

23. LOVE AND DEVOTION

She is looking through her husband's drawers when she comes across something a little surprising.

"I was putting away some of your underwear in your drawers."

"Thanks, for taking care of that for me."

"So whose panties did I find in there?"

"Women's panties. They must be yours."

"They weren't mine. They were scented. A perfume that I don't know."

"Oh, those. That was from when I was in college."

"The perfume smelled pretty fresh."

"You've been smelling women's underwear."

"What are they even doing in your drawer?"

"Didn't one of your friends forget them, honey?"

"I don't want to get mad. But this is as weird as shit."

"I didn't do anything."

"Love tells me to accept this kind of thing. I just don't feel it that way."

He never imagined himself keeping secrets from her. But there is too much to explain. Worse than anything, she will start to doubt her love. He just can't figure out how to distract her. If only he hadn't kept the panties.

"I didn't even know that they were in the drawer. I thought that I threw them out."

"Are they some kind of souvenir? Or did she leave them in our bed when I wasn't around."

"It's not like that at all."

He feels that it is even slipping his mind why they are in his drawer. She isn't she whether he needs a reminder to get to the bottom of things. Is this the kind of crisis that she wants for her marriage?

She tries to put the incident out of her mind. It is as if it never happened. And just as easily the offending panties go back in the drawer. She realizes that she has never followed through with the explanation of why they were there in the first place. She surrender the story with the drawers back to her husband.

Sure there is a lingering doubt. But it is hardly formed. This cloud of suspicion. She has lived much of her life in this kind of daze. And she is only able to occasionally penetrate it. She wants more. But she feels that she always falls short. And this time is exception.

She married him under the belief that he would be honest about things like this. And he has seemed to be up front with her. But this is just one more time where she can't get him to tell her what is really going on.

He's always tried to do his share of the work in the house. But what she does is getting her down more and more. This more recent load of laundry is only a reminder of her frustration. What does she have left at this point? She just has to shut her mouth and put up with it.

After a few days it has all been forgotten. The next time that she goes through his drawers, the evidence is no longer there. It has left his memory completely. She starts to think that she made it up just to get back at him. Why didn't she push it when she has the chance?

Because all that she could do at that point was to walk out. And she wasn't ready for that. As she closes the drawers, she lets that chapter get away.

She hates how her mind is playing tricks on her. She look at a pile of laundry piled neatly on the coffee table in the living room. What if the two piles suddenly became mixed up. Just an item here and there. Just enough to shake up their tranquility.

If he was going to mess up, would he be able to keep things a secret. Or would he slip up. She feels as if she has suddenly entered someone else's life that is not her own. She is not even where to start.

The smell of perfume still lingers in the back of her mind. She cannot get rid of this impression. If it was not created by something that she found in her place, where did it come from? It's hardly a fragrance that she associates with a friend. It is a mark like a signature. She wants to sort out its owner. In a sense, that makes her a detective.

She picks up a pair of her own panties. They are freshly laundered. She smells them. They have that just-washed smell. There is no trace of any other smell. She does the same for a pair of her husband's boxers. Still the same thing. The detergent has removed all record of the past. She wonders if a lab sorting through this stuff could find some clue of a past event. Do all the incriminating traces remain?

Her panties simply look innocuous in that pile. It is a testament that there is little out of the ordinary in her life. That is probably the basis of her suspicions about her husband. She has become too complacent in her life. It's not as if the romance has gone out. But the adventure has disappeared.

She has been glad to turn her back on a more turbulent past. She has never been that wild. But things did seem to get out of hand, out of her hands. And she welcomes the calm of marital life. It's just that she can sense a thin crack in its former serenity. It's not something that she can really say to him. It's just like bringing up the incident of the panties. It hardly seems to be the reason for a significant challenge to her life.

She even surveys the piles of laundry today for some sign that something is wrong. It really surprises her that the suspicious pair of panties are missing. She finds that she is doubting herself much more than she doubts her husband. That freaks her out a great deal.

None of the clean laundry says anything to her. There is not a clue about how she needs to think of her life. Everything has been washed clean. She doesn't want to think about her romance that way. That simply is the result of the process.

