

She's Like the Wind

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Ever since I saw the "In Another Voice" challenge on The Definitive Guide to Murder, She Wrote, I've wanted to rewrite a scene from Seth's POV. Inspiration never really struck, however, until I recently watched Dirty Dancing again. "She's Like The Wind" sounded so much like Seth's feelings for Jessica, and when I matched it to the "confrontation" scene in "Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall, Part 1," I knew I finally had the story I wanted. So, here you are: the "confrontation" from "Mirror, Mirror," told in Seth Hazlitt's voice.

"It was the bait."

"The bait? What?"

"The *bait*, woman! Your bait was better than mine!"

"We got it out of the same bucket!"

"Well, you just made it seem that way!"

This kind of argument was nothing new to either myself or Jessica Fletcher. We'd been verbally sparring like this ever since God Almighty was a boy, way back when our spouses were still alive. Heck, I could recall many a time when Frank and I would get a topic off and rolling at the dinner table and we would be the ones starting the debate. It never took long for Jessica to seize on a subject or a particular fact and jump headfirst into the conversation. My Ruth was always the moderator, because, as she said, someone had to play referee. Jessica, on the other hand, could either confirm or refute an opinion so fast, she could've taught those pinheads on Capitol Hill a thing or two about winning an argument. And win she did, more times than I care to admit.

I'm not complaining, although our sheriff likes to say I have a case of chronic complaints. Truth is, I loved all the times we got to square off. Still do. The arguments are never vicious, and the little jabs we shoot back and forth never cut to the bone. Jessica's an intelligent woman, which I like. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's arguing with someone who talks out of their fanny, shooting off their mouth without having the facts to back up their claim. Of course, the sheriff also likes to say I do the same thing, but who's talking?

Point is, today was no different from any other day; the argument no different from any other argument. Jess and I had just gotten back from a fishing trip with Caleb, each of us with a different catch of the day: Jessica, a nice string of fish; myself, a nice slab of humble pie. And although I was letting my "stubborn male pride," as Jess would call it, do the talking for me, I really didn't care that she had gotten all the fish. Seeing her face light up as those fish came rolling in, the pretty pink flush that came into her cheeks, and those amazing blue eyes sparkling brighter than the sun on the sea, was worth more to me than a boatload of fish. *I was right to get her out for a while*, I'd thought at the time. *Look how happy she is. Lord, I love seeing her this happy, hearing her laugh. I love...* At this point, I remember shaking my head. *Rein it in, Hazlitt. You might have been harboring these feelings for the last two years, going on three, but you don't know for sure if she feels the same way. Since she doesn't know, best you don't tell her rather than be sorry you did.*

Little did I know those feelings were about to be challenged. At the present, though, I was just happy to walk Jessica back up the pier and take her home. Any little bit of time I get to spend with her these days is a blessing, and rare, since she's working on a new novel every time I turn around. Truth be told, I'm worried about her. I don't want her to get so obsessed with her work that she turns into a lonely, bitter woman. I've seen it happen to too many people, and Jessica is too precious to me to allow that to happen to her.

"Well, putting aside my shortcomings as an angler for the moment, the day was not exactly a total loss. At least we made you laugh, and if I'm not mistaken, you have a bit of color in your face."

"Well, what's the matter with my face?" Jessica asked, raising both hands to touch her cheeks.

Nothing. Your face is beautiful, I wanted to say. Her cheeks were still rosy from the sea breeze, her blonde hair – what little of it wasn't hidden beneath that stupid baseball cap – was fluttering in the wind, and her beautiful eyes were still shining like sapphires. Laugh lines were engraved at the corners of her eyes, but that didn't bother me. Her face – everything about her – was perfect to me. Everything, that is, except her coming closer and closer to being a hermit.

"Well, there's nothing wrong with it at all, except it hasn't seen the light of day for about, oh, six weeks now," I said, hoping she'd catch my tone. Maybe she'd even agree that she was working too hard, suggest she get out more... that we could spend more time together.

