

# *Tethered by Letters*

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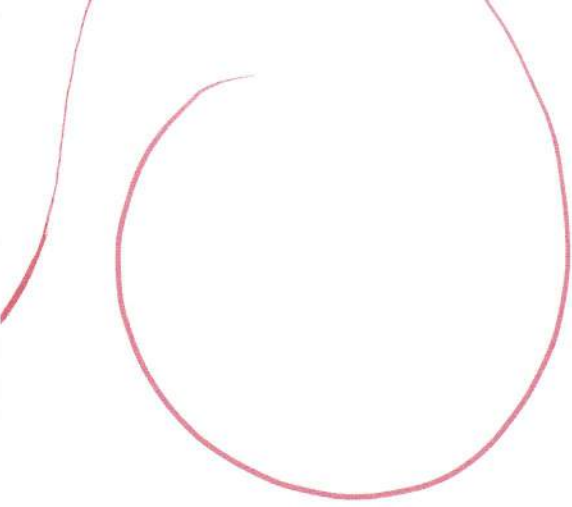


# Jink

a Noteworthy Short Story

by  
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**P**ru didn't remember when she'd first picked up her needles. It was around the time she'd married Tom. But she couldn't remember that very first day, how clumsy she'd felt, then an instant calm flooding over her body. Tom disparaged it from the start. He called it fusty, a pastime of another era. The female lawyers he worked with didn't knit. They didn't have time. But it was Tom's idea that Pru should stay home, in that giant behemoth of a Tudor house. Pru was on board in the beginning. She wanted to have a bevy of children. She didn't see motherhood as settling down. It would be clamorous and uncertain, like planting a garden with unknown seeds. You never knew what you were going to get.

What she'd gotten was a house without any children, after thirty years of marriage to Tom. Pru thought of it often, like she'd missed something, dropped a stitch in her knitting, or forgotten to lock the house in the morning. It slipped into her day like a fog rolling in. *I filled the gas tank, but didn't reproduce.* When she thought of it, she reached for her needles. Pru always had a project at hand. She made sweaters for friends and blankets for their children. She made hats and gloves and tablecloths and socks. She was currently at work on a futile scarf, too long for any normal neck. Piled up on the passenger's seat of her car, it was now the length of a stretch of highway.

But she couldn't stop knitting. The act was encoded into her fingers.

This afternoon, Pru was on her way

to Tink, her favorite knitting store, to pick up some extra circular needles. She didn't need them. Her attic was filled with a glut of supplies, skeins of multi-colored yarn, stitch counters set with mother of pearl. But she'd felt the need to get out of the house. The place was like a giant net, ensnaring Pru in unbreakable fibers. Even with the help, it was a full time job, expelling dust like a fluttering moth. Lightbulbs were always burning out, pieces of wood falling off the facade. She imagined raising kids had nothing on the Tudor. She'd said as much to Tom, when he signed the deed. It was only two years into their marriage, and Tom was already on the partner track. She said the place was too massive and old. But Tom had insisted. He wanted a house that looked imposing from the street, that gave off the air of a medieval fortress.

Pru pulled her car into the parking lot. It was one of those frozen days when the little town felt like the surface of the moon. No one milled about. The shops were open but exuded no light. As Pru locked her car, she looked forward to Tink. The place was a hearth, the definition of cozy, small and low ceilinged, a wood-burning fireplace lit in the winter. If the Tudor spit her out, then Tink drew her in. There was always a circle of knitters inside, chattering away as they clacked their needles. The sound was organic, like an arrhythmic heart. When Pru walked in, the knitters would turn. "Prudence," they'd say, in one booming voice, "we've been waiting for you," as if her body completed their circle.

But today, the door was double locked, a handwritten sign reading "Closed For Inventory." Pru felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. She milled around the parking lot, facing the gaping hole in her day. Where to go and what to do? Her shoulder had been hurting, so she couldn't play tennis. And the sun was too high for the grocery store. She liked to shop when the sun was low, when the lines were long, and she had to duck around the people. It put a crimp in the fabric of her day. She did this sometimes in her knitting, weaving mistakes into her projects. She'd read somewhere how Navajo women would weave imperfections into their blankets, a crack for the weaver's soul to escape. They called this the "spirit path." Without the crack, her soul



would get trapped inside the fabric.

