

Anniversary

By Epona, 'Rith, and Sevenall

Jessica was beginning to dread their anniversary.

It wasn't that she didn't love David. He was everything she'd wanted in a life partner, kind, considerate, strong, a good provider, even witty, but lately everything had become so...routine.

You could set your watch by their daily schedule. They got up about the same time each morning. David got the first crack at the bathroom since his job was a bit farther from the house than hers. Then, after a quick breakfast, they'd kiss each other absently before rushing off to the rat race once again. That evening, they'd hug with weary familiarity, have dinner and exchange dull conversation in front of an insipid sitcom before retiring to bed. Occasionally, they made love, but more from a sense that this is what married couples should do rather than as a natural outflow of passion. The next day, they'd get up and do the whole thing over again.

Jessica generally didn't think much about this. She was too busy helping David keep the wolf from the door with their two jobs to be introspective. But anniversaries were different. For some reason, that day opened a merciless inner eye that showed her just how barren their life was. The empty ceremony of the date only seemed to emphasize everything that was missing. But she put on a good show for the sake of the illusion. When David showed up at her work with a dozen roses (it was always a dozen red roses every year) she acted pleasantly surprised. She was always "delighted" at his news that they were going to "Le Chanterelle" (the place they went every year), and she was "overjoyed" at the small, expensive but impersonal gifts he gave her each time. To be fair, her gifts were just as impersonal, but Jessica didn't think much about that.

Now, lingering over coffee at their dessert course, Jessica struggled to maintain her mask.

Oh, God. Why do we even bother with anniversaries, she grumbled to herself. *It's as hypocritical as Christmas where we spend one day acting like we're supposed to be acting for the whole year and think that makes it all right.*

David looked up from his coffee cup. "I can't believe it's been six years, Jess'."

"I can," Jessica said, then immediately regretted it as he threw her a questioning glance. *What I can't believe is that there will be another year like this, a whole life of this, two people sitting in front of each other and smiling politely over their dinner.*

"What, hon?"

"Nothing," she said. She looked away, towards the table at the left. A young couple were sitting there, holding hands, feeding each other and glowing with happiness. No, love. She felt a hard lump of bitterness in her stomach.

Just you wait, she thought. *It's all lies that they told you. Love...passion doesn't last forever. And all you can hope for when the fire dies is civility.*

She turned back to the table to meet his eyes which now held a question, but, as usual, he didn't ask it. David just took another sip of coffee and studied the pattern of the tablecloth for a moment. Jessica sighed inwardly with resignation. Soon he would ask her about her work, what was going on, who was mad at whom...old,

familiar questions, threadbare from being asked so many times.

"You know, Jess', I've finally gotten some security at the firm and your work is doing well. Do you think...maybe we can think about starting a family?"

Jessica nearly dropped her coffee cup. This wasn't in the script! She couldn't have imagined a more unexpected question coming from him. Their childless state was more from default than an actual decision on their part. There was always something that had to be settled first before they made that step, jobs, savings, the little things that take up so much of life. Jessica had planned on having children...eventually, but now the idea awakened a feeling almost akin to horror.

I'm not even sure if I love him anymore and he wants to have children? Now? Why not three years ago when I might have looked forward to it?

By sheer force of will, she kept her emotions out of her face and asked the expected question. "Do you really think it's time?"

David shrugged and quirked the corner of his mouth into a wry smile. "We're not getting any younger, you know. If we're going to do it, now's the time."

Thank you so much, Mr. Sensitivity, she growled inwardly. That so puts me in the mood.

She looked at her husband measuringly. There was a hopeful look in his eyes that she hadn't noticed in a long time. Although he had seemed to ask from a sense of obligation, maybe he did actually want this. She pondered the idea. She had been longing for something new in their lives, something to spark the life back into their relationship. Maybe a child could be the catalyst to revive their marriage. *And even if it doesn't*, she thought with a shading of selfishness, *I'll still have someone I know I can love.*

Jessica smiled her first genuine smile of the night and reached over to lay her hand on her husband's. "Did you want to start tonight? Jessica hadn't seen him this excited in a long time. It reminded her of their vacation in Maui three years ago. They'd been to an authentic luau, not the tourist version. After the dancing, David couldn't wait to drag her into the tropical night to make love and she'd returned his eagerness wholeheartedly. As his excitement infected her now, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. After all, it took two people to make a marriage. Perhaps the fact that their relationship had cooled had been as much her doing as his. As he helped her into her coat and led her out into the cool New York night, Jessica felt a glow of hope work its way through her. Maybe things could be different now.

Out on the sidewalk, Jessica smiled in anticipation as David leaned out to hail a cab. Soon they would be home and they could, in a sense, start over. Her earlier apathy had faded to a mere unpleasant memory. David turned back to her with a goofy grin on his face and a thin trickle of blood running from his nose. She reached out in shock, about to ask what happened, when his body convulsed and the trickle became a torrent and was joined by the explosion of blood from his mouth. As he started to fall, Jessica grabbed him and tried to lower him gently to the ground, but she lacked the strength. They fell heavily together to the pavement, tangled like macabre lovers in the street.

"David!"

She lifted his head, trying to remember what little first aid she'd learned in high school. "David what..." His eyes were staring blindly up ward from bleeding pits in his skull. She felt for a pulse in his neck, but there was nothing.

"David! Oh, my God! David! Help! Someone help! My husband..." her voice trailed off as she became aware of the screams around her.

"Johnny! Oh, hell!"

"My baby! What happened to my baby!"

"No fuck, no! This isn't real."

"A doctor! Where's a doctor?"

Jessica looked around. There were bodies littering the sidewalk and wrecked cars all over the place. Absently, she notice the taxi David had hailed was halfway inside the restaurant's front window. It had barely missed them. A waitress stuck her head in the driver's window and breathed in shock "Oh, God! The blood!"

It was then she noticed that the voices raised in shock, anger, grief and disbelief were all women. She looked around at the survivors staggering out of buildings or cradling bodies in the street. All of them women. She clutched her husband's corpse to her breast and raised her voice in a scream of utter despair.

In his apartment, Yorick Brown pulled open his curtain and wondered what all the screaming was about.