Love is stronger than death

SONGS FOR GHOSTS

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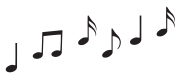

Somewhere in the distance, a bell tolled. A wedding – no, a funeral. A dramatic ceremonial sound announcing the death of my relationship. Despite getting dumped on a street corner, my basic sense of dignity still hadn't kicked in; I couldn't help but watch him walk away. He didn't look back.

The pavement at my feet was littered with white flowers and, as a breeze shoved along, more floated to the ground. I caught a single bloom in my hand and stared at its delicate snowy petals and golden centre.

An old woman passed me, her walking stick tapping a rhythm. Her face was turned upwards and a flower landed on the lens of her sunglasses. She plucked it off.

'They only bloom for one day,' she said. 'But they'll be back next year.'

I didn't know if she was talking to me or to herself. I answered anyway. 'Not the same ones.'

She smiled in my direction and strolled on.

I turned towards home and my heart felt like it had been left behind, lingering on the pavement where two unremarkable paths met. Maybe someone would walk through that spot and

feel a big waft of heartbreak; or they would see the flowers wilting, turning to dust in the wind.

'Everything okay, Adam?' Kate asked.

The kitchen was steamy and warm from the pot of potatoes on the stove. It curled around me thickly. Benny burbled in his playpen. I patted his soft blond hair.

'Yeah,' I said.

Kate was studying me.

'Everything okay with *you*?' I shot back.

She raised an eyebrow. 'Did something happen?'

I shook my head, trying to blur my features with movement. My face was always wide open, easy to read, useless for lying.

Kate hmmmed and said, 'Dinner's ready.'

I slumped at the table. She put a plate in front of me and sat opposite. Just me and her, again. And Benny.

'Where's Dad?' I asked.

'He has to stay on the base overnight.' Kate cut up her chicken in a disturbingly violent way.

'I see.'

We ate, thinking about men.

'I have to do some shopping later. Do you mind watching your brother? You can go out when I'm back,' Kate said.

I resisted the urge to correct her. *Half*-brother. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

'It's Friday. Don't you usually—'

'Not tonight.' Possibly not ever.

I could see Kate gearing herself up.

'Did you and Evan have an argument or...?' she asked.

Had we? Not over a specific *thing,* not about something one of us had done or not done.

I like you but I feel like you want something totally committed and I'm not in the same place. This is for the best, right?

It's just that I hadn't agreed with any of that.

'Not really. But. It's over.' My voice, appallingly, cracked.

'I'm sorry.' Kate reached across and touched my hand. I didn't move away, but I didn't hold her hand, either.

'I'm fine. Not fine. I dunno.'

Kate sighed. 'That's normal. You can wallow and eat ice cream and listen to sad songs. It was your first relationship so I can eat a lot of ice cream with you in case you don't know how to do that yet.'

I laughed a bit. 'Teach me your ways, mistress.'

A funny look flitted across her face. 'Don't call me that.'

'Master, then.'

She cleared her throat and smiled. 'You will be a worthy pupil. What flavours do you desire?'

'Chocolate, strawberry cheesecake, mint chocolate chip.'

'No green tea?'

'Don't like it anymore.'

'I thought it was your favourite?'

I shrugged.

Our third date had been getting ice cream and sitting in a park. *You Asians love green tea,* he'd said. I'd laughed awkwardly but then he'd kissed me and I forgot about it, just a small and normal joke.

Kate filled the sudden silence. ‘I shall let the student guide the master.’

I pulled my mouth upwards. ‘Thanks, Kate.’

Her eyes flickered the tiniest bit when I said her name. She still wasn’t used to it after all these months. *Stepmother* obviously sounded too evil, so first name it was. But every time I said it I could feel the distance growing between us. It was strange – when Benny came, Kate and I had become closer in some ways, united in love of him. She hadn’t changed towards me, but she was tired and her complete attention went to him; which was natural, he was a baby. *Her* baby.

I focused on my food, which tasted of nothing.

When we finished, I took the plates to the sink and did the washing up while Kate fed Benny.

‘Could you do me a favour?’ Kate asked. ‘I was planning to ask your dad but seeing as he *won’t* be back tonight…’

‘Does it involve repairing something?’

‘No.’ Kate made an apologetic face. ‘It does involve the attic, which I know you’re scared of—’

‘I am not!’

‘The last time you went up there you wouldn’t stop screaming.’

‘A spider *went down my back,*’ I said, reasonably. ‘And that was years and years ago.’

Kate corrected me. ‘It was two years ago.’

‘I’m not afraid of the attic. I’ll go right now.’

Kate reached into a cupboard and handed me a torch. ‘Such courage, thank you.’

That was when it registered that I'd been manipulated. I sighed and put a hoodie on so nothing would skitter down the back of my neck.

The attic was dusty and cluttered – probably too stereotypical to be the start of a horror movie. After a few hundred sneezes, I figured I'd scared any poltergeists or monsters away.

I peered at each box, wiping away dust to read their labels in the dim torchlight. SKI WEAR. Since when did we ski? FISH TANK. I remembered that fish: a traumatic loss. Finally, KID STUFF. Kate didn't believe in specificity. I hauled it out. Behind it was a much smaller box, not cardboard but wooden. Despite the layer of dust, I could see the writing carved on the lid was Japanese. I squinted, trying to work out the characters. Tea, maybe? I opened it.

