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All She Ever Lived For

BY PIA DE JONG

The winter had been harsh in Ridgetown, but finally the iron-like snow had yielded and melted. At 5 A.M., when a yellowing sun rose over the sycamores, the Latino garden workers, waiting to be picked up, could already tell it was going to be a hot day. At six, the temperature had risen into the eighties. It was the end of April, the time of year when the people of Ridgetown started to ask each other about their summers. When do you go to the Vineyard? Will you be in Northeast Harbor? But not today.

“Have you heard about Lucinda’s daughter?” the young mothers at the Pilates class asked one another as they hurried from their SUVs into the seven o’clock class, their faces flushed from their coffee and morning rush. The news had been out there, buzzing, snippets from friends who had friends who knew someone who knew something. They stretched and bent through their class, till the very end, absent-minded, until they scattered back to their houses.

“Have you heard about Lucinda’s daughter?” the gray-haired women of the garden club whispered to each other, when they gathered over lunch. Then, as the day went on, the men who gathered at their Old Guard supper club asked, turning to their first gin tonic of the night, “Have you heard about Lucinda’s daughter?”

At eight o’clock, Nadine stood near the bar at a reception for a new modernist exhibition at the Ridgetown Community Museum. She was a newcomer in Ridgetown, a town where residents of a decade or longer still called themselves newcomers. Pinched between her slim fingers was a flute of champagne. She was hesitant to take a sip, since she was by herself, and even though her mother had long ago slipped into dementia, she could still hear her voice: *a lady never drinks alone*. She looked at the paintings on the walls, abstracts in bright colors that were made by an artist of whom she had read a long interview

in *Vanity Fair*. Next to the article was his photograph, standing at the entrance of a barn in an off-white linen suit. One hip was bent slightly forward. His smile looked rehearsed.

Nadine looked in vain for something familiar in the paintings, something that she would recognize from the article about the man in the white suit who had somehow intrigued her. Even though she was not tired, she found herself leaning against one of the pillars. Faint voices from outside swirled into the museum. Laughter, that made her think of long-ago afternoons with her friends, when school was over, and she did not immediately head home. The sudden chill of the air-conditioning raised goose bumps on her bare arms. She had forgotten her shawl.

Then a velvety voice, close to her ear: "Have you heard about Lucinda's daughter?"

Nadine turned and saw three women in their fifties. They looked understated and chic in their cocktail dresses. Toned down make-up, in earthy colors, their hair in elegant up-dos. They wore rings on their fingers with sparkling diamonds that they casually flashed through the air when they spoke. They were *nice*.

Nadine, suddenly alerted, thought she must have been introduced to them before—perhaps at a benefit, but she did not recognize any of them. Somehow, in Ridgetown, the rich ladies all looked the same.

"Did you hear?" a petite lady in a deceptively plain little black dress insisted, studying Nadine's face.

"Yes, of course I heard," she said. "How could I not have heard it? Everyone talks about it." She then smiled politely and walked away.

Nadine felt increasingly uncomfortable around the paintings. Who ever said that abstract art did not represent anything? Their different shades of red next to the purples and oranges were so bright, she could not look directly at them. They blinded her as if it was the feverish sun itself in the midst of summer, high noon.

It was a mistake to be here. She should have gone to the gala for the symphony instead. Earlier that afternoon, she had been in doubt. Music, she had figured, the *right* music could be reassuring. Balm for her soul who had suffered from untold sleepless nights, but she did not like Brahms. Brahms was loud. Like clouds before thunder, before the heavy rainfall. Maybe she should not have gone out at all, stayed home, but then, she had cancelled so often.

Her husband had suggested that she join the board of the art museum. We should show up, he said, and get to know the people involved.

He was not with her tonight. He had promised, they had signed up as a couple, but he could not make it. Stuck in traffic, airport delays, car crashes, geysers, hurricanes, snow, and much more snow. Even today, end of April, somewhere in the world it was still snowing. And he, her dear husband, Oliver III named after his grandfather, or his father for that matter, since they were all named Oliver, was stuck in that very place.

She had left her children with a babysitter. A teenage girl had walked in on her toes, almost like a dancer, wearing tight jeans over her skinny legs. “Hi,” she had said, distracted by taking off her earphones. She had music on her iPhone, songs of which her kids knew every word. Movies, too, all on that small screen, movies her kids loved. And pictures of puppies. Endless pictures of endless cute puppies. Still, they were wary when she left. “Where are you going, Mommy?” “You look so beautiful in that dress, Mommy, like a fairy princess, and look, your hair, so soft, Mommy, can I go with you?”

