

Yesterday's Promises

"Thanks for driving me, Daddy," Kristy said, "Mom has one of her headaches again and I wasn't sure you'd drive me to Carol's on such short notice."

"That's okay, sweetie," her father replied, although in his mind he answered, *but your mother has been having too many damned headaches lately.*

For the rest of the trip they drove on in silence. Kristy sensed her father's mood and wisely didn't want to aggravate him. Soon the car pulled in to the curb in front of Carol's house. Kristy gave her father a peck on the cheek and bounced out of the car.

"Thanks again, Daddy. Carol's mom will give me a ride back home tomorrow morning."

"Enjoy your pajama party."

Tim watched his fourteen-year-old daughter go up the front walk. A pretty, vivacious girl, bright and energetic, she had a joy for life that seemed to bubble over from some inner spring. Her mother had been like that once, back when they were dating, and for a few years after they married, but it all changed over the years. First, the headaches started and then the ardor she had for him cooled. Soon the headaches had become a fixture in their lives, as tangible as the refrigerator in the kitchen, except that the fridge did its job quietly and unobtrusively, while Angie's headaches had become a major pain in the ass.

The roar of a motorcycle going by snapped Tim out of the thoughtful daze he had been in. He realized he sat in front of Carol's house long after Kristy had gone in to join her friends. He put the car in gear, pulled away from the curb and headed back home.

The next day, Saturday, Tim decided to wash the car. Angie's headache had been a real bitch and she had kept him awake almost half the night with her constant getting in and out of bed. Finally, he took his pillow and blanket and went into the living room to sleep on the sofa. He woke up groggy and listless, not inclined to do much of anything.

For him, washing the car had become his therapy. He found it relaxing. Dipping his hands into the soapy water, moving the sponge in slow, lazy circles, watching the soap bubbles race off the slick surface of the paint as he rinsed with the hose, all combining to put him at ease. The added bonus came in the form of a clean car, not a bad investment of some time, really.

Washing the car afforded the additional benefit of his getting a chance to see Karla, his next-door neighbor, a divorcee who moved in with her twelve-year-old son about two years previously, a damn good-looking woman who knew it. In the summer, in sunny weather, he could always count on her to spend a lot of time on her chaise lounge, basking, wearing a miniscule, thong bikini. He supposed the protection of her backyard made her do it, though why she didn't go naked mystified him, probably the fact a neighbor, a neighbor like *him*, might see. He figured she never considered that the thong looked a hell of a lot sexier than naked ... or did she?

At first, Tim only admired from a distance, content to fantasize. Then, one day, Karla came to the fence while he mowed the lawn and signaled that she wanted to talk with him. Normally, he'd be peeved at the interruption, but he eagerly shut the mower off and walked over.

"Hi, I'm Karla, your next door neighbor."

"Yeah, I kind of picked up on that."

"Duh, that's silly of me."

"No problem," he replied, not wanting to shut the partially open door. "I'm Tim."

"Hi, Tim," she said, extending her hand. "Do you know about plumbing?"

“The little I learned from my dad.”

“Great. I’ve been having problems with the disposal and it costs a mint for the plumber just to show up. Maybe, if you can fix it, I could have you and the wife over for dinner, sometime.”

Tim had always been good with home repairs, so he offered to help out. The problem turned out to be nothing more than a clogged drain. When he finished up, Karla offered him a beer. He accepted her offer and they spent a pleasant half-hour getting acquainted.

After that, Karla always waved to him when she saw him outside, usually wearing her thong bikini. When she sunned herself, she lost much of her reserve and spent ample time stretching, adjusting the straps, bending over and positioning her towel on the lounge, displaying her well-rounded posterior, all for Tim’s benefit, for she knew he watched. Sometimes, she would even unhitch her top while lying on her stomach, occasionally lifting herself to get more comfortable, her ample breasts dangling in an enticing invitation.

