

## CERTAIN PLACES

William Morris

He folds his sash, his apron, his robe. Stacks them on the cold laminate counter. Places the cap on top. Slides the sacred items into the white cotton envelope. The fabric is thin and the light in the changing room is very bright, which means he can see the green of the apron and the pleats of the robe through the envelope. He feels like they should be placed in something more protective. A hard case. A shell. Something that separates them more firmly from the world outside. The world that is not the temple. But then again, they are just articles of clothing. They are sacred because he views them as such. Because he believes in what they represent.

He places the bundle of sacred clothing gently in the duffel bag that he also takes to the gym. He goes to the gym more than he goes to the temple. He goes to neither place as often as he should. He is alone. His wife was not able to come with him. She was on the night shift at the hospital. But on her off day she did find a family name for him to take. A name to carry in his mind as he was washed, anointed, endowed. He glances at the stack of slips of paper and stub of a pencil that sit on the counter near the door that leads out of the dressing room. Some names cross his mind. If he were to write those names on the pad, they would be placed on the altar that sits in a room just down the hall. People would pray for these names. Not each name individually out loud. But because they were written on paper and placed on the altar. The others who came later that day would pour their faith—no matter how strong or wavering—into a plea to God to help the people who are named. He does not write any of the names down. He is not sure why.

He thinks maybe he feels he does not want to impose on these people who have crossed his mind. He thinks maybe he should be praying for them himself. He thinks maybe he is just shy or tired or that his reticence comes from the sense there is something momentous and important in picking up that stub of a pencil and marking the slip of paper, and he just isn't up to it, or it is unnecessary at this time, or the names that came into his mind were just reflective of his own worldly concerns and not there due to some sort of inspiration. Some whisper of the Holy Spirit.

He pushes through the door and heads for the entrance that is also the exit. The entrance that is also an exit is to the side of the building. The front doors are closed off. They will remain closed off until Christ comes again. He hopes that will not be soon. He wants Christ to return. He wouldn't mind being alive when that happens. But he is afraid of all that will happen before that time. He is not sure he has the courage for it. He is too attached to the modest but comfortable life he and his wife have and too fond of all the other nice families with modest but comfortable lives that they associate with—Mormon or not. He hopes this second coming of Christ will wait until he is much, much older.

He lingers for a moment in the foyer not wanting to pass beyond the desk where old Mormon men with wrinkled smiles and thick-soled white loafers check the credentials of Mormons who want to attend the temple. To walk out is to reenter the world. The world is difficult. Treacherous. Full of temptation. Not that he is overly worried about those kinds of temptations. Lesser, more insidious temptations are his domain. The temptation of comfort and security. The temptation of minor addictions. Of laziness and leisure and distraction. Of thinking all is well. Or thinking all is doomed. Of simply thinking and not acting because to act is to decide and to risk and to infringe on others, which is unpleasant. He pauses for a moment at the door wondering what he has accomplished by coming to this sacred place and participating in sacred rites and what he will carry with him as he leaves and whether

whatever it is that he carries with him can help him be better this week. He opens the door and steps outside into the warm sun . . .

. . . and he is no longer he.

He is someone else. He is now a woman. This woman is not Mormon. She is younger than he is but is still middle-aged like he is. She is married. Like he, she is married to a woman. She is wearing a flowing skirt and a sleeveless blouse and a shawl that is also a scarf. She is someone else, but she is still also he.

She is both attracted to and repelled by the building behind her, which he knows all about and she knows very little about. There is some separation between those two pools of knowledge, but she eddies around both. So does he. He wants to explore this further. She just wants to find her car and leave. He finds that he wants what she wants. Because he is also she.

