

Ghost Story

Desi Valentine

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Emily twisted her fork with linguine and mopped clots of white cream sauce. The pasta hung loosely and slipped to her plate where other lost mouthfuls congealed.

"Is everything alright?" Mark asked.

"Fine," she said, brightly. Her eyes were dull but her dimples deepened. Anxiety stroked his spine. "There was a customer, today. She came in a few minutes before closing, and some of the things she said made me a little uncomfortable. I feel silly even thinking about it."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing important." Emily touched his thigh. "How was your day?"

"It must have been something important if it's still bothering you, Em."

"It wasn't, really. I can't even remember it now. So silly." She pulled her shoulders back and rocked her head from side to side, easing her neck, letting it go, telling him to do the same.

Candles of every height and thickness covered the sideboard, filled the fireplace, and warmed their table. It had felt like a new beginning, setting up this dinner, scattering the rose petals. It was *I'm sorry* and *I forgive you* in a bottle of pink champagne and a spray of white lilies held in his arms at the door. Until her smile swung close to her eyes but didn't make it, and she raised her fingertips to her temples and rubbed. She'd told him it was lovely so he'd pretended too. She'd brought out the china to plate their meal and set her place right next to his. But now the soft yellow light made shadows flicker, deepening the marks of their strain. He thought of jack-o-lanterns and flashlights held under chins around campfires too small to keep the night away. He tried to remember when she started leaving all her warmth at work.

"Em, I don't know what's been bothering you. Can we talk about it? If I did something... I love you," he said. The light made her gaunt. "Tell me how to fix this."

She laughed with her mouth and squeezed his hand. "So serious! I'm just a little worn out, that's all." Shadow hid her eyes. "Come to bed, Mark. Help me feel better." She beckoned and he followed.

He felt her mouth on his body, his hands on her skin. The separation between life and dream became tenuous, the cellular exchange through diaphanous membranes sinking sensory stimuli amid drifts of darkness, shimmering light, fragmented awareness. He felt his throat swell with tears and his fingers clench sheets as she whispered heartbreak in his ear, as the tide surged red and lifted him away. She knew. Of course, she knew. And then sweetness – her lips on his mouth, her hands in his hair. Forgiveness. Oblivion.

He felt her weight across his hips, her hands on his wrists, and imagined her hair fall a bare breath above. He kept his eyes shut, let the sleep fade, let this moment stretch like the curve of her spine reaching up and up toward ecstasy. He had watched her sleep so many times during their life together. When she read mysteries and he read textbooks, he would look up from a chapter on long-dead psychoanalysts to find her curled up and drooling, her glasses skewed off to the side. He would rest a hand on her hip, feel her breath rise and fall, and imagine her voice through the words.

“Well, hello there,” he said, like a guy at the bar. He hoped it would make her laugh. When she didn’t respond, he tried to open his eyes but the resistance there was painful. Wine, sex and faltered insomnia had made for a black deep sleep, after months of nebulous tension. And now his eyes were gummed shut. Fantastic.

“Baby, my eyelashes are stuck together. Some fall weed’s blooming, I guess.” He laughed awkwardly and waited for her weight to shift, to free his hands. But there was no movement. No slip of clothing or brush of flesh. Her hair didn’t whisper across her shoulders. Her lips didn’t part or sigh. “Em?”

He blew out sharply, frustrated, and the last webs of sleep fell away. He realized the fingers at his wrists were too broad, and cold. Her pulse and her heat, her touch of perfume, all of it was absent and wrong.

His respiration increased. His heart rate escalated. The sweat slick was immediate and the hives prickling up at his wrists and ankles provided information just as abrupt and unwelcome. It was wool. He was held down with wool. Someone had strapped him to his own bed with wool. Who-

“Emily!” he shouted, stripping his throat. His brain reeled grainy snuff-film flashes and he screamed her name again.

