

The Return

GREG WAS GONE for nine months before he returned. The same amount of time it takes to grow a child, Jess would often say. What he went through was much more difficult than being pregnant, he would remind her, letting his voice catch on the last vowel. He did this often lately, said things in a different tone or rolled his eyes. A change Jess still hadn't gotten used to.

Don't cause unnecessary conflict, she reminded herself. Over and over in her head she repeated the words that appeared on page six of the twelve-page pamphlet, until she could breathe normally again.

Every Wednesday, Jess attended the weekly spousal support group that the community center offered. They said it helped with the return—to know what to expect, and to have some tools to make the transition smoother. Once a week for about two hours in the early evening, a group of fifteen spouses, mostly women, sat in a circle on metal folding chairs. Each week they were given a variety of pamphlets that the facilitator went over in detail. For the last half hour, there was an open discussion about people's concerns, questions, and advice from those who had already been through a return. Some of the women there had husbands who had returned and left and returned again several times already. Others, like Jess, were on their first return. The pamphlets ranged from what to expect during a return, various behaviors exhibited after a return, and how this particular return differed from other returns, those the spouses might be more familiar with.

Jess went to these meetings dutifully each week, because she was scared. She was scared that Greg had left and that he would come back in a way that she was not equipped to handle. During the second group meeting, a tall woman with long black hair sat next to her. Her name, Jess later found out, was Deb. Deb was nearly ten years Jess's senior; she had two kids and a husband on his fourth return. She wore flowy, colorful tunics and large dangly earrings that chimed whenever she moved. Each week Jess found herself staring at Deb for the majority of the meeting. There was something captivating about her

presence and the way she spoke to the group with such authority. The facilitator often called on Deb to talk about the experiences she'd had with her husband's returns.

"The first return I hardly noticed a change. Ronny was still as strong and tall as he had been the day I met him in college. Perhaps he was a little more distant and aloof. The second return I started to notice a difference in the way he spoke. As if he were dropping the ends of his words on the floor. But it wasn't until the third return I understood that something about a person really does change when they are away. When Ronny returned the third time, he'd lost his ability to remember. It's the strangest thing, loving someone who can't remember anything you do for them or any conversation you have. Needless to say, I'm not particularly looking forward to this next return."

The facilitator always made sure to remind the group everyone's return would be different, some in more obvious ways than others. Some in more difficult ways than others. "Perhaps there was something to gain from a loss of short-term memory," the facilitator said to Deb. "For example, you can pull pranks on him, or eat the last slice of cake and say it was really him who did it," the facilitator said, laughing at her own joke. Deb looked at the facilitator with annoyance in her eyes. She got off her metal folding chair and left forty-five minutes early. She didn't come back to the group until three weeks later.

When Greg went away, he left Jess alone in their two-bedroom apartment. She had insisted they rent a two-bedroom, even though Greg said it made more sense to rent a place with only one room or even a studio, since it was just the two of them. Jess told him that she needed a space to do crafts and yoga, to relax. He didn't argue with her. In truth, she had hoped that the second bedroom that now held loose sheets of felt, hot glue guns, and a yoga mat would one day hold a baby.

Being a mother was something that was deeply ingrained in her. Every woman in her family had a child and Jess had always known her desire to be a mother. She brought it up with Greg once before, right after they had gotten married. She didn't think it needed to be discussed; she assumed everyone wanted a child of their own. Greg responded hesitantly, with a vague answer, about how now was not the right time. "Eventually, sure," he said.

That was enough hope for Jess to hold on to. She didn't want to scare Greg. She'd give him some time to come around to the idea. So

she kept the paint samples and tiny clothes hidden away in the back of her closet where he wouldn't think to look.

Before Greg left, he was a tall, lanky, freckled guy with orange hair that had started to fade over the years. He was soft-spoken and gentle, and had an affinity for things like entomology and poetry. The two met at a bar in Jess's small college town in the north of Florida. Greg was stationed at a base nearby. He bought her a vodka soda, they stayed up talking all night about dragon beetles and Whitman, and the next thing Jess knew she had left school to marry him. Of course, when she'd said yes to his proposal that day by the lake, she knew about the returns, but she was young and in love and nobody really knew what it meant yet. This was a time before support groups and the pamphlets, the men leaving and coming back without their tongues.

ON AN UNUSUALLY COLD Wednesday for Jacksonville, Deb reappeared after her three-week hiatus. The facilitator, a thirtysomething with a psych degree who was not particularly in tune with their situation, pretended like nothing had happened. Deb came in five minutes late and sat in the empty seat next to Jess. As she settled in, Jess inhaled the cloud of Deb's sandalwood perfume.

