

We lost our baby.

Anna, my girlfriend, she was only eleven weeks pregnant. It wasn't something we'd planned, but when we found out we never really discussed the option of not keeping it. Anna had always said she wanted to have her first kid sooner rather than later, that she wanted to be young enough to enjoy it. And I knew if I was going to make a family, I wanted to make it with her. So we grinned like idiots and made plans and dreamed of the future. We bought silly little things like shoes and babygrows and teddy bears, we had long conversations about names, and we went for a routine ultrasound. That was when the doctor told us she couldn't find our baby's heartbeat.

It was as if someone had slipped into our home during the night and stolen our child.

We talked for what seemed like a long time, three voices wearing three different masks. The doctor's wore ritual, expressing sorrow by telling us about silent miscarriages in low, practiced, bored tones. Anna's wore thin, papery bars, her voice quavering and shivering as she struggled to hold her grief in. My own voice seemed to wear indifference, kept to short, colourless words. But behind my mask I could feel the cold, brittle fact of my baby's death building a nest in me, covering itself in thorns, like Sleeping Beauty's castle. Whenever I thought too closely on what was happening, they scratched and lashed me, leaving deep welts on me.

So I withdrew, and left it to lair inside me.

Our home seemed empty on our return; it felt like we had left someone behind. I sat on the sofa and stared at Anna's cherished bonsai tree. It didn't have any answers. It just sat on the coffee table, mocking me with its life while we had none, or so it felt. Anna just clutched the teddy bear - I had bought it on a whim, a stupid brown bear with a red bow we had named Elliot - and cried so hard she threw up at one point. I wanted to say something, anything, to make her feel better. What balm could I offer when I couldn't find one to wrap around that cold, brittle fact waiting for me in my own head?

Anna took some time off work. I didn't see the point in wandering our little house all day, chasing the ghosts of the dreams we'd lost. No, I doing my nine-to-five and putting in overtime when I could. When the cleaners finally locked up the office I went to a nearby park. I'd never been before, but all of a sudden it was an ocean of peace for me. I could sit there, undisturbed, and stare at an old oak tree without having to think about anything at all. I would do that for hours before going home, where Anna and I would talk about nothings to avoid talking about the somethings.

I followed this routine for about a week before the woman turned up. I was in the park, sitting and staring when a voice interrupted me.

"Hi there."

I didn't reply. I hoped she would get the hint and leave me alone.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, voice hoarse from disuse. "Just thinking."

"Well, sure, but they don't look like happy thoughts."

"They weren't." I turned and blinked. She was stood next to me on the bench, wearing a flowing green dress the danced in the wind alongside her long dark tresses. A small smile rested on her lips but blossomed in her eyes, dancing and sparkling there in the evening light. And she was barefoot.

"Mind if I sit?"

I shook my head.

“Thanks.” She folded herself down next to me, resting an elbow near my shoulder and propping up her head. “So, be honest. You were wallowing, weren’t you?”

I nodded.

“I thought so.” She nodded as if she knew everything there was to know about that. “Would you like some advice?”

I didn’t, but instead I said, “Are you going to tell me to turn my frown upside-down?”

She tilted her head back and a low, dark chuckle escaped, a complete mismatch sitting at odds with her light and airy appearance. It hinted at something beneath that exterior that wasn’t harmless as you might have thought. “What a ridiculous phrase,” she said. “No. Nothing like that.”

“So what’s your advice?” The sooner she imparted whatever homily she had tucked away behind her sparkling eyes, the sooner I could be alone again.

“Languish in your sorrows. Let them wash over you, and drown you, and lie under the water for as long as you can stand it.” She turned and looked through the old oak in front of us, as if it were a portal to memory. “Then, when you can stand it no more, rise to the surface and take a deep breath. Walk in the sunlight and let your worries trickle from your skin.”

Her words trickled over the welts inside me and soothed them. “Very poetic,” I replied. “Dour, but poetic.”

She turned back to me and smiled. It was only then that I noticed how weary she looked. Her skin was as fresh and taut as any other twenty-something, but her smile and her eyes said something different. They said she’d seen something. They said she’d lost someone. “It works. Trust me.”

She stood like a flower blossoming. “I’m afraid I have to go now Vernon. Remember what I said.” She walked over to the oak. “If you’re lucky, you’ll see me here again.”

“When?” I asked, and then was unsure why.

She laid a hand on the tree’s bark and looked up into its branches. “Don’t worry.” I wasn’t sure if she was speaking to me or the tree. “I’m always here.”

Then she stepped behind the old oak and was gone.

