

## Angela's Days

Angela glanced at her watch. Quarter till nine. It was too early to be up on a Saturday morning. Fortunately, the weather was unusually pleasant for December. According to the woman next to her, it had been miserable the previous year.

“-so cold and wet. I had to throw my hat away when I got home; it was velvet. Can you imagine?”

Not that it had stopped her from wearing a hat again this year. She had a great lavender one perched on her head, its floppy brim concealing most of her overly made-up face. It was impossible not to notice that her three-piece dress suit, purse, and shoes were the same color. Although Angela tried to convince herself that her jealousy of fashionable women had worn off years ago, it still nagged at her that she felt too round to dress that way. Her husband squeezed her hand; his lifted eyebrows showed that he knew she was being too critical. Angela offered him her I-know-I-might-be-wrong smile. To prove she could be friendly, she asked, “Whose graduation was it?”

“My daughter’s,” the woman answered. “This year it’s my son.” She offered her hand, bejeweled with three diamond rings, the smallest of

which looked to be a karat. “Louise Miller.”

“Angela Sinclair.” She put her own child-sized hand, adorned with only a simple college class ring, into Louise’s. “And this is my husband, Ben.”

“Nice to meet you. Who are you here for?”

“Our daughter,” Ben said.

“What’s her major?”

“Education with a minor in chemistry.”

Louise forced a polite laugh. “Sounds too ambitious for me. That kind of degree must have taken longer than most.”

Angela was embarrassed and slightly irked by the assumption. “She’s a semester ahead, actually.”

“Oh.” The woman looked around for a diversion. Finding none, she extracted a long, white wallet from her pocketbook. “This is my daughter”-pointing to a photo-“the one who graduated last year.”

“She’s very pretty; she looks like you.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, her eyes wide, expecting Angela to offer pictures of her own.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have anything recent of my daughter. We . . . wore ourselves out on pictures a long time ago.”

“Why is that?”

Angela wondered if she should use the same old excuse to keep the conversation from getting too personal. “Well”-yes, she would take the easy way-“I guess it was when Marie, our daughter, was six months old. Ben’s family insisted we have her model, but it ended up costing too much. I mean, seventy-five dollars for an eight-by-ten.”

“What a shame,” Louise said, her tone condescending and cold.

“Besides,” Ben added, “we were too busy keeping up with her to slow down for more than a few snapshots.” He was interrupted by the arrival of his sister and brother-in-law. “Hi, Grace, Lester,” he said.

As soon as she was seated, Grace asked, “What are we going to do for your anniversary?”

“That’s still two weeks away,” Angela protested.

“Which anniversary?” Apparently, Louise was still taking part in the conversation.

“Twenty-five,” Grace said. “We’ve got to plan something big.”

“Really, Grace, you always do so much –”

“Twenty-five! I’ve been married three times, and I can’t add them together to make twenty-five.”

Angela met Ben’s eyes, and they fought to keep from smiling. For the next five minutes, Louise continued to marvel at everything said. Angela offered polite replies only when necessary. People like Louise amused her, acting as if her family couldn’t be real.

“They’re coming out,” Ben whispered to Angela.

She turned, looking for the familiar black hair and permanently ruddy face.

“You were real quiet. What’re you thinking?”

Angela smiled. “We must have done something right.”

Twenty years earlier, a cluster of ugly, brown patio homes lay quiet on a chilly North Georgia night. In her own small house, Angela was awakened by her baby’s crying. She dragged herself out of bed to check on her.

Marie had kicked her covers off and was shivering with each weak sob. Angela tucked an extra blanket around the little body and rubbed her back until her eyes closed. As she climbed back into bed, mild annoyance seeped into her; she was always the one to wake up. Her tired eyes skimmed over her husband’s body. Fatherhood hadn’t affected his physique at all, another reason to be irritated. Staring at his bare chest and firm abs, she got a little turned on and thought of waking him. She

decided to let him sleep, though, since he had to teach in the morning. Also, she was too disgusted with her jelly-roll belly and doughy, white arms to feel very comfortable instigating anything. She suspected he, too, was repulsed. He never helped her get dressed anymore – their sort of sensual, little getting-ready-in-the-morning ritual. If he did pick her clothes out, they were always the baggy ones.

Angela rolled away from him and eventually dozed back off, getting up for good at five. It was an hour with which she had become uncomfortably familiar. Her body was accustomed to odd hours and didn't know how to deal with long periods of uninterrupted rest.

Ben awoke forty-five minutes later and, without greeting her, headed for the shower. She cooked breakfast, deciding that if he didn't care, she didn't either. A forgotten promise to herself – that she would never turn into a closed, resentful woman – lay empty in her subconscious.

