

The Smell of Lavender

Gina Reitenauer

1966

The eggs are as cold and flakey as the wooden table they are sitting on, the blueberry tea beside it just as stale. Yet in a vase that sits at the center, a few lively stems of lavender can be seen stretching upward. Hanging off the table's edge is one of several notes strewn about the quaint Maine cottage, each containing words of appreciation or announcements similar to this particular one, indicating the scribe went to get milk. It's the same serene scene every morning, all waiting for Charlotte's arrival from the bedroom.

A pair of pale green eyes stares blankly at the sea through a glass door, studying the way some waves flutter like tickling hands, yet others crash with force. The eyes belong to a man whose cotton shirt currently clings to his ribs with each unsteady breath. There's no sign of life about him except for a slight shaking sensation in his hands. *Don't think of her.*

His left hand presses the metal rim gently against his temple.

His thumb teeters among the trigger, contemplating it, feeling its texture as if it enamors him. Perhaps it does. One click and it's over. Just one quick motion. The simplicity is almost brilliant. He swallows. A gentle wind shuffles through an open window. A shudder.

Then the smell of lavender, blown over from the kitchen table.

A gasp. He can still see the curve of her lips as she admires the flower nearly 50 years ago. Abruptly, the man is almost in tears. It's as if he can see her.

His left hand is defiant, keeping the metal rim in its place. But the entire world is still. Frozen. He *can* see her. She is right in from of him. Yet the man keeps his eyes to the ground. He

doesn't even have to look at her to remember. Crisp cheekbones, covered in her warm, pink complexion, always making her seem flushed. A gentle, almost awkwardly upward-tilted nose. Honey curls that flutter about her shoulders. That porcelain look to her skin, even around the elbows and knees. *It's you.*

“Ch...” A pause, his dry tongue needing a moment to remember the sound it so often used to sing. “Charlotte.”

The man wobbles forward, as if needing to push himself with each step, but he keeps his head down. Once in front of her, he is hesitant and careful about putting a hand to her cheek, as if he fears bringing the smell of the gun and the closeness of death to such a lovely creature. *It can't be you. Not now. Not after all this time.* And then her fingers are around his. The man gasps, grimaces, still not looking at her, and she lifts his unoccupied hand, running it along those crisp cheekbones. The metal rim is still against his temple.

But finally, their eyes meet. And suddenly, they are young again.

-

1921

The shaking, melancholy man transforms back into an equally lonely, but bright, young man. He sits at a table, diligently taking notes and reading over what appears to be a boring work document. A small scribble on the manila folder in front of him marks the owner: Robbie Gwinnit. He's focused despite the blues blaring from the live band, engulfing the minds around him. Dancing, glasses clinking, heels hitting the glossed-over hardwood, drunken laughter, merriment. Bud's Marina, an old bar and restaurant on the wharf that doesn't usually see more than two or three townsfolk at once since prohibition came into play, is alive – a night of

celebration for hard-working accountants. It's the end of what they call "busy season," and to celebrate, Bud's letting them share in his stash of imported Canadian spirits.

The man glances up every now and then, brushing his jet-black hair from his face. Perhaps he's clearing his line of sight as he spots a young woman with honey colored curls skirt her way through the crowd, making rounds. Some smile and partake in whatever festivities of conversation the woman offers. Others shake their heads *no* or just seem plainly uninterested. Robbie watches as the woman wanders up to a middle-aged man with a leather jacket, a cigarette in his mouth, and torn jeans. A glint catches his eye as the man rocks side to side, a poor replacement of a dance. It's a delicate, silver chain that hangs out of his pocket, seemingly unintentionally. Robbie wanders if it's another woman's. *You've talked to that one already love.* Almost as if hearing his thoughts, the young woman looks to the side, catching Robbie's eyes on her. He immediately looks down, focusing his attention back on his work.

"Robbie!" A sigh. The young man glances at his seemingly always drunk boss.

"Yes Mrs. Trunket?"

"Whatterya doin' work here for?" Sherri Trunket keeps her balance by leaning on the shoulder of her jolly-but-not-as-drunk husband, a bottle of Spanish wine sloshing in her other hand as she gestures. "You are at a *celebration*. Look around you son! There are thousands of women here!"

"Not thousands Mrs. Trunket." Robbie briefly averts his eyes to the crowd, a sea of suit pants and bare legs.

