

Red Plaid Work Shirt

By Allison Fine
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The spring of her forty-fifth year she decided not to get out of bed.

In early March, just before spring broke and she took to her bed; they were sitting outside the barn by the little creek that ran alongside. He was wearing an old pair of jeans and the red plaid work shirt she loved so much. It set off his graying hair, the creases in his face, those steely, slate blue eyes. She loved him she just couldn't stand him.

"I wish I could push you into that old creek!"

He looked around at her, didn't smile, and looked away.

"What's on your feet?" He looked down at her toes, and saw some kind of worm-like thing crawling through.

"What'd mean, my feet?" She refused to look down. He was always going on about something.

The radio came on with a song by Shania Twain.

How the hell did she get that name? She wondered. Sure thing she made it up-- the whole thing. Oh well.

"Look at your feet, stupid!"

"Oh, stop it Robert! Who cares?"

She could feel something slithering there, but pride made her refuse to check it out.

“Isn’t that enchanting--you’re being attacked by worms and ugly little snake things.”

Finally she looked. It was a small black worm crawling around, looking for a home. She picked up her bare foot, brushed the worm off, and looked at him squarely.

“Aren’t you a goddamn woose?”

“Maybe.”

She didn’t faze him much, she reckoned. His thoughts were always his, locked away as tight as his jaw and his tight little ass inside those jeans. She wished she could just pull him down and take him there, but he wouldn’t find it funny. He hated predatory women, and she was forever holding back on her predatory notions. It was all about wait and wait and wait some more. She couldn’t stand it, but she couldn’t stand to live without it either. Such was their love.

“I gotta go, “ he said, getting up.

“Where you going?” she asked.

“Well, come on Kath--I got work to do.”

He ambled off toward the house. She did the chores and he went off to his studio to paint. His work was extraordinary, a combination of abstract art and photography all blended and smacked together in a way made you stop breathing and start thinking. People loved his stuff, it sold all over the country and in Europe, the

Montana Arts Council gave him a grant, he was exhibited all over the state, they did an article about him in Big Sky Magazine.

Meanwhile, she was the grunt. She cooked, but never cleaned. She hated cleaning so the house was always a mess and slightly dirty, and she took care of the horses. They had five of their own and boarded three. The house was piled all over every corner with magazines, books and papers, letters, copies of articles they both meant to read but never did, library books from other towns and other years. Theirs was a home of visual explosion and the written word encroaching on human space.

They were both avid readers, mostly in the bathroom and in bed, with the television on and her heart beating with his as they lay cupped inside of each other.

Both bathrooms were filled to the ceiling with the overflow. You often had to move magazines over just to get to the toilet. He'd long given up on the housekeeping issue. He figured if she made sure they had good, wholesome meals, lots of fruit and vegetables and good meat, home baked bread and pies that was the most he could ask for.

And she took care of the horses, which he loved. The horses that he'd brought with him from Texas. His favorite Palomino, Imaginary Meeting, getting older but still not wiser. Without being able to ride every day he turned cranky, and he was aware of every little detail of his babies. Kath just made sure nothing went wrong with the horses, and when it did, she took care of it. That way, tension eased and he could go back to his work.

She couldn't stand him moping about a horse, strung tight, worried; not doing his work. Her job was to do the worry and keep him working. It was the way they both

lived and understood life to be. He did his work and she did everything else. It was fine until one spring, her forty-fifth year. That was the year her body gave in to a blueness she had been fighting for quite a while.

Robert loved holding her strong body next to him at night, plunging himself into her at deep dream moments and early morning yearnings. She was easy to take, he was glad of it. He couldn't stand playing games for sex.

She, for her part, would have wished him to have a little more finesse in bed, but every time she looked at his little ass, or came into his studio and felt bathed in the light and the color and the passion of his work, she just didn't give a damn. She'd cook for him and take him any way he was. They were in love and it was strong. She missed her grown children, but Robert wouldn't have them around the house. They turned a critical eye toward him and his work; he knew they thought him selfish, taking the years of their mother's life and drying them out in the sun until they were bleached white. They wanted their mother to have fun. Kath thought she was having fun. Work was the only fun she knew, and Robert.

