

The Rags
By
Joseph Devon

Calla, the skirt, was constantly moving to the edge of the table then back again towards the rear as she greeted new guests and brought them inside only to be turned all inside out again by the sound of a new cart arriving. She was a simple skirt, her light airy fabric only containing an ornamental trill of lilies along the hem.

It was The Great Wash and it was always a successful affair, with clothes from all sorts of bags making the trip and meeting up at this, the most crowded time of the year. She was certainly busy enough without Miss Cobb, the presiding elder for the past few years, constantly coming over from the dance room to ask about who had just shown up and if anyone was still missing.

Banded around the neck and arms, Miss Cobb's torso wore the mystic runes of the world: a pillar in black, then a set of red semicircles over a point. Underneath, again in black were vertical-diagonal-vertical, and finally the branch with two forks spreading out on top. Her runes were cracked and fading but her collar was still taut and Calla knew better than to give her any sass talk, especially on a night like this when there was so much to be done.

Calla had just shown in a Mr. Carreras and she was watching his black form, somehow so majestic, walking back towards the dance, his high round collar folded neatly over itself once, when Miss Cobb appeared once again to ask if Sullivan and his wife had arrived yet.

Before Calla could even answer Miss Cobb caught sight of Mr. Carreras disappearing through the back door into the dance room. "Oh, Mr. Carreras's here," she said with something close to awe. "We just *have* to see if we can't get him to sing. He has such a marvelous tenor."

"Hello, Miss Cobb," a voice said from the table's edge and both Calla and Miss Cobb turned to see Sullivan and his wife, Molly.

"Oh, Mr. Conway," Calla said to Sullivan, helping him remove the thin plastic sheet that was covering him. "Is the white stuff still coming down out there?"

"Most certainly," Sullivan said, now turning his attention to his wife and the process of removing the plastic from her slightly aged but still beautiful white cotton shape. He moved gingerly, and from the look his wife was giving him too gingerly at that, making sure none of the white fluff fell on her form. "I heard that there's a leak of some sort far north, a box of something spilling stuff right into the fan."

"I heard that one of the machines broke down and is spraying the stuff into the air," Molly said, having had enough of her husband's delicate maneuverings and removing the plastic sheet herself, sliding it easily over her straps and cups.

"And I heard both had happened at once," Calla said, taking both plastic sheets, "they say there's snow falling all across The Mat in general."

"Molly?" Miss Cobb said by way of invitation. "We've set up one of the shelves upstairs for the women to freshen up in. May I lead you up?"

"Of course," Molly said, following Miss Cobb up the stairs, the two women falling at once into conversation as they walked, the sound of them laughing cascading down as they rounded the landing.

Sullivan followed Calla into a small room on the main level of the table and watched her storing their plastic bags in a cubby in the corner. He had seen her any number of times, year after year, at The Great Wash. She was a thin white thing, her form suggesting fragility more

than delicateness. “So,” Sullivan said by way of conversation, “I suppose you’ll be joining us in the warm cycle soon enough, eh, Calla?”

Calla’s handling of the plastic bags became harsher, the ends snapping in the air as she shook them and folded them roughly. “And why should I want to move over to the warm cycle anyway? I’ve been mixing with those in the cold cycle for my entire life, and I should hope that the cold cycle will always be good enough for me.”

Sullivan felt deflated, his polite conversation causing things to stray so far from where he wanted them flustered him and he felt a warm blush rising, knowing he had made a mistake. He was a well built sweater, charcoal gray with a handsome weave running in rows down his body. How was he to know that Calla was a cold cycle only garment? She wasn’t even a member of his bag; there was no way to know that her wearers didn’t feel her worth enough effort to separate her out. It was a natural assumption, he told himself, buffering with rationality to ward off the hot embarrassment.

He said his goodbye, layering on politeness and watching Calla busy herself at the cubby, unsure whether she was angry with him or just angry in general.

Standing at the entrance area to the table he looked up at the landing and saw Molly and Miss Cobb, still talking, coming down the stairs.

“Isn’t that right, Sullivan, dear?” Molly said as they came within earshot, clearly believing that Sullivan had been able to hear the earlier part of the conversation.

“Isn’t what right, dear?”

“Oh,” Miss Cobb interjected, the merriment in her voice showing that she had been finding humor in what was being discussed. “Molly tells me that you’re looking into finding a, what was it, some sort of bag for her to wear at the next wash?”

“A delicate bag, they call it,” Sullivan said.

“Oh, that was it,” Miss Cobb laughed, “a delicate bag.”

Molly’s voice was also laughing and Sullivan, still stinging from his overstepping with Calla did not know what to make about this laughter over a subject he saw as serious. “Well they use them all the time in the higher end washes,” he blustered, “you wouldn’t see a delicate washed in a regular cold cycle in those washes anymore than you’d see a red shirt tossed in with white towels.”

