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## The Coat Rack

Charles Corry

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**D**esolation swelled in Leon as dust boiled into a small cloud above the gravel road. From the porch, he watched the swelling cloud without noticing the gentle rhythm of the wind chimes, and his smile faded almost in direct proportion to the growing distance between him and the last car pulling from sight. Still he continued to wave, as though to the billowing dust cloud, in a desperate attempt to stay the moment and delay turning into the empty house. A steady stream of people had come and gone, paying their last respects to Annie and warmly consoling Leon, assuring him that he would be all right.

Leon did not notice the afternoon sky; he was unaware of the warmth of spring, the time of year that made him feel more alive. For the past few days he had been bombarded with an avalanche of decisions. It was an uncomfortable role for Leon. There was little time for reflection. Personal indulgences had necessarily taken a back seat to pressing matters.

The marriage of forty-three years had ended with stark finality at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, as Leon sat dozing in the clinical white of a hospital waiting room only minutes after a calm, attractive voice announced over the P.A. system: "Dr. Heart, Dr. Heart. Please come to I.C.U. Dr. Heart." It was the tone of voice one hears paging travelers to airport telephones. Leon hadn't realized that the call was an alert for the nearest doctor to rush to I.C.U. because someone—his someone—was drowning in an un-moving sea of blood.

It was like an extended dream that Leon wanted desperately to awaken from, a foggish nightmare to be swept away by bright sun and spring winds. He wanted to splash cold water on his face and feel the resurging sting of life, of yesterday. But he knew that yesterday was gone.

As the dust cloud settled, Leon turned and mechanically opened the front door. The living room was adorned with flowers and potted plants and permeated with mingled odors of cigarettes and flowers and covered dishes. What would he do with the ivies? He felt obliged to keep them; but if he did, he would have to tend them, and, truthfully, they were unpleasant reminders.

The modest frame house had been Leon and Annie's home for twenty-two years; yet, now, with the noise of people silenced, it seemed alien. The inhospitable quiet lent an uneasy chill to the room, and an empty feeling began to rise in his stomach.

Leon sank in his recliner and, with a deep sigh, blankly stared at the coat rack on the wall. His life had changed, and a close look in a mirror would have revealed a much more haggard face than met his eyes only days before. For the first time, he felt his seventy-one years. Age had dropped on him like a net, and he felt the full weight of its unyielding grip.

Suddenly he was glad to be alone, glad it was all over; yet, being alone frightened him. It was unbalancing, he thought, these conflicting emotions that Annie's death had brought about. Leon needed time to clear the fog, to relegate the events a proper place and unhinge the fear.

"I'll be all right," he consoled aloud, and the sound of his

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by Charles Corry

voice in the empty house startled him. He was not sure that he would be all right, and he grimaced to hold back tears and sank farther into the recliner.

"What will happen to me?" he softly spoke with an unaccustomed meekness. A conversation not intended for his ears echoed from earlier in the day.

"Poor Leon, he won't last long without Annie. I don't know if he'll be with us another Christmas."

"I know," the other voice added, "It'll be hard for him. His heart's not good, you know."

How would he cope without Annie? His lips tensed and a sense of anger swelled. He was the one with a bad heart; she had always taken care of him. Everyone, Leon included, had assumed that Annie would bury him, and in a way, he felt that she had cheated him by dying first. Frustration etched his face.

"Dear God in heaven," he cried, as the gnawing sensation built, "I don't know how to live alone."

In spite of his resistance, a tear inched across his weathered cheek as he stared at the coat rack on the wall. He felt something else, a sensation he could not put his finger on. Surely, he was just tired, he silently consoled and softly tapped the arm of the recliner.

The room took on a pale orange glow as the late afternoon sun settled into a spectacular sky. An hour passed before Leon realized that he was staring at the coat rack. The longer he looked at it, the more uneasy he became until the reason dawned on him, and unpleasant memories speared through his mind.

