

Watching the Sun Set on a Summer's Evening
with Two Survivors

He sat in his shirtsleeves in a chair at the edge of the garden, his back turned to the party that overflowed onto the patio. Thin as a ghost, he wore a silk ascot and held a cane in front of him with both hands. His wife sat next to him, hunched over by age, shaking slightly, nodding her head as though she were agreeing with some unspoken, absolute truth.

They'd come from the same village as my grandmother, who'd died years earlier. They were my family's oldest friends. The party was a celebration of the Summer Solstice, a gathering my mother held annually. I was alone that evening and it felt right to keep the elderly couple company as the party went on around them. It was the husband who'd suggested we take the seats on the edge of the patio to enjoy the first sunset of the new season.

"Is your girlfriend coming today?" his wife asked.

"No," I replied. "She had to stay in the city for her work." I shouted the words, leaning close to her, my voice rising above the others.

"She is quite a girl," she said. "Very smart, very strong. Hold onto her, she is a wonderful girl."

Her husband nodded his head in agreement. "A very nice girl."

"She reminds me of a girl from our village, Miriam. So very thin and her complexion--like porcelain," she said. "May she rest in peace." Her voice fell and her accent became heavier as though the memory saddened her. "So beautiful..."

Her husband put his hand on her arm. "My dear, you are upsetting our young friend here."

She took my hand. Her hand was dry and warm and felt almost like crepe paper. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "Much of the world died with Miriam," she said.

Her husband pretended to ignore her and stared out above the tops of the trees beyond the garden and the grassy slope of the yard.

"It is very peaceful here," he said, staring at the sun as it began to set beyond the hills. His wife nodded her head silently, and the smell of the night dew began to rise from the grass. "This is what we should remember, this." He nodded towards the stream, and the woods, and the orange sun beyond.

A light breeze stirred through the trees. The sound of glasses clinking together in a toast drifted over the patio from somewhere in the house. His wife shook her head uncontrollably. "Be careful what you remember," she said. "You must not..." she started, then squeezed my hand and closed her eyes.

"I shall never forget this evening," her husband insisted. He inhaled deeply as though he were leaning over a kettle of homemade soup, savoring the aroma. A smile spread across his thin lips, and as he stretched his arm, the bluish numbers elongated into a thin line that could have been mistaken for another vein.