

Love Me Tender

There is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable.

— Jacques Derrida

A small tabletop truck has come clattering into the car park of the Church of Saint Jerome. It pulls up in front of me blowing a cloud of black exhaust smoke. I'm leaning on my motorbike polishing my camera lens, and I'm wondering where the hell this Carlos is. I wait to see who it might be in the truck.

The passenger door opens and out comes, ever so slowly, a slender ankle in a buttoned boot, a narrow little boot of black leather, and this impossibly fine foot hovers for a moment before finding its way to the ground. Then another boot appears, and the bride alights in a sudden glossy shower. She is gorgeous. She is dressed in white silk, with lace. In her hair is a circlet of tiny white flowers. She is perfect except for one thing: when she turns, I see she has a black eye.

The priest is at the church door; the cassock is flapping on him this wintry morning. Through the doors I can see women in coloured hats nodding together in the pews. The driver of the smoky truck is a potato-faced old man in a black suit. I ask him if he is the Carlos who arranged the photographs, but he makes a face as if he has eaten something foul and shakes his head. Five old women dressed in black come running rickety-legged down the steps and take the bride from him. Carlos is not coming, the bride calls over her shoulder as they pull her inside the church.

Not coming. So now I have given up my Saturday morning for nothing. To come with my camera to wait for Carlos who is not coming. If I stay and take the pictures, who will pay me? The old surly one? The priest? The crones? It was Carlos who telephoned to arrange everything, Carlos to whom I would hand the bill, and he who would pay me the one hundred and fifty. He gave me no address or telephone number, only said to meet him at the church at ten o'clock. I replace the lens cap and slide the camera back inside its case. It is not too late to go home. My lover might still be asleep, breathing innocent in my bed when I slip in beside him. I decide to give them five more minutes.

But now, here is a car turning the corner and coming towards the church. It must be Carlos and the groom. Carlos is the best man, he will bring the groom. That is his job. But no, there is only a pale boy in a suit, and as he pulls on the handbrake I understand that this is the groom, that everyone is now here, and Carlos is not coming.

I am about to turn away when I notice the bride and groom standing at the church door, and they are looking at each other in a way I could not describe. I decide that I want my camera to explore this look, and my hand unzips the camera case.

Love Me Tender

As I lift the viewfinder to my eye I am thinking, well, Carlos will contact me, and when he does he will be welcome to the pictures, and he will also be welcome to give me the one hundred and fifty for my trouble. In these times one cannot always be giving, giving, giving. I have my own life's complications.

I follow the bride and groom inside the church. He goes alone to the altar and she vanishes into an anteroom with wooden doors. He is tall and fine-backed as if he would be a good dancer. But how pale he is! The guests all keep twisting around and looking over their shoulders for the bride. I stand ready at the back, holding my camera.

The music starts with a jolt. The groom stands stiff and the bride appears from the anteroom holding onto the old man's arm. She has pulled a white veil completely over her head. I take a picture of them as they begin their journey along the aisle. When they reach the front the old man gives a little shrug and leaves the bride with the priest and the groom. Then he moves away to the side where he stands staring at the floor. It's always the men dealing the women out among each other. Everything is symbol and image, my lover once told me; we humans, we are like that.

The groom has a pointed beard and moustache like a young conjuror, and his face is heart-shaped. He faces the shrouded woman. She is like a big white surprise parcel. In her hands are six or seven oversized white roses, so large they droop from their stems. The music swells, eases and dies, then there is only the sound of everyone breathing. I start to move towards the front but one of the old women seizes my elbow and whispers, You, make sure the pictures are of the good side only. I go to shake her fingers off - they are hard like claws. But she won't let go until I say yes. Yes, I say, okay. I feel like asking in a sarcastic way if she is the Carlos who is paying the one hundred and fifty for the photographs. But I don't; she is just old and anxious, and there is nothing wrong about wanting a bride to look her best in her photographs.

In the apse there is a statue of Mary crying. These churches are such dramatic, such unquiet places. The priest is talking (what is he saying?) and the guests are distracted, peering across the aisle at each other, examining their cuffs and whispering to their neighbours. The priest drones on softly as if it is a secret business. I can't hear well in this rustling whispering place. I think I must be going deaf. The priest's hair is dyed burgundy red but his beard is grey. It looks quite unnatural. He asks them each if they take the other and they say yes in tiny awed voices. The groom takes a ring from his pocket. Suddenly it's done. The ring is on her finger and it's too late, and everyone shifts in their seats, not sure whether to clap or stand or pray, and the world is now different. Now he is hers, she is his and all must be forgiven.

He lifts the veil up over her head and they kiss. I raise my camera. They are looking into each other's faces with a kind of alert composure, and as I press the shutter I think that with such a gaze they have no illusions, these two.

Love Me Tender

By now I am thinking that this event can never be repeated, and I keep taking pictures from various, shall I say, fortunate angles as they all spill out of the church. I notice the old one is keeping a strict eye on me.

Come with us, says the bride to me, the reception is at the Motel Casa Grande. So I follow them up the road on my motorbike with the camera hanging around my neck and the yellow town dogs snapping at my legs.

