

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

Rebecca knew the importance of selecting the right knife. The bread knife was obviously out. Its blunt tip wouldn't scare anyone. The paring knife had the requisite sharp tip, but its extremely short blade wouldn't scare anyone either. The santoku was wrong too. The blade was extremely sharp, but its tip was nearly as rounded as that of the bread knife. Her large chef's knife would be okay, she guessed, but okay wasn't what she was looking for. The carving knife was intimidating but its inordinately long blade would be awkward. That left her with the six-inch filet knife. That seemed to be the right knife. It had to be. Finally, the opportunity had come and she had to get this right.

Of course she wouldn't set out to kill the burglar. She could never do that. Rather, she wanted to scare him off. But what if she couldn't? What if he rushed at her? If things got really nasty, was the filet knife really the best choice? Maybe he'd been confronted by women with knives before. Most burglars didn't break in just once. She'd read about crime and knew that. So choosing the wrong knife not only might not scare him away, it might make him bolder. He would think her a fool. But maybe he would simply think she had the wrong knife because she didn't have the right knife. Most households probably didn't have as many knives as she did. Most households didn't house a gourmet cook. So the filet knife it would be.

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

Sometimes when Robert was out of town and more often now that he was gone she'd wake up in the night and think she heard something and lie there and wonder if maybe she should have kept the gun. Robert had insisted that she have it for her safety. Then, one day Susan had come by with her four-year-old and he'd found the loaded gun in her bedside table and waltzed into the kitchen with it where she and Susan were having coffee. My God that was a terrible moment! That was when the gun went once and for all. Bringing her back to the knife where, inevitably, things had always irrevocably been.

The question of the right knife had haunted her since she'd climbed out of the gorge, although she'd not immediately realized it. Her numbing feelings of helplessness and inadequacy, feelings that had left her periodically chronically depressed, unmotivated, or passive, now returned to their source. The circle had closed. In a life of choices, the seminal choice in all of its naked simplicity was once again focused with absolute clarity. She couldn't face the trauma of getting this wrong again. Having once before made the wrong choice, a decision that had become as much a part of her as an exploded fragment of shrapnel in her body, this time she had to get it right. The decision was fundamental, primordial, and inevitable.

She'd heard noises in the house before. The place was full of them, full of ghosts—one ghost in particular who would not leave her alone. But this time the noises were real. She'd been relieved to discover that they were coming from the basement. That meant there was no impediment to her getting to the kitchen and selecting the right knife. An impediment to getting to the kitchen would have been enormously disturbing. *Becky, you didn't get the right knife.* That was what he had said and, although he'd said it just once, he had said it a thousand times. There was another sound from the basement

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

like that of a man trying to stifle a cough. She reached out and grasped the handle of the filet knife and drew it from the block.

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The camping trip had been Robert's idea. Then, at the last minute, he'd had to work and talked her into going. Camping wasn't one of her favorite things, but Bobby had been insistent and she'd given in. He was eight and could really turn on the charm when he wanted to. They were to rendezvous with several other parents and their children at a mountain campsite and pitch tents and stay for several days. They were planning to do a lot of hiking. She was looking forward to seeing the wildflowers, many of which were in full bloom. And the exercise would be good for her, she told herself. Robert hadn't had a chance to check what they'd need to take, so he'd told her at breakfast before he left town. A lot of it was obvious, but some things she probably wouldn't have thought of herself. "Be sure you take a knife," he said. "You'll find you have all kinds of uses for a knife."

The next morning she dropped the back seat of her small station wagon and packed the rear full of the gear they would need. It took several attempts to get everything in. After putting things in and taking them out a number of times, and wondering if she shouldn't have rented one of those little trailers like they'd used when they'd moved things from Robert's mother's house after she'd gone into the home, she finally found a combination that worked, but only by packing the tent poles so that they rested on the console between the front seats. She closed the rear door over the neatly and logically packed equipment and luggage with the satisfaction she often felt after the completion of a finite task.

