

Constant Love

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Mrs. Whitaker

Mrs. Whitaker walks around her block several times each day at noon. Sometimes when she's feeling well enough, she walks around both her block and the one adjacent to it, directly to the south. Sometimes, when she's feeling especially well, as she was that spring, she'll head west toward Alta Plaza Park. On all her walks she's always careful to keep to the paths. This is especially important in the park, in order not get her feet wet. She's always careful there to keep to the outer edges, the peripheral paths that afford her the most spectacular views. For the park occupies the heights of her neighborhood and from it one can see in every direction a view that encompasses at least a third of the very lovely city in which she lives.

Mrs. Whitaker walks with a cane in her right hand and a long silver cigarette holder in her left. The cigarette is usually lit, seldom smoked. She walks tremulously, her cane and holder weaving before her as though

Mrs. Whitaker

warding off the landing that might be forced upon her at any moment by some unexpected obstacle. Her hair, once long and red, is now long and graying. She wraps it around her crown whenever she goes out. Her clothing is never wrapped. Her skirts flare at mid-calf; her coats, colorful and somewhat bohemian, blaze at elbows, buttocks and wrists. Thus arrayed, Mrs. Whitaker resembles a sparrow in flight, her progress the very image of pure impulse, her twittering imbalances, dips and swoops rendered poignant by the fact that she is someone you fear will never land at all.

That spring Tate watched her from his bench at the crest of the park and planned how he would snare her. One day he flicked out his cane to bar her way and just as rapidly raised it so she could pass. She seemed not to notice his antics, which worried him, not only on his own account but on account of what it suggested about her state of mind.

Controlling a childish impulse to stick out both feet, he said "nice day" the next time she came 'round. Nodding— or was it simply a Parkinsonian tremor? — she swept by him once again. As he watched her tilt away he

Mrs. Whitaker

realized that if he were to get anywhere with this woman he would have to get up and move.

So move he did. By the time she approached again, her third circumambulation that afternoon, he had launched himself onto his feet and into her path. His timing was perfect. Her weaving gait prevented her from sidling past him and so they wove together down the track, tacking into the breeze that was sweeping up the hill until finally he was able to introduce himself and persuade her to sit down beside him on a bench in the lee of the hill, opposite the children's playground.

I can't abide children, she remarked, surveying the scene.

Would you prefer to sit over there by the tennis courts?

Oh, that would be worse, she replied.

I have no children.

Ah, she exclaimed, looking at him for the first time with some real interest. How did you avoid it?

Oh, I didn't avoid it, it simply wasn't in the cards.

And do you regret it? she asked.

Sometimes. But I don't think I would

Mrs. Whitaker

have enjoyed it very much. Too much work.

Especially nowadays, she said.

Parents give a great deal of themselves nowadays. In our day one expected the children to do at least half the work.

You must have some.

A son and two grandchildren, she replied, smiling.

Mrs. Whitaker also had a husband at home. It didn't take long for Tate to learn that he'd been ill for quite some time and that Mrs. Whitaker was a devoted, though by now quite exhausted, wife. Over the next few months Tate never tired of telling her he thought she was quite a trooper.

Quite, meaning *really, actually*, taken from the Latin, meaning *to be freed of*.

Oh, come on Tate, put that book down and let's go for a walk, said Mrs. Whitaker one afternoon.

Let's go to my place, he replied.

Walk, she insisted.

My place.

Mrs. Whitaker

Never.

Monopoly?

Oh, no, not that, she exclaimed.

Mrs. Whitaker hated Monopoly. Tate enjoyed it immensely.

Let me read to you then, he offered.

Tate, you're a goddamned lazy bastard.

How much time have we got? he asked.

Perhaps an hour, she replied.

