

Man of the House

I was on the toilet—the home office, my man cave since the kids conquered the basement—maneuvering through my fantasy football site when the call came in. Seeing the name, I let it go to voicemail then listened with my finger on the delete key. Other than the message itself, my mother-in-law’s trembling voice, my mix of fear and relief, I don’t remember much more—I’d assume I proceeded to wipe my ass no differently than I ever had, wash my hands—before getting downstairs to tell Heather her brother was dead.

I’d made it across the living- and dining room—Heather was on the couch cuddling with her latest iPhone, a newsfeed or group text too enticing to notice her husband was now opening the kitchen door, letting Barkley out to the yard he’d been whimpering for—that’s when I realized I’d probably have to hurry. At any moment one of Matty’s junkie buddies could post or tweet an RIP. Could you imagine that—finding out about your little brother’s overdose on Facebook or Twitter?

I headed back, hoping the creaky hardwoods would get her attention.

Why the fuck was this my job?

After explaining how Matty was gone and no longer suffering, that he was up there with his Nana now, my nutjob mother-in-law added that she and dad had agreed Heathy shouldn't be shocked with the news, that it wouldn't be good for the baby.

*Oh, I see—Barbara—so it's my fucking job to do the same thing you think will kill my unborn kid?*

If this had been a weekday I'd have still been at work; that way, when I got home Heather would be prepared, open to pretty much anything, just like she always was when I walked in (she was use to my sad stories of clients, kids, who broke their probation and were heading for even worse situations), and I wouldn't be approaching a smile like the one she wore now, face in her phone, making that quick sniffing sound she does when she wants me to ask her what she's looking at.

I didn't ask. I'm not sure I'd have even been able to speak let alone tell her that her brother was dead after she told me some cutesy story about Reese Witherspoon's dog, Pepper, or if I knew you could do *Amazon* returns at *Kohl's* now.

I slipped behind the dining room wall, out of Heather's view, pretending to shuffle around some bills and other junk—Harper's Communion invites that "had to be out by New Year's," Connor's many works of art—strewn across the table. Some dollar bills rolled inside a supermarket receipt made me think of Matty. My elbow knocked a candle from its holder and I peeked around the wall. Heather's head stayed down. In nine years married, fifteen together, it wasn't ever apparent, till those few minutes, that my wife could go that long, twenty feet away, without acknowledging my presence. Did this happen more often than I thought?

I know what I'll do—*I'll text her.*

Considering my sleep deprivation, I'd sometimes get these fleeting jolts of mindlessness—go to hand my dog a piece of fatty meat at a restaurant or flip on the light switch after a storm had knocked power out hours earlier—and right then I thought my way out was to announce I was going to grab the kids' juice boxes or drop the late-cable bill off at *Verizon*—something domestic—then text her the news after my second beer at *The Cheesecake Factory*. Problem solved: by the time I “hurried” home she'd be over at Matt and Barb's situating flowers and *Edible Arrangements*, trying to decide if a Sunday service would piss off too many football fans. In less than a second of course, I remembered the shitload of reasons that made this an impossible solution and was back at the kitchen door to check on Barkley, as if his bathroom, my yard, was where the plan was waiting to be scooped up.

When I turned back, Heather was still in her phone. More serious. Maybe a restaurant review. Shitting on the Italian place we'd spent five-hundred bucks for Matt and Barb's fortieth anniversary (the hot young waitress was apparently rude to us). Or was it something even more important? A search for the perfect meme: a reply to some stranger's comment on *The Bachelor's* Instagram page? There were endless possibilities. Sometimes she just scrolled through the hundreds of pictures she'd taken of Barkley, the same dog almost always in her sightline, the adopted Boxer she'd begged for but was constantly “too pregnant” to feed or let outside.

I had no plan.

I tiptoed over the squeaky spot then disappeared down the basement stairs, passing the kids being the vidiots that any dreary Saturday could turn them. I entered the garage through the laundry room entrance I'd been locking religiously since mid-September. I sat on an upside-down bucket beside the Christmas decorations Heather had been bugging me to get out. A big

deep breath. I thought about praying, asking God for some strength, but said “fuck that,” aloud I believe, then gazed up at a spider web riddled with tiny dead insects. Other than being back in the bathroom, this was the best escape room in the house.

