

On Travel
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I grabbed the handle of my battered, flowered suitcase from the rumbling belt as my cell phone rang. I slipped my purse strap back onto my shoulder as my husband's voice flowed from the Bluetooth ear piece into my ear.

"On my way," I said. Nat always called when I landed, as if he had psychic abilities to know exactly when the plane was on the ground.

"Where are you now?"

"Baggage claim, heading for the shuttle." My damn strap slipped off my raincoat yet again and I dragged it back up. The automatic doors ground open as I approached, rain blowing in from outside. A jet engine roared overhead, carrying travelers away from Huntsville. The cleansing scent of rain evoked thoughts of spring despite the January chill. Thankfully, the parking lot shuttle was approaching as I walked out.

"I left you a note," Nat said.

"Where?" A chill that had nothing to do with the cold rain spread through me as I climbed the steps to the shuttle backwards, hauling my suitcase up the steps one at a time, my briefcase perched on top. The driver looked through me rather than at me as I reached the top step and found a seat near the front. A couple of other people hurried onboard before the door snicked closed.

"On the passenger seat. You can't miss it." Nat chuckled, a rich chocolatey sound. I shivered in response, remembering private moments that included chocolate and strawberries. Those moments, though, had been a long time ago, before I started working full time again.

"What's it say?" The shuttle lurched forward, pressing me against the cold vinyl seat.

I feared that he had finally given up on me and my quirks, my bad habits, my lack of attention towards him. Knowing that I had given up on my first husband for similar reasons did nothing to ease my mind. He'd put his job ahead of us. Looking back, it was obvious to me how immature I had been, wanting my husband to be with me every moment. The problem arose because he worked shifts with the police department. Every third week we would spend together like what I considered "normal" married couples did. Waking at the same time. Eating dinner together. Sleeping together. The rest of the time he was at work when I was eating dinner or sleeping. Alone.

Nat chuckled again, deep and rich. "Open it and you'll know. I'll see you when you get home."

"Give me an hour or so. I've got to stop at the office first."

"Tonight?" I could hear the surprise in his voice.

"Only for a minute. Promise." The shuttle wound its way through the parking lot. The street lights provided a background for the rain drops flashing past like tiny shooting stars. I gathered my bags as the shuttle drew nearer to my car.

"Yeah. Well, call me when you start for home then, okay?" The chocolate had left now, reverting to the harder, cautious voice he adopted when I was on travel for NASA.

"I won't be long."

The shuttle stopped at my row and I picked up my briefcase and dragged my suitcase off behind me. Dropping the suitcase to the ground, I pulled up my hood and wheeled the case through the rain to my silver BMW. Nat hadn't wanted me to buy the car, saying it was too expensive, but I had found a decent used one. Then he agreed that it was reasonable. I decided to splurge, relying on my own salary to make the payments. That was a great feeling, too. To know that I had some money to call my own, rather than relying upon Nat's concurrence for each item I purchased. Not that I didn't discuss it with him, but I knew it was ultimately my own decision. As my salary had increased over the years, I wondered how he would react if my salary were to surpass his. I'd heard of women whose husbands couldn't tolerate not having the bigger salary and they either ended up divorced or she stopped working to massage the man's ego. I love my job too much to give it up for something as superficial as a man's ego. But I love him, too.

After stowing my suitcase in the trunk, I put my briefcase on the backseat, slid behind the wheel, and closed the door against the suddenly gusting wind that drove the rain inside with me. I slipped my hood off, fluffing my hair with one hand as I slid the key in the ignition. The car purred to life. That's when I remembered to look at the passenger seat.

A white business envelope lay there, gleaming in the light from the parking lot. "Vanessa" was scrawled across the outside. It looked like it held more than one piece of paper, a puffed little pillow of hidden message. I didn't want to read the contents. I feared the papers inside would say he wanted out of the marriage. Threads of lyrics rambled through my head, claiming impossible promises. Stuff like never spending a night without him, or "I can't breathe without you" so how will I survive? I damn well would survive it, if that were necessary. Was it my fault that my job had morphed into a type of desirable monster that dragged me from city to city across the country for most of the month?

