

The greatest joy that Roger had ever felt was during a game of catch with his then six-year-old son. It was just the two of them, the men of the house, free with the ball and their mitts and fresh air and sunshine. The boy had been so enthusiastic, thrilled beyond belief when he caught the ball, eagerly chasing after it when he didn't. Roger could remember a moment of fierce pride – *I made this* – while his son came bounding toward him like a Labrador puppy, all bright eyes and big smiles. He returns to this memory whenever he can, though it becomes more and more difficult with each passing day.

Even with the so-called protection of nearly a dozen deputies, one of the heartless journalists gets close enough to grab Roger's sleeve. He ignores it at first, thinking that the pull on the fabric is simply a result of being hustled along at a pace to which he is unaccustomed. However, his brain soon registers the pressure of fingers and a palm, and he whips his head to the left to find himself face-to-face with the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. Despite the gravity of the situation and the fact that his right arm is securely around June, Roger is mesmerized by the heavily-lashed blue eyes that gaze up at him. He straightens his shoulders and sucks in his considerable gut, no mean feat while speed-limping in the midst of a crowd.

"Mr. Deedman, a word?"

"No questions!" Terry barks, and June cranes her neck to see who has penetrated their bubble of safety, nearly tripping over her own feet when she discovers who has a hold of her husband's arm.

"Mr. Deedman, please."

Roger is tempted to stop, weakened by her courtesy. Most of them have abandoned even bothering with greetings or introductions, reduced to the barbaric practice of hurling intimate questions at him and his wife without so much as a "How do you do?" Not that an "excuse me" would soften the blow (*Excuse me, at what point did you realize that you'd failed as a father?*) but even a facsimile of politeness is better than nothing.

"Uh..."

"Don't you dare answer her, Roger," Terry growls, pressing the corner of his briefcase into Roger's back in a gesture of warning.

"I'm sorry, miss—" He stumbles on the curb but is held upright by the crush of bodies around him.

"Ignore her!" Terry's attaché case feels like a knife against his spine.

"Mr. Deedman," she insists, "how do you feel about—"

"Hey!" One of the cops belatedly notices the interloper and raises an arm to hold her back. She easily ducks and gets even closer to Roger. For one delicious moment, her breast – higher and firmer than June's – presses against his arm, and that is all that exists. She is panting and glistening with perspiration and he immediately imagines her in that exact state but naked and in a bed that he doesn't share with a woman who began to let herself go the second she said "I do." A long-lost and therefore almost alien pressure builds in his briefs, and his mouth drops open involuntarily. *Hello, old friend. Where have you been?*

Then June is saying something and the spell is broken. "Huh?"

"I said we're almost there," his wife repeats, and he glances down at her, ashamed of the thought that streaks through his mind – *Boy, are you UGLY* – and taking note of how she has pressed her lips together in what he recognizes as her "I know you're up to no good" expression. Sometimes he thinks she can actually read his mind.

"Oh." There is a van, white with tinted windows, waiting for them. The tension in his pants diminishes. The deputy finally succeeds in getting the pretty reporter away from Roger, and his heart sinks. But she isn't ready to give up yet and calls out to him again. He twists around to get one last look at her, spotting her easily over the heads of his "protectors."

"What do you think it means that the Spauldings neglected to show up today?" she asks.

"Roger..." Terry warns. They are at the van now, and June is being unceremoniously shoved inside.

"They're cowards!" Roger shouts back to the reporter. *"That's what it means!"*

How did I get here? he thinks later that evening. *How did I wind up in such a mess?* And he doesn't just mean the business with Greg, though that is certainly the bulk of it. He's sitting at a kitchen table that he's owned for nineteen years and never liked, across from a woman he's been married to for forty-three years and hardly recognizes (and, if he's honest with himself, likes just about as much as the table). He hates his job, his luck (or lack of it), the very air he breathes. *And yet you continue to breathe it*, he muses sourly, staring at the glass that only seconds before contained three fingers of whiskey. The empty glass suddenly feels like the saddest part of the whole day, but he knows how to remedy that.

His arm merely twitches in the direction of the bottle, and June moves it out of his reach without even looking up from her magazine. Again, Roger almost believes that she's some sort of witch, but the logical part of his mind reasons that watching someone's every move for four decades will endow anyone with a somewhat prescient quality. "That's not the answer, Roger."

