

The Widow

I wore laddered stockings to his funeral. I had clawed through drawers stuffed full of socks and pantyhose and all I could find was soft wads of laddered cloth. I sat on a cold stone waiting for the service, watching cars drive through the cemetery, their windows long and black, cutting through the green lawns and the forest of stones. I stood up and made my way towards the chapel. He was raised a Catholic, and while he hadn't attended church since he was a small boy, his relatives seemed to think that agnosticism was a phase best overlooked in the grand theatre of death, and demanded that his body receive a church service. I had sat silently while these arrangements were discussed. One of these relatives now began to lead me into the church as though I were a small child myself, likely to drift away from her hand and wander onto a road streaked with traffic. The drone of the organ drifted over the pews and out through the back doors. While old women and young men walked to their seats with their mouths gaping, their cheeks wet and their eyes slit, I sat down mutely. Every person's body beside me shook as I stared resolutely ahead. The reproachful head of Jesus, tacked onto the wall like a deer, stared back.

I imagined myself sitting one pew over, my voice a tortured soprano in a choir of mourners, my satin dress watermarked with tears, a flood of pale hair concealing my face. Wailing in a crowd while my husband lay in a box, packed up like meat and waiting to be lowered into the crawling earth.

I closed my eyes and listened to the slow dirge. Each note hung in the air, and lingered there, ebbing slightly with every note after that.

I opened my eyes and a clutter of pale objects focused in front of me. Blinking, I opened my eyes wider. I turned over and saw his darkish bulk on the other side of the bed. He teetered on the edge, facing away from me. We had slept like this for months. He faced the window and I faced the opposite wall, an expanse of bed sheet stretched between us. He used to breathe heavily in his sleep. A deep snore would rise through the thick layer of mucus lodged in his throat, and the bed would shake as the sound travelled through it. Now the bed lay white and still. I reached out to pull his body closer to my own. He slumped towards me, his neck downwards like a swan, his eyes still closed. I pulled harder and the body rolled heavily onto my own. I tried to push him off but his weight was immense and his body limp. I started to panic, suffocating under him; I pushed and pushed, then tilted my body, until he slid off and landed with a soft thud on the mattress. His body was cold. The red crease marks from sleeping on the pillow were still streaked across his face.

After the service, the mourners descended down the chapel steps and into the glare outside. They resumed their chatter, no longer hushed by the solemnity of the proceedings, and by the sharp glances of the older women who had led me in. They started to gather in tight clusters of half-whisperers, of mothers and friends. I stood alone. Slowly, members of the crowd migrated towards me, and I found myself surrounded by geriatric hags, whose bodies were flanked by swathes of black and their faces slack with pity. As they clutched their purses with their unused hands, they all patted me like I was a small dog. One woman opened what I thought was another

crease in her sagging jowls. It formed a hole, and spoke. "I'm so sorry, my dear, he was a wonderful young man." Her voice trailed off with a small creak. I barely nodded as the others interrupted with their agreement. That he was, in fact, a wonderful young man, and wasn't it a shame.

Two terse older men offered to load the funeral flowers into my old, rain-spotted hatchback. They spoke gruffly out of the sides of their mouths, as though they were about to spit, but instead words shot forth. I gave them my keys without a word and they shuffled over to my car as I watched, over the heads of the small, bent women around me. The men began to push a crucifix of purple irises into the back seat. I thought about how the flowers would have fit easily into his car, a newer sedan that he would meticulously detail every Saturday morning without fail. His car sat at home, gleaming under a tarpaulin in the garage.

Once, I remember, we drove on a winding road hemmed by tufts of dry grass. We were making our way home, getting hungrier and more irritable. It had been hours since we last passed through a town. He was driving; I was clutching the door handle and pressing my forehead to the cool glass of the windowpane. The car swung slightly as we hit something small with a back tyre. I clutched the handle harder. He braked hard, and opened the door. I narrowed my eyes in confusion and followed him out of the car. Behind us lay parts of a wild hare stretched out across the road. "Oh god," he said, and checked his tyre. I stood over the eviscerated rabbit. Its fur jutted out of the road in soft clumps, echoing the grass. I reached over, silent, and tried to scoop it back together with my hands, to clutch all the parts of its little body and piece them

together. My hands were damp and red, and the pieces were still warm. Away to the side, he muttered something and kicked the car.

I paused to take a look as the men were finishing their work. Through the back windscreen, the inside of my car looked like a haphazard garden. Bilious wreathes of gerberas were stuffed behind the passenger seat. A bunch of carnations was shoved into the glove box. The same pink blooms peeked out from the cup holders. Finally, the men had manoeuvred another formidable crucifix, covered in an epidemic of baby's breath, into the car until there was just enough room for the driver's seat. I have always hated baby's breath.

I smiled to myself as I thought how perverse it would feel to drive home from his funeral enclosed by this horrible garden of bouquets and rustling paper tissue. How I would look. How I would have to use my imagination with regards to rear view vision. A few of the old women who had followed me to the car frowned at my sudden expression, and I lowered my smile. Stared vacantly. They seemed pleased at this.

