

ON
VALENTINE'S
DAY

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ON VALENTINE'S DAY

Nancy and Stan spent every Valentine's Day at the bar where they met on Valentine's Day, a place called Paddy-O's on Clayton Avenue.

Whenever Valentine's Day fell on a weekday, they would leave their respective offices at quitting time and go straight to the happy hour, just as they had on that fateful day, now 37 years ago.

They often marveled at how little had changed in all that time – through their courtship and marriage, their two children, and the first few years of their empty nest.

The downtown area in which they worked had, of course, been torn down and rebuilt, their respective firms moving to new quarters. And their jobs had added both responsibility and compensation.

But they still worked the same hours for the same firms, still drove in and home together, still lived in the house they had bought the year before Nancy was pregnant with their first child.

And they still met each Valentine's Day at Paddy-O's, which hadn't changed at all.

The crowd around the same bar could, in fact, have been them, albeit in slightly different clothing listening to radically different music. The young office workers still flooded in for happy hour, looking for some connection, unwilling yet to go home to their

lonely rooms, milling like pigeons around some scattered seed.

As they got older, being there did seem a little strange. The crowd got younger and younger, now their children's age, and they felt more and more out of place. But meeting at Paddy-O's on Valentine's Day was such a treasured tradition they were loath to give it up.

And so on this Valentine's Day Nancy found herself being eyed uncomfortably by twenty-somethings as she sat on a stool in front of a small, high table, nursing a tequila as she waited for Stan.

This was already strange, almost alarming, since Stan's office was closer to Paddy-O's and he invariably was the first to arrive. Nancy couldn't imagine that on Valentine's Day there would be anything important enough to keep him late at the office.

But there it was – he was late, then later, then much later. Finally, as she was pulling out her cell phone to call his, he arrived with a pasted-on smile.

"Hello, darling!" he said rapidly. "Sorry I'm late. Something came up."

"Happy Valentine's Day!" she said. They kissed and he went off to get his drink and free munchies.

When he got back, he took a few silent sips and then stared at her, speechless.

"What's the matter?" she said, feeling like someone on the slow beginning of a downward slide, not yet certain of the dizzying drop below.

"Nancy, I have something to tell you," he began, sounding like a stranger, like a fool, like someone she wouldn't have given a second glance in this bar 37 years earlier.

"What is it?" she asked, already knowing as the gondola began to pick up speed.

"I've been having an affair – a long affair," he began.

The gondola went into free fall.

"How long?" she stammered, not yet believing this was happening.

"Years," he said. "I know this is unfair of me – "

"Say what you want to say!" she cut him off.

"I'm leaving," he said, looking down at the table. "I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry."

There was a long silence amid the frenetic noise around them.

"You had to tell me now? Here? Today?" she finally said. She was surprised she wasn't crying, but she knew it was because it wasn't yet real. It was still like a play, and they were reading lines.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, as though there were nothing left to say. "I took the day off work. My things are out of the house."

How long had he been planning this? she wondered. The calculation of it ripped the cover off its ugliness, and she became suffused with anger.

But then she realized why he had done it now, here. He knew she couldn't scream at him as she wanted to. Not in this crowd.

"Goodbye, Nancy," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Please don't say that again!" she said harshly.

He nodded and left, his unfinished drink and munchies remaining in his place.

Nancy sat on the stool at the little high table for a long time, so numb she could hardly think. Thirty-seven years kept repeating in her head. Thirty-seven years. Thirty-seven years.

She wanted to burst into tears but couldn't let herself. There was no way she could comprehend what had just happened. So she held it off for a while, off to the side, and sat there like a wounded animal waiting for the initial trauma to wear away.

She sensed someone watching her and looked up to see a tall, elderly man with a bush of white hair and rimless glasses standing by the stool her husband had vacated.

"Excuse me," he said. "You look very unhappy. Perhaps I can help."

"I doubt it," she said.

"May I sit down?"

She nodded, not quite aware of what she was doing. This seemed like just another unreal happening.

"My name is Gabriel," he said, shifting Stan's drink and munchies to the table behind. "Gabriel Gunter. I couldn't help hearing the conversation between you and your husband."

"And you want to pick up the pieces," she said in an ugly voice. "Please. I don't think I can talk right now."

