

Second Best

by

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A movement caught Cathy's eye. She stared, amazed, at the couple who'd just entered the restaurant. Was it *Geoff*?

"...And veal parmesan. Did you get that?" She came back to earth with a bump.

"Er, no. Sorry, sir. Would you mind repeating that?"

Cathy paused for a moment on her way to the kitchen. She stared at the couple now being seated by the maître d', and felt a niggle of doubt.

Her total acquaintance with Geoff had lasted a bare three hours, but his face was printed indelibly on her memory. She wouldn't have thought he'd have aged so much in the five years since they'd met. Streaks of grey showed in his thick, dark hair at the sides, and pain-lines etched his face. If it *was* him, what had happened to his old expression of confidence and contentment? Perhaps he'd been ill.

She had to know. Moving swiftly to cut off another waiter, she bent and presented the menus.

"Good evening, Sir, Madam."

"Good evening." Was that a flash of recognition, or just a stranger's tribute to her warm brown eyes and the smile on her elfin face? Whatever it was, Cathy felt the fine hairs on her neck rise. Even with only two words, she recognised that chocolate-velvet voice.

Surreptitiously, she studied his companion, and felt strangely disappointed. From the way Geoff had spoken about his wife she'd expected someone warmer, more relaxed. The woman was attractive, but Cathy saw a hardness and brittleness about her sharp-featured face and precise movements as she flicked through the menu.

As Geoff gave their order, her head snapped up to give Cathy a calculating look, alerted by some husky, strained tone in his voice. Cathy concentrated on her notes, afraid to look up as his tension was transmitted to her. She mumbled an acknowledgment and fled to the kitchen.

For the next hour she was run off her feet as the restaurant filled up. Friday nights were usually busy, and she seemed to be always called to tables on the other side of the huge room from where Geoff and his wife sat. At last, as the frantic rush eased, she leaned her hip against the bar and glanced over to their table.

The table was empty. Cathy felt a hollow sense of loss; then that voice spoke quietly, urgently, at her shoulder.

"Cathy? It *is* Cathy, isn't it?"

She turned and smiled unsteadily up at Geoff. He was a tall man; she remembered how she'd fitted so comfortably underneath his shoulder when they'd walked arm-in-arm.

"Yes, Geoff. Myself, Cathy."

"What on *earth* are you doing, waitressing on the Gold Coast?" His deep-set blue eyes had a new, haunted look.

"I live here now. And I'm moonlighting, I need the money."

"Has your husband lost his job?"

"I wouldn't know," she said airily. "*I've lost him.*"

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. To be precise, he lost me. I kicked him out." Cathy saw, past his shoulder, his wife come back from the toilet, frown at the empty table and glance around the room.

"You'd better go, Geoff. Your wife is looking for—" she faltered at the agonised expression that flashed into his eyes.

"My — of course, you wouldn't know," he muttered, then took a deep breath and said, roughly, "My wife is dead, Cathy. She died almost five years ago ... soon after I met you, in fact."

Before Cathy could respond, Geoff's companion approached swiftly.

"Darling, what're you doing?" she emphasised the first word as she fixed Cathy with a combative look. "Our dessert's arrived."

He turned to her, putting a hand on Cathy's shoulder and drawing her forward. "Hilary, meet Cathy. Hilary Fenton, Cathy ... I'm sorry. I've forgotten your last name."

You never knew it, Geoff. But she kept up her side of the fiction. "Catherine Howard." She extended her hand, smiling.

Hilary took it briefly. "That name sounds familiar."

Cathy grinned. "Henry the Eighth. Fifth wife. My parents had a sense of humour." She'd reverted to her maiden name after the divorce.

"Cathy and I met years ago, when I was up in Brisbane on a residential," Geoff filled in.

"Really," Hilary Fenton said flatly. "*I don't remember waiters, Geoffrey. She must have made quite an impression.*"

Cathy rescued him. "I wasn't waitressing. I was on a course, too."

