

FICTION

Untitled

Clarissa Midyette

I've had lotsa different teachers in my life, but I think Mike was maybe the best one of 'em all. Mike taught me all kindsa important things, like how to change the oil in the old truck he drove everywhere, or how to make mashed potatoes just right. But I think the most important thing he taught me was about how there ain't nothin' wrong with bein' different, no matter who tries to tell you otherwise.

"And that's all right," Mike would say, "just means you gotta be careful sometimes."

I didn't get what that had to do with Mr. Jackson glarin' at me when I made to kiss Mike's cheek after he'd offered to buy me a Coke.

"Peter," Mike had hissed softly, pushin' me away. "Can't do that here." My face got hot and red, and I mumbled "sorry" as quietly as I could. My face didn't change 'till I's back in the truck with Mike and he started drivin' towards my house. That's when Mike had started talkin' 'bout people bein' different. Mike said that Mr. Jackson wasn't too keen on two guys kissin' each other, even if it was only a real friendly-like peck on the cheek. But he told me that not everybody was like that.

"Don't want you spendin' any more time with that fairy," Pa said, all angry-like at supper that night. "Boy's a bad influence on you."

"Aw, c'mon, Pa," Will said. My older brother Will was Pa's favorite. "Peter's just stupid. Doesn't matter who he's with, he'll be stupid."

Pa laughed real hard at that, even though Mama hit 'im on the arm and told 'im to be nice. I finished my supper quick as I could and asked to be dismissed from the table so I could try to do my homework for Miss Flynn, but all I could think about was why Pa didn't like Mike.

Truth was, Mike was really the one that made me see I wasn't quite the same as everybody else was. I's one of those different people he was always talkin' 'bout, and I guess he must've been too. I's just as happy to talk about how nice Lindsay's legs looked in that purdy new skirt of hers as I was to daydreamin' 'bout that time I saw Rob—he was captain of the football team and just 'bout every girl was in love with him—shirtless down in the locker room. How was I gonna know that I was different 'less somebody told me?

Mama always said I wasn't nothin' too special. "You'll get by, Peter," she'd sigh whenever I'd screwed up and done somethin' stupid, "But I hope you marry a woman smarter'n you'll ever be." Then she'd wipe her hands on her apron and tell me to go on and get washed up for supper. "And don't let your father know about this, y'hear? He'll whoop you into the next week."

Mama didn't think I'd ever amount to anythin'. Mike made me feel like I's somethin', though. Sometimes, when we'd sit on the little dock by the pond behind Mike's house, he'd look at me and it made me feel like I's the only person on this earth. And sometimes, if I was

havin' a real bad day and bein' real down on myself, Mike'd put his hands 'round my cheeks and look at me with big, sad eyes. Mike had the kind of eyes Mama called puppy-dog eyes.

"Hush, Pete," Mike'd say gently, in the same tone Mama'd take with my kid sisters sometimes, when one of 'em skinned her knee or pushed the other's doll into the mud. "You ain't worth any less than any other person. Hell, Pete, most of the people in the world could stand to take a lesson or two from you 'bout bein' kind and carin'. Ain't a soul in this world as sweet as you are."

Most of the time, he'd hug me real tight after sayin' that, and wouldn't let go 'till he knew I's feelin' better. On real good days, when Mike knew his pa wasn't 'round to see anythin', sometimes he'd even kiss me. Those were the days I'd think 'bout for weeks afterwards. Mike always said I was special, but those were the days I really felt it.

Mike always seemed like there's somethin' wrong. He wasn't unhappy, really, but Mama said at supper one night that he had a lot of weight on his shoulders, on account of how his mama was dead. Pa said that I's supposed to have more weight on my shoulders, and then Mama told him I couldn't handle too much weight. I didn't like it too much when Mama and Pa fought, 'specially when they fought 'bout Mike. Mike always seemed like there was less of that weight on his shoulders on the days he'd kiss me.

