

A BROTHER OFFENDED

My brother Tyler was sixteen when he killed Mary Ann Ridenour.

After Mary Ann's older sister got married, a flood of guests left the church to gather for the reception at the Hightower Country Club. I rode with Mom and Dad, but Tyler insisted on riding his Harley. He'd bought the used bike right after getting his driver's license, paying cash he earned working part-time as a mechanic's helper at Gordino's Garage.

The sit-down dinner was sumptuous. When the open bar started jumping and the rock band heated up, I stood around waiting for a slow number, bent on asking Mary Ann to dance. She and Tyler were trying to jitterbug to some old CCR number, when they broke off and slipped out a side door. What was going on? Did Tyler want to show Mary Ann his Harley? I opened the door just in time to catch them roaring off. Seeing Mary Ann sitting behind Tyler on that bike, her dress hiked up, knees spread, arms clasping his chest, twisted my stomach into a knot.

Less than ten minutes later, Mary Ann was dead.

Tyler went around a sharp curve on the narrow road leading to the country club. Deep woods on the right blocked visibility. On the left lay a pasture. Some cattle had escaped through the fence—a hunter left the farmer's gate open—and one hefty cow chose to stand in the middle of the road. Tyler hit it dead center.

There was no evidence Tyler was speeding, though I'm sure he was. He loved speed. Only a trace of alcohol was found in his blood, not nearly enough to warrant DWI, but it was

enough for me. No one accused Tyler of breaking any law. Perhaps the only person in the county who even thought Tyler *killed* Mary Ann Ridenour was me.

I loved her, you see. Loved her since we were kids. Loved her with a longing that at times made me want to rip out my heart. Tyler was my brother, but that didn't keep me from asking the heavens, why didn't you take him instead of her?

Our dad and Mary Ann's dad are longtime partners in a lucrative electronics business. The Ridenours are like family. Morley Ridenour was not likely to blame his partner's youngest son for the accident, at least not outwardly, especially since Tyler was himself badly injured. And in all honesty, what good would've come from punishing Tyler? Drawing and quartering Tyler wouldn't bring back Mary Ann.

We weren't close, Tyler and me, not like some brothers. We had nothing in common. I was into sports and Tyler was crazy about engines. I loved books and Tyler thought only dullards sat around reading. I enjoyed fishing and Tyler hunted. We had nothing in common except blood. I'm not sure we even liked each other.

I'd kept my love for Mary Ann secret because I was three years older than her and leery of being accused of robbing the cradle. She was in middle school while I was in high school. But on the day of the wedding, walking down the aisle as a bridesmaid, she smiled right at me and I could only think how, at age fifteen, Mary Ann had turned into a woman.

Her blond hair came to her bare shoulders. Her red lipstick gave a sensual gloss to her wide mouth. She wore a blue gown that matched her eyes. I knew what was under that gown. She played point guard on the JV basketball team and I went to every home game just to watch

her run up and down the court in those navy shorts with the white stripe down the sides.

There was nothing delicate about Mary Ann. Her long legs were muscular without being mannish. Her breasts were full and firm. More than once I'd seen her throw a basketball nearly the length of the court. Like a baseball. She could be clumsy, laughing at herself when she dribbled the ball off her foot. She had a weird cackling laugh. She fouled out of games more than any of her teammates. She had a funny way of wrinkling her nose when she thought someone was full of shit. I loved it, loved it all. I loved everything about Mary Ann Ridenour. If I could've danced with her that night—held her in my arms—I'm sure I would've found some way to tell her how I felt.

Tyler robbed me of that chance.

* * *

Today I manage the technical publications department for a company that makes chromatography products. When I hired Jeanne Hunt right out of college as a proofreader, she was just getting over this guy she'd been seeing since her junior year, a guy she'd planned on marrying until she found out he hated kids. When Jeanne and I started dating it crossed my mind that catching her on the rebound, and being her boss, was a likely recipe for disaster. But I didn't let that stop me.

A long-legged, bright-eyed blonde with a sultry voice, a guileless smile, and cheekbones that suggest royalty, Jeanne was the same age as Mary Ann would've been. I told myself it was mere coincidence that she looked something like Mary Ann, that in many ways she reminded me of Mary Ann.