"My God," he thought aloud, "how many times did I promise her I would fix it?"

One of the pegs was broken. He had repeatedly promised Annie that he would replace it. Repairs would have been simple: drill out the stub, replace it with a new dowel, and stain it to match the rack. It was a minor thing that would have taken no more than

half-an-hour. Leon had a knack for working with wood and an earned reputation for being able to make or fix almost anything. He took pride in the fact that everyone who knew him brought broken treasures to him to repair.

Everything he needed was in the tool shed. Why had he never done it? He felt a tinge of embarrassment and guilt.

Leon shifted in his chair and mentally began a process of self-defense. What difference did it make? No one ever used it.

"It's nothing but a damned old eye-sore," he grumbled. "Occasionally a hat gets tossed at it, but that's the use of it."

"Humm!" he grunted, "she was always wanting me to do some damn fool thing. Never a minute's peace. Gawd! If I did everything she wanted . . ."

"I should have just told her it wasn't worth fixing, and that's that!" And instantly he knew why he never told her, even as he framed the words. It was easier to put her off. Again he shifted uncomfortably in the recliner.

"Sweet Jesus, she was a sentimental old woman. It was nothing but junk."

Annie's thin, plaintive voice echoed in his mind: "Leon, I don't have many things of Momma's. Fix it. It'll do you good."

Leon looked away from the coat rack in an attempt to dispel the delicate, haunting echo. He set his jaw and pressed his fingers into the recliner.

"I was a good husband," he defended, "a good man. Not like some I could name."

Leon considered his virtues: moral, God-fearing, a church man and Sunday school teacher.

His chin lifted in hard indignation, and with clear steel eyes he glared at the coat rack. He stared at it until in his mind's eye the stub of the broken peg began to quiver.

Leon forced his thoughts elsewhere, and the hard-set expression softened as he remembered the expensive spray of roses he had placed at the foot of Annie's casket.

"Seventy-five dollars! You can buy a goddamn calf for seventy-five dollars," he winced.

Everyone said it was such a wonderful thing he did. He remembered the talk. They said it showed such love for her.

"Yes," Leon nodded, "Annie would have been so very proud, God love her soul."

He remembered how she admired the roses Jack gave to Betty on their twenty-fifth anniversary. Annie always wanted roses like that. Leon had made sure that these were even nicer than Betty's.

His eyes wandered back to the rack. Why had he never fixed it? Maybe he should do it now, as a tribute, so to speak, to Annie. She might even smile down from heaven.

"Fixing it might get my mind off things," he said.

Almost as an unconscious reaction, Leon got up from the recliner, went to the wall, and with his pocket knife, gently pried the rack loose. It came off with surprising ease, and as he held it, he noticed a fine line of dust on the uppermost back edge: a narrow line missed by Annie's dust cloth. He studied it for a moment and then slowly traced it with his fingers, erasing the thin, delicate

grey line.

Leon carried the coat rack out the back door, and, in twilight, walked across the lawn toward the shed. He did not want to repair the rack, and, truthfully, he no longer wanted to see it. As he walked, the heart of his feelings took root, and when he reached the tool shed he paused at the door and hurriedly turned to the iron gate leading to the pasture. Beyond the gate, he walked without hesitation past an oak tree with a tire swing hanging motionless. He and Annie planted the tree over twenty years ago. When he came to the ditch used for dumping trash, he stopped at the edge, gave a last hollow glance at the rack, and tossed it into the ditch.

Leon walked briskly away, and as he passed the tire swing, he gave it a good push. He noticed the smell of clover in the air, and for the first time since Annie died, he was hungry—not for covered dishes—but something different. Perhaps he would try the new restaurant down at the highway that Annie had been so curious about.

His shoulders straightened and his stride lengthened as the gray iron gate clanked shut. As Leon crossed the lawn, he could faintly hear the gentle, crystal rhythm of the wind chimes as the glorious red sky faded into night.