The wipers slapped into motion, water cascading from view with each swipe. I took a deep breath to calm myself. It wouldn't do any good to start crying in the rain. I grinned through my tears at the cliché. I focused on driving, the engine nearly silent as I drove out of the parking lot. I would wait to read the note until I got to the office. Then I'd have better light to read it.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up to the security gate, showed my badge, and then proceeded on to my building. The rain never let up. Drought relief was important, but did it have to recall Noah's flood?

At seven o'clock on a Friday night it was easy to pull into a spot close to the door. Most sane people left by four on weekends. Gingerly, I picked up the envelope and slid it into my purse. I pulled up my hood in preparation for facing the onslaught of rain. Getting out, I grabbed my briefcase, pressing the lock button on my car remote as I hurried to the grey building, glistening from the rain. The worry lingered in my mind as I rode the elevator up to the fifth floor and my office. Setting my purse and briefcase on the desk, I removed the analysis documentation from the briefcase and secured it in a filing cabinet. Only then did I allow myself to focus on the note.

What did Nat need to say to me in writing? Did he want a divorce after all? He made no secret of the fact that he didn't like being home alone so often. I didn't like it either, but the development phase of the new Ares launch vehicle project was too fluid to allow me to oversee it from my office. As assistant to the Ares Chief Engineer, I had to travel to where the work was performed to ensure that the engineering issues and guidance were being communicated to the right folks. I had tried to make Nat understand that. Perhaps I hadn't succeeded as well as I thought.

Open the damn letter, then you'll know and you can stop worrying about it, my conscience cried out. The envelope stared innocently at me from my open purse on the desk. A simple effort would reveal the message from my husband of twenty-odd years. I pulled the envelope out of my purse and stared back at it. It felt light yet weighty. Portentous. I should open it, I knew that. Yet somehow I couldn't. I slipped it back into my purse as my cell phone buzzed again.

"Where are you?"

"Greg?" I was startled to hear my boss' tenor voice in my ear rather than Nat's baritone. "Something wrong?"

"No, but where are you?"

"The office."

"Fire up your PC and send me that presentation on thrust oscillation that the team has been working, will ya?"

"Okay, give me a minute." I shrugged out of my coat and punched the On button of my PC. "What's going on?"

"That pseudo reporter is pestering the Administrator for more information, despite having just made the request for the original information. Griffin wants to see the latest info."

My eyes scanned the directory, searching for the right folder that contained the information Greg needed. "On the way," I said, hitting Send.

"Why are you in the office this late on a Friday? You should be home by now."

"Where are you?"

"Touché. I'm about to head home. You should do the same."

"Aye-aye, boss."

We chatted for another moment then ended the call. He was right, I was spending too much time at the office. At least from Nat's point of view. Hell, if I were the spouse left behind, alone at home, I'd probably complain, too. Grabbing my purse and briefcase, I tried to ignore the glaring white envelope rebuking me for ignoring it. It was silly, really. This fear was my own. Of course he loved me.

Setting down my stuff, I pulled the envelope out of my purse and slid a finger under the tucked in flap. Taking a deep breath, I pulled the flap out and fingered the paper.

"Hey, I didn't expect to see you tonight." Philisha leaned on the doorway to my office, her long black hair pulled up in an intricate braid. She pointed a red tipped finger at me and smiled. "You should be home with your hubby."

I crammed the envelope into my purse before she asked about it. "I'm on my way home, actually."

"Good. You've been gone a lot lately." She raised her eyebrows at me when she saw the briefcase. "Don't take work home, though. Spend the time with Nat."

She was speaking from experience, having just finalized her own divorce for similar reasons. The only difference had been that she wasn't traveling so much as just busy at the office, working many nights and weekends. One night she came home to an empty house with a note from him on the kitchen table wishing her well with her job and her life. I gazed at her a moment, and struggled to smile. "See you Monday, then."

"Yeah – now go." She handed my briefcase to me and guided me to the elevator.

Once more in the car, I called Nat. "I'm leaving now. I'll see you in twenty."

"Great."

He sounded cautious still, as if unsure I was telling him the truth. Annoyance sizzled inside me momentarily, but I suppressed it from my voice. “Really, I’ll be home as fast as this damn storm will let me.”