One night after we'd made love I asked Jeanne to marry me. She didn't answer right away. She lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. She thought so long and hard that I began to feel sick to my stomach. What had I done?

"Bad idea," I said at last. "Forget I mentioned it."

"I really like working for you," she said.

"Uh huh. But you wouldn't like being married to me."

"No, no, no. It's just . . . you know . . . the company has this policy against married couples working in the same department. I'd have to quit my job."

"One of us would," I said.

"You wouldn't give up your job just so I could keep mine."

"I'd do whatever it took."

She rolled onto her side. Tears glistened in her eyes as she ran her hand through my hair and tapped the tip of my nose with one finger. "God, but that is so sweet."

We were married not long after that. Jeanne quickly found a better-paying job as a technical writer for a software company.

For several years nothing came of our efforts to have children. When we decided to get tested, Jeanne tested okay; I was told I had a fifty-fifty chance of making a baby, maybe less. After a tense discouraging year failing at everything we tried, we discussed adoption. Then one day—eureka—and in due time our precious son was born. We named him Damien.

Our life was bliss for awhile. But being the neurotic I am, I insisted on dredging up some reason to suspect things weren't going as well as I imagined. And one day, sitting in the

barber shop watching Damien get his blond hair cut, it struck me that I was seeing Tyler at that age.

My own hair is dark brown. I look nothing like my brother. From then on every time I saw Tyler and Damien together—tossing a ball, flying a kite, playing horsey—I felt sure any observant stranger would assume Tyler was Damien's father, pegging me for some distant relative, or just a family friend.

Jeanne has one of those expressive faces that mirrors her deeper feelings. I began to observe that face more closely: the way it sometimes looked at Damien, the way it sometimes looked at me, the way it sometimes looked at Tyler. Some days I told myself I was making something out of nothing. Some days I believed this. Some days I believed the opposite. On my worst days I allowed myself to believe my brother had fucked my wife and Damien had been his doing.

I remember little from my Bible school lessons growing up in Oklahoma, but somewhere in scripture is a warning about the dire consequences of a brother offended. I identified with this. My brother had deeply offended me by killing Mary Ann Ridenour. Had he compounded that offense with Jeanne? What would be the consequence?

Tyler had dropped out of college to join the Marines. He prospered in the military, developing proficiency with a variety of lethal weapons, adding muscle to his tall skinny frame, learning to suck in his gut, square his shoulders, carry himself with pride. How stalwart he looked at our family gatherings, showing off those classy dress blues.

When stationed in the states he was usually close enough to Orlando to visit us. He

chose not to announce his visits ahead of time, he just showed up. I think he liked seeing the surprise on our faces, in Jeanne's case a beaming surprise. I knew it wasn't me he came to see.

Sometimes he dropped in while I was traveling on business. Oftentimes he stayed overnight. Once I asked Jeanne if the way Tyler made himself at home made her uncomfortable. Hoping she'd say yes, then I could decide what to do about it. But she laughed and said she wouldn't think of sending my brother out to a motel.

No, of course not. We could never do that. But it didn't make me any less uneasy.

Uneasy isn't the right word. I *agonized* over Tyler's visits during my absence. Did Tyler use the guest room, or did he snuggle with Jeanne in our king-sized bed? Once, after returning from a week-long seminar, I caught myself actually sniffing the sheets. And if I was feeling especially masochistic I could conjure up a porno parade of *Kamasutra*-like images.

In Jeanne's defense, she did nothing to suggest her love for me had diminished in the least. If she loved Tyler, she must still love me as well. Had she turned to Tyler to satisfy her longing for a child? Did I really want to know? Because what was I willing to do about it? Have some sort of showdown? Leave her? Without Jeanne and Damien, my life would hardly be worth living. Did I want to risk losing them over what might be pure paranoia?

I'd shoved it all to the back of my mind that Saturday morning in July when Dad called. I was at my computer in my upstairs office, translating a redundantly overwritten R&D report on the HPLC separation of amino acids into a readable technical bulletin. Dad used our land line instead of our cell phone, which usually meant he wanted to talk to Jeanne and me together. Jeanne was grocery shopping, her Saturday morning ritual. She'd taken Damien along to buy

him new sneakers. When I told Dad this, I was met with silence. I wondered if the line had gone dead. At last I heard a squeaky sound on the other end like a rubber bath toy makes.

