

Dead Woman's Shoes

by angel readman

It is not about the dead woman, all the dead women, floating in their bathtubs so prettily in paintings, their eyes flat enough to reflect candle flames. You have a poster of Ophelia on the wall of your den, it's up there amongst half a dozen other fine art prints: a gilded Klimt kiss, a fuzzy monet lake, just one poster of an openly dead woman. I don't take it to mean anything.

Loving you, I always knew, was a job I'd only get via a dead woman's shoes. There you were, the recipient of pot roasts, fresh bread, at a loss amongst neighbourhood widows and divorcees. A tide of them rolled over you in calico blouses, cut off jeans and hot pants; they came with their hands outstretched, balancing plastic boxes covered in cerang wrap, terracotta dishes full of their grandmothers recipes for finding a husband. Their words were careful and full of instructions, 'bake at 200, until the cheese bubbles' they said, as if they could melt the grief right out you.

You thanked the women and tightened your robe, woolly footed as if stunned by the smell of butter and chanel, observing the lipstick they'd applied so carefully before they just happened to 'stop by' with the 'extra' of a painstakingly made dish. Next, they'd be back, after a suitable enough time had elapsed, explaining they could use that casserole dish with the rosebuds on the side. They pretended they weren't sure if it was you who had it, but you knew. They tossed their hair as if they needed haircuts, and waited to be invited for coffee.

All this was new to you, these waves of women, the variety, thin women and plump ladies who squeezed their feet into fancy sandals and were always sure to paint their toes. Their intentions were the same, like a dozen identical gifts wrapped up in different boxes and bows. You started to tell them you did a semester at culinary school,

returned their Tupperware immaculately, without a single trace of crusted meat on the lid.

I wasn't one of these women. I saw your broken fence and knocked on your door with my toolbox in my grip.

'I saw some of your fence is down,' I said, 'I was fixing mine anyway, got some timber spare.'

You invited me in, stood staring at the fence as I cut new timber and nailed it in place. You watched me work as if I was a species doing something you couldn't really identify. I came back to paint the dry timber, to seal and sand, so that not one drop of moisture would get in. Weatherproofed, both our fences were white, smooth to the touch, like they were made of porcelain. I finished the painting when you were at work, and went back to my house. Then, there you were, knocking on my door, with a plastic box full of meatballs in your hands.

'Thought I'd bring dinner, after your hard days work,' you said.

We ate in silence. Neither of us mentioned the dead woman, she had been talked of to death.

When I moved into your place, it didn't seem to be the home of a dead woman, there was no one between us in our bed. No photographs of her on your desk. I came light, with only a few pairs of jeans, a toolbox and one lip-gloss, and when you saw me unpack you laughed, and tried to pick me up in your arms. Maybe you saw me as an unmoulded piece of clay that could be formed to any shape, but that was OK. The only place the dead woman still lived was in the closet, there her clothes swayed when I opened the door. She was every colour, felt of satin and cotton. Embroidered cranes on her thighs, cherry blossoms on her bosom on the high neck Chinese dresses she had worn. Another woman might have told you, after a respectable time, to repaint the bedroom and give the dresses to good will, but I didn't need the closet space. I painted the walls, because that's what I do. My clothes fit on the shelf beside the dead woman's shoes that smelled of peppermint and bread. I never

saw you look in the closet, touch the fabric, or hold a sweater to your face to inhale, but that's what I did. The dead woman never smelt of paint, she was meadow fresh, neat with new wool.

Living with you didn't change me, but I started to wear your belt. Our dinners listening to blues by candlelight were always prepared by you, green salad, grilled chicken, cherry tomatoes and any miniature vegetable or fruit plate, arranged like a star. It was this way, the simple sharing of someone else's life, that my shape changed, wittled away by the days until it was closer to the dead woman's form. What you loved about me was my practicality, once I had got to the last notch on your belt and my jeans bunched round me I opened the dead woman's closet, and slipped into her clothes. Cheaper than new ones, easier than drilling another notch in your belt. I stood in front of the mirror and looked, waited for you to find me there as if afraid to take the next step. When you walked in, you did not say anything. You were not angry or sad, you merely held me in your arms as if you did not want to let go, but I did not want to get away.

It's never been about the dead woman, I just wear her clothes. I move a little more gently, in dresses that don't quite know how to hammer and pound. My hair has grown long enough to suit dress. Most evenings, you run me a bath, and lay a robe on the radiator for me to step out into, it is warm inside, like slipping on someone else's shoes. Loving you, was always a job via a dead woman's shoes, but the shoes are my own, my feet too big to ever truly fit in. I lie in the bathtub surrounded by bubbles, the candles flickering, and not a single razor on the side of the tub. You will always come in when I have been in there only a short while, lift me from the tub and into your arms.

'Did I save you?' you ask, as you hold me.

'You saved me, you always save me,' I say, as you place me on the bed.

That's how we live, in the presence of a dead woman's closet.
Every night, we sort of almost save each other like that again and
again.

