

Threads that bind

I am an ordinary man, but loving Martha has made my life feel extraordinary.

We have shared thirteen anniversaries together. People often ask the secret to a lasting marriage. It is simple, really. Every day, you choose to stay. You choose forgiveness over pride, silence over argument, loyalty over temptation.

Love is a fragile thing; without careful handling, it breaks quietly.

Strong marriages demand sacrifice. And sometimes, the wisdom to overlook imperfections.

During our courtship, Martha and I lived in a world of handwritten notes, flower deliveries, and unexpected gifts. After our fairy-tale wedding, we flew to Hawaii for our honeymoon.

"You've married the smartest and most eligible bachelor on earth," I teased her over dinner on our first evening there. "How does it feel?"

"It feels wonderful," Martha laughed. Then, with a twinkle in her eyes, she added, "But tell me- only on earth? Not the universe?"

She burst into laughter before I could answer.

"You look beautiful tonight."

She smiled shyly.

Then I noticed it.

"Why didn't you wear the blue dress I bought you?"

Her smile faded slightly. "Oh... I forgot to pack it."

Something hardened inside me.

"I packed in such a hurry, Malcolm. I'm sorry."

"You forgot because what matters to me never matters enough to you."

"That's not true."

"You ruined the evening."

Before I realized it, I had swept the tablecloth aside. Plates shattered across the floor.

Martha stared at me with frightened eyes, tears gathering silently.

She bent slowly to gather the broken pieces of porcelain, her hands trembling so badly that one shard sliced her finger.

“Leave it,” I said.

“What could possibly matter more,” I asked coldly, “than wearing something I chose for you?”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered again, though I suspected she no longer knew what she was apologizing for.

I left the room before my temper worsened.

When I returned, Martha was speaking softly with hotel housekeeping.

“And now what?” I asked.

“I was ordering dinner- for both of us.”

“You couldn’t wait for me?”

“You were gone a long time.”

“I am the man in this marriage,” I said quietly. “Never forget that.”

That frightened her more than shouting ever could. She stood on the balcony long after midnight, staring at the ocean instead of sleeping beside me.

X---X---X

As one anniversary blurred into the next, routines replaced romance. Martha sang constantly — while watering plants, folding laundry, searching for misplaced earrings. Music made her forget the world around her.

I encouraged Martha to pursue music and creative arts. I have never been a selfish husband.

Her mistake was allowing herself to grow too close to her music teacher, Mr. James O’Connor.

Those were rare moments when Martha seemed unburdened — laughing freely, speaking without hesitation, existing without fear of disappointing someone.

I had almost forgotten that version of her existed.

One evening, I returned home earlier than expected. Martha sat at the piano, eyes closed as she sang. James watched her with an expression that disturbed me deeply.

Not admiration, but desire.

I handed him his payment.

We exchanged polite conversation.

A week later I happened to ask where he lived.

Fifteen days later, Martha showed me the newspaper with trembling hands.

LOCAL MUSIC TEACHER DIES AFTER FALL FROM BALCONY

Police suspected an accident.

I folded the newspaper carefully and placed it aside.

“Terrible accident,” I said.

“You should try something new,” I told Martha gently that evening. “Perhaps gardening.”

She nodded quietly. But for weeks afterward, Martha avoided looking directly at me.

Sometimes I would catch her watching me with an unreadable expression — not grief exactly, but the slow dawning realization that accidents could be arranged.

A fresh beginning.

X---X---X

Our four-year-old daughter, Susie, had developed a fever, and Martha devoted every waking moment to her.

“You only care about Susie now,” I told her one evening.

She looked exhausted. “She’s ill.”

“I received an award at the club tonight. Everyone else’s wives attended.”

“You knew I couldn’t leave her alone.”

“You’ve stopped caring about yourself since becoming a mother.”

"That isn't fair."

"You ignore your appearance. You ignore my needs."

"I cook for you, manage the house, take care of Susie—"

"Every wife does those things," I interrupted. "What exactly makes your effort exceptional?"

For the first time in years, Martha looked at me with something resembling hatred.

"Not everything is about you."

There were dark circles beneath her eyes now. Her once meticulous appearance had faded into hurried ponytails and wrinkled clothes.