It's not that Mrs. Whitaker did much of the actual nursing herself. For the last several months real nurses had attended Norman around the clock. In the beginning she couldn't bear being out of the house when he was awake, and he awakened at the oddest hours, on the schedule that drifted like a specter through each day and night. But it was clear now that even that specter was losing its shape, the pattern of his sleeping and waking disintegrating until Mrs. Whitaker finally gave up trying to make sure she would be with him at whatever moment he might need her and instead allowed herself to drift

Mrs. Whitaker

well beyond the currents of his needs or being. *What needs? What being? Indeed, what Norman?*

So these days Mrs. Whitaker cut bait. She slept, actually slept, at night with orders to the nurses that she not be disturbed. During the day she permitted herself to leave the house while he slept, which she did for increasingly longer periods of time. By now she no longer cared if she was out between shifts. In fact, she found the thought of him alone in an empty house rather titillating. She even allowed herself to imagine returning to a corpse, sitting down beside it and enjoying the luxury of absorbing Norman's final absence in utter solitude.

Mrs. Whitaker had a husband at home who was quite ill. He had been ill for quite some time and Mrs. Whitaker was a devoted, though by now quite exhausted, wife. Tate told her he thought she was quite a trooper.

Quite, meaning really, actually, taken from the Latin, meaning *to be freed of*.

Mrs. Whitaker

But release did not come, the trap remained cocked. Norman lingered on for quite some time.

I really don't know how this could have happened, Mrs. Whitaker mumbled into Tate's shoulder on the Christmas Eve that followed the springtime and Indian summer of the year they met, *how could it have happened?*

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and they were sitting in the living room before the great tree that was a Whitaker tradition. A mature spruce, twelve feet tall, lit up and loaded with ornaments, it stood over them like a giant totem, emblem of the season that anchored the entire year in place. Mrs. Whitaker straightened up and reached for a cigarette.

The children will be here soon, said Tate. They'll give you hell.

To hell with *them*, replied Mrs. Whitaker, lighting up.

You're lucky to have them.

I don't *have* anybody. You make me

Mrs. Whitaker

furious, Tate.

That's why we're such good friends.
Of course it is.

She reached over and placed her holder on the edge of the pewter ashtray in the center of a small mahogany side table.

You just like to look at it, don't you.
Yes, I do. Reminiscent of a bygone era.

Let's ask Celia to bring in tea and cookies.

Sit still, dear, I'll get them, Celia's upstairs with Norman, I think...

But Tate pressed her hand and went off to the kitchen himself. He came back a few minutes later with teatime laid out on antique Japanese porcelain plates whose warriors, swathed in maroon kimonos, twirled about each other in the white light of battle. Six chocolate mint cookies were ranked among the samurai's swords. The tea set itself was a few sprays of pink chrysanthemums painted on black, its various receptacles holding hot water, sugar cubes and whole cream.

Mrs. Whitaker sighed. You're right, Tate. I like to be taken care of.

Mrs. Whitaker

Tate smiled and poured.

The kids will be here soon, he said, should I leave?

Oh, dear, if you're not here they'll wonder.

Wonder what?

Oh, if you're hiding out in one of the upstairs closets. Besides, I don't think they mind I have a friend. I think they're relieved.

Well, I feel awkward.

Maybe it's the holidays.

Maybe.

Because nothing, nothing ever seems to embarrass you, Tate. You always seem so sure of yourself.

The doorbell rang a few minutes later and John Whitaker entered with Mrs.

Whitaker's two grandchildren, Tim, aged seven, and Elizabeth, who was nine.

Caroline, John's wife, was at home with the flu. Mrs. Whitaker was frankly grateful for her daughter-in-law's absence. She craved solitude.

The children scurried about for a few moments under the tree. There were always various treats hidden there, wrapped in brightly colored foil and tucked carefully in

Mrs. Whitaker

tiny rents torn in the cotton snow wrapped around the trunk. That was Norman's tradition, handed down in his family for who knows how many generations until Mrs. Whitaker, then Norman's fiancée, had almost ended it, her engagement to Norman that is, when at her first Christmas Eve party she'd asked her prospective mother-in-law if perhaps the Easter Bunny wintered under the Whitaker's tree. Mrs. Whitaker, Sr., unused to responding to displays of humor, particularly when she was entertaining, registered a small shiver of contempt. It was to be the only emotion her mother-in-law would ever cast her way.

