

Blurdays

I thought I saw my mother's freckled arm in my bathroom mirror. Her wrist has a crease where her watch would be if she still wore one. Her hand, with its raised vein on the back, held my mascara brush and deftly swathed my red lashes brown. The sight of her hand and arm without the rest of her startled me so much, I shuddered. The mascara brush fell into the sink, but not before it had stroked my left cheek with the Chinese figure for river. (Brian and I frequented the Lotus Blossom, whose placemats featured a course in Chinese for Dummies.) By the time I realized I'd experienced an optical illusion, I was five minutes late getting out the door. The necessity of redoing my makeup guaranteed me an aggressive drive to the office. I grabbed my keys and purse and bolted for the door.

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"What time is it?" I craned my head around the partition and asked Heather in the next cube. "I forgot my watch."

"Break time."

I set my chat window to Away, dutifully closed the window on the employee record I had updated, pulled a granola bar out of my bottom desk drawer, and moseyed to the break room. As usual, I picked up *People Magazine*, but threw it back on the stack, chagrined. Someone had grabbed the latest issue. I looked around. The new guy. Nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the latest gossip.

Heather confided to Crystal—and to everyone else in the room, "I said I'd go with him, and so we went, like, last Friday, to Saturday Night's—yeah, you know, it's soooo retrobate the fossil music they dig up—and Drake danced to disco, and he looked soooo adorkable."

From behind me, my mother laughed—loudly. Like a turkey cackling. I wanted to crawl under the table. When have I *not* been embarrassed by my mother's laugh? I turned around, certain she'd invaded my at-work space. I found myself stupidly staring at the wall. Then I remembered. Mother hadn't laughed since Dad died nearly a year ago. And I'd sat at the end of the table next to the wall on purpose so I wouldn't have to scoot up every time somebody wanted to get to the 'frig. Pretending to cough so no one would think it odd that I turned to stare at the wall, I wondered who else could laugh like that. It had to be the new guy. Too bad. Mother should laugh again. Just not in public.

"Hey, Angela," Heather said to me when I turned back around, "You seem to be in a good mood today. I hear your hubby's flying south this weekend. I want to go back to that club tonight. How about you and Crystal come with me?"

Crystal said, "I'm in. Yeah, Angela, didn't you disco way back when?"

I envisioned myself yanking the ring out of her nose and replied, "Not unless I discoed in diapers, darling." That was a lie. I'd pretended to be Olivia Newton John in the fifth grade talent show.

Crystal remarked, "It's not like we need a chaperone or anything, but we've heard married ladies know how to have fun when they can *swing* a night out."

Not having a quick answer for that one, I said to Heather, "I'll think about the invite and let you know before they turn us loose today."

Slipping back into my desk chair, I opened the Payroll Process window and pretended to work, all the while debating whether or not I should go. For the past twenty-three years, I hadn't swung a golf club without Brian, much less my derriere while pumping my forefinger in the air to the beat of "Stayin' Alive" or whatever they played—with disco the beat never varies anyway. Brian wouldn't be home until Sunday night. Choices lined up like dancers at an audition: work late, clean house, watch re-runs on TV, go out with the girls. No-brainer.

At five to five, I leaned around the edge of the cube and asked, "What time tonight?"

"We'll pick you up at nine."

"No, I'd rather meet you there. Uh, where?"

"Garden Drive and 10th."

Garden Drive began downtown and wound up in a swank neighborhood. It wouldn't do to wear my business blue suit or plaid slacks. On the way home, I stopped at Meredith's Magic Mirror. I'd passed it a million times, craning my neck to peer at the provocative dresses draped over thinner-than-any-real-woman mannequins. Now I had an excuse to pull up to the front door and stride inside.

One fun-filled hour and Julie Haus Siren Dress later, I emerged. All those work lunches had finally paid off in unconsumed calories and a size seven, not bad for a woman whose twins left for college last year.

