

The Promise

A Coda Short Story

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by Marie Sexton

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The whole thing started because I wasn't paying attention.

It was a Sunday afternoon in March. I was parked on the couch, reading. Jared was grading homework while he watched TV. That was when, seemingly out of the blue, he hit me with the big question.

“Do you think you ever want to get married?”

In my defense, I was completely engrossed in my book. I was down to the last hundred pages—the murderer was about to be revealed, justice was about to be served, and the hero was about to get the girl. I definitely was *not* paying attention to the TV.

Did I ever want to get married?

I didn't even pause to think about it. The word “marriage” still held strictly heterosexual connotations for me. I immediately pictured a tux. An enormous cake. Bridesmaids.

A bride.

I said the first thing that came to me—the worst thing I could possibly have said. I opened my big mouth and said, “Of course not.”

The only response was stunned silence, and when I looked over at him, the pain and disappointment in his blue eyes made me drop my book. “What?”

“Nothing.” He turned away from me. “It’s no big deal.” But I could see him trying to get his emotions back under control, trying not to show me how much my answer had upset him. He gathered up the stack of papers he was grading and took them into the dining room.

I finally looked at the TV, and that was when I realized what an idiot I was. Another state had finally legalized gay marriage. Not our state, of course. But the announcement had obviously spurred the question, which had resulted in my unfortunate knee jerk response.

It wasn’t as if the idea of marrying him had *never* occurred to me. It just hadn’t occurred to me at that one critical moment when it mattered most. And now the man I loved more than anything in the world was hurt and angry, trying to distance himself from me by hiding in the other room.

I could let it go. I knew Jared. He’d give me a wide berth for the rest of the evening, only speaking if I spoke to him first, and not making eye contact. When we went to bed, he’d start out on his own side. At some point in the night, he’d move closer. By morning he’d be in my arms, and we’d pretend like it had never happened.

But that wasn’t what I wanted.

I followed him into the dining room. He hunched a little closer over the papers he was grading, not looking up at me. I pulled a chair over and sat down facing him, his chair between my knees. I put my arms around him and buried my face in his mess of curls. I loved him so much. I loved the way his hair always smelled like the Colorado wind, and the stubborn way he angled his head toward me when he was mad, so I couldn’t quite get my lips onto his neck. He did it again now.

“Jared, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“It’s okay,” he said, even though it obviously wasn’t. “If that’s how you feel—”

“It’s not.”

“—you don’t need to explain yourself.”

“I thought...” What was I supposed to say? “I thought you meant something else.”

If I’d left him alone, he would have let it blow over. But now that I was pushing him, he’d push back. He snorted and shoved me away. “I can see how a simple yes or no question might confuse you.”

And even though I felt like an ass, I knew I had to tell him the truth. “I thought you meant to somebody else.”

The look he gave me was part anger, part sheer confusion. “*Somebody else?* What the hell would make you think—”

“I thought you meant to a girl.”

He froze, processing that. Jared had been aware of his homosexuality since high school. I’d only accepted my own attraction to him a year and a half earlier. Eighteen months wasn’t enough to completely erase thirty-three years of straight thinking. He knew that.

He sighed, and some of the anger left his face. He let me put my arms around him again. This time, when I pulled him close and pushed my face into his hair, he angled his head away from me so I could kiss his neck.

“You caught me off guard. That’s all.” He didn’t answer, but he finally relaxed against me. “Please don’t be mad. I didn’t mean it the way it sounded. I promise.”

“It’s okay,” he said again, and this time I knew he meant it. “It’s not like your answer *had* to be yes. I just didn’t expect your ‘no’ to be quite so emphatic.”

I pulled back so I could look into his eyes. “Is that what you want? If so, just name a place. Pick a state where it’s legal and I’ll book us on a flight right now.”

He blinked at me in surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. We’ll go next weekend. Or we can wait until summer and make a vacation out of it. We can go alone, or we can take the whole family. Whatever you want.”

He smiled at me then. Jared smiled at just about everything. It was one of the things that first attracted me to him. “It doesn’t matter. If we’re married or not, if the state recognizes it or not.” He shrugged. “It means nothing.” He put his forehead against mine. “None of it changes the way I feel.”

I knew what he meant. And yet, I also knew I wanted to do something for him. I wanted to prove it.

“Come to bed with me?” I asked him, and he smiled again.

“I have to finish grading these. You go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

“That’s not what I want tonight,” I said jokingly, and he laughed.

I was sound asleep when he finally joined me. I woke up to him cuddling up to my back. I nestled into him, and he wrapped his arms around me. “This reminds me of the first night I spent in this bed with you,” I said sleepily.

He was silent for a second or two. “That was the second night. The first night you spent in my bed, I was doped to the gills on Vicodin, and you were fully clothed.”

He was right. How had I forgotten that night? Jared had been in a bike wreck. Or, to be clear, he’d been hit by a car while riding home. I remembered how it felt, seeing him with road

rash covering side of his body, half of his face a mess of bruises, and a gash on his temple that could have been so much worse. He'd been lucky.

