

# My Lover Is Dead

*Tilly Wininger*

You and I lay on the last of the summer's sweet grass, ignoring how it tickles our sweat-drenched backs. It feels timeless, the moment, full of a dying sun so warm you can feel your skin buzzing with its heat. Clouds make shapes I've never seen, changing ever so slightly each second they spend dancing across the sky. It's just a memory, a nice one, but I wish I could remember more. I want to remember more of you.

You look beautiful. Coppery hair with freckled cheeks, hazel eyes with pupils so big they swallow the iris like a greedy dusk. Your arms are textured and elbows red from resting on the earth, small red bugs crawling up our limbs and nestling into our skin. This is how it should be, me and you laying with the earth. Together.

But instead, I watch the procession from outside the funeral home, a line of cars with little orange tags that read 'funeral' heading to the after-party. They'll tell stories about you, I'm sure. Funny ones from when you were a kid and ran into walls or sweet ones about your first recital. There won't be a single story about us, though. Nobody knew how close I was to you. I wasn't even invited to your viewing. I saw more of you than anyone else ever had, and still I couldn't be the last to behold you.

I remember one thing more clearly than anything else, that one sentence with teary eyes and shaking hands. Nervous smiles and your teeth chewing skin off your lips. As if I could say anything but yes.

"Will you marry me?" You requested.

You ask of me my hand in marriage, and I had answered yes, of course. I love you. I love you. I love you. That is how I know we must be married. Even in death, when hidden from the ones you loved and the ones I loathed, so far away that not even I can reach you, I will still say yes. The only question was how.

Days pass before I find the idea. It comes to me while holding my head beneath the water in my just-barely big enough tub. We'd showered here, together. I'd washed your hair, you'd scrubbed my back. I found one of your long, ginger hairs on the wall. It broke me, but in all the right ways. Just enough to consider...

What if I could be with you again? All that was left was to exchange our rings. The wedding rings we chose together, just as we would do most everything else for the rest of our lives. Together, together, together. The word sings in my head like a church bell, or a death knell. I can't be sure which. You're practically calling me, whispers of warmth surrounding me as my ears fill with water. When I emerge, I am certain of what I must do.

You picked up gardening a year ago, planted the flowers that pop up each year like clockwork. You explained time and time again that it was the bulb that allowed them to spring up in the same place. I simply credited it to your magic. Your green thumb. I wonder, are you green now? Are you melting into the earth yet? What will your scent become, now that you can't shower with your lilac shampoo and coconut conditioner? What will become of the rest of your bodywash, pomegranate and mango mixing together in a sweet concoction that I used to lather on your skin?

I decide to worry later about belongings, instead focusing on the trowel left in a small pot in my front yard. You had plans to come back here and pack the dirt some more, surrounding a small wildflower planted in a ceramic jug. Your watering can has a cobweb on it. Will you, too? I grab the trowel and begin the descent down the hill. I live next to the graveyard. Or is it a block away? Time doesn't pass the same since you've been gone. You were buried here, maybe in my front yard. One small mercy, you were close.

I wait for the cover of night to kiss my footprints away, covering them with mist that reflects the moonlight. Nobody else knew of us before, they certainly can't now. I pick my way across the graves of other lovers, coming to a stop only when I see your name. My lover. Etched into the stone, a perfect script reading your name and a last name that should have been ours. I begin to dig, nothing but my labored breathing and the sound of crickets chirping in my ears

to disturb the peace. Dirt begins to form in small piles around the perimeter of the grave, and before I can register the pain, my hands are blistered and bleeding from the trowel's rough handle. I continue, the stinging reminding me of your loss, reminding me of why I'm doing this.

For you, who requested marriage. For you *will* be wed.