

The Leaving Sweater

By Ruth Nestvold

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Growing up in remote Rolyinka, Alaska, in the middle of the last century, Victoria Askew never really learned the trick of how to leave. Leaving was not an easy thing to do on the Seward Peninsula. There was nothing within hundreds of miles except ocean and tundra and a few Eskimo villages and former gold-rush towns. The only way out was by plane or dogsled, and the latter, of course, only in the winter—not that Vicky had ever left that way. There were three hundred miles' worth of roads leading from Rolyinka, but they all led in an incestuous circle from one small subarctic town to the next.

Perhaps that was why leaving worked better with the leaving sweater.

The leaving sweater was made of scraps of leftover red wool—many different shades of red. And many different qualities of yarn, from mohair to raw silk to cotton and linen mixes. And many different stitches, from ribbed to open work to waterfall to butterfly. Although it had been a decade now, Vicky could still remember watching her mother make it as a present for Vicky's high school graduation—before she was to go away to college.

"I don't want to leave Rolyinka," Vicky had said, her arms wrapped around her skinny legs as she watched the needles fly in her mother's hands and the strands of wool take shape.

Knit two together, yarn forward, knit one, yarn forward, slip one, knit one, pass slip stitch over. "You have to if you want to get a college degree, Victoria."

"What do I need a college degree for? Mr. Gunnarson's already offered me a full-time job at the Golden Nugget."

Purl, slip one purlwise, purl seven. "Are you sure you want to be a waitress for the rest of your life?"

Of course she didn't—what girl had "waitress" as life goal? But she didn't want to leave home either.

Knit five, knit two together, yarn forward, knit one, yarn forward, slip one, knit one, pass slip stitch over. "Of course, if you're afraid of going to the Outside, you can always stay in Rolyinka."

Vicky would never have admitted to being afraid. Before the sweater was finished, she had been accepted to the English program at the University of Washington.

She wore the red sweater when she boarded the plane to take her to Anchorage and from there to Seattle. She wore the red sweater when she boarded the plane in Seattle to bring her back to Rolyinka for her mother's funeral. She wore the red sweater when she left the University of Washington—and the first young man who had begged her to marry him.

It was before the cultural revolution of the late sixties, in an era when men always bought rings before popping the question. Vicky stared at the diamond in its little red box on the restaurant table and said, "No."

Ron stared at her, the nervous smile wiped from his face. "No?"

"That's right. No."

"But we've been dating for almost a year!"

Vicky nodded. "I like you a lot, Ron, and we've had a lot of fun. But I've been accepted to graduate school in Austin, and you're going to medical school in Portland."

"You could come with me and continue studying there."

