

Adrift

by Shannin Schroeder

I read a novel once where a body washed up on shore and a woman who'd lost her husband a few years earlier took it home and took care of it—washed it up, propped it in a chair, named it David, and in general took up housekeeping with it. I say “it,” but of course the corpse was a man if she named it David.

When I read the story, I remember thinking it was, well, a crazy thing to do, but part of me thinks the widow had the right idea. Pick up a perfect stranger—perfect meaning dead, in this case—and shape him into the man you'd want him to be. Give him the insightful or tender words you'd like to hear. Have him choose to watch ice skating or Oprah instead of bowling and Jerry Springer.

I imagine the sleek wetness of his dark hair—nearly black from the drenching it's received. His muscles slick with salt-water, he's a difficult burden to tug out of the waves and onto the beach. He's so heavy that his body makes a deep rivulet in the wet sand, and an incoming wave threatens to pull him back out to the ocean. I hang on tight and save him from the outgoing sea.

The problem with the book's version, at least for me, is that the guy has no pulse. Imagine having to supply his thoughts and opinions and conversation 24 hours a day. No, my drowning victim would definitely have a feeble but determined pulse when I put my ear to his chest. And infinite gratitude after my careful resuscitation. *Then* he'd murmur plenty of sweet nothings and watch “I Love Lucy” marathons without complaint.

These are the things I think of as I watch the tide going out late in an autumn day at the beach near my home. If I do find things on the beach I can romanticize them to no end, but I don't see what if hurts. Some people jog; others collect solidifying starfish or, I don't know, mentally balance their checkbooks. I wander along at my own slow pace and daydream. It's my own kind of exercise, the best kind in my opinion.

“Suzie-Q,” my father used to complain, “you’re the only person on the face of the earth who could daydream while she was dreaming.” That’s not true; Dad likes to exaggerate. With things he doesn’t quite understand—technology (especially ATMs) and my daydreaming—it’s negative. Every car he’s ever had has been “the sorriest pile of nuts and bolts” he’s ever had. Food, especially when my mother cooks it, usually draws his most favorable remarks. My mother’s beef stroganoff is “*the* best thing” he’s “ever, and I mean *ever*, eaten” in his entire life—every time he has it. My father speaks in superlatives—biggest, best, worst, craziest—as if his native language is “ad exec” instead of English.

When you’re young, it can be incredibly exasperating. Imagine being punished on the grounds that every one of your transgressions was the “worst” offense recorded in the annals of parenthood. After you move out of the house, it’s much funnier, and you readily brag about his quirk to strangers. Of course, maybe that’s why he so willingly brags about my daydreaming.

It should come as no surprise, then, that today, when I find something unusual on the beach, I let my imagination run away from me.

It looks like foam at first, flotsam from an ocean that readily and regularly empties its contents onto the beach. I almost lose sight of it, in fact, but the shape of the wave was strong—bulging—and as I get closer, I can see texture and detail.

It’s a sweater, I realize, off-white and waterlogged, the unwitting victim of a tug of war between land and sea. Until I carry out a brave rescue, it looks like the ocean might win. I pull the sweater out of the water and hold it, stiff-armed, out from my body. The heavy cable knit is saturated with sand and debris, so that it looks like the kind of wool that has flecks of other colors woven into it. It *is* wool; I can feel its scratchiness with my fingers.

As I contemplate what I will do with a sopping wet sweater, I realize that my bare feet have sunk into the sand nearly to my ankles. I free my feet with two distinct slurping sounds and back away from the surf. I laugh as I realize that I’m actually stretched

up on my tiptoes to avoid dragging the huge sweater in the sand. I reverently position it on the sand in front of me, its long arms stretched out to each side as if offering to hug me. I gently straighten out the torso (does a sweater have a torso? I wonder).

It's enormous, I think, as I widen my eyes and waggle my eyebrows, lasciviously imagining the hulking frame it once graced. No, I decide, "graced" is a word better suited for the female form. This particular article of clothing *enveloped* his form. It has to have been—to be, I correct myself—a man's sweater, I reason; it's simply too large for a woman.

What kind of man loses his sweater on a beach in the middle of a blustery September day on the North Atlantic coastline?

Self-consciously, I bundle my fleece pullover closer to my body. It sounds like the thoughtless sort of act of which *I* am capable. Not exactly sporting of me to condescend to another human capable of the same act, I remind myself.

And suddenly, I know that there is some beleaguered, shivering, large man wandering the beach in search of the same things I seek: nature, contemplation, solitude. No, that's not the right word. I'm not here because I need to be alone, or even the reverse, because I'm lonely and need to escape an empty house. Yet I *am* a romantic at heart, and all romantics naturally seek—companionship.

