

The Ex Flies

by Karen Karlitz

I was getting an excellent contact high sitting next to Larry at a patio table overlooking the pool. He and his roommate Greg were the biggest stoners in our Santa Monica apartment building. If I was still alive I'd give them a good run for that distinction, but I'm not. Dead as a doornail as they say. Larry and Greg always had the best marijuana, and when they weren't at work, they usually hung at the pool, which was packed. Must be a Friday. Everyone was drinking, smoking and who knows what else. Chemically manufactured though it might be, they all seemed very happy. That is, except for my ex. Maxine. I watched as she stood staring down at her neighbors from her second floor balcony, giving them the stink-eye. She drank from a large water glass that wasn't filled with water. Maxine was always into red wine, claimed it was the healthy alcohol choice. When we were married and I still had money she drank the expensive stuff, as if drinking Chateau Montrose 2005 instead of two buck chuck made her any less of a wino. Now she dragged home lower shelf bottles of red from CVS, whatever was on sale. It irked her not to have money, but when I hit hard times her alimony sank. Now that I'm dead, she gets nothing.

Maxine looked grim. I suspected she'd gotten one too many left swipes or a recent hookup dumped her. No surprise there. She was screeching into her cell phone. I couldn't make out what she was saying, and didn't feel like flying upstairs to find out. I didn't care what went on with her, hadn't for years. In my semi-stoned state I was completely content to sit back and observe. It was still light enough outside to see that her face was red and her expression deranged. She'd worked herself into one of her usual freak outs. No longer on the phone, she was just drinking. Something must have really ticked her off, because she began slugging straight from the bottle. That woman could usually hold her liquor, but she was staggering around her terrace in a very un-Maxine-like way. Every few minutes she stopped to take a swig, then lurched back and

forth. I figured she'd pass out on her lounge before long. Losing interest, I flew over to my friend Jerry and his girlfriend Jennifer. We were the only spirits inhabiting the building unless some agoraphobic spooks were hiding out in someone's apartment.

"Larry's got great stuff, Jerry," I said.

FYI, only the dead can see the dead, who all look somewhat like their old human selves, but now we're covered with shiny see-through scales; we have no bones, skin, organs, or blood. Jerry gave me the thumbs-up sign; Jennifer's face scales creased into a smile. "Catch you later, Henry," Jerry said, and they headed in Larry's direction.

I looked up at Maxine's terrace expecting to see her laid out on her lounge. Instead the top half of her body hung over the iron balcony railing, the bottle of red dangling from her hand. I watched as it fell onto the grass below. I couldn't see her face, but I was sure I'd never seen her this drunk. Healthy drink my ass. Red wine can be lethal and gives you vicious headaches to boot. She'd be better off smoking a few doobies. And then it happened. It was like watching a movie because I couldn't believe such a thing was actually happening. Sure I'd often daydreamed about something befalling her, thought up countless ways my ex's demise could play out. But falling from a balcony? That was a little grotesque even for my taste. But thar she blew. Head leading the way, she careened down, long hair flying in the breeze. Maybe she foolishly chased her fallen wine bottle, maybe she decided to voluntarily check out. In any case, she landed without fanfare on the grass; just a few feet over and she would have hit the concrete surrounding the pool.

I flew over. There was no blood. She lay on her side, more peaceful than she'd ever been, though admittedly a bit disheveled. I thought maybe she was ok. A young woman rushed over. She knelt down and leaned in close to Maxine. "Are you alright," she asked, softly patting my ex's arm.

Maxine's serene face was still. A man who looked like a handsome extra at a California pool party came by. "Is she passed

out? I think she's the woman on the second floor near the trash chute. Can you tell if she's breathing?"

"Yes, I think she's breathing. She may have fallen from her balcony."

"No shit! Are you ok, lady? Can you speak?" the Central Casting guy asked Maxine.

Silence.

"I'm calling 911," he declared in a take-charge, melodious voice. He whipped out his iPhone as expertly as John Wayne drew a gun.

I stood by taking this all in. She was breathing. She'd probably be alright. I never really figured anything could kill her.

The ambulance arrived. Two men lifted Maxine onto a stretcher and took her away. The party at the pool resumed. No one in the building really knew her except me and my old college girlfriend, Pam. I "lived" in Pam's apartment next door to Maxine in the urn my ex threw at her when she realized Pam was the woman I tried reuniting with on Facebook when we were still married. But that's another story.