"Enough. Go find one to dance with. I mean if she lets you of course. But she will." The woman winks. "You've always had nice hands." The woman's husband gives Robbie a sideways look and Robbie shrugs. They both know Sherri has had a little too much sherry. Her husband

smiles and nods at Robbie before pulling his tipsy wife away. Robbie sighs. *Great. Now I'll get to sit there awkwardly listening to sobered Sherri apologize to me for drunk babbling and making her husband think she has reason to have an opinion about my hands.*

Robbie looks back at his work, then quickly back up, scanning the room. As if searching for something and not being able to find it, he sighs before looking down again. The minutes pass as happy couples and co-workers dance the evening away around him. Despite the occasional glance and muttering under the breath that naturally follows, they carry on as if hardly noticing Robbie is even there.

-

“Excuse me! Robbie right?” Startled, Robbie looks up. Who would want to talk to him?

He finds the pretty woman with the honey curls standing right in front of him, holding a small glass of beer. “Hi.” *Oh my god.* “Um... I... I'm sorry but I do not know your name.”

“Charlotte.”

“If you don't mind me asking, how do you know mine?”

“Sherri Trunket told me.” The woman gives him a knowing smile. *Of course she did.*

“Well I would not take anything she says too seriously. She's had way too much Sherry. She made it sound like her and I had some love affair right in front of her husband.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not!” Almost insulted she would even think so, Robbie laughs. “Must be mixing me up with some other guy.”

The two share a smile and Charlotte nods, “Mind if I sit down for a second? These heels are killing me.” Robbie gestures an *okay*. Charlotte sits and Robbie blinks, swallows. His hands are fiddling around with his work papers.

“God I love lavender.” Charlotte reaches out to a stalk of lavender in the centerpiece and runs it between her fingers. “It’s just such a lovely scent.” Robbie smiles, unsure how to respond, or whether he’s even supposed to. “Have you ever smelled it? I like to sit a vase of fresh lavender on my kitchen table, and I love the way it so subtly wafts over, as if sneaking up on me, and yet it’s a scent unable to be missed.” *Her words are like poetry.*

-

1933

The funeral home is bland, but the vases of lavender lining the room give the space color. The ceremony is about to begin as guests step out of their vehicles to pay their respects. A man wearing lobster-shaped cufflinks paces around back inside. He walks up to one of the vases of lavender and runs a stem through his finger with a sigh. He puts his hands back in his pockets but doesn’t move from the spot even as people begin filing in and taking their seats. Not even when he hears light footsteps approaching.

She stands beside him now, a shawl around her shoulders. It’s a pale robin’s egg blue, not too bright to stand out against her black attire. “Robbie, I’m so sorry dear.” An older woman with wrinkles now creasing her face, specifically her eyes, offers brief consolation before embracing the grief-stricken man.

“Thanks Sherri,” he replies.

-

Now the guests have arrived and they ask him to give the eulogy. Robbie’s face doesn’t quite show a stunned expression; it’s merely expressionless.

“Did he hear him?” A man’s whisper, back and too the left, snakes through the pews. *Yes.*

“Young man,” the funeral director addresses him again.

When Robbie still doesn't answer, the stillness of the room fades into a quiet stir interwoven with murmurs and repositioning, such as the uncrossing of legs.

"Robbie," the voice that calls him now comes from an older woman whose greyed hair once shown bright like wheat on sunny day. Like *honey*. Her eyes aren't the same color though. "Are you okay?"

Robbie doesn't turn to face her but at least he lifts his head. He stares into the distance in a manner that, from afar, it might actually appear as though he's looking at the conductor. "My sincere apologies, but," he pauses, takes a breath before finishing the thought, "I didn't prepare a eulogy ma'am." *How could I sum it all up in a few minutes worth of words?* The stirring becomes more pronounced now. *The words won't bring her back.*

-

1921

"I'm sure I've smelled it here or there before." Robbie answers Charlotte, who nods an *of course*. Now she awkwardly fiddles with the brim of her dress. "So what brings you here? I've never seen you around the office." At least not that he can remember, and he figured he'd remember her.

"I work for the *Kennebunkport News*. Local economy is my beat right now. And I mean this is an accounting party, you guys handle money, this place is a town staple but can hardly keep its doors open..." Charlotte shrugs. "Thought hey maybe I should come. See what the guests think, see if this little gathering helps get the word out about Bud's."