"Then what is?" In the living room, he can hear his lawyer on the phone, pacing and probably wearing holes in the already threadbare rug on their floor. Terry's been with them all day, but the whiskey has made his presence less bothersome. "I lost my son today; at least let me have a drink in his honor."

She closes her magazine with a brisk snap. "You really think you're honoring our son by getting hammered?"

"It's better than acting like nothing happened. You didn't shed one tear when they killed our boy."

"I've been crying for Greg for eight years," June says quietly. "And tears wouldn't have made a difference today, now would they?"

She has a point there. He's unburdened of the need to form a reply by Terry's appearance in the kitchen doorway. His tie is loose and there are pit stains on what had been a pristine white shirt that morning. "I'm heading out," he announces. "You two okay here?"

"Are you asking if we can be trusted to behave ourselves in our own home?"

"You know what, Rog? I don't know. After that stunt you pulled today—"

"It wasn't a stunt. I simply answered a question—"

"About the Spauldings. I specifically instructed you to make no statements, and *especially* not one about the victims' parents!"

"*WE'RE THE VICTIMS!*" For a moment, Roger is baffled at the fear in Terry's eyes, then he realizes that he's risen to his feet. He makes an effort to lower his voice, knowing that one of the journalists who have been camped out on the lawn could very well have an ear – or a tape recorder – pressed to the back door. "Our son was killed this morning, or have you forgotten that?"

"Your son was executed by the State for the horrific crime he committed," Terry counters. "Have *you* forgotten *that*?"

"How could we, when we're reminded about it every five minutes?"

At this, Terry actually looks ashamed. "Just keep your mouth shut," he cautions, turning to leave. "And for God's sake, stay away from Stormy Elston."

"Who?" Roger asks, but Terry has already gone out into the melee. The burst of flashbulbs can be seen through the microscopic gap in the drapes.

"Your redheaded girlfriend," June replies dryly. "She's on Channel 7."

"She's not my girlfriend," he says, knowing even as it's coming out of his mouth that responding will only make things worse.

"Could've fooled me." She stands and snatches up her magazine. "I'm going to bed."

Once his wife has fallen into her Ambien-induced snoring, Roger turns off all of the lights in the house and dares to peer through the opening of the blackout curtains and out onto the front lawn. News vans are still there, though not nearly as many as had been awaiting their return from the prison. Reporters are standing on the grass and in the driveway, one or two speaking into their mics, but most just chatting or eating sandwiches or staring at their cell phones. Suddenly, he spots her: she's by the curb, dressed casually in jeans and a light-colored jacket. There's a cameraman talking to her, and she laughs, resting a hand familiarly on his shoulder.

With anyone else, Roger would have been livid that someone would dare to enjoy themselves at a time like this. But the sight of her throwing her head back, letting that glorious hair cascade down to her waist, is so bewitching that for a moment, he forgets why she's even there. She seems to be having fun, and fun is something that has been absent from that house for a long time.

June used to be fun. Oh, she had never been much of a looker, certainly not measuring up to Ms. Elston, but she knew how to have a good time. He was just nineteen and she sixteen when he knocked her up, and so he married her, because that was just what you did. Greg had been their only child, and now he is gone, but at that moment, none of that matters. What matters right now is the gorgeous redhead by the curb, and as she once again lays a slim hand on the cameraman's shoulder, Roger feels a tightness in his trousers.

He undresses quickly in the near pitch-black of the living room, his gaze never once leaving the newly-acquired object of his desire. Taking himself into his hand, he makes quick work of seeking release, and as he feels the sensation reaching a crescendo in his fist, Stormy Elston faces the house. She can't see him, he knows this, but still it's as if she's looking into his eyes, encouraging him, egging him on.

Roger's at the point of no return now, and vaguely aware of a distant thought – *Make sure to clean up or June'll have a fit* – right as the eruption hits him in a series of short but gratifying spasms.

"What are you doing?" June snaps on the light. Roger, still feeling the fading twinges of bliss, quickly steps away from the gap in the drapes. "You dirty bastard," his wife snarls, and as she strides toward him in her matronly nightgown, he braces himself for a slap. Instead, she reaches past him and pulls on the curtain so hard that the entire rod comes down, exposing him to the congregation on the lawn.

