



Pink Dogwood

By Marion Robinson

What *was* I thinking last night when I parked? Probably wondering if my new skirt was too dressy for coffee or not dressy enough for the kind of fancy lunch I imagined Brian treating me to. Whatever it was, the car ended up way too close to the concrete wall.

I threaded myself carefully through the gap, keeping the skirt from brushing either the dusty side of the car or the shrubs sticking out over the hip-high wall. Abruptly a higher branch came into focus, almost scraping my forehead.

Right in front of my nose, the grey branch divided into twigs, each twig tipped by a Hershey's-Kiss-shaped grey bud. The April sun felt warm to me, but the buds didn't agree – they were still closed tight. The branch drooped in an arc from a trunk that had the same drab grey bark. The tree was twice my height and loaded with buds. So many unfamiliar plants grow in the mild climate here in Portland compared to the western part of Oregon where I'm from.

I made it into the car without messing up my clothes and nosed it out of the parking lot. The driveway winds among the apartment blocks in the complex, with neatly-kept greenery between the buildings and on each side of the drive softening the edges.

Halfway down the drive, a brown truck with 'Jason's Garden Care' painted in white on the door was parked at the edge of the road. Jason hoed methodically around the shrubs. He was wearing a green t-shirt and his sandy hair hung in front of his eyes like it needed a trim. He looked up as the car passed. I waved. He usually spent Saturday mornings on these gardens and I usually stopped to chat with him.

The day I moved in, back in January, my car had been loaded with boxes and bags and suitcases – all my possessions. Jason saw me struggling with the box that held the microwave and offered to help. His big nose and sticking-out ears were comical, but he didn't stop helping until everything was stacked in the otherwise empty living room. "What are you going to sleep on?" he asked.

"There's a rolled-up foamy and sleeping bag somewhere in this heap. And a bag of groceries with a frozen dinner. Enough to survive my first night."

He left, but two hours later the door bell rang. It was Jason. Behind him were an easy chair and a side table. "These were just collecting dust in my basement," he said.

He avoided answering when I offered to pay for them. So of course I said hello after that when I saw him working, and sometimes I brought out my special double chocolate chip cookies.

But not this Saturday morning.

My stomach rippled with nervousness. Three months I've been in Portland and finally last week I had picked up the phone with a trembling hand and called the office where Brian works.

I was afraid he would say, "Who?" when I gave my name, but instead he said, "Rachel? Jeff's sister? I haven't seen you since your high school graduation. How are you?" Then he was flatteringly quick to agree to my suggestion to meet for coffee on Saturday morning. My imagination colored in the rest of the morning with a stroll along the river and lunch with champagne.

I turned left onto Burnside Road. From the apartment complex, the road climbs a little higher and then goes steeply down to the city through a dark forest. At the bottom of the hill, Twenty-third Avenue was so thick with traffic it took two lights to get through the first intersection and I was several blocks beyond the cafe before I spotted a place to park on a side street. My handbag slipped out of my hand as I got out of the car. I picked it up, locked the car, and dropped the bag again when I tripped over the curb. It was silly to be so nervous, but that's how it was.

I dashed around the corner. A cloud of salmon-pink stopped me dead. It was a tree densely covered in two-inch blossoms. I peered into one that presented itself at nose level – a knobby yellow center ringed with cream and surrounded by four pink petals. Each petal had a notch in the outer edge. But I was late – I hurried on.

The window of a store reflected like a mirror. A hank of my hair had slipped out of place already. I stopped, undid the clasp at the nape of my neck, raked my hair back with my fingers, and refastened the clasp. My straight fine hair is impossible to do anything with and it's such a nondescript brown. I'm not sure these dark-rimmed glasses suit me, either.

Even outside the café the buttery scent of baking made me inhale a deep greedy breath. Just inside the door were display cases crammed with decadent pastries. Beyond was a large room crowded with tiny tables and metal-framed chairs.

Brian's profile stood out as if he were under a spotlight. He has small ears that lie close to his head against his black hair. The curl of his lips and the way his cheek meets his jaw are like you see in pictures of Greek statues. Seeing him knocked me breathless the way it did when I was fifteen and my older brother brought him home on a visit from college.

As I came over he saw me and stood up. Those blue eyes sucked me in and made me stare even though I knew I shouldn't. He offered his hand. I reached out, stumbled over a chair leg, and missed his grip.

"Rachel," he said. "You haven't changed a bit."

