

Yesterday in the Rain

Yesterday it rained. As I crossed the street with the umbrella in one hand and the leash in the other, Fluffy pulled me along and I stepped into a puddle, soaking my new green pumps. A man was crossing from the other side. When our eyes met, I saw his glaze over with indifference, and he strode away while I had to deal with Fluffy and the wet pumps.

Before I'd left the house I made the mistake of glancing in the hall mirror, catching a glimpse of a woman I didn't know. The years had passed away in a blur; first the children, then the grandchildren, and now there was a stranger looking back at me every morning when I brushed my teeth. A woman I didn't recognize, that I felt sure my husband didn't either, especially as he ate his toast and drank his coffee in the morning, never

glancing up from his newspaper. There were times I felt like screaming: what's in that newspaper that's so much more important than I am? But then I would catch a glimpse of the woman in the mirror and I realized that he didn't know her either.

The moment the man on the street looked at me and I saw the indifference in his eyes I felt, as a direct knowledge in my being, that I was going to die one day. One day, the person that I was, with all the thoughts and perceptions that had ever occurred to me would be gone. Whatever was or wasn't in the man's eyes made me know.

And in a moment Fluffy and the pumps and the rain meant nothing. My husband's newspaper was nothing. When the landscaper had said he was going to come, then didn't come again for two weeks until the lawn was overgrown and the

garden was full of weeds, lost the deep importance it had for me that morning. There was going to come a moment when I would cease to exist.

Sure, I had spent my Sundays in the white-washed Presbyterian church in the center of town saying prayers, singing hymns and sitting through the sermon while I had to continuously poke my husband in the side to keep him from falling asleep. But what had the pastor said all those weeks? What had it meant? The look in the man's eyes gave me the desire to know.

As I walked on and my pumps slushed, I wondered if I would cease to exist completely and go back to that mysterious state of nonexistence that I'd been in throughout all of history before my birth. Fluffy pulled me along and I passed a boutique window that had a lovely pink dress with beading around the

neck on display. I thought I would like to wear it to the dinner party that night, and then a terror gripped me as I wondered what it would mean to cease existing altogether.

How much was that dress with the beading on it? 200 dollars? That would fit into the monthly budget with no problem. And I remembered the gravestone that I had purchased for my mother when she had died the year before.

“This one is only three thousand,” the woman had said in a polite and appropriately somber tone, “but it’s one of our best. You can even add an engraving here at the top for no extra charge.” She pointed to the catalogue with a finger that had a long, pink manicured nail.

I remembered thinking that my mother would hate the headstone, but I heard myself saying, “that’s fine, we’ll take it.” My husband had looked at me with raised eyebrows but I got it

anyway. At the funeral I felt a terrible regret but it was too late to do anything about it.

I decided to skip getting the dress. After all what difference would it make? I thought back to Sundays and wondered if it was even worthwhile to remember what the pastor had said. What if he'd talked about the virtue of well-tended lawns with landscapers who arrived on time? What if he hadn't said anything that was going to make any difference to me? But what if he had?

As I gazed at the dress the woman I didn't know haunted me as a reflection in the window. I turned away and kept walking towards the bakery. That afternoon I'd said to Richard, "Fluffy needs a walk. We'll go pick up the bread. There are only a few slices left." Richard had grunted as he watched the stock market report on the big TV in the living room. I'd put on my

green pumps because they looked good with my white pedal pushers, put Fluffy in the car and drove into town.

And then the puddle and the man and now it felt absurd to go to the bakery and get the bread. But I went in, making small talk with the man who worked behind the counter.

“It’s good to see you Mrs. Blake,” he said, getting the bread I needed before I asked because I’d been coming in and getting the same loaf for four years.

“You too Jonathan. How are the kids?”

“They’re a handful but they’re fine.”

“That’s good to hear. Thanks for the bread. You know how Richard loves it. It’s all he’ll eat in the morning.”

I got home and left my pumps on the welcome mat. I started slicing the bread in the kitchen as the stock market news

droned from the other room. Even as I reminded myself to slice the bread extra thin, because otherwise Richard would complain, I thought back to my life and wondered why I'd done anything I'd done. Why had I married Richard?

“Did you get the bread?” he asked as a loud commercial about getting all you want out of life by having a platinum credit card blared from the TV.

“Yeah I'm just slicing it now.”

