

If the Walls Could Talk

by Jenna Jauregui

At one-fifteen on a Tuesday afternoon, a woman is pacing the living room of a fourth-floor apartment in Los Angeles. The thermostat is set to a brisk 69 degrees, but Catherine B. Andrews is sweating. Beads of salty moisture are gathering under her soft blond curls at the nape of her neck, and she can feel cold dampness under her arms. **My God, now she'll have to change her blouse before he arrives.** A tinny, hollow sound cuts through the silence of the room as the clock on the mantle chimes the quarter-hour, sending her heart into a pounding frenzy of adrenaline—twenty minutes before Jerry comes home.

Catherine crosses the living room from her position by the front door, and almost subconsciously she goes about re-straightening the photographs on the wall, re-adjusting the drapes that frame the window, and re-aligning the edges of the stack of wooden coasters on the **coffee table.** **She moves the vase a hair's breadth to the left, nudges the end table an inch closer** to the arm of the couch, and plumps the cushions for what must be the eighth time in the past fifteen minutes. Anything to take her mind off the fact that Jerry would be walking through the front door in less than half an hour. Earlier she had vacuumed until the plush carpet showed perfect lines. She had dusted all the surfaces in the apartment, and mopped the linoleum in the kitchen. The dishes were washed and neatly stacked in the cupboards, and there were fresh sheets on the bed in their bedroom. The apartment smells heavily of Pine-Sol and the Luscious Lavender perfume that Catherine had dabbed on her wrists and behind her ears, but to her the air is thick with the odor of dread, pungent and sour. Surely Jerry will detect the scent, notice its presence in spite of her attempt to mask it. And then he will know. Catherine

surveys the room with a critical eye, as she has countless times today, scanning for any betraying evidence. Everything appears normal: the couch and matching chair sit perpendicular to each other in front of the electric fireplace, upholstered in a shade of beige somewhere between sand and dirt. When they bought them a month ago she had wanted the pale pink fabric, the exact **color of snow under a rosy sunset, but Jerry wouldn't have it.** **"I won't live anywhere with pink furniture,"** he had insisted, **"and besides, it would get dirty too fast. We'd have to have them cleaned at least once a month, and even then they'd eventually turn gray and dingy."** With that, the furniture was sentenced to be perpetually boring, its color—supposedly all the rage in modern households—tasteless but practical. The rest of the décor is similarly done—brown carpet something close to the color of roasted almonds, beige curtains that glow hazelnut when daylight shines between them, golden oak tables in a shade of cashew. The walls are macadamia white, and if not for the colorful canvas prints she had hung, she might as well be living in a bowl of mixed nuts, suffocating among them.

She continues her pacing, nervously twisting the diamond ring around the third finger of her left hand—round and round, pressing the tip of her thumb into the facets of the gem. It's an antique, and it once belonged to Jerry's grandmother. The white-gold band is set with a glittering solitaire diamond—a whole carat in weight. Her old friends from Florida had practically swooned as they gushed over "The Rock," hauling her hand in front of their faces so they could get a closer look. Now, after a week's absence from her finger, the ring feels weighty, the way any piece of jewelry feels before the brain has time to get used to the sensation. A foreign object on her hand. Heavy.

She looks at the clock. Ten minutes. She'd better go change.

Catherine makes her way down the hallway into the bedroom she shares with Jerry, her fingers trembling slightly as she unfastens the buttons down the front of her blouse. This room is more colorfully decorated than the living room, with the red and blue pillows and a large framed photograph of them the day they got engaged, the one they took on a balcony over Hollywood's Walk of Fame with the multicolored neon lights glowing in the background. They have giant grins on their faces, their eyes sparkling with love. She remembers that day almost four months ago, when Jerry held her hand in front of Grauman's Chinese Theater. They had spent an hour placing their hands and feet in the impressions left by the great actors of Hollywood, forever immortal in the squares of concrete. "Someday they're gonna put your handprints here, Jerry!" Catherine had exclaimed, letting go of his hand to point at the ground, "Right here. Right on this piece of sidewalk."

"Someday, maybe." Jerry had said, putting his arm around her. "And I'll write in the wet cement: 'To my devoted wife. Without you I'm nothing.'"

Catherine had laughed, wrapped her arms around his waist and smiled into his face. "Who's gonna be your wife, Jerry? Who's gonna take care of you when you're a big star?"

And he had knelt down, pulled the ring from his coat pocket and held it before her, dazzling in the lights of Tinseltown.

She had always fallen for the ones who swept her off her feet.

