

“If You Forget Me”

Mornings here it is too quiet. I awake suddenly, remembering the reasons that I used to have for waking. I don't speak of reasons to wake in the existential sense but reasons such as waking into a Sunday knowing he likes to see me in a pretty dress and the iron will take a while to warm. The quiet has taken the space between our beds and made a home there. A home within a place that was once a home and is no longer. Which is, I think, the most desolate of places. Solace is not the same as silence and the silence here is the silence of a place once warm and worn and now belonging to us, separate. When the light is right I think of us as separated, not separate. Mostly it is dark and we are apart.

Our beds lie parallel, neatly made each morning, no secrets and no shame. There is a sadness I feel, going to sleep in what I still think of as the guest room. When he began kicking out in the night I turned and curled into a smaller share of the bed. When he began waking and shining a light in my face, when he began calling out because he feared I was an intruder, when I became a stranger in his space, I moved us, wordlessly, across the hall. There was nothing to say and no need to say it. He would not remember sharing our bed and I would not forget. What is there to explain? There are no guests but me in the house we once shared, the house he still recognizes as his own.

Bitterness towards this house seizes me sometimes. The floors he lay himself, the window seat he built for me, the shelves that, even still, cannot hold all of our books. He still knows this place as I want him to know me; he still claims it as his own as I want to be his. He will welcome me here as long as I explain to him each morning: *I am your friend. I sleep here because I do not belong elsewhere.* What I do not explain is that what I have feared all my life has happened, finally. What I tell him is not entirely true. Not only do I not belong elsewhere, I fear that I may not belong here. The first time I felt belonging was with him. Only with him, afterwards, did I continue to feel at place. I strung belonging along between the

times we were together. When it grew too thin to keep me warm, I would call him shyly and ask to see him. Now, seeing him all day and most of each night, I am freezing.

The noises he used to make in the mornings were not the kind of noises that would cause anyone to awake. They were the drying of cups and shuffling of books and breathe-in breathe-out of making a place a home. Asleep, hearing them, I would only sleep more deeply.

Between what was our bedroom and the guest room now caging our beds, at the end of the hall, is the spare room. He spends his time there when there is light, leaf-filtered, wrapping the dust-skinned windows. The room runs the width of the house which is not a wide house but wide enough that we agreed without ever saying so that that room would have been suitable for a few children. In the absence of children, one of us shut the door and the other did not open it. Now he is there alone making noises I cannot identify but which do not sound like the noises that encourage rest. Sometimes he cusses, loudly. It should not be such a surprise, yet, sitting wondering what he could be doing that has gone undone for all the years which we have lived here, it does startle me.

I want to go to him there as we used to go to each other. I do not. I know what he is doing and I cannot bear to see it.

As with the rest of the unfolding of our life together, there was not a time of in between. One day he woke up, took in a violent breath and asked why I was sleeping next to him. I did not smile; I knew he was not expecting me to. We had laughed together often but he knew I feared being alone more than anything. He would not joke about leaving me or forgetting me even though he had, overnight, both forgotten me and left me. I stood up and told him *I am your wife*. He looked towards his left hand and saw a ring caught between his his cracking knuckles. Winter was coming. When he turned his face towards me there was anguish. In his expression and in my heartbeat and in the ticking of the clock which was the only sound. I do not believe either of us breathed until he spoke.

I don't know you.

He didn't. I trust that. If he did not remember that I was his wife or what I was doing in his house, he would have said so. He didn't say, *I don't remember you* because he could not remember to remember.

That day was a hell unlike any other which I have experienced in my life. There are no words for it because it continues and I have never had the gift of explaining what is happening around me. It took weeks of the same agonizing morning before I slid his wedding band off of his hand cooling in the night. Months later I moved us to the guest room. I dread the mornings in which I will wake up in a room separate from him but I know that they are coming.

I know that they are coming in the same way that I know what I will find each night when I open the spare room door. While he sleeps, I go to that room like I used to go to him. My life has been a steadfast and unruly wandering towards being known and, even still, I find myself bending towards any scrap of the satisfaction of that desire. For a few minutes I listen to his breathing and allow myself to wonder if I am in his dreams. I remember when I used to wonder if I was in his thoughts.

Now my wonder at him is an unwavering pain. When he closes his eyes I do not exist to him. I am neither remembered nor dreamed. But there is a place in which something of me does exist and that is where I go. I go to the room where our children would have slept and dreamed and woken and I see my face and know it. It is a severe room. He keeps it clean because dust would stick to his thick paint and he keeps it empty because he fills it each day. Except for a row of cupboards on the windowless wall, he wakes and walks each morning into a barren room. It is this way because each night I harvest dry and drying lines and lights. He paints all day, always my face. A face which he leaves on paper as he has left it in flesh. I am always struck by the variety of expressions he gives me. Sometimes I am tempted to save one, usually one in which I am amused or joyful or content. Those are feelings that I do not feel anymore and it amazes me that he remembers something that I do not.

It is something of a miracle to sluce my feet through icons bearing my own eyes and lips. It is despair, too, to gather something good and lovely and bear it with me close to my chest only to burn it in a sputtering flame. The only way I know to love is to hope, not for a return of love, but simply to go on loving.