

Refuting the White Rabbit.

I have a confession to make.

Sofia and I have been married for forty years.

My wife is dying.

And I am having an affair.

Of sorts.

Her name is *Kassandra*.

Kassandra places the emphasis on the middle syllable in her name, which makes her sound like a Russian princess.

When I tell her this, she smiles. 'Perhaps I'm related to *Anastasia*,' she says.

'Who?' I ask, handing her a paper bag containing two sweet rolls.

Her laughter is gentle. 'Will I meet you in the park, or should we go somewhere more private?'

I brush flour from my hands. It sprinkles the counter, and I take up a cloth to swipe the dust away, eyes lowered, intent on the task. Even after a year of such encounters, I'm excited, but afraid. 'The park is fine,' I say. The bell above the door jingles as *Kassandra* steps outside. She rests the rolls on a flat package she is carrying and, with a wink in my direction, she pulls the door shut.

It is 2.00 pm.

On the other side of town, in the bedroom that was ours, *Sofia* is receiving her afternoon dose of morphine.

I met *Sofia* in my family's bakery. Her mother had sent her for brioche, which was our specialty. She greeted my father, asking after the busyness of his morning before placing her order. I stood before the ovens, transfixed by the melody of her voice.

'William, bring six warm brioches for Miss *Sofia*,' my father called.

Sofia.

Is it possible to love someone before seeing their face? I think so, but even if it were not, the moment I laid eyes on the dark-haired girl in the lilac sundress, my heart belonged to her.

‘William? Where are the brioches?’ my father asked.

I looked at my empty hands and then up, into Sofia’s smile. ‘I, um, sorry,’ I mumbled.

‘Bah!’ My father threw a dishcloth at me. ‘Do something useful,’ he said, heading for the bakehouse. As he past me, he nodded in Sofia’s direction; a gesture with all the subtlety of a nuclear explosion.

I bent to the task of polishing the sparkling countertop while I tried to think of what to say to Sofia, but my mind was blank. As providence would have it, Sofia was intelligent and beautiful. Without a word, she placed a piece of paper on the counter.

‘Six brioches,’ my father announced as he returned. I grabbed the note and hurried back to the ovens, pausing in the doorway for a second to look at her face.

‘They smell wonderful, Mister Chapman,’ Sofia said, smiling at me as she spoke to my father. I knew what that smile meant: she had made the first move, but the rest was up to me.

A man is supposed to grow in confidence with age, but being with Cassandra fills me with the uncertainty of a teenager. As I walk towards the park where she waits, my stomach clenches with nervous tension. I keep my gaze downcast so no one recognises the hunger in my eyes— a hunger that shouldn’t be inside the husband of a woman who is dying in stages.

Some of the tension melts away as I enter the park and stroll between the trees, ignoring the ‘Keep off the Grass’ signs, which have never meant anything to me anyway. I’m a man who uses his instincts to find the practical route through a situation, rather than one who follows a rule for the sake of obedience or decorum. I guess that’s how I came to be involved with Cassandra. The tension comes again, this time tinged with yearning, as I see her in the distance, sitting under a Cotton tree. She is bent over a book.

It’s not Cassandra’s beauty that arrests me, although she is beautiful in the way dawn is beautiful: fresh, vibrant and bursting with potential. Nor is it her boldness, which she wields with a devil-may-care abandon, or her intelligence, which she slips on and shrugs off as needed, like a favourite coat. I think instead, it is her patience that brings me undone, and her ability to make me forget myself; my failings and inadequacies.

She looks up as my shadow falls over her. ‘There you are,’ she says, putting the book aside. Her eyes are heartbreak blue. ‘I thought you were going to stand me up.’

I sit down beside her. ‘A late customer,’ I say, resting against the tree. A lifetime of baking – stirring, kneading, lifting, carrying – has taken its toll, but it is the scent of vanilla lifting from her skin that makes me glad for the solidness of the trunk at my back.

‘That’s cool,’ she says, reaching behind her. ‘I thought we could try something different today?’ Her smile is kind but, still, the old terror surges inside me; the fear of exposure and ridicule.

I kept my secret from Sofia for the year and a half of our courtship. It wasn’t hard to do; I’d been hiding that part of myself since I started working in the bakehouse at fourteen. My father and workmates didn’t catch on as I had a natural flair with ingredients and a memory for recipes. They thought I loved the work, and they were right— mostly.

Two weeks before our marriage, my father called Sofia and I into his office. He was behind his desk and, as we sat, he pushed a file filled with papers towards us. ‘This is my wedding gift,’ he said.

A nervous tingle started at the base of my spine. ‘Really? A pile of paper? Thanks, Dad, that’s sure to come in handy if we need to make paper aeroplanes, or fix a hole in our shoes.’

My father scowled. ‘Very funny, wise-mouth. It’s a partnership contract,’ he said, opening the file and tapping the top sheet. A cold sweat broke out across my back. ‘See. What do you think of the name?’

