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Anniversary for Three

By CATHERINE HANDLEY

LINDA BUSTLED AROUND their 18th-century dining room. The pale-green linen tablecloth was just right with the mahogany woods. Savoring the moment, she placed tall, deep-green candles in the candlesticks, pink roses on the table, tall goblets at the two places.

Every detail must be perfect. Because tonight was their fourth wedding anniversary.

Linda hurried into the kitchen and looked fondly at the miniature four-tier cake she had baked.

On tiptoe, Linda reached up to the top shelf and brought down the little bride and groom that had been on their actual wedding cake.

"Here," she said, "up you go again!" and put them on the cake. To think that I should be this lucky, she told herself; should have traditions like other people.

Linda had grown up an orphan, living with a spinster aunt. There were no family traditions. That was why she and Jerry had this cake on their anniversary and celebrated it alone. It was a tradition.

Linda heard the front door open. She hurried toward the front hall—and heard voices! In the hall she saw Jerry, rugged, bronze-haired, taking the hat of a grizzled, grey-haired man.

"Darling," Jerry said, kissing her cheek, "this is Mike Morrison. Head of engineering at our place."

Linda put out her hand. "Should say 'was' head of engineering," Mike corrected him. "Thanks for inviting me, Mrs. Funston."

AS JERRY gestured Mike into the living room, Linda wigwagged her eyebrows: "What's this?"

"Brought Mike out here for a good dinner and a little quiet after all those speeches. Today was Mike's retirement lunch." Linda remembered Jerry had said that it would be hard for Mike, a crusty old bachelor, to retire.

"Told Mike you'd like a little company," said Jerry heartily.

"Well—well," said Linda, "I'll serve dinner." She felt as downhearted as Mike looked. How could Jerry bring home a guest on this of all days?

Jerry didn't notice that Linda had duplicated the very dinner—roast beef, asparagus, the tossed salad—they'd had on their wedding night. Instead, he fussed over Mike.

"Hey, how about Mike's watch?" Jerry held up Mike's wrist.

"It's beautiful," said Linda dutifully. Mike looked at it dazedly.

"You know, Mike," Jerry said warmly, "you've really got it made. Because, being an engineer you can do some consulting work. Listing your expenses will help on your income tax. I've jotted down some prospects for you." He pulled out a list.

Mike took it, read it, and seemed to brighten a little.

Linda pushed the asparagus around on her plate. To bring Mike home on their anniversary!

Jerry was still talking. He reminded Mike he could write for trade journals. "Remember those articles you wrote about safety in engineering? They were good. As a matter of fact, I could use some articles for our own magazine."

Mike straightened up and said, yes, he would have some more roast beef.

Linda watched Jerry being the expansive host.

He had come from a big family with lots of brothers and sisters. They had their own way of doing things. Evidently Jerry's and her little tradition hadn't meant as much to him as it had to her.

She got up to clear the table. In the kitchen she looked sadly at the wedding cake with its little bride and groom. Probably it would seem silly to Mike—and Jerry obviously didn't care.

She decided to substitute apple pie and cheese.

Mike stayed late, but when he left he looked 10 years younger. And he thanked Linda for the dinner and a pleasant evening. The June night came in softly through the open door.

Jerry returned to the living room and settled in his easy chair.

LINDA got a tray to clear away the after-dinner coffee cups and ash trays. She looked at Jerry.

"Now," Jerry said, "we can celebrate. Bet you made a cake."

"No!" she heard herself saying suddenly. "Why bother?"

Jerry looked up, surprised. "What's the matter, honey?" He got up and put his arms around her. Linda drew away. "But we always celebrate our anniversary alone, with a cake."

"That's just it!" said Linda, trem-

bling with a quiet hurt.

Jerry lifted an eyebrow. "Why, Linda, after that lunch today Mike needed somebody. Retirement day is one of the worst days in a man's life. And remember, Mike has nobody to go home to."

"But how could you bring Mike home tonight, without even asking me?" she burst out.

"There just wasn't time, honey. I was leaving and looked in on Mike. The guy was broken up. So I just said, 'Come on home, fellow.'"

Linda turned away, tears under her eyelids. "If you really loved me, you would have found some other way to help Mike."

Jerry's forehead was wrinkled in perplexity. "But I thought, Linda, if you loved and trusted someone, you'd love and trust him whatever he did." Jerry turned her around to face him. "Now, let's have some cake."

"No," said Linda, "it doesn't mean much today."

She picked up the tray and went to the kitchen.

Just then the doorbell rang.

And Linda heard Jerry say, "Well, hi, Mike!"

Suddenly Jerry called to her. "Hey, honey, come on out. Mike wants to tell you something!"

Mike, smiling, was standing in the hall. "You folks sure helped me tonight. After that lunch today—well, you get pretty blue when they're putting you on the shelf."

Jerry gestured with his pipe, to stop him.

"Then, Jerry here, began giving me ideas. I realize I can still contribute. And that when there are nice folks in the world to encourage you, you can always find your niche, even if you are retired."

"Drove back, saw your light, and had to come in and thank you."

LINDA LOOKED AT the glow in Mike's face. Then she looked at Jerry and saw his face, naked, in a moment of complete self-forgetfulness. Jerry's expression mirrored Mike's pleasure.

With a sudden rush of understanding, Linda saw how much a part of Jerry were the human val-



Mike had returned. Linda looked at Jerry and, with a rush of understanding, knew why.

ILLUSTRATED BY NORMAN BAER

ues of kindness and good will. Mike had really needed Jerry tonight. Just as she had needed the reassurance of Jerry's love with their anniversary celebration alone—with their little wedding cake.

She reached over and touched

Mike's arm. "We're so glad you came back. We were just going to cut our anniversary cake. It's a little family tradition. Come on in and pull up a chair, won't you, Mike? We can't think of anyone we'd rather have share our cake."



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