

Colleen Kearney Rich
The Five of Cups

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Our house is crowded with spirits. My husband, Russell, knows this because I tell him, but he doesn't believe me. The light can play tricks, he says.

Well, these tricks are like outtakes from *Peter Pan*, I tell him. And they are. I see these shadows out of the corners of my eyes and they are just like Peter Pan's wayward shadow in the movie—an absence of light, an outline of a form. And, if I try to look at them directly, they vanish.

How come I can't see them, Russ says.

Maybe you don't try, I tell him. I know he believes it is the chemo that makes me see these things, and maybe it is. But then again, maybe the spirits are real.

I make the mistake of mentioning the spirits one too many times so on top of everything else—the trips to the hospital, the visits to the therapist—I have to schedule an appointment to have my eyes examined.

Men aren't good at these kinds of things, my mother tells me. She states it as if it is a scientific fact.

That is a generalization, I tell her and quickly change the subject. Russ has been supportive. He *is* supportive. It scares me to think there are people out there waiting, watching for him to miss a step.

We had planned to have a family, Russell and I. We often talked about it, but it is my fault there are no children. It was me who wanted to wait.

Maybe it is for the better, I tell my mother. That way he won't have any baggage. My mother blesses herself with the sign of the cross.

My father never has much to say these days; he lets my mother do all of the talking. He reminds me of one of those tobacco store Indians: tall, wooden, silent. Everyone is so silent.

DR. BROOKS SAYS THERE IS nothing wrong with my eyes. I tell Russell this as I'm getting ready for bed. I realize that he was there when the ophthalmologist told us he found nothing wrong, but I say it aloud just to hear myself say the words and to remind Russ that my eyes are fine, a part of me is still all right.

Then we'll see a specialist, he says.

For a moment, I think that there couldn't possibly be another kind of specialist left for us to see. What would the specialist be called—an oncologist ophthalmologist? The idea tickles me for a moment, then I begin to doubt myself. I can't be sure of anything anymore. There really could be such a doctor out there somewhere.

I think of telling Russ about the oncologist ophthalmologist, but when I look over, I see that he is already in bed with his back to me. But it is OK, because I realize that he might not see the humor in my Dr. Seuss-like rhyme. I don't think I've heard Russ laugh in months.

It takes me longer to get ready for bed these days and sometimes Russ is asleep long before I get there. I wear a prosthesis during the day in the place where my left breast should be. It is a small, spongy mountain that one of my doctors assures me I will not need after the reconstruction. When they talk about the reconstruction, I think of the South, of history lessons. I can't imagine it. When they want to discuss the procedure, I just say that it is down the road and put it aside in my mind. I keep the little rubber mountains in a dresser drawer under my scarves.

I know this is more than Russ bargained for, and maybe even more than he can bear. I have overheard him on the phone with his parents. I know that he has asked them for money, but we don't discuss it. Sometimes I see him staring out the French doors at the barbeque in the backyard, at the trees, at nothing. There are dark circles under his eyes now. I might have dark circles too for all I know. I've stopped looking in mirrors.

MY BEST FRIEND LISA COMES once a week during her lunch hour and reads my tarot cards. We eat Chinese takeout as I watch my future unfold on the dining room table. The Five of Cups comes up every week.

“No use crying over spilled milk,” Lisa says. The woman on the card is wrapped in a hooded cloak like the Grim Reaper; spilled goblets lie at her feet. The liquid mess left from the cups is red like blood.

“It’s wine,” she says, “red wine. And the one cup left standing means that all is not lost.”

“It’s gruesome,” I tell her. I am still waiting for the Death card, which never appears. Sometimes I believe she has taken it from the deck. She points to Temperance, another card that is always there.

“They are telling you to be patient. Go with the flow. Find your balance.”

“Find my balance.” I laugh. I want to say that that is impossible, that my ballast is off, but I don’t. It would make Lisa uncomfortable and I don’t want that. Too many people are uncomfortable already.

No one knows what to say to me. You are looking well, most of them tell me with their fixed smiles in place. Their sad eyes betray them. Worse are the ones who wax philosophical. He never gives us more than we can bear, they whisper significantly, as though I should feel privileged. One of the few, the proud, the breastless.

Even I don’t feel comfortable. No one is seeing things quite the way I am, and everyone responds to everything I say as if I am posing a complex mathematical problem. The pauses in conversation seem huge, a canyon to cross.

I feel like a stranger in my own body, I tell Russ. We are in the car on the way back from the doctor’s office. They wanted more blood. He squints at the windshield and his eyebrows draw together for a moment as though he is trying to see something through a fog. His lips press together a few times as if he is about to speak. Only seconds have gone by, but each of them is separate, whole, and heavy. I watch the struggle on his face dissolve as he gives up on thinking of something to say. Instead he makes a sound, a kind of hum.

And it isn’t because of the prosthesis, I add. It is more like something under my skin. I think it may be the chemicals. They are making me uncomfortable in my own skin.

Russell's eyebrows pull together again and stay together. I bite my lip and realize I've probably gone too far. Sometimes I feel like Russ is that last cup left standing, filled almost to overflowing. In my impulse to have a real conversation, I push too far. I make a mess. I listen to the windshield wipers squeak across the glass for the rest of the ride home.

"We need new wipers," I say finally, trying to push down the silence that is pressing against me.

"Yes," he says, "the noise, it's awful. I'll take care of it this weekend." A look of relief spreads across his face.

