

Pomegranates

By: Shari Lopatin

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They say Arizona is a place for folks to start over, and that's what I had in mind when I landed in the high desert of Prescott. I remember, it was the year the sun rose red over the United Kingdom, and boilin' wine flowed across the hills of Northern California.

It was also the year I met Helen.

Folks like me don't like other folks' judgmental stares, so we stay indoors and keep to ourselves. I didn't have no friends to help me move into my two-bedroom duplex that Saturday afternoon, when Thanksgivin' was in the air and cool crispness stung my cheeks. I was liftin' boxes from my pickup truck into an empty livin' room when I heard her voice before I saw her face.

"Howdy there, neighbor," she said, and her voice was wispy. I put down my box onto the dirt driveway, and when I turned around, she was starin' at me with a hand on her hip, silver hair cropped above her ears.

"Hi," I said, suspicious.

"You need some help?"

"What's it to ya?"

She smiled, and I watched her leathery skin crinkle at the corners of her eyes. "Just helpin'," she said. "My name's Helen, and this here's Baby Ruth; she's my best friend." Helen motioned

down to her feet at a black cat with yellow eyes, a tiny thing, probably the runt of the litter. “She follows me everywhere, just like a dog.”

“Nice to meet y’all,” I said, as the cat came to rub against my legs. I didn’t have much experience with animals, so I didn’t pet her. But the way she looked at me, with those easy goin’ eyes, it triggered some long-buried emotion that I couldn’t name.

“Why Baby Ruth?” I asked.

“‘Cause that’s the best damn candy bar ever made by mankind. And it fits her, don’t ya think?”

The cat meowed. “Sure, I suppose,” I said.

“What’s your name?”

I froze, never big on sharin’ personal details right away. A girl can never be too careful.

“Jessie,” I said after a few moments. “Jessie Jay Jones.” I bit my lip for givin’ her my full name, unsure why I did it.

“Well ain’t that a pretty name,” Helen responded, crackin’ a smirk. “So back to my original question, Miss Jessie Jay Jones: do you need some help?”

I was going to tell her no, that I got it myself, that I was used to bein’ on my own, but I said yes. That afternoon, Helen and her black cat, Baby Ruth, helped me move into my patio home. It was the first time in my life that anyone lent a hand liftin’ my old, ratty boxes.

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Helen lived directly across the street from me. I could see straight into her front window if I wanted, but I wasn’t much for spyin’. She told me she lived there for fifteen years. Gosh dang, I was still in middle school when Helen moved into that house. I couldn’t imagine livin’ *anywhere* for fifteen years.

Like me, she lived alone, except for Baby Ruth. But there was always these cars comin' and goin' from her house, and people—all *kinds* of people: Mexicans and artists and ranchers. One day, a lady showed up who claimed to be Helen's best friend from childhood. She was a Wiccan, and when Helen introduced us, she taught me all about the red candles and black candles and white candles.

I wanted to ask Helen where she was from, what she did, but I feared bein' intrusive. I hated when people intruded into my life, so I never asked. Helen, on the other hand, wasn't so shy.

"What do you do?" she inquired one day.

"For a livin'?"

"Of course for a living."

"Oh, it ain't nothin' special," I told her. "I just work at the local diner."

"As a waitress?"

"Pretty much."

"You got a boyfriend?"

I shook my head. "Naw," I said.

"Why not?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at Baby Ruth, who was restin' comfortably on Helen's feet. "Guess I just move around too much."

I anticipated the judgement any moment.

"A girl shouldn't spend too much time alone," Helen said, and I grimaced.

"You're alone," I said, my voice a little sharp, and then I felt bad. Somethin' told me Helen didn't say it out of shrewdness, but rather, out of concern.

“So it would seem,” she responded. Then Helen smiled, but I noticed it wasn’t genuine. Instead, she seemed—robotic. “But honey, I ain’t *never* alone.”

