

FROM

The Last September

BY NINA DE GRAMONT



Because I am a student of literature, I will start my story on the day Charlie died. In other words, I'm beginning in the middle. *In medias res*, that's the Latin term, and though my specialty is American Renaissance poetry, I did have to study the classics. Homer, Dante, Milton. They knew about the middle, how all of life revolves around a single moment in time. Everything that comes before leads up to that moment. Everything that comes afterward springs from that moment.

In my case, that moment—that middle—is my husband's murder.

WHEN I LOOK BACK NOW, it hurtles toward us like a meteor. But at the time we were too wrapped up in our day-to-day life to see it. Charlie and I lived in a borrowed house by the ocean. Our daughter, Sarah, was fifteen months old. September had just arrived, emptying the beaches at the very moment they became most spectacular: matte autumn sunlight and burnished eel grass. Cape Cod Bay was dark enough to welcome back seals but warm enough for swimming, at least if you were Charlie. He made a point of swimming in the ocean at least one day every month, including December, January, and February. I used to joke that he was part dolphin.

But this was late summer, and unseasonably warm. You didn't need to be a dolphin to go swimming, and on Charlie's last day he had already been in the water by the time Sarah woke up from her morning nap. At eleven thirty, he carried her into the extra bedroom I used as a study. If I'd run my hand through his hair, I would have felt the leftover grit of salt water. But I didn't run my hand through his hair because I was too angry. I was generally angry at Charlie that fall, and it didn't help, his tendency to wander into

the room where he knew I was trying to work. Sarah still wore nothing but a diaper, and obviously not a clean one. Between jobs since his restaurant failed, Charlie had spent the morning working on reshingling the house, which belonged to his father. Like Sarah, he was half naked; he wore khaki shorts and no shirt. Ignoring my pointed glance, he lay down on the worn, woven rug, crossing his long legs at the ankles. His curly blond head rested on his hands with his elbows pointing toward the ceiling. Sarah squatted about six inches away, her gaze focused on her father, concentrating in that intense toddler way—almost as if she knew these hours constituted her last chance to see him alive. Remembering that look, I like to think of Charlie’s face imprinting itself on her subconscious, the memory as intrinsic as the strands of his DNA. Sarah was a thoughtful child who already had an impressive vocabulary—twenty words that she said regularly, more popping up here and there. But she was slower to walk. She hadn’t begun crawling until past her first birthday; she often stood up on her own, her face scrunched in a grimace as if she were *planning* to walk, but she had yet to risk a step.

I sat at my desk, reading a collection of Emily Dickinson’s letters to her sister-in-law. My dissertation was on these letters, their hidden code. Charlie had promised to watch Sarah but instead was letting his parenting time spill into mine—lounging with only one halfhearted eye on his daughter. I tried not to move my eyes from the text. If I indulged in my usual gaze out at Cape Cod Bay, it might imply availability. I’d spent the early morning with Sarah and would have her again in the afternoon. Now was the time for Charlie to remove himself and our child from my work space. Staring down with unnatural concentration, I marked a line that I had already underlined many times, grooves surrounding it so deeply that you could almost read a sentence on the next page through the wear. *Sue, you can stay or go.* I dragged my pen beneath it, drew another large star in the margin, then put down my pen and sighed.

Just as Charlie raised his eyes to mine, Sarah teetered to her feet. She pushed up with one hand on the teepee of her father’s crooked elbow. Then she let go, picked up one bare foot, and stepped closer to him. I pushed my book aside. This was the moment I’d been waiting for, checking milestone charts, harassing the pediatrician.

“Did she just take a step?” I asked, as if I hadn’t seen it myself.

Sarah broke into a smile. Her fat little legs began to shake with the effort. Charlie and I froze as she lifted her foot to step again, then collapsed in a triumphant, diapered heap on his chest.

“Step,” Sarah said, her voice filled with the finality of the achievement, and the prospect of a new world of movement.

Charlie got to his feet and swooped Sarah over his head in one fluid motion, so her white curls grazed the exposed beams of the sloped, second-story ceiling. Two identical pairs of blue eyes smiled at each other. Everywhere Sarah and I went people asked, “Is she yours?” assuming I must be the small, dark-eyed nanny.