They had fights that lasted for weeks. Sometimes he would take off and camp out somewhere up in Canada, not calling her for a week or more. She would fly to New York to visit her oldest daughter and shop and spend an entire month's budget on make up. This was how they punished each other. It never worked. Once the punishment was over, they'd come together just as before, only with more intensity because of the missing. Missing was what put energy into the relationship, it kept the pot stirred. They needed it. If they hung around each other for too long, especially in the long, dark and deep winter months, the whole love thing would come unraveled.

They would start snapping at each other about everything, her bread wouldn't rise; his photographs would take on a dull and somber tone. One of them would have to start a terrible moment, whip it up into a fight, and push the other one out the door. It was the tension and the rhythm of their love.

She was the rock, he was the moss, she decided. But maybe they hadn't been tested. No one had really called the note on this one. Perhaps, he could transform into something solid she could hold tight to, count on, and be with. She just didn't know. He saw her as he saw the sunset or the fog or the snow, a force of nature, part of his life, a natural phenomenon to be on friendly terms with, but keeping a distance all the same. Not too close, not too far. It was a delicate balance and he knew just how to maintain it.

She hated the balance. She was forever tipping it over on its edge, just to see what would happen. If she tipped it too far, he'd just walk away and get into his work.

The spring of her forty-fifth year she decided not to get out of bed. It had been raining for nearly a month and she just couldn't stand it. There was nothing to get up for, anyway. Robert started taking care of the horses again, like he used to in the beginning. He made the morning coffee, dished up cereal and toast, even contemplated hiring someone to clean up the mess. He figured as long as she stayed in bed, he could clean everything up and she wouldn't know the difference.

An old friend from Robert's hometown in Texas came to visit. Buck Horner was a man who never left Texas no matter where he went. Texas never left him either. Texas spun off his shoes, his shirt and his eyebrows.

Buck had just gotten divorced and wanted to lick his wounds. Kath didn't mind. She just stayed in bed, took the food Robert served her on one of those trays they had got for their wedding, and watched TV. Everything. Soaps. Talk shows. News. Especially news. She watched CNN endlessly, hoping for some news item that would make her want to get up. Like an earthquake that destroyed the entire coast of California, or a market crash that would plunge them into a complete depression.

Buck Horner started helping out with the horses, and pretty soon it was his full time job.

"You want to stay on as hand?" Robert asked him casually.

"Well, I could."

"You can stay in that spare bedroom, if you want. I can pay you a little, get your room free."

"OK."

That's how it was done. Robert went back to his art and Buck took over all the chores Kath had always done. Kath noticed but didn't particularly want to say anything. It was fine. Didn't want to stop what she wasn't doing, or not doing. She liked Buck's deference and easy manner. He, for his part, stayed away from her as much as he could.

One day she watched Robert's bare ass streak by the bed into the shower.

"Hey you!"

He turned.

"Yes?"

Even though she had taken to bed for a month, the sex hadn't stopped, in fact, she seemed to want it all the time now. He was losing interest. Her usually tight body was becoming loose and flabby from all this bed life; and he didn't like it.

"Why DON'T you get your ass out of that bed for a change?"

"Because--come here!" she commanded. He obeyed. He lay next to her on the bed, put his hand underneath her ample breasts, feeling the slow thud of her heart. Everything in her had slowed down, it seemed. He just couldn't see why. He kissed her belly, her nipples grew hard, and he made love to her, with Buck downstairs clattering around in the kitchen trying to figure out where everything was.

After lovemaking, he took a shower and went back to the studio. She lay there, still, staring at the ceiling, no thoughts coming to her.

Once a day she would put on her old ragged bathrobe and wander around the house. This was usually in the afternoon when Buck was in the barn and Robert had left to run errands in town. Then she'd wipe her hand along the counters and tables, marvel at how the boys had managed to straighten everything up and give it a more orderly approach.

One of these afternoons Buck came into the kitchen to grab coffee and check the bread.

"You baking the bread now?" she asked softly.

"You bet. Robert showed me how."

"So, why doesn't HE make it?"

"Dunno," Buck said. He was a simpleton she decided. The bread had risen twice; he popped the three loaf pans in the warmed oven.

“Want some warm bread when it’s done?”

