**Which One is the Real Susanne?**

Susanne sourly looked at the sink, bloated with the mounting pots, pans, and bowls. The dinner came and went. Between listening to her husband’s woes about his colleague who, once again, lost an important document, delaying the contract signing, her oldest child’s upcoming field trip, ladling chili into bowls careful not to drop any onto the crispy white tablecloth, taking mental notes to schedule an eye doctor appointment for the youngest as she’s begun squinting more than usual, refilling the dog’s water bowl, running to the kitchen for an extra spoon, worrying about her cherished houseplant looking sadder than usual, checking the weather to see if she needs to take the winter clothes out of the upstairs closet, and remembering that she never returned her friend’s phone call, Susanne did not even register how the chili tasted. Was it too salty? Indeed, someone would have said something, especially her oldest – a picky eater. Was there enough? She kept trying to find the perfect balance between feeding everyone and not making so much that they would have to eat the leftovers for days. Did she add enough beans? The doctor said the kids should eat more legumes, but she could not remember if she used two or three cans of kidney beans. The pots, pans, and bowls stared back at her reproachfully. Susanne rolled her sleeves and got to work, her exhausted mind still firing up. Her husband hung around in the kitchen, trying to help her dry the dishes, but she waved him away, the soap bubbles landing on the floor.

              Half an hour later, the kitchen sparkling, Susanne stood in the bathroom. She looked in the mirror, trying to glimpse the old Susanne, now buried under the weight of her daily worries.  Downstairs, the dog barked, wanting to be let outside. Susanne heard her husband grunt and get up from the bed, and then the stairs creaked as he descended. When did the stairs begin to creak? They should have installed the doggy door in the backyard over the summer. Did anyone take the dog out for a walk today? Did she fill his water bowl? Yes, she did when they had dinner. Did she feed the dog? She must have; otherwise, the dog would have made it known. Did the kids go to bed? Susanne did not remember saying goodnight to them. She walked down the hall and peered into the oldest kid’s bedroom. A faint flashlight glow flared up the kid’s face as he looked up at her. Susanne did not want to nag. She said goodnight and gently shut his door, not hearing anything back. She walked to the youngest child’s bedroom and found her on the floor, playing with Legos. Susanne walked in and pulled the covers back, inviting her daughter to get into bed, and turned on the nightlight. She kissed her daughter goodnight and retreated, stepping on a Lego, biting her lip, and turning off the light. Susanne tiptoed into the bathroom and got ready for bed, noting that they were running low on toothpaste and the shower glass door needed cleaning. Did she have some glass cleaner? Need to check if she must pick up any at the store tomorrow. Finally, she got into bed. Her husband turned to her and reminded her to set an early alarm for the oldest kid’s field trip. Before falling asleep, Susanne remembered her friend’s call again, but it was late. She would call her back in the morning.

              The morning routine was complete. Everyone had breakfast. Susanne got their winter jackets out of the closet and brought them downstairs. The temperatures dropped overnight, and it was supposed to be a chilly day. Susanne’s husband rushed out of the house to deal with the contract at work, the oldest made it to the bus leaving for the field trip, and the youngest was dropped off at the daycare. Susanne stopped at the pharmacy to get more toothpaste. On the way home, she turned off the car radio; it was much too loud for her racing thoughts. Was there something she forgot to do? The glass cleaner! Susanne rushed to the door and looked under the kitchen sink. The last bits of the glass cleaner swished around in the bottle. If she dilutes it with water, it might be enough to clean the shower doors, and she would get more. The dog wagged his tail. His water bowl was empty. Did he have breakfast? Susanne refilled the bowl with some kibble, just in case. She caught a glimpse of her houseplant, its droopy leaves despairingly hanging around the pot. She should feed it some fertilizer and maybe move it to another spot with more sunshine. Was it seasonal? Perhaps she was watering it too much or too little. She should look for that copy of the houseplant magazine she’d saved; it had an article.

