

BITTERSWEET

by Jude Bolick

The funeral went relatively well. The service was appropriate, although a bit sappy for his taste. Everyone was very gracious about the fact that there was a baby screaming through most of it as well, though that was probably because she was the daughter of the deceased and thus had the right to throw as big of a tantrum as she wanted.

Her tuft of brown hair was stuck to the side of her pudgy cheek, her face sticky from the tears and snot running down her face, despite Wadsworth's best efforts to keep her presentable.

She would let out a howl every thirty seconds or so, her wide eyes closing as if the act gave her voice more strength. The tall ceiling of the church helped echo her tortured voice around, making sure everyone in the seemingly endless rows of pews could hear how upset she was. The stained glass windows lining the two walls on either side of them shook with each sob, the people represented in the artwork appearing to cry alongside her. Wadsworth held her tightly, keeping his own crying silent as he tried to mute her voice by pressing her into his chest lightly and wrapping the blanket tightly around her squirming figure, whispering to her to try and calm her down.

"Shush, Tilly, it's okay..."

But it wasn't okay, even Tilly knew that much.

The pastor had to pause the ceremony twice throughout its duration to wait for a break in the baby's screams. He didn't say anything, he just stared sadly down at the two while Wadsworth apologized to him silently with his dark green eyes. When Tilly paused her tantrum to catch her breath, the pastor would start his speech back up as if he had never stopped.

At a time like this, Wadsworth would usually pass the furious child to his wife, then stare at her with mock irritation when the baby ceased her crying almost instantly. But unfortunately, for both the baby and her father, that was no longer an option. He couldn't be angry at her for acting the way she was. He wanted to react the same way, so instead he just let her vent for the both of them.

The only complaint he had with the funeral service was with how many people came up to him afterward and offered him their sympathy. They came single-file down the long red carpet separating the pews like a crimson river, letting the current take them to where he sat on the far right side of the front row. They would say something generic, like “I’m so sorry for your loss” or “She would have loved this ceremony” before turning away and heading up the low steps to the altar where they shook hands with the pastor and offered the woman in the coffin one last goodbye. They would then make their way against the current to the double doors in the back of the church and exit silently, saving their post-funeral gossiping for outside.

The deceased’s mother was the only exception to this rule, as she stayed and chatted with the pastor for an extended time, complimenting him on doing such a wonderful job. It made sense; she was the one who had organized the funeral, paid for the service, and chosen the violets that were surrounding the corpse. During this phase of the funeral, Wadsworth just sat in the front row the entire time, nodding and keeping a tight smile as he bounced Tilly in his lap, keeping his eyes away from the coffin. He tried his best to pay attention to the people coming to see him, his mind both attentive and wandering due to the conflicting emotions fighting inside of him, but he often found himself falling back into memories, unable to stay in the present indefinitely.

After a while, the crowd died down, leaving him alone in the church. Even the pastor had left, and the body was taken away soon after.

It was just him and his daughter left.

The large church hadn’t seem so vast and ominous with all the people crowded inside its four walls, but now that the massive building was only holding two people, its size loomed in an almost threatening way. He shifted in his seat uncomfortably, gaze slowly moving up to the domed ceiling. His eyes were still puffy from the tears he’d been crying, though he wasn’t even sure why he was, or what exactly he was upset about.

Last week, he had found evidence that his wife, his high school sweetheart, had been cheating on him since college, and that the little girl in his lap may not even be related to him. He had gone into his wife’s room one night to clean it as a surprise for when she got home from her long day at work when he found the proof: a stash of men’s boxers hidden under a pile of t-shirts, several sizes too big for him. Then, two empty bottles of cheap brandy tossed under the bed, hidden until she got the chance to throw them away discreetly.

In her college days, whenever she and her college buddy would hang out together, they'd drink exactly two and a half bottles of brandy between them, and he would take the rest home with him to prevent her from finishing it. Wadsworth was never that good at taking drinks, but then again, the college friend was a much bigger man than he was, his clothes several sizes bigger than his own were.

