

Twinkie In The Pantry

I am slowly waking up to the world I'm in. Especially after watching the way my neighbour, Marie, leans against my husband, Joe, and whispers in his ear, her glossy red lips just inches from his neck...

I stayed a little longer on the throne than I should have; the first warning sign was the tingling of my feet.

But I was so deeply engrossed in the story I was reading that I didn't want to wait hours later to finish it. I decided to stay in the small, windowless bathroom and continue reading in ultimate privacy. I was captivated. It was about an older man who had fallen for the owner of a restaurant simply by watching her from the table where he sat eating dinner six nights in a row. He decided he wanted her and set out to win her heart. In his silver years, he wasn't sure if love really mattered any more – companionship was the necessary component. And it did not matter to him that they were both married.

The writer took the story somewhere I had never anticipated and it left me thinking. That's not the best place to leave me – my imagination runs amok and that's why standing here at this New Year's Eve party I am slowly waking up to the world I'm in. Especially after watching Marie

I spoon-fed him my Better Than Sex cake. That's not a look one easily forgets, but Joe and I had been a little off-key lately and, after 20 years of marriage, things were becoming a bit fuzzy.

"Charlene, come taste my artichoke dip. It's wicked!" Helen's raucous voice pulled me from my trance.

*After 20 years of marriage,
things were becoming a bit fuzzy*

lean against my husband, Joe, and whisper in his ear, her glossy red lips lingering just inches from his freshly shaven neck. It wasn't the act that really bothered me; it was that Joe had closed his eyes with that dreamy look on his face that I haven't seen in years since the time

Oh, sure, that's exactly what I needed, more calories to add to the rest that had settled in my midriff and lately shifted to my arms. Wattle, I was told it was called – a fleshy lobe hanging from the neck, but, in my case, from under the arms. I remember my cousin

complaining about hers while holding her sleeveless arm up and shaking the loose fat just to annoy me. "You'll get yours, just wait and see," she promised me, the look on her face just a tad shy of evil. I had scratched her name off a party list I was planning for Joe's 50th birthday, only later to pencil it back in after my mother insisted that I was being too sensitive and a little cruel – she had to tell me this right after she showed me her own wattle.

Helen plopped a big chunk of dip on to a wheat cracker and fed it to me. I could barely keep it all in my mouth and had to use my fingers to direct it. "Wow, you are right. This is scrumptious," I said, licking the remains from beneath my bottom lip. "About as scrumptious as Marie looks

tonight," I added facetiously with a hint of sarcasm, certain that Helen would love the chance to gossip. I pointed to the vixen with only my eyes and without turning my head – a skill we women have perfected over the years.

"Oh, yesss," Helen cooed, disguising her expression by placing her shiny orange fingertips lightly over her mouth. "She's quite the package tonight." Then she looked around the room for Marie's husband. "Hmm, looks like Burnie isn't here. Better warn the wives." She giggled, elbowing me in the side.

"Why's that?" I attempted to look innocent.

"Haven't you heard? She and Burnie are on the outs. Word on the street says that she's got another Twinkie in the pantry."

I hate it when Helen talks like that. Why can't she just tell it like it is – almost as if she is afraid she'd make it real if she did. It was like when I was a teen and my mother would say, "Watch your Ps and Qs," as I was heading out the door to a party. It took me years to actually figure out what she meant, and I don't think pints and quarts was what she had in mind.

"Oh, too bad. I like Burnie," I said. I generally root for the underdog, especially if they are short and bald and their wives are *that* attractive.

"You know Twinkies have a very long shelf life. It's all the *sugar*," Helen eyed me warily. "They may be headed toward the Big D."

I didn't like the sound of that. Marie and Burnie had been married a few years longer than me and Joe. People divorce all the time, I knew that. It didn't bother me as much when it happened within five or 10 years. But 20? No, it just wasn't right. I looked over at Joe again and felt a sadness overcome me. He caught my eye, cocked his head and lifted his eyebrows as if to ask if I was alright. Or maybe he was asking me if I wanted to leave. I didn't know, but I was suddenly glad that he had seen me at all. We'd been

there nearly an hour and not once stood by each other. The moment we walked in the door, he went one way and I went the other. It had been like this for several months (probably longer, I have had my head in books lately) and neither of us had bothered to question it.