The letters swam, the lines moving mockingly, changing position until I felt sick. ‘Well—’

‘*Two Chap’s Bakery*,’ Sofia said, taking my hand under the desk. ‘That’s a terrific name, Mister Chapman. And we’re honoured by your gift, aren’t we, William?’

I cleared my throat. ‘Yes we are. Thank you, Dad.’

My father beamed. ‘No problem, but you should read the contract before you thank me. You might be signing away your first born child.’

I laughed, but when I looked at the file, the sick feeling in my stomach rose like a helium-filled balloon and clogged my throat.

Sofia saved me, again. ‘Would it be okay if we took the contract with us, Mr Chapman? I’m sure there will be much for William to consider and, well, I have a hair appointment in twenty minutes.’

My father smiled and closed the file. ‘Of course, my dear, we shouldn’t allow business to get in the way of beauty,’ he said, with a wink.

As we walked towards the bus stop, hand in hand, the file tucked into Sofia’s bag, I worked up the courage to ask, ‘How long have you known?’

Sofia shrugged. ‘Long enough to know it doesn’t matter,’ she said, signalling the approaching bus. ‘You are a good man, William, and you’ll be a good husband. Everything else we can work out along the way.’ She glanced at me as the bus pulled into the stop. ‘Besides, we all have our burdens to bear,’ she said, and dashed aboard.

I paid the driver and wandered down the aisle to the seat she had taken. ‘And what burdens do you have, lovely Sofia?’ I asked, sliding in beside her.

She lifted her chin and feigned a pride I knew she didn’t possess. ‘It’s a secret.’

‘Ah,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘How sad for us.’

‘Sad?’

‘Yes. You see, I couldn’t possibly marry a woman with secrets.’

‘Oh well, if you put it that way—’ Sofia locked her gaze onto mine, ‘but you must swear not to tell anyone.’

Although I knew she was playing a game, I understood that her words were meant to reassure me. ‘I promise.’

She nodded, satisfied. ‘Okay, my confession is, I can’t cook.’

‘Really?’

‘I couldn’t boil an egg to save myself.’ Sofia turned the engagement ring on her finger. ‘Are you disappointed in me?’

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and drew her close. ‘Sweet Sofia, I couldn’t be disappointed in you if my life depended on it,’ I said, kissing the tip of her nose.

Tenderness filled her face. ‘Thank you, William.’

We were quiet until we drew near our stop. Sofia pushed the button and we stood, bracing against each other as the bus swayed. ‘Of course, it’s a stroke of luck that you’re marrying a baker,’ I said, leading the way down the steps.

‘Indeed,’ Sofia replied, linking her arm with mine, ‘but a stroke of luck for whom?’

Although we have a rule about such things, Cassandra has a gift for me. I recognise it from earlier; the package wrapped in plain brown paper, tied with string. She holds it out to me.

‘What is this?’ I ask, folding my arms.

She raises her eyebrows, but doesn’t respond to my delaying tactic. Still I hesitate. There’s a commitment involved in accepting a gift and I’m not sure I want to make it. I like what is between Cassandra and I, as it is.

‘Nothing will change, William,’ Cassandra says, apparently reading my mind. ‘Besides, it’s not for you.’

Surprise forces my hand forward. ‘Who is it for?’

‘You’ll see,’ Cassandra says, as I pull on the bow to release the string. She rises to her knees. I turn the package over and loosen the tape. Cassandra presses her hands together beneath her chin and I can see she is struggling not to reach over and hurry my unwrapping.

Her unexpected impatience makes me smile and I consider drawing out the moment, but I can’t be that cruel to her. I pull the paper away like a magician revealing his best trick, and my smile vanishes.

‘Do you like it?’ Cassandra asks, her delight obvious. She touches the cover of the book with her fingertips. ‘It’s a collector’s edition.’

I’m speechless, overwhelmed. *What have I done in my life to deserve this woman?* I wonder as I force words into the space between us. ‘It’s her favourite.’

‘I remember you telling me,’ Cassandra says, resting her hand over mine, soft, warm, confident; everything Sofia was but is no longer, thanks to the disease pulling her relentlessly towards eternity. ‘I thought we could read it together, you know, to practice.’

She sits close to me and takes the book from my hands, leaning it against our bent knees. A faint odour wafts towards us as she opens the cover and I think of oak-panelled libraries with books stacked from floor to the ceiling.

‘Shall I begin?’ Cassandra asks, and when I remain silent, she does:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice ‘without pictures or conversation?’

It wasn’t until after the first battle was won that I discovered that *Alice in Wonderland* was Sofia’s favourite book. I’d arrived home from work one evening and found her reading to Miranda. Not wanting to disturb them, I sat in the darkened hallway outside our daughter’s bedroom and listened.