Where was that copy? Susanne dug through the cabinet in the living room where they stored old newspaper cutouts, magazines, and photo albums. She took one of the photo albums out. Her college years, back when they still had to bring the camera film to be developed rather than snapping instantaneous pictures on their phones. She opened the album and saw her younger self stare back. The young Susanne’s hair framed her youthful face as she laughed alongside her two classmates, the green lawn of their college campus stretching out behind them, dotted with groups of other students. That was the final weeks before their graduation. The coursework was done, the classes were half-full, and the sun was bright. They would sneak out of classes early and sit on the lawn, the sunshine warming their faces, elated to begin their next chapter. Susanne had had her summer internship at a finance firm lined up, anticipating it being turned into a full-time offer by the time the trees started turning the leaves. It did not happen. Susanne sighed and shut the album. The copy of the magazine was not in the cabinet. It must be in the attic, taken there with other junk. Susanne made a mental note to remind her husband to get the storage bin with old magazines down from the attic when he came home. The dog barked. Susanne let him outside and absentmindedly stared into the backyard as the dog ran around in circles, barking at the squirrel on the pine tree. She would have to pick up her youngest soon; she only stayed half a day at the daycare. Susanne checked the time on her phone and had a pang of guilt. She forgot something. The eye doctor appointment! She made the call and scheduled it for next week.

              Susanne looked at the sink, bloated with the mounting pots, pans, and bowls. The aftermath of a busy family dinner filled with laughter and banter. Her husband talked about his colleague who, once again, lost an important document, delaying the contract signing – can you imagine? Her oldest child excitedly chatted about his upcoming field trip as Susanne ladled chili into bowls, careful not to drop any onto the crispy white tablecloth, which was her grandmother’s and cherished. Susanne lovingly glanced at her youngest and noticed her squint again – an eye doctor should be able to sort it out. The dog hung around the kitchen table, begging for scraps, and everyone laughed as Susanne refilled his water bowl, desperate to get the dog’s attention away from the table. The youngest dropped her spoon, which the dog excitedly rushed to, and Susanne ran into the kitchen to grab her a new one. Returning to the dinner table, she saw her house plant looking sadder than usual. She should find that copy of the old magazine she had on it... or better yet, call her friend who was a walking encyclopedia on houseplants! She was excited to catch up with her, having missed her friend’s call the other night. Amid the family chattering, Susanne heard the furnace click on and thought she needed to take the winter clothes out of the upstairs closet. Winter was coming, which meant Christmas, her favorite holiday. Susanne had cleared her bowl of chili and realized she did not even register its taste, being busy listening to her family. She knew she did not oversalt it this time, judging by her oldest kid finishing up his bowl. She might have finally found a good balance; everyone was full, and the pot was empty – no icky leftovers, as her oldest, the peaky eater, called it. Susanne’s husband said he liked the extra beans she had added – great; the kids should have more legumes, according to their doctor. The pots, pans, and bowls stared back at her invitingly. Susanne rolled her sleeves and got to work. Her husband hung around in the kitchen, helping her to dry the dishes, the soap bubbles landing on the floor as she handed him the next bowl to dry.