All this had a predictable effect on Tim. He never passed up an opportunity to chat, spent a lot more time on yard work and even started dieting and working out so he would look better when he went out to swim in his pool. At first, he passed it all off as harmless flirtation. Eventually, even he had to admit that it had become more and more serious. Finally, he stopped lying to himself and admitted that he wanted sex with his neighbor more than anything else in recent memory. Just thinking about it aroused him and he went around the yard with the mower, his desire a clearly defined ridge in his shorts. Hell, he had committed adultery a hundred times in his mind anyway. *Screw you, Jimmy Carter.*

Only one thing held him back ... opportunity.

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Then, one day, the opportunity came. He sat in Karla’s kitchen, enjoying a cup of coffee after having replaced a couple of electrical outlets. No one else occupied the house. If he read the signals right, Karla would follow his lead. He decided to make a few suggestions and see where it would go. He swallowed hard, gathered up his courage and made the attempt.

“You know Karla, I’ve enjoyed getting to know you better this past year. To think, we lived right next door to each other for almost two years, yet never got past the ‘Hi, how do you do?’ stage.”

“There were many times I wanted to stop over to introduce myself,” Karla contributed, “but I felt that Angie might see me as a threat. After all, I am the proverbial divorcée next door.”

“You should have,” Tim said emphatically. “Angie is so obsessed with the absence, or presence, of her headaches, she doesn’t have any time for a real emotion like jealousy.”

“You two don’t get along?” Karla asked innocently.

“We tolerate each other. When the conversation goes much beyond, ‘How do you feel?’ Angie quickly loses interest. We don’t really talk anymore. Our love life is a complete zero. We’re two people sharing the same house. If it weren’t for Kristy, we’d have split up long ago.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that, Tim,” Karla said soothingly. “I know firsthand how it can be when two people drift apart.”

“Yeah, I guess you do. Tell me Karla, how do you live with the loneliness?”

“I like to think I manage,” Karla confided, “but I’m not the together, independent woman I seem. When I watch you work so efficiently on the repairs you do for me, I wonder what it would be like ... oh, don’t listen to me, I’m just talking foolishly.”

“No, no!” Tim cut in. “I don’t think you’re being foolish at all. What do you wonder about?”

Karla looked intently at Tim. Her eyes seemed to overflow with warmth and tenderness. “I wonder what it would be like to be married to you, not only to have you around to fix things. I wonder what it would be like to do things for *you*, to share things with you, to laugh with you, enjoy good times with you ... to *love* you.”

The last three words caused a thrill to run up and down Tim’s spine and he became aroused. There he sat, in the kitchen with the woman of his every fantasy and she came right out with the very words he had hoped to hear, as if in answer to his secret dreams.

In the next moment, they both rose from their seats and stood close to each other. Karla looked up at him, so lovely, so desirable, so ... *there*. She had on white, cotton shorts and a tight-fitting yellow tube top, which emphasized the quickness of her breathing, her soft, full breasts moving seductively beneath the cloth, twin points straining the fabric, showing Tim she felt the urgency of the moment as much as he did.

Slowly, he stepped forward and took her into his embrace, not wanting to hurry and spoil the magic of the moment. Karla melted against him, pliant and willing. He bent slightly and brought his face close to Karla’s. He could smell the fresh scent of her hair, the coffee on her warm, moist breath. His heart throbbed in his chest, as he brought his mouth down on hers.

A small spark of static electricity occurred as their lips met and she moved hard against him. They kissed with a fierceness born of long suppressed passions. Tim reached around and cupped her firm buttocks and could feel the supple, ripe softness of her as his hands moved over the body he had longed for. Her hands proved equally eager for him, moving over his back, her fingers moving under his trousers’ waistband.

In his mind, Karla lay under him, naked, willing and ready for him to take her, to *own* her. *I can’t believe this is actually happening!*

Just then, the slam of the front door announced the arrival of Karla’s son, James. The two of them jumped at the sudden sound and sprang apart, hearts pounding, panic surging up into their throats. A second later, James came pounding through the kitchen doorway, as graceful as a stampede.

“Hi, Ma. Hi, Mister Bradford,” he said as he dove into the refrigerator. “Ya got any more of them pudding snacks, Ma? I’m hungry.”

“No, dear,” Karla replied, her voice shaky. “You finished the last one yesterday.”

