

Conjugal Love

by Paula Sophia

Janice wore a wedding ring made of toilet paper spit wads molded into tiny interfolded rectangles, a gum wrapper chain bound by threads of orange and red tied into a minuscule heart-shaped knot.

Duane had spent hours cementing the links with his own saliva, sculpting them into the right shapes, folding them one after another. Each moment had been devoted exclusively to her, to her happiness, to her smile. How many fiancées spent this much time thinking about their bride's wedding ring? Not many. Most of the time they went to pawn shops, laid down the plastic, not much thought, not much emotion. Just business.

When she walked into the Raging Hair Salon near 23rd and Dewey, she noticed the place was packed, all six hair dryers occupied, all six salon chairs seated with clients. Even the manicure table had a customer, and everyone knew, nowadays, if you wanted perfectly sculpted nails, you went to one of those Vietnamese shops in the Asian District. They were cheaper, and the nails lasted longer. Plus, they gave foot massages with their pedicures.

Janice saw Liz sitting in Carla's chair, hair plastered with white paste, various strands folded into layered squares of aluminum foil. She covered her left hand, looked down to avoid eye contact. She wasn't ashamed, just cautious. She didn't want to have a confrontation, so she slipped by the receptionist's podium (she was never there) and quietly nestled herself next to a dusty old plastic palm tree.

Liz noticed her anyway, narrowed her eyes and frowned. She brought out her left hand, displayed a diamond ring.

"Manny popped the question," she said loud enough for everyone to hear. There were oohs and ahhs, some nervous laughter, a few whispers.

Carla nodded, smacked her gum and winked at Janice. "Well, what a shame."

Liz ignored the comment, continued primping her ring.

Janice and Manny had been engaged once, years before when they were still in high school. She'd been mesmerized by his charisma, his promises of a sweet life, but it didn't take long before she saw how vain he was, how boring and brutal. He was the kind of guy who'd leave a girl with a bunch of babies but without a penny of support.

"We're going to have a big wedding," Liz continued. "If you're lucky, maybe I'll invite you."

"Don't bother," Carla replied. "I'll be working, always working."

Liz pouted.

Janice grabbed a bridal magazine from a coffee table cluttered with out-of-date magazines, many of them with missing pages torn out by women who wanted their stylists to recreate a particular cosmetic effect, a new hairstyle or hair color. She held the magazine close to her face, wanting to avoid Liz's dirty looks, her disturbing stare. A wedding dress on page thirty-two caught her eye: the svelte, white fabric, the sleek lines and trim bodice. The strapless top seemed molded to the model's body, and she looked so happy, so beautiful. The model had her left hand extended, a dazzling diamond on her ring finger.

Nobody Janice knew had a wedding like that. Either they got married in the church dressed in their mothers' bridal gowns, gaudy and ancient dresses with off-white lace faded from years of hanging in the attic, or they snuck down to city hall to get legally entangled before the families could protest. She'd promised herself a storybook wedding when she was a girl, but nevertheless, reality had overcome fantasy. She looked at her ring.

Manny's car stopped in front of the salon, a blue Monte Carlo with low profile tires, chrome spoke wheels and a loud, booming stereo. The car throbbed to the beat of a Hip-Hop tune, vibrating the windows of the salon so much a glass heart suspended in the window by a suction-cup hanger fell to the floor and broke.

Carla absentmindedly scratched her head with a finger smeared with hair color solution, drawing a frown across her forehead.

Liz beamed a smile, twisted her head around to get a glimpse of the car. She squirmed in her chair. "That boy," she said. "I don't want him to see me like this." But she didn't seem distressed, more pleased than anything.

When Manny walked into the salon, the women - customers and booth operators alike - hushed. They eyed the young man, smiled at his sleek designer blue jeans, his white and black t-shirt with an emblem of a fist grasping a stack of cash, his gold chains and meticulously sculpted black hair spiked in the middle to look like a razor.

Janice raised the magazine to hide her face, wishing she could make herself smaller, small enough to fold her limbs behind the pages, small enough to disappear. She held it to the brink of her bangs, eyes just above the top edge of the pages.

"Here's my man," Liz shouted.

"And here's my lady."

Manny grabbed Liz's hand, caressed her sleek fingers and bent down to kiss the diamond ring. Some of the other women moaned, staring at Liz with envy in their eyes, slight frowns on their faces.

"My man, Manny," Liz said. "What brings you here?"

Manny smiled. "I just needed to see you, before..." His voice trailed off, and his smile melted into a frown, worry lines in his forehead, lines that had never been there before.

He'd left the car running, the music still booming, nothing but bass, not enough melody to recognize a tune. Another knickknack fell from the window, a stained-glass rainbow. It struck the floor and shattered in two.

Janice saw a police car pull up behind Manny's ride, red and blue lights ablaze. The cop got out of the car ticket book in hand.