And then I remembered my wedding day, and that one tiny moment before the ceremony when I'd felt that one thing that I'd never let myself remember until the moment of Fluffy and the man and the pumps, when I had wondered if I loved Richard. When I had wondered if I had ever known what love was at all. But then I'd remembered that the church was full of family and friends, and Richard was already standing at the altar waiting for

me, so I'd smoothed my hair, walked down the aisle and married Richard. The years had gone on, and here I was slicing bread with Richard in the living room flipping to a cable news station.

I stopped slicing, put the knife down and sat at the kitchen table. I wondered who that woman was who had asked herself that question all those years ago, in the small room in the back of the church, in a white gown with pink lips and a hint of color on her eyelids. As the rain started again and thunder began to rumble in the distance and Richard changed the channel to a show about antiques, I wondered again what love was. Had I heard the pastor talk about it?

But all I remembered about church was poking Richard, feeling embarrassed that he couldn't stay awake, wondering what I was going to wear to the neighbor's cocktail party and whether or not Richard's practice would continue going strong.

The weeks had rolled on, the children had grown, and then I was slicing the bread, but the woman who had wondered what love was is in the back of the church on her wedding day was somehow still there.

Richard came into the kitchen and said, “I hope you’re slicing it thin enough,” and he examined a few pieces.

“Yes, I know just how you like it.” I paused. “But why do you want the bread to be so thin?”

He looked at me with that puzzled look he had, the lowering of his eyebrows until his eyes looked like slits, and didn’t say anything for a moment.

“I mean, why are you so particular about your toast in the morning?”

“What a strange question. It’s simply how I prefer it.”

“I think it’s a little more than a preference. Last week when I sliced it too thick you sulked for an hour. Really dear, it’s only bread.”

He looked at me as though I were an impenetrable mystery. “This conversation isn’t going anywhere. We have to leave at five.” He went back into the living room. I checked my watch and saw that I had an hour to get ready for the dinner party at the Cumberson’s.

I went upstairs into the bathroom. As I applied eyeshadow, I looked at the stranger in the mirror and wondered how her life had become green pumps and thinly sliced toast and Richard in the living room watching the endless stream of stock market numbers on the bottom of the enormous television.

I remembered when I had first met Richard at BU, when I’d found his diffidence charming, but I hadn’t been that sure about

marrying him. My parents were all for the match so they sent me to talk to the pastor of their church, who at the time was an imposing older man whose sermons always touched on the fire and brimstone fate of unbelievers.

“Love,” he’d said, sitting across from me at his massive mahogany desk, “is a decision. Sure, people can get caught up in the stage of infatuation. You know, your heart beats wildly, and you can’t think of anything else, and all the romantic clichés that go along with that sort of thing in our culture. But those things are not stability. Those are not things that last.”

“So then how can I possibly decide?”

“One must be reasonable about these things. Anyone can become infatuated with anyone. But you have to think about what could make this last for a lifetime. Are you compatible? What do you have in common? Is he someone who will be able

to give you what you need in life? Believe me, infatuation fades. And then what? How can you make that work for the rest of your life? My advice to you dear, is to make a list of all the things that Richard is and see if those are things that you could be happy living with for the rest of your life. You don't need to base your decision on some sort of fanciful feeling that is destined to be gone anyway."

So I'd gone home, made a list, and married Richard. And there I was looking in the mirror at a stranger wondering what to wear to the dinner party that night. And one day I would die and I would never know what love was. Sure, my marriage had lasted through the years but it had gone along like a smooth stream, without anything creating ripples because there was never anything strong between us in the first place. According to my parents and the pastor and Richard it had all been so right.

I went into my closet; it was a sea of green and white and beige. I imagined myself wearing a tasteful beige dress, talking to my dinner companion about the weather and how my landscapers were terrible and how wonderful the new chef was at the country club and I began to feel sad. I sat down at the edge of the bed as the sadness overtook me and I started to cry. It was very unlike me as I rarely ever cried about anything. Even when mother had died everyone had commented on my calm stoicism. But there I was thinking about beige and crying. I tried to pull myself together but some unknown grief wracked my heart. What would everyone at the dinner party think if they saw me at that moment? But suddenly I didn't care. I didn't care what Richard thought either so when he came upstairs to see if I was almost ready and saw me crying and said, "whatever is wrong? Did something happen?" I didn't say anything and I turned away from him.

Richard stood there in silence for a few minutes not knowing what to do, since I'd never cried like that in thirty years of marriage.

So I'd gone to bed while Richard went to the dinner party and told everyone about the landscapers. When I woke up this morning, I looked out the window and everything was new. It all started yesterday, in the rain.