“I’ll make the martinis, then.”

“With two olives?”

“Of course.”

I turned up the radio, trying to will the country ballads to soothe my fears away. It couldn’t be too bad if he was chilling martinis for our ritual Friday night cocktail. Granted, they would be later than usual, but it was our tradition to relax and chat over them on weekends. I sighed, recalling how the tradition began the first night we’d met. He’d walked into the resort bar where I was killing time before going to my condo that Friday night. Alone. I missed my stewardess friend, who at the last moment wasn’t able to join me because she had to fly to Maui. Tough break for her. Isolation was not my preferred state of being, so the nightlife at the bar provided entertainment I couldn’t find on the TV. Nat had strolled in and sat down a few stools away from me. He turned his dark eyes to me and smiled, his smile in sharp contrast to the bronze skin of his face. His black curly hair made him look boyish, despite the strain of the shirt across his muscular shoulders. He looked like he might be from one of the Caribbean islands, perhaps Jamaica or the Bahamas. He’d asked if I wanted a second round, not knowing I was on my third glass of wine already. I didn’t hesitate. Something about him clamored for me to lay my hand on his arm, to feel his strength and warmth beneath my hand. “Make it a martini,” I had said. He told me later that he could tell I wanted to be closer, but hesitated to be so bold. He came to me, then, closing the space between us. We spent much of the week together, hiking, playing tennis, and amazingly enough, talking.

Glancing at my purse on the seat, I noticed the crumpled envelope had become damp on the walk from the building. I pulled it from the purse and smoothed it out and then laid it on the seat to dry. I shifted into drive and headed home. Longing for my husband’s touch summoned tears to my eyes. Although I worked mostly with men, spending the majority of my days in the office and offsite at other facilities with them, they held no fascination for me. The engineers and managers were just people I worked with.

Nat of course could not know that. God, I hoped he didn’t think I was having some kind of affair with them. He loved me. I knew he did. Had he missed me and now wanted to spend time with me? Or was he going to let me down gently, as was his nature? He had been such a wonderful dad to our two kids, now grown and off to college. Always listening when they talked, guiding when they needed it. We were the epitome of empty-nesters, but I had grown bored and restless at home. After eighteen years raising our twins, I needed to reassure myself that I could do more than wipe noses and help with homework.

The envelope glared at me from the passenger seat as I waited for a red light to change to green. I tried to ignore its eerie whiteness in the darkness of the night. Rain dotted the windshield, the wipers intermittently clearing the glass but not my vision. I glanced at the pale envelope. The rain drop shadows created dripping shadows that looked like tears on the envelope which glowed eerily beside me, the shadows imitating the silent tears now creeping from my eyes.

The rain crescendoed on the roof, drowning out the DJ’s banter. I wiped my hand across my eyes, erasing the tear stains as best I could. I turned up the radio again as the weather report came on, announcing a severe thunderstorm approaching.

“God, just get me home.” I hated driving at night, let alone on a rainy night. The plane had been late coming in because of the rougher weather we had to go around between D.C. and Huntsville. The last three days had been spent helping Greg answer questions about thrust oscillation, a normal occurrence in solid rocket motors, which somehow had been made into a media issue when in fact it was expected. Now we just had to decide how best to adjust the design to mitigate or eliminate the effect on the launch vehicle.

Lightning shattered the darkness as the traffic light switched to green and I pressed the gas pedal. I pondered why I couldn't open the envelope while I had been sitting there in the parking lot and yet again at the office. Was I afraid of it, really? It wouldn't surprise me that he was unhappy. Once our kids had grown up, though, I needed something to do, to make me feel like I mattered again. So I cleaned the dust and cobwebs off my bachelors' degree in structural engineering by returning to college, and two years later graduated with a master's degree and a job offer from NASA. Then the Ares Project started, and I was tapped to be the Chief Engineer's assistant to facilitate internal communication among the design engineers. I was proud of my responsibilities and they were satisfied with my performance. I felt valued and useful again.

Nat had been happy that we had a second income, especially with our children still in college. But as the months went by, I had sensed he resented the extent of my travel, which often carried me away from home for a week at a time. Sometimes I took him with me, if his job allowed him to be absent for a while, but that wasn't often.

