

Mary Pomfret

Scene Thirteen

It was hard to know why she bothered. When she bought the black silk nightdress she thought how different it was from the pure virginal *broderie anglaise* number she had worn on her wedding night. She hadn't even thought about being sexy in those days. Just took it for granted. Now, it had to be worked at, contrived: smoke and mirrors, an illusion of what the years had stolen. She tried the nightdress on in the soft light of the small friendly boutique.

"It looks lovely on you. So . . . you know . . ." said the sales girl. But now the in hard lights of the hotel bathroom in the unrelenting mirror, she saw a woman with breasts that drooped and a pot belly that looked almost pregnant beneath the soft silky folds. The low-cut neckline revealed her chest which had once been white and supple but was now red, wrinkled and spotted with pigmentation. She wished now that she had bought the longer one because of the blue varicose vein that ran the length of her calf. Close up in the mirror she noticed that her eyebrows looked straggly and grey and tried to pull a few out with her tweezers. As she did so, she saw the shaving rash under her arms. She pressed some lip gloss across her lips and snapped the bathroom light off.

Earlier in that day, she and Tom had walked along the beach. Tom's limp made it difficult to walk too far. Tom's accident was the thing that changed his life, changed him, and changed her. They had talked a little of this and that, and then as she often did, she drifted off into her own thoughts, watching her own feet in the sand, hearing only the sound of the waves and squeals of the seagulls overhead. Finally, they sat down next to each other on a rock. She stared out to sea. She felt his arm reach around her, his lips on her cheek, his whispering in her ear,

“I love you, Rose.”

Perhaps she had imagined it. Perhaps it had happened some time long ago and not that afternoon on the beach, the day of their thirteenth wedding anniversary. How things had changed since their wedding day. Everything really. Their move from the outback to the suburban coast, near to where Rose’s family lived was a huge change for both of them. But Tom had to be close to the medical services he needed. Sometimes he seemed lucid and bright and she felt hopeful but other times . . .

Now as she lay in the bed next to him, he smelled sour. She couldn’t quite remember how long it had been that she had been offended by the smell of him. She wondered if her smell bothered him. She’d read somewhere that when people love each other they liked each other’s smell.

Rose slept little that anniversary night in the queen sized bed under Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, but he seemed to sleep well. They had breakfast that morning in the hotel dining room in silence. He read the paper, or tried to at least. With glasses on the end of his nose, he shook the outstretched paper before he turned the pages. For a moment he reminded her of a man who used to catch the bus every morning when she was on her way to school. He would always be dressed in a crumpled pinstriped suit, an un-ironed shirt, a loose grubby-looking tie. As he read each page he would tear the middle and go on to next until the entire newspaper was ripped. He must have gotten some satisfaction from ripping the pages.

“Why don’t you rip the pages, Tom?” He didn’t even look up. He often didn’t hear what she said.

“I’ll just keep staring out the window then,” she continued.

They seemed to be surrounded by honeymoon couples. It was almost as if they had been planted there by fate as a kind of cautionary tale, drawing attention to the very fine line that exists between comedy and tragedy; and love and contemptuous familiarity.

How long was too long, she wondered? How long does a person stay in a relationship that isn’t working before it becomes damaging to the soul; before two people become middle-aged caricatures of their former selves?

The drive home from their weekend away, for Rose, was silent. But the strange thing about silence is that it doesn’t exist unless you are

aware of it. Rose doubted that Tom was ever troubled by it. It was kind of essential for fishing, so for him not speaking was nothing more than habit. Eventually he did speak.

“I’ve got another fishing trip coming up next week, Rose.”

“Oh, that will be nice for you, Tom. It will be a break for you from my constant chatter.” said Rose.

He said nothing. It was as if he only heard the words he himself spoke and that he was incapable of hearing hers. Could have been part of the brain damage.

Rose thought about the lines of her most recent poem. She had struggled with this one at first, replacing words and rearranging the lines, but she felt it was close now; it didn’t need too much more work.

*Another bottle of red is opened, crystal
glasses are refilled, but they both know
that it’s a mistake, because only the rough stuff is left.
Their friends have all gone home now, and they are left alone,
staring down at the tainted tablecloth, no longer stiff starched
and white.
Making patterns with fingertips in spilt salt,
leaning away from each other,
forcing smiles with grape stained teeth,
like vampires sated.
The evening drifts towards dawn.
The ghost of good times hovers and they try to laugh,
about a remembered something or other,
and the waiter, polishing cutlery, yawns loudly.
They always were the last to leave.*

She wondered how Tom would react if he read it. But there was little chance of that; he only ever read the sports pages.

