



A Sweater

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She graduated in May, nineteen years of school, a doctorate in English. She was full of purpose and poise. A job waited in the fall, associate editor for a publishing house in New York. Life was turning out exactly as she wanted, as she had planned. First though, a summer in Maine. She had grown up in the South, had been schooled there. She figured that a few months in a Yankee stronghold like Maine would prepare her for anything New Yorkers had to offer.

Car loaded with her things, she didn't look back as she drove away from her parents' home. The trip to Maine was uneventful, and she found herself in a small town on the coast; Saco, "sawk-oh" she was corrected when she first tried to pronounce it, not "sack-o." It was atypical of every fishing town in Maine, and she found a motel, a remnant, it seemed of the fifties, and moved in. A small cottage on the beach, though more appealing, was out of her price range during the summer season.

She wandered around the town the next day, a stranger, yet warmly greeted by everyone she met. So much for the mistaken idea that these folks were stand-off-ish. Her wanderings found her by late afternoon at the town pier. A large lobster pound, Bayleys, was located at the end, and the buyer greeted each waterman as he pulled up. Boats and winches, cordage and lobster traps, small talk about things in these men's lives on the water. The lobsters were unloaded, weighed and receipted. A busy place, each movement purposeful. The sounds of men working, gulls wheeled overhead looking for scraps. Their shouts and cries filled the air. A symphony of working life — she took it all in.

She watched one young lobsterman, about her age, inserting wooden pegs in the claws of his catch. He worked quickly, paying little heed to what was going on around him. Curious, she approached him. "Excuse me," she spoke, too low to be heard above the din.

"Excuse me," too loud this time, she realized. The young man jumped back, startled from his task, he nearly fell off the pier.

"Damn woman are ya trying to kill me, I near fell in," he shot at her.

"I'm sorry, I was just curious as to why you were doing that, and you

could just swim over to that ladder if you did,” came back from her.

“No I couldn’t, there isn’t a waterman on this coast that can swim a stroke, ya fall in out there, swimming just delays the inevitable. The wooden pegs keep them from getting you with their claws. Usually we put them in as we pull them from the traps, but I had a big catch today, and didn’t get them all done,” he said, his voice becoming less angry. “Most folk are using big rubber bands now, but scrap wood is free, so I cut my own during days I can’t go out. Save money that way,” he said in a friendlier tone. He went back to work and she watched him. Deliberate, no wasted movement, skills honed from seasons of doing it.

She walked farther out on the pier now, watching others engaged in the many tasks demanded of this life. The sounds and smells filled her mind. Given the homes she had seen, the cars in the town, it was a “close to the bone” life. Few frills, no luxuries, yet no sad faces, either. These folk had somehow found a secret in this existence. Some contentment that theirs was a good life, rich in a way she could not see.

“Suppa?” a voice asked, in that distinct Maine accent. She turned and he was there. Smiling at her. “Sure, why not,” the words tumbled out of her. Amazed she had so readily agreed, she allowed him to lead her from the pier. He walked her up into the town. The restaurant he took her to was a simple place, vinyl table cloths on small tables. Stainless steel napkin dispensers, paper place mats. The walls, though once white, had turned the color of an old newspaper. The food was working class and hot, hearty and abundant. Like the town, it was purposeful — fill the belly, warm the body. They talked, and talked, for hours. Why, she could not fathom, yet the longer she spent with him, the longer she wanted to stay. It was late when the waitress told them it was closing time. Both arrived back into this world at her interruption. They left holding hands. Hers just ended up in his. It was supposed to be there, she thought. Walking through the now quiet town, he pointed out this and that. Through his words she could see the beauty in the simple place. They ended up at his home, not his house; this place had always been a home. Plain like the man and the town, she felt warm there, and safe. She never did things like this, yet found herself kissing him.

He reached down and she watched as his hands undid her blouse. His fingers cautiously pushed aside the material, as one would do to curtains when hearing a strange sound outside. Then at the sight of her modest breasts a sigh, one of contentment. He pulled her to him now, her face and breasts against the bulky sweater he had worn all day, she inhaled his scent. It was the sea and him, and something else, a new scent, security. They made love till just before dawn.

“Hav’ ta go to work,” he told her. She smiled at him and watched him dress. She rolled from the bed to kiss him goodbye, but as soon as she did, discovered that even summer mornings in Maine could be cold. “Heya, put this on,” he whispered and handed her the bulky sweater he had worn the previous day. She pulled it on quickly and was filled with warmth, as if he was holding her. It covered her modestly, though most of her well-shaped legs were still exposed. She followed him out to the porch and stood on the grey salt pine boards and watched him walk into the town headed for his boat.

She spent most of the day in that sweater. She was not sure why, yet to take it off felt somehow wrong. She was waiting for him on the porch of his house when he returned from his labors. He had not asked her to be, nor had she asked, it was just supposed to be that way. They both knew it.

The summer, as it does in Maine, passed quickly. What was between them grew as fast, and as the fall approached she made two calls, one to a publishing house in New York, the other to a different house in Virginia. “I PAID \$140,000 DOLLARS FOR MY DAUGHTER TO CLEAN FISH IN MAINE!” Her mothers’ comment was not as loud or as direct, but the disappointment was there none-the-less.

They married soon after. Each morning she would stand upon the porch of the simple home and watch him go off to the sea, clad only in the sweater, usually all she wore that early. Days passed, then months. Every night he kept her warm and safe, every day the sweater did the same. The first baby came and then another. They grew, all of them. The sweater still warmed her, and the children too. Money was always tight, there are no rich “Lobsta’ men.” She began to write about the life in that town. The publishing house in New York hadn’t forgotten about her, and the stories found their way to magazines. The money helped. The writings were filled with the simple truth that life, though hard upon the waters off the Maine coast, was satisfying in a way that some accountant in Ohio could never know.

He was always there, like that sweater. Worn now and patched several times, the color faded from the hard life, both of them. But always there; it was the constant in her life. Eventually even her family had come around to him and the life she had chosen.

In April she heard them on the porch, two other watermen with their wives. His boat was found drifting; he wasn’t aboard. She thanked them quietly and closed the door, went to her bedroom and put on the sweater. She could smell him, after all those years and washings the smell of him was still there. She cried softly knowing, knowing that “there wasn’t a waterman on that coast that could swim.”

Four days later, his body washed up on the beach near the town of Old Orchard. The cold water makes a body bluish in death and as cold as the oceans' heart. Hell was cold she knew, she knew it then, a place where a body couldn't get warm. A place where one would wish for the fires of the gospels.

The man from the funeral home called. A suit to bury him in. "No, she said, he'll be laid out as he lived." She got his extra set of yellow rain bibs from the shed, like a farmer's overalls, a sign of his trade. She carried them down to Atkinsons Funeral Home and gave them to the undertaker. "We'll be needing a shirt for him," the man said. "No, take this," a whisper her answer. She pulled off the old sweater she had worn there, his sweater. The sweater which had kept her safe all those years. She held it to her face, felt him in it, smelled him in it. Then slowly handed it over.

Folks were kind of surprised she didn't show up for his funeral. Both families were there, his two kids were there, but she was absent. "Too overcome with grief," some said or thought to themselves. "Such a hard thing to lose a man," others answered. The truth was she had said goodbye that day at the funeral home. The sweater would keep him warm and safe, the smell of her and the sea on it, until she joined him to take it back.