The reception is in a courtyard overhung with hibiscus and frangipani. While the old ones are busy with the food, my lens is free. When I look at the bridal couple I cannot help thinking about my lover. When he is over me he has the face of a beloved old lion. Beneath me he has the smile of an impulsive teenage boy. I wore Plum Luck lipstick one time, just once the whole year, and I caught his eye. Now I can't stop wondering what I would do. Would I forgive?

At first I think it's my imagination. The bride and groom keep turning their faces towards me and standing very still. I think they want me to take a photograph of the black eye. Take it, I think they are saying, go on. They don't speak to me. Here they come sidling up again, staring into the camera with their heads touching. They are grave for a young bridal couple. I take the pictures.

I have been told the only thing we can ever do in life is forgive and forgive and forgive. But it is the most difficult thing. I try to imagine staying with my lover for another day if he lifted his hand to me. No, it would not be enough for him to say it is part of our culture, or that he had no control over himself. I'm sure I would not forget. How could I? And if it happened once, surely it could happen again.

Until now, I have never thought about any of this.

But in any case, he wouldn't. He is my gentle, my considerate lover.

The wedding lunch appears and it is excellent. There's a suckling pig and fried fish and trays of stuffed peppers and cases of good wine. The cake will be discussed for months. The guests seem to be from all over, and I hear several languages being spoken. There are moments when I don't understand what anyone around me is saying at all. I don't mind this as I am concentrating with my camera.

The band starts and soon everyone is dancing except the old ones, who turn their chairs and sit tapping their feet. The band has a conga player, two guitarists, and a bass player with a scarred old upright bass; he is also the singer. They are playing old American pop songs from the sixties and seventies but with a kind of mariachi feel, and they do harmonies well. Love Me Tender. Dream Baby. *You're too good to be true, can't take my eyes off-a-you.* Some of the guests are a little drunk. They dance with a violent joy, reefing each other around against the music, which is light and happy.

One couple dances on the edge of the crowd, holding each other close, and they move together absorbed in their own frame, her forehead touching his cheek. There is nothing yet to forgive there, I think, and they will go to sleep in each other's arms tonight. With other couples I see a history of grievances and forgiveness,

Love Me Tender

and more will be required soon. Marriage, I see, is a business of continuing forgiveness, again and again, then again.

Some of the couples are dancing the lambada. Although it is said to be a sexy dance, they give it a mechanical look, as if they are good with the steps but without love. I am wondering more about love now. I imagine myself with a black eye. The bride and groom only speak to each other in whispers. It is the veiled world of a man and a woman, all the invisible capitulations and pledges, the thousand articles of faith. Who am I to say what she should do? What if it was my lover, and me with the eye? But I know he would never do that. He would not express himself that way, not with violence. He is always kind. A new thought comes: how then would he show anger, and would I be hurt, and would we forgive? To hit another person is to lay all your cards out on the table. It is to say, this punch is what I am ultimately capable of: here it is. Neither my lover nor I know yet what the other is capable of. We are untested.

Dream baby, got me dreamin' sweet dreams, the whole day through. Dream baby got me dreamin' sweet dreams, night time too. There's a tight little drum beat and they really are singing some good harmonies. I take a glass or two of wine and dance with the men but I don't look into their eyes. I'm thinking about my lover's eyes, which, when he first opens them in the morning, remind me of warmed sapphires in light. I'm thinking about how gentle and brave he is. I am thinking if he asked me to marry him I would say Yes, I will marry you, even though we are untested.

The light is changing and the hibiscus leaves make cool shadows on the brick wall. I have drunk too many glasses of the sweet wine and I'm not sure anymore what I have in my camera. It's been a long wedding day. The band is packing up their instruments and the guests are picking over the cake crumbs and searching under the tables for their hats and coats.

The bride and groom come over as I am zipping up my leather jacket for the motorbike. I wish them luck. We stand quietly for a few moments. I am not a meddler (I leave that work to others) but I know they can see my question. He was frightened, the bride tells me. He has promised never to do it again, she says. He was afraid about me and his cousin Carlos, that there was something, but now he knows there is nothing to worry about. This was the only time; he will never do it again, she says. The groom nods, wordless as she tells me these things. She seems sure. I hope things will go all right for them. I don't know. It is a serious thing.

I take one more picture in this very gentle light. She is a great beauty, and his face is pale and heart-shaped. I have read that a promise is our only defence against the unpredictability of the future. I have also read that forgiveness is our only way of undoing the past. It is not saying what happened was all right. It is saying: of my own free will, I reverse your deed. But maybe life is the one that needs pardoning. Sometimes when I think about what there is to forgive, I don't know where to turn my eyes, and I look at the ground.

Love Me Tender

The truth is, I'm not sure if it's always possible. But that afternoon, when I return from the wedding, when I find my lover waiting in my garden, I tell him Yes. I hold him tight and I say, if I was yours and you were mine, I would try to forgive the unforgivable — in you, in myself, and in life.

That Carlos telephones me the day after the wedding. He will come to collect the photos soon, he says, and will give me the hundred and fifty. He had been unfortunately detained in hospital on the wedding day, he says, otherwise he would of course have been there.