Mike also taught me 'bout how everyone's got their own secrets. After the first time he kissed me, he said that'd have to be our little secret, and I's okay with that. I trusted Mike with just 'bout everythin'. I told him all of my little secrets. Sometimes he'd get real sad, like the time I told him how I don't think Mama and Pa care 'bout me much.

"I'll always care about you, Peter," Mike said, and he'd say it like it was the most important thing in the world. He'd say it like the whole wide world depended on me knowin' what he was sayin' to me.

"Even if I do somethin' real, real stupid?"
"Even if you do somethin' real, real stupid." Mike always knew how to make me feel better.

Turns out, even Mike had his own secrets. He didn't tell me very many—reckon that's why they're called secrets—but I guess that was why he showed up at my house real late one night and climbed in through my window.

"Pete," he whispered, and I 'bout jumped ten feet in the air, he'd scared me so bad. "Pete, I have to leave."

"You should leave before Mama and Pa find you, but you just got here," I said, lookin' at Mike all confused-like. "Long as you're quiet they won't find you."

"No, silly," he said, and even in the dark I could see him grinnin'. That made me grin real big, and I was too busy thinkin' 'bout how Mike always made me grin to realize when he sat down right next to me and gave me a big hug. His shoulders were shakin' and I could feel a patch on my shoulder startin' to get wet. Mike was cryin'.

I don't know how to deal with people cryin' real well. I used to be a real crybaby, but my older brother told me cryin' was for wusses and that if I didn't wanna be a wuss I wouldn't cry. Will always said that cryin' was for girls, and then Mama would snap at him and make him be nice. My kid sisters cry lots, 'bout stupid things, but I ain't ever the one to help 'em. They always run straight to Mama.

"Where are you leavin', then, if it's not my house?"

"I have to leave town." Mike's voice sounded all choked, like Mama's when she told me Grandpa had died and gone away. "My pa's real upset with me."

"Well, when my pa's upset with me, I just offer to do some of his chores." I'd heard stories 'round town and from Mama and Pa 'bout how Mike's pa tended to get real angry and yell lots. I didn't think helpin' with chores would help somebody that angry, but I wanted to help Mike some, on account of how he always helped me lots.

"I don't think chores'll help me, but thanks for tryin' to help."

"Oh." We sat there for a little while, Mike tryin' not to cry and me tryin' to figure out what I was s'posed to say. "Are you goin' to come back?"

"I'm goin' to try. I'll come back and get you, Pete. Don't like leavin' you." He hugged me one last time, real tight, and I could feel him cryin' so I just tried my best to be a good shoulder to cry on.

So, even though Mike hasn't come back yet, I think I understand why. His pa didn't like how Mike was different, and Mike didn't like keepin' secrets. I think that's why Mike was so set on teachin' me 'bout those things. I think he did real well.

I heard Mike's pa isn't real happy with Mike leavin' town and all. Mama and Pa said that Mike better not come back to town on account of how his pa will whoop him real good. I don't want that to happen to Mike, but Pa says it's what that boy deserves. Pa says lots of angry things 'bout Mike, says there are lots of rumors flyin' 'round 'bout him, but I don't get why.

I don't know a whole lot, but I know that Mike'll come back for me. Might be a while, but Mike'll come back for me. Teachers don't just

give up on their students. 'Least, the real good ones don't.

And after all, Mike was the best teacher I've ever had.

When the Heartseller Comes Over the Hill

Madison Aeling

Three-hundred men died tonight.
Hurry now, you know how it goes.
Douse your fires, snuff your candles, dim your lanterns.

Three-hundred men have died, the
Heartseller will be over the hill.

The Heartseller will be over the hill.

Róisín Ó Ceallaigh's brother had died first. The only son of her bloodline and ten years her younger. He was a boy too brave to live long. Róisín had never believed in the stories, so she went and bought the brightest lantern she could find and hung it high above her door.

Shannon Mac Gabhann's husband was next. Men who batter their wives are always terrible with swords. Cowards they all are, and I have long seen my share of cowards. Her candles remained lit as a wish.

