

White Flags

A Short Story

By Cathryn Vogeley

A windstorm came up. Monica watched the trees bend and heard a loud crack. She ran to the kitchen window. The Redbud had snapped off at the ground, laying the whole magnificent tree with its black bark and green heart shaped leaves across the driveway. She raced outside to find it was a clean break that left the branches still intact, full of tiny pink buds that had already set for the following spring. The sweet smell of living wood came from the trunk's center and she marveled at how quick things change. An hour ago, the tree had been entirely healthy. Her chest ached while she took in the randomness of life. There was no remedy for loss and she had no more tears. Nature does not ask for permission.

It had been early June when her nephews, Harley and Josh, wanted to spend time “out in the country” at Auntie Monica’s place. They were twins, quick to smile, each a space between their too big rabbit teeth. Lively eight-year-old children, exactly what she needed to put some cheer into her day. Three of their friends came too, bare-faced innocent kids, at a time when the pandemic death toll headlined the daily news.

Greg was stretched out in his Lazy Boy, drinking a diet coke, watching a World War II documentary. He despised diet coke. But the doctor warned him to lose thirty pounds or look forward to type-two diabetes. He barely looked away from the TV when Monica said the kids were on their way. They'd stayed home for months, going out only for necessities, seeing no loved ones.

"Don't worry honey," Monica promised her husband. "No visitors in the house, I swear." And she meant it.

The van pulled up to the house, the doors slid open and five youngsters jumped out. Monica stood six feet from the van and said a quick hello to her sister.

"Mask up boys," Monica said, but they ran down to the woods before she could hand them out.

*Let 'em go. No need for masks outside.*

But then Harley needed to pee, and Josh wanted to go with him, soon all five kids raced through the house laughing and shouting, "Tag— You're it!"

Monica shooed them out. "No, no boys, one at a time, please," and their happy noises lessened as they ran outside, the screen door's loud squeak and a clap of wood on wood followed. She loved their boundless energy; healthy children enjoying summertime like kids should. Soon, Harley begged for a snack. For a few hours they'd helped her forget the body count, the tragic loss of life around the world. And so, she found frozen chocolate treats on a stick and handed them out, ignoring the inevitable mess until once again, they crowded into the house, around the big farmhouse sink, leaning in under the faucet, flinging water into each other's faces.

After the boys left, Monica apologized later to Greg, adding they shouldn't be concerned because the kids hadn't come into the living room where he sat. But days later Harley tested positive for Covid, then Greg woke up complaining of burning pain in his chest. Night and day he fought for air until he had none left, finally taking a bed in ICU. Remorse overwhelmed Monica, took her energy, her appetite, and her sleep.

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Monica glanced at the morning-glory-blue sky, monotonous beauty over the world that had been sprayed in dirt and ash. Her sun-bleached hair whipped across her face, the heavy metal chime bonging a deep tone next to the wide wooden swing, where futile as it was, she wiped the seat with a dry rag before sitting. Grit clung to her bare legs while she dug her toes into the dust, forcing the swing back, wishing for rain, waiting for news. The phone lay mute in her hand.

Across the yard, leaves hung limp over dried up fruit that lay dead on the ground. Dirt stained the cuticles around her bare toenails and the sandals she wore had become permanently discolored.

A campfire smell made her look toward the distant neighbors, but then she remembered. *Oh, of course. The forest fires.* Monica left the swing and wandered toward the house, over chalk drawings —bubbles, big to bigger, small to smaller, in pinks and blues and whites, they decorated the driveway, fixed in place as if painted on. There they were, silent but screaming. Fool! Selfish! Your fault!

A raft of dead bugs and debris had settled in the bottom of the watering can. Monica filled it from the outside tap and made her way to the bedraggled flowerpots by the front door. Coleus, bleeding heart, and potato vine wilted each day by mid-afternoon. The deep red leaves sparkled

with the dirty ash and as she sprinkled the water into the soil, she waved the can over the leaves, saying quietly, there now, take that drink, soak it up and thrive. The phone vibrated. She grabbed it, hit the home button. An Amber alert in the next state over; some other person's worry. Monica slipped it back in her pocket and stepped inside the silent kitchen where Greg's hoodie dangled from the wall hook, right where he left it the day they went to emergency.

The sign next to Greg's ICU room said, NO VISITORS. Every morning Monica hovered outside the window. The man under the tubes and machines could have been anyone, covered as he was head to foot. Greg's curly red hair disappeared under the blue paper hat. Large accordion tubing hid one side of his face and white tape held the breathing tube in place. Red lights blinked and the rise and fall of the constant heart pattern kept on; it seemed to say, *I'm here Monica, see? I'm still beating.*

The door opened. A nurse hustled out, and with her came sounds; whirring, beeping, hissing, and for a half breath Monica was a part of Greg. Then the door closed and she was cut off once again.

A year ago in their little forest, Greg had put in dozens of native flowering shrubs that would attract birds and butterflies like azaleas, wild raspberry, and Oregon grape. No need to fertilize, or water, or worry about sun, Greg had said. They'd do just fine on their own in the shade. Monica insisted that he stick a white flag next to each plant. She didn't know poison oak from trillium. And she didn't want to water a poisonous plant. They put the flags out together, all fifty of them scattered about, amongst the weeds.