“Is anything wrong, Dad?” I asked.

“I’m afraid so,” he said.

I took a deep breath. “Is it Mom?”

“No . . . no . . .” And then he began to sob.

I’d never heard my dad cry. He’s a big, rugged man, the sort of man I thought incapable of crying. The sound was terrible. I immediately thought of Tyler, then on his third tour in Afghanistan. I asked Dad if something had happened to my brother.

“Y-yes,” he said with a kind of whispery breathlessness.

“Is he dead?” When there was no answer, I added, “Has Tyler been killed, Dad?”

“No. No, Derek. Tyler’s still alive.”

“Still? Then he’s been wounded.”

I heard him clear his throat. “He stepped on . . . Tyler stepped on one of those IEDs.”

“Oh boy. Can you be more specific?”

“Specific?”

“His injuries?”

“Oh . . . yes. Not his face. Not his head. Some, but his eyes are okay. Thank God, no brain damage. His hearing, they say, should return. . . .”

“Good. That’s good.” Again I sensed his reluctance to continue. “Well then . . . how bad is it?”

“I’m afraid . . . his legs . . .”

I shifted the phone to my other ear. “Legs plural?”

“Both legs . . . above the knees.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

Another moment of silence. “His arms . . .”

“*Both* arms?”

“Both arms.”

I sat back in my chair. “Tyler lost both arms and both legs, Dad?”

“Right arm . . . near the shoulder. Left arm . . . just above the elbow.”

“Both arms *and* both legs?”

“Gone, Derek, gone. Both arms and both legs. Blown away . . . blown away . . . blown away . . .”

Silence again. Dad’s voice had taken on a dreamlike quality. He had to be in shock. I swivelled around to look at the books on my shelves, then up at the revolving ceiling fan. And when I tried to picture Tyler armless and legless I found myself struggling with, of all things, the outrageous compulsion to giggle.

I didn’t actually giggle. But what had triggered such an impulse in the first place? What the hell was wrong with me?

“Anything else, Dad?” I asked, focusing on keeping my voice normal. “Injuries I mean?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. Here . . . I’ll let you talk to your mother.”

My mom is the realist in our family, the strong one who faces up to facts. Her voice was resolute when it came over the phone, honed with a fine edge of resignation that seemed to say what happened has happened, a tragic reality, now we need to move past it and get on with the business of dealing with it. I pictured her standing up rather than sitting down, mouth set, every muscle and tendon taut, right eyelid pulsating the way it did when she was under stress.

I fumbled a pen out of the mayonnaise jar on my desk and scribbled details on a memo pad. Tyler was on patrol. Helmand Province. Another Marine was killed in the explosion. A medic had tended to Tyler right away, saving his life. He'd been airlifted to the military hospital at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Now he was being flown to the National Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland.

“The Marine Corps will fly us there too—your dad and me. We hope you and Jeanne can meet us.”

“For sure, Mom. We'll be there. Are you okay?”

“As okay as I can be, hon . . . under the circumstances. We'll keep you informed as information comes our way. The hospital will let us know. Unless you have questions . . . I need to be with your dad right now. He's not okay.”

“No. No questions, Mom.”

“We love you, Derek. We love Jeanne and Damien.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

I tossed down the remains of my lukewarm coffee. I went downstairs and set the cup in the kitchen sink. I stepped out the sliding glass door and eased into a plastic lawn chair on the

deck. I sat gazing out past the forsythia bushes, at the picnic table, at the swing-and-slide set I'd recently assembled for Damien. The noon sun glared hot and high in a deep blue cloudless sky. A chattering squirrel hurled insults from the oak tree at the far corner of our fenced-in backyard. I grew aware of my right foot tapping.

And then, spontaneously, I erupted into a fit of giggling. Like a seizure. Rather than try to stifle it, I gave it its head, hoping to purge my system. When the spell passed I felt nauseous with self loathing.

Shock? Had to be. Somewhere I'd read how severe shock could cause freaky behavior. Any other explanation wasn't acceptable.

No one else could ever know about this. No one.

