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## **Birthday Dinner**

by  
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“Does this taste good, or what?” Tony swiped a piece of French bread out of the basket on the counter, glancing at Angela to see if she noticed. He dipped the morsel into a canoe-shaped ceramic dish holding olive oil mixed with balsamic vinegar, grated Parmesan cheese and herbs. As he slurped the savory mixture down his throat, Tony noticed his mother-in-law gazing out the bay window from the corner of the kitchen. His wife’s voice stole his attention.

“You brat! You’re jumping the gun. Just wait—dinner’s nearly ready.” Tony loved to eat and devoured her cooking, though the quantities he consumed never showed on his lithe body. He still challenged the younger guys he ran with, even though at 48 he was one of the oldest in his group at the Atlanta Track Club.

Minced garlic sizzled lightly in Angela’s frying pan, simmering nicely with four Italian sausages, sliced Portobello mushrooms and strips of green bell pepper. Tony noticed her fingers dripped with thick, red-tinted olive oil from the sun-dried tomatoes she had just added to the pan. The aroma of her favorite foods cooking in new stainless pans wafted through the kitchen. She and Tony had just moved into this new house, and she was finally satisfied. Angela had been craving a gourmet kitchen with dark granite countertops and a wrought-iron pot rack that hung over the island in the middle of the room. A year ago, the day before she turned 49, Angela’s agent had landed her a six-figure advance for her biography of the governor of New York, the ticket to their new home. A rare kind of contentment assuaged her bones.

Tony picked up a pewter tray bearing three glasses of cabernet sauvignon and pretended to serve her like a waiter, with a white linen towel over his arm. Angela lifted a long-stemmed glass and sipped, rolling the burgundy wine around her tongue. She enjoyed the playful look in Tony's eyes. He mouthed the words, "I want to be alone." She pressed her finger lightly to his lips and look away.

"Mother, would you like a glass of wine? Let's celebrate."

Angela's question got lost in the air.

"I feel like I've lost my identity."

Mother's words drifted across the kitchen from the rocking chair in the corner. She had parked there ten minutes ago to watch her daughter cook dinner. Tony brought her a glass, and then slid the tray on the tiled counter. He didn't pause to sip his wine before he turned on his heels to head into the family room. "I think I'll go turn on the stereo, find some decent music."

*At 83 years old, my mother feels she has lost her identity.* Angela's paring knife slipped out of her hand as she tried to slice her onion. She licked the slippery oil off her fingers to get a grip on what she was doing. Angela wiped her fingers across her jeans and tucked some straggling strands of auburn hair behind her ears.

There was no way she would respond to her mother's comment until she turned around and saw her mother's face before she chose her words. She needed to see how Mother's mouth was set. She needed to read the expression in her mother's hazel eyes.

Was this a set-up for an argument? Angela knew her mother too well. They had just gotten home from a day of shopping and lunch out together, celebrating Mom's 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. Angela thought it had been a good day. A good day for her mother and a good day for them together.

The day was supposed to be over around 4:00, but they were getting along so well, there was no need to end it. Angela had asked, “Why don’t you stay for dinner? I’ll cook for you.” Mother had said, “That sounds good. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

It had taken twenty years for a day like this to happen. Angela had left home when she was 17 after a screaming match with Mom and Dad in the kitchen. She had hated it at home. Home was a place to be suffocated by the imposition of her mother’s dominant personality. Home was a place where “Angela” could not emerge. Home was a place where Angela’s worth as a daughter was measured by how well she lived up to Mom’s and Dad’s expectations.

Over twenty years had passed before Angela and Mother could be friends. Angela had been convinced that the only way to survive around her mother had been to distance herself from home, get her own life, and learn the impossible art of how to forgive.

Angela turned to examine her mother’s expression. She saw that her face lacked the worry lines created by the all-too-familiar typical frowning eyebrows and sad smile. Instead, her soft eyes and unworried expression told Angela she just wanted to talk.

“Mom, you could never lose your identity. There is nobody else like you—and you know that! How can a person lose their identity when they’re 83?”

Angela knew her mother had never gotten over the trauma of moving out of her brother’s house three years ago when they had to sell it, and move into a retirement home. She knew what was coming.

“I hate where I live. I just can’t make the place look like me.”