That night, after I came home from another shift of crappy tips and crabby parents and cat-callin’ married men, I felt an episode comin’ on. It always started with a pit of dread in my gut, like a killer was waitin’ to pounce from the shadows of my closet.

Then I got paranoid, switchin’ on every light and peeking ‘round every corner I could find. The thoughts started racin’, attacking my mind like a swarm of bees, and I started seein’ red, looming and woeful, and it frightened me.

*“You ain’t no good at nothin’, Jessie Jay.”*

*“If no black eyes are gonna teach you respect, maybe they’ll knock some sense into you.”*

*“Gosh dang it, Jessie Jay. The least you can do is give me a blowjob if you can’t cook a meal.”*

I always felt like I was gonna die. I stopped breathin’ and my knees went weak, so I fell to the floor and wondered if I’d be alone for the rest of my life, even though I liked bein’ alone. I hated myself for wantin’ more, for wishin’ my family was there, even when my family was mean.

I wanted it to stop every time, so I cried some more, pleadin’ into the open air. When the pain kept on comin’, I closed my eyes and started wailin’ harder, convulsin’ and clenchin’ my muscles until finally, I fell asleep on the floor. I didn’t remember nothin’ after that.

The doorbell roused me the next mornin’. I’d spent all night on the floor in a fetal position and drooled on the carpet. My neck was killin’ me too. When I called out to ask who’s there, silence responded.

I pushed myself to a sittin' position, then climbed to my feet. I stumbled to the front door, the taste of yesterday's food still in my mouth, and glanced out the window. Empty air.

I opened the door—looked left, then right—and finally I glanced down. When I first saw it, I remember feelin' confused.

A bag of fresh pomegranates.

I reached to grab the bag, unsure at first what I was holdin', and a note fell from the inside. I snagged it before the wind could, and opened the folded paper.

*Please enjoy some fresh pomegranates from my backyard tree. It always produces more fruit than I can eat. Let me know if you'd like more. I have plenty.*

*Happy Thanksgiving!*

*Helen*

I almost dropped the pomegranates. No one had ever left fruit at my doorstep before, and as I stared at the bag of orbs, I broke down cryin'.

I pulled the fruit inside and closed the door, cradlin' the pomegranates like new kittens. When I peered out my front window, I saw Helen wearin' heavy gardening gloves and clearin' away brush as Baby Ruth trotted behind her. I studied her movements, her facial expressions, her keenness. She was a cross between Annie Oakley and Mary Poppins, filled with grit and mystery, but also compassion.

I started to wonder about Helen's life, her travels, her story. I didn't even know her last name.

*I'll ask her soon, I told myself. I'll ask her soon.*

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Thanksgivin' came and went, and soon Christmas would arrive. The holiday was maybe two weeks away when Helen had her first garage sale since I moved in.

"Where'd you get all this *stuff*?" I asked, crossin' the street to examine her multitude of trinkets, crafts, and quilts.

"I made it," Helen said.

"All of it?"

"You better believe it."

Baby Ruth wandered up to say hello, and I reached down to scratch her chin.

"She's taken a liken' to you," Helen said.

"Well, she is a cute little thing. How'd you meet her?"

"Found her in my garage when she was a kitten. Her mamma'd been attacked by coyotes and dragged her to my place. That poor mamma, she died a day later, so I bottle-fed Baby Ruth back to health. She's been by my side ever since. That was what—ten years ago now?"

"What a great story," I said, and knelt down to Baby Ruth's level. She hopped onto my knee and I found myself gigglin'.

"She only does that when she's really fond of someone," Helen said.

I pet Baby Ruth and reveled in her gentle purrs. When she jumped off, I stood again. "Do you mind if I look around at your work?" I asked. "Maybe I'll buy somethin'."

"Sure, take your time."