Tim's mouth emerged from under the Christmas tree smeared with chocolate.

You look like the proverbial Cheshire cat, remarked Mrs. Whitaker coolly.

Tim looked through her shyly, then swung his gaze over to Tate, whom he was truly glad to see because Tate shared his enthusiasm for Monopoly. Not many adults in his circle did.

O.K., responded Tate, set it up and I'll be over in a minute.

Oh, dear, how could you, Mrs.

Mrs. Whitaker

Whitaker signaled by lowering her eyes. She didn't want to sit alone with her son for the very long time it would take Tate and the boy to get through building up the Boardwalk. Tate shrugged his shoulders as if to say he was entirely helpless.

Junior Monopoly? suggested Mrs. Whitaker. It's there unopened on the lower shelf.

Tate and the boy pursed their lips and shook their heads.

How about San Francisco Monopoly? It's just as arduous as the original you're both so crazy about, but you get to see your hometown in print.

They showed more enthusiasm for that idea. Tate pulled the other unopened package out from under Junior Monopoly and Tim delightedly set about ripping open the plastic wrapping with his fingernails.

Merry Christmas, said Mrs. Whitaker.

Celia came downstairs just then and stopped beside the old Hickory baby grand that stood at one end of the entrance hall just outside the living room. She raised her thin face to the group gathered in the other room. She was Irish, newly arrived in America. She

Mrs. Whitaker

stood beside the piano waiting for Mrs. Whitaker to notice her.

When she did finally notice her, Mrs. Whitaker thought, *this is an old fashioned girl in an old fashioned house. I am old fashioned. Death is monstrously old fashioned.*

What is it, Celia?

Mr. Whitaker is asking for you, Ma'am.

Thank you, Celia.

That was all. The girl turned on her heel, like a soldier released from attention, and returned to her post.

Old fashioned, thought Mrs. Whitaker. The kind of good old-fashioned servant one seldom has to act for, the kind one can be completely oneself in the presence of. It's a matter of power, of course. I wield it, she gracefully yields. It's the most natural thing in the world, a good servant pretends it's the most natural thing in the world. She pretends and she hides, sparing us both the embarrassment. Is that why good servants are so often taken to bed? Mrs. Whitaker wondered if Norman had ever taken any one of theirs to bed. Would he now, if he were

Mrs. Whitaker

able to want anything, want Celia?

Mother, said John

Mrs. Whitaker felt reproach in his soft voice. What Celia accepted, her son would not.

John, would you go to the kitchen please and get more tea and cookies?

As she said this, Mr. Whitaker stood up, lifted the tea platter off the low marble table in front of her, and held it out to him. Would she have dropped it if he hadn't immediately taken it from her hands?

Before his retirement at the age of seventy, Tate had spent fourteen years as city editor of San Francisco's only evening newspaper. He was so gentlemanly and agreeable as an old man that few who met him then for the first time could imagine him as he must once have been, that is to say, tough. Oh, it doesn't take much to be a newspaperman, he'd demur, when challenged to show his stuff. His job, he said was to find poetry in the streets and rush it into print.

Mrs. Whitaker

Well, if you think what goes on the front pages of the Examiner is poetry, you're just a nut, exclaimed Mrs. Whitaker when he once tried to explain this to her. I just can't imagine your type in a city room, she added for good measure.

You watch too many movies, dear, he replied.

You're too sweet, she smiled back, much sweeter than Spencer Tracy.

It's a calling, said Tate, ignoring her reference to the one actor in the world he truly detested. He eyed her with a twinkle in his eye. Don't you remember? When we were young everyone was a socialist of some sort, or an artist.

Or in love with one, she twinkled back.

We all thought Art should serve the people, serve life...

Life is Art's fodder! interrupted Mrs. Whitaker.

Take it easy, said Tate.

Well, go on.

You *were* around when we were young, weren't you?

Yes, I was, she replied tartly. In 1936 I

Mrs. Whitaker

drove down to the Ferry Building in my beat-up Cadillac to gawk at Harry Bridges and his General Strike.

