

CORA

Cora wouldn't leave the house on the thirty-first of the month. It was a day never meant to happen, she often told me. When the Mayans made their calendar some wanted to structure it differently to avoid this transgression. How she knew these sorts of things, I cannot say.

She painted her eyes darkly, adding wings that seemed to give her tall cheekbones the gift of flight. The lighted mirror in our bedroom came alive each morning --a time when I avoided speaking until she finished curling those lashes that could win arguments on their own. We took our coffee in separate rooms. I read what dreadful episodes were occurring in the world, while she sat on her pink stool applying black liner. Disturbing her during this ritual was out of the question. It would be like polluting the space of a great movie star before filming a scene of triumph and tears.

"Saturn and Jupiter are set to form a conjunction next month. This hasn't happened in 397 years."

Her voice only had to travel from the next room, but it seemed more distant than that. I set down what I was reading and tried to summon an interested response. Planetary alignments were as trivial to me as what Julius Caesar had for lunch on his eleventh birthday.

"What does that mean for us, dear?"

"Peace and unity, I hope. If the sky is clear we can view it through the Celestron."

I glanced over at our tripod-mounted telescope sitting near the window, its cylinder pointed toward the heavens. The lifeless gray sky held a mood of ambivalence. I imagined that was what anything looking down at *us* would feel, cosmic or otherwise. Cora often talked of galaxies and nebulae, but it wasn't the only way she made me feel small.

"Will you check to see if we got the mail yet?"

"It's not even noon."

"Yes, but sometimes they come early. I'm expecting something."

I would need to go down to the lobby of our building, a 1924 stack of bricks that once housed an armory and police station. This was a special fact about our complex that I never revealed to Cora. Her superstitions often aroused flights of fancy, and the last thing I wanted was to break our lease and have to move somewhere else. She said that a structure could house more than just the living. Wood or concrete stored the energy of dead souls like a charged battery that might release itself when provoked, often by the moon or Venus. This was a selling point for her when we found the place, because it had just been converted from an office building for a public works administration. New zoning laws meant no former tenants who might have used it as a living space.

“...and nobody wishes to haunt where they shuffled papers during the day,” she told me.

The knowledge that our parking garage had once been a jail was something I didn't want her to know. I figured that this omission couldn't cause any harm. Even by her reasoning, the departed would have long ago passed into another dimensional realm. Spirits can only stain the walls and hide dormant in crevices for a limited time. Surely in one hundred years or so they had detached themselves and begun their interstellar passage to Andromeda or Centaurus.

I took the elevator, imagining a phantom trapped within the shaft as living folks went up and down it all day long. What a bizarre idea to think that the essence of someone could stay behind for generations without their physiology. To hang around even after several iterations of inhabitants had come and gone, their sets and sequences causing upheavals of damage and dust. Each successive group had left behind their own imprints, performed renovations and brought furniture in and out. Yet some mirthless revenant could be clinging to a speck of tile, waiting to be unleashed by a Venusian volcano or Martian windstorm.

People may have suffered and died within these same walls, but it was beyond our reckoning. That would be one thing if we knew exactly what happened, but without knowledge of the events themselves it was like they never occurred. If a dog shits in a bowl does a person throw it away? More

than likely, it becomes washed and sterilized by soap and water and the guests coming to dinner are never informed. No one is the wiser, least of all the dog.

Lynda was our property manager. She sat in an office all day, eating boxes of food ordered from the local vendors who probably quivered when she approached. Between bites of mango chicken and garlic green beans she typed on a keyboard and answered the phone, drumming the eraser-head of a pencil on the frame of her glasses while listening intently to what the caller had to say. Sometimes I wondered if there was anyone there on the other end, or if it was just a performance to avoid talking to the residents as they shambled past looking for pieces of mail and packages that hadn't arrived yet.

As I entered the office, she looked at me with the kind of casual disdain one might save for a door-to-door vacuum salesman. Her finger went up in the air, as if to let me know her world was too important to pause even for a moment.

I saw what I came for on her desk, a brown parcel with the name Cora Agostino on the label. It was the size of a pillow and looked as though it were taped by someone who had a fetish for rope bondage. Before I could pick it up, Lynda set the phone down and chirped at me.

“Your wife order something?”

“Yes, apparently. But she's not my wife.”

“Oh, sorry. Your fiancée.”

“Well, she's not that either.”

“Ah. Live-in girlfriend?”

“Sure.”

