

THE LIGHT FLICKERS

by Sara Searson

She couldn't believe she'd been chosen. Millions of people must have applied — billions, even. And yet she'd been chosen.

She had five minutes. It took her longer to make a good cup of tea. Actually, a cup of tea sounded like a great idea. To steady her nerves.

She pondered the odds while she made her tea, steeping it and pouring in spoons of sugar and splashes of milk. She'd never in her life been lucky before, and she doubted she'd ever get this lucky again.

I can live with that, she thought, smiling down at the tiny candle at the center of her kitchen table.

It was the first of its kind, possibly the *only* of its kind, and it would burn for five minutes exactly. And while it burned, she would see a ghost. See him and speak with him, as if he'd never left.

She got everything ready. She wasn't sure if ghosts could drink anything. She made him coffee anyway, disgustingly black, just how he liked it. She put his favorite record on the tiny player, both left to her in his passing. Did ghosts get cold? She put his favorite blanket on the back of the chair, just in case.

She set a timer on her phone and lit the candle with trembling fingers.

Were ghosts supposed to look how they had on their last day, or their best? Neither was true. He looked like... himself. Not young and in his prime, but also not how he had those last few months: weak and pale, more hospital machine than man.

He just looked like Dad. Before the diagnosis, but after he'd gone grey.

She glanced at the candle to see the wax had already begun pooling onto her table. How much time had she wasted just staring at him?

"Dad," she said.

He smiled at her. "Hey, kid." His voice was the soft rumble she'd been trying so hard not to forget, like the good kind of thunder. "You need to move on."

She shifted. She'd always hated being scolded by her dad. "I'm trying. I needed to see you."

He frowned. "I wish you didn't."

"Do you wish I hadn't applied for the candle?"

He watched her in silence for a moment before the smile was back. "Of course not. I'm happy to see you." He squinted at her. Where were his glasses? Did ghosts not need corrective lenses? But then why was he squinting? "You grew your hair out."

She ran a hand through her hair, just brushing her ears. Last he'd seen her, her head was buzzed. "Yeah, well, you weren't around to match with anymore."

He laughed at that, much more than he normally would have. Perhaps he hadn't heard a good joke in awhile.

She waited for his laughter to quiet. "I miss you."

He nodded. "I know. Me too."

"I'm sorry," she told him. Her voice broke and she realized she was crying. Tissues, she hadn't set out any tissues. How stupid of her. Of course she would've needed tissues.

"You shouldn't be," he responded.

"But... you were sick and we fought and you——"

"And I died."

She swallowed against a lump in her throat. *Died*. He had, hadn't he? Died, right in the middle of the fight. "Just like you really," she said. She blinked back her tears to send him the closest thing she could manage to a teasing smile. "Anything for the last word, right?"

He reached across the table before stopping. Ghosts couldn't touch physical things, right? If he tried to touch her hand, it would pass right through. She was glad when he retracted his hand. She couldn't live with the heartbreak of confirmation. "I never wanted to leave you," he said.

"I never wanted to have the last words I said to you be 'I hate you.'"

He blew out a slow breath. "I know you didn't mean it. And I'm sorry too. I should have told you about the DNR."

She nodded in agreement. "Yeah, probably." She glanced at the candle. Half burned. Where had the time gone? It wasn't fair. She needed more time.

But there was no more time to be had.

"I don't know that I can forgive you. Not before you leave again."

He frowned across the table at her. "You have to understand——"

"No," she interrupted, "you have to understand. I was talking to the doctor, asking about next steps, only to find out that the next step was that you died. I thought that was a callous thing for him to say, but it was just what you wanted."

“I didn’t *want* to die.”

“But you didn’t want to live either.”

He opened his mouth before pausing and closing it into a deep frown.

There was the sound of only the record for a few seconds before she broke it. “Do you regret it? Signing it, that is.”

“No. I’m glad I did. I’m sorry I left you, but I was hardly even me anymore.” He smiled wistfully. “Can’t even remember the last time I listened to this.”

He tilted his head back and listened, humming along to the scratchy record. She wanted to talk, ask him questions, get the closure she sought. But she could tell that this was exactly what he needed. His record and her quiet company. Who was she to deny a dead man this simple wish?

She looked to the candle as the flame flickered. Nearly burned out. “I don’t know how to forgive you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Her time was up. He was leaving her again, and she’d already used her miracle to see him.

“Close your eyes,” Dad said.

This request was easy to follow. She didn’t want to see him disappear.

She opened her eyes as her phone buzzed on the table. The coffee was untouched, the record was still playing, the blanket still on the chair.

She was alone at her kitchen table.