"Long time no see," Jess said.

"I can't believe you're still here. Your husband hasn't made the return yet?"

"No, not yet. He's due in about two weeks though. What about yours?"

"Next week, actually. I thought I'd stop by one last time to say my goodbyes to our lovely facilitator here. And to my friends," Deb said, looking at Jess.

Jess wasn't exactly sure what to make of this, but felt a lurch in her stomach. They walked out together at the end of class, and they exchanged numbers. "I'm just a call or text away if you need anything. Seriously," she said to Deb, locking eyes with her. Deb nodded and muttered that she had to go and clean the house, before Ronny returned, for the fourth time.

Jess spent the next two weeks studying the dozen or so pamphlets she had accrued since Greg had left. She read them all, consulted her notes, and then read them all again. On the drive to the airport, Jess thought of Deb and her silky hair and her stories about Ronny. She felt nauseous and considered turning back, going home.

When she saw Greg walk through the gate in the Jacksonville airport, she was relieved to see that he had all his extremities—two eyes, one nose, a mouth. Although it did seem, though Jess thought that she might be imagining this, as if he had a slight limp when he walked toward her. Not so much a limp really, as a strong lean to one side, as if the floor were tilted. It was a bit off-putting at first, and Jess did have to arch her back slightly when she went in to hug him.

“Are you limping?”

“Nice to see you too, Jess.” Greg laughed and embraced his wife. Something felt off—not necessarily wrong, just not familiar. As if a stranger was hugging her and not her husband. A slightly tilted stranger.

On the drive home, Jess asked Greg to tell her about the desert. Except for movies and magazines, she had never seen a desert. Having lived in Florida for most of her life, she couldn’t imagine such an absence of lush greenery. What did it feel like to walk in a place where you were surrounded by absolutely nothing? Where the color palette was monotone and everything looked like everything else? The pamphlet did say to keep the conversation light upon return.

“Describe the desert to me, what did it smell like?” Jess said, as she pulled out of the airport parking lot and headed home.

“Smell like? Dust. It smelled like dust and cat litter and death.”

“What about the camels? I read there were camels there.”

“I saw a few camels, but it was mostly nothingness. Like when you’re looking out at the ocean and it feels like it never ends. Except no sea foam or colorful fish swimming underneath. Just bone fragments and grit.”

THEY ARRIVED home and Greg said he wanted to sleep. Jess recalled the pamphlet saying something about how this might happen; it was a normal response to a return. One woman’s husband slept for forty days straight. After their conversation in the car, Jess almost hoped that might be the case with Greg.

While Greg slept, Jess called Deb to see how she was handling her husband’s return. She picked up the phone and stared at Deb’s number for what felt like an hour. She didn’t want to seem too pushy or needy. Deb seemed like the kind of person who craved distance.

The support group recommended that spouses continue to meet weekly with the group for as long as they needed after the return.

The facilitator made vague promises of helping those in the midst of a return adjust to their new reality. So, three days after she picked Greg up from the airport, Jess went to her first postreturn group meeting. She was disappointed to find the seat next to her remained empty for the entire two-hour session.

There was one other woman in the group whose husband had recently returned. His name was Paul; he had come back from his first return unable to feel things. His wife said she had tested his new inability in many different ways. His symptom was first discovered when she walked into the kitchen and saw his hand resting on the stove, the burner turned on high. Then she started to tap him on the shoulder when he wasn't looking—nothing. Paul didn't seem nearly as worried about this as his wife was. Curious as to how far this inability to feel went, one morning she told Paul to give her his hand, and she sliced a straight line across the bottom of his palm with a kitchen knife. He didn't flinch, didn't make a sound. The two of them just stared into the sink as Paul's bright red blood dripped onto the dirty dishes.

The facilitator looked at Jess expectantly. "And how are things going at home, Jess? How are you dealing with the return?"

Jess looked around at everyone who was staring at her, eagerly awaiting a dramatic story about her husband, how he'd come home with only one eye, or no fingernails.

"Things seem to be normal. A little too normal, actually. I mean, of course, he has been sleeping more than usual. But nothing like for forty days straight. More like exhaustion. And he doesn't seem to want to talk about what happened in the nine months he was gone, but that seems to be expected too. So, things are going pretty well I guess."

The facilitator looked at Jess with concern, "There's nothing out of the ordinary with your husband? Nothing strange you've noticed or odd behaviors he's exhibiting?"

Jess didn't tell the group about her husband's newfound lack of balance. It seemed trivial, temporary, like a cold or a rash. Jess thought of it as a minor symptom, something she could keep under control. Especially compared to what she was hearing from the others.

