

Jeanette's Tale

Let me guess; you're more than a little stressed out about Finals Week. It's been a long and arduous semester, and you have at least that ONE COURSE that you just struggled with all year long, you know, the one that you're sure will ruin your GPA.

Fair enough. Let me tell you about Jeanette. I met Jeannie on-line a few years ago, and we chatted regularly. While we've never met in person, she's come to mean a lot to me over the years. She's in her thirties, divorced mother of three, ranging in age, well, when we met from high school to elementary school. By now her youngest is in Middle School and her oldest must be in her third year, or so, of college.

Jeannie herself is a lovely woman, very strong and independent, highly intelligent and inquisitive, and, in her thirties, decided to return to college to get her degree in Social Work. She was very proud to be able to sit down and do homework alongside her kids as an example for them, and, sure enough, graduated with her Bachelor's degree. She uprooted and moved to another state, and started graduate school, working on her Master's. There was a little bit of attraction between us, even though we've never met in person, but we decided that neither of us wanted a long-distance relationship, so we opted to remain friends.

About a year ago, I stopped hearing from her. She started dating this new man, Dave, and I just kind of figured that she had moved on. It seems to happen a lot; the "new man" is intimidated by her "old friends," especially male friends, and suddenly I'm just no longer in the picture. It's OK, I'm used to it, but, this time, it was not the case. I wish it were.

Instead, Jeannie had a massive stroke. Eventually, her sister came upon my name hidden away somewhere and sent me an email to let me know what had happened. It did not look like she would survive at first. But, one thing about Jeannie, is she's a fighter. She did survive, but lost a huge portion of her memory. For a long time, she could not move, or talk, and about the only thing you could get from her, for brief periods of time, was eye movement.

Slowly, Jeannie began to recover her faculties. She learned to walk again, and remembered the people around her. Her children's names were among the first words she remembered. When last I heard of her, several months ago, she was just starting to put together sentences again. She was still struggling with the language; she was getting better at recognizing words, but not choosing them. For example, if you asked her to point to an orange, she could, but if you held up the orange and asked her what it was, she could not choose the word.

Knowing Jeannie as I do, this must have been driving her nuts. They moved her to a rehab center, where, according to the nurses and rehab specialists, she was one of the hardest working patients they had ever had. Her plans for graduate school are gone forever; now her dream is to get back to some state of normality. Yesterday, I got the most wonderful Christmas present I think I could have ever asked for; I got a card from Jeanette.

Looking at the handwriting, you can tell that she had written it. It looks as if it was written by a child, still struggling with upper and lower case letters, and the difference between "r" and "n". Still, it clearly displays another layer of translation that she has achieved; we don't think about it much, but not only to be able to choose the words, but to be able to inscribe them is a level of complication that is not as trivial as those of us who do not have to think consciously about really are aware of. It's a brief card, that reads simply "DeAr Richard, JeaneTTe, DAVE, Kylie, Zach, Mckenna" with the word "Hi" in the corner, underlined not once, not twice, but thrice.

As you study for your exams, keep Jeanette in mind. While you are struggling with complicated concepts and challenging courses, take just a moment to think of my friend, and the many people like her, who are working just as hard, if not harder, to re-learn the difference between “r” and “n”. Be thankful for what you have, and the level of difficulty you have obtained. Good luck on your finals.