"Yes. Well, we mustn't keep you. Your supervisor is looking daggers. Come along, Geoffrey."

Cathy glanced around, but Margaret, the supervisor, was talking to one of the other girls and paying no attention to them. By the time she turned back, Hilary Fenton had led him away.

For the rest of the evening, Cathy's mind was not on the job. She put herself on autopilot and let her thoughts drift back to that night in Brisbane, five years ago.

The view of the Botanical Gardens, in the last of the evening light, was blurred by the rain drizzling down the window of the motel's restaurant. Cathy was becoming stir-crazy. All week it had been raining; every day was spent cooped up in the lecture room, every evening sitting in the motel, weather-bound.

Perhaps that was for the best, she thought gloomily. If she went walking alone at night in the city, she'd probably get mugged, or worse. If only there was someone to talk to. The waitress was an airhead, and there was never anyone else able or available.

She looked up as a figure appeared in the archway. A tall man, early thirties perhaps, with an interesting face. He wore a charcoal-grey pinstriped suit, and a dark-blue tie that matched the eyes glancing around the tables. As they swung to her, Cathy smiled a tentative invitation.

He hesitated, then moved towards her. Cathy felt a moment of panic. She wasn't one to invite a pickup; had she not been so lonely and bored, she wouldn't have even looked.

"Do you mind if I join you?" An attractive voice, deep and beautifully modulated. "It's such a dismal night, and we're the only ones here. It seems a bit uncivilised to sit alone."

If he hadn't voiced her thought, or if he had been brash or sexually aggressive, she would have refused. As it was, she smiled uncertainly. "It certainly does! And I'm bored to snores."

He took that as an invitation, and sat down. "Me too. I came up today for a weekend residential in a correspondence course I'm doing. It's not the most scintillating stuff, I'm afraid."

"You're lucky it's only a weekend!" she retorted. "I've been here *all week*, doing a refresher course in social studies."

He grinned. "Sounds like we could swap horror stories in further education. Let's find a more pleasant subject. Tell me where you're from, and what you do when you're not improving your mind."

"Well, I'm from Rockhampton, and I improve kids' minds in school, or try to. My husband does the opposite. He manages a leagues club loaded with pokies."

She noticed he relaxed when he heard she was married. Was he worried that she assumed he was trying for a pickup? She wasn't surprised to find he was also married. He had the contented, cared-for look of one who loved and was loved.

Over the bottle of wine they shared, he told her he was a civil engineer, from Sydney. "I'm doing a distance degree in environmental planning and management. I missed the Sydney residential when I was out of town, so I had to come up here."

By the time coffee arrived, they noticed simultaneously it had finally stopped raining.

“Would you mind joining me for a walk?” she asked. “I’m so sick of being cooped up.”

“Love to.” He rose, and pulled back her chair. As they went to the door he tucked her arm under his and they set off at a brisk pace across the road and along the sealed path that ran through the gardens.

As they talked they discovered an astonishing number of common interests. Cathy had never felt so comfortable with a man before. Not even with her husband Ian, she realised, with a momentary twinge of guilt. Striding along, big, warm and dependable, Geoff seemed to her like the elder brother she’d never had. As she skipped along at his side, chatting happily, the loneliness and boredom of the past week slipped away unnoticed.

When he escorted her back to her room, it seemed only civil to invite him in for a cup of coffee. The room had no armchairs, so they both sat on the sofa, Geoff’s long arms spread comfortably along the back as they yarned like old friends who hadn’t seen each other for ages. Then he looked at his watch.

“Good grief, it’s after midnight.” He rose, smiling down at her. “It’s been wonderful talking to you, Cathy, but we’d better get to bed. Otherwise we’ll be sleeping through our lectures tomorrow.”

He took her hands, and raised her to her feet. She put her hands on his shoulders to give him a friendly kiss goodnight.

Something happened to the intention of that kiss.

