

A Decent Interval

Today I slept until I was sure that the sun was on the house and it was warm. Even then I stayed in bed, staring up at the white ceiling. I stared at the frosted dome light etched with peacocks, gray with dust. Then I read for a while from *The Book Of Untroubling Thoughts*, which I keep in a drawer beside the bed. Then I was not troubled, even by the men feeding branches to a chipper down the road, so I got up and made tea. While it steeped, getting darker and stronger in the heavy brown mug, I sat by the window in a maple chair, and listened to the birds. It occurred to me that birds have a lot to sing about, so much that I could never understand. But I was not troubled by this.

I have never been easily troubled; in fact, some people are amazed at how steadily I take things in stride. My husband went out one day to play golf and had a heart attack, and never did come home. I just kept on going. My friends expected me to fall apart, to resolve into a dew as it were, perhaps because I'm rather small. And we were very close. We did so many things together. We always went to church, and the traveling, art classes, swing dancing. He loved to dance. So when the insurance came through, I just stood up and went away. There was a cruise to Alaska, then one to Italy. I know what people thought. They whispered about a decent interval of grief. But he wasn't getting any deader while I sat around. He would have wanted me to go, and I loved to watch them paint Venetian masks.

My husband died on a day like this, bright and dry and still. But he comes to me mostly at night when the moon is dark behind clouds, or dim in its first sliver, so that he is hard to see. Then I think that he is standing in the yard, where he would often pause after setting out the trash cans for the truck. He liked to stand and simply listen to the night.

The birds sang a long time; long enough for me to drink the tea, and have a dish of applesauce and peaches. My husband was fond of peach ice cream, you know. He would microwave a slice of pie and have it a la mode. He was a man of simple pleasures, brief, uncluttered thoughts. He said there's no good way to die but many fine ways to live. He

lived to play golf in the sunshine and eat as well as possible. I think one or both – golf or food – may have betrayed him, but I try not to be troubled about that.

There is a path from here that runs across a weedy field and through a copse of trees -- sycamores, he told me once, I think -- then breaks through a cleft in a rocky bluff and drops to the edge of the river. I like to walk that pathway when I can. But the trail is steep and he rarely walked that way with me. He was afraid of the current, that it would sweep him off a slippery rock and carry him away, fast and furious, and grind his bones for parts of rocky banks and gravel beds. Or worse, he said, that the river would do this to me. But I like the trail to the river from our house. The neighbors ride their horses, the animals nervous and wide-eyed for the way the trail begins to drop through the oaks and deadfall firs. But I can walk it pretty well. I take my time to come back up. If I were naming things I'd call the best, most wooded part The Mushroom Glen, for all the yellow fungus on the stumps and fallen logs. It's peaceful, cool and green, and I can lose my sense of passing time.

My husband was a man with focused fears of death. So we walked up the hill, to where the conifer shade gives way to a field that's often in the sun, with wildflowers growing there. He would always pick some for me to carry home. And I would stand next to him, watching as year to year his back grew narrower in a light blue or gray checked shirt – he would wear nothing else outside of church – as he aged and shrank. And then there came that day when he completely disappeared.

My mother left a set of alabaster vases that I love, but I don't need to use them anymore. I wrapped them all but one in felt, and put them in the closet down the hall, behind the light bulbs and her box of recipes. Just one I keep in the center of my table in the kitchen here, with two silk poppies. They don't require water, or a walk up the hill to pick them, and I'm much too busy now for picking flowers anyway. You know how it is.

I found myself, one evening clear and warm and flooded with northern summer light, on the deck of the Statendam, off the coast of Alaska. But in that moment, I had no idea

where I was. Suddenly, the world went blank. Even my name was gone, and everything – the ship, the coast, the sea – was overwhelming, huge. I froze in place and couldn't even cry or scream or ask for help. But finally they took me to my room. The doctor came with valium and said it was my nerves. Anxiety. I needed rest, he said, and he was right. I slept and everything was fine. I slept all night and I was right as rain, as my husband used to say. Except that the day, the several hours before my episode, were gone. My memory of Hubbard Glacier never did return. I have the photos though.

My friends come by from time to time. We sit and talk over coffee, and watch the breeze in the tree by the bay window there. It has pale yellow blossoms and long seed pods. A strange tree; Australian, I think. Or we meet for lunch at the café in town. The place with the old exposed brick walls, and framed sepia photos of dead settlers. Families on buckboard wagons, men in large hats. I like the spinach quiche and raspberry iced tea. They serve those little sourdough rolls in baskets lined with linen towels. My friends talk about their grandchildren. It's all so nice and very calm, with the clink of silverware and the murmur of a friendly day. Impossible to be in such a place and still feel troubled over anything at all. I know you understand.

And you see why I have to go down to the river, through The Mushroom Glen and down and down, with half a dozen switchbacks and glimpses of the river below through the brush. Finally, the grassy bank, the rocks along the edge, and water rushing fast and cold. I hope that the river will take him now, carry him out to the headlands and the sea. It's for the best. And I have to go because of what I heard in church, that an angel went down into the pool and troubled the waters, and whoever went in next was healed. And that's all I want, to be healed, set free, sent home. To go and tell no one. Go and sin no more.



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