

HEMINGWAY IN SPAIN

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The dimness inside the winter house feels to Martha like a slow brood of numbness. She sits sometimes in the high-backed chair Frank liked and gazes out the window at the way snow can be an erasure, at the way wind kicks up the small and incorporeal veils of white. One morning, she sees the black wings of a crow in an oak tree along the edge of the woods, the naked limbs dusted white. This is her life now. If it's not too cold, she walks into the backyard and looks up at the gray sky. It appears as hard in February as stone.

And she thinks too much about Frank. She remembers, for one thing, how in their final summer together, they argued about yellowjackets.

"I don't want the nest so close to the house," she said.

"They've got to live somewhere." His tone was flippant. One of his little jokes.

“Did you see what they’ve done to the grass? They tore it up to make the hole.”

“Don’t go near it if it bothers you.”

“That’s how you deal with a problem?”

“It’s not a problem, Martha.”

“Oh?”

He made a small pyramid of his fingers. “What do you want me to do? Spray them? The planet needs yellowjackets. They pollinate.”

She had another memory, this time of Frank pissing outside. He had a bladder by the end that required it. Or maybe it was his prostate. They would be walking Shiloh at Tildon Park, and suddenly he would hand her the leash and step off the path, trying to hide himself behind a tree. There was a feeble arc to the spray that seemed to her like a grandly pathetic commentary on the human spirit. The piss launched forward feebly, intermittently, gravity taking over and tilting the angle down and down to find the ground.

This, she tells herself, is how she passes her time now: meditating on urine. Her own pee, she decides, is an even more depressing symbol. Sit and dribble. She wonders if she should have shared this metaphor with her sixth graders before retiring. Usually, they rolled their eyes at the mere mention of

any non-literal meaning, like some annoying sleight of hand. Maybe piss would have done the trick.

Of course, not all of her memories concern Frank. She finds herself, often, calling up things like that time she was in college and visited her aunt in St. Paul, her aunt who always seemed to be edging right up to the borderline of oblivion, always talking endlessly about remission and tumors and treatments and lopped-off breasts.

Aunt Cecile still smoked Newport cigarettes—even after she knew she was dying. She kept them in a bottom drawer in that old kitchen of hers, which was painted an almost sickening mustard yellow. The cigarettes came in a carton, and Aunt Cecile would draw out a pack, tear off the cellophane—the sound has stayed with Martha all these years—and perch the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and strike a match. That sulfur smell. Smoke followed Aunt Cecile wherever she went, rising above her in a grayish-blue veil.

Not long after that, of course, Aunt Cecile became smoke herself, and Martha's mother spoke of her dead sister from then on with a kind of sad nostalgia, as though death reduced a person to that alone.

Then there was the first time—years before that—Martha held a baby in her arms. It was Aunt Cecile's only child. Martha was maybe ten at the time,

and Lynsey, the baby, squirmed like some feral creature found hiding in a hollow log at the deep center of the woods. There seemed to be no intelligence in her eyes but just that simple dumb substance of the sensory, just the blind onslaught of instinct . . . though Lynsey was a computer programmer now.

These days—this first year after Frank's death—the winter light reflects off the snow on cloudless days and seems to Martha disconcertingly optimistic. The sun appears in a fine mood, bathing the trees behind the house in such an approving glow it sets Martha's teeth on edge.

First thing, most mornings, she feeds Frank's dog—that's how she always thinks of Shiloh—then walks her beneath the gray or garishly blue cold sky. Then she takes Shiloh down a deer path into the woods, where the dog sniffs and sniffs while Martha gazes up through the empty tree limbs.

Martha's left knee has been bothering her again this winter as she walks. It is as though turning the corner into the upper half of her seventies means that nothing works anymore. Sometimes she will straighten it while rising from a chair and the pain will arrive with a fierce grudge. And at night, often, she leaves her bed and goes into the kitchen to put ice in a washcloth and hold the cold against her knee. She read somewhere that icing isn't recommended

anymore, but she doesn't care. If she gave up all the things that weren't recommended, nothing would be left. She likes the way the ice feels anyway. It numbs the pain or maybe distracts from it. She's become a fan of distraction at this point in her life.

