SHORT STORY

On the Stroke of Twelve

by Trang Dinah Tran



"In Darkness" by Suzette Dushi

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I know it's pathetic to be excited about going out with my husband, but after fifteen years and two children, we rarely have time together anymore. When the kids were little, everything evolved around them. Then Steve took a job which sends him on extended overseas trips regularly. When he is at home, he dotes on the children to make up for his time away. I can't help feeling like motherhood has overshadowed me, and I wait for him to see me as a woman in her own light again.

I choose a midnight-blue chiffon dress and a white wool shawl. Medium-heel, black pumps aren't glamorous but good for walking. I want more for tonight, not just a meal, but also a time to wander and be together, and who knows where that would lead to. Lately Steve has enjoyed staying home too much. Whenever we went out to dinner, he would want to go home immediately afterwards.

My mother's white pearl necklace and matching pearl earrings feel cool and smooth. I've rarely had a chance to wear them. In the old photos my mother had looked so elegant and modern in her shift dress, with sunglasses, pearl necklace and earrings. No one would detect in it the sign of a lonely soul resigning to her fate beside a dominant husband. *All men were like that in my time*, she had said.

I try the pearls on. They may be dated but they match my dress, and besides, no one cares anyway. I carefully apply shimmering blue eyeshadow, blush and deep red lipstick. A light spritz of Lancôme's Miracle completes my makeover.

In the study Steve is on his iPad as always. His grey hair and bifocal glasses low on the nose age him seriously but also give him a worldly air. He doesn't want to have anything to do with hair colouring but his wardrobe is a different matter, out with the baggy trousers and loose shirts, and in with body-hugging shirts, patterned woollen cardigans, fitted jeans, and fashionable pointed shoes.

Steve glances up quickly and returns to his iPad. I know better than to expect him to say anything. My dressing up isn't something worthy for him to make a fuss. Ben10 music is blaring from the television in the living room; no wonder the kids are so quiet. I pack their favourite books and toys in a backpack, Ben10 figurines and watch for Ben, Cinderella books and pumpkin coach for Ella. My friend Susie has offered to keep the kids so we can have our time tonight. She had once said that we shouldn't put a high price on pride in a relationship. I suspect that she was referring to my nature. But proud or not, I'm not going to cajole a compliment out of Steve. A forced praise is meaningless.

At six-thirty we drop the children at Susie's place. She knows of my effort to rekindle our relationship. Susie winks and raises a thumb up to me behind Steve's back then whispers,

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‘You look like Cinderella going to the ball.’

I watch Steve ruffling Ben’s head. *Will he be my prince tonight?*

I realise I forgot to bring Ella’s pumpkin coach cover. She will be upset. ‘Can you give her some yellow material to cover the coach and make it a pumpkin again? She loves that game.’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll make her a new one. Just enjoy your night.’

The car is unusually quiet without the kids and the radio is muted. Only the droning of the engine and the clicking sound of the indicator fill the space between us. I glance at Steve. His face is like a statue in the mottled light flashing through the screen. At times he frowns slightly as if something is stirring inside his head. I can’t feel anything between us, just a heavy nothingness.

‘Isn’t this good, honey? The kids love to stay with Susie, and we have time for us.’ I want to add ‘like the old days’, but that would sound like trying too hard.

‘Uh huh,’ he says slowly. ‘What time should we get there?’

‘Seven, we still have plenty of time.’

He withdraws back behind his statue-like front and says nothing more.

I look away and count the streetlights and the neon-lit shops as they pass. This dinner is my idea and the restaurant is my choice. Steve has gone along with whatever I suggest. But why do I feel like a deflated balloon before our time even starts?

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The restaurant is tucked away at the end of a narrow street. The light piano music and the subdued, ambience light warmed my heart. A black-cladded waiter takes us to our table where a red rose in a tiny glass vase awaits us. I sniff it and smell nothing. I love roses, firstly for their scent and secondly for their petal formation, but this one disappoints me, a perfect-looking shell that contains no essence.