WHEN JESS got home that evening, she expected Greg to be asleep, but he was standing in the kitchen, reading the newspaper. His head was leaning to the left, his ear nearly touching his shoulder, as if he were reading something perplexing or confusing.

“Hey, honey. What are you up to?” Jess said cautiously, not wanting to make any sudden movements that might upset him. She remembered something about that in one of the pamphlets.

“Oh, nothing, just couldn’t get to sleep. Thought I’d read the comic section to get my mind off of things. I made some coffee if you want. It’s decaf.”

Jess breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe she was just imagining things. She had been expecting things to go wrong, so she’d invented a problem. Greg seemed normal, drinking coffee and reading the comics. Both things he did before the return.

“That sounds great, I’d love a cup.”

When Greg got up to make Jess a cup of coffee, she gasped. His body was now at a forty-five degree angle. He couldn’t seem to walk in a straight line, and when he began to pour the coffee into the cup, it fell onto the floor. Jess could see a small puddle of brown liquid collecting there, from the first cup Greg had tried to pour earlier.

After Greg went to bed, Jess went into the bathroom and called Deb. She answered, warily, as if she didn’t get many calls from people, especially this late at night.

“Deb, it’s Jess, from the support group.”

“Oh, hi.”

“I think there’s something really wrong with Greg. I’m not sure what to do about it. He seems to have lost the ability to balance. Like he’s off-center, unstable, crooked or something. It’s hard to explain, you just have to see it.”

“Well, that’s a new one. I’m not sure I’ve ever heard of someone returning off balance. At least he didn’t come back without any teeth, like Ronny here.”

“No teeth, not a single one? How is he doing?”

“How is he doing? The question is, how am I doing? Some days he looks like an old man, other days like a baby. He can’t eat anything but soup. I’ve broken three blenders already trying to liquefy his favorite foods—steaks, brisket, lobster. I feel bad for him, but I can’t understand half of what he says to me. And it doesn’t make it any easier that he can’t remember anything. I don’t know. Things are different.”

“I think you should come to group next week. It might be good to share what you’re going through with the others. And maybe there’s another pamphlet they can give you.”

On the other end of the phone, Jess could hear Deb sigh.

“I don’t know, I’ve been going to that group for three years, and it hasn’t seemed to make much of a difference.”

Deb sounded different than the last time they talked. She sounded defeated, tired, worn out. Four returns will do that to a person, Jess thought.

“I’m not sure how much more of this I can take, Ronny is really bad this time around. Sometimes I just look at him sitting there and think about all the ways I could put him out of his misery, put myself out of this misery. He’s so helpless, it would be so easy.”

“Deb, what are you saying?” Jess twirled her hair around her finger, biting the ends anxiously. She was afraid of what Deb was hinting at. “Promise me that you’ll come to the group next week?”

Deb promised halfheartedly and hung up the phone. Jess found herself once again alone, on the cold tiles of her bathroom floor.

FOR SEVEN DAYS Jess stayed home with Greg and watched as his condition rapidly declined. It got to the point where he couldn’t hold anything anymore; he was putting the emphasis on the wrong parts of words, his sentences hanging heavy at the ends, sounding more like questions than statements. Jess desperately wanted to help him and suggested they go see a doctor. But that only made him angry; he refused to admit there was anything wrong with him. Who, then, was this crooked person walking around the house in zigzags and spilling cereal on the floor?

Night after night Jess sat at her desk with the pamphlets spread out in front of her. They had titles written in bold letters: “What NOT to do after a return,” “How to cope with returnee symptoms,” “What to expect when you’re expecting a return,” and “What is a return and how can you get through it?” Jess flipped open the pamphlet on returnee symptoms. On the third page there was a list—excess sleeping, a lack of desire to socialize, a lack of talking, night sweats, an absence or heightened sense of any of the following: appetite, fear, sexual desire. On page four she found a list of rare, but still normal, symptoms—excess or missing appendages, a rapid loss of hair, a constantly running nose, an inability to remember things, trouble with certain words or common phrases, a sudden interest in botany, a craving for dairy, a change in height, a change in personality, a noticeable change in character or personality.

None of this was what Jess was looking for, although she wasn’t quite sure exactly what she was looking for. Perhaps the mention of

symptoms where someone was tilted, off-balance, as if their internal axis had been thrown off. Someone who could no longer walk in a straight line or stand on two feet without stumbling for very long. Someone who had lost the ability to eat soup, to drink coffee, to successfully move things from their plate to their mouth. Someone who emphasized the wrong parts of words, who said everything as if it were a question, who got really angry at little things, like crumbs collecting on the kitchen floor. Someone who had to lie on top of her at a forty-five-degree angle to have sex. Someone who, when they cried, had their tears fall in every which direction, anywhere but down.

