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After Alice died, and my father left, I finished school each day at three and walked through Seabreeze to the arboretum. It was vast and covered many ridges and valleys, with small lakes and ponds scattered throughout the trees. I liked the pinetum, where the great spruce hung to the ground as if too heavy for themselves.

There were fir and cypress trees, juniper and hemlock. Amongst the evergreens were deciduous trees: the snowbell and the silverbell.

When I reached the arboretum, it was as if all the oxygen from the trees expanded inside me. I had a swing I favored, about 10 minutes in. No matter how bad I was feeling, when I got on that swing, I felt alive again. I listened to Nick Cave—"Nocturama." I liked the song where he talks about leaving his lover in the St. George Hotel, sleeping on the unmade bed, and how a change was going to come. His voice was so low and sad and thoughtful and yet hopeful.

*Well, I kept thinking about  
what the weatherman said  
And if the voices of the living  
can be heard by the dead  
Well, the day is gonna come  
when we find out...*

And I guess that was the way I felt, since Alice died. Wondering if she could hear me, wondering when the day would come when I found out—and wishing this day would come sooner than later because I didn't want to wait. I wanted to know everything, now. I wanted to



feel as much as Alice felt, though Alice was born with a heart defect, and no one noticed at first, not until her skin turned pale, almost blue-grayish, especially around the eyes, and my mother knew something was wrong. It was something my father

never forgave her for—that she didn't take her for testing early enough. She was too afraid, she didn't want to know. So Alice kept on, fierce, crying, wearing herself out. She

became breathless. Then she began to faint. My mother thought it was emotional, and maybe it was. There was something wild about Alice, as if she sensed thing others didn't, as if they unnerved her so she could hardly breathe. But that was nonsense, my father said, a botanist and practical. It was a heart defect that made her breathless, that made her faint, that caused her sudden death in a fit of rage at age 6. My angelic demoniac Alice: golden-haired, dark-eyed Alice—my vanishing twin.

My father, as I said, could not forgive my mother. "You can just stop loving someone," he told me. "I didn't think that could be true, but it is." He took me and a small square

cardboard box of Alice's ashes to the arboretum. He was going away, he said. He would not see me for a long time. But one day a flower or seed would bloom from Alice's ashes and it was my job to watch and tend the tree. It would, if he were to guess by Alice and her fieriness, be a flame tree.

Even at 6 years old I knew not to tell my mother about Alice. First, my father said, it wasn't legal to spread ashes in the park. Second, my mother would make of it a mourning spot. She had a talent for grieving and it would be best for her not to know. This secret

was the thread that connected me to him. In

this way, it also cut me from my mother. It was true, what my father had predicted: her grieving became her life—stays in the hospital and then years when she did not leave the house, when she lay on her bed and listened to the radio day and night.

After a few years, my father was right, and seeds and then a seedling and a twig and a sapling rose from Alice's ashes. I waited and waited anxiously, each day in spring for the bud to come, and then to bloom. And it was not a flame tree, with its bright fiery leaves, it was a Fire Cherry Tree, small with shiny red slim branches, and in the summer, tiny red cherries—red the color of tin toy soldiers—and flowers of white. I ate a cherry each year and each year it tasted sour and was pulpy, its skin hard and thin. The pit was larger than you would imagine from such a small berry; each year I planted one in our backyard,

which was wild, of course, and overgrown with no one to tend to it, the last house on Pemberton Road.

Then one day in the park—it was spring and it had blossomed that year violently—a profusion of apple and cherry blossoms, of pink and lemon magnolia—I was walking past the swings to the small lakes Pat and Trimble when a strange beauty appeared to me. He was standing beside a cherry tree, wearing riding clothes, which was strange, because there was no riding in the park. Also, his riding clothes looked out-of-date. He was wearing bright red breeches, and tan-colored boots and a long soft coat with a row of intricate buttons and a collar. And, of course, he was very beautiful. I was arrested by his beauty.

He seemed to be the figure from the painting, "The Polish Rider", which I had seen at The Frick once, on a high school trip to the city: his youth, his curved almost round face, his mouth, perfectly shaped, his hair, soft and in curly locks, and eyes like liquid. Only in his case, the young

man before me, the eyes were not the soft brown of earth, but violet. He held a fur hat in his hand; it had a red feather on the top.

It was I who spoke first, perhaps because I was so surprised by him.

"Where is your horse?" I asked.

He looked about. "My horse? My horse. She is a mare. She wanders."

His voice was smooth and flowing. I stopped before him.

"I've seen you here," he said. "I often see you here."

"But I haven't seen you."

"You come every day."

"That's true."

"Like someone in a reverie."

I laughed. "That's what I would like, a reverie."

"To be lost?"

"No, not lost. Just without thought."

The violet of his eyes was disconcerting. I remembered the story of Atta, the daughter of the king of Pessinus, and Attis. They were to marry, but the goddess Cybele was in love with him so she struck him insane—the way gods could—and in his madness Attis wandered in the woods, took a dagger and killed himself. From his blood violets were born.

"You wish to forget your sister?" he asked.

"How did you know that?"

"Everyone knows."

I supposed that was true, in a small place.

"What would you say," he said, "if I had seen her?"

"When she was alive?"

His eyes took on a sudden gleam, as if the sun had filled them. "You share the same golden hair, the same dark eyes."

I didn't see how he could know Alice from so long ago.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

He beckoned north toward the lake.

"What is your name?"

"My name is Acheron."

"I've never heard that name."

"It's an old name."

We watched each other then, for a minute or so. He was so easy to look at, a placid brilliant lake, its smooth surface.

"Well, he said, I suppose you're right. I must go and find my horse."

That night, at home I looked up Acheron on the Internet. It was one of the five rivers of Hades, the river of woe.

*An excerpt from "Fiery World," Irondequoit*

*resident Louise Wareham Leonard's forthcoming novel. She has written three novels, including "Since You Ask" (Akashic Books, New York, 2004), for which she won the James Jones Literary Society Award for Best First Novel.*