

STRAPPED IN

Byron was stretched out on the couch in Keith's living room with his sixth beer in his hand. "Sometimes I think about killing you," he said, giving each word equal weight. "Plan how I'd do it and all."

Keith sat in an armchair across from him, an ankle of one leg resting on the knee of the other. It was Sunday evening, and his wife Laura was in bed with a book by some guy he'd never heard of. The baby had been sleeping since ten o'clock.

"That's heavy stuff," Keith said.

"You think so?" Byron said.

"You better settle down. Get married again."

"I've been burned once, haven't I?"

"If you say so."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out."

"Give me a break."

"It's your life. Not mine."

A year and a half ago, Byron's wife had walked out on him. His story was that she'd been running around since day one. The talk in town was that he'd been the first to take the step.

Byron closed his eyes, grunted. "I could spend the night right here."

Keith watched him take a final swallow of beer then set the empty can on the rug. "No more for you," he said, reaching for Byron's windbreaker and tossing it onto his chest.

Byron pulled himself to his feet. "What've you got in place of a heart?" he asked.

In the morning Keith woke up with Byron's avowal floating through his mind. His tone of voice, as Keith remembered it, struck him as stranger than the words themselves. Intimate, almost caressing. He pressed his head deeper into the pillow, pulled the covers tight across his shoulders.

At breakfast, Laura nursed the baby while Keith finished his second cup of coffee. "What did you two talk about until one A.M.?" she asked.

Keith knew it would worry her if he repeated Byron's words but went ahead anyway. He wanted to see what she'd make of them.

The baby's mouth slipped off Laura's breast, and she nestled it back. "Why would he say such a thing?" she asked.

"Beats me," he said. Maybe because the two of them were closing in on thirty. Maybe because things were going better for him than for Byron. At the time of his divorce Byron took a serious hit on his split-level ranch. Moving in with his Mom and Dad had not made anybody happy. Now he was staying with Jen Bradley, who was back

in town after six years in New Haven. She had landed a job at the bakery on Main Street and lived in the apartment above it with her kids. Three small rooms with shower/bath.

“Byron’s off in a world of his own,” Laura said. “You can see it in his eyes. He says one thing, but he’s thinking something else.”

“He’s an asshole,” Keith said. Even in elementary school, Byron had not been his first choice as a pal, or his second either. But these days, with his closest friends married, Keith found that he came in handy on nights when Laura was glued to a book, and not much was happening on TV.

“I think you should stay away from him,” Laura said, smoothing the baby’s hair.

“Easier said than done.”

Byron worked for a real estate company that was planning a sub-division on a one hundred and seventy acre farm half a mile from the village of Westfield, and Keith was doing the survey. He was in no mood to meet Byron that morning, but he couldn’t get out of it. When he pulled up to the site in his pick-up, Byron was standing beside his black Buick SUV with the radio playing the heavy metal station out of Hartford. He said lots 10 through 14 had to be reconfigured to save money on driveways.

“Shit,” Keith said.

They were the lots on the hill behind the fields, and the land grew steeper as the two men moved up the rise through tall grass still wet with morning dew.

“I need it by tomorrow,” Byron said, when they reached the summit.

“No way.”

“Be reasonable. Okay?”

“Thursday. Take it or leave it,”

As Keith headed down toward the road, Byron called, “Will you be around this weekend?”

Keith shrugged without looking back.

Byron’s eyes followed the trail of dust kicked up by Keith’s truck. He knew he’d gone too far the night before. Lying on the couch, his thoughts had drifted to a documentary he’d watched on cable TV earlier in the week. It was about a young schoolteacher who hired one of her students to kill her husband. The kid used a kitchen knife, and the police photos showed the guy’s slashed neck and blood soaking into his shirt. Next thing Byron knew, a picture came into his mind of him standing over Keith with a knife in his hand. Before he could stop himself, the words spilled out.

Byron knew that if Keith and Laura were able to find a baby-sitter for a couple of hours on Saturday evenings, they often stopped by at the Fife ‘n Drum to listen to the piano player. On the chance they’d be there that weekend, Byron decided to drop in with Jen for a drink.

“Hey, Keith,” he said, sidling up next to him at the bar. “You remember Jen Bradley, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Keith said. Her first baby had come along when she was still a senior in high school. Her second by a different guy later on. Or so he’d heard.

The women introduced themselves while Byron ordered drinks, including another round for Keith and Laura.

“No more for us,” Keith said.

“It’s Saturday night,” Byron said, signaling for the bartender to go ahead.

