



ECTOPHILIA

Short Story Contest Winner

by Dorian Karahalios

Don't trust the Egyptian priestess, with her gloopy dollar store mascara, pewter ankh, and vaguely Egyptian eyeliner, when she tells you your wife has communicated from the Great Beyond and has requested—no, demanded—mummification. Instead, laugh. You two have been communicating just fine through levitating chairs and flying chinaware. Likewise, don't be swindled by your Catholic priest who tries to sell you an expensive plot in the church graveyard. You've already had her body cremated, the ashes baked into bread then fed to the ducks at Mulberry Park, where you had your wedding photos taken. In fact, tell your priest that she is more alive than she's ever been and that you don't appreciate the threats of excommunication.

Your wife spends her time rattling her kitchen equipment and jingling the unpolished silverware in the dining room drawers. She has yet to speak, and you imagine that if she did, she would say words like *honey* and *hubby* and *help*, extending each 'h' into a spine-tingling hiss. Wish out loud for her to charge the stand mixer with psychic energy and take possession of dough so that it might knead itself into award-winning loafs. You miss waking up in the morning and filling your lungs with that honey-dripped, yeasty aroma and walking into the kitchen through a cloud of bacon grease. But most of all—you think—you long for a way to monetize your wife's newfound powers.

Once bedridden and shackled by tubes, your wife now floats lazily through the kitchen or stomps, child-like, up and down the basement stairs. Talk to her during the witching hour as she wanders the hallways, creaking floorboards and running her yellowed nails along the grooves she's made in the floral wallpaper. Tell her you're glad to have her back. You were an absolute wreck on your own.

Say, "I was so alone without you."

She stares blankly past you, moaning, so imagine what she might say: *They use ovens as iceboxes here; or, I love what you've done with the place. Brown box chic.*

Promise her you'll figure out a way to make things more intimate. Lie in bed and stare into her eyes. Ask, "What's the other side like?" as she hangs from the ceiling, dripping the pus that once flooded her lungs onto your new satin comforter. The first time she does this will be disturbing, but learn to love her in spite of it. Become an expert at washing pus out of satin. She responds to your question with wheezing. Her head flies off like a spinning top and comes to rest in your lap; admire the pale weightlessness of it. Reach out to stroke her cheek, only to have your hand pass right through.

In a moment of weakness, countless nights later, reach, not to the wife that crawls along your ceiling leaving hand and foot prints of blood, but to the wife in the photos on your nightstand. The wife you want is feeding ducks with botched bread, shooting down your design for her new website. The wife you want is in bed next to you, not hanging from the ceiling fan.

Ask, “Why are you doing this to me?”

Drip, drip, drip, she says. Translate it into, *Because it’s what you wanted.*

Tell her you love her. Don’t begin to deconstruct the meaning of the word “love” and the phrase, “‘Til death do us part.” You are blessed.



Take her out to dinner Friday night. Not to that run-down hole-in-the-wall diner that has the waitress with the piercings and the short, colorful hair, and not dressed like the slob she always used to say you were. Take her somewhere fancy, where the servers dress better than your old Sunday congregation, where the table never runs out of fresh artisan bread and you drink ice water out of wine glasses. Rub the tablecloth between your fingers and stare through the eyes of your wife to a table behind her, where a fully fleshed couple is laughing and drinking expensive wine (All the wine here is expensive. Order iced tea.). Watch the two interlock arms and drink from each other’s glass and wish you had done that with your wife before she was rendered ethereal. Wish that she would at least wear something nice to date night and not the threadbare, soiled hospital gown she died in. Wonder if it’s too late for your wife but not too late for you. Maybe she’s holding you back. Maybe you’re holding her back.

Order the calamari appetizer and the New York strip with a side salad. You can’t afford it, but what’s another hundred dollars? A drop—a speck—in an ocean, a universe, of debt.

Ask your wife what she’s having. You used to admire her for her decision-making and take-charge attitude, how she’d see to the awful task of calling to make appointments or inquiring toward business hours. But now she’s shy. You had to call to make reservations tonight, rehearsing the speech in your head a dozen times over. Your wife hides from the world and the server ignores her. Tell him she needs a few more minutes to decide. Even on this date in this candlelit restaurant, she won’t reveal herself entirely despite all your efforts. Instead, she turns the candle flames a pale, banshee blue.

“Ungh,” she says.

Take it to mean she’s hungry. Offer her some artisan bread, its crust a pale imitation of what she used to make. Imagine that if she could use words, she would tell you more than you ever wanted to know about the bread: its hydration level, its baking temperature, the variety of wheat used in the flour. Suggest the French onion soup.

“Ungh.”

Suggest the wedge salad with blue cheese dressing.

“Ungh!”

Slam your palms onto the table. The muffled shock rattles the ice in your glass, causes the candle flames to return to a soft orange. “Well, what do you want?”

She looks at you like a child staring at a television.

“What do you want?”

The server comes by, asks if everything is alright.

Grind your teeth. Cancel your order. Ask for the check. The server tells you the iced tea is on the house. The bread, as always, is free.



Scrubbing ghostly handprints off walls has become habit. Clean the ceiling, re-hinge the cabinet doors, then watch the first five minutes of *The Tonight Show* before your wife crawls out of the television screen. When you catch yourself in the hallway mirror, observe how you’ve lost weight, how you’ve developed the look of an obsessed artist. Compliment yourself, meekly. Watch in the mirror as your wife wraps her translucent, marshmallow baker’s arms around you and exhales unintelligible whispers into your ear. Imagine her asking, *Where did we go wrong?*

Say, “For starters, you died.”

