Friendsgiving

Six years had passed. And other than remarks we both made minutes after everything happened, Bridget and I never talked about the incident, exchanged calm, sober accounts of what we each remembered. Life went on. In no way had it lived between us the way it did the bigger group—our marriage and family had too many milestones and memories, incidents of its own to let a disaster night with friends shape our relationship. But you can't just file away the big stuff—this I found out soon enough: the big stuff always comes back to bite, often when you least expect.

I was in the living room, a lazy Saturday, watching the Sixers blow another double-digit lead. Bridget, still in scrubs, had poked her head out to grab the mail and was now slowly passing my recliner, squinting into a piece of paper as if the student loan people had finally decided to garnish my wages.

She'd disappeared behind the wall and started mumbling as she opened a kitchen cabinet. I thought I knew then what she'd been reading (social media has taken a toll on the element of surprise). I sipped my beer and dug deep into a Pringles tin. I waited, watched the game. She was laughing now, a signal, my cue maybe, and I called in to ask what was so funny.

And then she was back in the living room, standing right above me, holding a save-the-date card less than a foot from my face. “We’re not going!” she said.

This wasn’t Bridget behavior. She never even alluded to making decisions for me. This was in part why she was great, different, not the type of wife my friends were long tired of but too stuck in the mud to make a move from. “*I’m not going”* would have been more like Bridget.

I laughed. “What do you mean?”

She moved the card back but kept it held out like a fencing sword. *En-garde!* “What do I mean?” she said. “You’re kidding me.”

“People have the right to get remarried, Bridg.”

“Sure they do . . . and their invites have the choice to say yes or no.”

“Sounds like you’re not letting me make that choice.”

“You actually think you’re going to this?”

I raised a palm, made a face. “What’s your deal?”

She moved over closer, was blocking the game now. Bulgy eyes. She was giving me that look—we all know that look, different for each wife—that says, *I let a lot of things slide, but not this!*

“I know you don’t like him—that’s fine—but I’ve known the guy since fifth grade,” I said trying to bend my head around a still-tight body I should’ve given more attention. “I don’t like tons of your friends either but I—”

“My . . . Hah!” She started laughing maniacally, blinking her eyes, looking behind her as if pretend people, Ashton Kutcher and film crew, were about to open our basement door and

tell her I was only kidding. "*My—my* friends," she said. I was in trouble now. "*My* 'tons' of friends who . . . who you don't like—they don't beat their fucking spouses."

Six years of silence packed a hell of a punch—the tingles and butterflies, heavy legs, that weird frozen feeling you got the first time you saw an ex after the breakup. So I did what I always did when the shit hit the fan—I fled. I paused the game and went for the fridge: another beer. She was following behind, the card still in her hand like a weapon.

"Please tell me you're not being serious right now, Dan."

When Bridget cursed, said *fuck* especially, you knew she was pissed. But when she called you by name when it wasn't necessary—that's when all hope was lost. And I knew then that a beer wouldn't help, that the game was probably staying paused, that the day, the week even, was likely ruined. I turned from the fridge. The card—a picture of Tim and his new young thing—was facing me again, held out like it was one of Declan's disaster Math tests he said he'd studied for, and I was Declan, the kid, who wasn't telling mommy the truth, who was in trouble for shocking her with this absolutely unacceptable bombshell. And I responded like he would, like a child: "What"? I said. "Why are you making a big deal?"

That look again. But this time with even bulgier eyes and her teeth clenched tight, face a bit tilted, as if ready to rock back and headbutt me into the corner cabinet she hadn't yet closed. "Oh, I forgot," she said, "you weren't sure he 'definitely' hit her. (Air quotes are another thing Bridget does when crazy pissed.) "How can I forget," she went on, "none of us were in the room. She could have 'fallen' . . . because black eyes and bloody noses and cowering in a corner while your husband flees the scene—that usually has 'accidental fall' written all over it." She stopped and stared and clenched those pretty white teeth again, shook her head for a second

or so, almost snarled, before calmly serving the knockout blow. “Man, Dan. One thing’s saying that—another thing’s believing it. Or wait—you *don’t* believe it, do you? You just don’t care.”