The muted drone of the garage door opening brought me to my feet. By the time I reached the van, Damien was out of his car seat. He wore a gold T-shirt, navy shorts, gold socks, new red and blue sneakers. He ran to me and pointed at his feet. I lifted him up and gave him a kiss. His lips were smeared with chocolate, his chubby hands sticky.

"Wow!" I said. "Those are so awesome. Why don't you trot outside to play while I help Mommy with the groceries."

I shepherded him to the back door of the garage and watched through the window until he settled into his swing. Jeanne was pulling cloth bags out of the van, setting them on the concrete floor. Grabbing a couple, I went on ahead. I put the ice-cream in the freezer, the milk in the fridge.

"Anything else need refrigerating?" I asked.

“That’s it.” Jeanne sat the last bag down on the kitchen floor and stood watching me with a curious glint in her eyes.

“Dad called,” I said.

“Oh? How is he?”

“Not good.”

She waited, visibly holding her breath.

“It’s not him. Not Dad. It’s Tyler.”

I told her Tyler had been badly wounded, monitoring myself for the slightest inclination to giggle. When Jeanne wanted to know how bad, I didn’t mince words. She stood there nodding like a cuckoo bird. Then she started rocking on her heels. She lurched to the nearest chair and collapsed. She leaned forward with both hands cupping her ears, shut her eyes and lowered her head to her knees.

“Okay,” she said at last, scrubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Okay okay okay. That’s the fucked-up deal then.”

“He’s a combat Marine,” I said lamely.

“Oh fuck—fuck fuck *fuck!*”

“Dad took it hard.”

She jumped up and grabbed my face with both hands. Her fingers felt icy, her nails dug into my cheeks. “How are *you* doing?”

I was reluctant to admit how well I was doing. Confessing to Jeanne about my outlandish compulsion to giggle was out of the question. “Dad’s the one I’m worried about.

They want us to meet them in Bethesda. Can you take off work on short notice?"

"Of course I can."

"We can drive it in two days. We can leave Damien with the Cornelisons."

"No." She jerked her hands back. "Damien should come too."

"You really think that's a good idea?"

Her brow crimped. "Why would I think it's a bad idea?"

"Well . . . we don't know Tyler's emotional state. Dad's a wreck. I'd rather Damien not see Tyler—even Mom and Dad—until we know how everyone's faring."

"But we need to think about Tyler," Jeanne said. "Seeing Damien might be some comfort—I'm sure it would be—they're so close."

"But—"

"He doesn't need to see his uncle until we know Tyler's state of mind. But he should be there."

The thought of describing to our son Tyler's horrific injuries disturbed me. Damien would want to know exactly what was going on. Hard to explain to a five-year-old.

I went out to the swings to tell him we'd be traveling to see Grandpa and Grandma. I made it sound like a holiday. Jeanne and I called our bosses to arrange time off. We packed and went to bed early and got up before dawn on Sunday morning.

Traffic was light as we drove out of Orlando toward the coast. I set the cruise control just over the speed limit. For a couple of hours we rode in silence while Damien played with his LeapFrog Leapster. When he announced he had to pee, I turned off at the next exit.

After topping the tank, I followed Jeanne into the convenience store. I found her standing just outside the men's room with her head bowed. I touched her arm and she jumped. Then she collapsed against me, clutching my shoulders, her body shuddering.

“We shouldn't let Damien see this,” I said.

She straightened up and wiped her eyes. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

Around five o'clock we stopped for the night in North Carolina. I called my parents and my mom answered. In that same controlled voice she told me their flight from Oklahoma City was scheduled for tomorrow morning. They expected to see Tyler right away.

I put Damien on the line and both grandparents managed to say a few words. Jeanne took the phone and muttered something inaudible. No one mentioned Tyler.

We'd spotted a steakhouse just down the access road from the motel. We needed to stretch our legs after the long drive. We each held one of Damien's hands as he skipped along between us, humming tunelessly.

While we were looking over the menu, two young soldiers wearing camouflage fatigues, sporting GI haircuts, came in, likely from the nearby Army base. Their manner was jaunty, their ruddy faces glowed with health. They ordered beer with their meal and the middle-aged waitress, a plump woman with a caring face, asked for their IDs. They produced them with exaggerated groans.