“I don’t know,” she shuffled off, back upstairs and the safety of CNN. What happened in the world was more real to her than what was happening in her own house.

Buck shook his head. When Robert came into the barn early one evening to check on the horses, Buck was there shoeing one of the mares.

“Hey,” Robert said.

Buck nodded.

“What do you think about this whole China thing?”

“Dunno,” Buck said and went on filing.

“What do think about Kath? I think she’s having some kind of nervous breakdown or something, what do you think? Maybe she needs Prozac or something.”

“She needs electric shock treatment!” Buck spit and laughed.

“I don’t think that’s funny,” Robert said tersely and walked out of the barn.

“Didn’t mean anything by it!” Buck called out after him.

Man, what a couple, he was thinking. They both need shock treatment, he decided. He kept the shoeing up until he had shoed the mare and two other horses. He decided to take Imaginary out for a ride. Riding out into the late afternoon, sun playing off the plains and the mountains, Buck started to think maybe it was time for him to move on. Robert needed to get his family in order, and he was tired of the whole weird business.

Robert had a sense about people’s thoughts. He knew about what they wanted, how they were feeling, often before they did themselves. He had a hunch that Buck

was fixing to leave soon, and he wanted Kath rehabilitated before then, so things would keep running smoothly. He just wanted things to keep going along, so he could continue doing his work. He had a show in Santa Fe next month, and really had to bust ass to get all the projects he'd been working on finished. One project was an abstract portrait of Kath, when she younger, carrying the baby she lost. It would have been their only child together. Each of them had kids from other marriages; he hoped she could give him a child that was made from the two of them. It didn't happen. After the miscarriage, Kath insisted on getting her tubes tied.

“Look, I'm getting too old for this baby business anyway,” she said. “I'll be forty next year. Let's move on.”

Robert moped for days and weeks, not knowing why he felt so bad and she didn't. He rode Imaginary out in the evenings, just as the sun was leaving, and some of those evenings brought up tears. Maybe he was crying for himself, or the dead baby, or possibility, he didn't know. Kath didn't love him the way he wanted her to, the way his first and second wives did. But then, they drove him crazy and he had to leave them. He had five children, all grown, and was working on his third grandchild.

“Having a baby is just not in the cards!” Kath said another time.

“Why you bringing this up? I don't care,” he answered, washing his hands in the little sink in the mudroom. His boots were dusty and worn; he pulled them off with some effort.

“You need some new boots,” she offered.

“So what? I like these old ones. They serve me well.”

He walked to the oven and absently checked the baking bread.

“Get out of there!” she shouted at him, walking toward him with her sassy way. He grabbed her by the ass, hugging her close, feeling her neck with his hand, and kissing the tip of her hairline.

“Stop it!” She pulled away.

He backed up, looking at her with his slate eyes, not wanting to let her go.

“Fine.”

“The baby’s dead, Robert. It was nobody’s fault.”

“I KNOW,” he said and went off to the studio. That was the last they ever talked about the baby. After that, each one of them went about their tasks with great focus, as if to make sure nothing got out of hand, no small energy would escape, they didn’t have to enter into discussions about babies again.

The grandchildren of Robert came on periodic visits, with their mothers or their fathers or both. They would sit in the studio and finger paint while he worked. The little boy grandchild, Cassidy, was always pestering Kath to teach him to ride, so she did. The grandkids filled the void of the baby, eased the pain, and took away that longing inside of Robert.

Things went along until that year Kath was forty five and refusing to be alive in any discernible way. Robert thought it might be delayed mourning now that she was menopausal; maybe she had regrets. Her three grown kids were about their business, and not ready for marriage and kids of their own.

“I just want things to get back to the way they were,” he said one day, leaning on the TV stand.

“Don’t lean on there--it’ll knock the TV over!” she screamed.

“God, Jesus, Kath--you and that damn TV.” He abruptly shut it off.

She sat up in bed, suddenly.

“Turn it on!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

She rose from bed, like an angry mound propelled into motion, rushed at him, knocking him sideways, away from the TV, into the dresser and on the floor. When she saw him on his back she laughed.

