



Though it's but the second of November, Marjorie can already smell the damp despair of another South Georgia winter in the morning air. As tangible as the aroma of the bacon sizzling in the frying pan and the Folgers brewing in the coffemaker, that odor of mildew and rotting vegetation manages to seep into the house through each and every, no matter how minute, crack and crevice. Sighing, Marjorie thinks how if it were a poisonous gas—some insidious, biological agent of warfare—then she, Bethany, and Jude would all be dead.

'What time's Dad coming?' Bethany asks as she contemplates her reflection in the toaster's shiny chrome surface, although it distorts her rather attractive thirteen-year-old countenance into something glimpsed in a funhouse mirror.

'He said he'd be here at nine,' Marjorie replies, wondering if all teenage girls are as obsessed with their looks as her daughter. Then remembering herself at that age, she decides they probably are.

'That means ten,' chimes in Jude who, at eight, is preoccupied with more important things than his appearance and sits mesmerized by the Saturday morning cartoons on Channel 13.

Bethany lacks her brother's childish optimism. 'More like eleven,' she says, fluffing her curly blonde hair then tilting her head to study the effect.

Marjorie removes the bacon from the pan and places it on a paper towel to drain. 'You guys want scrambled eggs or fried?'

Jude rocks back in his chair. 'Scrambled,' he says and giggles over the antics of Scooby Doo.

Eyes still trained on her likeness, Bethany frowns. 'I just want a piece of toast.' She shrugs. 'Maybe a teaspoon of jelly.'

Marjorie looks at her daughter, who is looking at herself. 'That's not enough,' she says. Yet she knows it will do no good. Bethany has decided she is 'gross' and needs to lose weight, although she wears a size four and has already lost seven pounds since school began.

'Dad's taking us to lunch at the club,' Bethany says, frown intensifying.

Marjorie cracks the eggs, beats them with some cream and seasoning, and pours the mixture into a buttered skillet. As the eggs bubble, beginning to cook, she glances out the window into the backyard. Leaf strewn, it needs raking again, even though James hired the neighbor's son to do so just last week.

'Mrs. Gilmore,' Chad said when he showed up on her doorstep the previous Saturday, 'I saw your husband at the mall. He asked if I'd be interested in doing your yard work.'

She looked into his eyes and said, 'You mean my ex-husband.'

'Whatever.' Chad rolled his shoulders beneath his football jersey to demonstrate his indifference.

Marjorie told him the tools were in the garage then went to finish her coffee, all the while envying the self-absorbed disinterest of the young.

Had their marriage survived, she and James would have celebrated their eighteenth anniversary yesterday, November the first; but the marriage did not survive. Their divorce was final as of exactly three months ago last Thursday.

Marjorie stirs the eggs with the spatula and thinks how yesterday, eighteen years ago, she wore a French-lace wedding gown and was naively happy. She also thinks how, since it was not she who ended their marriage, she obviously remained naïve, though not necessarily happy, until that evening in May when James sat down on the sofa, the ice cubes tinkling in his Scotch, and said, ‘Marjorie, we have to talk.’

She looks back out the window at the gray bleakness of the November morning. Funny, but before the words even left his mouth, she already knew what her husband was going to say.

Fifteen minutes later, he mumbled, ‘I’m sorry,’ as if that apology, rather like an insincere afterthought, could atone for the fact that their marriage, gasping its last feeble breath, lay dying at their feet.

‘Go to hell!’ was the best she could do, and those words provided scant consolation, given he’d just confessed he was in love with another woman.

The eggs now cooked, Marjorie scrapes them onto plates, and she thinks how maybe, just maybe, her husband’s infidelity would have hurt less were the woman not but a mere eight years older than his daughter, making her twenty-two years younger than his now ex-wife, a fact that made James Gilmore a typical—oh, so typical—successful, middle-aged male, as well as a cradle-robbing bastard.

Marjorie places the food in front of her son, who begins to eat without taking his eyes from the TV, and sitting down across from him, she stares at her own plate.

Typical. But wasn’t that what their marriage itself became? She stabs the suddenly unappetizing mound of eggs. Disgustingly typical?

Yet, eighteen years ago yesterday, she never dreamed that on a Saturday morning in the really not so distant future, she would be waiting for James to pick up the kids for his bimonthly visitation and thinking of their marriage as disgustingly typical. On that day, like all newlyweds, she considered their marriage a fortress, a stronghold against the world, with the two of them forever safe—forever in love—between its invincible walls. .

She herself was young then—twenty-five. Yes, young and beautiful, a hundred and ten pounds, her flesh firm, no spider veins or stretch marks, with a taut body, and, oh, don’t forget that naïve innocence. But now that young woman no longer exists. Like their marriage, she too has died and cannot be resurrected.

