

NINE-MONTH MIDNIGHT

by Marie Bacigalupo

an excerpt

As she readies herself with her mantra, he prepares to meet the spirits.

Unable to deny herself, she watches as the psychic's eyes follow the candle's rippling flame, moving upward till they come to rest somewhere above the smoke stream. "Come, baby," he says, his voice a lullaby, soft and melodic. "Your mama is waiting. She misses you." Sal coaxes the materializing spirit to acknowledge her mother. "Here, little one. Here is mama." Dolores feels a disturbance in the air. A breeze brushes her mouth. She sighs with pleasure. "My sweet—"

Someone is pounding on the door, someone is forcing the knob! Sal rushes to the outer room to quiet the shouting stranger.

Dolores looks up in horror as Joe bursts through the door and charges at Sal. She shakes with fury. "You spoiled it! You spoiled it!"

His eyes search the shadowed séance room; they fall on the table, the candles, the drawn drapes....

"Why didn't you come on time? She was here! You would have felt her!"

His eyes cloud.

She pounds on his chest, scratches his face with jagged, chewed nails. He does nothing to protect himself. When she collapses in shrieking exhaustion, Sal leaps forward. Joe repulses him with a shoulder jab and picks up Dolores, cradling her in his arms while she kicks and buffets him.

On the way out, he turns to Esperanza. “Stay out of our lives, I warn you.”

“She is not ready to live without me.”

Joe halts his steps. He lays Dolores on the sofa and approaches Sal.

She clutches his sleeve, desperate to restrain him. “Leave him alone! He’s a good man, a good man!”

Joe ignores her plea, moving toward Sal, dragging Dolores across the floor as she hangs onto his sleeve. The spiritualist stands his ground. When Joe’s fist connects with his jaw, Dolores sinks her teeth into her husband’s arm. Grabbing her hand, Joe, cursing, lugs her across the anteroom and into the elevator, where a horrified passenger jumps out. When she releases his arm, he hoists her over his shoulder and throws her into the backseat of the car. Beside herself with disappointment and outrage, Dolores seethes with loathing for the man she once loved.