

Allan Reeder
from *Listen to Me*

Years ago, when we lived in New York, Eva and I would invite Louise for dinner, or sometimes for entire weekends, though she lived just across the river, in Brooklyn. The problem was, she loved my wife. It was obvious by how subtly but unmistakably she ignored me, waving me off with the grim shifting of her dark eyes, rendering me an obstruction in the room. Or her crying out about Eva's new skirt or shoes or the different way she was wearing her hair, exclamations that were at least partly a demonstration of my irrelevance. And whenever Eva playfully reprimanded me—we were young and let our role-playing games occasionally spill from our private hours into public moments—Louise was quick to join in, to point out my faults, but without the requisite glint in an eye or flashing grin. She didn't understand it was a game.

I told Eva one night: "She loves you, you know."

Louise had come for dinner and had stayed through a second bottle of wine, reigniting one memory after another that featured only her and Eva. They were six years old when they met.

"It's so apparent," I said, "how she loves you."

Eva was in her robe, seated at her mirror, brushing her hair before bed, that quick, strong stroke. "But of course," she said, and she opened her free hand theatrically to the room, and then smiled at me in the mirror.

"I mean, she is *in love* with you," I explained. "And so, she can't stand my existence."

Allan Reeder

Eva put down her brush. “Simon,” she said. “Simon, she is lonely. She is alone.” She turned from the mirror, closing her robe. “We are her friends. Are you actually jealous?”

I wasn’t jealous, not then. That wasn’t the word. But I wasn’t sympathetic either. I couldn’t draw from the well of pity Eva sustained. Louise’s loneliness was a choice, I’d decided. True, she didn’t have Eva’s beauty. She had short black hair flat as a winter cap, and an arcing nose with a bump halfway down that, I’d occasionally mused from across the dinner table, would have been functional had she worn glasses. But she wasn’t unattractive; it wasn’t her physical being that determined her loneliness. There were men who sought her company—she made sure I overheard her descriptions of them, and their romancing utterances. And when she laughed, lifting her chin as her cheeks rounded, her dark eyes could catch me in admiration of the way joy transformed her. But joy transformed her only around Eva. Jealousy wasn’t right. I am no saint, but what I carried then was a frustrated wish—perhaps like a father’s for his daughter—that Louise could be happy on her own.

“I’m not jealous,” I told Eva. “It just bothers me.”

“Come here,” she said. I knelt, and she placed my head between her breasts as she used to do, her hair a red curtain over my eyes. We were maybe thirty then, with another fifteen years to go before I was the one to pull her into me and hold her with the prayer that nothing more would happen. There is a file in the bottom drawer of my desk that tells the story of Eva’s cancer in records and bills. Postoperative instructions.

Allan Reeder

Explanations of benefits. But there is no picture of the first thick scar, like barbed wire, that replaced her right breast. Or of the hairless woman who emerged from those early poisonings and, on Sundays, strode beside me to the park without wig or scarf, the bra under her sweater cupping one breast and providing the other. Nowhere is the minute five years later in the steam of the bathroom—36th Street, apartment 4A—as she guided my fingers into the flesh of her left breast for confirmation. The lump like an eyeball. (“My *left* breast,” she said the next morning. “Shouldn’t that mean it’s left to me?”) And nowhere, not even in memory, are the songs she insisted on singing in the cab ride to the hospital. But I do remember her attempts at humor—that, finally, she would get her balance back. That she would no longer be “keeping me a breast.” And then the bald, scarred woman returned, suddenly narrow as a girl and wanting a change. We moved less than a year later.

Here, on Everett Hill, in a silver urn on the mantle that I touch only with my eyes, her body is bone and dust. We had four years, sixteen seasons, before a walk through the birdsong in the back woods when she stopped me and said, “Listen.”

I perked my ears for a new song.

“No. Listen to me,” she said. She pointed to the house, to the woods. “This is where I’m going to die. Nowhere else.”