I wanted to be in my chair again—standing-arguments were always too truculent, like you were proclaiming participation in the battle. I wanted to admit defeat, tap out, sit down. I wanted the remote and the TV, my Pringles and beer. I wanted to point at the basement door, say *Shhhh* . . . *let’s talk later—the kids* . . . But they were both with our neighbors on a Halloween hayride. And I’m not sure that would have mattered much anyway. Once Bridget had said my name and *fuck* and made *that* face multiple times, was obsessively using air quotes . . . it was too late for *anything* to stop her. She was going to say what she was going to say that day and I don’t think the presence of anyone—her fellow book-club nurses or grannies she did ceramics with or even her Eucharist-minister parents—*nothing* was stopping her.

“What does that have to do with his getting remarried,” I said. This was about as dumb a thing I could have come back with—more fuel. Now not only would I be missing the game in real time but she’d turn it off, making it impossible to rewind, playback what had passed. (My watching sports while I could have been taking advantage of the kids being out, straightening the basement a bit—this was the stuff she’d normally let fly.)

That look—again. “What—what does it have to do with getting re . . .” She was trying to repeat what I said but was too incensed to get the words out.

“Yea, I said, “we . . . we don’t know what was going on in their marriage.”

“No, *Dan*—we actually do. He fucking beat the shit out of her while we sat in a room twenty feet down the hall—that’s what was *going on* in their marriage.

As corny as flashbacks can be in movies and books, the prompting many times so convenient in pulling forward the story, puppeteering the character's thoughts, flashback *did* indeed happen that very way at times, in real life, and the scene I hadn't seen vividly in some time now was reappearing: I was in my buddy's apartment, Friendsgiving night, watching Tim pull Ashley from the floor and towards the bedroom where she was supposed to be "lying down" and "relaxing" while we had a few more drinks.

"Where the hell are you going?" Bridget said now. I'd left the kitchen, had gotten a hoodie from the dining room closet, and was heading for the door, the car, the bar, the Sixers game. It would make things worse later but stop the bleeding, the battle, for now.

And in the car and on into the bar the projection played on. I kept stopping and pausing my thoughts, rewinding the scene the way I do the TV, bringing Ashley and Tim back to the couch, telling them, well, anything to stop them from going into that room together.

* * *

He hit her. I knew that. She may have been the most annoying, worst drunk, I'd ever met, but no man should *ever* lay a hand on a woman. The second half of that statement—"no man should *ever* lay a hand on a woman"—was the only part I shared in the aftermath, always adding ". . . if that was what happened." I never used "but" or said anything before or after it. (*No man should ever lay a hand on a woman . . . but Ashley constantly flirted with bartenders—right in front of Tim—and her idea of being a stay-at-home mom was arguing on the internet with strangers while the kids were at daycare and pre-K, and then—then on weekends taking the girls to their games or shows or birthday parties [the shit she wore, flirted with other dads*

in, looked like it came straight from Taylor and Ella's closets] all while Tim was working a second job . . . but no man should ever lay a hand on a woman.)

There were endless stories—horror stories—about Ash. She was the disaster wife we'd all gossiped about—all of us, for years: my buddies, their wives, girlfriends; I'm assuming even Tim knew she was nuts but married her for some low self-esteem reason. But I wasn't a controversial guy—and *"but"* implied that something Ash did justified what Tim had. What good came from "but . . ."? Journalists and talk show hosts, a mayor even, had lost jobs for daring to use that precarious conjunction when it came to domestic abuse. No, I never said *but*. No buts about it! As drunk as I was that night, I remember every remark I made about the incident. I said that the situation was between them—and that was why I let them go back to the room alone, that I hadn't much issue with his pulling her—he was only pulling her because of how thrashing, drunk, out of her fucking mind she was. (And this was the God's honest truth: back then I never thought guys I knew were capable of doing what Tim did—punching women, wife beating, domestic violence was for bad Hollywood plots and roid-head athletes with twelve different baby-mammas.) I also said that when I heard the first few thuds, I didn't head in because, well, Tim yelled out to us, said everything was fine, and I believed him, figured she'd fallen getting into bed. "We all saw how hammered she was," I said. All my friends, even the wives and girlfriends, concurred. We were sitting, some standing, pacing, around the back bedroom, the scene of the crime, the fifteen of us now that Tim was gone, trying to make sense of what happened. We'd gone to an Italian place in Rittenhouse for our annual couples' dinner (the wives' and girlfriends' doing every late-November) and were having postgame drinks at my buddy Noodle's place. (Noods had no kids and was a ten-minute walk from Porcini's.) We