Of course they cried when she brushed their little hands off her carefully selected chiffon dress. Of course they did not want her to leave, but they were better off without her. They did not know that yet, but they were better off with the girl in her skinny jeans with her iPhone with all those pictures on it of cute puppies. She wore a top that showed her round breasts shamelessly. This girl, whom Nadine had found last minute at a babysitting service, had a name she could not remember. Something with an A . . . Abigail? Amanda? She was probably in love, too. Girls that age always were in love.

Nadine walked into another room, where she was surrounded by paintings that were dark—sand deep browns, divided by thick black strokes of black paint, like Motherwells.

She looked at them through half-closed eyes, to see the brown blend into the black, and the black in the dark purple. As if someone had spilled water over them and the contours had disappeared. She could see the man in the white linen suit make that, on sleepless nights, shivering in his atelier. Of course he would not wear a suit then, nor care about his smile.

There was a group of women her age, she figured. The slight hairs, a few only, but still. Their skin had lost its luster. Not completely, but mostly. They waved at her, called her name, and she walked over to them.

But as she drew closer, they seemed to change. Grow fainter, grayer, older. Were they really her age? Were they like the girls she used to

walk to school with? Her hair braided, white socks in her new shoes, a plaid dress. On windy cold days, wearing mittens and a matching hat her mother had knitted.

The sky was brighter then. A beautiful bright, that reflected glowing light from far away. They held hands, endlessly swirling on the grass, then letting go. When she rested on the floor afterwards, flushed, the colors behind her closed eyes were pink and tomato red. Little pearls of sweat, floating on her brow, tasted like potato chips.

Nadine turned around, suddenly looking for her husband. He was stuck, she knew, but maybe he would show up after all. Maybe the snow had suddenly melted, the traffic jam solved, the airport cleared. Maybe he just had gone out of his way to be there. Oliver, always so firm, so knowledgeable, dear, where have you been? Where are you?

Nadine moved among the visitors, all so elegantly dressed. Wearing higher than high heels that gave them the height to look out and see things that were otherwise hidden. Overseeing whole rooms must give a sense of safety. Nadine was short, but she never got around to wearing heels. She could have, after her mother did not care any more about those things, but then it was too late.

“Excuse me,” she said to the lady next to her. The woman, in a shiny green dress, looked at her, with a puzzled look.

“Can I help you?” the lady asked. Her neck was wrinkled, as if the skin could not hold itself together. *You can tell the age of a woman by looking at her neck.* Nadine could have been this woman’s daughter.

Where was her mother? She called her on the phone earlier that day, several times, because she wanted to visit her. She had everything ready to leave her house, but was unable to reach her.

“Sorry, but I just want to get by you,” Nadine said. She wondered if she ever was able to get around all these ladies. There were so *many* of them.

“Are you okay?” asked the lady who wore a necklace that ended between her pale breasts.

I would have been okay if you just let me through, Nadine wanted to say, but Ridgetown was not a place for impolite people. It was also not a place for people who hear the colors in the paintings screaming at them.

The lady stepped aside, while fingering her strand of pearls, a deep dark black.

Nadine walked into the main gallery, which was circular. The round red carpet on the floor was spotless, and she hesitated to step

on it. She stopped at a statue of a girl positioning her arms as if in a ballet class. *Port the bras*. Her thin waist, the small of her back, all of it was done with precision, like a Degas . . . or was it Rodin? Her face showed no expression. Why, Nadine wondered, why bother with her body, if there was no expression on her face? Her lips were thin, pencil-like lines. She was sure the statue was cold. Frozen metal. *If you put your tongue to the rail of the bridge, when the temperature is below zero, it will stick to the bridge. You need to pour warm water on it to free it.*

Suddenly the lady with the black pearls stood next to her. “You walked away so quickly,” the lady said, “and I thought, maybe you had not heard about Lucinda’s daughter.” She brought her face close to Nadine, so the smell of her perfume was unavoidable—irritating her nostrils, her skin. In her throat, too. A bitter taste. “Have you?” she whispered.

“I did, I heard about it,” Nadine said, breaking her silence. She wanted to step aside, but was afraid to be rude. *Never upset people if you can help it.*

“Well, dear, tell me, honestly, aren’t you surprised then?”

“Yes, of course,” Nadine said. “But I am sure she must have had her reasons.”

“Reasons?” The lady said. “Reasons?” She looked at Nadine with disbelief. “What reasons could she have, for heavens sake? She had everything. The beautiful children, the colonial house, the accomplished husband.” Her piercing eyes now became even more blue. “Have you ever noticed how good-looking her husband is? Really. And smart, too. Went to one of the Ivies and did well. Extremely well. She was born rich and married into even more money.”

She sighed and turned her diamond ring. “Nobody in Ridgetown ever did such a thing. It is horrendous.”

“But,” and now her voice softened, “since you seem to understand. What do you think got into her head?”

Nadine saw a group of women her age enter the room. She murmured, “Excuse me,” and walked toward them.

“Hi,” she said.