When Ben emerged from the bedroom, he was fully dressed, his brown hair still damp.

“You'll catch cold,” she scolded, attempting to sound playful. He didn't notice her averted eyes and tensed shoulders and wrapped his arms around her. He let go when she didn't respond.

“Another early morning?”

“She kicked her blanket off. You were sawing logs.”

“Yeah, I almost slept through the alarm, and on the worst day. I've got a parent meeting in twenty minutes.” He ate quickly and was gone by six-fifteen.

Ben taught AP European History at Upton College Preparatory, a struggling private school in a city of thriving magnet programs. His teaching skills were higher than most school's standards, but his meager salary and skimpy benefits hardly did those abilities justice.

Angela didn't work. She was talented but had no motivation. Before Marie, she had been a research assistant at her university, the only

paying work she had ever known. Even if she wanted to go back to that job, they had moved away from the suburbs and the university ten months ago. They were cutting corners everywhere, even if it was just saving gas on Ben's commute.

Angela often forgot this house wasn't equipped with the conveniences of the old apartment. Halfway through rinsing the dishes for the dishwasher, she remembered she had to wash them by hand. She set them out to dry, shivering, and checked the thermostat. Sixty-nine degrees. She didn't dare change it; they had to save heat for the colder weather ahead. Angela risked leaving the baby for a few minutes to take a hot shower. She shook as she undressed, uncooperative feet tripping over pajama legs.

Marie awoke thirty minutes later, and Angela thanked her blessings that she was agreeable. It was always a toss up whether she would wake up cheerful or grumpy. This morning, she thought getting dressed was a game, giggling when her arms missed the sleeves and reaching behind her on the changing table, knocking over the caddy of ointments.

"Marie," Angela chastised. *Be patient*, she warned herself.

She sat Marie in her high chair and let her scribble on a scrap of paper while she poured cereal and milk in a bowl. Marie relinquished the paper and crayons with little fuss and jabbed at her breakfast.

The baby played with toys in front of the TV after eating. Angela kept an eye on her while she collected a load of laundry. Ever since Marie started crawling, one of her favorite pastimes was to overturn and rummage through trashcans. Now that she could walk, she also liked running her hand along tabletops, sending anything at the edge toppling to the floor. Angela set the laundry by the door, her narrowed eyes meeting the bright blue of her daughter's. Angela dared her to make a mess; Marie dared her to turn her back.

"I hate laundry, Marie-pea." She plopped on the couch, springs

squealing in protest.

At eight-thirty, there was a knock on the door. Angela raised her eyebrows and said, "Who's that?" Marie giggled, slapped her arms on her legs, and was lifted into the playpen so her mother could answer the door.

Cold wind met Angela's face and sought the spaces between the cotton fibers of her sweater. She saw a UPS truck down the street. A large package with a picture of a computer on it and an envelope taped on its side was nestled against the wall. She pulled the letter off and read it.

*. . . Congratulations on your fifth anniversary, and you can wish us congratulations for Lester's new job.*

Angela couldn't imagine buying anyone a computer for a wedding anniversary – even after a promotion to vice president of a bank – but she wasn't surprised. Her brother- and sister-in-law had never had money trouble and didn't have children.

"At least *they're* happy about our anniversary. Five years. . ."

They had married while they were still in college. At first, they did well attending classes and working at the same time. They were happy as long as they had each other. Now they had each other, a baby, and a patio home that nearly froze in the winter.

The wind revived and tore through her sweater.

"God, it's cold!"

Marie giggled from inside, and Angela echoed her. She dragged the box in, slammed the door on the weather, and stood, thinking. She'd never considered owning a computer. In the past, she'd always used a friend's or one at school.

Marie waved her roly arms, and Angela scooped her up. "Look at our new computer."

The little girl stared at the box then grabbed a lock of her mother's hair. Angela winced and gently pulled it from Marie's grasp.

“Would you like to see Daddy for lunch?”

The baby clapped her hands. “Ooh!”

Angela applied a little lipstick and blush, allowing herself to believe it took away from her chubby physique. She skimmed the closet, going past the pre-pregnancy size threes, and located a pair of pants from the fifth or sixth month, size twelves. She zipped them, her lips twisting in a grimace. When she was finished dressing, she swung Marie onto her hip, and they left.

The trip to Upton was worth it when she saw the look on Ben’s face. She sometimes caught herself worrying – and hated herself for it – about him losing interest and being tempted by other women. She was relieved to find him in the teacher’s lounge, seated alone at a table filled with student essays.

