

Second Sorrow

I worry about it sometimes, that you didn't know what you were getting into. Do you think if you had it to do over again, knowing what you know now, knowing all that was about to happen and the toll it would take, do you think you'd still choose me?

Probably you would, you're a good person. You might do it because you thought you should help me. Do you ever wonder about that—about the difference between loving somebody because you have to love them and because you want to love them? Sometimes I'm not sure which is which. When you first met me, I'm pretty certain you'd have said, "I have to love her," and I liked it so very much that I was compelling to you, that you never felt as if you could not choose me.

Carter, I don't want you to feel obligated to me. I'm a strong person, I know that about myself. Sometimes with you I'm weak, but that's only because I allow myself to be, because I love you enough to let you help me. If you left right now, I'd pull through. Maybe I couldn't have done it three years ago, right after I was attacked, maybe not even last year, but now I could. I don't need you the same way I needed you even a year ago, and I like it that I'm getting to a place where I might not need you at all. I'm grateful for you, but I get tired of thinking I'll always be in your debt.

You know that African tribal belief that when you save someone's life the person you saved belongs to you forever? It's a beautiful idea, but so burdensome. I've said this before and I believe it—that you helped save me, that I was in the most impossible place. I needed someone who was different from everybody else, who could be only for me, but maybe it's been too much for you.

I know this about you: you'd never leave until you were sure I was going to be all right, and I've been thinking lately that in your mind you'll never really be sure. You're always calling to check on me, to make sure I'm home safely, because you know I could just be out walking again some night and it could happen all over again. You think about that every day, don't you? I feel sorry for you sometimes. For a while I felt safer because you were always worrying for me. It was like being protected. I was tired of worrying for myself, and somebody did it for me. Do you remember how we would be

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walking in Georgetown and I would let myself go, like a kid, ready to walk off the curb into traffic? But you were always paying attention. Every time you'd catch me by the arm and pull me out of harm's way. For a while there we started to count how many times you'd saved my life. We made a game of it. It was funny. I was so accidental, it seems impossible to me now that I was once like that.

After you'd saved my life, I could always laugh and be happy.

Whenever I was at home and depressed, physically unable to get out of bed, I didn't have to call you because you were so reliable, you were so concerned. You'd call me and say, "Anne, are you sad again today?" and I'd admit that I was, and then you would just talk to me and let me be sad.

It's not that simple anymore, though. The world is hospitable to violence, to sorrow, I can see that clearly. I read the true crime books, I read those stories of rape in which an armed man enters a house while a couple is together and he holds the gun to the husband's head and ties him up, and then he rapes the woman in the other room or sometimes in the same room. What could you do about that? If you tried to save me, he'd kill you; and that's the only thing that could possibly make it worse—watching you die. The rape wouldn't matter then, I wouldn't even care. If we're ever together and we get attacked, I don't want you to interfere. I can survive anything, even another rape, as long as I know you'd still be alive. Promise me you won't do anything.

Shall I tell you something?

Do you remember how I used to say that someday I would tell you everything? How I was so mysterious about a part of me that was too painful to share? Sometimes I can't even remember what all my secrets were, what it was that I thought was so awful that if you knew about it you couldn't love me anymore, why I had to let you see me only gradually, letting my flaws become apparent only once you were already enamored of me in a thousand ways.

What I wanted to say just now was that there's no way we're supposed to make it—you know that, don't you?—there's no way we're supposed to last. It's the final damage. It's what always comes after, like when a couple loses a child. Sooner or later their relationship is a casualty. Every day you go forward, but you're a constant reminder to one another of the awful thing that you endured together. Even when you're not thinking about it, you're

still thinking about it.

I like it that every day we stay together after my rape is such a long day. It's an eternity to other people's time, and even if I left tomorrow we'd still be together because of everything we can't forget.

Still, there's part of me that wants to be done with it all, to close it off from memory—God, how I wanted to shut down so many times after it first happened. You stayed by my side and gave me a choice, and then one day I decided I wouldn't shut you out. We were on Hilton Head, and we couldn't go in the ocean because it was windy and never above sixty-two degrees, and we played table tennis, read novels under blankets at the beach, and took long afternoon naps. One morning I was terribly depressed, and I'd told you over and over again that I wanted to die. But you didn't badger me or barter with me, you didn't treat me like a child. You just said that you would never be the same if I died. And I didn't tell you—I couldn't say it out loud just in case I couldn't keep my promise—but it was at that moment I promised not to shut myself off from you.

Do you think if you had it to do over again, knowing what you know now, knowing all that was about to happen and the toll it would take, do you think you'd still choose me?

Tell me, did you think I was mysterious when you first met me? I sometimes wonder what you thought I might be hiding. What would you find unacceptable? How much would it take to drive you away?

I was always so worried about our differences. "We are so different," I would remind myself, but then I couldn't remember how, except that there were things you wanted that didn't require me. There were times after we first met when I would talk myself into leaving you for your own good. I would write notes to myself in my journal, "You must leave him so he can find someone who will not be so troublesome, who will not get in the way of all the things he wants to do." I really hated my own neediness. And that was all before I was attacked. Which goes to show that often what we think of as need isn't the real thing. After the rape, then I needed you.