One hundred fifteen degrees in the shade, pine needles fried on the branch. It was August before she remembered the plantings. The lush grass had dried into sharp stubs. There had been no rain for nearly three months. The forest floor had turned brown while she was tending to the worry that moved in and took over every waking minute. Even the old ferns were flattened, still with green fronds but too weak to hold themselves up. The white flags marked nothing other than bare sticks. A few plants held crinkled remnants of powdery leaves. Monica trudged up the steep driveway to the house where she filled the watering can, turned and walked heavily back to the forest. Again and again, she carried the weighty bucket, doing whatever she could to make a difference.

Greg's body swelled. His wedding ring nearly sliced into the skin before they removed it. A tiny nurse with a high-pitched voice handed the black titanium band to Monica. She tried it on her thumb but it wouldn't stay. She loved Greg's hands, freckly under a patch of blond fuzz; powerful hands that so gently stroked her face and pulled her close. At home, she sorted through necklaces, trying each one until she found a long gold chain that would hold the ring in over her heart.

Every day the weatherman predicted rain, a chance of rain, maybe three days ahead, maybe at the end of the week. But the week came and went and there was no rain. The water pressure fell so that it came out in a trickle; wells were going dry all over the area. Monica quit flushing the toilet regularly and let the plants go dry.

She fiddled with her necklace, sliding Greg's wedding ring over the chain, glad that the doctors had saved the ring. At night Monica would unclasp the necklace, and using a flashlight, read the words she'd had inscribed before their wedding: *I made a wish and you came true.*

The nurse gave her an update each day and it was always the same: Greg's O2 sats are too low to come off the vent. We are doing everything we can. Hang in there. All we can do is wait and pray.

Monica had never been a praying sort. She believed what will be will be. But these many weeks, she'd flushed every tear over her nephew, Harley, after he passed from Covid. Now, with no change in Greg, she felt hope drying up like the forest plants around her home.

"Please God," she said one evening as she lay in bed alone. "Please, don't take Greg too."

The old house creaked and snapped; its ancient wood frame contracting in the dry air. The bedroom opened onto a covered sleeping porch through a screened door. Monica lay alone in the dark, and listened to an owl's haunting call for a mate. From the distant ridge came coyote puppies' eerie high-pitched yipping. Sounds that she and Greg listened to after making love, in each other's arms, still and quiet, they waited for the mate's return call which always made Monica giggle, happy for Mr. Owl, she'd say.

Monica barely breathed trying to catch the bird's reply, but that night, the forlorn call went unanswered.

Greg seemed to take a dive overnight; his kidneys were shutting down. They would need to wash out his blood through a machine, a treatment called dialysis. Monica cried and wondered if her tear ducts would quit producing water too.

The next night, Monica lay in the dark, listening for the owl. Wind breezed through the room and she heard the dead leaves whoosh outside her window. She turned on her side, trying to appease

her painful back muscles, tired from sitting. The wind stopped and there was no sound outside. She lifted her head; the door was still open wide. She heard the sound of wind again, but no, it wasn't wind; the sound grew stronger and regular. She stepped outside. In the dark, she knew the sky had opened, sprinkling the dry earth at first, then dumping what seemed like the entire stratosphere. The rain came hard, as if from a high-powered nozzle it shot water straight down onto the house, trees, pavement, and grass. Monica sat on the second story porch, listening, inhaling the sweet smell of wet soil, feeling the cool wet rain splash onto her face.

The rain fell in torrents and as if making up for lost time, it kept on that way for five days and five nights. Dry cracked soil turned to mud and without the roots to hold onto it, the dirt began moving, sliding down the walls along the road, covering the thoroughways with mud. A house leaned on a steep hill until the support posts moved, leaving the home's back end hanging, barely attached.

Monica braved the flooded roads, making the treacherous drive to watch Greg through the ICU window each morning. Dialysis seemed to be helping.

It was in the middle of the night after she'd passed out from exhaustion, when she awoke and checked her phone. A text from hours earlier, three phone calls. Greg's heart had stopped, and would she please call immediately. Her hands shook as she tapped the numbers, tapped wrong and started over. She thought of life without her husband. Tears eased down her cheeks that she wiped away and tried for the third time to call the hospital.

The doctor apologized for the delay in communication. There was no one free to phone her during the code. Greg's heart had stopped many hours earlier. They worked on him until it began

again, weak at first, then with full force, probably the adrenaline the doctor said; the adrenaline knocked it into a normal rhythm. Greg had turned a corner the doctor said. His temperature returned to normal and his oxygen saturation increased, although subpar, it was the first positive change since he arrived months before. Come in the morning, the doctor suggested, when Greg has had time to rest. Maybe he will even be awake for you.

Monica ran out the front door without shoes, her bare feet lustful for water, for the wet under her and over and on her; in the dark and with outstretched arms, she danced and whirled, singing out, she sang praise to Mother Earth, and gave thanks to God.

Author's note: This story is a version of Take That Drink, a winning story on [www.blog.reedsy.com](http://www.blog.reedsy.com)