

In the Dim Light

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Marilee set the table for four. She had opened their doors and called. Now she listened to the familiar sounds nibble with a yawn at the day beginning.

The taps were running, footsteps hurrying — it was the rush hour. Marilee knew. She didn't join in the children's jokes, their little games and revenges in which she found it hard to discern love. She expected it to return, at least in a more obvious way, in the evening around the dinner table. In the meantime she cut their sandwiches, prepared their pocket money — all with a sense of urgency like a process worker.

The lunch-boxes were ready. Marilee hummed her favourite song. Fred wiped his mouth and went off to work. The noise immediately sprouted up. Just to get the feel of it she tapped Johnny on his shoulder. It was there, round and young, partly hers. Life was a cake, she thought — its base, routine; its glaze, joy.

The children grabbed their schoolbags. When the door shut on them, Marilee sat still, her mind swinging between bleakness and relief. Before long the room's conspiring whispers called for her aspirations to come forth. Keenly she laid them bare over the table and let them stroll freely, without apologies.

She was normally quite secretive. Yet, two months earlier, she had dropped a wish amongst the toasts and the pots of jam. Breakfast may have been a mistaken time for revelations. All eyes were watching her. The workforce. It had fallen with a big plop into the well. All gazes wondered. She should have guessed that Fred knew what was best for her. Even Johnny, a young man of eighteen, believed in asserting some authority. And while Danny looked at her with sleepy eyes, Andy had earnestly questioned her qualifications.

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Her meek mention of a typing course might not have been heard. She would go ahead all the same with a confidence build-up first.

She sat at the breakfast table and planned her day. Enrol Danny in tennis lessons. Shopping. Muffins for Fred. Wash windows — his request. A birthday cake to make. Her father liked nuts, mmm ... almonds to buy.

She pedalled up the road. It was all uphill to the village centre. Passing by the school, she glanced at the empty playground bordered by brushboxes. Between their branches she saw a dozen fuzzy heads facing their desks. When her children were at school she felt as tranquil as if they were sound asleep. Only she could not linger in the classroom as she did by their beds, spying on their dreams, watching, if the past cradled her, for tiny particles of babyhood playing over their cheeks. "Oh Debbie ... I wish I could just tell you to come home."

The two-mile-long ride lead her to the shops. She still had time to make a detour. There was a college down the road. It was an old stately building with pinetrees and poplars here and there, towering ones, benches in their shade, flower beds along the walls, even a fountain right in the middle. Wouldn't it be nice to sit in this garden and have lunch with other students. Discuss their subjects of choice and many other topics. A different world. She enrolled herself for a typing course.

Marilee lived in a new house. One day she would plant a hedge at the back, a row of almond trees on the side. She might even find cuttings of wild roses in a vacant lot and plant them near a window, train them to grow around it. Now of course there was only sand, cement and gravel. The house still bore the smell of new.

She sat in a corner of the lounge room, spread a couple of papers in front of her. Typing Job Offers. She took a sip of wine and reflected

on each job's description of duties. She thought of her future, typing in an office, camaraderie, polished fingernails, smartly dressed, enjoying her job. She folded the papers and let her imagination of herself in an office run free.

She was calm. She talked to herself silently. When Danny comes home, I'll try to listen to his stories. I might put him on my lap — just for a minute or two. And Johnny. I'll run my fingers through his frizzy hair and say yes but don't come home too late. Andy — so much like me. I'll pinch his freckled nose — just like mine. I might make them all a pudding. They like puddings. Even Fred. And so did Debbie.

Marilee went on and on, extolling her children's merits, making silent promises. Other thoughts also visited her. They were no longer burdensome. There was a bright future in front of her. The room was warm, the curtains drawn, the door closed. She enjoyed the dim light.

It was in a dimly-lit room that Marilee saw her eldest daughter for the last time. Her pale face lay on the pillow, smiling in her final hour. Her mouth had murmured translucid words. They had blown out of her lips and flown to Marilee on a wing. She remembered this eerie, almost sublime, moment. Soon after, Debbie had closed her eyes, her heart, and turned her head to the rising moon, like a small rose settling in a crystal vase.

It was a time of retreat, of mirages. Whenever Debbie's profile emerged from behind corners, Marilee would call her and say, "Let's go home, Debbie." Hand in hand they would stroll along the grapes of wild roses draping hedges, and her small hand would slowly, gently, slip out of hers.

Debbie now appeared mainly through mists at dawn. Sometimes, during the day — probably a caprice of hers — her hair twined

round a sun-ray and, when evening approached, her red ribbons floated frivolously in the twilight. She would never vanish. Marilee knew. There would always be flitting apparitions. Debbie was a cameo pinned on her dress.

Marilee touched her enamel vase, smooth like Debbie's stone. The softness of her memory chased away the black shadow, opened it up for confidences. "Debbie, I'm going to learn to type. Tell me what you think. It's a beautiful place with trees and flowers, groups of students chatting on benches." Her answer came from somewhere far away, blowing through the poplars, hovering around the walls, over the garden, the fountain, the students, before reaching Marilee's keyboard.

