

The Possessions Room

Grace Ford

The tension in the room was near unbearable at that moment as one by one the names were called. Some jumped eagerly out of their hard wooden chairs at the sound of their name, but most people carried a blanket of sadness with them into the Possessions Room. Me, I wasn't quite sure how I would react. I wanted information, but some things are better kept a secret, tucked away.

It was strange, anyhow, the way we had met. Coney Island had just opened, and it was "magician's weekend." I had saved up just enough money to go see it myself. I was marveling at a simple card trick when I turned around and saw that the man behind me eating fire. I was shocked for a second. His work was marvelous He juggled torches back and forth, and one occasionally disappeared somewhere. He held my eye for a second, but then I was captivated by something behind him. There was a girl there, who at first glance was staring at the magician, but who was actually staring at me. She was Clara.

"Leonardo?" the voice asked back in the Possessions Room. I stood up. Now, I jumped eagerly at the sound of my name. I followed the man through the thick, swinging doors into the room. As the floor beneath my feet changed from carpet to wood, I breathed deeply. "Whose possessions are you looking for?" the man asked in a business like tone, as if he were conducting trading down on the streets rather than sorting the possessions of the dead. I gulped. Reality was sinking in. 146 girls were dead. And some of them younger than fourteen. There was a large chance that. . . that. But I couldn't think about it. She was alive, for sure. No doubt about it. Right now, she was probably. . . .

"A name please" the man asked again. "Sir, I am not going to wait all day. There are plenty of other people who would be happy to take your place." At this point, the man reminded me of the evil wizard in the story my mother had told me in Italy when she was still alive. The story had ended well, a true fairy tale. Thinking of this, I nearly laughed, but then I remembered the situation that I was in. I wasn't so sure my story would have a happy ending. In nearly an instant, my mood had sobered.

"Clara," I choked out.

Yesterday, when I heard the news of the fire, I ran downtown. By the time I got there the flames had died away. From the outside, the building looked unharmed, just a few broken windows. But the bodies—and it is hardly fitting to call them that—lay upon the pavement. The letters that I would be looking through today were the ones that had been pulled off dead bodies. The possessions would be those that had been found in the ashes of the fire. While I was standing there, I could hear people passing on the streets telling stories of those who had jumped. When I had gotten there, the first of the makeshift wooden coffins had started to arrive, and it was just at that point when the limo arrived to take the owners home. Upon that sight I turned to the gutter and retched, over and over again. I prayed that Clara had left early, that she wasn't one of the ones. That she had been lucky. I prayed that the monster that was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had not claimed her life, as it had so many others. I wandered the streets around the factory, calling her name. But when I went to her family's home later that day, she hadn't returned home. They couldn't find her anywhere. A widow with six children at home, Clara's mother couldn't look for her. I left the old woman curled in a ball, sobbing. Clara was her only source of income. She asked me to go look for her.

"Bring my Clara home" was all she said. So in a way I wasn't just doing this for me. I walked home that night in utter desolation, unable to start my search. This morning, I couldn't bear to visit the morgue; I couldn't accept that she might be gone. On my way here I stopped at that street corner where we had first met. I prayed for everyone affected by the fire, even though I had never been a religious type.

"I'm going to need a last name to sir, unless you would like to step outside. Like I said, there are plenty of people. . . ."

"I know, sir. I know," I said. After a few deep breaths I said: "Clara Lombardi."

"And what floor would she have worked on?" The man was asking too many questions. My heart was beating out of my chest. I had only visited Clara at work once. I remembered how horrendous the conditions were. The elevator that I had taken up to the eighth floor was filled with young bodies, but instead of talking and laughing as they should have been, there was a somber silence in the air. It was almost as if they were heading to a jailhouse, not to work. There must have been hundreds of them crammed into that one floor. Young girls working with their backs bent over for ten hours a day. It was no wonder that they had gone on strike a year ago. It was all over the papers. These girls only made ten cents an hour. The unfairness of it all had made me want to weep. Of course, this was right before I had met Clara. And after we had met, it seemed as if there was no longer any sadness in the world. It was funny how now I was thinking of things in terms of before and after I had met her.

"Sir?" That man again.

