

With all his heart

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HE LOVED HER WITH ALL HIS HEART, he said. He said it more and more often in the days leading up to their wedding but the sentiment had a way of striking Ruby like a spring drizzle, as so much pitter patter. She knew her man. She had already sensed the great vacuities in him, the huge interior caverns with nothing in them, nothing as far as she could tell. He was not the sort a girl dreamt about as she grew and ripened, that nameless presence waiting in the shadows to reach out and say her name and then hold her with such tenderness, so gently, with arms that were strong and confident. Ruby's man wasn't any of that. He was clumsy, even when he tried to take her hand in some special gesture, or when he leaned over to whisper something sweet and intimate. Apart from everything else he was overweight and got loud when he drank. And he was balding. But he had a passable job in a passable company. He liked going places and eating well and laughed at her jokes. He didn't have a clue about dress but had proved himself pliable enough. It might just work out. Perhaps she could fill these cavities over time. Maybe get him involved in local politics, the way she had been before they started dating. True enough, Ruby could have done better, in an ideal world. No doubt about that. She wasn't anything overweight herself. And she was good-looking, in a way that he could never ever counterbalance. She was a little tall for a girl, taller than he was, and she liked to wear her spikes, which only made it worse. But he didn't seem to mind. The spikes did things for her posture and her legs, which she knew were shapely, really shapely. People noticed her. She should have been able to do better, but this was what the world was offering to a woman at thirty-five. She had had other chances but she knew she had a sharp tongue. She could take it or leave it but there wasn't any line forming behind him. She decided to take it. It was too late for dreaming. When he told her he loved her with all his heart, she would say I love you too and let it go at that. His name was Roger. Ruby and Roger. Roger and Ruby. Either way it didn't sing.

They had not been married but a week when still broader infelicities reared their head. They had settled into their new place, a cramped little apartment on the Upper West Side. The furnishings were carry-overs from their separate pasts, the queen bed and TV and the chairs from hers, the sofa and the kitchen table from his and so it went. None of it matched but there wasn't money yet to do much about it. Not yet, but with two of them working that would change. The problem right now was the people above them. Every night the people above them moved around like foraging elephants, What are they doing up there, Ruby asked. They mustn't have a rug, Roger said. So at this point every evening, after the business of supper had been gotten through, they turned on

the TV and sank into the sofa to complain. Just Ruby complained actually. Roger tried to be more positive. I love you with all my heart, he'd say, taking her hand. Do you want to go to bed, she'd say with a hopeless glance up at the ceiling. Anything would be better than this she'd say to herself. So they would make love and afterwards he would have a beer and something more to eat and Ruby would get lost in a political magazine. Then she would do her nails and before long it was time to call it a day and go to bed for the night. Usually around this time the people upstairs did the same thing. With the lights out and with silence descending at last, each of them, on separate sides of the queen bed, back to back, at home now in unsharable thoughts, slipped one by one into what was becoming, for Ruby at least, the most welcome part of the day, a good night's sleep.

At this rate the marriage wasn't going to last, Ruby realized. The problem wasn't Roger. It was her. She had always gotten involved in politics, in local election campaigns, for councilmen, or the district attorney, and once even for the mayor. She loved the excitement but she had lost touch with the old crowd when Roger came into her life. The two didn't mix. The marriage has its suffocating side and there wasn't money or opportunity to do anything about it. Roger knew things weren't going too well and did everything he could to make it work. He suggested they to go to political meetings together, and they did once or twice but it wasn't the same for her with Roger in tow. Anyway this was an off-year and this neat guy, Tony, who she'd worked with and was hoping to bump into wasn't there.

Roger took up cooking. He got home from work half an hour earlier than she did and would have the meal cooking away on the stove by the time she came through the door. One night he prepared cabbage with finely chopped apples, the way his mother used to make it. And boiled potatoes. When Ruby said she hated cabbage, Roger reached over and scraped the cabbage from her plate onto his own. How can you eat that stuff, she asked him watching him put it away. I grew up with it, he said. Gross, she said. Gradually, Roger learned Ruby's likes and dislikes and catered to them. Ruby watched her weight and sitting down to a meal meant a sacrifice for them both. Her idea of supper was miniature vegetables, preferably organic, sprinkled with herbs and butterbuds, and some rice pilaf or a maranta concoction she'd get at the health food store. Sometimes she allowed herself a piece of free-range turkey breast. There was no question of meat and potatoes and gravy, the food Roger grew up on. Roger began drinking wine instead of beer and on his own began to add flowers and candles to the table. In the candle light the place settings and glitter of wine glass lent a touch of romance to their dingy kitchen. Roger lost weight and his color improved and Ruby began to feel better about her husband. She would come through the door at night and find him stir frying something at the stove, wine glasses filled,

candles lit, the kitchen warm and cosy. From time to time there was a surprise by her plate too, maybe outlandish earrings he'd seen in a window (the more outlandish the better as far as she was concerned), or a book about some political figure she had shown interest in. Ruby had only to mention an interest and Roger would have something by her plate the next day or two. One night they saw a travelogue about Cancun on TV and Ruby said she always wanted to go there. The next night there was a book all about Cancun on her plate. It was what they could afford. After a while, when Ruby came through the door her eyes would light up at the scene, especially if something was there by her plate. On such nights the tender time they spent after the evening news lingered longer.