The women hardly seemed to notice her. “You have no idea what it took for me to be here,” one of them said to no one in particular. “Really, Natasha was so clingy. She wouldn’t let go. She spilled her tomato sauce all over her new white dress.”

“Well, I know the feeling,” the woman next to her said. She was

beautiful, blond, with pale teeth. She looked so much like a movie star with her perfect body that Nadine thought she must be one. “Eliza needed her medication for her asthma, but refused to take it. It took forever. I feel like I ran a marathon to get here.” She took a glass of white wine from the tray held by a waiter with no expression. “To us,” she said. “To the accomplished women we are!”

“I have told her, too, about Nicole,” she said, suddenly in a softer voice. Just before we left. I told her what happened. Well, of course we don’t know what happened, but I told her what she did. What we all think she did.”

“Really?” the other one asked.

“What else could I do? I had to, there is no way to avoid it.” She paused, to sip her wine, and left a half-circle of pink lipstick on the crystal.

“I had a hard time with that, but I figured, better she hears it from me than from someone else. Besides, I got an email from her school, they will be sending in some counselors.”

“I got that email, too,” the other woman said. “Yes, they are sending in the grief counselors. They will be bringing their handkerchiefs, the tissues, the binders with follow-up information, hotlines to call.”

“I know,” the other woman said, brushing aside a stray blond hair.

“It helps,” she said. “You know, there are three necessary stages of grief—anger, denial, and acceptance—and if you follow them meticulously, it saves a lot of time. Especially, because there is still so much to do before the end of the school year. We already missed too many days because of the snow.”

Nadine took her purse, slipped it open and found a crumble of a pill that was in it. According to the doctor whom she visited every Thursday afternoon, she needed to take it. He never looked at her, instead looked at a piece of paper on which he jotted things down. She never knew *what* he wrote. Was it about her?

She had discovered if she divided the pill over the day, she did not have to deal with the nausea that much. And it worked: it numbed the loudness of voices, of colors. She took it in her office, her kitchen, in her bedroom on sleepless nights. Even outside on a beautiful day like this when you could wear a sleeveless dress. *You don’t have to worry about your arms yet. Leave that for when you are my age.*

She felt the pill starting to go into effect, but it was not enough. Not enough to bring her back to the reception for a new modernist

exhibition at the Community Museum. To Ridgetown where she was a newcomer, still after all those years. A town where everyone was so *comfortable*.

She had grown to love the edges of Ridgetown, where the endless woods began. The trees with their strange complacency, and, something she had discovered recently, the mysterious paleness of the pond that was hidden in the heart of it.

Some days, when walking there, she became a sycamore, some other times an oak that looked at its reflection in the water. She wanted to be in that quiet realm.

On some days, when the children were at school, when nobody would wonder where she was, she drove her car over to the park. The expensive car, safer than safe, her husband, Oliver III, had bought her as a birthday present. He had shown her a sales video about a crash, where the car came out undamaged.

She had walked barefoot on the wet grass, and when she was warm, had put her hand in the lake. The place was warm, enticing, most of all, calming. It had her own rhythm, a flow she had longed for.

"Nadine?" she heard a voice say. Suddenly her name felt right. This must be Irene, her best friend from middle school. "Irene," she almost screamed and ran toward the lady.

"Hi," she answered, looking away from her.

"Sorry," she said, "but I think you mistake me for someone else."

"Oh no," Nadine answered, "you just have forgotten who you are. Remember how we walked home in the rain? Wet up to our undies, the white undies our moms bought at Woolworth's." *Three for the price of two.*

"Have you forgotten how we hid in the garage when we were afraid to go home? After we kissed for the first time and we covered up for one another. Remember how all we wanted to do was grow up, and then, we did not want to grow up anymore."

"Excuse me," the woman said, "but I have to go."

"Don't leave me," Nadine said, "please, stay with me."

But the lady pushed herself into another group of ladies, and Nadine heard her ask, oh so quietly, "Have you heard about Lucinda's daughter?"

"Good evening, ladies and gents" someone with a loud voice was saying. "The director will now open the exhibition." All the good-looking people quieted themselves, and looked expectantly at the lecturer. A distinctive-looking man in a dark gray suit stepped forward.

His hair gleamed. He looked magnificent, marvelous, stunning; he looked like her father when she was eight. Her father, who carried her on his shoulders and walked away toward the pond to feed the ducklings, humming: *beautiful lady*.

But, now she looked closer, he did not look like her father at all. He looked like her once lover. The man with the tattoo on his forearm, who listened to her until she was done talking. Who never got tired of stroking her skin until all her fears had quieted.

“You stopped my life,” he had told her. “I love you like I never loved anyone in my life before. You are special.” He was not her husband, it was wrong to be with him, but still, she could not escape from him. She kept seeing him, he kept asking for her.

