

SHARON OARD WARNER

Whatever's Good Will Be Gone

Fiction

Jack breaks the news within minutes of making love, his words coming out between soft little pants: “Maybe ... sweetie ... we’ve ... got ... to ... talk.”

Both of us are stretched out on our backs, ample bellies rising and falling, eyes on the white ceiling. For a woman in middle age, I have good stamina, but Jack is heavy, and it only works for us when he’s on top. Halfway through, I feel lightheaded, as though I can’t suck enough air into my lungs; afterwards, I’m bushed.

“You still with us?” Jack asks me.

I say out loud what I’ve just been thinking: “Damned if I’m not alive.”

“You sound surprised.”

“I am.”

This Friday afternoon tryst will go down as our eighteenth. I keep track in a cheap Hallmark date book, marking the days we have sex with a small round O. Why an O? Why not a J or an S or an F? I have no idea. It’s certainly not an O for orgasm because I rarely have one of those. As an LPN, I was trained in recordkeeping. In my father’s last days, I took notes on water intake and transcribed his last word, which was “boy.” It doesn’t do to rely on memory — memory is flimsy.

For instance, I remember that Jack and I met in the hallway of the apartment building in midsummer, but I can’t be more precise because I didn’t write it down. I was hauling in groceries as he was carrying in boxes, the kind you rummage for in dumpsters. The lids had been neatly sliced off, so the contents were heaped up and out in plain sight, no rhyme or reason to the packing, a sock draped over a sauté pan, that sort of thing. Right away, I figured he was running out on a marriage, or maybe just taking a breather because he was still wearing his ring.

My father had only been dead for a matter of days, and I wasn’t feeling particularly sociable. So I closed the door and forgot all about my new neighbor, until he knocked on my door one Saturday evening in August. Wanted to borrow my microwave to pop some corn, he said. Afterward, the air in my kitchen smelled heavenly, and he invited me over to watch the Lobos lose their first game. According to my Hallmark calendar, that would have been nearly seven months ago.

Now, he clears his throat and tries again: “Something I need to tell you, Maybe baby.”



I brace myself for what's coming — curl my toes beneath the sheet and tell myself an obvious untruth: *You were fine before he came into your life, and you will be fine afterward.*

But what he says next is entirely unexpected: “Sophie’s pregnant.” Sophie is Jack’s teenage daughter, his precocious and smart-alecky seventeen-year-old.

Relief sweeps over me, more satisfying than any orgasm, but to show such happiness is unseemly. Instead, I ask how far along she is. Jack doesn’t know. It didn’t occur to him to ask. “Peggy must have some idea,” he says. “She’s the one who told me. At first I didn’t much believe it.”

“Of course you didn’t,” I soothe, “it’s hard to think of your daughter as a sexual being.”

“That’s not it. I know that Sophie is a sexual being. I’m not blind. But I also know that Peggy is a worrywart. She concocts problems out of thin air.”

“But not in this case,” I say.

“No, not in this case,” he replies.

When Jack dozes off for a few minutes, I return in my head to the classifieds. Fridays I scour the ads, looking for the likely sale. Estate sales and divorce sales are tops on the list, but part of town is important, too. By and large, I stick to the older, more established areas: the Northeast Heights, Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, and certain parts of downtown. February tends to be lean pickings. The only intriguing ad in today’s paper is for a WIDOW’S SALE. The address is in the North Valley, where Jack’s family lives.

“Feel like a movie?” I ask when he wakes.

“I don’t know what to do,” he grumbles, but he isn’t talking about our plans for the evening. He’s still on the subject of Sophie. “Should I give her some advice?”

“Well yeah, Jack. But I’m not the best person to ask.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, I’ve never been a parent.”

“Count your lucky stars.”

He rolls away, and my gaze roams over the naked expanse of his back, stopping at the nest of soft hair that sprouts from his sacrum before moving on again, to his shoulders, which are hunched and no doubt tight and sore. “Poor sweetie.” I scoot closer, plant my strong, speckled hands to either side of his neck, and knead the knots with my fingers.

He sighs, then moans in gratitude. “Maybe, sweetheart. You always know just what I want.”

“It’s not hard,” I reply. Men want touch and women want talk, as any nurse worth her salt knows. “It’s not hard at all.”



Then he's out with it: "If she's going to insist on this pregnancy —" his voice travels around the room before coming back to me — "I may have to move back home."

Right then and there, I want to wring his neck. "What did you say?" I ask, but I heard him; I heard him all right.

"Just for a little while."