Fuck it, Martha thinks whenever the knee hurts too much. She has decided, recently, that *fuck* is the only curse word she can bear any longer. The others sound too half-assed and weak-minded, too scatological. *Shit* no longer holds any power. She is down, it seems, to the one expletive. Growing old, alas, is like holding water cupped in your palms and watching it drip slowly and inexorably through your fingers.

Mostly, though, when her knee acts up, she wonders what pain Frank must have endured at the end, and then she thinks, *Fuck death*. Which is a weird use of the term. Like there is anything even remotely carnal about dying. When her knee is finally numb enough most nights, she throws the ice cubes in the sink and goes back to bed, waiting with each new step for the knee to cry out again. It's biding its time. It has a foul little sense of humor. Sly and mean-spirited. It's exactly how Frank sometimes thought about her in their later years, perhaps. And suddenly she has a picture of him. He is stirring eggs

at the kitchen counter, the yellow yolks swirling in the bowl and coming undone. He winks at her like there is something seductive in the rapid movements of the whisk, which there isn't.

The seduction part, though, gets her remembering how Frank, even in his prime, was always embarrassed to have his shirt off, even when no one but she could see. Was it the paleness of his skin? A certain skinny concavity? The hairlessness like a little boy, except around the nipples, which sported such long and twisting strands they were like miniature dreadlocks?

These winter days, of course, Martha doesn't have Frank's chest in her life any longer but just his abandoned shirts. Sometimes she opens the bedroom closet to look at them on their hangers. She doesn't touch her nose to them. It's not that kind of thing. She studies how quiet the clothes seem, how limp, like they are waiting for something unknown. One of his old sweatshirts says *OLD MEN RULE* on the back. There is certain irony in this now. An Ozymandias kind. She thinks, too, about Frank's hairbrush, which is still in his drawer in the bathroom. In her formative years, before she met Frank, Martha would have found a guy with a hairbrush suspect. Only girls, she would have thought in those unenlightened times, used a hairbrush. Boys had combs.

And she teased Frank sometimes about this, teased him, as well, about his goat's tail ponytail, about his vanity with that hair even after it turned gray, his vanity that he didn't go bald but still had those long locks, which the ponytail was meant to corral when he was at work selling cars at Tomlinson's Honda. It was another of life's ironies: her aging hippy-ish husband—who sometimes wrote poems on the side—passing his life selling cars.

Martha, each time she stands before Frank's clothes, tells herself what a relief it would be to do a clean sweep. All in a cardboard box for some giveaway. And all the odds and ends—the hairbrush too—dumped in the trash. So why does she keep it all? Not for the comfort they offer, for they offer the opposite. Then why? Because they aren't hers. Frank was always fastidiously particular about his stuff. *Use your own shampoo. Use your own floss.* So how can she toss it now? Even in death, he'll be annoyed. And in life his preferred method of displaying his irritation was the silent treatment. He must be truly peeved with her now.

Sometimes she wonders if the two miscarriages were somehow seminal in their marriage, with more of an impact than either of them ever admitted. One pregnancy ended quickly . . . eight weeks in. The other in the seventh month. She and Frank, after they moved past the child-bearing years, occasionally

played a little game. What if they'd had both? Usually, they focused on the negatives. No Barcelona trip when they were in their forties, those eleven days walking down Las Ramblas and visiting the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and sampling the coquettes and the potato bombas and gazing at the blue eye of the Mediterranean.

A vivid memory from that trip often returns: a night at the hotel when they argued because Frank got drunk on the beer that came with the price of the room. They were sitting in a leafy courtyard, the sounds of the vibrant night city around them, and Frank spoke in such a loud voice that it was embarrassing, especially when he began pontificating about Catholicism and its abominable Spanish history. Other guests were in earshot, so Martha tried to change the subject, but Frank began railing again—they'd been down this road so often before it had ruts—about his own Catholic upbringing and the disturbing imagery at the core of it all: Christ tortured and forever dying on the Cross, the cannibalistic blood and the body, the ritualized and sensationalized sharing of a life's mistakes . . . inside a secret booth to someone in a wizard's robe. The only thing Frank said he'd liked as a kid about being Catholic was that Mass was in Latin . . . until the Church messed that up too.