“That’s it, Kath,” he got up, his voice unsteady. “You can do whatever the hell you please with your life. Stay in bed till hell freezes over as far as I’m concerned, but I’m not going to sit around here and indulge you in it! I’m going to get some things together and move.”

“Oh, sure,” she laughed derisively, and held her hand down to him to help him out. He smacked it away. She froze.

“I mean it,” he said, getting up, rubbing his back. “You’re in some crazed state and I’ve had enough. I’ve picked up the slack, Buck is leaving; you’re on your own.”

Her breathing quickened, her heart jolted and started, she slipped into a panic state seamlessly.

“You CANNOT leave me!” she screamed breathlessly.

“Oh yes,” was all he said, stood his ground square in front of her, and looked past her to the window.

“You do what you need to, you’re on your own,” he concluded and quietly left the room.

Kath was thrown into terror. She grabbed the glass sailboat he had bought her at some art fair, threw it hard against the window. Part of the sail chipped off, but nothing else happened--it just made a cracking noise and fell to the floor.

“DAMN! DAMN DAMN” she screamed, hoping he would hear. Where was his sympathy now? Where were the compassion, the pity, the worship, and the sex? She threw herself onto the bed and broke into loud, ugly sobs. Buck could hear the noise from outside the house. He walked into the kitchen, catching Robert emptying the coffee grounds into the sink.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I told her I’m leaving.”

“Oh yeah? You are?”

“Yes,” Robert said with finality, turning on the disposal so as to avoid further conversation.

“OH, she won’t be able to manage without you.”

Robert did not hear this last. He turned, throwing something into the trash, and walked to the studio. He could hear the sounds of the horses in the barn, he picked out Imaginary’s special whinny and thought:

‘I’m taking him with me, she won’t have that piece of me too.’ He vowed.

Packing up the studio, with all his work and art supplies, was tedious, but he did it slowly, over several days. Kath started wandering out of the bedroom more. He was not sleeping there anymore, but on a camp bed he set up on the porch. She felt the pain of his absence, could not fathom it would be permanent. She half-hoped he’d go to Canada, as usual. That felt more secure than this new tactic.

“So--what’s your new game?” she asked him as he pushed paintings and drawings and photos over to one corner.

“I’m packing up. It’s no game.”

“Where you going?”

“To my brother’s in Butte until I figure out what I want to do.”

“What about the horses?”

“They’re all yours, Kath, except Imaginary and the ones you board. That’s your gig.”

“So, you’re just dumping the whole lot on me?”

“I guess so,” he said with finality, snapping his wooden paint case shut.

“I--I--really don’t want you to leave, Robert,” she said in an uncharacteristically weak voice, running her hand along the empty wall where his work had hung.

“I can’t do any more with this, Kath. It’s run its course.”

“Oh.”

“You understand?”

“Not exactly.”

“I love you--I just can’t live with you.”

“Is there--is there--somebody else?”

“Don’t be stupid,” he lowered his head so she could not see his eyes.

“Look me in the eye and say that!” she commanded. He looked up, staring at her squarely, as he had always done, with those slate blue eyes.

“No, you’re not lying,” she concluded. “I just don’t understand--why a woman can’t go through something--”

“Kath, this isn’t just about you staying in bed for three months, though, God knows, it has been a pain in the butt, it’s about the whole thing. The coming apart periodically, the heart ache--I just can’t take it anymore!”

“If you’d just compromise, Robert. If you’d just--”

“Compromise!” he exploded. “Oh fuck it, Kath,” he moved around her stolid form gingerly to get to a huge pile of drawings behind her.

“Excuse me,” he said. She stood her ground.

“Move, Kath!”

“No, goddamn it!” She grabbed him, he dodged, she swung her arm at him, and he held up his hands and moved away.

“We’re not going to do this again, you goddamn witch!”

“I’m not a witch!” she said, picking up a broom leaning on the corner.

“Don’t use that!” he shouted and began to laugh. She laughed suddenly and dropping the broom, collapsed in a heap on the floor.

He went over, kneeling down, and held her tight. He could feel her whole body tremble.

“Kath,” he said, kissing her hair, stroking her gently. He felt the familiar curves of her breasts and hips, his heart began to rise, some part of him wanted to take her right there. It would be so easy. She was so beautiful; he loved her so much. The resistance was greater and he could not figure out why. He only knew he had to honor it. This resistance was built up over the years, and hammered home by stubbornness.