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Park at the edge of the lot and risk getting mugged, or park near the front and risk our new Infiniti getting mugged? I found a spot next to a Viper near enough to a light pole I could read my driver's license without opening my car door. Hopeful, I slipped the license into the disguised front left pocket of my dress along with my keys, and shoved some money into the right pocket. Last time I was carded I'd dressed up as Orphan Annie—Brian's boss had a penchant for Halloween parties. I didn't care to recall how many years ago. But I was feeling lucky tonight.

The bouncer waved me inside without a query. He *did* seem to hesitate for a second, though, as if *thinking* about carding me. I stepped through the chute like a rodeo rider, images of Urban Cowboy flashing in my mind as strobe lights flashed in my eyes. How would I ever find my friends in this crowd? Would I end up sitting alone in a corner for hours, sipping diet cola? Before I could politely refuse or scream, a tall lanky scraggly-bearded guy in too-tight pants pulled me onto the dance floor and confused Saturday Night Fever with Dirty Dancing until I managed to pivot and

swivel across the floor and right through the door of the ladies' room, hearing and smelling my partner croon, "Catcha layta, Julie."

I leaned against the sink to catch my breath. Heather and Crystal burst through the door.

Heather nodded her approval of my dress then shook her head and said, "Cool threads, Angela, but that dude—too lerpy."

Crystal wasted no time on hellos. "What'd I tell you, Heather, about these married women?"

I gasped, still a little winded, "That guy reminded me of Shaggy from Scooby-Doo," remembering to add, "you know, the reruns."

Heather replied, "Like I said—lerpy."

They escorted me back to their table, a ring side seat where we could watch the drama of girl flirts, boy gets girl onto dance floor, girl teases, boy comes on too strong, girl backs off, boy grovels, girl plays hard to get, boy buys girl drink, and the cycle repeats until the girl has had enough to drink and goes home—with or without boy. Heather and Crystal knew enough strangers by names like Nice Tush, Big Hair, Easy Money, and No Way Jose to keep the high decibel small talk going. After one hour, a mixed drink and a diet cola, and five flings on the dance floor later, my head was pounding, my feet were sore, and I hated to admit it, but I was bored. So much for girls' night out.

Feigning a limp after an obnoxious middle-aged man with hips wider than mine insisted on doing The Bump, I moaned, "Heather, Crystal, I'm awfully sorry, but I think I've twisted my ankle or something. I better go home and soak it."

As soon as I stepped through my back door, I kicked off my high heels. In the bath tub, I examined my naked body for signs of age and sighed. There were ... a few. I got out, towed my hair, grabbed my brush and really looked at it for a change. As I feared, a couple of gray ones mixed among the auburn. My mother still wasn't showing any gray. Not fair. I knew I ought to call her. So I did.

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The next day, I sat at Mom's kitchen table, sipping coffee, staring out her patio doors at the slab of concrete and patch of dirty grass she affectionately called her back yard. I studied her hair. "Mom, you're finally getting gray."

Her lips turned up in an I-can't-believe-you're-so-naïve grin. "What do you mean 'finally?' I got my first gray hair when I was your age—like you are."

"I've never seen any gray in your hair—until today."

She got up, went to the bathroom, returned with a box of hair color, and set it on the table in front of me. "I never believed in looking older than I feel."

I picked it up. I'd have to remember that brand and color. I never knew ...

She muttered, "You can have it. I don't care."

Her eyes fixated on the inside of her coffee cup as though it were an aquarium ... of memories.

"Hey, Mom, keep it and do your hair so next time I go out with the girls from the office I can swing by and take you with me."

She glanced up at me with a twisted smile. "You went out with the girls while Brian's out of town?"

"Just danced a few times."

"It was as boring as white bread, wasn't it?"

"How'd you know?"

"For one thing, you called me at 10:45 and those places don't even get cranked up until 9:00. You'd said you'd just had a leisurely bath, well, you can't have stayed long."

"Good detective work, Mom."

"Besides," she sipped her coffee, "I did the same thing once when your Dad went on a fishing trip with his buddies."

"You're kidding!" I set my cup down and stared at her as if she had morphed into a Martian. I tried to imagine my mother ... couldn't do it.

