

Possession(s)

by

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When your wife dies you find music tastes different and food sounds the same. You don't walk, you creep. Some days you crawl. Others, best just to lie still. The closets are full of hosts. Blouses she wore when she was twenty-six. A denim skirt. Killer dresses. Shoes—heels, pumps, a pair of Capezio tap shoes—entombed in boxes. When you open the closet door her coats hold still, suspecting they're gonners. Threads of memory. She wore this one there, that one here. Every garment a chapter. The clothes of the dead have no future. You could burn them. You could leave them be, decades of sartorial history hanging from a pole sagging with the weight of remembrance. You could cross-dress with a vengeance. *Everything Must Go*. Not discarded, donated. To the Women's Shelter, cartons and paper bags and piles of clothes, until the woman behind the counter says they're overstocked. You're tempted to take them all back. Who denies the donation of a dead woman's clothes? The rest to St. Vincent DePaul's, and there her cottons and linens and rayon blends are added to bins heaped with corduroy and polyester. (But for one satin nightgown that will not be donated.) Until the closets seem empty. Your clothes don't count—they aren't you, but just neglected shirts, pants, and jackets. As summer wanes, you open a drawer and find sweaters, scarves, wool hats and gloves. Gear for a woman who understood winter. You send sweaters and shawls and silk scarves to the women and girls in her family. They respond with photographs of ten year old daughters wrapped in blue for the fifth grade's Colonial Day. Still you are possessed by possessions. Even after you dispossess yourself, they turn up in the kitchen

drawers and cabinets, where she kept jars of dry goods, beans and grains. And there, in the freezer, plastic containers: soups, tomato sauce, chili. Nutritional messages from the afterlife. Hoard them. Defrost only as a last resort. Yet through the winter the freezer becomes as spacious and cold as your heart. By the time you open the last tub, labeled *Black Bean Chili 3/14/10*, food no longer has any meaning. It's no longer an act of love, a gesture of kindness. There is no intimacy in tuna salad or in marinating chicken thighs. It's embarrassing to recall how often you ate by candlelight; it's like the satin nightgown tucked away in a drawer you never open. Instead just heat and serve. Just nuke it. Just eat. Overcooked sustenance. When you eat dinner right out of the skillet or pot, the temptation is to glance over your shoulder in shame. No one is watching, except the cookbooks. Shelves of cookbooks, back issues of *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*, and a three-ring binder stuffed with recipes, a culinary legacy handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter. Recipes written in her short hand, scrolls and waves and loops fetching across the page with an occasional word, a white cap of English. Instructions for future meals, for candlelight dinners, for guests. There are no recipes now, there are no guests, no need for the wedding china, the good tablecloth. Don't forget *Widower's Rule #1: Never turn down a dinner invitation*. You're the guest now. And after dinner you walk about the house, speaking to the dark. *Go ahead, come back and haunt me. Move the book on the table. Slam the bedroom door. Anything, I'm ready. Go ahead, I dare you. Scare me to death. I am ready.* The reply is silence. Yet sometimes you feel her in the silence: nothing moves, no hinges creak, no lights flicker. Just her silence. Fuck you, Steven Spielberg; death has no special effects. There is no possession, just possessions. To break the silence you play music. CDs in horizontal stacks; vertical rows of plastic jewel boxes, never properly alphabetized (as she so often suggested). Songs with melodies, lyrics, choruses, verses, movements, codas. Songs you can't live without. Songs you'll never listen to again. Songs you know by heart. Songs you want to forget. Songs you can't forget. Songs for dinner, for reading, for dancing, for killing a bottle of

wine, for making love. Songs to break the silence. Songs against eternal darkness. But one day (maybe) you'll make a deal with the silence. You'll sit in her grandparents' chair and it will only be a chair. Or you could give it away. All of it. Everything. Everything except the stones. She was forever (or so it seemed) gathering beach stones. She'd return from a beach with her coat pockets sagging, doing her best Virginia Woolf. Round stones, egg-shaped stones, disk-shaped stones, stones ground smooth by water and time. Stones from England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Turkey, Cape Cod. Stones stored in shoe boxes, in plastic bags, in bowls; clusters of stones distributed about the house like incense. She liked the look of them, the feel of them, rattling in her palm. You could get rid of it all, but not the stones. You could walk on them, sleep on them, sit on them, eat off of them. Your house would be silent, filled with stones. You would have solitude. You would not be alone. You would have the stones.