              Half an hour later, the kitchen sparkling, Susanne stood in the bathroom. She looked in the mirror, curiously studying her face, now soft and mature, for a glimpse of the old, bubbly Susanne. Her eyes sparkled briefly, and she found her. Downstairs, the dog barked, wanting to be let outside. Susanne heard her husband get up from the bed, and then the stairs creaked as he dashed downstairs. When did the stairs begin to creak? She never noticed before, but the sound brought her sudden comfort. It was a sign of their long history in the house, from just the two of them to a bustling family of five, including the dog. They should have installed the doggy door in the backyard over the summer, but it’s not too late now. Did anyone take the dog out for a walk today? No, but Susanne remembered looking through the French doors into the backyard as her husband and kids ran around with the dog and chuckled. Did she feed the dog? He got lots of scraps from the kids who secretly fed him cornbread and chicken fished out of the chili under the table, Susanne pretending not to notice. Did the kids go to bed? Susanne did not remember saying goodnight to them. She walked down the hall and peered into the oldest kid’s bedroom. A faint flashlight glow flared up the kid’s face as he looked up at her. He always snuck away a couple of pages of his book before bed, such a smart boy. She walked up to him, turned his reading light on, and said goodnight. He muttered back, buried in the book. Susanne then walked to the youngest child’s bedroom and found her on the floor, playing with Legos. Her husband always said she would grow up to be an architect, and the quaint Lego structure her daughter had built made Susanne smile. Maybe a very whimsical architect! Susanne walked in and pulled the covers back, inviting her daughter to get into bed, and turned on the nightlight. She kissed her daughter goodnight and retreated, stepping on a Lego, biting her lip, and turning off the light. Susanne tiptoed into the bathroom and got ready for bed, noting that they were running low on toothpaste and the shower glass door needed cleaning. Did she have some glass cleaner? Need to check if she must pick up any at the store tomorrow. Finally, she got into bed. Her husband turned to her and reminded her to set an early alarm for the oldest kid’s field trip. Susanne jokingly pushed him, reminding him he was on duty the following morning. Before falling asleep, Susanne again remembered about her friend’s call. She would call her back in the morning.

              The morning routine was complete. Susanne had woken up early. It was her husband’s morning, but he pleaded, desperate to get to work to sort out the contract. She mischievously told him he owed her one. Everyone had breakfast. Susanne got their winter jackets out of the closet and brought them downstairs. The temperatures dropped overnight, and it was supposed to be a chilly day. The oldest made it to the bus leaving for the field trip, and Susanne dropped the youngest off at the daycare. Susanne stopped at the pharmacy to get more toothpaste. On the way home, a song she liked came up on the radio, and Susanne quietly hummed to it as she pulled into the driveway. Was there something she forgot to do? The glass cleaner! Susanne rushed to the door and looked under the kitchen sink. The last bits of the glass cleaner swished around in the bottle. If she dilutes it with water, it might be enough to clean the shower doors, and she would get more. The dog wagged his tail. His water bowl was empty. Did he have breakfast? Susanne refilled the bowl with some kibble, just in case. She caught a glimpse of her houseplant, its droopy leaves despairingly hanging around the pot. She should feed it some fertilizer and maybe move it to another spot with more sunshine. Was it seasonal? Perhaps she was watering it too much or too little. She should look for that copy of the houseplant magazine she’d saved; it had an article on it. Or better yet, Susanne remembered, call her friend! She dialed her friend’s number, and she picked up, happy to hear from Susanne. They had chatted for an hour, so caught up in recounting their days, little news about their families, the weather, and making plans to get together for a coffee that Susanne had utterly forgotten to ask her about her houseplant.

Where was that magazine copy? Susanne dug through the cabinet in the living room where they stored old newspaper cutouts, magazines, and photo albums. She took one of the photo albums out. Her college years, back when they still had to bring the camera film to be developed rather than snapping instantaneous pictures on their phones. She opened the album and saw her younger self stare back. The young Susanne’s hair framed her youthful face as she laughed alongside her two classmates, the green lawn of their college campus stretching out behind them, dotted with groups of other students. That was the final weeks before their graduation. The coursework was done, the classes were half-full, and the sun was bright. They would sneak out of classes early and sit on the lawn, the sunshine warming their faces, elated to begin their next chapter. Susanne had had her summer internship at a finance firm lined up, anticipating it being turned into a full-time offer by the time the trees started turning the leaves. That did not happen as planned, but what she gained was much better. Susanne shut the album. The copy of the magazine was not in the cabinet. It must be in the attic; taken there with other trinkets and old things they never had the heart to throw away. Susanne made a mental note to remind her husband to get the storage bin with old magazines down from the attic when he came home. Along with the Christmas decoration boxes, even though it was much too early for that. The dog barked. Susanne let him out and chuckled as the dog ran around in circles, barking at the squirrel on the pine tree. She would have to pick up her youngest soon; she only stayed half a day at the daycare. Susanne checked the time on her phone and had a pang of guilt. She forgot something. The eye doctor appointment! She made the call and scheduled it for next week.