

Colleen O'Mara

Carob Tree Blues

When I was a child, I used to hold my breath—wanting so desperately to turn blue. I used to hold in air so long that when it burst out from my lungs, my feet would leave the ground, my body jerked with so much force.

When I was a child, I made my mother paint my bedroom blue and we picked out a bedspread with little blue flowers, and all of my school books had to be covered with blue wrapping paper, and I wore a blue dress to church every Sunday because I thought that if I surrounded myself with the richness, the depth, the purity of this color—then I would be saved within its arms.

Most people don't think about the thickness of blue. Nor about the infinitesimal length of the sky, nor about the weaving of each vein carrying blood through the tips of each body, nor about the richness of four black men wailing out this color in the depths of New Orleans. They don't think about it because they're looking into reds and violets to find their meaning.

People don't think about the four letters, not about the sound that the word makes, not about the feel it has when you speak it. Blue. Go ahead, say it to yourself and feel how your lips come together, folding inward, spitting out the first sound and then feel how your tongue stretches and slides across the roof of your mouth, extending your lips outward as if waiting for a lover's hasty kiss. Balooo. Baloo. Blue.

When I was a child, I used to hold my breath hoping that one day I would look into the mirror and I would be staring back into the purity of sky, the depth of ocean, the clarity of water, the richness of stream. All other's blues. Blues of otherness.

Out of all the colors on the wheel, I wanted this one to be me. I tied all of my fingertips once separately with string and watched them turn shades. When they got to purple, I cut off the string. I painted my hair once with poster paint. Each strand, sticky until it dried. When I was forced to wash it out, the color whirled

dirtyly down the bathtub's drain. It stained the linoleum gray and I have yet to be forgiven for that childish indiscretion.

"Look, see, how you can't get those stains out, they just won't come out, they just won't, I told her not to do it, I told her, I told you, but you wouldn't listen now would you, no, now would you, now would you?"

My mother has never been known for brevity. I remember growing up with my mother and it was exactly that—a with, not a below, not an under, not a beneath but really more of an along-side. She had been shipped out from New York by her Irish Catholic father who dragged her to the altar to stand beside my father who was the father of the baby that lived within my mother at the time. Thank God that baby was not me because I know that I certainly could not have survived all of the references that my sister Maureen so solemnly withstood.

"Oh, you know, that one, the one, that's right, well, no not exactly, more like seven and a half. She's always been *sucha*, *sucha*, *sucha* delicate child."

I always thought that Maureen was about as delicate as the old Carob that sat out in front of our house and I thought she would crack about as easily as sidewalk. Like me, Maureen was just like her bedroom. It was her escape, her sanctuary she would say. She had stacks of records which she scattered, at times, around her room. You could always hear music coming from down the hall, flowing through the house. To me, my sister Maureen was music. She was strong never-ending melodies, thickly woven harmonies that never gave in, never suffered, but must have held a vulnerability that I wasn't old enough to hear.

"Godammit!"

And then there was my father who I must say is the handsomest man I will ever know. He used to burn, like red molten fire and he used to wail louder than screeching ambulance sirens. His favorite color is emerald. It couldn't be green because that is grass, or plant, or garden hose. No, his color is emerald like the magical isle or the stone within my mother's eyes. Emerald, emmaworld, emmasworld, Emma—my mother, Emma's world—

my father, John. And so he painted our house this color. It stood alone on the top of the block, blazing out from the other homes, which hung back from the paved street in subtlety. I was brought up in a track house. This meant that every house on our block was, on its interior, the same. Each one was familiar to the neighbors' eyes, each one containing the same floor plan, the same kitchen, the same dinette, the same master bedroom. This was comforting when I was younger but then grew to be unnerving.

John didn't really mean to be as dogmatically overbearing as he was. Really he didn't. It was just part of his nature, his culture, his up-bringing. He used to tell a story about his father, my grandfather, who wore a particular type of belt, with a particular length and a particular width. It was the type of belt, my father would say, that made a child swallow deeply just by catching it in the corner of the eye. He used to say that his father, my grandfather, never had to use that belt of his because it was just enough that he wore it. That was authority he would say. That was respect.

It was the summer of my seventh, Mo's sixteenth birthday and it was hotter than usual, steamier. It was the last time Mo stayed around the house taking swimming lessons at the Y, walking to the movies on Saturday, throwing footballs around on lawns longing for dew by sunset.

