

The Old Man In The Bed

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The old man in the bed is her father, not quite her dad. Connected to him are a few tubes she can see and a couple she can't, which is just as well for both of them. She is his youngest and the one who knows him least. Until recently, she has been mostly grateful for that. She's always been told she had his smile, his Swedishness, a little at the tip of the nose. It's felt good to look like him because he saw himself as so handsome, which meant he must have thought she was quite a lot by relation. No matter the circumstance, every girl wants her father to think she's pretty. "*Green piercing eyes and catlike movements*" is how he describes himself, even recently to the tired lady from Meals-on-Wheels.

He would have preferred she and her sister not go to his apartment, mostly because he'd seen no point in refurnishing since his fourth wife made off with everything but his grayish-blue velveteen reclining lounge chair, a leaf bag full of unused yarn, her copper pot collection, and his Purple Heart. However, the impending long hospital stay right on the heels of his last was new reason for him to fear being robbed. Following the gasping verbal map of where and in which hanging brown suede jacket his envelope of emergency cash could be found, she and her sister respectfully ignored the clutter, dust, jugged wine, and expired, untouched bottles of OxyContin. They lingered, instead, over his leather-bound scrapbook of winner's circle photographs. In each he was impeccably suited and ankle-deep in paddock mud, his smile only a little less wide than his jockey's. He was distinct from the beaming Wall Street men book ending him. Despite having the kind of disposable wealth that allowed them the money-gobbling hobby of horse owning, the rich men seemed to lean into her father's frame, attempting to absorb what he had that was unpurchasable. Or maybe he'd just trained them, too.

She made for his bedroom closet as instructed and, in the appointed jacket, found no cash. Hanging just beside it, though, was a white wool cardigan sweater. Izod. It was the one she had given him many Christmases before, when she had no idea he was not the kind of guy to be caught living or dead in such la-di-da, country club attire. On the sweater, pinned just left of the little green alligator, was her father's Purple Heart.

Why had he chosen that sweater as the hiding place for one of his most potent keepsakes? Did it have something to do with knowing the cardigan would never leave his closet, so the precious medal was safer there than it would be wrapped in tissue and put in a box in a drawer that his ex-wife could too easily find on her second pass? Did he care? Or maybe he did wear the sweater sometimes, just around the house, because it bonded him to the daughter he knew less and connected her to a time and an artifact that represented when he felt proud of himself. Before everything else.