Well, I got caught up in all that and became a newspaperman. I thought journalism was the only honest way for a writer to earn a living. It was important to be honest.

What a privilege, said Mrs. Whitaker.

Oh, you bet!

You are also a man.

Yes.

Well, I was a very rich young lady and I spent most of the 30's looking out the window. Was I honest? The question never crossed my mind. I enjoyed my privileges, I can tell you that.

But not the constraints.

Oh, I played at breaking out, but not very hard. The times scared me, Tate. So I found the constraints imposed by my class rather silken.

I wonder.

Wonder what?

How you really were then.

Well, I married Norman then and I've lived with him in this house ever since, for

Mrs. Whitaker

more than fifty years. I suppose everything else must be judged in the light of that enormous fact. Mrs. Whitaker's eyes began to water.

Well, I worked the streets, but I certainly never lived there.

So, tell me what you found there, Tate. And try not to sound ridiculous.

Oh, I found stories, lots of stories. Behind every crime and accident, behind anything that's gone public, there's always the possibility of a good story. By the time a reporter's nosing around, a lot of that possibility is pretty apparent. People may be ducking and hiding, trying to manipulate you, but their pants are down. Your job is to keep them exposed until you've got what you want.

And the poetry? asked Mrs. Whitaker.

You distill what's happened.

Not distort?

You pare the story down, shape it. The important thing is to hold on to the facts and to whatever sense you can squeeze out of them. Usually you had some reason for running after the thing in the first place. If all else fails you hold on to that. Of course, what you write may not look familiar to the people

Mrs. Whitaker

who lived it. They may not even recognize themselves or the company they keep. The point is, once it's in the paper it's not theirs anymore, it's the next day's trash. But for a lot of people that trash is the big picture— they may not know it and if you asked them they wouldn't admit it, but for a lot of people the daily news is the big picture, the only big picture.

That's quite a horrible thought, said Mrs. Whitaker.

I don't think so, said Tate. I'm sorry, my dear. I could understand your reaction if you were talking about the Wall Street Journal or Baron's, or even the New York Times, but not the Examiner, not the National Inquirer.

Oh, Tate, you're teasing me!

I'm quite serious. Some papers are better than others.

I might possibly be persuaded to think of the ones you like as performance pieces.

Performance pieces?

Oh, you know, it's the newest thing in the theater, using everything imaginable to connect with the audience. You know, in most theater the mouth's the primary orifice, but these new works... well, it doesn't matter.

Mrs. Whitaker

Surprising how little it matters, when it's good, that is.

Pure excitement, said Tate.

That's it, said Mrs. Whitaker.

And totally unpredictable.

That's it exactly!

But holding nonetheless.

Oh, yes!

Well, said Tate, call it what you want, that's what I was after.

Tate... Come to the window, would you?

They were sitting on the couch in Norman's bedroom. Mrs. Whitaker took Tate's hand and struggled to her feet. They often took each other's hand when they anticipated imbalance. Tate wondered if it was such a good idea. He followed her to the window overlooking the street and stood behind her. He looked down onto the summit of her shoulders, where her skin was a thin parchment stretched over the most fragile array of bone and muscle.

Look out there, said Mrs. Whitaker.

Tate had no desire to lift his eyes. He closed them and wrapped his arms around her.

Mrs. Whitaker

'Tate, it's flat, so absolutely flat out there.

'Tate's eyes popped opened. It was as though his nose was pressed against a wall of green and black patches, some brick red here and there, some blue and white strips near the top.

It's flat because nothing's moving, he said.

It's deadly, replied Mrs. Whitaker.

Just quiet, you live in a quiet neighborhood.

Too quiet. Sometimes on my walks I feel I'm in one of those movies where everyone on earth has taken off, leaving all their things behind. Not a living soul around, but the houses are still standing, the skyline's intact, no cracks in the pavement, the cars are properly parked. One tableau after another, the screens shift as I walk, sometimes it's quite upsetting.

Lonely?

'Terribly lonely.

Why won't you let me help you.