Rose watched Tom pile his tackle in the back of his ute. He would be gone for a month. His old mate Bazza was going with him so she didn’t have to worry about him. She handed him his peanut butter sandwiches and thermos of coffee and he kissed her cheek. Rose had gotten used

to him being away for weeks on end—when he worked on his parent’s cattle station and she stayed in town, knowing he would return when he was ready. That was long before the accident.

“See you in three weeks,” he waved without meeting her gaze.

“Four . . . four weeks, Tom,” she replied.

She knew that he would come back, that he would always come back, that he would never leave. She would have to be the one to go.

Rose slowly began the task. Packing was easier than she thought. She had heard of people who have good friends who come over and help them leave their husbands, but Rose packed alone. In many ways she had been packing for a long time.

The wedding pictures were in an album that hadn’t been opened for so long that the pages had stuck together. She remembered her bouquet—pink rosebuds, daisies, and three small lilies. She’d never replaced her wedding ring when she lost it. Her ring that had long since slipped away down a loose floorboard, or had wedged into a dusty skirting board, or was tossed out with the potato peelings on a night when she was rushing to make tea, or was swallowed by a vacuum cleaner in a strange motel room somewhere, when they were on a long forgotten holiday.

Rose had been packing for thirteen days now. She had marked the days off on the calendar. The boxes were stacked in the lounge room, waiting for her. It was now only a matter of making the phone call and packing her clothes into suitcases. She had signed the lease on a town house for rent. When she inspected it, it was sparkling white and clean. Sterile. No cobwebs. No Tom.

“I’d like to arrange for a removalist to come, please,” said Rose as she spoke into the old, crackling phone. Rose looked at the corkboard hanging in the kitchen with all her appointments and ‘Things To Do’; *Pick up Tom’s drycleaning. Collect Tom’s script from the chemist. Order the Christmas ham.* All the little details that added up to her life. Gave her purpose. She wouldn’t even need a trolley in the supermarket

anymore. One of those plastic carry baskets would do the job. The trolley was part of her role: to buy the food, to plan the meals, to create a home for two. This would be no more. Was she robbing herself of something? Not love, no, that was gone, but a type of life that you can't have alone.

"When would you like the goods picked up?"

She heard the dog barking next door, signaling that the postman had come.

"When?" she replied.

"Yes, when would you like the goods picked up?"

Perhaps it was too soon. Perhaps she just needed to sort out a few more things. Maybe there were still the food cupboards to sort through.

"Look, maybe . . . I'm not sure . . . sorry . . . I'll ring back tomorrow," said Rose and put the phone down. Rose didn't ring back the next day, or the day after that. She went shopping at the supermarket and filled her trolley to the top.

The night before Tom was due to return, she lay awake. She got up and went to her bookcase and pulled out one of her favourite comfort books *Leaves of Grass*. She came upon the lines '*Nothing is ever completely lost, or can be. No birth, identity form—no object in the world.*'

And what of love? she thought. *Did Mr. Whitman include love in his poem, 'Continuities'?*

She reached for her notebook. Fiction and poetry make all things possible.

She wrote.

Scene 13

Rose is putting the last of her clothes in a suitcase when Tom walks in to the bedroom after returning early from a fishing trip.

Tom

I've just seen a removal van pull out of our driveway, Rose. What's going on?

Rose

I'm leaving you, Tom. I can't stand it any longer.

Tom sinks slowly down onto the bed. He sits with his head bowed, covering his face with his hand. Silence

Rose

Look, I'm sorry . . . I should have given you more warning but it's over Tom, you must know that.

Tom sits with his head in his hands. Silence.

Rose

You won't starve if that's what you're worried about. I've left lots of frozen meals in the freezer.

Tom remains motionless with his head in his hands. Rose stands next to Tom and reaches out to touch his shoulder.

Rose

Tom, are you okay?

The lights dim and the set fades to black. The spotlight remains on Tom seated and Rose standing, her hand on Tom's shoulder.

Rose

Are you okay, Tom?

Tom takes his hands from his face, reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out a small gold ring. He takes Rose's hand from his shoulder and slips the ring on her finger.

Rose

(gasps loudly)

Tom . . . my wedding ring . . . I thought it was lost . . .

Silence.

Rose and Tom maintain their freeze position. Silence. Spotlight dims slowly to black. Curtain.

Rose heard the ute pull up in the driveway. She heard the low rumble of the men's voices, the crunching steps in the loose stones and the thud of boots flung on the back porch.

“See you mate, I’ll drop the fish around tomorrow,” called Bazza.

Rose walked out to the kitchen where Tom stood still in the kitchen door way.

“Hello, Tom, how was your trip?”

He looked up for a second but didn't reply and walked back in.