

WIDOWS IN THE DINING ROOM

“He was the best man I’ve ever met.”

The bright afternoon sun beams through the windows surrounding the small chain restaurant. Warmth radiates from the fake red leather booths as the air conditioner breaks for the fourth time this summer. The heavy pull down from my too-full apron and the uncomfortable no-slip shoes cause me to break a sweat in the congested room as I walk back and forth. The woman in front of me sits comfortably in the booth with a thick cardigan draped over her frail shoulders.

Many women come in, all older, and many feel the emptiness in their hands. The coldness in that emptiness overshadowed the Californian valley heatwave.

"He was the best man I've ever met."

Her hair was short and bounced off her shoulders in a frizz. Wrinkles met the lines of her eyes and mouth theatrically, decorated by bright pops of makeup that fit her personality. Red blush highlighted her cheekbones, and bright blue powder created animated round eyes.

She talked short and loud. Other waitresses mistook it for rudeness or disrespect, but I found an understanding instead. She couldn't be bothered with the small talk and minor politeness of the day, and I don't blame her. I couldn't blame her because how would I know or expect when I could still feel that warmth in my hands?

Her mannerisms were erratic and restless, and when she first sat at the table, she leaned back to thoroughly look at me. Each skinny leg swung up to rest on the sticky leather-bound booth. The old woman was spoken with assertion and confidence and didn't wait to order. "I want the clam

chowder with two breadsticks." Her crackling voice loudly calls for the *two* breadsticks, specifically the young woman across from her; a distance in their relationship doesn't get anything other than water.

I watched the two women wait; their wait was short, and their conversation was quiet. They seemed happy enough, but the disconnect was apparent then; when the older woman finally had her soup, the dialogue nearly vanished completely.

Watching from a distance, I couldn't help but listen to the silence of their company. A safe, comfortable silence. The day was slow, more than any Sunday early afternoon I've worked before. The breath slowly escaped my lungs, a sort of sigh or half yawn. But my smile grew wide when I saw them.

Of course, it should've been expected; it's a Sunday: Sundays are John and Joanne's day.

I watch them walk in, hand-in-hand, as John raises an unsteady arm in a wave to all of us one by one.

Every Sunday, they have the same schedule: Church in the morning, an early lunch at our small diner, then they share an ice cream down the road, and finally, it's back home to relax.

High school sweethearts into their 90s, still smiling at each other and teasing, still holding hands as they walk in.

I greet them with a hug. They hug back so gently that it feels like they are missing from the embrace. I try not to, but I can't help but notice the way John sits down each Sunday, the shake in his knees, the look in his eyes.

He accepts everyone and greets them with a warm smile and a hug if they initiate, even the new hosts he's never met before.

Joanne has a Coke while John has a black coffee. I don't ask; I don't need to, but they always insist on telling me. John gets a grilled chicken breast with mashed potatoes and a chicken tortilla soup while Joanne orders a clam chowder like the woman before her.

Always have the same order and table if available.

They sit and murmur with each other; John used to talk to most of us, and each one of us, the manager included, would make our way up to the couple. We would hug and talk about how their week was what they've been doing, and ask about family and holidays. John was always the one to reply, while Joanne was happy to just listen to him.

At my other table, the younger woman gets up to use the restroom; the bright blue-eyed woman waves me over and hands me the card, taking the opportunity to pay first. The name Betty is imprinted in white. The bumps of each letter make the name more pronounced. Betty Miller.

By the time I return with Betty's card, the young woman is starting to emerge from the corner bathrooms. I handed her a pen to sign, and I could see the chipped nails. A light blue is painted on them, but the edges are torn and jagged with sharp points. Her eyes are lightly red and irritated, like she's about to cry, but showing no hint of it in her emotions.

"Can I have a small bag?" One breadstick sits wrapped in a napkin on the table, the garlicky grease soaking through at points.

I nod and grab the small bag only a few steps away.

"Thank you, Betty. Have a good rest of your day, ladies." I nod to the younger woman who has returned, sitting in the booth.

"No, I don't think I will."

A laugh made its way out of my throat; surprise and guilt followed swiftly behind. The uncertainty as to whether Betty was making a joke diminished as I looked at her stern face. Not made at my laugh for her pain. Frankly, I don't think she even noticed.

I let her take the lead as I wasn't sure what hand I should play in this interaction.

