

“THE RIBBON”

A Short Story

By

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His hand, large, rough and calloused from many years of labor, slides lovingly over the cold marble gravestone causing the hairs on his arm to rise. The morning air is crisp and bites his hollow cheeks, the ground hidden underneath a thick fog cushioning the graveyard in silence. Only his breath can be heard: deep sorrow in the smallest intake, the sound so faint in the vast open ground.

The gentleman kneels and places a single red rose on the gravesite, his eyes closed as he reminisces; a flash of her red coat out the door, a wild whiff of her jasmine perfume; the sweet and salty taste of her lips, her supple flesh. He sees his past, his rough soul matched to this gentle one, her hands so small in his.

“Evelyn...” The whisper of her name disappears in a cold cloud of breath, the soft syllables holding a past happiness that he will never again attain; it brings the grief, cutting his heartstrings and consuming him. With a deep grunt, this gentle giant doubles over, holding onto the tombstone like a life raft, his body racking from the physical pain of living a half life.

His lined face spills its last tears and he lets out a ragged breath. His stomach burns with embarrassment and he grabs at his wool scarf scrubbing roughly at his cheeks, trying to erase any evidence of the weakness of tears. He stands up and brushes at his thighs, clearing his throat he listens to the sound echo in the fog. This routine he repeats once a week, rain or shine. He has left a single red rose every Saturday for the last five years.

He caresses the tombstone once more and walks away, his heavy steps making the fog eddy around his shoes. Soon he is gone deep into the mist and the graveyard falls silent.

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It is with grim familiarity that Mr. Marcelle, our gentleman, walks with purpose to his vehicle. For the past five years he has always had an irrational fear in leaving the graveyard –

perhaps it was the tale his brother would tease him about, something about ghosts being too familiar with you, following you home... A chill comes over him and he shivers. He shakes off the feeling of creeping fog on his neck and reaches into his jacket for his keys. Fingers cold, he fumbles and drops the keys. The parking lot is silent, the gravel crunches loudly as he turns to retrieve his keys from the ground.

Something in his peripheral makes him stop.

In the fog a figure stirs, slender and dark. He feels familiarity and turns to stand, awestruck as she, for he is sure the figure is a woman, materializes out of the mist.

She seems to glide slowly closer and then suddenly, her face is clear. She is pale; a long face that speaks sadness is framed by dark hair that shines. She has oriental features, beautiful eyes, each a dark well that he could fall into endlessly. She wears elegant clothes, tastefully cut; her long neck is pale and abruptly split by a luxurious velvet ribbon clasped with a gilded brooch.

Some instinct, some animal in him wants her to be his – his mind fights against this; his ineptitude with social graces diminishes his past valor. When is the last time he had a conversation with someone? The last five years he has locked himself away from the world and lived in grief, his voice rarely used to converse. Could his words even pique the interest of this woman? She smiles at him and continues to walk on.

*Quick, before she goes*, he scolds himself – then he gasps, his hands covering his mouth. Those words were spoken out loud but she's already heard him.

“Sorry?” Her voice surprises him, her delicate disposition is at odds with her deep and full voice, not some girl's caught in her throat but the deep voice of a woman who knows she's a

woman. Her voice seems to reverberate from his ears straight through the marrow of his bones and into his soul.

“Oh.” Mr. Marcelle is awestruck. This beautiful woman laughs and blushes.

“It is cold out today isn’t it?” She wipes at her nose and snuffles a bit, “Coming here... to this place...” She doesn’t finish her sentence but her head dips a little lower. He recognizes the sadness that comes with losing a loved one.

“Oh yes,” Mr. Marcelle clears his throat and smiles awkwardly, “I’ve been visiting my wife.” They both smile shyly at each other, nervous and lost in the strange

“I could use a pick me up, would you like to grab coffee?” She places her small hand on his forearm and pulls towards his car, she tilts her head and smiles up – his eyes drink in her beauty. He is lost.

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It is a small café that she takes him to, a ten minute drive from the cemetery with checkered table cloths and large porcelain latte cups. His hands shake a little – he checks himself, is it the coffee or the company? He finds his cheeks are flushed and his throat aching from constant conversation. His fingertips graze his cheeks, a little sore from smiling: muscles that have not been used in years.

*This is what it was like with Evelyn*, he can’t help but the thought flutters through - so quickly gone but the feeling hot in his body and soul.

She laughs again at something he says - she laughs a lot and he loves it. It has been so long since he has heard pure laughter, since he himself laughed. He excuses himself to the washroom and she nods, her hands cupping her mug of green tea: a spoon of honey, no cream.

