

The Last Day

It's dark. The wind is chilly and the moonlight filters through the trees, casting shadows across my backyard. I step barefoot in the grass, branches crunching under my toes. I don't feel them break. The moon is full and pregnant, hanging low in the sky. I find myself glancing up at the Big Dipper a lot as I walk. I am covered in dry blood.

I'm numb. I should feel scared or mad or guilty, but I don't feel anything. I walk towards the shed, hook a finger between the wooden doors and pull it open. It shrieks loudly in the still Pennsylvania night air. I turn the spigot on and wash my hands with a bar of soap until they are raw.

I think about my mom, who always smelled like lavender and laundry detergent. I think about laying on the kitchen table with her, painting our nails, doing each other's makeup. I wonder if she is happy, if she is still alive.

I wake up early on the morning of my husband's sentenced execution.

The house is cold and quiet. I creep around in my socks, shutting all the windows. The windchimes are chiming softly from the front porch, singing their own melody.

I get a skillet out and crack a few eggs over top of it, watching the yolk drip down slowly. I pour a cup of scalding hot, black coffee and smoke a cigarette. My hands shake violently, even though I feel calm.

The doorbell rings at 8:43 AM. It is my husband's sister, Lauren. She looks like shit. Her green eyes are bloodshot and puffy and her black hair is tangled, hanging down her back. She

hugs me, pressing her forehead against mine. "I can't believe today's the day," she whispers, her voice cracking in the middle. I pull away.

"I know. I have no idea what I'm doing," I tell her. My throat feels tight, like I'm about to cry. I swallow hard. "Do you want a cigarette?" I ask her and she nods.

The smoke alarms wail loudly, breaking the silence. I go into the kitchen and take the burnt eggs off the stove. The room is full of smoke and Lauren coughs. My eyes burn and I blink quickly. I tell her I have to take a shower.

I stand under the water and let it spill over me. It is hot and I wrap my arms around myself, turning my face up to it. I think about when my husband Daniel and I first started dating, and how we would always shower together in the morning. He would pull the ends of my hair back and comb his fingers through it, washing the shampoo out. My chest aches and I press my thumb against my left breast, where my heart is, trying to focus on the beats.

When I get out I wrap a towel around myself and stand in front of my closet naked for close to an hour. What do you wear to go watch your husband die? My head spins from the effort of thinking. I feel detached from myself, as if I am watching someone else's life. I find a too-big, solid gray sweatshirt that still smells like him, and black leggings. I pull a hair brush through my auburn hair for twenty minutes before putting it up in a bun.

Lauren is sitting on the couch, surrounded by newspaper clippings. The first few weeks reported the story of a missing teenage girl, Susannah Lance, who had disappeared from her bedroom in the middle of the night. Her body was found on August 7th in a creek three miles away from her home. She had been stabbed over sixty times, according to the news reports. It wasn't long before the police connected her to my husband. He was her English teacher and there were rumors that something had been going on between them. He confessed on October 2nd and was arrested and later sentenced to the death penalty.

The clippings show a picture of Susannah. Her skin was pale and her eyes were round and dark. I have sat up many nights, unable to sleep, looking at her picture.

Lauren is sitting cross-legged, her brow furrowed. She looks up at me. "I can't believe this is really happening," she says. I have heard her say this many times now. I don't say anything. She lights a cigarette.

I choke down a granola bar, wash it down with warm water. It is tasteless and gritty. I think about how the State Correctional Institution Greene allows their inmates to have a Last Meal of their choice and wonder what Daniel is going to choose. I think about our dating days, and how I used to find all kinds of unique, intricate recipes to try for him. His favorite was the lemon pasta with roasted shrimp and I learned the recipe without even glancing at it. Anything to impress him.

The SCI-Greene also allows me to visit with him for thirty minutes today before the execution, which is scheduled at 5 PM. I am nervous about it. It has been over two months since I have last seen Daniel. He hadn't looked anything like the man I had been married to for eight years. He spent most of his time showing me his journals which were full of poems. He told me that he had found God, a statement that I was sure was meant to piss me off.