I started toward him just when Marie walked up and handed him another glass of Scotch. Joe looked quickly away and took the offering from her with a nervous smile. I turned my back and continued talking to Helen. "Hmm, I think I might head home early tonight. I'm a little beat from planning Joe's party."

"Honey, it's not until next weekend. What are you doing, remodelling the house?" Helen laughed between sips of wine.

"Well, kind of. I hired a band and set up an area to dance. I've also been making my own hors d'oeuvres. I want it to be very special. After all, it is his 50th."

"Yes, I agree, it should be very

'You're pretty sweet to make such a fuss. I know he didn't do that much for your 50th'

special. You're pretty sweet to make such a fuss. I know he didn't do that much for your 50th." Helen avoided my eyes and looked down at her sparkling shoes.

"No, I guess he didn't," I said, trying to remember what exactly he did do six months ago to celebrate my half a century on this planet. "Oh, yes, he took me to dinner at Bartlett's and..."

"And, he went back to his office to work afterwards," Helen jumped in. "I recall how upset you were, but you also knew that he was on a big project with a short deadline, so you understood. That's what we wives do best... we understand." She rolled her eyes and then quickly flashed a fake smile at one of the guests nodding in her direction. "I'll be right back, honey. Stay put. Have another one of my heart'a'chokers."

I glanced at the dip in the shiny silver bowl and then

I looked over at Marie. She had on a sleeveless dress and when she lifted her arm to take a sip of her drink, I noticed hardly any wattle. My eyes followed the outline of her body and I saw exactly where the wattle had gone: straight to her hips – her gorgeous Italian hips; baby-making hips, my father used to say to my mother before they had a half-dozen children and before she woke up one day with a double chin and a pound of wattle. With that image still clear in my mind, I turned my back on the dip and eased through the crowd toward my husband.

"Hi, honey," I said in my softest, most sultry voice, looking directly into Joe's eyes.

"Hi, Marie." I quickly turned before he could respond.

"Where's Burnie? I hope he doesn't have that awful flu that's going around."

"Oh, no, he's, uh, well, he's not up for parties these days," the she-devil said rather awkwardly.

"Well, if he tasted Helen's artichoke dip, he'd change his mind. Maybe he's just not up for a new experience. Why don't you check it out yourself, Marie? It's really good." I found myself taking her by her wattless arm and leading her toward the table. "I'll be right back, Joe. Pour me a glass of wine, please, sweetie," I said over my shoulder, followed by a slow wink.

Helen saw me manoeuvring Marie toward the spread of fancy appetisers and excusing herself, she quickly ran to my aid. "Ahh, are you tempting our guest to try my incredible dip?"

"Of course. I can't keep this secret all to myself." I picked up a cracker and Helen scooped a gloop of the creamy artichoke, carefully placing it on the centre of the thin wafer. "Brace yourself," I warned Marie and crammed it all in her mouth.

She chewed heartily with eyes opened wide and reached

for a napkin to dab her mouth. "Oh, dear, this is really good." And before she could finish wiping, Helen had another one heading right toward her. Marie instinctively opened her mouth wider this time. "I cull eat deese all day," she burbled in between chews.

"I'll send home the recipe so that you can make it for Burnie. It's too bad he didn't come to the party." Helen paused before dragging out the next question in a slow, singsong voice, attempting to disguise her curiosity with concern: "Is everything alright?"

"Well, yes," Marie stalled, the look on her face revealing that she knew Helen knew what she had not thought anyone knew.

Helen put her hand on Marie's shoulder and said sweetly but firmly, "I've heard differently, dear. How are you holding up?"

I stood there watching Helen magically weave her web; luring her guest into her confidence. Marie didn't once look my way, but kept her eyes fixed on Helen's as she told her that she and Burnie were sleeping in different beds. And before Marie knew it, Helen had managed to pull out of her that it had been nearly a year since they had sex. She even had the nerve to ask Marie if she had a Twinkie in her pantry. Marie looked at her as if she had just spoken Chinese. Then Helen, in her own evasive way, explained what she meant, while Marie turned three shades of red and quickly dipped into the artichoke dish. I knew then what I thought I already knew and quickly excused myself before everyone else knew what I didn't want them to know.

"Where are you going?" Helen raised her voice over the crowd.

I grabbed my husband's arm, and, trying not to draw attention to myself, I slowly mouthed, "We're going home to clean out the pantry."

THE END

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