Nothing. He heard his pounding heart and rasping breath, and nothing. He tried to force his eyes open and groaned at the pain and the accompanying realization. It wasn’t hard to picture two rectangles of adhesive pressed firmly like mortician’s tape, ash on cadaver grey. Had an assistant run out for paste? No. No one had run. The house was quiet, but there was a sense of bodies present and still, of silent watchers. Panic made thoughts thin and slippery.

“I know you’re there. Just tell me she’s safe, okay?”

Was that a cough? He strained hard against the woolen cuffs and felt moisture slick the tape. “What do you want? Why are you doing this?”

The cough responded. Louder now. A muffled laughing glimpse of hysteria needled the base of his skull.

He understood the physiology of adrenaline. He had completed three ultra-marathons chanting hymns to the pagan gods of logic and endogenous opioid peptides. There would be pain. The pain would reach to touch the limit of his endurance. And then endorphins would trail kisses between pituitary and hypothalamus. His body would flood with bliss. He knew this. But knowing did nothing to stay his yell when the tape tore out his lashes.

He raised his head to take a visual inventory, blinking fast, pumping epinephrine. An army blanket had been cut in strips and used as tethers. Three sections made the rope across his hips, the knots offset so as not to dig into his abdomen. Early morning gloom greyed his white t-shirt and pajama pants, softened dresser edges, melted walls. He didn't remember dressing. His mouth tasted like aspartame and taphouse carpet. He considered the possibility they'd been drugged.

"Emily!" Had they tied her nearby? His head whipped side to side. "*Emily!*" The wool bit back, and the hives rode sweat up into his elbows, thick in the backs of his knees. He thought about candle flames and rotisserie spits and felt fire licking his skin. "Why are you doing this to us? *WHAT DO YOU WANT?*"

Shadows broke the band of light below the door. He held his breath. Listening.

"It's for you," said the voice of a girl who had laughed at his back, like a vulture inviting colleagues to carrion, over twenty years ago.

"Marianne," he said. There were no more questions. He closed his eyes against her smile. He felt Emily's hand on his cheek, her knuckles smooth along his jaw, and allowed himself to burn.

"Let him go now," she said.

"Not yet."

"You've made your point."

"Not yet." Marianne's fingers were gloved, of course. He imagined she'd netted her hair and slipped on her lab whites as well. He saw sepia snapshots of young radicals portioning chicken pox into Callebaut truffles, gifts from their emerging health lobby to under-generous legislators. Giddy with pride, all of them laughing, she'd kissed him and said, "I subbed the VZV for anthrax," as the mail truck trundled away. And then the stunned silence, the terrified accusations, and her cackling glee were behind him. He'd run after the truck, of course. An unforgiveable act. He'd caught the driver, made a scene, laughed about an imaginary girlfriend in an imaginary office and how he'd just remembered she hated these chocolates. *Can you help a brother out? I'll owe you, man. Whatever you want.* He remembered Marianne's neat script on the closing page of last spring's lab-tech intake application: *You owe me.* Because without his support, her career had floundered. Because he had promised to love her forever, and lied. Because what they did back then would be biological terrorism now, and he could not risk the association. An assistant had sent a form letter: "Thank you for your interest, but..."

He felt Marianne's hands on his body and sharp, blinding, freezing bright fear in every narcotic-tipped nerve.

"What are you doing?" Poor Emily. *I couldn't tell you, Em. I'm so sorry.* "You had an affair and he dumped you. He's scared now. You made your point! All those times you came to the store, you didn't tell me this was part of the deal. I didn't agree to this part! You can't-"

He bit his lips together, tasted blood, and bucked his shoulders up toward the pain, away from it, *into* it, as Marianne's left held his ankle and her right gripped her scalpel and his Achilles resisted and split.

"You can let him loose," she said, her voice receding with the click of her heels. "He won't be running out on anyone for awhile."

Emily cried after her, but it didn't matter. It was done. He felt giddy relief and his wife's ragged breath, the fall of her hair on his face. Fading, lifted, burning and cold, he heard Emily dial the phone.