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September 12<sup>th</sup>. I had six—six—missed calls from our babysitter. We were at Heather’s work friend’s wedding—it was about the time drinks were starting to hit people hard, expose which wives might not be so happily married—when I saw the calls and headed to the bathroom. Six! One missed call is enough when you have a seven-, five-, and three-year-old home with a sixteen-year-old girl you’d caught riding her boyfriend’s face a few months earlier (Heather’s heel broke at another wedding and God forbid she could enjoy the rest the night without my driving five miles, drunk, for a new pair; and when I opened our front door the shy neighbor who called me Mr. O’Malley was pumping her shaved crotch into the face of some boy lying on my couch. It was the most surprising and exciting thing I’d seen in my thirty-three years).

But now six missed calls. And as I’m crossing the dance floor, the phone in my fingers, about to call her back, a “CALL ME!!!!” text.

Imagine that. Imagine where my brain was when I stood at the urinal and waited for my big-titted babysitter to answer.

“Hi, Mr. O’Malley.” Alarm in her voice.

“Hi, Keri. What’s going on?”

“I have the kids over at the *McDonald’s* on Oxford.”

“OK . . . Wait, what time is it? Why—”

She started to cry—and I mean sob—like only a teenage kid could.

“Keri, what—”

“Someone broke into the house, Mr. O’Malley. They were—”

“Keri, slow down—”

“A guy was standing in your dining room, going through a drawer, when I brought the kids down from bath time . . .” (Heather was frightened of drownings and told babysitters *never* to give baths—ever—but my middle one RyRy, Keri’s favorite, no doubt talked her into it and now this development, this break-in, was so much bigger than ignoring the bath rule that she forgot to lie, leave it out, while explaining things.)

“. . . He saw me then . . . he just ran down the basement steps and—”

I didn’t need her to hear much more. I was pretty certain by then.

“Ker, what did he look like—do you remember? Ker . . . Keri. Ker. Keri, don’t cry, Ker. Ker, it’s OK, bud. Ker?”

“. . . Then I just told the kids to run outside. I like kinda chased . . . I pushed them out. Ry’s in his underwear. I think they thought I was playing because we were telling scary stories earlier . . . but now—now I’m not sure. I don’t even—”

“Keri, listen. Thank you so much. You are doing great. So great. What did he look like, though, Ker?”

“What.”

“The guy, Ker, was he regular looking, white, black? Young?”

“What. Uh . . . white.”

“Tall?”

“Kinda.”

“Kinda, OK. How about hair color—brown, all shaved maybe?”

“He had a hat on . . .”

“A hat. OK. Frontwards, backwards? Remember?”

“Frontwards I think—yea, frontwards.”

“Ker, how old would you say—twenty-five, thirty?”

“Youngish—yea around that.”

“Fat, skinny?”

“Skinny.”

It was all coming together. Heather used her selfie stick to take a pic of us and some other couple at the beginning of cocktail hour and there wasn't a doubt in my mind it became a Facebook “check-in” soon after. Matty knew the garage code (I of course was an asshole for telling Heather that wasn't the best idea), and now he was too amped up on chasing his high to figure the kids would be there with a sitter.

“Listen, Ker,” I said, “remember how I kept a secret with you that night with Kyle? Ker. Remember?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I need you to do me a favor now—keep a secret for *me*.”

“OK, Mr. O'Malley.”

When I asked her if the kids saw him and she said no, definitely no, I told her to buy the kids, and herself, some sundaes and milkshakes—whatever everyone wanted and I'd triple it back into her pay. “Do you have money on you, Ker?”

“Yup.”

“Good. Squish Ry in a booth or something so nobody sees his underwear. Eat in there and take your time. Enjoy it. A few more things though, OK?”

“K”

“That guy was Mrs. O’Malley’s brother,” I said—“he’s kind of slow and gets confused.”

“But what—”

“Ker, hang on, OK. Just let me tell you this, OK.”