They arrive at the car. It is her car, not his car. It is an all-wheel-drive station wagon. It is dark green. There is a rainbow sticker in the back window. He thinks that it being so true to form is a clue that this she who is so different from he is maybe not all that different. She thinks nothing of it. It is just a car that she drives. She drops the duffel bag she is carrying on the seat next to her. She looks in it. He expects to see a bundle of temple clothing. There is no bundle of temple clothing. He is confused. What she sees confuses her too. She sees a pile of folded fabric. A quilt. It is white and green. The fabric is satin. It seems like something that would be part of her life, but she doesn't quite know why. She doesn't take it out of the duffel bag, which she is quite sure is her duffel bag. The one that she takes to the Y. But she lifts a layer of it and feels the fabric. It is not a complete quilt. It is a quilt top. It seems like it is for a baby blanket. She does not quilt. She thinks that her wife quilts, but she isn't sure about that now because he is so sure that his wife quilts.

The freeways and roads home are familiar to him in their bland suburban generalities and unfamiliar in their particularities. Every turn feels right. Every turn feels slightly off. She pulls into the driveway of a house that is smaller and in a neighborhood that is slightly shabbier and homier than the one he lives—lived—in. She pauses. Looks at the flower beds full of sage, lavender, fuchsia, deer grass, goldenrod, and river rock. Looks at the verdigrised hummingbird wind chime. It all seems right. She clicks the garage door opener. The door opens. She pulls in and finds everything familiar.

She is more nervous than he to find her wife. She is afraid that she will somehow be changed. He is more nervous than she when they finally find her out in the backyard tending to the late summer squashes and melons. Because it is her. That is, it is his wife too. Or rather, a version of her.

Early on she attempts to keep his wife separate from her wife, but it is difficult. She keeps opening doors for her. Keeps buying the wrong kind of ice cream. Keeps getting in on the wrong side of the bed. Her wife is remarkably indulgent about these missteps. Makes a comment about extra stress at work. She wonders if agreeing with that diagnosis is a betrayal. If she should explain that he is now part of her. But he agrees that she shouldn't. She wonders if she should let him be her conscience in this matter. But she loves her wife dearly and deeply and so does he and so, practically, there is no real difference between before and now when it comes to their relationship. This makes it easier for both of them to settle into her life. Yes, it is strange, but the very fact that they are each other makes it impossible for either of them to radically change how they live. Everything develops a patina of strange if he or she thinks about it too much. But mostly they don't think about things too much. Work is work, life is life, food is food, sex is sex. Church is not quite church, but he is largely satisfied with the liberal mainline Protestant services they attend. It still feels like church to him.

It does take her a couple of weeks to find the courage to confront the quilt top, which is still folded in the gym bag. But she really needs to go to the gym. She had wanted to blame him for that reluctance, but they both admit that exercise is a struggle for them and resolve to finally get back to a routine. Her wife (their wife) is delighted to be presented with the quilt top. A couple they are friends with will be having a baby in a few months. He is happier than she thought he would be about this. She suspects it is because he is focused on her wife engaging in an activity that mirrors that of his wife.

Two months pass. Their wife finishes the quilt. She lets them into her workroom to view it. She cries when she sees it. Cries because of him. It has been quilted with dark green thread in patterns of leaves and acorns. It means something to him beyond just being a reminder of his wife. She can't tell exactly what. He is unable or refuses to explain.

The baby is finally born. They drive down to Pleasant Hill to see the baby and present the quilt. Harried and tired though they appear, their friends are effusive in their praise of the gift. She and he and their wife aren't planning to stay long. One of the friends mentions that her work gave her a pair of tickets to the World Series game that evening. Even with the new baby, she was not going to turn such largesse down. But clearly one of them would need to stay home with the baby and to be honest the friend's partner is not at all interested in baseball. She and he are restrained in their shared enthusiasm for the idea; however, their wife knows of her fondness for the game and the team and encourages her (them) to go.

They take BART to the game. The train is crowded but good-natured. Festive. Both of them are soon swept up in the excitement as the train arrives in San Francisco. They procession with the other fans to the baseball park.