He feels better, his body lighter from urinating and he heads back to their table by the window. She isn't there though; no one is save for the empty mug and tea bag. A napkin sits on the table, she writes in cursive and the ink is indigo bright:

“Dear Mr. Marcelle - so sorry, something came up! Please, call me... - Sorcha”

His calloused hands neatly fold the napkin into a small triangle which he tucks into his breast pocket. Her laughter echoes in his mind and he promises to himself to call her tomorrow.

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They go out on many dates, it is on their third one they hold hands, he remembers her skin is smooth and cold like marble. On their fourth date her lips brush his lightly when he walks her back to the cemetery to her car. It is on their fifth one that Mr. Marcelle invites her into his home.

They have just seen the latest film, something fantastic about Paris that made her smile and made his heart ache. Her eyes flutter up at his invite, a small blush blooms over her face. He makes her tea; she sits on his couch, hands folded sweetly. She sips her tea and they smile shyly at each other.

The air is charged with both of them anticipating, waiting for the next thing to happen. They laugh about the movie a little bit and then the next thing he knows she is on top of him. Her hands caressing his face, his hair, his legs... his... He has not known a woman other than Evelyn for over twenty years. He keeps on his silver wedding band.

The next morning he wakes up and she is gone. His bed is made and cold on one side, leaving him to question if she was ever really there.

And yet there she is again, at the same coffee shop at the same time they agreed. A transformation has taken place in Mr. Marcelle. He smiles more, his face is smoothing, his jaw

not as clenched - even his hair seems thicker. It is when he is with her his eyes are lit up with a renewed passion. This new life scares him and he has to fight the sense of duplicity, the sense of treachery, he knows Evelyn wanted him to be happy.

Sorcha is his vision; her raven hair and creamy skin never stop enticing him. Her cool hands a pleasure on his rough face, the way she caresses his cheek in the morning gives him shivers.

One day, after the sheets have been ruffled and the bedsprings worked, they lie together, limbs and sheets tangled. His fingertips trace the hollow of her collarbones and he touches the ribbon on her neck.

*It is curious*, he thinks, this little ribbon that has always been there but lay unnoticed. Immediately her hand springs up and catches his, "Please Marcelle, do not, ever, ever touch my ribbon." Her tone scares him for a minute, a deep resonance that brings his survival instinct out. His mind seems clear of a haze but then she smiles up at him and leads his hands elsewhere, "Anywhere else you're free, my love."

Love? He recognizes that term, the feeling associated with it, the words form in his mouth, so foreign since Evelyn's passing.

He tilts her small chin towards his and looks into her dark eyes, "Sorcha, I think I may be in love with you." It is a heavy admission for him, he never thought he could love after Evelyn yet Sorcha brings that old feeling of butterflies to his stomach. The days seem sunnier and shorter with her, his nights are warm and his coffee mug is always full.

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It is after a month of bedroom meetings and coffee dates that she moves in. She doesn't have much, an antique trunk filled with lace oddities and heirlooms. His home becomes fuller,

more feminine; there are drapes now instead of just blinds, there are fresh flowers in vases and groceries fill the refrigerator.

In all this time of transition Marcelle continues to work at the window factory and Sorcha remains mysterious in her ways. She comes in at night with her cloak billowing, a faint scent of forest wafts in with her.

For nights and days she sleeps in bed with him, her white silk nightgown soft against his calloused hands. For nights and days she does not remove the ribbon around her neck, and for nights and many days Marcelle is happy.

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It is not until the anniversary of Evelyn's death that the quietness in his mind clears for a night. He slips out of the house, entering the thick night air, the fog seeping into his bones making him cold. A dozen red roses are held in his hand as he sneaks into the graveyard and caresses the cold stone of Evelyn's tombstone.

When his hand touches the grave his mind is suddenly clear – as if he had been living under water. Sounds reach deep into his ears, the moon seems brighter and the fog lighter. His eyes clear for a split second as Evelyn appears before him, materializing in the mist.

She looks the same as she did before, dark hair curling around her face, a sweet smile and genteel eyes that glow in the mist. He shakes his head, he's never been a believer but something about her, he knows she is real. He knows that she is his Evelyn.

His heart beats fast and his palms are sweaty, he is enveloped in her love from the beyond. Evelyn's eyes flutter around his face, sadness in them, tears welling. Her lips part and she breathes out a small phrase, "The ribbon". Her voice echoes all about him.

Does she warn him? It is an odd thing to mention the ribbon and nothing else. And within a beat of his heart she is gone, the fog disperses and Sorcha is there. She grabs his hand, her skin cold against his sweaty palms.

They rush home, Sorcha pulling him through the door and into the bedroom. She is in a fury as she pulls off his clothing and leads him into the sheets, her breath hot in his ear, her warmth enveloping him – her eyes wild in the night. She ravages him.

