

Diane de Forêt, Ray Bradbury

Diane de Forêt

It was at twilight in the autumn of 1989, in the hour of the closing of the graveyard in Paris, when I, overlooked by the guards who were ushering out the last visitors, came upon the low marble tomb of Diane de Forêt, she of the forest, and stood listening to the last calls of the guards and the shutting of the gates.

The thought that I might be trapped in Père Lachaise for the night did not bother me, for I saw laid out before me the most beautiful tomb, the most radiant marble carving, I had ever witnessed in any graveyard in all my life.

The tomb itself was a marble lid some six feet long and perhaps eighteen inches high, and upon the lid, in gossamer folds of marble, her delicate hands laid across her frail bosom, was the figure of a timeless mythic beauty.

Hers was the face of a young woman, no more than eighteen, with a fair brow, fine cheekbones, and a mouth that seemed shaped almost to smile, disregarding time, this place, and the weather.

I stood for a long while, stricken with those pangs which, in the life of the flesh, can only be recognized as the start of something as mysterious as hate, fear, or joy, while its name is love.

All those elements that move their chemistries in us partake of the same mystery and break off to become special emotions, neither summed nor solved, only to be accepted, enjoyed or spurned swiftly, seeking other chemistries, other emotions.

Now, as I shadowed the tomb with the last of the sun's light, I swayed and almost fell at my terrible surprise; this youngness, this beauty from my past.

The vertigo subsided. I read these words above her :

DIANE DE FORÊT

Born 1800. Died 1818.

Oh, God, I whispered. Lost before I was born.
More words were carved in marble below:

So quickly she ran that only Death
could catch her.
My fortune was to know her for an hour
and love her,
in my life, forever.

Following were the initials R.C. and a postscript:

Who has carved this relief
to shape her memory.

Ah, Lord, I heard myself say, there are two lovers here, not only the
child bride but her beloved, the sculptor who day by day raised this
bosom, these hands, this sleeping face up from the stone. How many
years had passed and how often had he come to drop his tears upon
this silence?

Not knowing, I leaned close to memorize each fine detail of fair brow,
delicate nostril, and half-smiling lips, rained on by storms but
undissolved by time.
In doing so, my tears, blinding me, fell upon the marble face.

As if at a trick of vision, her features seemed to melt instantly, then
freeze before I could pull back, breathless.

My tears had touched her lids. It seemed she wept. The tears were now
not mine but hers, and moved down her cheeks, to touch her lips,

which, touched, caused me to doubt my senses. For the faintest murmur, the merest whisper, drifted up from the pale marble face.

“Yes?” the whisper said.

Silence. I waited, frozen in place.

The lips shadowed themselves: “Who’s there?”

No, no, I thought. Not so!

“Well?” came the whisper. A tear trembled on her cold mouth.

At last I said, “It’s only me.”

“If that is true,” came the whisper, “where have you been?”

“I—”

“I’ve been waiting for you,” came the whisper.

“I—” Again, I could not go on.

“It’s been so long,” said the voice hid in the face, within the stone.

“Why have you abandoned me?”

You don’t understand, I thought, we are separated by death. Yours. And then, his, your lover’s, a long time ago.

At last I murmured: “What can I say?”

“Something. Anything.” A shadow crossed her mouth.

“I am here now.”

“Thank God.”

“Do you forgive me?”

A leaf fell and touched her cheek, quickly. “Oh, yes. Now that you’re here, all the past years are nothing. Say more. Anything. Something.”

I took a breath and said, “I love you.”

“Oh, yes!” came the cry. I feared that the tomb might burst and a woman-child erupt from this cold chrysalis. “Now I know what I was waiting for! Again!”

“I love you,” I said, and it was the truth.

“Oh, yes!” came the ardent voice again. “And this time is it really true? By the way you say it; true? Dear God, take my soul! With those words, let me die!”

“But—” I exclaimed, and stopped.

You are already dead, I thought.

“Oh,” the voice went on in breathless haste beneath her name and face, “is there anything more beautiful than love? To love is to live forever, or die and recall love for eternity. We never tire of hearing it. There is no burden. One rises up with each time it is said. So, please ...”

“I love you,” I said.

And from within the tomb, a trembling pulse, a knock of life against the downpressed lid.

“Yet,” her quiet voice said, “we must speak of other things. Since last we met and talked, what?”

One hundred and seventy-one years? I thought.

“It is a long while,” I said. “Forgive me.”

“But, why did you run away? After that, I didn’t want to live. Did you go round the world and see places and forget?”

And returned, I thought, to find you here, and built your tomb.

“And what will you be doing now?” her voice said.

“I am a writer,” I said. “I will be writing a story about a graveyard and a beautiful woman and a lost lover returned.”

“Surely not a graveyard? Why not somewhere else?”

“I’ll try.”

“Love,” said her voice, “why so sad? Let me comfort you.”

I sat on the edge of the tomb.

“There,” she whispered. “Take my hand.”

I placed my hand atop her folded hands.

“Oh, your hands are so cold. How can I warm them?”

“Say as I said to you.”

“‘I love you’?”

“Yes.”

“I love you!”

A moment and then, “That’s better. Warmness. And yet there is something you haven’t told me. Say it now.”

"A long time ago," I said, "you were eighteen. Now, more than a century later, you are still eighteen."

"How can that be? Eighteen?"

"There is no age, no time, where you are. You will always be young."

"Where am I then that keeps me young?"

I could hardly breathe, but managed to go on: "Touch above you, below, and around. Then you will know what keeps you."

In the following silence, the very last of the sun faded from Père Lachaise. More leaves fell.

The faint heartbeat beneath the lid grew ever fainter, as did her voice.

"Oh, no," she mourned. "And is it true?"

"It is."

"But you have come to save me!"

"No, dear Diane de Forêt, only to visit."

"But you said you loved me!"

"And I do. Oh, yes, God yes, I do."

"Well, then?"

"You still don't understand. I am not who you think I am. But you are someone I hoped to meet one day."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, which is why it is so wonderful."

"You were waiting all these years, just as I was waiting?"

"So it seems."

"Are you glad you waited?"

"Now, yes. But it was lonely."

"And from now on, what?"

"You still don't understand," I said. "My age."

"What has that to do with us?"

"I am," I said at last, "seventy-three years old."

"That much?"

"That," I said.

"But your voice is young."

"Because I am talking to you."

There was a sound beneath my hand upon her hands. Was she weeping? I waited and listened.

“Dear one,” she said at last, “how strange. We are on opposite ends of a balancing-board. I rise, you fall, you rise, I fall. Will we ever truly meet?”

“Only here,” I said.

Her voice quickened. “Then you will come back? You won’t lie to me again and leave?”

“I promise.”

“Come close,” she whispered. “I cannot speak. Help me.”

I bent near to let my tears fall again on her face. Her voice, refreshed, said, “While you still have tears to help me speak, it’s time.”

“To say goodbye?”

“Seventy and three years? Do you have someone beyond the gate to go to?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Then, you will return. And bring your tears?”

“They will not stop.”

“Come again. There is much to tell.”

“About Death?”

“Ah, no. Eternity. All. All of it. Eternity, dear friend. Eternity. I will teach you. Your tears have stopped. So must I. Goodbye.”

I rose.

“Farewell, Diane de Forêt,” I said.

A leaf fell shadowing her face. Farewell.

I ran to shake the gates and call the guards, half wishing to be free, half hoping to stay here forever.

Just in time, the guards arrived. They unlocked the gate.

The end