"There was a little dive down the road. You'd just left for college. The house was empty. Your Aunt Carol called. I figured, what trouble could I get into with my sister? She and I got all dolled up and headed for the honky tonk. It didn't take us long to figure out we'd made a big mistake. I had to pull Carol out of there before she belted some drunken cowboy's wife and caused a fight." She tentatively sipped her coffee and set it down quickly. Mom had never liked her coffee too hot.

She continued, "I wouldn't normally be telling you such things. I'm not proud of some of the foolishness I indulged in back then. After I let Jesus start calling the shots in my life, that's when I got a much better idea."

I stifled a groan. Mom had a way of inserting Jesus into most conversations. I decided to endure the 30-second commercial for Christ to hear about her better idea. I *hoped* it was better.

"The next time your Dad went on a fishing trip, I went with him. I wasn't much on the fishing part, but being outdoors and spending time with him doing something he liked ... well, it was worth the mosquito bites. And the next time he went away from home on business, I gave him the business when he got back."

I raised my eyebrows. This didn't sound like Mom.

The corner of her mouth turned up. "When your Dad got home, I surprised him with his favorite meal, and then I sneaked into the bedroom and got all hussied up just to spend the evening at home with him. He had no idea what had come over me."

My face froze in a wide grin. My mother, the Martian. No, wait, women are from Venus, right? Whatever. "So what had come over you?" I asked, never one for analytical thinking.

She got up, poured us both another cup, and sat back down. "Jesus helped me see how important it was to show my husband some appreciation and spend as much time with him as I could. I sure didn't want your Dad to fall prey to any temptresses either. At least, I wasn't about to give him any excuses. I don't regret those times. Dan Marcion was the best husband I could ever hope to have." She gulped her coffee. It was too hot. She put her hand to her mouth and made a muffled "Oh!"

Before I could stop her, she'd started crying.

"He liked my little surprise so much," she said between sobs, "he started this little game ... saying he was going to a far far country ... I'd know he meant he was going to the library to read the papers for a couple of hours to give me time to get ready" She daubed her eyes with a napkin and drank her coffee more slowly. She looked up at me with a lopsided smile. "When he got back ... well, we won't talk about that."

I raised my cup to my lips and eyed her over the rim. The things I didn't know about my parents. I set the cup down and drew triangles on my napkin with my fingernail.

"You know, Angie, maybe I'll keep that box of color. Your dad's in a far country all right, and he won't be back in a couple of hours this time, but I can still look nice for him. No sense in folks looking at me and thinking what a sight Dan Marcion married."

I raised my cup to her and said, "Here's to the new widow Marcion! Watch out Bachelor Boudreaux!"

Mom's eyes widened. "That old coot?" She must've seen the grin I couldn't repress. She began to laugh and laugh. Like a turkey cackling.

So did I. Suddenly the room rocked with the sound of turkeys. A beautiful sound.

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That evening Brian came home.

He stood in the kitchen doorway, his briefcase in his hand, his hair mussed. "Ange, our meeting ended early. I know you weren't expecting me until tomorrow. We can go out and grab a bite to eat."

I gave him a kiss to remember and whispered, "You get freshened up. I'll change."

You guessed it. I slipped into the Julie Haus Siren Dress.

Brian let loose a whistle. “You must want to wine and dine and have a night on the town. We could try that club, Saturday Night’s, the guys at the office have been talking up.”

I shook my head. “Let’s phone for Chinese and eat it here by candlelight. We’ve got a stereo and CDs. We don’t need a bunch of strangers around when we want to get down and boogie–do we?”

Brian wrapped his arms around my waist and squeezed. He stroked my hair as I leaned my head on his shoulder. Umm. Maybe there was something to what Mom believed, after all. I’d have another talk with her soon and see what other surprises she and her Jesus might have for me. Brian began to slow dance without any music. I noticed the photo of Mom and Dad on the mantel, arms around each others’ waists, smiling at me. I caught Dad’s eye and winked.

THE END