



CLOSET SPIRITS

A woman in a peach nightgown peeks over her novel at the window shade glowing amber in the late afternoon sun. She wonders how she could have been reading all day, yet be less than halfway through her book. Scooting herself up in bed, she checks the sheets, then her nightstand, but finds no other books. These anomalies—these recurring gaps—disturb Deborah. But she can't worry about that now—not when Jessica is so depressed.

Already late afternoon, Jessica, in mourning over the departure of Jason's regiment for the Crimea, hasn't moved from the mahogany four-poster. Supported by pillows, she struggles to concentrate on a novel. Soon, a single tear falls from her eye, puckering a small circle on the page, then spreads to form an image of a cross. The omen causes her to weep in earnest.

As she reaches for tissues, a sound startles her. She is used to the bones of the old house making their ancient music, but this is louder and comes from the staircase that ends just outside her door.

She calls out, "Is someone there?"

When there is no answer, she dismisses the episode to nerves.

Shivering, Deborah closes the novel and turns to her sentinel, a stuffed white bunny on her pillow.

“There must be someone on the stairs, Alfie—someone who doesn’t belong in the old house.” She thinks the intruder must be Ramone, the evil but handsome attorney, a sworn enemy of Jason. Ramone secretly covets Jessica. Maybe he came to rape her.

Pushing that unpleasant thought aside, Deborah stretches, allowing her body to celebrate the soft caress of the satin sheets, and her eyes to devour the peach chiffon billowing from the canopy of her four-poster. The tension from the novel seems to melt away, and she places a hand atop the book and shuts her eyes. But they spring open only a moment later, because she hears a noise—perhaps the front door opening.

“Hello,” she calls, and immediately feels foolish, knowing that her voice can’t possibly be loud enough to carry downstairs. “Hello there.” She makes her voice louder this time, but there is no answer.

“Who can it be at this time of day?” she asks Alfie, while looking for a clock on the nightstand, then on the makeup table, and finding none. She rises and tiptoes to the door, grasps the knob and twists. It’s locked. She looks around in vain for the key. Another time, when she wanted to venture out of the bedroom, a door barred like this made her feel like a prisoner. The memory sends her scurrying back to bed, where she pulls the covers to her chin.

Sometimes she can discipline her mind, by forcing it to concentrate on something else. She focuses on Morton and his big brass bed, where they make love. He is demanding, like the male icons in her novels. In fact, she often fantasizes he *is* one of those characters and would swear their lovemaking comes straight out of scenes she has read. On occasion, she has even awakened sore, as she had this morning, a small price for such exquisite pleasure.

She wishes, though, they would make love in her own room, because in Morton’s is a cavernous dark closet shrouded by red brocade curtains. She has seen spirits emerge from it and hover over the bed. Her imagination is playing tricks, she knows, but it frightens her nonetheless.

Once spent, Morton drapes her in his long arms and carries her back to this room. At any rate, she assumes that is how she arrives in her own room. She asked Alfie about it once, but he’s good at keeping secrets.

Despite Morton’s passionate nature, they do not sleep together. From her novels, Deborah knows that many couples from the Victorian era slept apart. Yet, it strikes her as odd. Morton is in sales—she knows that—and often entertains clients. Another peculiarity, though, is that he never shares details of his business, or any other part of his life.

“You are a strange and mysterious man,” she says aloud.

Deborah sighs, then looks down at her hands, surprised to find them holding a book. Curious, she begins to read.

Another sound intrudes, closer now. "Is that you, Hortense?" Jessica knows, however, it is Sunday and all the servants have left for town. She pulls the bed sheets close to her bosom and fingers the cross that hangs from her neck.

There, again! No doubt now: someone is climbing the stairs, and from the sound, dragging a heavy object. She can't imagine who or what it can be, but the possibilities cause her to tremble.

Jessica is afraid of firearms; her brother, the Duke of Cheshire, was shot through the heart in a duel. Opening the nightstand drawer, she stares at the two-shot derringer.

Suddenly, another noise startles Deborah. Twisting to reach the nightstand, she claws open the drawer. But there is no pistol there, only tissues. Then she hears a thump. A man—and he's dragging something—or maybe a deformed visage of a man, with a useless withered limb that trails behind. She trembles; she has read about such creatures.

"Darling—is that you?" Her voice splinters, and sounds like a screech.

"Alfie? Is that Morton?" The bunny stares at her. Sometimes he can be so frustrating.

Now gooseflesh erupts on her arms. She forces herself to stand, tip-toe to the door again, and put her ear against it. Scuffling! There is no doubt now; a man is ascending the stairs, and she jerks away as if the door is aflame. Her hands scurry through her hair, then smooth her gown. Knuckles grope for her mouth, and she bites down, backs further away, finds herself at the closet, where she is distracted by the image of a gowned figure trapped in the mirrored door. The woman is wraith-like, gaunt.