If avoiding awkwardness had been part of the plan, it was a miserable failure. Our back-and-forth may not have been as devastating as Napoleon's incursion into Russia, but I suffered my own casualties whenever Lynda spoke to me.

Cora was delighted when I showed her the package, taking up a pair of scissors and carefully opening it. I turned away, gazing out the window at the traffic outside. We had an errand to run on the

other side of town and needed to use the bus to get there. Our car had been stolen one night and despite taking the time to file a police report, it was never found. We often imagined a group of thieves having the time of their lives in our Honda, setting a course for Mexico with the tiki dancer on the dashboard shaking her hips the whole way. They would stop at fast food chains and pick up hitchhikers, never once using the rear view mirrors. Full speed ahead. The dream of escape become bright reality.

“Oh, just look at it!”

In her hands she held a shimmering gown. It was sparkling. Vermilion. As if cinnamon had become radioactive in a cartoon. I looked at her face and how joyous she was in this moment. That blissful acquisition of something. A new property. Another little thing to define her person.

“It’s lavish. But do we have an occasion?”

She gave me a fierce return, as if the mere suggestion of its practicality were to puncture the magic of the moment.

“We’ll find one, won’t we?”

I said nothing more. My silence was better than another misspoken word.

The day she vanished began like any other, or so my version of the story goes. Isn’t this the way we are always told of great surprise moments in our history? It is not a dark and stormy night at all, but a placid banality we would forget if only given the chance. Those famous dates had fair weather and mundane beginnings. No one saw the suicide bombers coming out of the sky or the earthquake which leveled a city. Not everything is cancer spreading like a growth over dissembling vitality, or an armada of terror mobilizing before our eyes. Sometimes we get a heart attack without any warning sign, as if a deadly snake had been taking its siesta beneath a rock.

Cora always woke up before me. She had given up wine for over a year, but my cup refilled itself often throughout the night. Her sobriety seemed to deepen the imagination. These musings

brought me greater anxiety, and the redness in my glass felt like a necessity. The headaches it brought required an extra couple hours of sleep, though I wasn't quite unconscious. Her shuffling through the apartment kept half of my brain on alert, as if being in her presence at all required some element of defensive awareness.

In this sense, things were in their natural arrangement. I lay in bed, fighting off the dread of another morning. She was in the living room listening to a compilation of piano sonatas. Their ominous tones were more somber than what I would have chosen, but she despised music with lyrics early in the day because she felt that words could interfere with how she perceived the oncoming hours. "True art requires blank spaces and intentional silence," she once told me. Too powerful a suggestion takes away the consumer's ability to choose its meaning for themselves. "That's why classical and jazz sit on a different spiritual plane."

I never argued with these ideas. Why would it matter? Toward the end our conversations lacked harmony, as if we were attempting a waltz but the other was stuck in the mazurka. I didn't resent her for this. Sometimes people throw words at each other and what hangs there isn't made out of form or substance. We don't remember what was said, only how it left us feeling afterward.

She must have spent these moments trying to reconcile the life she was leaving behind with the one that was waiting for her. It might have been giving her deep emotion, as a grand change often does.

But there was no hint of this to me at all. When I came into the room she smiled with an expression that contained no foreshadowing. I could tell she'd been deep in thought, and before I had the chance to talk she looked at me with narrowed eyes.

"This music. It's definitely turquoise. Wouldn't you agree?"

It was a game we often played before the car was stolen. To pass time on the road we would listen to playlists and choose hues and pigments for different songs. Often we heard colors differently, but this time I could understand.

"I think so. Not quite blue. Nor alive like green. It's sad. But maybe in a warm way?"

She nodded, barely listening to me. “Or is it teal? I can’t tell if it’s green blue or blue green.”

I thought about asking her if she was hungry, or wanted to go someplace, or anything relevant to our daily affairs, but the piano was too demanding a force. The keys dripped with atmosphere and I didn’t want to continue trying to talk over them. Or be heard.

Coffee was made, so I poured a cup and watched her as she sat on the love-seat. There was a radiance in those eyes that hadn’t been there the day before. It would be one of my lasting memories of her. Sitting on that maroon sofa in a sort of trance trying to sort out the tonal complexions. It’s one of the ways I will choose to keep her with me, long after the pain of her disappearance has softened into the background of my years.

