

## The Letter

*Evan Rehill*

She was finishing a letter to her ex-husband as someone began singing opera in the courtyard. Looking up from her typewriter with an arched eyebrow, she opened the window to investigate.

White ashes came pouring from the sky, and the courtyard statuary and potted plants were near buried already. The place looked deserted, but the opera singer continued to flood the courtyard in a gorgeous baritone. Leaning a little out the open window, the white ashes pouring into the natural wave of her white hair, she scanned the windows of the neighboring apartments. But all the curtains had been drawn early against the weather.

She was wearing a sleeveless evening gown and pearls, although she had no intention of leaving the apartment. Perhaps, she thought, someone was

playing a phonograph record beneath a window, for it was that kind of perfect late afternoon, when you could sit on the floor smoking a cigarette and listen to opera as the ashes covered the city.

Some of these white ashes came creeping in the open window, so she closed it silently and went to turn up the gas heater.

In the kitchen she put water on for tea and reentered the living room, settling back to her desk. Outside the afternoon was fading into evening. A subtle shifting was taking place, as the gray light of the sky darkened by degrees into night's absolute blackness; the white ashes remaining superimposed against the changing of the backdrops. She stared at the interior of her apartment, fingering her pearls absent-mindedly. An antiquated grandfather clock stood stoically against one wall, ticking steadily. It had been passed down through generations of her family, along with the upright piano in the far corner, holding sheet music for a Satie piece she loved. The song came back to her as she stared at the notes, across the room, the music lifting and lifting into a great caesura, that silence like a prolonged holding of one's breath, before the single note returned with a pathos so powerful it could force a listener to hold a hand over her heart, or weep uncontrollably, make-up be damned; like a feather falling from great heights that note would come floating down. She looked up above the silence of the piano, searching for that feather, any feather falling, finding only the chandelier, hanging from the vaulted ceiling. There its glass tendrils hovered, like notes ready to descend upon the candelabra below, which sat, waiting to be lit, on the dining room table. Craning her long neck, her eyes settled on the chessboard, which her ex-husband had once carved for her by hand, each piece one of a kind.

She scowled at the chessboard as the tea kettle began to sigh.

Walking through the apartment, her heels click-clacking elegantly across the wood floors. It was a sound that, upon entering the human ear, registered with the staccato melody of class and dignity.

Stopping at the chessboard, the tea kettle whistling in protest, she gazed down at the pieces and pursed her lips. With her hand, bejeweled in sapphires and diamonds, she picked a queen from the set, turning it over and over in her fingers, staring at the piece with such intensity a vein began to pulse in the middle of her broad forehead. The wood was smooth and cool to the touch, the tiny queen elegant, alone and away from the unhappy pawns and jealous

kings. She closed her eyes and then reopened them, fixing her gaze on the kitchen, the slightly curving line of steam she could see ascending into the air, and placed the queen back into its place on the chessboard.

In the kitchen, after turning off the gas burner and preparing her tea, her reflection lit up in the window, a trick in the way the light bounced off the glass, back into the room. And when she looked up she saw herself standing in the kitchen, drinking a cup of tea, its steam rising as the white ashes poured down all around her; onto her shoulders, over the curves of her breasts, into her eyelashes. She sipped from the tea and felt she could taste the elements of the weather outside. And with the same hand with which she had held the queen, she extinguished the kitchen light, watched herself disappear in the window, and moved back to the desk.

Prying the finished letter from the typewriter, she folded the pages carefully inside an envelope.

She remembered a deserted beach on an island she had visited with her ex-husband. She remembered finding a lagoon, and how they had swam into the darkness of it, laughing. The lagoon spilled slowly back out to the ocean, with its waves and never-ending.

She had been young then and knew how one look over a bare shoulder could drive men mad. But she hadn't cared about any of that then, not there in the lagoon with her then husband, himself very young. And when they had crawled out of the inky water he led her to the turtle sanctuary, at the end of the beach. The turtles were so big she was scared, but stood still, in the bluest water she had ever seen, mesmerized by the sight of her husband grabbing onto the shell of one tortoise and swimming away, into the rocks with it.

Looking up at the sky in that moment, not full of ashes but cerulean as the water around her legs, she felt the sun holding her face, her high cheekbones, in its warmth and its light. She knew then, for that moment when she stood on the beach, waiting for her husband to resurface on the tortoise's shell, that this would be something she would look back on later, and that when she looked back she would be sad.

She did not understand this then, did not diagnose her feeling as precient nor mildly clairvoyant. Only vaguely did she recognize that this one fantastic moment would eventually have to shift in its focus; a plane would

slice the sky, shattering the landscape, and her instant would come undone, come unraveling down all around her.

A tear had fallen from those high cheekbones as she came to this conclusion, there on the beach, and standing at the window of her city apartment so many years later, looking out as the white ashes continued falling and falling, she felt the same tear release itself from her memory and cling to her face.

Turning to the chessboard and then again to the window, touching her fingertips to the tear, she realized that the afternoon was over, and the opera singer had gone away.

She thought then about her ex-husband, at this moment undoubtedly putting on an extra coat, or pulling his wool hat with the ear covers over his wild mane of now white hair, smacking his leather gloves against his legs before venturing out into the evening. He had always been a fool that way, dreaming the city was his alone when the ashes started falling, thinking he could avoid being buried in the avalanche.

Exhaling a quick breath, she turned away from the window. She felt a little better now, glad to have finished the letter, although she knew it would remain there on her desk, addressed and sealed, until the weather turned.