Jess was worried. She was worried about Greg, about the fact that he could no longer do many things for himself. He could no longer drive, express his thoughts clearly, or remember that he loved her. And it had all happened so fast, in a little under a week. The only thing Jess could think to do was wait until her next support group meeting.

Wednesday came and Jess found herself once again sitting on a folded metal chair in a circle of worried women. Deb walked in ten minutes late, looking as if she hadn't slept in a week. She sat down next to Jess and didn't say a word. The facilitator passed around a freshly printed set of pamphlets, still warm on Jess's lap. They read, "10 Tips on How to Rekindle Romance after a Return."

Once the meeting was over, Jess found Deb in the bathroom, splashing water on her face. It looked like she had been crying.

"Deb, what's wrong? Is it Ronny?"

"I can't do it anymore. I just can't do it. I'm not even sure if he knows who I am half of the time."

"I'm sure it will get better. Have you looked through all of the pamphlets yet?" Jess said, only halfheartedly believing the words coming out of her mouth.

"I'm sick of the pamphlets and the talks and the circles. None of it is helping. This time it's different, so much different. This return took everything out of Ronny, and now it's taking everything out of me. I have to do something now, before things get worse."

Jess looked at Deb. Her face was swollen, her hair looked as if it hadn't been washed in days, and in her eyes there was only emptiness.

"I'm going to do it tonight. I already bought what I need; it's sitting in the trunk of my car. The time is right. You do understand, don't you Jess?" Deb said to her.

Jess was having a hard time processing what was happening in front

of her. She knew that the right thing to do was to try and stop Deb, to talk her out of it, to tell the facilitator what Deb was planning. But she didn't. She could see the pain that Deb was in, and she wanted Deb to be happy. Deb deserved to be happy. No one could blame Deb, and Jess certainly wouldn't.

Deb left the bathroom, and Jess watched as she drove away from the parking lot.

WHEN JESS GOT HOME, Greg was sleeping diagonally across the bed. She had tried pushing him over or straightening him out to make space for herself, but he always ended up back in the same position, no matter how hard she tried. Jess gathered her pillows and a throw blanket and fell asleep on the couch, surrounded by her pamphlets. She dreamt of Greg. Of the time before returns and pamphlets and broken dishes. She dreamt of a warm night by a lake where Greg had given her a ring, painted with gold, and she had said yes.

A knock at the door woke Jess from her sleep. She didn't get up at first, but the knocking became more authoritative, urgent.

Jess opened it, still dressed in her robe and sweatpants.

"Hello, are you Jessica?"

"Yes, how can I help you?"

Jess could see the early morning dew covering the grass behind the man. He was dressed in a wrinkled navy suit, his top button undone.

"I'm Detective Jones. Do you have a moment to talk? It's about Deb."

Jess could hear Greg shouting from the bedroom. She was sure he was asking something like, Who is it? What does he want? It sounded like a bad connection to a radio station. Soon he won't be able to talk at all, Jess thought.

She got dressed and went with the detective to a diner down the street from her house. He asked her about her husband and the return and the support group and how she was handling it all. She told him about the pamphlets and about her husband's inability to stand up straight. It felt good to talk to someone, to talk to anyone about Greg and the return. Especially to someone who didn't have a more impressive story to tell about their own experience. Someone to just listen. She looked at Detective Jones's black curly hair, and her eyes lingered for a moment on his forearm that rested on the table in front of him. She suddenly felt she had been talking too long.

The cops found Deb sitting on someone's private dock looking over the lake. The old couple who owned the house saw a figure out their back door and called the police. She was in her nightgown without a jacket and had a near-empty bottle of whiskey sitting on the floating dock next to her. One shoe dangled precariously on her foot, while the other was found floating a few yards away in the lake. The young cop who answered the call tried to make sure she was okay, asked her if anything was wrong. She wouldn't even look up at him. It was as if she wasn't there at all, he later wrote in the report. He found her purse and got the address off of her driver's license. When he opened the front door with the spare key he found under her mat, the first thing he saw was Ronny, slumped forward in a dining room chair. Next to him was a bowl of soup, a cup of coffee, a spoon.

As they drove her to the house, Jess wondered if Ronny had known what was happening. If he had screamed and cursed Deb in words that sounded like open wounds. She wondered if Deb had watched the whole thing. As his toothless mouth foamed and bubbled over. As he slowly slumped forward, until he was folded in half like a piece of paper. Jess wondered if Deb had done the right thing.