

Denial Can Be a Beautiful Thing

If anyone asks me about Martin, my husband of forty-two years, three months, and eight days, I always say the same thing, He was a good man, bless his soul. The day the heart attack took him was the hardest day of my life.

The women tsk, tsk, rub my back and age-spotted hands, and the men nod knowingly. Most of them have been there, on the other side of a couple, left alone to navigate their final years in a strange place, forced to make new friends, their meals served on someone else's time-table from someone else's menu.

What I never say, never bring into the light to be examined, scrutinized, judged, is how the man I married the year I turned twenty, when life thrills waited like mischievous pixies in corners and behind unopened doors, picked me, an unripe peach, and left me to rot.

When I met Martin, I was drawn to his vitality and the ease he had in his own skin. His laughter would ring through a crowd and pull people to him like homing pigeons. If I'd been more worldly, I would've noticed that those who surrounded him were men—men who paid careful attention to their appearance and snickered behind their hands whenever I came near.

During my more generous moods, I console myself with the knowing that it was a different time, people weren't as open-minded as they seem today. They were quick to judge the unknown, trapped in hand-me down beliefs they gripped tight like car keys and wallets. I try to imagine what it was like for Martin, trapped inside a knowing of who he was but unable to live within it. He had needed a certain kind of life, but had to settle for...that's where I stop, knowing that / was what he had settled for and my level of self-honesty can only be taken so far if I have any hope of staying intact.

When my thoughts become smoky black, I ask: Why me? What about me had made Martin think that my life would be so less than ordinary that there would be no loss if he wasted my years in a loveless marriage full of lies and deceit? What had he seen that first night at my

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parents' country club, the one they'd pinched and saved for in order to join, trying to fit in, pretend they were more than they were? Did he spot me from across the room in my handmade gown, the one I'd spent hour upon hour stitching, imagining myself transformed into a glamorous princess in gold taffeta, and discern all my insecurities, all my uncertainties, and decide that I would be the perfect dupe to wash his clothes, cook his meals, scrub his toilets? My deepest fear is that the answer is yes—that was exactly what Martin had thought.

The one and only time I tried to share my fears was almost a year to the day after our June wedding, an absurd anniversary that sat like dead weight on my chest. It was so long ago, but when I close my eyes, I imagine me and my dear sweet Dorie, my closest friend since grade school, my touchstone and confidant, in all our youthful beauty, sipping iced tea on the veranda, the sun starting to slip low in the sky. We did everything together—school dances, sleepovers, long hours of talking about the men we would marry and how many babies we would each have: two for Dorie, twin boys, and five for me, I liked the way “a handful” felt in my mouth. Martin peeked his head out the sliding glass door and told me not to wait up, he was going out with the boys.

“I was going to make that meatloaf you like so much,” I told him, the eagerness in my voice making me blush.

“Great. Save me some, I'll eat it later. Bye chickies”

I stared into my glass and listened as Martin's car backed out of the drive and headed down the street, away from me and the home I'd tried to make.

“He sure is handsome,” Dorie said.

I forced a smile. “I know. Our wedding photos look like something from *Picture Play*.”

Martin had looked dashing in a white tuxedo with black tie and cummerbund and I'd worn an A-line Dior, my hair in a French pleat with a birdcage veil covering my eyes, making everyone and everything fractured and gauzy.

“Do you ever worry? With him going out so much and all?”

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“A little. Do you worry about Saul?” Dorie had gotten married a few months before to her high school sweetheart.

“Not for a second. That man knows what’s best for him.”

We laughed, knowing what Dorie said was true. Saul was a meek man with a heart that beat only for her. My laughter turned into tears.

“Are you okay?” Dorie asked, taking the glass from my hand and replacing it with a napkin.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I lied.

“Are you preggers? I heard that does crazy things to your emotions.”

I cried harder.

“There, there. It can’t be that bad, can it?”

The words tumbled from my mouth. “I don’t think he loves me.”

“Of course he does. He married you.”

“But I don’t know why. He’s never here and when he is, he barely speaks to me.”

“That’s just the way some men are.”

“Is that the way Saul is?”

“No, but he doesn’t count.”

I hesitated before adding, “And he sleeps in the guest room.”

“Why?”

I started crying again. “I don’t know. I think I disgust him.”

“That’s not possible, Nora. You’re beautiful. It must be something else. Do you snore?”

“How would I know?”

“How was the honeymoon?”

“Hawaii was lovely. I showed you the photos.”

“I mean, how was the *honeymoon*?”