But his serious tone only served to fuel Miss Cobb and Molly’s merriment and they both enjoyed a good laugh at what Sullivan felt was his expense.

“Oh come now, dear,” Molly said, not seeing that this subject was a serious one for Sullivan, “lead me into the dance, won’t you?”

Sullivan allowed himself to be placated, but he still felt as if he was on unsure ground and he wished he could start the night over again.

They walked the length of the table and entered the dance hall, the noise immediately growing in volume, engulfing them as they passed through the doorway. Molly saw any number of garments she wished to talk to and she drifted off, Sullivan holding onto her strap as she left him, letting his touch linger there for as long as possible as if he were frightened to let her go.

He wandered over to where the familiar form of Cutty was sitting, telling an off-color joke in far too loud a voice to a group of leggings. Cutty was all energy while he told his joke, his legs flopping about and his waist trembling with anticipation of the punch line which he didn’t seem to notice he had flubbed and, judging by the amount of laughter he gave to himself, didn’t seem to care. He repeated the punch line with a whimper, almost doubled over, his words barely coming out through the laughter that was wracking his body. The

group, for its part, hadn't cared that Cutty had botched the joke; his laughter was enough to get laughs out of all of them, always had been.

"Ah, Sullivan," Cutty said, the cords on his body still shaking all the way up to his waist, "I've got the finest joke to tell you."

"I believe I caught most of it as I was heading this way, you were certainly telling it loud enough."

Cutty waved him off, using most of his concentration to bring his laughter under control and before Sullivan could stop him he was off again, telling his joke, setting up the introduction all wrong and beginning to botch the middle part as the legging all around looked on, enjoying Cutty's mood and buffoonery more than the joke itself.

Cutty lost his place for a second time and stopped talking as he realized that something was going on behind him. He turned to look on as the dance floor began to organize for a more formal waltz and people began to call out for partners, Miss Cobb doing her part to make sure no one who wanted to join was left single, stalling the start of the dance until a group of three or four ladies had returned from where they had disappeared into the entrance hall.

"A lovely dance, isn't it?" Sullivan turned to find himself facing the stately and prudish Miss Gregors, her willowy long arms ending in threadbare black cuffs.

"As it always is," Sullivan answered. He wasn't sure about her tone and she wore around her neck the tag of the cold cycles. Looking at him diffidently she extended her arm. Sullivan took it courteously and led her out amongst the crowd. The formal waltz started and Sullivan led her skillfully enough around the floor. Her body was rigid and unyielding, unfriendly as she dipped and swayed, letting go of his hand occasionally to cross through the line of dancers when required before tramping back again. Most of her energy was dedicated to prattling on about her recent wash and those she had seen and the details of life in the cold cycle, all of which Sullivan found rather boring and in no way proper conversation for a formal dance. Then Miss Gregors caught him completely off guard by asking, "And will you and your wife be joining us in the cold cycle for the next wash? After all, we are all only made of cotton."

"I'm not sure my wife is up for the trip," Sullivan said, he hoped politely, the bluntness of the question and the forwardness of Miss Gregors in asking it making him glance nervously about to make sure nobody was listening. He knew she was a tired old garment who saw herself as nothing but a cold-cycle for life but he never expected her to be so bold as to suggest that he and his family join her in the rustic cold.

"Oh," Miss Gregors asked, "your wife isn't up for it. Is that so?"

"That would be my belief, yes. Poor dear caught a terrible snag the other day and is practically ready for the delicate cycle."

"Is that a fact," Miss Gregors said, and Sullivan wished she would say something that at least showed signs of breaking out of her prim tone of voice.

When the dance ended Sullivan parted ways with Miss Gregors as politely as he possibly could and was about to put distance between the two of them when he saw his wife, Molly, standing nearby, having watched their turn about the dance floor. Sullivan steered Miss Gregors over to her and Molly embraced the older woman warmly. Miss Gregors seemed on the verge of staying to chat when Sullivan made the excuse of wanting to take his wife out for a breath of fresh air.

"Wasn't that dear of you, taking her for a turn on the floor," Molly said as she walked alongside Sullivan.

All thoughts of the stinging tone of Miss Gregors' voice emptied out of Sullivan at the sound of his wife's compliment, at the tone of love in her voice and adoration for dancing with Miss Gregors who, Sullivan could see now, was merely an old garment who had more loneliness than orneriness in her.

"Well, I know how the old girl gets. Barely getting out anymore, sad really." Sullivan let pride and a boisterous sense of humor creep into his voice, knowing he was showing off for his wife but enjoying the feeling of finding something inside of himself that impressed her so. "I was sure the old bat could use some company. Do you know that she asked me if we were going to make a trip to the cold cycle next outing?"