“You haven’t made love to me in week,” she said in a small voice.

“I know.”

“Well?”

She turned toward him, holding his beautifully formed head in her hands, watching his eyes watching her intently.

“I love you Robert. I can’t let you go.”

“All right. But I’m going to stay with Charles anyway.”

All the boys in that family use their formal names, Kath thought. It always fascinated her that they did, growing up in the middle of nowhere Montana.

“Well, what does that mean? Do you have to take all your stuff?”

“I’ve got a show next month, and yes--I’m taking my work.”

“Your clothes too?”

“Yes,” he said softly, letting go of her. She sat still on the floor, like a lumpy doll, neglected and worn.

“So, you are leaving me.”

“I guess so.”

“Well..” she had nothing to say.

The next day Robert starting folding his clothes neatly and putting them into boxes. Buck had left for Colorado to do a Horse Clinic; said he’d be back in 10 days to help Kath out until she could find someone. She was grateful. At least Robert wasn’t taking that away from her.

She walked into the bedroom as he packed. After the previous day, she'd made a decision to get back to life again. The way back was as swift as the decline. No sense dilly-dallying around. Robert looked up as she walked into the room.

"So?" he asked, not really expecting an answer.

"So?" she asked back, fingering one of his shirts, the purple silk she bought him in California last winter.

"Are you leaving anything behind?"

"Yeah, my guts," he said, and laughed.

"I don't think that's funny," she spoke firmly.

"Well, if you can't see the irony--listen, we got to make a clean break of this. You're still young enough--you'll find somebody else."

"I don't think so. Not like you."

"I can't help it."

"I'm not that young, anyway. It's harder for women."

"I'm not looking for anyone, Kath. I just want some peace and to do my work!"

"Peace'll bore the shit out of you," she said and walked out.

She went to the barn and decided to ride Imaginary one last time before Robert took him away. She and the horse had an honest respect for one another. They rode over the rise, where the sentinel of trees dipped into the mountains and the sky, she turned him deftly over the curve of the land toward a special place she liked to stop and sit. They sat quietly for some time, Imaginary waiting for her to signal to move on. They moved on after a while, starting in an easy trot. Kath gave him head and he

began to move faster, his gate steady but strong. Pretty soon he was running and she could feel the wind whipping around her ears. Riding Imaginary was almost as good as riding Robert, she realized. She'd miss them both.

After they came back, Kath spent a long time brushing him. Robert watched her from the window of his studio. He liked the curve of her back as she brushed his horse, he liked her strong and sturdy legs; he liked the softness of her arms. There was a twinge of regret rising up inside of him; he quelled it instantly and went on packing. He knew she'd have another spell further on down the line, and he'd be at this point again. No use prolonging the inevitable.

The sky was blue and cloudless. His stuff was all packed. He loaded each box carefully into the pick up, making sure the paintings and canvases were wedged tightly to avoid any problems.

She put Imaginary into the trailer he was hauling behind his pick up.

"You got enough hay for the trip?" she asked, walking over to the trailer.

"You bet."

They stood looking at one another, squarely, face to face. She could feel his breath on her neck.

"Well--" he spoke after some moments, "better take off--got a few hours drive ahead."

"Yeah."

"Will you call me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, but give it a few days, will you?"

“OK,” he voice broke. He heard it and stepped forward into her arms, holding her tightly, feeling her back. She leaned into his shoulder and cried. He wouldn’t let her go as long as she was crying, he decided. He held tight. She wouldn’t stop.

After a while her crying moved into silence. He rubbed her gently, kissed her on the cheek, took his hand and ran it along the nape of her neck and up her face to her eyes.

“I got to go,” he said gently and pulled away from her clinging arms.

She watched him slip into the seat, put on his seatbelt and start up. The sky was opened wide, like her heart. The truck and trailer pulled off. He leaned out the window, waved at her. She waved back. She saw he was wearing the red plaid shirt. All of her life and vitality went out with him and that shirt. She turned and walked back to the house.

Well, she could always find another cowboy with a red plaid shirt, she thought, and swung herself over the porch railing like a kid.

