

Last Day

We're in town getting groceries when she comes to collect her rifle, ammunition and other stuff. In the door, Tommy stops and says he can smell her. I can too. Her acrid sweat, her tart perfume. We hurry to the kitchen, and I tell Tommy to stay there and don't move while I search the house. I bring a butcher's knife with me.

"Maggie! Maggie!"

She's taken some clothes from her closet. Dresses, jeans, shirts, sweaters. Cowboy boots, house slippers, tennis shoes. Drawers are pulled out from the dresser, sock drawer empty, bra and panty drawer empty, most of her shorts and t-shirts. Her nail stuff gone. Her jewelry box gone. She's used red lipstick to write Fuck You Fucker on the dresser mirror.

I look under our bed, nothing but dust and dirt and stray socks. An old used condom. Hopefully mine. Her night table is missing her family Christmas photograph, the one where she was pregnant with Tommy. She beamed those months, a glorious time. Her other photos remain, me and her, me and Tommy and her. Also missing: her toenail clippers and Gideon's bible.

"Maggie! Maggie!"

I check the bathroom, holding my breath as I pull back the shower curtain. The toilet isn't flushed, bright urine. All makeup stuff removed, hairdryer; birth control and depression pills out of the medicine cabinet. Tampax box. Toothbrush and our toothpaste. Various shampoo and skin lotion bottles. Shower cap. She's even taken her pile of Q-Tips.

It's been a bad couple of weeks, nothing any good, reaching a crescendo three days ago, the night of the flying pot roast. We haven't seen her since. Not that things were that great before, they simply got worse. She and I haven't been on even ground for a long time. Some of it my fault, most of it hers, though that's always been the case since she started going out and drinking. I just figured it would all work itself out one day and we'd be happy again.

In the back den, really a third bedroom, I find the gun cabinet open, her rifle and shells gone. Maggie with a weapon. I load my small pistol and put it in my pocket, just in case, you never know. There's a finality here, not a happenstance. She must have been a whirlwind when she came to get her stuff. I don't get the Fuck You Fucker on the mirror. Why would she do that?

The living room seems unmolested, except for her Scrabble box missing from its shelf. Maggie loves that game. At least once a week we sit at the kitchen table and play and she always wins, though it is a bit unfair, because I can't spell and Tommy's too young, heading to kindergarten next month. Sometimes she plays against herself, pretending she doesn't know what tiles her opponent holds. And crosswords, angry when they're too easy, angrier when they're too hard.

Tommy stands big-eyed, trembling in the kitchen shadows. I flick on the light and put away the groceries, telling him she's not here. I open a box of ice cream bars and hand him one, hoping he'll calm down. Tommy loves his mother, probably more than me, and he gets badly out of sorts when she's on one of her tears. It becomes all he can think about. We sit at the table and eat our ice cream. Maggie sometimes says she's not sure whose he is, but if you look at those ears and dimples, I don't see how you could have any doubt.

"I miss mommy." He says. "Where's mommy?"

"Don't worry. She'll be home soon."

He's a good kid, from the start, a calm infant, aware and curious, mostly happy and considerate. But at five he's beginning to fray a little bit, his mother's moods taking their toll. I try to keep him stable, never speaking bad about her, giving her excuses when I can, doing my best to waylay concerns, as if that is possible. Our household is all to hell and I give him credit just to make it through the day.

I say we'll go out and find her and he asks where she is and I say she has to be somewhere, look for her, see if she is at work.

She's been erratic, some nights buoyant and kind, other nights mean and cruel. No matter what, she's good to Tommy, always his buddy. I'm the bane, the thorn, some nights saying she'll kill me, other nights saying she'll kill herself. Easy to blame the drinking, there is that, but something ugly deep inside has made an appearance.

Do I worry about our safety, about violence? I do, sometimes. Her anger, when full-fledged, would frighten an exorcist. Which is why I have the gun in my pocket. Better safe than sorry. Maggie on a rampage is never healthy.

Of course I won't use it, unimaginable, but I might need it for show. This is Texas and in Texas a man isn't a man without a gun.

In the truck, we hold hands and pray. I ask God to help us find Maggie and please let her be all right and not be in too much trouble. Tommy cries and I hold him against me, telling him his mother will be fine, we'll find her, and everything will be good. It's been three days since she disappeared. The flying pot roast. Leaving the house in a rage.