Pru climbed into her car and pulled out of the lot. She didn't know where she was going, which felt both wrong and exhilarating. Maybe she would just keep on driving. She'd listened to a podcast about a woman who had done that, just got in her car and drove out to Seattle. Six months later, her husband got a postcard from Mt. Rainier. The woman didn't write a note, but the text on the card read, "Washington Rocks."

Pru and Tom didn't travel much. When they did, it was to one of Tom's legal conventions. They'd stay at five-star resorts in places like Denver. But they never left the States. And that was fine with Pru. She'd never sat right with prescribed bouts of leisure. She had been an overachieving child, graduating first in all of her classes, earning her masters by twenty-three. When she met Tom, her plan was to go for her PhD. She'd study and teach until they started a family.

But after five years of marriage, Tom had confessed, he wasn't sure that he wanted children. He didn't mind them as people. He always enjoyed the ones that he met, when they were the issue of others. But he wasn't sure that he wanted to make them, when things seemed fine enough as they were. Marriage made sense because you pooled your resources, husband and wife and a house to upkeep. But children drained them. And the biological imperative was dead. The Earth was already too overcrowded.

The truth hit Pru like a wave of exhaust. His cerebral argument was generally flawed. They had plenty of money to raise plenty of children. And if he'd done his research, he'd know that the global birthrate was down. Who cared if China was overcrowded. They weren't raising a child in Beijing. She called him selfish, accusing him of not wanting to share her. But if anything cured selfishness, then it was children. She'd seen it happen, amongst the husbands of her dearest friends, and several of them had been obstinate cases.

Tom assured her they'd finish the conversation. He said they made a terrific team. There wasn't an issue they couldn't resolve, when they put their heads together. They'd figure it out—not today, or even this year, but eventually. He said all he needed was a bit of time. Then they would come to a resolution. And that, Pru thought, was

nature's cruel trick. Men need time, and women don't have it.

He held the conversation out like a carrot, never giving Pru the one thing she needed—the simple "no" that would free her from hope.

In the end, she stayed for a number of reasons—primarily that Tom was a very good husband. True, he was a workaholic, but he was kind to Pru and they seldom fought. They "fit," Tom said, and "made good sense." That wasn't exactly how he'd proposed, but it wasn't far off. It was Pru's father who introduced them, when Tom was an associate at his firm. Her father called Tom "a superlative egg." And in truth, he was. "Handsome," "smart," "going all kinds of places." Tom wore these labels like pins on his suit. Their marriage, as all, was a contract of sorts. But they'd never bothered to work out terms. Tom thought Pru would make a very good wife. And Pru thought Tom would make a very good father.

And now, at fifty-five, Pru's life with Tom was a facile pattern, a piece of tracing paper with lines. She knew exactly what each day would bring. Drinks at the club. A charity for every season. And the bumps in her day—the long lines and inclement weather, the sore arm she nursed from over-practicing her serve—were welcome hurdles that staved off boredom. And there was her knitting, of course, a constant series of challenges. It was far from fusty, despite what Tom said. It was unsettling and uncertain, a practice fraught with expectations of failure, as any other act of creation.

Driving slowly down the ice-splattered road, Pru felt an urge to snap the wheel, quick and sharp. *What would happen*, she wondered, *if I got into a wreck?* Nothing major, just the kind that came with some scrapes and bruises. She imagined Tom by her hospital bed, the worried look of his handsome features. They were both of them aging what most would call *well*: few wrinkles, no furrows that Pru thought of as *parenting lines*. Tom would put his hand on the small of her back. "Of course I'm here," he'd say, and lean down to kiss her. "Where else would I be?" He'd let his lips linger on the brim of her forehead. "Dear Prudence," he'd call her, a pet name he hadn't used in years.