We finished eating before they did. When the waitress brought our check, I asked Mona—the name on her name tag—to give me the soldiers' checks. She went over to them and whatever she said prompted them to look our way. One snapped a smart salute. Jeanne made

an effort to smile, then grabbed her napkin and pressed it to her mouth. When we got up to leave she hurried on ahead.

“What’s wrong with Mommy?” Damien asked.

“Nothing, sweetie,” I said. “A little tired, I guess.”

“Me too,” he said. “Traveling sure wears me out.”

Back at the motel, Jeanne and I sat propped on bed pillows watching CNN. Thankfully, there was nothing about Afghanistan or Iraq. Once the lights were out, I lay listening to the air conditioner, an occasional truck growling on the interstate. For a time I was privy to a drunken argument between a couple just outside our window.

At last it grew quiet. The outside lights encroached around the edges of the window drapes, casting the room in eerie gloom. I couldn’t fall asleep. I rolled onto my other side to gaze over at the next bed, at Damien’s Roman nose and cherubic mouth, at his palm touchingly cradling his cheek.

I recalled a backyard barbecue at our house following Tyler’s first tour in Afghanistan. He’d ridden his current Harley from Camp Lejeune down to Orlando the day before, a Friday. He and Jeanne played tennis on Saturday morning. I’d wrecked my knee playing high school football and couldn’t offer much competition on the court. I was surprised that Tyler could, given his disinterest in sports, but Jeanne said they matched up well. They returned around noon, showered, and joined me on the deck.

Stretched out in a recliner with a beer, Tyler was barefoot, face stubbled, sinewy body tan as a lifeguard’s. He wore sunglasses, a gray T-shirt bearing the Eagle, Globe and Anchor

emblem, ragged denim shorts. Jeanne sat across from him on a redwood bench.

While I grilled burgers I listened to Tyler tell my wife war stories. Her back was to the picnic table, elbows on knees, hands clasping a bottle of beer. She'd tied her hair back in a ponytail. She looked delicious, her long legs slender and brown in white shorts. She'd left the top two buttons of her white blouse undone. I was sure Tyler had a full view of her braless breasts, those elongated chestnut nipples. I tried not to let it bother me. But it bothered me now.

Tyler had developed a paradoxical affection for Afghanistan. He spoke warmly of the Nomads and their tents; the dark-eyed children; the lean taciturn leathery men; the secretive shifty-eyed women peering out of burkas. His description of an assault breacher nicknamed The Joker, a huge, multi-ton vehicle fitted with a plow on skis, captivated Jeanne. The Joker looked, Tyler said, like a monstrous tank with a cannon. It was used to dig safety lanes through minefields laid by the Taliban; exploding IEDs apparently didn't faze it. If numerous mines littered an area, The Joker could fire rockets packed with C-4 explosives to detonate them at a safe distance. This big bastard will save a lot of lives, Tyler vowed. I took note of how my brother avoided looking at Jeanne's breasts. Most men couldn't resist getting an eyeful of those honeys.

Next morning when we left the motel, I followed the access road to a gas station. While I was squeegeeing bug splatters off the windshield, Jeanne got out and came around to the driver's side.

“Mind if I take a turn? Gotta do something to keep my mind occupied.”

“Be my guest,” I said.

Just before we reached the Maryland line my cell phone chimed. Mom told me they were at Bethesda Naval Hospital; they’d seen Tyler. I didn’t ask how he was doing. I wasn’t ready for that. I relayed the information to Jeanne.

I slipped off my sneakers and reclined in the leather seat. An itch at the base of my left big toe compelled me to reach over and scratch it through my sock with my right big toenail. It occurred to me that Tyler could no longer indulge in this innocuous pleasure.

I hear the prostheses they make these days are quite advanced, their development driven by the growing need, but still. Tyler would surely miss being able to open a stubborn jar of pickles. Tying his shoestrings, walking barefoot in the surf, running his hands over a woman’s breasts, even picking his nose. Tyler would miss simply being whole.

We passed a rest area sign and Jeanne flipped the turn signal.

