

Just Before She Left

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The wrong dress puckered at her hips and bubbled unevenly like misplaced Saran wrap from her waist to her underarms. She checked the tag, a 14, still too small or maybe it was the style. Just not her type. No matter how much she jogged or swam, or played volleyball, it would still look like she had been poured into it.

The dressing room smelled of a backed up toilet and old food. She promised herself no more thrift stores after this. Though she knew the department stores had masses of the same colors and patterns and smelled of the cosmetic and perfume counter, it was no less frustrating shopping there to find exactly what she needed at the last minute. The truth of the matter was that she didn't want to go, so she waited until she couldn't anymore, hours before the event.

If she hadn't picked up the phone without looking at the Caller ID two weeks ago, she wouldn't be standing there examining the pinched cloth that covered the sagging skin underneath. She could have told Bob when he called the next day after his soiree that she had blitzed out to Joleen's farm to visit her horse and dog and had missed his call and his invitation to be his arm candy. They were each other's default and she owed him. She just wasn't in the mood to pay.

His heartaches always seemed to sucker-punch him and he had an insidious way of snaking into her reserves and siphoning every last ounce of good friend out of her. She could handle the tears and even the way he would never let go of her hand when he asked again and again what was it, what was he doing wrong? Why did Mary, Stephanie, Beth, Karen, and all the others leave him? And they were leaving sooner now, too. Beth ended things in six weeks, Mary four.

Diane couldn't answer him because it would implicate her and she still needed him to help her move in three months and help paint and tile before then. She could listen to him for free labor. She could give him Kleenex, let her hand get sweaty and find a dress for an interminable evening of smiling and chatting with people she'd never have to see again once she moved to Virginia.

Bob had locked Diane's elbow and forearm with his for most of the night. The only time he'd let her free was when she had to use the bathroom. She'd left him six times to fix her hair which had so much mousse and spray in it, a tornado would have had trouble parting it. There was nothing to fix and only one of those times did she actually have to pee, but she had to get away. Her dress kept sticking to her where he held her so close. The long-sleeve rayon-polyester blend dropped neatly over her shoulders down to just above her knees. The hand embroidered moon and two pine trees on one shoulder and near the left knee cinched it for her. That and that it covered her worst feature: her saddle bag hips, and showed off her best: her neck. Simple, unique, but not threatening. A good friend dress that Bob's next girlfriend would not second-guess. He was bound to meet her that night. He had to.

They had never found their way into each other's arms: Diane made it clear she wanted and needed a friend only the day after they met at the picnic and he'd called her to meet for lunch. His eyes were glassy, wanting, it repelled her. Who called the day after? Definitely too desperate and needy. But he made her laugh and forget. She was very practical about matters of the heart. Bring no one in unless you are prepared to change your schedule and open your heart. Being closed was easier, less messy.

The last man broke her heart into so many pieces, she didn't ever think she'd find them all. The light had to catch some of the fragments just right before she could sweep them all together. He had been perfect: a classical guitarist and mortgage broker. When he wasn't closing deals on houses or refinancing his regulars, he practiced with the vigilance of a concert professional. He had a private teacher and met with other local dedicated guitarists regularly. He was busy, she was busy. She organized and planned conferences. She nurtured every last detail of anyone's event as though her black lab, Charley needed nursing back to health. Nothing was left unfinished or overlooked. She never forgot anything and she had trained herself to sleep only five hours a night.

So, when they found time to be together, it was mad, passionate, and the most tender love she had ever known. He attended to her like a slave and she gave him anything he wanted. She knew she couldn't give to him like this all the time but also knew she wouldn't have to either.

It surprised her only a little that he announced his intent to travel overseas to Vienna for a tour and month-long class with his guitar group. She saw it only as a blip in their otherwise reliable relationship.

The month only became long on the 17th day. Then, she missed his smell. He called irregularly and many times missed speaking with her. The messages did not keep her warm at night.

He was different when he got home. There were more guitar seminars and classes. His enthusiasm for mastering techniques methodically and with the utmost care made her jealous. He didn't call her funny names anymore but worse, was a creeping feeling that she had never felt what he felt about the guitar for anything. This simple truth had always rattled low inside her but now was too audible for her to ignore.

But they went on. He doted on her enough when they were together and this calmed her during the lonesome times. She hated herself for wanting things to remain the same but she did.

When he announced that he was selling his mortgage business and moving to Vienna, her heart turned to blown glass: thin, frail, and transparent. She held it out to him. He didn't even ask her to go with him.

Diane forgot, or rather worked her way through forgetting when the flints of her ungathered heart winked at her.

Bob had been the first man she'd met since Jeremy left over two years ago. And they were fast friends after she told him no, she would not sleep with him. It had been good enough for eight months, something she could handle mostly. It only became difficult when he moaned on and on about how much he had done for these women and how little he got back in return. A simple good night phone call or an 'I love you' when they looked him in the eye. That's all. But he moved too quickly and always started talking about rings and where to live. "Go slowly, Bob. Give this one a chance to breathe. Don't ask her what kind of dishes she has just yet, okay?" Diane would advise. He was getting too old for this. A woman was either in his life or not. Period. And it would have been okay if he had truly drawn the line like this, but he didn't let go easily. He'd make contact weeks after the woman had announced, 'don't ever talk to me again,' dropping an e-mail about a tool he'd left at her place. It was a silly little-boy ploy to get her to call him again. Only one of them did respond and that was to laugh on his voicemail at a bill he'd sent for painting and hanging new doors at her place. Through all of the drama, Diane would sigh and pat his hand, privately glad she had never slept with him.