"My husband died yesterday."

Oh.

Her face was slack when she told me; maybe a look of astonishment was hidden in her eyes. Eyes looking into the vastness of her world.

She looked at me as though I was in on the local gossip, a sort of "can you believe it?" nonchalant kind of look. She seemed calm earlier, happy, and distracted by her soup until the end. Could it be possible to forget something like this?

"He was the best man I've ever met!" She tells me, though I don't think she necessarily wants to tell me; I think she just wants to say it. She wants the universe around her to know.

Within the next five minutes, I learned everything about her late husband except his name. I learned how hard he worked, a blue-collar husband worked on average 60 hours a week if he could. I learned how compassionate and understanding he was. "I had children from my previous marriage, and he worked two jobs to support those kids." She told me.

I think I said I'm sorry here and there, but it was drowned out by Betty's recollection, followed by the younger woman's occasional push to leave. Despite her assumption that I was uncomfortable by the grandmother's grief, I wasn't, and so I continued to sit there and listen.

She lists all of the incredible things he's done, like how he rode a bicycle every day so that their daughter could use his car. He helped pay for her schooling and gave her a roof over her head whenever needed. He loved her how a father should.

"He was the best man I've ever met," Betty repeats, and I notice that the young woman next to her has become softer. She's not trying to push their way out anymore embarrassed.

Her daughter - Karen, I believe was her name - whom he raised as his own, died. Her daughter was a single mother trying to raise two children on her own; when her daughter died, she

not only left Betty childless but her children motherless as well. It was barely a question to Betty and her husband if they would start over again; they knew they would. He then loved their grandchild as his own and cared for her the way a father should. The way he did for Karen, all over again sacrificing, but he was happy for them. He was happy despite the work.

According to Betty, he never smoked, drank, or cheated, and he loved her for over 50 years of marriage until yesterday when he had a sudden stroke and died—74 years old, perfectly healthy last week.

This time, the girl didn't have to try to push her grandma out of the booth; Betty slowly made her way out, sliding slowly to the edge of the sticky leather seat and taking one leg out from under the table at a time.

Her eyes were red, but no tears came out. Her wrinkled, colorful eyelids seemed heavy, on the verge of shutting. She blinked, slowly, over and over again, but they craved sleep, a break from the world.

Just before pulling herself out of the depths of the booth, her eyes stopped at something beside us. The dark pupils seem to dilate, and a longing smile grows on her cheeks. Wide and happy, but a sort of disappointment mixed in.

Her granddaughter helped her out from the table the rest of the way, and I watched as they walked to the door opposite where she had just been looking. Just before they turned, I thought I saw a tear slip past the young girl's eye.

The plastic-to-go bag with the single breadstick swings back and forth with Betty's firm grip on the handle.

I can't help but wonder if her husband would eat the second breadstick. As I clear the rest of the table and bring it to the back, I feel slightly guilty about moving everything immediately - so quickly moving on from something that is altering their lives at this moment.

“What were they talking to you about?” My manager asks as she fidgets with the cups, bored with this morning.

“Her husband died yesterday.” I don’t think I can deliver the statement as bluntly as Betty did.

“Poor thing,” She says barely above a whisper. She wants to talk and relieve herself of her doldrums; I don’t think this is the kind of conversation she imagined. “I don’t think I’ll keep you very long today, so why don’t you just detail the side stations and sweep up before the next server comes in.” Just like that, she’s moved on; I’m not sure why I can’t seem to.

It’s an unfortunate commonality working here. I see them throughout the day. They walk themselves in - a slow quietness in the way they walk. Sometimes they have a book to keep them company, others nothing but a small purse. It's small but heavy as it pulls their arm down. They tilt towards the weight as they walk to a table, always by the window. They look out for company, looking for birds or butterflies flying past, another life to share a meal with.

Glasses sit at the bridge of their nose, eyes pointed down to look through the thick lens. They don't all have glasses or purses, and not all are quiet or small, but they all hunch. All look down as their shoulders cave over them as though the air around them, like all of life, is far too heavy for them to sit upright.

And they're female, every single one of them—a widowed wife, never a husband—the widows in the dining room.

"He was the best man I've ever met."

I see them all day, every day, I hear story after story of great men and lonely women.

