

A Lamp by the Side of the Bed

Last night I read until 2:00 in the morning. I guess I'd wouldn't have chosen to quit just then, but my eyes felt gummy and itchy like they were tacked together. They felt hot even, so I thought I'd lay my head back and rest a while, and then get on and finish that chapter, but of course I didn't. My neck woke me. I had this stiff achy pain on the side of my neck that ran all the way up to my jaw where my head had fallen over. My fingers were numb where I'd clung to the book, but it had still slipped sideways out of my fingers. I couldn't feel a thing in my little finger, and the other four were kind of numbish. I felt foolish, but this staying up reading late was something that I'd never have allowed myself before, and I felt duty bound to try it. Of course, I'd never had a lamp on my side of the bed before; that is until now.

The light had always been on Daniel's side. He said he'd needed it there, so he could see the dials on the clock. I really couldn't understand the sense of that since the numbers were all lit up in a greenish poison-colored glow. I'd asked about that once in early marriage, but just that one time. He looked at me like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. The disgusted look on his face was way out of proportion to what I thought I'd said. He shook his head a time or two long blond hair slipping down over his forehead. Maybe he hadn't really heard what I was saying. I hadn't thought of that before now. He just patted me on the shoulder, and said that if I really wanted to read, I could just go out to the den and read.

It wasn't really a den. It was the second bedroom in our little rental house. I wanted to keep it as a bedroom for when we had company, and maybe later for a nursery for when children came. We hardly ever had company, and the children never came, so

we kept it a den. I never did like to read in there, though. The sofa was lumpy and hurt my back. The chair that matched was stiff and straight up, so I could never just slouch down and really enjoy my book. His mother had given both to us, so we kept them long after we should have gotten rid of them. I told Daniel that I had that little bit of money that I had left over from my parents' will, and I knew that at least I could get new furniture or good used furniture, but no, he refused. It was good enough. I even mentioned that we could get another bedside table and lamp, but he said that would just ensure I would be keeping him awake half the night.

Even now that we are in a nice big house, I still usually go out and read at the kitchen table. It is quiet in there, and the light is all soft filtered light put in by a fancy kitchen designer. I can still listen to the sounds of the refrigerator humming and an old-fashioned clock ticking, so it is company of sorts. I read here most nights until I get almost too sleepy to make it back to bed. I usually drink a glass of tea or get a snack. It is handy for that. That jogs me awake a little, so I can make it back to the bedroom and wash my face and put on my nightgown. Sometimes, I think how nice it would be if I could just scoot down in the bed and turn off the light when I got too tired to read. Now, I have that chance.

I wonder, but don't really care all that much, where Daniel is. His note said that he was destined for a life with Caroline. So, I imagine them to be on the beach, at the mountains, touring somewhere. Somewhere that is a lot more fun than just right here. I pop a dark brew K-cup in my Keurig hoping that a strong cup of coffee will smooth out the soreness from my neck and the stiffness from sleeping all crooked.

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The first time I met Caroline was at Daniel's office Christmas party, I really liked her. She was a large beautiful blonde with a sweet friendly smile. I thought she would be someone that I would really like for a friend. I don't make friends easily; I just don't seem to be able to put myself out there to make an impression or whatever. Caroline seemed interested in me, though, what I had to say, and my opinions about several topics that came up in conversation. Of course, I had had a glass or two of wine, so maybe I wasn't as quiet as I normally was.

When we got home, I asked Daniel about her. He didn't answer my questions in much detail. He didn't act impressed with her. Said that she was new, had good credentials, but thought she knew more than anyone else. He said, "You know how it is with those single women who try to do a man's job. Ballsy bitch." I was a little confused because at the party it seemed that we always managed to be somewhere in her periphery. Oh well, I thought. I just went on upstairs to get ready for bed, and Daniel turned on the tv and settled in to watch something on Fox news.

I was more than surprised when Caroline called a couple of days later. She was having a brunch for some women that she had met since she had moved here, and she thought that would give everyone a chance to get better acquainted and not let all the holiday madness totally take over. I really didn't want to go. I don't like to socialize with people I don't know. It was more fun than I thought. The food was good, the ladies were nice, and I felt comfortable.

Caroline and I had a lot in common. We both grew up as only children of strict older parents. We both grew up in small towns where we tried to fit in with the other kids

but didn't socialize or date much. The only reason that I was included in social events at all was that my dad was the major employer in our town, so people thought they had to be nice. We were both good students but tried not to make a big deal out of it, so as not to call attention to ourselves. I really couldn't believe that Caroline hadn't been a popular cheerleader or group leader, but she said that she wasn't.

We didn't get together much during our friendship. Mostly on weekends. Daniel had a group that he played golf with on weekends, so I was used to being alone without him. Caroline and I went shopping, had lunch, and saw a play or two. She was so much fun. I didn't realize that I had forgotten how to have fun. Maybe I never had had much. I even laughed. The rusty unused sound of it almost scared me.

Caroline took me to her hair stylist. My thick frizzy hair was reshaped into something nice that I could manage myself. My short stubby nails were shaped and polished. I felt great. Daniel didn't seem to notice. Caroline just smiled and shook her head and said, "Oh he is such a guy."

Starting right around Valentine's Day, Daniel had to spend more and more time at work. He usually came home late at least two or three nights a week. When he came home, he had a strong distinct bourbon smell. I wondered a time or two how much work was happening. I almost asked Caroline about that, but then I hated to because I knew that she would be there with him, for work, I thought. I didn't want to be one of those nagging prying wives who felt the need to always be checking on their husbands.

I took my coffee and sat at the kitchen table. Did I need to maybe eat something? Was I losing weight? Maybe I could fix a piece of toast or an English muffin. Sure, an English muffin would really be nice. A nice healthy wheat one.

Just as the toaster popped, the phone rang. We even still had a landline.

“Well, it’s done.” Caroline’s voice didn’t sound shocked or sad or anything.

Actually, pretty emotionless.

“Where were you?” All I could think to ask.

“I know. A week was longer than you expected, right?”

“Well, yes.” Did I dare to ask questions? “Was it the beach or where?”

“No, it was my parents old place on the lake. Let’s say he enjoyed himself until he didn’t, and you little miss worrywart don’t need to know more.”

“When are you coming home?”

“Oh, I’ll be there late. You don’t have to wait up for me.”

I did though, of course. I had gotten this great mystery from the library that I was dying to read. I was just into an absorbing exciting part, when I heard her punching in the numbers for the keyless entry. Would she get the code wrong? Would the alarm go off? But no, here she came bounding up the stairs like a young puppy. She grabbed me in her big strong arms for a very special deep kiss.

“Well, were you waiting up for me or just deep into your book?”

“Why, of course its because I’m waiting up for you.” I hated lying, but it was partially true.

“Well, I am worn out. I’m going to get out of these clothes, take a quick shower, and get into some comfy pajamas.” She turned to look at me and gently squeezed my shoulder. “Tomorrow night, though Missy, I would really like to sleep on that side of the bed. I want to have the lamp on my side. I need to be able to check out the dials on the clock.”