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

They lived about an hour from their destination. For about half of that the road was increasingly mountainous. It had rained slightly that morning and the road was still damp. They were talking, laughing. Bobby was in a great mood, delighted to be going on this adventure. All of his friends were going to be there. It was going to be great. They'd listened to one of his favorite cassettes and talked about a book that he was reading. She listened as he talked about a new video game that was about to come out and that he had to get because it was going to be just so awesome, even better than its predecessor which had been pretty awesome itself but not as awesome as the new one was going to be. It was then, as they came around a sharp curve and began a steep descent, that the deer darted in front of the car.

The next few minutes—and it couldn't have been more than a few minutes—had become the point of orientation for the rest of her life, the point that everything started from and came back to. As she swerved to avoid the deer, the car skidded on the damp pavement. She tried to correct it, but the combination of the wet road and the steep incline made the car fishtail out of control. They went through a railing and slammed into a tree. The tree was one of those shallow-rooted scrub pines that grow at odd angles from steep terrain. The impact of the collision substantially uprooted it from the sparse, wet soil and the car rolled over it to finally rest suspended over a precipitous drop of hundreds of feet into a rocky creek below.

Dazed, with her heart hammering in her ears, their perilous state took a moment to dawn on her. When it did, she knew that they had to get out of the car immediately. She looked over at Bobby. He seemed okay, although his eyes were wide and he had a distant look. She released her seat belt and started to reach for the clip on his. It was

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

then she realized that the combination of her braking and the collision had shifted the tent poles forward between the seats and rammed them under the dash so securely that she could not get to the clip of his seat belt at all. Frantically she pulled at the poles, but they were jammed as firmly as if they'd been driven into place by a mallet.

She would have to cut his seat belt strap, she thought. Robert had been right about being sure she had a knife. She pulled her keys from the ignition and opened the knife on her key chain. She had no sooner started to cut on the strap than the blade broke. There was no other blade. It was just a penknife, a little thing Robert had given her years ago to open letters and cut string. It was worthless. How could she not have not known how useless it would be?

Bobby was now in shock, his lower lip trembling and his hand grasping his pants leg so firmly that his knuckles were whitened and his nails flushed as if they were painted. She knew that she had to call for help. To do that she had to get her cell phone from her purse. She had to think clearly. Where was her purse? She had to find her purse. The back. Yes, she had put it into the back with everything else to keep it out from under foot. She had to get it and call for help.

She opened her door and got out.

“Mom,” Bobby called, “Mom, don’t leave.”

She looked back to reassure him, tell him she wasn’t going anywhere, just getting her phone to call for help. It was then that she realized that the car was moving, inching forward. Her weight must have held it in place. She realized this later. Then she didn’t realize anything except that the car was moving and she had to do something. What she did was grab the door frame and, when she lost her grip on that and the car continued to

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

move, the trailer hitch at the rear of the car. The car not only continued to move, it accelerated as the slope sharpened. Digging in her heels she continued to grip the trailer hitch and pull back as hard as she could all the while muttering, “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

She was relatively strong. She swam and had broad shoulders and muscular arms. But she had no more likelihood of holding back the car than she would have had of leaping into an open tenth-story window from the sidewalk below. She lost her footing and was pulled over and dragged. For awful, inexorable seconds the car pulled her with it as it nosed toward the gulf. She was resolved to go with it. What kind of life would be left for a mother who let her only son fall over a cliff because she was too stupid to take anything but a worthless penknife on a camping trip? How hard would it have been to bring the right knife, the knife that would have cut through the seat belt strap? Tears coursed down her cheeks as the car pulled her on her stomach over the rough ground. It would make no difference now, she thought. No one would ever know how miserably she had failed.

The car pulled her to the edge with it, but she lost her grip and was brought up short by a shrub that was not substantial enough to stop the car but popped back up under it as it rolled over the edge to hold her bloody and dazed on the final sharply sloping lip of earth and rock before the drop to the creek below. There was a sound like the wind through the sails of a ghost ship. Or of an eight-year-old boy crying out in terror. Then nothing. After a while she tried to stand up, but her knees kept giving way and she would fall. Her legs felt like rubber. Finally she managed to stand and pull herself back up to where the car had rested mere moments before.

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

She heard a voice from up the slope and looked up to see a man standing in the opening in the guardrail her car had made.

“I said are you all right?” he called down the slope.

