

THE MOONLIT PAGE

Leave the Bird Upside Down



The coat needed shorter sleeves. It did not, Mrs Bell explained, need a better button.

Sami had not yet said anything about the button.

It sat halfway down the front, pale against the brown wool, with a tiny blue bird standing on its head. The other buttons were plain and dark.

"I was looking at the sleeves," he said.

"You were looking very near the button."

He held out his hand for the coat, and she slipped it off.

Her husband had replaced the missing button the previous winter. They had been getting ready to go to a concert. She had gone upstairs for her scarf and come down to find him wearing his reading glasses, the coat across his knees and a biscuit tin open beside him.

"He found that one first," she said.

"There are worse methods."

"The thread was already in the needle. I think that settled it."

Sami put the coat on a hanger. The bird continued its upside-down business beside his work lamp.

"Did you tell him?"

"About the bird? At the interval."

“And?”

“He said it was the right way up while he was sewing it.”

Sami looked at the coat again. He could picture it laid across someone's lap, the collar pointing away.

Mrs Bell put the coat on again and held out her arms while he checked the sleeve length. They agreed on the alteration. He wrote it on the ticket, then added a small note underneath.

Leave bird.

“Thank you,” she said.

After she had gone, Sami took a plain brown button from the shallow tray beside his sewing machine. He held it against the coat. It was almost exactly the right size and colour. Ordinarily he would have shown it to the customer. A spare matching button was worth keeping.

He set it beside the ticket, not on the coat, and returned to the sleeves.

When Mrs Bell collected the coat, she tried it on and lifted her arms. The cuffs now stopped where she wanted them. She looked at the bird before she looked at the mirror.

“I found this,” Sami said, showing her the brown button. “You can have it as a spare.”

She considered it.

“Would you put it in the pocket? If another one comes off, we'll be prepared.”

He put it in a small envelope first.

“Plain ones don't mind which way up they go,” he said.

“That will disappoint him.”

At the door she fastened the coat, starting at the bottom. The pale button slid through its buttonhole and the little blue bird resumed its headstand.

“My husband says he can turn it round whenever I like.”

Sami waited.

“I've told him he's busy enough.”

She went out with the spare in her pocket. Sami returned the chalk to its dish and crossed the sleeve alteration off the ticket. Beneath it, his other instruction needed no mark at all.

To remember

1. Mrs Bell brings her coat for shorter sleeves and explicitly asks Sami to keep its mismatched upside-down bird button.
2. She describes her husband's ordinary pre-concert repair and his explanation that the bird faced him correctly while he sewed.
3. Sami records "Leave bird," shortens the sleeves and keeps a matching brown button separate instead of changing the requested detail.
4. At collection she accepts the plain spare in an envelope, keeps the bird in place and repeats that her husband can turn it whenever she wants.