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Family to Rent

by Vera Gajic

He'd been dreaming about Maureen again, her kind eyes, her thick hair and crooked smile. She'd walked her fingers up his arm and woken him. It was the first time he'd felt sexually aroused by the idea of Maureen, this was new, this confirmed he was falling in love with her.

When he'd booked his "wife" at the agency he'd specifically asked for an unattractive woman in her 40s. He wanted a realistic wife, someone that might actually have married him. George knew he wasn't attractive or rich, or funny. All of which meant he was single.

When Maureen arrived he couldn't believe how comfortable she was, that was the word, comfortable. He felt more comfortable with her than with anyone since his mother died. With her mousy unkempt hair, pink lipstick and sensible skirt, there was nothing threatening or flashy about Maureen. You certainly wouldn't notice her in the supermarket.

This last year had been the happiest in his life. He spent all week looking forward to Saturday and he felt sure that Maureen had started to feel the same. There were little signs, she was flushed on arrival, there was a sparkle in her eye, she dressed better. She had been careful not to tell him anything about her private life but she couldn't change her kind nature and her cultured background. She must have felt how well they got on, she must have some feelings for him.

Now that he knew how much he wanted Maureen he decided he had to say something. Nothing shocking like proposing but he needed to know that he meant something to her and they could meet like a real couple.

He rehearsed what he was going to say and by the time he was at the café he was word perfect. He was sitting at their normal table with two coffees ready. He would start by asking how her week had been and what plans she had for Sunday. Then he would say how lovely it would be if he could see her on Sunday too but not through the agency, not because of the money of course.

He'd been through it a few times in his head but she was late. This was not like Maureen. When she did arrive she looked unusually flushed.

"I'm so sorry I'm late George, specially for our last meeting," she said.

That sentence went through George like a thunderbolt, "what do you mean our last meeting? I wanted..."

"George, don't look so surprised, it's been lovely meeting you, but you know you only booked me for a year and now we have the break-up. Normally I would start being difficult for a couple of weeks and we'd argue a lot so it would feel like a natural break-up, makes it easier, but you see I'm giving up this job. I'm getting married to John. I meet him on Saturdays too, just after you. Lovely man, he declared his love for me a few weeks ago, we're going to get married and move to Spain."

George couldn't speak, this couldn't be happening.

"But, but Maureen, you can't leave me, I love you," but he couldn't actually say it out loud, John had beaten him to it.