Sitting at the bar alone with Laura had made Keith feel like they were dating again, a sweet mood shot down by Byron's arrival. He wanted to tell him to get lost but swallowed the impulse. Keith's short fuse had landed him in trouble more often than he liked to remember. Which did not make Laura happy.

"We're taking Jen's kids swimming at Lake Waramug tomorrow. You guys want to come along?" Byron asked.

"I'm afraid we can't," Laura said, her voice sharp. "My mother was in New York all last week taking care of some things at the apartment. She just got back up here this morning and wants us to bring the baby over for lunch."

"Yeah, that's right," Keith said, although it was the first he had heard about the plan. From the beginning his mother-in-law had made it plain that a guy whose father directed the town crew did not measure up for Laura. In her presence he always felt like he hadn't washed his hands or cleaned his nails.

"Boy or girl?" Jen asked.

"Boy," Laura said. "Nine months old tomorrow."

While the women talked about their children, Keith studied Byron's face. In the past when looking at him, he'd seen the kid he went to school with, who was always uncertain whether Keith would treat him like a friend or a pain in the ass. Now he found himself facing an overweight man with features that registered discontent even when he smiled. His eyes had a hard glint, and his cheeks relaxed into a sullen mass. Keith could imagine him doing something crazy. Let him try, he thought.

Ten minutes later, Keith signaled for his check.

“You haven’t finished your drink,” Byron said.

Laura stood up. “Tomorrow’s a busy day,” she said.

The following Saturday the Lion’s held their annual lobster cookout in the village. At past cookouts Keith and Byron had worked together on the big pots, dropping the lobsters into the boiling water and scooping them out when they were ready. To avoid standing next to Byron all day, Keith offered to be cashier, the job nobody wanted.

“What’s the matter?” Byron called when he saw what Keith was up to. “Afraid you’ll scald your hands?”

Keith laughed, but only because he knew he should. “You got it,” he said, making change for the first sale. No more jobs from Byron’s shop, he decided. Plenty of work was coming in without that.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Jen arrived at the cookout tent with her kids and picked up cokes and a couple of lobsters. Studying her as she walked toward him to pay, Keith thought that without make-up she looked older than he remembered.

“How’s Laura doing?” she asked, handing Keith a twenty dollar bill.

He kept his eyes on the cash box while breaking the twenty for her. “You know how it is with a baby in the house,” he said.

“It doesn’t get any easier,” she said, moving off.

A few minutes later, Laura came along pushing the carriage her mother had given her. Keith thought it was too fancy for Westfield, but there was nothing he could do about that. When Laura stopped to find out how things were going, Keith nodded toward Jen, who was sitting at one of the tables beneath the trees. “Look who’s here,” he said.

“I suppose I should say hello,” Laura said.

Keith knew all of Laura’s expressions, and as she headed toward Jen, he saw that she had put on what Byron called her “gracious lady” look, something he wouldn’t have dared say to her face. Keith wished she’d stop doing that. Until they married, she had been a weekender. As it was, the other women in town never felt at ease with her.

By quarter to five, all the lobsters had been sold. While Keith counted up the cash, Laura waited to walk home with him.

“Jen’s got herself in a mess,” she said. “Her place is too small for Byron and her kids. He’s always yelling at them.”

“What does she expect?” Keith asked. “He’s not used to kids.”

“He better get used to them if he’s going to stay with her.”

“Who says he’s going to?”

The short cut to their house on Lane Street took them through the parking lot behind the liquor store. Seeing the Lion’s V. P. unlocking the door to his car, Keith stopped to tell him how much money had come in during the day. When he turned to catch up with Laura, he saw Byron climbing into his SUV. Keith was hurrying behind it, when the tail lights came on, and it shot back toward him. The brakes squealed just as the bumper hit his left leg, and he fell in against the rear window, catching himself with his hands. He was shaken up, but not hurt.

“You dumb bastard. You almost ran me over,” he shouted, as Byron jumped out onto the gravel. Keith was getting ready to swing at him but held back remembering his promise to Laura.

“My foot slipped off the brake. Hit the accelerator,” Byron said.

Keith slapped the dust from his pants leg. "Forget it," he said. It could happen to anyone. It had happened to him. But he'd be smart to keep an eye open when Byron was around.

Byron wasn't sure himself whether it had been an accident or not. He knew he didn't decide to do it. But he couldn't remember his foot slipping either.

"Keith, wait," he called, but Keith kept going.