"Tori?" Lauren is talking to me. I look up at her. She tells me she is going to go shower. I sit down on the couch and try to drift away.

The girl is covered in blood. I half expected her to be gone when I got back from cleaning myself up, an irrational fear that had spread through me about five minutes down the highway. She is lying awkwardly in the grass. I try to pick her up and she is dead weight. I end up having to drag her towards the car, stopping to take a break every few minutes.

It is past midnight. I had passed a cop on the way here; their blue lights had been on, causing my heart to momentarily fail. My shirt is damp and sweat drips into my eyes, burning them. It takes me thirty minutes to lift her into the trunk and when I finally get her in I sit down on the ground panting. I take the knife which is still wet out of my pocket and wrap it in my blood-soaked shirt before tossing it into the woods. A coyote howls somewhere in the distance.

We drive Lauren's car to the prison. She drives slowly, with both of her hands on the wheels and her knuckles bone white. I want to say something to her, to break the awkward tension between us. Sometimes, I think that she suspects what really happened, even though she has never said anything. I can feel it in the way she sometimes spit her words at me, bitterly. As if she's saying, *'Fess up, you bitch*. Acting normal is harder than a person would think. You forget how to act normal when you have something to hide.

We pass through Washington County quietly, the trees one big mass of color. The sunlight blinds me. I think about the day that I first met Daniel. It had been at a bookstore. He was sitting at a round table, drinking coffee and reading Edgar Allan Poe. He wasn't exactly attractive, with a crooked nose and honey brown eyes that were too big for his face, but I still couldn't stop looking up at him. A few times I found him staring back over his thick-rimmed glasses. I finally took a deep breath and went to his table. He looked up at me and a smile played on his lips. "Can I help you?" he had asked, sounding amused.

"I was just wondering if you..." I had trailed off, feeling embarrassed. A blush crept up my neck and across my face. I thought about bailing, walking away before I made too much of a fool of myself.

"What's your name?" he had asked. His voice was warm, gravelly, and drop dead sexy.

"Tori."

“Do you like Edgar Allan Poe, Tori?” He tapped his finger against the book. I sat down in the chair across from him.

“I like the Tell-Tale Heart. I think that, you know, that kind of guilt would be huge. That it would be the closest thing to being insane,” I told him. He nodded his head thoughtfully.

“I think that you’re probably right,” he said after a minute and then reached his arm across the table and said with the most dazzling smile, “By the way, the name is Daniel.”

I drive down the road with the music on loud and the windows down. My head is pounding. The clock on the dashboard says it is 3:04 AM. The devil’s hour.

I park under some trees, facing the creek. I know that it won’t be much longer before Daniel realizes I’m gone, if he hasn’t already. He has always been a light sleeper.

The realization of what I’ve done is starting to sink in. I feel like crying but I tell myself I have to finish what I started.

I pop my trunk open and roll the dead girl out. She is already cold. I try to feel any pity for her, but I can’t. All I can think about is her hands on my husband, her lips against his neck. I could almost stab the whore again.

I drag her over to the side of the creek. My arms are tired from all of the pulling and tugging. I give her one good kick and she tumbles down the side of the hill and crashes into the water loudly.

Lauren and I pull into the prison’s parking lot at 1:49 PM. A little over three hours left until Daniel takes his last breath. I light a cigarette with shaky hands. Lauren starts to suck in her breath quickly, her eyes glistening. I grab her hand tightly and hold it. “It’s okay,” I tell her. She looks up at me sharply and jerks her hand away.

“No, it’s not. It’s not okay at all. They should have investigated it better. They should have done something else. Me and Daniel were so close and I *know* it couldn’t have been him. He cried when our puppy got ran over. He would always move spiders out of the house instead of just killing them. He couldn’t have killed that girl.” She starts to sob then, her shoulders shaking hard. She presses her face into the steering wheel and cries loudly. I stare down at my own hands for a minute before getting out of the car.