"Where's your notebook?"

"What do you mean?"

“Aren’t you supposed to record the things people say?” This comes out much more accusingly than Robbie intended. Charlotte does not seem to take it that way. She absentmindedly takes a sip of wine and shakes her head *no*.

“I mean yeah, but I don’t. I have a photographic memory.” Her voice is small but confident, strained over the loudness of the blues and the people.

“Does that not mean you remember things you see, not hear?” *Goddamnit*.

But she’s still not really offended. “Well it kind of works with any type of information I guess,” Charlotte explains and Robbie nods, unsure where to take the conversation next. After a moment of silence, Charlotte looks around, as if to make sure no one is eavesdropping. “Between you and me, I also really want to take over this place someday.”

Robbie’s glad he didn’t lose whatever *in* he was trying to get with her. “Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I grew up coming here with my Dad.” Charlotte looks away, a little uneasy now. “He used to know Bud. They were friends when they were kids.” She gestures with her hands but still doesn’t meet Robbie’s eyes. “We always joked about what if tourists somehow found out about the place and then came flooding in. Ever since he died, I’ve just wanted make that happen. It’s so sad to see it all falling apart.” Only now do her calm hazel eyes meet his pale green ones.

-

1925

After the recent succession of thunderstorms the past few days, the sun is beaming down on Kennebunkport as if saying hello. Illuminated by its rays, the sailboat wobbles gently across the waves, a slight rocking back and fourth as the water calms itself from the storms. Overall, the coast is calm despite the flurry of water-goers claiming their spot on the sea.

Robbie is sitting across from Charlotte, who wears a pale pistachio-colored summer dress in complement to the off-white sail. On their laps are sandwiches; between them, a picnic basket. They look as though they could be currently posing for a photo shoot gathering pictures for a magazine or tourist brochure.

“I just don’t see why we can’t buy it,” Charlotte’s tone is level and calm despite her insistence. Robbie looks slightly exasperated. *God you’re killing me with this, love.*

“Char, it’s not that we can’t. In fact the timing is probably perfect right now, with the rumors going around that Bud’s been looking for buyers and all... I just don’t think it’s the best choice for us.” He pauses before adding, “especially not if we want to start a family,” although he doesn’t look at his wife as he says it.

Charlotte nods, takes a bite of her sandwich, and looks away. “I know. I just wish you’d consider it. It’s not that I haven’t thought it through or that I don’t see how difficult it might be. But you know how important this is to me.”

“I know, I know. I just...” Robbie trails off. He sighs. *I have to say it.* “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“What do you mean?” Charlotte seems confused. *I wonder if it’s ever even crossed her mind. The fact that it might fail.*

“Okay so we buy Bud’s and people come and it’s a hit and we live a happy life. But what if we buy it and we can’t get it off the ground any more than Bud? Don’t you think he knows a thing or two about running the place?” Robbie takes a breath, keeping his voice calm, not wanting to upset her. “I’m just worried we’d be way in over our heads. We don’t know a thing about managing a place like that.”

“Well we could learn couldn’t we? We can take classes, read books.” She’s talking with her hands. Robbie contemplates how back in the day she might have been fidgeting with the hem of her dress or her sandwich wrapper. But she’s more confident with him now.

“I just don’t want you to be upset if it doesn’t work out. If we never actually try, we can at least imagine it might.”

“Well that’s a very pessimistic outlook Robbie.” If Charlotte’s upset, her tone doesn’t reveal it. It’s more stoic, like it always is when she’s trying to hide that she isn’t particularly happy. But Robbie knows better. *I’m sorry.*

“You just like to look at life with pure hope in your eyes and I try to keep you away from anything that could shatter that.”

-

Weeks go by and the waves continue to be amped up by the storms only to have to calm down again. Charlotte’s briefly dropped hints here and there about Bud’s, but for the most part, if she’s thought about it, she’s kept any daydreaming to herself since that picture perfect day on the sailboat.

Robbie walks into the kitchen with his satchel slung over his shoulders. Looking up from a pile of interview notes and article revisions, Charlotte smiles at the sight of him. She hops up and flutters over to give him a kiss.

