

## The Wrinkled Tea Bag

Karen reluctantly drove to Regina's house to take her to the monthly meeting of the 'Tea Bags'. *Would she back out again?* Karen dreaded the game of beg-and-plead. If Regina agreed to go, this would be her first outing since her husband of forty years, had died. Karen had faced challenges with her friend ever since that day.

Joe's death had visibly altered Regina. Her brisk 'penguin walk' had slowed to a bob, like a cork in swirling water. She walked aimlessly while Karen gently cupped her elbow with one hand and patiently directed her steps with the other. The 'take charge' Regina had become weak and dependent, leaving Karen to feel more like a babysitter than a best friend.

Karen used her own key that dangled from a teapot-shaped key ring. She entered the rambling three-story house and glanced, once again, at the faded silk poinsettia plant—Joe's favorite flower. Teacups and saucers balanced precariously on stacks of books. Modern day calling cards from her tea friends overflowed from a tarnished silver tray.

Ten years before, Karen and Regina met at an antique shop. They were drawn to the style of the Victorian age. Regina had collected figurines. Joe indulged her passion until every flat surface was covered and it resembled a thrift store.

Now, dust bunnies multiplied with each visit. Three weeks before, Karen swiped her hand across a rosewood coffee table that looked like it had been sprinkled with gray talcum powder. Her fingerprints had become part of the decor.

"I'm early," Karen called, "I'll fix us a cup of tea." She felt a twinge of guilt that she hadn't offered to clean Regina's house. But it would have taken weeks.

After filling the electric teapot, Karen heard quiet sobs coming from the bathroom. She peeked her head around the door. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub in her ragged chenille

bathrobe and a wide-brimmed floral hat, Regina looked like a child playing dress-up with her mother's wardrobe.

The woman patted her heavy thighs with both hands and said, "Honey, I'm not going."

*Here we go again.* "They're your dearest friends." Karen sighed. "You're the Queen of the Tea Bags." She tried to imagine what Regina's excuse would be today. Last month she insisted her coupons needed sorting.

Seated on the lid of the toilet, Karen eyed her companion. Her hair had been recently styled and her new pumps were waiting at the foot of her bed. *What's the problem?*

"I just don't feel like it!" Regina snapped, as though she could read Karen's mind. Her eyes were wet with tears. She buried her face in her plump hands.

Karen wanted to leave, turn off the teapot, and pretend Joe hadn't died. *Who was this helpless and needy woman?* She looked closely at her friend, her hat sitting lopsided over her gray-tinged curls. Filled with compassion, Karen considered Regina's situation; alone in the world if you didn't count 'The Tea Bags'.

In the corridor of the hospital, minutes after the doctor had given her the fatal news about Joe, Regina sang the lyrics to *Two For Tea*—their favorite song. Even the doctor joined in on the chorus.

Now, Regina's crying developed into a howl.

Karen draped an arm around her soft shoulders. She felt Regina's despair trembling under the thick fabric.

"Look in my," Regina muffled a sob, "my closet."

Karen stood and smoothed her skirt. She glanced at her watch. *This better be good.* Her heels clacked on the wooden floorboards. The door creaked as she opened it wide. Dozens of empty hangers hung on two long white poles. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Karen ran her hand across the wire triangles that tinkled like wind chimes. “What do you want me to see? There’s nothing in here.”

“Exactly!” Regina wailed. “I’m so embarrassed!”

“Of an empty closet?” Karen walked down the hallway. “Did you move your clothes into here?” She grasped the crystal doorknob and began to turn.

“Wait!” Regina let out a grunt as she hoisted her hefty frame, then waddled over to her friend. She took a raspy breath as she flung open the hall closet door. A mountain of blouses, skirts, slacks, and dresses slid to the floor.

“This must be every piece of clothing you own!” Karen picked up an armful of garments. “Everything is wrinkled.”

“That’s right,” Regina said flatly, “without Joe, they’ll be wrinkled for life.” She waded forlornly into a sea of crumpled fabric. “I truly have nothing to wear.”

Joe had been a professional clothing presser. On several occasions, Regina had bragged that she was probably the only woman whose husband ironed *her* clothes. Unlike her friends, she was not obligated to purchase wrinkle-free acrylic or polyester as long as Joe was willing to de-wrinkle her 100% cottons and linens.

It had not occurred to Karen, or any of her friends, that Regina had never learned how to iron; a skill most women acquired as young brides. Karen looked around the room and realized Joe must have also polished and swept.

Regina stared at the pile like it was the scene of a gruesome crime. “If only this were the Victorian Era. Did you know that folds and wrinkles were once a symbol of status?” Regina picked up one item after another then tossed it back into the pile. “Wrinkles indicated that the dress was new, fresh out of a box from Paris or London . . . Joe and I were always going to go to England . . .”

While Regina rambled, Karen walked to the back hall, picked up the lonely ironing board and grabbed the iron from the shelf.

In the kitchen, Karen pushed a metal lever and the legs of the board stretched and squeaked into place. She wiped the dusty iron with a damp cloth and plugged in the cord. From the tangled pile of clothes, she pulled out a dress embroidered with tiny pink roses.

“Have you ever *tried* to iron?” Karen asked gently. She turned to see Regina holding two white blouses, both with large iron-shaped scorch marks.

Regina walked them over to the trash. “What am I going to do without Joe?”

“Come here,” commanded Karen. She handed Regina the dress. Karen led her step-by-step through the ironing process, a skill she had taken for granted.

Regina gained confidence with each straightened crease and flattened wrinkle. She held her dress at arms length, pleased with the result. Then she said softly, “How am I ever going pick up where Joe left off?”

Karen offered Regina a mug of steaming chamomile tea, “One cup at a time.”

When the women left the house for their meeting, Karen noticed a fresh bounce to Regina’s walk. She rejected Karen’s helping hand as they passed by Joe’s unused car in the driveway. Regina opened her own door, fastened her own seatbelt, and lowered the sun visor.

Karen started the engine.

Regina asked, “Do you give driving lessons?”

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