

The Game

“It was a Sunday. Hot. Muggy. Near the end of summer. Still August—I think. Wasn’t it?”

These were Ellen’s words, in just this order, the inflection never varying, whenever she began to talk about that night at the ER. She’d say she couldn’t remember the last time it had been busier and then she’d list the cases: “... twenty in four hours. Two of them DOA’s—one from the overturned ATV. It was the father, for Christ’s sake. And the other, well, it was a young woman. A mother, wasn’t she? There was a toddler in the middle of the backseat. They said he was facing toward the trunk and that saved him.”

And she was right about these things, and about the way you could feel the rumble of thunder through the floor, even with all the commotion in the waiting rooms and the hallways full of staff and gurneys moving from one room to another and the relatives pacing up and down the corridor while someone they loved was being seen in one of the cramped and windowless examining rooms. And she vaguely remembered

pushing through the double doors that separated the ER's din from the calm of the cafeteria, and the sticky film on her stethoscope as she pushed it into her coat's side pocket, and the irritating feel of its frayed seams as she searched for the bottle of pills it turned out she'd forgotten. But she'd not speak of the jagged streaks of lightning that flashed above the windowed ceiling of the cafeteria, nor of the few minutes when all she could hear was the piped-in music meant for slowing down one's heartbeat, nor that she was sitting near the atrium taking her first bite of lemon meringue pie when the young orderly approached her.

"You're needed now," he'd said. "It's important. I'll bring your stuff."

"Can it wait?"

"I don't think so."

Ellen had sighed and rubbed her neck and then she'd stabbed the fork into her pie. "I forgot the aspirin," she said as she stood and turned her back to him.

The muscles in her neck tightened even more. She rolled her head full-circle and forced a yawn. Her jaws cracked. *This young man*, she thought—now shaking her head from side-to-side— *has some things to learn about protocol*.

As she reentered the ER corridor, a nurse motioned her into the first examining room and handed her the phone and, before either spoke, shut the door. Ellen stood in the room alone.

"There's been an accident." Her husband's voice was shallow and raspy and sounded as though it came from a thousand miles away. For a moment she didn't recognize it.

Yet they'd spoken only hours before and she recalled his last words—words he said almost every evening when she left for work: “Oh, don't worry about us. We've got plans—guy stuff.” Then his voice had been soft and close and full of familiar depth.

“Yeah, mom,” Jamey had called from half-way up the stairs, “skydiving. Like this. See?”

Ellen had looked up just as Jamey slid down the banister, straddling it face-forward, his arms above his head.

“Jamey, get off there this very minute!” Ellen had shouted and, turning toward her husband, she'd whispered, “He better be kidding.”

Her husband had shrugged his shoulders and winked. Then he'd come to the door with her and pinched her from behind and out of Jamey's sight. She'd flinched and hoped neither of them noticed. They'd just finished dinner, the four of them. Danny had already left for his job—selling smoothies at the mall. Ellen worried about his driving after dark, but it was only a few blocks away and she'd agreed to his working only if he always called before he started home

“Tomorrow night we'll sleep in the same bed,” her husband had whispered. “God! I hate these crazy schedules of ours.”

It was the shift work he hated, but she didn't mind it, as it helped keep her life in the neat compartments she needed. Somehow being both mother and wife hadn't worked for her, so she concocted what was part ruse and part defense, borne out of a lack of sexual desire and her own childhood memories of cold houses and mischievous brothers. *No latchkey children*, she had insisted. Even when her seniority at the hospital allowed

her day shift, she stayed with nights. And now, though both boys were teenagers—Jamey had turned thirteen only last week—she still insisted.

Her husband's voice seemed far away. Or, maybe, it was she who had moved outside herself.

"It's Jamey," he said.

She didn't answer.

"He was downstairs. He and Tag."

And then, it was as if she knew before she was told, as if she'd carried the prescience in her genes. Waiting.

"The leash got wrapped around his neck. Jamey's neck. It was that game."

"When?"

"I must have been in the shower."

"How long ago?"

"I called the hospital first."

"How long ago?"

"They called 911, I think."

"How long ago? Answer me! Damn it."

"I should have called you sooner."

"Where is he?"

"They're here with him."

“Don’t let them move him.”

“It’s too late...”

She dropped the phone, or maybe she threw it, and she ran down the corridor of the ER toward its entrance. *The pain, the blood, the anguish that pour through these hallways, she thought, always, something’s pouring in.* Her legs moved quickly and her mind raced as she told herself she could push *this* pain back. That she could undo this one moment and that the four of them could return to the dinner table, and she’d scream, “STOP!” And no one, nothing—not even time—would move until this awful thing had passed.

The summer heat caught her breath and she felt a sharp pain deep in her chest. The blue lights of the parking lot stung her eyes and the dampness in the air wilted her resolve. For a moment she couldn’t remember where she’d parked her car, or if she’d brought it, or if she had, which car she’d driven.

Her coworkers found her dizzy and babbling between short breaths and stifled sobs. She looked into their faces and saw strangers. Their names and all she knew about them fell from her mind and disappeared in the darkness that had suddenly wrapped her, constrained her, tied her in the awful reality of who she feared she’d become. For she could think of no name for it. Not widow. Not orphan. *No, she thought, there was no name for it.* It wasn’t supposed to happen.