I enter the prison slowly, stopping in the front room for a few minutes to let my eyes adjust. The lady at the front desk remembers me from before. She gives me a sad smile and slides me a pen so I can sign in. I go back towards the visiting room and sit down in the uncomfortable, plastic chair. The room smells like bleach.

Daniel comes into the room a few minutes later. His hair is long and scraggly and his face is ashen. He walks over to me fast and wraps his skinny arms around me, bringing my head to his chest. I lean in to him and start to cry. He pulls away just enough to look at me and uses his thumb to wipe the tears off my face. “Tori, baby, everything’s going to be okay,” he says in a low voice. He kisses my forehead gently and sits down, pulling me down beside of him.

“I don’t know what to do,” I tell him, feeling choked. He shakes his head and sighs. “Maybe I should just tell them, Daniel. I can’t live without you. I can’t keep living like this. I miss you.”

He kisses me again, roughly on the lips. I pour myself into him, grabbing his t-shirt and pulling myself as close to him as I can get. He pulls away again and looks at me seriously.

“Don’t you dare tell them a damn thing, Tori. We’ve talked about this,” he says harshly, pushing my bangs out of my face.

I shake my head, feeling close to hysterical.

“I miss you so much, though. I didn’t know. I thought you were with that girl and I should have asked you first, should have waited until I had proof. I didn’t know. I’m so, so sorry.” I bury my face in his chest again. He is a lot skinnier than he used to be and his chest is solid. He puts his arms around me.

“I know, it’s okay. I love you, Tori. Nothing will ever change that. I just want to hold you for a little while.”

He is quiet, then, just kissing my forehead and running his hands down my back. I keep my head against his chest where his heart is, and listen to his heartbeats, trying not to think about the second that they will stop. I study every little detail of him so I will have it in my memory later. My throat is tight the whole time but I don’t cry, for his sake.

I get home around four and see that the lights in the house are on. I panic for a second, sucking in short little breaths and scrambling to think of an explanation. Daniel walks out on the porch and waves me in, looking concerned. He is wearing a solid red t-shirt and boxer shorts. I take a deep breath and follow him into the house.

When he turns around and sees me standing there in blood-caked jeans and a bra on he stops dead in his tracks. His eyes get wide and he moves over to me fast.

“Tori, what the hell? Are you okay?” His skin has turned white and he feels clammy. I feel brave, then. I feel like I can do anything.

“I killed your little whore. I hope you’re happy now,” I spit out, feeling wholly pissed off. He backs away from me looking stunned, as if I had slapped him.

“What are you talking about? You don’t mean --” He stops and puts his head in his hands. His eyes are red as if he’s going to cry. “Tori, I never touched her. What did you do to her?”

And even though I have no reason to, I believe him. I had never asked him before. I had never thought about asking him. Always just assuming that he would lie. I realize he could be lying right then but I can tell from the look on his face that he isn't. He's telling the truth.

When our time is up Lauren goes in to visit with him. She is crying and her green eyes are glassy. I sit out in the waiting room, watching the hands on the clock turn slowly. I recite poems to myself aloud. I am itching for a cigarette but I think about Daniel in the next room over and I don't want to leave.

She comes out after a few minutes and drops into the chair beside of me. It is past four o'clock and I know it won't be long before they take him to the death chamber. The clock seems to be moving faster and faster.

She looks up at me, "I'm sorry for freaking out on you earlier. I know you're as upset as I am. Oh, Tori, what are we going to do without him?"

Her words cause a lump to form in my throat. I take her hand again - her fingers are double-jointed just like Daniel's - and blink the tears out of my eyes. "I honestly have no idea."

A guard comes out and takes us to the observation room, a small room with concrete walls and a window that can see into the death chamber when the curtain is open. There are no chairs. Savannah's mom and dad are there, too. I look away from them quickly. I can't see Savannah's round eyes in her mother's face, or the shape of her jaw from her father. I expected them to look smug, since they had been the ones to push for the death penalty, but they look sad instead.