You do help me, dear, from the proper distance. Too close and you'd blot everything out. I can't afford that now.

Mrs. Whitaker

That was September when, even though the doctors had declared Norman comatose, views of some sort were still possible. By November there was only rainwater coagulating on the exterior surfaces of the panes. Mrs. Whitaker's only relief from this radical foreshortening was the small blaze Celia nursed each morning in the bedroom fireplace. The firebox hadn't been used in years and in order to preserve her memories in the unlikely event that flames might spread from the box into the walls, Mrs. Whitaker had Celia clear the mantle of its jumble of small photographs, commendatory honorabilia and humble cherished gifts. Among these last were a pack of five finger-sized blue and white patched porcelain dogs, three of them seated and two standing, their ears perked and their heads cocked in various attitudes of anticipation. John had bought the entire set for 25¢ in 1953 down on Union Street, at Sultan's Department Store. He'd carried them home, leaping up the Fillmore Street steps two at a time, and deposited them under the Christmas tree with the shy satisfaction of a child who has just bought his

Mrs. Whitaker

first present with his own money and managed to deliver it intact.

The dogs were for his sister, Lucy, who was still alive then, but only just. Every evening she was wrapped in a bright red and green plaid blanket, carried downstairs, and laid out on the couch before the tree. She was only ten that year, but already past complaining. Did she suspect she'd be taken directly from that couch to an iron lung? John certainly didn't. When she was removed to hospital, he cried disconsolately. When she asked for her dogs he insisted his nurse lift him up so he could place them himself on the rim of the metal drum arching over her chest. The arc of the drum would be her last view, the window through which her imagination leapt for as long as her eyes were strong enough to focus.

Fortunately they were among the last of her body parts to go. At the beginning, when her arms and legs froze up, Lucy had sought refuge in books. But when her sight began to fail, she lost her way. She could tolerate the machine that inflated her lungs,

Mrs. Whitaker

but not the isolation of sightlessness. Furthermore, in the Whitaker family, failure of muscles as delicate as the eyes was experienced as a failure of the will. Her fading vision both terrified and humiliated her. Bitter tears of remorse signaled her final surrender as her little brother looked on in horror.

So years later, when Mrs. Whitaker insisted the mantel in Norman's sickroom remain empty, John went downstairs, took the enlarged replica of Monet's Springtime off the living room wall, and carried it back upstairs to hang over the fireplace, directly in his father's line of vision. It was a vivid landscape, Norman's favorite, an ample view which, once seen, tended to remain in the mind's eye. John hoped it would not tax his father's failing senses. It was, after all, a view that his father had once claimed not even blindness could obscure.

Failure of emotions as delicate as the heart's is experienced as a failure of the will. How could it

Mrs. Whitaker

be otherwise, thought Mrs. Whitaker, gazing down at her husband of fifty-two years and wishing him dead? Wishing the bed emptied and out of the house, wishing for a new one whose mattress was rebound in thick clean cotton sheets and clean blankets, all covered by a spotless white bedspread.

Mrs. Whitaker sat down in an armchair and reached under the covers for Norman's hand. She closed her eyes and rested for a moment in the net of their entwined fingers. She enjoyed the feel of it, marveling at the warm plump pressure of his palm. She marveled, too, at the contrast between it and the cool, bone-white expanses beyond. It seemed to her that whole regions of his body were disengaging one from the other, subject to a queer sort of continental drift that was slowly subverting the unity upon which his life had heretofore depended. His hands, enjoying good circulation, were obviously doing well, but his bottom and feet, enjoying no circulation whatsoever, were collapsing here and there into untidy pools of black ringed death. Norman's hair, washed daily, was fine as a baby's and smelled like

Mrs. Whitaker

sweet shampoo. But his teeth were rotting and his breath stank. Most unnerving of all was the sound of his breathing. It was uneven and rasping, confusing Mrs. Whitaker's own essential rhythms, so that after only a few minutes beside him she found herself breathless.

