

FORGIVENESS

Cristina White

Maybe I forgave you when I was seventeen. No, not really. It was only a kind of silent pact you and I made. We agreed not to be in constant conflict and I set aside my hate and said all right, we will make our peace and I will trust you never to hit my mother again.

You died decades ago, and in October my mother will have been gone from this earth for twenty-two years. There is no end of loving her, of being grateful to her and missing her laughter, her generous ways, the good food she made, her courage and loving kindness. I talk to her often but I never talk to you and tonight I think I should talk to you. Maybe we should have it out, because I've heard that carrying anger and hate is a burden, and maybe it is time to let it go. Dear God, I want to let it go before I die. No one knows when that will happen, but it will happen. None of us gets out alive.

The truth is, I don't hate you. I used to, when I was young and full of rage and despair and sorrow. I was fifteen and there was an afternoon when I heard you yelling at my mother and I wanted to kill you. The knife was there. I picked it up and I was ready to drive it into you and make you stop. Stop. Stop. But then you were there in the doorway. You were looking at me with a knife in my hand, and I knew it would not end well. Your six-foot plus two-hundred-pound body would have the better of me. The knife would be turned against me, into me.

I set the knife down and walked out of the house. That was the day I knew I had to leave, get away, before one of us maimed or murdered the other. I told my mother I had to leave and I did leave. My grandmother and I took a bus and traveled nearly three thousand miles away to live with my brother in California. I was there with my brother and grandmother for over a year, until finally my mother asked me to return. We missed each other too much.

I returned and it was better then. It was as if a cool, moist wind had dampened the fire-hot air in our household. I remember a day when you and I drove to a spot where the dogwood trees were in full bloom. We walked there, and you said let's bring some of these home to your mother, and we did. We brought white flowering branches home for her, for our home. And that was when I felt we had settled things between us and I could rest from hating you.

Two years later, you broke my trust again. You were drunk and you hit my mother. And that was it. I could not forgive you. I could never trust you again. And though my mother was desolate when her marriage was finally over, I was glad you were gone, and grateful when she was herself again and made a life without you.

This was all decades ago, and I am weary of this burden. Tonight, I want to remember the afternoon we walked among the flowering dogwood trees and there was an hour of peace between us. I think about the legend of the dogwood, and those who say the wood of this tree was used to build the cross—the cross on which Jesus was crucified. It is only a legend, a story told in the deep South. It is a story I can hold onto, because you and I were in the deep South that afternoon we walked in a grove of dogwood trees.

Tonight, I place myself once more in that hour of countless white blossoms and I think of Christ, who forgave us all. I say to the night sky, to you: I forgive you. I remember and thank you for the good you gave me, for the times you reached into the well of a loving father and gave me water to drink. I forgive you your faults and weakness and the torment you bequeathed, this pain and sorrow I have carried for too many years. I lay it down in this sacred ground of forgiveness.

I lay it down that I may rest and you may rest.

Rest. Peace be.

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