



Black Shirt With Pearl Buttons

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1.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. He had been sitting in the same place since two-thirty, in the rocking chair by the open door. His favorite chair when the wind was up. He listened to the wind chimes and the creaking of the chair, dry in its old joints. It had rained for a week and dandelions bloomed in the field beyond the creek, beyond his open door, in sight of his mind's eye.

The dandelions were shattered and scattered and blown over the water that tumbled through his young eucalyptus trees. The water, when it was high with rain, made him think of puppies falling over each other. The puppies tumbled to the sea, and the feathers of dandelion floated through the door and disappeared into the carpet.

He listened to the women talking in a farther room. He loved the murmur and rush of words filtered through the wood, broken by distance, and he wondered if they were speaking of him. He closed his eyes as the clock across the room chimed the hour. It had a resonate voice, that fell back from the vigas and latias overhead.

"I ought to shower now. It's late. A short walk, and then I'll get ready for supper. I'll wear the new black shirt with pearl buttons that she bought for me."

Leaving the door open, he went out across the grass, into the current of spring air, which bore the best hope and sacrifice of ten thousand flowers. He wondered if they knew it would be today, if they planned to go, prepared or even prayed. Maybe the wind just came for them, the way it seemed to come for men.

The dog rose up from her sleep beside the house and waited near the trees. He touched her head, and she lead the way through the trees to the water. The creek was not so wide or cold as he feared, and they went on into the field, into full and unobstructed sun. He was tired, and laid down in the grandmother quilt of dandelions, spinning themselves away into life.

He wondered how he came to be wearing his brand new shirt.

2.

At five o'clock she looked across the table at her sister, who had fallen silent and was swirling the dregs of cold tea in the bottom of her cup. All the other women had gone, by ones and twos, into the dying afternoon. The dandelions had stopped floating past the house.

"It will be dark soon," she said.

The sister looked at her watch and at the light graying outside the window. "Yes, about half an hour."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't eat yet. After church."

"You're right. They brought so much food. I don't know what will become of it, but waste."

"Well, the grandchildren are coming tomorrow. They'll eat it. Especially the cookies and cakes."

The sister stood and took her cup to the sink, washed it, and set it in the rack. She looked out the window as she dried her hands. "It will be beautiful tomorrow, for the service, now that the rain has gone."

She did not answer, but scraped her chair on the floor as she stood, brushing the front of her dress with her hands, and went to the bedroom. From the dresser, she took her silver brush, sat on the end of the bed and brushed her hair. It was hard not to count the strokes of the brush, once she got the rhythm going; hard not to let the rhythm and the counting drive tormenting thoughts to the bright front of her mind from every darker corner.

She wept, as she had off and on for days, and stopped and stared at the pictures in frames on the wall. Her parents, her uncle in his uniform, she and her sister on horseback, her wedding. On the dresser, the child that died long ago, holding the old dog. It was aging, slowing even then, black with white paws.

From the bed, she took a package and returned to the kitchen, where her sister was waiting, holding their purses and coats. "I'm ready. Are you?"

"Yes. I thought I'd take the new shirt. I'll leave it with the priest. He'll see they put it on."

"It's beautiful."

"Yes, he would like it. He always wanted a shirt like this, black with pearl buttons."