

Éile and the Ghost

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It was only once she was down on her hands and knees with a bucket of bleach that Éile realised the hard truth so many middle-aged women before her had conquered: divorce is never an easy thing. But she was sure it would've been much easier had she been the one to bring it up.

It was bad luck really, at the core of the matter, because she truly had been thinking about it. Of course, to say that now would be entirely useless. Everyone says that once the *proceedings* are *underway*, as Pat had put it. But, it was true. She really had been thinking about it. It may have been a foggy pipedream but daydream or not, the thought had been there.

Now, instead of telling the girls from the walking club that she had finally done it, she was sat at home alone—glass of wine in hand like a sword being wielded—while Pat was down at the pub, gallivanting, probably raking in the congratulations from the lads. He had always been a bit of a peacock. In the beginning, his showboating had been one of the things she loved about him. She wished that things could've stayed as they were in the beginning.

At the start, it had all been light. The way she remembers it, it was a perfect romance. The kind where they used to dance around in

the kitchen together, Pat always landing on her toes, the way people did in the old movies when they were really in love. And over time, things cooled down. She had never thought it was such a tragedy. Everyone's marriages stagnate eventually. They weren't the type to be having notions about romance, like in those films—silly really. Éile had no expectations of being chased through any airports. And they weren't teenagers anymore. Éile's face was pulled down by wrinkles. Her back ailed her. Makeup seeped into the folds around her eyes. She knew that her youth was long gone.

It didn't affect Pat the way it affected her, the aging business. He didn't feel the same red-hot shame. She had always quietly expected to be a graceful ager, a glamorous old woman, like the ladies in Paris. Instead, she was met with pity when she walked into the make-up sections. She was certain the younger workers had laughed when she bought her red lipstick. She had planned to wear it for her wedding anniversary. Instead, it was sitting in the drawer, next to her unused lacy red bra, just collecting dust. Not such a tragedy really, she thought, as there was no need to think about it now

And yet, think about it she did. It was this realisation, the slow rotting of the venerable, hard-won lipstick, that prompted her cleaning spree. It was as if by cleaning the home, quickly becoming a mere house, she could manage to rid herself of the hold the walls had on her. She scrubbed the place raw. Once the inside was sparkling, she moved on to the unruly garden. Pat never did get around to cutting the grass. She didn't know what she'd do in the summer without him, once it started to get out of control. Once she had heaved herself through the impossible bush and weeded every godforsaken corner, she decided it was time to move on to the most daunting area of them all: the loft, or the ghost's room as she thought of it.

A tiny space, the attic was full of nothing. There were boxes upon boxes, housing boxes of their own like little families. Éile almost envied

the warmth, the care of the mother box holding its baby inside. The thoughts further confirmed what Pat had told her a hundred times, she was away with the fairies. Not that it mattered what he said now. An ex-husband's opinion doesn't have the same stature. With this in mind, she heaved herself up the wobbling ladder and into the asbestos-filled chamber of antiques and decay. "God forbid the ghost is in a bad mood," she thought to herself as she climbed. At least if today was the day she left God's green earth, at least she would be doing it as herself—not an accessory to a man who pitied her.

The attic was as frightening as she remembered it, even more so with no one downstairs to protect her. Although, towards the end, it may have been more likely that Pat would've fed her to the monsters as a means of escape. She could never understand what it was about her that irked him so. She didn't mean to be a bother, or annoy him at all. The worst of it was the haunting. When she woke him up in the middle of the night to warn him of the keening she was certain she could hear, she could see the disgust on his face. She was too ashamed to admit just how convinced she was. There was something up there in the shadows. She didn't want to be the one to say the word "ghost," but the thumps and creaks in the night got into her head. She tried to suggest the idea to Pat, but it only made him angry. Why couldn't *she* deal with the ghosts this time, why was it always up to Pat to solve every one of her problems? The more she aged, the more like a toddler she became, hiding behind him, relying on him for everything. She didn't want to be the kind of person to drink alone and attempt a conjuring in her attic.

In her youth, her glorious early twenties, she was a different woman. When she and Pat had first met, she was full of fire. She had been bursting at the seams with sugar and honey, after hearing men's sweet words for years. But as time passed, the sugar eroded her. She felt sticky inside. It was a shameful thing, the decay. And there was no one there to talk about it with. Her family were hours away, her son was long

gone on a one-way flight. The worst of it was the pace of the world. It seemed to spin on its axis so much faster now. People were planning their moves to Mars while she was still trying to master the technology of the noughties. Sometimes, it seemed to her that the world was much too big to live in. She was constantly scrambling, trying to find her place inside the molten rocks, always searching for that little bit of warmth.