She pushes aside a space where she can put her legs up on the coffee table. She has arrived home early from work. She is hours ahead of him, a whole lifetime. She doesn't expect him to come home late. But as it is, they are already leading different lives.

It's not as if her suspicions have taken over how she feels about things. The trust still feels intact. And there is a passion that keeps her going. She's not really sure what is wrong. Maybe she is too demanding. She hates to see herself that way. If he had made it home early, he would have done the laundry or started dinner.

She could go in the kitchen and get things going. But her heart is not in it at this point. She loves the relaxation. He would hardly begrudge her this moment. So she settles back in the couch. There is something entirely real in what she is feeling. She doesn't even need him to acknowledge how she feels. This is enough.

Even as it closes in on the time that she expects him home, she is feeling less and less a connection with him. It is almost as if he has intentionally vanished from her life. And when he appears in an hour or so, she will hardly know who it is that has walked through the door. She takes a deep breath and settles back.

There is hardly anything strange when he does arrive. She shares none of her misgivings from earlier in the day. She is simply glad to see him. She doesn't want to explore these feelings too profoundly. They are all part of her recent past, and she wants to keep it that way. Her desire for adventure is no longer an issue.

"Do you want to go out for dinner?" he wonders.

"I'd prefer to eat inside."

And that appears to be the resolution of their separation. They will enjoy dinner together. They will both work to prepare it.

As they make dinner, they hardly say a thing. They are waiting to actually sit across from each other before they explore what is going on.

"You got out early today."

"I finished my work. I didn't want to start anything new. I just ducked out. I'll be back there tomorrow."

He doesn't want to ask anything else about it. He simply accepts her early arrival. He has essentially arrived on time so he has little to explain.

During dinner he still has little to say. She works to encourage him.

"I guess it wasn't too hectic if you managed to make it home on time."

"It was an OK day. I guess that I'm a little bored there. I don't want the boredom getting to me. I find that I'm starting to daydream."

"So what are you daydreaming about?"

"Nothing special. Another job. Another life."

"You're not bored with me, are you?"

"Not in the least. We still get along so well. It's work that seems to get me down. I like my job. But I'm going through a lull."

"So you look forward getting home."

"Of course. That's why I don't let them keep me late."

She is trying to figure out why he is avoiding her glances. Maybe it is his fatigue. She doesn't want to read too much into what is going on. It's better to leave well enough alone. Just to imagine how well they get along together. Certainly they do.

"We're not listening to music tonight. I thought that you just got some new stuff."

"I just feel a little distracted."

"Is everything OK?"

"I don't look sick, do I?"

"You don't seem like yourself."

"Sometimes that's a good thing."

Indeed sometimes it is.

"He looks down at this food. He becomes quiet again. It does feel enough for her. But she realizes that she is only inches from starting a little conflict. Better to leave things alone.

After dinner, he says that he wants to do the dishes.

“You just go watch TV. I’ll be OK.”

She sends him off to the other room. She has enough to worry about without adding TV to the mix. She’ll let him pick out a DVD. Maybe some detective story. Psychological horror.

She adds, “Just don’t choose something too crazy. You’ve been getting into the weirdest stuff.”

“I guess that I feel frustrated.”

As she is doing the dishes, she thinks about the missing panties. What could they have been? A souvenir. He has been so reticent about sex lately. What could he possibly be doing?

She imagines another world where he is this voracious lover. This is something that she has never really seen. He pulls off the girl’s panties with his teeth. Maybe that’s from a movie they’ve watched. But she lets it roll. What is going to be next?

“I can make you feel good?”

Where else has the girl heard this kind of thing before?

“She whispers in his ear, “What about your wife?”

“She’s at home asleep. She has to get up early in the morning. She’s really no fun anymore.”

As she stacks the dishwasher, she wonders if she is no fun. Getting home early only made things worse. Just more time in this house by herself. And she thought that she has something to look forward. If she’s lucky, he might be passed out on the couch by the time that she has finished.

She takes the time by herself for her advantage. She didn’t want it to be this way tonight. But he is hardly happening. He seems so lethargic that her little fantasy about him seems almost preposterous. That doesn’t stop her imagination from working overtime. This is her escape from boredom.

