

Dinner for Two

Every day, Jennifer Jenison fixed her husband the same supper, and had it on the table by the time he returned home from work at 5:30.

It wasn't that she liked the routine, so much as her husband enjoyed the meal. Twin pork chops, pan-fried and then baked in the oven until the skin was crisp and the meat tender.

She served this with her mother's garlic mashed potatoes, with cream and butter, because she could afford it, and long, fibrous string beans.

By the time 5:24 had rolled around, and the first in the wave of husbands was pulling their respective automobiles into their respective driveways, Jenny was warming the plates in the oven as she mashed the potatoes, just to make sure they were extra fresh and perfectly delicious.

Once every now and again, she would set the table with a daffodil from the garden, because she was worth it, and because both she and her husband worked hard to put a nice supper on the table in a timely and precise fashion. Today, Jenny remembered, with a fond grin on her red lips, was their tenth wedding anniversary, and if she didn't go the extra mile for their favourite dinner tonight, well, when would she ever?

By the time she was mashing the potatoes, she'd already fixed the scotch and soda that sat waiting in Gerald's place at the table, for that moment when he could sit down and realize his day's ambition.

Jenny grinned broadly, that day, as she stirred in the last ingredients of her mother's recipe, a recipe she remembered well from her childhood.

So she mashed, and mashed, and mashed, the mashed potatoes, until they were ground into a fine and creamy consistency, tinged slightly green with the garlic and parsley.

Admittedly, she was nervous about making any alterations. Gerald was a man who disliked change immensely, a man after her father's own heart. So afraid of change was Gerald that he was quick to scold, nay, berate Jenny for making the slightest alteration to the tried and tested methodology that had become the recipe for a blissful suburban existence.

But Jenny had soothed her nerves with a cup of tea, a nice cup of tea with lots of milk and sweet honey, just as her mother used to drink, when her mother was distressed, hands trembling as old Mrs. Dyckmann gripped the porcelain with prematurely arthritic fingers.

Finally, the potatoes were perfect. She spooned a dollop onto the waiting plates, since removed from the warm oven, a hearty dose for Gerald, and a smaller spoonful for herself. She sprinkled one final spice, ground until it was almost like cracked pepper, onto one of the plates.

Now, everything was perfect. Two chops for him, and one for her, for she had a figure to maintain, and appearances were ever important in the life she was forced to lead.

She gave them each a few string beans, bright green and still steaming from the stovetop. Then, she poured warm gravy over the pork and potatoes, and the meal was complete, just as she remembered from her youth. Just as mother used to make.

The clock had set its hands at 5:28 for almost 45 seconds now, which meant that Gerald could be in any moment. This would give her ample time to lay the dishes on the table, and walk to the door to greet him, just as she'd done every day for ten years: a table set for two, a glass of scotch and soda, and a wife waiting at the door, hands folded neatly over the pink plaid apron.

She tilted the plates so that the painted fruits were facing the diner, just as her mother had taught her, just as was polite, proper, and perfect. Just as she'd done it every day for ten fruitful and satisfactory years.

She wiped her clean, warm hands against the apron, and set off for the door, heels clicking against the polished hardwood in the 11-year-old house, a house that had been built just after the War, a house that had never known the stomping feet of toddling children, or the padding paws of a family dog.

Perhaps the *clap-clap* of the shoes of acquaintances was enough for Jenny, but Gerald had wanted children almost *desperately*. But now, unfortunately for him, those years had passed her by, and it was dinner for two at the Jenison house.

The other wives offered sympathetic glances when they saw her shopping at the market, never in need of the motherly necessities. Little did they know that the absence of children was by her own design, and not the result of foul luck. Children were not her desire, nor her ambition.

She touched the curled-up edges of a bouffant hairdo, that honeysuckle hair that turned the neighbouring wives green with envy. Her appearance was perfect, her house smelled of cooked food, and not a thing was out of place. Routine had taken hold. Routine *always* took hold. Routine was the great and monotonous constant.

She heard the car door slam. She painted on a smile, just as she painted on every other emotion she feigned in Gerald's presence.

Six, seven, eight, nine. Jenny counted silently as she reached out to open the door. Gerald could walk from his car to his home in eleven seconds. She pressed down on the handle, and carefully, she pulled the door open.

Her husband stood before her, looking contented as he stepped into the front door. His eyes were vacant and empty. Not the eyes of a man unintelligent, but of a man stagnant. A man jaded. Today, at least, he'd maintained the decency to preserve sobriety and discretion.

He stepped over the threshold, and she stepped back, leaving perfect room for him to close the door behind him without any awkward shuffling.

Like a marionette, she leaned in and accepted a peck on the cheek. Perhaps something more would come later, but for now, a peck on the cheek was admissible.

She accepted the gray fedora, feeling the coolness of the fabric in her right hand, and the warmth of the trench coat over her left arm. She did not need to tell him supper was on the table; supper was *always* on the table, five working days a week, and on the weekends as well.

He wiped his feet and shuffled through to the kitchen, not cold, but not warm in his actions. Rather, he moved like a wind-up robot, the kind of wind-up robot she would give to a son, had she bore one. Like a little tin soldier, marching to the beat of the drum in her head, wound like the clock on the wall of the kitchen, ticking back and forth as it counted down to the happy moment when her Gerald would return home.