I don't trust myself to speak. A tear trickles over the bridge of my nose and drops on the crocheted pillowcase, a beautiful piece of handwork that I would never have considered using if it weren't for Jack. Has he noticed the luxurious bed I created for him from the linens of dead rich people? Probably not.

We've gone from happy to horrible in a heartbeat. On his way out the door, Jack curses loudly, and I realize he's done it again: banged his hip against the corner of the claw foot table, my most recent acquisition.

Having started life in a hunting lodge in New England, the table is now wedged into this one-bedroom apartment in Albuquerque, New Mexico. We all have our come-downs to suffer, but the table has fallen hard. If retail space in Santa Fe weren't so expensive, I'm sure I would have placed it with a dealer. As it is, the table takes up every inch of my available dining room space and most of the hallway. For the time being, I make use of it myself; it's here that I spread the classifieds and take my meals.

When it comes to sales — garage, yard, or estate — early arrival is all. Don't bother to show up late because whatever's good will be gone. Pickers adhere to this rule, me included. But it's not fail-safe, you see. People don't necessarily recognize what's good or valuable. If they did, they wouldn't throw out their treasures in the first place.

As I head out the next morning, I cross the hall and press my palm against the varnished surface of Jack's door. As usual, it's chilly to the touch. It doesn't reveal whether Jack's inside or not, but I like to take a guess, and generally I'm right. This morning, I imagine him sitting on the toilet, reading one of his many issues of *National Geographic*, and am thus able to leave the building with a smile on my face.

Outside, the winter sky is a pale blue streaked by cirrus clouds, the air chilly but dry. Our mountain range to the east often gets snow when the city doesn't, but this winter Sandia has rarely been capped by white. It's been a dry year in a dry decade, and not for the first time I wonder whether human beings should build cities where there's not enough water to support them. My father called it tomfoolery, though he enjoyed the golf courses and blue skies as much as any of them. While he was dying, he would gaze out the window and remark, "Good day for golf," before drifting off to sleep.



Although the lot in front of our building is nearly full, the space where Jack parks his dusty Subaru wagon is empty — so much for my ability to take a temperature. This absence means nothing because I know he’s not yet gone for good, but my heart lurches nonetheless.

When my father died, he left me his truck, and it’s better for picking than the Dodge Caravan I used to drive. These days, I make more spur-of-the-moment buys, it’s true, and some of them have been too big to fit in the truck. That’s why I’ve made a rule for myself: whatever I buy and don’t sell to a dealer must fit into my apartment. No renting storage lockers; no furniture hoarding, which is not to say that I haven’t considered moving to a bigger place. The day Sophie knocked on my door I was scouring the classifieds for a two-bedroom.

Driving across town I recall what I can of that one encounter, which took place before the first O in the Hallmark date book, before I had any interest or investment in the Granger family. She was distressed. Her green eyes were bloodshot, and she sniffed loudly. “Need a Kleenex?” I asked. She waited at the open door while I pulled a few from the box in the bathroom and thanked me in the absentminded way of children. I’d already closed my door, but I heard Jack greet his daughter and Sophie’s outburst: “Why don’t you come home?”

The widow’s house is within a mile of Jack’s place, and when I reach the intersection of Fourth and Solar, I give way to curiosity and yearning. *What need have I for another piece of junk?* I ask myself. *None at all*, I reply. For a good half-hour I circle the bordering streets, getting a feel for the neighborhood. Stucco and pueblo-style homes mingle with the occasional brick colonial, all of them set back from the street. It’s the sort of neighborhood that warms a picker’s heart, well established, with mature trees and expansive front yards, most covered in dormant grass rather than gravel. The people who live in these houses pass down their possessions and tend to them with care.

In an effort to glimpse Jack’s place from a safe distance, I turn into what I suppose is an alley and am immediately startled by a pair of longneck geese, stretching their snaky heads over a shambling picket fence and honking for all they’re worth. That’s the way of things in Albuquerque: roosters are common in the older neighborhoods, and so are goats. Given sufficient acreage, your next-door neighbors may have horses. I’ve seen llamas, and on the north end of Rio Grande, buffalo. Hell, Jack keeps bees, and he lives a stone’s throw from Wendy’s.

Full of potholes, the alleyway soon turns into the road that leads to Jack’s house. It’s set back from its surroundings and situated on at least an acre. What I notice first about the Granger place is its pitched tin roof, but then I take note of the long covered porch. Jack has told me about his home: the original owners were transplants from Dixon



in northern New Mexico. Out of yearning for their own landscape, they planted a cluster of piñon trees at the east end of the house and a row of apple trees behind the garage. This time of the year, it's hard to see the point, everything so dry and dreary, but in the summertime it must be beautiful.