That was when she heard a voice screaming that she only belatedly realized was hers, and fell down to her knees and began beating the ground with her fists. Later, Robert said it only once, said it in his anguish and grief without thinking, said what she knew so his saying it no matter what the circumstances just put the proper emphasis on an realization of her inadequacy and worthlessness. *Becky, you didn't get the right knife.*

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She approached the door to the basement. It was ajar, as it always was so the cat could get in and out. The house was built into a slope and the basement faced out into the back yard. There was a door there with a cat door in it. As the doors and windows on the first floor seemed secure, she assumed that it was through that door that the intruder had entered. Light filtered out through the crack between the door to the basement and the door frame, emanating from the basement and confirming that there was in fact someone down there who'd switched on the light. Delicately, quietly, she opened the door widely enough to enter the stairway and started slowly down, holding the knife before her.

He was standing before the shelves where she kept her overflow from the kitchen, the open shelves that she called her “pantry.” Here were the cans of diced tomatoes and beans and chunk pineapple and tuna fish, the jars of salsa and apple sauce and olives and artichokes, the boxes of oatmeal and grits and cornmeal, the bags and boxes of myriad shapes of pasta, the bins of onions and potatoes, the bottles of flavored and unflavored cooking oils and vinegars, the imported fruit spreads and the fresh-ground peanut and

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

almond butters, the bottles of soy and peanut and fish sauces and Worcestershire and Tabasco, the bags of dried rice and beans and barley and couscous, the jars of her homemade mustards and jellies and jams, and of her pickles and sauerkraut and red cabbage. It was absurd, really. Since Bobby's and Robert's deaths it had just been her but she felt that she had to have this massive larder. Everything here was duplicated in sufficient quantities upstairs in the kitchen to prepare virtually any of the varied menus she loved. But she simply had to have the backup of several more cans, jars, bottles, or bags of everything downstairs.

The man had a couple of large brown grocery bags on the floor and had been filling them with things from the pantry. He glanced up from his task to see her. He looked her in the face, then at her knife, then briefly at her face yet again before he averted his glance. He looked embarrassed and horribly sad. He wore a faded baseball cap that had once had the insignia of some team or business or incipient enterprise emblazoned across its front but which now displayed nothing but an indistinct blur aged beyond any recognition. He was dressed in an olive-colored tee shirt under a dreary flannel one of indistinct hues that reminded her of one of her dust rags and jeans that displayed lattices of white thread that had worn through the denim over each knee to look almost like patches. Workmen's boots with toes that were so scuffed that no polishing could ever bring a sheen back to them protruded from under the frayed fringes that the cuffs of his pants had become. He was blade thin. She realized with chagrin that he didn't seem particularly cowed by her knife. But even as this thought occurred to her, renewing her gnawing feeling of inadequacy, she suddenly recognized him.

“Graham Barger?”

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

It came out as a question, but she did indeed recognize him, and he knew it, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other and looking down at the basement floor. One summer morning several months ago she had found a small piece of paper with her newspaper in the plastic tube where the paper was delivered each morning. “Graham Barger,” it said. “Yard work, landscaping, removal of yard trash, gutter cleaning. Will do all odd jobs. No job too small. Satisfaction guaranteed.” There was an address and a phone number. She prided herself on doing all of the yard work but, quite frankly, she increasingly just wasn’t able to keep up with it. The yard was almost two acres, with several flowerbeds and a great number of trees. It needed constant cutting, trimming, pruning, and weeding in the spring and summer. And there was that big pile of branches and sticks and cuttings at the bottom of the hill that was so unsightly. So she’d called Graham Barger.

He arrived in a faded green pickup punctuated with indiscriminate rust spots. There was a lawn mower and a small tractor in the back with a weed eater and an array of rakes and shovels and brooms lurking among several large red gas cans. When he climbed out of the truck and introduced himself she immediately noticed that his face was weathered and his teeth bad, but there was a sparkle in his blue eyes and she liked him. She hired him for the day to clear and haul away brush and take out several dead limbs in her trees. About mid-day he’d asked her if she had a bathroom he could use and she told him there was one in the basement and that the door was unlocked. That must have been when he’d gotten the idea to break in.

