

# Jerry's Gift

A very short story by

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Peeling paint, outside and in, no wall and no ceiling immune to the wrinkling effect of age, no surface worse off than another.

Maureen took the exfoliated, ivory-colored flakes in stride, dismissing the dusting in her hair, her clothes, and her life as a bad case of temporary dandruff. But the flaking walls of her great-grandfather's house, like her life, would shortly be renovated as soon as she negotiated an equitable price for Jerry's gift.

Damn satisfying.

The slanting sun warmed her skin to a faint blush as she sat in the veranda, the breeze pregnant with the scents of pine and rose. Maureen loved this southwest corner of the veranda. The air served as walls and nature replaced the lack of decor. Every afternoon she would stop the refurbishing, make a pitcher of lemonade, and sit facing the eighty-year-old maple trees at the edge of the property.

Her ritual.

Her space.

Her world.

Maureen flexed her toes against the bare boards, set her rocking chair in lazy arcs and, without haste, scooped shipwrecked paint chips from her lemonade. She filled her mouth with citrus coolness and reveled as the liquid trickled slowly, very slowly down her throat. She hadn't been left with much after the divorce settlement, but she didn't complain. She was content.

She smiled.

Jerry thought he'd won. Probably was still smirking as he roamed the thin streets of Europe with his newest bimbo, Grace. Maureen could easily imagine him gloating, believing he'd put her in her place—a nobody, from a nobody family, back to a nobody ex-wife. Never mind if she had spent the greater part of her youth supporting him while he studied corporate law. Never mind if his pedigreed family had disowned him for the duration of their marriage. Never mind, either, if she had spent the past three years, before getting fed up and filing for a divorce, molding herself physically and socially to mirror Jerry's definition of a wife. In the end none of that had mattered. Maureen hadn't been flashy enough for his career, or enough of an ego boost for a superstar attorney. Jerry's relief had been palpable when she had finally served him papers, the documents some sort of divine sign validating his voyage of self-discovery, as well as giving him carte blanche to hoard more mistresses than previously.

Maureen set her rocker in motion, enjoying how the movement displaced the air and cooled the skin around her neck. Who would have thought, after the nasty divorce proceedings, Jerry's last act would be one of generosity? A satisfied chuckle vibrated within her chest and the

air stirred, mixing the scents of pine and mossy earth around the veranda. The shifting maple leaves captured the light and winked like jewels against the magenta sky.

Jewels. Such an appropriate symbol, Maureen thought, one worthy of a liquor-free toast.

“Here’s to ex-husbands.” She raised her glass in tribute. “And their need to find themselves.”

Several paint chips spiraled their way to the ground. She drank more deeply and patted the square, black velvet pouch riding her lap. She should thank Jerry for his impatience and for his compulsion to prove his male prowess. His behavior had been her saving grace. By this time tomorrow, the two-carat diamond cufflinks, the ruby and diamond earrings and matching pendant, the 18K gold and sapphire bracelet and ring, and the brooch with an emerald as wide as her thumbnail’s matrix, Jerry’s pride, his family heirlooms, would be dismantled, cut, redesigned, and sold. Because he had been in such a hurry to discover Europe and plunder the depths of his latest bimbo, he had rushed to retrieve the jewelry pouch from the safe deposit box a couple of hours before his flight without inspecting its contents. Because Jerry had been focused on his hedonistic lifestyle, he’d forgotten he’d stashed her jewelry together with his late grandmother’s the year before. And because Jerry had been drooling over the finality of their divorce once he’d delivered Maureen’s pitiful cachet of pearl necklaces, bracelets, and emerald teardrop earrings to her lawyer, Maureen had been handed an unexpected bonus *gratis*, free of liability and reprisal.

Maureen lifted the velvet pouch and cradled it in her palm. Its weight satisfied her sense of contentment and justice served. And if the mistake were ever discovered, all roads would lead to her ex-husband. Maureen had not been near the bank, nor was her signature anywhere in any document linking her to that safe deposit box. Never had been. Jerry’s trust had never extended to include Maureen as cosigner in the safe deposit bank account.

His loss. Her gain.

Gravel crunched. Maureen’s visitor parked next to her RV. With lemonade glass in one hand and the jewelry pouch tucked in the other, Maureen stood. She dusted her hair, smiled, and waited for the jeweler to reach her.