A nurse entered the room and approached the bed. *I'm going to turn him now,* she said, *and change him.*

Mrs. Whitaker wandered over to the window and leaned her forehead against its mullions (creamy smooth enamel, not one flake of aging paint, not one speck of dust, certainly no mildew). She noticed Tate's old Mercedes convertible drawn up in front of the house, its soft lime placed just so against the deep emerald of the curbside lawn that was so carefully, so perfectly tended. The car, too, was carefully and perfectly tended. The sight of its rounded contours and soft leather seats satisfied her senses, effortlessly. Moreover, it made her feel rich and safe (which in her mind had always amounted to much the same thing), reminding her that she, too, would enjoy a well-kept old age for as long as she

Mrs. Whitaker

could afford the proper maintenance.

Mrs. Whitaker watched Tate swing around the front of the car and up her walkway. As he disappeared under the overhang of the first story it seemed to her that he had gone forever. The screens of green and black, brick red and lime shifted and locked into place. Norman's breathing grew quiet and she felt her own return to its regular rhythm.

She didn't turn around when Tate entered the room, nor did she move when she felt his presence at her back.

Has the nurse left? she asked.

By now the only sound in the room was the steady hiss of oxygen bubbling through clear bottled water. Perhaps, Mrs. Whitaker thought, it would be best to quiet that too. Moving past Tate, who remained staring out the window, she headed for the bed. She screwed down the valve on the oxygen tank and pulled the tubing from the outlets. She delicately removed the little flesh colored plastic prongs from Norman's nostrils and pulled the sheets up over his shoulders. She kissed his forehead.

Mrs. Whitaker

When she turned back toward the window she found herself facing the back of Tate's gray suit, a carapace of stiffly pressed upholstery that reminded her of the absent-minded orderliness of the man she had just left. She found the contrast between the cloth (fine-grained texture of perfection, no hanging threads) and Tate's aging skin quite unbearable. The back of his hand, for example, that was extended to her from out of a starched white cuff, reminded her of nothing so much as the head of a turtle whose scrawny neck bones (alas, Tate's wrist) lay in flaps of extendible scales.

Take that suit off, Tate, said Mrs. Whitaker, it's dreadful.

Tate startled and Mrs. Whitaker looked for an exit. As she darted for the door she bumped into Monsieur Monet. He was dressed for Spring, in flour sacks and sandals. The painter offered her his arm, which was bare and bronzed. She took it. He had, after all, been waiting for her for more than a hundred years. *My paintings are my eyes, Madame, will you share my eyes, Madame?*

Mrs. Whitaker

Mrs. Whitaker took his arm, *yes*, and turned with him towards the mantle. She gazed up at the figure of a young Frenchwoman from the last century seated in a field of yellow grass and dandelions. The woman's white dress spread like froth from around her waist, curling over the grass and under her knees. An open parasol sat tilted on its head beside her. The prow of her elegant black hat pointed toward her lap. Mrs. Whitaker leaned forward to get a better look and saw the outline of some small volume (was it poetry or fiction?) lying in her hands (were they gloved?). Mrs. Whitaker tentatively stepped forward (there were no paths). Her shoes sank into the foliage, which clung to her ankles and clawed at her calves, begging them to give way. A series of involuntary frissons rose from her thighs to her belly. She endured them. The sun caressed her cheeks. She endured that, too. But when the wind rose and the wheat began to weave and darken and the young woman began to sink out of sight into that sea, Mrs. Whitaker's legs buckled and she too succumbed, entangled in grasses.

She lay there a long while, pushing her

Mrs. Whitaker

hands through the matted undergrowth, her fingers tunneling and twisting, slender knobby fish flitting through the riot of plant life gone to seed. Eventually she found a patch of moist soil between the stalks and dug her nails into it. The wind blew hard overhead, its eddies from time to time reaching under and lifting the hem of her skirt. But for the most part the wind was an invisible barrier between herself and the rest of the world. It was the transparent walls of her new house.

Celia was the one who discovered the body. Lucky thing, too, because it was Celia who pushed the prongs back up Norman's nose and turned on the oxygen. By the time Mrs. Whitaker had lifted her head off her chest and straightened up in her chair, Celia had the situation, and herself, well in hand.

