

The Town Drunk

Presents

Left Behind

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The disordered silence in the drawer full of freshly laundered socks was broken when a new pair of thick, cotton socks plumped down into their midst and looked around in fluffy-toed wonder.

“Hello,” said the new arrivals, so new they were still hooked together. They had a pattern of blue snowflakes about the cuffs, and they spoke in one voice as new socks do. The other socks took no notice, clustered around a lone brown and pink argyle.

“Hello?” said the Cottons again. “What’s going on?”

“The Winnowing is upon us,” sighed a gloomy hiking sock whose reinforced toe had a thinning spot at the nail line. Its mate, who had a similar thinning spot, whispered, “Right Argyle has been taken up into the Dryer.”

“Oh,” said the young socks. “Is that the, ah...” indicating the brown and pink sock.

“The new Widow Argyle,” the hiking sock said. “You couldn’t have come at a worse time.”

“We couldn’t help it,” said the Cottons. “We can’t help being Given, and we can’t help being Taken Away. Besides, the new Widow Argyle is truly blessed!”

“Blessed?” The argyle broke away from an angora’s embrace and stared at them. “I go into an hour’s wash a happy and productive left sock, and I come out of the Dryer purposeless and alone. For what use is a single sock? Without my mate, my life is over!”

“To be Chosen by the Dryer is surely a great honor,” said the new cotton socks.

“And what do you know about it?” said Widow Argyle. “You haven’t even been worn yet.”

“It wasn’t a dog or a traffic accident. It was the Great Miracle! Your mate was assumed into the Dryer to fulfill the transcendent destiny of sockhood.”

“And just what is that?”

“Well...”

The fact was, they didn't know. They understood, as well as their limited experience allowed them, the developmental rites of hosiery. First came Knitting and the time of Unity, when new socks were first paired and bound together with hangers and tabs. During that period, the new socks thought and acted as one being. Then came the Unbinding. Tabs were cut, and the socks were released from their hangers. From that point they had the ability to speak with each other, though most often they went catatonic until their first Wearing, which fortunately was usually only a short time later. From then on, they began to differentiate, developing unique scars, stains, and patterns of wear. No longer one unit, they still operated in conjunction to fulfill the highest article of sock existence, to protect and comfort the Feet. When they were bundled together again after the ritual of Laundering, they shared their experiences and thus increased their mutual wisdom and strength. The end of a sock's life could come in many forms, of which the most mysterious was Laundry Day.

Like all truly important rituals, Laundry Day was dangerous. A small but significant percentage of participants did not return. Beliefs regarding the afterlife varied, but in general, socks tended to be optimistic. The tragedy was that of those not chosen.

“Where does that leave me?” said Widow Argyle. “Puppet shows. Catnip toys. You call that existence? A blessing, they say, a miracle, to disappear in the Dryer. I just don't see it!” She broke down entirely.

The Cottons huddled with the hiking socks, listening to her quiet despair.

It wasn't long before the Cottons were released from their hanger and worn for the first time. Their differentiation began almost immediately, as the kitten of the house snagged Left's cuff in attacking a piece of snowman-patterned ribbon. The wearer's ankle was unharmed; Left was very proud. Later in the evening, Right stepped in a puddle of spilled eggnog on the kitchen floor, valiantly interposing itself between the Foot and a shard of china.

Both socks were promptly relegated to the Hamper. Over the course of the next few days, they were joined by other socks, each of whom shared tales of shoes inhabited, fishing hooks fended off, abductions by Kitten, and harrowing escapes from behind the sofa.

“So then I zapped her on the whiskers, and I still had enough of a static charge left to propel myself into the hall,” said Left Hiking Sock. “I got picked up at that point, and here I am.”

“But I'll tell you,” said Left Hiking Sock to the Cottons, “I'd rather deal with that kitten any day than Widow Argyle. Even before Right Argyle... went away, she was a little odd. Now she's downright peculiar.”

“Peculiar?”

“She was snuffling all over me before we went on that fishing trip. Said she could read doom in my lint. I was so spooked I nearly lost that fight with the fishing hook.”

“She also said she was concerned about you two young cottons,” put in Right Hiking Sock. “I think it will comfort her when she sees you safely back in the drawer. She wasn’t herself when you met her. The Argyles have always been very kind to newcomers.”

