

Under ashes

By Christine Miscione

Carey's pointer finger pushes into the ivory keys like a toddler plays the piano. The rest of his hand is seized in a gnarled mass that reminds Rachel of the knobs on the old trees in his father's backyard. She watches as he plays a staccato *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* but hums something like *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

"You come home different after you see him," Gabe says, from a distance. Rachel knows he's unsure how to act when she returns. His softness pulls inside and he becomes gangly and awkward, a little boy.

Tonight he stands behind the island in their kitchen as if shielding himself.

"It's hard to see Carey like that." She opens the fridge. "How was work?"

"What did you do with him today?"

She hates when he asks her to elaborate. Elaboration is a snitch. It tells secrets she doesn't know she has.

"Looks like we're out of milk," she says. "I'll pick some up after work tomorrow."

"You never answer that question."

She takes out the can of apple juice and slides it on the counter. "Carey played piano. I fed him dinner." She lets her voice trail and looks for a glass in the cupboard. She tells him only as much as he asks.

"Maybe you should stop seeing him for a while."

She looks over at him, exhausted. "I'm always repeating myself: he's orphaned there, Gabe. His father won't visit him."

"But three times a week?"

"This is as good as life gets for him." She leans on the island as if it's the only thing holding her up. When Gabe says nothing she continues. "He watches cooking shows all day with geriatric residents triple his age. None of them will cook again."

Gabe walks towards the door and puts on his running shoes. "I'm going for a walk."

"You know I'm all he has," she says.

"It was five years ago, Rachel."

"It was ten years."

He zips up his jacket. "You and Carey were never married."

"I still made a promise to him."

"You made a vow to me."

"It's different."

The next morning, in bed, she watches Gabe's bare chest move up and down and thinks about how he is perfectly made, each hair, each speck of him as it should be.

He clears his throat like something is stuck there. She runs her hands through his hair. "Tell me," she says, quietly.

"I'm trying to be strong for you."

She pulls him close to her so she can bury her face in his neck and breathe him in. She loves how he smells of boyhood in the morning and how, when he holds her, his warmth presses into her like the emanation of love, that's how she feels it, his love becoming something physical, capturable, like she could scoop it in a jar and keep it forever.

They hug in silence. She looks out the window. "Why haven't we planted any trees yet? We've been here a year."

"This is so hard."

"I used to have ash trees but then that beetle came."

"Why haven't I met Carey after all this time?"

"Maybe willows?"

"Does he know you're married now?"

She looks at him, his eyes so dark the brown becomes the black. She thinks of how much lighter Carey's are, the colour of wet sand. "What good would meeting him do?"

Gabe looks away. "Maybe it'll help."

"Let him have some peace."

Gabe clears his throat again. "I need to see."

"It's not fair to him," she says. The sentence tastes acrid on her tongue. She knows it is only a half-truth.

"To *him*?"

"Carey's in diapers living in an L-shaped ward that smells like urine, and I prance in there with my new husband, parading all my joy—that's fair?"

Gabe untangles himself and stands in front of the bay window for a while, his hands clasped around the back of his head. From the bed he looks like a silhouetted angel. "I know you take your wedding ring off when you see him." His voice lowers. "I watch you put it on in the car when you get home."

She feels like she's choking right then, so she gasps, maybe too deeply, too obviously. She looks away and stares at his pillow, its soft indent where his head used to be.

"I'm your husband," he says. "This is destroying me."

That night they drive his truck to the nursing home. He makes her leave the sunflowers she bought for Carey on the passenger seat. They sit on the grass by the entrance for an hour until she is ready. She plays with her wedding ring. He clears his throat awkwardly. She wants to tell him that what's stuck there is heartache—she has it too. No matter how many times you try to swallow, it won't go away.

Inside, the ward feels the same. The light still flickers by the elevator. There's the pervasive scent of disinfectant, the teddy bear calendar, the dirty bibs in a pile by the dining hall door. But now Gabe's hand is in hers. His hand, clammy and powerless. His wedding ring digs into her palm and she knows nothing moves through him except unease.

Carey's room is at the end of the hallway, past the TV and its mob of wheelchairs, the people in various stages of vanishing. Past the bathtub room. The upright piano. The room with the ninety-year-old man who strips naked after every meal. When they get to Carey's door, it's closed and she thinks only about him behind it, defenceless. She rests her hand on the doorknob and wants to tell him she's so sorry.

Standing there, the distance between her and Gabe feels wider than their two-by-three kitchen island made of wood and quartz they picked out together for their country home, all the pots and pans hanging on the rack he built above. It's wider than the five acres of land they own, the one-thousand-eight-hundred miles to the Dominican Republic for their honeymoon. It's wider than how she feels sometimes when his body is pressed against hers, when he's inside her and she's supposed to be his.