But that only lasted for a while. The people upstairs were as bumptious as ever. The money wasn't there to do the things they read about in the mags. And the stuff Roger left by her plate was just junk really, and it all began to wear off. It was Roger's mother who saved the day, not with cabbage and finely chopped apples, but by dying and leaving her only son a small amount of money.

How much did she leave? Ruby asked with a bright smile when Roger announced the news.

Enough, Roger said. Enough for now. Roger loved his mother and didn't feel like smiling.

Well, was it a lot? Ruby asked, still smiling.

Not a lot, Roger said. Anyway, now we can find another place. And get some things. A king-size bed. And for sure I'm going to take you to Cancun.

That would be nice, Ruby said.

Roger and Ruby moved shortly after that. They found a quiet place in a building with an elevator. They replaced their queen bed with a king size. Then, not long after moving into their new apartment, Ruby went back to politics.

It happened this way. It was during her lunch break. She was just walking along Fifth Avenue when she bumped into Tony, a man she had once thought might be the one for her. He was a political operative, smart, fast talking, exciting to be with, and he moved in the best circles. Politicos running for office invariably sought him out. Ruby knew he would be good for her, but Tony never gave her the right look. Still, she hung around and got to rub shoulders with some very important people--all in all the most thrilling times of her life.

Tony, she cried, when she spotted him coming toward her. I can't believe it.

Well, hello there, Tony said. Let's see, Ruby, isn't it? From the mayor's race. I remember you.

That was so exciting, Ruby said.

Not very exciting for losers, Tony said. But, you're right, it was fun. Fun without frills, he said with a big laugh. The losing side has empty hands when it comes to payback, he winked. Ruby loved the way Tony could joke about anything almost.

Where you headed, Tony asked, looking her over.

Just for lunch, she said.

Good, Tony said. That makes lunch for the two of us.

At lunch Ruby asked, What are you up to these days? Whatever it is it must be interesting.

I'll say interesting, Tony said. I'm with Calaverti's team. A great bunch of guys.

Ruby smiled but she had no idea who Calaverti was. He's running for the State Senate, Tony said with a wink. Got a good chance of clobbering that old fart McCarthy.

Sounds exciting, Ruby said.

Yeah, it's a ball. Especially to be with a sure winner for once. McCarthy doesn't have a chance in hell. He's dead meat, far as I can tell. With this investigation hanging over him.

I can imagine, Ruby said, trying to recall what she had read in the papers.

Tony studied his lunch partner. You know, Ruby, he said. It's still a fight. They have all the money, you know, real money. We need all the help we can get, smart volunteers, good people to man the phones, make coffee, a million things. Know anybody?

Like me? Ruby said laughing.

Yeah, I was hoping actually... he said with a big grin.

Sure, I'd love it. I don't think my husband will mind.

Tony looked down at her ring. I'm sorry. I didn't realize... his voice dropped off.

What's to be sorry, she said, placing her left hand in her lap. Roger won't mind. He'll be happy, she added.

OK, then, good, Tony said, taking her other hand.

That evening, at the dinner table with Roger, Ruby found an envelope by her plate with airline tickets and hotel booking for three days in Cancun.

Roger, Ruby said, it's so sweet of you. But you shouldn't. We can't afford this.

We can too afford it, Roger said proudly. I told you we'd do this. And besides, I got a raise today.

You got a raise! How wonderful for you, Ruby said. I'm so proud of you.

And we have a room facing the ocean, Roger said beaming.

Ruby looked at the tickets. But it's for the Fourth of July, she said.

Our anniversary, Roger said with a huge grin.

Ruby studied the tickets. Oh, Roger, she said, after a while. Can't we put it off until later?

Later? Like when? Roger said.

Maybe in late November or December, Ruby said. She pointed to the tickets. These can be changed, can't they?

Sure, for a price. But it will cost a lot more in December, Roger said. He saw that she was unhappy. What's the matter, hon. Are you worried about work? July 4th is a four-day weekend. It's our anniversary.

It's not that, Ruby said, reaching for his hand. She explained that she had been asked to help the candidacy of a state senator. The summer months were the most critical. It wouldn't be right to leave.