“She’s still not herself,” said Left Hiking Sock. “You gotta stay focused, or you can’t do your job. And her thinking these days is very fuzzy. Lint. Huh.”

Just then, the Hamper was dumped into the Washer. The Cottons tried to stay together, but once they were soaked, they couldn’t resist the agitation. After a while, Right found the rhythm hypnotic. As the egg-nog stain lifted out of its sole, it began to feel at peace. It relaxed and let go of the stain. It looked forward to the Dryer, and it hoped Left was experiencing a similar inward journey.

Left found that once it stopped worrying about Right’s whereabouts, it was able to use the motion of the Washer to pull its snagged elastic into place. Right and Left met only briefly as they spun inexorably into a deeply individual meditative state.

Thus somnolent, they entered the Dryer. Left Cotton tumbled in the heat, regaining its nubbliness and fluffing up, absorbing the static electricity it would need for self-defense and propulsion. It gradually revived in the stillness of the cooling Dryer.

The door opened, and the socks were pulled out. Left was eager to reunite with Right and waited impatiently as the basket was picked over. There went the hiking socks. Then the angoras, surprisingly colorfast and fleecier than ever. Eventually all the socks were paired off—except for Left Cotton, who was tossed unceremoniously into the drawer alone.

Right had vanished.

The remaining socks clustered around the bewildered and disoriented Left Cotton Sock, trying to comfort it—but it was no use. No one could find any justice in what had happened. Only one Wearing! It wasn’t unheard of, but so rare. And so soon after the last one. Left Cotton—the new Widow Cotton—couldn’t bear to face Widow Argyle. Now it felt ashamed of its unbleached smugness of only a few days past.

“So,” said Widow Argyle, “it seems we’re of the same denier now, doesn’t it?” She didn’t seem angry; she sounded thoughtful.

Left finally looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“We’re alike, in some useful ways,” said the widow. “Alone, but not worn out. It will be all right now that we’re together. I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“It’s a sign. Your mate and mine were taken away so close together. That means we’re meant to rescue them together.”

Left Cotton now understood how Widow Argyle had turned peculiar. But Left was lonely and afraid, and Widow Argyle had a good heart, even if she was a bit loose in the elastic. Maybe if Left stayed with her, she’d tighten up again.

So Widow Cotton and Widow Argyle became close friends. They hung out together in the back of the drawer and heard all the comings and goings of the world of hosiery. Widow Argyle remained peculiar, muttering to herself and casting auguries; the hiking sock’s wasn’t the only one whose lint she read. But she also taught the young Widow Cotton some basic sock survival skills.

One day, the widow was coaching Left on the preparation and maintenance of static charge, and poor Left Cotton felt hopelessly wadded up.

“Why do I need to learn this?” asked Left Cotton.

“We won’t be stuck in this drawer forever,” said the widow. “You’ll need to be able to pull your own weight when we get out. Eventually, we’ll get to the Dryer again.”

“We’ll be asleep!”

“Only the first time. You’ll see.”

The time of Winnowing came again, when new socks arrived and old, worn-out socks were taken away. All the other socks had been taken out in pairs and worn, but Laundry Day had been delayed, so that Left Cotton and the Widow Argyle were taken out and worn together on kitchen floors dabbled with chocolate spills and cookie batter droppings. Left kicked a tiny light bulb into a corner, and the widow got snarled in scotch tape.

“It’s always this way,” said the widow. “Soon there’ll be new arrivals with Santa Clauses in their cuffs and jingle bells on their ankles, you mark my words.” In fact, there already had been, small ones that scampered around the house getting very dirty very fast, sliding on polished floors.

Finally, Widow Argyle and Left Cotton landed in the Hamper.

The widow chortled with glee. “My plan is coming along beautifully!”

“So now we’re in the Hamper,” said Left Cotton. “I still don’t see how we’re going to rescue our mates.”

“Trust me,” said Widow Argyle. “When you wake up in the Dryer, just use the static like I

taught you.”