John stalked my sister Maureen that summer as she played across the street in the Berger's yard. I could see him watch her from inside the house through the screen door. He sat on the porch, out on the chair—smoking. I'm sure for Mo, the red fleck of light was all that gave his shadow away.

"Whatcha doin'?" I remember asking him through the metal door that smelled liked dusty tin.

"Nothing. Go inside."

"But watcha..."

"Noth. Thing. Go. In. Side."

I did as I was told but sat kneeling in the living room's picture window watching my father glow. As dusk fell the group of Mo's school friends decided to stop for the night. The twins that lived down at the other edge of our block headed for home first, and

then Mike Tugner from two doors down, and then Pam—Maureen's friend from church, and then Mark Berger walked Mo to the gate solemnly catching a glare at my father who still sat glowing in the shadow of the porch.

"See you tomorrow Mo," he called after her.

"Ya, sure," she called back already half way across the street.

I watched her from the big window sill that framed the front room. She finished crossing the street, walked up the steps, and was followed into the house by red John.

"So Emma, little Mo here has herself a boyfriend," he said slamming the door behind him.

I had that feeling that I always got when my father had been glowing in the dark. It was a tightening of the muscles, of the heart, of lungs.

"So, Maureen do you like this boy?" He followed her down the hallway. "Do, you? Answer me!" He kept following her down, to the right and to the back of the house. "An. Swer. Me!"

Of course, Mo never did answer him. She never really talked to him. She never really talked to anyone except for me, and that was only our secret. Maureen was a beautiful girl, really, my aunt would say. She had auburn hair that had golden streaks in it when she stood in the sun. Her eyes were dark brown and her face was pale with a long thin nose. She could look deep inside of people, just as she looked at John, and know what you were really thinking.

Maureen used to pick me up from school everyday. She'd hold my hand as we walked home. Her hand was always big and usually chilled. She used to say "Cold hand, warm heart." When I close my eyes now, I can see her standing in her plaid uniform. The maroon plaid uniform of St. Michael's showing off the gold in her hair. Father Malone used to call to her "Well, heeelllooo Irish" because he said she was the beauty, the flower that reminded him of home. She always brushed off his attention. I guess she never believed him, because he was much too kind for her to feel comfortable.

Maureen used to hum in my ear as she brushed my hair

sometimes. Her voice was rich and her breath felt like feathers against my ear. It was usually after a bath. She'd let me sit in her room on her bed, flushed pink from the heat of the water. She'd brush out my hair in long strokes, her fingers sorting through the strands, her hands running through the softness. She'd hum to me songs that she had learned, without words, with only melody. She always made me feel warm, safe and warm.

"Do ya? What am I bringing up here, Emma? What is that girl going to turn into, Emma?" He was back in the kitchen screaming at my mother and I could hear them through the walls, through the doors, filtering through the music that came from Mo's room. "What am I bringing up here?"

At dinner, my father was no different.

"So, Mo thinks that I don't see what's under my nose! So, Mo thinks that what she does is without my knowing it!" He'd do things like that all the time. Work himself into a raging ball of red fire.

"So, Mo—have you been out with that Jew yet? Have you let him hold your hand?" He was taunting her. I watched her keep her eyes down. "And you?" he turned to me. "What are you lookin' at?"

"Come on John, leave the girls alone. I can't understand when you get this way, I just don't know why this has to be, why you have to be, why you have to say...." My mother tried to negotiate, tried to bridge the gap, tried to be the string that held it all together but she always shredded like cheap thread.

Maureen used to help me climb the trees in our yard especially the big one out front. "Don't be afraid," she'd say. "I'm here." "You won't fall." "I'm here." "I'll catch you." She would bring me out front on a Saturday or a Sunday after changing from our good clothes. I would stand there in blue jeans and sneakers staring up at the big, knotted tree—my adversary. Up through the leaves I would peer into patches of blue sky. That was where I wanted to go, up through the leaves. Maureen would give me a quick push up as I grasped onto the lowest branch, heaving myself up, clammering up to sit in the Carob's neck. "You're fine. You're

okay. Don't worry." Her voice would come to me as I stared down to the ground below. There she'd be smiling, urging me on, urging me to go on, move forward. "Don't be afraid. Don't ever be afraid," she would tell me as she held out her arms. "Now, jump. Close your eyes and jump." But I never could. "Come, on, you can do it. I'm here. You won't fall," she'd say and I wanted to believe her. I wanted to move but every second that past sent me deeper into my paralysis and left me with a searing feeling of panic. Then I would turn sideways and shimmy my way down from the neck, over the bark, scratching my arms, and sometimes my stomach along the way. I could never do it. I could never reach for the sky, nor jump for the ground.