It is an all-important game five with the series tied two-two. Their mind floods with her memories as they walk in. She had spent many hours as a child taking in games on a small black-and-white television

or via AM radio in the car or, sometimes, watching in person at Candlestick, all bundled up with a blanket just in case the fog rolled in. Her father had always packed licorice. Black for him; red for her. She wishes she had thought to buy some licorice to bring with her to this game. While they wait in line for garlic fries, he lets her feel a bit of his jealousy. He had not had a good relationship with his father. She expresses sympathy. Acknowledges that while she and her father had loved each other very much she is not sure he had truly understood her. And not just after she had come out to her parents. For all the good memories she and her father had created at Candlestick and via other outings, she suspects that she had always been a mystery to him. Her mother had said as much once. Your father loves you more than anything. He just doesn't always know what to do with you. The two of them are quiet for a moment. They order their fries and take their seat, nervous but confident.

The Giants' star pitcher takes the mound. He gathers the eccentric spirit of the fans and of the region and channels it into every throw. Time slows. He clearly has the stuff. The stadium is his house. Both he and she are enthralled by his pitching.

Their team carries a small lead into the top of the ninth. The crowd is silent, nervously trying to ward off a change in fortune, anxiously focusing all their hope on victory. There are two outs now. Only one more to go. The star pitcher winds up and hurls the ball toward the plate. The opponent hits it weakly to third base and the out is made. They leap to their feet, hug her friend, hug the stranger next to them. It is as sweet a moment as either had experienced in their previous separate lives. And it is lovely feeling part of something greater, of being part of such a jubilant crowd even though they both know that some people in the crowd would disdain her because of who she is. And some would disdain him for who he is. But that thought doesn't actually come until they are filtering out of the stadium, pressed in on all sides by joyful bodies anxious to get home or to a bar, and they look back and don't see their friend, and they look down . . .

. . . and what they are holding is no longer the game program.

She is annoyed by the press of fans. She should have stayed and socialized at the conference, but she isn't in the mood and so had used the excuse of needing to get home to feed her cat. She glances down at the conference program, and she is now aware that the other two are now with her. Or are her. And she them.

He is delighted to discover that they share a faith even though her observation of it has been intermittent for several years. She—the other she—is happy that she remains a she across the transition but is also jealous that the she they now are has this thing in common with him. She is also disappointed that this new she seems to be straight. Seems to be because her experiences with dating, although few, seem to all have been with men. There are some intense emotional experiences with a few women, but they disentangle those a bit and discover they all come from her Mormon mission, which (he explains) facilitates such moments because you are assigned to live with one other missionary of the same gender 24/7 and those assignments rotate every few months so they're more like an intense, short-term, celibate, serial monogamy situation than just having a roommate.

Meanwhile, she approaches that she is now him and her with a scholarly fascination. What an interesting chance to explore the nature of identity. They are both older than she. They both love the same woman. Had, indeed, married the same woman. Or at the very least a version of the same woman. And this realization by her sets the other two into a sort of crisis as they realize that now that they are her, they no longer have that relationship. She not only is not in a relationship with the woman they both love—she doesn't even recognize her. This causes them both to retreat inside themselves. A sensation which fascinates her. She wonders how long the two of them had been each other before becoming her but doesn't probe that deeply out of respect for their desire to be alone. Or as alone as possible when they are both her.

She simply sits and stares out the window of the train and waits. They come back—or rather become more active—at around the same time. The other two try again to see if buried somewhere in her there is a memory of their spouse. They fail. Are sad. Resign themselves to the fact that since they are now her, finding their spouse may take some time.

He panics a little when she gets off the train and walks home to her apartment. He is not used to urban environments. But she—the other she—explains that there are gradations in exactly how bad a neighborhood is and that this is not all that bad and she—they—were likely quite safe even though it was late. Her (now their) roommate is already asleep. She wants to stay up late and probe the exact nature of their presence with, or as part of, her, but she also is looking forward to the next day of the conference so she feeds the cat and makes a late snack of half a Braeburn—he doesn't think he's ever had a Braeburn apple before—and three slices of aged white cheddar—he doesn't think he's ever had aged white cheddar before either—and goes to bed.