What if this wasn’t by consent? Then the souvenirs might make more sense. And if he moved the panties, where the hell are they? With a whole collection of other such artefacts. The fear of discovery fills her with a chill. This is all apparently innocent. But the facts are adding up. And she is having difficulty restraining herself

He’s never been that aggressive. But nothing has moved him enough to get emotional. He has always taken everything in stride. That is what she loves about him. Even in traffic, it takes a lot to get him riled up. He’s the perfect guy. That’s probably what she said when she took him back to her place.

“Are you married?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you all evening.”

“It doesn’t give you pause.”

“Of course it does. But that’s what gets me hot. Do you like married men?”

“Not generally. I just want to avoid the complications tonight.”

“Things are going to get a little messy.”

She tries to recollect about the nights that he has arrived late. It doesn’t seem to be that many. Of course, she has fallen asleep at 8 on a few occasions. Just fallen into a deep sleep. Enough to let him sneak out.

And those business trips. He has been out of the city a few times. She is getting needlessly suspicious. She wipes the counter and tries to dispel those thoughts. Maybe an after

dinner drink might help. But she is ready to konk out. She just wants to hold on for a few more hours. Maybe she'll think about him differently when she's snuggling next to him.

She lets her suspicions take over. She doesn't go in there. She is trying to find more things to do in the kitchen. She questions herself. She wanted to get married. It did take a little coaxing. But what does she really know about him? Sure they've spent loads of time together. Even taken trips. But there is this side of him that she can't figure out. What is it?

The dishwasher is running. She works to put the negative thoughts out of her mind. She feels a little relieved to discover that he is no longer in the TV room. Maybe he has gone to bed.

She ends up watching one of the movies that she had warned him about. This only adds to her suspicions. The perfect husband. The unsuspecting wife. And the lies continue. She can't admit what is happening. They are in free fall until that crucial scene when she becomes the victim that he had tried to protect her from.

The movie is too real for the moment. She isn't even sure if he went up to bed. Maybe he is on the computer. Or tinkering in the garage. Anything seems possible.

She asks the question again. She doesn't know him in the least. She has created this image of him as a gentle man. That is because he always gets what he wants. Even now. He had told her at dinner that he was going to watch a movie. Now he is nowhere to be found.

Why the souvenirs? Why the risk of being caught? Perhaps that is the fun of it all. He is doing all this in spite of her. She's part of the game. And when she realizes what is going on, she will be the last and final victim. She has to play detective. Get to him before he gets to her.

She hates this. The movie has only added to these ridiculous feelings. There have been times that she's felt like killing him. She never hides her emotions. She has let him have it. She's screamed at him in public.

"You've kept me waiting a solid hour. What the fuck were you doing?"

She is sure that people thought that she was certifiable. But he has never reacted in the least. He is so meek. He ignores her insults. Could this guy really be the maniac from the movie that she just watched.

Her husband probably gets off on watching this kind of thing. This powerful guy ties up his victims. Or he drugs them. He leaves them defenseless. He is always the powerful one.

She looks around her living room. If she needed to defend herself, what could she do? She could hit him with a rolled up magazine. Knock him on the head with a flashlight. Throw hot coffee in his face. Something to slow him down.

She doesn't see herself as that capable at hand to hand combat. But in a fury, she could muster all her defenses. She is not going to surrender to his threatening behavior.

Maybe it's not enough to be ready for that moment. She could force it to happen. Increase her vigilance. Engage in a little more detective work. She needs to get a handle on things. One more piece of evidence, and she has all the ammunition that he needs.

What would happen if she really found something else about him? She could watch this movie with him again and see his reaction.

She is tired, but she is too restless to sleep. She silently works her way up the stairs. She uses stealth as she moves from room to room. He doesn't realize that she is on the move. When she appears, he will be totally taken aback.

He's not at the computer. He hasn't been up there all night. On an off chance, she

checks the guest room. He's not there.

When she finally gets to the bedroom, she is prepared for the confrontation. Now she is extra secretive. She is moving on all fours. She can feel herself slither on the floor as if in some major offensive maneuver.

There he is. It is all happening too fast. She has thought about it. She can see him. He can't see her. She needs to move quickly.