“Well, the job’s done now, so I guess I should get going,” Tim said, his heart finally re-anchoring itself in his ribcage. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“You’re welcome,” Karla replied, giving him a look full of frustrated longing.

Tim reluctantly left for home.

That night, Tim lay on his side of the bed, staring at the ceiling. For once, Angie lay sound asleep, snoring lightly. Tonight, however, sleep fled from him as he remembered the scene in Karla’s kitchen. In his mind, he replayed that kiss over and over until his loins throbbed with desire. He wondered if Karla lay in her bed next door, inflamed with the same desire, thinking of him.

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Tim had to wait two days until the weekend. His lateness coming home precluded his seeing Karla out in the yard and he could not bring himself to call, or trump up a pretense of

seeing her. The memory of their close call in the kitchen remained still too fresh in his mind and caused a momentary pang of guilt.

Finally, Saturday dawned fair and Karla made her pilgrimage to the lounge. The sight of her in her thong caused desire to well up in him and he hurried to the fence. She saw him and went to meet him. They looked at each other in silence for a long moment. Tim could see the same spark of desire in Karla's eyes that existed there two days ago.

So, she missed me as much as I did her. "I missed you," he said softly.

"I missed you, too." Karla responded, reaching up to place her hand where Tim's rested on the fence.

"Look, I'll come right to the point," he said. "I *need* to see you. The past couple of days have been hell for me. I want you so badly, it's all I can think about and I believe you feel the same way about me. We *have* to make plans to get together."

"I know how you feel, Tim," Karla said, uneasiness in her voice, "but we can't talk about it out here. It's not safe."

"I don't care what's safe anymore. If I don't have you soon, I'll, I'll ... *explode!*"

"Tim, please!" Karla pleaded. "Someone will hear us. I want you too. We'll just have to be patient for a little while longer and then we can be together."

Just as she finished speaking, her head snapped to the right and she looked toward the house behind Tim. The color drained from her face. Tim turned to see the cause, fearing the worst and, sure enough, standing just outside the back door, clad in her bathing suit, a towel draped around her neck, stood his daughter Kristy!

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"Don't try to explain, Daddy!" Kristy said, her face wet with tears. "I heard everything. How could you?"

Tim sat next to Kristy on her bed. He had followed her to her room when she fled into the house. He felt limp, drained and thoroughly ashamed of himself. He had never wanted to hurt Kristy and he wished he had been more careful, so she wouldn't have overheard.

"Kristy, please try to see this from my side. The love your mother and I had is gone. We haven't been close for years. We're two strangers living in the same house. Those headaches of hers have made her a different person. I don't even know her anymore."

"No, Daddy. No!" Kristy yelled at him. "I won't listen! How could you even think of doing this to Mom! The headaches aren't her fault. She's *sick!*"

Tim felt anger rise in him at Kristy's accusations. "Sick? Is that what you think?" he retorted. "Perhaps in the beginning the headaches were a real problem, but your mother *uses* them now. She brings them on when she wants to manipulate a situation, or when she wants to manipulate me!"

Tim regretted his angry words the second he saw the look on Kristy's face. She looked as if he had unexpectedly slipped a knife between her ribs. He expected more screamed accusations, but, instead, Kristy answered him in a quiet voice, which made it even worse.

"Daddy, how can you possibly *think* that? Mom and I talk about her headaches. She hates when they happen. She feels they're hurting our family, driving you away." Kristy's composure began to desert her and her lower lip trembled as she spoke. "Did you know she worries about how you feel when she's always sick like she is?" At this point, Kristy's emotions got the best of her and she started crying again.

Tim tried to comfort her but she shook off his arms. A pain like a knife went through his heart at her rejection of his affection. He could only watch as Kristy twisted the corner of her towel, her head bowed. Her crying subsided and she sniffled, reaching up to wipe a drip from her nose. A great sadness swept over Tim as he watched his daughter in her sorrow over something beyond her ken.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I can’t expect you to understand something that I don’t fully understand myself. I am, after all, just a man. Your mother and I haven’t known each other as man and wife for so long I can’t remember the last time, yet, I have never once been unfaithful to her. As God is my witness, this is the first time I have even *considered* seeing another woman.” Tim felt tears begin to well up in his eyes. *Damn! Not now!* he thought. “How long can I be expected to ignore *my* needs, *my* wants?” he continued. “Perhaps if there was love there, I could do it, but there is just nothing there anymore. I wish things were different, I really do.”