Sorcha falls asleep in Mr. Marcelle's arms, her dark hair cascading against his pale chest. He strokes her cool porcelain cheek, twists his fingers in her hair, then his eyes stop and he stares at her neck: the velvet ribbon shines in the darkness of the room.

A humming in his ears draws his fingers towards it; he remembers Evelyn's apparition and her words. Her visit suddenly rushes back to him; he hears in his mind her voice echoing, growing in desperation: "The ribbon – the ribbon... THE RIBBON!"

His hands fumble and his heart beats against his chest as his finger slides to the small golden clasp, the velvet folded in a soft bow. A slight tug, a slight resistance... then he gasps as the ribbon falls off.

In grace it dances away from her neck, her pale skin shines in the filtered light. His fingertip strokes the bareness of her neck; he cannot draw his eyes away from the smooth uninterrupted skin.

Her eyes snap open, pupils large and eyes no longer the soft brown he remembers. Darkness is in them and her small hand reaches and grasps his wrist, her knuckles are white and he cannot pull away. Suddenly she has an inhuman strength.

Sorcha's mouth opens, her red lips gasping, her voice so different from the melody he is used to.

“You have done the one thing I asked you not to.”

As she speaks her face slowly ages, deteriorating as if she were being eaten by maggots in the grave. The skin around her neck puckers and melts away, a red jagged line of blood seeps and grows deep; an ancient wound reopens, her skin seared against some blade that had beheaded her.

“I would have loved you, forever.”

Her body rises, her head rolls off of her neck, the sinew snaps off in the most revolting sound as her head swings, her dark hair tumbles along and her head hits the floor, a heavy thud echoes in the quiet room.

Mr. Marcielle cannot scream but he feels his insides burning, he gets up and wretches. He will carry the image of the bone, blood and sinew snapping in his mind forever.

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The next morning he awakens and his mind pounds as if he drank a bottle of red wine; his mouth is parched with thirst of a hundred years.

*Did he dream it?*

His eyes open slowly to the dimness of his bedroom, the sun filters through heavy velvet curtains and the heat is stifling - his shirt clings to his back in a cold sweat. Lifting his head off the floor he surveys his bedroom. It is nothing as he remembers; instead of the cozy apartment he remembers sharing with Evelyn and Sorcha there is a disaster of a bachelor pad. A place that has not been cleaned for a year, clutter and mess abound.

It looks like he hasn't left his place in ages; dishes are piled up, newspapers stacked four feet high against the wall, fruit flies buzzing above the sink. His bedroom is in disarray, blankets

everywhere, crumbs stuck between the folds of carpet. Mr. Marcelle is scared, what is wrong with his mind? And then he stops, there, he sees it, laid across the bed – a deep velvet cloak.

“She was here...” His voice croaks as he affirms this to himself, this garment is proof of her existence. He stops this thought, how can this cloak be here yet his home in such disarray?

He leaves the bedroom to splash his face with cold water, he stretches high, muscles stiff from a night on the floor. The whole apartment is in the same state and he cannot bare it, he cannot bare the proof of his unstable mind.

He leaves to the afternoon light and heads to the corner store. It’s been ten years since he has smoked but he picks up a pack of cigarettes, his steps filled with purpose. The nicotine calms his fraying nerves.

His destination is the graveyard. He steps through the gate and walks the familiar path to Evelyn’s site.

He lights another cigarette, relishing the sharp bite of tobacco on his throat and the head rush he feels. He stares at Evelyn’s tombstone and exhales a cloud of smoke.

“Evelyn, what the hell has been going on?”

Before he can help it his body doubles over, cigarette forgotten. He gulps for air as grief consumes him. He is back to where he has come from, lost between grief for Evelyn and Sorcha.

*Was she real?* He keeps asking himself this, he keeps questioning his sanity.

“My love,” Her voice echoes in his mind sending shivers across his body. He looks up at the apparition before him, his angelic Evelyn, glowing in the afternoon light. Tears streak down her face. Her translucent hand reaches out to caress his cheek; a cold sensation like rain is all he feels. She speaks softly to him but he cannot hear her, it is like she is speaking through water.

His hand reaches out to grab her, he knows this is the last time he’ll see her.

She fades away, "... I love you."

There is a silence after she leaves and the muffled blanket of air slowly recedes. Time seems to resume and Mr. Marcelle raises his head and views his surroundings.

The graveyard is plain, green tufts of grass shaking from the small breeze, quiet chirps of songbirds rising. The sky is clear, the sun is high. He breathes in deep and smiles; it is time for him to live again.

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