

Whispers

By Emma Peterson

The grove was young and green the day I buried it. Rosa didn't know anything; I stole it myself. My parents could never buy the necklace for me, but I had to have it. The day after, people came to take Rosa away. Everybody whispered that she was a thief. I never saw my best friend again. The treasure I had wanted so badly stayed buried. I couldn't bear to look at it.

It was the ten-year reunion that brought it back. People were everywhere, moving and pulsing with the music. I stood against the wall avoiding the too-loud laughter and too-wide smiles. And then the whispers:

"Well, she turned out pretty."

"How did they end up together?"

Just gossip from people reliving petty high school grudges, until they said her name.

"Remember Rosa? I knew it would end badly for her, what with her family. They probably sent her back to Mexico." I couldn't bear to hear them talk that way. I crept out of the room and went to the grove where Rosa and I played.

When I arrived it was dark. The trees were not the saplings I remembered. They had grown strong with thick trunks and high branches. I felt like an unwelcome visitor among unwilling guardians of an old secret. I dug the box up that night. Dirt stained the new clothes I'd bought for the reunion, but I had to make sure it was still there. Sitting under a tree, I held the necklace in my hand. The trees stared, unblinking. I reburied it and left with a heavy weight on my shoulders and dirt under my nails.

Ten years later, nobody at the reunion talked about Rosa at all. I stood to the side as they chattered. Rosa and I would've laughed at them pretending to be friends. I went to the grove to escape people and memories.

The trees whispered that night, gossiping behind my back like old classmates.

"What happened to Rosa?"

"What did you do to Rosa?"

"I didn't do anything to her. It wasn't my fault," I said aloud.

I could feel eyes watching... always watching. The trees muttered to each other, branches crackling and cackling. I was hit with sudden conviction that it had ended badly. My classmates' words rang in my head, "They probably sent her back to Mexico." Did they discover her family wasn't supposed to be here when they took her? I shuddered and curled into myself, letting my

long hair shield my face. The accusations of the rustling leaves and waving limbs were relentless. I escaped to my car, but the voices still rang in my head.

I left my thirty-year reunion halfway through. I was done being alone in the crowd. Rosa made me feel like I would never be alone; we thought that we'd always be friends. I crept into the grove. The trees stood sturdy, their roots buried deep and strong. They glared and sent silent accusations looming over me. I could feel my chest tightening in a panic attack; it was happening regularly now.

Sirens screamed in the distance. What if Rosa got arrested? I gasped for air, feeling as though I was drowning. Maybe they thought she stole it and took her to juvie.

My breathing sped up and I couldn't stop thinking. Maybe she became what they saw; what if she really became a thief? Could she be rotting away in jail because of me? The shadows under the moon lengthened and grew into bars. My breath came in shallow gasps that never reached my lungs. I stumbled to my feet and ran as the trees shook with silent fury.

At my fortieth reunion, I went to the door and turned around. I couldn't go in there again. I hadn't bothered to buy anything new or do my hair anyway. The grove was alive that night. The trees screamed their fury into the wind, their limbs cracking and shaking with age. Their branches attacked me, painting my skin with red scratches.

"What do you want?" I shrieked.

They paused and laughed. Mockingly they questioned me, "Don't you know what you did? Don't you know!"

I pounded on the trees and screamed, "I don't know what you want. What did I do?"

They rumbled back to me, "Don't you know she's dead? That you killed her?"

I crumpled on the ground, my thoughts running in circles. My old dress was ripped and stretched and my gray hair flew wild. "I didn't kill her! Did I?"

The trees pushed their roots upward, shoving the necklace up, trying to reveal what I did. As I fled, the trees grabbed at me—tugging me back, still howling.

It was raining during my fifty-year reunion. This time, I didn't even bother to go. I wore a blue dress--blue was always Rosa's favorite--and had my hair done. I went to the grove to read a letter. The messy scrawl on the envelope was unmistakably Rosa's. I still recognized it after all these years.

Everything was dripping with rainwater. Rosa would've loved the vibrant colors--bright green against rich brown. The rain soaked me with the type of wetness that felt like it would never leave.

The grove had aged; some trees had fallen. Others were as crooked as my worn fingers. They murmured to each other, echoey and hollow-sounding in the rain. I clutched the letter in my hand. I was scared the trees would blame me for whatever the letter said. As I listened, their voices grew clearer, whispering and calling for my attention. "A thief and a liar," they hissed "A thief and a liar."

I lowered myself slowly under the tree where the necklace was buried, opened the envelope, and pulled out the letter. Slowly I unfolded the paper, unveiling Rosa's words. As I began to read, tears joined the rain streaming down my face.

"My Dear Friend,
I'm sorry we haven't spoken for so long..."

The trees were finally quiet.