I began pokin' through Helen's garage and found myself tantalized by her crafts. Beautiful scarves knitted with expertise, wall-sized quilts stitched with scenes of sunsets and Saguaros, finely painted birdhouses, bronze-welded windchimes. It went on and on and on.

"Where did you learn to do this?" I asked, fascinated.

“My momma encouraged it,” she said, but didn’t reveal more. “The Mexicans, they like to come here on Fridays and buy in bulk, then sell south of the border.”

“You ever been to Mexico?”

I waited for an answer, but Helen only winked at me. “How are those pomegranates?” she asked.

I wished she’d answer my question, but I didn’t want to be annoyin’, so I let it go.

“They’re delicious,” I said. I could tell Helen took pride in makin’ others feel good and accepted. “I’ve been using them in salads. I’m goin’ to bake you some banana bread soon, as a thank-you.”

“No need. Just glad to bring a smile to your face.”

I spent more time meanderin’ through Helen’s crafts before settlin’ on the red-and-white birdhouse that hung from a yellow string. When I went to pay for it, Helen held up her hand.

“It’s yours,” she said. “A gift. You go on now and feed those baby birds.”

I wanted to hug her, but somethin’ in the way Helen spoke told me she wasn’t the huggin’ type. So I thanked her once again, and walked across the street back to my place.

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I’d decided to climb into bed early that night and was already snugglin’ under the covers when I heard the sirens. I lived on a quiet street in a quiet town, so the sirens caused enough concern that I crawled outta bed and into my slippers.

The air was freezin’ that night, and we were expectin’ the first snow. I switched on my bedroom light when I realized the sirens got louder and closer. Rubbin’ my arms to stay warm, I sauntered toward the front window and looked outside. About four police cars had parked in front of Helen’s house.

“What the hell?” I asked aloud, and a vile feeling rose from deep in my stomach. Somethin’ was wrong.

I spun around and jogged back to my bedroom, reached into the closet, and grabbed a robe. I wrapped it around my waist before runnin’ outside. The air was damp, and I could smell the snow comin’. But that didn’t matter. My eyes fixated on the crime tape surroundin’ Helen’s house.

“What’s goin’ on out here?” I called, hopin’ one of the officers would answer.

“Ma’am, we need you to step back please.”

“That’s my friend in there. Is she okay?”

Another officer approached when I said this, a tall man with copper skin and slanted eyes. When he spoke, he revealed a thick, Spanish accent.

“You say you’re her friend?” the officer asked.

“Yes sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jessie Jay Jones.”

His eyes wilted when I said this, and he turned back to his partner. “This is her,” he said.

By now, I was crazy confused and startin’ to grow angry. Why wouldn’t anyone tell me what happened? I was desperate to know if Helen was alright.

“Miss Jones, we have some difficult news,” the Hispanic officer said. “Your neighbor, Helen, took her life tonight.”

My heart stopped beatin’ the moment I heard those words. At first, I thought my mind played a cruel trick, but when I asked him to repeat himself, I knew I’d heard correctly.

“How – how is that possible?” I asked.

“She left a note,” the officer continued. “And she named you.”

“She named ... *me*?”

The officer bit his lip. I could tell this was hard for him. “Yes ma’am. She asked if you could take care of Baby Ruth for her. She said no girl should spend too much time alone.”

I lost my balance then, and all I could think about was the heartbroken look I imagined in Baby Ruth’s eyes, and I collapsed to the ground hysterical.

“How could she do this?” I asked, cryin’ into my hands. “Why? *Why?*”

A woman rushed to my side, and she smelled of peppermint and vanilla. I didn’t see her face, or know her name, but I felt her embrace tryin’ to comfort me. I couldn’t understand what had happened, why Helen would feel so badly that she’d leave Baby Ruth alone. She loved Baby Ruth with everythin’ she had.

They later told me she’d downed a bottle of sleepin’ pills and probably didn’t feel a thing. She left behind two grown children and some grandkids who lived on a ranch in Texas. I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard this. I’m from Texas, too.

