

ARRIVAL

Phil looked anxiously at the list of arrivals. Flight 419 from Vancouver was running ten minutes late. Why did it have to be late? This was September and there were no weather issues. The E.T.A. was now showing 6:15 PM.

He glanced at his watch, the one she had given him last Christmas, their first Christmas together. It was only 5:30. So it would likely be another hour and a half before he saw her, once she deplaned and made her way through to Arrivals. Marie – he used to call her his Sweet Marie, like the chocolate bar. And she called him Philbert, her loveable nut.

But that had been in the early days, the so-called honeymoon phase. Before they moved in together, taking a small downtown apartment close to where she worked as an assistant manager at a boutique. They had been dating for eight months and things were going well. She brought up the idea of living together, as a trial, and it certainly had been a trial. The apartment was quite small and their schedules gelled so that they were in each other's way as they prepared for work in the morning *and* when they came home to relax. The neighbours also had young children, and the street noise and traffic was constant. Still, it was thrilling to be sharing a space, ...at first.

They enjoyed the proximity to good restaurants, clubs and theatres but spent more than they could reasonably afford. Since she made more money than he did, he felt in part that she deserved those expensive outings. Then his hours were cut and they had to make do with less. They got Netflix and tried to focus on staying home more, but Marie felt bored and confined and ended up going out to shows with her friends. Phil began going out with his friends more and having them over to watch TV shows and movies, often leaving a mess afterwards.

Like a lot of men and women, they had different viewpoints. The apartment did not have a dishwasher and she liked to clean any dishes as they were used. He preferred to let the dishes build and make the job worthwhile when he did do it. She didn't like having a messy kitchen. He claimed that, with the dishes in the sink it wasn't that messy, and besides no one else saw it. If they had company, they could clean beforehand. She argued they'd get cockroaches if they kept leaving dirty dishes and crumbs on the counter. He said he hadn't seen one cockroach in the three months they'd been there. She insisted they would see them if they kept being so messy. He told her they had a great landlord and he would spray if they ever did see any. She pointed out that it's hard to get rid of them once you have them and spraying didn't keep them away. He told her of someone he knew who had his place sprayed over a year ago and hasn't seen another one since. She argued that it's a lot of work and very disruptive to have to clear out your cupboards and move everything away from the walls to spray the whole apartment. He said they didn't have much furniture and the cupboards weren't that full and she was exaggerating. She said that if they got roaches and had to spray, he could be the one to move everything and prepare for it. He said he would. She said she still wanted all those dirty dishes cleaned NOW.

Yes, they bickered like any married or common-law couple but they also shared an intimacy that neither had felt with another. She liked that he was methodical and organized and always knew where everything was. He liked her spontaneity and that she enjoyed cooking and exploring new recipes. They both read voraciously and liked to keep informed, sharing stories and items they encountered.

But the stress continued. The tension over money grew, as well as conflict over personal habits. She liked to have noise around her constantly – the radio or stereo, the TV. She often whistled or sang as she went about the apartment. He liked quiet. She could read with a jackhammer pounding outside the window; he needed silence to concentrate. She had a cutesy way of talking – using expressions like “oopsy-doopsy” or laughing “tee-hee” – which he found annoying, but he also realized his habit of partly undressing and leaving socks or sweaters all over the place drove her crazy.

Phil checked his watch again. 5:58. Now the Arrivals screen was showing the expected time as 6:05. He couldn't wait. Yes, he was dying to see her.

She'd been away a month, the longest time they'd ever been separated. When she'd left, things were not going well between them. She wanted a break and decided to visit her sister Cara just outside Vancouver. They had agreed before she left that they would have a communication break as well – no calls, no texts, no Skype, nothing. The only exception had been yesterday when she had sent him a simple text to remind him when she was coming back.

He had done a lot of thinking over the last month. They had lived together for almost a year and had had their share of ups and downs. She helped him through the restructuring of his job, and dealing with a friend who almost lost his life in a motorcycle accident. When a close friend of hers had to have a mastectomy, she cried in his arms for hours. He had been there for her when her father died – at the age of 52 – and never felt closer to her. He recalled making her a Margarita, holding her close and massaging her feet.

He missed her. That was the long and short of it. He missed her.

Things would be different now. The absence had made him realize how much he appreciated her. How much he needed her. He would show her more. Tell her more. He would ask what she wanted or needed.

Before she left, there had been no talk about breaking up. But then Marie acted out her feelings more than vocalizing. There had been several nights when she sullenly marched into the bedroom, slammed the door and turned on the bedroom TV so loud he could not hear the TV in the living room. She would bang pots and pans together, drop her shoes or scrape a chair across the floor. She didn't need to say anything to let him know how she felt.

When she planned the trip, there was some discussion, of course. He knew tensions were running high and didn't know what to do about it. They always seemed to come back to each other so he generally held a “ride it out” attitude. She came home one day and announced that they needed a break. Phil was not opposed to the idea.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe that’ll help.”

“I mean a real break. No calling, no contact at all.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“I haven’t seen Cara in three years. I’m going for a visit.”

“For how long?”

“A month.”

“A month?! You, uhm, ...you can take that much time off?”