I decided to follow her advice the next day. I went straight home from work, pulled three bottles off the little wine rack Anna’s dad had bought for us, poured two glasses and sat down next to Anna on the sofa. She was under a blanket, staring at the TV even though it wasn’t on.

“Here.” I offered her a glass. She looked at it like she’d never seen it before. “We need to talk.”

“Why?” She took the wine. “What is there to say?”

I wanted to tell her how I felt, so she could tell me how she felt, and we could shed this thing and move on. But I could feel that cold, brittle fact stirring, ready to lash and strangle me if I relaxed. So I said “I don’t know.”

We sat in silence for a while.

“Me neither,” Anna said, before handing her wine back to me.

She was in the park the next night, sitting on the bench with her chin resting on her knees.

“It didn’t work,” I said as I sat down next to her.

“What didn’t.”

“Wallowing. Languishing. Whatever you said.” Holding my head up, holding anything up, felt too hard and I slouched against the warm wood beneath me. “I tried talking to my girlfriend and it didn’t work.”

“Vernon.” She smiled a gentle, amused smile with a hint of sadness. As if she found my antics amusing but also knew they would have to end soon. “You blessed fool. Wallowing isn’t talking about your feelings. It’s holding them in until they’re about to consume you. It’s about self-destruction, not in the sense of killing yourself, but in the sense of allowing the part of you that grieves to die. It’s about falling to pieces and rebuilding yourself with the only bits that survived.”

She spoke as if this was something I should enjoy. “I don’t understand.”

She moved closer. “You’ve got to give in to it, Vernon.” She stroked my hair. “You can’t bounce back until you’ve hit the bottom.”

I looked into her eyes. Her body spoke of a young, carefree woman sitting on a park bench in her bare feet, but I felt as if I knew better. She could help me. “What do I have to do?” I whispered.

“Come here.” She leaned in and brushed her lips against mine. The touch was feather-light, but I could feel her restraint, that she was caging a stronger passion, excitement, impatience, whatever.

She tasted like the smell of leaves on an Autumn morning.

It would be easy to say I stopped thinking, but that isn’t true. Even as I began to kiss her back I knew it was wrong, that even losing my child didn’t excuse it and Anna didn’t deserve it. But I was scared and alone, and this woman presented me with an easy option to stop that; I could take this thing that we were about to do, take this nothing, and imbue it with the something that haunted me.

I kissed her harder as I let all my bottled feelings loose, which came with a sob, and the last thing I remember before everything fell away was the roar of blood in my ears, which sounded like the wind blowing through dead branches.

When I became aware of myself again I was lying under that old oak. It was dark and quiet but still warm, and there were hot tears on my face. The only noise I could hear was her whisperings. I looked to see her against the tree, the darkness shrouding her nudity.

“What are you saying?” I asked her.

She didn’t look at me. “I was just saying it was going to be okay.”

I nodded, grass rubbing the back of my head. “I know.” I felt fresh and new inside. As if that cold, brittle fact was planted under soft loam, ready to sprout into something new. “Thank you.”

“You needn’t thank me, Vernon Nash. I should probably thank you.” She turned to go.

“It was my baby, you know,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t see her again and wanting her to know why. “I lost my baby.”

She stopped and looked at me. I chuckled a little and wiped my eyes. “I’ve been waking up every day for the past week and wondering ‘Will I feel something today? Will I cry?’ But I didn’t. I got up, I ate, I worked, I slept. I didn’t dare do anything more. I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t collapse under the weight of it.”

She wandered over and squatted by my head. I smiled at her. Her smile was sad now, but there was an excitement in her eyes. “I know something about that. People cut down my children every year and chop and grind up their corpses for their pointless mortal needs. My sisters didn’t know what to do. It felt like there was

nothing we could do.” She laid a hand onto my forehead like a benediction. “You’ve helped change that. You’ve given us a son, and he’ll help us fight back.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to.” She stood. “Your part is done. Go home.” She turned away from me and walked behind the oak. And she was gone.

The memory of that woman in the park and what we did began to fade as I walked home, and when I arrived at the front door I found myself unsure if it had really happened. I told myself it didn’t matter. What mattered was that I could walk through that front door and comfort Anna, that I could say all the things I’d wanted to say to her from the beginning. That I could see a future now.

We hurt. We healed. We put our lives back together. It’s what you do. I never told her about the woman in the park; it didn’t seem important, and besides it would only hurt her. Instead we talked about moving, starting afresh, just the two of us. Leaving behind the ghosts that still haunted our home. We were happy.

But this morning I found a note written on the coffee table next to Anna’s bonsai tree, in what looked like sap. It read ‘You have a son. You will meet him soon. Move to the country.’

I don’t know what I’m going to tell Anna.

I’m sure we can work it out somehow.