

1946

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E. W. Tedlock Jr.

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Recommended Citation

Tedlock Jr., E. W.. "Winter Garment." *New Mexico Quarterly* 16, 2 (1946). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol16/iss2/8>

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WINTER GARMENT

E. W. Tedlock, Jr.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK he suddenly stopped drying the dishes, put down the tea towel in a crumpled heap, and told his wife that he did not feel well. She did not question him but told him to lie down. She would finish. His action was rather ironic, since he seldom volunteered to help at all. Tonight there had been a sort of tenderness in him as he began wordlessly to help her.

At nine o'clock, when she had finally finished tidying the kitchen and the dining room, she opened the door to his study. He was sitting immobile in his old leather armchair — simply sitting there staring out at the room. On an impulse she went to him to kiss him, but he did not respond. He only patted her hand as it rested beside him, and she went away without saying a word.

She went upstairs and sewed until ten, then went to bed alone. Before she turned out the light, she looked at herself in the long mirror on the closed door. She noticed again that she was slightly stooped, that there were little concavities and sags of age. But she was still a big, round-limbed woman, her flesh still ruddy. She turned out the light, slipped into her cotton nightgown, lay down in the bed, and thought of him.

He, in the study below, had hardly stirred. He was enacting a scene with himself which had become increasingly frequent this last year, though he had never been entirely free from it. He was smoking what he told himself was a last cigarette before bed, a simple thing to do, a natural thing to do, except that for him it marked a dreaded decision, a little resolve painfully hard for him to make, to give up once more his conscious life for the uncertainties and fantasies of sleep. So he sat there doing nothing, staring sightlessly through the eddies of smoke refracting the light from the lamp beside his chair.

He sat there fascinated and repelled by the moment. It was painfully recurrent, familiar, this feeling of bodilessness, of being only a brooding mind, suspended curiously in some way in time and space, surrounded by intimate, remembered objects but in no way connected with them, unresponding, feeling nothing, only brooding timelessly and vastly. At this moment, this late decisive moment, after a day of acting, feeling, communicating, everything but mind fell away. The mind worked on. It sat aloof and remote and denied the moment of sleep and surrender.

The light from the lamp shone full on his bald head edged with quite gray hair which shed on the shoulders of his coat a powder of dandruff. The powder was cumulative, for he was a man who had stopped looking into mirrors. His face, half in light, half in shadow, was not entirely intellectual. There was strength in the high-arched nose, the sharp bony structure of cheeks and chin. Yet the taut skin suggested purification; the tiny lines about the eyes and mouth, concentration without calculation. His thinness suggested a gradual dwindling and diminishing as age advanced. The big leather armchair held him loosely.

The ash of the cigarette smoldered close to his fingers, and he crushed it, moving only his hand and arm, in the tray on the table in front of the lamp, took another from the pack lying there, lit it, and was immobile again. He had made a concession to the moment. He was staring straight out at three-quarters of the room, and without moving his head he looked at the clock on the big roll-top desk in the far corner. The arm of the second-hand swept on swiftly, round and round and round. The hour was only a meaningless point in the endless progression of the hand. It meant nothing except that it coincided with his being suspended thus between waking and sleeping.

He looked out at the room, and he knew, without being moved, that it was shabby. It was cumulative, like the dandruff on his coat. It bore in rough-carpentered shelves pushed against papered walls the accumulated books of forty years. It bore in the roll-top desk and on the table nearby other books and the accumulated jottings and scraps of jottings of thirty years of labor in the same house in the same room. It was not a slick, sharp, neat illustration of modern interior décor. It was worn and somber and jerry-built. It was improvisation and expedience. It was unpremeditated biography.

Scattered through a few of the shelves were the books he had

bought as an undergraduate, managed to buy by skimping on other things, but not to excess — he was no martyr. He knew when and where he had bought them, but, curiously, he could not remember how they had moved him, what absorbed eagerness, what passions they had aroused. He could only, at the moment, say they had done so. That was all. They were odds and ends, unconnected by method — poetry, novels, essays, some in handsome bindings, a few in tooled leather, bought for richness as well as reading. Some of them, he knew, were still unread. He had bought them to possess them.