She looked impatient. “I worked it out with Jenna.” (Her boss.) “I’m going Tuesday.”

“In two days?”

“I don’t want to wait.”

When he didn’t say anything more, she added, “You understand the no contact thing? No calls. No texts.”

“Alright. If that’s what you want.”

Nothing more was said until the next day when he asked, “Do you need a ride to the airport?”

Without making eye contact, she replied, “Linda’s taking me.”

Then she was gone.

But now she was coming back. Now people were filing out, waving to others, calling out to them. But she wasn’t one of them.

Another stream of travelers flowed out, then another.

In his mind he rehearsed what he wanted to say when he saw her. First he would say that he missed her and realized how much he loved her. Then that he couldn’t wait to go home with her and share a quiet evening on the couch together. He hoped she had a nice break from work and liked it out there, but he was glad the trip had not been any longer.

And how would she respond? She would be pleased to hear he missed her, glad that he was so happy to see her. Then...

There she was. Tall and slim, wearing her flamboyant orange pullover and straw hat, her long dirty blonde curls waving as she walked.

His heart skipped a beat and he was reminded of when he met her. It had been at a cooking class – Innovative Budget Cooking. His mother had recommended the class after visiting and seeing how he ate. Originally he hated the idea, then thought it might be a good way to meet girls. It was. Out of a class of fourteen, he was one of only three men. On the first day, he noticed four young ladies he would be very happy to cook for, including Marie. She stood out for being taller but also for being brighter. She wore a glossy silver blouse that flashed whenever the light caught it, which was often. She was exuberant and had an infectious laugh. He was in love.

He felt the same way now, as if he was seeing her for the first time.

He remembered having to sit at the other end of the room, and flirting with one of the other students, who was nearby. Then he got partnered with Marie who after a few minutes appeared to be competing for his attention. This was such a novel experience for him that he was immediately drawn to her all the more and put all his flirtatious efforts in her direction. They discovered they both loved Thai and Japanese cuisine, and before the end of the course were dining out together.

And now here she was, as beautiful and bright as she was then.

She ambled along leisurely, not at all rushed, gripping her purse and her carry-on. Did she see him? She seemed preoccupied, in another world.

He waited till she was closer then moved toward her. As she glanced in his direction he waved, with a tentative smile.

She saw, but gave no sign.

He waited until she came out of the throng, until she was almost beside him.

“Marie!” he cried out softly.

Wordlessly, she passed him the carry-on. Together they jostled to get clear of the crowd of arrivals.

“How was the flight?”

She peered at him knowingly.

“How was the flight?” she repeated, with a sad smile.

Why had he said that instead of what he had planned to say? Was it too late now to say he missed her? He wanted to grab her and hold her and kiss her but her body language forbade it.

“I ...I did miss you.”

She frowned at him. “Then why didn’t you call me?”

He was taken aback. “You said no contact. No calls.”

She laughed sadly. "I left you the number."

"You said for emergencies."

Sighing, she replied, "Well, it doesn't matter now. Let's go sit down somewhere."

They found a hard, uncomfortable bench and sat.

"There's no easy way to say this," she began.

He gulped.

"I've thought a lot about you and me."

"So have I," he interrupted. "I know some things weren't going well but I know I really want to make it work. I hope you're with me on this. I'll do what I need to and we can work on it together. That is, I want to figure out what I can do to help. I need you for that. Tell me what I can do."

She sighed deeply then looked him straight in the eye.

"You can accept that it's over."

Even though he knew now what she was about to say, it still came as a blow.

"Your sister ..." he began, then realized that was not the right approach.

She shook her head slowly. "No, I figured this out all by myself."

"Okay, so things were bad, but there was a lot that did work. I mean all couples fight and argue. But there were good times. Tender moments. Remember when I made you a Margarita and gave you a massage?"

The sad smile returned. "Yes, you did that once. And you only rubbed my feet after I asked you to. And when you did you were grossed out doing it, complaining the whole time."

A lump came to his throat.

"Come home and let's talk things over. I'm sure things'll be better."

"I'm coming back to the apartment, but just because I need a few things. I'm going to Linda's tonight. I made arrangements to stay there for a few days."

"But ..."

"I'll come back in a few days and get the rest of my things. There's two months left on the lease. I'll pay what I was paying till then, then you can decide if you want to renew the lease on your own."

This all seemed so unreal to him. He reached over to put his arm around her but she not only pulled away but stood up.

“I just wanted to hold you,” he murmured, fighting back a tear.

“This shouldn’t be a shock, Phil.” There was an edge to her voice now. “I’ve told you time after time that you never listen to me, never acknowledge my feelings or ask how I am. You’re completely self-centred and you never think about anyone else. I’ve just had it.”

She turned and began walking toward the parking lot.

He wanted to remind her of all the times he had done something for her or showed her consideration or love, but he assumed it would be pointless. She clearly had her mind set. No doubt, to her, whatever he had done had not been enough.

But she hadn’t been the easiest to live with. She always wanted things her way, she overspent and mismanaged finances, and she seemed to him insensitive and inconsiderate.

So, who was right? In the end, there was no right or wrong.

He picked up her carry-on and followed behind her at a short distance, watching her walk away.