

Cherry Wine

My mother occasionally asks me how much I remember. I tell her “Not much,” trying to measure how much she doesn’t need to know. I don’t remember much myself, just tidbits of our relationship. Pieces of you littered throughout my brain. Some days I share more with her, I tell her I remember the weight of your footsteps coming up the stairs. I remember the way my heart used to race when your foot landed on the fourth step and I knew you were just seconds away from reaching the bedroom. I remember when my excitement became dread. I tell her about the parties you used to take me to, the way the tone of your voice would change when you would correct me in front of others, but nobody really noticed. I tell her about the firm grip you used to keep on my waist in public, but I don’t tell her about how I justified it. I don’t tell her I used to crave your touch rather than fear it. I don’t tell her about how I sometimes rationalize the way you would treat me.

She always asks, asks about when it started, asks why I didn’t tell her, asks about how I went to work every day and saw my grandparents on the weekend and yet I kept everything to myself. It’s a delicate plea for understanding, an attempt to bridge the gap that now separates us. Rather than seeing me as her competent adult daughter, I’ve now regressed back to a fragile young girl, weaker than I actually was. I don’t answer her questions. A mother’s concern is unrelenting, but I give her excuses. “I have a lot of work to do,” and when that doesn’t work, “I’m tired, mom. My head hurts,” always does.

I leave out the random parts. The good parts. The parts I don’t know why I even remember. I don’t know why I remember where your dentist’s office is. The memory of you complaining about how awful the traffic always was to get there and how squeaky the chairs were creeps into my mind when I pass by the exit for the office on the freeway. The neon blue

tooth attached to the side of the building screams at me to relive everything about you. I booked all your appointments for you, added them to your Google calendar, put sticky notes on your coffee mugs. Late at night, hours after you apologized to me and promised it would never happen again, we used to joke about how I was a glorified assistant, it was a twisted attempt at normalcy. Normal couples make jokes. You would always rest your head in my lap at those times, and I would run my hand through your hair to try to hide the way it would shake relentlessly. I still wonder if any of your future assistants will be as enamored with you as I was.

I don't know why I remember when you would come home with my favourite dish from the Vietnamese restaurant in the West End where we had our first date. The takeout was soothing, it reassured me that everything was going to be okay, that you were still the kind-hearted guy from our first date that had me wishing to see you again. You made it into a ritual. After the really bad nights, when I would have to fall asleep with a bag of frozen peas on me, the bright green takeout bag would be on the kitchen counter when you came home from work the next day. I ate the food with gratitude, kissed you on the cheek, and accepted your apologies.

I don't tell my mother much of anything anymore, I mostly repeat the same answers. Her worry is visible on her face, weighing her down, but I still evade her questions. She tells me she blames herself. I don't tell her that I'm the one at fault. Everyone either ignores it completely or won't stop trying to get me to talk about it. It's exasperating. It's embarrassing when I find myself defending you as if its second nature, biting back a comment about how you were nice to me most of the time. Sometimes. The reflex to shield you from judgment emerges immediately, a response that I had grown accustomed to from late nights when I had to convince you, convince both of us, that you were a good person.

I wish the questions would be about the time you booked us a cabin up North for our anniversary. The perfect romantic getaway. This was just after one of the first few incidents, and I really, really believed that you would stop. The cabin felt like a momentary pause from everything, completely secluded in the forest. The only noise we could hear throughout the day would be our own voices, and the birds chirping just outside the patio screen door. You didn't hit me that weekend, didn't even yell at me. That weekend at the cabin left me with hope, naively convinced me that our rough patch was over.

I don't know why I remember when you called me the most talented writer on Earth. I had been struggling with my latest piece for work and felt like I couldn't write anything. None of my sentences flowed and everything seemed out of place. You told me I could make a fortune cookie quote sound like the most interesting novel ever. My mashed-up brain finds it easier to recall when you were kind to me, when I wrote lovesick poetry about you, when you would bring me flowers once a week as a gift rather than an apology. It's grossly ironic how my head starts to throb when I think about every other aspect of our relationship.

When I think about you too much, remember too much, it gets worse. My head hurts so bad I wish I could crawl into bed and just die. My mother and I don't talk about the episode I had three weeks ago, my body filling with rage, and shame, and humiliation to the point where I cried. Cried for the first time in months, my entire frame shaking as I struggled to catch my breath. I threw your favourite mug at the wall with strength I never knew I had, only getting angrier when I realized I had shattered something important to you. My mother physically restrained me as I struggled to pick up the pieces, until I eventually moved on to my phone, muttering about how I needed to call you, needed to apologize, needed to tell you that the restraining order was my mother's idea, not mine.

I don't know why I remember our first holiday office party together. I was your plus-one for the modest gathering planned by your office, a small function that carried the weight of countless expectations. I remember being wracked with nerves, anxious about everything going well so the evening wouldn't end poorly. I baked a pie, wore a brand-new dress, and ironed your suit. I aimed for it to be obvious that we were a normal, boring couple. I didn't make any jokes that would offend anyone or make you look bad. Every word I spoke, each gesture I made, was an exercise in being the perfect partner. I chatted with the other girlfriends in the room and wondered if their carefully applied makeup was also covering a days-old bruise. I was under the impression that everything went well, that I didn't embarrass us or make a fool of myself, but you thought the opposite. Usually, you waited until we got back to the house, in the privacy of our home you could punish me for my behaviour comfortably, knowing your actions wouldn't be witnessed and you could remain uninterrupted. I don't know why I remember the soft sound of the pop song on the radio in the car before you turned it off abruptly. I did something wrong. Something you weren't pleased with. The open bar at the party augmented your rage and we didn't leave the parking lot for another forty-five minutes. I remember on the drive back you muttered something about tinted windows, about how grateful you were that you bought the vehicle model with tinted windows.