Then, on the shelves, began the textbooks, anthologies from undergraduate courses, many of them obsolete, their margins bearing penciled notes, their bindings the marks of hard use, much carrying, much throwing upon tables and desks. They were formidable, serviceable books, bound in neutral colors, thick despite thin paper. Then there were the books from his graduate days, the books of specialization, many thin little volumes priced for the student, uniformly bound, but trimmer, more handsome, than the anthologies. And some of these had been bought for possession.

The rest of the room was lined with the accumulation of thirty years as a teacher, samples from publishers, textbooks, the choice of literary guilds finely printed and illustrated, specialists' books never widely circulated, all sorts of odds and ends of books picked up at bookstores in big cities and little cities wherever he had traveled and had time to browse, books bought for love, from curiosity, from a desire to let nothing perish, for usefulness in filling some vacant informational corner, sometimes because a friend or acquaintance had written them, the outpourings of university presses. Big books, little books, pamphlets, periodicals, there they were, the cumulation of a lifetime, uncataloged except in his mind.

His mind! He inhaled the cigarette deeply, and his hand dropped. His arm was far away. It hung far down, curiously detached from him. His mind contemplated it there for a moment, then went back to the books, and suddenly, queerly, familiarly, hatred swept outward and upward from some hidden, mindless source. Suppose tombs spoke, suppose sepulchers opened, suppose blood filled atrophied veins, suppose the miracle happened. But it would not. They were safely shut up, and the key, the miracle, vanished. The thing was lost in the mastery. Life dropped away in fragments until the mind sat stripped, capable only of brooding.

The hatred passed, and he brooded there, peering through the blue smoke, curiously contemplating. He noticed that he was listening too. He listened through the stillness of the room, and he noticed that when he concentrated, when he tried hard, he could hear. There were noises in the stillness. He listened. At first there were only little, fugitive noises: the slight rustle and crack of an old board expanding or contracting, a mouse gnawing patiently somewhere in a corner, the momentary rattle of a window from a gentle wind-push outside, faintly the whir of the electric clock, perhaps even the subtly shifting pressure of the floor above on the beams and joists below, and then, above his head, the muffled, just-caught groan and squeak of a bed. The noise caught his mind and held it.

She, in the room above, did not sleep. One would think she did, seeing the long form motionless under the sheet. She had turned her face to the window so that the cool, moist spring air moved across it. And, in a sort of receptiveness, her arms lay above her head. She liked to sleep thus with his arm flung across her breast, his hand resting in the little hollow between her neck and shoulder. Sometimes he did not make this gesture, and she turned and huddled on her side in isolation.

Now she lay waiting, thinking of their life together. She thought of their children, their handsome children, the slim, grave-faced boy with his lively, vagrant imagination, and the sturdy girl with her fine brow and independent way, begotten here in this house, nurtured and nourished in it like plants that must have rich soil. She had borne them for him, and she had joyed in the moments of his pride, when she could see in him, and share the pleasure in, his children. Those were the golden moments, the moments of gaiety and pride.

And she had found passion with him, the fierce, creative passion in which her patience and stillness were released. The routine days were intervals of duty performed steadily and slowly with an infinite trust in fruition, until she herself became a symbol in the house of that trust and fruition. It was as though fate played no part there, or that she herself was their fate and their destiny.

Of his intellect she understood little. It was enough to feel that something important to him was going on. It was enough to feel it as a power in him. She seldom read. Long ago he had prompted her to read more, and to please him she pretended to be interested. But in her woman's heart she did not want it. The golden moments of gaiety

and pride and passion were enough, and she moved through them like some full-limbed goddess born from the sea.

As she lay there, facing the window, a sudden scent of blossoms came into the room, the fragrance of lilacs in bloom in the garden below. And it brought to her suddenly the time of the awakening of their love, and she began to think of that.

Caught by the sound of her turning, he thought how distant she was to his brooding detachment, as though a stranger slept within the house, or he, a stranger, sat only thinking in the room below. He could think back; he could see in a vista of years her full, strong figure, advancing golden in sunlight slowly diffusing, the soft blond hair turning to mist, the well-featured face fading slowly, down through thirty years passing steadily through infinite duties endlessly repeated, with intervals of exultation. And hatred of the moment struck through his mind, and the ash of cigarette dropped in his lap, and the glowing tip burned upward to his fingers.

