

Our Story in Ten Photographs

by Matthew Robinson

1. The ghost that photographs my wife and me has a peculiar sense of lighting. In this one, we are sitting at the kitchen table of our old apartment. The table is made of glass. There is nothing on the table except our elbows. She has lowered her head between her hands, gripping her brown curls for support. I'm resting my head on my right palm, wearing a miles-away gaze. The light pouring in from the windows behind us glows a luminous green and the air between us shimmers like the northern lights, as though a bridge has opened and something otherwise invisible is being transported from one of us to the other.

2. We are watching a movie and an explicit lesbian sex scene has commenced. I am aroused almost immediately; her breathing deepens, too. The simulated intercourse on the screen before us is as real and passionate as any attempt we have made, though it is unfair to compare fiction with reality. We are trying not to make eye contact, but our heads are tilted slightly in, each of us listening for the other's throbbing heart.

3. The pets. Our substitute for children. White cat, black dog, twelve pounds each, same age. They were named by previous owners, but it feels like they've always been part of our lives. Together on a clawed-up ottoman, the cat is curled up like a croissant and the dog is sitting upright in front of him, looking at us (off camera), seemingly asking if there is a way he can persuade us to do away with his nemesis while he sleeps.

4. The ghost that photographs us has gotten tricky with editing. This picture is actually two pictures merged into one. We are standing in the exact same place at different times, and the ghost has faded us to the point that we appear as two bodies merged together. Behind us, an ornate bookshelf built by the hands of a man

who once held me as a baby and said I had the lips of a girl. Half-read works by Joyce, Calvino, Nietzsche, Adler, Didion, Paley, are visible. Their titles are ever so slightly distorted by the ghost's imperfect positioning. It is obvious that we are each alone in the house when the picture is taken, as neither of us has an ear perked to listen for the other should assistance or maybe a kiss be needed.

5. There's no way to tell this from looking at the picture, but I've just returned from mailing an unemployment questionnaire—my fifth job in five years down the drain, in the least exciting circumstances in which one can be terminated: Poor performance. “Poor performance,” those two words placed together, so loaded with dignity-consuming alliteration and connotation, loom over my head in faint, sans serif text. She is hugging me. My hands are tucked into my pockets for fear of being seen with me. Later that evening, after dinner, she tells me she wanted to take me out for a nice meal so she could tell me that she's not disappointed in me.

6. Me, slumped in a camping chair on the patio. Green trucker hat adorned. Cheap beer in hand. Never sunglasses. On the small table in front of us, cards from a game she just won, strewn to all edges. My eyes are aimed nowhere; only her dark, curly hair can be seen.

7. Here we are with another couple, old friends actually, having a double date night in. Pizza. Wine. Candles. Easy smiles. No questions about the ghost with the camera. This tells you the casualness of the friendship between couples, the years that have passed with numerous occasions such as these. Still, despite the familiarity, there's a distinct lack of intimacy, and none of us four would dare occasion to ask a question that would too defeat small talk in favor of the horrible truth. The mutual hope is that a board game and friendliness will suffice as adequate company, and we tell ourselves it does.

8. Moving day. The empty living room of what will be our third apartment together. Our arms cradle boxes labeled “Kitchen” and “Bedroom Misc.” Nervously joyful expressions bounce off of our faces. The ceilings in this apartment are lower than the previous, and I'll have to bow my head every time I enter the kitchen—a

gesture, I fear I secretly believe, is one of submission; therefore, I will submit to my surroundings every morning before my first cup of coffee.

9 & 10. I'm going to describe both of these pictures at once because neither are as they seem nor as I will describe them. They appear as individual self-portraits taken while we're sitting next to each other—the background is too distinctly lit and familiar to mistake this—but I'm here to tell you that the ghost took these pictures. This is right after we decide to stop being married. Tears loitering at the bottoms of our eyes dilute but do not conceal what I choose to see as shared hopeful glimmers that each has realized the other's best friend has found what will make them the most happy, which, we agree, is what all of this was about in the first place. We cannot agree, however, on which of us will assume custody of the ghost that has documented our lives.