Jenny Jenison hung the hat on the hat rack, the same peg each time, its lustrous paint since worn off. Then, she moved to the closet beneath the stairs that led to the empty second floor,

where no children slept or played. Opening the creaking closet door (that would need to be oiled immediately), she removed a hanger and delicately hung her husband's coat.

She did not hear the sound of cutlery, but that was not a bad thing. Quite the opposite, it carried only good tidings: her husband was mannerly. Though the meal ran the risk of cooling, in spite of the oven-warmed plates and apposite timing, Gerald would *never* start the evening meal unless his wife was opposite him, her eyes imploring, her smile inviting.

She walked through the kitchen's doorway and stopped by the table. She pulled back her chair with a squeak, the squeak of wood on wood. And then she sat down, carefully pushing the seat back in.

She spread the cloth napkin over her apron-clad lap. In silence, she picked up her fork, and her knife, and began to slice the still-steaming chop, almost in time with the husband facing her. She spoke first, just like always:

"How was your day?"

"Good. Yours?"

"Good."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, just the usual. I cleaned. I had tea. And then I cooked dinner."

That was usually the extent of dinner conversation. The rest of the evening's silences were plugged with the monotonous *clink* of ice against the glass, or knives against the plates.

But tonight, on this most momentous of nights, Jenny wanted to take it one step further. She felt the need to speak nostalgically, not of her relationship, her gray, childless marriage, but of her childhood, fruitful and delicious.

"This was my father's favourite meal."

"I can see why. The potatoes are good today."

"Thank you. I used my mother's recipe, just like always."

"Right."

"My mother was a very nervous woman, you know."

"Oh? I suppose that's where you get it, then."

Jenny forced a smile. Yes, she was nervous. Comical, her nervousness. A laughing matter was her anxiety. Regardless of how greatly it impeded her, her crushing sense of impending disaster was little more than a passing joke. And a funny one.

"Yes, I suppose it is. But, then, my mother always took it a tad further."

"Did she?"

Gerald was being polite. He didn't honestly care about the nuances of the lunacy of his mother-in-law; nor did he care for her paranoia, a trait shared by her daughter, his wife.

"Did you know that she went to her grave *swearing* that my father was trying to kill her?"

Gerald chuckled, "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Of course, I never believed it. My father was an honest man. He was an advertiser, and a soft-spoken man. But he was afraid of change, I think."

"We all are."

"Yes, but my father especially. It was so bad, that my mother worried perpetually about upsetting him, though she rarely ever did. She thought he was going to poison her."

"That's ridiculous."

Jenny smiled. It *was* ridiculous. Her father, Harold, *was* a kindly man, with a kindly heart. Jenny loved her father dearly. She could never understand her mother's fears.

"It got so bad, she forced herself to develop an immunity."

"An immunity?"

"Yes, an immunity to one specific type of quick-acting poison. That's how she thought he'd do it, a quick-acting poison sprinkled into her wine."

"That's preposterous."

"Well, she worried greatly. Every day, when she would take her afternoon tea. That's when she would do it, I think. Over many, many, lonely years, and many cups of afternoon tea, she made herself immune."

Gerald nodded, disinterested. He took a forkful of the mashed potatoes. His meal was half gone, by now. "What's the point?" he asked, bluntly, "The point of your story?"

Jenny smiled, vacantly, "Oh, nothing, really. Just... the lengths to which people will go, if they let their minds wander... ." she trailed off.

Gerald nodded, helping himself to the food on his plate. Jenny smiled broadly, that he should enjoy her cooking so, even after all these years.

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. Jenny enjoyed the meal she'd worked hard to create. The mash had a taste stronger than she would have liked, but that was okay.

By supper's end, Gerald was gazing at her in horror. "My God, what's wrong with you?"

She smiled at him, "Nothing, dear, nothing at all," she gave a faint chuckle. Perhaps the ravages of her plan were beginning to show, the cracks and the holes filling in her ordinarily radiant complexion.

"What have you done?"

"Nothing that I hadn't been planning for a very, very, long, long time."

He stared at her, mouth agape, perhaps at the monster his wife had become, perhaps at the ease with which beauty became corrupt, perhaps with the guilt born from the knowledge that he was the corruptor.

She glared at him, "They'll never believe you, you know."

"What?"

"They will never, ever believe your story."

"Jenny, stop it. Quickly, write something down. Write a note, confess, Jenny, confess!"

She laughed, a frenzied little giggle capturing the full breadth of her awakening insanity,
"There's a tart, in the oven, darling."

He had jumped to a stand, now, upsetting the vase that held the daffodil. It burst on the floor, shattering into many, tiny pieces. He was wild eyed, wan with sweat. But other than that, his appearance was utterly normal. That of a healthy man of Gerald's age.

"Jenny stop it! Stop it, Jenny, quickly, write it down, tell them you did it to yourself!"

"And there's coffee in the pot, if you want it, darling," she breathed, her voice hoarse, but feeling bright and rapturous and profoundly free, "Unless it's just desserts, for you, tonight."