No matter how hard you love someone, you can grow old with them, but you'll still lose them most heartbreakingly. Mortality in others is just as unstoppable as it is in yourself, which scares me more than anything.

Another woman lost her husband and his cherished car in the same year. One widow lost all of their money after he died and couldn't find her way back home. Women are looking to see the age of 100 without their life partner. There are so many women alone in the end.

As I clean the ketchup bottles and reorganize the salt and pepper in the cabinets I catch a glimpse of Joanne and John who still sit there, slowly eating. Joanne talking for the both of them.

J&J

Something about their generation they all shared the same initials, as through that was how they knew they were meant to be together. Joanne and John, or maybe Harold and Helen. They come in on wednesday for Wine and Happy Hour. Both loud and comedians with the cheesy jokes they find on facebook. Both in their 60s.

Maybe it was Ben, short for Benjamin. Or maybe Brandon.

My shift finishes up quickly. The next server coming in and me leaving almost immediately. John closes out with me just as they finish up, and I say goodbye to them. Giving each of them a sort of small hug, ducking down to their level sitting on the bench.

As I walk out, car keys swinging in my hand, I feel the warmth of the sun on my face and the cooling breeze on the nape of my neck. It was hot and suffocating inside, but it's so warm, the kind that feels welcoming and understanding, outside.

I see John and Joanne walking outside, towards their small brown coup. Hand in hand they walk out. A slight swing in their arms and a tilt up in their faces. I know they are thinking the same thing; what a nice day it is. They're off to Dairy Queen to enjoy some ice cream together in the welcoming warmth of the day.

As I walk back into my house, a short drive from work I try and think of the couple enjoying their Sunday instead of the hardships Betty must be facing at the funeral home right now. But from their, the grief Betty has inflicted in me through stories of her life, hangs heavy in my lungs.

I feel this new sort of understanding, ignorance is light and easy, until you're faced with reality then it dies and continues to sit with you. A heavy corpse ignorance becomes.

I look to my parents; complicated in their history, but there's a close wisdom of each other. The kind of understanding that you can only achieve through years of flaws, to see each other in the depths of who they indeed are. More importantly, to allow another to see you in your depth and to feel acceptance. Only after years of vulnerability can you truly understand one another.

I can't help but picture it: decades of giving herself to another, then losing them and having to live on the last few years alone. I see my mom, overtaken by time and wrinkles; I see her hunched over. Her body and heart weakened, and she's more lonely and vulnerable than ever before. I see her widowed, I see grief fill up the last few years of life, I see her.

After these days, after hearing the great stories of men and watching women's hands search for another next to them, I feel that coldness in me. Coldness in the tips of my fingers that not even the welcoming warmth of the sun can reach. I feel it in my fingertips the rest of the week, until I meet the next new widow. It stays with me, this unforgettable knowledge that everyone is a victim of death. Everyone will die, I will die, but before that I will be widowed.

I see the future grief in every stranger I meet and in every friend I know.

I see it in my parents, their age and their future. I see it in my sister with her new baby, a baby that will grow up as she grows weak, giving her life to him. I see her with her loving husband, and I imagine the pain and the space he would leave vacant for her. I see my friends, my bosses, and strangers.

Couples holding hands as they walk together, laughing; I see young, short-lasting couples and older ones who've grown tired of each other. I see them all, and I know their grief that is to come.

I see myself and my fiancé, he'll be my husband by next year, but when I look at him right now, at his charming half-smirk, half-smile, when I see him, I think of death. I think of the pain I would feel and the complete disregard for reality—the hopelessness and unchangeable end.

I see myself walking into a diner; I feel that hunch in my shoulders and the heaviness of life overtaking me. I feel that distance in my heart and the quiet sadness I would feel. I wonder what age I would be, I wonder how long it would take me to walk back into that diner, and I wonder what I would say about my loss. What kind of life we would have? If I felt the heartache overtaking me, or if there was a sense of happiness and pride in the misery.

I can't help but feel it, the end of life and the overbearing loss as I look into these painful eyes. I see them magnified in the thick glasses. I see them empty with confusion as they look past me. That look has shown me more about life than anything I could ever read or perceive. I look at these widowed wives as they enter the restaurant and see the future of everyone I love. Most adamantly, I see my own inexhaustible fate.

Later that night, as we sit and watch a movie, I hold my fiance's hand, and I don't let go the rest of the night.