

## SHADOW OF SHIVA

This is not a Christmas story, although it takes place during the holidays—Christmas 1980, to be exact. In this story, there will be no mention of mistletoe or reindeer or *It's a Wonderful Life* or chestnuts roasting on a fake fire in a Bing Crosby TV special, the Thin White Duke and Bing lip-syncing “Little Drummer Boy” to canned music. I will not tell you that my parents hid my new green and white banana bike, with streamers and jingle bells on the handlebars, in the way, way back of the station wagon, where I came upon it a midnight clear and rode it twice around the block, undiscovered. This is not a story about family—not even my closeted brother, who scrawled his confession on a notecard and presented it to our parents in a gift-wrapped box in the middle of a Steelers game.

This isn't really a story at all.

It's a fern and a nightlight and a shadow stretched across my bedroom wall that looks exactly like Yoko Ono.

She appears in my room at night. No one knows but me. Visitation began December 9<sup>th</sup>—the day after Mark David Chapman aimed a .38-caliber revolver at her husband in the archway of their apartment building in Central Park West and fired five shots.

John Lennon was dead.

His widow sits shiva with me.

My family is Jewish, but we're not practicing Jews. My father worries that the very mention of Hanukkah and Yom Kippur might stir the pot of anti-Semitism that once boiled in our small North Carolina town. It's easier, he says, for his two children to sing “Little

Drummer Boy” with Bing and Bowie than “I Have a Little Dreidel” in Yiddish at a makeshift temple in the next county.

But I know what it means to sit shiva. When my grandfather died, my family and I flew to New York to be with my grandmother for the full seven days, all of us dressed in black, mirrors covered, TV unplugged, her rabbi reciting the Mourner’s Kaddish with us every morning.

That’s another story, though.

The night of Yoko’s last visit with me, I am eleven years old. In exactly twenty years—December 15, 2000—I will watch my own husband die in a freak accident in our front yard. I will be a widow. My parents, two children, and my gay brother and his lover will sit shiva with me in my split-level house in the same Tar Heel town from which I hail. We will wear black, cover mirrors, unplug the TV, and my mother-in-law’s rabbi will recite the Mourner’s Kaddish with us every morning.

But tonight, I am eleven years old, bundled up in my canopy bed, nightlight gleaming on the fern my mother placed on a stand by my closet to hide the hole my brother punched in the wall after the boyfriend we didn’t know he had broke up with him. Yoko’s sable mane is there—amorphous, feral—splayed across the wall above the plant, keeping vigil over me, like her husband in the *Imagine* John Lennon poster on my door. Like John, Paul, George, and Ringo in the *White Album* poster above my stereo. My mother always plays “Birthday” on my birthday. I knew the words to the Beatles song before the traditional tune.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I say to Yoko.

“It’s the last time,” she says. “Tonight is the seventh night of shiva.”

Technically, one begins the practice immediately following the burial of the deceased, but there was no burial. John was cremated at Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York. Yoko requested the world observe ten minutes of silence on Sunday, December 14. The world obliged. So did my family and I.

“What’s it like to be a widow?” I ask Yoko.

“What do you think it’s like?” Her voice is sterile, her Japanese accent clipped.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t even know what it’s like to be kissed.”

“You’ll find out,” she says.

“What it’s like to be kissed, or a widow?” I say charily.

“You’ll find out.”

I trace a heart shape on my flat chest with my finger. In my mind’s eye, it’s flaming red. I want to feel the heat, the passion—even then I do.

“What would you say to me if I were?” I mutter.

“If you were kissed?”

“No.”

“Oh, the other,” she says. “I don’t know yet. It’s only been a few days.”

“Is it hot or cold? Red or blue? The feeling, I mean. It can’t be black and white.” I clutch my stuffed Snoopy. I still sleep with stuffed animals, although I relinquished my footie pajamas to the Salvation Army years ago. I wear a white flannel nightgown with little rose petals on the collar now. I’m still a child. I don’t think so, but I am.

“It was hot at first,” she says. “Red, I suppose.”

“And now?”

Silence. Ten minutes of silence. I mark the time on my alarm clock.

“The feeling has no color now,” she says.

“But it will later?”

“I suspect it will be a rainbow.”

I stare at my John Lennon poster. He’s my favorite Beatle, the cool one with granny glasses like mine. Or rather, mine are like his.

“And I will be kissed?” I ask.

“That’s up to you.” She refuses to betray the future. I’m glad. I want to choose the color of my own life—red, I think. Red is the color of love. All you need is love.

My clock flashes 10:50—the moment John died in the back of a limousine en route to Roosevelt Hospital, Yoko, anointed with his blood, sitting next to him.

“I have to go,” she says. “You will stay.”

“No, I won’t. The clock will strike twelve soon. Then it will be tomorrow, and I’ll be *here, there, and everywhere,*” I croon.

“That isn’t this story,” she says.

I watch her hair flicker in the glare of passing car lights.

Once upon a time, I will live with my husband in our split-level house with the lethal front yard, and I will tell him about the fern and my gay brother and the hole in the wall by my closet and the nightlight I still use in case Yoko returns. She never does, not even on the last night I sit shiva for my husband—the night of Bing and Bowie and mistletoe and reindeer and *It’s a Wonderful Life* and the gold bracelet engraved with my name on the front I will discover in my husband’s coat pocket en route to the hospital, my hand, baptized in his blood, clutching his.

“What color will it be?” I ask Yoko. “The story, I mean.”

She doesn't answer.

My eyes burn. "I think it will be a rainbow."