There he is on the bed all asleep. She has been thinking too much about this. It has made her just crazy. She should not have watched the stupid movie. She realizes that she is giving in to just the sorts of things that have been affecting him as well. No wonder he watches this shlock all the time. That way he can sleep perfectly soundly.

For a change, he is out of the house tomorrow before she has even got up. She remembers talk of an early meeting. This is just one more opportunity to go through his stuff. She actually takes some time to go through the closet. She knows that it's going to make her late for the office. But if she finds something, it could be all for the best. It would set her mind at ease, or would it.

She pictures a big box full of perfumed panties of all sorts. If he really is such a player, he needs to keep track of her conquests. Remembering him zonked out on the bed hardly seems like the image of the new Don Juan. But she is playing along for the time being.

She should have held on to the illegal contraband. She can still smell that potent perfume. There is no denying what has happened. Maybe it all took place in his car. And he didn't know what to do with the left panties. So he just stuffed them in a drawer.

It might have started out as a rendezvous. And the two of them couldn't wait. His hands were already exploring the mysteries of her garments. Sneaking underneath the straps, pulling on the elastic, rubbing along the skin. And she just stretched out her legs, and put them on the dashboard. It didn't take much for him to slide those panties off. And he just let them fall on the floor as he went to work on her perfumed flesh. She was so appealing. So fresh, so young.

And after her consent, he started to feel guilty. Knew that his paramour would only blab about the conquest. That she better be shut up before she jeopardized his perfect world. And he had gotten rid of everything associated with her except for the offending panties. They just lay on the floorboard. He had even forgotten about them. His wife had missed them the next time that she was in the car.

"Honey's what's that strange smell?"

It was the perfume. It alerted him to search his own car for incriminating evidence. He found the panties just under the seat. So close to his wife's discovery. He then stuffed them in his drawers.

She puts together the perfect scenario. It explains everything. His recent lapses. His secretive nature. All her questions. But there's nothing to support her suspicions. Whatever there might have been as surely disappeared. As she looks through the closet, there is nothing more to corroborate an alternative view. She will have to accept for the moment that there is nothing that she can do

She closes the door of the closet and heads to the showers. She feels a sense of defeat. It seems strange. This should be a good thing. But it really hasn't restored her faith in her husband. As she heads off to work, she doesn't want to think about her failure. It leaves her

feeling dirty. The doubt lingers. And now it's part of her. Nothing will make it go away. Even if he is the innocent character that she's always imagined, she has this other image of him as the sex killer. She can't shake it.

At best, she is dealing with the possibility that her husband has been with another woman. Her silence appears to sanction his mischief. This isn't what she signed up for.

As she ascends the elevator to her office, she wants to put it out of her mind. Heaven knows that there's enough to keep her busy today. But she just feels frazzled from all her detective work. She believes that some secret hideaway contains all the mystery that has eluded her. She wants to do her best to figure out how things have become out of her control. She is two places at once. She rushes through work today. She doesn't even take a lunch. She wants to beat him home. Maybe even take an hour or two and put everything back in order. What did she miss last time out?

By early evening, it is clear that he is going to be late. All this time has stoked her suspicions. But it has told her nothing new. Her solitude is only adding to her fear. Either he is up to something. Or he may have caught on to her invading whatever privacy the marriage still entitle him to. She wants to uphold the trust between them. For all she knows, she might have mistaken a pair of her underwear for someone else's. She does have a black pair that is almost the same. And it wouldn't take much for her to let it stray into his pile of things. He may have even done the same when he was folding.

If he did have something to hide, he could have easily stuck them in her drawer. She never would have been the wiser. And if she was, she never would have blamed him. She would have thought that she had picked them up at the gym. His mistake, if he really made one, was to stick the panties in his own drawer. He does not realize how to hide things in plain sight.

She has to give this a rest. In all the time that she has been home, she hasn't eaten a thing. A few drinks. A few drinks more than usual. But nothing to satisfy that hunger. So she can feel her suspicions twist inside her stomach. That only makes her distrust him more.

When she finally makes herself dinner, she feels that she is giving up. How long did he expect her to wait? He hasn't even called.

