

Sweaters

My friend Jill's husband died of a heart attack; I saw his name in the obituary and decided to visit her. We went to high school together, Jill and I, then saw each other at reunions, and for a couple years after college we played in the same adult soccer league. We had not talked in several months, the last time being when we ran into each other at the grocery store and chatted about how our holidays had gone. I never spoke to Wayne, her husband. He was sixty, the obituary said. I didn't realize Jill was younger than him. He was quiet and successful and had never given me more than a polite nod.

I baked a chicken casserole and signed my name in a yellow sympathy card that I bought at a drug store. As soon as I closed the card, I realized that it was a pointless thing to give her and threw it away. Of course I was sorry for her loss. No store-bought card will ever say that better than a casserole will. I didn't call ahead to tell her I was coming. Our town was quite small, not the type that warranted phone calls for these types of visits. Her house was a twelve minute drive from mine, yellow, and two stories tall. On her front porch were two rocking chairs and some wilted ferns. There were no cars in the driveway, but the door and windows were open. I rang the doorbell anyway and stood with my casserole dish.

From the back of the house Jill yelled, "Come in!" I entered, and the wooden floor creaked under my feet. Several bouquets of flowers sat in the hallway. It didn't smell like flowers. It smelled like coffee, warm and potent and rich. I remembered the smell of the coffee shop she owned for years when we were younger. She was so proud of that coffee shop. Standing in her hallway, I realized I couldn't remember what it was called.

To my right was the living room and its empty armchairs. There were no lights on. As I walked toward the back of the house, a cat's head appeared at the end of the hall. It looked at me and I looked back. It went back into the room it came from. I followed it.

Jill sat at her kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. Steam was rising from it and dissipating around her face. The stove and counter behind her were covered with various dishes of food. She looked up at me as I entered and a slow smile came over her face. "Elaine," she said. "How nice to see you." She did not move from her seat, but took a sip of her coffee and kept the mug in her hands, pulling it close to her chest.

"Hi, Jill. I made you a casserole." I held up the casserole dish in my hand. I wasn't sure how much sympathy was appropriate. "I'm so sorry about your husband," I said.

She gestured to the counter behind her, and I set the dish down. "Here, sit," she said, pulling out the chair beside her. I did, and the cat wrapped itself around my leg. I reached down to scratch it.

"That's Marmalade," Jill said. "She's Wayne's cat. I always wanted a dog, but he's allergic – was – and so this was our compromise." She reached down and scratched Marmalade behind the ear. "You hate me, don't you?" She said to the cat, and laughed. Then, looking back up at me, she said, "Did you ever meet Wayne?"

"No, I didn't," I said, straightening up. "At least, never officially." I felt foolish, coming to the house of a dead man I'd never known and petting his cat.

"He was a wonderful man," Jill said. "Quiet, but so kind. And healthy, too. I mean, we didn't see a heart attack coming, of all things. He exercised more than I ever have. Treated his

body well. But, you know, sometimes these things happen.” I wondered how many times over the past few days Jill had said these words to people in her kitchen. Or told them to herself.

“It sure is strange,” I said. “I mean, my father was overweight for my whole life. He never thought twice about his heart. He was a smoker, too. But he didn’t care. And he lived to be ninety-nine years old. For the last ten years, I was just waiting for that call. I was sure that’s what would kill him. But it wasn’t. He got dementia. And eventually he just went.”

Jill exhaled through her nose and nodded. “I’ll never understand it.” She was still holding her coffee mug tight in her hands. “I sure do miss him, though.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said again.

She shook her head. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about, sweetie. Life goes on, doesn’t it?” She took a sip of her coffee. “People have been coming and going for the past two days, bringing me food and telling me how sorry they are. That’s not what he would have wanted. He never liked all the formality of grief.”

I nodded. “What would he have wanted?”

Jill thought for a moment. “I don’t know,” she said. “I really don’t. I mean, he would have wanted his life to be celebrated, not his death to be mourned. That’s probably cliché. Is it? I don’t know. I don’t think he would want everyone dressed in black, talking about him in a sanctuary. But you know, we never talked about it. We never thought much about the fact that we were old enough to die.”

