

Blue Were Her Eyes

“You know what the worst part is? No, I’ll tell you. Maybe. Just listen a minute, okay? The worst part is she didn’t even cry. I mean, Jesus. Not a damn tear?” I adjusted the cell phone with my hand, then pinned it again to my ear with a shrugged shoulder. “I don’t know. I don’t know. All right. I’ll tell you all about it in a few hours. Bye.”

I hung up and looked down at the bag at my feet. I inhaled and released the breath stoically through my nose. I glanced at the gate, noticed the line thinning, so decided it was time. Before I boarded, I took a last look out the window at the plane. The bridge between airport and aircraft had always looked like a great accordion to me. Seeing it now sent a fine sense of happenstance flooding through my system, but it was fleeting.

I flung my bag over a shoulder and walked through the gate. My first step inside the plane was met with a plastic smile and monotonous greeting. I replied similarly, perhaps with less enthusiasm. I shoved a hand inside my pocket for my boarding pass, needing to glance at my seat assignment. As I shuffled my way down the narrow aisle, I was careful not to brush any drifting arms or shoulders.

At my seat I was met by a charming woman. Her curly white hair was quintessentially elderly. The pearls adorning her neck were a degree too big for her slight frame and protruding collarbones. Her eyes, though competing with a smattering of wrinkles and loosely hanging skin, were nonetheless vibrantly blue and inescapably present.

“Hello there,” she said to me after I crumpled into the seat next to her.

“Hi,” I said, doing my best not to sound troubled, an inclination stemming from the woman’s unnecessary and certainly undeserved warm smile.

“Off to see the grandbabies,” she said, perhaps more to herself than to me. “It’s been quite some time since I last saw them.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure where the conversation was supposed to go next. “I’m...sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t go apologizin’ now, Hun,” she said. “Besides, these kids would tire of me if I saw them any more than I do.”

“Oh,” I said again. Not wanting to invite the woman to share any more information than was absolutely necessary for us to be cordial passengers, I opted to keep my responses short. “I see,” I said.

The woman, who had been giving me rapt consideration since the moment I’d taken my seat, now turned away and faced forward.

“But I don’t wish to babble your ear off with that talk,” she said.

I looked at her, feeling suddenly sympathetic. She pulled a magazine from the seat pocket in front of her and flipped through its contents. I felt somewhat regrettably for my standoffishness with her, but concluded that I would have made for a subpar companion had we engaged in a longer dialogue, what with my racing thoughts demanding my attention. I stroked my ring finger, as I’d done for a number of years, but the satisfaction of my compulsion was upset somewhat by the feeling of flesh rather than metal beneath my working fingertips. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see anything more until we touched down.

“Hun, I’m sorry to bother you, but could you do me a favor?” I sensed the woman’s warm smile directed at me.

I opened my eyes and tried to sound pleasant. “Of course,” I said.

“Oh, thank you. It’s in my bag, the brown one up there.” Her eyes pointed to the compartment above our heads. “Could you grab my photo album from it? It should be right there on top.”

“Sure,” I said, undoing my belt.

I felt foreign, getting into a stranger’s bag, but my hand quickly found the hard spine of a bound photo album and I handed it down to her.

“Oh, thank you now,” she said.

The woman began to shuffle through her album slowly, meditatively, and I watched. I’ve always been fascinated by the similarities of photo albums. The people will look different, sure, but one will always find the wedding pictures, the birthday parties, the group shots during holidays and so on. But I’ve also always found photo albums to be entirely lacking, for none include the low points—the sicknesses, the divorces, the painful estrangements, the deaths. As I continued to peek at the photographic sequence of the woman’s life, I wondered where her pain fit in between each image of gaiety and laughter.

The woman startled me by speaking. “This is my daughter, Emily.” Perhaps she had sensed my eyes wandering over her album, but her tone told me she didn’t mind. “She’ll be picking me up at the airport tonight.”

“She looks very happy,” I said lamely; photo album, everyone is happy.

“She is, I’d say,” the woman said wistfully. “She has healthy children. Do you have any children?”

“No, unfortunately, no,” I said. “Not yet.”

“Handsome man like you, you’ll find someone to start a family with,” she said sweetly.

“How do you know I haven’t already?” I said.

“No wedding ring.” She nodded at my interlaced fingers. “Although you’ve been feeling that finger since you sat down. Makes me think you recently did have something there.”

