

Pearls

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The shelf above the stairs was crammed with knick-knacks, dusty figurines, postcards from long ago trips, and June's most prized possessions, a row of oyster shells. Collected from long cold grey daily walks on beaches as the couple tried to enjoy their long cold grey retirement, scrubbed scrupulously clean and displayed at just the right angle so that their stained undersides were hidden from view. June called them beautiful, Tom called them an anomaly.

June loved pearls, and Tom couldn't understand why. To him, they were something pretending to be beautiful but created by an irritant, a sharp grain of dirt invading an oyster and forcing it to make a protective layer. But June liked the particular way they shone, she said, their 'pearlescence'. Tom thought that pearlescent was a stupid word, even when you pronounced it properly, but he didn't correct her. Instead, he simply hid the remote when the shopping channels came on and prayed that June would never discover 'diamonique' jewellery. At least the pearls were fairly inexpensive, and he always knew what to get her for those difficult things like birthdays and Christmases and 'thank yous' and then the 'sorrys' that were really the 'I don't know why I'm apologising but here have a pearl'-s that eventually became the 'please don't go, what have I done, have some more pearls'.

When June told him that she was leaving him, she threw a lot of things. How *dare* he accuse her, she said. Where was his *proof*? When he held up the video camera she said that he never showed her any attention anyway, and then it all went quiet. He didn't have a thing to say, and she had disappeared, so he waited. When she reappeared, he was amazed at how much she could carry in one go. If he had known that earlier, he would *definitely* have stopped insisting that he carry all the groceries home himself each week.

From the top of the stairs, June had an unfair vantage point, but he was proud of the fact that he didn't flinch as the missiles tumbled towards him. Most stopped a step or two before the hard floorboards at his feet, a fact that he was particularly grateful for when it came to the iron. Last to go was the jewellery box, an ornately carved heavy-lidded wooden affair bought during a business trip from a Souk in Morocco (and happily, looking far more expensive than it actually was). She had wanted a red leather handbag initially and had briefed him on the correct design, ideal number of pockets and preferred circumference, but just before he left,

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she read somewhere that they treated the leather with camel urine so had decided against it. Even way back then, when they were fresher and she still craved his touch, he had found the idea of her toting a camel-piss satchel to be pretty amusing.

The jewellery box had been a safer bet, and June had loved having something new to polish. Twenty years on though, this made it unpredictably slippery, sliding out of her raging hands and vomiting forth an astonishing array of pearls in every colour until the stairs were flooded with them. Tom had time to consider that in this instance ‘pearlescent’ really was an apt description, before the offending items were at his feet, then under them, then all around him. He had the vague impression that he was surfing, before his considerable bulk came crashing to the ground.

Oaks felled in forests would have made less of a racket than Tom’s torso making impact with the hateful little jewels. By the time five of their neighbours had arrived, Tom was bruised but upright, furiously brushing crushed pearls from his flannel shirt and substantial behind. He glittered prettily but refused to let them in, ignoring the jarring tones of the novelty doorbell and forcing the neighbours to press their snooty noses hard against the cold glass of the front door. They just wanted to check that everything was alright, they said. They had heard ‘noises’. They meant shouting of course, but were far too middle-class to admit that people might do that. They crowded in for a better view as Tom attempted to shoo them away, whilst the one that June was sleeping with hid at the back and smiled.

It was Tom who had left in the end, though it took some time. She had offered to leave of course, but it didn’t seem right. They had lived in that house for thirty-six years. He thought that she would be grateful, or repentant, or guilty, or something. But all she was, was silent. She still spoke of course, but empty words, the mechanical spasms that still remain in a chicken’s body once the head has been cut off, allowing it to run around. She asked him if he’d like a cup of tea so many times that the words lost all meaning and for three long quiet weeks cooked his dinner according to the rota established eight years ago, and smiled blankly when he returned home from work. They slept cold and stiff in bed, balancing on the edges and waking with headaches. They forgot to put the heating on, refusing to admit that the season had just changed and that winter was approaching. One evening she draped a blanket over his knees and he welcomed the warmth until he saw that it was crocheted and remembered her going to ‘crafting classes’ that lasted too long and happened too often.

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That night in the second week, Tom had gone to bed early, stepping over the pile of crushed things at the bottom of the stairs that neither of them had the heart to acknowledge or begin to tidy away.

Tom and June continued like this into the third week, tired and sore. It was colder inside the house than it was outside, and still neither of them really spoke. Then, on the last night, Tom told June that he didn't want a cup of tea, and more, that he didn't actually even *like* tea. That night she slept with her arm wrapped around his waist and in the morning he woke early and slipped free. She continued to cuddle his empty space as he inched the curtains open and saw snow reflecting a weak yellow dawn. His reflection in the window seemed ill, her shape under the covers was plump and desperate, and both of them looked far far too old.

In the lukewarm shower, Tom scrubbed at his side, erasing June's touch and wishing that he had put the immersion on. Shivering more than he should have been, he shut the shower off and reached for a towel, which immediately slid to the floor with a self-satisfied thud. It took Tom two attempts to pick it up and he groaned as he did so. The towel was damp, full of cold air and smelling a little like wet dog. He avoided the mirror as he dried himself vigorously, attempting to encourage the blood to rise to his skin. As Tom brushed his teeth, he noticed that his left wrist was glittering slightly. He felt sick as he saw the pearly sheen on it and wished that he hadn't let June touch him again. He rubbed at the patch first with his fingers, then water, then the stinky towel, but still it remained. He glared at the shower, still plopping cold droplets down the plug hole, then turned it back on. It made a hiss that sounded like it knew that he would return, but as he stepped under it, the water was warmer, and the glitter washed away.

Tom held his breath as he opened the bathroom door, but it was still early, and all was still silent. A good, sleepy silent, not a 'have a cup of tea and lets never talk about anything ever again, ok?' silent. The airing cupboard was down the hall, in the spare room, and he crept towards it feeling vaguely ridiculous. Inside it, there were four different coloured socks and two pairs of underpants, one with a hole in an inconvenient place. He put the best of the selection on and looked for some trousers. His khaki chinos lay in the ironing pile; they were crumpled but would have to do. He dressed quickly in them then shoved the remaining undergarments in his pockets. His favourite shirt was happily waiting on the top shelf, all flannelly

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and warm, but he knew he would need a jumper too and cursed the fact that he only owned two. His insistence that a man only ever needs one black and one navy pullover seemed rash now as he was forced to put on his wife's beige cardigan. The arms were just about long enough but the material pulled tightly at the chest area. Well, that would have to do too. Tom's ancient walking boots were in the corner of the room, heavy and fierce looking, but they would at least be warm. In this charming ensemble, he plodded his way as quietly as possible towards the stairs. He was nearly there when he stopped and sighed, trudged his way back to the airing cupboard and put the immersion on for June. There was no need for her to be cold anymore.

At the bottom of the stairs, Tom stepped heavily in to the waiting pile, enjoying the crunch of things breaking under his feet. The noise filled the hallway as his big boots bit at the items underneath them, and for a brief moment he felt quite alive. Woken now, June watched him leave; crushing pearl dust in to the carpet so firmly that she would never be able to get it out. He didn't turn round at all, not as he heaved his winter coat off the stand in the porch, and not as he took his keys from the door, unhooked his car key and let the others fall to the floor. She understood then that he would not be coming back. He didn't turn round as he took the brochure from the little table by the door, the one that advertised the retirement villas that they had researched only half-jokingly. She understood then exactly what she had done.

As he left, the only thing that she didn't really understand was why on earth he was wearing her beige cardigan.

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