

A Good Provider

by tommy klehr

She looked over from the passenger seat at her husband and smiled. It had been twenty years. She hadn't expected him to remember. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, placed her hand on his thigh.

"We'll be home soon enough," he said. He was not much for public displays of affection, or even private ones, so this didn't really bother her anymore. He was a good father and a good provider for his family. She would have liked more from him, but, well, she found others to fill that void.

She sat back in her seat and pulled out her cell phone. No messages. *Strange*, she thought. He usually responds. She tucked her phone into her purse and tossed it in the back seat.

"Don't you need to make that call?" he asked.

"No. Just checking for messages."

She stared out the windshield, losing herself in the rhythm of the intermittent wipers as they cleaned the mist from her view. She thought back over the day.

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It was a typical morning. She had gotten up early and sent the kids off to school while her husband finished the overnight shift. Then out for a jog. When she got home, the message indicator flashed on her phone. Her husband had called. Overtime. He was always willing and, well, they could use the extra money.

Invigorated from the morning run, and without her husband home, she turned on the computer in the hope of some time with a friend. When he didn't respond, she gave up and settled for herself.

Later, after she had showered and gotten dressed, she was about to leave for work. On her way to the door, she opened the refrigerator to grab lunch. There, in front of her lunch bag, were hand-drawn cards from her younger two kids. *Happy anniversary!* In colorful crayon.

She had forgotten that today was their anniversary. It had been in her head for weeks, but she had forgotten it was today. She didn't feel bad, though. *He probably doesn't remember*, she thought. She ran back up to the bedroom and grabbed her gift — a platter she had hidden in the bottom of her dresser. It was a replacement for the one that had broken at Thanksgiving all those years ago. She had never gotten around to wrapping it, so instead she just put it inside one of her sweaters, the red one that he always liked. She took it downstairs and placed it carefully on the table, putting the cards from the kids on top of it. Then left for work.

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At 5:00 she left the building where she worked and walked to the parking lot. She removed her cell phone from her purse and tried her friend again. Still no answer. She was about to leave a message when she noticed her husband standing by her car, watching her, his own cell phone to his ear. She quickly closed her phone and put it in her purse. He listened intently a few moments more, looking directly at her, then put it away.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Did you need to make a call?" he said, not answering her question.

"No," she said. "I was just checking in on a friend. I'll try later."

"Happy anniversary," he said. Emotionless, but at least he remembered. "Dinner?" he asked, pointing to his car.

She nodded. "What about my car?"

"Don't worry about it."

He walked her to his passenger door, and opened it for her. He had done that only five times before. When they got married, this very day twenty years ago, and once when each child was brought home from the hospital.

She beamed. There was no other way to describe it. She desperately craved this attention from him and he so rarely doled it out. When it did come, though, she relished every minute of it.

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The sound of the turn signal brought her back to reality. They had just turned onto Maple Street. A few seconds later, they were home. She rushed up the sidewalk to keep from getting wet in the rain, but realized that she left her purse in the car, so she had to wait in the rain anyway. He took his time following her. As he stood at the bottom of the steps, he paused for a moment and looked up at her. She saw a man deep in thought. She went down the steps and kissed him, attempting to wake him from his trance.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Let's go inside," he said.

She was surprised to find the lights off. She called out to the kids, but got no answer.

"I took care of everything," he said. "Jimmy is with a friend for the night. The others are at your parents."

A smile crept over her face. The wine from dinner was still working and she was dissatisfied with the morning's lack of events. She walked back to the doorway, where he was still standing, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Well then, what are we doing here?" she asked. She kissed him deeply, but he did not return the favor.

"I have something for you," he announced and began to move his hand to his jacket pocket.

"Oh! I have one for you, too," she said. She turned to the table and grabbed the platter wrapped in the sweater. She held the gift in her hand, offering it to him. He made no move to take it. Feeling the need to fill the void, she started talking.

She spoke quickly. "The traditional gift for twenty year anniversary is china. And I was thinking, 'what do we need that is china?' And then I remembered that old platter that was your grandparents. The one that got dropped and broke."

He stood still, silent. She carefully unwrapped the platter, tossed the sweater on the back of a chair and showed him the gift.

"Well, I found a picture of it online and took the picture to an artist who made this and painted it to look like the original. So now we have the whole set again. See?"

He made no move to take or even touch the platter. Offered no words of thanks. He simply stared at his wife. His right hand over his jacket pocket.

"I have something for you," he said again.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes. You have a gift. Okay."

She put the platter carefully on the kitchen table and turned back to her husband, who still hadn't moved. After two false starts, he slid his hand into his pocket. It emerged with a small white envelope.

She put her hand out, accepting the gift, and said "Thank you."

He returned his hand to his pocket and removed his phone as she opened the envelope and pulled out the contents. A photograph. She furrowed her eyebrows and slowly dropped her jaw. He watched as her eyes darted around the picture. He had stared at that picture all day, so he knew what she was seeing based on her eyes. The face, battered and bruised. Head tilted to the left. Arms tied behind. Legs to the chair. The blood.

He pushed a button on his phone. Turned it toward her. She heard a woman speaking in a sultry voice. Her words. Her voice. Then a man's voice.

That's when she recognized the man in the photograph. The void-filler. The one who hadn't responded all day.

She looked at her husband, slowly shaking her head, trying desperately to reconcile it all. The father of her children. He could do these things?

"Do you think I don't know what goes on in my own house?" he started calmly. Then shouting "My own fucking house? While I'm at work?"

She didn't hear his words, though, his emotions finally on display. This *storm beneath the calm* all those years. She didn't see his hand raised. Didn't hear it slice through the air. Didn't feel it strike her

cheek. She didn't feel the pain as she twisted from the blow and lay on the table, knocking the platter to the floor, shattering it like its predecessor on that happy Thanksgiving so long ago.

She didn't notice that he violently removed the clothes that separated them. Didn't care when he took by force what he thought was rightfully his.

She didn't hear the insults and obscenities he hurled at her. Didn't feel the blows to her body.

And when he was done, she didn't hear him crying as he sat on the floor, his head in his hands. She didn't hear his parting words to her as he left the house, vowing never to return.

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It was the force of gravity that brought her back. She slid off the table collapsing in a heap on the floor, the cool linoleum easing the pain in her cheek. She felt her fingers as they pinched the skin on her naked thigh. Felt her fingernails dig into her own flesh, so desperate to wake from this dream. This nightmare.

That's when it all sank in. She began to cry. She tried to scream, but she couldn't make a sound. And that made her want to scream even harder. She screamed with such force that the air escaped with a dry rasp. She screamed and screamed and screamed until her lungs were completely deflated, but still she couldn't make a noise. And then she inhaled, moaning, gasping for air, struggling to get enough. She sucked so hard that she pulled all the air from the room into her and with it all the colors so that when she opened her eyes, nothing was left except black and white. No shades of gray. Just black. Just white. And truth.

She saw the broken platter on the floor. Grabbed a piece of it. The sharp edges cut into her flesh, as she squeezed it, but she felt no pain anymore. She saw the blood, black, gather in her palm, then trickle down her alabaster wrist. Squeezing even tighter in her hand, she brought the shard to her neck and pierced her throat, watched the black liquid rush from her heart. Her heart that had loved so much. That only wanted love in return. The blood rushed from her heart to her neck and into the air, collecting in a black

puddle around her. Her heart raced, a desperate but futile attempt to save itself, only accelerating its own demise. The pounding in her chest slowed, and the puddle grew larger, and the gush soon turned to a trickle, and the white in this new dichromatic, truthful world that she had just discovered slowly faded until she was left with just the blackness of reality.