The next day of the conference lives up to her expectations. The panel on Fragility in the Nature Writing and YA Dystopian Novels of the Anthropocene is fascinating. She also has a wonderful chat with the editor of a mid-tier university press who is somewhat interested in her work on digital technologies and performance. And, finally, the reading by former San Francisco poet laureates is amazing. Or rather, she thinks so. He also enjoys the reading and the panels. He doesn't understand much of what is said. Or rather, only understands what is said in that he feels and has an awareness of what she understands. But he likes that the panels and the poetry reading have the same tone and rhythm as general conference or a gospel doctrine class taught by a good Sunday School teacher.

The other she seems at times mildly amused and at times mildly annoyed by the whole thing. It is strange for her to feel that from the other her. To feel more than one way about what she is—what they



are—experiencing. It is somewhat of a relief that she can ascribe such mixed emotions to the other two rather than having to wonder what is wrong with her brain or her soul or herself. And even though the other she is lukewarm on the whole poetry thing, she vows to go to more local readings. And the other she is fine with that because she is also her (and him).

At first, the other two are willing to sit back and experience her everyday life. The monotony of classes taught, papers graded, research compiled. A few (never enough) words written on the dissertation. But they soon become restless. Want her to be more active in tracking down their wife.

At first it is just a constant, vague tug like a minor headache or the feeling you've lost your boarding pass as the plane wheels up to the gate. Then it becomes more insistent. She finds herself wandering aimlessly across campus scanning the crowds of students and faculty for any glimmer of recognition. She finds herself googling combinations of names desperate for a photo, a résumé, a profile, a username. Anything that could be something. She wastes hours of time she doesn't have. She finds nothing.

She tries to reason with them—with herself. This is not who we are right now. This is who you two were, but now that we are we, you need to let this go. If it is to happen, it will happen like it happened for the two of you: spontaneously and later in life.

They are not content with this line of reasoning.

One day she finds herself on the other side of the Oakland hills hanging out in a quilt store leafing through every pattern book, handling every bolt of cloth, staring impolitely at every customer who walks in the door. It takes her awhile to conjure the feeling that she does not need to be there strongly enough for her to leave and walk back to the BART station. She chastises them the entire train ride back to Oakland. He is defiant. She is more understanding or perhaps savvy enough to know that since she is also she, she won't get far with recalcitrance. That

since she is also they, they need to find some sort of unity. Or, at the very least, cooperation. She (the other she) uses her influence to soften him a bit. She (the main she) acknowledges their deep sense of loss. She opens herself even further to them. The three of them (that are also just her) come to an understanding. But in doing so she finds something else. A fear of her. Or rather of what she might do that could attenuate the other two further. She doesn't understand that fear because it seems separate from her in a way that the other two aren't. She fears that it could be a wedge. Or a destabilizing influence.

She doesn't know how serious to treat that fear of their fear. She decides to test it. She wakes up early one Sunday morning and puts on a gray wool skirt and ivory blouse. She hasn't worn this skirt for a while because it's awkwardly modest. The hem hits her legs just below rather than just above her knees. It takes three buses to get there. He doesn't recognize it until they are already there. He had always driven there on the freeway. In fact, it's one of only two places in Oakland he had ever been to back when he was just he, and it had been more than five years since he had made that trip. The sky is gray. The air cool. The grounds are a riot of color even though it's early December: sprays of purple, magenta, and white flowers. Deep green grass. White and sand-colored stones, drawing their colors from the white and gold building that dominates the property. The palm trees are wrapped in Christmas lights that aren't on because it's mid-morning. Faint, tinny Christmas carols are playing through outdoor speakers. It's Sunday. The temple is closed. She couldn't go in anyway. She is no longer a member in good standing.

He is wary but calm until, while walking the grounds, she gets too close to the building where Sunday services are held. The Christmas carols are drowned out by the sounds of the organ in the chapel, which is playing "Be Still, My Soul." It is her favorite hymn. The first verse ends. The second starts. When the congregation sings about how the mysterious shall be bright, she veers toward the doors that lead to the

foyer that leads to the chapel. He fights it. The other she is confused but supports his efforts. Her steps slow. She gets close to the doors but just can't bring herself to open them. The three of them wander over to the visitors' center. They ignore the greetings of the smiling elderly missionary couple. They head directly to the windows at the back and look out over Oakland. The fog hasn't yet burned off, so the Bay Bridge disappears into the gray that is San Francisco. She leaves. Walks all the way down the hill so she doesn't have to wait for a bus that only comes every ninety minutes.

