

The Cake Appeared

The cake appeared on a weekday evening. Tall, frosted pink, garlanded in royal icing roses and centered in the middle of the porch. Twyla almost tripped over the confection as she fumbled for her keys to open the front door.

Inside, Garth waited for her the way she assumed all men who stay home while their wives work waited, trying to look busy without showing any sign of eagerness to talk to a real person after a long day attempting to manifest an art career out of a passing college dalliance with oil pastels, anxious also to find out if she liked the dinner he prepared. He probably wondered if she would notice how he mostly cooked pasta, mostly with fresh basil but always with canned mushrooms.

“Did you see what’s on the front porch?” Twyla asked without making the kind of eye contact self-help books say is necessary for a lasting commitment.

“I haven’t been out since I brought in the mail.”

“And what time was that, or do you not remember?”

“Why do you think I always forget what time I check the mail?”

“Well, what time was it?”

“Honestly, I don’t remember.”

Garth set the table. She noticed he always selected plates that didn’t match. For a moment, Twyla despised her husband in a way she didn’t think was possible in real

life, this hatred she sometimes saw in movies or read in bad romance books, this longing for Garth to die in a fiery car crash so she could eat dinner alone. Sometimes, especially after a long day, she just wanted to eat dinner without looking up from her phone. After an appropriate amount of grieving the crash, she'd even be sure her salad bowl matched her dinner plate again.

After a moment of these thoughts the smell of fresh basil centered her firmly back on the planet of Twyla and Garth. She loved the way her husband always grated fresh parmesan on her pasta and added cracked pepper at the end. She wanted to cry out from the tender feelings that swelled in her body as she stared at the place where his left thumb used to be, that accident with tin shears during another failed attempt to discover the art medium that "spoke" to him. Her long day at work was to blame for her strange behavior. Or her hormones. Perimenopause.

At the table, after changing into pajamas because couples married over ten years have earned the right to wear pajamas during dinner, Twyla and Garth chewed in a comfortable, if slightly irritating, silence. As the meal came to an end Twyla said, "I appreciate the offer of a cake, but it kind of pisses me off how you forgot I'm trying to diet right now."

Twyla scrutinized her husband as he placed a canned mushroom in his mouth. She couldn't quite imagine ever kissing him again as he chewed and swallowed the mushroom before answering her.

Garth wiped his mouth on one of the napkins Twyla only folded and ringed for company. An eternity of unspoken misunderstanding passed between the couple before he said, "What cake?"

"You know what cake. Why are you playing games with me tonight?" Twyla pushed away her half-eaten dinner. She stifled a burp of garlic.

"Devolved into what?" Garth stared at Twyla in the way that never failed to make her feel guilty. "I really don't understand."

"You buying me a present, then me not liking it so much, you feel you need to lie."

Garth stood from the table faster, less careful, than normal. He stacked the plates of uneaten spaghetti on top of each other. With his back to his wife, hot water from the kitchen faucet turning their leftovers into carnage, he said, "I haven't given you a present since our anniversary."

"No, I guess you haven't."

Twyla didn't ask her husband to come to the front porch to see the cake. He didn't offer to look. They walked through their nighttime rituals with an understood, non-adversarial calm. She noticed Garth trying to gargle without making as much noise as usual so she remembered to shut the bathroom door tight on her turn so he wouldn't hear her pull the slick backing off a maxi pad before attaching the pad to her underwear.

The uncomfortable sleep that followed, a hand attacked by pins and needles, a stiffening neck, Twyla blamed on the way the cake waited on the porch. Out there in the dark, alone, the cake taunted her with its flawless design, tempting her stomach, hungry from not finishing dinner, hungry more from she and Garth not kissing each other goodnight.

Many other nights the couple did not kiss each other before bed. Being married was different than in movies. Twyla had even trained herself, a few years back, to only cry out of one eye after she and Garth had sex. Crying after sex, this pattern began about five years into their union. She never analyzed whether the tears fell from a low-grade, overall dissatisfaction, or something less chronic, like hypoglycemia. Somehow, the longer she lived with Garth, the longer they shared the same bed and passed back and forth the same pile of library books every few weeks, her eyes became psychically connected to his penis. That's how she chose to explain the clockwork waterworks, tears flowing hot and fast, and still a little unexpected. Twyla either tilted her head so they fell on her pillow instead of on her husband after he finished, or she blinked in a pattern she mastered so only the eye furthest from Garth betrayed her secret.

