

Dominoes

Mrs. Wander died ten years ago today. The news didn't hit the papers. The dogs didn't howl until the next morning. All of the emotion of the event funneled into a single domino. Which shivered violently. That domino was Mr. Wander. A short, bespectacled man who loved animals. He loved bird watching too. He could even sit on the dock and watch fish for hours. But if there was one thing that excited the man the most, it was staring at the reptiles at the zoo.

That was how he had met Mrs. Wander in the first place. They were at the reptile exhibit together. She and he. They laughed at the piped constrictor's silliness. The snake laughed back. They held each other's hands and looked through the glass at the lizards. They also looked at the reflection of themselves. They weren't sure which made them smile more. It wasn't important, anyway. At some point, Mr. Wander exchanged his glasses. He got a thicker frame. To compliment the outfit. The outfit with a black tux and bouquet. And an emerald ring. That's the color of a piped constrictor - emerald.

Their hands grew papery together. The Wanders' hands. Their cheeks and foreheads exhaled and collapsed. They walked slower. One morning, the dogs howled. Mr. Wander changed his glasses. This time, he bought an even thicker frame. To go with the white flowers. The flowers next to the epitaph. It was difficult to see on that Tuesday. What with the rain and all.

Mr. Wander shivered on that seventy-five degree morning. The ground was closed up and a fresh layer of manufactured grass was placed upon it. Then Mr. Wander and his glasses fled.

Everything ended here. Well, the truth ended here. You see, Mr. Wander suffered from something his friends would have called a 'disorder.' But then again Mr. Wander didn't have many friends. And the friends he had couldn't speak. What with them being animals and all. But sometimes there's more. More than what the flip-flop world is comfortable to show. And sometimes 'disorders' are what's real and the newspaper is not. But this story *isn't* about what's real and what's not. This story is about Mr. Wander, who took his glasses and fled.

They fled into the crust of the earth. The man and his glasses. They found a cave. They sunk into the stalagmites. The rocks shifted with the years. After three eternities, precisely, a devil found them. They were thawed delicately. The man and his glasses were. A kind, sunken face greeted their slumber. It asked why they were there.

"I cannot live without my wife." Mr. Wander's brave spectacles confirmed its owner's sentiments. The glasses glinted valiantly. The devil smiled. It was touched. It offered a deal.

"If you both leave, I'll bring her back."

Mr. Wander awoke alone. Well, he had the spectacles as company, of course. Mr. Wander cursed himself for believing his dream. Or whatever it was - that memory. The day went as usual. Then the sun made its customary descent. Mr. Wander went to the zoo. He slid his fingers along the glass and the hand-rails. His spectacles tinged with sorrow. A yawn accompanied his entrance to the reptile exhibit. Then a gasp.

There! Beside the piped constructor! Mrs. Wander slept peacefully. He ran over. He pressed his face to the glass. She was there. Beautiful, calm, content. He could see himself in the reflection too. He wished he wasn't in the way. But she was there and he was happy just to look at her.

Perhaps now would be a good time for an intermission. You can stand up. Try to stretch. Are you getting tired? There's a vending machine in the hallway. Please make sure you're comfortable. You see, this is the hardest part of telling the story. For me, at least. It's difficult to portray Mr. Wander's happiness. It's hard because it's not real. His happiness. Mrs. Wander was really under the manufactured grass far away from him. Far, far away. Mr. Wander was looking at his reflection the entire time. Are you ready to continue?

Mr. Wander's glasses beamed, despite three tears that obfuscated its lenses. The lonely domino radiated. Every day, Mr. Wander awoke with purpose. He couldn't get to the zoo fast enough. Sometimes, he ran all the way to the reptiles exhibit. Sometimes, he walked slowly, to build the suspense. Mrs. Wander took his breath every time. She took his breath and she held it against the glass. Mist formed against that glass. It formed, and then it evaporated.

The next morning, he awoke in a regular way. Leaving his bed, his hand swept the table. The mahogany one next to him. This was where his glasses slept. And his thick-framed companion fell to the floor and shattered. This is not realistic, of course, that a four-foot fall would shatter a pair of thick-framed glasses. But it's up to you to decide what's real and what's not. It always has been.

It hardly bothered Mr. Wander. The glasses falling. They had lost their importance, anyway. The reptile exhibit held his interest. Well, *someone* in the exhibit held his interest, to be exact. Mr. Wander went about his day. He hummed in anticipation of the afternoon. At last, the sun made its downward trajectory. Mr. Wander commuted to the zoo. The grass waved toward him. It was coy about something, though - the grass. But Mr. Wander was in too much of a hurry to engage with it. His replacement spectacles remained dull to the world. Way underneath the grass, a devil grimaced. Think about it. One of his deal's beneficiaries was gone. These glasses didn't glint.

Mr. Wander hobbled to the reptile exhibit. There, beside the constrictor, was glass and a description. An explanation of how the piped constrictor preyed on rodents. Useless facts to the directed old man. He asked about the other exhibit. The old man called over the zookeeper. Mr. Wander asked him about the exhibit that was there yesterday. The zookeeper apologized. 'Budget cuts' was the excuse given. But, really, he didn't know what to say to the old man who had made a hobby of staring at that wallpaper day after day after month. No one knew what to say to him.

Mr. Wander left the exhibit later that night. It's not important to discuss what happened in his head. With his emotions, I mean. Well. Maybe it *is* important, but I would rather not talk about it. What's important is that they ended in denial. His emotions. Mr. Wander denied that his wife was taken from him a second time. And then he left the reptile exhibit.

There's a scene at the end that's just beautiful. It was when Mr. Wander was walking back home. There was this child. She was playing dominos on the sidewalk. The child. But she wasn't really playing dominos. She was just standing them up and then calling her parents over. Her parents would tell her she did a 'very good job.' After a few seconds, they would leave. The child would flatten the dominos and stand them up once more. Then, she would call her parents. And her parents would tell her she did a 'very good job' and they would leave. This repeated every minute or so. And Mr. Wander walked right past her as she was standing the dominos up.

His left foot brushed one of them. It swayed, the domino, but it didn't fall. And the child didn't notice. Not even a glance.