Wishful thinking. "Yeah, well, I've been working on my book," was her cheery reply.

It was all I could do to keep from growling at that. She didn't see. She didn't even realize that she was spending too much time on her work and not enough with the ones who loved her. She wasn't *living*. I was irritated, and with good reason, but the next words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Yes, you have been workin' on your book. You are *always* workin' on a book, Jessica. I wonder sometimes how you can tell them apart."

As soon as I said it, I felt like swallowing my tongue. *Dad-blammit. When am I gonna learn to keep my mouth shut?* Jessica's confused expression only reminded me that I have no filter between my mouth and my brain. Suddenly, I was desperate to avoid continuing this conversation. Yes, I was worried about Jess, but dag-nabbit, I didn't want to be such a smart-aleck about it! All the way home, I managed to deflect her attempts to get an answer out of me. I brought up everything from the weather to medical advancements to those blasted video games I see the kids playing nowadays. All the time, I was wondering what can of worms I'd opened. I didn't find out until I brought Jess home, and then the little nightcrawlers attacked with a vengeance.

"Honestly, Seth," Jessica said as we walked into her house, "I want to know what you meant by that remark!"

"No, you don't, Jess," I said, watching her take off her baseball cap and smooth her hair. I felt my stomach warm, wondering if those beautiful blonde curls were as soft and silky as I imagined. At *that* particular thought, I decided to use the same argument I'd had with myself earlier. "If I thought you did, I'd tell you, but since I know you don't, best *I* don't rather than be sorry I did."

Jessica laughed. "Oh, sure! That makes *perfect* sense!"

"Ayuh," I answered, just as the phone rang. While Jess went to answer the phone, I decided to pour myself a cup of coffee. Thankfully, the coffeepot was still on and there was some good black joe inside. As I fixed my cup, I heard Jessica address the caller – that fellow Bracken from New York. I thanked God my back was turned, so Jessica couldn't see me rolling my eyes. That pushy publisher had been dying to get Jessica to sign a contract with him, so he could feature her next book in his Christmas catalog. *That*, of course, would mean more hours chained to her typewriter... more hours where I didn't get to see her.

"Ah... my doctor prescribed a day of fishing, and I was too tired to argue with him."

I had to smile at this. Clearly, Bracken must've asked Jessica where she'd been all day, which told me he'd been ringing her phone off the hook while we were gone. At least I'd done her a service there, and thank the Lord, she seemed grateful for it.

"Oh, no, let's not talk about that right now."

The smile was snuffed out right then and there. Was he *still* pestering Jessica about that dad-burned contract? My question was answered in the next minute:

"Look, please, Mr. Bracken; when I make up my mind, I'll be in touch! I promise!"

I downed half the mug of coffee like it was Jack Daniel's. *Wheedling, weaseling snake-oil salesman. Just leave her alone! Let her live her life!*

My silent rant apparently did no good. If Jessica's next words were anything to go by, he was still trying to win her over.

"Not even a hint! I'm sorry!"

As she said this, she was smiling, acting all charming as if he was right there in the kitchen with us. She actually looked like she was looking forward to closing the deal. I felt my stomach give a lurch... or was that my heart? *Stomach. It's just your stomach.*

"Of course! One way or the other! Good! Goodbye!"

Wrong again, Hazlitt. It's your heart, I thought. She'd all but agreed to an extra workload, and I felt like I was going to be sick. "Persistent fella," I managed to grind out, when all I really wanted to do was throttle the man long-distance.

"And stubborn," Jessica agreed, giving me one of those pointed looks she fixes on people who make her BS meter go *ding-ding-ding*. "Like some other people that I know."

Crap. I could practically hear that *ding-ding-ding* at that very moment. Jessica knew I was trying to avoid talking about my little barb at the harbor, and she knew there was something on my mind despite my denials. I tried taking another sip of coffee, but it soured in my mouth. "You must've made this last night," I said, dumping the rest of the cup down the drain and setting the mug in the dish drainer. My only clear thought was to get out of there as quickly as I could. I did *not* want to tell Jess what was on my mind,

because telling her I was worried about her might also mean telling her I... I shook it off and made a beeline for the door. "Well... I'll be seein' you, Jess."