There was a particular smell of wood and something else herby, plant-like. Inside was a bundle wrapped in navy cloth. I unfolded it to find a slim book, no title on its worn grey cover. It was filled with handwriting. I held the torch close to the first page.

March 25th

So, Obaasama, you have died and left me. I am sorry to begin a letter in this way. However, these are my feelings and I have resolved to write the truth – as best I know it – here, to you. You always valued honesty and why should I lie to you? I would prefer to be direct than untruthful. Besides, I imagine the dead can see through the lies of the living.

For a second, I thought a bug was running over my arms but, when I checked frantically, I realised that it was goosebumps rising on my skin. I swallowed and turned back to the book.

It is unkind of me, and disrespectful too, to be angry that you have died, though months have passed. But I am here in this house on the hill, almost alone. Something has changed. I see strange things, Obaasama. There are whispers in the garden. I dream of music. Perhaps this is simply me wishing for you and the music you played. Your biwa is lonely without you, as am I.

They were letters, or a diary written like letters. Or a *novel* in the form of a diary – that made more sense. The writer sure knew how to start with a bang. The book looked ancient. How did it get up here? It didn't seem like something Dad or Kate would read. Dad didn't pick up a book unless it was about a war, and Kate adored, bafflingly, both true crime and Jane Austen.

The writing on the box was Japanese; the letter in the book was respectfully addressing a Japanese grandmother. Maybe it had belonged to my mother.

'Adam, you alive up there?' Kate called.

'Yeah – found it!' I said.

My heart thumped. I untidily rewrapped the book in its cloth, and closed the lid. I scrambled down with everything, pausing in my room to shove the mystery box under my bed.

I brought the KID STUFF down to Kate.

'You're a brave boy.' She began rummaging around in it.

'What do you need it for?' I asked.

'Some of your old clothes might fit Benny soon – you had some adorable stuff.'

'That's – sustainable.' I inched towards the door. 'I have to do some homework, I just remembered—'

'Very studious of you for a Friday night,' Kate said absently, unfolding a tiny T-shirt.

I agreed and hurried to my room. I pulled out the wooden box but faltered after I opened the diary – what *was* a biwa?

I fumbled for my phone and read the first definition that appeared.

A biwa is a type of Japanese lute.

A musical instrument. How could that be lonely?

I began to read.

March 25th

... Your biwa is lonely without you, as am I.

Of course, I talk to O-Suzu and I am very fond of her. It is not the same, though. Not because she is a maid, but because I do not know if she has noticed any of the strange things. I have not spoken of them to her. O-Suzu is only five years older than me but she is so practical and clever. I am worried of what she might think and could not bear it if she resigned and left me. Mother is in Saga, taking care of her father. If I told her about these odd ideas she would be frightened. Uncle is not so far away but I do not think he will help me. Or rather he will assist me in the way *he* thinks best. For a priest he appears more occupied with this world than any others.

Obaasama, please help me. Is it you, causing these strangenesses I have sensed? Are other spirits or ghosts here? Can you ask if they are calling me, and why? I feel healthy and at only eighteen years of age I do not think I am in danger of becoming a ghost myself. But I cannot see the future.

I have been praying and burning incense and putting out salt but nothing seems to have any effect. Maybe this letter will. I cannot think of anything else. I am finding it laborious to think at all. I know you enjoyed letters, however, and perhaps you still do.

In any case, this has been some comfort to me. Perhaps tonight I will sleep.

March 29th

Obaasama, I must apologise for the letter I wrote to you. I was full of emotion. I am somewhat calmer today, or more tired. I did not sleep as I had hoped. My body hurt and my mind was flapping like a bird trapped or a butterfly caught between hands.

So I got up quietly and opened the outer door to the garden. I sat in the engawa and gazed at the shapes of trees and the glassy surface of the pond. The moon was thin as a fishbone.

I thought of you, Obaasama. What you would have said to calm me. And then, because I was dazed without sleep – or perhaps I *was* asleep, and only dreaming of wakefulness – I thought I saw your figure. An old woman wearing a grey handspun silk kimono, or perhaps it was not grey but grey in moonlight.

I called your name and you approached. I could not see your feet beneath the hem of your kimono. In your hand you held something. You were almost at the large flat stone set outside the door but your face was in shadow and your face used always to be filled with light. My fear became too strong and I fell back and shut the door fast and with force.

In the next room, O-Suzu called my name. I said I had wanted some air. Now I would return to bed. Good, she said. Yet I did not sleep.

When the sun was bright and there was no greyness left, I opened the door to the garden. On the large stone was an object, some kind of odd stiff leaf. Then I saw it was the plectrum used to play the biwa – a bachi. I looked at it for a long time before I picked it up. I knew it. It was yours, Obaasama. I had seen it in your hand many times, held firm to strike and strum.

I went to find your biwa, which I had not seen in some time. Before the end, you were too tired to hold it. You wanted to listen to me play, though I am not close to you in skill. The biwa case was closed tight. There was no bachi inside.

I called O-Suzu and asked if she had touched the biwa recently. She said, no. Not to clean it or check it or play it? I persisted. She repeated confusedly, no.

When O-Suzu had gone I picked up the biwa. There were no fingerprints on the lacquered wood, no marks on the slender half-moon openings. The four silk strings were strong and taut, the ivory frets firm in their places. I held it like a child. I saw in the case a piece of paper. *For you, Granddaughter*, it said. Your writing, Obaasama. So the biwa is mine. I held the bachi in one hand and the biwa in the other and I struck the strings just once. The sound echoed and I hoped you could hear it.