

Woman in Red Coat
(after Jane Hirschfield)

Carter Greenbaum

The day had not gone nearly as she had planned. Now, she sits at the window between the sofa and the liquor cabinet, while all about her the evening collects, scattering drops of itself. It is quiet as a night in Pompeii, and she looks out the window, lost in the various stillnesses of the passing worlds, the ice as it gathers on the telephone wires. She waits, until at last, it can grow no darker. To her right is a glass of vodka. To her left, a cellular phone she hasn't learned to use. She watches, with eyes both liquid and resigned, a woman in a red wool coat get into her pickup truck across the lake. The woman looks at her through the window and quickly turns away.

Her youngest daughter, Rivka, makes a collect call on the landline and she yells to her husband, "I've got it." The youngest daughter was the first to get slapped in the face, the first to leave their hometown. The bells toll. The nine o'clock whistle moves over the neighborhood with a shudder.

"Hello," she says.

"Hi mom," the daughter, soft and chipper.

She falters for a second, collects herself. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Rivka says, "I'm calling because Aron said-

"You are calling collect," her mother interrupts.

"Oh, funny thing with the phone company."

"I didn't know collect calls still exist." Her acerbic wit struck her daughter and turned the conversation slightly sour.

"Aron told me I should call."

“You know your brother,” her mother says, “always worrying.”

“He said something happened today?”

“Another time,” her mother pleads, “It’s been a long day,” but Rivka continues to speak. Rivka is 50 years old. Unmarried. For the last 12 years, she has told her mother, has told the entire family, about her boyfriend, Loren. No one has met him though. Loren thinks the world is coming to an end. Rivka tells her mother that, now, she, too, is worried. A disapproving tut hangs in the air.

Loren is dying again, Rivka says, as she explains his rare deterioration of the eye. “He’s losing the middle of everything.” Rivka’s mother imagines the world coming to him through the periphery, the newspaper visible only as the white outside aisle of each page. Her daughter must look to him now like an untamed mane of white hair, the twiggy spindles of her mercurial limbs like fishhooks on a bed.

“They pick our softest parts,” the mother says to Rivka on the phone.

“There’s a procedure for it,” Rivka adds, perhaps missing her mother’s sincerity.

“For what?”

“His eye.”

“They have procedures for everything,” she says, and Rivka can hear her mother pulling another arrow from her little quiver.

“Do you suppose that I’ll be able to meet Loren before the procedure? If he can’t see, then you won’t have anything to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Rivka says defiantly. “That’s not it at all. He’s not too mobile at the moment. Maybe soon. Definitely soon. He just needs this procedure and the doctor says it will be \$3,000.”

“And he’s dying from this?” she asks.

“Well, maybe not dying, but it’s serious,” Rivka admits.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Rivka asks, surprised by her mother’s sudden resignation. Rivka wonders whether to press her to use a Western Union this time.

“Yes, okay.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Rivka asks.

“Just fine. It’s been a long day. I’m tired. Your father is already in bed.” Her mother hangs up slowly and Rivka calls her brother again.

Aron is 59, lives ten minutes away from their mother, has a wife and three children, two homes, owns his own business, goes to every one of their mother’s doctor’s appointments.

“It’s your sister,” Aron’s wife screams immediately once the phone connects and Rivka can hear his wife’s shrill echo through their house. She can hear her brother apologizing to his wife.

“How did she know?” is Rivka’s first question.

“You’re the only one makes collect calls.”

“Oh.”

“Did you talk to mom?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she says obliquely. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Did she tell you what happened today?”

“She didn’t say anything happened.” Aron sighs at his mother’s intransigence.

“She’s dying,” he says and silence drops into the space in between them like hot metal.

“Again?” Rivka asks.

Rivka’s mother knows what her children talk about when she leaves the room. They are after her to make a will. They are afraid the government will take

everything. She wants to take them to the window sometime to show them the lake under the cover of fresh snow. The whole thing is written out there. Nothing. She has nothing to leave them. Also, she would like to be burned.

It repulses her now to think of her daughter fighting over the money, as if that's the only thing that will be left. She was the first person in the family to attend college, one of the first women in the country, in fact. She wants to be remembered that way. In fact, she's told her husband to write it on her tombstone, and nothing else. "Graduate of Hunter College." It will not say "Beloved grandmother" or wife, beloved mother or sister. It will not say beloved anything, which is certainly to the point, especially if we consider Rivka.

She calls out to her husband, who is already asleep in the bedroom. "Aron and Rivka are fine," she says to herself, but her husband doesn't answer. There's no need to. She does all the talking for them both and he likes it that way. Forty years selling insurance, he's tired of talking. You have to ask yourself, to what would you sacrifice forty years of your life?

She reaches inside of her pocket before she gets undressed and feels the slate stone she had taken from the edge of the lake earlier that evening. Her fingers move over the surface, losing themselves in the reality of the durable world. She turns the stone a few times, asking it another question it won't answer, and then puts on her nightgown and goes to sleep, but she can't sleep. Instead she remembers.

She thinks about the entire day with her grandchildren, how she had planned for every possibility, every contingency. She found alternate movie times, fallback restaurant reservations. She spent the last six months shepherded between doctors appointments, nurses governing where to go and when, what to eat and how much. No longer, she thought. This day would be her own with her grandkids. It continued to play back in her mind.

A grey day. First it rained and then the rain transformed into snow, back into rain. The weather could not decide which season we were in. It snowed and the quiet transformed into busy white air. The whole day, an odd tension broke between her and her grandchildren as she ferried them between the movies and the mall, and finally it was dinner.

