

The Impudent June Dinnertime

Ted Curran made it most of the way home from work on June 7th when he realized he had been lusting after his own wife.

He was on a long straightaway after exiting the Turnpike and had noticed an extraordinary redhead in the car behind him. His place of business, and the workplace of his wife Emma, were nowhere near each other, but their routes home both finished through the Turnpike and it wasn't unusual that they would cross paths on the way. Although the shape of the front of the car behind him looked like Emma's, the angle of the sun in that impudent June dinnertime made the car, in the rear-view mirror, look black. The direction of the shade mostly concealed her face above the nose but cast in brilliant illumination a strong beautiful chin with a pouty lower lip marked as clearly by shadow as the noble profile of a Grecian goddess. The hair spilling majestically over her shoulders like a cape looked like fire. With sunglasses on, the driver behind him could have been in her early twenties or her early fifties and it is natural that the part of a middle-aged man's brain that is tuned to locating women's faces, would have assumed twenties. Then the light changed and both cars moved and, with more space now between the cars, he realized the car behind him was hers and the profile and regal nose and chin were her.

Ted knew at least four ways home from that point and Emma turned toward the one she had always considered most efficient, while Ted proceeded straight ahead, choosing the country road option. He loved that road at that time of day at that time of year, and felt the clamp of the day loosening on his heart. Ted held a theory about memory, episodic memory to be specific, the kind of memory for distinct events in one's own personal life. These episodes, he felt, were somehow stored in the human memory banks not only by the time of the year but by weather conditions, as though in a grid with the weather as columns and the times of the year as rows. So a particular October dawn wouldn't remind him of a dawn last October but perhaps one from ten years ago that was similarly unseasonably warm. Something about the angle of the sunlight. Yesterday had been a chilly day for June, wet from start to finish, and it made him remember his son's kindergarten graduation and sitting in a humid auditorium listening for his name while weather flagellated the windows. But June 7th reminded him of a bright careless, lengthy day fifteen years earlier, when they each left work early and drove together to Lamaze classes in a leafy suburb.

When Ted arrived home, Emma had not yet appeared, and he intended to remind her that the shortest route is not always the quickest. He looked in on his son doing homework in the office, and then futzed around the kitchen wondering what Emma had planned for dinner. There was a recipe on the kitchen counter for Swiss steaks and he opened the fridge to confirm the presence of the meat. Once he tired of waiting for Emma he went upstairs to change out of his work clothes but when he came back to the kitchen, she still had not arrived.

“Mom say anything about having book club after work?” he asked his son Ray, who said no. Her running shoes were also in the closet. So Ted sat down and read some of the newspaper.

After an hour, he was pestered by the theory that she may have stopped to see her sister Claire, which posed an uneasy dilemma because Claire was prone to panic, and if he called Claire and she hadn’t seen Emma, it would be a big deal. He sent Emma a text and after an hour elapsed with no response, he was torn between irritation and concern. He bought pizza for the boy and had enough appetite to eat half a piece. When Ray was taking his shower, he called Emma directly instead of texting, but there was no answer on the cell phone. He told Ray that his Mom was probably on a business trip and Ray seemed to take this with a shrug. Ted did consider this a reasonable theory but he couldn’t do much to check on it until the next morning when someone would be at her work. He got maybe forty-five minutes of sleep, with the cell phone on his pillow in case she called, with the volume turned all the way up.

He took Ray to school the next morning and neither of them said anything about Emma. When he returned home, Ted called Emma’s work. The woman she worked with said that they had been just about to call him, because Emma hadn’t shown up. She knew of no business trips or scheduled sales calls.

Ted then called his own work and alerted them that he would be late. It seemed to him that the next step would be to contact the Police, though he had heard that someone had to be missing three days before they could investigate. If they did investigate, their first question would likely be if he had contacted her family. Whether he was spiritually ready to call Claire was another matter. However, he came to accept that this was next, and he placed the call. It proceeded just about as he expected; Claire had not seen Emma, and immediately transitioned into screeching accusations to the effect that he didn’t care about his wife because he hadn’t yet called the police, and that he had driven her away. These hurtful charges were followed by hysterical apologies on Claire’s part. With effort he got her calmed down and ascertained that she had no useful information about any unusual plans.