“K.”

I told her to get the kids ready for bed as soon as she gets back to the house, that the man was gone now and would not, one-hundred percent, be back. “I promise, Ker. Just like I promised I wouldn’t say one word about you and Kyle that night. OK?”

“K.”

“If Harper tells her mom you guys were in *McDonald’s* at 9:30 or whatever time it is now, I’ll tell Mrs. O’Malley that you texted me around six—Harp tells fibs all the time—and I just forgot to mention it to her . . . Ya know what, Ker—forget that; I’ll tell Mrs. O’Malley *right now* that you texted me at six asking if you could take them then. As far as we’re all concerned it’s 6:00 right now. OK?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Just whatever happens, do not tell *anyone* about the guy in the house—that’s real important, OK, Ker? It would upset Mrs. O’Malley a whole lot. I will take care of it. Oh, and Ker—the garage might be open when you get back; can you go into the laundry room by the door and press the button to bring it down? It’s a big black button next to a couple of key hooks. Can’t miss it. OK? Text me when you’re done. OK.”

“K.”

“And Ker, one more thing: Tell Tyler that tonight might not be the best night to stop by.”

Her laugh and the adorably seductive way she said goodbye told me that I was probably safe, that she wouldn't ignore what I said, panic, and take the kids to her house or something, her mom or dad calling me—or Heather—asking what the hell was going on.

Believe me, this was my only option. If I told Heather what happened, she'd want to know how the hell I came to the conclusion it was Matty. She'd curse me the whole ride home, tell me I'd never supported him and was always trying to bring him down (I'd ask if she was kidding then mention all the jobs I'd gotten him—jobs he fucked up again and again—or how I financed his aspiring hip-hop career by handing him five-hundred bucks for an entire collection of demo tapes that no one else would buy). I saw the whole scene back at the house: Keri sitting at our kitchen table with a douchebag detective—Mr. and Mrs. Lacy there to support their whore daughter—giving her account of what happened. I wouldn't even be able to watch this comedy skit with a beer or cigarette—that would be “inappropriate” (Heather's favorite word); I'd have to just sit there and pretend, as I'd begun getting pretty good at, that my brother-in-law wasn't a drug fiend capable of pretty much anything.

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Autumn Sundays were my one day away. We watched the Eagles in my buddy's basement then went to *Cheerleader's* or *The Dancin' Bare* for the 4:30 games. Heather barely bothered me as long as I was back to give the kids their bed-time baths. But I didn't watch one down of football the day after Matty's break-in. I instead took the half hour ride into Kensington and waited by the abandoned rail bridge my cop buddies had told me they'd spotted Matty on more than one occasion.



I'm not too sure what my intentions were, sitting there in my locked car, listening to the Eagles game. But a few hours in when I spotted a flat brim Phillies hat across the street, rolled down my window and shouted Matty's name, I rushed from my car and chased him, reacting on instinct to his instant retreat of guilt.

Being that Matty pretty much lived in this squalor gave him the clear advantage. Could he be leading me to some dead-end full of fellow zombies? But his turns were taking us away from the back alleys and abandoned railyards and then boom—Allegheny Avenue. People everywhere—sitting on stoops, revving up motor bikes, drinking and eating—enjoying a beautiful September day. A young black girl coming out of a Korean grocer stopped and let us pass, made a face that seemed to say, *There go them junkies again*. When he took our chase into a playground full of kids then headed into the ball fields—that's when I knew I gained the advantage. I was faster than Matty and could now go full tilt; I wouldn't come home with scrapes down my arms, a "what the hell happened to you?" from Heather, like I would if I tackled him in the middle of the concrete street. I sped up, got closer, then slowed again and shouted out a warning when he was near shortstop and I was passing over the pitcher's mound. "Nowhere to go, Matt." No response. He had no chance of getting to the exit gate across the field before I got to him. He looked beyond pathetic. He kept pulling up the jeans falling off his skinny ass, slowing him down, like an idiot ball player holding on to his helmet while rounding the bases.