"You could have died," I whispered, and his arms tightened around me.

Looking back, I could almost pinpoint that night as the turning point in our relationship. That was the night I started to realize how much he meant to me. The doctor had told me to keep an eye on him overnight, and to call right away if he started experiencing dizziness or nausea. I'd slept in his bed with him, and it had been all I could do not to wrap my arms around him and hold him close. It hadn't been a sexual urge, by any means. I just wanted to know he was there, that he was really okay. I wanted to reassure myself that he was alive and safe. I wanted to feel him breathing. Instead I'd wrapped my hand around his wrist, feeling his pulse against my fingertips. I slept like that the whole night.

I was brought back to the present by Jared's hand sliding down my stomach.

"Matt?"

It was only my name, almost a whisper, but that one word spoke volumes to me. I knew what he was trying to say. I heard in his voice an echo of the same tenderness I was feeling for him at that moment. I turned toward him and pulled him into my arms, and he relaxed against me with a quiet sigh that was part contentment, part arousal.

Sex with women had always been about softness – soft skin and soft hair and soft curves. There was nothing soft about Jared. He was all elbows and knees and hipbones. His arms were hard and strong, and his legs even stronger. His thick, coarse hair seemed to tangle around my fingers of its own accord. Even his skin wasn't quite soft, except in that spot just below his ear. And if I seemed overly fascinated with that part of his body, it wasn't because of that softness. It

was because when I kissed him there, I could smell him, and I could hear the low, urgent sounds he made as our bodies moved together. Even now, after all this time, after so many nights spent together in his bed, it still amazed me how that *lack* of softness turned me on so much.

I put one hand into his thick curls and angled his head so I could kiss the pale column of his throat. “Say it for me, Jared.”

He put his arms around me, and for once he didn’t tease me. He didn’t play the game. He said immediately, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” I whispered as I wrapped my hand around both our shafts at once and slowly started to stroke. “You have no idea how much.”

There were no more words after that. Just warm lips and his quiet moans, his pale skin against mine, legs tangled together, and slow burning passion that rocked me to my core. There was no way in the world I was ever letting him go. I knew that. I’d always known it. But I wanted him to know it too.

He didn’t say anything after that night, and it seemed he’d forgotten the entire incident. Maybe he had, but I hadn’t. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d failed him somehow, and I had no idea how to make it right.

The following weekend, Jared’s mom Susan asked me to take her and my mother to Boulder for the day. Brian, Lizzy, and Zach all had birthdays coming up, and they wanted to go shopping. We parted ways in the mall, and I resigned myself to several hours of boredom. I was searching for a book store when I saw it: the jewelry store. And inside, several different couples, shopping for rings.

The figurative light bulb in my head went on. I knew immediately this was what I wanted—a symbol. A way to show him how I felt. I felt a little stupid for not having thought of it sooner.

I hoped I could shop without being bothered, but as soon as I started looking, one of the sales ladies came up to me. She was about my age. Pretty, but wearing way too much perfume.

“Can I take anything out of the case for you?”

I pointed out a couple of the rings, and she took them out for me to look at. I didn’t want it to be fancy, and it definitely couldn’t be delicate. Anything too soft wouldn’t survive all the mountain biking he did. “I need it to be tough,” I told her.

“In that case, I’d suggest platinum or titanium. They’ll hold their shape better than plain silver.”

I ruled out platinum immediately based on price alone. I chose titanium bands that were wide and unadorned. “Can you engrave these?” I asked her.

She cocked her head at me, like she was confused. “Of course.”

“Perfect.”

That same confused head tilt. “Are you looking for an engagement band in titanium also? Or do you want to consider white gold?” She pointed at the next case over, which was full of women’s wedding rings.

My cheeks burned, and my pulse sped up a little. I hated myself for still being embarrassed by it, but I wasn’t backing out now. “No,” I made myself say. “I need two, just like this.”



She wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. It actually took her a few seconds to process that. Then I saw comprehension in her eyes and she smiled. It seemed genuine, too. "Of course."

She pulled out a bunch of little plastic rings and had me try them on until she found my size, then asked, "And what about the other ring?"

I had no idea what to say. Jared's hands weren't as big as mine, but definitely larger than hers. She saw my dilemma and said quietly, "Look at the others in the store."

I looked around at the other men. Specifically, I looked at their hands. One of the other employees had hands about the size of Jared's. I pointed to him, and she winked at me conspiratorially. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

I had to make an excuse to go back to Boulder a few days later to pick up the rings. She gave them to me in little grey boxes—the kind with the hinged lid that you always see in the movies, when the guy gets down on his knee and opens the box while popping the question to his lady. I didn't know why, but the boxes bothered me. I took the rings out and shoved them in my pocket, then dropped the boxes in the trash on the way to my car.

