**Sanctuary**

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published in audio form in The Drum Literary Magazine, Issue 35, April 2013

www.drumlitmag.com

After Logan Airport you unpack your suitcase and return to your house and your part-time job where your colleagues have left cards in your office mail box: “Sorry for the loss of your mother.”

You read each card and you think, “Loss? What loss?”  Because there is *no* loss.

Since her funeral and your transatlantic flight there is only this underwater silence in which loss and life happen somewhere else, to someone else.

On Route 95 North you watch the faces in the cars and you wonder which of these drivers still has parents. You exit onto the two-lane road that winds past the red maples and the pumpkin farm and the pilgrims' pastures.

While you were in that Irish hospital, while you were walking behind a hearse to the village graveyard, New England has turned itself to  bright, high def Autumn.

Every night you go to bed early because now, even two weeks later, you are still exhausted from the noise and arguments of the cancer ward.  Some nights you wake from a dream of a woman whose bones have gone swimming through her black and molten body.  Or you wake up convinced that you hear the nurse’s footsteps in the hall.

On your days off you wander through the downstairs of your old misshapen house.  The pumpkin pine floors creak. You make coffee. You pour out cereal and bring it to the table but forget the milk.  Rising from the breakfast table takes ages because now  you have to plan the simplest things.

After breakfast you head upstairs to shower and dress but you never make it past the dining room window where you stand watching your street with its brightly painted federals and Victorians, their window boxes planted with hardy Mums.

The side streets lead down to the sea wall and the clam flats where once, a man could feed a family with just his clamming fork and a rake.

Some of your neighbors’ houses have painted plaques inscribed with the original owner’s name and his ancient trade: *Nathaniel. Jeremiah. Caleb.*

*Chandler. Rope maker. Ship merchant.*

These are not the names or trades of your childhood.  This is not your history, this Yankee place where the merchants went to sea while the wives scanned the horizon from their lonely widow's walk.

At your window you are watching and waiting for something to begin or end, for something inside you to slip its moorings and unleash that thing you’re supposed to feel, that thing they call grief.

This watching, this waiting goes on.

On Sunday mornings the cars park along the curb outside your house. Old men walk around the car to hold the passenger door for their wives. You watch them totter down the sidewalk, this Sunday morning pilgrimage to the white clapboard Methodist Church.

“What religion are they?” On your weekly phone calls home your mother used to ask this, sometimes interrupting your tale about a dinner party or a neighbor’s holiday open house.  You told those party stories to fill in time and to justify the Comcast international calling plan.

 “I don’t know,” you said.

“You don’t *know*? Ach, they’re probably Protestants.”

In your mother’s and grandmother’s country--your *ex-*country--Protestants were tweed suits and fox hunts and the occupying force. They were not these old Methodist women in stout shoes or these Medicaid men in Sunday overcoats.  They were not this 1800s church out your window with its white steeple against a blue fall sky.

On Sunday afternoons you and your mother and sister used to drive to a neighboring village where once, centuries ago, the Guinness family had a huge lakeside castle and stables of servants and horses and a small stone church.

The Guinness gentry are long dead, and the castle is a tourist hotel, but the lakeside walks are still open to locals like us. On those Sunday walks your mother used to nod across the lawn at their church and remind her daughters: *Step inside one of their churches and you’ll be dead within a month.*

You wore a black suit to her funeral at St. John’s Parish church where you knelt with your brothers and sisters in the front pew. The priest shook incense and sang *Ave Maria* while you prayed that you would remember where to kneel or genuflect.

Down by the sea wall the marsh grasses grow rimed with ice as the tide cracks and creaks in the crevices beneath.

At night the dreams come worse. In the mornings the last Canadian geese fly south over Plum Island while you are still pacing your widow’s walk through the creaking house. You begin to wonder if this is a kind of madness, an infirmity that's here to stay.

One Monday you are stationed inside your window when your mind flickers half awake.

You find the number in the yellow pages. When she answers, you tell the pastor woman that you’re a writer and a neighbor and that you’d love to rent a place where you could work undistracted. You do not tell her that you must escape your own infirmity; you must quarantine yourself from your own house.

On your days off you stir yourself from the breakfast table and pour a travel mug of coffee to bring to the church and the pastor’s office where her vestments hang on the back of the door.

The pastor says she’s hardly ever here, and that the United Methodist Church is happy to have a writer in residence.

You set your laptop bag on the small desk. But mostly you leave your writing bag unpacked to cross to the long windows for a mirrored view of your own house, your own footprints through the snow.

One day you unpack a notebook and you begin to write your requiem for a mother and a daughter–for the women you once were, the women you might have been.

One morning you leave the office to walk across to the church sanctuary. You open the double doors to the plain brown pews, the crucifix above the altar.

The wind creaks in the trees outside the windows.

All that New England winter you come to sit in the same pew, a lone pilgrim in this place.

You do not find God.  But you learn to speak anew.