My first thought after tackling him somewhere in left-center field, his animalistic moans and putrid body odor, dust in my eyes, was something I hadn't feared till now: Were there needles in his pockets, dirty AIDS needles, I could be pricked or stabbed with? But with his arms now as far as they were from the jeans that had fallen completely down to his ankles, I just punched. "You like robbing your sister's house!" And punched. "Scaring your fucking

nephews—your goddaughter.” His stupid hat had somehow stayed on and I pulled it down over his blistered face and pushed it into his eyes and squeezed like his head was one of those stress balls my psychiatrist had started me on. “You fucking scumbag junkie fuck!” A grunt. A laugh? “You need to fucking kill yourself so your family can live their lives.” I’d thought about all the football and beer and pussy-watching I’d given up and gave him one last shot—a place kick to the face.

I walked away from my brother-in-law sprawled out in his underwear, turning a few times just to make sure he wasn’t cracked-out enough to come back for more. Because I was white I wasn’t much worried about the cops showing up. I’m sure we had quite the audience at the playground or passing by, but black people didn’t call the police. And if someone did, said that two white guys were tussling in the ball fields, the cops would maybe drive by—maybe—just so they could cover their asses in case somebody died or something. My cop buddies told me all about this newfangled mentality with addicts. “Junkies down here are like pigeons living amongst the humans—they migrate and mingle amongst themselves—and we only take notice when they start shitting on people’s heads.”

Realizing I’d left my door open when I first spotted Matty, I started to jog back to my car—that’s when I noticed Matty’s hat, the brim no longer flat, crushed in my fingers, my fist still clenched and red like it was squeezing Matty’s face. Like a Frisbee, I flung it into some grimy alley we’d passed on the chase, wondering if Matty had ever sat back there with the trash and leaves and grimy blankets, a needle in his arm or sucking dick for cash.

In the next two months I changed the garage code countless times, obsessing about what had happened in the field. Matty was not the tough-guy revenge type, had always been a bit afraid of me even, but drugs could make a guy do pretty much anything, no? Would he attack me

when I wasn't expecting? Or the kids? Approach them coming out of school? Every morning and then ten, twenty, thirty more times throughout the day I'd stalk his Facebook page for something, a vague message, a picture of the face I lumped up—something that would say . . . I don't even know—just something. But no new posts, no glimpse into Matty's mindset, evidence he was or wasn't plotting revenge. Only proof of his pitiful existence. That sleazy profile pic—giving the middle finger in the Phillies flat brim he no longer owned—above dozens of Ebonic posts, content more pathetic than my sixteen-year-old babysitter's.

There was zero activity all the way into November.

Heather would still give me the normal Matty reports. Lying in bed, on long rides home from a ballgame or carnival when the kids were asleep, she'd tell me—per her mother—how Matty was doing in his latest ventures, how dad had had him registered for the Carpenter's and Glazier's and Electrician's exams and how he was still super passionate about his intervention work. These were conversations that might have led to an argument prior to then. (“You really believe this “recovery” bullshit, Heath? Your brother spends his days under The El; it's no secret—he gets tagged in posts at Kensington and Somerset . . .”) Though Heather wasn't quite as bad as her parents, she sure as fuck was blind when it came to her baby brother and would constantly counter with arguments even stupider than her belief in itself that her brother was “in recovery.” (“ . . . Maybe he's trying to help those guys he use to use with get clean—ya ever think of that, Ry.” “*Use to*, Heath! Have you taken a good look at your brother lately?”) But after my little encounter with Matty, I was no longer letting Heather steer us into such arguments. I just waited patiently for something, anything, to tell me that a situation had ended, not begun, in the field that night.

Thanksgiving was approaching. We were hosting again and I needed Matty to show. Despite looks and behavior that got wackier by the year, he never missed Holiday parties. Believe me, there would have been nothing better than a year off from Matty—pie and football and beer without having to pretend the elephant in the room, the drug addict in my house, wasn't there. A holiday from Heather's mind-blowing denial: *Alexa* missing from the fireplace (Heather blamed her cousin's kids); Matty passed out on the couch, the toddlers climbing all over him ("How soon you forget, Ry—we were just as hungover as he was ten years ago.") I could already see this year's what-the-fuck moment that I had to keep my mouth shut about: my mother-in-law passing around Matty's addict-turned-counselor business cards while everyone was waiting to pick Pollyannas.