weren't in the apartment ten minutes before Ashley had spilled red wine, kept putting her hand on my buddy Greg's married knee and thigh, shouted *Boooooooo* when no one wanted to share the blunt she was rolling, dropping everywhere, on the couch. She was heading outside with her crumbling blunt, "Boooooooo," she was slurring again, "you all suck big—" when she fell, bam, as if a trip wire ran from the coffee table to the entertainment center. Cursing as she crawled and picked pieces of weed from the rug, slapping away her husband's hand as he bent to pull her up—that's when Noodles' girlfriend offered the bedroom and Tim scooped up his inebriated wife, bear-hugging her torso, dodging her flailing arms as she screamed down the hall.

Ashley was on the bed now, lying quietly on her back, as if all the fight had been knocked out of her. With pillows propping up her head, Bridget and my buddy Ziggy's wife (Courtney's an X-ray tech or something) held ice packs on her nose and cheek while asking her questions, simple ones about the year, the president, what she had for dinner. She was slurring, her eyes drooping, from what we guessed were the shots she wouldn't stop ordering at desert (though we were all suspicious that there'd been more, before she got there, pills maybe, too).

Us being drunk and Ashley being completely smashed (*Smashley* was actually one of her nicknames) was probably why we were summarizing the events right in front of her, as if her condition was so altered that she couldn't comprehend our conversation. "Should we take her to the hospital, call the police even?" one of the wives asked. (Two of my friends *were* the police—further complicating this mess.)

"Guys, stop. I fell," Ashley mumbled. "Timmy would never . . ."

Tim had bolted, without a word, heading for the front door when we finally barged into the bedroom. (After the third thud, the loudest yet, we'd hopped up as one and headed down the hallway, waiting by the door, where a giant crash was followed by Ashley's scream, breaking glass.) Ash was down in a crouch, catching the blood flowing from her face.

One of my buddies eventually ran out after Tim but never found him. He must have headed into the park, towards Samson or Chestnut, and hauled a cab. He wasn't answering his phone. "But he wasn't even that drunk," my one buddy said as we sat and stood and paced and summarized still. "And knowing we're all out here, he . . . he wouldn't be so dumb to just hit her and think we wouldn't know . . ." "True," someone else said. "He was way too sober, not whacked at least, and way too smart a guy to act that way. I mean, if this goes on with them at home it's one thing . . . but here, in a friend's bedroom . . . with of all us . . ." The other guys, their wives and girlfriends seemed to agree with this—or at least pretended to—as if the sounds from behind that door, the shattered full-length mirror, Ashley's blood and lumps and her husband escaping the place was all a conspiracy. So perplexed everyone was. We'd known Tim for twenty-plus years. Student council guy. Mild mannered. Good golfer—never cheated. An honest realtor who'd sold most of us our homes. Sure, we all had darkness in our closets, but Tim was the last of our friends we thought capable of *this*.

Bridget had waited to speak until there was no other talking heads saving face or inaccurately recapping events that had happened only a few minutes earlier. Ashley was in the bathroom now; she had gotten up after saying she felt dizzy, nauseous, and two, maybe three, of the girls had followed her. "It's called an impulse behavior," Bridget finally said to the eleven or so of us left. "In people with impulse issues—this can't be controlled the way it might with

the more common person. Why do you think these abusers hit and hit and hit again, even after they've apologized over and over, been arrested, re-arrested in some cases . . .? Because the problem is more powerful than the self-control! What is wrong with you guys!" My buddy Volpe tried to talk, defend our remarks, attempts at semi-exonerating Tim, but Bridget shut him up quickly. "He just left his wife here, you idiot. Does someone whose wife 'fell' while he was putting her in bed walk out, leave her at *his* friend's place . . . without any way of getting home to her kids? He is embarrassed, his secret's exposed—yous are all fucking idiots." She made a quick move to her phone and someone, I forget who, franticly asked what she was doing. "I'm getting an Uber—taking her to the hospital," Bridget said heading towards the bathroom. I followed.