"Why—Why not? Maur-reen doesn't seem to want to answer me. Does't want to tell me the truth, doesn't want to admit it. So, she'll just sit here until she does."

And that's exactly what Mo had to do. Sit in that hard wood chair without the cushion until she admitted something that wasn't true, or admitted it just to get up, or began to cry which she never did. And so she sat there while the TV went on and the dishes got washed and put away and as the dogs were fed and as the news came on and as I went to bed and as Carson guffawed and as my mother retired and as the TV went off and the lights too and as the house creaked because it was settling in for the night. She sat there. Maureen, the maroon Carob, and probably cried into her arm so no one could hear.

The next morning, John let Mo get up from the table and seemed madder than he had the night before as she ran down the hallway, to the right, and to the back of the house, slamming her bedroom door. Only music came from her room that day, sad lonely tunes that filled the house with misery and colored the air with tension.

That night after dinner, Mo went to the movies because it was Saturday and a double feature was playing. John took me in the car with him as he followed her. I remember the smell of that old Chevrolet. It was a mixture of stale smoke and sweat. I sat on the vinyl seat, my legs dangling over the side, kicking my heels.

"Why are we following, Mo?" I asked my father.

"Just because," he said as he watched her round a corner.

"But why, Daddy?" I remember asking.

He finally parked across from the Egyptian as Mo paid for her ticket and waited in line. I'm sure Mo could see us, especially John as he sat glowing in the darkness of his Chevrolet. Every once in a while he'd extend his arm to ash on Piedmont Street.

Maureen used to take care of me when my parents would go out at night. When she'd put me to bed, she'd lay underneath the covers with me. Her hair would hang long down her back and her skin always smelled like rain. I remember, she'd let me hug her arm as she gave me a story. She always said, "Stories aren't read, they're given." "Like a present? Like on my birthday?" "Yeah, like on your birthday." It was at these times that I would feel myself vanish into the warmth of my sister.

Maureen used to tell me how to hide sometimes, underneath my bed where it was cool. "Hide here. Don't move." It was when there was shouting. Emma and John. Shouting. Yelling. I could hear them and Maureen trying to stop them, trying to, trying to. When it was quiet, she'd come and get me. I could see the door crack open and the light streak across my wooden floor. Then I'd see her face smile at me. She'd put me under the covers and hum to me until I fell asleep.

I heard my father suck in his breath when Mark Berger turned the corner. Mo waved to him smiling and caught a glare over her shoulder. She grabbed Mark's arm and hugged it to her, smiling up at him. They held hands into the theatre.

When we got home that night, John let me sit up to watch the late night movie. He was sitting in his chair facing the TV with me laid out on the floor at his feet when Mo came through the front door. I froze when my father stepped over me, slammed the TV off and then slapped Mo straight across the face, straight away—no words, no anger, no fire, no glow—just slap and then led her to her chair at the table without the cushion.

I ran to get Emma but I remember now that she was sleeping. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. She just would have said she didn't understand, why did he, why should he, why couldn't

he, why is he, why does he, why...." So I went to my room and melted into the blueness of sky.

The next morning Mo was still in the same place sitting awake on that hard chair, staring forward at red John who sat in the living room in his chair. He'd stopped glowing. I tip toed through the kitchen looking for Emma who I found outside hanging laundry on the line—and whistling.

"Mommy, what did Mo do?" I asked her.

"What? Oh, they're just playing sweetheart. You know how they play sometimes." She laughed. "I just don't understand why, just don't know how, just don't know.... But don't worry, it's different for you, darling. You came later. Now, come help mommy."

They sat like that the whole day through breakfast, through lunch, and through dinner. Mo just sat there while he glowed. She didn't talk, didn't eat, didn't sleep, just stared off into the panneling against the far living room wall. I made myself invisible that day by snapping my fingers and moving through rooms without sound.