Did you like being needed? I was pretty sure you did. Do you remember how, after you moved me into that very secure, high-rise apartment in Arlington, immediately I began to hate the place? My god, it had no charac-

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ter. Of course, I was also depressed, and probably would have been depressed no matter where I was. I'd get myself back and forth to work each day, that was all I could do. I couldn't be bothered with hanging prints or cleaning the apartment. For how long did I sleep on that ridiculous mattress on the floor? It seemed entire days passed and I barely moved from that mattress. You'd drive down for the weekends, and you'd find me in bed and you'd offer to take me to dinner, only I refused to shower or take a bath because the bathroom was dirty. So you scrubbed the bathroom, I can still picture you down on your hands and knees scrubbing the bathroom for me. You'd call me into the bathroom to see if it was passable yet, and I'd point out a hint of mold under the faucet or soap scum on the shower curtain, and you'd walk me back to bed and clean some more. Eventually the bathroom met my standards, and you drew me a bath and helped me get undressed. And afterward when I was outside, for the first time all day in sunlight even though it was already evening, I did feel better.

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between loving somebody because you have to
love them and because you want to love them?*

Most of the time I can't remember anything of what it was like back then. I can remember your kindness if I force myself, but the person I once was is barely recognizable to me. If I saw a picture of her, if I saw a home movie of a young woman who looked like me and was acting that way, I'd say, "Who is that? What's wrong with her?"

I'm not that broken person anymore, and I know how much that pleases you. I did it, I kept making myself better, but not without your help. I'm your achievement. Yet the broken me is always there in your memory, like a parent who fights with a grown child by remembering the rebellious teenager in her, never the autonomous adult. With a parent, what you say can never be judged solely for the pure truth or error in it. We've always had the most interesting conversations—about whether F. Scott and Zelda ever really fell out of love, about why the Boomtown Rats might be better than the Beatles, about whether or not Bob Dylan is really a poet. Still, maybe there's part of you that handles me. You don't mean to be condescending, maybe you can't even hear it when you are, but if you've seen someone when she's truly vulnerable maybe you can never get that idea of her out of your head. Do

you think that's true?

Don't become too attached, I feel like warning you, to the part of me that has to get left behind.

There was a time when I would invent scenarios in which you wouldn't have loved me. I'd locate them before the rape, wondering if my life had gone down a wrong path, if I were using lots of cocaine, sleeping with many men at the same time, skipping from job to job, and we met under those circumstances, could I still charm you? Would you be willing to risk it? The person you love now would still be there buried inside and you'd see her, maybe only for a flash, and long to be with her. If you saw me as already so worn out by life, perhaps you'd think you could undo some of the damage.

Or, what if I'd been married and had three children, what if I'd stuck with Sebastian, my college boyfriend? In my mind I'd put these challenges to an imaginary you: if I were divorced or separated, and I'd fallen out of love with my husband or maybe never loved him, would you start up with me?

I hate it that I can project my life along those lines and put myself in those scenarios and see myself there, knowing I really could be those ways if I hadn't been so lucky and that, maybe under the wrong set of circumstances, you wouldn't love me. Everything seems so arbitrary. As if love is just a way of deluding ourselves about the perfectly contingent details in the life of a person we say we can't live without. So much depends on getting to someone before her choices exclude you forever from central aspects of her life. When I tried very hard and could really imagine myself in a dire parallel life, I'd get angry with you for your inability to recognize me for who I really was. I thought you of all people should find me, even if I hadn't yet been brave enough to let myself emerge.

Do you remember where we were when you first told me you loved me? We had just met some friends for drinks at the Skydeck of the Sears Tower. You were moving away to New Haven, and I didn't yet have the job in DC. We'd been together every free minute for the prior two weeks, and we didn't want the night to end so we sat on the steps beneath the Sears Tower and suddenly you asked me, "Do you want me to love you?" I smiled and said, "Why, do you?" That was what I wanted from you—the risk of it, with no guarantees in advance. You didn't miss a beat and you admitted, yes, you loved me. Then I said that I very much liked the idea of you loving me.

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I didn't say "I love you" back. I hated the idea that my words might be dependent on yours. I wanted them to be spontaneous and true, so I kept them secret until I could choose the right time.

I worry that you can't ever choose me now, and I hate that. Everything's been decided for us. We were already in love, but there was so much ahead of us, so many choices to come. Then this happened, and the choice was made for us. You've got no choice but to love me and stay with me until you're sure I'm all right, and if I were another woman maybe I could just rest in that and allow myself to be taken care of. Only then I wouldn't get to choose either.

So instead I have to get to a place where I'm perfectly free to choose you or leave you. In which case you can't win—maybe I'll change and become easier to live with, but then I won't be yours anymore. Probably you'll never be able to get over your attachment to that person I once was who absolutely needed you, you'll never learn to see me as I truly am or as I'm going to be.

And someday I'll have to leave—just to prove I can do it. You won't hate me for it, will you?

