an excerpt from

Fossil

by Randi Triant

I hadn't been to Janet's East Village apartment for six years, not since I'd been in college. A black man the size of a racehorse jockey answered the door.

"Girlfriend's been talking a blue streak all day," he said. I followed him as he walked like a model down the stubby dark hallway to Janet's kitchen. He was dressed in scrubs, like a surgeon, but instead of a calming blue they were splashed with red and purple Hawaiian flowers. Over the shirt pocket there was an embroidered *Friends In Deed*.

"Her dinner's in the oven," the stranger said, motioning toward a toaster oven. It was the size of the Easy-Bake-Oven Janet and I baked cakes in when we were kids. We could never figure out why they always tasted like communion wafers: tasteless and dry. Opening the oven door, the man pulled out a miniature rack. A glass pan of shriveled, cut-up vegetables—carrots, peppers, eggplant, zucchini—were being sizzled to death in a veneer of oil. "Ten more minutes," he said, shoving the rack back in and banging the door closed. I might not have seen Janet for six years but one thing I knew for certain: Janet would've eaten Elmer's Glue before she had one smidgen of those vegetables.

"Christ!" I heard from the bedroom down the hallway.

"I've written out all the instructions. See?" This time the man swept his hand across the refrigerator door, as if he were one of those mannequins on *The Price is Right*. Only he was so small, an image more like the Wizard of Oz crept in. Three white sheets of paper, filled with times and dosage and what Janet should eat or drink with what pill, covered the refrigerator door.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" the man asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Why? What has she told you?"

He shook his head. "Just: 'Call Milly. She'll know what to do.' Like you were Florence Nightingale come back from the dead." He stared at me for a minute and then just when I was wondering if he'd ever leave, he said, "So, do *you* know what to do?"

And suddenly I didn't want him to leave at all. Ever.

Janet was on her bed, watching a television talk show. An extended family was announcing that they'd all slept with each other. The enraged host yelled about America losing its moral compass.

"Hector show you his recipe from *The Unedible Cookbook for AIDS Patients*?" Janet asked, without turning her attention from the TV. Wincing, she clicked off the television.

"I'd rather die than hear that crap," she said. I wasn't sure if she was referring to the show or her home health aide. She turned to me. The six years since I'd last seen her had done their dirty work. In the framed photographs on a nearby bookcase of art books, I saw the Janet I knew: hair thick and blond, nose aquiline like an Egyptian princess. But now her hair was brittle and mousy brown. Her nose looked larger than it should've because of the weight she'd lost. When the disease couldn't make her ugly, it'd made her ordinary.

As if reading my thoughts, she said, "You haven't changed a bit."

And I hadn't. I still kept every brown strand neatly tied back in a ponytail. Still wore my oxford shirt buttoned almost to the top. My face still wore the same seriousness it always had, which confused people because they expected something perkier from someone as small as me. Everyone except Janet, that is.

Janet ran a hand through her thinning hair and, flipping her palm over, watched as the snagged hairs drifted to the comforter. It was a muggy June day, but she had on a sweater that hung loosely on her shoulders. "Hector loves to tell me about the serenity of dying. She needs to kick that fifty dollar a day crack habit, is what."

I smiled in spite of myself.

"What?" Janet said.

"Is there a McDonald's nearby?

"I've missed you," she said, smiling back. It was an awkward, shy smile—her teeth were graying from the chemo she'd undergone for a brain tumor. She clicked the television back on. We watched it for a minute and then she said, "Just when you think your life is surreal, there's shlock TV. Get me a double quarter pounder, will you?"

A week later, the curtains in Janet's room were flat against the window screens, the July heat sucking them outward.

"Let's get out of here. Go to the beach," I said. "We can catch the train out to Jones."

"Too far," Janet said. She was sitting in a wicker chair, wearing a neon green T-shirt and cut-offs covered in orange paint. Her body temperature was so normal she was actually sweating like me. "I have a better idea," she said. "Don't worry. It involves beach chairs."

We walked to a small supermarket two blocks away. As Janet slowly made her way down the frozen food aisle, I followed, two plaid beach chairs in my hands. She stopped at Frozen Vegetables. "How about here?" she asked as if we were at the ocean. She took one of the chairs from my hand and placed it in front of a freezer full of frozen baby peas and string beans. She opened the door to the case. A rush of cold air hit us as she sank into her chair.

"It's not going to be here all day," she said to me, adjusting her John Lennon sunglasses and tilting her head back. Goose bumps quickly covered her thin arms and legs. "Feels good," she said. She looked so small in the chair that I had to fight the urge to cover her hand with mine.

"I can feel you staring at me," she said, her eyes closed behind the sunglasses.

