

Squirrel at the Bird Bell

By Maryanne Pope

In our periwinkle blue bedroom, the bed, the vanity, the pictures on the wall; they all look the same and of course, *are* the same – but now I’m seeing them through fundamentally changed eyes. Sam will never sleep beside me again, or empty the change from his pockets onto the counter, or pray to the picture of Saint Jude tucked in the corner of our mirror before climbing into bed.

I open the closet doors to get my pajamas and stumble backwards at the sight of Sam’s clothes. Grabbing his gray dress shirt, the one he’d worn to the wedding in Disneyland last week, I hold it up to my face. I breathe in his scent as if it can sustain me. Loss: I feel absolute loss. I pull out his flowered Hawaiian shirt and blue boxer shorts then gently shut the closet doors.

Our Shepherd, Sasha, sits on the bed watching me carefully. I brush my teeth with Sam’s electric toothbrush. I put on his shirt and shorts. Then I take his wedding ring from my vanity and place it on his chain around my neck. Sam was a cop and never wore his ring to work. “Because,” he’d said, “I don’t want the shitrats to know I’m married.”

I climb into his side of the bed and put my head on his pillow, clutching his ring tightly. I kiss his Timex, now on *my* wrist because it was given to me in the hospital. Then, like a wolf in her den or a Canada Goose in her nest, I begin mourning the loss of my mate. I throw in a prayer to God – if such a thing exists – to look after Sam (the non-physical part of him, if such a thing exists), wherever he is. With Jude, the patron saint of police officers, perhaps?

I replay the events of the day in my mind.

Sam fell; your husband is brain-dead; may we have his heart, liver and kidneys?

Through a false ceiling; your husband is brain-dead; skin, kneecaps and eyeballs?

No safety railing; your husband is brain-dead; the rest to medical research?

I don't know how to stop the agonizing thoughts so I come up with a more pleasant one: "Come to me in my dreams," I whisper into the darkness. "Maybe you could turn on your watch light or something...you know, as a sign that you're OK."

I awake at 6:00am to see a reddish-orange light framing the edges of our bedroom window. I blink a couple of times to make sure I'm actually awake and then watch as the light slowly disappears. I recall the dream I just had: I'd been in an underground parkade and seen blood spatter on the concrete a few meters away. I was flying towards it with my body parallel to the ground, but when I got to the blood, my field of vision faded out around the edges – and I woke up.

Although I don't know the specifics about Sam's actual fall, the dream gives me a strong sense of peace, as if I perhaps experienced the *essence* of his death. If so, I get the impression that when Sam's head hit the cement, it was simply over for him...like the end of a film where the final scene fades to black.

I fall back asleep for a few hours but when I awake the second time, around 8:00am, the entire truth and the horrific anguish that accompanies that comes crashing into me in this first moment of recall. There's no mysterious lights or strange dreams to buffer the reality; just excruciating emotional pain and sheer terror.

There's a knock on our bedroom door. "Can I come in?" It's my sister-in-law.

“Yeah.”

“How did the night go?”

“Brutal.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You could make poached eggs,” I suggest. “Those were Sam’s favourite.”

“You got it.”

I manage to get out of bed and go downstairs to greet my fate – and the concerned faces of my two oldest brothers.

“Good morning, Googie,” one brother greets me, using my childhood nickname.

“Hi guys.”

They stare at me, wide-eyed.

“How about a coffee?” I suggest, not knowing what else to say.

And so my first day as a thirty-two year old widow begins with poached eggs, toast and coffee...and a hole in my heart the size of Texas.

After breakfast, I’m on my way upstairs to take a shower when I notice something hanging from our birch tree. At first I think it’s one of Sam’s black work socks, which wouldn’t make any sense, but when I get to the window I can see it’s a squirrel hanging upside down eating from the birdbell. I’ve never seen a squirrel there before. My life is quickly turning into one of those kid’s books where you have to find ten things wrong with a picture, like a person walking on air or a house with no door.

Yet seeing this squirrel makes me smile. I think of how Sam had got a kick out of Sasha’s behavior towards squirrels: she’d bark ferociously, tail wagging. I make a connection between that squirrel and Sam...I can’t rationalize it, but it gives me comfort.

I'd planned to have Sasha blessed today at the annual 'blessing of the animals' ceremony – in honour of St Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals – at the Anglican church downtown, where Sam and I were married. My, how plans change.

I turn and quickly walk upstairs. In Sam's shower, I use his shampoo and soap...personal items he'll never touch again. I run the water good and hot, just like Sam did, but a tsunami of sorrow surges to the surface from some deep place inside me. How am I ever gonna get through this? When I step out of the shower, I see Sam's towel hanging on the hook and I realize that is the last thing I'd seen him touch and I know I can't disturb it. So I reach instead for my own towel but just happen to notice my pink packet of birth control pills on the counter and I think oh yes, I better not forget to take...

Oh no.

"I THINK I'M GONNA NEED SOME HELP IN HERE," I scream out the bathroom door, still naked, hoping it'll be my sister-in-law coming to my rescue and not one of my brothers. I throw on my robe but my hands are shaking so badly, I can't tie it.

My sister-in-law races into our bedroom, "What's wrong?"

I slump down on the end of the bed. "I can't fucking handle this."

"What happened?"

I show her my package of birth control pills.

"Oh dear," she says.

"He'll never touch me again." I don't recognize my own voice.

"Adri, there are going to be so many tough 'firsts' for you..."

"Sam and I will never make love."

She looks to the floor.

“We’re never going to be parents,” I announce.

“Adri...”

“I knew we probably wouldn’t have kids but this makes it pretty fucking final.”

She sits down on the bed beside me and holds me as I cry. And cry and cry.