We drive into town, up Main, passing stores and gas stations, and stop in at the courthouse square. Upstairs, in county records, they make a big deal about Tommy, how big he's getting, and they say Maggie's been calling in sick all week, saying they're worried, asking if she is okay. I say she's getting better and she'll be into work on Monday. She's an assistant bookkeeper, mostly filing and copying and running errands, a simple job that bores her. I haven't worked in months, not since they closed the machine shop. My unemployment check helps, though not nearly enough. At least I get to spend time with Tommy. I wouldn't miss our days together for the world. We've become a real combo. This bad thing Maggie's going through won't last. I'm sure of that. Besides, what can I do? There's Tommy, and a cracked home is better than a broken one.

We head down FM 359, going by the run-down bars and honkytonks, our eyes peeled the whole time, searching for her beat up grey Impala, a dent in the side from when she clipped Wilson's mailbox. That was a long night. Late, after I'd put Tommy to bed, she came in drunk and manic, unsure of what she hit, worried she might have run over someone or something, and I went outside with a flashlight and found dents and scrapes but no flesh and blood. She sat at the kitchen table and drank beer and said she was changing her life, stop drinking, stop going out, stay home, be a good person, become a good wife and mother. That lasted maybe until Friday, then she didn't return for a day and a half.

Cars and trucks already parked outside Dan's Icehouse, day-drinkers getting their hours in. Dan hasn't seen her, not since yesterday afternoon, there with Mark Dolan, the Morris twins, far table. At the Wagon Wheel, they say she'd been waiting

when they opened, her and Mark Dolan, and they'd run a tab, four whiskies and five beers. I pay it.

Mark Dolan is a bad sign. He used to be all right, back in high school a decent guy, strongside linebacker, team captain, full of jokes and pranks, though since then he's grown testy and belligerent, prone to honkytonk parking lot fights. Handsome, broad shouldered, still an athlete's body. I know Maggie's lying when she says he's just a drinking buddy. If they haven't, then they will. It's impossible to imagine they haven't. She hardly tries anymore to keep her stories straight.

At the Sonic we eat a late lunch in the truck. I get a double and Tommy has his Jr. We share fries and a big Pepsi. He's on about his mother, where is she, what is she doing, is she coming home? I say she's good, no worries, of course she's coming home. I haven't told him about the missing rifle. That would send him into the stratosphere. I try not to think about it, hoping she's out hunting squirrels or whatever. One of her favorite things, shooting birds and animals, something she learned as a little kid, going with her dad into the woods and killing stuff. Deer season is a major holiday in our house. Her father drives up from Houston and they spend a four-day weekend in a cabin he owns deep in the woods, and they return with dead deer tied to the roof of his Cadillac. We eat venison for months.

"Dad," Tommy says, "where is mommy? Call mommy again."

I call, two rings, then a recording saying the voicemail is full, same as before. She must see my name, Scott, on her phone, before deciding to tap the decline option. I've been texting too. No reply.

On the seat between us, I find Maggie's dangly triangle earrings and it catches my breath. A Mother's Day gift from me and Tommy. She put them on and danced

around the living room. Maggie has this laugh, this magic in her eyes, the way she makes you feel like you are the only man in the world. How she can hold Tommy in her lap and tickle him and he's the happiest boy that's ever lived. How she's able to light up a room by simply being there. Smart, funny, exotic, something special, when she's sober. On a buzz, she becomes hard and difficult. Nights when her breath smelled like dragon fire. A night, in bed, the scent of another man on her skin. Shut up, she said, you don't own me.

Jan and Ken Deets are in the car next to us, finishing their lunch. I ask if they've seen Maggie and Jan leans out the window and says they saw her and Mark Dolan dancing at the Junction last night. She says Maggie looked like she'd had a few too many. She says I should rein Maggie in, before it gets too far. I've always considered Jan a sanctimonious bitch. In high school, she tattled on me and Maggie for playing in the backseat of Tom Green's car during our lunch break. Jan and vice principal Janks knocking on the rear window and Maggie grabbing for her shirt and me pulling my jeans back up. We still laugh about that.

At school Maggie was thin and boney, almost scrawny, but after Tommy she's become more lithe and supple. She pretty much has to wear a bra now, except at home, where she likes to walk around naked. I've told her a few times Tommy has gotten too old for his mother to get nude whenever she wants. She asks Tommy if he cares, if he cares his mother isn't wearing clothes, and of course he says no. She looks at me and says, see, he doesn't mind. She asks me if I mind her naked. If I don't like the way she looks anymore. I say she's great, and she is. She laughs and says she thought so.