"She would have worked on the eighth floor," I said.

"And would you like to look at letters? Many people have found that very helpful," he asked kindly enough, but it made me angry anyhow. Him talking about letters helping people find their dead ones as if they were finding someone on a street or in a restaurant. My temper flared for the second time in just a few short minutes.

"Watch what you're saying!" I shouted at him.

He abruptly took a few steps back, but I was obviously not the only person he had had to deal with today. Suddenly the box of letters was in my hand.

"There's a table over there." The man said. "If I see you taking things, specifically money out of the letters you will be subject to severe punishment."

I didn't want to ask what that was. The only punishment that I could think of at that moment was my inability to find Clara. I sat, obediently, and started pulling letters out of the box. Some of them were burned, and nearly crumbled at the touch. It was strange to think of them. These letters of the dead. This awful thought sent shivers down my spine. Then I noticed one letter that was in Italian. I immediately thought of Clara. The cover on it was illegible. As I tore open the envelope it nearly disintegrated in my hands. I began reading the letter with an animal like ferocity.

Words and phrases flew through my head, jumping around. "*Dearly beloved mama*"; "*I miss you*"; "*The money enclosed in this letter*"; "*I love you*"; "*Hope that you are alright*"; "*You are in my prayers*"; "*Love is in my thoughts*"; "*Love connects us.*" And it seemed as though the word love was featured in every single letter. It made me think of why I loved Clara. I would scan the notes quickly, always looking for some clue to Clara. But luck, at this point, was not on my side. With each box of letters I opened, there were new lives being lost. The letters that I most remember would be the one that

eerily spoke to my own situation. In fact, it was the very last two letters in the box that rang strangely in my ear. I knew that the letters were almost gone, and I didn't know what to think. I decided to read the letter entirely, no matter what it said, and even if I knew that it was not Clara. Many of the other letters had been burned, and were hard to read at many points. But these ones were surprisingly unscathed. The first one read like this:

Dear Mama,

I have used what little wages I have made this week to purchase the paper for this letter. I hope that it finds you well. All the myths of America have proved false. The streets, rather than being paved with gold, are instead made only of dirt. One must work much harder here than in Italy. The only thing is that if one is not lazy, one can have a much better life here than in Italy.

Living conditions were better in Italy though. Oh mama! I do very much miss you so. Here, crowded amongst so many in so small a space I find myself so very dreadfully homesick. I wish to return to Italy but then remember what I am doing for you here. Thankfully, I have found employment at the triangle shirtwaist factory. Enclosed is what little money I have made so far. I apologize, because after the money for food and lodging I fear that there is not much. Please give my regards to Juliana. When I return, and oh how I long for that day I hope I will be a rich man.

Much love,

Giuseppe.

This note began much like the others, but it was the main tone of it that set it apart. The writer seemed so depressed with his situation. Most letters had been fake and cheerful. But this one was real. It cut to the core of what was happening here. The stories that were told in Italy of America did not ring true, but those who arrived here did not usually want to tell their family that. And that was what made this letter so intriguing to me. It told of the situation of all young immigrants to this country. While I had traveled overseas with my father, we were still grossly disappointed when we exited Ellis Island and found the real condition of the city. The first night, we had slept on the streets, in search of housing. And this was the reality for all of immigrants. The person who had written this letter was strangely honest, and that related to my situation. And so, becoming honest with myself, I picked up the last letter with the realization that it would not be Clara's.

The next note began with "*Dearly beloved mama.*" But it was not this part of the letter that had spoken to me because my own mom had died ten years earlier. It was instead a letter that spoke about love. "*I know, Mama, that when I first came to America I complained dreadfully about it. But something has happened here to make it the most beautiful place in the world.*" At this point I stopped, and skimmed down the letter further. Most of the letters I would toss aside, but because it was last this one intrigued me. It made me think of the special love that happened between me and Clara. I guess that to the world I seemed to be just a lonely, useless human being, but I meant the world to her. And that made us special. And that went along with how the letter ended, with the phrase: "*Our love is special.*"

After this letter I renewed my search. I knew I would not, could not find her here. I guess what had happened had already occurred anyway. If she was dead, she was dead. A week before—it was hard to believe it had only been seven days—I had taken her to visit my father for the first time. I needed to ask him for the rings my mother wore, but first I needed him to meet her. My mother had died before we came to America, back in Italy when I was still very young. After she died, my father had turned harsh and fiery. I had never wanted him to meet Clara, but it was inevitable. However, my father took a liking to Clara. His fiery temper diminished and he was more pleasant than I had seen him in a long time. Then the fire.