Her departure made no sense to me at the time, and still contains far too much enigma for any conclusive resolution. She only took a few things with her. A suitcase was missing, along with some clothing and a makeup bag. The furniture, records, and books were all accounted for, with the exception of the seminal work *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* by Charles Mackay. Cora hated long periods with nothing to do, and I’m sure that wherever she chose to travel was going to involve some down time. This bible for sensationalism would make a welcome companion. She liked to read loudly from it at a random page, reciting the narrative of a 17th century alchemist who had the same assistant for five hundred years. Or the great asteroid panic of 1910. These sorts of things made her happy, and I never discouraged them.

What I did wrong in our relationship has troubled me always, although in some respects I knew from the moment we met that our ending would be mysterious or difficult. How often do things conclude gracefully, like a beauty pageant where everyone receives an award, eats cake together, and compliments one another on their various gifts and talents?

Without the only person around who could answer all my questions, I went into a state of misery. There were long nights of staring at the sky through the telescope in our living room,

wondering when she would return. As usual, the stars held no answer for me. I began to give them human characteristics, as astrologers often do. The moon became a figure of great sarcasm. I could often sense its cold mockery, as if it knew what I was feeling and took great delight in my injury.

Her friends seemed to know where she was, but none would tell me. I felt like the victim in the situation, but any source of possible comfort perceived me as the reason for her disappearance. In this way, I was wretchedly alone. Her extrication from my life removed any bonds she had created. Her parents shunned my phone calls, and after a few weeks I gave up trying to reach them.

Her note gave me no solace other than to confirm she had walked out on her own two legs. There was no abduction or accident that left her floating in the river. Nor was she taken up the elevator shaft by a murderous wraith. I read it over and over, as if an addendum would suddenly appear on the page revealing what I wanted to know. I stared at the sentences looking for a secret code or puzzle sequence that might tell me something, but I knew deep down that it was fruitless. My eyes spent hours obsessing over words that took her two minutes to scribble on a used envelope.

Our apartment turned into a garbage heap. My energies became focused on basic functions like eating and sleeping. Some weeks I did too much of one and not enough of the other. The bottles piled up and I would have to wait until the middle of the night to dump them in our downstairs trash to avoid being witnessed by the neighbors. Not as though they cared. Somehow in my paranoia, I thought that hiding evidence of my excessive drinking would somehow absolve me from something. My state of psychosis from constant uncertainty and self-interrogation must have made me a sight. I stopped shaving and going to work. The skin around my eyes began to change shape. This mental and physical dishevelment was so prominent in my mind that I refused to go out unless it was too early or very late. I wanted no part of daytime business hours when I might run into someone I knew.

This carried on for a few months until my savings dwindled and friends began to voice their concerns. I was implored to clean up and go back to work. This was a slow process that seemed to peel my skin and make a walking corpse out of me. By cutting out liquor I felt my pain receptors again, and

thus the raw exposure to what I had been hiding from. Sitting by the window for months with a cup in my hand waiting for Cora to return was a comforting little fantasy I'd created out of chemicals and wishful thinking.

After repairing months of neglect, I began collecting things to take them to her brother's house. He and I had always gotten along well. Unlike other mutuals, he actually answered my call. I enlisted a friend to help me take them over there, moving things box by box to his vehicle parked in front of the building. Lynda eyed us with her lizard-like curiosity, but actually inquiring about my activity was somehow beneath her. She knew that Cora had gone because I told her one day in the simplest way I could. Luckily for me she took the news at face value and didn't require specifics. It was the first time I truly respected her. Leaving my friend and I alone while we smuggled away her worldly possessions was the second.

The apartment began to take on a new spiritual life. Her clothing in the closet was gone, along with any makeup or personal items in the bathroom. Photos of us together were placed in the bottom of a box, along with decorations she chose and any random item that felt too strongly connected with the woman I loved. There were a lot of odds and ends to stow away. Many trinkets and curios ended up tossed or donated.

A year passed, and things were different. I began dividing my free time between a boxing gym and a community garden. They were both places to go where I could breathe and be active, without the stifling walls of my building. I sparred with people to get out my aggression and planted vegetables to reclaim the peace. Our telescope was sold in the great purge. I couldn't gaze out at the Milky Way without thinking of Cora. My focus went away from the skies and back down to earth.

I no longer took the elevator after an incident in which two of the residents were trapped inside for three hours while a crew worked to free them. Perhaps it was one of the angry wights from decades prior, unscrewing a few bolts in an attempt to free itself from captivity.