A couple of weeks later, Byron stopped to cash a check at the drive-in window of the Union Savings Bank and spotted Keith inside talking to a teller. After nodding, Keith glanced away from him with no further sign of recognition. Byron felt the slight but despite that drove around to the other side of the bank and stopped his SUV behind Keith's pick-up, blocking it. They hadn't spoken since the incident at the lobster sale, and he thought maybe, if they could just be alone together for a while, they'd fall back into their old pattern. Then everything would be okay again, wouldn't it?

A day earlier, Byron had put a down payment on an unfinished house a mile or so outside the village. He wanted to find out what Keith thought of it.

"Got a couple minutes?" he called as Keith crossed the asphalt toward him.

"There's a property I'd like you to see."

Keith waited a beat before answering, "Sure. Why not?"

The house stood on a two-acre lot with a brook running through the back. The outside was enclosed with plywood, but inside the framing was open between the rooms. The owner had run out of money in the spring, but from time to time, when he had the cash for lumber, he had put some work in on it himself.

“You were right,” Byron said, as they stood looking at house.

“About what?”

“When you told me I needed to settle down. I’m thinking maybe I’ll stay on with Jen.”

There was a pause, then Keith said, “Why not? She’s okay.”

“She’s had her problems,” Byron said.

“Who hasn’t?”

“You know what I mean.”

“As long as you don’t get too serious, why worry about it?”

Although the remark didn’t surprise Byron, it hit him hard. “Fucking son-of-a-bitch,” he thought. There was no way now that he could tell him he was thinking about marrying Jen. Suddenly, Keith’s face appeared in Byron’s mind as if isolated on a TV screen. The disdain on it told Byron all he needed to know. Keith did not want him hanging around anymore. Period.

“Feel like a beer?” Byron asked, trying to sound casual. “I’ve got a six pack with me.”

“I think I’ll wait till I get home.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. “Come on in. I just want to show you how I plan to fix up the place. It won’t take but a minute.”

As they climbed to the second floor, Byron pointed out where the bathrooms would be, then led the way into the skeleton of the master bedroom. From it a door opened to a deck above the attached garage.

“Go on out,” Byron said, letting Keith move ahead of him. “From there you can get a good look at the brook. It’s real nice.”

As Keith stepped onto the deck, he noticed that the railing was only partly in place. Cut wood for finishing it was stacked nearby next to a barrel with a hammer laying on top.

When Byron spotted the hammer, a picture shot through his mind. Blood oozing from the back of Keith’s head. Coating his hair. Trickling down his neck. He grasped the handle, raised it an inch—then hesitated and let it slip from his hand.

Alerted by the scraping sound behind him, Keith grabbed a short length of two-by-four and swung around, landing a blow on Byron’s head above the ear. Byron lurched against the railing, broke through it, and fell to the cement driveway below.

When Keith turned to run down to him, he saw the hammer on the barrel, exactly where he had noticed it seconds before.

Reaching Byron’s side, Keith knelt down and touched his shoulder. Stirring, his eyes still closed, he whispered, “I can’t move.”

That was when the full seriousness of the situation hit Keith. He called 911, then reached for Byron’s hand. He was still holding it when the ambulance arrived. The attendants were strapping Byron onto the stretcher when a state trooper’s car swerved into the driveway, its blue light flashing.

“What happened?” the trooper called out as he hurried toward the stretcher.

At the sound of the trooper’s voice, Keith felt a tightening in his chest. He should answer his question, he realized, but wasn’t able to muster up the will.

“I fell from the deck over the garage,” Byron said, his voice low, when the trooper reached him. “I leaned on the railing, and it gave way.”

Later that evening, Keith received a call from Jen at the hospital. An operation on Byron’s back was set for early in the morning. No hope for his legs, though. He wouldn’t walk again. “I’ll never be able to get him up and down the stairs at my place,” Jen said, her voice giving way. “How are we going to live?”

A few days later, when Keith learned that Byron’s dad had located a used mobile home for sale and was having it set up behind the unfinished house, he volunteered to put up a ramp so Byron could get in and out in his wheelchair. After he moved in along with Jen and her kids, there was talk about him going back to work, but as his condition sank in and disability checks began to arrive, he lost interest.

When Jen became pregnant, Keith was surprised that Byron insisted she keep the baby. As it got harder for her to give Byron the attention he needed, Keith filled in by ferrying him to the doctor’s and handling small problems that arose from time to time.

Often on weekends, Byron wanted to get up a game of hearts. If Laura made too much of a fuss about “another one of those evenings,” Keith went without her. The two men kept the sound high on ESPN while they played, so they never talked much.

THE END