

Medicine

When I got home from work, Jerry was sitting in the kitchen with his dead wife's engagement ring and a pint of Jim Beam on the table. He was turning the ring on his pinky finger and studying its sparkling reflection against the bay window, which had become a black mirror against the autumn night.

I hung up my coat in the mudroom and checked the wall calendar to see if the anniversary—"The Day," as I call it—had arrived again without my noticing. Most years I remember, but I'm not very good with dates and some years I get so wrapped up in my own life that I forget it's coming.

But The Day wasn't for another month. In the past, Jerry had only carried Pam's ring on The Day, and it unnerved me that he'd driven to the safe deposit box for it almost a month early. The Jim Beam concerned me more, of course. Jerry had all but quit drinking soon after we met.

People who think they know Jerry call him a stoic. Not to say that he's cold, or a tough guy, he's just quiet, in his own head, maybe a bit secretive. My friends say he's a "guy's guy," but that's not true, not with me, anyway. I know his private side. He can be passionate when the spirit moves him, and he's very funny in a dark sort of way. He loves practical jokes, but he doesn't laugh when his victims find him out. Instead, he just raises his eyebrows and smirks in his devilish way and says, "Pretty good, yeah?"

Another example: one night early in our marriage I was awakened by music from the radio in the den. I listened more closely until I also heard voices coming from there. I slid out of bed, put on my robe, and went to see who had the nerve to come visiting at that hour. It was just Jerry, though, sitting in the plush La-Z-Boy with our cat Ginger in his lap. He was rubbing her ears and saying, "Who's a pretty kitty? Who's the prettiest little kitty in the whole world?" It was so unlike him, not because he disliked Ginger (if anything, he's indifferent to her), but because he spoke to her with such genuine affection. This from a man who still shifts his gaze to the floor when I say that I love him. Don't get me wrong, I know that Jerry

loves me. In fact, he's the only man who has ever loved me for who I am, truly and completely. Most men will say that when you meet them, but then immediately start trying to change you into the woman they really want.

I tiptoed back up the stairs to bed that night wondering how well I knew the man I'd married. Was the scene with Ginger a common occurrence or just a momentary spell of sappiness? If this was his true character, should I start spying on him to see it more often? After a few minutes of annoyed speculation I decided to forget about the incident and drifted back to sleep.

What I saw in the kitchen, though—the ring, the whiskey—suggested that after seven years I still had a lot more to learn about my husband. I couldn't retreat back to bed this time, though, so I went quietly to the sink and filled the kettle for tea. Jerry just kept playing with the ring, turning it in the light to watch the diamond sparkle.

Silence makes me uncomfortable. I asked Jerry if he also wanted tea.

"No thanks, hon," he replied.

"Did you have supper?"

"I heated up some stuff from the fridge."

I put the kettle on the stove and got a container of leftover spaghetti out of the fridge for myself. I put the spaghetti in the microwave and programmed it for three minutes, then returned to the sink.

Jerry looked over at me and mumbled, "How was work?"

"Crazy," I said. "Two girls called off. I was the only RN on the shift."

He nodded slightly and said, "Okay," as if I'd told him the time of day or that someone was coming in the morning to inspect the furnace. He held the ring between his thumb and index finger and showed it to me.

"I wonder what it's worth these days," he said.

I don't believe in ghosts, but the ring always creeped me out. It seemed to have its own presence, like a third person in the room. It looked absurdly small between Jerry's thick fingertips, like

some misplaced accessory to a doll's house. I hadn't seen the ring in years, and I'd forgotten how beautiful it was. The band was platinum, which was an unusual and expensive setting back when he and Pam got engaged. It had a three-quarter carat diamond in the center and two quarter-carat sapphires flanking the diamond. The ring he bought me is very similar, actually, only mine's gold and has a pair of rubies instead of sapphires.

I said, "It's insured for three thousand, if that's what you mean."

He dropped the ring onto the placemat and pulled around a chair and offered it to me. The microwave beeped but I ignored it and sat down next to him.

"Everything's piling up," he said. He tapped his forehead. "In here."

