

The Room
Stella Samuel

"It hasn't changed a bit. Not in twenty years." Melissa ran her hand along the striped bedspread on one of the beds. The same stripes hung from a curtain rod covering a large sliding door. A photograph of the hotel pool hung above both beds, each shot taken from a different direction. In one of the photos, room 217 was centered with the pool in the foreground. The mountains were visible from the balcony of the room in the other photo.

"Yeah, I think that's the same striped bedding we've seen every year," Mark said. "Some things never change. And some things do change."

"I can't believe it's been a year." Melissa sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Mark's waist to her. Resting her head on his hip, she closed her eyes inhaling his scent.

"Melissa."

"Oh, Mark."

Mark pulled her into a standing position and wrapped his arms around her. "I miss you every day. There are three hundred sixty-four shitty days of the year. For twenty years, I've only had one favorite day each year. It's never Christmas with the kids. It's never birthdays. It's never Valentine's Day with my wife. I even got a promotion at work this year. It's always this day. Every year. This day. October ninth. It's my favorite day."

"Well, it's the only day you get to see me. It's my favorite, too," Melissa whispered.

"You're wearing different cologne."

Mark stepped back with his hands wrapped around her tiny wrists. He looked her up and down. "You are as beautiful as ever."

"We get older every year, Mark. I'm getting older. Twenty years is a long time."

"It is. It's so long. And the three hundred sixty-four days until I see you again always feels like an eternity." Mark pulled Melissa back to him holding her tight. "You've changed shampoo. You used to smell like strawberries. What is this? Vanilla?" He ran his fingers through her hair and sighed.

"Kiss me," Melissa whispered. "You haven't kissed me yet."

"I can't, my love. Not this time."

Melissa stepped back looked at Mark. His wrinkles were deep. His head of hair was graying and thinning. His mouth pinched at the corners.

"I'm sorry, Melissa. It's over. It has to be. This has to be the last time we meet here. Once a year for twenty years is a long run."

The room spun under Melissa's feet. The walls, yellowed with age closed in on her. Stains on the carpet below her feet swirled as nausea washed over her.

"I left him," she said. "You've asked me for years to leave him. I did it."

"Please don't lie. Not anymore."

"Just kiss me, Mark."

"No. Melissa. I only showed up today to see your beautiful face one last time. To remember every October ninth for the past twenty years. To tell you I love you. But I cannot kiss you."

Melissa stood. "Every year for twenty years you have convinced me to come back here. To this hotel. To this exact room. Every year, Mark. Every year I have come. I have made love to you, and I have returned back to my life. To my husband and children only to wait until October

again when I can be with you. This year..." She paused placing her hand on her lips as if to stop them from speaking. Sobbing, Melissa sat down on the edge of the bed.

"She knows. Penelope. She knows about us. She knows about you." Mark stepped away. From the sliding door overlooking the pool, he asked, "Melissa? Do you know my wife? Penelope? Do you know her?"

"Of course, I don't know your wife. How would I know your wife? I only know bits and pieces of you. But I've loved you for twenty God damned years, and you won't even kiss me."

"Penelope. My wife's name is Penelope. But she goes by Penny."

"Penny?"

"Yes. Penny." Marked turned to face Melissa. "Last night she left me. She told me she'd been meeting someone in a hotel for the past fifteen years three times a year. She said her lover always picked the same room. Our room, Melissa. Room 217." He turned again looking outside. "Overlooking the pool." Mark wiped a tear from his cheek and sat in the armchair with the same striped pattern as the bedding and curtains. "She was very sorry. She regretted hurting me for fifteen years."

Melissa's face was pale. Her hands gripped a section of stripes on the bedspread.

"Penny?" she whispered.

"Yes. She plans to be here tomorrow. October tenth. Funny, I would arrive home the morning of the tenth with your strawberry scent all over me. That day she always left. I'd stay home with our children filled with thoughts of you. She'd return to me the next day. I'd still smell your sweet strawberry scent."

"Penny?"

"Penelope. But yes, you have known her, in this room, for the past fifteen years, as Penny. She loves you, Melissa. You didn't take me. You took my wife."