

D U C K

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

WHEN THEY CAME IN, I was folding the sheets and waiting for the jeans to finish drying.

She was in her sixties, medium height, thick around the middle, still showing some black in her hair. She struggled with a yellow laundry basket overflowing with clothes, and her eyes were glazed with exhaustion.

He looked older and much more frail. He wore a gray suit that was a little short in the legs, an open white shirt, and a sweater vest with reindeer on it, though Christmas was two months gone. His matching gray Homburg placed him squarely in a distant era.

He carried a small, yellow, stuffed toy duck in both hands.

The woman stopped in front of a row of plastic chairs and said something that I couldn't hear over the chug of the machines. He sat in one of the chairs with exact posture, the duck in his lap, one hand protectively over its back. He didn't appear confused or angry or anxious, the way people with Alzheimer's sometimes do. Instead he seemed to be patiently waiting for something he no longer believed would happen.

It was hard to look at him, and hard to look away. The woman put her clothes into three washers and sat down with a small table between her and the man. She didn't say anything. She slipped her wedding band off and put it on the table, closed her eyes, and began to massage her left hand, knobby with arthritis.

WHEN I GOT HOME, Anne was on the couch, watching TV. "Just taking a break," she said. Her sewing machine and ironing board were set up there in the living room, where she was putting together another wedding gown that the bride, or her mother, had given up trying to sew. It was the steadiest income Anne had, which was not much income at all.

My own freelance career consisted of one client, 250 miles away in Raleigh. I would drive down for a week or ten days, working long hours and sleeping at my mother's apartment, until I had enough to get us through another month.

I put the clean sheets on the bed, then put the rest of the clothes away. I had meant to spend what was left of the day working on a new portfolio, but I couldn't get the old man out of my head.

I went through the kitchen into the garage, feeling edgy and self-conscious. On the top shelf at the back was a box that I had brought home after I moved my mother into assisted living. I set it on the stained concrete floor and opened it. Inside was a slide projector and boxes of slides, knickknacks from my parents' travels, and an orange and white stuffed rabbit.

I'd had him as long as I could remember. I had named him Ring because of the jingle bell on a red ribbon around his neck. The paint was scuffed off his

button eyes, his fur was matted from too many washings, and the wire had long ago come out of both ears.

There was a clunk from the front porch. A minute later the front door opened and then closed again. "The mail's here," Anne said.

It took a few seconds before I could trust myself to talk. "Anything good?" I said.

"Ads," she said.

She was in the kitchen now. I could hear her through the open door but not see her. I was afraid she would come out and turn on the overhead light and find me. Still I made an awkward attempt to hold Ring to my chest.

"The gas bill," Anne said. There was the sound of a ripping envelope and paper unfolding. "Yow," she said.

I closed my eyes and took a long breath. "It's okay," I said. I opened my eyes and put Ring back in the box and closed it up. "I'll take care of it."

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