*The Pollyanna!* My worries about our encounter were growing by the day. I knew there'd be awkwardness and fear—for him too I assumed. But now I was obsessing over the possibility of picking Matty's name from a fucking bowl. Whether or not he showed, Barb would be sure to include her baby boy in the family gift-giving tradition. Would I buy him some flat brim hats (bring some Christmas levity to our situation) or avoid the hand-to-hand exchange and drop fifty bucks into the *gofundme* page—*From Near Death To Saving Lives (Addicts-Turned-Counselors)*—that would soon be popping up on my newsfeed?

He never showed.

"Matty's going to his new girlfriend's place for dinner," my clueless wife announced a few days before Thanksgiving. It was too farfetched to just stand there and say nothing.

"Well, maybe we'll meet this lucky gal on Christmas," I said.

"You know what, Ry, maybe we will.

But before our first Christmas lights were even out of the garage, Matty was dead and his sister, and everyone else under his spell, was going to be forced to face the truth.

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I re-entered the house through the laundry room, taking the same path Matty had, stopping to watch the kids route on, fanatically direct, a video game character through some land of perils. Heather was in the kitchen now, that eighty-pound weight gain putting an extra groan in the floorboards. Her activity—fridge door opening and shutting, clinging silverware hitting the sink—said that she hadn't heard the news yet.

This was going to be really fucking hard.

I cared that Matty was dead then, just as much as I do now—not one bit. He would have been a never-ending headache for me, heartache for Heather, had he kept on assaulting her common sense to the point of our fights, the name calling and finger pointing, my nights on the couch, beginning to smell like divorce. Sure, there were those weeks of wondering if what I did and said in the field might have motivated Matty's death. But that, like most over-dramatic, self-pity, was replaced in time by clear-minded hindsight: If you tell someone to kill themselves and they do, then you sure as hell weren't the reason.

It was the look in Heather's eyes—that's what I dreaded as I stood there behind the kids that day, staring, smiling nervously, while rehearsing what I'd say when I got upstairs. The blame she might put on me—how Matty saw me as a big brother and how I never helped, constantly shut him out, was a pessimist in everything Matty attempted.

But like most imagined catastrophes, the anxiety exceeded the reality. My anticipation, the scenes I envisioned, the beginning of the end of our marriage I could feel in my heavy limbs

and sweaty palms, wasn't how it went. It seemed that in Matty's death, Heather, the Cassidy clan in general, had accepted responsibility, could suddenly see clearly again. No, they didn't put their hands in the air during the family eulogy, surrender for involuntary manslaughter, the way I would have liked them to. No. Like all the great fakes, they continued to live their lie in public, embracing family and friends approaching the casket, replying to the "I'm sorrys" with clichés such as "Nobody could save Matty but Matty" (these were funeral-goers, hundreds filing in, who'd have seen Matty panhandling in a *Wawa* parking lot and ducked behind their steering wheels, used their phones to avoid eye contact coming in and out of the store, then went home to tell roommates, spouses about how fucked up on drugs Matt Cassidy was).

*Nobody could save Matty but Matty.* What a joke! I got a pair of handcuffs and an iron plumbing pipe that says that line only exists to make negligent narcissists feel better about *themselves*. Let's be honest, nobody ever *tried* helping Matty. Parents who lived in fantasy land: Saint Barb and her *Novenas*—leaving her son's fate in God's hands; and Big Matt—the staunch Republican always fed up with snowflakes or Muslims or prima-donna ball players kneeling for the anthem, the Union Carpenter—whose best advice was telling Matty to pull himself up by the bootstraps and get to work, fully believing that a job in the trades—the career partly responsible for his being a miserable dickhead—was going to straighten his son out, keep him clean, get Matty to start building a nice, assimilated, American life for himself.

How fucking blind could two people be?