Pru shook her head in the empty car. She didn't know if Tom would come for something



as small as a fender bender. He might send Pam, his secretary, with a handful of flowers as he did on her birthday. Pru liked Pam, a middle-aged woman with a gummy grin. She was the kind of secretary you wanted for your husband, past her prime, her bottom spread out to fit the seat of her chair. But when Pam did this part of her job, filling in when Tom was remiss as a husband, Pru hated her like an insidious threat, a mole implanted at the core of her marriage.

She reached into her bag on the passenger seat, pulling out the tail of the futile scarf. She kept on pulling, and the scarf kept coming. It was a lovely color, a marled red with flecks of pale blue. She was still driving, so the next part was tricky, but she managed to unthread the scarf from the needles. Now the scarf was a vulnerable thing, a ball of yarn on one end, and a row of unbound stitches on the other. This was the point of the open wound, susceptible to the slightest of tugs. Pru tossed the ball of yarn out the window, and the scarf began to unravel on the seat.

She watched it unwind with a feeling of correction.

She continued through the streets of the town, leaving a tail of clotted red yarn. She checked here and there in the rearview mirror. It looked like a trail of blood in the snow. The scarf on the seat was getting smaller. She had a momentary thought to stop the car, and salvage what was left of her work. Whittled down, it was the perfect size for Tom. If she drove another block, it would fit her own neck, or she could give it to one of her friends.

But she kept on driving. It was thrilling, knowing that something was about to be lost, and she wasn't doing a thing to save it. Sometimes it wasn't just one mistake, but the whole endeavor that she'd have to tinker.

When she arrived home, she carried the remainder of the scarf to the door. It continued to unravel, a mess of yarn with entropic potential. She looked behind her, at the long red tail that curled down the street, like the gutted entrails of some ancient serpent. Her friend once took her to a storefront shaman. She wasn't a real shaman, just a former hippie who'd read enough books. She had a cute little shop on the same street as Tink, where she mainly sold crystals to the local housewives. They thought it

would be fun, while their husbands sat at the club over bourbon. They paid the hippie a handful of dollars for an index card full of laminated chants. Then the hippie read their spirit totems. Pru's friend was an owl, which meant that she could sniff out deceit. And Pru was a snake. She was pleased to learn it only meant she was resilient, like a ship that stays afloat in a storm. It also meant she was a natural healer.

Pru hadn't thought of that visit in years. But as she dragged the scarf up the steps of the Tudor, she remembered something else the hippie had said, that snakes are harbingers of transformation.

When she entered the house, Pru was hit with the smell, a cloying mix of roses and Ajax. Pru hated cut flowers, though she still instructed the maid to replace them. It was something you did in a house with a foyer. But Pru thought it pointless. Even in bloom, the poor things were dying, life leaking out through a gash in the stem. Pru wound the yarn around the vines of the roses, and continued to make her way through the Tudor.

She stopped in the kitchen, winding some yarn around the waffle iron, coffee maker, juicer and kettle, then the iron pots hung from hooks on the ceiling. By the time she was done, the kitchen was strung in a web of red veins. The place looked alive for the first time in years. She did the same in Tom's office, winding yarn around his stapler and blotter, then twisting a loop around the base of his chair. Then she handled the bathroom and guest room. She didn't descend into the basement. The last person down there was the man who came to read the water meter. It was nothing but a gaping hole, with concrete walls and a vinyl floor, an ulcer in the belly of the Tudor.

She went upstairs, to the bedroom first. There she only wound the yarn around the pillows, hers and Tom's. Then she climbed the pull-down steps to the attic.

This was Pru's place. She had a system for keeping it in order. She kept her patterns in clear plastic boxes, and her yarn in color-coded rows. Her needles were lined up like surgical tools, atop an old mahogany dresser. She liked to lay them out so she could see them. When things were put away, they were easily lost. That's one of the things she



despised about the Tudor. It had so much storage space, so many hidden rooms and compartments. It made the place feel even more vacant.

But the attic was alive, packed with the energy of potential. If the basement was the gut, then the attic was the heart. Pru saw it as a kind of laboratory, filled with her experiments, some failed, some successful. There were pieces she'd made for disfigured bodies, shirts with three arms, an opening too small to pass a head. There were fair isles sweaters that had won her competitions. Pru hung them all together on a rack. It helped her to remember—it is only failure that makes success so potent.