"Hey, Manny-boy, you're busted," Carla said, unable to hide the satisfaction in her voice.

Manny frowned at Carla, retreated from his bride and made a comic display of blowing Liz a kiss, but she didn't reciprocate the gesture, staring at Manny like she'd never see him again.

He stopped at the door, smiled in Janice's direction. She ducked behind the pages, hoping he wouldn't speak to her.

"Jan-Jan?" he said. "How you doing? It's been a minute."

Janice lowered the magazine, smiled but didn't speak. She felt the stares, the glares of the women. Manny stood there for a moment, took a cautious step toward her.

"That cop, he's writing you up," she said.

Manny smiled awkwardly, shrugged his shoulders and rushed out the door.

Liz left her chair, trotted toward the door, and stood watching, bare legs rubbing together, feet shifting back and forth, arms tucked under her salon poncho like she was shivering.

Manny waved his hands at the cop, open palms, shrugging shoulders, the classic "who me?" gesture. The cop had put down his ticket book, had his left hand behind his back reaching for a pair of handcuffs, right hand on the butt of his holstered weapon. Through the glass, Janice heard the cop yell, "Turn around, put your hands behind your back."

Liz rushed out of the salon. "Officer, officer," she pleaded.

The salon's patrons crowded the shop's window: women wrapped in ponchos, women with wet hair, women in curlers, half-applied makeup. They whispered to one another, clicked their tongues, and moaned. Only Carla stayed back.

Janice watched Carla primp in the mirror, run a brush through her hair. Carla's face was smooth, a natural light brown with a healthy glow, and she had long, shiny black hair. Still so pretty, even after all she'd been through. She'd lost her baby's daddy to a gang shooting, had been abused by a string of boyfriends before she finally gave up, preferring to live alone. After scraping some savings together she applied for a small business loan and opened the salon. Now, her son was in college studying to be a teacher, a star athlete at the University of Central Oklahoma. Carla was a survivor, but Janice felt sorry for her. So alone.

Janice looked at her paper ring. It wasn't ideal, but at least she had someone to love, someone who wrote her letters every day,

someone who called her every week, and when they made love every other month or so, it was urgent, intense, and passionate. How many women had her man's complete, undivided attention like that? It was like high school but better, no time for awkwardness, always the expectation of interruption, the rattle of keys, a knock at the door. She found the apprehension titillating, focusing.

After a few minutes, the crowd of women disbursed, ambled back to their chairs, to their hair dryers, their operating booths and cosmetic tables. A few lingered at the windows, gawking. Janice saw Manny in the back of a police car, noticed that two other police officers had arrived. A tow truck had hooked Manny's car, his pride and joy.

Liz stood in front of the salon, head hung low. She was crying. "Please, please let my baby go. He's innocent. We're getting married." Her voice vibrated through the glass.

The police car with Manny drove away, and Liz started screaming at the remaining officers. One of them approached her. He yelled at Liz, told her to go back inside the salon or she'd be arrested. Liz rushed through the door, wailing, eye makeup streaming down her face.

Carla put her arms around the young woman, ushered her back to her booth and coaxed her to a seated position. She hugged Liz, held her while she sobbed. The other women in the salon nodded knowingly, wiped tears from their eyes, or just stared at the floor. For the first time all morning, you could hear the radio music: some upbeat tune with inane lyrics that mocked the situation. Somebody stood up, walked across the room and shut it off.

"They said he did a drive-by. They said he tried to kill someone..."

Carla started unraveling the twists of foil from Liz's hair, leaned her backwards toward the neck-rest on her shampoo sink. She streamed water on Liz's head, massaged the hair color and soap from her tangled mass, all while humming a soothing melody.

Janice felt compelled to approach Liz and offer consolation, to tell her things may not be as bad as they seemed, but she hesitated. Liz made no secret about her distrust of Janice, her dislike of the

woman her man had once loved years before, but Janice's compassion lifted her out of the chair.

The salon remained silent, but now, there was an air of tension, every woman watching Janice. Liz sat upright while Carla dried her hair with a blow-dryer. The high-pitched whir of the tiny electric motor and the rush of warm air reverberated off the walls, a maddening swirl of ambient noise that made Janice pause and look down. She was about to turn around and leave when the dryer went silent.

Liz cleared her throat.

Janice winced.

"How much did they give you when you pawned Duane's ring?"

"Not much, the diamond wasn't real."

Liz examined her ring, the huge, white stone, the way it glittered, spraying her face with tiny shots of reflected light like a dance hall mirror ball. She took it off, held it in the palm of her hand for a moment like she was weighing it.

"Then I probably won't be able to post bond."

Janice offered her hand. Liz grasped it, fingered the paper ring and pulled Janice's hand closer to her face. She gazed at the precise piece of jewelry.

"Wow, how pretty," Liz said, eyes brimming with tears. "It's so... delicate."