My head jerked up again when I heard the priest announce that the wake was being held in the "Gardenia Room", which was just down the road in the cemetery grounds. A woman in the crowd took my arm, momentarily distracting me, and the two of us started to totter down the road in our stilettos like tiny, uncertain birds. I stumbled a little and snatched at her wrist. I could feel her pulse through her skin. I took my own wrist and felt it throb with my thumb. Our bodies kept time, a measured waltz, and we walked to his wake, counting one two three, one two three.

Two of the men trailing behind me spoke in suppressed voices that undulated from mutters to brief shouts. One of them said something about “the game”. I wondered for a second whether they might be talking about game theory, examining the funeral party as an interactive social scene. He used to talk to me excitedly, as I got ready for bed, about something called game theory, and how it could be applied to ordinary social situations. I feigned interest in what he was saying as I brushed my teeth and thought of other, more practical things. How to pay the phone bill, whether we could last another month without a microwave. I wish I’d listened, so I could participate in at least one of the conversations surrounding me instead of just lurching ahead silently, unsteady in my tall black shoes. I wish I’d listened anyway, so I’d have more to recall now that I needed to cling to thinning memories.

One of the men mentioned something in a louder voice about the “second test against Wales” and I realised, abruptly, that they were talking about rugby.

An acute laugh shook me out of my thoughts and my focus shifted to the two women on my left, one of whom was still vaguely clutching my arm. “I was having the same problem with my yellow pansies. Turns out the little buggers were hiding under the leaves. Buy some pyrethrum insect spray from the supermarket, and see if that helps.” I turned my head slightly and the speaker glanced at me, quickly, and quietened. As if on cue, the conversation between the men behind me lulled as well. The laughter and chatter that arose from those few moments of walking began to die down, and everyone’s smiles settled back into sombre faces. In front of me, a little boy was

clumsily trying to hide in the dark skirts of his mother as she walked. She pried his hands away from the grey folds, and held them in hers.

He came home late one night and fell dramatically onto his knees on the kitchen floor. He grabbed desperately at my skirt. He was drunk, and his breath was stale wafting up from his mouth. His hands seemed small from my great height. "I'm sorry," he said. "It doesn't matter." I let my line of sight rest on a point on the floor, where I noticed for the first time that there was an uneven gap between two of the tiles. I stepped backwards, away from him, and his hands let go without resisting. "I'm going to bed," I told him. I knew I'd wake up the next morning, or the one after that, soft and pliable, tired of resentment, and everything would awkwardly fall back into place. We'd leave for work, eat dinner at seven and watch some television before going to bed again. Each time I awoke, the sharp sensation in my chest I felt every time I inhaled would lessen a little, until it disappeared entirely, and each routine that held the day together would become more fluid, more convincing. I would forgive - and until then, I would wait.

I remembered vividly the fluorescent light overhead, buzzing, and my indifference to his clumsy, pleading face. I closed my eyes and inhaled as we walked slowly down the road to the Gardenia Room, and felt a sharp pain in my ribs as I did.

I awoke, and opened my eyes encrusted with sleep, dry-mouthed. I rubbed my eyes roughly with my fists. His body lay shadowed on the other side of the bed, one arm slung over the edge. I sighed. I had been here before. I pulled his dark bulk over towards me. His face was cold and elastic, his mouth partly opened. His body was

still. With both hands, I pulled his mouth open wider, stretching his lips over his teeth, and carefully reached my hand down his throat and felt around for his heart. I dug through the oesophageal wall with my nails and grabbed the congealed muscle, wrenching it from its fleshy nest and pulling it out through his throat. The aorta trailed after it. I tightly clutched the heart in my hand. I felt his face twitch, and he blearily stared up at me and asked, “What’re you doing?” I blinked and looked down. There was nothing in my hand. I looked up again slowly, afraid. I curled my knees into my chest and burrowed into the blanket a little further, in that vast bed, suddenly alone. The other edge of the bed seemed very far away. I ran my tongue along the roof of my mouth. I thought I could taste something, faint and metallic.

Everyone had become sombre on the walk to the wake. As a result, the wake was so quiet that the clatter of a teacup returning to its saucer startled me. I jumped a little and drops of weak tea flew out of my own cup, landing on my hands. I hovered over the table in the middle of the room, surveying a vast panorama of white cloth laden with trays of sandwiches cut into triangles, sitting amid a bed of hard crumbs.

Everyone was wearing black and dissolving into the dark brick walls, only their pale heads visible, moving around the room, murmuring and occasionally staring at me as though I should be crying uncontrollably – or a martyr, tearstained and solemn. I lowered my gaze back to the sandwiches, and started to arrange the little triangles into shapes on the table. I made a sandwich smiley face, a star, and then a fish made entirely of salmon sandwiches. One of the caterers, a heavy woman with badly applied false eyelashes surrounded by the wafting scent of hairspray, sidled up to me as discreetly as a woman of her size could. She said, carefully, “I’m sorry to bother

you, but I thought I should let you know that we've run out of beef. We can make up some egg sandwiches, though, if that'd be alright?"

I took my time finishing off the fin of my sandwich fish. I looked up at her, and I held my gaze.

"Why don't you just run down and get my husband? He should be medium rare by now."

The low murmurs of conversation that filled the room suddenly stopped dead. I realised that the room hadn't been quiet at all before. As every face in the room turned to look at me, I found myself in the midst of a silent crowd. I stared at my fish made out of sandwich triangles laid on the table. The bread was drying slightly. The edges were curling.