

phone, when she remembered. Today's crisis wasn't a little one. It wasn't just the car. She couldn't call John, because she didn't love him any more.

Walking the six blocks through the cold to do her errands, Julianne wouldn't let herself cry. She had to be calm and brave. It wouldn't be easy for John, to learn suddenly that she had changed, that maybe he wouldn't be hearing her voice on the phone after this or ever again helping her with her little crises. She'd have to explain it to him gently.

She stopped first at the laundromat, then went on to the service station. Mr. Simmons was obliging as usual. "Sure," he said, "I'll send up a rental battery. But you tell the mister he better get a new battery for that old car."

Julianne nodded and hurried out. She couldn't explain to Mr. Simmons that she had something much more important to "tell the mister." Vaguely, bitterly, she wondered about Mrs. Simmons. Did she love her husband, even with his hands so dirty and grease on his face?

At the butcher shop, still thinking about the Simmonses and fighting tears again, Julianne suddenly went all soft and spent three days' budget on a steak. A small porterhouse cut thick, to be cooked rare the way John liked it. This might be the last time she'd ever cook a steak for him. Maybe she wouldn't even be living with him any more. Maybe he wouldn't want her.

How would she live without John? But she mustn't think about that now. She had to think about *him*, about telling him as kindly as she could. Perhaps the steak would soften the blow and show him that she really, well, that she wasn't just . . . Anyway, it was a nice thing to do.

JOHNS ALWAYS put his key in the door promptly at 5:49. At 5:30 the dinner was progressing by careful plan and Julianne was dressed in her best. She had spent two hours on her hair, her nails, and countless indecisive tryings-on. She had finally chosen the New Year's Eve dress, low-cut and shimmering, because it was John's favorite and they had been so gay that night. Maybe the dress, too, would soften the blow and show him that she didn't just care *nothing* about him *at all*.

She sat on the sofa to wait. Her fingers picked little balls of fuzz from the gray upholstery, and there was an odd feeling in her stomach. With two minutes to go, she went to put the steak in the broiler. Her hands shook, and there was definitely something wrong with her chest.

Then she was at the door, hearing his footsteps in the hall, his key in the lock. Just for a second she thought she was going to be sick with the flipflop in her stomach. The door opened and there he was, grinning, his big ears red with cold.

The tingling started in her back and crept up to her neck. It was just starting down her arms when she threw herself on him, hugging him, crying, kissing a big red ear.

"Oh John, I love you so," she said.

He held her close and kissed her yellow hair. "I love you, too, Honey," he said in a husky voice that started the tingling all over again. "And I needn't have bothered with these silly flowers."

She hadn't even seen the green package until, with his arms still holding her, he threw it from behind her back. It hardly bounced on the sofa before she was tearing off the paper, burying her face in the blossoms. "Sweetheart roses," she breathed, awed and wondering.

He looked embarrassed. "I don't know why I bought them," he said. "It was just, well, just that lately I thought . . . Well, I wondered . . . Oh nuts!" He pulled her to him, rough and tender. "Everything's wonderful now."

She clung to him, stroking his straight brown hair. Everything was wonderful now, especially John. She wished the kiss he gave her could last forever.

But John's head came up. His nose wrinkled, sniffing. "What's burning?" he asked.

Julianne gave a little wail. Then she broke out laughing as she headed for the kitchen.

"It's just a silly steak I bought for you," she said. "And I needn't have bothered, either."

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