I don't want to be a complainer, but that's what I've become. I try to console myself with the idea that I am doing it for Russell. These little projects like the wipers give him a focus, something constructive that he can do. Often I feel like a pregnant woman, whiny with cravings, but when I see how composed he becomes, I immediately think up another mission for him. A new robe, a specific Ben and Jerry's ice cream, a special tea that is supposed to be great for nausea that you can only get at health food stores.

He should go to work, my mother says.

He does go to work, I correct her.

He could fall behind, she says, it could cost him a promotion. In this economy, it could cost him his job. She and my father want to help out by hiring a maid or someone to do the lawn.

This place is falling apart, she says in disgust. When she comes over, she plumps pillows, dusts, and unloads the bags of groceries she's brought. My father sits in the living room watching college basketball. I never knew he liked basketball. A baking dish brimming with lasagna sits on the kitchen counter.

He's losing weight, my mother says. My father looks exactly the same so I assume she is talking about my husband.

He looks like hell, she adds knowingly before stomping into the pantry with her arms full.

We all do, I tell her. We all do.

Sometimes I wonder if these shadows I see could be caused by lack of sleep. I can't seem to make it through a whole night anymore. Like an infant, I wake suddenly every two or three hours. Often it feels as if I have just dozed off and caught myself doing so. Maybe my eyes are just overtired.

I have tried to keep track of how often I see the spirits. I have rearranged the lamps in rooms throughout the house to see if it makes a difference. More important, I've learned to resist the urge to turn my head to catch a glimpse of one of these shadows as it darts across the wall, especially when people are present.

LISA IS TRYING A NEW tarot spread today. It looks like a daisy with the cards fanning out on all sides like petals. I am sipping my wonton soup slowly, mostly for the warmth and the saltiness. I never really feel hungry anymore.

In the spread, there is a crumbling tower. It is smoking and burning. Lightning zigzags across the stormy sky behind it. As soon as she turns it over, I immediately think it is my marriage, that I am going to lose Russell.

"This can be a good card," Lisa says as she points to the Tower card.

"It doesn't look like a good card," I say.

"It means the breaking down of existing structures, that doesn't have to be bad."

"Destruction doesn't have to be bad?"

"It depends on how you look at things. Destruction could be the opportunity for rebirth. Break the old mold; start fresh."

"Old mold," I say though I'm not buying it.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." She begins to collect the cards, but I stop her.

"Tell me more," I say, "about this rebirth." Lisa smiles as if she has a theory, as if these cards really are telling her the future.

"This is you," she says and points to the High Priestess card. It is a beautiful card of a long-haired woman on a staircase holding a bouquet of lilies.

"It is a card of intuition, of higher knowledge. The stairs lead to Hades, but you can still see the real world, where the priestess came from, at the top of the staircase. She is between worlds," Lisa says and sounds happy about this as if it is some kind of romantic adventure for this priestess.

"To hell and back," I say.

Lisa nods in agreement.

"Like me."

"Yes, like you." She reaches over to squeeze my hand.

THE SPIRITS SEEM TO BE slowing down. Sometimes if I don't move quickly I can observe these shadows out of the corner of my eye, and they are still and steady. They aren't ghosts as I would've imagined them to be, but they seem to be three dimensional. They have a shape, a depth, like a clot of dust that is visible and invisible at the same time.

I am disappointed. I can't help it. I don't know exactly what I had been hoping for or if I had been hoping at all. I wanted these apparitions to have an identity, to be someone, to have a message for me.

It is four o'clock in the morning and I am sitting in the living room, purposefully ignoring shadows and listening to the grandfather clock tick, when I notice how blue it is outside. It looks so unnatural that I have to go out into the yard so I can be a part of this foreign landscape.

A full moon hangs hugely over the treeline. In the tarot, the Moon indicates a time of confusion, of uncertainty. But there is no uncertainty out here. Here the moon is a happy sign. It conveys peace with a certain confidence, a fullness.

I want to stay outside for as long as it is going to be blue, but it is too chilly to sit on the glider. So I begin raking leaves. It is so dark that I can't tell if I am making progress. I don't see Russell when he comes out on the patio so I am startled when I hear his voice.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Sure."

"Are you in any pain?"

I shake my head. I add one more rakeful of leaves to the heap I've started then put the rake down. The moon is so huge that it looks as if it could fill the house.

"I had beautiful hair," I tell the moon.

"You *have* beautiful hair," Russ says.

I need a moment to think about this, so together we stand and survey the yard. In the moonlight, it isn't the overgrown wreck it is in the day. The vines that have overtaken the hedge are silver and ornamental in the blue light.

"I don't want to die," I tell Russell.

"You won't," he says and he sounds as if he is sure of it. I want to believe him.

"I can't sleep," I say, as if it is a scientific fact.

"Try," he says and takes my hand.

He guides me into the living room and sits down in the recliner before pulling me into his lap. He covers me with a homemade afghan and tucks it under my legs. For a moment, we don't fit. I'm all angles now, mostly bone and not much cushion, and I jab him with one of my elbows before he rolls me up like a baby. I am so tired that I let him. He folds me up in such a way that I fit perfectly in his arms, his lap, the chair. I curl up against him and rest my head in the hollow of his shoulder. It feels right. It feels like home, like I've come back after being gone a very long time. Something inside me quiets, a noise, no, a din that I didn't recognize was there until it is gone.

"Sleep," he says.

And I do.