

Owning Betty

Roberta Lee

Excerpt from Chapter 1

People who are in love suspect nothing or everything.

Honore de Balzac

The body of the twenty-eight-year-old woman named Roseanne Solozano--wrapped in a robin's egg blue cotton sheet and bundled neatly with sisal twine--lay nestled among redwoods and ferns in a quiet, steep-banked ravine a few miles northeast of Santa Cruz, California.

It was early May in the year 1974, and the morning fog burned off as the sun rose higher. The day warmed rapidly; the ravine was filled with radiant splotches of sunlight filtering through the trees, the cheerful twittering of birds and the hidden life in the underbrush. Some of the latter--flies, of course, always alert, always inquisitive--had already begun investigating the new arrival in the ravine. Crows found it early that morning as well, and cawed to each other about the unfamiliar shape in their familiar woods.

It wasn't until dusk, however, that the body was discovered by a larger creature. A gray fox--which was the lucky occupant of a cozy den under a fallen redwood partway up the ravine's northern bank--followed its nose to a meal just as the sun was setting. It sniffed the wrapped object carefully all over, then set to work methodically chewing a hole through the sheet and the clothing beneath. Although equipped with a beautifully evolved array of sharp, elegant teeth, the fox was not large and strong enough to do more than begin tentatively nibbling at the large windfall of food that night.

Flies found the body in earnest the next morning, as soon as the sun was high enough to warm the air and waft the seductive odor of fresh carrion through the ravine. They quickly began making use of body cavities and the long, deep gash in the side of the throat to begin feeding and depositing eggs, anticipating that their offspring would thrive by virtue of such fortuitous placement. Soon there would be a blossoming nursery of wiggling larva in the filtered shade of the redwoods, as decomposition elevated the body's temperature well above what it had been while alive: a perfect environment for the birth and growth of a healthy new generation of insects.

The fox returned that evening--the flesh was already softening as decomposition progressed, making it a much easier

task to begin ingesting the protein and nutrient-rich organs it craved.

The first turkey vulture scented the body early the next morning; the large bird was using the thermal updraft over the ravine to lift itself to soaring altitude. Landing in the ravine was difficult, however, due to the vulture's considerable wingspan; it managed to do so only after an extremely cautious approach that ducked below the dangerously jagged lower limbs of the over-arching redwoods. Blessed with a powerful beak, a featherless head (immune to the body fluids that might otherwise saturate and then stiffen feathers), and an admirable degree of determination, it immediately began its difficult but crucially important ecological task, opening the body further so that smaller animals could also begin utilizing it. Vultures being highly social birds, generous in feeding, it was soon joined by companions.

By mid-day, there were five vultures at the site, and they were so delighted by having found such a bountiful source of nourishment that they stayed on well into the evening, and then roosted contentedly overhead that night, congenially, all in the same tall tree.

The weather remained dry, although each morning fog rolled in off the nearby Pacific, moistening the tissues slightly as carrion beetles--who specialize in utilizing drying corpses--

began laying their eggs. The small larva hatched quickly, feeding beneath and inside the rapidly changing body.

A coyote found it, as well, and was able to remove the entire lower half of an arm, since the sinews that held bone-to-bone were quickly losing their strength. It trotted jauntily back to its den--for the coyote was a mother, with four growing cubs to feed--with its prize.

Days progressed, turning into weeks; weeks went by, turning into months. Many creatures found sustenance in the narrow ravine, and then finally all that was left were bones and a few shreds of faded fabric. The ravine, however, still had work to do.

Needles fell from the trees over the body, the leaves of deciduous plants were blown over it, and gradually it disappeared into leaf litter as the heavy rains of winter after winter--year after year--enveloped the bones gently into the welcoming soil.

Eventually, Mother Nature provided for Roseanne what her murderer had not: the embrace of a grave.