"Janet, you're freez—"

"Ssh," she whispered. "Let's just enjoy the moment, shall we?"

Five minutes passed before the check-out boy, who looked like he wasn't even out of high school yet, found us and closed the glass door, snuffing out the cold air.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I told Janet when we were out on the street again. Since I'd arrived I'd picked up my mother's annoying habit: apologizing for things I had no control over. My mother had started to do it shortly after my father had left us. "I'm sorry," she'd say to me if I complained about anything: homework, my

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flat-chestedness, my life. Apologizing to Janet felt as if I had a better grip on things; if I could apologize for something, it must mean I could fix it before it happened again.

"Why, did *you* hire him?" Janet said.

Suddenly she stopped. She stared over the roof of a car at two small boys yelling and racing toward the entrance into the supermarket, their mother trailing behind. The boys stomped on the black vinyl mat that operated the automatic door opener, and then rushed inside. "Martin. Jonathan," their mother called, but the doors swung closed before she got there and her sons stood on the other side, their faces pressed up against the glass. Their mother was stymied, reluctant to step on the opener, afraid the door would knock them over.

"Get away from the door," she shouted. We could hear the boys laughing as they leaned against the glass with their bodies.

"Don't let her in," Janet said, her face contorted, but just then the kids ran off, the woman stepped on the black cushy mat and the door suctioned inward. "Damn it," Janet whispered.

"Do you know them?" I asked, even though I was sure she didn't.

"Don't be stupid," she said in a curt voice that told me that I didn't get it and probably never would. Already I felt her illness separating us, rather than bringing us together. She'd crossed a river and kicked down the bridge after her.

"What's going on?" I asked. I couldn't stand the thought of her locking me out. But all she said was, "I'm tired. Take this," and handed me her beach chair.

College had separated Janet and me. The day after we'd graduated from high school, she took the money she'd inherited after her parents had been killed by a drunk driver, and over her grandmother's objections, moved from Cambridge, where we'd grown up, to the East Village to paint. I was a Humanities major at Fenwick College in Southern Vermont. After the suffocating environment she'd grown up in—her grandmother was a devout Catholic—Janet craved the immensity of the city. But Fenwick's smallness provided me with a security I hadn't felt since my father had left. We tried to keep connected through weekend college visits, but neither of us could understand the other's choices. Those weekend get-togethers would begin Friday night in a giddy reuniting atmosphere. But by Saturday afternoon, we'd be sitting in a crowded Village cafe or at a sticky booth in the Commons, drinking our coffee, distracted by everyone else around us, and getting irritated by the interruption in our real lives. By Sunday we couldn't wait to leave.

Still, I stubbornly clung to the possibility that during one of these visits something would change and we'd find ourselves exchanging something tangible again, like when we'd been kids and had swapped shoes because we wore the same size; I'd always loved slipping my foot into her Converse sneaker, still warm with her heat. Or maybe Janet would tell me something about life that I still didn't know, like when we were eleven and she'd told me how to smoke a cigarette: "Like this, silly. Not your thumb; guys do that."

Over the four years I was at Fenwick, Janet and I spent fewer and fewer weekends together until they petered out completely, like a sex-less marriage. We began to wait a couple of days to return each other's calls, then weeks, and eventually that fell into a deep radio silence between us. I told myself to stop thinking about her, that I'd been stupid not to realize that she'd changed. Friends grew apart, moved on.

I graduated and got a job in Fenwick's Student Affairs office. Another three years passed. Still I didn't hear from her. And then, I did. One day the phone rang in Student Affairs and when I picked it up, it was her voice I heard.

"Yes, I'd like to have an affair with a student. Is this the right office for that?"

I was so startled that I didn't immediately respond. "I can't believe it's you," I finally said.

"Listen, I was just thinking, why don't you come for a visit?" she asked. Her voice cracked a little, as if she'd choked on a peanut. It was her voice, but not her voice. Something had happened. Something had made her unsure of herself. The sound of it instantly made me switch from warding her off with some excuse, to telling her yes. Fragility is seductive. It made me want to see her.

After I hung up, I immediately regretted it. What had I gotten myself into? Why had I said yes so quickly? Friday came closer and with it, half a dozen times when I'd pick up the phone, only to place it down again when the ringing would start.

When she picked me up at Port Authority, she looked a little paler and thinner than I'd remembered. She was bundled up in an orange fake fur coat and a green quilted army hat with flaps that hung straight out over her ears. I felt oddly under-dressed in my plain down jacket and serviceable duck boots. She rubbed her cheekbone, which seemed more pronounced. "I've had the flu. But don't worry, I'm not contagious," she told me.

