

MY SISTER VISITS

By MARIAN CRONIN

The week after Arthur died, I prayed. I sat on my porch on a Friday afternoon, soaked in alcohol and sunlight, feeling more miserable than I'd been since grade school, and I asked whoever was listening for a little help. The apartment was empty and so was I. On the night Arthur died, I dragged the armchair from the room with his stuff to the enclosed back porch and I sat there, day after day, night after night, with an evolving rotation of ever-stronger drinks. I stared out the cracked window at the city laid out before me and the skyline bookend. I tried to see something beautiful but there was nothing like that left.

For the whole week, I stayed home from work and sank into his armchair and thought about dying. My mom or my sister or some collection of aunts and cousins came for lunch everyday and they straightened up after themselves and me; the apartment had never been so clean. They chattered and told stories and jokes and, although I couldn't laugh anymore, their voices filled the void when I thought it would consume me. My mom wanted to take me home

with her, she wanted me to move back into the basement and see a therapist but I insisted on independence and self-medication.

Regardless of who visited, we always had drinks with lunch. When my mom came we had beers and when Cassie came we had wine; Aunt Mary made gin martinis and Aunt Margaret brought sangria. Sometimes, with the cousins, we had a joint on the porch for dessert and always, I kept consuming when they left. I burned through all the sympathy alcohol I'd been given and drank the dregs of my least favorite bottles. I drank the fucking Malort I picked up in a holiday white elephant two years ago and I merinated in my absolute grief, a caricature, now, of misery.

I didn't think about the future and I embarked on a quest to learn how much alcohol it would take to ward off the ghosts of the past. So far, "every drop in Chicago" hadn't worked but I was determined in my thirst for knowledge. Instead, the past was projected onto my brain and played in my dreams. On the day after his death, I woke up thinking it had been a nightmare and on the next day I woke up wailing. What had at first been a welcome reprieve from the crushing reality of my loneliness had become a psychological horror show, playing my torments on a loop with an insistence that felt personal. Physiologically, I was getting used to it. In the days that followed I woke up silent, soaked in tears and sweat with fists tight enough to draw blood from my palms. In the mornings, I stretched my back and rubbed my neck but the weight of my nightmares couldn't be shaken so easily.

When he left for California, I agreed to store Arthur's crap in my unused second bedroom. Maybe I thought their presence here would lure him back to me, or maybe I was just being a good friend. On the night of the funeral, after being dropped off and walked upstairs by one of Arthur's concerned cousins, I was floating on a heady mixture of merlot and denial, and I stripped naked in that second bedroom, surrounded by boxes of his packed clothes and the

furniture he couldn't bring himself to sell. I chose a box and dug through its contents, opening the neatly folded parcels and basking in the smell their disruption evoked, until I found an ancient relic, a sweatshirt from his high school soccer days. Worn to threads and absolutely steeped in Arthur's spirit, I left my morbid finery in a puddle on the floor, and wrapped myself in well worn cotton that still didn't know Arthur had died. I sank with an ill-advised nightcap into the armchair and decided I'd never change my clothes and I'd never move again.

It was day two or three post-funeral and I had stuck strongly to my will, moving only to refill my glass and returning with haste, when Cassie came over and made me do it. She pushed me into the shower and found a fresh set of clothes for me to wear and, right when I thought I could trust her, she suggested we take a walk. So we took the train one stop up to Ping Park. It sits along the river with a northern view of the city, an array of architectural highlights offered on a platter in the foreground. I used to come here with Arthur, back when things could still be beautiful.

We walked along the paved path and Cassie chattered. I didn't listen but I was grateful for it anyway. Her voice in my head wrestled with the voice that was normally there. The small stories she told fought valiantly and effectively against the big storyline playing out in my life; the office gossip quieted the roaring of misery's monsters.

Her phone rang and she checked the number. She looked at me contrite, and asked if I minded.

"Of course not," I said, though I did not welcome the silence.

"Thank you!" she said and she answered it. She stepped away from me out of manners or privacy or something, and I sat on a bench and looked at the city. The water glistened in the vibrant autumnal sun and a cool breeze rustled the season's golden leaves, and I knew then for a

fact that beauty had died with Arthur. I had been hopeful that its absence would be temporary and that it would return in full someday, but the emptiness I felt towards a perfect day confirmed it for me. There was beauty in my world no more, and I would never be happy again.

I snorted in laughter, Cassie looked over at me and smiled. I could be so dramatic.

I tried not to eavesdrop on Cassie's phone call, and I stared at the city in front of me. I ruminated on my losses, and for a brief moment, I allowed my mind to wander towards the future I was so close to having, and the one I am fated to live through. I thought of Arthur on the night we fought, and I thought about the tearful apology I never got to give him. I saw us in a little home together, old and grey and still in love. I cried and from somewhere above, a crow cawed and the wind blew and a feather, so black it was almost blue, fluttered lightly into my lap.

"Hm," I said.

"What's that?" Cassie asked as we walked home.

"A sign," I said.

"For what?"

"I don't know yet."

"You don't believe in signs" she reminded me.

"I don't believe in anything," I corrected. "Which gives me the freedom to believe in anything I want."

"Are you feeling better?" she asked. "You're starting to sound like you again."

We were silent for a moment, her question hanging in the air, unanswerable.

"Walking works," she said.

Arthur once told me that I didn't know how to ask for help when I was surrounded by outstretched arms and it occurred to me that he might have been right. After we finished our

post-walk wine and Cassie said her goodbyes, she implored me to ask for anything I needed, anything I wanted, anything I could think of.

“Money. Food. Another bottle of wine--any time of the day or night. Please. Call me,” she said and she hugged me. I hugged her back.

My bank account was as empty as I was and the only thing I’d eaten since life had stopped was microwaved Ramen. But I couldn’t tell her that and, in fact, I felt anxious to get her through the door.

“I will,” I said. “Right now all I need is some quiet.”

“OK,” she said, turning back towards me in the doorway. “Promise?”

“I promise,” I said.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too, Cassie. Thank you for coming.”

“Any. Time. Seriously.”

“I know.”

Her presence is calming and her generosity is genuine but I yearn for the dramatic loneliness of despair. I’m eager to spend the afternoon, the season, the year, analyzing my agony. The weather doesn’t cooperate, it never does. The sun is still shining and keeping things stubbornly warm for late October, but I am strong and persevere. I hang blankets over the windows to blot out the sun and I pour myself a glass of wine deep enough to turn the lights out and I think about the way Arthur looked at me when he said it.

“You need to learn to ask for help,” he said, his voice deep and quiet and everywhere, always. Through some sonic magic, I could still hear him saying “you’re surrounded by it and you won’t take it. Avery,” he implored. “You need it.”

When he was serious, his voice got so low I had to lean in to hear him, and vertigo pushed me into his arms.

“How?” I said and he smiled, he hugged me, he kissed me.

He never really gave me an answer and now I wish he had, maybe then I could do it. Instead, I pull the blanket aside and I look up at the aggressively blue sky, so brilliant and cloudless you’d think the world hadn’t ended.

“If you’re paying attention,” I said to the sun. “I am in it. Send help.”

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