That evening she puts on a different skirt and goes to a bar. One that one of her fellow grad students frequents. Had invited her to once. An invitation she had declined. The bar is full of women. She hasn't been in an all-women group that large since the last time she had attended a Relief Society activity. They had put together sanitation kits for African refugees. That was after she had stopped attending church but before she had told the other women in the congregation to stop contacting her. She had gone because it had been an act of service. And for all that she was (is) conflicted about the LDS Church, she wasn't (isn't) conflicted about the need for service. She asks for a Diet Coke. No, nothing in it. Yes, this is her first time here. Yes, it's quite possible that they recognize her. She is a grad student at Cal. Yes, she was the one who taught the class on film and the male gaze. She soon finds herself talking with a small group of women. All grad students or the significant others of grad students. The other two are oddly conflicted. On the one hand, they seem to be hoping to find the woman they are looking for. On the other, they seem to be wary of her having too good of a time. She tries to pin them down on this, but it's hard because she is listening and talking to the other women who are treating her with a warm caution but genuine interest. They talk academic politics. Local activism. Theory. Poetry. She enjoys the conversation but finds herself unable to stay more than a couple of hours. She isn't sure if it's because of the other two or because of her. Or both. Before she goes, one of the

women in the bar writes down her email address so she can send her an invite to a poetry reading that's set for the new year.

She is relieved she doesn't have the funds to travel home for Christmas and that none of her family is able to come visit her. But she is also lonely even though she is not just herself but also the other two. She doesn't go back to the Oakland temple or the Oakland bar. The other two seem relieved by her lack of activity. She isn't quite sure why, although she does spend some time chasing after a selection of images they seem to be holding back from her—a roaring baseball stadium; a quiet, brightly lit room.

The new year arrives and with it the email inviting her to the poetry reading. She decides to go. As she walks into the community center where it is being held, she remembers the feelings she had had at the reading at the conference. The swelling of her mind and heart as if the sounds of the words were wrapping around her like a warm blanket. As if the other people in the room were brothers and sisters. As if she was part of something more than herself. As if she was capable of being more than who she currently was. As if the world was going to be okay.

The other two suddenly react. Overwhelm her with feelings of danger and fear. She stops. Turns around. Walks toward the doors. She needs to not be there. She needs to be outside. She needs to go home. She needs to just be her. The her that was also them. Not some other her. Or him. But as she is walking out, the woman who invited her is walking in along with some of the other women from the bar. They are delighted to see her. They invite her to sit with them. The other two flood her with feeling, but she is now pleasantly trapped by the group of women and flows into the room with them (both the women and the them that are also her).

The only seats are up front. Hard folding chairs. She ends up on the outside end of the second row. She promises the other two that she will leave if they really want her to, but they have to stay for at least the first reading.

All through the first reading she feels like she is crawling with them (the other two). But also with herself and all that she doesn't like about herself. The second poet is so good—the words coming out of her mouth like honey or birds or flowers or curveballs—that she and him and her get caught up in the flow of the poetry. She looks around. The room is filled with people. So many that some are standing. All their faces are turned intently toward the poet. Some have their eyes closed. Some sway slightly to the rhythm of the words. The second poet finishes, her words cascading into a final crescendo. The room bursts with applause.

The final poet, the famous one, gets up to close out the performance. But before she reads, she calls for a few other poets in attendance to come up out of the audience and perform a short piece. The second of these guest poets comes to the stage and begins to speak, and they, the three of them, catch their breath. It doesn't look like her. Like their spouse. But there is something in her voice and something in the way she stands on the balls of her feet when she says the word *body*. And then they lean out and forward so they can see her better and realize she is wearing a long flowing white cotton skirt and has tied a dark green crepe silk scarf around her waist. And then the poet turns her head away from them, and her ear catches the light and in it is a small silver earring from which dangles a small silver acorn . . .

. . . and they are no longer just they.

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