

To the River

I was sorting out drawers. I had long ago finished his; now I was into my top dresser drawer, where I kept my lingerie. I know no one called it that anymore. There was so little fabric to undergarments these days they probably didn't rate a category. They should be called strings and straps.

I pulled out the contents and lay them on the bed: the satiny half slips with wide lace borders at the hem, the full-length cotton slips, the strapless push-up bra I wore for a wedding once. No would know what these are. I used to wear the cotton slips on sticky summer afternoons with just a pair of underwear underneath. I'd lie on the couch under the ceiling fan and read, feeling a bit bold without a bra on. What a prude I would probably seem now.

I ran my hand over the half slip. Who will go through my things? No daughter or daughter-in-law or granddaughter will sort them, perhaps making fun in a gentle way, but also admiring the creamy fabric and subtle shades of ecru, ivory, and taupe. A push-up bra, they might say, when did she ever wear that? She was quite a looker when she was young, you know. I sighed. No one I knew would be going through these intimate things. It would at best be a stranger running an estate sale. So it's left to me.

Before Peter died I indulged in fantasies about my life after he was gone. Not that I wished him dead, but I always knew he would die first, the way I knew I'd live for several, if not many, years after him.

My fantasy life included a set of mismatched dishes culled from our larger collection, all blue and white designs, maybe a set of six at the most. I'd chose favorites from the Limoges china my mother left me, as well as pieces I'd picked up at estate sales. My home would be a

small cottage with a garden in a charming village, where I could walk to everywhere I needed. I'd keep my car for excursions to the country side. I'd have a cat or two and a quiet routine which included breakfasts in a sunny kitchen overlooking a small garden, a happy balance of solitude and social activity, and lots of books, music, art, and movies.

How little I knew about widowhood.

This life I imagined contained the love and energy Peter brought to our life together. I did not anticipate the hollowness of every moment, the feeling of complete pointlessness to every activity, including getting out of bed. I went through the motions – I'm a New Englander, after all, and I am too familiar with the slippery slope of depression – but that's all it was. The dog was a good companion for a while, but six months after Peter died, Blue was diagnosed with cancer and was gone within weeks. I didn't have the heart for the heroic measures the vet suggested. His death, although sad, seemed insignificant compared to Peter's.

I kept expecting it to get easier with time, but that was not the case. I watched friends my age, also widows, bounce back and I thought I would do the same. But they had children and, more importantly, grandchildren. I never regretted my childless marriage, which was a conscious choice by both of us, yet I envied my friends now.

I sat down on the bed. The beauty of these fabrics would have once pleased me, but now they were just another chore. I was halfway through emptying the drawer and suddenly exhausted. I looked around at our bedroom. Everything was the same, the dressers in the same place, same curtains, same bedspread, but the emptiness was palpable. His singing, his laughter, his slippers scuffing down the hall, were all gone – not even the echoes of it anymore. I missed the small daily tasks, even the annoying ones, the way he never hung up the damp bath mat,

making the rug underneath it clammy, unless I did it. I missed him fiercely, with a physicality that surprised me.

And suddenly the thought clicked into place, like a missing puzzle piece. In my mind's eye I could see it falling slowly into the gap it belonged to, as if hinged. The realization that what I was feeling was now a part of me, it wasn't going to recede, it was something I would always carry with me.

This knowledge ran through my body, making me restless and jittery. I had to do something. Anything.

I left the back door unlocked. Our road wasn't a busy one, and it would be at least a half hour before the afternoon school buses rumbled by. I walked away from town, not realizing my goal was the river until I began to smell the dampness. Cars passed but I didn't notice them.

I reached the river. It wasn't a pretty section. The water was dark on this overcast day. I stood and stared at it, my mind empty. I was alone, I thought, and although it felt like I was on the edge of an abyss, there was an odd sense of freedom to it.

A plinking sound caught my attention. The Parker Street bridge was about twenty yards up and on it were two small forms, a boy and a girl. They were picking up rocks and dropping them into the water, peering over the railing to watch. I watched them for a moment until the boy looked up and saw me, then gestured to the girl. The girl raised her hand and fluttered her fingers. I did the same, surprised that they began to make their way toward me, scrambling down the steep embankment.

They approached me as if I was someone they already knew. Now I saw the boy was about eight, in a striped t-shirt and corduroy pants. The girl was his size, but appeared younger, with long black braids and light eyes.

“Hello,” she said when they stopped in front of me.

I stayed seated on the rock I had found and squinted up at them. “Hello”

“Why are you alone?” said the boy. The girl peered at me, her blue eyes so pale they looked other wordly.

“I just am.”

“What are you doing?” They were taking turns speaking – this time the girl.

“I’m thinking, I guess, and resting.”

The boy pulled a small, flat stone out of his pocket, flicking it toward the water. We followed its course – one, two, three, four, then five skips.

“Not bad,” I said. Peter had skipped stones and was quite good at it.

“I’m better.” His sister found a rock on the shore and, still half bent over, tossed it with a gentle motion of her wrist. Six skips.

The boy shrugged and tried another, then they took turns as if they had nothing else to do, nowhere else to be. The careless beauty of their gestures, the responsiveness of their bodies, their smooth skin, all made me want to touch them and soak up a bit of that ease.

The boy turned to me. “Now you.”

I shook my head. “I was never very good at that.”

“I’ll show you. It’s all in the wrist.” He stood next to me and demonstrated. I followed his instructions. My first stone didn’t reach the water, but the second skipped three times.

“You’re getting it,” he said, smiling.

“Thank you.

He shrugged. His eyes were dark. Maybe they weren’t brother and sister. They certainly didn’t look alike.

I brushed off my pants. “I’d better go.”

“See you,” they said, in unison, and turned to walk back to the bridge. I walked home slowly, noticing for the first time that fall the leaves changing.

All night I kept thinking of those two children, and wondered if I’d imagined them.