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I looked at my dear friend, someone I'd never lied to and trusted with all my wants and fears, and thought about Martin's insistence that we get two hotel rooms, claiming that he had trouble sleeping at night and didn't want to keep me awake. I left girlhood behind that day when I chose not to burden Dorie, a person I loved, with something she couldn't control.

"It was fine."

"Just fine?"

"It was good. I'm just being silly. Who knows, maybe I am pregnant."

Dorie didn't look convinced, but didn't push the issue.

Over time, I accepted my situation, even though I wasn't quite clear yet what exactly the situation was. That would demand late night drives where I followed Martin to out-of-the-way bars as well as countless phone calls from strange men demanding to speak with my husband without even a polite hello, until five years into our marriage when Martin shared his predilection, followed by a promise to stay if I never mentioned a word of it to anyone—including him.

In my confusion and loneliness, I threw myself into volunteer work where I learned that I had a knack for numbers and for getting people to do things for free. During those early years, I had wanted nothing more than to step inside the closed box that was my husband's life, be invited in and settle with him, know him as any wife would, but the invitation never came. He had his life and I had mine. Then we started *Around the World Travel Agency*. It became the largest agency in the city. Those years were the best of my life. During the day, I had Martin all to myself, only having to give him up when we locked the doors and he rushed off to parts better left unknown.

Martin died on a cruise in the Mediterranean, leaving almost everything to me. The only stipulation he made in his will was for \$100,000 to go to a man named Roger. I told the lawyer to send it, along with a box of Martin's shirts, all of his jewelry except his wedding band, and an old picture I'd found of him taken on one of the Greek islands. His face was a rich walnut brown

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and he wore a contented look I'd never been witness to. My husband claimed that his travels to Greece were to re-energize and reconnect with himself, but I realized that Martin's trips were a way to get away from me and to be with someone else. I was stunned that after so many years of being lied to and discarded, I could still feel betrayed by one of Martin's half-truths.

I returned to the travel agency after the funeral, but my husband had taken the excitement of running it with him to the grave. I sold it to two agents who'd been with us for years, boxed up the house, put everything in storage, and went to Greece.

I went from one island to the next. First Corfu, where I spent days walking from one end of the island to the other, looking into the faces of strangers, running my hands over the stucco walls as if trying to conjure a version of the truth that would help me rest easy and find peace. I moved on to Crete followed by Rhodes, and ended on Mykonos—all the time searching for something I wouldn't find.

On Mykonos, I heard a man's laughter floating from across the bar. Hurrying over, I expected to find Martin, forgetting that I'd seen him laid out in the coffin with the pearl satin liner, but only found a group of four young people—two men, two women—confident in their youth and beauty, enjoying the sun, drink and company. They grew still when they saw me staring; growing uneasy in the quiet, they moved away. I chased after them, trying to make them understand how silence could feel like a slap and a turned back could bruise a soul, leave it tender to the touch.

That was my bleakest moment. I considered going to Milos and throwing myself headfirst into the island's volcano, my gray hair unbound, tendrils of lost years trailing behind me. Instead, I returned to the hotel and milked a sunburn that settled in my wrinkles and stung when I tried to cover the painful red with face powder.

The sunrises were what I took away from the trip. Each morning, I slipped from between the rough hotel sheets, pulled on my robe, made myself a cup of coffee, and sat on the balcony to watch the sun come up. I'd rarely considered God, feeling that if there was one, He never

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would have made Martin into the man he was. But those mornings, sitting alone, sipping my strong, sweet coffee and witnessing the slow peek of the bright sun, I felt connected to life, as if there was a reason for everything and the answers were hidden in the crystals of color reflected all around me.

After returning to the States, I had my things removed from storage, put into a moving truck, and taken south. Dorie and Saul had moved to Florida when their first granddaughter was born ten years before and had been urging me to join them at the Mayflower Retirement Community, a name that conjures women in petticoats and caps, men in black waistcoats and silk stockings. I don't know if the name is a sardonic play on words referring to the unavoidable journey the residents are about to embark upon or the new, unfamiliar setting we find ourselves in, geriatric pilgrims on our last adventure.

Houses we worked a lifetime cleaning, spackling, lawns meticulously mowed were replaced with emergency on-call buttons and two bedroom bungalows ill-equipped to contain a lifetime of furniture, memories and disappointments. The first time I went to the dining hall for dinner and saw a sea of white hair and gleaming pates, the phrase God's waiting room sprang to mind. It sent a quick chill down my spine. With a deep breath, I pushed my shoulders back as far as I could—years of carrying Martin's lie had rounded my shoulders and slightly bowed my back—and followed Dorie and Saul to their table.

