

Rendezvous

By
Jennifer Crow

Lauren MacIlroy scraped two scrambled eggs onto her plate, buttered two slices of toast, and poured herself a glass of orange juice. She carried them to the table, careful as always to step around her husband's ghost. He slumped in a chair, his pale form stained with ephemeral blood.

Her gaze skated past his presence when she sat, and though her silverware chattered a bit against the plate, she thought she did quite well at ignoring Peter. It was typical, she thought. In life, he never argued or raised his voice, just watched her with sad eyes until she came around to his point of view. In death, his broken, accusatory form loomed over the hardwood table like a question mark, the closing punctuation of their marriage.

Lauren ate the last two bites of egg, ignoring the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. In a few moments - as soon as she placed her dirty dishes in the sink - he would vanish. She kept her eyes focused on her plate as she filled its emptiness with the glass and the silverware. Habit allowed her to cross the room without glancing at its other occupant.

In twenty years of marriage, she and Peter had eaten breakfast together almost every morning. That last morning was a notable exception, and Lauren suspected that was the source of Peter's persistence. He'd made one of his rare stubborn gestures, insisting that she stay to eat with him. Had he sensed, somehow, the fleeting opportunity for goodbye? But she, equally obstinate in her way, had blown him a kiss and handed him a list of chores as she went out the door.

It was a friend who had called her on her cell, told her to come home right away. But all the speed in the world changed nothing. Lauren leaned against the sink, her fingers flexing over the stainless steel. She clung to that complete absence of Peter. She was learning to understand it.

"I'm sorry, all right?" She turned, but the chair was empty. No body, no blood.

No Peter.

The rest of the day she could manage; her deceased husband hadn't appeared at work or in the store or under the trees at the park. Lauren found herself constantly watchful, though, in case he decided to expand the horizons of his haunting.

Another morning, and she caught a flush of red on the white tile inlay of the table top. *Red kitchen in the morning, widows take warning*, she thought. And then, *Peter would have laughed at that.*

She missed eating with him, beginning the day with talk of plans, or companionable silence. The rhythm of life had suffered a fatal disruption when that drunk had run a stoplight and ended Peter's life. And it seemed Peter sensed it, too. Why else was he sitting in the kitchen every morning, wordless and unlovely?

"I should have taken the errands that day," she said. She still couldn't bring herself to look. The glass she held chilled her fingers. "Maybe I would have done them in a different order. Maybe I was the one who should have died."

Peter made no answer.

"What do you want?" She'd read somewhere that if one wanted a ghost to go away, that question often worked. And yet - she gave his place a quick sidelong glance, and something like relief crept up on her when she saw Peter's translucent bulk like a shadow.

"What do I want?" The question startled her. She set down the juice and stared at her upside-down reflection in her spoon. "I want Peter back. I want him not to have died."

It was a foolish wish, she knew. She had lived long enough to know that death ended things. And yet . . .

And yet Peter sat across from her, as he had every morning for years. She pushed back from the table. Careful to step around her dead husband's ghost, she took out another plate and set of silverware, another glass. She fixed his breakfast, just as he always liked it, and set it on the table in front of him.

When she settled herself in her seat again, she bowed her head over her cold breakfast and took a deep breath. Once she'd gathered her courage, her hope, she looked up, and into Peter's smiling eyes. His ghost fingers picked up phantom silverware, his ghost teeth chewed spirit toast. They ate together in companionable silence.

And when she cleared the plates, he was gone.

As she scraped remnants of eggs into the garbage disposal, the phone on the counter jangled. Her hand hovered over it a moment before she answered. "Oh, hi, Janet. Fine. No, really."

She listened for a moment, then said, "I'd love to get together - it *has* been too long. Breakfast?" She glanced at the sink, the two dirty plates. "I have plans for breakfast tomorrow. How about lunch?"