Marjorie picks up a strip of bacon, returns it to the plate.

Bonnie is his new wife. Bonnie. It’s the name of a child, a child bride who will not have to sacrifice to see her husband through medical school. Young, beautiful Bonnie will never have to clip coupons or shop at discount stores. No, that was done by Marjorie Renee Gilmore, so Bonnie could have an affair with a prominent surgeon, who would leave his wife of eighteen years because she is now forty-three and no longer young nor beautiful, at least not with the beauty of youth, which is all there is of beauty and, when it fades, what is left is but a pathetic charade.

Bethany suddenly whirls away from the counter. Scowling, she glances down at the short, plaid skirt, beneath which her thighs are exposed. ‘I hate this skirt,’ she announces. ‘It’s hideous.’

Marjorie recalls how, two weeks ago, when she glimpsed the skirt in Macy’s, Bethany said, ‘Mom, please, I’ve got to have it!’ Yet she doesn’t remind Bethany of this, just watches her daughter swish in disgust from the kitchen, the words ‘I’m going to change’ following her down the hall toward her room.

‘Girls,’ Jude says as Marjorie looks out the window at the gray nothingness of the field behind the house, a nothingness that bleeds into the even grayer horizon.

On this day, eighteen years ago, she and James were on their honeymoon in Mexico, the trip a wedding gift from his parents. At almost this exact time, she probably was lying between sheets still warm and moist from the night and eating strawberries and cream, James licking the cream from her fingers and then her breasts and then—

Marjorie blinks at the memory, made somehow unbearable by her husband’s infidelity, and forks some of the now cold eggs into her mouth.

Later, exploring the city, they haggled with vendors, dined at an outdoor café, and walked arm in arm down the sunlit streets. On a corner, they stopped and watched children who, dressed as skeletons and ghouls, giggled and danced as they shouted ‘Calaveras! Calaveras!’

She thought it must be a Mexican Halloween, but James, who spoke the language and, even then, was more cultured and worldly than she, told her the holiday wasn’t quite the same.

‘The children are saying, ‘Skulls! Skulls!’” he said and explained that their chant was a plea for treats—confections shaped like skulls, skeletons made of white chocolate, and coffins made of marzipan.

It was only then she noticed the displays in shop windows, having been too caught up in James to notice them before—the skeleton figurines playing pianos, reading books, and doing all the things a living person would do.

'But why?' She asked, wondering where the appeal lay in something that represented death.

He said, 'Today, November second, is Dia de los Muertos.'

She frowned. 'Dia de los Muertos? What does that mean?'

'The Day of the Dead,' he explained as he handed coins to two laughing children. 'It's a holiday both to honor the dead and to make fun of death.' Smiling, he watched a little girl run by, dark braids bouncing on each side of a ghoulish mask and over her thin shoulders. 'It's to show death they aren't afraid.'

James then told her how the people visited the graves of their family members, cleaned up the gravesites, and decorated them with flowers and candles. 'After they've finished,' he added, 'they have a picnic.'

'A picnic?' She laughed. 'Surely not on the graves!'

'Yes, a picnic, but it's held beside the graves, not on them; and during the meal, people share their memories of those who have died.'

Being young, Marjorie had little first hand experience with death and found it all delightfully superstitious and, perhaps, a little bit silly.

'After the meal,' James said, 'they light the candles to bring back the spirits of the dead, then scatter a trail of marigold petals. This trail leads from the graves back to their homes, so the spirits can pop in for a little visit.'

She pretended to shiver and watched her new husband smile.

'But that's not all.' He placed one arm across her shoulders. 'When the spirits arrive for their visit, they find this huge feast waiting for them. One of the main dishes is pan de los muertos.'

'Which is?'

'Guess.'

'Well, from what you said before. It means something of the dead.'

'Exactly.' He pulled her close. 'It's bread of the dead, a sweet bread made especially for the occasion.'

She repeated, 'Bread of the dead,' as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him there on the street corner beneath the bright Mexican sun, amid the echoes of the musical chants of children shouting 'Calaveras! Calaveras!'

Jude, now finished with his breakfast and the closing credits of Scooby Doo rolling on the screen, shoves away from the table. 'I'll be back,' he says. 'Don't turn off the TV.'

Marjorie hears her son hurry from the room as she continues to stare at the sky of another November second. She recalls how James later explained that, for the Mexicans, Dia de los Muertos was a time of joy not sorrow. 'Since they'd already wept for the dead,' he added, 'they can remember their loved ones without either tears or regret.'

And Marjorie envies them this, for it is something she herself can never do.