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To Change a Zebra

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Olivia Moore *To Change a Zebra*

Pink...pink...pink...echoed in my head. A wicked color! A color that represented all I ever worked for spiraling down the drain. Pink. The color of life became the color of death, and the base on which my feet were rooted began to lurch and sway from the pounding of the waves. Pink tidal waves against my brain, tearing out all sense with the undertow. Hot tears blazed down my face, ran along my neck, and down between my breasts...my swelling breasts. I looked at my bed, my ballet slippers, my rugs. Pink. I had always loved that color, but now...

Again I looked at the little plastic stick with the pink stripe, and prayed for a speedy death, but none came. I stared out of the window until the sunlight stung my eyes. When I pulled the shade, black spots began to dance before me, growing larger with every slowed breath. As I dropped to my knees and drifted off into a blissful unconsciousness, I heard the door creaking open.

"Sylvie...sweetie...wake up!" she said as she laid the cold, wet cloth on my forehead. I remember it was so soothing to the pulse in my temples.

"Sylvie, what's the matter? Are you okay?"

Valerie held my head in her lap, but I didn't open my eyes. I could smell her perfume floating over me. It was a light musk. A calming smell.

"I'm fine, Val. How did you know I was here?" I prodded. "I told you I'd be busy for a while!" I squinted my eyes at her, adjusting my legs into a more comfortable position.

"I knew what you were doing, Sylvia! Geez! I went with you to the store to get it! I thought you'd at least want me around in case something like this happened. You're so nervous and everything!"

She reached for the plastic stick, asking a feeble "Is it done?"

I focused on her face so I could see her reaction clearly. Her dark brown eyes widened in recognition of the pink stripe, and then were normal again in a steady and controlled manner. I shifted my eyes to the ceiling. The stenciled pink doves seemed to chase each other, each nipping at the tail feathers of the one before it. Without a word, Val leaned over me, and in a warm embrace she told me she was my friend.

As I remember back to that day, there were too many moments that seemed like living hell. Val helped me off the floor, and seated me on my bed. My body was shaking. I had to think. I had to make arrangements. Arrangements...God! There were a lot of options. I had to call Tom. He'd know what to do. He always knew what to do. I dialed him as fast as I could. Valerie sat down in the plaid lavender chair opposite. Her shirt sort of blended in with the pattern. Ring...ring... ring...

"Hello?" a voice on the other end answered.

"Hello...Tom?"

I could already feel the weight shifting to his shoulders.

"Hey, Sylvie! I was just going to call you! What's up?"

His voice was so confident, so ready to handle anything, that I felt like a little girl again.

"Tommy, I have to talk to you. I'm..."

But by now my voice was choked up and the word I wanted to say had been struggling violently to make to the top alive. It failed. A large sob rose in its place.

"Sylvia, sweetheart! What's the matter?"

"I'm pregnant!" I sobbed so loudly that I startled Val.

I heard Tom suck in a deep breath.

"My God, Sylvie, what did you say? It can't be possible!"

"Tommy, please!" I said, still wailing, hot tears resuming. "It is! It is! I just finished taking the test! It came out pink. Tommy! There was a pink stripe!"

"My God," he said again. "My God."

"What are we going to do?" I said like a child. "You know what to do."

"It's okay...it's going to be okay," he said in a choked voice. "How pregnant are you? I mean how long have you been pregnant?"

"I'm not sure. You know how irregular I am!"

"Sylvia! You have to think! How long has it been?"

"Well...I guess about three months at the most."

"Three months? Great! "

"What do you mean, 'great'?"

"You can still get rid of it for up to three months."

"Tom, I don't know, I--"

"It's for the best," he said firmly.

My mind went blank as I let him take over. He knew me and I trusted him. I listened to him rattle on about the money he had saved up and where we would get it done

"Okay?" he asked. "That's what you want, isn't it? No one will ever know."

"Yes," I answered numbly. Of course this was what I wanted. Tom knew the right thing to do. I didn't have time to take care of a child. My life was too complicated already, and I had a lot of things to do. I was too young, and this way my parents would never have to be disappointed.

"So I'll be over to get you in an hour. I love you, Sylvie," he said before he hung up.

"I love you, too," I repeated mechanically. There was an intricate pattern on this wicker table I'd never noticed before.