I see, Roger said. Then, after a moment he asked, When does this start?

Roger, Ruby said reaching to touch him, I'll be working with someone I knew before. His name is Tony. He's a very sharp political operator. He knows everybody. Maybe you could get involved too.

Maybe, Roger said. He studied his wife. You knew him before?

Yes, and I've invited him over for dinner some night, to meet you. I told him you were a good chef.

OK, swell, Roger said. What does he like?

Italian, she said.

Italian, Roger repeated. I'll figure something.

And Roger, I'm sorry about the Cancun trip. We can go some other time, right?

I love you, Ruby, Roger said. Remember, OK? I love you with all my heart.

I know you do, sweet, Ruby said.

A week later Tony came for dinner. Roger took the afternoon off and prepared eggplant rollatini. By the time Tony came, the house had a glorious smell of Italian cooking.

The rollatini is delicious, Ruby said in the middle of the meal. Tony had said nothing.

Thanks, Roger said. He looked at Tony. I'm not Italian, so I don't know if I did it right, he said. I followed a recipe more or less.

It could use more garlic, Tony said with a full mouth.

I didn't use any garlic, Roger said.

You didn't use any garlic, Tony said, putting his fork down.

No. I hate garlic, Roger said. And Ruby does too.

Tony turned to Ruby. That true? he said. I hadn't noticed, he added with a laugh. You must be long-suffering with me around.

No, I like garlic, really, she said. It's Roger mostly. His mother was Irish.

German-Irish, Roger corrected.

German-Irish, Tony repeated.

With that Tony turned to Ruby and to politics and there the two stayed for the rest of the meal. After dinner, Ruby said she had to go with Tony to a campaign staff meeting. It was very important and was just for insiders tonight. Roger said he understood. He did the dishes, watched a little TV and went to bed early. He was fast asleep when Ruby got in late.

Ruby began spending more and more of her evenings at campaign headquarters, often skipping supper. One night, after eating dinner alone, Roger decided to go down himself and be helpful if he could. Maybe he could man a phone or something also. When he got there people were milling around but Ruby was nowhere to be seen. He asked for her and they told him she had gone out to dinner with Tony. They ought to be back soon. Roger waited around and after a while Ruby came in, making straight for the ladies' room, looking like she had had a few drinks. She flushed when she saw Roger.

What are *you* doing here? she said. What a surprise, she laughed. I didn't think you cared for this kind of thing. Roger noticed her lipstick was smeared.

Where's Tony? he asked.

Tony? she said. He's around somewhere. We just stepped out for a bite.

Button your blouse, he said quietly.

Roger left and went looking for the man who had smeared his wife's lipstick. Ruby hurried behind him.

Roger, she called. Don't do anything stupid.

You should go home now, he said, turning around. I am your husband. Do as I say.

What? she said.

You heard me, he said facing her. I want you to go home. Right now! This last he said so loudly heads turned to look at the two of them.

Roger went off leaving his wife behind dumbfounded. He found Tony in a conference room with the candidate and some others. Roger barged in past the guard and stood before Tony. Keep your dirty hands off my wife, he shouted. Everyone stood up. Get him out of here, Tony shouted. The guard tried to grab Roger but he was able to break free. You heard what I said, Roger shouted pushing Tony. Tony pushed back and Roger hit him in the eye, a good solid sock. The guard wrestled Roger to the floor and someone called the police. Ruby came rushing in and tried to help her husband but they held her away. We don't need this, Tony said looking at her with disgust. No way.

Sirens sounded and within minutes the police rushed in with guns. The candidate spoke with them quietly and then left for another room with his team. Roger was taken away in a police car. Ruby took a cab to the police station but was not allowed to see her husband. In the morning, they told her. She went home. On the TV that night they reported a violent incident involving the candidate. Name of assailant has not been released. Motive is unknown.

In the morning Ruby went to see her husband. He was being arraigned on assault and battery charges. Tony filed the charges. He had seven witnesses lined up.

They led her into a small room. It's my fault, Ruby said when Roger came in. I'm so terribly sorry.

Roger said nothing and just looked at her.

I'm quitting politics for good, she said.

You don't have to, Roger said. Just be my wife.

I want to, she said beginning to cry.

They held hands for a few moments. Honey, she said, will they keep you long?

Who knows. Not forever, he said rolling his eyes.

We'll get a good lawyer, she said.

Right, he said.

And when you come out we'll go to Cancun, she said laughing through wet eyes.

Right, he said, adding with a grin, If there's anything left after the lawyer.

And do you know something, she said. I never told you this but I really love your cooking.

No garlic? Roger said.

I hate garlic, she said.

So do I, he said, and they both laughed.