I don't know what's happened. I mean, I do know, but I don't know. Maybe I don't want to know.

The carhop comes up to take our tray and she asks what we think about what is going on and isn't it crazy. Jan says it's just nuts. I don't know and Jan and the girl talk over each other as they tell me the Austin Country State Bank was robbed not even an hour ago, but nobody got hurt, except Thelma Louise fainted and hit her head and they took her to the hospital in an ambulance just to make sure she didn't crack her skull.

It's our bank. Tommy says he's scared. I say I'm scared too, which doesn't help.

We head back up 359, passing the square, the grocery store, veer onto 18, and I see the bank and a crowd and there's Sheriff Jim and his constables and some state troopers standing in a semi-circle. Red and blue lights flash around and around on top of the cop cars. Sheriff Jim flags me over, pointing to a spot, coming up to my side of the truck. He takes off his Stetson, smooths his sweaty hair.

"You seen Maggie?" He says. "We got to find Maggie."

They're looking for the Impala. People saw her and her car and they saw Mark Dolan get out of the car and go into the bank and use a rifle to hold the place up. Nobody got injured, Thelma passing out. Robbed every cashier. No idea how much money yet.

Sheriff Jim puts his hat back on. "You got to get me to Maggie before the state boys do. We got to set this right. I don't want her getting hurt."

Tommy starts crying.

"When's the last time you see her?"

"Three days."

"Three days, Jesus."

Tuesday was the night of the flying pot roast. I had the beef ready to serve, green beans and mashed potatoes on the side, when I saw Dolan's blue truck pull up in

our driveway and stop and Maggie get out and slam the door and weave up the walk and come barging in the back door yelling that she can't find her keys. She had her keys at Dan's Icehouse, and she had her keys at the Wagon Wheel, but she didn't have her keys when she was ready to leave from Mickey's Saloon. She'd ridden over to Mickey's with Dolan, and they went back to the Wagon Wheel, and they didn't have her keys, but she had to have had her keys when she went to the Wagon Wheel because there was her car in the parking lot. They returned to Mickey's and her keys weren't there, either. It made no fucking sense.

She rummaged through her purse time and time again, while Tommy and I set the table. I don't know what I did or said but I did or said something that set her off. I only know that my pot roast went flying across the kitchen floor. She stumbled over and kicked it to the corner, where she stomped on it until it became mush. I laughed, because it was absurd, and she didn't like that, and she went after me with her fists and I used my oven mitts to fend her off, and I laughed more, and that just got her to where she was growling and spitting and screaming, and she grabbed a fork and jabbed at me, and we circled each other in the kitchen while Tommy huddled up under the table. I wasn't laughing anymore. I kicked her shin, and she went down, holding her leg. Bending over, I told Tommy me and his mother were just playing a game. He got up off the floor and stumbled over to Maggie and cried in her arms. She held him for a bit and then she went out, saying I better be careful, I better watch my back, and I watched her on her phone at the end of our driveway and after a while Dolan's truck came to pick her up. What a nightmare.

Sheriff Jim leans an elbow in my open window. "This is bad, Scott, real bad. You find her, you don't do nothing, you call, you get me there. Let me be first and we might

get this right.” He nods to the troopers. “Those state boys might, you know, ask questions later. I just want her safe, okay? No reason to get it worse than it is.”

“What’s mom done? Did mom do something wrong?”

“Nah, son,” he says. “We just need to talk to her a bit.”

Her dad’s old deer cabin is way off in the woods. You go FM 721, past Kenney and the river bridge, three more miles and then left down a dirt road and another dirt road and then the cattleguard and the curving muddy ruts through a dense forest until you come out to the cabin and a small clearing. I’m pretty sure this is where we conceived Tommy, in the side bedroom off the kitchen, a muggy June night, windows open, flies and mosquitoes buzzing, our bodies damp with sweat, loud music, Toto and Africa, while we did some great long drawn-out lovemaking.

Maggie planned on college, Texas at Austin, a half-scholarship, dorm room and meal plan, probably leaving me in the dust. She finished fourth in our class of fifty. All she could talk about that summer, weaving college into every conversation. I had no idea what I was going to do. At the time, graduating high school seemed enough, maybe Blinn Junior next year. Then we found out about Tommy, beginning of August, her bags already packed for Austin, and I expected her to head down to Houston and end it, simple and easy, but she decided God had a plan and He wanted us together and us together with a kid. She threw away all the University of Texas forms, brochures and pamphlets, and never said anything about it again.