Angela restrained herself from laughing. Her mother had lived a full life according to her own design. After Dad died, and now that control of her environment was out of her hands, she was miserable. But that’s not why Angela was laughing. This should have been *her* telling *her*

*mother* about her own identity issues, a conversation that never happened, with Mother standing in the kitchen cooking dinner. Angela thought, *she is the mother; I am the daughter*. Isn't that one of the privileges guaranteed to a child? Angela had always felt she had been robbed of freedom—freedom to communicate with her parents, freedom to have a personality. As a writer, working out her resentment through written words had become the salve for her festering wounds, and had dissipated her need for vindication.

“Well, what should your place look like then?”

Is this what it had been like, when she had tried to challenge her mother with similar questions twenty years ago? The same kind of un-ease of not knowing how to answer such a personal question?

“What do you think it should look like, Angela? It should look like me—not like a cookie-cutter apartment with the same color walls as the hallways of the building, and the same prints on the walls that everybody else has. It should look like me!” Mother's questioning eyes gazed at Angela as if expecting her to provide a solution. She now treated Angela as if she knew everything. As if she needed her mother, and Angela was the next best closest thing. “But the question is, what does *me* look like now? I know I've changed since your father is gone.”

“You think you have, mother? I mean, I guess you have....” Angela had anticipated this day would come, when she would have to give her mother the kind of understanding and patience that her mother had never shown her. She had wondered if their relationship would become a role reversal like she had read about. Was she to play mother now, with mom becoming her child? Was it true that when people grew old, they began to slip back in their minds, becoming like children again?

Angela's heart melted over her mother's vulnerability. The kind of vulnerability that seems to come with growing old. The kind that everybody fears. That hated, unwanted, humiliating, vulnerability that comes from losing control over life.

"You know, I hate it when people bring up my age! Just the other day, I went to the doctor to get my blood tested. I just wanted to know, was it too thick, too thin, or what? He couldn't just tell me that. I said, 'Dr. Kramer, what's the results of the test?' He said, 'Mrs. Potter, you're in really good shape for an 83-year old.' I said, 'For an 83-year old? What do you expect me to do—crawl in a corner and give up just because I have gray hair?' Can you believe the nerve of that man, being condescending to me because of my age!"

Angela knew what she meant about being condescended to because of her age. Mother had said that anyone at the age of 17 couldn't possibly know what they wanted in life, they were just a child and lacked experience of the world. "Children" had no say, no valid opinions, no credibility.

"Mother, you know who you are. You know you are in great shape physically. You wear blue-jeans and baseball caps and you still dye your hair blonde. You take vitamins everyday. You could probably teach the doctors something about health! Don't let him get to you."

"My friends are dying all around me. How would you feel? Just last week, my friend Jean's daughter put her in a nursing home. She's going to sell Jean's house right out from under her."

"I can imagine how you feel, Mom. When death starts getting so close to you, you start thinking about your own life, don't you? I mean, appreciating it, being thankful for what you've

had...doesn't it make you want to make the most of every day when you wake up in the morning?"

"You know, I said that very same thing to myself this morning. I said, 'Lord, thank you for this new day. Give me a chance to bring you honor.' That's what I said, and I meant it."

"C'mon. Dinner's ready. Let's eat."

Tony's favorite jazz station sounded great on his new Bose speakers from the family room. He filled Mother's and Angela's glasses with more cabernet. Angela wondered if Tony was going to pose the question.

"Mother, this is as good a time as any to bring this up. Today's your birthday, and we have a surprise for you."

Mother put her glass down. "What are you building up to, boy? I don't know whether to feel excited or should I brace myself?"

"Angela and I bought this house with plans for the future—"

Mother squealed. "Are you pregnant? Oh my land—am I going to be a grandmother finally? How exciting—" She jumped up and ran around the table to kiss her daughter and flung her arm around Tony's neck. "I'm so happy for you two! And you're telling me on my birthday—Oh honey, you couldn't have given me a better present!"

"Mother, please—sit down! Let Tony finish."

"Angela and I bought this house with plans for the future—and our plans were to build you an apartment in our lower level. Our question is, would you like to move in with us?"

The shock of the news melted Mother's expression. She ran her fingers through her hair, suddenly conscious that she wanted to look more presentable for this moment. Her hand moved to her chest as if recovering from a moment of hyperventilation.

Mother looked from Angela to Tony, tears streaming from her eyes. She gasped. “You *want me...here...with you?*”

“Here are the keys, Mother.” Tony pulled out a brass ring holding two new keys. “We just finished the place two days ago. In time for your birthday. You even have your own private entrance. I made sure you did.” He laughed and kissed her forehead. Tony picked up her hand and placed the keys into her palm, curling her fingers around the keys.

Mother’s tears continued to flood but now she was laughing. “What color are the walls?”