The scarf was now completely unwound. Pru grasped the tip of the tail in her fingers, and sat herself down on a pile of patterns. If she listened closely, she could hear the termites biting through the rafters. The house was so old it was rotting like teeth. And Tom's desire to bolster it—to pay gobs of money to renew old systems and excavate decay—was life support for a terminal heap. If Tom stopped to think, he might see that the Tudor was a drain on their resources. Children would have done the opposite, ensuring their renewal, expanding them beyond their own walls.

Children spilled you over the world like a mist.

Pru closed her eyes and lay back on the patterns, thinking of the unmade things beneath her, a mother hen roosting on an empty nest. It wasn't that she *needed* children. She had *wanted* them, of course. But she had plenty of things that brought meaning to her life. Her parents for one—still thriving, still traveling the world well into old age. She gave money and time to philanthropic causes. Pru was the defender of many things: books, art, people battling diseases. She'd even adopted a child in Peru. They'd never met, but he sent her letters, photocopied onto letterhead. *Gracias por darme mi vida*. Thank you for giving me my life. He called her *Mi Salvador*, my savior.

The thing was, her body was retaliating: with the hot flashes, the night sweats, the constant need to drink buckets of water. She felt herself drying up like a well. Even her skin had begun to scale, just like the skin of her spirit serpent. It was a constant

reminder, that the conversation with Tom was complete. Pru wasn't in the business of self-defeat. She'd come to accept her own fault in the matter, all the waiting and hoping she'd done.

But she found it upsetting, that Tom had said he didn't want any children, then saddled her with a house to replace them.

Pru opened a box marked Notions N' Things. She reached inside and found the lighter, the one she used to burn raveling. She placed the yarn on the floor and lit it on fire.

It burned like a snake consuming its tail. And as Pru watched it go, she imagined the Tudor exploding in flames, the roof shingles peeling away like ash, the chimney spewing out black plumes of bile. She saw herself on the scorched front lawn, huddled together with her friends from Tink. They descended on her like a gaggle of mothers. "You couldn't have saved him," they'd say about Tom, in one booming voice. "If you'd have tried, we might have lost our Pru." And they really couldn't stand to lose her, they'd chime. Her body was the closing link in their circle.

She sat back down on the pile of patterns, watching the yarn melt like wax by her feet. The fire was slow, but it was picking up. She remembered the first night they spent in the Tudor. Tom had tried to start a fire, but the logs were rain soaked, and they'd slept that night on the living room couch, bound together, laughing and kissing and then making love. After that, they didn't need a fire. She remembered too the nights Tom was sick, or she was, and they'd nursed each other back to full health, bringing in soup and magazines, resting their heads on the other's shoulder. And then there was the day that Tom lost his dad, how he'd clung to Pru, like a child in need of a mothering hand.

She saw each of these things, and then saw them burn.

Pru got up fast, her body light, like she'd molted that dried-out layer of skin. Then she stomped on the fire until it was out. She picked up the charred end of the remaining yarn and began to wrap it around her fist as she descended the pull-down steps to the attic. She retraced her path through the empty house, unwinding the yarn from the bedroom pillows, the bathroom faucet, and the stapler and blotter in Tom's home office. Then she freed the odds and ends in the

kitchen. She had trouble untangling the yarn from the roses, and broke the vase in a spray of glass. She left the mess in the doorway and went outside.

The tail of the yarn still wound down the street. She wondered what people were thinking in town, what Tom would think as he drove home from work, when he realized the yarn led back to the Tudor. She saw a flash of Tom in the driveway. He was sitting in his car, afraid to get out, staring at the remains of his house.

The sun was setting, the perfect time for the grocery store. Pru thought she'd make something warm and hearty, like a winter stew and a rack of lamb. As she headed inside, she was glad for the house, that it stood in all its faded glory.

She'd never felt a thing for the heap until then, remembering all that was lost in the fire.