Eithne de Paor's son had lived for hours. His brothers took him to their mother who held his hand and stroked his hair and sang to him until he slept. Of her twelve other sons, none would put out the lantern for her. She sat before her fire, tending to it, dozing in her chair. Waiting.

I went to Róisín first.

She was sleeping when I found her. I remember thinking how peaceful she looked, for a woman who just lost her only brother, and how peaceful she looked for Róisín Ó Ceallaigh.

Róisín was a large woman, her skin tanned and freckled from work in the woods, hands calloused from lumber. She wore wild sturdy curls that formed a mane around her face. A face you look at not because it is beautiful, but because it demands it.

I waited, it would not take long.

Róisín Ó Ceallaigh woke. When she saw me, she sat up in bed. She crossed her lumber-woman's arms over her chest. "You're real then."

"Yes, Róisín Ó Ceallaigh."

She raised one red eyebrow. "You know me?"

"I know you. I wouldn't come if I didn't know you."

She smiled with one corner of her mouth, looking out her bedroom window into the glow of the lantern outside. "So, I should have put out the lantern."

"Perhaps," I said.

Róisín said nothing.

"Heartseller," she said. Testing my title. "*Heartseller*. How do you go about it? The stories never make it that far."

"You give it to me."

"Give it?"

"Not for nothing," I said. "You sell it."

"But *you're* the Heartseller."

"It is not a title I chose," I said. "We never choose our titles."

She furrowed her brows as I said it. She ran a hand up her shirt, pressing down on the skin in the center of her chest. Feeling her

heart beat below her fingertips.

"What will you give me?"

"Anything."

She glared at me. Her eyes were green as emeralds and sharp as knives. "I know your kind," she said. "It is not *anything*."

"It is."

I did know Róisín Ó Ceallaigh. I knew she was the oldest of eight children. I knew she had six sisters that were all cast aside by their father in favor of their brother, the youngest, who had killed their mother on her birthing bed.

I knew Róisín Ó Ceallaigh had built the very house I entered. I knew there were still splinters lodged in her calloused palms, that she felt nothing in her fingertips and had a nail on her left thumb that had gone black and fallen off. I knew somewhere in this house two of her sisters slept, and they had fled with her instead of living under her hellish father's thumb. He slept now, sonless, in the castle on the hill that looms above the village.

"Then you know," she said. "You know me."

"Róisín Ó Ceallaigh," I said. "When the sun rises, you will have everything your brother had. Your father's castle will be yours, everyone in this village will be your people. Your sisters will live lives in silk, and your birthright will be yours. Firstborn."

Róisín removed her hand from her shirt. She let her hands fall onto the bedding beside her and gripped the blankets. She held her head high.

"So be it, Heartseller."

Róisín Ó Ceallaigh's heart was red. It glowed and pulsed like an ember, so full of life. It would stand proud amongst the others, it would be one that never faded. It would outlive the sun.

Shannon Mac Gabhann was awake.

She sat by the window and watched the night pass. Beside her sat a little red candle, dripping wax onto the windowsill. In the light, Shannon looked as if she was fading. Shannon Mac Gabhann was already a ghost.

She saw me coming up her entryway path. She took her little candle and opened the door. The wax from the candle melted and pooled on the flesh of her hands, but she did not flinch.

"Shannon Mac Gabhann," I said.

She moved from the doorway, standing to the side and gesturing for me to come in.

Shannon Mac Gabhann did not build her house, and neither did her husband. Her house was one of the oldest and largest in the village; her husband's grandfather had built it. It was full of trophies. The house was her husband's grandfather's, the animal skins covering the floors and the horns adorning the walls her husband's fathers, and Shannon, her husband's.

"I know your kind," she said. The red candle wax now streamed down the back of her hand, oozing through her fingers. Bright against her white skin. "Give me what I ask and nothing less."

I bowed my head to her. She raised her chin and ran her free hand over her belly. "Of course," I said. "I deal not in tricks."