And then my vision from the sea appears. Okay, he's not drowned or even in the process of drowning. In fact, he looks remarkably healthy. And the only slicked up muscles on this guy are the sweat-covered forearms I can see popping out from under his three-quarter length sleeves. His hair is nearly black, though, and wet after what looks to have been a late afternoon jog. He's very tall, and though somewhat lanky, I estimate he fits the sweater perfectly. I imagine myself going down on one knee, playing the part of the prince to his Cinderella, offering the sweater and my kingdom if it fits. Instead, I flash him my winningest smile.

He ignores my and jogs past to a spot about four feet away where, to my surprise, he stops at the edge of a read-and-white striped towel. Funny that I haven't noticed the towel or his other personal

effects—newspaper, thermos, duffle bag—before now. I'm usually much more observant than this—even in the midst of a daydream. It might not be much on conversation or getting where I'm going while I'm daydreaming, but I do tend to pull in the details of my surroundings to add them to my imaginative wanderings.

Take the sweater, for example.

As I remember it, I glance guiltily back down to the spot where I've laid it out on the beach. I look up in time to meet the surprised stare of the stranger.

"Is that my sweater?" he asks in a puzzled voice.

"Uhm..." I stall, wondering how to explain why I have been positioning his sweater as if I'm about to offer it as a pagan sacrifice. "Well...it *might* be."

"It *might* be?" he parrots as he strides over to where I've got his sweater splayed out on the sand. He leans over to get a closer look. "It *is* my sweater. What are you doing with it?" He grabs it by one shoulder and yanks it off the ground as if it's likely to have gotten contaminated lying there on the sand. He stands holding it stiffly out in front of him, afraid to let brush against his clothes. I choose to find his posture offensive and deliberately will myself to forget that, only moments before, I had held it in just such a manner.

The condition of his sweater sinks into his wet skull.

"What do you mean getting my sweater wet? Are you some kind of lunatic?" he demands.

"Of course I'm not a lunatic, " I counter hotly. I don't think about how big he seems hulking over me or how sorry-looking that sweater is dangling from his fist. Instead, I focus on how adamantly he refuses to live up the sweet-voiced, grateful devotee from my earlier ruminations. It doesn't matter that I didn't get my chance to save him; I *did* manage to save his stupid sweater. I think it's time he knew it.

"If you *must* know I saved your precious sweater from being washed into the ocean!"

"That's ridiculous!" And now he shakes the sweater at me with a look that tell me he'd rather be shaking me. "I left this at least fifteen feet from the water!"

His anger, this confrontation, the whole scene, all of it surprises me almost as much as my disappointment that this—boor? Lout? Oaf? Yeah, I decide, that works—this *oaf* won't be fulfilling my criteria for gratified victim-turned-dream man. I feel caught somewhere between the guilt of a thief (I *did* have his sweater, after all) and the indignation of the unjustly accused. I go with indignation.

"Oh, right, like I have nothing better to do on a Saturday evening than drag poor unsuspecting sweaters into the water. *Then* I save them. That's how I work. I just scour the beach, night after night, waiting for my chance to snatch up ill-attended clothes. Oh, not to *take*, them, mind you," I huff, warming to my theme, "but to toss them to the relentless waves and then scoop them up just in time to return them to the unsuspecting owners!" I end my speech on a bit of a shout, and the guy retreats a couple of steps for good measure. I'd like to think he's afraid of me, but I imagine it's to stay out of the way of the crazy lady. And what's more, I think he's still convinced I did it. I find that as grating as his attitude, but I'm also aware that he has no reason to believe otherwise.

"I have no idea who threw your sweater into the ocean, but it wasn't me," I finish with a sniff.

I wait, my back turned to him now, expect to hear a stammered apology or, at the very least, a gruff "Well, how was *I* supposed to know?" Instead, I hear silence. Enough silence that I begin to worry that my dramatic monologue has reduced him to a puddle in the sand. It looks like I might get my chance to revive him after all. I turn around to offer my friendliest smile and my own apology for being so defensive.

I'm just in time to see him stuffing the last of his things into the duffle bag—all except for the sweater; he still has that clutched in one hand. Then he's off, all but running toward the safety of his car.

On inspection—from this distance and from the rear—I realize he wasn't quite as imposing a figure as I had imagined. He looks ridiculous running across the sand. Why hadn't I noticed that when he approached me? He certainly wasn't large enough to fill out that sweater, or maybe the sweater was just distorted from being in the water. Maybe it will shrink from the exposure to saltwater, I mentally tack on for good measure.

I begin to suspect that he's a business traveler from Boise or Kansas City. I've just sent him packing with one *hell* of a story to tell his colleagues at the Farm Bureau back home.

"You won't believe what those Northeasterners are like," he'll begin, settling back into the vinyl chair behind his laminated wood desk. "I met *one* woman on the beach who would make Norman Bates look like a pussycat." I imagine he'll even wear the sweater for effect—no matter that his office is sweltering 72 degrees all the time or that his boss prefers all agents to wear suits on the job.

"Goodbye, David," I yell, on impulse, at his retreating back. "Take care of yourself!"

The jogger gives me one last dirty look before he rounds a dune and passes out of sight.

