

The Letter

Ann sat alone in her apartment, unsure of what she could do. She'd eaten dinner, called her two sons, watered her plants one final time before the night, admired the sunset, and made a fire in the chimney. Usually, this was the time that she would read a book or watch television until she felt tired enough to go to bed, but her mind tonight was too unfocused for reading, and for some reason, the darn remote wasn't working. She gazed around the room in vain, searching for anything with a chance of keeping her busy. As a young girl, she'd always detested boredom, and Anne told herself that now an old lady, she hadn't changed in that aspect. *But in a way you have*, she thought, correcting herself. Younger Ann had hated inoccupation because she felt as though she were missing out on something that she could be doing, while older Ann hated inoccupation because she disliked being left alone with her thoughts. Like any person of a certain age, she had an intimate acquaintance with death that could do nothing but grow as the years went by. Whenever her mind was vacant for too long, thoughts of those who had passed replaced its emptiness. And so she found herself thinking of her deceased husband, John.

Ann had met John almost sixty years ago when she was seventeen and he was twenty-one. It had been at her neighbor's Christmas party, and the year was 1964. The two fell for each other almost immediately and met as often as possible throughout the remainder of the holidays. When John returned to university, they wrote to each other three times a week. Ann cherished his letters more than anyone could ever know, and it became a habit of hers to wait outside the house for hours on the days she expected a letter, eagerly awaiting the postman's arrival. Every single holiday without fault, John came to visit her. After finishing university, he completed his mandatory military service, during which he drove hours to see Ann at every given opportunity.

The couple married in 1969, five years after they had first met. Ann gave birth to her first son in 1972 and gave birth to her second four years later. John and Ann were perfect for one another. He was rather short-tempered and snappish, but she was quiet and passive, so she knew to easily brush off her husband's irritable behavior. Since she was a child, Ann had always been like a rock beneath a waterfall; any water that hits it merely rolls off and leaves it intact. All in all, their marriage was a happy one, but thirty-six years in, John died.

The first notable sign of John's cancer occurred three months prior to his diagnosis. He and Ann were visiting their second son, who was living in Canada at the time. John went skating with him, and suffered a fall and broke his rib. Later, while journeying to Crete with Ann to renovate a house they had just bought, John was plagued with frequent back pains. Upon consulting a doctor, he was informed that his pains might be the result of something serious and was advised to return to France for further examination. This examination revealed John's lung cancer, and it explained why John's rib had broken so easily in Canada: the disease had already spread to his bones, weakening them. Ann was made aware that John had anywhere between weeks to one year remaining of life, and she was unsure of whether he himself knew how short his time left to live was. She'd done her best to enjoy her last months with him and to make them the best, though naturally, they were the worst. She dreaded his death so much that when John perished in December of 2006, Ann almost felt some sort of relief, despite the unbearable pain she was left with.

Ann found her mind drifting back to the letters John had written to her while they were apart. She'd burned many of them, but kept just one, her favorite. But perhaps now it should be

destroyed too. Ann knew that once she died, her children and grandchildren would search through her possessions and one of them would find it. That she did not want. Her relationship with John was naturally intimate, and she wanted her descendants to view her as what she was to them: a mother, a grandmother, but not a young woman in love. That was the side of her that belonged to the people of her past, but was not for her current family to see. Ann had put off burning that last letter, but her time to depart from life was rapidly approaching. It could be tomorrow for all she knew. Silently, she climbed up the stairs to her bedroom. The letter, folded in half, lay in her bedside table's drawer. She retrieved it without unfolding it and carried it downstairs. She knelt in front of the fireplace. It was then that, possibly for the hundredth time, Ann reread the letter. Again and again, a soft smile on her lips, her heart ached each time she reached the end. She reminded herself of what John had once told her, that it was foolish of her to attach herself to material possessions, and that instead she should attach herself to her memories, which only she would ever hold ownership of. Ann let tears escape her eyes and slide down her cheeks as she folded the letter for the final time and placed it into the fire. She knelt there, motionless, watching the letter ignite and turn orange, and then crumple up into a charred ball before dissolving into ashes.