The sky turned dark. Beer bottles opened, weed was lit and passed around, pizzas from 800 Degrees were delivered. No one worried about the unhappy woman on the second floor.

Many sunrises and sunsets passed near our building by the sea on 4th Street. I tried to catch many of them. Now that I no longer had eyes (although I could see quite well), I was able to look straight into the searing light without incurring injury or having to turn away.

So life and death continued on as before, although being next door to Maxine I knew she had yet to return. Then one day I heard Maxine's front door open and slam shut. I figured she came back, and flew onto her balcony, the scene of her unfortunate swan dive. I looked through the slider fully expecting to see my old nemesis, and was surprised when her cousin Ellen walked into her bedroom. Maxine hated Ellen. Called her an opportunistic, phony, controlling, manipulating, jealous, devious witch, said her behind

was even bigger than her mouth, and claimed, above all, she was not to be trusted. Aside from the ass description, Maxine may well have been talking about herself. So there's Ellen, Maxine's closest living relation, scavenging through her belongings, the great majority of which were originally mine. Maxine had grabbed much of my furniture and artwork in our disastrous (for me) divorce settlement.

Ellen spoke into her cell making a verbal list for the moving company of what to ship to New York and what to leave in Maxine's apartment. In her unmistakable Brooklyn accent she said: "Take chest of drawers, nightstands, desk, chair and floor lamp. Leave bed, headboard and ugly red velvet chair. Wow, it's freaking hot in here." She opened the slider, giving me full access. I entered, perturbed that this Machiavellian nightmare was taking possession of my beloved worldly goods. The question of what happened to Maxine crossed my mind, but I was too intent on watching her cousin defile my belongings to dwell. I felt...violated.

I followed her into the small living room. "Nothing much in the living room" she reported into her phone, wiping the sweat from her brow. "The cocktail table is a maybe." A maybe! What a moron. It was a vintage Knoll in almost perfect condition and worth a small fortune. After I died and Maxine's shithead lawyer succeeded in ripping me off yet again, Maxine was given my apartment keys; I'd been living in a cheap Beverly Hills rent-controlled one bedroom the last few years of my life. From my mantle vantage point where Maxine kept my urn, I watched as she and some guy carried the table into the Hollywood Hills house she won in our divorce settlement. They also lugged in several packing boxes filled with stuff she hadn't legally been able to snatch from me in the first go round. Almost killed me all over again. Not long after, or so it seemed to me, the house ended up in foreclosure; that's Maxine's karma for you, and also how she came to live in a Santa Monica apartment.

I wondered what this imbecile would decide about the art. There was a signed Picasso pen and ink over an ugly end table that Maxine brought with her from a prior marriage (she went through

two other suckers before me). Ellen barely gave it a look. I bought it years ago after I sold my first book. *Herald Square* turned out to be a pretty big seller. I tried, but never came close to that success again.

Ellen entered the kitchen. I followed her behind which was, as Maxine phrased it, double wide. "That's a cute picture," she said aloud, looking at a colorful framed print from an '80s Picasso Retrospective. She spoke into the phone: "No artwork except for the framed print in the dinette." Looked like my real Picasso might end up in a dumpster but at least Ellen wouldn't have it.

Pam was at work and I was stretched out on the yellow beach lounge on our balcony. I'd just come from the pool and was feeling mellow. Larry was there smoking. I stuck close by him, got sufficiently wasted, and flew back upstairs. I was snoozing, peaceful as all get out, when a familiar voice seared through what was left of me.

"Well, look who's here. I'll be damned, and I suppose I am. If it isn't Henry Davis. I'd say in the flesh, but clearly you don't have any." The cackling that followed was diabolical.

I was afraid to look in her direction. I thought if I didn't move maybe she'd disappear. I was fully awake and completely horrified. It was Maxine, no mistaking that god awful shrill voice. She sat on the railing between our apartment balconies holding on. Guess she wasn't taking any chances. She resembled Maxine except, excuse the repetition, no bones, organs, skin or blood, and she was covered with scales. So there was the answer to my question: my ex had bought the farm.