Once again they cycled through the laundry. This time, instead of allowing themselves to be dumped out of the Dryer, the odd socks used static electricity to repel themselves from the rest of the laundry and remain inside—conscious, aware, and ready for the next Laundry Day. From there, the widow insisted they would be able to see what happened to the lost socks. Left had doubts that they would be able to do anything about it, but the experience might be comforting anyway.

Laundry Day came soon enough, and Left Cotton was covered by layers of sodden and insensible friends. The tumbling began, and Left momentarily lost sight of Widow Argyle. Then she reappeared.

“Stay with me!” called Left, but the widow wasn’t paying attention anymore. She spun away into the dark. Left followed as best it could, using static to pull itself along the unconscious bodies of its friends. It fetched up against Left Hiking Sock and clung for a moment to get its bearings.

Then the widow reappeared and clung to the other side. “This is it!” she said.

“What is?” said Left Cotton.

“Look!”

A vortex of light opened up, spiraling away in the direction opposite the tumble. It was drawing in Left Hiking Sock. Left Cotton hung on, wrapping itself around a trouser leg.

“Here I come, dear!” called Widow Argyle. She was toe and instep into the vortex, and Left understood then what her plan really was.

“No!” Left yelled. “Don’t leave me!” Left held on to the hiking sock.

“Let go, it’s Hiking Sock’s time,” said the widow, laughing. “And I can go too, and be with my Right Argyle at last!”

“I won’t let you!” said Left Cotton. “Hiking Sock! Wake up! Come back! Right Hiking Sock needs you!” Left was losing its grip on the trouser leg. It summoned a zap of static and sent it charging into Hiking Sock.

Hiking Sock awoke. “Huh? What—”

“Hold on, Hiking Sock,” said Left. “Don’t let go.” Left looked straight into the looming tunnel of light.

There hung Right Cotton—but a curiously flattened and enlarged Right Cotton, looking as though it had been liquefied and spread over a surface to become an image, a representative icon

of the sock, eggnog stain rendered in plush amber velvet, the blue snowflakes edged in glittering bullion.

“Right Cotton!” called Left.

Right responded. “Left, you have to stay.”

“But why, Right? I want to be with you. Can’t you come back with me?”

“I’ve changed, Left. I can’t do that job anymore. I’m fulfilling another purpose now. You have to go back and keep on. Don’t worry—I’ll see you again soon.” Right Cotton turned to Hiking Sock. “Hiking Sock, you can join me, if you want. It’s up to you.”

“No way! I’m not ready for *that* job,” said the stalwart hiking sock. It gripped both Left and the Widow Argyle in a double-knit reinforced embrace and swung them all away.

“No!” cried the widow. “I want to be with him!” She struggled in the grip of Hiking Sock, but the vortex had already closed. The Dryer tumbled once more, then stopped.

In the silence, Left Cotton asked Hiking Sock, “Why didn’t you go?”

“I’m not ready to leave my mate behind,” said Hiking Sock. “And didn’t you see what your Right Cotton was doing?”

“Not really,” said Left. “More armor work, but I don’t see what kind of foot it’ll fit now.”

“Not Feet,” said Hiking Sock, sounding spooked.

Widow Argyle said only, “Darn.”

Widow Argyle and Left Cotton were worn to bed that night, and the hiking socks as well. When the house was quiet, they all found themselves padding silently downstairs to the living room. There was activity above them on the kitchen table, and soft laughter. Then they all stood back to face the fireplace.

The socks gazed up in awe, wonder, and horror. Above them, nailed to the mantel, were the living spirits of Right Argyle and Right Cotton. Transformed and transcendent, radiant with glitter and trim, no longer were they the staunch and useful armor of the Feet. Instead, they encased in their fragile glory power, intelligence, sweetness, and beauty. Batteries, intricate puzzles, peppermints and chocolates, and tiny jeweled pictures peeked over the tops of their cuffs.

“Right?” whispered Left Cotton.

“Right?” whispered Widow Argyle.

“The ultimate purpose of the Mystery of the Dryer,” said Left. “We protect soles, and they—”

“Doesn’t it hurt?” interrupted Hiking Sock. “The batteries look lumpy, and I can’t imagine only having one outing in a year.”

The socks gazed at their engorged and immobilized spiritual counterparts for as long as they could, until the lights turned off and they padded back up the stairs to bed.

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