She no longer sang while cooking.

Around that time, Daniel D'Souza became a frequent visitor. Charming. Divorced. Excessively comfortable in my home.

One afternoon, Daniel arrived carrying a stack of children's books.

"For Susie," he explained. "The library was clearing out duplicates."

Susie hugged the books to her chest and ran off to her room.

Martha smiled. "You really didn't have to do that."

"I know," Daniel replied. "That's what makes it a gift."

Martha laughed softly.

Yet I noticed she never laughed that way when I bought her jewelry.

"No one will ever love you more than I do," I reminded her that evening.

And I meant it.

X---X---X

The harsh white lights of the hospital ward pierced my eyes as consciousness slowly returned.

Pain pulsed through the back of my skull.

Fragments of memory drifted through my mind.

Crystal glasses clinking. The party.

“You’re recovering well, Malcolm,” the physician informed me the following morning. “The skull fracture was superficial. You were fortunate.”

Martha stood beside my bed, gently holding a spoonful of medicine to my lips.

That afternoon, my cousin Andrew visited.

“Do you remember anything about the attack?” he asked.

“My attack?”

“You were struck from behind at the party.”

My eyes drifted toward Martha near the window.

“No,” I said slowly. “Only fragments.”

Andrew waited patiently.

“The gathering was small,” I continued. “Molly Joseph was there — Martha’s friend from the school. The Abrahams. Daniel D’Souza from the library.”

Daniel began playing an old jazz tune on the piano.

Martha immediately guessed the melody and sang the next line before realizing she had done it aloud.

Daniel applauded dramatically.

Martha burst into laughter — real laughter, sudden and unguarded.

For a brief instant, she looked years younger.

I could not remember the last time she had laughed like that with me in the room.

“Peter was serving drinks. Ruth prepared dinner.”

Another memory surfaced sharply.

Irene Abraham couldn’t stop praising the appetizers. “These are wonderful,” she said.

“I taught her myself,” I remarked.

Irene laughed softly. “How lucky you are, Martha.”

Then she commented on how healthy Daniel looked lately.

"That glow?" Daniel laughed. "Must be love." Everyone laughed.

I remembered something else. Peter offered Daniel a glass of wine.

"Better not," Daniel laughed, tapping the amber pill bottle in his pocket. "My heart has become high-maintenance lately." He placed the bottle briefly on the piano while reaching for his drink.

Martha's smile faded. "You've been taking your medication regularly, haven't you?"

"Occupational hazard of reaching middle age."

"You should take it seriously," Martha said softly.

Daniel smiled. "Someone has to worry about me, I suppose."

Martha refilled Daniel's mocktail glass. Their fingers brushed.

Martha pulled her hand away almost immediately, but not before I noticed the warmth in her face.

It was the expression of someone remembering what it felt like to be seen kindly.

"I went to the bathroom after that," I murmured.

"And then?"

I closed my eyes.

"A blow to the back of my head."

Darkness.

X---X---X

Before my discharge, Andrew informed me.

"Mr. Daniel passed away last night."

I attended the burial.

The doctor shook his head solemnly.

“Cardiac arrhythmia. Tragic, but unsurprising given his medical history.”

I nodded.

Very tragic indeed.

X---X---X

Several days later, Martha brought home a box of books from Daniel's apartment. Among them was a worn copy of *Gone with the Wind*.

She left the box on the dining table and disappeared into the kitchen.

As I sorted through the books, a folded note slipped from between the pages.

Daniel's handwriting.

The first line was enough.

My fingers tightened around the paper.

The injury to my head?

Necessary. An alibi must be believable.

He had mistaken her loneliness for permission.

Martha was mine.

She had always been mine.

Martha returned carrying a tray of tea and a strained smile. The smile she offered me never quite reached her eyes.

For a fleeting moment, I wondered if she knew.

Then she lowered her eyes, the same way she had done throughout our marriage whenever silence felt safer than truth.

Neither of us mentioned Daniel again.

“You look beautiful tonight,” I said, smiling softly.

At last, things were exactly as they should be.

I raised my cup gently.

“To new beginnings,” I said.