

The Nanny

by Mark Manselle

In the dark, alone after she was gone, he would whisper her name into his pillow and fight the tears more out of sheer exhaustion than anything else. He had mourned for her even before she had passed, as he watched helpless while the disease marched slowly and methodically against her defenses. Until finally, almost mercifully, it overtook her completely.

"Tuesdays." John said.

"What?"

He caught her looking. He was standing at the kitchen sink with his back to her, and she had not been expecting him to turn when he spoke, so he caught her. The recovery, he thought, was smooth. Her eyes flicked up to meet his own for a brief moment, and then she went back to flipping the pages in her magazine. Nonchalant, but for the slow creep of red into her features.

"Tuesdays." John said again. "Katie's band practice is on Tuesdays right after school. It usually lasts until four-thirty or so."?

"Uh-huh." She said, but didn't look at him.

"She has a fit if you keep her waiting."

She smiled and met his eyes. "I'll be there."

"Otherwise, Michael's out at three. Over at the middle school."

She kept her eyes on his. "I'll take him over to the park on Tuesdays. Until Katie's done."

"Good." He said. He turned and wiped his hands on the kitchen towel. That odd mix of panic and desire was strange. He thought; it's just been a long time since anyone checked you out. Relax.

The days that followed her passing, though, had been more than he had been prepared for. The pain, the actual physical sense of her missing presence in the world had just ruined him. He asked

God, why? Then settled into a cocoon of blankets and pillows that still carried her scent, and wondered which question he wanted an answer to the most. Why did you take her? Or why did you leave me behind?

Jill, his wife's sister, had become his children's rock for a time. Auntie Jill still came around, but as she had so delicately put it; "I can't take care of them forever, John. I have a life, too."

So he had begun to interview nannies.

"You hired the cute one?"

"Cute what?" He replied. Buying time, he'd known she would pick on him for his choice. He stood next to the refrigerator pouring milk into his coffee, trying to concentrate on the coffee and wear no expression on his face at all.

"Oh my God, John. You're blushing."

He could feel the heat on his face. Dammit.

Jill was different. He could remember every feature of his wife's face, and her sister looked nothing like her. Jill didn't act like his wife, or share any similar tastes in clothing or friends or even hairstyles with her. But when they laughed you knew, and they could both read him like a book.

He gave up and sat down with her at the kitchen table. He picked up a spoon and stirred the milk into his coffee cup.

Jill leaned forward and put her hand over his, he could hear the smile in her voice.

"It's okay, John, Karen's gone. She was sick for a long time. You deserve to be a little horny."

"Crass." He said.

"Ah, yes. But true."

All their life together, while they had dated, after they had gotten married, even after the kids came, she had hummed in the kitchen. She did it as she made something to eat, or washed the dishes, or poured herself a cup of tea.

He couldn't remember the tunes.

He would lay in the silence and breath her smell in. Will himself to remember, but he couldn't recall.

Only the tone of her voice.

That happy, contented tone that told him he was home. He was loved.

He wept. Bitterly and selfishly wept for that loss. Bit the pillow to stifle his moans.

Tuesdays became their night.

She was a wonderful cook. She got the kids off to school, and then came back to the house and cooked dinner for everyone. Labeling the Tupperware containers in her neat script. Then picked the kids up from school and dropped them at home. He put dinner in the microwave.

The first Tuesday he'd completely forgotten.

He had come home to an empty house and walked around calling out everyone's name for a few minutes before he remembered.

Then checked the fridge for dinner and found a tuna casserole. She had used a marker and a pink sticky note to label the dish.

He'd ordered a pizza instead, and then he had gotten completely busted when she dropped the kids off and the pizza delivery kid had come walking up the driveway with his hat on sideways and two large in his right hand.

She hadn't said a word. But her big dark eyes gave her away. Amusement? He couldn't put his finger on what was behind that look.

The kids had saved him. Screaming at the pizza delivery kid. Startling him. They hadn't seen delivered food since the wake.

Auntie Jill was into health food.

And the words had tumbled out, hesitant and broken around the frog in his throat.

"Join us?"

?

Now they shared stolen smiles across the table as the kids scarfed down slices of heaven. Danced around each other carefully in the kitchen as they cleaned up the dishes.

Sat at opposite ends of the couch, the kids on the floor in front of them, watching something Disney.

He found himself breathing shallow breaths.

Tasting pepperoni while he willed himself to watch the television, the children, not to look over too often.

Panic and desire.

It had been Oprah, oddly enough, that had gotten him up.

He had lost the remote in the sheets and he couldn't remember what celebrity she had been interviewing. Talking. Smiling. It was always such polite f-ing chatter among the rich and famous as they discussed problems only they could relate to. It had made him angry and tired all at the same time.

And he had to pee anyway.

And the sheets didn't smell like her anymore, they just smelled.

He had found himself sitting on the toilet in the middle of the night, staring at his toes. And in the absolute quiet of that moment...

Humming.