I was taken aback by the woman’s power of observation, and it must have shown on my face.

“Don’t think much of it now,” she said. “When you get to be my age, Hun, there are certain things you’re just used to looking out for.”

“Oh,” I said. Then after a brief pause, I continued, “I’m still not used to its absence. It all happened so fast.”

“The end probably happened fast, yes. But—now correct me if I’m overstepping—but the crack that separated you two was probably a long time in forming.”

I thought about it. Maybe it was, but how could one say, what with being consumed by the wrenching end, the realization that the person you thought you’d grow old with no longer wanted to with you. I looked to the woman. Her hands were folded and resting on the photo album in her lap. I saw that like me, she had no ring upon that finger. I wondered if her age had something to do with it.

“Hun,” she began, “indulge me a few minutes, hmm? I’ve got a story I think you’d like to hear.”

“Of course,” I said, forgetting all about my need for silence of a few minutes before. “I’m listening.”

“When I was around your age,” she began, “I married the love of my life. His name was Henry. He was tall and handsome, like you, and he had a way with words. He wanted to be a writer, you see. He’d studied Journalism at the university, and his first job was a crime reporter. Very exciting, I thought. Henry would rise early each morning and wouldn’t return until late.

Though I missed him dearly when he was gone, I loved getting the paper in the mornings and reading his article from the previous day. In an odd way, I felt like I'd been with him when I read those stories. I could picture us both interviewing people, researching a few things at the library or the paper's archives, and then sitting down to write the story, together. Obviously I did none of that, but I liked imagining it.

“After he'd worked for five years, and we had a steady enough income to put down on a house, we decided it might be time for some kids,” she smiled shyly, perhaps even naively, at this divulgence. “Before long, we had our first child, a healthy baby boy who reflected his father's eyes and who gave me the chills with the slightest smile. We named him Aaron. Henry loved his son more than life itself. On Fridays, when Henry was off early, he would pile us into the sedan and start driving. I never knew where he was taking us. Sometimes it was to the beach. On rainier days, it was to a museum or the cinema. Once, after a particularly successful week at work, he drove us all the way down to Los Angeles to see The Beatles play. After the show, he bought us a room in a darling hotel. I still remember how the sheets felt and how I drifted to sleep humming those lyrics.

“My tears are falling like rain from the sky,” she sang quietly, almost pensively. “Is it for her or myself that I cry?” She paused, perhaps thinking of another time, far and gone. “Just gorgeous lyrics they wrote, don't you think?” she asked.

“Yes, definitely,” I said

“It's a shame, really, that you weren't around to see them play. They were unmatched.

“But where was I? Oh yes, Henry. He treated me like his queen and Aaron his young prince. And when I got pregnant again, this time with little Emily, nothing changed. If anything, he became even more reverent of his family. But when Aaron turned ten and Emily was six,

something changed in him. It was Aaron's birthday party when I first felt it—Henry's switch. I don't think it had been there the whole time, something like that would crush me, but instead I believe it sort of grew up in him, caused by complacency at work, or our household, or any other of a thousand reasons that I was never able to satisfactorily pin down.

“We had Aaron's tenth birthday party at a nearby spring, and one of Aaron's friends had recently lost his father to a terrible automobile accident. I remember feeling dreadfully sorry for the young man, imagining with a stricken heart what our Aaron would be if a similar fate befell his father. Henry devoted a lot of time to consoling the boy's mother. I thought he was simply being an empathetic ear to a broken woman. After all, Henry's own father had died when he was a teenager. But as the party progressed, I noticed a novelty that I'd never seen in my husband, except, that is, when he had courted me all those years before. My husband was flirting with the woman, in front of everybody there, and it broke my heart.

“Later that week, he told me that there was an emergency at work, and he had to get down to the office immediately to help with a printing error. I waited, pleading to the walls that the worst was not occurring. After two hours, I couldn't take it anymore. I phoned the paper and asked to speak with him. I remember who answered, a nice boy by the name of Jack, and he told me that there was no printing error, and that he hadn't seen Henry since the day before. I remember him asking if everything was all right, but before I could respond, sorrow tightened my throat, my heart clenched, and I ended the call before hysterics consumed me.