Shannon Mac Gabhann. I knew she used to be beautiful. The most beautiful woman for miles. Beautiful enough to attract others of my kind, and I knew she had been careful then. Then, she didn't step into the circles of toadstools. Then, she left gifts by the window and sprinkled salt by the door.

Now Shannon Mac Gabhann was small, despite her belly being round and full. Her hair was grown past her waist and was as yellow

and firm as straw. Her eyes were clouded, and her arms pale as the moon, streaked with formless marks of blue.

"I want a husband," Shannon said. Her voice was shaking, the words *I want* were foreign to her. "A *good* husband, you hear? A strong husband. A kind husband." Her clouded eyes were now a deep blue, and they caught the light of the flame in a way that mimicked courage. "I want a husband who will love me."

"Hush," I said. I reached for her. I ran a strand of her ruined hair through my hand, where it became fine and soft once again. "I only ever give what you want."

She looked up at me, and she smiled.

Shannon Mac Gabhann's heart was white, with ribbons of blue moving on the surface, like worms, trying to dig in deeper. It likes to be held, so I hold it. I hold it as close to me as I can.

Eithne de Paor sat in her chair.

The fire was lit, and her children were not with her. Eithne de Paor could not walk; her chair had wheels to get around. She sat in it, crumpled, every joint in her body as hard as a knot on a tree branch.

She swung her head over to look at me, her neck permanently crooked. She moved each part of her body separately, and with great effort. I believe she could see me, even through her milk-white eyes, for when those eyes fell on me she sighed and nodded her head.

"I told them," she said. "Put out the lantern before midnight."

"They didn't believe you?"

She shook her head. "They think I'm a mad old woman with mad old stories, Heartseller."

"I don't come to the mad."

"Oh, that isn't true."

With a trembling, jointed hand, Eithne picked up a long iron fire-poker that had been leaning against her chair and jabbed at the logs with it. Her blind eyes reflected the flames like a mirror. She prodded until the largest log fell, and the flames burst forth, swallowing the new air. She looked content, closing her eyes to allow the flames to warm her face.

"Go on then," she said. "Do your bidding."

"What is it you want?"

She opened one eye. Against the fire, it glowed orange. "You're supposed to know, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "I know, but I do not understand."

"What's so hard, Heartseller?" she said, closing her eyes again, leaning her head against the back of her chair. "I want you to take my heart."

"I..." I paused, a loss for the words. "I can't take it."

"Why not? There's nothing else I want."

"You could want wealth," I offered.

"Gold. I could fill your walls with gold."

She shook her head. "What am I to do with gold?" she said. "I'm too old to buy those silk dresses or heavy jewels. It'd be wasted on me."

"If not for you, then for your children."

To this she scoffed. "Of all the things my children need, it is not gold."

"Power then," I said. "Come morning, you will rule this land. Every inch of it yours, to command as you please, all the people *your* people. To love you, like you deserve."

She crossed her arms over her lap, knitting her fingers together. "I don't want power," she said. "And I am loved."

"Maybe not a queen's power," I said.

"I could give you power over the sun, and the moon, you could take them down and hold them in your home. The stars even. Weave them into your hair."

"My hair is thin," she said. "What would I do with the sun and moon?"

Here I paused. I thought of what brought me here, of the hearts that drove me over the hills. Yes, there was one last gift I could offer.

"Your son," I said. "Your son, back from the dead, just as he was."

"My son is at peace," Eithne said. "I do not want him back." She took a long breath. "Take my heart"

"I can't."

"I give it to you."

"You can't give it," I said. "You have to sell it."

Eithne de Paor smiled.

"I know your kind," she said.

"You all do."

She sat up in her chair, as tall and proud as her crooked spine would allow.

"Give me your heart."

"What?"

She placed one hand on the wooden wheel of her chair, with a great creak of the floor the chair turned to face me. Eithne de Paor smiled through me.

"Your heart, Seller," she said. "I want your heart."

I have heard the stories the people tell of me. The songs.