A scrape at her bedroom door! She swivels, frantic, then remembers she must hide. Forgetting the figure in the mirror, she hurries into the closet, closes the door, and ever so quietly squirms into the furthest corner, careful to breathe no louder than a mouse.

The bedroom door creaks, and her heart races. Please, let it be Ramone, it must. She bites her lip. If only she brought the book, she would know for certain. Footsteps pad across the carpet, into the adjoining bathroom. Water runs. She knows Ramone will see her things, fondle them. She imagines he picks up her hairbrush, strokes its handle, then gropes for her towel, breathing in her scent. He unsheathes, grasps his manhood; the dark veins pumping, pumping. Her breathing is audible now and her hand finds the slickness between her legs. A moan escapes her lips just as the water stops running.

After a brief silence, a machine growls to life, jolting Deborah to her core. My God, it's a chain saw, she thinks, forgetting that Ramone can't possibly know of such a device. She tries to make herself too small to be seen, because if he finds her, he will leave her torn and bleeding.

The machine stops, allowing her to relax the tiniest bit.

Then, a knock—on the closet door!

She inhales fiercely, squealing, and deep inside feels a loosening.

“Deborah, er, Mrs. Langstrom. You can come out now.”

Deborah is puzzled. The voice belongs to a female.

“I'm done cleaning, Mrs. Langstrom. I'm going down now to fetch your dinner—give you a chance to straighten up,” the woman says.

The door shuts and Deborah hears a key turn. She knows it can't be Jessica, because she's in bed with a pistol. She scours her memory for the voice, then covers her mouth with her hand and suppresses a giggle. Of course, she knows who it is. Hannah, the maid. She cleans and brings meals. “Silly girl,” she chastises; the machine is a vacuum—Hannah has dragged the vacuum up the stairs.

Deborah shakes her head, opens the closet door and steps out. She feels a warm trickle down her legs, sees that she has soiled herself. What has become of her? Not remembering Hannah, whom she counted as a friend—perhaps her only one, besides Alfie—then peeing herself!

She hasn't always been so forgetful, so helpless. Before she and Morton moved east, there was her work as a volunteer. Her passion for it earned her the nickname *Whirling Dervish*.

There was a hospital, she remembers, though not its name or location. She came to the children's ward, a noisy, bustling space, tiny bodies moving here and there. A small boy, gaunt and lonely, lay silent in a bed. She spoke with him and after much tickling, made him laugh.

“Mommy,” he gasped, “Please stop!”

It almost broke her heart, and at that moment she knew she wanted children, needed to make them laugh, would never allow them to be lonely.

Recalling these details is a surprise to Deborah, because remembering lately has been an arduous, mostly fruitless chore. At any rate, her life now is much different. Partly it is Morton's doing; he discourages outside activities and won't hear of children. Her own

lethargy is to blame too, she admits. Morton takes care of everything—from the selection of her books to arrangements for housekeeping and meals.

Well, something will have to be done about re-igniting her energy. She clenches her fists, bangs them on her thighs and vows to start tomorrow.

Deborah steps out of her nightgown and walks to the bathroom to wash herself. When she finishes, she goes to the closet, places a finger on her chin and surveys its only contents: several silk nightgowns, each peach. She chooses one and pulls it over her head. The motion makes her stomach rumble.

“I have your dinner, Mrs. Langstrom,” Hannah says, making Deborah gasp.

Turning around, exhaling, she says, “Oh—Hannah, I didn’t hear your come in.”

The maid shoulders the door all the way open and brings the tray to the makeup table where Deborah takes her meals.

“There now, I’ve brought you your soup, a nice clam chowder, and some crackers.”

Deborah sits down, picks up her spoon. Maybe it’s hunger, but she feels more alert than she has in some time. She notices Hannah is still standing by the table, fidgeting with the lace collar of her white blouse. “You look as if something’s bothering you. What ever can be the matter?”

“Oh, Miss.” Hannah chews on a knuckle, struggling to find a way to reason with a woman who has taken to hiding in her closet. “Well—just that—well—I found another mess in the living room today.”

“A mess?”

Hannah frowned. “You remember my tellin’ you about these messes before, don’t you, Miss?”

“Oh yes—of course.” But Deborah doesn’t remember. “You know how men can be.”

Hannah puts her hands on her hips. “There are men all right—more than a few, I’d say.” She tells Deborah she found an empty bottle of scotch, several glasses and cigar butts.

“I’m sure Morton just has guests. You know, businessmen—clients.” Deborah thinks it odd that Hannah seems so upset.

The maid cocks her head. “Then you didn’t hear or see anything last night, Miss? They must’ve been carryin’ on plenty.”

Deborah searches her memory, but can't remember much of anything from the previous evening, except for a hazy image of Morton's bed and the forbidding closet.

She shakes her head. "I'm not a light sleeper, you know."