“Hi,” their greeting is warm as always despite whatever the air is between them, but Robbie is certain he can make it even warmer with what’s about to come. He pulls a slim bunch of papers out of his bag and hands them to Charlotte. She reads them over, at first apathetic. And then the glee begins to warm her face like the sun. She’s beaming.

“Robbie! You...” Her voice is a mixture of speech and laughter- the ingredients of a pleasant surprise. “Ah! Oh my god!” Her arms are around him as she jumps up and down. “We bought Bud’s!” She cheers.

-

The walls of Bud’s are made of a rich wood, just like the now empty bar. The tables are black and polished. The walls are adorned with portraits of unknown faces, light fixtures, framed paintings of mountains and seas. Doors lining the seaside wall that once opened out onto a deck are closed. A small stage sits in the center.

“God I forgot about the stage. I think Bud put a rug over it and used it as that raised platform for tables.” Now Charlotte mutters under her breath, “God knows he didn’t need any more tables.” Robbie laughs. She continues, “But back when I came here with my Dad, that’s where the blues music would have come from, and it would have been every night. Not just special occasions.” Charlotte is giddy as she and Robbie make their way through their new project, a book titled *How to Make it in the Restaurant Business* peaking out of her bag.

-

1927

Few changes have been made to Bud’s. Most of the layout and fixtures are still the same, a tribute to a place held special in the buyer’s heart. Even much of the staff is the same, despite some new additions. The main change is the stage: it’s back. Tonight, the band’s music courses among the room of chatter and waiters and entrees. Bud’s is alive.

Charlotte is weaving her way through the tables, hurrying over to Robbie, who’s standing behind a small hostess booth.

“We did it!” She kisses him on the cheek and stands beside him, but only briefly before scurrying off again.

Robbie smiles genuinely as he takes phone calls and hands out menus.

“Wow! Looks like a successful opening night!” One woman exclaims.

Robbie laughs humbly. “Indeed.”

“You’re not Bud are you?”

“No ma’am. But I suppose I am one of the one’s who’s taken his place.”

The woman laughs and shuffles her feet. “I knew you couldn’t be! If he was still that young then I’d only be twenty!” Robbie laughs too, a laugh that sounds almost like relief. *We did it.*

1966

His left hand presses the metal rim gently against his temple.

Somewhat diagonal of Robbie, hanging on the fridge, is the latest in a string of offers from realtors and dreaming chefs. Once he and Charlotte got Bud’s back up and running again, it quickly became a tourist destination, bringing in the sons and daughters of the parents who used to stop by during their summer vacations. She’d brought it back to life just as she’d hoped. Even the shops and small town of Kennebunkport were benefitting from the influx of travelers during the warmer months.

If it weren’t for the stock market crash a few years later, life might have continued on that way for Charlotte and Robbie. And all of Kennebunkport for that matter. But a town that relies on tourism is sometimes flimsier than its people hope.

How do you respond to a stranger telling you about the dreams they have in honor of their death father? “I am sorry.” *Say more, more idiot.* But if Charlotte is fazed, she doesn’t show it. She simply brushes him off.

“It’s fine.” *No it isn’t.* Charlotte puts a huge smile on her face, as if trained in keeping an animated demeanor. “So what brings you here Robbie?”

“I live next door.” He nods as he says it. “Oh and I’m an accountant.” *Obviously.* But he says this as if he’s the only one, as if the party wasn’t made for him and his co-workers. He and Charlotte share a laugh.

“Hey, I was thinking of taking a walk and, um, putting my feet in the water. I could use a little fresh air. Care to join me?”

Robbie looks down at the work papers before him. He remembers Sherri Trunket’s criticism of his anti-social tendencies and acknowledges the knots he feels in his stomach whenever he looks at beautiful Charlotte, as well as the knowledge that something else stupid will inevitably come out his mouth. He hesitates, and then he gets a whiff of her perfume. It smells like lavender. And now Robbie smiles, “Sure.”

Charlotte reaches her hand out. *Great, my hands are still all clammy.* Robbie looks up once more at the woman standing in front of him and grabs her hand. She pulls him gently through the crowd of sweating, celebrating bodies. They’ve all had too much to drink. Robbie feels the crunch of broken glass under his foot. *I thought this was supposed to be a formal event?* He looks down as he’s pulled along, contemplating his own ironed black suite, paisley, tucked-in shirt, straight, crisply folded black tie, and of course he couldn’t forget the lobster-shaped. His

eyes shift up, falling naturally to where her shimmering, coral-colored dress gives way to Charlotte's back. A small shadow is casting just above the dip of her spine where her dress ends. Her shoulder blade as her arm extends behind her. A wispy lock of hair coming loose from her tied-up curls. *Good God she is beautiful.* As if reading his thoughts, Charlotte gives him an over-the-shoulder smile.