They are different each time. Some say I am cloaked in black, while others say I am as naked as a newborn. Some say I ride on an ashen horse, and others say I have a wagon that simply pulls itself. I have been told I have blinding red eyes, and I have been told I have no eyes at all. I have even been told I am the

brother of Death, and I have been told there is nothing like me in the world.

Of all the stories, there is one thing that never changes. Two undisputed rules among the people.

The Heartseller has no name.

The Heartseller has no heart.

"You know me," I said to Eithne de Paor.

She smiled. "I know you, Heartseller."

My heart was red.

My heart glowed and pulsed like an ember, so full of life. My heart stood proud amongst the others, it was one that never faded. My heart outlived the sun.

My heart was white.

My heart had ribbons of blue moving on the surface, like worms, trying to dig in deeper.

My heart liked to be held, so hold it. Hold it as close as you can.

But my heart is black.

It is black and dotted with stars. It is a little piece of the night, carved from the sky. My heart is old, and it has seen more than I ever have, or ever will.

My name was Róisín Ó Ceallaigh, the firstborn of my family, and the rightful heir to everything my brother had.

My name was Shannon Mac Gabhann, I was the most beautiful woman in my village, and I will be loved.

But my name is Eithne de Paor, and I am free of my children. I am free of my home.

Three hundred men have died across the hill. Hurry now, put out your candles, dim your lanterns.

The Heartseller is coming over the hill.

Poisoned Pomegranates

Shayna Brooke Silverman

Unclothed and short of breath, they lay next to each other, collapsed on their backs, staring at a ceiling fan, trying not to be the first to look at the other. Their own despair and lost desires had started too long ago; this lingering had simply lasted too long.

The smell of smoke strode across the bed, leading her eyes towards his tang-covered lips. He was a cigarette sipping a whisky glass, and because of this she became a rolling pair of eyes. Their place was old, musky, and half-buried in the earth. The corners of the room were connected by cracks that veined the walls and met at the heart, where the fan beat above them. And, like stained glass, they were filtered in a deep lighting by slatted windows.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the rise and fall of his chest. He too peered out the corner of his eye and noticed her glance.

"What are you looking at, darling?" His words melted between his lips like cream left to sour on the counter.

"You just look beautiful, dear," she replied quickly, retreating to the whine of the ceiling fan. She started to move her hot hair from behind her neck but then stopped. She didn't want him to notice how long her hair had become; she knew he liked her hair shorter.

He noticed her movement and jumped a little, murmuring inaudibly and scratching the chin where his beard once was. He wondered if she noticed its absence.

He started to get up. He looked at her

and lit another cigarette. She lay in their old bed, wooden and splintering at the feet. It creaked when they sat in it, when they rose every day and slept every evening. It was their good morning and good night. But tonight, it just seemed to break the silence. She stared back at him. He thought she was plain. Not unattractive, but plain. Her hair was longer than he'd like. He didn't want to speak. She was the one who started that conversation in the first place this night. But he was the one who grabbed her hips and kissed her in a park all those years ago. Maybe she was just a girl to him and he was just a boy to her. They were just people.

She thought of the first time they used their bed. How he had stared as she approached him. How he had wanted to crack her open like a pomegranate and watch the seeds waterfall out onto the bed. She remembered when, before the bed splintered, he'd kiss her, and it would prick her skin. How he was a sea urchin and she was poisoned. He stared back at her. He was peculiar looking. Not unattractive, but peculiar. He had shaved his beard and he was different without it.

She thought maybe she ought to grab his hand. He thought maybe he ought to look at her face. She thought maybe she ought to say something else. He thought maybe he ought to roll back onto her, but the hunger was gone. All desire had gone in an instant. He wasn't manly enough for her and she wasn't womanly enough for him. Still, they had each

other. They had had each other for some time now.

Finally, she asked him, "Would you quit smoking for me?"

He paused and looked at her with a soft smile before responding. "Of course, darling." He put his cigarette out on the bed frame. "You are my only vice."

GENDER & ETHNIC STUDIES