What if what I was keeping from you when we first met, long before the rape, was my knowledge of what was coming—my secret was what I saw. It was as though my whole life had prepared me for it. I'd come out of the worst childhood. I'd conquered growing up with an alcoholic father, a susceptibility to violent boyfriends, an anxiety disorder. Even though all my high school friends were fundamentalists, I broke free and learned to think outside the lines. I was a feminist, I read the books. I read *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, and I knew what could happen. Statistically, it was even probable. I couldn't tell you all of this. You would have thought I was paranoid. But maybe I was just a woman who understood how things really are. That's what I couldn't yet tell you.

I haven't told you everything, Carter. I know now I never will. It's impossible to tell another person everything about yourself. Maybe it's impossible ever truly to know another person, at least not in the way you know yourself. Some people would say that's obvious. Not if you believe in love, though—then you want another person to see you in all the ways you are, almost like God. You can't keep anything hidden, and even if you could you don't necessarily want to.

When I feel that way, I start to resent it. I want my privacy. For me there

will always be a few things I want to keep hidden, even if I'm not sure in any given moment what they are or whether they're important. When I feel you wanting to know everything about me, I tell myself, "He wants too much," like Daisy letting down Gatsby.

I worry we're too intimate. We don't keep anything from each other—our flaws, moral or physical. I'm critical of you sometimes in a way I would only be critical of myself. I want to know your anxieties, to feel privileged by my knowledge of you. Maybe women like that sort of intimacy better than men do, in which case men are lucky. You don't have to worry about what to confide because women want all your confidences. It might even be a maternal thing, certainly by now it's cultural. Think of how fathers cringe when they learn about their daughters' periods, when they imagine them as sexual beings—but mothers, they're not even horrified by wet-dreams.

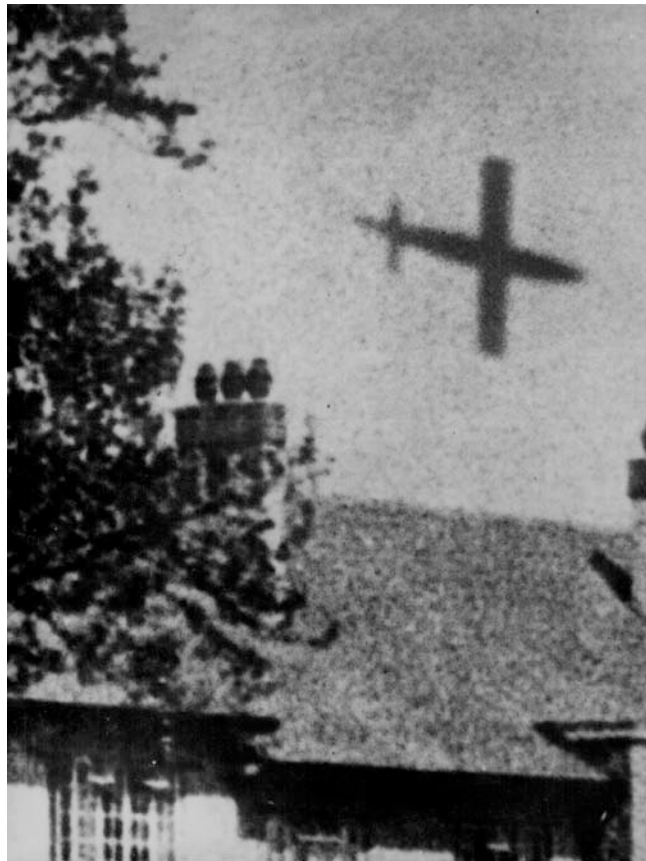
*I worry that you can't ever choose
me now, and I hate that.*

You're different from most men, still maybe not different enough. Maybe I should have told you less. Early on I had no choice because everything in me wanted to confess to you; and then later after the rape I let it all out, my defenses were down and you saw everything—all my fears and vulnerabilities. I didn't bother anymore. I let you scrub my bathroom, I let you clean out my kitchen when there was rotting garbage in the sink and every now and then the smell got so bad I wouldn't even go to that side of the apartment. All the things one keeps hidden from the rest of the world, except maybe for the briefest glimpses, and I gave them away. Even marriages are based on some deception—the things you don't let the man learn about you. When I was still at college I remember having drinks with this graduate student after a summer advertising class, and he started to tell me about his marriage. I asked how it was different—being in love versus being married—and he said, "You know the honeymoon's over when you're in the shower and your wife comes in to take a dump." Well, it was crude of him to speak about it that way, but in the back of my mind there was the secret thought, *What could she have been thinking?*

Do you want to know what I now think my real secret was? The thing that goes so far back I'd almost forgotten about it?

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I'm afraid I chose you because I knew one day I would need you. I had to make you love me. I told you only what I thought you could bear until you could bear more, and I let you fall in love with the best parts of me first. Yes, it was because I saw what would happen, because I knew bad things were coming, and I needed you—someone who was loyal, who would know how to love me when I was in a bad way. I loved you instinctively: you were that person and I liked the way it made me feel. It was the survivor in me that knew you right away, but I wonder now if maybe that was unfair.



View of a V-1 rocket in flight over London during the last days of World War II.
(Source: National Archives)