Molly perked up immediately. "Did she? Oh, Sullivan," she practically cried, "that would be lovely to see some of the old country again. Did you say yes?"

"We hardly need *her* to invite us, you do realize, dear," Sullivan said, trying to cover the wound he felt at her excitement, the feeling of him being her world sloshing out of his heart to be filled with bitter jealousy that anything Miss Gregors could offer would appeal to his wife so strongly. "Besides, you know I had planned on a trip through the warm then maybe a fluff cycle. It's good to share what the better cycles have to offer, it expands one's world."

"I suppose," Molly said, not nearly conceding enough for Sullivan to recover the feeling of warmth he had enjoyed not a few moments ago. He was staring off towards the landing when a large crash intruded on his thoughts and he looked up to see Cutty attempting to lead the band into something more ribald than the previous few numbers. There was a great murmuring in the crowd as it decided what it wanted, and finally it seemed to vote in favor of Cutty who managed to convince the band to play an upbeat reel and as Sullivan watched from the side, Molly, Miss Gregors, even Miss Cobb were gathered onto the floor and began to dance in time to the baser, more rustic music now playing.



The late night air was flooding over the edge of the table and the sound of Cutty outside hailing carts echoed in the nearly empty entrance hall.

"He'll have every cart in The Mat coming over to us," Miss Cobb said drolly.

"All right, then, there you go," Sullivan said, helping another few party guests off the table and into the cart that Cutty had garnered. "Cutty!" Sullivan yelled as Cutty went bounding off again, "Get some plastic over your head or you'll catch your death of stiffness and it'll be the rag pile for you for certain!" But Cutty's mood was too jolly to pay any attention to the soft snow falling all around him outside, and he paid no heed to it, only brushing it off when a pile started to form somewhere on his form.

Sullivan retreated back into the hall. "Who's still here?" he asked Miss Cobb as she disappeared into the back room where the cubbies were.

"I believe just Mr. Carreras and maybe a few others" she said.

Sullivan walked further back, towards the rear dance hall and he heard singing coming through the doors, a tune he couldn't recognize, something distinctly cold cycle about it, but beautiful none-the-less. Back by the rear hall the sound was louder, and the dark corners and dim light served to heighten the emotion of the song.

He turned toward the landing and saw a form standing there, almost hidden in the shadow. It was his wife. She was hovering over the stairs, her whole visage lost in the tune haunting the entrance and stairs from the dance hall.

Sullivan was struck by this vision, by the emotion filling his wife, and he wished for the words or skill to somehow capture this image, all of it, the song and her look and the light

and he felt like he was failing in the attempt, that his heart was somehow too small to do any justice to what he was seeing.

Miss Cobb came out of the cubby-room with a few more plastics. "Oh!" she exclaimed, piercing the mood, "is that Mr. Carreras singing? Oh, and me not in the dance hall to hear it." She was clearly disappointed, but even as she spoke the singing died down and some words were heard and then the door opened and a few garments came out followed by Mr. Carreras, looking haughty and gruff.

"It's the weather," he said, "makes my throat as hoarse as could be."

"But I thought you sounded lovely," Miss Cobb said.

"Nonsense, woman," Mr. Carreras said in a tone that made nobody wish to question him, "hoarse as could be."

"Mr. Carreras," Molly called down from the stairs, slowly descending. The mood of the hall had not changed for her; she was still contained in the past on the landing, as if she were still hearing the melody that was now silent. "What was the name of that song?"

"The Lad of Saint's Way," Mr. Carreras said, and, as if this were enough of a farewell to the rest of the guests, he allowed Miss Cobb to show him to the door where a cart was waiting.

Staying to make sure that everyone was taken care of Sullivan and Molly were in the last cart, and after dropping off Miss Cobb and Cutty, they made their way inside, their plastic bags over their heads as they ran through the snow.

When they were inside and had made their way past the various sleeping forms to their room inside the bag, Sullivan watched as his wife began to undo the finery she had put on for the party. He attempted to recall the mood of her on the landing, so lost in emotion, so desirable.

"What was it about that song?" he asked, wanting to lead her back, wanting to share that moment with her now, in private.

"It reminded me of something."

"What was it, Molly?" he asked. "You know you can tell me." His tone was friendly, convincing, he knew she wanted to open up.

"It reminded me of someone I once knew who used to sing it; back when I was a cold wash only," and to Sullivan's shock he saw that his wife was on the verge of sobbing.

Sullivan recoiled inwardly, the moment slipping away from him, the intrusion of this other person sparking bitter floods deep within. "To make you cry like that? Who was it? Someone you loved?" he threw the questions out hoping to minimize her memory and restore his place in her life by squashing it with words.

"It was a sock I used to know..."

"A sock?"

"We used to walk along the folding table, we were quite young...quite young."