Same with Heather—she wasn't down under The El pulling him out of flop houses. She was scurrying for my seed at every ovulating moment. Then planning which type of gender reveal we should have this time around. Less than a month before they found Matty's body, we were on our brand new *Trex* deck shooting paint ball guns (pink or blue?) into the shed when

everyone in the yard knew there was a hell of a good chance the mommy-to-be's brother was shooting heroin in Kensington. Nobody ever did dick. We just sat back and rooted for Matty, hoped for success the way we did our sports teams. Maybe others *could* have helped. And that guilt, a common guilt, is what I believe brought everyone back to reality, kept them from pointing fingers and destroying the relationships they still had left.

You could even say that Matty was popular in death. Our little family gatherings were suddenly filled with all sorts of Matty chatter. Stories, funny ones mostly, about pre-addict Matty—the goofball yet caring kid who'd give you the shirt off his back. I even join in from time to time, once getting a rare chuckle from Big Matt when I mentioned the night I took his son to *Hooters* for his thirteenth birthday, the giant boner Matty had when two blondes pushed him up on his chair for a birthday serenade. Friends, too, told tales. I'll run into guys Matty grew up with, old class- and teammates, teenagers me and Heather would pick up, pile in the back of my old Chevy Celebrity, after their dances and keg parties, guys who abandoned addict-Matty only to return for the baked ziti and roast beef sandwiches at the funeral luncheon.

People wanted to be close to dead Matty.

I'd sometimes wonder if my death would be received anything like Matty's. If I got shot on a field visit or suffered a massive coronary screaming at one of RyRy's referees, would my friends and family laugh about the young, happy me; would Heather read my love letters to a smiling, crying audience (the high school candy gram I used to first ask her out, the emails in college begging her to take me back) or was all that sweet, cute, funny shit too far gone, had marriage and kids and work sucked so much life from me that cranky Ry, bitter Ry, Ry the guy living through his eight year old's sports career, was all people would remember?

What the fuck happens?

I began contemplating this question a whole lot after Matty. Wondering if there was something I could do *now* that might help my kids not to lose that luster, from becoming scared, glazed-over grownups whose daily highlights are the few chances they get to escape the reality they'd been shepherded into. I've really started searching these last few years. Only a parent understands the depths you'll dig for something that you'd be handing over to someone else.

I'd have never imagined this was where I'd be almost a year after I was hiding in my own basement, stalling, pretending to watch my kids' play a video game. (I guess I figured Matty's death would be like everyone's and the extent of perspective, any transfiguring I might undergo, would come as I kneeled in front of the dead body—*Start cherishing every moment, Ryan; Stop sweating the small stuff, Ryan*—before falling right back into the narcissistic pit of reality.) Yea, it was still all about me on that December day—how Matty was fucking up *my* life. I was as frightened of going up those steps as I'd ever been anything in my life. The kids were helping to delay things though. An argument between Connor and Harper: Connor took Harper's controller before she got through her second game with RyRy—and that was the rule, dad, two games then switch, and she only got one! “Dad, tell, Connor that rules are rules—that he has to follow them even though he's little.”

It may have been the first time I didn't want to escape a situation like this, tell them that daddy had things to do, then jog up the steps two at a time so I didn't have to devise some bullshit plan that made no one hate daddy.

But then came the shriek of anguish from up the steps, the “NOOOOOO!” that quieted the bickering kids and brought all our eyes to the ceiling. A thud then subsequent silence made me wonder, for that mindless millisecond, if Heather had dropped dead, if Big Matt and his Barbarian would be having duel funerals for their only children; I even envisioned little Emma's



casket, my psychopath mother-in-law referring to our dead daughter as “*Our Little Guardian Angel*” the next forty fucking years of my life.

But then more high-pitched sounds from above.

Being that Heather and I had been fighting so often around then, the kids so use to those angry screams she’d make after slamming a door or throwing her phone, crying as she crouched above her iPhone 8 or XR or 11 Pro Max, collecting its parts like they were fragments of JFK’s brain, none of the three seemed to think much of their mommy’s gasps then wails then whimpers—the video game was what mattered now—and their eyes were back on daddy, staring silently, like students, looking for an answer from the man of the house.