"Ashley, sweetie," Bridget whispered in after cracking open the bathroom door. "Ash, do you have a number for your babysitter? Is Tim's little sister watching the girls?" Right then I began thinking about the who-knows-how-many hours I'd be in an emergency room and not my bed. I thought about Ashley mumbling and slurring and crying, trying to escape and slipping on linoleum floor at Hahnemann or Jefferson or some other downtown hospital where North Philly gun-shot victims are brought in on stretchers screaming in pain. Would the staff ask questions? Should I stick to my story? Could one hesitant answer incriminate Tim? Would they be obligated to get the police involved? I was even drunk enough to wonder if I could be arrested for my lack of action, for letting them stay alone back there long after the noises had gotten pretty fucking frightening: The Coward Law.

Very few people got in Bridget's way when her anger, her tone, reached this level of pissed; she was too pretty and too tough and made too much sense for anyone to even think

about questioning what she wanted. And I too went along—literally. With Ashley's limp body slouched between us in the back seat, I hadn't asked one question till the Uber driver veered onto the *676* ramp, away from where I thought our final destination was: the ER. "Aren't we going to Hahnemann or—?" "She's fine," Bridget said looking out her window, away from me, "Advil and sleep is all this girl needs."

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When a somber Tim arrived at our door the next morning, after I'd woken to missed calls, texts thanking us, telling us how drunk he was, embarrassed and ashamed he is, Bridget had already told me she'd wanted no parts of this—it was my friend and my responsibility and I'd have to sit and wait with Ash while she took Riley and Declan to soccer. "Text me after they leave," she said, "I do *not* want to see his face."

I've always wondered what Bridget would have thought of that face of his, the leaning-forward, heartfelt-feigning look, the pursed lips, he started his apology with. "If I did anything inappropriate last night," Tim began—it was an abashed look that I'd have believed, respected at least, before this, if the apology was for something else, if I hadn't now known what truly lived inside this dude.

Ash was already out the door by then—she barely said a thing from the time she finally came up from the basement till we saw Tim pull up out front—and she had marched down our path, passing Tim with her face in her phone. She was in the car while her husband was giving this here apology.

"I was pretty tuned up and a . . . Me and Ash, we . . . we've got some stuff we gotta work on . . ."

It's really something to truly see someone, know exactly who they are, for the first time. All they'd done before that and will do after—none of it mattering now. How often does someone do something so powerful, whether benign or malicious, that warrants that, that unveils them till eternity? But it wasn't just Tim who was forever altered from that day on**.** When our crew got together again—Tim and Ash had apparently patched things up, were still together, happy as ever according to Facebook—things just felt different, awkward between a group of guys who'd known each other since fifth grade.

Jokes, humor, making light of the dark had always been our crew's way of healing, of putting the past away. We could be harsh, sure. When someone had a zit or a bashed-up haircut, we'd make sure he knew that we knew . . . and then some. If your parents had a piece of shit car or your dad had a habit of drunkenly screaming at referees during CYO games—no ball busting was over the line. In our late-twenties my buddy Marty hopped a curb, took out a fireplug, the tree he hit next the only reason he didn't plow into the old lady's living room. He got a DUI. Lost his license, his girlfriend. Had to move back home with his parents. Wake up at 4 a.m. and take two buses then the subway to work. Suicide watch type stuff. So we helped. Courtesy of our cop buddy Hartner we got hold of Marty's mug shots, had tee-shirts made: "*Nobody Parties Like Marty*" above his airbag-damaged face. We debuted them—all of us donning them—for his surprise thirtieth birthday party.

But Friendsgiving was different.

None of us had even texted or talked about what happened. And if anyone had searched for jokes, levity, and came up with some—they were likely jokes on themselves, reminders of their complicity in the most unfunny thing they'd ever been a part of.

And these absent jokes, humor we couldn't use to bury our latest issue, had no doubt shown the first time we were all together again. It needed time, I guessed. An incident like that needed time, subtle baby steps, healing, before things got normal again—that was what I blamed for the uneasy and awkward feeling that loomed over a late-January birthday party at one of those bounce house places that were all the rage when the kids were younger.