“When Henry got home, the perfume she'd been wearing was still on him, despite the shower his just noticeably damp hair told me he'd taken. Unable to sleep that night, I cried soundless tears as a nearby clock ticked by the final seconds of our love affair that had begun fifteen years earlier.

“In the morning, Henry left for work, unassuming of my suspicions. My children noticed my puffy eyes where my husband hadn’t, and they both begged me to tell them what was the matter. I told them to pay it no attention. I was hardly able to consider the horrible possibility of my babies finding out what their father had done. It was later that very morning, after my children had gone for school, that I decided something: I couldn’t let them find out. I thought such knowledge would shatter them. So when everyone got back home, I pretended. I put on makeup to hide behind. I forced myself to laugh at all the appropriate times. I even routinely kissed my husband on the lips, as was custom, after dinner. My children, also as was custom, both moaned and groaned at the ‘gross’ affection. When I was next alone, in the bathroom to check my cheeks and eyes, it took every ounce of my strength not to crumble.

“Days passed like that, each night becoming a little easier to bear. As the years passed, I caught Henry a total of thirteen more times, and, of course, who knows how many times that I didn’t. Sometimes I found a stain on his clothes—oh, a little lipstick on the collar or another place—and in those cases I quickly washed it away, ridding the evidence from our household.

“Other times, when I was weaker, I followed him. We only had one car, so I had to ride a bus. I’d often lose him in the slow transit, but once in a while I didn’t. I’d get off the bus near where his car would pull into a driveway or a motel. From a distance, I’d watch him hop out of his car with his hat pulled down low. He would have a bounce to his step, always that bounce to his step. After he disappeared within some doorway, I’d steel myself, forcing the grief down and away, and then I’d return home to wait.”

I stared at the woman, hanging on her every word. Her blue eyes, still so bright, had not even a hint of moisture in them, and I realized that their vibrancy, their resoluteness must have

been borne of pain. The misery they had witnessed must have sharpened them, like a horror movie makes the dark seem blacker.

“I don’t know what to say,” I finally mustered. “How did it end?” I asked, glancing at her own ringless finger.

“I wish I could say I ended it, but the truth is not even after my children had left, not even after Henry stopped loving me completely could I end it. Aaron became a father soon after he got his first job, and I feared for my grandbaby as much as I’d feared for my own babies. But, a year ago, Henry died. He had lung cancer that spread, and the whole thing was quick, which I am thankful for. I didn’t want the family to see him suffering.

“The ironic thing is, after he died, I found how painfully I’d been living. I love pouring over my memories, but I find so many of them tainted by him. When you get to be my age, your memories are nearly as dear to you as your experiences. I love visiting my grandbabies, but I find each visit brings me less satisfaction as I become more and more out of touch with their lives. I have to rely on my memories of the days when I was the caregiver, the one my children came to for all the answers, all their pressing problems that only someone as smart as their mother could solve. Those memories are what keep me going, but they are dimmed by Henry.

“And you know, after he died, I realized another thing. I should have left him. I should have left him the night he slept with that woman from Aaron’s birthday party. You know why I didn’t? Because I thought I was sacrificing my happiness for my children’s, but I discovered too late that my children would have been fine had I not shouldered the burden that their father created. Pain is necessary, Hun, but it’s how we create our own pain that shapes our life. I took my husband’s infidelity and I wallowed in it, breathed it in like so many dead and shriveled flowers.”



“And your children, they still don’t know?” I asked.

“I can’t justify telling them. I probably never will,” she said. “You on the other hand, you seemed a bit down. I think it’s important sometimes to know you’re not the only one. See all these people here with us? They all have their own stories.”

After we landed, and the ever-rushing travelers had hurried off the plane, I got our bags down from the compartment. I handed down her small brown one.

I wanted to thank her, to say something profound, to acknowledge her in some small way, but the moment passed with nothing more than a common smile passing between us.

“Goodbye, Hun,” she said.

When I got to the gate, I looked back down the accordion bridge. She was thirty meters behind, shuffling up the ramp with all the fortitude that a woman her age could muster. Her eyes were focused on the path before her, and she did not stop for a breath.

I carried on, leaving her behind.

Outside the airport, my closest friend was waiting in his car. I put my bag in the back and clambered into the passenger seat.

“Hi,” I said. “Thanks so much. For this.”

“Of course, of course. I just can’t believe she—”

“I’m starved,” I interrupted him. “Mind if we hit that burger joint on the way back?”

End