"Is this what you want?!" she screams. "Let everyone see what a fool you are!"

Roger gets one glimpse of Stormy Elston's horrified face before he turns to flee, trying in vain to cover himself with his hands. The frenzied spangle of flashbulbs accompany him until he is out of sight.

It's morning, and Roger sips his coffee in silence until June comes down to the kitchen. She pours herself a generous glass of orange juice to wash down her toast and oatmeal, neither speaking to nor looking at him. She simply prepares her food, arranges it on a tray, and carries it up to their bedroom.

He downs a second cup of coffee and then goes up to Greg's old room. There is no pain like the loss of a child, he's come to realize. Even though his son committed an atrocious act, and robbed another family of not one but two beautiful children, Roger still aches with the awareness that the universe has been thrown irreparably out of whack.

Kids are supposed to bury their parents.

That's just how it is.

He lowers himself to the bed, head bowed, hands clasped together between his problematic knees, and remains that way for a while, attempting to pray but unable. Instead, he finds himself in some sort of meditative state, listening only to the sound of his own breathing, the throb of his heartbeat in his ears.

A thud from the other bedroom yanks him out of his fugue, and he surmises that the sleeping pills, crushed to a fine powder and added to the carton of juice that morning, have kicked in. For the first time since he'd come up with the plan, it occurs to him that June may not survive. He's no doctor or chemist, and he wouldn't have the slightest idea of what would be considered a lethal dose. Coupled with his lack of control over how much juice his wife actually drank, there's a very real possibility that he may have just murdered her.

All he wants is peace. He wants to know that once his task is completed, no one will rush in and disturb the perfect silence that will immediately follow or alter the picture that he has so painstakingly painted in his mind. Whatever June wants to do later on is of no concern to Roger, but for now, he needs his quest to proceed unimpeded.

The point is moot if it turns out that his wife is actually dead, but there's not much he can do about it now. Either way, he's not overly concerned about the condition of his soul. It's not like she'll be the last person he kills. After all, she certainly isn't the first.

Because he killed Greg, didn't he? He killed him by not being attentive, by disregarding whatever warning signs had been there, by not believing that his son could do something terrible. He killed him with ignorance, indifference. He killed him with lazy parenting.

Roger rises to his feet and lays everything out according to the diagram in his mind: Greg's Eagle Scout uniform, immaculately pressed, across the pillow; his green cap and gown from high school graduation across the foot of the bed; various toy soldiers and robots in a semicircle on the floor; matchbox cars lined up on the dresser like a funeral procession. Gingerly, Roger steps over the toys to climb onto the bed, his bum knee giving a last twinge of protest.

Head on the Eagle Scout uniform, feet bracketing the mortarboard, Roger tucks the final two items, the last picture Greg took on the outside and the patch with his inmate number on it (this isn't the time to sugarcoat things, after all – the incarceration and the crime that led to it are just as much a part of his son as everything else) into his shirt pocket. He covers himself with the newspaper that came out the morning after his son was sentenced, the headline – *DEEDMAN'S A DEAD MAN* – tucked under his chin. Lastly, he carefully pulls the razor from his pants pocket.

The first cut is virtually painless, but the second hurts like the dickens, and Roger gasps at the unexpected sensation. It only lasts for a moment, though, and as warm wetness courses down his wrists, he finds himself thinking of the Spauldings, of the anguish on their faces in the courtroom as they heard the account of their daughters' ghastly slaughter, of the anger when they appeared on television to disparage the Deedmans, of the relief when their children's murderer was condemned to death.

Roger doesn't want his last thought to be of the Spauldings, and part of him begins to panic. As life continues to flow out of him, however, the discomposure fades and the Spauldings are as insignificant as the coffee he drank that morning.

He closes his eyes.

It's just the two of them, the men of the house, free with the ball and their mitts and fresh air and sunshine. The boy is so enthusiastic, thrilled beyond belief when he catches the ball, eagerly chasing after it when doesn't. Roger experiences a moment of fierce pride – *I made this* – while his son comes bounding toward him like a Labrador puppy, all bright eyes and big smiles. He scoops little Greg up into his arms, inhaling his little boy fragrance – grass and dirt and cookies – and holds onto him as tightly as he can, silently vowing to never let him go.