My cell phone buzzed. Turning down the radio, I pressed the answer button. “Hey hon.” A tractor trailer passed me and sent a wave against my windshield. I increased the speed of the wipers.

“Where are you now?” His voice purred in my ear, chocolatey again, warming me.

“I should be there in ten.”

“Martinis are ready.” The deep rumble of his chuckle flowed through me and I smiled.

I hadn't realized how much I craved him until I heard his voice against the boom and flash of the thunderstorm brewing around me. It had only been three days this time, but now it felt as though I had only just returned to reality. I glanced at the envelope again, knowing I should have opened it already. Maybe it was a surprise, a good one, the weekend getaway to Gatlinburg I'd longed for, perhaps, and he thought I knew and had the martinis ready to celebrate. The thought suggested that I find a place to stop the car and read the paper inside, but I had already told him I'd be home soon. What if it were bad news, though? Would he make martinis if so, my nagging inner voice argued. I needed time to think, to sort this out, to open the envelope.

“I – I need to stop at the Shell and put gas in the car.” It was partly true, I only had a half tank.

“Now?” The chocolate had hardened again.

“It'll just take a minute and then I'll be home. Really.” The yellow Shell sign glowed up ahead, a welcome sight.

He took a long breath and let it out slowly in my ear. “It's getting late, you know.”

That was code for he was getting annoyed. “Understood. See you soon.”

I pulled into the station and shut off the car. LeAnn Rimes crooned over the radio, echoing my earlier thoughts. I felt she was speaking to me, making me think about what my life would really be like if Nat walked away from me. “If I had to live without you, what kind of life would that be?” she asked me. I could feel my life without my soulmate become a never-ending expanse of loneliness, stretching forever. I'd never find another man who would understand me

the same ways that Nat did. “I need you in my arms, need you to hold, you’re my world, my heart, my soul.” How is it that she could understand my feelings so succinctly?

Sure I could survive without Nat. I’d keep breathing. Working. Eating. Crying. Did I want to, though? Is that why I went through the pain of birthing twins – to give up on their dad when our goals shifted away from their old paths? Is that why we worked through all of the challenges of remodeling the old farmhouse into something nicer, of enduring the childhood illnesses of the children with chicken pox and sniffles? Did I really want to find out whether I could live without Nat, the man I’ve loved and cherished for twenty years? Is that what he wanted?

I grabbed up the envelope and stared at it as LeAnn sang my thoughts and feelings. My fingers ripped the end of the envelope open, sliding the carefully folded paper from within.

Nat had written on the outside five simple words: “Please come, be with me.”

The paper trembled in my hands as I unfolded it and read it. It was an itinerary for a trip for two to Italy.

Relief raced through me. My heart pounded in my chest. I leaned my head back against the seat, staring unseeing at the rain beating against the windshield. Thank God.

Hell with gas! I turned the car on and pulled quickly out of the gas station, fishtailing on the wet road. Glancing in my rearview mirror, I saw the stunned looks that chased me home. I sped down the road, tears once again sliding down my face. The rain shadows mirrored my tears on the itinerary, this time tears of relief.

I pulled into the driveway, my eyes scanning the house for lights. The front door opened as the headlights struck the door, and Nat’s trim silhouette appeared in the backlit opening. Turning off the car, I opened the door and slid out. He walked down the stairs, carrying his huge golfing umbrella as he approached me. LeAnn had it backwards. I couldn’t breathe with him so near, reaching out to me.

“Nat.”

“You’re getting wet.” He pulled me to him, under the shelter of the umbrella, into the warmth and strength of his embrace.

“I love you.”

He kissed me. “Does that mean you’ll go?”

I looked up at him, the darkness of his eyes reflecting the glisten of the rain on the pavement behind me. Drops of rain collected and fell from the edges of the umbrella, splashing cold drops up onto my slacks. I didn’t care. All I cared about was being with Nat at that moment. Being safe in his arms was the next best thing to knowing that he still loved me and would never leave.

I nodded and hugged him tighter. He tugged me along with him back up the steps into the golden lamplit glow of our home.

The End