Steve is more animated when the food comes and when I talk about the children.

‘Ben loves to walk home from school with his friends every day. On the other hand, Ella doesn’t like walking at all and she’s getting rounder.’

‘Ay, she’s still young. She’ll be all right in a couple of years.’

‘I just want her to be more active, but she refused all sports.’

‘You’re worried too much. Give her until grade Six. Ben probably needs that private time to prepare for high school soon. Is it next year?’

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‘The following year.’

The wine must have warmed him up as Steve goes on to his favourite topic: his position and his achievement.

‘When those delegations went through the factory, you should see the look on their face. Amazed. They couldn’t believe we produced such high-quality product. I’m working on getting an exclusive contract with them for the rest of the year. We might book a stall in the coming trade show.’

I nod and comment on his ideas; occasionally my gaze lands on the scentless rose. I feel the weight of the smooth pearls on my neck and imagine myself both a smart and elegant partner. We do look like a perfect couple.

Steve doesn’t ask and I don’t tell him about my painting course, the new CD I bought and the Zumba class I have just joined. They aren’t secret, but he won’t know what to say, and it hurts more when he says nothing.

We leave the restaurant at eight-thirty. A breeze makes me pull the shawl tighter. Twinkling stars scatter the clear, dark sky. Perhaps the wine relaxes me, or the absence of the children gives me a carefree feeling like in the old days. I want to stay with this lightness as long as I can.

Steve drives slowly out of the car park. I keep my voice low lest it betray my expectation. ‘Ok, where are we going now?’

‘Hm. Where do you want to go?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe go somewhere for a coffee or something.’

‘Oh, I don’t think I can squeeze anything in. I’m too full.’

He turns left into the highway leading toward our suburb. I wind the window down and feel the freshness pouring in. Wind splays chilling fingers into my flowing hair, goose-bumping my scalp. I have to give it one more push.

‘Why don’t we take a walk somewhere? A bit of exercise.’

‘At this time?’ He glances at me, raising one eyebrow. ‘Where?’

‘Maybe along the river, or near the Shrine.’

‘Ok,’ he says with a sigh. ‘If you want.’

Steve parks along Birch Avenue near the Shrine just like he used to do when we were going out. Orb-shape lamps cast puddles of white light across the gravel path and give it a mystical

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feel, like the road leading to a medieval castle.

‘Wow!’ I inhale the myrtle scented, cool air. ‘Isn’t it fresh here?’

‘Fresh? I think it’s cold.’ He zips up his jacket and raises the collar, hands in pockets.

We stroll side by side, crushing the gravel under our heels. Steve’s taller shadow towers over mine. He has a long stride while my petite size and court shoes need daintier steps. I clutch his elbow, deliberately slowing him down.

‘Steve.’

‘Yes?’

‘When you’re away on those trips, how did you spend the night?’ I ask even though I have heard the answer before.

‘Well, it depends. I’d have a drink with the boys or go for a walk if it wasn’t raining. But most of the time, I’d stay in the hotel and watch a film or something.’

‘Sounds pretty lame, huh?’ I flick a stray stone with the tip of my shoes.

‘What do you expect, Ann?’ His voice carries a tinge of defence as if I am accusing him of having an extra-marital affair.

‘Oh, nothing. Wouldn’t it be too boring sometimes, having the night all to yourself?’

‘What could I do? I’m not young like those boys anymore. Over there, you need to get up early every day to beat the traffic out of town. Work usually lasts late into the evenings. I’d be knackered by the time I get back to the hotel. A shower, dinner, then snooze. No energy left for anything else.’

A breeze stirs the air and the leaves above us rustle busily as if they are also chitchatting. Any conversation is better than silence, isn’t it? The night has deepened. Lush foliage and trees around us release their hidden scents. Stars above unveil their sparkle and I am clinging to Steve’s arm, pretending we are still on the same wavelength.