We come through the woods and up the shell drive and she’s standing topless on the front steps, a towel wrapped around her waist. She’s combing her wet hair, saying she’s been showering, saying it feels good to be clean, telling us to get inside and

wait while she dresses. It's all matter of fact, as if we've shown up for an afternoon visit, as if we're about to have a good time together.

I should call Sheriff Jim, let him know where we are, so he can handle this, but she's my wife and she's the mother of our son, and no matter how bad things get she still has my heart in the palm of her hand.

Dolan is in the kitchen, tugging at a bourbon bottle. He has on tight jeans and a loose t-shirt. Hey, kid, to Tommy, and asking me if I want a snort. I say no. Tommy goes to the window and runs a finger against the dirty pain, making a streak.

"They're looking for you."

"I bet they are."

"They'll get here."

"Yeah, man, but we're going, leaving, you know, heading to Mexico. I got a town I know about, right on the beach."

"Where?"

"Nah, nah, she don't want you to know."

They have a box out and they're taking her dad's liquor and canned goods. A garbage bag of bank money, bills spilling out, by the refrigerator. Dolan puts his bottle on the counter, rubs his eyes and says, "This is fucked up, but we'll get there. We got a plan. Fucking got to get it done."

I wonder if he expects me to pity him. He tosses Tommy's hair. "Sorry, kid, for the language."

I tell him to take his hand off my son. Tommy says it's all right and I say no, it's not. I nod him my way.

The cabin was built God knows when, maybe middle of last century, six tiny rooms, plank floor, no heat or air-conditioning, lucky to have lights and running water. The high school parties we had here, some after we had Tommy, though that's all petered out. I haven't been here in ages. I wonder when Maggie last came. Tommy doesn't trust the place, too many spiders and wasps, and one time we found a snake in the living room and watched it slither off and go down into a hole in the floor. He hasn't recovered from that yet.

Maggie comes out cradling her rifle in the crook of her arm. She's wearing the light blue summer dress I bought her last Christmas. She modeled it for us that morning, twirling around the house. Her boots echo on the creaky plank floor. She takes a swig from the bourbon bottle and another and then grabs a beer out of the refrigerator. Reaching down, she takes a fistful of bills from the money bag and tosses them at my feet, saying I don't need to thank her. She uses the rifle to point us to the living room, where she sits on the couch, crossing her legs, the weapon on her lap. Tommy and I stand, Dolan is behind me, in the doorway.

Shrugging when I say it's not too late, we can work this out, she makes a humph noise. Eyeshadow, pale lipstick, her blond hair combed back, revealing her face, an adolescent look, her nervous eyes dart around the room. Leaning the rifle against her knee, she pats the sofa and has Tommy sit beside her, taking him close, her arm around him.

"How's my little man?"

"I'm okay."

"I missed you." She snuggles her nose, smelling his hair. "You had a bath this morning."

“A shower.”

“That’s good. We need you clean.”

“I missed you, mommy.”

“Missed you too, bunches.”

“Are we going home?”

“Not today. We’re going on an adventure, you and me.”

“Where?”

“A secret.”

I say, “Sheriff Jim—”

“Fuck Sheriff Jim.”

She tickles Tommy and he laughs, happy to be beside her, though still wary. He has a lot of questions roaming through his head. So do I.

“Glad you’re here. Saved us a trip.” Maggie hugs him against her, turns to me.

“You didn’t think I’d leave my Tommy behind.”

The summer dress clings to her like a second skin. The cabin has closed in and becomes suffocating. She has Dolan open a window. Cricket noise rises from the distance, growing louder and louder, as we sit silently and wait for what is about to happen.

Maggie makes Tommy move away a little and she takes the rifle and points it at my groin and says I must be happy to see her. She has Dolan take the gun from my pocket, saying my car keys too. He takes my pistol and keys, then stands close behind me.

There’s a pimple on her neck. She must not know it, otherwise she’d done something about it.

She says God talked to her, choosing her path, last week, brushing her hair before work, she heard Him and He said He had big plans and she didn't know what He meant until that night driving home from the Wagon Wheel when she understood what He meant when He said Mexico.

"He told you to rob the bank?"

"No. That's just something we had to do. We needed money." She laughs. "You go where the money is."