Maureen, you see, was the one that protected me. She was the one who made sure I didn't get in the way. I can barely remember this one time John came home from work and we were all at the dining room table, eating. He was angry that we were eating without him. We were living without him. We were, without him. He swung his arm across the table and dishes flew to the floor, shattering into thousands of tiny little pieces. I remember beginning to cry, beginning to scream as my father began touching his long, wide, leather belt. Mo swept me up out of my chair, into her arms and ran to the back of the house. I remember my head leaning into her neck, breathing in her skin, breathing into hair?

That night, I could hear him yelling at her as she sat there. Yelling at her, yelling at Emma. Their voices always seemed to filter through my daydreams, even the ones I had at night. I heard words I'd never known before and they were all directed at Mo, at Maur. Reen.

I snuck out of my room, and slowly tiptoed down the hallway, my warm feet meeting cold, hard wood floor. I moved to the end of the hallway where it met the living room and could see

their figures, Maureen perched in her chair, staring blankly forward with no movement, no sound, no cry. My mother stood to the side of John who was ranting from one end of the living room to the next. His face was deep red, the color of pure blood.

I snuck peaks from behind the wall as quietly as I could, holding in breath, in muscles, in lungs. "Now, John, calm down," Emma said. "Calm down, why can't you, why don't you, why do you, why must you..."

"Godammit!" he screamed as he took out his belt. In one swoop of his arm, I watched as he brought it back behind his ear, up above his head, flying to the ceiling and then brought it down hard, full, deep. It met Maureen's thighs with a searing whip of dense, thick, tortured air.

Everything stopped for a moment, froze for a split second in the painful acknowledgement of actions already performed. It was one of those moments that one wishes they could turn back time, erase the clock, earn back seconds that were never meant to happen. I stood in my spot, in the hallway, in the doorway to the living room, with my breath held so tightly that I may have burst if Maureen had not begun running. She ran from the chair, past my spot, down the hall, past my room, and into the master bedroom. John followed after her as she slammed the door and locked it. I ran to my room, to my bed and wiggled my way under it. The light from the hall spilled into my room, across the wooden floor. I heard him yelling, Emma crying. I clutched at my pillow, burying my head, my fingers, my ears, my nose, my eyes. Mo-Maureen-Maureen Ann-open this door-open this-open-please-Maureen-Maureen-Maurrreeensooorrry-Maur-rreeeen-Maurreeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...

The silence grew so intensely that I have never been swallowed up by so much quiet. Staring at the crack of light that came into my room, I longed for that smile that would drag me from under my bed. But she never came again, and I drowned in the absence of sound, of breath, of maroon Carob trees that twinkled when she was forced to laugh.

"Look, see, how you can't get those stains out, they just won't come out, I told her, I told you, but you, but you, but you..."

Emma muttering to herself. Muttering. Muttering away.

When John left a year or so later, she made me stand outside with her in the middle of July and we painted the house, the two of us, along side one another. We painted over the emerald.

"Come on, sweetie, come on, that's it, you're doing good, just fine, just..."

I only stood half way up the wall and not too much higher with the ladder. It took us two weeks, I think. Out there in the sun, in the heat, in the swampy air.

"Not a good time to paint, Emma." I remember someone, somebody saying. But we painted it over anyway—shearing it of all color.

"White is the sign of purity," she said. "Father Malone says so at Mass, he says so, the sign of good, the sign of God. That's it sweetie, good, good, yes, that's right, that's it, that's right," she said to me that hot, damp, steamy, summer day. Emma needed that assurance I guess. It's that assurance that she gets every time she comes home from her job at the bank. Everytime she comes home from the market, carrying her bags of groceries. She waits to be greeted by this gleaming house. It is only when she climbs these steps and enters this doorway that she is reminded of her unending task. She was left to remove the stains.

Emma's not the only one though. I guess they found me that night, late, outside, up in the Carob tree in the front yard. I guess I was crying, whimpering. They had to coax me down with a promise of an ice cream, or a doll, or something like that. I guess I accepted. Emma said that I just kept telling them, "I wouldn't have fallen. I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have. I could've jumped."

I'm sure now that I was probably reaching for something. Up there, I was half way to sky, half way to blue, half way to baloooo. I could have made it, I know. If I had just believed. If I had just moved. If I had just jumped. If I had just believed that Carob's don't have shallow roots.