The night the cake appeared, Twyla cried without being penetrated first. Tears slid into her ears as she lay flat next to Garth's snores. Why did he, after all this time, buy her something she told him she didn't want?

Why did he lie, and if he lied about something as harmless as a cake, what else did her husband lie about? What bothered Twyla most of all was how her husband knew, amid her protests, her calorie counts, her low carb walnut craze, that she wanted nothing more than to come home after a long day with that exact cake waiting for her. Just that shade of pink, just that piped frosting, like the most intricate *toile de jouy*.

The next morning Twyla struggled to wake her husband from what looked like a deep sleep by trying to untie the string on Garth's pajama bottoms with her teeth. Stillness hung in the room like a third party ready to crash her awkward attempt at a move she once saw in a soft-core movie when the couple, newly married, watched reruns of *The Red Shoe Diaries*. Twyla and Garth's real-life bodies never seemed to line up the way bodies on cable television lined up, but she kept trying. She even considered digging the black wig out of the closet. In the 90's when they first started dating, off and on, during the on times Twyla dressed up like that girl on the weird TV show who could tie a cherry stem with her tongue.

Twyla felt her jaw pop with a zealous tug on the pajama tie. She let the soggy tie fall from her lips. "Do you want me to get the wig instead?"

"That old thing?" Garth's sleepy body stood at attention in the only area Twyla cared about right then. With her hands Twyla pulled his pajamas down his thighs, leaving them in a plaid bunch near his knees. He asked, "What's gotten into you this morning?"

"I'm feeling crazy." She covered his navel with her mouth. Twyla almost considered inserting her tongue before she took a break from seducing her husband to say, "I'm feeling like I'd do anything to thank you for the cake."

Garth clenched his back. Plaid undulated past his knees as he placed a hand near her head. "But I already told you, I didn't buy it."

Twyla removed her lips from Garth's body. She got out of bed without pulling up his pants, and he knew to let her go.

Standing under the shower later she tried to stifle her sobs. Downstairs, after she stopped crying and allowed time for her swollen eyes to go back to normal, Twyla found a cup of coffee waiting for her on the kitchen counter. She added cream and followed the smell of Garth's coffee to the front porch.

Her husband perched on a folding chair next to the cake. Twyla sat on another chair he had arranged opposite his. The couple drank their coffee without speaking. The sound of the paperboy missing the paper box startled Twyla into sound.

"My back hurts sitting on this thing," she said.

"Mine, too."

"And I should probably get ready for work now."

"Me, too."

The couple folded the chairs and leaned them against the side of the house.

Without voicing their plans they knew to meet each other back at the cake that evening.

Twyla would bring take-out. Garth, drinks.

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That night they ate dinner in front of the cake the same way they ate dinner in the kitchen, except the couple used chopsticks and ate right from the take-out boxes.

Nothing but an awareness of too much salt registered on Twyla's tongue. Garth ate less than usual. Halfway through dinner, Twyla forced herself not to criticize the way her husband stirred his chopsticks through their shared low mien in a way that made the noodles look like worms.

"This will be wormy soon, too." She pointed to the cake.

Garth balanced too many take-out boxes on his lap. Twyla tried even harder not to criticize the way he dropped sweet and sour sauce dangerously close to what had become her favorite icing flower.

The longer Twyla stared at her favorite flower, the sheen of its petals, the curve of its leaves, she began to believe that Garth did not give her the cake. Well, no one actually gave the cake to her. For all she knew, Garth's lover left the cake in the middle of the porch on an otherwise very normal day. For wasn't her husband very handsome, even with one thumb?

She knew she could have a lover, too, with the way some of the men at work, even the younger ones and the married ones, stared at her. And she also knew Garth never considered the possibility of her acquiring a lover with the ease that other women acquire handbags or books-of-the-month. The knowledge of her ability to inspire male adoration, or at least a tangible, if fleeting, male attention, filled her with the power, on the porch that evening, to talk with her mouth open and full of food, she felt so certain no action could diminish her attractiveness.