We went straight to her apartment. As soon as I saw the bathtub in the middle of her kitchen, all of those weekends we'd spent disconnected and uncomfortable flooded in. When

I'd stayed with Janet, I'd hated that you had to take a bath in full view of whoever was in the apartment. Not that anyone had ever been around when I'd visited. I'd suspected that she hadn't wanted her friends to meet me, nor me them. The first time I'd visited, Janet had bragged to me about being able to lean back from the tub, open the refrigerator, and get a beer while you were bathing. I'd thought the whole set-up was ridiculous.

"So," I said, staring first at the tub and then at everything else: yellowing porcelain sink streaked with oil paint and filled with dirty dishes, cracked subway tiles, the refrigerator with its peeling checkerboard sticky paper. Her apartment had never been really spotless, but it had had a certain bohemian air to it. Now that was replaced by outright neglect.

"Sorry. I didn't have a chance to clean up," she said. Suddenly, she pulled out a brown vinyl chair at the Formica table and sat down. She looked clammy, as if she was about to faint. She pulled off her flap hat. Her hair was sweat-matted to her forehead. She rubbed her hand over her face. "This flu really sticks with you," she said. "I need to lie down." She brushed past me, closing the bedroom door behind her. She only had one bed and we had usually slept in it together, nights filled with tossing surface sleep because I never felt comfortable with her in such proximity. But, this time, through the kitchen doorway, I could see that the living room couch was already made up into a bed. I was so relieved that we wouldn't be sleeping together I didn't think about what it meant.

Janet didn't get up until noon the next day. I'd gone out earlier for croissants and was sitting at the table eating when her door opened. She made Turkish coffee in a banged up copper pot, the syrupy mixture boiling on a hot plate as she added in the sugar. After she poured the coffee, she sat down at the kitchen table, placing her hand on top of her coffee cup, holding in the heat. "I want to tell you something. Well, I really don't want to tell you, but I want to tell somebody."

My body stiffened. "Oh, well, I guess if *anybody* would do, it might as well be me." I didn't know why I felt so insulted. It wasn't as if Janet and I were even friends anymore. It's not like I wanted her to confide in me. Whatever it was she wanted to tell me, it couldn't be good. Whatever it was, the flu or something else, made her look as if she'd just gotten the awful news about her parents.

"I didn't mean that," Janet said. She got up and went over to the sink. She rinsed out her cup though the sink was full of dirty dishes. Then she said: "There's a new exhibit at the Morgan," as if we hadn't been talking about something else.

I didn't ask what the exhibit was. I was eager to get out of the apartment before Janet reconsidered and suddenly decided I was the *somebody* she should talk to. Did she really think we could just pick up where we'd left off after not speaking to each other for so many years? Why had I come? The sexiness of the fragility I'd heard over the phone now seemed suffocating. Standing in her decaying kitchen, I felt as if I'd ended up back in bed with an ex (if I'd ever had an ex) for one last failed reconciliation, regretting every minute and wondering when it would be acceptable to put my clothes back on.

Why did I return to take care of her? Fenwick gave me the summers off so I was able to go, but that provided the opportunity, not the motive. Was it the attraction of helping someone who was now weaker than *me*, who for the first time in her life needed me, like one of the many students I helped everyday? I could be her savior. Perhaps I equated Janet's being ill with our estrangement, as if our distance had somehow made her sick, prevented her from getting better. I'd simply go back and fix everything again. I was good at fixing things. I told myself I'd take care of her as I'd taken care of Fenwick's students, with little investment, but great efficiency. I told myself I'd show her that I could put aside our growing apart, like I'd often disregarded a student's comments about how college rules suck. I continued to tell myself this even as I began to feel something else the longer I stayed with her. Something obdurate, that lay hidden, safe, waiting to be unearthed like a fossil, earth meeting bone and never coming apart again.

By August, Janet was referring cryptically to things in a scattershot way. The combination of the disease and the meds was short-circuiting her brainwaves.

"You know, you can't go through life not paying tolls, Milly," she told me one afternoon. She'd been talking like that for days; it was like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. I'd always felt that Janet had been two steps ahead of me. But now it was as if she was in a car and I was trying to keep up with her on my pogo stick. At night lying on the sofa bed, I would listen to her incoherent ramblings from down the hall.

"Sooner or later someone has to pay the man in the booth," she said to me, and laid her head down on the pillow.

After ten years as a media producer, Randi Triant received her MFA in writing and literature from Bennington College. Her nonfiction and fiction have appeared most recently in *The Rambler*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Post Road*, and in the anthology *Fingernails Across the Chalkboard: Poetry and Prose on HIV/AIDS From the Black Diaspora*. She has taught creative writing at Emerson College and Boston College.