”

“Okay, they’re black roses. So what? Why are you making it sound so sinister?”

“Because,” Jill says as her finger tips inadvertently trace the faint residue of a scar which trails along her jaw line from just below her ear nearly to her throat. Leaning forward, she adds with an increased note of concern, “I don’t understand why you’re not more bothered by this.”

“Because it’s just a simple mystery, nothing more.”

“Morgan, it’s not a simple mystery.”

“Trust me, some day it’ll all become clear,” I insist. “No one’s been hurt. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Maybe not yet,” Jill persists. Pausing, she adds in her take no prisoners, don’t screw with me tone, “You have to call the sheriff.”

“And tell them what, exactly?” I repeat.

“For starters, how about you suggest they begin an investigation, check all the flower shops in the area, see if someone’s been buying single black roses.”

Can it be that when you have money you become less trusting? Besides the Porsche, I know Jill lives in a beautifully landscaped two plus million dollar high rise beach house on Little Hickory Island with a pool overlooking the Gulf and a stand of magnificent sentinel palms guarding the front. I drive by it every time I come to Bonita. She, for sure, has a heck of a lot more money than me.

Both of us live alone, more or less. My husband, really my ex-husband, moved back to Minneapolis last year. I haven’t seen him in over fifteen months. I can honestly say I don’t miss him. Jill’s husband, his name’s Don, flies in and out two or three times a week on his own plane, usually spending Tuesday or Wednesday nights and the odd weekend at the beach house. I have no idea what he does, exactly, having only met him once. I think he’s in finance or investing or something. Jill’s never been completely clear, and I don’t pry. I also think he’s a good dozen or more years older than she is, but I’ve never asked about that either.

Jill looks like she “belongs” with the Porsche, the beach house, and all the other trappings of her life. I’d use air quotes, but this is an inside thought which, admittedly, is rare for me. Her carefully highlighted blond hair is just the right length to be worn down or in a pony tail. Her

clothes, or at least the ones I see, are always the latest coordinated spandex workout gear, designed to flatter your shape and keep you comfortable while you're grunting and sweating. I, on the other hand, go in more for old T-shirts and relaxed-fit shorts.

"Has your management company checked the security cameras?" Jill asks.

"We don't have security cameras."

"You're kidding! Can you see your car from your condo?"

"No. It's an open parking lot. My unit overlooks the ponds which when I bought seemed like a better view. And besides, what do you want me to do, sit at my window all night until it happens again? Sometimes it's days or even a couple of weeks. There's no pattern."

"We'll install some cameras," Jill says. "I can call our security guys and get it put together in a couple of days."

"Are you crazy? I still don't understand why you're making this into such a big deal."

"Morgan, I'm concerned about the threat level."

"Threat level? What's so threatening about a single black rose?"

Jill again fingers the scar which I've never noticed until now.

"Maybe you should think about moving."

"Jill, I'm not going to move."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Are you kidding?"

Jill leans forward. "I take it that's a no."

"A gun. Really?"

"Morgan, this is Florida. Everyone has a gun."

“No. No guns.”

“We’ll get you a gun. I’ll take you to the range and teach you to shoot.”

“No.”

“Then what’re you going to do?”

“I’m hoping that whoever’s doing this will eventually get tired and just go away.” “You’ve got to be kidding! Don will be here tonight. I’m going to talk to him, see what he says. Maybe he knows someone who can help. I still think we should get our security people involved.”

All I can do is shake my head and concentrate on the dredges of chocolate in the bottom of my paper cup. Finally, I say, “Jill, I don’t have the budget for private security. I’m sorry.”

The two older guys who had been admiring Jill’s car have taken the table across from us and are earnestly talking politics and Washington over a pair of cappuccinos. They don’t seem particularly happy.

Before I can stop her, Jill calls up her best smile and says, “Excuse me, can you help us? We’ve got a bit of a problem and we’re wondering if you might have some suggestions.”

“Yeah, sure” the one on Jill’s side responds eagerly. “What’s going on?”

Jill briefly describes what’s been happening with the single black roses. They look immediately toward me, leaving me feeling more defenseless than I had when I first started finding the roses. Jill quickly finishes by adding she’d call the sheriff. “Morgan doesn’t think it would do any good.”

“Well,” the guy opposite me says, “I have to agree with her. I guess you could call them, but I don’t see what they’re going to do.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I don’t agree,” the one opposite Jill says. “I think you have to do something. At the least, you should call the sheriff.”

So now it’s a committee of four, and still we have a split decision. Even as I try to reassure all of them I’m going to be okay, their expressions say they’re not so certain.

Having exhausted their options and opinions, the two guys shrug, apologize for their lack of helpfulness, and return to their earlier conversation regarding Washington and politics.

“Morgan,” Jill says earnestly, “ I just have this gut feeling this isn’t going to end well. Sometimes very bad things can start from something everyone brushes off as an innocent accident.”

“Tell me about the scar,” I say softly. “What happened? Does it have anything to do with something like this?”