When Wadsworth knelt down to retrieve the bottles with shaking hands that fateful night, setting the baby in his arms down gently on the mattress so as not to crush or disturb her, he noticed a crumpled piece of paper shoved into one of them. He dumped it out and read it several times to make sure he was not mistaken.

See you next week~

It took him several minutes before he got back the strength to stand, his knees quaking as he held onto the bed for support. His mouth hung open, his eyes never leaving the note clutched in his trembling hand.

Tilly squealed with delight as he scooped her up, racing through the house to the phone, his eyes never leaving the note as he dialed his wife's number.

He had intended on asking her about the note, calling her out on it and venting all of the fury that was rapidly building up inside of him, but when he'd called her cell phone, a police officer had answered it instead.

He had rushed to the hospital, both he and Tilly still in pajamas, just in time to watch his wife flat-line after a car accident had left her nearly severed in half. He stared at her still body, all the fury now mixing with grief, his eyes barely able to register what he was seeing. He was still holding the note in his hand as he slowly approached her hospital bed, taking her cold hand in his shaking one. Tilly was fast asleep in his arms, her eyelids fluttering peacefully as she sucked on her thumb, blissfully ignorant to the fact that her father was now a widower.

He had knelt by his wife's hospital bedside once before, with the baby cradled in his arms, but the last time it had been with great joy that he'd announced they had a baby girl.

This time, he had to be pried away as the doctors came in to remove the body, their baby girl obliviously dreaming as he sobbed in the waiting room.

Even at her funeral, he still had the note in his pocket, the weight of it far heavier than the limp child in his arms, who had worn herself out screaming through the entire ceremony.

He was left with a baby, barely a year old, to care for on his own and the weight of knowing that he'd never know if his wife truly was cheating or not.

Did he even have the right to question her now that she was dead?

The whole situation left him feeling sick and more alone than he'd ever felt, not knowing what to feel, struggling to feel anything at all.

In the silence, the questioning voices in his head got louder, his eyes scanning the room briefly to search for a distraction, though he lacked the motivation to simply go home, especially without his wife in the passenger seat next to him, holding his hand as he shifted gears.

He wondered if the man he thought she was cheating on him for had shown up to the funeral.

He had done his best to scan every face, but he hadn't seen him.

Maybe he'd slipped under his radar, or had been too nervous to come up and offer Wadsworth his condolences.

Great, now his only chance at peace of mind was gone, the church empty, and he'd likely never see him again.

As he looked around, staring at all the empty pews, he noticed something that silenced all the voices in his head.

He wasn't alone after all.

Sitting alone, at the back of the church, her eyes cast up to the ceiling, was a strange woman dressed in all black.

At least, he thought she was a woman. The smiling mask she wore made it difficult to tell gender or expression.

She had bangs that came down to her plastic eyebrows and long black hair, so dark that it put his own shaggy midnight hair to shame, that draped over the back of her bench and almost touched the floor behind her.

Her body was proportioned unnaturally, and she sat in a way that would break a person's back, but not hers. She looked comfortable in her painful position. Her hands were crossed in her lap, her odd body embraced in a tight black sweater and what appeared to be yoga pants.

Something about her intrigued him, so much that he found himself standing up, wrapping the sleeping baby up in her tiny blanket as he walked toward her, cradling the girl in his arms.

The woman didn't move as he approached, but he could tell by the way her head twitched ever so slightly that she knew he was there.

He wondered how she knew his wife, and what had brought her to the funeral.

He stood beside her for a moment, trying to figure out how to approach the masked woman.

Now that he found himself so close to her, he found himself appreciating her height for the first time. She was nearly up to eye level with him seated.

However, despite her classic horror movie appearance, he didn't feel afraid of her.

Maybe he'd simply given up on life, so much that he was willing to make small talk with a murderer.

"May I sit...?" he asked gently, keeping his voice low despite knowing there was no one else that could overhear them.

Something felt so sacred about the woman, something secretive and almost forbidden.

The stranger nodded, patting the seat beside of her twice, inviting him into her hidden world, a secret paradise all her own.