With a smile that mirrored his rosy mirror self, Charlie pretended to take a congratulatory bite out of Sarah’s cheek. Not a giggler, she didn’t laugh, but just looked quietly and enormously pleased. Clearly she understood her accomplishment and all that it presaged. She had spent months thinking it through, and finally the road lay passable before her. We cheered, Charlie bringing her down to his chest so I could step in for a family hug. His bare skin felt warm against my forearms. Sarah’s spicy baby scent bonded the three of us into a single entity. We could hear the flutter and chirp of swallows outside our open window as they staged for their journey south. The Saturday Cove church bells chimed the half hour, mingling with the salty breeze off the ocean. Our home’s musty disrepair transformed, as it sometimes did, into something almost magical.

“My God,” Charlie said. “I love you so much.”

He squeezed his hand at my waist, a degree of fervency, as if he had something to prove to me. So I said the only possible thing, reflecting the dominant, if not sole, emotion: “I love you, too.”

Charlie kissed my forehead. And Sarah—who deeply approved of any kind of affection—put one hand on her father’s bare shoulder and one hand on my T-shirted breast. Then she laughed.

I hope I’m not just being charitable toward myself but am remembering correctly, because it seems to me now that in that moment, I thought: if Charlie left for work every morning in a coat and tie, we might have enough money to pay our bills or move out of his father’s summer house. But we wouldn’t have been in the same room, all together, to witness Sarah’s long-awaited first step.

And that moment is what should have remained of the day—happy and indelible, an entry in a pale pink baby book. If the phone hadn't rung two hours later, I never would have known to regret using up our luck so early. When I think about the rest of that day, and how it unfolded, there are too many stretches of time that would require rewriting, if ever the chance presented itself: to do everything over again.

I WAS AT THE POST OFFICE when Eli called Charlie. All traceable moments were carefully detailed later, in police reports, so I know that at the precise instant the phone rang back at the Moss house, I was standing in the vault of mailboxes staring at a postcard from Ladd Williams. Sarah had one sticky hand wound into my hair and she stared down at the note intently, as if she could read it, too. Ladd had funny, distinctive handwriting—all sharp angles and cubes. I recognized it without having to look at the signature.

I turned the card over. On the front was a picture of a toucan. *Honduras*, it read, under the bird's otherworldly green, red, and blue beak. *Todo Macanudo*. Ladd had gone there with the Peace Corps, but apparently he was back—the card was postmarked Saturday Cove. The note, which I'd already memorized, read: *Dear Brett. Staying at my uncle's cottage. He has some books you used to want, you can stop by to borrow if you like. Best wishes, Ladd.*

I closed our box, leaving the rest of the mail—bills we couldn't pay—untouched. As I pushed through the door into the sunlight, Sarah plucked the postcard out of my hands. "Cat," she said, looking at the bird. *Cat* was her standard word for anything new. Then, as if she knew this wasn't quite right, amended, "Kitty."

How like Ladd, I thought, not to include a phone number or tell me the title of the books. If I wanted to know, I'd have to show up on his doorstep. The last time I'd heard from him was just before he left the country, a little more than two years ago. He'd written a sort-of love letter intimating that I was the reason he needed to go away. But it was a convoluted piece of writing, filled with erasures and apologies and semisarcastic jokes, and I didn't know how seriously to take it, or if I'd interpreted it correctly in the first place. I'd also never mentioned it to Charlie.

Sarah brought the postcard to her lips, nibbling delicately on one corner. Part of me wanted to take the bait immediately and drive over to his uncle's

compound. I wondered if anyone had told Ladd that I'd had a baby. I buckled Sarah into her car seat and pried the soggy postcard out of her grip. Instead of putting it in my pocket, I just tossed it onto the backseat, where Charlie could find it if he had any interest, which he probably didn't. Charlie never got jealous.

And that's what I thought about on the short drive home: a postcard from an ex-boyfriend. My husband's general lack of jealousy, and how it was probably founded. If Ladd could see me now—with my hair unwashed and sweatpants doing nothing to camouflage the still-leftover pregnancy pounds, not to mention the child all but sewn to my hip—he probably would not be writing cryptic love letters.

What did I know about the way my life would change in a matter of hours? Absolutely nothing. *Murder*. It's a word out of potboilers and film noirs. It leaps from the TV screen during police dramas or the evening news. It doesn't sound real. It's nothing you ever think will have to do with you.

THE LAST SEPTEMBER

by Nina de Gramont

ISBN 978-1-61620-133-3

On Sale September 2015