

## **The White Afghan**

"No, Buzz," she said, "I don't think so." Sandy twisted her sparse straw-colored hair from her face. Her hand waved the appetizer fork. "I'm sorry. Early on, I might have said yes, but I've thought about it." Their eyes tangoed, then she looked away and chewed the cuticle on her finger. "I appreciate all the work you've done on my trailer house."

Her words echoed dully through his head. It hurt. He was glad he hadn't bought a ring and gotten on his knees. The plain bread dripped melted cheese into his Cabernet Sauvignon. He lashed out, "I understand why you will stay single."

Her eyes narrowed. "You think just because I don't want to marry you I'll be an old maid?"

He sipped the white wine and he scrunched his nose – white wine clashed with cheese fondue. "I didn't say that." He sat the water glass down. "It's crazy. When I want to marry, you aren't ready. When I give up, you get interested." He wiped a drop of cheese from his mustache. "You're afraid of commitment." He tried to wall himself up, leaking loneliness.

"Yes, and you're always analyzing. You'd analyze love until it got bored and left the room." Her eyes swept around her trailer house as she stood – seeing the old desk, an overstuffed antique rocker, and the fragile Ming vase from her marriage to the lawyer. "I like my life the way it is." She fluffed on the couch as if it were a nest. "Billy and I are doing okay. I have a job and everything."

The old wound reopened and it smarted. "You don't need me now that I have your trailer repaired." His head dropped as if looking down into a dry well. A moment later, he met her eyes.

"Don't look at me that way." She shivered and gathered the white afghan from its perch, spreading it gingerly across her lap to admire its delicate patterns. The white knit cut diagonals across one lonely string of blue.

He slumped next to her onto the couch. "I took the construction job here to be near you, hoping we could work it out." He wanted to hold her. "I care about you. It's lonely when you're not around."

Sandy bobbed her head. "Don't you think it's cold tonight?" Grasping the white afghan tightly about her shoulders, she picked at the fuzz balls.

"I think we could make it," Buzz spoke softly, "I mean it's been three years off and on."

Her pallid blue eyes met his, but she said nothing. She coughed and her narrow chest heaved. He patted her on the back until she stopped hacking.

Peeking through a veil of waxen hair, Sandy shook her head. "We're too different. It simply won't work." She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, exhaling in his direction. "We have different outlooks on life." Her eyelids were so low her expression suggested omniscience.

"How?" Freckles of pain formed on his rough, sunburned face and he brushed thinning hair from his eyes.

A resigned, hopeless tone, as if it was pointless to talk. "Oh, I don't know." She dug at her scalp. "I have something on the back of my head. Would you look?"

Tenderly, he traced through her silky cowl of hair and found a faint red ulcer. "I don't know what it is. You should eat more – take some vitamins." He tried to pull her close, but she flapped away.

An irritated tone. "You keep telling me that." She took a deep drag on the cigarette and blew smoke into the room. A white cloud gathered at the ceiling.

Quietly, they watched a sitcom in which the husband was a dufus. Looking at her slender form, he thought of when they last made love – her sudden fear and withdrawal. She didn't want to get pregnant with him.

Crushing the cigarette in an ashtray, she traced the single blue string running through the white afghan with her finger. 'Busy patterns', she called them. "Guess I know you better than

anyone else. After all, we went to high school together." Her nearly hairless eyebrows went up. "Gee, almost fourteen years now." Shifting her tail, she said, "We've shared a lot."

Buzz looked at her with hope.

Her tone changed. "But I want someone different."

His shoulders drooped as if bearing an anvil. "What do you mean – different?"

"Well... A man who expresses his feelings."

"Expresses his feelings?"

A weak smile creased Sandy's face. "Yeah, well..." Fumbling with the white afghan, she focused on it. She loved it more than anything. "I want someone who loves Billy as much as me."

"I like Billy. We play hide and seek and toss balls back and forth."

Her index finger traced the blue string down its solitary path. "You're always on him, always criticizing. He's afraid of you."

He shrugged. "I want him to grow up to be a man, not a sissy."

She let out a devitalized laugh. "I know you think I'm crazy, but I'm not getting in a hurry to wake up at fifty, feeling I wasted my life on the wrong man." She paused. "That's why I haven't let you move in with me."

With an ingenious smile, he said, "But you may also wake up alone at fifty because you didn't try to love me. That would be a real waste." The appeal came from some secret torment. "Sandy, we've put too much in to let it go. Three years! It doesn't make sense."

A slender wrist went to her face. The antique wall clock stood at 10:30 where it had stopped long ago. "You're different from what I want." Her fragile fingers picked at the yarn balls. Starting at the tattered end, she meticulously plucked each white cross-over stitch until the blue tread showed clearly.

He stared at her. "I don't understand."

With a deep sigh, she fluttered up like a frightened pheasant and the white afghan fell to the floor. "I've made a list of the qualities I want in a man." From the old desk drawer, she pulled out a

senescent Bible and leafed through it. She found a ragged paper and thrust it at him. "See." Nesting back onto the couch, she clapped her hands on her scrawny legs. "I made it in high school."

*You've had this list all these years?* When he came to 'successful', he stopped. "I guess that's where I lost out if you mean financial success." He looked down at his scarred and calloused palms.

Spontaneously, they laughed like old friends.

He continued reading. "Maybe consistency, too."

She nodded and grinned as he continued down the list. "Well," almost ashamed, "Two out of twelve isn't all bad." The laughter died in his throat.

"You don't express your feelings either."

The wound reopened and smarted severely. They could only maul the grave of their relationship. If he dropped to his knees and begged, she would accuse him of going mad. A dim light came on. Years from now he would still want her, believing they were the same, but she thought they were different and that was all that mattered.

Buzz stumbled to his feet. "Well, guess I should go." A clump of mud fell from his work boots but he ignored it.

Shaking her small head in agreement, she settled onto the couch and pulled the frail white afghan across her lap. She examined its tattered end where she had picked the lint balls free. Pulling at the lonely blue string, a portion unraveled.

She broke it off.

Pausing at the door, he gazed at her averted face. At the deepest level, they were alike: always dancing, swaying, and jerking back and forth to the music of their relationship but never daring to swing and dip beyond the edge.

He dragged his soul behind as if it were a steel ball, a leaden shadow, and stepped into the night. Uncannily, she left him in peace.

Shallow dry snow had blown up in the dark – snow without moisture, leaving no trace. He felt a silent bitterness for the energy expended and time lost. At some level, he knew she would

reject him, and he'd feel self-pity, yet there was an odd sense of relief. Deep within was a stirring – an awful and dim awareness. It rose in his gut and spread upward into consciousness. The frightful pain gnawed but helped him know he was alive.

He ground the starter on his beat-up work truck. Feeling afraid of himself, he was alone. Perhaps twenty-nine is a fragile column of nothingness when a man looks back and sees his accomplishments are of little value, and looking ahead, senses the same. He wondered if he could go on. He talked to the storm, wanting to make it part of himself so he could blow away to another part of the world – another life. Maybe he should just end his.

Dry snow spit recurrent arrows at the windshield, neither clinging nor blowing away, rather, the flakes hung suspended in the darkness.