After dinner, she watches some TV. But that only distracts her. She had been tired. But now she is wide awake. She has never felt this house to be so large and empty. Every noise is setting her on edge.

Around eleven, she starts hearing strange noises downstairs. She is on edge. Maybe someone is breaking in. The sounds get louder and more distinct. Some kind of tapping on concrete. She is really getting frightened.

He opens the door, and she jumps out of her chair.

"You scared me."

"I already told you that I had a late meeting. I'm sorry if you forgot. I couldn't call to remind you. Things just became crazy busy."

"That's OK."

She gives him a big hug. He acknowledges her. But he is tired.

"I need to get to bed. There going to continue it all in the morning."

"Do you want to eat?"

"I ate there. I'm going to take a shower and hop into bed. You're welcome to join me."

He just seems too eager to make it seem as if things are all right. She can hardly calm down.

She picks out another movie and pops it in. Sure it's something scary but she can apply her brain to figuring out the puzzle. That will make things easier for her at this moment. Things are a little too out of the ordinary.

The meeting is the perfect cover of more mischief. There is no way that she would question his activity. He gets off the hook. He even gets a quick shower to wash away the evidence. He does seem at wit's end. All committed to his story. She is filled with more doubt.

The movie is about a man who murders his family and then moves to another town. He meets another woman. Things appear to work out so well between them. When they finally move into their new house, she finds a box of his old stuff, souvenirs from his old life. She finds it shocking. She was so sure that she knew the man that she was with.

In the film, the woman starts to investigate. She finds out about the first family. The man now starts to threaten her due to the discovery. The movie is all too familiar. Even though her husband is upstairs sleeping, she still suspects him. This story of the meeting really wears thin,

She has the chance to go through his things. There is nothing unusual. She almost expects a matchbook or some other clue to slip on the floor separate from his jacket or his brief case. She ends up hanging his jacket up in the hallway. Maybe he is just too meticulous. He has hidden whatever clues that he has.

When she finally gives up, she decides that she doesn't even want to go upstairs to sleep. She gets a blanket and pillow and falls asleep on the couch with the TV still on.

She is still on the couch when he wakes up in the morning.

"Did you watch TV all night?"

"No, I fell asleep around 1:30. I just never managed to turn TV off."

"Are you going to go to work now?"

"What time is it?"

"It's 7:30."

"I'm going to go upstairs and sleep some more."

"I warmed the bed for you."

"Great."

She settles back in the bed. She is comfortable. She's tossed and turned a little while downstairs.

She doesn't arrive at work until 10. She stays a little late to make up for the last two days. When she gets home, he's nowhere to be seen. Another meeting no doubt.

She makes a lonely dinner and settles back for more TV. The routine is wearing on her. She never signed up for this. She doesn't want to be the understanding wife anymore.

By the time that he finally comes home, she is fast asleep. They aren't going to settle anything tonight. She is just too tired to even wonder about him.

She doesn't have any nightmares. She wakes up very early. She leaves the house to go to the gym. By the time that she gets back, he is gone. She actually likes it like this. She believes that he can really give her any answers that will satisfy. She'll have to make sense of it on her own.

She doesn't bother to go through any more of his stuff. He has been too conscientious as

of late.

When they arrive home that evening, it is about the same time. None of her fears have been allayed. She eats dinner without bringing up anything significant. She pretends that everything is back to normal. She just wants to wait until he is asleep until she heads up to bed.

“Are you OK, honey?”

“Just a little edgy from work. I’ll be OK.”

She looks for another movie to fall asleep to. This is becoming a pattern. It is only feeding her suspicions about him. She is now living in this artificial worlds where each movie is another piece in his biography. It all falls into place. And she is the detective who is sorting it all out. She is sure that some lead is to follow. When she’s home by herself, she’ll take the opportunity to apply her new skills.

He is oblivious to it all. It is almost as if he has put that part of his life behind him. He no longer has any interest in the bizarre films. Maybe because they seem too childish to him now that he has truly adopted his evil ways.

“Is there something wrong with the bed?”

“You just toss and turn all night.”

She picks out the first excuse that comes to mind.

After a few weeks, he seems to work his way back into her good graces. Fear and loneliness cause her to break down. She starts to think that she has been very silly.