"Fuck, Henry, have you been here the whole time and I didn't know it?" She looked ready to blow.

I said nothing. Anything at this point could bring her to a boil.

"Well, have you?"

"Yeah," was all I could manage. I hadn't felt this screwed up since before my demise. I hoped she wasn't planning to stick around.

"Jesus, you've been spying on me for years. Watching me have sex, take a shower, getting off to me undressing. Gross. I should have you arrested."

"Don't flatter yourself," I said, regaining some spunk.

"Admit it, you old piece of shit, you've always been sex-obsessed."

"Not when it comes to you," I shot back. This was getting ugly, too ugly for such a beautiful day. "Get off it, Maxine. Since you threw my urn at Pam, I haven't been inside your apartment."

"You didn't have to be inside. You could see plenty lurking from the balcony."

"Nope. Never. Except for after your fall..."

"Go on," she said, her scales quivering with fury. I'd never seen that before, not on any of the spirits I'd encountered. I was wary, but at the same time fascinated. Illuminated by the sun, her fluttering scales exploded in a brilliant light show that was almost blinding and even more captivating than the Joshua shows at the Fillmore.

"Your cousin Ellen came by." I spoke slowly, watching her face for signs of a major freak out. I readied myself to bail off the balcony if necessary.

"Oh, fuck! Is that why nothing's left in my apartment? Fat ass took it all."

"Not exactly. She took some stuff, mostly from the bedroom. The moron didn't take the cocktail table or the Picasso."

"Where the hell are they?"

"A guy from Out of the Closet came and took what her movers left behind. Some of their customers hit the jackpot. They probably don't even know it."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Have you lost it completely? What could I do? Give me a break, Maxine. I'm dead."

"I suppose," she said, but didn't seem convinced.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"What?"

"Did you....deliberately...you know, jump?"

She turned away. I refrained from repeating the question. If the broad didn't want to tell me, why should I care?

She turned back around. "Are you nuts? Why would I do that? Life was good. I was seeing someone. Very seriously. A doctor. Head of something at UCLA. Radiology, yeah, he was head of radiology. Handsome. Had a house in Bel Air. You'd love it. Mid century, a Richard Neutra. It was an accident. I had a little too much wine. I was due for my period and had taken a Valium. I never drink when I take Valium, but I forgot I'd taken it. It was an accident, Henry. Plain and simple."

So there it was. The tell, tells actually. She *always* drank when she took Valium, and there was no rich, handsome boyfriend. Maxine committed suicide, no doubt about it. Saving face. She may be dead but she still had her pride. Why rub it in? "Yeah, that's what I thought."

We both got real quiet. My high was ancient history. Shocking as it was, I felt sorry for her. She was so forlorn, so alone.

She looked down at the cracked cement floor. "I don't have anywhere to go, Henry. I won't stay with you long. Promise. I'll figure something out."

Fuck me, fuck me! kept buzzing through my mind, but stoically I ignored it and said, "No worries. Stay as long as you need."

We could have fit (the scales of the departed vaporize and disappear upon entering a vessel), but I refused to let Maxine sleep inside my urn. The lunatic woman actually suggested this. When I nixed the idea straight away she said, "Are you sure you don't want to sleep with me, Henry? C'mon, it'll be like old times." The scales surrounding her eyes fluttered.

"You may not be expired long enough to know this, but the dead are incapable of having sex, Maxine."

"Well, no, I didn't know that. I mean, how would I?" She looked at me coyly. "We can still snuggle, honey bear," she said, using the name she used to call me way back when.

If I'd eaten, I'd chuck my lunch. This chick was certifiable. Still, I couldn't bring myself to tell her how I really felt, but no way was she staying in the bedroom I shared with Pam. I had to put her as far away as possible; I relegated her to a piece of Mexican pottery, a good sized bowl, on the kitchen counter.

Time passed. I avoided running into her as best I could, but she was always floating around, especially when Pam was at work. It drove me crazy, but so far she was on her most excellent behavior. It reminded me of her act before we got hitched. Thoughtful, calm, selfless, patient, kind, free of neurosis (or psychosis for that matter), a real sweetheart. As I would later discover, she put on one hell of a show, giving no hint what lay beyond that carefully constructed facade. I had no clue who I was marrying.

(To be continued...)