A man’s strong and steady hands held her arms. He was behind her and she worked to shove her elbows into his ribs. A woman’s tight fists held her wrists. Ellen raised a hand to her mouth and bit into the woman’s knuckles and at the same time she

kicked her ankles with strong angular motions that sent them both rolling to the ground. And then she felt the sting of the needle in her thigh.

She woke to the cold blue-white of the overhead light. She felt the hard Naugahyde under her hips and then the space behind the unsupported curve of her back. She tried to lift her arms, perhaps hoping to raise herself upright, but they felt heavy and limp and she imagined them enclosed by warm metal cuffs—the kind no longer used but would come up around the table and hold her close. Secure. Safe. From herself. She thought of the sharp edges of the scissors she knew to be in the top drawer of the cabinet in the far corner. Its key was on her chain, the one she carried—always—clipped to her right-hand pocket. She could see another cabinet to her left. Its door was ajar. She imagined it full of pills in tall bottles—the way it might have been when she was in training—and she could feel herself swallowing them, one bottle after another, not looking at or caring about the contents, and she could feel the dryness in her throat and the crustiness of the phlegm that clung to her lips. Again she strained to lift her arms, and when still they would not move, she kicked her feet against the table pad until her heels burned. She prayed they were raw and would bleed her life out of every vein.

I knew. I should have stayed home. I knew. I should have stayed home. I knew. These words swirled through her mind over and over, like they were churning something viscous and vile, and she imagined watching the blender on her kitchen cabinet full of milk and strawberries and she saw herself lifting its lid and dropping her fingers one by one into the frothy foam and then feeling them struck by the steel blades hidden below. *I would trade with him. God, let me trade with him.*

A figure entered the room. She closed her eyes and forced her breathing to slow and pressed her body against the sticky surface of the table. She listened to the person's movements and waited until she heard the swish of the closing door and the click of the latch, as its tongue hit against the jam before she again opened her eyes. She could see the face of the clock on the far wall, protected by its own cage. Its hour hand pointed to the number one.

She must have slept, or perhaps she'd been drugged. Again. The clock now pointed to five. She felt the heat of another's hand on her wrist and detected the familiar scent of her husband's aftershave. His eyes met hers. They were only inches away. She could see their red veins push against the corneas, the eyelids swollen so that they appeared purple, the sweat dripping from his forehead down around his temples. For a moment she thought Jamey just born and that her fatigue was from labor and her husband's tears were from joy and relief. *He's fine*, she wanted him to say. *Our new son is fine and healthy, and yes, he has all his toes.*

Instead, he said, "It's my fault. If only I hadn't showered then."

And she found no words to contradict him or comfort him, no feelings that might lead to forgiveness.

"Where is he?" she asked, not taking her eyes from his face, pressing her hand around his. "Where is he?"

He turned his head toward the door and nodded. "They've taken him."

"Where?"

He looked at her and started to say what they both dreaded but he could not speak and let his head drop and touch her forehead.

“No,” she moaned and shook her head from side to side, each time moving her husband’s brow away. “I kept hoping... I prayed I was wrong...tell me it’s not true. Please, God. No, no...,” her last word becoming a wail that seemed to go on and on until she had exhausted her breath and emptied her heart of feeling.

And then she was sinking, falling into the world of forgetfulness and half-lucidity and she was feeling the sting of the needle yet again, for they would not allow her the pain nor suffer her screams’ intrusion. Not when they had their drugs and their own needs to keep distance and propriety. Not when they saw her on the other side, a victim of—no, a vehicle for—all they fought. But nothing anyone could do would keep her from going to the game.

It was the game Jamey and Tag played from the time Tag was a puppy. Tag, the spirited golden retriever. Jamey, sitting on the floor, holding Tag’s thin, retractable lead above his head while his thumb adjusted the length of the cord. Tag, running round and round, as though he were a thoroughbred going through his paces. Jamey calling out commands. *Heel. Trot. Pace. Turn.* Commands made up of dogs and horses and a boy’s imagination.

“Be careful!” she heard her own voice. “Take it outside.... For God’s sake, at least stand up.”

“He’s all right,” her husband’s voice came from somewhere behind her. “Don’t treat him like a child. He’s a young man...not your baby anymore.”

But she'd been seeing young men in trouble for a long, long time. And so the images came to her: images of mangled faces and dangling legs and dismembered fingers. Over and over they came, as though they were etched on a slow-moving film, while the blue-white light that penetrated her eyelids served as their screen and the drugs running through her veins ate away at her reserves. All the filters she'd been trained to keep in place and that she'd relied upon for so many years crumpled and fell away like they were nothing more than undisturbed dust held together by time and sheer will. And at that moment she knew she had nothing to protect her sons from the sons who filled the lobby and corridor, nor to distance herself from all the parents who waited and wrung their hands and pounded their heads against walls and chairs and one another and whose screams started somewhere deep inside themselves where not even x-rays could detect their presence—and she knew she'd failed.