Miranda was our reward for surviving Sofia’s first brush with disease. She was a long time coming into our lives, which was my fault. We’d spent the first ten years of our marriage working in the bakery, building our reputation and expanding until we had four shops in our little empire. Sofia was my everything on this conquest: my partner, my eyes, my interpreter, my muse, and I had no idea what I would do without her; a point I made

whenever the topic of starting a family was raised— usually by my father, who loved to stir the pot.

My wife smiled and patted his arm at these times and said, ‘Each gift in its time, Father,’ and although I knew she meant it, I saw the sadness around her eyes.

Perhaps it was the sadness that let the disease in, the first time.

Life as I knew it stopped as we went about beating the villain that had crept into Sofia’s body. I was terrified for her, and – if I’m honest – for myself. Every day I visited her at the hospital, sitting with her as she endure the treatments, and I would whisper over and over as I held her hand, ‘I can’t do this without you.’

And sometimes, if she could manage it, she would reply, ‘I know.’

Two year later, we celebrated her recovery by bringing Miranda into the world.

In the years that followed, I came to understand what a remarkable woman I had found in Sofia. Never once did she leave me in the lurch, and yet she attended to our daughter with infinite care and finesse. We were loved, Miranda and I, with every ounce of Sofia’s being.

It was my father who issued the warning. Sofia was bustling around the bakery, clearing orders and reading letters to me as I slid a tray of croissants into the oven. Miranda sat at the office desk, calling on her mother to help with her homework. Back and forth Sofia went between us, stopping only when my father caught her hand.

‘Dear girl, you must take some time for yourself,’ he said.

Sofia smiled. ‘They need me, Father,’ she replied.

The year after Miranda moved out of home, the villain returned, swathed in poison and intent on finishing the task of stealing my wife from me, right when she felt I needed her the most.

... So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake.

Kassandra finishes the page and tilts the book toward me, a gesture of gentle encouragement. I take the book from her and gaze at the page. The letters jumble and the sharp taste of panic – that old foe – fills my mouth. I breathe and focus as Kassandra has taught me, allowing the letters to settle, but I don’t begin. Instead, I close the book and take Kassandra’s hand in mine.

‘I can’t do this with you,’ I say.

‘You’re ready then?’

‘Not at all.’

She places her free hand against my cheek and draws me toward her. I close my eyes and feel the brush of her lips against my forehead. When I look into her face, there are tears hanging on her lashes. I squeeze her hand; there is nothing more we need to say.

I stand in the doorway of our bedroom, book in hand. Amber shades of evening filter through the curtains, falling across Sofia in our bed. She has become a child again: small, fragile, dependant, only her determination continues to define her as a woman.

Our doctor visits her every other day, and there is a nurse who stays in the house to tend to her medication. When I talk to them about her condition, they shake their heads and wonder at her refusal to give up life.

Although I don't tell them, I know why she lingers.

The carpet absorbs the sound of my footsteps as I approach the bed but Sofia hears me anyway. Her eyes open with the slowness of deep fatigue and the shackles of guilt around my chest tighten. While my wife has spent the last year battling the villain consuming her body, I have battled the villain inside my heart: fear.

My hope is that our individual struggles will end today.

I sit in the chair beside our bed and rest my fingers over her thin wrist. 'Hello sweet Sofia,' I say, weeping inside at her laboured breathing. 'I have brought you a gift.'

Despite all she endures, Sofia finds a smile for me. 'What is it?' she murmurs.

Unwrapping Cassandra gift for the second time, I hold it where Sofia can see without effort. Her gaze moves across the cover, slow as time, then travels up to meet mine. 'It's beautiful,' she says. There is a glassy shine in her eyes but she has no tears left to cry. 'I'm sorry. I can't read anymore.'

Forcing the roughness of grief from my voice, I say, '*You* are beautiful, my love, but I don't need you to read anymore.' I catch the slight widening around her eyes. 'May I lie beside you, Sofia?'

Her nod is almost imperceptible in the fading light. I turn on the bedside lamp and gently climb onto the bed. It feels wonderful to be next to her again. When I am settled, I check to make sure Sofia is comfortable. Her eyes hold mine as she says, 'How?'

I kiss the tip of her nose. 'It doesn't matter,' I reply, opening the cover of *Alice in Wonderland*. The first page is the easiest because I can hear Cassandra's voice in my head as I read to my wife. The second page takes longer but I get through it, my confidence growing with each sentence.

After the fourth page, Sofia whispers my name. I look at her and notice a new serenity in her face. ‘Thank you,’ she says.

I can’t stop the tears that fill my eyes as I kiss her again. ‘Thank you, Sofia, for keeping your promise.’

Somehow, she finds the strength to snuggle into my side. ‘Keep going,’ she says, and I do, even after her breath has stopped and there is only the sound of my hesitant voice following Alice through Wonderland.