Hannah eyes drop down to her shoes. "I found something else, Miss." Her hand disappears into her apron pocket, comes out with something shiny. She puts it on Deborah's table.

"It's a foil packet," Deborah says as she picks it up.

Yes, Miss. A condom wrapper. And it's empty. "

Deborah colors, drops the packet.

"There was more than one too, Miss." Hannah shuffles her feet, looking quite uncomfortable. "The truth of it is that I—I think maybe it's time I should be puttin' in my notice here."

Deborah gasps. At her core she senses that things with Morton might be abnormal, that maybe someone should help her.

"Hannah ..."

"Yes, Miss."

But more than anything else, Deborah can't bear to think of Hannah leaving. She stands, takes the maid's hands. "Hannah, please. Don't talk such nonsense. You know how fond I am of you. Why, what would I do without you?"

Hannah's is taken aback by the moisture in Deborah's eyes. Then her own begin to glisten. "Oh, Miss—it's just that I worry so. Sometimes, I think the Mister might not treat you just right."

"Oh, Hannah—whatever are you talking about?" She can see the old woman is still agitated, though, and forces herself to be more convincing. "Don't you fret, now. I'm just fine. And I'm happy, Hannah. Really—Morton is a—a lovely man. It's just his clients. You know how business can be—and salesmen are such a rowdy lot."

Deborah releases Hannah's hands. "I'll bet there's a perfectly reasonable explanation. One of them was probably cleaning out his briefcase or something."

Hannah has her handkerchief out, and is dabbing at her eyes. "Well, Miss, I suppose there must. You know best."

Deborah feels relieved, then begins to wobble. She sits down heavily. “I think I’ll finish my soup now.”

“Yes, Miss. Maybe take a nice nap after.”

Hannah starts for the door, then stops.

“Oh—your pills, Mrs. Langstrom. The Mister insists I give them to you straight off so you won’t forget.” She emphasizes the point with a forefinger.

Deborah smiles, takes the two pills and swallows them with milk.

Hannah tells her she’ll be back to pick up the tray. Then, halfway out, she frowns, knows she has forgotten something. She turns back to Deborah. ”Here. It’s another package—from Mr. Langstrom.”

“Ooh—you know how I love surprises.”

Hannah pats her on a shoulder and leaves the room, shaking her head, taking care to leave the door unlocked.

As Deborah sips her soup, her eyes wander to the package. She realizes it’s a book, but she simply must know the title. Tearing the wrapping, she sees *Another Man’s Wife* slashed in raised, blood-red letters. She shivers, puts it down, fills another spoon, but the effort is too great. She has unexpectedly become drowsy, barely sensing the notion flitting about her mind, that earlier she had vowed to do something about herself—something important. But it vanishes like a star in a clouding sky.

Her eyes stray to the book again; she runs her hand over the raised letters and opens the cover. Inside, as is often the case, is a note from Morton.

My Darling Deborah,

I do hope you will enjoy this book. For now, however, please be so kind as to only read pages 76 and 77. Commit them to memory, my dear, and be certain to follow their instructions tonight. And do remember to take your pills.

Your devoted husband,

Morton

Deborah nods, turns to page 76.

Deborah

Olivia lies in her bed but does not sleep, too

Morton

excited over her impending rendezvous with Andular.

She knows her family and the servants will soon be in

bed, and if not asleep, then reading, distracted

Deborah

from the normal noises of the house. Olivia will know

the right time by the sound of his bedroom door

closing. There! Her breath catches as she hears the

signal, and she pads quietly to her door and peeks

Deborah

out. All is clear and Olivia tiptoes down the hall

until she is in front of his door, which she opens to

Morton

to find Andular in bed, reading a book. He looks up,

Deborah

smiles and opens his arms. Olivia, unable to contain

herself, runs to his bed, casts off her robe and leaps

into his sinewy arms, ~~unaware she is watched by more~~

~~than one pair of male eyes, their bodies concealed~~

~~for the time being in the closet behind heavy red~~

~~curtains.~~

To her pleasure, she finds him unclothed, and sees
Deborah
the degree of his desire. Olivia gives him a coy look,

then sweeping long, auburn hair over her shoulder,

bends and takes him in her—

Deborah gasps, clutches the neck of her nightgown. She feels warm, tingly, uses the book as a fan; then reads more. Now and then she lets out little cries. Her hand drifts between her legs, and soon her breathing grows rapid. When she finishes page 77, somehow she remembers to stop, though she doesn't want to. It is just as well, though; the ordeal has been exhausting.

She yawns, stretches languidly, and moves to her bed. She pushes Alfie aside, along with Jessica and her travails, and curls into a ball and closes her eyes. Descending deep into a dream, she walks to the big brass bed, unaware of the spirits flowing past the closet curtains, flings Morton's bedclothes aside, and takes him in her...

THE END