His attention made the shadows in her life distant and less gray, however. With him, she forgot about being the only one among her friends and family who was single and who had no

children. She never stopped long enough to want or not want those things, she only felt as though she should have them. She knew better than to believe she could select them off the shelf, and if they didn't fit, put them back. A part of her wished it could be that simple though. She had given herself all the comforts of life and felt content, pleased that she could make this happen alone.

Bob's other gift to her was of laughter. She would never forget how he jumped up onto the picnic table in front of the singles group and opened his arms singing. Delighted with his ebullience, she laughed until her stomach hurt.

Diane exited the bathroom and bayoneted people's eyes with her own as she bee-lined for the cubes of cheese. Someone brushed behind her causing her to push her hips into the edge of the table. She felt certain it was Bob ready to affix her to his side again but it wasn't. Rather, just someone squeezing past her to get to the table of wine.

She lowered her eyes for a moment to choose a few cubes of cheese. Their speckled herbs and incalculable divots reflected an oasis she lost herself in. She didn't even sense Bob around. It occurred to her to leave but she didn't allow herself to carve a path toward her coat.

Piano music floated in from two rooms away. Debussy, The Arabesque. She followed the sound as if sniffing out a fresh pie.

Bob's upper body swayed as his hands swept over the black and white keys in graceful arcs. Mesmerized by the enchanting melody, Diane closed her eyes as she leaned against the wall. She lost herself and forgot about everyone around her long enough to wish he would play it again and again.

He paused not more than the equivalent of two measures before moving onto a Bach Toccata and then selections from Bartok's Mikrokosmos. Well out of her dream state, she stepped away, back to the cheese and strawberries.

If she didn't say good-bye, he'd call her at the office until she would pick up or leave her message after message at home. He would whine and plead until she'd agree to have lunch to explain herself. She couldn't interrupt him in the middle of his playing. It was his soiree. How much could free tiling and paint be worth? Worth not having to explain herself? Worth unclogging her voice mail with his messages? Or, was it worth hiring the work out? Would he bill her for what he had done already? Was it worth never seeing or talking to him again? Worth him showing up wanting to talk to her? He would need to talk, to know why even his friends were leaving him behind.

He shook peoples' hands and gave them hugs and kisses thanking them for enjoying his playing. She stood in an ill-formed line and waited.

"Oh no no no. It's far too early. This is just intermission." He was expectant, innocent. "If you're tired, I know you don't know many people here. But you don't have to because you know me, he he. You don't have to walk around with me anymore. Here here. Wait in here. It won't be much longer. I've got a surprise for you."

He guided Diane into his office upstairs. His computer faced out a window and the walls were blocked off into segments of framed awards and recognition from juried art shows for his ornate woodwork and photos and employee of the month certificates from his early days as a journeyman plumber.

He closed the door and said he'd be back soon. She sighed as she eased into the only soft thing in the room: his office chair. She pulled the matching footstool out from the corner and stretched out. She folded her arms and closed her eyes.

The dreams were spotty and dramatic. She saw the face of the boy she loved when she was eleven. Max. He was thirteen. He used to draw a line from her eyebrow to her cheek with his finger and part his lips lightly in a shy smile. They would walk along the country road between his house and her aunt's in the dead heat of that Michigan summer. He would hold only one finger but it always made her toes tingle and her heart race. He showed her how he chased a chicken and brushed down a horse. He took her to his favorite spot under a willow tree at the edge of their hay field. He loved the sound of her voice and the wind through her hair. He was the first person she'd ever kissed. He had her heart and she told him that. Two weeks was the agreed upon length for the vacation that her parents had set up with her aunt, but Diane promised to return soon. Her aunt and uncle had had that farm forever. She'd be back.

They wrote and on a very rare Sunday, he would call her. Next time never arrived though. Uncle Larry got brain cancer and Aunt Jessie couldn't support the farm by herself. Their boys, grown and gone, had no interest in sustaining it, so it was sold. Diane cried an ocean in her room and her parents didn't know what to make of her sadness. She didn't know how to tell them she was not crying for Uncle Larry.

She awakened with a start and wasn't sure where she was. Diane stood abruptly, bristling. She ran down the stairs, darted through the mingling guests, and tightened her purse against her hip before she reached the door. She ran out to her car shivering in the November dry air of Denver.

What she did not expect was to see Bob at her front door at 4:30 in the morning holding her coat and a rose. She did not expect to let him in and hold him tight or tell him thank you and ‘I’m sorry.’

She did expect him to be a thoughtful and patient lover because of all of the women he had known and even married. And when he turned out to be so-so, she did not care for him any less. The hollowness of not having been touched in so long was swallowed and this mattered more than knowing who she was at that moment or recognizing the dimensions of how terrible it was going to be to disentangle herself from him later. The moment opened its mouth wide to forgetting, making the line between fear and joy of being with him blur into a cloud.

Even still however, she did not expect to forget about relocating to Virginia to start over and be with her mother who would be recovering from knee surgery. Or, how hard it would be for the first few months to a year getting adjusted and acquainted to her future. She did not expect to forget about how frizzy her hair would become in the humidity or how her fingers would forever be lined with dirt while tending her mother’s flowers.

What surprised her most was to awaken crying quietly missing the innocence of first love, uncomplicated by histories and disappointments. Of how it had pinched her heart and sent a feverish thrill throughout her. Of someone who had traced the arc along the side of her face or held one finger and made her feel secure, free.