"Keep your voice down," Martha said at the table.

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“How do you know anyone here speaks English?”

“Just shut up, Frank.”

“I’m getting more beer. You want some?” Before she could answer, he added, “You ever wish we hadn’t given up, Martha? You know, trying to have kids?”

It always stunned her when he brought that up, always seemed to catch her off guard.

“No,” she said.

“Are you lying?”

“Talk about the Catholic Church again. I’d hate that less.”

He grinned. “Is it romantic being in a foreign country with me?”

“It will be romantic hearing you snore tonight. You always do when you drink this much.”

“Then let’s talk about Hemingway in Spain. That’s something we can agree on. Someone utterly full of himself but still a genius.”

“You think he was a genius? Those books annoy me.”

“Maybe we should retire in Spain. What do you think? What’s the cost of living here?”

“Are you going to learn Spanish?”

“I’m going to expect all the Spaniards to learn English.”

“There you go.”

Thinking about that trip is always a reminder of how he managed the trick of making her laugh even while she was so annoyed she wanted to throttle him. And the largest irony of all? The August Frank died they weren’t even living together in the same house. He had left Ohio for Michigan, ostensibly to help his brother and his family for a few weeks . . . the brother was having a new hip put in. But the truth? Martha always figured he was glad to go, that retirement had simply become too much. The house—where they spent so much of their time now—felt like the air inside it had been sucked out.

Often Martha grew impatient with him for simply sipping his coffee on the screened-in porch. After all, that meant she couldn’t sip her own in peace. Plus, he made little slurping sounds as he drank, and he read *The New York Times* on his phone, his glasses so low on his nose they looked ridiculous. Even the birds calling from the trees behind their house sounded desultory, like they were going through the motions or were clinically depressed.

But once Frank left for Lansing and she had the porch to herself, the birds perked up and swung for the fences. That's how the world worked, apparently. Martha doesn't believe in God, but she does wonder sometimes how God hears the prayers of people when the sounds mix with all the birds from across the planet. If she were God, she would listen to the birds instead . . . instead of all that bellyaching and asking for favors. A bird sings because it is its being. So what was her being in those late summer days before she learned that Frank had died while pushing a lawn mower in his brother's backyard? She has no clue. She does know that he died of an aneurism. She was told that the mower's engine kept running even after Frank fell.

And now—and the ironies are prolific little buggers—she is alone all the time on the porch, alone in a way she wanted to be before but doesn't want to any longer, as though she is the one who has been fickle all this time, as though death is a strange aphrodisiac and has rekindled her love for Frank that had dwindled down to a pilot light before.

She remembers being asked if she wanted to see the body. At the funeral home. The question stunned her. Her first thought was no, why would she want to do that? She remembered that last week before her mother died, how her mom looked more and more like a cadaver in the hospital, like she was

readying herself. There were those horrible hospital smells and the feeding tubes and the way her mom's eyes fluttered opened and closed as though of their own volition, and the claw hands that Martha felt obligated to hold.

Martha didn't want the same kinds of memories with Frank, didn't want to carry for years the image of him at his worst . . . though surely, they would have prettied him up with their blood-draining and their formaldehyde and their makeup. Still. She wants to remember the ambulatory Frank, despite how much more slowly he was walking in those final years, like an old dog getting up for one last walk on the leash. Frank had some bad tooth problems near the end. Gum issues. Had two implants to replace the two teeth that were yanked, and he complained all the time that those implants ached.

That was one definition of love, she decides. To get through all of it together. To watch the years stitch one into the next. To sit on the raft of the couch or at the kitchen table or in the car while the decades floated by as flotsam and jetsam, bobbing. Meanwhile, they had gas beside each other in bed at night and asked the other to look at weird growths beneath their toenails. It was the *solitude à deux* of a lifetime, the reading together on the porch or taking the dog for a walk or dreaming side by side in bed within their own separate heads. Love as the marathoner no longer even running by the end but

walking resentfully, determinedly, irrationally, despairingly . . . but who will not give up.