Her mouth seemed to open of its own volition; her hands slipped down and under his arms, which came around her as she moulded her body against his. Her eyes closed, and she felt a wanton, pleasurable excitement explode inside her, making her body soft, pliant, receptive.

Cathy gave a little moan of protest as his lips were snatched away. She swayed as he dropped his arms and stepped back. She tried to focus on his face. There was a look of consternation there; of horror, almost.

“God! What am I *doing*? I’ve never, *ever*, done anything like this since I was married. Never even *thought* of doing it...”

“N-neither have I,” Cathy stammered, which wasn’t quite true. She’d at least thought of it occasionally, when Ian was being particularly obnoxious.

Geoff pulled himself together, with a visible effort. “I’m terribly sorry, Cathy, I don’t know what came over me to do that—”

“It takes two to tango, Geoff!”

He smiled wryly. “Perhaps it’s a good thing I’m flying back to Sydney tomorrow afternoon. Look — it’s been a wonderful evening. One I’ll never forget, in more ways than one. I’ll go now, and then we won’t spoil it by doing anything to make us feel too guilty, eh?”

Cathy looked into his eyes. She saw the shutters coming down, locking her out of his heart, out of his perfectly satisfactory life. This had been a momentary aberration, an attraction that had caught him unawares. She couldn't resent it; she could only envy the woman who held his affections so securely. She stitched a smile on her face.

"Of course. You're right." She took his hands, feeling a sudden desolation at the wary look that flashed across his face. She gave his hands a little squeeze and dropped them.

"And thank you. I'll always treasure this memory." She forced some animation into her voice, and added, "Now, off you go, before I change my mind!"

He grinned in relief that she was taking it so well, and without touching her again, moved to the door.

"Goodnight then, Cathy, and thanks. Be happy."

It was a long time before Cathy, profoundly disturbed, could get to sleep that night; not because she'd almost invited a perfect stranger into her bed, but because the incident was at last forcing her to reassess her life.

She had no doubt Geoff was thoroughly devoted to his wife. It'd been manifest in practically everything he'd said. Not that he'd talked *about* her; she still knew nothing concrete about her, not even her name. It was just the way she was woven into his conversation, making of the pair of them a seamless garment.

Most of the experiences he talked about were "*we* did", not "*I* did", and his speech was laced with: "my wife thinks" and "as my wife says". And always, then, there was a special tender tone in his voice.

Cathy had heard about such marriages. She'd always thought they were an impossible ideal; now she had to face it: they did really exist.

And if one accepted *that*, it followed that other marriages were second best.

She and Ian had married young, and not for the usual reason. They had both been nineteen, sweethearts from schooldays. That was four years ago.

Marriage and a career had matured Cathy. As for Ian, what had seemed an engaging playfulness in a youth was becoming wearing in an adult. So many of their frequent arguments seemed to end with her saying "Oh, *grow up*, Ian!"

She thought about her childless state. She'd always rationalised it by saying they couldn't afford a child; now, she admitted to herself, she didn't want to have Ian's child.

They were getting up to leave. Geoff glanced her way and said something to Hilary, who frowned and appeared to protest. He spoke again and she sat down mutinously, as he turned and walked towards Cathy.

"So what are you doing now, Cathy?" He took up the conversation from when Hilary had interrupted them.

“I’m tutoring at Gold Coast TAFE College, as well as doing shifts here on the weekends.”

“And are you happy?”

“I suppose so.” Cathy felt uncomfortable. Once again, Geoff was causing her to reassess her life. “At least, I’m not particularly *unhappy*. But what are you doing here?”

“Attending the Institute of Engineers’ annual conference. It’s on at this hotel, didn’t you know?”

“No. I’m just a shift worker. A lot goes on here. The casino and this restaurant run twenty-four hours a day.” She hesitated, then said gently, “Geoff ... how did your wife die?”

“Cancer,” he grated. “That virulent sort that attacks younger women. At least it was reasonably quick.”

“Oh, Geoff ... what can I say?”