I'm starting therapy next week. My mother said if I didn't then I would have to go live with my grandparents. All of us in the same house again. I grew up with them, spent late nights playing Sudoku at the kitchen table with both of them while mom was sleeping. It was during these quiet hours that the three of us became closer, a trio that even my mother would feel left out of. The rhythmic scratch of pencil on paper lives in my mind when I think of my childhood. My grandparents' home was comforting, just like the cabin. The television was always on,

playing either the news or some sports channel. You could hear it in the background of every memory I have from that house. I remember the first time I brought you there, before everything started. With the constant charm that you always had in those early days, you shook my grandfather's hand and kissed my grandmother on the cheek. Ate their food with a smile on your face. Right before we had left later that evening, my grandmother whispered in my ear, "He's great, honey. The perfect man for you." A month and a half later, how could I bear the embarrassment to tell them that you hit me for a reason I couldn't even remember? The contradiction between my grandmother's praise and your violence was something I couldn't let escape from the privacy of my mind.

My mother ended up telling them everything she knew, which wasn't much. We went over for lunch and dinner a lot, but never talked about it. The first time they tried, I left the table so quick that the headrush from standing up so fast nearly made me fall over, and I had to grip the edge of the dining table to catch myself. After that, they didn't ask about it. We talked about other things, local gossip, what happened at church on Sunday, the neighbours. I tuned them out and focused on the faint sound of the television.

I don't know why I remember the last time you hurt me. Leading up to it, you had started having more bad days than good. I asked about your day and you looked at me with a rage that usually only came around after too many drinks. The push was so unexpected, I was ready for a strike to my face, but your heavy hand landed on my collarbone instead, the tender bruise from last weekend just under your fingertips. I flailed for the railing but couldn't get a grasp on it. You panicked after I hit the fourth step and you didn't know if the horrible sound you just heard was the sound of the wood creaking or my ankle snapping in half. I don't know why I remember the petrified look on your face, the apology instantly forming in your head as it happened, rather

than the force that you pushed me with. The sound of my voice pushed you over the edge. My constant talking was our biggest problem. On your bad days, you hated me the moment I opened my mouth, even if I only had words of adoration for you. My head hit the ground so hard that the wood right at the base of the staircase is stained with the crimson blood that had poured out of me. My mother scrubs at it each night.

I barely remember when I woke up in the hospital later that evening, my first reaction being complete shock that you would even bring me here. This was a departure from the routine I had grown accustomed to. Typically, you would either ignore what you had done, completely blocking out the bruises littering my body, or, when you were feeling generous, you would bring me something from the freezer and a few painkillers. Waking up in the hospital bed was when I knew it was bad, knew that I couldn't completely ignore it anymore. This time, the clinical surroundings and the scratchy discomfort of the gown against my sensitive skin served as tangible proof of your actions. My mother was next to me, clutching my hand with a grip so tight that I could only trace it back to when I was a girl and we would cross the street together. I held my breath, scanned the room for you, thought about what story you told her, a script that you had saved in your brain. Maybe I drank too much last night, or perhaps I was half-asleep, and simply took a tumble. As soon as she noticed I was awake, my mother asked me what I remembered.

The only words that left my mouth were to ask where you went.

I haven't seen you since that night. The restraining order was put into motion swiftly, my mother handling most of it. I showed up when I needed to. My signature across the forms, each stroke an act of compliance, an acknowledgment of the necessity to capture our shared history within the rigid confines of legal documentation. I recounted some incidents, as per my mother's request, just so the protection order would be secure and you would actually be scared off. We

fought about it some nights. It would start with a few whispers, a harsh phrase directed at her when my head would start to hurt. At an alarming speed, I would become the embodiment of selfishness, behaving like an absolute monster as I shouted at my innocent mother for merely telling me that no, it wouldn't make sense to contact you. It's unnerving to see myself act like this, like a distorted version of the reliable, sane daughter I once was. As much as I try to convince myself that you didn't affect me that much, I can't deny that you have altered who I am at my very core.

My mother's love is unyielding. I keep expecting her to give up, to move out of the house after one particularly challenging encounter with me. Her care is a stark contrast to the treatment I have considered normal for the last couple of years, yet also a reminder of my life before you. I often struggle to remember the earlier years. The puzzles at my grandparents' home. Playing in the snow with my mother. My friends from high school. My first boyfriend whose only crime was dumping me to go to college. Your presence clouds my mind constantly, forces me to forget that there was once a time that I didn't know you, when I didn't have a scar on the back of my head and a body that feels ten times older than I actually am. I don't know why I remember your unrelenting hatred rather than the love I've felt from countless others before you. I don't know why I remember you more than anything else I've ever experienced.