My phone buzzes. Lovely Susie texts to let me know the children want to have a sleepover and she will put them to bed. Her message ends with ‘Make the most of your night, Cinderella’ and a winking emoticon. She must be thinking I’ve recaptured my prince tonight. Oh! Susie. This is no fairy tale. Even Ella knows the coach turns into a pumpkin and Cinderella returns to her tattered self at the stroke of twelve.

We walk back to the car. Steve has had enough bracing the cold and wants to go home.

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He can hardly wait to change into his PJ's. I put on a lacy camisole set underneath my silk robe. When I come out into the living room, Steve has made himself comfortable in front of the television. Two cups of steaming peppermint tea are on the table. I glance at the television. This mood killer will suck up everything within its reach.

I settle on the single couch next to his and open my book, sipping the tea occasionally. But words keep jumping across paragraphs while the sound of television grates on my nerves. Reading doesn't make me forget that we are having a childfree night. It is already eleven o'clock. Our day is approaching the end.

Half way through the chapter, I pack up. 'I'm going to bed. Are you coming?'

His focus stays with the screen. 'Okay.'

Our bedroom feels more and more like my own bedroom, considering the amount of time Steve spends away on trips. I've assumed that we can always reignite the old spark if we aren't interrupted by the kids. I have come up with all sorts of reasons to explain away Steve's lack of enthusiasm. By now, I am running out of excuses.

When Steve comes in, he makes himself comfortable next to me on the bed. I nudge close to him, but he turns away to pick up the iPad and begins flicking its screen.

I stare at the gap of white sheet between us and feel the dam of water behind my eyes begin to leak. I try to hold back the sniffle and breathe by mouth like a fish gasping on land. I won't have him see me teary. When the constriction in my throat has subsided, I tap on his arm.

'Steve.'

'Huh?' His eyes stay on the tablet.

'I wonder...'

'Hm?' He's still looking at that damn screen.

'Do you feel like…' A weight presses on my vocal cord and makes it hard to speak. I squeeze the words out with difficulty. 'Like something… missing between us?'

He takes off his glasses slowly. 'What do you mean?'

I inhale a deep breath and push my pride further down. *Can't he see what is happening between us? Why does it have to be me to bring it up?* 'I don't know how to say it, but our lives… There's nothing lively… nothing interesting anymore. I'm sorry. I can't express it.'

He stares at me for some seconds. 'Ann! What are you thinking? I haven't changed at all.'

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That isn't what I am talking about. It's *us*, not him. The weight on my throat becomes heavier. 'It's us, um, can we do something about it? It's… not the same anymore.'

He strains his eyes on me and enunciates slowly as if talking to a hard of hearing person, as though I haven't heard him the first time. 'I haven't changed. I'm still the same. I don't have a problem.'

With that declaration he puts away his iPad, shuffles the pillow and turns off his night lamp. I know he will be snoring in three minutes.

Hot blood rushes through my veins. I switch off my lamp and amble to the kitchen. In the subtle glow of the wall light, I pour myself a shot of sake from the first bottle off the shelves.

He gave me a proclamation of fidelity I didn't ask for. He didn't even see the gap I was trying to bridge. When did I become so invisible?

The sake tingles my tongue and burns my throat. He could see nothing wrong! My worries are all in my imagination, nothing to do with him.

Ella's yellow pumpkin coach cover lies at the edge of the bench. *On the stroke of twelve, the spell will be broken…*

My hand lands on a string of hard, round beads. My mother's pearls. I've forgotten to put them away. My meek mother had spent her whole life swallowing her pride and existing in the shadow of a man. Who would have thought that when it is my turn wearing her pearls, I will be following in her footsteps too?

I take another mouthful of alcohol and let it burn my mouth. Outside the bi-folding door, the backyard is wrapped in a pitch-black blanket. I haven't wanted to let go, but now I have nothing to hang on to.

In a swift move I sweep the pearls away. They hit the floor with a dull clatter.

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