

unraveling



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New. He had been grasping for the perfect adjective for the better part of seven days. As

an eternal optimist, "new" was the most positive descriptor he found applicable. His wife, Lydia, had brought him to the "new" place one week ago. Though he tried, he could not remember her consulting him on the decision. In fact, the more he reflected, the more aware he became of the missing details. Unfazed,

he resorted to assumption to fill gaps. Knowing Lydia, she was probably emptying the entire house of furniture, appliances, knick-knacks, and antiques (her husband included in the latter category) in order to soothe one of her frequent bouts of cleaning fever. Until she recovered from her irrationality, all he could do was wait. He imagined his return home: Lydia proudly describing all the work she had

done, only to unveil the house in the exact same state as before. He smiled. For all the fifty years of their marriage, each object in their home had always fit snugly in a designated space, reminiscent of the jigsaw puzzles of which Lydia was so fond.

Much to his dismay, the days continued bleeding into one another like a child's clumsy watercolor painting. As he became more familiar with the house, he could not help but think that "new" had been an exceedingly inaccurate word. In fact, the house was quite old indeed. The women in white padded across the wooden floors in their sterile little tennis shoes, attending to others in nearby rooms. He became accustomed to the tinny smell of canned peaches, the syrupy aroma that stung his taste buds somehow preferable to the chemical-laced lemon scent of Lysol disinfectant that seemed to be in constant use. His whole body grew stiff from sitting in the wheelchair all day, and frequently remaining in the position through the night. He felt no inclination to stand; he might as well rest before Lydia put him back to work at home.

Sometimes he caught a glimpse of another boarder in the house. They all seemed rather odd. Henry, an ancient man nonetheless adept at maneuvering his own wheelchair, continually stole his belongings: toothbrush, robe, sweatshirts. Henry would roll off with anything in reach, often wearing almost nothing but a smug, toothless grin. Eden, a woman of equally estimable age, could be heard babbling nonsensically along with the game show television channel at all hours of the day, only forming coherent words when she chanted, "Wheel! Of! Fortune!"

Having had his fill of eccentric living

conditions, he began asking the women in white when he could return home. They smiled, looked at him with empathetic eyes, called him "dear" and continued to tie on his bib and spoon-feed him the dreaded canned peaches. Being hard of hearing himself from his days flying helicopters in Vietnam, he pitied the women their deafness.

Lydia visited every day. She would bring some knitting (usually a sweater for him) and sit beside him while her dexterous fingers clinked the needles against one another. He was concerned, for he knew Lydia only knitted when she needed to distract herself from more serious matters. He also noticed that she looked different: sick, strained, more worried than usual. Something very serious must be wrong. He asked, but she answered with nothing but diversion and avoidance, almost as if she was having a conversation with herself. Sometimes he would extend his hand to stroke her face, wanting to relieve those closely-knitted lines on her forehead. On these occasions, the omnipresent women in white would rush forward, intercepting his loving gesture. Lydia's eyes then drowned with sorrow, and she would say goodbye, reining in her tears as she promised to see him again the next day.

After weeks of confusion, he became infected by doubt. Why did no one answer when he spoke? What was happening at home that so distressed Lydia? These questions had no answers. Instead, the more he reflected, the less he discovered he knew. Memories lingered as a palpable haze in the vault of his consciousness, yet he could not manage to solidify them enough for extraction. The more effort he put into pursuing his new enemy, Memory, the more nimbly his adversary fled. Soon,

any desperate grasp for knowledge resulted in nothing but the disheartening image of an unraveling sweater.

The glow of empathy that once filled the eyes of the women in white gradually dimmed, leaving only the lackluster glaze of conditioned sympathy. Other family members besides Lydia frequented the house. Each time they left, their lingering gazes, quivering chins, and moist eyes intimated something dark he had yet to accept. Confined to his chair as if bound by ropes, optimism began to depart, much as memory had. He made the decision to become silent, hoping that the women in white might sense something amiss, and let him return home.

His spirit faded according to plan, extinguished like the flame of the gas stove that Lydia would turn off with a loving scold after he had forgotten to do so. The women in white did notice. So did Lydia. They spent even more time at his side, and called in strangers to make him as comfortable as possible. Why didn't they understand? He was fooling them, he was not actually sick! The strangers continually placed a cloud of fresh pillows beneath his head and tucked comforting blankets tightly around him.

One night, he looked up at Lydia, perched loyally at his bedside. He told her of his devious plan to return home, and her smiling eyes let him know that she understood. That comprehension was all he needed. Closing his eyes, he let the cloud consume him, dreaming of Lydia, and allowed the final thread to unravel.

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