Her arms tighten around your neck. Reach up to tear them off, though your hands will pass through like they always do. Remember the nights you spent curled in your corner of the bed with your own blanket because when you shared, she stole them in her sleep. Remember the frustration, the fatigue, the threats of separation, all for the sake of a good night’s sleep. Remember the make-up sex, anger turned to lust turned to exhaustion, and how the both of you slept like babies afterward, the idea of separation as distant as death. Realize that you’d rather have those arguments, tangible in steaming breath, spittle, and thrown pillows, than the current cold nights wondering which piece of furniture her head was going to pop out of next. Desire a warm body. Not a person with a face, but rather a heart pumping blood through arteries and veins, supported by bone, encased in flesh. Most of all, you want to get laid. Suggest an opening of the marriage as she reaches a pale claw out from the mirror. You’re a modern couple, and, after all, monogamy is for the living, isn’t it?

She moans and gurgles, black tar spilling out of her mouth. Imagine that this is her way of saying she’s all for it—she was dropping hints and hoping you’d bring it up.

Fabio’s ghost was coming onto me earlier, invited me to a party. I didn’t know how to answer.

Think, But Fabio isn’t dead. And isn’t he gay? Or maybe just a 5 on the Kinsey scale.

Is this really the hill you want to die on?

Say, “Just one date. It’ll be good for us.” Feel her raspy, bone-cold breath against your neck. Shudder as you inhale and try to shake the feeling of wispy-like fingers constricting around your heart. You have become a master at communication. You can make your dentist appointments all on your own now.



Fill your online profile with phrases like “down-to-earth” and “fun-loving.” Write that you enjoy hiking even though you haven’t been on a trail since you were in high school, and that you spend your Friday nights going out with “the guys.” There are no guys on Friday nights, just you and a bucket of ice cream watching your wife crawl out of the television during commercials. Leave the income field blank.

Your wife is there, playing with the computer monitor, making it flicker and produce face-like images, when, miraculously, you receive a message. The woman seems interested, says her name is Tammy. She makes a bad joke about how so many men are down to earth she’s beginning to think they’re all mole people.

Type, “LOL” anyway. She thinks you’re cute: that counts for something. Ask Tammy—who sings karaoke with her friends on Fridays and who has never seen the movie *Donnie Darko* because it seems too scary—out on a date.

Meet in a coffee shop that charges five dollars for a cup of coffee. Your wife has come along because she is concerned or jealous or curious. She hisses and wraps herself around the espresso machine, contorting her body and sliding around the machine’s levers and metal fixtures like an octopus tentacle. Tammy greets you with a hug. Take a moment to savor it—the weight of her thin arms around your shoulders, the warmth they give off, the slight compression in your chest—but not too long. Recall that hugs must be long enough to show interest, but not so long as to turn a person off. Wonder which kind you just gave Tammy. She has weathered and tanned skin, but her blue eyes are bright and she smiles between sips of her latte, foam sticking to her teeth. Take a sip of your fair trade, eco friendly, single origin coffee and sigh. Feel an unwinding of your heart, as if someone has released the turnkey and only now can the springs and gears inside finally begin their motions anew. Your wife is clinging to the male barista, ruining his latte art and splashing microfoam into his face. Turn coffee into dinner. Go to neither a hole-in-the-wall diner nor a cloth napkin place. Pretend to

be young with disposable income. Eat at the food trucks downtown, run through the park and feed garbage to the park’s mechanical goat. Do not act your age and do not act like a widower.

Return home to find your wife sitting in the living room, her face a pale, blank slate. Her hands rest in her lap and hold the features that have fallen off: two brown eyes, a flat, wide nose, a thick pair of lips, a set of natural bushy eyebrows. Tell her about your date, about Tammy. Tell her she should have been there to run through the fountain and eat greasy food truck meals.

I was there. I saw the whole thing.

Say, “I’ve never felt so alive.”

I’ve never felt so dead.

“I’m sorry.”

Your wife rises from her seat, letting her facial features tumble to the ground, where they turn into mealworms and wiggle into the floorboards. Get the feeling she’s become a different person. Tell her so. You want her to be happy but wonder if she wants the same for you. She loved you, but does she still love you? Ask her while she hangs out of the medicine cabinet, pressing her forehead to yours as you brush your teeth.

Think about Tammy before you drift to sleep.



Restructure your debt and continue to date Tammy. Your wife, once the awkward third wheel, spends her time haunting other people. On the news, you see construction accidents, homicides in meth houses, police brutality. She has been broadening her horizons and spending fewer nights at home. Enjoy your newfound freedom from housekeeping chores and sleepless nights. Your nights now are sleepless in a good way. When you lie in bed with Tammy, wonder where your wife is and if she’s safe. It’s natural to be concerned for loved ones. Tammy loves you, but you are unsure if you love her, if you will haunt her when you die. You still love your wife, but you are unsure if she loves you now, wonder where has she gone. Long for a ghastly pile of ethereal fingers to turn up in the vegetable crisper or for a figure to stalk you down the hallway at two in the morning. Take pleasure in the pleasures of Tammy’s flesh and let your mind wander to ducks and bread and funerals. See your wife in every minor kitchen accident and settling of the house. Stop Tammy in the middle of sex because you could swear, *swear*, you heard your wife moan from down the hall. But your wife’s dead. She’s been dead. She’s moved on. It was just the wind.

Say, “It was just the wind.”