They step out into the fresh air and Charlotte inhales, slowly breathing it in like a balloon. "Think Bud's out of his infamous imported liquor yet?"

Robbie laughs, a mixture of politeness and amusement. "Not a chance. It's his daily crutch."

Charlotte laughs. "Why's the man so obsessed with sherry anyway?"

"God knows. But I have to give him credit for finding a supplier of Spanish wine in Canada."

Charlotte laughs. "Valid point." She seems to look Robbie up and down, as if studying him, then gives a polite smile. "I can't tell whether you're intimidated by me or think I talk too much."

He looks away. *Guess there's no reason to hold back...* Now meeting her eyes, both insistent and nervous, "Oh I certainly do not think you talk too much."

Charlotte's cheeks become a deeper rose color as she steps forward and takes Robbie's hand. The chemistry they had both been suppressing, unsure of whether or not the other felt it too, seems somewhat more real now, more valid. And again she pulls him along. They stumble around the side of *Bud's* and Charlotte picks up her speed, nearly bringing them to a run as she hops along the dewy rocks leading down the bluff. Robbie's slick work shoes struggle to keep him upright.

“So what’s your daily crutch?” Charlotte is yelling above the sound of their feet and the approaching waves.

“Huh?” His breath is shallow from the run.

They finally reach the landing and are on the shore. The only competing sound is the gentle whisper of the sea in the night. “Your daily crutch. Bud’s is alcohol. What is yours?” Charlotte repeats herself.

“Hm.” Robbie contemplates this for a moment. “I don’t really know. Sailing maybe?”

“You sail?” Charlotte’s eyes are glowing like the reflection of the moon on the water.

Robbie is smitten by the cuteness of her enthusiasm. “Yeah. My parents were big sailors. Raced in competitions. It’s how they met back in the day.”

“Wow. That’s something I’ve never learned to do, and for this town I almost think that makes me an outsider.”

Robbie smiles and briefly bites his lip before speaking. “Well, maybe I could take you out for a spin sometime? It looks hard but you get the hang of it pretty fast.” *For a spin?*

Charlotte looks surprised at the invitation. *Jesus did I just ask her out?* “I would quite like that,” she replies. *Okay.*

“And what about you? What’s your fascinating crutch?”

“Oh it’s not nearly as interesting as sailing. The first thing that comes to mind is breakfast food,” Charlotte answers and Robbie laughs. “And fresh blueberry tea in the summer. I’ve always been a tea drinker but once I found blueberry I fell in love. I was always too stubborn to drink it, seeing it as more of a tourist thing, but it’s actually delicious. In fact it pairs greatly with breakfast.” Charlotte joins in the giggling typical of two people who’ve just met and are intrigued by the other. Robbie is fascinated by her ability to laugh at herself, despite the fact that

they are laughing at something very nonchalant. He probably would have been fascinated by anything she said.

“Well hey you know what they say about love... you know right away,” he says this as if trying to justify something, then admits, “I’ve never really been a big fan of tea.” His fingers are still intertwined in hers, his thumb now running along the back of her hand. *Too much too fast?* “Maybe I’ll have to give it another try.” Her fingers play around with his too.

-

1930

It’s a foggy morning out on the bluff. Charlotte is sitting at the table with a half-eaten plate of eggs in front of her, as well as a cup of still-steaming, fresh Maine blueberry tea. Robbie’s side of the table looks about the same. They aren’t talking much, and Charlotte seems to be picking at her breakfast with her fork more than eating it. Her head rests on her arm, her elbow on the table. Robbie takes a sip of the tea.

He swallows, “Ah, hot.” At first it doesn’t even seem like Charlotte heard him.

After some time, she speaks. “You didn’t used to like tea.”

Robbie considers this statement, unsure whether her tone tells him to take it as an insult or a simple fact. “No I did not. But once I started making it for you and giving in to your requests for me to just try it, well what can I say, it grew on me.” Charlotte gives a half-hearted smile and shuffles, taking her elbow off the table. Something about her change of position suggests to Robbie she’s about to say something important.

