

Carnations for the Living

Standing on his tiptoes, the husband threads the fiftieth carnation into line with the others. He's in the kitchen, preparing a surprise while his wife comes home.

Or, while he thinks she's coming home. Where is she? She should have been here an hour ago.

At the dining room table, the husband's mother sits smoking a cigarette while her son tugs at her shirt. In his hand, the son has a drawing he's made and wants to show her.

In her downtown office, the husband's wife slides back and forth her cell-phone on her desk.

On its screen, an inviting text-message:

“Meet me at my place?”

This is from Cedric, the man she and her husband met at a fundraiser and whom she's been contemplating an affair with.

She taps the phone again, but doesn't type anything. A half-sneeze wrinkles her face and she puts her head in one hand.

Behind her, her husband's ex-affair taunts her. The ex-affair wraps a rope of blond hair around the backside of her neck, revealing her chest, and loosens the strap of her blouse.

Several years ago, the husband and wife had found themselves sitting on the couch of a counselor's office, listening as he explained away the misbehavior.

“Slightings like this often arise out of a desire to fill the absence, not out of a desire to hurt one’s partner,” the counselor had said. “It may be improper to think of them as slightings at all.”

Her husband had been nodding, of course, because it was his mistake this theory excused. Strangely, however, the wife had found herself nodding too.

How could she allow herself to be walked all over like this? How could she be so stupid?

Next to the counselor, in his desk chair, the wife’s mother had been sitting there, arms crossed. She had been wearing dark sunglasses to conceal the bruise under one eye.

You know what, this is pathetic.

The husband takes the carnation in his hand and throws it in the trash.

He knows who his wife’s with: that asshole Cedric, who’d shamelessly interposed himself between the two of them at that event and talked his wife’s ear off. Right now, he’s probably talking off other of her things too.

The husband sighs and leans forward on the counter with his head in his hands.

“I hate you,” the wife screams, to no one but herself.

She’s in her car now, driving, not to Cedric’s house but to her husband’s.

“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,” she repeats, slamming her palm against the steering wheel.

To her, she’s not alone: her mother is seated in the passenger’s seat, still with her sunglasses on, quietly taking the abuse.

The husband raises his head, and he sees the figure that caused this whole mess for him: a dead little boy. The little boy stands by the dining room table, attention fixed on a yo-yo. His hair is the color it would have been had he lived.

It's the little boy I was chasing when I hurt my wife, the husband thinks. It's someone else she'll be chasing if she hurts me.

All these ghosts that surround us, that make us do things unfit for the present moment.

When he and his wife had moved into this house, part of the reason had been that it contained a graveyard, and they'd wanted to bury the little boy, keep him close physically but let him go symbolically. What they hadn't realized was that you couldn't do one without undermining the other, and that letting in one ghost let in droves.

Which is why I should just fill in the graveyard with concrete, the husband thinks. Right fucking now, while my wife's still out there, while she's still haunted too.

The little boy with the yo-yo gives him a moment's pause, but the husband steadies himself and walks by him: even if he loses the little boy, he'll gain a person he hasn't been alone with in years: his wife.

Opening the front door, adjusting his eyes to the night, and walking around the house's side to the shed, the husband sights the concrete mix and he gets started.

Some time later, there's a knock at the front door.

The husband stands up from the couch, walks to the door, and opens it. He's left the carnations in the kitchen a ragged mess.

“Oh, sorry, I must have the wrong house.” A beautiful young woman greets him, her lips glossed and mascara applied.

“Who are you looking for?” the husband asks.

“I’m looking for my husband.”

“Well...” he takes a quick glance at her figure, “I wish it was me, but it ain’t.”

“I’ll try next door,” she says, and they wave and part ways.

He walks back into the living room. Nice woman, he thinks. Some lucky guy who has her.

But as he passes a small mirror that’s beside a bookcase, something catches his eye: he steps forward and sees that he’s been transformed: his age spots are freckles, his wrinkles are smooth skin, his vexation is a widening smile.