“You know there are several men who could’ve left this for me.” Bits of kung pao chicken sprayed from her mouth in a way she assumed looked sexy. She pointed to the cake in a half-hearted way she hoped came across as a signal that meant, this old thing? Having a cake left on my porch is such old news. A total cliché in the eternally exotic world of desirable me.

Garth studied the cake. He tilted his head the way he once did during his photography phase when he walked around cutting his field of vision into thirds. “We don’t really know if it belongs to us. I kind of think the cake was delivered to the wrong address.”

This blatant insult became too much for Twyla to bear, the weight of this man who sat before her on a folding chair without even making an effort to sit up straight enough to minimize his burgeoning gut. Minimize was the word that came to mind, the way he refused to play along with her fantasy of having too many secret admirers to

count, how the next night one of the mystery men might leave a box of chocolates. She would eat eagerly, without sharing, without reading the candy key stamped inside the lid, her mouth stuffed with coconut and pineapple and caramel while her husband waited for her inside.

Twyla seethed in the silent way that caused her body to tense up. Her ankles cramped. She swore she felt the disappointment of being married to a man who had never comprehended her obvious talent for attracting other men, men stronger and more powerful than a husband who pushed pastels around on paper all day while she slaved away and he didn't bother to wash his hands before touching the good napkins, as a pang of loneliness in her right ovary. This feeling is what her mother warned her about when she married such a good-looking man. With a house payment and a yearly Christmas letter it felt impossible to divorce Garth. He understood her love of fresh basil. He knew to never comment on the way her weight fluctuated with her binge watching habits. She felt too old, too disappointed, to learn everything about a new person until that person ceased being new, too. Then she stared at the cake, the electric pink frosting alerting her to the possibility of something, anything, coming around the corner.

"Why haven't you ever bought me a cake like this before?" She asked Garth as he stacked the empty take-out boxes next to the empty beer bottles. The couple had not had enough beer to instigate a fight.

“Because you never eat cake.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t like cake.”

Garth folded his chair to signify the end of wanting to talk. Twyla hated the way men always decided when to start and end a conversation. “How am I supposed to know that?” he asked. Garth was inside the house with the door slammed before she had a chance to answer.

“Because you’re my husband.”

She grabbed a blanket off the living room couch without running into him and went back to her folding chair. The sunset from her porch looked less miraculous than the sunsets people had been posting recently on Facebook. Sometimes Twyla’s life felt like a series of cakes she hadn’t eaten and sunsets she hadn’t seen.

At dusk the front door clicked open in the tentative way couples sneak around each other in the middle of an argument.

“Are you warm enough out there?” Garth asked.

“Yes,” Twyla answered.

“Do you need another blanket?”

“Not yet.”

The door shut. Twyla waited a minute to be sure Garth had retreated into his study to ponder all the drawings he would try to draw the next day. She picked up the

cake the way someone unaccustomed to holding a newborn picks up a baby, as if something inside the child, and the pastry, might collapse at any moment.

The aroma of vanilla hit her nose as Twyla examined the cake closer to her face than most people examine cakes. The sickly sweet frosting smell reminded her of childhood birthday parties. She loved the anticipation of blowing out the candles each year, but this cake was too elegant for candles. She began to wonder who really did leave a cake on her porch. The short list of men at work who had stood a little too close to her and lingered for a little too long added up to the kinds of men who pretended they wanted to have affairs but would probably turn her in to HR if she dared make the move to stand too close first. And Garth didn't know any women besides Twyla.

It didn't matter, as darkness shrank the neighborhood into a series of similar porches, who left the cake, or whether the cake was somehow delivered to the wrong house to begin with. It didn't matter that Garth used the napkins his wife reserved for company. The canned mushrooms didn't matter. The drawings that never got drawn. Nothing mattered to her but the way the cake felt balanced solid between her hands.

Twyla stepped off the porch into the void of the darkened neighborhood with the cake secure in her hands. She walked without looking back at the light Garth flicked on for a wife he didn't realize was no longer there.