“Look, Robbie, I don’t want things to be this way. Of course I want our breakfasts to be the perfect way to start the day like they used to be. I hate that half the time we fall asleep without saying a word to each other and wake up the same way. I hate-”

“Char, please, you don’t have to-” Robbie interrupts her.

“No, please let me finish. I need to say this.” Her voice is stronger with each syllable but her eyes avoid his. “I hate that we’ve started knocking before walking into the bathroom if the other’s in the shower. I hate how long it’s been since we’ve gone sailing together and felt the wind upon us, and since we’ve stayed up just talking and laughing at things that aren’t even that funny until four in the morning simply for the sake of not losing any of what we saw as precious time together.” Now Charlotte’s eyes meet his. “I miss you. I miss the way we used to be, the intimacy we always had. I’m sorry.” Her voice gives off an air of defeat. “I just... between Bud’s sinking and my migraines I’m just having a hard time being myself. But...” She seems to lose track of her thoughts and Robbie wonders if saying all she just said took whatever energy she had out of her.

Charlotte. Robbie sighs, reaches across the table, and takes Charlotte’s hand in his. “I know love. I know.” *It’s okay.*

“Thanks for still making me breakfast every morning.”

I just want you to be okay. I’m worried. “I’ll make breakfast for you until the day I die.

-

1921

The two travel the edge of the sea, the waves crawling up to their feet to meet them just briefly before saying goodbye again. Charlotte’s dress billows in the gentle sea breeze, along with the fabric of Robbie’s suit against his back. Charlotte steps into the waves, letting them creep around her ankles, and further. The shins. Now the knees. Although her hands clench her dress just below the waist to hold it up, the water tickles the bottom. Robbie is hesitant to follow

her. She looks back at him, the left side of her face illuminated blue by the moon, and stretches out a hand with that same smile he's already fond of, an invitation for him to join her.

He laughs, gesturing at his attire. "My suit?"

"It's just water." She just lays out the fact. No pressure. Just a simple fact. And she's right.

Robbie gives in. He takes a slow step forward. The water seems to consume his shoes. He had forgotten about the shoes. They were new. But so was she. She was something new.

Charlotte watches him with a smile as he parades out to her in the water, now above both of their knees. She turns to him and takes his hands in hers, looking him in the eye. And then she runs, pulling him even further into the water.

He stumbles. Laughing. And then he splashes her. For a brief moment Robbie is taken aback; Charlotte looks shocked. But then she splashes Robbie back. They continue on this way for a few minutes, enjoying the innocence of an activity so childlike despite their obvious chemistry electrifying the cold water. They struggle to keep their footing against the waves. Falling, now he's on his knees. She's right beside him. Helping him up. But he pulls her down with him and they share another laugh.

Suddenly, Robbie wants to kiss her. But he knows he shouldn't, not yet. But Charlotte, apparently more in the same mindset Robbie thought, lifts her hand out of the water and gently runs it along his face. They stay like this for a moment, and Charlotte lets out a nervous giggle, a joy so innocent Robbie has never seen anything like it. Charlotte's knee slips on the ever-shifting sand floor below her. Robbie catches her, suddenly overcome with the desire to make her laugh like they just had been, to see that incomparable, simple joy he just saw.

Their eyes meet as they kneel in the water. His pale green. Hers hazel. His alive. Hers alive. But are they? His eyes don't falter. They stay locked on Charlotte's, as if drilling holes. But all he sees are 33 years of denial.

She's dead, dead as Bud's after the damn stocks.

-

1933

There's a plate of freshly made eggs on the table, a cup of blueberry tea beside it. Robbie is setting a few stems of lavender into a vase in the center. The breakfast, the lavender, the open window letting in the sea breeze- it's the same serene scene every morning, all waiting for Charlotte's arrival from the bedroom.

Robbie sets a fork and knife on a napkin beside her plate and says "voilà!" *Hopefully it doesn't get cold.* He checks his watch. *She should be coming any minute now.*

But he's impatient. He walks through the quaint little cottage to their bedroom where he finds her tangled up in the sheets. Sunrays peak through the curtains and rest on her cheek, her shoulder, her leg stretching out of the sheets. To an outsider, Charlotte might look unnervingly still, but to Robbie she looks peaceful.