The man in the gray suit stepped in front of the crowd and started to speak. His voice rumbled low, like she liked men’s voices. It went like a wave through her body. Like a wave that moved everything, that built up until every muscle was tense and ready for a powerful release. An exhale that made her cry and wanted her to jump up. *Beautiful lady*.

“I am so happy to welcome you today to the opening of this spectacular exhibition,” he said. “I am so thrilled, as I know you will be. This exhibition is absolutely unique. I hope it will turn out to be the highlight of my tenure here at the Ridgetown Museum. No, even better, the highlight of my life.” The women all laughed. The men applauded.

And then, she could not believe her eyes, the man from the *Vanity Fair* article stepped out of the crowd. He did not wear the white linen suit, he wore a black turtleneck sweater. He looked thinner, gaunt. She stretched out her hands, to touch him, but he did not step to the center. He just crossed the circle and disappeared on the other side. Nadine cut herself loose from the crowd, and followed him. “Wait,” she said, “wait for me. I have to ask you about the colors. The screaming, bright colors.” But where did he go? He went so fast.

The man with the tattoo on his forearm broke up with her on a Sunday afternoon. “You will get over me,” he said. “The beginning is the hardest. You will be thinking of me every minute. Then, sooner than you can imagine, hours will go by without me on your mind. And then, to your surprise, after a while, you will realize you will have forgotten me. You will hear my name and wonder what about me had moved you so much.”

And he was right. She forgot. She woke up one day, and he had

stepped out of her mind. He left a numbness that made her feel intensely sad. Like a streetlight that went out, so you could not see the trees anymore. A strange nothingness. She could not recall the feeling of his hands on her body. The thrill when he called her name after he had made love to her, lying on his back in the grass, next to the pond. Nadine, Nadine. Her name lost its echo on summer evenings and winter afternoons. Her name lost its luster, like a dying plant.

Her mother had chosen her name, loving the French twist. She said the name reminded her of France, of Paris. Most of all of the Seine. Kids playing in the distance, music, romance. *You are everything I live for, Nadine*. Her mother had softened the loudness, dimmed the insistent colors. Nadine built a safe nest in her mother's hair, where she liked to hide.

"I am sorry," she said to no one in particular, or maybe to all of them, and stepped out. "So rude!" she heard someone say, "just now when the director speaks. She could at least have had the decency to wait." *Never draw attention to yourself*.

She stepped outside, breathing in the fresh air. But even there, Nadine heard the ladies in the hallway whispering, "Have you heard about Lucinda's daughter?"

She covered her ears with her hands, followed the painter in his black turtleneck, of whom she saw a glimpse in the distance. Now, the sun was down, finally, on this day that started with temperatures in the eighties at five o'clock. A hot day, as the Latino workers already could tell at five in the morning, when they were waiting for their bus.

The painter, who wore soft-soled shoes that left no prints on the pavement, went slower now, so she could easily follow him. She and he walked for a while. Nadine was neither cold nor warm. It was all so *serene*.

It must be like watching puppies, cuddled on a couch, endless cute puppies, that make you laugh and cry, or, when putting on your pajamas, while singing along with songs you have known forever. Or maybe letting your mind slip into unconsciousness, like her mother had done.

The woods, she arrived after a while, were a light golden-green, soft and calming. *Nature's first green is gold, her hardest hue to hold*. The sycamores, the oaks, the aspens, they smelled like the earth. But the painter on his soft shoes took her further, to the center, where the

lake was. There he paused, for the first time, finally, and waited for her. Together they watched the filmy surface. It contained an echo of days long gone. *Daddy, look, the ducklings are there. Nadine, you know why? They knew you were coming.*

That afternoon, when she had first met her lover, he held her in her arms, smelling like wood and thunder. She had put her fingers over the tattoo. "I will never forget you," he said. Then he kissed, and slowly undressed her, putting her naked body on a bed of leaves. "You are the best that ever happened to me."

After he spilled his love all over her body, he washed her with clear water. His love had not vanished, it was still there, hidden deep inside the lake, where it held all its secrets.

She put her hand in the water, and let her fingers play with it. The lukewarm water turned into the Seine, and she heard laughter in the distance. She now took off her shoes and stepped in with her bare feet. The painter watched her. There were stains on his hands of dark paint.

The hem of her chiffon dress got wet, and became heavy.

"You look like a fairy princess, Mommy, please stay with us."

She stepped deeper into the water, let herself dissolve, disappear, slowly but certainly. There was music and laughter and bright colors and strange beauty. More music, cute puppies and a tinge of tenderness, even love, and also a familiar but ever so appealing nothingness.

She floated until the water could not hold her any longer, and she started to become the water. She became the whole, glistening lake, the quiet lake that was hidden in the woods in the outskirts of Ridgetown, where everyone was so comfortable.

"Have you heard about Lucinda's daughter?"