She doesn't look at him. She whispers, "Are you sure you need this?" but rhetorically. She already knows the answer.

Carey's room is shadowy. He sits alone by the window, his strong, beautiful face staring at a blank TV. His head dips incomprehensibly below his shoulders, the slouch of his back, his atrophied legs, his hands curled inward in his lap—this is the body that used to wrap around her at night. This is the body that protected her. She knows every inch of it.

She swallows hard but her throat feels scratchy and she notices Gabe's breath stop beside her. He lets go of her hand. She wants to hold Gabe and tell him it's going to be alright. She wants to hold Carey and tell him the same thing.

"Carey, sweetheart, it's me."

Carey grunts and half-smiles, his usual happy greeting. Does he realize who Gabe is? Those tiny glittery dreams she and Carey used to have—the two of them marrying in the aviary. The house in the country. Babies. Here is your dream, Carey, only someone else is living it.

A string of drool falls from his mouth. She doesn't know how to preface. She steps toward him. She takes his bent hand. She clears her throat more than once and in one breath it falls out of her: "Carey, sweetheart, this is my husband."

She imagines the collapse of fifteen years. The freckle above his bellybutton. The scrape of his beard on her neck. The trees she watched from his window when she'd curl into him with nothing to say. They made love for the first time in his father's old Volkswagen van on the fifth of June. Does he remember? Their summer solstice parties under the ash trees. His piano. His father's Sunday morning Frank

Sinatra. They were together at a time when they weren't thinking of time. She wants to say to him, Carey, my favourite place in the world was you. I don't know how to forget.

His hand tightens on hers and shakes suddenly. She feels like she's going to be sick. He grunts, "Go, go," and she wants to beg him to forgive her, that she doesn't mean it, it's all a lie—but before she can, Carey lifts his other hand and points crookedly at the bathroom. "Go, go."

"Bathroom?" she asks.

A one-sided nod.

She exhales, she realizes, for the first time. When she wheels him across the room, Gabe asks, nervously, "Shouldn't you get a nurse to take him?"

"I do it all the time, it's fine."

"But shouldn't the nurse do it?"

She stares at him. "Are you actually jealous?"

Gabe stands by the doorway hanging on his bones. She feels in that moment no swoon, no flicker, no longing for him. He seems like an imposter standing there, a voyeur to her sadness. "I think you should go," she says.

"I didn't mean it."

"This is hard on Carey."

"Carey doesn't understand that I'm here. He doesn't even know who I am."

"Don't talk about him like he isn't in the room." She points to the door.

"Please leave, I'll meet you by the nurses' station."

Gabe doesn't move. He continues hanging in that concave way that jealousy and heartache regress a man. "Your eyes change when you're thinking of him."

"Go."

"I can see it, they do."

"Your eyes change when you think I'm thinking of him."

"Is this ever going to end?" Gabe's voice stronger, shriller, a child's whine.

She turns her palms up toward the room, toward Carey's life. "*This* is forever. And it wasn't supposed to happen."

"If it didn't, you know we wouldn't be together."

"I never think about that," she lies. Beside her, Carey whimpers. "You're upsetting him, please just go."

"Him or me?"

She wheels Carey into the bathroom. "You're being selfish."

"Him or me, Rachel?"

She slides the door shut behind her. When she opens it again, Gabe is gone.

Later, at home, Gabe says sorry in a breathy way. He says now he understands and he was wrong and he should have left Carey alone. "It was only because I love you." As if love makes it all make sense.

They cry together for a while. They make love. She feels his love and she knows he can feel hers. But the next day it creeps back. They're sitting on the back steps, her head leaning on his shoulder. She says, "All my life I've slept near trees."

She feels his body move. He shakes his head. "I'll never be him."

It comes like a kick in the stomach. She's winded. She says quietly, "I never said anything about him."

"You know who him is, that means something." He grabs her eyes with his. "I saw the way you looked at him."

"I thought we were over this."

"You never look at me that way."

"Please don't. Please. Please."

He looks away, far off into the green tilted expanse of their backyard. They sit in silence. A housefly lands on the deck in front of them. Tugging at her sleeves, she says, "Carey's only a ghost to me now. But you never believe me."

"Because you still love him."

His words are crystalline and inviolable—*still love him* sailing through her, impaling her to a past she knows she loves more, and all she can see is Carey when he was twenty-one, their favourite ash tree, his strong hands, the dimple in his right cheek. Carey playing piano for her, and how it made her cry sometimes, and how she'd bury

her face in the scent of his neck. She wonders if this future with Gabe was always there, crouched between them, savagely laying in wait—every tenderness and dream fated to lead to now, to this, and if so, what was the point.