"You should stop now. It might not be so bad. You can say you didn't know Mark was going to rob the place. You can say you were kidnapped or something. There's a way out of it. But you've got to stop."

"Too late." She sighs. "We're blessed. We're in His hands."

I tell her I don't believe a word. She's made up this whole God stuff. And she says, No, it's real. I ask what He sounded like. Was His voice big, loud, booming? She says it was soft. He whispered to her. Is she sure it wasn't like a bad hangover? Maybe she was hearing things. No, she says, it was God. She knows what God sounds like. I say, Bullshit.

I say, "Tommy, come here."

"Stay here, Tommy."

"I'm his father."

"I'm his mother."

Our poor son has no idea what to do, his little brain whirring, but he untangles himself from her and gets up off the couch and comes to stand next to me. His trembling body shivers against my leg. I lay my hand on his shoulder.

Maggie says it is all my fault. If I'd been a better man, a better husband, a real man, a real husband, none of this would have happened, but she didn't have a choice, she did what she had to do, she's doing what she has to do. She's saving herself and she's saving Tommy. She won't let me ruin their lives. And I say I'm not the one drinking and fucking around. I'm not the one staying out all night. I'm not the one throwing fits at home. I'm the one taking care of Tommy. I care for Tommy, not her.

She stands, leveling her rifle, and Dolan points my gun. We go outside into the sun and heat. The crickets are a monsoon. She tells Dolan to get their stuff and he goes back inside and returns with her travel bag, the money, and the box of booze and cans. He opens the trunk of her Impala, and it is packed with full trash bags and all our suitcases. It takes him a while to get everything set right.

Tommy remains by my side.

The sunlight on Maggie makes her look like she's bathed by a heavenly glow. Her translucent skin is ablaze. Her eyes are frosted blueberries. Her gaze shifts from me to Dolan shutting the trunk, and finally our son.

"Tommy! Come to your mother! Tommy! Come to your mother now!"

I keep hoping for sirens, for cop cars to appear on the road coming out of the woods, for this all to end right now. Her dad's cabin isn't a mystery. Everyone knows about it. Famous in its own way for our high school parties. By now they must have figured it out and heading here right this minute. Tommy steps away from me.

"Yes, Tommy." But he wavers. "Tommy, I'll shoot your daddy."

"She won't shoot me, Tommy."

"You don't want your daddy to die."

He doesn't know she won't shoot me. I think there's no way, out of the question, but she raises the rifle and sets the stock against her shoulder, turning to a firing stance. Maybe she will.

She says, "If you hadn't been such a bastard."

"How was I a bastard?"

"You've always been a bastard."

I want to say she's always been a bitch, but that's not true. There's been plenty of really great wonderful times. They all coalesce in one moment, about a year ago, a simple image, the three of us at the grocery store, trying to decide which flavor of Pop Tarts to buy, and for some reason we got the giggles and couldn't stop.

I say she has a pimple on her neck and when she reaches up to touch it I hurry forward, long, fast strides, and I'm almost there when Dolan tackles me to the ground like we're in high school. I see stars and I can't hardly breathe. He punches me with his hard fist, and I see galaxies.

"You want me to hit him again?"

She says no, that I'm not doing nothing, that I'm done, and she says, Come on, Tommy, and I lay there and try to get my vision straight and I hear car doors slam and the engine and tires on shell and then the sound of the car leaving into the woods.

I call the Sheriff, go inside and drink two beers quick. Pick up the money from the floor. Bring two more beers outside and sit on the steps. I picture Bonnie and Clyde getting ambushed in the movie and all those bullets. We watched it about a month ago, with Tommy asleep between us on the couch. Later, she played Bonnie and I did Clyde and we made love. That might have been the last time.

I hear the sirens first, then Sheriff Jim's car, followed by his constables' cars, appearing out of the forest. He stands over me, watching me finish my beer. I tell him they have Tommy, they have Tommy and they said they were going to Louisiana.

At home, I wander the house from room to room. Night comes, but I don't turn on the lights. Sheriff Jim calls late and says no word yet. Maggie and Tommy are in the house, their voices, their smells, their sounds, and I talk to them until dawn. In the morning, I shower and get dressed and sit in the kitchen and drink coffee. Jim calls again, no word yet. Maggie calls to say they are in Mexico, saying goodbye, one final dig. She lets Tommy on the phone and he asks when I'm coming to join them and I can't come up with a decent way to answer that. The day outside is hot and still, as if it is holding its breath.