"Char, honey," Robbie whispers to her. She doesn't respond.

Today's the first breakfast Charlotte would miss in nearly a decade.

-

1966

Charlotte.

The smell of lavender. The sea breeze coming in the window. His unsteady breaths.

It's gone.

Notes strewn about the house. Addressed to a deceased lover. Never answered. Fresh eggs everyday, never eaten. Fresh lavender too, never appreciated as much as before. A piece of paper hanging on the fridge – an inquiry from an outsider, a rich man- with all the charisma and assets needed to do the job – looking to buy the Marina, *Bud's*, the one he and Charlotte bought when they were 29. When they were young and in love. When they were hopeful.

But once she was gone so was he. He couldn't move. Couldn't think. Couldn't breathe.
How is anyone supposed to revitalize a bankrupt bar when they can't even breathe?

33 years. The hopelessness of loss.

The metal rim is pressed gently against his temple.

A cotton shirt. A quiet sea breeze through the window. The smell of lavender.

Robbie reaches for her, finding nothing but a void in the space where he swears she just was. He grasps, arms flailing, grasping, and breathing heavy now. Panic, an immense pang of realization, relief, and sorrow. Robbie collapses, wheezing, letting the salt water sting his body. Letting it consume him. Swallow him. *It hurts. It all hurts.* He is lying on the wooden floor of his and Charlotte's old beach cottage. Seventy years old.

His eyes flutter and scan the room, trying to make sense of where he is. A pistol lays flat in his palm to the left, outstretched from his body. Suddenly a foreign object. *She was so full of life.*

Robbie moves his hand, letting the pistol lay, only to find that his cotton shirt is damp. Startled, he moves his hand to the side of his leg. His pants, damp. His lips sting with salt water; his eyes with tears, a result of a memory more vivid and real than the present.

-

1956

The eggs are as cold and flakey as the wooden table they are sitting on, the blueberry tea beside it just as stale. Yet in a vase that sits at the center, a few lively stems of lavender can be seen stretching upward. An old, melancholy man is setting a plate in the sink among others – probably a collection of this week’s leftovers. The drain is clogging up with eggs. She never comes out of the bedroom to eat them. Decades ago, it might have been seen as denial, this daily ritual- the tea, the eggs, the lavender- but now, one might wonder whether Robbie actually thinks she’ll come walking out of the bedroom and sit down to join him.

-

1966

Robbie stands up, letting the pistol lay. He scans the room, his eyes setting on the vase of lavender. It’s as lively as she once was, a symbol of life in the midst of death. *Perhaps, the free spirit she always was, she was set free that day long ago. I have to believe she was. She looked so peaceful.* He sighs, walks over to the ghostly table, and runs a finger through a stem of lavender. *Oh Charlotte.* He glances over to the note on the fridge. *I’ll let go.*

-

Some days pass, but soon enough there’s a knock on the door. Robbie answers.

“Good morning Mr. Gwinnit,” the charismatic rich man addresses him.

“Good morning Sir.” The two shake hands and Robbie gestures with an arm for the man to step inside.

Robbie tells him he’s finally ready to sell *Bud’s*. “But it’s conditional.” He says. “The bar will have a new name. It will be named after Charlotte.”

The buyer nods, “Very well.”

But Robbie isn’t finished. “And it will stay in tact, it’ll still look like Bud’s.”

The stranger bites his lip. “Look, Sir, I know this place is very special to you, and I can hardly even imagine what it must be like to let it go... but I can’t promise it will all remain exactly the same. We’re trying to bring the place back to life, and that might require a bit of updating, renovation, anything of the sort.”

That isn’t the way she wanted it... This isn’t how it’s supposed to be... The man causing Robbie this discomfort doesn’t take his eyes off of him. Perhaps he had been expecting the hesitation. *He’s right though.* Robbie nods slowly, “Right. Of course, of course.”

Now it’s the man who hesitates. “Is that alright?”

Robbie seems to think again for a moment before answering, and likely unrecognizable to the stranger across from him, there’s a hint sadness in his eyes when he finally speaks. “Yes, that’s alright. As long as it’s named after her.”

As long as it’s a memorial. A reminder that sometimes, to hold on, one has to let go.

“Certainly, Robbie.”

A reminder to give in to the subtleties of life. To feel the water on your feet. To let it do its dance around your shins.

To let the sea breeze rumple your suit.