He brought his glance reluctantly back up to her face with a look very much like that of an old, tired dog.

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

“You don’t need no knife, ma’am,” he said.

“You let me be the judge of that.”

The nerve of the man! How did he know what she needed?

“I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry to get caught? I’ll bet you are. How did you get in?”

“Jimmied the door. It’s real easy to jimmy most of ‘em. I didn’t hurt it. Didn’t break nothin’.”

“What on earth did you think you were doing?”

“Well, I guess I was taking some food.”

“*Stealing* food, you mean.”

He nodded almost imperceptibly, saying nothing.

“Can you think of any reason why I shouldn’t call the police?”

“Please don’t do that, ma’am. I’ve never done nothin’ like this before. It’s just that things have been awful tough.”

He didn’t elaborate.

“That’s no excuse to be breaking into people’s homes and stealing things.”

“I know that full well.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“I told you, ma’am.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Okay then. Here’s how it is, ma’am. A few months back, right after I worked for you, I had a tree fall wrong and bang me up pretty bad. I couldn’t do nothin’ for some time and my business dried up. By the time I was back on my feet people had found

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

other folks to do their yard work and handyman stuff. My business still isn't back. During this same time my wife got laid off from her job and we were just makin' it on her unemployment when my boy Bobby got hurt real bad in a car wreck. We don't have no health insurance and the costs of the doctors and the hospital and all just ate us up. We didn't have money for nothin', not even food. That's how bad it got. We was goin' to the food bank, but lots of times they run out or gave us real small amounts to keep from it. Times are tough for lots of folks, I guess. And we had our other three kids at home, even with Bobby in the hospital, to feed. You have kids, ma'am?"

She shook her head, noticing for the first time that she had let the knife fall to her side where she held it pointed to the floor.

"Well, they eat right much when they're growing up. And you hate to tell 'em they can't have seconds, you know. Or, even worse, that they can't have no more on their plate to begin with. And—"

"That's enough," she said. "That's enough."

She closed her eyes. Some things were more threatening than an intruder in the basement.

"How's your Bobby?" she asked after a moment.

"They say he's going to be okay. But it's been a terrible time for us, ma'am. He had a punctured lung and two broken legs and his head was fractured, you know. It was bad, real bad. But he's going to be okay, thank God. Thanks for askin', ma'am."

"I'm glad your Bobby is going to be all right," she said.

Barger nodded.

"I guess I'll be goin'," he said tentatively. "If it's okay."

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

“Just keep the things you’ve got in those bags. And take anything else you need.”

“I couldn’t do that, ma’am.”

“So it’s all right to steal my food but you won’t take it if I give it to you?”

He looked sheepish.

“Well, if you put it that way . . . ”

“Look, no way I’m going to get back to sleep now. After all this turmoil you’ve put me through. And I’m hungry. So I’m going to make some coffee and an omelet. Maybe some toast. You can come up and have some, or go on and take those bags and leave. Up to you.”

She started up the steps and, after a moment, he followed her. She told him to have a seat at the kitchen table and he meekly complied. “Hope you like your coffee strong,” she said, as she measured out the beans into the coffee grinder. As the coffee was brewing she took out a cutting board and began chopping green pepper and onion, thinly slicing mushrooms, and cutting thin strips of smoked turkey. She used an array of knives, each selected quickly and without much thought. He watched her quietly for several moments before saying, “You sure seem to have the right knife for everything.”

She didn’t reply.

“You know,” he said after a moment, “I have one of those Swiss army knives. You know the ones with all kinds of blades and screwdrivers and corkscrews and pliers and scissors and stuff. I carried that thing everywhere for years. I was going to be ready for anything. Then when that tree fell on me I just lay there on the ground and thought how worthless that knife was for doin’ anything about the fix I was in. I was just sprawled out there till they found me. Sometimes life just throws things at you that it

## THE RIGHT KNIFE

don't matter what you think, you can't handle. I still carry that knife. It's handy for little stuff. But, shoot, when a tree falls on you, you can't do nothin'."

She paused in her cutting, looked at him.

"I may have some work for you, if you're interested. This old house is getting to be a bit much for me."

"Well, ma'am, if you think you could still trust me."

"Yes, I think I could."