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Maryellen Sterns was the first person I ever knew who died. I didn't even know her that well; she was in seventh grade and I was only in sixth. And yet a month after the car crash, she began appearing in my bedroom when I was trying to fall asleep. I didn't question why she chose me. It seemed impolite to ask.

I had never been a good sleeper, always dozing and rising, wandering around the house after my parents and brother were asleep. I flipped like a land-borne fish under the covers as sleep swallowed me up only to spit me out again. So I was used to the altered texture of the night: the odd creaks from phantom rooms, the warped squares of moonlight creeping across the walls. But I had never seen a ghost before.

She first appeared in my doorway deep into an early October night filled with lightning and thunder from a freak late-season storm. "Don't be scared," she said before I even saw her, and somehow, I wasn't. Dressed in jeans and a purple T-shirt I imagined she was wearing when the accident happened, she stayed where she was, waiting to be asked in. I had been trying to will myself to sleep by counting backwards from a million by sevens, and since that wasn't working, I saw no reason to turn her away.

She came over and sat at the foot of the bed. "Do you know Miss Lucy Had a Baby?" she asked.

I nodded, and we clapped our hands together and sang. Her hands felt strange against mine: solid, yet not solid. Like they had mass, but no temperature.

*Miss Lucy had a baby, she named him Tiny Tim, she threw him in the bathtub to see if he could swim.*

The rhythm of our clapping was oddly soothing.

*He drank up all the water, he ate up all the soap, he tried to eat the bathtub but it wouldn't go down his throat.*

I fell into a sort of trance, going through the lines automatically and only regaining awareness of what I was doing when we reached the end.

*Out went the doctor, out went the nurse, out went the lady with the alligator purse.*

Maryellen put her hands in her lap and peered around my room, checking out my books and stuffed animals.

“What do you want to do now?” I asked.

“I dunno.”

I was feeling constricted under the sheets, so I stood up and stretched. Maryellen came up next to me, alert and ready to follow me to our next activity. I couldn't think of anything else to do with her in my room that wouldn't be boring to her, so I wandered downstairs to the kitchen. I kept looking over my shoulder, expecting her to vanish between glances, yet she was there each time I checked.

I got myself a glass of water, drank half of it, and set the glass down on the counter. Maryellen stood next to it and waved her hand back and forth through it. “Can you feel that?” I asked.

She shook her head.

I was going to go into the living room, but Maryellen seemed stuck on the current situation. She poked one finger through the side of the glass and wiggled it around in the water. Not even a ripple on the surface. I strolled around the room a couple times and then opened the refrigerator. While it had been half empty that afternoon when I went to look for a snack, it was

now filled to capacity with bowls and platters I had never seen before. “What’s this?” I mumbled, pulling out a large plate shaped like a lotus flower and putting it on the counter next to the water glass. Maybe my mother was throwing a dinner party. But had she bought all new dishes?

Maryellen whipped her head toward the plate. “What is that?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I pulled a gossamer cloth napkin off of the plate’s contents, which turned out to be a circle of small teacakes dusted in powdered sugar. Before I had time to consider whether or not to try one, Maryellen grabbed a cake and took a big bite. “Mmm!” she said, biting into it again.

“You can eat that?” I asked, skipping over the fact that her ghostly hands could pick it up in the first place.

She nodded, her mouth too full to speak.

Hesitant, I reached out and picked up a cake. It was lighter than I expected. I took a tiny nibble from the edge, and the flavors overwhelmed me. I didn’t recognize them then, but many years later I tasted them again and remembered lavender, bergamot, a highly fragrant type of vanilla bean. “Whoa,” I said between bites, lightheaded.

If the food were for a dinner party, I would get in serious trouble for eating it, yet I couldn’t help myself. Maryellen and I finished off the cakes, and then I pulled out one dish after another after another, and we stuffed ourselves, half drunk on the scents and tastes of everything. Between a dish of golden sweet potato fritters with tamarind sauce and a bowl of cardamom spiced pudding, it occurred to me to ask her, “Do you usually eat?”

“Nope,” she said. “This is the only food I can have now.” She stuck her hand right into the pudding and scooped some into her mouth.

We sat on the floor bathed in refrigerator light and devoured every morsel of food on those dishes, savoring each bite. No daytime food I'd ever tried had tasted so sweet, so rich, so flavorful. I was so sated that I fell asleep right there on the tiles, the empty dishes piled all around us.

I woke to the sound of my mother coming down the stairs. It was light out, and Maryellen was gone. I jumped up off the floor to put away the platters and bowls before my mother saw them, but there were no dishes anywhere. Peeking into the refrigerator, I saw no sign of any unusual plates or fancy food.

"You're up early," my mother said, coming around the open fridge door to where I was standing.

"Have you seen that big plate that looks like a flower?" I asked without thinking.

She looked at me quizzically. "Which one?"

I held my hands about a foot apart. "This big. A big pink flower. Or purple, maybe?"

"We have those nice china plates with the yellow flowers on them. Is that what you're thinking of?"

"No," I said, more insistent. "The whole thing was shaped like one big flower."

She peered at me. "Hmm. I think maybe you're thinking of something else. Maybe something Grandma or Aunt Farrah has?"

I wanted to argue more, to push the point, but I could tell it would be useless. "Never mind."

"You want some breakfast?" my mother asked.

"I'm not hungry," I said, and went to get dressed for school.