Then I met Cory. His t-shirt caught my eye. It was a picture of Santa Clause, his pants pulled down with a bulls-eye on his behind. Rudolph stood behind him holding a shotgun. He saw me looking and laughed.

"I don't get it either. My grandson bought it for me."

"Is it revenge? Did Santa try to shoot Rudolph at some point? Was he craving venison stew?" I asked, absent-mindedly searching through my mail.

"So you think its self-defense? Santa went mad, the holiday stress and all, and went on a rampage. Every reindeer for himself. Go Donner! Go Blitzen! Run away! Run away!"

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“I think the better question is why your grandson holds such hatred for Saint Nick?”

“Maybe it’s because he’s Jewish.”

We laughed and he held out his hand. “I’m Corrigan—but call me Cory, everyone does.”

We started spending time together. At first, it was inviting him to sit with me and my friends during meals. Before long, we became one of those morphed couples where everyone referred to us as one entity: NoraandCory—CoryandNora. It was assumed that if one of us was attending the outdoor string concert in the park or the luau in the courtyard, the other would be there. I didn’t know how to react. Although I’d been married, a couple of sorts, I’d been a lone attendee in my social life. Martin and I rarely went out together and when we did, when there was no way for him to excuse his absence, usually funerals and weddings, he would scan the room for someone more interesting and leave me to fend for myself in the crowd.

The first time Cory kissed me, two months after our initial meeting, I turned my cheek to him out of habit. Martin was not a man to show me affection and a quick peck was all he allotted, doled out on holidays and birthdays. An apology was given by Cory as he hurried across the trimmed lawn to his bungalow. I didn’t know the protocol for such a situation: Should I follow him and try to explain? Wait for him to seek me out? I debated calling Dorie, but felt ridiculous for not knowing how to handle the situation at my age. So I did nothing. A familiar act that was like an old friend.

Cory stayed to himself, or at least away from me, for the next week. It was painful, knowing that his absence by my side was noticed by those who inhabited our small world. As I’d done in the past, when things became unbearable, I planned a trip. The imagined locale and the productive search had always calmed me in a way nothing else did. I decided to go some place exotic and settled on Sri Lanka. I envisioned myself hiking through the tropical forests I’d heard so much about from my more daring clients, a beautiful flower tucked behind one ear, monkeys chattering in the trees. How I would navigate such an escapade with my bad knees was a detail I chose to ignore.

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Two days before I was to leave there was a tentative knock at my door. It was Cory. He wore a t-shirt with “Retired: Don’t Ask Me To Do a Damn Thing” across the front.

“I like your t-shirt,” I said, unable to think of anything clever to offer. “Grandson?”

“Yeah. I just don’t have the heart not to wear them. It’s a strange obligation I never thought I’d feel.” He’d told me that before, but the moment made repetition familiar and safe.

I invited him inside and busied myself by making coffee.

“I want to apologize to you,” Cory said after I handed him a cup—two sugars, no cream—and settled at the table across from him. “I made a mess of things. It’s been a long time.” I didn’t have to ask him a long time for what. The courting rituals my peers and I performed were as distant as high school dances and black-and-white televisions.

“No you didn’t. I did.”

“Please don’t think that. I should never have presumed that you were interested in an advance from me.”

“But I was.” I blushed. “I am.”

“Then why did you turn away?”

“Fear, I suppose. Or habit.” I wanted to add more. Wanted to tell him about the years of craving the touch of a man who chose to make his shame my own. That over time, it was easier to find the lack inside myself than admit my foolishness for loving a man who could never love me back. Wanted to tell him how it was easier to let those who cared for me believe I was barren than share that I’d never lain with a man, stepped into the world where grown women reside.

Cory stood, reached for my hand and pulled me to my feet. He kissed me, running his hands up my back. It was a luxurious feeling, one I’d never experienced. He kissed my neck and my knees went weak.

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“I need to tell you something,” I whispered into Cory’s right ear. I knew it was his bad one, the reason for his keeping me on his left whenever we went out together. “I’ve never had relations with a man.”

When he didn’t stop kissing me, I allowed myself one last lie: He heard and doesn’t care. As I stepped into a new life, a second chance, a do-over worthy of being printed on one of those t-shirts Cory’s grandson finds such joy in, I decided that denial can be a beautiful thing.