“You don’t have to say anything, honey,” he reached out and lightly touched her cheek. “Your face says it all.”

They stared at each other wordlessly for a moment, then he cleared his throat. “Will I see you tomorrow night? We’re having our official end-of-conference dinner here.”

I no sooner find him than he’s off again!

“Yes, I’m on duty,” she said brightly. She looked past him, meeting a withering stare. “You’d better go, Geoff. Hilary’s getting impatient.”

He sighed. “OK. Till tomorrow, then.”

As she drove home to her little flat at Benowa, Cathy wondered about that sigh. She wondered about that years-ago kiss. Had he seen how it shook her, and taken the blame to save her embarrassment? Or had it shaken him, too, out of his happy complacency? She wondered where Hilary fitted in. She pondered the significance of meeting Geoff again, at another turning point in her life.

When she came home from the course five years ago, she hadn’t known it was a turning point. Not until she opened the washing machine, and found the red lacy monogrammed knickers planted by her so-called friend, Michelle.

For the sake of her marriage, she’d always bottled up her resentment of Ian’s occasional infidelities; but now her perceptions had altered.

After the merest hesitation she plucked up the offending garment and carried it at arm’s length, like a piece of stinking offal, to the lounge room, where the unsuspecting Ian sat watching TV as he waited for his dinner. She opened her thumb and forefinger, and the gossamer frippery fluttered down to his lap.

“That’s it, Ian. You’ll hear from my solicitor.”

She marched from the room and began packing. After a moment of stupefaction Ian followed, but she spoke not a word to him, ignoring his cajoling, his bluster, his supplications and finally his tears as she packed her clothes, toiletries, CDs, DVDs, books, linen, towels, cutlery, dinnerware, pots and pans, iron, favourite pictures, rolled

up the microwave and the ironing board in a scatter-rug she particularly fancied and phoned for a stretch-limo to fit it all in, charging the car to Ian's credit card.

Since then, it had been a lonely five years. Regardless of Ian's other shortcomings, he had been quite adequate as a lover. Cathy could have had her pick of one-night stands, but although she had a normal healthy woman's desires, she was too fastidious to be promiscuous. She yearned for a stable relationship.

Henry, another tutor at the college, had seemed to offer that. He wanted her to move in with him, though he hadn't mentioned marriage. She'd been inclined to accept, and had promised to give her answer on Monday.

Now, she knew what her answer would be. Meeting Geoff again had made all the difference; he'd shown her that, again, she was about to settle for second best. Even supposing *he* was committed to Hilary, there must be *someone* special around, who could make her feel special, too ... mustn't there?

"Ms Howard!"

Cathy paused in the hotel's service entrance. Hilary Fenton was hurrying towards her. She raised interrogative eyebrows as the older woman took her elbow and drew her aside.

"Ms Howard, you probably think it's a bit strange to approach you like this," she said confidentially, "but I'm just trying to save you some embarrassment. I don't know how well you know Geoffrey—" she held up her hand as Cathy opened her mouth to speak, "—but I've known him for *ages*. Now, Geoffrey is the sweetest, kindest man one could ever hope to meet, but he *does* have one serious flaw."

Cathy regarded her stonily, her full lips compressed.

"He's a bit of a moral coward. He hates disappointing people, particularly women." Hilary laughed lightly, indulgently. "It gets him into a lot of trouble. So many women take his kindness too literally ... and personally.

"So I just thought I should tell you, that ... we're engaged."

"Congratulations," Cathy said flatly. She removed her arm from Hilary's clutch. "Now I really must go, or I'll get the sack." She fled inside.

There was no chance to speak to Geoff at the dinner that night. Hilary saw to that, clinging like a limpet, claiming his attention whenever it strayed to Cathy as she bustled around the tables. And what could she do, anyway? Show him up as flirting with a waitress, in front of his fiancée and his peers?

At least she discovered his surname, reading it off his nametag. But that was all. Her shift ended before the dinner did.

