

He Loves Me

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Erin turned her engagement ring around her finger, counting each revolution. He loves me. He loves me not. She used to count the small diamonds set above the white gold band, but there were only three so she knew how it would end. Daniel was taking forever to get out of the shower, and on exiting would probably make some inane remark like “It took forever to shampoo my mustache.” She’d laugh, of course, to make him feel better, but sometimes his sense of humor irked her.

When the door opened and steam spilled into the apartment, she glared at him, daring him to say it. He stopped in the doorway, smoothing his hair back with a hand. “Sorry I took so long. But it shouldn’t make us late.”

She said nothing.

“What? You *have* seen me naked before,” he reminded her.

And there it was, the slight condescension masquerading as humor, forever reminding her she wasn’t quite good enough.

“Anyway, it’s all yours.” Daniel crossed to the bedroom and closed the door behind him. Erin rose from the couch and trailed her fingers underneath the row of pictures lining the short hallway. Their apartment, though old, had more than enough space—a bedroom with walk-in closet, bathroom, living room, and kitchen—but she couldn’t help feeling confined.

Erin left the door to the bathroom open and flipped the switch to the fan. The steam quickly cleared but the cabinet mirror remained foggy. She sighed and wiped the glass with toilet paper so as not to leave smudges.

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Applying makeup was always a Sisyphean chore. She only acknowledged her reflection when necessary, and then never looked away without first criticizing some imperfection. Tonight her hair was braided and then curled into a bun, a look Daniel thoroughly approved of, but it looked much better in the magazine. Worse were the faults she couldn’t change. Her nose was too flat and wide. Her eyebrows lopsided. When she blotted her lips to apply lipstick she looked like a retarded cow about to get hit in the face with a two-by-four.

Daniel had said that once when she was complaining about her appearance. He was trying to be funny though all humor contained a germ of truth. Still, he wasn’t a bad man. He didn’t beat her, rarely raised his voice and always apologized when he did, and tonight was taking her to a comedy club. He was jealous at times, but never violently, and hadn’t changed much once she’d agreed to marry him. If anything, he was happier and more relaxed.

“You look beautiful,” he said as she emerged. He kissed her quickly on the cheek and eyed her as if wondering whether or not the comedy club could be skipped.

“I’ve never seen you wear that outfit before,” she said.

He twirled, arms up, showing off a button-up denim shirt, piano-key tie, and beige slacks. “I bought it today.”

She hated it. It made him seem so garish, so immature. “You look ridiculous,” she said.

“The better to accentuate your loveliness,” he said, and kissed her again.

She hated that too, how he constantly reminded her of her looks, how he constantly said she was beautiful as if trying to convince himself. Before they were engaged, he’d said, “I’m going to tell you you’re beautiful until you believe it, no matter how many times it takes.” She’d found his misguided

gesture profoundly romantic, but now she wondered what kind of man she'd agreed to marry.

No. He was just trying to cheer her up, if in an annoying, ineffective manner. He didn't like seeing her so sad all the time, not that she was. It's just that knowing he was watching her...Erin realized she'd forgotten to put on her earrings, her favorite dolphin ones, and ducked under Daniel's outstretched arm into the bedroom—he was leaning against the doorframe, and turned to watch her with a goofy grin on his face.

She fished her jewelry box from under the bed and, shielding it from him with her body, raised the lid. Inside were various keepsakes: a family photo with her father erased via magic marker, the acceptance letter from the University of Mississippi, a guitar pick once used by Willy Nelson, and the silver earrings.

Erin loved dolphins, loved the idea of coursing free through sunset waves. Intelligence, kindness, honesty and grace. Nothing like the people she was forced to know. She donned the earrings, returned the box, and turned to Daniel. She didn't want to say it, didn't know why she did.

“Why are you marrying me?”

A pained smile flickered across his face. “You know why. Because I love you.”

She sat down on the bed. “Why do you love me?”

He sat down next to her, enfolded her in his arms. “Because you're kind, generous, able to put up with me, and”—here it comes, she thought—“beautiful.”

“You're biased,” she said.

“And?” He smiled.

“That's not what I meant.” She struggled briefly to get away, but when he started to let go, she held his arms to keep him close. “Why did you fall in love with me?”

He squeezed as if that substituted for an answer. A real answer. He'd tried before, but his inarticulate fumbblings did little to allay her fears. That he'd started dating her out of pity. That he'd fallen in love with her against his better judgement. That as soon as he realized he could do better, he'd leave. If he could give her some reason, something to hold onto, she could make sure that never changed.

She knew he was getting impatient, that they'd both been looking forward to this night out all week, so she told him she was feeling better and they should get going or they'd be late. He reluctantly acquiesced, but not before she felt his wave of irritation.

“I'd like to think I know how I feel,” he'd said once, exasperated, on a similar occasion. But that could change. It could change so quickly she'd be left wondering if they'd even had a relationship in the first place, and she never felt closer to that precipice than in these hesitant moments.

Erin rushed to her feet and kissed him, apologizing and promising vaguely it would never happen again. He responded in kind, with confused reassurances, and slowly peeled himself away. He was going to get the car ready and she might want to freshen up.

When he left, she touched her face. She'd been crying. Of course she'd been crying.

She went back to the bathroom and took off her earrings, placing them next to the soap dish. She needed to redo her hair and didn't want to chance getting the dolphins caught. Meticulously she unpinned her braided bun and, deeming the braid itself unsalvageable, let her hair completely down.

It had frizzed to where it was nearly unmanageable, and by running her hands through it in a desperate attempt to restore order she only managed to get her engagement ring

caught. Daniel had spent the last week gushing about this comedy club and she was not going to ruin it for him. Angrily, she jerked the ring free, tearing a few strands loose, and set it down next to the earrings.

Nothing worked. She could pin her hair up in a bun but that was only a makeshift solution that did nothing about the frizz. She tried a high ponytail but that only accentuated the plainness of her face. She considered cutting it short right then and there, then hung her head in frustration.

When she shook her head to clear the hair from in front of her face, a silver flash streaked into the sink. One of her dolphins! She reached for it, catching it before it fell more than halfway, but in her haste knocked the other dolphin and the ring into the basin. The ring half-slid, half-rolled once around before disappearing into the drain. The dolphin tumbled more slowly, tauntingly, skidding to a stop.

Erin was still shaking silently when Daniel returned. He shepherded her into the bedroom, laid her down under the covers, and climbed in after. He held her until she could speak, until she could say more than “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He brushed her hair back from her face, cradled her head into his chest, and found out what happened. “It’s ok,” he whispered, “I’ll just unscrew the pipes tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” she said.

“Positive.”

They didn’t go out that night, stayed cuddling in bed, but right before he fell asleep, right before he said “I love you,” he sighed.