I pulled his hand away from his face and held it in my lap. "What do you mean, babe? Is the business in trouble?"

"No, it's not the business."

The kettle started whistling, so I hurried to the stove and turned it off. I took a bag of Earl Grey out of the tin and put it in a mug with boiling water and a teaspoon of honey.

"You must think I've flipped my wig," he said.

"I would never think that."

I carried my tea to the table and waited for him to continue. We sat for a few minutes while I blew steam off my mug and he stared at the ring.

The chair creaked as he shifted his weight and picked up the Jim Beam. He held it up and said, "Medicine. That's what my dad used to call it. He'd come home from work in the dead of night and say to Mum, 'Woman, fix me a spoonful of medicine.' Mum would get him a pint jar and fill it half-way up with that cheap Canadian stuff. I snuck a taste of it once. Nasty. The old man sure loved it, though. He never stopped at just one 'spoonful,' of course."

"Why didn't you drink it?" I asked. "This one, I mean, the Beam."

"Not sure," he shrugged. "When I bought it, I had every intention of getting blasted. I stopped at

the bank to get the ring out of the safe deposit, then I came home and got set up here to start feeling sorry for myself. I just couldn't work up an appetite for it." He placed the bottle back on the table and held my hands in his. "Something happened this morning that made me think of her. I hadn't thought of her that clearly in a long time."

He stopped, as if to arrange the events better in his mind. After a few moments he smiled and pushed the loose strands of hair back behind my ear. "You look pooped. Maybe you should go up to bed and let me work this out myself."

"Of course not," I said. "Tell me."

He cleared his throat. "I was drinking my coffee in the project shed. Mike came in and told me the young guy, Jason, was off the job. I asked him why, if he was sick or something, and he said, 'No, he's in jail. Last night someone found his wife and both his kids shot to death.'"

"My God," I said. "Do they think he did it?"

"Oh, he did it, no doubt. They nabbed him on I-80 driving toward Ohio. He confessed the whole thing. I should have seen it coming. I never liked that kid, but the market's tight I had to keep him. He's a decent welder but he has a smart mouth. Hot temper, likes to pick fights. We all should have seen it coming."

"You can't read people's minds, Jerry."

His eyes narrowed on mine and he said, "No, but you can feel trouble coming. We all can, we just don't pay attention to it. People don't pay attention." He caressed my hand in his lap and said, "Do you see what I'm saying?"

I didn't, but the intensity of his gaze made me uncomfortable, so I said that I did.

He cleared his throat again and said, "It really knocked me off kilter. I started seeing Pam in my mind, in these quick snapshots, like camera flashes. It made me queasy. I stayed in my office most of the morning, but then around lunchtime I told the crew to go home and drove to the bank to get that." He nodded toward the ring. "I meant to come home and get good and drunk, then take this thing down and toss it in the goddamn river."

"Why didn't you?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't. Scared, maybe."

In all the time I'd known him, I had never heard Jerry use the word scared in reference to himself. Our eyes met and I realized what he was asking me to do, what he'd been silently asking me every year on The Day but I'd been too thick to realize.

"Now, don't take this the wrong way," I said, "because I don't care about the money, but why don't you sell it, or give away?"

He shook his head. "Pam would never have allowed it. Never. If that ring ends up on another woman's finger, I'd never forgive myself."

"All right then," I said. I picked up the whiskey bottle and twisted off the cap. It sounded like knuckles cracking. I filled a juice glass for Jerry and dumped a few glugs into my tea.

I raised my cup and said, "Mud in your eye and medicine in your belly."

We sat at the table for hours, talking and laughing and drinking. Finally I took Jerry's hand and led him to the mudroom. Everything was spinning, and I giggled as Jerry helped me into my coat. When I turned around to face him, he kissed me.

"But won't I be throwing her away, sort of?" he asked.

"Not at all," I said. "It's just a some metal and rocks."

He sighed. "It's worth a lot of money."

"It is. And?"

He kissed me again. "You're right."

We stepped outside into the dark and stumbled across the yard in the dark, searching for the break in the trees that would lead us to the water.



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