I remembered my mother calling me to tell me my father had died. Her tone had been flat and calm, because she knew that I already knew every word she was about to say. She’d given

me the “he’s out of his suffering now” line, but she was really saying that she was out of her suffering. She didn’t have to spend another day looking into the eyes of someone who didn’t know her name. My dad’s funeral was in a Baptist church, officiated by a man he’d never met.

“Anyway, I’ve been going through his things,” Jill said. “He never got rid of anything. So I’ve certainly got something to keep me busy for the week. And this morning I started sorting through his sweater collection. He has dozens. They’re nice. But I can’t keep them. I’ll never wear them. So if you’d like one, you can take one with you. For yourself or your husband. Or whoever you’d like. I really can’t keep them all.”

“I’ll take a look,” I said, even though I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“They’re upstairs,” Jill said. We stood and left the kitchen. Jill’s hand slid along the wooden banister as we walked up the staircase. Her other hand still held her coffee, which was no longer steaming.

I followed her into her bedroom and stared at the bed covered in layers and layers of cloth. There really were dozens of sweaters, folded up on top of themselves, arranged by color and fabric. Some were worn at the edges, others looked brand new. A gray cashmere pullover still had its tags on. I reached out and dragged my fingers across it. Cashmere always made me want to bury my face in it and go to sleep.

“He bought a sweater in every town we ever went to. Wore them all winter long. And they never got old. I mean, some of these he’s probably had for thirty years.” She picked up a maroon one with white stripes and refolded it. I picked up the one nearest to me, which was dark blue and faded. “That’s one of the old ones,” she said. “Actually, that one might have been passed down to him. So I really have no idea how old that one is.”

“How often did you two travel?” Jill and Wayne didn’t have children. I knew he had a good job, and I knew she came from a well-off family. But I didn’t know anything about their lives together. The things they did, the way they had spent twenty-some years.

“For a while, we were traveling all the time,” she said. “He had to for his job, you know, and sometimes I’d just go with him. And we’ve gone on a trip almost every summer since we got married. But once I closed Stomping Grounds and got a real job, I stopped traveling with him as often.” Stomping Grounds. That’s what it was called. As soon as she said it, I could remember the hand-painted sign hanging above the shop’s entrance. “I wasn’t in love with him.”

“What?” I looked up from the white Irish fisherman sweater I was holding. She was clutching a dark green sweater, staring into the wool as if it was trying to tell her something. I didn’t move and she didn’t move and there we were, standing together, clutching her dead husband’s clothes and wondering who would break the silence. She did.

“I mean, I loved him.” She looked up at me. “I loved him. Of course I loved him. I married him, you know? And lived with him for twenty-seven years. And shared my life with him. So of course I loved him. But *in* love with him...” She trailed off and shook her head. “I know I wasn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he was in love with me. I mean, it was so obvious. All the time. Every day, it was so clear to me that he was so in love with me. And we were happy, sure, and now he’s dead and he’ll never know the difference, but I lied, you know? That’s what I did. I don’t want that to be it, but it is. I lied. Even to myself. But I’ve been thinking about it all day, and you know, even though I’ll miss him forever – which I will, I mean, come on, he was my husband – I don’t think

my heart is broken. You hear stories, you know, about people dying of grief when the love of their life dies. And I..." She looked back into the green sweater. "This was his favorite one." She passed it to me. "Smell it."

I brought the fabric to my face and inhaled the sweet, faint smell of stale smoke. The wool was thick and warm. "It smells like cigars," I said.

"In '93, a friend of ours brought us a box of cigars from a trip to Paris. We started smoking them together at night, every night, on the back porch. We would just smoke and talk, and it was so nice, we bought more when we ran out. And I guess we were both addicted for about a year." She laughed. "We had to force ourselves to quit."

"Love is complicated," I said. "I mean, everyone experiences it differently. And you did love him. So maybe you didn't love him as much as he loved you. But that's okay, right? If you were both happy?"