He took the seat graciously, bouncing Tilly in his lap as he tried to figure out what she was staring at so intently. It was impossible to tell with the mask obscuring her eyes entirely, little upturned black slits all that were visible to the widower.

An array of smells filled his nose as he breathed in deeply, the oddly specific scents provoking a collection of strong emotions.

The woman beside of him smelled of roses, but in a different way than one might expect.

Not a bunch of fresh roses, bundled together and given as a gift to a lover on their anniversary, no, but a single rose, left out in the rain, the petals melting away in its slow decay, left to die on the hard concrete, as alone as the person who had brought it, and as ignored; rejected.

She didn't smell of candles, burning slowly on a bedside table, the small flickering light casting long pulsing shadows across the walls. She smelled of smoldering wax, left over from the candles that had burned all night, casting no shadows as the person who had lit them stayed up, checking the clock beside of them, wondering why their lover hadn't come home, or returned their texts, fearing the worst and wondering what "the worst," in their mind, was.

There was a deep sadness in the air, and he could feel it emanating from her. It drew him in, his heart filled with a longing to understand her pain. Not to relieve her of it, but to be a part of it, share in her beautiful suffering.

He glanced down at the baby in his lap, curious to see her reaction to the stranger in the mask.

Tilly's bright brown eyes met his, swollen from all of the tears she'd shed during the ceremony.

She continued to suck on her thumb, ignorant to the stranger's existence.

When he looked up to see if the stranger had noticed the child, he watched her hastily turn away, as if she had been staring at them and didn't want to be caught.

Wadsworth suddenly found himself questioning if the masked woman was just in his head.

The two sat in silence for a moment, basking in their sadness, separate but together, before the woman decided to break the silence.

"A beautiful ceremony," she said wistfully. The small talk seemed so unfitting for her, and he could tell it felt wrong for her to say it. She was simply breaking the silence, wishing for a meaningful conversation, but fearing to scare the widower off.

It made him want her even more.

Her voice rang out like church bells after a divorce, as hard as a pebble against a darkened window, yet as soft as a whisper in the middle of the night in one's sleep, calling out the name of someone other than the person sleeping next to them.

The mask failed to dampen the tone or volume, which drew his eyes over to her face.

As he watched her move, he realized that her chest didn't rise or fall with breaths, and her mask had no breathing holes carved into it.

"Indeed..." he breathed, awed by the woman's air of mystery.

He decided to take the risk, asking what was truly on his mind, not dancing around the point. He disliked small talk as much as she seemed to.

"How did you know my wife...?" he asked, his fingers twiddling with the blanket's hem as he spoke.

The stranger stayed silent for a moment, offering him little more than another head twitch, the movement letting him know she was still listening to him, not off in her own world.

He was a part of that world now, and he never wanted to leave it.

It felt so safe, a place to be himself without shame.

"I didn't," she said after a moment, startling him.

A sick thought passed through his mind and he found himself asking the next question automatically.

"Were you the one who hit my wife...?"

She shook her head, leaning back as she gazed up at the ceiling.

"No."

"Then what brings you here?" he pressed, desperate to understand her more.

She hesitated, still worried about scaring him off.

It suddenly struck him what the confusing emotion was that was in every breath she didn't take, in every unnatural twitch of her body.

She was lonely, seeking out a friend as much as he was.

"I've been to every funeral," she said after a moment, finally turning her head to face him head on.

She had finally let him fully in, taken the dive, laid it all out in hopes he wouldn't reject her.

"I'll be at yours, too, Wadsworth..."

Wadsworth turned to her, trying to process what she'd said, wondering if he had misheard her.

As he met her hidden eyes, he could have sworn that he saw her wink, a smile widening on the lips behind the mask.

Thousands of questions flooded his mind, struggling to be the center of his attention, begging to be let out and thrown at the stranger in the mask. But only one question came out of his mouth, the most innocent of them all, yet powerful enough to beat the rest of them back:

“Would you like to go get some lunch?”