Sometimes I felt as though Cora herself had become a manifestation, though I knew this wasn't possible. She was very much alive somewhere, enjoying pursuits divined by the rotation of our solar system. It may have hurt to be excluded from them, but I had to believe this wasn't an indictment of me as a person. I may not have been an ideal mate, but I was mostly kind and patient. I had my issues and inconsistencies, but I hardly deserved the sort of runaway abandon you see during the denouement of a Hollywood romantic drama.

In a way, her goodbye letter was a forgery because she never really left. Even after it became apparent she would not physically return I felt her presence at odd hours, like a malignancy that enjoyed a good taunt. I thought about giving Lynda my notice, but it was difficult to part with the location. My front door was just steps from the center, and I could commute easily anywhere I needed to. Yet in the wee hours of the morning, there was an affliction worse than loneliness that came over me. It was the dreadful visitation from an entity who had no clear objective other than to be noticed.

My attention was often demanded, and despite trying to ignore the thing I usually gave in. A cold draft made my skin prickle and forced me to turn up the heat. Subtle tapping noises got me to stand up and attempt to locate their source. It used psychic ones too, and I descended into a form of moon madness as my subhuman faculties came alive in confrontation. I whirled about the room, demanding release. I fell upon the floor in tears, begging to be forgiven.

Eventually my chronic hysteria forced a move, and I took a studio on the outskirts of town. It was like trading old leather for sterile plastic. My new residence became an apartment sprawl facing a shopping complex.

My neighbors are all bizarre to me in their outright normalcy. I was used to the eccentrics who inhabit downtown, and the weeping rejects of society who plead for dimes and cigarettes. There are no shanties out in the suburbs, only the bleak futurity of condominiums and town-homes. My walls are made of composite wood and the fixtures have an inherent shoddiness. The supplies no doubt were procured from the most cut-rate sources available, then hastened together into superficial refinement. A

large sign near the entrance has splashy graphics with a chichi name. It reads *Welcome to Pinnacle Palais*.

I do feel welcome. The antiseptic nature of this cheap facade is what brought me here. I eagerly traded character for purity. There is no doubt in my mind that these low quality materials will age poorly. In twenty short years the Pinnacle shall be a raging dump. I don't care. My main concern is the metaphysical hygiene it gives me. I may have to live across the road from burger palace and the outlets of corporate fashion, but I am the only one who has slept within these walls. There has never been another soul to inhabit #329. Cora and her army of ghosts cannot find me here.

There is a certain peace in bland uniformity. I now understand what was happening to me in that building after she departed. It was the same disease that kept her from thriving. Cora tried in her own way to tell me about the possession taking place in those walls, but I ignored her. It wasn't some noisy specter rattling chains or a wailing woman in the hallway. There was a personality she invited into our home that wouldn't leave once it was there. I'm not convinced it had anything to do with the history of the abode at all. It was something she unconsciously invited, like a disaster we manifest by believing in its inevitability.

Her letter never addressed it, but something tells me she discovered the background of the building itself and attributed our shortcomings to what I had concealed from her. A giant deception is often grounds for divorce. She would have become aware of the possible death and torture in our environs and been unable to forgive me for keeping it hidden. In my mind, she knew that I knew --and loathed me for it.

There is no way to have this speculation graduate into fact. She has been gone for years now. I think about her much less than I used to.

Recently, something caught my eye. I was home watching television with a boredom surpassed only by laziness. The local news ran a segment about a fundraising event at the courthouse for

underprivileged youth. There was a man standing on stage accepting an award. What he was saying became muted as if I had turned the volume completely down, my focus drifting behind him.

It was the lady standing to his left with an asymmetrical haircut and string of fake pearls around her neck. She used white shadow on her eyelids and wore a calculating smile. Something drew my sight to her immediately, but it took a moment for recognition to kick in.

She was in that gown I once described as lavish. The one I recklessly asked about. Funny to think I had questioned whether she needed to buy it, now seeing how well its lines hung on her body. It glittered uncannily, as if burnt umber were strewn with gold dust. *Vermilion*. She continued to smile, looking away from the woman speaking and out toward the audience. Her eyes landed directly on the lens of the camera and locked with mine. I sat straight up, aghast. We made contact for too long of a moment, then I ripped myself away and turned off the television.

I carried the screen out to the curb and left it for someone else, vowing to read books instead. It was enough to think of those eerie figures of my past being happy and healthy somewhere else, without beaming their phantasms into my living room.

What a life we live. Full of moving parts and haunted houses and people who mean something one year, only to become complete strangers the next. I often tell myself it wasn't Cora, but I know better. To think that we are each a phase given to one another. Growing ever. Eventually becoming the very spirits we fear.