Next, I notice the wide-open door on the second floor, painted blue-green and yawning into empty space. Then I spot the telescope, glinting gold in the weak winter sunshine. I bid on and bought that telescope on eBay, a birthday present for Ian, Jack's son. Just now, it stands untended in the doorway, but Jack swears that Ian loves it.

The telescope came complete with the box and the instructions, absolutely as good as new. Certain things you should never pay full price for: telescopes, exercise equipment, and bridal gowns are all easy as pie to come by. You've got your pick of them. People like to imagine themselves as stargazers, but when it comes down to it, they aren't up to the task — getting up in the dead of night and screwing with a delicate piece of machinery, in the dark no less.

Too late, I realize that this gravel road I'm headed down dead-ends in the Granger's driveway. But I don't regret the mistake; if I hadn't gone the distance, I wouldn't have spotted Jack's wagon parked just off the gravel road, and he wouldn't have seen me. Really, we both needed to take sight of one another in the clear light of day. At least, this is what I told myself then and tell myself now.

He didn't need to come out of the house, but he did, and when he saw me there in his driveway, hunkered down behind my daddy's steering wheel, he stopped dead in his tracks. His sour expression was my cue to haul ass, but my foot slipped off the clutch, the truck bucked, lurched, and finally shuddered to a quick and noisy death. All the while I turned my key in the ignition and revved the engine, he waved me on, nothing friendly or welcoming. This was a shooing, get-the-hell-out-of-here gesture. I left as fast as I could.

A week passes, during which I don't hear a word from him, not even when I buy the armoire and stow it in his apartment. Our amiable apartment manager is only too happy to unlock the door for me, and, when he does, I can see that Jack is already in the process of clearing out. Once or twice I hear Jack coming and going with someone, maybe Ian. I consider poking my head out to say a simple hello, but the memory of his shooing me away keeps me hidden on the other side of the door.

On a Saturday morning at the end of the month, I return from my usual round of sales to find a slip of paper taped to my door: "Meet me for drinks at the Diner?"

Thank goodness, I think, we'll have a chance at goodbye.



The Route 66 Diner is down the road, a square white cinderblock building adorned with an excess of neon, most of it pink. The fifties color scheme — pink and turquoise and black — is offset with chrome, and I can't tolerate the place unless I'm seated in a window booth. There, I can watch the cars roaring up Central Avenue, headed east to the University of New Mexico or west to downtown. Most Sundays, the sidewalk is busy with mothers pushing strollers, homeless gentlemen wheeling grocery carts, and the occasional weekend student bent nearly double by a book-heavy backpack. No one walks empty-handed. Everyone has a burden of some sort.

Jack arrives ahead of me. I find him at our booth, wearing the red flannel shirt I gave him for Christmas. He's already ordered for us. I've no more than slid into the booth when the waitress delivers our malts — chocolate for him and strawberry for me. This is our version of going out for drinks. A little sweetness loosens our tongues better than beer.

"That's a nice piece of furniture you left in my place," Jack says, "but you're going to have to move it come the end of the month."

He doesn't use a straw. He prefers bringing the glass to his lips and licking the thick sweetness off his mustache with the tip of his tongue. He tends to make a mess. Myself, I bend to the straw and suck. Soon, I am rewarded with a mouthful of sweet cream and strawberries. Back when I was sixteen and miserably pregnant, I was especially fond of strawberry ice cream. I couldn't get enough of it.

"That armoire is not just nice," I say, "it's beautiful, and it would be really valuable if someone hadn't sawed off the feet. Can you believe people do things like that? Makes me think of the way people will chop off a dog's tail, cruel and entirely pointless."

Jack gives me one of his curious looks. "Like I said, you'll need to get the armoire a new home in a few short days."

I concentrate on the task at hand, sucking at my straw. Then, when I've had my fill of sweetness, I answer: "The armoire is for Sophie, Jack. An expectant mother needs a place to store things."

He peers at me across the table, uncomprehending.

"It's true I was never a parent," I explain. "But when I was a girl just Sophie's age, I was a mother for all of nine months and three days."

"You gave up the baby?"

"It was taken from me, Jack. Don't you remember what happened to girls who got in a bad way? They went to the Home. Mine was Catholic, and they preached forgetfulness."

"Forgiveness?"

"*Forgetfulness*. They knocked me out for the labor, and when I came to, the baby was gone. Out of kindness, they refused to tell me anything at all."



“You don’t know anything?”

I think of my father’s last word, neatly transcribed into my datebook. I could share it with Jack, but I don’t. Instead, I reach across the table and grab his hand. He squeezes back hard, his fingers sticky. If I were to lick them right now, they’d be wonderfully sweet.