When I got home, I had a whole new dilemma—where to hide them. Not that I expected Jared to be snooping around for anything, but I was irrationally worried he'd find them. I finally tucked them inside a roll of socks and stuffed them in the back of my drawer. Then I had to figure out when to give them to him. We were past Valentine's Day. His birthday was still months away. We hadn't ever celebrated any kind of anniversary. If we had one at all, it would have been in November. Unless...

I had to check the title on my Jeep. I'd bought it from Lizzy the day after meeting Jared for the first time. We'd immediately become friends. Of course, it had taken months for it to

develop into anything more than that, and another six weeks for me to accept what those feelings meant. Nonetheless, the anniversary of the day we met seemed like as good a day as any.

Except that day turned out to be Zach's birthday.

Whether they liked it or not, Zach and Angelo had officially been adopted as part of our family. Lizzy invited everybody to her house for dinner to celebrate. After nearly nine months in Coda, Angelo had finally learned to relax a little around Lizzy, Susan, and my mother. I even caught him smiling at my mom once. Everyone was having a great time.

Everyone except me.

I wasn't faking it well, either. Jared watched me out of the corner of his eye, and Angelo looked suspicious. I couldn't stop being nervous. I had the rings hidden in my pocket. I had no idea what I was waiting for—a perfect moment, or a sign from heaven.

I was in the kitchen trying to decide how to proceed when Angelo came in. He leaned against the counter next to me and elbowed me in the ribs. "What the hell's your problem?"

It was tone that would have set anybody who didn't know him on the defensive. I did know him, better than Zach even, in some ways. Normally I wouldn't have fallen for it. But tonight I did. "Nothing," I snapped.

His eyes widened, but he just grinned at me. "Okay, man. Don't freak out."

Angelo was the person I cared about most in the world, second only to Jared. He knew that. He just stood there next to me, waiting me out. I finally reached into my pocket and pulled out the rings. I opened my hand so he could see them.

He looked at them for just a second, then grinned up at me. "Gee, Matt. Didn't know you felt that way 'bout me."

I started to laugh, but right then Zach and Jared walked into the kitchen. I cut my laugh short and quickly stuck the rings back in my pocket, blushing furiously. I knew I looked guilty, and Jared's suspicious look confirmed it.

Angelo grabbed Zach's arm and steered him back toward the door. "Wait," Zach started to say, "I came to get—."

"Later," And said to him as the door swung shut behind them

And just like that, Jared and I found ourselves alone in the kitchen.

He faced me, only a foot away, but not touching me. "What were you and Angelo talking about?"

"Nothing," I said, trying to sound casual.

He looked at the floor for a minute while he decided what to say, but finally looked up at me again. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong."

He smiled, but it was strained. "You've been acting funny the last couple of weeks, and it's worse tonight." He stepped closer, but he still didn't touch me. I looked into his eyes, and I hated what I saw there. Because I saw fear, and a hint of panic. His voice shook a little, but he said, "Are you unhappy?"

"No!" And this was exactly why I wanted to do this. I didn't want him worrying that I'd leave. I needed him to know how much I loved him. "No," I said again, and pulled him close to me. I grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his head back so I could see his face. "I've never been happier."

He relaxed a little, and his smile finally made it all the way to his blue eyes. “Then what is it?”

This was it — our big moment. I wished I’d thought it through more. I wished we weren’t in Lizzy’s kitchen, with a sink full of dirty dishes behind me. Still, I felt like it was now or never.

“Do you realize we met exactly two years ago today?” I asked him.

He blinked at me in surprise. “I knew it was this month.” Of course he was smiling. “I can’t believe you remembered the day.”

“Impressive, isn’t it?”

“It is, actually.”

I leaned down and kissed neck, then confessed. “I cheated. It was on the title to the Jeep.”

He laughed. “I’m still impressed. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

I reached into my pocket and took out the rings. I took his hand and placed both rings in it, closing his fingers over them before he could see what I’d given him. I held his hand closed.

“I thought about what you said Jared, and you’re right. Whether we do it or not, it doesn’t change the way I feel. But,” I had to stop and take a deep breath, “I wanted you to have something. I wanted to prove it to you.”

He seemed amused by the whole thing, but also curious. I finally let go of his hand and let him open his fingers and look down at what I’d given him.

He stood there for the longest time, looking at those two rings lying in the palm of his hand. He didn’t move. He didn’t speak.

“Yours is engraved,” I managed to say, although it was hard to make my voice work.

He took the smaller of the two rings and peered at the inside. It said, *Yours forever. I promise*. He took a deep breath, and I could tell he was shaking as much as I was. I couldn't see his face though, and he still hadn't said anything in response. My heart pounded, fear beginning to bloom in the back of mind. Maybe he didn't want this after all? "Jesus Jared," I said, my voice trembling. "Say something."

He finally looked up at me, smiling. He had tears in his eyes. That was why it'd taken him so long to respond—he hadn't wanted me to see that. "Thank you."

I pulled him against me and buried my face in his thick curls. "If you ever want to make it official," I told him quietly, "just say the word."

He shook his head. "This is enough."

"Are you sure?" I asked him.

"I promise."