Wouldn't you know it, she wasn't about to let it go. Once Jessica sank her teeth into something, she was as stubborn as a bulldog. "Oh, no, Seth Hazlitt! You're not going to leave until you tell me exactly what you meant by that crack at the harbor."

Get out, Hazlitt. Just get out while you can. "That was a stupid remark. Why don't we just drop it?"

"No, no! Let's not, let's not."

Although political correctness and tact are not my virtues, I knew I had to come up with a harmless, end-of-discussion response. "Jessica..." I fought to spit the words out. "What you do with your life is absolutely none of my business. I tend to forget that."

Saying that felt like lying. Every word was true, but honestly, I felt like her life was my business. I'd felt that way ever since Frank asked me to take care of her after his death, and even more so after... after I fell in love with her. But letting her see my emotions wouldn't help matters any. I tried to make a clean getaway out the back door, but Jessica, quick as lightning, blocked my path. *Stubborn woman!*

"And a good thing, too. Do you realize, Seth, that if I didn't have you to keep me on an even keel, then who?" She gave me a short shove. "Out with it!"

Right then and there, my feelings very nearly showed themselves, in a sad kind of smile. I loved Jessica so much that I didn't want to risk hurting her (and losing our friendship), but it was because I loved her that I wanted to tell her the truth. In the end, it was the latter love that won. *All right. If she wants the truth, I'll give it to her. If I don't, no one else will. No one else loves her like I do.* "All right," I began. My stomach tossed. *Lord, if I hurt Jessica, I swear I'm gonna be sick. But she's gotta know this. She's gotta understand she's running herself into the ground.* I ignored the onset of nerves and laid it all out.

"Do you recall last month, I asked you to go hikin' with me up to Spooner's Mill?" As I spoke, I turned away from Jessica, pacing the kitchen. I couldn't face her, not just yet. If her expression was hurt, I wouldn't be able to go on, and *she needed this.*

"Yes! And I wanted to go! You know that!"

Her voice was enough to bring me back around. She did look a little shocked, but I didn't see hurt in her eyes or on her face. *Yet*. "Except there was that article you wanted to finish. And a couple of months before that, it was the fishing trip to Rockford, except you couldn't find any time for that, either."

"Well, I had this terribly important meeting with my accountant, and..."

I wondered if she'd have an excuse. A legitimate one, but an excuse nonetheless. "I'm sure it was very important, yes, I am." She looked so confused, I had to turn away again. "You know, Jess..." I gazed out the kitchen window. Her garden was a sorry sight. Weeds choking the flowers and spreading like kudzu. Bushes and grass growing out of control. I knew Jessica, and she was a conscientious gardener. This was further proof that her work was taking over her life. If she didn't have enough time to tend to her precious flowers, something was wrong. "I have arrived at an age – well, I expect we both have – where I don't think we ought to have to rev the engine as hard as we used to."

"Well, are you saying that I'm, I'm working too hard?"

The question got right to the heart of the matter, piercing my heart in the process. "I'm sayin' that's all you seem to have time for these days," I said, trying to swallow the lump that suddenly invaded my throat. "Have you looked at your garden lately? The weeds are threatenin' to carry off the rhododendrons!"

I knew I'd hit a sensitive area when I saw Jessica squirming, struggling to find something to say. "Well... I've got a lot of obligations!"

"To whom, Jess?" I asked, sick of the excuses. Who *was* she obligated to? Her publishers to fill out another contract, write a dozen more books, go on every single junket that kept her farther and longer away from home? To everyone in Cabot Cove who demanded a piece of her time? Good night; she was like the wind, blowing here, there, and everywhere to all who wanted her. All I ever asked for was a little bit of time with her where we could just have fun; where she could just be Jessica, not J.B. Fletcher. Was it so much to ask? "Now, a few years back, you needed this writing to help you get through the empty days and lonely nights. I know that. I went through it myself. But Frank's a long time gone now, just like my Ruth. And another bestseller, or ten bestsellers is not gonna fill that void."

