Ghosts

by Tyler Koch

The man and the woman ate dinner together as they did most nights. It had become a habit over the years, back when they had children. Their lives were busy yet they always found time for one another at meals. It was an expectation in their house but it was more than that. It was something treasured.

A single candle sat in the center of the table as their only source of light, a pale, singular flame that wavered unsteadily. The clink of forks and knives the only sound. It was early yet, barely eight, just enough time for the sun to paint the clouds pink and orange before departing for the night. Neither spoke to one another and neither felt the need to speak. They were comfortable in silence.

Each sat back in their chair after their plates were clean. There was no need to rush. They had all the time in the world. Their children once dictated their bedtime and when they set their morning alarm clock. But years had passed since then. Years since the children brought their friends to play in the backyard. Years more since they had a sleepover. How fun that had been, once upon a time. Ten children running through the house at three in the morning, chocolate on their faces from desert. Staying up all night never bothered them. There was a price to pay for children and they paid gladly. They would pay again if they had the chance, were their bodies younger and their minds sharper. What an adventure that had been. What stories they had to tell. What a life they'd had.

The man burped into his fist and the woman smiled.

“How's your indigestion?”

“Manageable.”

“That's good. I bought more Tums today at the store. Do you want some?”

“No no.” The man waved his hand. “Not now. Maybe later.”

They returned to silence.

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The man crossed his arms and set them on his belly, a belly that hadn't existed ten years ago. He wasn't the man he once was, not when they'd had children. Back then he'd been fit, gone to the gym every morning with his son, run track with his daughters. He even tried doing a backflip in one of their tumbling classes. That hadn't ended well but his daughters laughed and every time they came home to visit they told the story of their dad who fell off the trampoline. He had a scar from the injury but the scar was a reminder. Better times, not when he was trapped in a body like this. He huffed and puffed going up the stairs.

The woman stayed at home most of the time. She made their lunches every day, little brown bags with notes inside. Their children never were embarrassed by the handwritten messages. One of her daughters showed her years ago how she kept them all. She was going to give them to her daughter one day, pass on the tradition. But now her cookbook was covered in a thin layer of dust. Pots and pans unused for months on end. They bought a new dishwasher because their children insisted but they didn't need it anymore, not for two people. She washed the dishes by hand. There was a time when the five of them were so busy the dishes stacked up in the sink, stained with spaghetti sauce or squashed pees. Then the dishwasher had been helpful. Not now. Not anymore.

“I liked the asparagus,” said the man, looking out the window as he spoke. “Better than last time.”

“Me too.”

“You want to get desert later?”

She shook her head. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“Alright. Don't need it anyway.” He patted his stomach with a sigh of resignation. “Could do to follow that diet Charlie's on. What the name of that again?”

“I don't remember.”

“It has something to do with caveman, doesn't it?”

“I don't know.”

“Yeah. Caveman. I need a diet like that.”

“I can look into it if you want.”

But the man adjusted his hands and shook his head. “Don't bother. No need. Might be easier to get some protein shakes at the store. Cheaper that way.”

“I'll pick some up next time I go.”

“Can you get some of those ice-cream sandwiches too?”

“Which kind?”

“Not the ones from last time. They tasted fake. Get the real kind.”

“Okay.”

The woman folded her napkin in her lap and set it on the table.

“Rebecca wrote us. Did you see the letter?”

The man's eyes widened behind his thick eyebrows. “What it say?”

“She and her husband are doing well. They got back from San Diego a few days ago, had a good trip they said. Went to the beach almost every day. She sent some pictures too.”

The woman got up and went into the home office and returned. She gave her husband the letter and set the pictures on the table, looking at them again with a small smile on her face.

“Remember when we took the children to San Diego? What beach did we go to again?”

“La Jolla.”

“That's right. I bought a skim board for the kids to use.”

“Didn't Charlie hurt himself?”

The man chuckled. “Nothing serious. He pretended to be hurt until Elizabeth did the same trick he'd been trying before he fell. That got him up fast.” He continued reading, eyes skating over the page. “And they went to the zoo.”

“Here's a picture of the two of them there.”

The man looked. “Is that monkeys in the background?”

“I think so.”

“Remember the monkeys we saw when we took the kids to that zoo in Seattle? One of them kept on imitating Charlie.”

The woman nodded, smiling. “When Charlie tried to leave it started shouting and jumping around the enclosure.”

The man looked through the rest of the pictures. The woman took one and framed it on a shelf in the living room, one of the many shelves with pictures of their children, pictures of their former life. The man and the woman much younger than they were now. Their children actual children, not the adults they turned out to be. Grandchildren would follow they knew, not now but soon, next five years they hoped. Charlie dated a very nice girl, Rebecca married, Elizabeth too much of a free spirit to be settled down with any one person. She picked up one picture in particular and traced her finger over the glass. The five of them gathered for a family portrait. Their children were in high school then. They always said they hated those years but the woman loved them. Going to sporting events, after school functions. They were always together.

“What you looking at?” called the man from the table.

“Just put one of the pictures in a frame.”

“That's good. Make sure you leave one free for Charlie when he comes to visit. He always brings a picture or two.”

“I will.”

The man grumbled something to himself and returned his folded hands to his belly. The woman set the frame back on the shelf and cleared the plates from the table, washing them by hand. It wasn't a long process.

“Do you want to watch television?”

“Sure.”

They hit the power button on the remote and the television returned to the same channel they watched yesterday. No need for so many buttons. The man hardly understood half of them. Volume button. Channel button. Power button. That's all he needed. His children tried to talk him into upgrading to some cable package or other but he said no, waste of money. He always preferred playing games or going outside when they were around. But it was too hot to go outside now, he was too old. It used to be so easy before when he had a purpose.

The woman sat down with knitting needles and yarn and continued the scarf she'd been working on for Elizabeth. She was somewhere in Canada right now, very cold country. The woman planned on shipping the scarf to her when she finished. Knitting was something she picked up rather recently, a way to pass the time, fill the void. Before she used to read while her husband played with their children somewhere outdoors, but she couldn't focus now with the noise. Knitting was easier in that regard. Her husband looked over occasionally and commented on her progress.

An hour later the man stood and said he was going to bed. The woman said she'd be up in a minute, she was almost done for now. He turned off the television and walked to their bedroom and shut the door. When she reached a point she was happy with she set the scarf and needles on the kitchen table and joined her husband in the bedroom. The lights were off, her husband lying with his eyes closed on his back. He couldn't say on his side anymore, not like he used to. He snored softly.

The woman changed into her nightgown and got into bed with her husband. She didn't say goodnight, it wasn't something they did anymore. They fell into their own routine after their children left and that was fine by both. She opened the drawer to the nightstand and put earplugs in her ear. The snores were manageable now but they would get worse, a crescendo toward midnight. Finally came the nightmask to cover her eyes. Her husband got up early, a habit from before.

She closed her eyes and remembered a time when her children used to come into their room after a bad dream. Her husband had always been so good about that, letting the children sleep between them. That was before he snored. That was so long ago.