

Every Year After

"Where have you been? We were so worried!"

"What?" Abby replied. "Why were you worried? I was just in the back yard."

Abby's husband looked at her with an incredulous expression.

"The back yard? Honey, please...don't play like that."

The look of confusion she initially wore changed to one of amusement as she said, "Is this a joke I don't know about or something...?"

Her husband stepped forward from the hallway leading into the kitchen. He had frozen in that spot when she entered the kitchen from the back door. His face showed no sign of amusement to match hers. He walked forward and embraced Abby in a large hug. His breathing started to rock in what Abby assumed with sobs.

Her face screwed in confusion and concern. "Honey, whoa, whoa...what is it? What's going on? I'm right here."

He pulled himself away from her just enough for Abby to see the tears streak his cheek. A cheek that had more stubble than usual. She usually caught him on that and wondered how she missed it. She also noticed that his hair was a little oily, like he hadn't washed it in a couple of days. Further confusing her because she distinctly remembered hearing him get into the shower this morning while she stayed in bed to relish the Saturday.

"Abby...what...what happened?"

Releasing herself a measure from his hold, she pulled back and looked him directly in the eyes. "Paul, I honestly have no idea what you are going on about."

He took a step back from her, hands holding hers. Irritation rose to the surface. "No idea? No idea? Are you seriously going to tell me you don't know where you've been or what you were doing all this time?"

"What? Paul, I was in the back yard. The first sprigs of jasmine were coming up so I wanted to tie them up their runners. I was out there maybe an hour. It's only just now two o'clock-"

The words halted mid-sentence. She looked at the clock on the microwave which showed 10:05.

Letting go of Paul, she rounded the island in their kitchen, to walk closer to the microwave. "Was there a power outage or something...?"

He put his hands down on the counter of the island and leaned in, "No, Abby, there was no power outage. You really expect me to believe that you don't know how long it has been?"

"How long what has been?"

"Since you disappeared."

Whipping her head towards him, her mouth slightly open.

"Disappeared? I was gone an hour, and not really gone. How could I have disappeared from our own back yard?"

"Abby, this isn't funny. You've been gone, without a trace for three days and-"

"Three days?! What are you talking about? I've been here. Right here. In our back yard. How could I have disappeared? No. No. This is a joke, right? You're joking with me. Changing the clock. Just a stupid little joke." Her voice rose in volume and pitch, gaining a frenetic quality as she began to piece together her husband's appearance and his insistence that she was gone.

Cocking his head a little to the side, Paul asked, "Wait...you aren't kidding, are you? You really don't know."

She didn't seem to hear him as she backed away from the microwave, shaking her head a little as she kept asking, "Three days? That's not true, right?"

Stepping around the counter, Paul reached for her arm. "Honey, please tell me you remember. We need to know what happened to you."

"I-I-I...don't know, Paul."

Pulling himself to her, still holding her arm, he leaned in to rest his face against her hair. Breathing in deeply, he relaxed a little at the familiar scent of his wife.

"Paul? Everything ok in there?"

Both Abby and Paul looked up to the direction of the voice. Paul still looking at his wife, tears renewed on their trek down his cheeks. Abby showing concern for a voice she doesn't recognize.

"Paul, babe, can you hear me? Is everything ok?"

Breaking his concentration away from his wife, he raises his voice to answer, the first syllable cracking in his throat, "Yeah, um...just...just getting something to drink. I'll be up in a minute."

Abby turned her attention to Paul. "What? Who was that?"

"Oh, honey, why do we do this every time? You know it hurts."

"Paul, what is going on? Who is upstairs?"

With a sigh of resignation, he answers, "My wife."

"Not funny, Paul. Really not funny."

"Yeah, I'm not trying to be, Abby. We do this every year."

"Every year?" she reacted, pulling away from him.

"Abby, listen to me. You are going to leave again in about thirty seconds so I'll make this quick. Every year on the anniversary of the day you were finally...discovered...after disappearing from the back yard, we do this. I don't know why, but I did it the first time and you responded to me. So in order to make sure it keeps happening, I do the same thing. Every year...for the past nine years."

Her expressions of confusion and shock were equally mixed.

"I don't tell Leigh about this happening. I don't think she would take it well. But every year, I know it is coming, and I get so nervous waiting for the day, I forget to shave and bathe. But we only have seven minutes together and it is everything I loved showing up here and leaving again and again. Year after year. Next year, we will have this same conversation."

Abby tried to say something, to tell him how ridiculous this was. Her jaw worked itself trying, but nothing came out.

Paul pulled her in close again, but this time he was met with some cool air and nothing else. He stood in a mock embrace, in their kitchen, for a few minutes more. Tears falling in the empty space before him.

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