He looked up, surprised. “My two favorite girls! What’s the occasion?”

“Grace and Lester sent us something for our anniversary.” Angela passed Marie to her husband. “You’ll never guess what.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“A computer.”

“What? You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I wish we had enough money for the Internet.”

“We’ve been living without it for five years; a little longer won’t hurt.”

“But see, if I could work at home from the computer. . .” They seldom spoke of it, but Ben was an advocate of putting Marie in a daycare so Angela could work. Although she didn’t want to, doing it from home was better than a nine to five job. “Maybe I could get the hang of it again,” she suggested, hoping he would say they were better off than it seemed and that she wouldn’t need to.

Ben said nothing, stared into space for a moment, then attempted

to stack the essays with his free hand. "I guess you'll have to find a babysitter and drive to the university," he finally suggested.

Angela reluctantly nodded. She could at least give up one day to look into it.

At six thirty, Angela sat up with a start and looked at the clock twice to make sure. The thin sheet fell away, and her bare arms rippled with gooseflesh. She felt for her bathrobe, ending up with only a handful of sheets. She stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom and yanked her robe off the back of the door. Ben was in the shower; he hadn't heard her.

"I'm cooking breakfast," she called on her way out.

Several minutes later, he sat at the kitchen table, smiling for no apparent reason around a forkful of eggs.

"Okay, what is it?"

Pleased that she was showing interest in him, he said, "I have a surprise."

"Surprise?" Angela grinned, feeling a mix of pleasure and anxiety – surprises were usually expensive. "What is it?"

"I was approved for a loan at Lester's bank if I open an account there. If you get a job, we'll put your paychecks in there to save for a house. It'd be good to talk about it when we have more time. Why don't you meet me at school again?"

Angela feigned doubt, "I met you yesterday."

"It's up to you." Ben stood, his chair scraping against the tiled floor.

Angela's eyes glazed over, seeing but not seeing the blur of the opposite wall. Not only was Ben talking to her, but he was trying to turn her dream of the good life into reality. "Okay," she acquiesced, "I'll stop by."



“That’s my girl.” Ben leaned over his wife, kissed her briefly, and left.

Angela hurried through her shower, just making it; Marie started crying while she scavenged for clothes. This morning, instead of being greeted by a cheerful hug and wet kiss, Marie was in a foul mood. She cried when Angela tried to change her, clung, sniffing, to her neck, and didn’t want breakfast. Angela carried her squealing child to the bathroom and set her less than gently on the floor. Marie started a fresh gale of screams.

“Uhh!” Angela countered through parted lips and gritted teeth.

*Count to ten, count to ten. One...two...*

Marie looked at her mommy, hurt and confused, tears streaming down her red cheeks.

Angela’s breathing slowed. “Oh,” she gasped. She scooped her daughter up and held her close. “I love you, Marie. I’m so sorry.”

She set her on the floor while she dried her own hair. Angela saw her upturned face and blew the warm air at Marie until she started to laugh. When her hair was dry, she carried her baby to the den. She vacantly stared at Marie watching her inexhaustible playing and thinking about how life would change if she got a job. “I hate work, Marie-pea.” For the first time, she heard the laziness in her voice and was annoyed with her lack of incentive. To make herself feel like she was doing something, she set a pot of soup on the stove and fiddled with the recently hooked-up computer. She was soon frustrated with it and Angela turned away. Angela couldn’t see her daughter.

A wordless, inhuman howl called her to the kitchen.

“Oh, God! Marie!”

Marie’s scalded face was contorted in pain, her body covered in blisters, and her clothes welded to her boiling skin. Angela reached for the phone and, after several aggravated attempts, stilled her fingers long

enough to dial 9-1-1. She reached for Marie, trying to comfort her, but the baby screamed and writhed at her touch. Angela couldn't see through her tears but could feel the small, burning body that squirmed in her arms.

It was forever and no time at all until the paramedics arrived. Two men held Angela down while she reached for Marie, who was convulsing on the stretcher. Angela's belly heaved and she vomited on the floor of the ambulance.

Once in the emergency room, she became more aware of her surroundings. The woman behind the counter made her fill out an impossibly lengthy amount of paperwork; what wasn't smeared by her tears was too sloppy to read, anyway.

"Here." She handed the clipboard back, sniffed, wiped her eyes, and looked around for her daughter. She could hear but not see her.

"Um, Mrs. Sinclair?" a voice called from far away.

Angela turned. "What?"

"Do you have a more recent insurance card? This expired last week."

Angela clutched at the counter, missed, and slid to the dirty floor.

*Ohmygod, the insurance, ohmygod.*

But she was always home to watch Marie.