

## THE ANNIVERSARY

Joy Costello stared at the 25 circled on the calendar. Three more weeks till their twenty-fifth anniversary. She shuddered. How had it lasted that long? Of course, there were the children: Amy, Ben and Anthony Jr. Amy—married now—happily, it seemed; Ben working for himself as a mechanic; Anthony, the only one who'd gone to college, still trying to "find" himself, which meant he was still sponging off his parents. If not for the kids, would she have stayed? She thought with longing of the career she almost had. Sighing, she picked up the discarded socks and underwear in young Tony's bedroom, added them to the clothesbasket and lugged it out to the laundry room. The damnable heat began to creep from somewhere deep inside her, her heart began to race. She dropped the basket on the floor. Taking a washcloth from the basket she swabbed the back of her neck. Soaked. She leaned against the washer waiting for it to pass. Then came the chills.

She wondered if Tony was unhappy. She noticed the rolled eyes and the looks that passed between him and Tony junior. At least he had his work. What did she have? Twenty-five years of cooking, cleaning and laundry. It was different when the kids were small; PTA, Brownies, Cub Scouts, then high school football games and cheerleading practice filled her life. She supposed she ought to be glad the chauffeuring was over, but life was dull as sticks now. She didn't feel useful or even pretty, certainly not desirable. She sighed, sorted the clothes into whites, colors and darks. Just another day in her ordinary life.

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Tony Costello looked at his planner. He'd circled the date. Their anniversary. Was it really twenty-five years? They'd gone by so fast. The kids had come quickly and had grown up just as quickly. He and Joy would be alone now if Tony Jr. would just get his act together. Would it make a difference he wondered? How had they lost their sense of intimacy—they didn't talk anymore, Joy always seemed so remote. Maybe it was because Tony was there always holed up in his room, writing—or maybe it was just that the fire had gone out. Sometimes it was a relief to go to the office. Do all marriages go this way; if he had it to do over, would he?

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Joy caught the phone on the third ring.

"Hello."

"Good morning. Is this Ms. Joy Costello?"

Joy. Her parents had chosen that saccharine name because of their boundless happiness at finally conceiving a child. Tony had said it suited her. Maybe back then. It felt more like Joy-less now.

"Who's asking?" It was rude; it was the way she felt.

"Uh, I'm sorry if I've caught you at a bad time—"

"I don't accept telephone solicitations." She hung up. It rang again.

"Hello," she barked.

"Ms. Costello, please allow me to tell you this is not a solicitation call. I—"

"I'm very busy." *Sorting laundry.*

"I won't take much of your time. My name is Rachel Camber. I'm with Customer Service at the D IY Store." Joy was very familiar with that name. The garage walls were lined

with boxes of Tony's "needed items" that he never got around to using. If she just had the money they cost—

"Our company sponsored a nation-wide Dream Come True contest. I'm pleased to tell you that you've won the grand prize."

"The grand prize—what is it—a handyman's layette?" *It must have been Tony; he's forever wasting postage on sweepstakes—and for what? All they ever do is send junk mail.*

Rachel Camber laughed. "No, ma'am, it's a bit more grand. Tell me, what would be your dream come true?"

She snickered. "To be twenty-one and single."

"For that you'd need a fairy godmother. How does an all-expense paid trip for two to Hawaii sound?"

Joy leaned against the washer to support her wobbly knees.

"Ms. Costello?"

"I'm here," she squeaked. "But, I haven't entered any contest."

"Someone entered it for you and wrote the winning essay. Anthony—"

"Of course—my son, the writer." *The unemployed writer.*

"You have an anniversary coming up, silver, I believe. He wrote that you'd always dreamed of going to Hawaii. It's a beautiful essay."

"I didn't think anyone ever paid attention to me and my dreams."

"Obviously, they do. All you have to do now is pick a date, pack your clothes and fly off to beautiful Honolulu."

"You've taken my breath away; Ms Camber. I can't even think."

"I understand. We'd like to set up an appointment to photograph you and your husband, and of course, the writer."

"You're serious."

"Yes. When would be a good time?"

"I don't know, I'll have to talk to Tony and Tony Jr., well, he's *always* here. Can I call you?" *I'll need a haircut and color, my nails—she looked at the ragged edges— I probably should have won an extreme makeover.*

Rachel said something about a confirming letter. Joy's mind was miles away.

"Congratulations and Happy Anniversary, Ms. Costello."

"Mrs. It's *Mrs.* Costello." She hung up, still in a daze. Of course, it might be a scam, but the woman hadn't asked for any personal information. Joy finished loading the washer and went into the kitchen to call Tony.

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"What smells so good, Mom—is it what I think it is?" Tony junior's nose twitched as he savored the aroma.

"It's your favorite. Veal Marsala with spaghetti, garlic bread, salad—the works!" She was smiling.

"What's the occasion?"

"A celebration. Your sister and her husband, and your brother are coming."

"What are we celebrating?"

She pinched his cheek. "As if you didn't know."

"I'm clueless."

"Does the DIY contest ring a bell?"

“Yeah—” His eyes widened as he lifted the lid on the simmering sauce. “Don’t tell me—”

“You did it! Your essay was the winner. Pop and I are going to Hawaii. Now go shower and get dressed, they’ll be here in an hour.”

“But I—”

“No buts.” She kissed him, patted his rump, “Go.”

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A reception committee had been waiting when they deplaned in Honolulu. Amidst flashing lights and hula dancers, their necks strung with orchid leis, they’d been whisked off in a limo to their hotel in Waikiki. After all the excitement they were finally alone in a luxurious suite with a magnificent view of Waikiki Beach.

Tony stood at the window.

Joy kicked off her shoes and flopped on the king-sized bed, luxuriating in the softness of the down-filled cover.

“Come try this out, Tony, it’s just like in the commercials.”

Was she being coy? He removed his shoes and lay down beside her.

“What’s that thing on your arm?”

She smiled. “It’s a patch. You didn’t notice? I’ve had it for the last two weeks.”

He looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. She was pretty; there was something different about her hair. And she’d kept her figure. Most women her age had gotten dumpy. She had a sparkle in her eyes he hadn’t seen for a long time.

“Remember our honeymoon, Tony? How much in love we were—how we promised it would always be that way. What happened to us?”

The years rolled back and he saw them standing barefoot on a Jersey beach in the moonlight, the water lapping around their ankles.

“We were young and in love.”

“Don’t you love me anymore?”

He sat up and faced her. “How can you ask me that? Of course I love you.”

“You never say it.” It was a reproach.

“I’ve loved you from the first moment I saw you. I’ve wondered, though, whether you still love me.”

Her mouth formed an “O” and her eyes grew wide. “Oh, Tony. You’re the father of my children. I’d never want anyone else. Don’t you know that?”

“You seem so unhappy most of the time. I wanted to do something to please you. That’s why I entered the contest. I thought if I could win I’d make you happy.”

“You? But I thought—”

“I know. I decided to let you think it was Tony Jr. I wanted to surprise you.”

“That you did.”

He nodded toward the patch on her arm. “So—what did the doctor say?”

“Oh—the usual. It’s normal. It’ll pass. You know the drill. He gave me the patch, said see how it works. I’m glad I went. At least my thermostat has turned the heat down.”

“I hope it hasn’t turned it down too far.” He reached across the bed and drew her to him.

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