At last the sting aroused him. He crushed the cigarette and stared at the room, and the hatred within him welled up black and unstable. He got up and walked unsteadily along the shelves of books, and as he walked he hated them as dry symbols of his impotent spirit. In flames yellow and leaping, the pages writhed and twisted and fell back to blackness, leafing over and over in curling rhythm. With a shove and sweep of his hand he flung a row of them to the floor, would have done it again, then stopped in shocked reaction. For a long time he looked at them, stooping and peering at their tumbled chaos, thought to pick them up, and did not. Instead he went to the window and stared out at the night, and the dusty glass spotted from the spring rains was like a barrier between him and his desire. He forced open the latch, jerked the window up against twists and warpings of the channel, and pressed his face close to the screen, confronting the night. And it was like a deep, dark pool, infinitely liquid, stirring slowly with forms and shapes merging and blending tranquilly. It surged gently, surface and under-surface, with a power of an inevitable cycle, with the rhythm of time before time. It seemed to him it washed against the house and against his face at the window like a laving and a purification.

At first it seemed impalpable, the night, as though he had found transcendent, transmuting perception. Then he began to make out in the yard the shapes, the great elm overreaching the house, and the full, high lilacs beyond. And as he looked, a breath, a little push of air,

moved the fragrance to the window and to his face, and the clean sweet scent ran through him with a little shock of recognition, and he remembered a similar night and a similar scent years ago.

For weeks they had eaten at the same table. It was late spring, and he was working hard in the graduate school, so he had shut out the indolence and pleasure of the season. They had said a few polite words to each other, and he had admired momentarily her classic features and her sturdy body. He had even noticed the stillness and patience in her, the quality of passion at rest, but he had never known that she had thought of him. Then one night they met outside the library, on the sidewalk paralleling the great grass parks of the Midway, and, at whose suggestion he could not remember, they began to walk together out across the long gleaming vista of lawn and trees toward the lake.

Each rectangle of grass was concave, slanted sharply down and inward, so that they descended and finally rose again, into and out of ponds of deep, moist shadow. Poised on the brink, they were conscious of the intermittent shush of cars traversing the ribbons of roadway stretching back into the city. Within the declivities they moved light and alone, wading within the embrace of trees and banks under a warm, heavy sky. At the top of the second they took off their shoes and ran barefoot down the steep grass and out into the night until they were breathless. Then they walked slowly with their arms about each other to climb again. At the end of the roadway they crossed the railway tracks and turned into the curving paths of Jackson Park, and after a bit when they could hear the surging beat of the lake, they turned into a meadow sheltered by trees and bushes.

There they embraced, isolated thus between lake and city, enfolded in the night. Then they lay on the grass, her head on his arm, and there for the first time he discovered the secret of her nature. He flung his arm across her breast, and as it lay heavily there he discovered the strong fierce hammer of her heart beneath. It beat rapid and strong with the rhythm of the night and the pulse of the lake on the shore behind them. She was still, oh so still, patiently still and waiting, and only the thud of her heart beneath her round strong breast betrayed her. It leaped upward and outward with the impassioned force and timelessness of night and earth and sky and moving water. And as they lay there, there moved from the high, full bushes about them the clean sweet scent of the late lilacs remaining from spring.

This, as he stood at the window, flooded upon him suddenly and

swept away the sterile bitterness of his mood. He lingered there for a long time, savoring the night. Then he turned to the room and slowly, mindlessly, gathered up the tumbled, fallen books and placed them aimlessly on the shelf. By his chair he stopped and punched out the lingering, smoldering ash of a cigarette, turned out the lamp, and in the darkness traversed the hall and climbed the stairway. Inside the bedroom door he paused and looked for her figure by the window. He could see the long figure lying motionless, one arm flung behind her head, patiently still, patiently waiting. He took off his clothes, his thin figure moving methodically in the darkness, groped in the closet for his pajamas and put them on, then lay on the bed beside her. And his arm, in the familiar gesture, went across her breast until his hand rested in the little hollow between shoulder and neck, and beneath his arm, as he went to sleep, he felt the strong, sure, patient beat of her heart, measuring unfalteringly the passage of time which changed not.