Ma'am, intoned Celia.

What is it, asked Mrs. Whitaker.

Mr. Whitaker has passed away.

Thank you, replied Mrs. Whitaker.

Celia remained at attention, in order to elicit some further response. She prayed that

Mrs. Whitaker

that response would be orders. Appropriate orders.

Have you opened all the windows, asked Mrs. Whitaker.

Yes, Ma'am.

And drawn up the sheets?

No, Ma'am.

Well, that's all right. You may go.

Yes, Ma'am.

Tate, may I ask you to call the doctor?

She used the second line to reach her son, who was at his office. When he heard the news he wept.

What have I done? thought Mrs. Whitaker. *Have I done this?*

The doctor arrived sooner than she'd ever thought possible, and pronounced Norman dead. His solemn and public declaration of the obvious was exactly what was required of him and exactly what he delivered. He left quickly, tactfully refraining from asking after Mrs. Whitaker's state of mind, for which she was mightily grateful. John arrived soon after, his wife and the

Mrs. Whitaker

children in tow. Tim was delighted to see Tate setting up the Monopoly board. They greeted each other with wan smiles and immediately set to work. Meanwhile, Caroline kept hold of her daughter. Celia herded them both to the drawing room and pinioned them there with a complete and heaping tea service, so surrounding them with delicate porcelain, gleaming silver, hot teas, and an assortment of sweets that to break down or break free, (and leave such bounty abandoned?) would have required a presence of mind and sense of mission that the younger Mrs. Whitaker did not yet possess.

John's first thought was his father. The minute he arrived he reached for his mother's arm and headed for the staircase. Mrs. Whitaker managed to grab her cigarette holder just in time. As she ascended the staircase (and certainly the occasion required an ascent rather than a bent-over, pedestrian, climb) Mrs. Whitaker graciously dispensed the incense of cigarette smoke to an unseen audience, imagining she was Ginger Rodgers mounting one of those celluloid stairways to heaven that was a fixture of the prewar musicals of her youth. She'd always found

Mrs. Whitaker

those ascents compelling. It was the landings that unsettled her. When one reached the top there was simply no "there" there, to quote the savage Ms. Stein; only the black of the back of the stage, or perhaps a fake trap door, or pair of dark velvet curtains through which the actors entered and exited.

Now dear Norman has exited, clever man. Oh, yes, he tunneled out into the dark a very long time ago, that's true. But we never said a proper good-bye. He left behind the hem of his gown that very long time ago, just one corner, mind you, black damask edged in scarlet silk, stitched with gold thread, a bright remnant flickering on the boards beyond the footlights. It's quite curious, really, how that evidence of his absence bound me to this house. I waited for that one corner of the hem of his gown to be yanked offstage by his own unseen hand. I waited for a final flourish by which he might reveal himself, and me to myself. No such luck.

Were you with him? asked John, as they stood together at the foot of the bed.

She nodded.

Don't feel badly, said John.

I don't, replied Mrs. Whitaker.

Mrs. Whitaker

John shook his head, as though warding off some unpleasant memory.

I think we should cover him now, said Mrs. Whitaker, turning away.

John caught her arm.

You did your best, he said.

Not as much as I would have liked, replied Mrs. Whitaker.

And having admitted that much, she staggered over to the couch, her cigarette holder weaving before her, and landed on her bottom with a grunt.

What have I done? thought Mrs. Whitaker. *Have I done this?*

Failure of emotions as delicate as the heart's is my failure, thought Mrs. Whitaker. *How could it be otherwise?*

John sat down beside her. She allowed him to take her hand in his, and then she wept.

Mrs. Whitaker



Alta Plaza Park, San Francisco, California

A young woman meeting her birth mother for the first time, an elderly woman attending her dying husband, a boy dealing with his father's shame; these three stories about love examine in exquisite detail what it costs and how we pay.
— from *The Bindery at the Well*

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Constant Love

Léa Calegaris Park



Constant Love