

A man without a proper winter coat.



“Cause she seemed to be so proud of me just walkin’ holding hands.

And she didn’t think that money was a measure of a man.

And we seemed to fit together when I held her in my arms. And it left me feelin’ warm.

‘Cause she brightened up the day like the early mornin’ sun.

And she made what I was doin’ seem worthwhile.

It’s the closest thing to livin’ that I guess I’ve ever known.

And it makes me want to smile.”

With apologies to Kris Kristofferson

“You’re a 50+ year old grown man that doesn’t own a proper winter coat.”

That was Tina’s evaluation of me after our third date. Tina was being kind; the lack of a winter coat was the least of my issues. My situation was actually much worse.

My marriage had just ended. The company that I worked for was in the process of being sold. My son-in-law had just returned from Iraq. He and his wife, my oldest daughter, had their hands full with their 10-month daughter (my first grandchild); they needed me. My youngest daughter was finishing up college; not quite out of the nest. I was living in O’Fallon, Illinois with my two teenage sons in a very leveraged house that I was trying to sell during the housing crisis. I was driving a company owned 8-year old Ford Taurus with about 150,000 miles on the odometer that did not have a working heater. My dog had just died. I walked around in a fog.

I was a country song.

A mutual friend had told me about Tina and wanted to fix us up. Tina was a successful attorney, a single mother who lived in Creve Coeur Missouri, just off Ladue Road in one of the tonier parts of St. Louis County. She had successfully raised two sons on her own while balancing law school and a full time job. When I told my brother about Tina, his first remark to me was “why would she want to have anything to do with you?”

It was a fair question.

But after a few phone calls, (I had to convince her that a man that lived so far away-20 miles-was worth any of her time) she agreed to meet me for the first time at a Starbucks in the Galleria, a big shopping mall near her home. I had zero expectations about the evening. I had been out on a few dates since the divorce and things had not went well; it was scary out there. It seemed that all available women in my age group were either already taken or crazy.

I arrived first, and after about twenty minutes past our arranged meeting time and no Tina, I called the phone number she had given me. The call went straight to voice mail. I assumed I had been stood up. My brother had been right.

Then my phone rang. It was Tina. Seems there were two Starbucks at the Galleria, I was at the wrong one. And that phone number Tina had given me? That was her home phone number. She didn’t give her cell phone number out to strangers.

I hustled my way over to the other Starbucks. But I still wasn’t sure whom I was looking for; I had not yet seen her face. But then I saw a beautiful, stylishly dressed, confident woman near the entrance whom appeared to be waiting for someone. I hoped that this was Tina. She started to smile when she saw me, and she asked me if I was Tim. She had recognized me from a by-line photo on some articles that I had written for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*. Yes, I said. I smiled. She did not appear to be the least bit crazy. And now I had her cell phone number.

The fog started to lift.

We went inside, sat down, and started to talk. She was wicked smart, knowledgeable on every subject we discussed. A mensch. We liked the same music, had read a lot of the same books, enjoyed the same movies. She was way more into art, I was way more into baseball. We both had big, close knit families. Our children were the most important things in our lives. And, of course, she was adorable.

I earned enough trust to take her to dinner. The conversation continued to flow and the evening grew late. As we left the restaurant (we had driven separately) I asked her if I could see her again. She said yes. I drove home happier than I'd been in years.

We went on some great dates. She taught me what a "tapas" restaurant was and all about Greek food. We took in live music, went for walks in the park and I let her beat me at ping pong. We attended baseball games and visited the art museum. On one date, Tina excused herself and left the table. When she came back, she patted me on the arm and said "you're a good man Tim Hollenbach." I was smitten.

At around date five, we went back to her house, I thought, to watch some TV and who knows? Turns out Tina had other plans. Thus began the inquisition.

On an earlier date, Tina had told me that she was a "professionally trained investigator." Well, it turned out that this night I was the one being investigated. She asked me about my education, my religious beliefs, my health, my exercise habits, the kind of friends I had. She had me explain my past, my present and what I wanted for the future. Had I ever been sued? What hobbies did I have? How much do I drink? What was I proud of? What did I want for my kids?

We talked a lot of politics. Where did I stand on the issues of the day? Who had I voted for? Who would I vote for? Did I read? What were my favorite books? Favorite authors?

She dug into specifics in each area; and had follow up questions if my answers did not satisfy her, or seemed misleading. The questioning didn't end until early morning. By the time I got into my car to drive home, around 2:00 am, I was exhausted.

The next morning, I woke up confused. What in the hell was that last night? It seemed like I was on trial. Or being vetted for the Supreme Court. Did I pass? Was I out? Had I done or said something to make her angry?

I called my brother to share the information and ask what he thought of all the questions. He started laughing and told me... "you idiot, she's smart. She's evaluating whether you're worth a serious relationship. But for what it's worth I don't think you have a chance with that attorney."

When I called Tina that afternoon, she told me that she had 'a great night' and what were my plans for the day? Did I want to come over and watch some TV or something?

Turns out my brother was wrong. Somehow I had survived the inquisition. I had passed the test.

The attorney liked me.

Those dates were almost 15 years ago. We did start a serious relationship. Along the way, Tina took me into her home and helped me finish raising my sons. Treated my kids, and my granddaughter, as her own. She introduced me to her sons, her son's girlfriends (now their wives), her Dad, her brothers and sisters, and her extended family. She showed me how to get out from under that leveraged house. She negotiated a new salary for me in a new job that doubled what I had been making previously. She restored my confidence so I had the courage to take a new position in another company that properly valued my worth.

She introduced me to artists like Van Gogh, Manet, Chagall and so many more. Had me listen to Bob Dylan, Etta James and John Prine in a whole new way. She taught me how to dress with some sort of style. She improved my health, my attitude, made me smarter, kinder, a better dad, a better son. She handled me with care. And she came to love me.

I had already fallen in love with her.

Sunday, May 1st, 2022 marks our 12th wedding anniversary. Since we've met, we've seen four of our children marry, added four grandchildren, both successfully retired, bought a new house in Texas, traveled all over the country, to Europe twice, and made new friends everywhere. We also continue to go on great dates. And we're far from done.

There is a scene in the movie *Cast Away*, near the end, where Tom Hank's character is explaining to his friend how he had survived his time on the deserted island. Hank's character, Chuck, explains:

"I had power over nothing. And that's when this feeling came over me like a warm blanket. I knew, somehow, that I had to stay alive. Somehow. I had to keep breathing. Even though there was no reason to hope. And all my logic said that I would never see this place again. So that's what I did. I stayed alive. I kept breathing. And one day my logic was proven all wrong because the tide came in, and gave me a sail. And now, here I am. I'm back, talking to you. And I know what I have to do now. I gotta keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?"

Well, for me, back all those years ago, when I felt like I was on a deserted island, the tide brought me Tina. My sail. My way off the island.

I cannot imagine what my life would be like had I not met her.

But I know for sure that I still wouldn't have a proper winter coat.

That's all I'm sayin'

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