

An Odd Request



*a short short story
by Janet Ference*

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the author wishes to thank
the kind folks at
Shut Up and Write!
because I did

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Pat had never quite trusted her husband. He was odd. Pat didn't really understand odd, even after twenty-six years of marriage. Her upbringing had been ordinary. Their wedding had been odd. His people didn't know any better, so they sat on both sides of the aisle. Their church clothes were ill-fitting and loud. They cheered.

Pat's husband's name was Paul. 'That's a simple name,' she thought when she met him. He was a forklift operator for a paper company. 'That's a simple job,' she thought when she married him. It was honest, reliable work. There would always be warehouses and pallets and paper.

She was wrong. Paul came home with a pink slip one day, two years ago. He said there was nothing the union could do. The company was cutting back. There were lay-offs all around. The demand for post-it notes had fallen. It had something to do with computers. Pat didn't understand. It was odd. 'Was no one using paper anymore?' she wondered. 'Did no one have an afterthought, a later contribution?'

Paul looked hard for work the first year. It wasn't good for him. He grew more odd. He took to walking and whistling. He became ill. 'Colon cancer,' the doctors said, 'inoperable,' like it was an ordinary thing.

This was not the ordinary life Pat had imagined for herself. She was not a person who sought independence or excitement. Her sense of enthrallment came Sundays at church. She was good to her neighbors, and she had reared well-mannered children. In her estimation, she didn't deserve this betrayal by God and Paul. He was only forty-six. He should not be dying.

Paul told Pat he was fine. He began to do volunteer work, driving a forklift at the Food Bank. There was no money in that. Pat made cut-backs, budgeted Paul's unemployment checks carefully, and she made their savings last. She saw to it that they got by, in her ordinary way.

Paul seemed to thrive. He worked at the Food Bank. He played softball. He mentored a boy. It was odd to remember he was dying through all this. Pat didn't accuse him of it. She tried to set it aside and live an ordinary life. Still, he got a bit weaker each month. Pat noticed this with wonder and terror. His doctors nodded and muttered and said very little. In time, he quit going to them, which drove Pat crazy.

Then, as oddly as ever he'd done anything, Paul told Pat he was dying, as though she didn't know. He said it would be soon. He asked what she wanted of him.

It was too odd a request. She didn't know, couldn't imagine. She was shocked at the question.

When he was still working and well, Paul had been in the habit of bringing a bouquet or flowering plant to Pat at least once a week. She enjoyed them. This was an ordinary gesture.

Now he began to tear up the lawn. He marked it out in beds. He filled them all with flowers. Pat didn't know where he'd stashed the money for this. It was an odd garden. He planted a spiraling bed of roses at the center, lilies by the door, hydrangeas under the oak tree. There were beds of bulbs along the sidewalk, to surprise her in the spring. Annuals, petunias, snapdragons, pansies, peonies, marigolds, and forget-me-nots, were all laid out in plots like a dizzying quilt. He put in camellias, and gardenias, and azaleas, like bold threads running through it. He started morning glories at the base of the mailbox. It was too much.

Pat and Paul lived in an ordinary suburban neighborhood. They were meant to have a well-groomed expanse of lawn. These rules were even in the neighborhood association's by-laws.

Paul was being contrary, odd, and he was dying. He said as much, so no one stopped him, but the folks next door began staring.

So Paul put in giant fuchsias. He planted ten of them, to form a hedge with those neighbors.

Once he finished that, Paul went to bed, didn't rise again, and died within a week.

Now his fuchsias are flourishing. Pat thinks they're preposterous, all purple and pink at once, and such a pistil!

The neighbors hate them. For that reason, if no other, Pat tends them scrupulously. They are odd, and Pat has become odd.

This short short story was expanded from a Blue Fern Twitter Tale:

Pat thinks fuchsias are preposterous, all purple and pink at once, and such a pistil!
Her husband, Paul, planted ten of them before he died.