

Anniversary

It was their anniversary. Dressing up was what Grace did on their anniversary—one of the things she did—so she did it this year too. A quick calculation told her she had done it for twenty-six years. She should go out, but where? All of their usual haunts had closed. So once again she was dressed up with no place to go.

I never asked to be born to this, she told herself, as she had before. And as she had before, she found the sentiment naive, but it saddened her anyway, for we all feel, she always assumed, that we were born for happiness. And this was not happiness. Her mother told her years ago, when she first met Samuel, that she thought their love for one another a mere infatuation, whatever that meant. At that age, one sort of love was much like any other to Grace. And when it lasted as long as it did, she assumed they had shed their infatuation for something more durable. Something it was best not to name, for if you didn't know what it was you didn't feel compelled to destroy it. And no one had destroyed it. And that was the truth of it, even though you couldn't really talk about it in the same way anymore.

“Our marriage is like Mozart,” Samuel said after one of his concerts. “We will never tire of it.” He had been on tour at the time, happy to have her with him, not to have to travel alone.

“You should listen, not talk. I’m not able to take all that in.” That was all Grace could think to say after the service, hoping her mother would take it kindly, for there really wasn’t anything to take in, and her mother could smother any emotion with words. But she knew that her mother, in her own way, was only trying to be kind. It was a hot July afternoon, and she felt faint from the heat, and from grief. She thought of feigning an illness, to get away from everyone, but the thought of lying in bed alone was more than she could bear. What she really wanted was to pack a suitcase and take off for a state, a city she had never seen, the desert even, anyplace but where she was. But at the time it felt like a desertion even to think a thought like that, and she knew she didn’t have the energy, much less the will, to carry it out.

And looking back on that time, that endless void after Samuel’s death, it had seemed cruel to open the door to another, to the boy, now the man, she had given so much thought to. Everyone, she had assumed, had someone in her past she couldn’t help thinking of. Someone that might have presented her with an alternate path in life. And there was hers, five days after the worst day in her life. Ian had looked her up after all those years, and after all those years he was still a nice enough person. A nice enough person showing up at the wrong time.

She had no choice but to ask him in, offer him coffee, even though it felt wrong to have another man in the house. But even so soon after, it would have felt equally wrong to send him away. She refused to straighten up the house, to rid it of even the ghosts of music left behind. The action of a Steinway still sat on the table where it had been placed for repair. With the two of them sitting there the silence grew oppressive. She should have been asking Ian about his life, his work, about how things had fallen out since the

last time they had seen each other, in college on the other coast. But whatever she tried to say stuck in her throat.

“I’ve thought of you from time to time,” she said.

“I’ve thought of you often” he replied. At the time she couldn’t help thinking what she might have said, given another year.

Seeing his discomfort, all she could add was, “I thought you knew.” She said it twice, about her loss, just to fill the silence.

“I wish you’d told me,” Ian said, and with some feeling, taking her hand before he left. His eyes told her that he was embarrassed for her. She didn’t have the presence of mind to ask him his address, and he didn’t offer it.

Before she knew it the windows were dark. She should turn out the lights and let the darkness close around these memories, around her solitary life. But it was her anniversary, and she always wrote something down on that day, something positive if she could. She took her place at her desk and took her journal from its drawer. Declaring this to be the last time, she wrote about their years together, about the life they had wanted with children and couldn’t have, about the trips they took, and about his playing, his Mozart, his Chopin, his pleasure at playing for her. She wrote about every good time she could remember. She wrote until the sun came up, and then, with the roseate light coming in at the window, she read through what she had written and went to bed.

END