Kristy looked at him again. A look of tenderness had replaced some of the hurt and anger on her face. Like all women since the dawn of time, she considered the weakness in the man she confronted and saw the situation in a new light. She took both his hands in hers, reversing their relationship of child and adult.

“Mom loves you, Daddy, she tells me so. Why can’t you see that?”

The knot around Tim’s heart tightened, as he looked at his daughter. God! She looked so much like Angie did when they first met. His tears began to blur Kristy’s face. He took her in his embrace and hugged her, his eyes squeezed tight shut. Kristy hugged him back. They sat there for a long time, reaffirming their love for one another with their hugs.

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Tim stood at the kitchen window, looking out into the backyard. Karla’s lounge stood vacant now, the cushions dented in the places where her lush body had pressed them down. He wondered what had happened in her marriage, why she and her ex-husband had divorced. Did she find it as painful to confront her son as he did to face Kristy’s hurt? More than anything, he wanted his daughter’s love. He couldn’t bear it if, with everything else, he didn’t have her love and understanding.

Tim felt utterly drained, all emotion gone. In its place, a curious numbness existed. He turned from the window and went down the hall to the bedroom. Slowly, he turned the knob and swung the door open. Angie lay supine on the bed, a cold compress over her eyes. The slow rise and fall of her breathing told Tim she slept. It had been a bad night.

For the first time in years, he thought about her without anger. What had happened to them? Where did it all begin to go wrong? They had been so much in love, so full of one another. How could that love have dried up so quickly, so completely?

He thought back to his college days, when he had first met Angie, then just a girl of nineteen, pregnant with another student’s child, yet she had a love of life, a stubborn idealistic streak that refused to be quenched. It intrigued him how she could be like that. In the midst of her troubles, she could be capable of great warmth and feeling, unselfishly and unstintingly giving of herself. Because if it, Tim kept seeing her and had come to love her.

When they married and she gave birth to Kristy, another man’s child, he had to drop out of college and get a job. Yet, their life together had been a happy one. Tim loved his new bride and the child she had brought into their relationship. Even when they found they could have no more children, Tim refused to resent Kristy and loved her like his own.

Then, Angie started getting migraines. They would prostrate her for hours. Little by little, they began to measure their lives as episodes between Angie's headaches. Soon, the headaches became all that she could think of and it robbed their marriage of love. Somewhere along the way, Tim and Kristy came to occupy second place in Angie's life. A seed of anger grew in Tim's soul, gradually outgrowing his love for Angie. Perhaps, now, some love still existed, but years of neglect and resentment drove it into the background, Tim could no longer feel its presence, even as he stood in the bedroom doorway looking down at his wife.

Incongruously, Tim's thoughts turned to Karla. Obviously, she liked him, the episode in her kitchen no fantasy. Tim hadn't felt so alive in years, as when he held Karla in his arms, his blood pounding through his veins once more. Karla seemed an intelligent person, capable of more than just physical allure. At this point in Tim's life, she embodied everything Angie didn't. Why not take from Karla everything Angie had denied him all these years? He had paid his dues, after all. Kristy said she feared he would throw over his marriage for Karla, yet he had no intentions of doing so. He couldn't desert the people who depended on him. Karla would merely be a release for him, a way to meet his need to receive and to give physical love, love that Angie denied him and he wondered if Karla felt the same way.

Tim reached for the doorknob and quietly closed the bedroom door. He turned and walked down the hall toward the kitchen, his mind awl with thoughts. He tried to take all the facts and weigh them on the scales of his reason—needs and desires on one side, duties and yesterday's promises on the other—love versus lust, frustration versus passion, Kristy and Angie versus Karla and her son.

Somewhere, somehow, he could balance the scales. It would just take some time. He merely needed some time. Tim walked down the stairs to the back door and stood there for a few minutes, thinking. He reached for the knob and opened it.

Heaving a sigh, he stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine.