

Twenty-Four Months

By Rebecca Andersen

The recliner in my mother's living room is cinnamon velvet. I have been sitting in it for the past four hours. Two days after Thanksgiving, in Montana the sun goes down early. It's only a quarter to five, but as I sat here I watched the sun slid across the carpet and now blue-darkness has settled on the snow outside the window. My dad shuffled in here half an hour ago to plug in the lights on the tree. Orange, green, blue, and yellow reflections blur in the windowpane. He's never set the tree up this early before. But this year mom and dad wanted it to be up for the last time they saw Kate. Until two days ago, Kate was my wife.

We were married on Tuesday, November 27th, and it ended on Thursday, November 27th. Two years exactly. And I knew when I said "I do" that it was going to be that way. That's why we got married in Colorado, and why we had to live there. The state passed a new law allowing for contract marriages that were void after two years. But I liked Colorado Springs. The mountains were beautiful. So was my wife.

"Scott, honey? Are you going to join us for supper?" Mom's tired voice wraps itself around the doorframes and pours into the sitting room with the light from the kitchen, the strip of light almost reaching the recliner in a manner that allowed me to see the light without being blinded. Mom had made sandwiches with the turkey from the Thanksgiving meal I barely remember eating two days ago. Maybe I hadn't joined them. That day was very blurry. I trace my fingers across the velvet armrest. When I was younger, I used to be fascinated by how velvet could be slick like the inside of my lips going one way, but rough and resisting if I tried to stroke it the other direction.

I walked into the kitchen, slid a chair across the faded goldenrod linoleum, and sat down,

leaning back against the dark wood paneling on the walls. Dad makes comments about Christmas, the grandchildren coming from Florida, the conversation he had yesterday with Uncle Vern down the street, and mom gives appropriate noises and here and there. I'm silent, and I'm remembering that Kate changed her cell phone service again just a week before Thanksgiving. It was the fifth time she'd changed providers since we'd been married two years earlier. Cell phone contracts were meant to last two years, I realize, just like my marriage. But she hadn't even made it that long with one company. Verizon had lasted eight months, maybe. I don't know what her new number is this time.

Five weeks ago, I came home from my graphic designing job and found her packing my stuff. Her curly blonde hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and she didn't have any makeup on. Her eyes were red, and I wondered if she was getting sick.

"What are you doing?" I asked. "That's my stuff." I reached out to touch her arm, but Kate quickly turned away from me and started fiercely folding the sheets. She was ignoring me again.

I tried to move on anyway. "My dad called today to tell me that he's going to put up the tree so you can see it when you drop me off in Montana in November."

"Did he?" Kate's voice was very soft.

"What day do you want to leave? My mom wants to know when we're going to arrive."

Kate shrugged, still not facing me.

"Are you mad at me again, Kate?" I asked her.

She turned around now. "No." She folded her arms across herself. "I just..."

"What?"

Her jaw clenched. "I'm not going with you!"

“But we decided that we would both go. I thought we had decided that.”

Kate closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. “I just... I don’t...” She stopped there.

After a few minutes of silence, I raised my arms in the air. “We can’t communicate, Kate. Most couples actually talk to each other. We don’t now, and I can’t see that changing anytime soon.”

“So it’s better off this way, you think?” And before I could register what she was saying, she continued. “I can’t come with you. I’ve got . . . a date.” She turned around again swiftly, covering her face with her hands.

Sometimes people say they can tell when something like that is coming. I hadn’t. I wished I could take back what I’d said. Not just for the past five minutes, but everything I’d ever said that must have driven Kate away from me. Because if she had a date, that meant she must have found someone she liked more than me.

When I proposed to Kate three years ago it took her two months to give me an answer. I knew she was afraid. Her mother had just gone through the most bitter of all three of her divorces. Kate’s mother had curly blonde hair just like Kate. She told me that she was a lot like her mom in other ways, too. She told me she didn’t want to commit to something she’d never seen work. So she found out about the new law in Colorado. After two years, the marriage would be over, and then we could choose to move on our separate ways or to get married again, until death did we part. I guess I thought I two years was long enough to convince her to stay with me.

Mom touches my arm, startling me from my thoughts. She knows this is hard for me. I set my sandwich down half-eaten, pull a tomato slice out from under the bread, eat that, and then say a soft “thank you” before retreating back to the half-lit sitting room. The recliner’s

cinnamon color reminds me of the bedspread in my apartment with Kate.

The first month we were married, Kate decorated our room in what she called “French Country” style. I had to place my Print Magazine issues in a wicker basket behind the espresso leather ottoman. But that didn’t last long. She was continually changing things, moving things around. The day I left, the room was a hodgepodge made of an antique secretary she found at a flea market outside of town, a collection of bronze bird paperweights in the windowsill, a modern light fixture, and an assortment of pillows and throws I couldn’t begin to describe. The blanket, though, was a beautiful rust color, and I longed to use that color in designing maybe a wedding announcement for one of the blissful couples who walked with hands tightly clasped into my office every so often.

I loved to watch Kate sit on the bed, thumbing through a home decorating magazine. I admired the way the rust-colored satin shimmered as it dipped around her legs. I admired her legs.

I never stopped telling her how beautiful she was. But I think she stopped believing me. When I tried to compliment her, she’d pull away and mutter about needing to get something done. Like she was tired of me. Like she wanted to change not only the bedroom but the man she shared it with.

In my wallet there is a receipt in there from the first week we were married. Yes, I’ve kept it this long. \$8.25 spent at Charlie’s Ice Cream, getting “our” flavor to celebrate our one week anniversary. We had 104 anniversaries, but we only celebrated 51 of them. The night of our one year anniversary, Kate bristled when I suggested going out to dinner, and we sat in silence on the couch, watching Mythbusters on TV.

On Saturday morning, I slip my feet into Dad's snow boots, the kind with the black rubber, brown leather, and lining that looks like sheep fleece, and I step outside. My first breath freezes the inside of my nose. The snow on the driveway squeaks. The only things in the mailbox are the Christmas ads my parents didn't pick up from yesterday. They are stiff and wet, and very cold.

Back inside, I spread the pages out on the carpet and read over them while I sit on my hands to warm them. There's a crockpot on sale that I know Kate would love to have. It's at a store an hour away in Helena.

After I leave the store with the crockpot in my arms, I drive to the UPS office and pull into the parking lot. I sit in my car for twenty-eight minutes by the glowing green numbers on my dashboard clock. I can't send it to Kate because I want too badly to hand it to her. I drive back home, wrap the crockpot, and set it under my parents' tree without a tag on it.

A week later, I am awoken just after midnight. My cell phone's screen lights the room, and I lean over to see what had set it off. A text message from an unknown number. I open my phone and rub my eyes to clear them.

There's a part of me that never works in the middle of the night. An off-duty brain connection that refuses to work on-call. So when I read the words "there was no date" on the screen, I don't have a clue what it means. Someone must have mistakenly sent it to me. I ignore the message and pull the covers back around my arms. As soon as the light flicks off, I am asleep.

Not even two hours later I wake up again. No date. That message was from Kate. Was she saying that her date fell through or that she didn't have one to begin with? I have her phone number now until she changes it again. That gives me about four months.

But I know that my leaving was what she

wanted. Just like I knew from the day we met that she was going to become the love of my life. Just like I know the day before I'm sick that I'm going to be sick. Some things give me feelings that are stronger than experiences. The day before I got in my first car wreck I felt shaken and my back hurt.

Kate never asked me to stay. Then again, she never asked me to write love notes to her on the lime green post-its she set on the desk, yet she was mad at me for not writing any.

My parents open Christmas cards together at the table in the kitchen. Mom's snowman socks slide back and forth on the faded linoleum and she bites her bottom lip a little as she reads. Mom and Dad laugh together as they read, communicating without saying much. I watch them and think about me and Kate. We never said much, either, but we certainly weren't communicating. I guess we kind of gave up trying after the first year was past us.

There was no date. I can't stop thinking about that text message. What was she trying to say? Was she asking me to come back? The hope made me ache inside.

Two days later, and I can't take it anymore. That text message burns inside my head. I wake up before my parents and get my laundry out of the dryer so I can stuff it into my suitcase. Once I have all my stuff, I climb into my car and start driving to Colorado.

Five-hundred and seventy nine miles down the road, I realize that I left Kate's crockpot under the tree back home. I'll call Mom and tell her to keep it. But I'm more than halfway to Kate now, and I have a good feeling about this.