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about 660 words

PROGRESS

By Jeanné Clark

In the days and weeks after the divorce, Tom spent a great deal of time thinking what he would say to Erica if he ran into her at, for example, Supermart. His mind created a myriad of hateful words to slam against her.

He imagined saying--in a cold, clear voice--"Erica! You look just as much like a controlling bitch as you ever did!"

Or, if she were to ask how he was, he might answer, "Great, now that I don't have a shitty wife in my house anymore!"

He wanted to say something that would make her eyes do that blinky thing they'd do right before she cried. He remembered it--three blinks in a row, then her lower lip would begin to quiver.

The last time he'd seen her cry had been when they had had to put Fluffy, the old Siamese cat, down at the vet's office. Erica hadn't cried once during the divorce. That would be his victory, if he could get her lower lip to tremble.

He started making excuses to go to Supermart.

Four months after the divorce. Without children to keep Tom and Erica in each others' worlds, they had no reason to see each other and therefore hadn't. It didn't have to be that way, but that was the way it was. She'd

probably moved on by now—she was good at getting over things. Two days after her brother had died, she had acted as though nothing had happened.

Tom still wondered what he would say if he were to bump into her somewhere. He decided a bit of casual chatter, the standard salutations, might do.

Perhaps something like, "Hi, Erica, how's life been treating you?" No. Too casual--like friends.

Maybe he could just ask, "How are you doing, Erica?" That might work. Formal enough, he supposed, but still sociable.

Perhaps he would ask about the dog she'd won "custody" of. He wondered how good old Kellie was doing. In fact, he'd thought about getting another dog and then decided against it. Too much work.

Now he didn't go to Supermart unless he needed to, like when he was down to his last roll of toilet paper. Or when he ran out of paper plates--he didn't like washing dishes.

Eight months later, he still hadn't seen her. Waking from a dream, he thought for a moment that she was lying beside him. He reached over and touched the barren pillow, willing her long brown hair to appear. It didn't. He couldn't go back to sleep after that.

Instead, he lay awake, thinking for the first time in a while how a random encounter between them might go. He decided that he'd ask her to coffee. Give them a chance to talk. They'd been married for seven years, after all. Maybe she missed him, too.

Once again, he started making excuses to go to Supermart. This time, he even made lists.

One day, a few months later, between the paper towels and the dish soap, he spotted Erica. He was reaching for a

pack of Bounty and almost didn't recognize her. She'd cut her hair. It made her look bossier.

She put a bottle of Dawn in her grocery cart; she looked his way. Did he look different? If his appearance had changed, he hadn't noticed in the bathroom mirror.

She recognized him. "Hi."

Did she want to talk to him? Did he want to talk to her? Should he talk to her? Was she seeing someone else? Did she still miss him? Did he still miss her? Questions flooded through his mind, confusing him--but making everything clearer.

"Hello." He didn't look at her again.

With that, he turned his cart away and looked at his grocery list. It was only three items long, he realized.

She was his past.