"On the contrary," Gabriel said. "I think it

would do you good to talk right now. And I have no designs on you, if that's what you think."

"People don't come here unless they have designs."

"My only design is to be of some help," he said. "If I may."

And he sat down opposite her.

Neither said anything for a long time. Nancy stared at her drink until she realized that it was of some help to have him there, distracting her from what could only be agony.

"Sorry," she said. "I don't mean to be rude."

"Be as you like," he said. "It must seem to you as though the world has disintegrated. Nothing you thought was true is true; nothing you counted on is left."

"I don't care what's true," she said, amazed that she was talking to someone about this only moments after it happened. "I just want my life back."

"Shall I give it back to you? I can do that, you know," he said.

"You can?"

"Yes. I can have your husband back here in two seconds. Would you like that?"

She thought about it. Aside from whether she believed it could happen (she didn't), she realized that she didn't want it to happen. Not right away. If Stan had come back into Paddy-O's that very moment and said he had changed his mind, she knew she wouldn't say yes. Too much, in just a few moments, with just a few words, had irrevocably changed.

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

"Then what do you want?" he asked. He seemed earnest in his desire to help.

"I want this not to have happened."

"What's 'this'?"

"I want . . ."

She realized that she didn't really want Stan not to have told her he was having an affair. What she wanted was for Stan not to have had the affair. She wanted things to be as she had thought they were.

"You want the world to be as you thought it was," Gabriel said, as if reading her thoughts.

"Yes!" she said. "Can you do that?"

He shook his head. "There's too much reality there."

She began to cry, for the first time. In front of him, in front of everyone. A few young people nearby turned to look.

"You married the man you married," Gabriel said. "And you were who you were. There's nothing to be done about that."

She nodded through her tears.

"So what do you want?" he asked again, kindly, gently, not as though offering anything but his ear.

She thought for a long, long time about that. Even in the commotion around her, it was as though Gabriel were able to clear a large space in which she could actually think.

She realized with utter clarity that she didn't want her life back. That had been a lie. All those Valentine's Days talking about their love! How long

had Stan been having that affair? And with whom? And had there been others?

Then she realized that it didn't matter. What mattered was that Stan didn't want to be married to her any longer and hadn't wanted to for some time. That was all that mattered.

And if that were so, then she really didn't want to be married to him.

Perhaps she wanted not to have met him 37 years ago. All those years wasted! If she had only chosen differently, perhaps she wouldn't be facing a lonely life, cut off from her past, with no long-loved and trusted partner to sustain her.

But then she thought of her children and realized she was wishing them away. Of course she could have had other children, but she didn't love other children, she loved hers, and wouldn't wish them away for anything.

So what did she want?

She couldn't believe that she wanted what had just happened. That her very much beloved husband had told her on Valentine's Day that he was having an affair and was leaving her. That, certainly, she didn't want.

But that was what she had. And, given that, she really couldn't think of anything she wanted more.

Ah! She knew! She wanted Stan to realize what he was giving up. She wanted him to come back to her on his knees begging! That was what she wanted!

Then she could turn him down, let him squirm a little, let him suffer! Maybe in the end she'd

take him back, maybe she wouldn't, but at least she'd have the satisfaction of knowing that he was in agony and she was in control, rather than as it was now, the other way around.

But when she thought more about it, she didn't want that, either. In seconds Stan was gone, gone, gone. Someone who could do this to her, plan it out so cleverly, think about it so coldly, she didn't want. Not under any circumstances. She didn't even want him to want her. She just wanted him out of her life completely. Gone. Kaput.

But that was precisely what had just happened.

That wasn't what she wanted! How could she think that was what she wanted?

She looked up at Gabriel, who was looking at her and smiling, as if reading her thoughts. She saw herself in the lenses of his glasses. She looked red-eyed and distraught.

"What do I want?" she asked him.

"Like most people to whom something terrible has happened," he said, "you want it not to have happened. But given what has happened, you have come to realize there is no choice but what is. So the only way forward is to choose it."

Well, of course, she thought. That wasn't saying anything.

But then she realized it was precisely what she had just done.

"Thank you," she said to Gabriel, looking back up at him.

But he, of course, was gone.