The next week was hell. Henry took his rejection badly, glowering silently in the staff-room. Everyone knew they'd been a couple; now everyone speculated about why they were not.

The nights were worst. Hilary's remarks festered in Cathy's mind. Was the supposed mutual attraction just a figment of her imagination? He knew her surname now. He could Google her. If he cared, surely he'd have called. It seemed she was too late. Hilary had got there first.

Her mood changed again when she arrived at the restaurant on Friday night. There, mocking her, was the empty table where he'd sat. Her sadness switched to defiance.

"Dammit, she's *not* right for him!" she muttered to herself. "Forget your pride. Ring him tomorrow. There can't be *that* many G Alders in Sydney!"

The evening passed in a daze. When her shift was over, she was just about to leave when Margaret accosted her. "Cathy, could you get that guy who just came in?"

"I'm about to go off—"

"Just do it, would you?" she snapped. "It's been a hell of a night."

I *need* this job, Cathy thought angrily, as she went to the man who was sitting with his back to her. She forced a smidgen of welcome into her tone. "Good evening, sir. What would you like?"

"I'd like you to join me for supper," he said quietly.

"Geoff!" he leapt to his feet, took her hand and guided her to the chair just as her knees gave way. "What — where—"

"From Sydney. To see you." Margaret appeared at his elbow, a fatuous, conspiratorial grin on her face. "I think — caviar and champagne, with coffee to follow. Suit you?" He raised an eyebrow, and Cathy nodded, unable to form any words. As Margaret left, he reached across the table and took both her hands in his.

"We need to talk. I didn't have a chance last Saturday night."

"No. Hilary saw to that!"

He frowned. "Yes. I'm sorry about that. It was a mistake bringing her, but then I never knew *you'd* be here."

"Well, if she's your fiancée—" she stopped at his expression.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Something in her face gave the answer. "From Hilary?" Cathy nodded. "She had no right to say that! She was an old friend of ours, that's all. She divorced, and came to live up here. I looked her up, thinking..." He stopped, then went on quietly, "It's a long story, Cathy."

She squeezed his hands. "Tell me."

He was silent for a moment, his thumbs gently stroking the backs of her fingers. "When Ingrid died, it damn near killed *me*, too. What we had was so special ... I knew I could never replace her." Cathy felt a chill of foreboding, but then his eyes lifted to hers,

and gradually their bleakness faded. “That’s when thinking of you was such a comfort to me.”

“*Me?* Why?”

“Yes, you. When I met you, I loved Ingrid totally, but still you had the power to move me, deeply. In the lonely years after I lost her, it started me thinking about the nature of love.

“You’re nothing like she was physically. She was tall and fair, you’re petite and dark. She was grave, while you sparkle. But you were both infinitely lovable women. I realised then that you don’t love a person for their resemblance to another loved one, but for their own unique personality and qualities. So you see, it’s nothing to do with replacement. It’s a whole new beginning.

“I never thought of looking you up. I thought you were happily married. When I came up here, I looked up Hilary instead ... she was someone I knew ... and then I saw you! And I knew I was about to settle for second best.”

Cathy gasped, caught off guard.

“And so, I just had to come back when she wasn’t around, and see if you were—”

Cathy made up her mind in an instant. “Available? Most definitely and very much available.”

He laughed at her vehemence. “And so, I’ve spent this past week organising things at work, so I could take a month off to court you.”

“Court...?”

“It’s an old-fashioned notion, isn’t it?” His eyes danced, as he recognised the love shining in hers. “Perhaps we could cut the courting short, and go straight on to the honeymoon?”

Cathy gazed at his expressive face, and saw the pain-lines were fading already. She felt a surge of power; *she* had done that, just by her presence. Before the month was out, she vowed, she’d bring back that look of sleek contentment he’d shown five years ago. And he’d give that blessing to her face in return.

“That’s the best offer I’ve had in this lifetime,” she whispered, as the champagne arrived. “I’ll take it.”