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About 3300 Words

BEFORE WINTER COMES

by

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The party had been a good one. Even in the bleakness of the November morning, Marcia could think back over the events of the evening before without too much regret. She stopped on the landing as she came downstairs and wondered at the neat appearance of the living room where there had been so much gaiety the night before. There was only one white ring left on the walnut table. There were no overflowing ash trays for she had emptied them before she went to bed. The chairs were all in place, their cushions back in their original shape. The yellow and red chrysanthemums in the brass bowl under her father's and mother's pictures were still fresh and lovely in their informal arrangement. Her mother's favorite flower had been chrysanthemums and her

father had grown them especially for her. Marcia tended them carefully during their long growing seasons in memory of her father and mother.

But Marcia was not happy. She rekindled the fire from the embers still glowing among the wood ashes. The hickory log was pungent with smoke which was carried off up the chimney. Marcia knelt on the hearth thinking how like one's desires the smoke was -- giving promise but often not fulfillment. Even when tiny red flames began to break out along the log, Marcia's low spirits persisted.

She brought her breakfast tray in by the fire. Dick's presence was everywhere. He had been the last one to leave the party for she had held to his hand as the guests were leaving, begging him with her eyes to stay awhile. "Dick will help me with the dishes," she had said.

But when Dick started to put on an apron, she said, "I'd rather break the dishes than do them tonight. Go in by the fire and I'll fix us a night cap."

She remembered his outstretched hand with the ink smudged fingers as he reached for his drink. And she could hear again his surprised voice as he said, "Was the gang so thirsty tonight that I must drink coke for a night cap?" And her answer, "It's safer for your homeward road."

"Does my safety mean that much to you, Marcia?" Dick asked as she stood behind his chair smoothing the lines from

Dick kissed her on both cheeks as he had done every time they had parted for the last five years. Marcia put out her hand to detain him as he went out the door, but pride withheld the action of her heart, and she let him go.

Marcia's breakfast coffee cooled in her cup leaving a thin film of cream on top. Her mood was not helped by the haunting sound of the wind as it scraped a dry branch of the lilac bush against the window. Then, as if exhilarated by finding an entry into the house, the wind came down the chimney in a sudden gust and stirred the small flames of the fire until the log caught and blazed. Marcia held a piece of toast on a long fork over the fire until it was warmed through. She ate it slowly as she looked out on her snow covered yard.

The chrysanthemums flattened by the wet snow were trying to raise their red and yellow sprays. Marcia was glad that she had picked so many the day before while they were still untouched by wind and snow. The sight of the earthbound flowers made her feel flattened and earthbound also and quite unable to raise her spirits about the circumstances of her life. During the five years she had known Dick she had progressed in her own mind toward the ultimate goal of love and marriage. But outwardly, there had been no change in their pleasant way of living. Dick was still the loveable easy-going companion of her leisure hours. She had become the comfortable accomplice of his erratic pastimes.

"Just finished my assignment," Dick would telephone sometimes late at night. "Let's go for a ride."

Or a call at closing time at her office. "I want to talk over my next article with you. I'll call for you at your office and we'll go some place for dinner."

Never, "Are you doing anything tonight? Can you go out with me?" Always taking for granted that Marcia's free time was his time. Just like a comfortable pair of shoes to slip into when feet were tired and aching, at the end of a long day.

Marcia kicked off her own slippers and sent them crashing into the fire screen. The unpremeditated action sent the dishes on her tray skidding and Marcia out of her reverie. In her bare feet she hurried to the kitchen. She set about the task of washing and drying the dishes with all the recalcitrant vigor of her injured personality. The fury lasted until the warmth of the soapy water penetrated her emotions. She reached for a towel to keep the tears out of the dish water. As the towel dampened, Marcia felt the assuaging tears of desire and hope taking over.

"Do something about it, Marcia," her inner voice said. "Maybe Dick needs prodding. He's lethargic when he is with you for he has given his all to his job. You make him too comfortable. He needs a few nettles to waken him."