My neck and cheeks prickled with a flush.

It had barely registered on me that a woman was sitting beside Brian. Now she stood up. She was tall and slim, and her chestnut hair curved around her ears.

"This is my friend, Cathy," said Brian.

"Hi, Rachel." Cathy's fingernails were perfect ovals, glossed with a pearly polish.

"Sit down, Rachel," said Brian. "Jeff mentioned you were in Portland. Working here, now?"

"I'm a receptionist in a dental office downtown." Somehow my bottom found the seat of the chair, only a little off center.

A waitress, her eyes fixed on Brian, asked for our orders.

"A cappuccino, dry," said Cathy, "and an almond biscotti."

Fancy coffees are too fiddly for me. And how can a cup of coffee be 'dry'? "Just ordinary coffee for me," I said. "Were those chocolate croissants in the case on the way in? I'll have one."

"A double espresso," said Brian.

I dredged up one of the topics of conversation I'd practiced. "Jeff said you were called to the bar recently?" The news from my brother had also given me the name of the firm Brian worked for. That was how I had known where to phone. The previous two years, all I had known was that he was in Portland, which was why I kept applying for jobs here until, finally, I landed one.

Cathy answered for him. "That's right." She touched his arm. "And he's on track to be the youngest partner ever of the firm."

Brian smiled at Cathy, a smile accompanied by a hundred-watt stare from those blue eyes, the kind of smile I had dreamed of him giving me. He put his hand over hers. “Does the senior partner’s daughter have the inside track on information?”

Cathy blinked her long eyelashes at him and put her finger to her lips.

I was the kid sister again, butting in on older brother’s date. I didn’t need a tissue, but I fumbled in my handbag anyway. They were so icky-sweet with each other I wished it was a barf bag.

Brian stopped melting over Cathy. He pulled out a wallet, extracted a business card, and handed it to me. “When you need a lawyer, be sure to call me. Wills, real estate, whatever. You’ll get the special ‘friends’ rate.” For me, he smiled like the man who sold me my used car.

Did Brian agree to meet for coffee only to make another contact for his business? “I’ll keep that in mind,” I said, shriveling inside.

By the time Brian pleaded another appointment, picked up the tab (“I can expense it”, he said), and left with Cathy, I was glad to see him go. Whoever had been in my dreams, this wasn’t him. Half the dentists in the office and dozens of our clients are nicer, if not as decorative. The fantasy fizzled like candy floss doused with water.

On the way back to my car I wondered what to do with the rest of the day. What friend could I phone? The extravagant glory of the pink blossoms soothed my deflated spirits. Probably Jason would know the name of this tree.

He had almost reached the end of the plantings along the driveway when I got home. I parked the car and sat in the sun on the wall bordering the lot. Jason kept working toward me. He is big, yet his steps are careful when he places his boots between the plants. He stopped a couple of paces away and pushed a strand of hair off his forehead. His face is tanned from his outdoor work. He doesn’t make me trip over my own feet.

“Nice day,” he said.

“I saw a tree. Down on Twenty-third. It had gorgeous pink blossoms, zillions of them, four petals with little bites out of the ends. Do you know what it is?”

“Probably some variety of *cornus florida*. Commonly called pink dogwood.” The lines at the corners of his eyes deepened. “You’re sitting under one now.”

Startled, I looked around. Behind me was one of the trees I had noticed earlier in the morning. “This grey thing?”

“They bloom later up here on the hill than down in the city. But take a look over here.”
He beckoned me around the corner of the building.

On the south side, the buds of a grey tree were splitting open, showing pink inside. I had to laugh at myself. “You mean they’ve been here under my nose all along?”

I used to think blue eyes were sexy. Brown ones, like Jason’s, are so much warmer.

“Have you seen tulip fields in bloom?” he asked. “There’s a farm south of Portland. I was thinking of going there this afternoon. Would you like to come with me?”

“Tulip fields? Like Holland?” This was more exotic than a stroll along the river. “I’d love to.”

He rubbed his chin with his square hand. “There’s a good pub in Mount Angel. We could stop for a hamburger.”

I thought of the tiny coffee cup in Brian’s slender fingers. “Do you drink espresso?”

“Espresso?” Jason shifted from foot to foot. “A mug of plain coffee is good enough for me.”

The air smelled of rich soil and new growth. “Me, too. Can I bring you one now? And something out of my cookie tin?”