I sat up. Replaced all the letters in the box, and walked slowly up to the man in charge. I was noticing new things about him. He wore a name card that identified him as Robert Smith.

"Did you find anything?" he asked with a sad look in his eyes.

"No," I responded.

"I am sorry" was his only response. Then he handed me another box.

"What's this?" I asked. I had thought I was done with boxes. I was done sorting through peoples' lives. I wanted to leave. I would find Clara elsewhere. But I knew, as soon as I took hold of the box that I would have to look through it.

"Well..." he said

"Well what?" I asked.

"Easy son," he said. "Easy. Since you didn't have any luck with the letters, I thought you might want to look through this box."

"And what does it contain sir?" I asked.

"It contains personal possessions," he said, his manner more businesslike now.

"What type of personal possessions?"

"Well you know, rings, jewelry, purses, the like."

"Thank you sir," I said.

The first thing that I pulled out of the box was a necklace. My thoughts at this point were no longer in the room. Instead they were jumping around of their own accord. I thought back to another, happier time, when I had first bought something for Clara. I was continued pulling things out of the box as I remembered. I think it was about a month, or maybe two months ago. I had simply walked into the shop to take refuge from the rain. I hadn't even glanced up to look at the sign on the front door. Inside my eyes were met with one of the queerest sight I have ever seen. It was half pawn shop, half something else entirely. Immediately I noticed something. It was a necklace, made of some sort of strange looking metal. The main part was a chain with a small charm strung on it. And engraved onto the charm was a small bird in flight. But my favorite part was discovered when I flipped the charm over. In miniscule, cursive handwriting was written the words *Love, forever*. I thought it was beautiful. I had walked into the shop simply to find refuge from the rain, but my entrance turned out to be a strange twist of fate. I immediately walked up to the counter and asked to purchase the necklace. I didn't mind that it nearly had cost me my week's wages. Nor did I mind that my father had beaten me when I returned home because I had spent the money on something so unnecessary. We ate only potatoes for that week. But these things were worth it when I saw that beautiful necklace on Clara. Love, forever.

I pulled some very depressing things out of that box lying on the table. Wedding rings made up the bulk of the possessions in that box. Many people who had worked in that factory probably had no money to spend on jewelry. One piece, however, stood out to me. Like the necklace that I had given Clara, this one too was made of that strange looking metal. Instead of the flying bird that had been on hers, this necklace had a bird sitting on a perch, and it seemed to be calling out as if in the middle of song. And, on the back were engraved the words *Love, Forever*.

When I had first glanced at this necklace, I had thought that it was Clara's. A rush of emotions had overtaken me. At first I was relieved, and then saddened. But when I had realized that the necklace didn't belong to Clara, a feeling I can't describe came over me. The best words for it I guess would be a feeling of nothingness. Like something inside me was empty.

I put the box away. I couldn't look at it anymore. I had had enough sadness for the day. Maybe tomorrow I would renew my search, but today, I just wanted to go home and collapse into my bed.

March 24, 1911 is another day I'll never forget. The day before the fire. That day it was sunny and pleasant. I took Clara to Coney Island again. Somehow to me it showed the completion of our circle, only today no magicians paraded the streets. At first, we walked through the park, laughing about something I cannot remember. I bought penny licks from the ice cream cart as we strolled, hand in hand. Later, we sat on a bench, watching the sun set over New York City. I dug around in my pocket. Then I gulped once, nervous. "Clara" I said in a near whisper. She scooted closer to me on the bench, looked up into my eyes. "Will you marry me?" I offered her my open palm. Inside

of my hand lay my mother's engagement ring. My father had agreed to give it to me. The ring was a simple band of gold, with small jewels set in it. It was perfect. And the smile on her face was beautiful. I had wanted to capture that moment and take it with me everywhere.