A brief November sun shining through the window fell on the rows of glasses she had arranged according to size

and pattern, and myriad sparkling, prismatic rays danced on the ceiling. Marcia wiped each piece of silver with care and admired it as she lay it upon a white towel on the table. I'm just a hausfrau from the inside out, she thought, for I see far more beauty in a tableful of glass and silverware than in any typewritten pages I have ever done.

She opened the ice box and began to plan with last night's party leftovers. There was plenty of chicken to cream and put over toasted English muffins, Dick hated patties, the molded salad would make two nice servings, a frozen vegetable with butter and lemon, and for dessert the plate of fruit which was last night's centerpiece. It was afternoon, Dick would be up. I'll call him, she thought, and not wait for a possible call from him.

She had to look up his number in the telephone book for she was not in the habit of calling him at home. Dick answered in a voice which showed little interest in the one who was calling. "Oh, it's you, Marcia, what's up? Seems as if I just left you an hour or so ago."

The realization that he hadn't missed her or, perhaps, not even thought of her since he left her last night made Marcia swallow hard before she said, "There's so much food left from the party last night, why don't you come out tonight and help me eat it?" Then without waiting for an answer, "It's

so like winter outside, snow banks all around. I'm sure there will be more snow, and it's so lonely to sit by the fire alone." Marcia changed the receiver to her other hand. She straightened her clinched fingers as she listened for his answer.

Dick's voice, faint at first in the transition, grew louder as he replied, "I intended to catch up on my reading and my sleep and go to the office later. I write better there when it is quiet at night. But, I'll have to eat."

The tear that ran down Marcia's cheek was not pleasant to taste.

"I'll come," Dick said.

"I'll expect you at six o'clock," Marcia answered in a husky voice.

She filled the record player to its capacity caring little what music would be played. She lay on the sofa listening to the music and absorbing a mixture of emotions which she hoped would create a mood for the evening ahead. She wrapped her robe around her and snuggled down into its warm folds. The warmth of the fire brought out the distinctive fragrance of the chrysanthemums. As the long, gray afternoon passed into an early dusk, Marcia felt her earthbound chilliness giving way to warmer expectancy.

She forgot about time until she saw that the firelight was the only light in the room. The last record had finished

playing. Marcia broke the waiting stillness by jumping up from the sofa and hurrying to the kitchen to begin her preparations for the meal. With the long flowing sleeves of her robe pinned up and a big apron covering her she worked quickly and effortlessly until everything was ready.

She always had Dick in mind when she dressed for any occasion whether it included him or not. But tonight he was more than ever in her thoughts. She discarded a dark blue dress for Dick had said once that blue was not her color. "Blue leaves you colorless," he had bluntly told her. "You need the warmer colors to bring out your personality."

She would wear the warmest colors in her wardrobe tonight, green skirt, yellow blouse and some of the dark red chrysanthemums to add more color.

Dick was late and she arranged the table in front of the fireplace three times before she heard his ring. She let him ring twice before she went to the door to appease somewhat her long wait.

"I was beginning to think I had dreamed that you invited me to dinner," Dick said as he hung up his coat in the closet.

"You didn't dream it, Dick, I invited you deliberately and quite clear in my own mind." Marcia was surprised at the flippant tone of her voice.

The flippancy continued as they sat in front of the fire with their drinks.

"This is a good cocktail, Marcia," Dick said relaxed and comfortable from the warmth of the fire and his drink.

Marcia held her glass to let the firelight shine on it as she answered, "I've always made good cocktails, but this is the first time you have ever told me so."

Dick looked up in surprise, but did not answer. The fire crackled and flamed in many colors from the gypsy fire which Marcia had sprinkled upon the logs. She rattled on about irrelevant things while Dick made only a partial effort to turn the talk to more stable topics.

In the last minute of dressing, Marcia had fastened the spray of flowers in her hair.

Dick, finding a small opening in the conversation, commented, "You look like a bright autumn day with your green skirt and yellow blouse and those dark red chrysanthemums in your hair." And then as if remembering Marcia's usual quiet way of dressing, he added, "I never saw you with flowers in your hair before."