I took Baby Ruth home with me that night, and she howled into the darkness. I’d never heard a cat howl in despair, and it’s the most tragic sound I never want to hear again. I tried to encourage her to eat the food Helen left behind, but Baby Ruth wouldn’t touch it.

I started to panic that she’d die too, but after another day, she finally nibbled. Within a week, she jumped into bed with me and we mourned together.

I stared out my front window as Helen’s family arrived to clear out her house. They piled mounds of crafts into plastic crates, which they transferred into SUVs. I felt compelled to reach out and meet them, but then I grew scared and stayed inside. They probably wouldn’t think much of me anyhow.

I didn't do nothin' for Christmas, besides spendin' it quietly with Baby Ruth on my lap. I thought long and hard about Helen's last message: *no girl should spend too much time alone*.

Helen always had people comin' and goin' at her house, but maybe it wasn't enough. I found myself wakin' each mornin' and starin' at her empty place, until one day, I saw myself lyin' dead in there, and it terrified me.

After the *For Sale* sign went up, I decided to check on Helen's pomegranate tree one day. I let myself into her backyard and realized how vacant it felt. The tree still had ripe fruit hangin' from its branches, so I pulled them off to keep them from rottin'.

"I never did bake you that banana bread," I said to the pomegranates as I twirled them in my palms. "I'm so sorry, Helen."

When I pulled the last of the fruit from her tree, I heard a female voice call from the front of the house askin' who was behind the gate. I didn't answer, but crept toward the front, unsure who waited on the other side. When I turned the corner, I recognized the woman from the days after Helen died, when she'd wept from the driveway. She was Helen's daughter.

"Who are you?" she asked, and I was about to run away and retreat into my duplex, but then I remembered Helen's warning. Swallowin' my nerves, I forced myself to stop and look the woman in the eyes.

"I was a friend of your momma's," I said, and the woman's expression softened immediately.

"No kiddin'?" she said. "How'd you know her?"

"I live across the street." I motioned to the patio home with Baby Ruth starin' out the window.

"Is that my momma's cat?" the woman asked.

"Yes ma'am," I said. "She asked me to care for her. I hope you don't mind."

The woman nodded, but I could tell she was conflicted, so I did somethin' I'd never done before. "You wanna come inside for some tea?" I asked. "Maybe you can tell me more about your momma."

At my offer, the woman grinned, and I realized it was the same welcomin' smile that Helen always had. "I'd love that," she said. "My name's Jeanine."

I stepped forward and shook her hand. "I'm Jessie Jay Jones."

"Now ain't that the most darlin' name I heard in a decade."

Her compliment made me feel warm inside. "Thank you," I said. "Would you like a pomegranate?"

As I handed Jeanine the fruit, I felt fear leave my mind for the first time in my life. Helen's daughter took the pomegranate from my hand, and we walked across the street together as the snow started driftin' from above.

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## **A Note from the Author**

I dedicate this short story to my neighbor, may she rest in peace. I hope the story brings some awareness to the issue of suicide and the stigma of mental health. Frequently, those who need the most help may hide behind smiles or reach out to others more than they help themselves.

I decided to publish my story for free for two reasons: 1) sometimes, writing and storytelling should be free for everyone to enjoy; and 2) maybe it will get you thinking about the stigma around mental health. Feel free to share my story with your friends.

If you feel compelled to stay in touch after reading “Pomegranates,” please feel free to sign up for my Readers Club email list at [http://eepurl.com/c\\_M\\_0L](http://eepurl.com/c_M_0L). You can also sign up on my website at [www.ShariLopatin.com](http://www.ShariLopatin.com).

Thank you for reading my work. I hope it touched something deep inside of you and made a connection, as only human storytelling can do. If you would like to contact me directly, you can always email me at [shari.lopatin@gmail.com](mailto:shari.lopatin@gmail.com), and I will respond!

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