

Being the Murdered Woman

By: Cathy Ulrich

Cathy Ulrich doesn't think that her favorite song will ever become popular. Her work has been published in various journals, including *Jet Fuel Review*, *Vast Charm*, and *Five South*.

The thing about being the murdered woman is that you set the plot in motion.

After you die, that song you liked will become popular. Your best friend will hear it for the first time after on her way to meet some friends for dinner, piped out over patio speakers. She'll be wearing the shoes you left at her apartment; she had left them lopsided where you had thrown them—*these damn things are killing me*, you declared, and she watched you go barefoot down the creaking stairs, barefoot out to the idling rideshare. She watched you open the passenger door, turn back and wave. She thought your wrist looked so thin.

She'll be wearing your shoes that night; pick them up from where she has left them lying. She'll undo the buckles, slide them onto her own feet. They'll pinch a bit in the heels, but she'll like the bite. It will remind her that she has something left that belonged to you.

She won't go to your funeral—it will be something your parents organize, and your father will insist on putting you in a suit and tie that your sister will buy at a discount store. She'll make a small concession and select a tie in a bright shade of purple, your *favorite*, she'll tell your mother, but your father never knew.

Your sister will be the one who gets the call, the only family member left in your contacts. She will say to the coroner *thank you for telling me*. She will think *why did I thank him?* when she ends the call.

For a moment, she will think of not calling your parents, not telling them. Letting you fade away. For a moment, she will think of the last time she saw you, how there was something beautiful about you, something almost regal when you turned to her and said *I'm not coming back*. But she will call your father, as she has always done. She will think *he always knows what to do*

You will lose your name after you are killed, the way your best friend will eventually lose those uncomfortable heels. She will realize one day they are gone, won't remember the last time she had seen them, cry like she did that first time after hearing your favorite song.

You will lose your name. Your roommates will call you Mama Bear, the way they always did. What will we do without our Mama Bear? they will say, and remember the first time you got up early on a Sunday morning and made pancakes from scratch for everyone, including Georgia who hid away from the rest of you, Georgia in her dark bedroom, Georgia with her unpacked boxes, Georgia always ready to run, Georgia who will say *goddammit, not another one* and cry loud, angry tears that the others will pretend not to hear.

The detective who is assigned your case will do everything *by the book*. He isn't a bad man; no one would call him that. He will talk to the right people, ask the right questions. But there will be a part of him that thinks maybe you should have seen it coming. He won't think it with the out-loud part of his brain, but he will think *what did you expect to happen, dressing like that*. He will think if you had lived a *quieter life*.

When they find you, the police will call you by your old name. One of them will make a joke. A few of them will laugh. One will pull your skirt down so your thighs are covered. They will find a pearl here and there around your body, small and round and shimmering.

The pearls, of course, came from a necklace. It had been your mother's. She sent it with you when you left, tucking it into your hand when your father wasn't looking. She said, quietly, *it suits you*.

She will never know your real name, never call you by your real name. After you are killed, she will call you *child*. She will say *my child*.

When the police finally return the loose pearls to her in a plastic bag—and she will wonder if they have been cleaned, she will wonder if your blood dots them still in specks too small to see—she will clutch them in her hands, she will say, *oh, my poor, sweet child*.

Your mother will go along with your father as she always does, allow the suit and the purple tie, tuck the loose pearls away in the back of her jewelry box, order a grave marker with a name on it that never belonged to you.

Your best friend will go back to that alley where you were found after she loses the heels. She will leave a single white lily there, she will write your name with purple sidewalk chalk on the ground, your real name, your *true* name, and after a few days, it will disappear with everything else that had been yours.