"That could be and could not be a compliment. Autumn is a long way from spring," she answered enigmatically. "Pull the curtains, Dick, and put another log on the fire while I serve dinner."

Dick was just settling down comfortably again when Marcia came in with two plates in her hands. "Now bring the table

up close to the fire and the two fireside chairs. Put two cushions in mine so it won't be too low." Marcia held the well filled plates while Dick obeyed her orders.

"Why all the hurry, Marcia?" he growled. "Haven't we the whole evening ahead of us?"

"Not if you are going to the office to write tonight," Marcia returned to the kitchen and came back with the coffee service. She placed it on a small table near her chair. Dick pulled out her chair and waited until she arranged the cushions to her liking. Marcia repressed her desire to reach up and bring his face down to hers. "Not yet, Marcia, not yet," the inner voice said. "Give him another chance."

Marcia and Dick were used to long silences between them. Like people who work with others all day they found relief in quiet communication without words. But they were not silent tonight, at least Marcia wasn't. The most trivial things in her world were brought out and scintillated around for Dick's reception.

She talked so much that her plate was still full when Dick said rather plaintively, "I'm still hungry, Marcia. Is there any more in the kitchen?"

Marcia brought him another full plate. When he had eaten it, she brought the ~~basket~~^{plate} of fruit. They ate the grapes until the green stems lay bare and exposed on the mound of fruit. Dick finished with a big purple plum, then pushed back his chair and

stood in front of the fire. The smoke from his cigarette joined the wood smoke in the chimney.

Marcia closed her eyes to shut out the sight of him standing there by her fireside, as he had stood so many times before, near enough to touch but with a barrier between them which their years together had not broken down. Her barrage of meaningless words bounced around the room until she felt they had a hollow, mocking sound.

"What's the matter with you tonight, Marcia?" Dick broke into her small talk. "I never before heard you repeat whole conversations of over the fence gossip. You have seemed to be talking against time all evening. As if there were no tomorrows or weeks and months and years ahead."

"Perhaps there aren't, Dick. Who knows? I've had a strange feeling all day. It's the changing season, I suppose, the wind, the falling leaves, the first snow, the coming of winter. There may never be another spring and summer."

Tears which she had not anticipated, ^{and} could not control, ran down her cheeks. Dick handed her her napkin in a helpless sort of way.

"So many firsts tonight, Marcia. I've never seen you cry before. To many people Fall is the most beautiful season of the year," Dick tried to comfort her.

"It can be if you have plans for the winter ahead," Marcia's voice was so low that Dick leaned close to her to

hear. Suddenly, she brought his face down to hers. "Dick, I want plans, and I want you in those plans."

Then pushing him away as suddenly as she had drawn him to her, she said, "Forget what I have just said. I'm letting my mood run away with me tonight." She jumped up from her chair and began to stack the dishes.

Dick took a plate out of her hand and set it down carefully on the table. Then he pulled her into his arms. "I don't want to forget what you said, Marcia. You have given me a start in the direction in which I have been headed ever since the first time I saw you. But Dick, the procrastinator, never ahead on anything, copy, money, time, letting life slip by with scarcely a check on the calendar until brought to time by something unexpected."

Marcia relaxed in his arms and listened quietly. There in the circle of firelight she felt unseen forces closing around them. With Dick's arms around her she was confident the forces were good ones.

"I haven't made plans," Dick continued. "There was always tomorrow which might be a better day, a better bank account, more security in my job. But maybe in my profession I'll never find that bright tomorrow."

"I could help you find it, Dick," Marcia said. "We could live today while tomorrow is coming up."

"Do you mean that you would take a chance at life with me knowing me like you do?" Dick turned her face so he could look into her eyes.

"It's what I have wanted for a long time, Dick," Marcia said. The tears ran down again, but these had a pleasant taste.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Dick exclaimed. "The marriage license bureau opens at 8 o'clock in the morning. Will you meet me there so we can get this thing going?"

"I will," Marcia answered.

The fire found some unburned crystals, and flames of every color filled the fireplace.

The End