As I replaced the receiver my eyes met Valerie's.

"So you're going to do it?" she asked softly. "You're actually going through with it? I mean...you're sure this is what you want?"

"Yes of course I'm going through with it! Don't put this kind of pressure on me, Val. I don't need it."

And I didn't need it! I didn't ask for any of this to happen. She didn't know what was happening to me anyway. My whole life was almost turned upside-down, and if it wasn't for Tom deciding, I might have made a terrible mistake. I sat down at my vanity and stared at myself in the mirror. I was still pretty. My

stomach was still trim. The only thing different was my chest. I laid my head on the ivory of the vanity table. It felt cool against my head. After it warmed up I'd move over a couple of inches to feel the cool again.

"Well?" Val asked.

"Well, what?!" I snapped. "I already answered you."

"No you didn't. I asked you if this was what you wanted.

"Would I do it if it I didn't want to?"

The breeze from outside blew the lacy curtains into the room. They knocked over my perfume bottle, and the strong scent of honeysuckle reached my nose. Valerie didn't answer me.

"I mean, Val, you know I appreciate your concern, but I don't want to think about it now.

And for the first time, Valerie spoke harshly to me.

"Sure, Sylvia! Don't think about it now! Instead wait until you get back and you can't change your mind and you can't go crying to Tom because he doesn't understand! Wait until your insides feel torn out and your baby is gone! Just wait, damn it! That's it! Just wait! You'll wish you could stop thinking about it then!"

And then she started crying. She crumpled down on my pink rugs and sobbed. She sobbed until her body shook and I could see the pink tidal waves still hitting her. They were still knocking her down and pulling at her senses after all this time. Slowly I got up and walked to where she sat, and slowly she stopped crying and her body convulsed with hidden pains.

"They all said no one would ever know, Sylvie, but that's not true. I know. It's been three years, and I still know."

God! Why hadn't she ever told me? I was her best friend and she betrayed me. I was hurt! I always told her everything about me. How could she! And suddenly I didn't feel sorry for her. Everyone made their own choices, and she made the wrong one. It wasn't my fault she took it so personally.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said with a bitterness that startled me and caused her to look at my face. "Why didn't you tell me? You could have told me! I would have understood, Valerie!"

"Sylvie, please don't be like that. I am telling you! You wouldn't have understood before! Well, maybe you would have, but I convinced myself that no one could."

I got up, grabbed the plastic stick with the pink stripe and walked to the bathroom. I'd get rid of everything so my mother wouldn't find out. I wrapped it all in the soft white toilet paper and flushed it. As it spiraled down the toilet, the doorbell rang.

I ran past the dejected Valerie to the door and it flung open. There was Tom, as handsome as ever with a navy blue blazer thrown over his shoulder. He waltzed through the door with the confidence of a Greek god, and I knew that everything would be all right. He would take care of me. I grabbed my coat and my purse and walked out the door with my boyfriend on my arm. I breathed a deep breath and got in the car.

"It'll be okay." Tom reassured me with a hand on my leg.

"Wait!" I said as we pulled out. "I forgot my ID."

He pulled back into the driveway and I sprinted back to the front door. I wasn't more than two steps in before I heard her.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" she sobbed again and again.

I peeked around the corner and there she sat, still on the pink rug, swaying back and forth with each cry. There, my best friend cried for me. She cried for the pain I was running to meet for the rest of my life, and she cried for the tidal waves of pink that wouldn't let her rest for one moment. She cried for the baby that she lost because they said she would forget. She cried for her best friend and what she knew she would never forget. And watching Valerie then, tears streamed down my face and I felt a new heat in my heart. Was I going for my freedom, or was I going to imprison myself forever?

I went to where she sat for the second time in that hour, but this time, I took her head in my lap and pressed a cold cloth to her temples. And slowly, the pink tidal waves became a pink tide pool that lapped softly against my ankles, and the base on which my feet stood became a rock. Valerie's eyes stayed closed and then opened to a squint.

"I thought you left," she said.

"No. I decided not to...I decided not to," I sighed.

As we sat there on the floor, the wind began to blow harder and thunder rumbled in the distance. The curtains whipped and lashed at my vanity, but I had moved the perfume. I knew the rain was coming, but wasn't that what made the flowers grow?