Lauren and I are still holding hands when they open the curtain and let us see into the death chamber. They have Daniel on the table hooked up to wires that are monitoring his heart

and breathing. Leather straps keep his arms and legs restrained. Lauren sucks in her breath hard.

He sees us and smiles sadly. He looks calmer than I would have expected. I feel my heart breaking.

We sit on the couch together. Daniel tucks my bangs behind my ear and sighs. "I need to know what you did to her, Tori."

I am near hysterical. Fat tears roll down my face. I back away from him and wrap my arms around my knees.

"I stabbed her, Danny. What am I gonna do? I'm so fucked." I half-scream at him, feeling like a bubble in my chest is going to burst. I shake violently.

Daniel jumps up and paces around the living room. He runs his hand through his hair. His brows are furrowed together. He stops moving and looks at me. "She was really young, baby. They may push for the death penalty."

I nod, a chill running through me. Daniel's eyes are red, like he's going to cry. He drops to his knees in front of me and grabs my arms.

"Listen, Tori. You didn't stab her. I did, okay?" He says it firmly, looking me straight in the eye.

"What? I don't understand."

"Understand this: You are seriously fucked if anyone finds out what you done. She was a teenager, Tori. A kid." He drops his head.

They have Daniel hooked up to an IV machine. He looks scared and it breaks my heart. I lean my head into Lauren's shoulder. I want to hold him again and my arms literally ache from it.

I think about running into the room, screaming that they are wrong, that Daniel doesn't deserve to die for this. Lauren wraps her arms around my shoulder and digs her fingernails into the skin of my arm, leaving tiny white half-moon crescent shapes. She closes her eyes and starts to cry.

The executioner pulls a single vial out of a drawer. The sight of the needle makes my stomach sick.

"Where did you hide the body?"

He asks me this using his teaching voice, as if he is asking the definition of a word. He rubs his thumb across the top of my hand slowly, back and forth.

I am unsure if I should trust him, then. I wonder if maybe he wants me to tell him so he can go turn me in. I shrug a little, flipping my hair over my shoulder.

"Tori. I have to know."

I am quiet for a minute, thinking. I decide to tell him despite my worries.

"In the creek. I hid her there."

He looks sad. He takes his shirt off and gives it to me. I put it on and curl up against him, pressing my head against his chest.

"I'm going to go to the Police station and turn myself in. All they want is someone to blame. If I confess, they won't investigate it any further than that. At least, I hope not." He says this robotically, without any emotion in his voice. He kisses the top of my head hard. I pull away from him.

"No. You can't do that. There's no way."

"You can't keep me from doing this, okay? I love you."

The executioner gives him the shot. He is looking at me the whole time. He mouths the words 'I love you'. I nod, registering his words and don't even have any time to mouth anything back before his eyes are drooping shut. His breathing slows and I can barely see his chest rise and fall anymore.

I walk out of the room before the heart monitors register his heart stopping. I find a bathroom down the hall and puke into the toilet, my stomach heaving even after it's empty. I lean back against the cool, concrete wall, put my arm across my mouth and scream into it.

Lauren comes into the bathroom a few minutes later looking pale. "He's gone," she whispers, pulling at her necklace. She gags a little, like she is going to puke, too, but she swallows hard and holds her head straight up.

We go back out into the hall. Savannah Lance's parents are standing there. Her mom walks up to me. It is the first time I have ever been close to her. She smells like raspberries. Her eyes look exactly like Savannah's, down to the slight tilt in the corners. She looks me over before speaking to Lauren. "I am sorry that things had to happen like this. I always thought Daniel was a great man, and I just couldn't believe that he actually done this." Her eyes flicker back to me momentarily. "It's sad that the people who act the most innocent are usually the guilty ones."

Lauren's eyes flash but she presses her lips together hard. My heartbeat quickens, hearing the hidden accusation behind her words. Lauren grabs my arm and pulls me down the hallway and out of the building.

Once we are in the car I think about how people say their lives always flash before their eyes when they die, and I wonder, in the last few seconds, if Daniel was thinking of me.