Now I was beginning to feel like a heel. Her beautiful blue eyes were shining with tears, all because of me. The truth hurt, but why did I have to be the one hurting her? "Seth, I know that!"

Do you? "Maybe yes, and maybe no. All I know is that if... Frank Fletcher were still around, you wouldn't be spendin' half your life chained to that typewriter and the other half chasin' around the country. No, sir. You'd be out smellin' the salt air at sunrise."

Jessica didn't answer me right away. Her lips were threatening to bow, and I seriously contemplated running away. It would've broken my heart to see her cry. As it was, a tear was making its way down her cheek. "Seth, are you trying to hurt me?"

She might as well have stabbed me, that question cut so deep. *"Hurt you?" Do you really think I'd purposely hurt you? You mean everything to me! I don't want to hurt you! I want to hold you in my arms and protect you from everything that can hurt you. I want to cherish you like the precious woman you are. I don't want to see you hurt by the life you're living. That's the only reason I'm saying all this.* "Oh, for pity's sake, woman. That's the last thing I want to do!" I opened my mouth, but shut it again to keep from blurting out the words on my tongue – and on my heart: *I love you.* Now was not the right time to tell her, not with emotion and tension so thick in the kitchen, you could've cut it with a machete. If I ever worked up the guts to tell her how I feel, the moment needed to be full of joy, not sadness. All I could do was funnel my jumbled emotions, pain, and concern into one sentence. "I just think maybe you ought to get off the treadmill while you still have a chance."

Jessica didn't say another word. She didn't need to. Her face was shining with tears, her eyes were still dim with pain, and she gave me the barest ghost of a smile. *All right, that's it. I have to get out of here now. I can't stand to see her in such pain... and know that I'm the one that caused it.* "Now... that's my piece and I don't want to talk about it anymore at this time, so I will... chat with you later." I put my fishing hat back on my head, tipped it to Jessica, and took my leave, thinking that was a pretty pathetic way to end the most emotionally raw conversation we'd ever had.

You're a coward, Seth Hazlitt, I told myself as I got into my car. *You ought to be in there comforting her and telling her what she means to you, instead of running away.*

What good would it do? The cynical side of me starts playing devil's advocate. *If I told her I love her, how do I know she'd return my feelings? I don't want to lose our friendship... or what's left of it. She's just out of my reach.*

As I drive home, what I said earlier starts to resonate. Jessica really is like the wind. Beautiful, blowing from place to place... and I can't hold her. Sure, I can hold her in my arms for a while, but she's not truly mine. She's my friend. I can't hold her like I want to...

like a wife, a lover, a partner in life. I can feel her soft breath as she kisses my cheek and the softness of her body close to me, but that's as far as it can go. Heck, earlier I couldn't even look her in the eye because of the emotion I saw there. I probably don't even have the *right* to look into those beautiful eyes.

Beautiful. Unattainable. Out of my league. All perfect descriptions of the wind... and of Jessica. And I'm a fool to even think I could give her what she needs. She deserves to be loved and cherished. She deserves someone who will never hurt her, and Lord knows I've done that today.

But you love her. Face it, you'd go crazy if you had to live without her.

I pull into my driveway, shut off the car, and sigh. I do love her, and I always will. She stole my heart two years ago on the cliffs of Cabot Cove, and the sad part is, she doesn't even know she's done it. *Lord, forgive me for all the pain I've caused Jessica. If you can spare a miracle, I'd sure appreciate it if you'd patch up our relationship. I don't want to lose her.*

As I get ready to enter my house, a little breeze blows around me, and I can't help but smile. Maybe all's not lost. Jess and I have weathered worse storms than this, and something tells me we'll be all right. She's like the wind, all right, but I'm like the waves, running toward the shore. She'll blow back into my life, and I'll come running with open arms.