It was over dinner when she decided she would break the news to her grandchildren, her future.

5 P.M. was the reservation. Behind the restaurant, the sun was setting as the ends of empires going obsolete. They were the first diners and they would have their pick of tables in the entire restaurant so she chose something close to the window. It was so large – the window - that it could make you feel simultaneously inside and out. The mauve light filtered in through the glass.

She sat down and folded her napkin as a Queen at the last dinner of her dynasty, withering away. She watched the sun move beyond the lake. That was the future in the distance: Call it what you will. At the edge of the lake, where the water was just freezing, it was as though a great fire was kindling so that the ice on the lake's surface seemed, for a moment, to be burning also. She watched a woman in a red coat at the lake's edge get into her pickup truck.

“Did you feel that,” Saul, her grandson said and reality filtered back into consciousness as the room shook slightly.

“What I was saying,” she continued, “is that these last few months have been very difficult for me.” Saul clenched his sister's wrist and pointed out the window. Something distracted him from his grandmother. His grandfather looked down at a wristwatch. The world moved fast between all of them and color burst into the room like something living and dying simultaneously.

The room shook once more, but even louder this time and her granddaughter, Leila asked, “was that an Earthquake?” She rose from her seat and her grandmother

half commanded, half shouted, half-begged her to sit down again. Other diners scurried towards the exit. The scene descended into a sudden panic and the waiters rushed out, into the parking lot, but an unsteady calm kept the family at the table by the window, which had turned an uncertain color. It was fiery ochre red admixed with ash, black against the oncoming night sky.

“I just wanted to have one day,” their grandmother said, almost to herself. “One day,” she repeated, and amidst the chaos, she collected herself. “You two both know that I was diagnosed for the first time two years ago. It’s been a long road, but I’ve finally made a decision to end the chemotherapy.” Her words dropped into the room, almost unnoticed by her grandchildren as they became transfixed with the fire outside the window, which had multiplied. They were scared, as they had never been scared before, caught in between their grandmother’s steely determination and the certain threat of fire.

Sirens split the room and suddenly the power in the restaurant went out so that the only light came from the fire outside the window, which had now engulfed the nearest tree. The grandmother kept talking as if nothing had changed, as if nothing would ever change. And when one of the waiters called out to her from the entrance that they would have to leave, she shrieked back at him, “I’ll wait for the fire department!” Saul looked at Leila, Leila at Saul again. Their grandfather looked once more at his watch.

The grandmother turned to Leila, and in a voice that sounded over-rehearsed, said to her, “You will leave this city one day. I can see it in your eyes. You will find a new city and new dreams and some of them may be fulfilled and some of them may die. If you really want to leave us, you can, but remember, you may be better off in this town, where the dreams you pursue won’t damage you.”

Leila looked at her brother in disbelief as the fire caught the awning outside of the window. She wondered whether her grandmother was really speaking to her or

to some one else. The gas tank of a car exploded and firefighters ran into the dining room as their grandmother began to address Saul.

“We should go,” Saul said to his grandmother and she held him by his wrists, her weak arms finally showing strength. “We are not leaving. I have come here to give you my sentence, and it is a long sentence, and we are not leaving until I am done.” The firefighters grabbed the children and their grandmother yelled after them, “excuse me, excuse me!” in vain.

Another man helped their grandfather with his walker, and finally, she rose from her chair like the selected survived and joined her grandchildren in the parking lot. Ash mixed with rain mixed with snow fell from the sky. Their children called their dad, who met them in the parking lot. He raced over to his kids, holding them by their heads, “Is every one ok?” he asked.

Aron looked to his father, who said, at last, as if in another world. “I think my watch broke.”

Aron hugged his mother. Her body went limp and expressionless. “It was a car crash,” she said.

“I heard.” Aron’s children stood in the parking lot taking pictures with their phones.

“It’s cold,” she said, “even our bodies are cold that were once, as kindling.” She paused. “When are they letting us back inside?”

“I think, maybe, we should go to a different restaurant.”

“No. This one.”

“I don’t think they’ll be letting us back in,” Aron said.

“Why?” she asked, her patience waning.

“It was a fatality.” She shrugged. Her son looked at her and thought to himself, “she is unrecognizable to me now.” Death has done that to her like an injured animal trying to stand, and he does.

Saul confronted his father. "What happened?"

"They say that a woman lost consciousness while driving and ran down an embankment over there." He pointed. "And her car caught fire."

"Is she ok?" Leila asked.

"I'm not sure." Saul looked down at another text message on his phone. "Have you two had something to eat?" They shook their heads.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" Aron asked his parents.

"That's fine," his mother said as she watched the police officers line the parking lot with tape.

She is in her bed again, looking up at the water stains in the ceiling. The thoughts continue to twist in her mind. She can't sleep. She rises from her bed and looks out at the window once more. The rain has stopped. The clouds have moved on to become clouds in some one else's life and the sky is clear. The moon is a lamp for the stars. Suddenly, she is outside of her house in a red, wool coat. Her children are bickering on a phone line very far away. If she's quiet, she can hear the sound of them deciding what to do, a sound as small as ice melting.

Look out any window, it's the same: *The wintering light. The truck piled high in cut leaves.* It is all just memory now. Time passes. Everything turns to ice and beneath the ice, the fire stirs, the future: call it what you will. The woman in the red coat looks at you and quickly turns away.