"Was he...an argyle? Or silk?"

"He was white cotton, gym, and he was stitched poorly."

"And you loved him?" Sullivan asked, not sure if he was being haughty out of defense or quizzical out of disbelief. "Is this why you wanted to take Miss Gregors up on her offer?" the surety of the thing growing in his mind.

"Miss Gregors?" Molly asked, puzzled as to how her name fit in.

"She suggested we join her for a trip back to the old country, to the cold cycle, I suppose you wanted to go with her because you thought maybe you might see this..."

"James?"

"...this James while you were out visiting?"

“No, of course not,” she turned away from him. “He’s dead. He died so young.”

“He was a sock; they can go so easily...”

She impaled him with a turn of her head and he immediately felt sheepish and small for not only feeling the need to belittle this memory but in failing so miserably in his attempt. Humbled he struggled to right the course of the conversation. “So what was it he died of? The weak stitching you spoke of?”

“I think...I think it was because of me that he died,” she said, and she was sobbing, her whole form shaking with grief. The memory was between them now, but it was doing more than separating them, it was changing her, transforming her in his mind into some other thing with a life behind her full of emotions he had never felt and, with a sudden twinge, he began to believe he never would.

He released her to work through her own emotions and releasing her he felt as if he were casting aside an iron that had grown too hot to hold, like he was backing away for personal safety. He waited, knowing she would go on.

“It was before I was to come over to the warm cycle. We would go walking all the time, we were quite the pair and I think he intended to...” she trailed off, the pain of the moment, foreign to Sullivan, forcing her to regroup and start over. “When I was to leave the cold cycle and come over I couldn’t stand to tell him, so I wrote him a note and had it delivered to his bag. That night when I was gathering my things I heard a voice calling out to me, that warbling tenor voice that would come out of his frail mis-sewn body. I went outside and there he was. The look on his face...” again her pain took her to a place that Sullivan could not go, could not even contemplate without the gulf between them growing greater. “I told him he needed to get back to his bag, that he couldn’t stay out so late, but he wouldn’t listen. I told him he’d wind up in the rag pile if he didn’t hurry back and he told me...he told me he didn’t want to go on living. He told me that. And he only looked at me as I yelled and yelled and finally he went back.”

“And?” Sullivan asked, his wife’s engagement in her tale drawing him away from his jealousy and hollowness.

“Lost in the wash, never seen again. Word reached me a week after I arrived at the warm cycle. They weren’t sure if it was his late arrival or his weak stitching or if it was just his time, but, oh Sullivan, when I heard that news...” and she buried her head and was lost to him again.

She was asleep and the bag was silent. Only the faint light of the outside world shown through the mesh walls. Sullivan watched her as a stranger, this woman who had been involved in such a romantic moment, who had a lover willing to part with this world for her. He looked over her white features, her sagging straps and barely frayed edges. She was still beautiful but he could picture how she had looked in her youth when this sock, James, had loved her, had possibly turned to rags for her.

The night stretched out behind him and he looked it over, his calm dark-adjusted heart wondering at the mess of emotions that had entangled him. The dance and his words with Miss Gregors and Miss Cobb looking so frayed. The late hour let his mind dance too long over that last image and he remembered how ghostly and threadbare Miss Cobb had looked. It was possible that someday soon he would be getting word that Miss Cobb had turned to rags, one wash cycle soon would be her last and they would be gathering outside their bags

to bid her farewell and he would be called upon to find words, to give a speech, to console and to calm. That day was not too far off.

And the night wormed its way into his soul, and he felt himself close to that world of rags and string. It was better to go there in full function than to wither and fade. Better to become a rag for some glory than as a final concession to age. So his wife had made a sock take a step towards that end, had instilled such passion in another. He didn't know from experience, but he supposed such a feeling must be love and he could see the form of James the sock, small and sewn improperly, standing on the shelf outside of Molly's bag.

As silence reigned inside his mind he heard the soft tapping of flakes upon the mesh and he squinted drowsily towards the outside. It had begun to snow again and he watched the flakes float past outside. The time for him to set out on his own unraveling journey had come. Yes, Calla had been right; it was snowing all over the Laundromat. Down the central aisle, down upon the oversized machines. It was falling on the dryers and folding tables and over the carts in the corner and it fell over the washing machine where a sock named James had met his end. It was falling on the bags and the racks and the sinks and the vending machines and his breath hushed quietly through time, weaving with the infinite as the snow fell softly, like their untoward final breath, upon all the useful and the rags.

About the Author:

Joseph Devon was born in New Jersey. He grew up and began to write books. For a longer version of this story be sure and visit him online. You can always find news about his latest books, recent short fiction and all things Joseph Devon at www.JosephDevon.com. You can also buy a hard copy of what you just read. Drop by, you'll be glad you did.

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