She is going through his drawers again when she finds another pair of panties. She almost waves them in the air to convince herself that they are real. She thinks about hiding them until it’s the right moment.

She wonders where the new one’s came from. When she looks, they seems to have the same construction as the first pair. And they have that same perfume. She particularly notices that smell of betrayal. She decides to leave them on the dresser for him to find. She is not going to let him off the hook.

When he comes home that night, he walks back into the kitchen with the panties in his hand.

“What are these? They were on my dresser. Are they yours?”

“You don’t recognize them.”

“No. Why should I?”

“They were stuffed in your drawer.”

“I don’t know how they got there. Are you playing a game with me?”

“Smell them. Do you recognize that scent?”

He puts on a poker face.”

“Nothing that I know.”

“Does it get you a little excited smelling them?”

“I’m not some kind of pervert. Are you playing a game with me?”

“No game. This is real. You need to tell me what is going on. You’ve been staying late at work. Now this.”

“I told you that I’ve had meetings. You have nothing to worry about. I thought that we weren’t getting along. But things have gone back to normal. What the problem?”

“You. You frighten me.”

“What are you talking about? You throw these panties at me. Now you’re saying that I frighten you. I’m still the same guy that you married.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I don’t know who the hell you are. I never did. All of a sudden you just appeared in my life. You have a lot of explaining to do.”

“For what. Silly suspicions and a pair of panties.”

“I know that I’m right this time.”

She holds the panties in her hand and takes another whiff.

She comments, “This is fresh perfume. Where the hell did this come from?”

She can put together the story for herself just by smelling the fragrance. She feels that she knows the owner of these panties.

“Tell me, is the woman who owns these even alive?”

“What are you accusing me of?”

“You’re a violent person. I’ve always felt this hidden aggression with you.”

“Everyone is a little wild. This is nothing to make me any different.”

“Oh, it is. You act out your fantasies. Who is she? Where is she?”

“Let me smell them. That’s your perfume.”

“Are you trying to tell me that I’m crazy? I’m crazy. I must be crazy if I’m with you.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” He storms up to his computer room. She doesn’t follow him up there. They don’t talk again until the morning. They act as if nothing happened. The panties are nowhere to be seen.

“Let me take you to dinner tonight.”

She glistens as he proposes a little adventure.

“We can both come home a little early.”

She starts to believe that maybe a crisis can help rekindle the romance. She still guards the panties in case she might need them.

He ends up being late that night. All their plans come to naught. It just seems terrible.

“I have to confess something to you, something that I’ve never told anyone before.

She can feel the blood rush to her head. This is driving her to the end. She doesn’t want to know.

“This is not a good time.”

“I can’t hold this in any longer.”

“Sometimes love means saying nothing at all. Just letting things work themselves out. Haven’t you thought about it that way.”

“But I don’t want to hold it in any more.”

“I didn’t marry you for this. Just let it go. If you pretend that nothing happened, I can do the same. Just hold on.”

She wants to make sure the panties are in a safe place. Even if she relents and decides to maintain her ignorance, she wants some insurance.

She first checks her drawers. Then she checks the closet. She checks the bathroom. She checks her clothes. She looks everywhere. Then she goes back down.

“Have you seen the panties?”

“What panties?”

“I can’t find them.”

“OK, I’ll play it your way. You said that you had something to confess. I’m ready to hear your story.”

“I didn’t have a story. I told you that I was late at work. I called your cell. It was off. What did you think that I was going to tell you?”

“You knew that I had something on you. I had the panties. So you were going to confess. You were going to tell me whose they were. But you found them. And now you have nothing to tell. You don’t have to.”

“The panties, the panties, what are you talking about?”

“Let me search you.”

“I really feel pissed that you’re doing this. But if that’s what you need., go ahead and look.”

And she starts to go through all his pocket. She digs deep in his jacket. She makes him pull out his pants pockets. She pats him down rather aggressively.

“Were you a cop in another life?” he asks.

“Very funny. Where did you hide them?”

There are some questions that are better left unanswered. She is not sure where to start.

“I’ve just been having a rough time at work. Maybe I need another job.”

Neither one says anything more about the incident. She believes that she has been overzealous.