

Ghost from My Past

Venita Jensen (2022)

Liquid pours from the canister hanging from my hand. I look at the pile of bricks outside the bedroom window. It's almost covered by overgrown grass. My husband was an architect. He would have found a use for those bricks. He could have incorporated them into a beautiful home. Too bad he hadn't done much actual building during his time in that profession. Despite the late nights, he never seemed to get any work done.

But it's okay.

My husband told me he was out late, planning projects, but his office closes at five, and it was dumb of him to think I didn't know that. I see a broken bottle on the bedside table. It didn't bother me much that he was rarely home though. He loved a good drink, maybe a little too much. As soon as he came home, he was straight into the kitchen, pulling a beer out of the fridge, drinking his useless life away.

But it's okay.

I walk into the dining room where a book lies on the floor in front of me. My husband loved to read. I'd tell him that chores needed doing, but he'd only reply with a grunt and stay in his world within the book, and nothing would get done.

He'd come home and complain, saying, 'You're useless. You spend all day at home while I'm out making a living, and nothing is ever done. You can't even be a proper woman.'

But it's okay.

I kick the book towards the fireplace. A beautiful painting of a bright red star used to hang over it. Too bad it reminded me of the bloodstains all over the house. Now, the only thing that remains of the painting is ash.

There's a fist-sized hole in the floral wallpaper near the fireplace. My husband brought me flowers a few times during our eight years together. At the start, they were to show his love, and I believed him and loved him back but, in the last year or so, I only received them after big arguments. He said they were also to show his love, but I didn't believe him or love him back.

My coat catches on a chair, which scapes as I pull my coat away. It was my husband's chair. On a worn leg, I see a spot of dried blood. Mine. I reach up and touch the scar along the back of my neck, remembering the pain. I put down the canister, and my hands shake as I try to unthread myself from the splintered chair leg.

'Why won't you leave me alone?' I ask, and the chair releases its grip.

I pick up the canister, start pouring its contents, and tighten my face to stop my lip from quivering. Passing the bathroom, I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the shattered mirror. I cringe at the sight of my black eye, rat's nest hair, and busted lip.

But it's okay.

I walk into the kitchen and put the canister on the bench. I grab a reusable bag and shove fruit and muesli bars into it. I open the fridge and grab whatever seems useful and long-lasting to take with me. The beer sits there, taunting. I take a bottle and throw it as hard as I can against the wall: the pieces shatter. I grab the cash that's kept above the fridge and stuff it into the bag, swinging it over my shoulder. I go back to pouring the contents of the canister as I turn and walk into the lounge room.

When we were first married, we cuddled and watched TV together. Loving touches were shared as though we were a happy couple that would spend the rest of our lives together. Somehow, I can't wrap my head around how his touch turned so painful. As I look at the photos on the walls, I remember the happy life he promised me at the altar. It never came and, instead, I was forced to stay home and endure his harsh actions. The wonderful friends I'd made before I met him were ignored and, eventually, they stopped calling. I was unable to produce the children we agreed to have, which made his punishments worse.

As I walk into the guest room I'm reminded of my family. We promised them at our wedding that we would let them stay anytime they wanted, but this room stayed unused, collecting dust. I don't think I even remember my mum's voice anymore. I wonder if she still thinks of me. If she worries about me. Why didn't she come to help? When I would shout out her name as I was hit, why didn't she come to tell him off, wrap me up in her arms, and tell me everything was going to be fine?

But it's okay.

He's gone.

He can't hurt me ever again.

Maybe Mum will still care for me when I turn up crying at her doorstep.

I drench the bed and make my way into the sunroom. Windows fill the wall in front of me, but I don't feel seen or exposed. The bush hides our house like a cloak. Only the birds, spiders, and kangaroos stand as witnesses. I empty the remaining liquid from the canister onto the fly-infested corpse laying butchered in front of me. I try not to breathe in the stench as I pass by the bloody axe and make my way outside into the overgrown backyard. The pile of wood that my husband cut during winter is piled against the house.

This morning, he barged inside, axe in hand, furious because I hadn't made him breakfast yet. As he became more infuriated, I started to fear the axe would be the next thing swinging at my head. So, before I could convince myself otherwise, I kicked him in the groin and pried the axe out of his hands. He got up and charged at me, and I swung the axe in self-defence, the blade biting into his stomach. It surprised me that, this time, he was the one releasing a blood-curdling scream.

I take a matchbox out of my pocket and flick a match alight. Memories that, long ago, filled this place with a sense of home had been tainted and filled with pain. I throw the match and the flame catches the trail of gasoline, growing larger, as I head out the door. My husband loved this house. That's why, as the floorboards catch fire and the smoke rises into the air, I can't help but smile.

It's okay.

I'm the happiest I've ever been, and I don't care that I've committed an unspeakable act. *He can't hurt me anymore.* And, as the house where we spent our years loving and hating each other in burns to the ground, I am free, and he's just a ghost from my past.