Inside one of the loving, mother cardboard boxes, she found a photo album, weathered and cracked, the pages seemed to snap as she turned them. Inside, it was full of photos of Éile. No wonder it was collecting dust. As she opened it, she was certain there was a watcher there with her. Although it was unideal for it to be a ghost, company is company.

She cracked the crusty book open wider, as wide as she could, and showed it one by one to the four corners of the room, moving slowly between them. By God, she needed someone to see who she used to be. It was unbearable to let that self live only in her own memory and a discarded, uncared for album buried deep in an attic alone. Someone needed to bear witness, even if it was a possibly imagined, proof-she-was-crazy fucking Ghost. It was hard to recognise the young woman in the photos. She wished she could've reached inside it, pulled herself out, and shaken her until she confessed something. Quite what the confession would contain she wasn't yet certain, but anything would've been appreciated.

Maybe she would say the confidence she was so sure she had possessed had simply been wishful thinking. Maybe it was all faked. She had always been this way, odd and difficult and pitiful. She didn't know if that would be a damnation or an absolution.

She wanted to reach through time and grab her youngest self, at six or seven when she was just learning how to be a person. This was the little girl she wanted to hug and kiss, and submerge in amber. She wanted to keep her most miniature self there for a hundred years, unmoving and unchanged, a permanent snapshot of all of her

potential. She could have been something maybe, if it hadn't been for the nuns, or her ever-insensitive mother, or the other girls in school who never let her into their circles. Or maybe if she had never met that goddamn Pat, the dimmer of her sparkle. The reaper of her passions. He had blinded her to the beauties of the world. Every morning the sun woke up and put on a lights show, just for Éile. And every morning she missed it. And why? Too busy making the lunches for school and work, or washing the uniforms, or cleaning the kitchen? She must've loaded and unloaded that cursed dishwasher a thousand times. It was more times than she had been held, or kissed, or loved with an open heart. Was it such a crime? To want to be loved so fully, so kindly, to have someone who would always answer her call. She wanted a constant.

Sometimes, Éile just wanted to hoard her time, spend none of it. As she aged, she felt herself turning into a scared dragon, sitting on its gorgeous hoard of hours, minutes and seconds. Maybe if she stays still enough, the hunter won't see her. Maybe she'll be able to save it. To turn back the clock and be the sole objector in the church on the wedding day.

Before she could be swept up in the injustice of it all, she snapped back to herself. The ghost was likely gaining on her, she could feel him leering over her shoulder, probably seeing the photo of her in her youth and wondering what went wrong.

But Éile didn't close the book. She didn't hide the poor, naive girl. She didn't hide the poor naive woman staring at the photos. If a ghost was going to devour her, in her own lonely attic, then so be it. At least there would be someone there to see how she had shone. Let it happen. She could only make herself so small, cower in her own home for so long.

She had every right to be there, sitting with her ghost in the dust and feeling something in her chest. It was something long and tough, unspooling like a roll of film. Something simple; something endless. She could almost see it gathering before her, the long list of everything

she could've done. She could've been anything. And what had she to show for it? A son over in Oz. A husband on the lash in the town, probably making a show of her by now. A lonely house with only a half-arsed ghost to keep her company. Not even paranormal enough to send her a stronger sign than a shiver up the spine and an uneasy feeling...

It made her mad, filled her up with the fighting kind of anger. That girl in the photos had been smart, and funny, headstrong even—she had to have been. And Éile had no idea where she went. The injustice of it all struck her hard and left her breathless. She still couldn't put her finger on when love had turned to tolerance.

Before she let herself get too carried away, she was moving again. Rising up, she decided that was enough of that. Pat always said she was one for self-pity, and now he wasn't here for her to finally tell him where he could go. If she could go back and meet Pat again, she wasn't quite sure what she'd do differently. Maybe she would try to make him love her again, the way he used to. The fumbling hands, the stomach-turning nerves. She would try to capture it like lightning in a bottle and keep it in one of those boxes in the attic. Or maybe not. Maybe navigating life on her own wouldn't have been any worse than this. Although she was alone, at least she was herself. If that self happened to be the kind of woman to get wine drunk and perform a makeshift seance in the attic, then so be it.

She would leave the attic soon, fall asleep on the couch. The memories of the ghost's breath on her neck would be gone by the morning. But Éile would be changed. Pat had no hold on her now. She was no longer the cowering fool behind his legs. Although she might not be sure what she'd do without him there, she would know she could be there without him—her own person as she had been at the start of it all. And she would keep whatever company she so desired, ghosts included.