But the second time and third and so on—all the thirty-fifth birthdays and remaining weddings that would come, the Friendsgiving tradition that continued for now—kept feeling, well . . . awkward. I felt that everyone, me included, was less themselves, shared their opinions less on any issue that might seem sensitive or turn heated. Less laughter. More business-like, artificial. Better than being home with the kids but not *exactly* where they, we, wanted to be. Turnout was always a little bit lower. People drank less and Ubered home early, acted as if getting home to the babysitter was a bigger deal than it used to be. Tim's beginning to bring his new girl around a few years after the incident—that same girl smiling beside him on our save-the-date card—didn't make things any better or worse really; we were used to stuff like that by then—there'd been a few big divorce scandals, usually-younger dates taking the place of the wives who'd cheated or been cheated on . . . more stuff that we got through with humor.

Then Friendsgivings ended all-together—"Just a year off" was how it was explained over the group text. But that year became two and three . . . There were still the occasional graduations and fortieth birthday parties, though sometimes me or Bridget would scroll across

a party that happened without us, our old friends in Facebook photos with their new friends: their coworkers and suburban neighbors, parents they'd met from their kids' schools or teams.

Mostly now it's funerals or shopping, some sports stuff a few of the remaining "city kids" play on together. A quick catching up then a "we'll need to get together soon" that never happens.

I knew how Bridget would respond if I brought up not seeing my buddies much anymore. "Life's crazy," she might say. "People are busy." And she was right—people were busy. Other than Marty, a story for another day, all of us were married with kids—even Noodles' bachelor days were done; he too had a family, a nice new house. (Word was that he didn't use Tim as his realtor.) Our days of drinking in shore houses were now spent on the boardwalk, in arcades, in lines for rides. "Life happens, bud."

But there was more—more to it than age and responsibilities. I knew this. There was a look now. I'd seen it every single time since that late-November night. Even the wives had this look. A hell of a thing really: for old friends, guys with half a lifetime of stories together, to now have just one overriding thought when looking into each other's eyes. At least this was how I saw it. I now looked dead into my buddies' faces and saw us huddled outside a door, listening as if we were twelve-year-olds trying to hear the moans of an older brother's girlfriend. Ashley was being haymakered in there and none of us moved. We just shared a look, a stair, and have been doing so ever since.

I'd constantly get impulses to tell Bridget about this look, this unavoidable, unshakeable look, this one thing that never changed when everything else continued to (Bridget's where I constantly verify and validate), but after a second or so I'd realize that this subject had always

been off limits, that re-reminding her of that night, of what did and didn't happen, wasn't worth that hopeful surge Bridget had a way with providing at times.

But the day the save-the-date came, as I'm sitting in the bar, staring at the ball game, looking back at that night, the infamous Friendsgiving, and all its destruction as closely as I had in some time—looking back, I realized, decided then, that Bridget too was changed by what happened that night, hadn't unremembered anything any more or less than anyone else. And not only was she disappointed with my lack of action, my disgusting comments, but I had the next morning, after twelve hours to sleep off a half a case of beer and three or four shots of Tequila, to process what had happened—I had the chance then to redeem myself. But I didn't knock Tim down our steps, stand over his pleading body and give him the treatment he gave his wife. No. I did nothing—again.

The Sixers game was well over, yet I sat, had two more beers. I wanted no parts of leaving the bar, facing Bridget again. There was no total redemption, no statute of limitation, for being a pussy who didn't protect a woman, make her abuser pay for what he did, and it took a stupid save-the-date six years later, three beers and a few fistfuls of communal peanuts for an idiot, me, to soak this all in, to see what my wife's eyes were saying.

But I timed it perfectly and pulled up to the house just as the kids were being dropped off from the hayride. I walked through the door to laughs coming from the kitchen and little gifts—mini pumpkins, a stuffed animal shaped and colored like a candy corn—sitting on our piano bench. Bridget was asking them questions. Then I was asking them questions. It seemed that maybe the fight was finished, just another blip, another *thing* in a life that would keep on handing out *things*. She even told Declan to put his iPad down when daddy was talking. *Daddy*.

And after she asked the kids what they wanted for dinner and they both yelled *pizza*, she referred to me again: “And what does daddy want?” But when I looked in her eyes, “Pizza,” I said. “Of course, pizza”—that’s when I knew: I knew deep down, and deep down is the only place that counts, I knew that when our day was over and we’d done what we do, I’d be facing a different type of fight.