It amazes Martha sometimes how her life has come to this, how much of an effort she makes, for example, not to look at herself anymore in the bathroom mirror. Quick glances if she has to. The old lady in the glass—fat, wrinkled, nearer and nearer to the steep cliff drop—eyes her irritably, like the two of them are adversaries now.

And to think there was a time when she and Frank first met that she was proud of her body. Like when she'd been a kid and would do cartwheels for her parents, saying, *Look at me, look at me*. With Frank, when they were first together—in their late twenties—she wanted to say the same to him when she undressed, as though this were some true accomplishment on her part . . . that she came equipped with youth. To be an object on display—for Frank, or in public, when eyes turned to watch—was not so much an affirmation for her alone but of the general rightness of the world, that sense of every possibility of a life, the years with their open arms.

These days, more often, she feels like a cut flower in a vase. Some of the petals have fallen off and others are withering and turning brown. It's just a matter of time now. Most of her life, she's come to see, is that weird wake at

the back of a speedboat, that little highway of water that looks a different color than the rest of the lake, that wake on which she once waterskied in a bikini she would never wear now . . . or any bathing suit for that matter. Now her body is a moldering log in the woods, a moldering log just waiting for the grubs and other insects to find it.

She and Frank, she remembers, used to go to bars a lot when they were younger. Sit across from each other at rickety tables, a pitcher between them, maybe nachos beside the pitcher, and talk and talk as though words were part of some grand puzzle with so many pieces there was no way to guess the final picture until the end. Dissecting and analyzing and remembering and fantasizing and making plans.

Sometimes, now, she wonders if those words weren't more of an evasion than an illumination, a way of distracting the eye from whatever truth was actually at hand, all that yammering a surplusage while the real business of life was forever instinctual and animal. Words prettying it up the way Frank had surely been prettied up by the mortician.

What a word, she thinks. *Mortician*. It sounds almost comic in its dreadfulness. A horrible profession . . . like her dad's, which had also been a doozy. He would talk humorously about the very worst toilet fiascos he was called in

to fix. Shit volcanoes flowing out of open toilets and rushing across bathroom floors. Shit rising from shower basins. Shit backing up from septic systems.

Which is another way, Martha thinks, of seeing a life. People try their best to keep the shit at bay, out of sight, which, in the end, is impossible.

These days—post Frank’s demise—Martha suspects that her favorite place around the house is going to be her summer garden. She will look for hornworms on her tomato plants in the drowsy heat, will watch the little green orbs grow larger until they turn red and sag down the vines.

And now, in winter? She likes to look out the kitchen window at where those tomatoes will grow come summer. For now, the falling snow is a benediction, perhaps. A cold confetti. She walks out into it sometimes with her husband’s dog. *Her husband’s dog*. As though ownership continues after death. As though we actually own anything at all, even our own lives, even our own thoughts, which often branch outward of their own volition or collect amid the freight of clouds or dream themselves out of some unknown marrow in our bones.

This is how, Martha decides, she will view her remaining years. She is lost in the cycle of the seasons, time speeding up so much it's like sitting in a moving car and watching all the scenery whooshing past. Winter then spring then summer then winter once again.

And often she talks to Frank inside her head. And what does Frank say in return? Nothing. He is giving her that silent treatment again, but it's OK. Everything is OK. It's her new mantra. *I'm fine. Pretty good. Not bad.* These are the acceptable answers. The others are either too exuberant—*super or excellent or couldn't be better*—or too morose: *awful, terrible, pretty fucking bad.* The truth is a sucker's game, she's decided. She is going to believe, instead, in letting the shower stall steam up each evening until the entire universe is fog. She is going to close her eyes into the winter sunlight and exist as the glare behind her eyelids. The problem, she has decided, is the expectation. The past is too much a closed door. It is a door she keeps trying to pry open to convince herself it is still there. Or maybe the past as an unlatched gate she hears clanging deep in the night while she is trying to sleep. Or the past as a freight train after midnight, the horn so far away it's a ghost. But always she sits up anyway to listen. She misses Frank. There, she's said it. Misses him and that's that. And it annoys her that it's so. And that, too, is the way of the world. The magician

pulls back the curtain and that's what's waiting. All the magic can be summed up as the one thing that isn't magic after all, no matter how much she wishes it were.

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