I sat in the van and watched my wife walk to the ladies restroom. For some reason I found myself thinking about her tits. Until it dawned on me why Tyler hadn’t looked at them that day—to him they were probably as familiar as her arms.

Something swelled inside my chest like helium. I felt ready to explode. Damien was busy with his LeapFrog Leapster. I got out and walked across a grassy area to a picnic table. A large woman in halter and shorts, trailing a black cocker spaniel on a leash, eyed me as I circled the table like a robot. When I stopped to stare back at her she hurried off like she’d been assaulted.

At last Jeanne emerged from the restroom and came over to join me. “They say those

air dryers are loaded with germs,” she said. “But what can you do?”

“Talk to me.” My sharp tone brought her to a halt. She stood there rubbing her hands on her slacks, looking confused. “Tell me the truth about Tyler.”

She glanced after the woman with the dog, making sure she was beyond earshot.

Looking back at me, she said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do.”

She crossed her arms and turned her head, staring into the distance. She held this pose for what seemed like a full minute. When she looked at me again her face had turned to stone.

“Whatever you’re thinking,” she said, “you should stop.”

“I have to know.”

“Know *what*?”

The anger in her voice caught me by surprise. I shrugged my shoulders.

“All right, I do know what you’re talking about. Of course I do. I’ve seen it in your face often enough. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You can tell me.”

“Tell you *what*, Derek?”

“What I just said.”

“What you—look—why should I have to defend myself?”

“I just want the truth.”

“The truth?” She shook her head slowly. “Think about that. What you want—what you *think* you want—is for me to confirm what you suspect.”

“I’ll believe whatever you tell me.”

“No you won’t. The only thing you’ll believe is a confession, because you’ve already made up your mind. But here’s the thing . . . even if I was guilty I’d never admit it. And do you know why?”

I shook my head.

“Because I love you too goddamned much. And I love Damien. I love what we’ve made of our lives. I don’t want things to get any more complicated than they already are. If you can’t handle that, if that keeps you from loving me or loving Damien, if that keeps you from wanting to go on living the life we’re living . . . then I guess it’s your problem.”

“You’d rather I just keep wondering?”

“I don’t see any other way, sweetheart. I just explained why.”

I had to think about that, and for a long time I did. Jeanne stood there with her jaw clenched, watching the woman with the cocker spaniel returning.

And then I started to giggle. It hit me like a storm, like an Oklahoma twister swooping down out of nowhere. I tried to stifle it, but it was like trying to stifle a sneezing fit.

Jeanne uncrossed her arms and backed away in alarm.

It lasted maybe half a minute. Then the giggling morphed into something similar to what I’d heard come out of my dad. A storm of a different kind. No way could I staunch the flood of tears, those heaving keening yowls like a wounded animal might make. It was less than manly. I don’t know what I was ashamed of most, the giggling or the sobbing.

When Jeanne came over and put her arms around me it only made matters worse.

It took awhile for me to wind down. Afterwards I felt drained.

We walked back to the van in silence.

Damien was still engrossed in his game. I took the wheel and we drove on.

The traffic grew heavier, bunching up as we neared Bethesda. Now and then I glanced over to find Jeanne staring straight ahead, lips drawn taut against her teeth. I kept thinking about everything she'd said. It was starting to make sense. Even if I got the truth I'd asked for, would I actually know it? And what would I do with the truth? How would the truth serve me? If it came to it, who would benefit from my throwing down the gauntlet? Who would win? Who would lose? What would be the prize?

The truth isn't always a good thing.

Call it weakness if you like, even cowardice, I'd stopped caring. One thing I'd learned from my mom was to just press on once you know a thing is beyond rectifying. And having made that decision I found myself letting go and rejoicing in my own good fortune. Shamelessly rejoicing. If I was a coward, I was a live coward. I not only had Jeanne and Damien, I had my arms and legs. I could walk and run and dance. I could pick my nose. I had so much more than I deserved.

Compared to Tyler, I had everything.

And that was where I left it as we reached the hospital and stepped out of the air-conditioned van into the mugginess of a Maryland summer afternoon, the gritty reek of frying asphalt washing over us like a wildfire. Jeanne held one of Damian's hands and I held the other. Our son hummed tunelessly as we went inside to welcome his father home from

Afghanistan.

END