"Maybe." Jill took the sweater out of my hands and folded it back up. "But I don't know... if I was happy. I mean, I was content. And I don't regret anything. But maybe I settled."

"I don't think you settled."

"I don't know." She was smelling the sweater again. "I feel like I did. But the thing is, I don't even feel bad about it. I don't even feel guilty. Shouldn't I feel guilty? Or feel some regret? I mean, my life could have gone completely differently, but I don't really care. And that just feels wrong."

"Haven't you had a good life, though?" I was thinking about Stomping Grounds. Every time I had gone inside that shop, Jill had been behind the counter, a smile on her face, making

drinks and jokes. It always smelled like freshly roasted coffee beans, and customers would sit for hours doing work or reading books or just talking to each other. When it closed, a clothing store moved into the building. When that closed, it became a Starbucks. I hadn't been there in at least ten years.

“That’s the thing. It’s been good. But it’s always been easy. I stayed in my hometown, I married a man who was good to me, I didn’t have kids.” Jill sat down on the edge of the bed. “But now my husband’s dead, and I don’t want to change anything. And that scares the hell out of me. Elaine, how many times have you been in love?”

I thought about it. “When I was ten years old, I was convinced that I was in love with a boy at school. I told my mother, and she told me I was going to keep thinking that for a while, but eventually I wouldn’t anymore, and I would meet someone else I liked. But for years, even after that boy moved to another town, I still thought he was the one for me. I imagined us meeting again, falling in love, getting married. I didn’t think there could be anyone else for me. And I fell in love with people when I was in college, and now I’m in love with Steven, and I still feel it every day. But I don’t think that made my ten-year-old love any less real. I mean, it wasn’t as much love as I feel now. But I was still in love with him.”

I was a little shocked by my own words. I’d never told anyone about my first love, and I hadn’t even thought about it in decades, but I found myself wondering what became of him. “Wayne loved me like that,” Jill said. “I know he did. But he also cheated.” She said this as if she was telling me his favorite color.

“He did?” I felt myself snapping back to reality. My childhood crush moved away, and men cheat.

“He never told me, but I know he did. I’m not oblivious. It was years ago, with a coworker, and I don’t think it lasted long, but I knew he was having an affair. And what does that say about us? I didn’t love him, and I married him. He loved me, and he cheated. Neither of us did what we were supposed to do.”

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I left Jill’s house with two sweaters. She hugged me goodbye, saying, “Thank you so much for coming, Elaine. Let’s see each other again sometime. You really are a sweetheart.” I was in the kitchen when Steven got home. He had grocery bags in one hand and his phone in the other, held up to his ear. He was talking business and smiling, which he was always careful to do on professional calls. When he hung up, I said, “How was your day?”

“Oh, fantastic. Great things happening at work. And look, I got us chips and salsa.” He held the bags up, looking triumphant. “How was yours?”

“It was alright. I took a casserole over to Jill.”

“That’s sweet. How is she doing?”

“She’s doing okay.” I watched him empty the last grocery bag. He pulled a soda out of the fridge and held it out towards me, eyebrows raised. I shook my head and he put it back.

“Honey, do you love me?”

“What?” Steven grinned and his shoulders jerked up for a moment as if there was a laugh inside him that didn’t make it out. “Of course I love you,” he said as he put the milk and butter in the fridge and closed the door.

“Are you in love with me?”

“Of course I am. What are you talking about?” He leaned over to give me a kiss.

“There are seven billion people in the world. Do you think there’s a single person you could love as much as you love me?”

“Not a single one,” he said.

“I don’t believe you.”

“What do you mean? I married you, didn’t I?”

“But statistically, it doesn’t make sense. How am I the only person you could love that much?”

“Well, don’t you love me that much?”

I didn’t answer for a moment. I thought again about my mother’s voice on the phone, how she hid the relief in her voice when she told me her husband was dead. The eulogy she gave at the funeral. The black dress she wore. And then about the way she explained love to her ten-year-old daughter, telling me that it would eventually go away. The smell of cigar smoke, too faint for Steven to notice, crept up from the collar of the sweater I was wearing.

“Of course I do, honey,” I said. “Of course I do.”