Catherine catches a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror on the closet door as she reaches in for a fresh blouse. God, she looks awful—her blue eyes are slightly puffy from crying late last night, and her face is drawn and tense. Her lips, even with the rosy shade of lipstick, show no trace of the giddy smile she's wearing in the picture above the bed. Such happy times. She attempts to will her face into a cheerful expression, but her efforts are in vain. God she's so nervous she can barely button her blouse. Taking a deep breath, she tries out her voice. "Jerry! You're home!" Too high. "Jerry! Honey! I'm so glad you're home!" But her voice betrays her. She swallows against the lump that's been building in the back of her throat, guilt that has been churning in her insides since yesterday and has slowly been rising to her mouth—a poison in reverse. The emotion is so real she can almost taste its bitter flavor on her tongue. Surely Jerry

will notice it when he kisses her, will smell it on her breath if he doesn't taste it on her lips. And then he will know.

From the bedroom she can hear the clock chime on the mantle, its jarring notes slicing through the silence of the apartment. One-thirty. Only five more minutes.

Jerry had gotten the phone call two weeks ago—a close friend from high school was leaving for his destination wedding in Germany and wanted Jerry to come out to Santa Barbara for the weekend, join his buddies for the bachelor party and spend some time catching up with his old friends before coming home.

“Are you sure you'll be all right by yourself?” Jerry had asked her, concern showing in his face. “It's only been barely a month since we moved in here, and I don't want you to feel like I'm abandoning you in a strange place.”

“I'll be fine! Don't worry. It's only for a few days, and you should go. He'd be so happy if you came.”

“If you're sure...”

“Please. I'm twenty-four. I can look after myself! I'll rent some movies or something, maybe finish typing my resume so I can start looking for work here. Don't worry, Jerry. I'll be just fine.”

Moving in with Jerry hadn't been an easy adjustment—he liked things in their place, including her. At first he hadn't wanted her to work, but soon it became apparent that the expense of two people living in the city of Los Angeles was not feasible on Jerry's income alone—working part-time while picking up bit roles in soaps and commercials.

Catherine had gone out Saturday night—something she didn't normally do because Jerry was afraid she would get mugged, or worse. She felt spontaneous and slightly rebellious; she was just looking to have a drink, enjoy the atmosphere and have some fun, like she used to.

“Oh,” Jerry had said Friday evening as he fumbled in his pocket for the car keys, his suitcase in hand, “The jeweler called and said your ring would be ready by tomorrow.”

“They got the loose prong fixed?”

“Yeah. So you can pick it up by five on Saturday.”

It was six thirty by the time she realized she had forgotten to pick it up, and the jewelry store didn't open again until Monday. Oh well, she would get it then.

Catherine had entered the club and was sitting at the bar, trying to decide what drink to order. Colorful flashes of light pierced the darkness of the room, and the throngs of bodies on the dance floor moved to the pulsing beat of the live band. Consumed with a feeling of freedom, Catherine realized that she didn't even have to worry about Jerry calling her tonight. By now he had most likely had enough to drink that he wouldn't give her a second thought until tomorrow afternoon. She turned to the bartender and was about to order a Long Island when she felt a

hand on her back, and heard the words she hadn't heard in at least two years. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Why hadn't she just said, "No thanks," and left? Why hadn't she remembered to pick up her ring from the jeweler? Why hadn't she dressed a little more plain, put on less eye makeup? Why hadn't she just stayed home and watched *Sleepless in Seattle* for the sixth time, her budding discontent with Jerry reflected in Meg Ryan's own uncertainty, wondering about the future of her relationship? Why had she flirted with a stranger, staggered up four flights of stairs at midnight to room 416 while grasping his hand, and opened the door with the silver key? Why had she been surprised to find herself alone the next morning on the living room floor, her lipstick smeared in a scarlet line across her cheek and her blond curls in messy disarray?

"To my devoted wife. Without you I'm nothing."

Why does she think she can keep it a secret?

Catherine looks again at her reflection in the mirror. She dabs concealer under her eyes, and whisks a fresh coat of mascara through her eyelashes. She fluffs her hair with her fingers, straightens her blouse, and lets out a deep breath as she makes her way back to the living room. Every wall in the apartment was there to bear silent witness to what went on while Jerry was away. And soon Jerry will know too. He will know because she will tell him.

It is now one thirty eight on a Tuesday afternoon in Los Angeles, and a man is standing outside of apartment 416. In his left hand he grips a brown leather suitcase, and his right hand is fumbling with his key ring, his fingers searching for the small silver key that will open the door. Inside the apartment, Catherine B. Andrews is sitting on the beige colored couch, anxiously awaiting the return of her fiancé. Her hands no longer tremble and she is no longer sweating, though she can still feel the lump of remorse that blocks the back of her throat. **She doesn't know when or how she will tell Jerry what she has done. She doesn't know how he will respond.**

But the door will open. And he will know.