

The 49 Days

by Lillian Ann Slugocki

(Orpheus & Eurydice)

Where is she exactly?

Of course there is no answer to this question. But that didn't stop me from asking it. Constantly. Obsessively. And when I didn't get an answer, all things and all people, including myself, became lopsided. Unbalanced. Like a fun house mirror. One event didn't follow another in orderly fashion. This is when a married man entered my life, and I started seeing my dead mother. Sitting in my kitchen at night. Sometimes drinking coffee.

It began three weeks after her funeral. I was in rehearsal for a play I had written. We were working in a loft on Forsythe. The first day I meant to take the D train downtown from the West Village, but somehow ended up going over the Brooklyn Bridge on the Q. At first I thought, wow, magnificent view, but then a moment later, said shit. So I was late. I finally got on the right train and walked up into the chaos of Chinatown. I thought, this is the only place on the planet where the fish for sale are still dangerous. This is how fresh they are. How alive.

But I was late, sweating a little. I pushed through the multitudes of people on Grand Street, turned south on Forsthye and rang the buzzer. Four flights up, like a ski run. There he was. He played Dr. David Valentine, an oncologist. He was sitting with an actress with red hair. She played Our Lady of a Thousand Tumors, and lately had a starring role in a soap. The two were discussing the scene where they are locked in a passionate embrace in the morgue.

I liked the way he played it. I was glad his version of Dr. Valentine

wasn't cloying. But I also saw his wedding band and thought, stop. A dead mother is no excuse to be an adulteress. So I put it out of my mind, and got to work. One night, after eight hours of rehearsal, I fell asleep on the couch. The phone rang and woke me up. Hello? My mother said, hi, its me. Ma how is it that you can call me? She said I don't know. I hung up the phone and went back to sleep.

The next morning when I woke up and remembered what happened, I thought, holy shit, that really was my mother. She called me. It was unnerving. Frightening. But also kind of fun. Where was she? I didn't know. But I knew she had to be *somewhere*. You can't call someone if you're *nowhere*. Meanwhile, back at rehearsal, Dr. Valentine started to whisper, anybody ever tell you how sexy you are? And I'd say, yes, and you're married.

It got worse. The phone would ring at night, no one there. I'd walk into the kitchen, find her sitting calmly, at the table. The lights low. Always after midnight. Around two a.m. I don't remember what she wore. Once I asked her if she had seen God, and she replied, don't be ridiculous. Other times she told me she'd been traveling down a river that wound through a forest. I told her I was rehearsing a play about her death, and she said, I know that. Once I said, this is very strange. And she didn't have an answer for that.

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The theater was in the basement of a restaurant on 42nd Street; owned by a man who was on a hit TV show in the 90's. On opening night, after our standing ovation, we were upstairs at the bar. Dr. Valentine sat on a stool on his second beer, and I was between his legs. I leaned in and told him my mother is haunting me. She shows up in my kitchen at night and just wants to talk. He said, she's in the Bardo. In the Eastern Tradition, it's a way station between life and death. The Tibetan Book of the Dead says we remain there for 49 days.

I was impressed, how do you know all that? He said, my mother died five years ago. That was the exact moment I knew I was going to sleep with him. His wife and his children had nothing to do with this. I wasn't going to try and steal him away. I just needed directions. He might know. I had to get real close. The director pulled me aside, whispered in my ear, you know he's married, right? I said, we're just going for a cup of coffee. She laughed. We got into a cab and drove away.

At my apartment on Bedford, he said, we should fuck in the kitchen. Right where you see your mother. I said, Yes. Good idea. I straddled him on my kitchen chair. At the witching hour. Underneath fluorescent lights. It was exhilarating. Exclamation point. And when it was over, he couldn't get out of there fast enough. The spell was broken. The wife, the children, the home in the suburbs crashed through. I felt sorry for him.

He dropped out the next day. The director was very pissed at me. But my mother stopped showing up at my apartment in the middle of the night. Initially, I was relieved. A little further down the road, I was inconsolable.