An hour later, he was meeting with a Detective Wong at the local precinct. "It is not actually true that we have to wait for three days," the detective was explaining. "We can investigate as soon as the family has reasonable cause to believe an absence is unusual." The police station was calm and well-lit, and felt more like a realtor's or a place where people buy trendy computers, if not as lively. Ted saw no prostitutes or gang members, or at least none who could be identified by the stereotypical tells.

"I guess it is possible that she told me about a trip or plan and I forgot." Ted allowed. "But she doesn't travel much for business and they didn't know of anything. I can't remember any overnight trips she ever took by herself. Occasionally she would visit faraway relatives, but then she would go with her sister."

"Is anything missing? Did it look like she had packed anything? Are all the suitcases still home?"

"I didn't notice anything. I don't know if I would recognize all of my wife's suitcases, but it sure seemed like there were as many clothes as before. There's barely room for any of my clothes in our master bedroom closet."

"Would you be amenable to me taking a look?" asked Wong. "I have some experience here and I have a pretty good feel for things people take if they are deliberately going missing."

Ted hesitated, because what Wong had requested struck him as also a very plausible request from a policeman if he had cause to suspect the person who had reported the disappearance, and wanted to look for evidence of foul play. But it did not seem like this was a good reason to say no, so he agreed.

Detective Wong took an unmarked car, as if to spare Ted from questions by the neighbors, but on the other hand, he spent over an hour searching the house. Ted followed him to some extent at the beginning, as the policeman gingerly inspected Emma's toothbrush and other sink items, then started opening clothes drawers and closets, never touching much. Wong noticed that their master bedroom hamper was full, and he silently pointed that out to Ted. "Do people who are preparing to disappear do wash first?" Ted asked.

"Depends on how long they have been planning."

Ted grew tired of accompanying the search, and before long, grew concerned that he would need to leave to pick up Ray before the policeman was finished. Finally Wong reappeared and agreed that there was little sign of missing items. "We can check her credit cards," he noted. "The ones that are in both your names you can do on your own. The ones in her name, they probably won't tell you anything. I

can get authorization to see those records but that would be after a set interval.” They shook hands and agreed to inform each other of any developments.

By the passing of four days, all the credit cards and bank accounts had been heard from, and there was no activity that wasn't Ted. Her cell phone hadn't been used and was not turned on, so it could not be located by the phone company. She had not reappeared or made any contact. When Ray got home from school that night, Ted watched him reading a book and he wondered if the boy was more worried than he seemed and how Ted would explain it to him if his mother never returned.

“Dad,” said Ray, breaking the reverie. “I don't mean to be a pain, especially when we are worrying about Mom.”

“What is it, Ray? It's not a problem.”

“Do you think you could cook something tonight? I'm getting a little tired of pizza.”

Ted nodded. “Mom left this recipe for the Swiss steak.” He picked up the little card, which had been left unmoved from the last day he had seen her. “The steak should still be in the fridge.” When Ted located the meat, however, it was a sickly swampish brown and he realized it had passed its sell-by date. He wasn't much of a cook and had not really thought about the fact that food could spoil on its own if simply left alone. “Maybe we can order take-out one more night and then cook tomorrow,” he said.

The steak seemed to go over well the next night, and Ted found some other recipes simple enough for his meager skills for a few more days. There was no important news – Claire called once to blame him for Emma's absence and then apologize, and Emma's work also called with apologies and reviewed their pay policies for an employee who stopped coming to work. “But when she comes back, her job will be here,” the woman at Emma's HR said. Ted could not tell from her tone if she thought she was comforting him or humoring him.

He heard nothing from Wong or any other officials, and called once to confirm that they had no news. For variety, Claire called to say that Ted should be taking Ray to a child psychologist to make sure he was coping well. Ted told her that Ray was coping just fine but when they had finished their conversation, he tried to have a talk with the boy, who quite naturally seemed preoccupied and scared. Ted told Ray that it was OK if he complained sometimes. “You know, you can be yourself. You don't have to be the perfect boy, just be yourself. Wherever Mom is, she will come back as soon as she can and she isn't expecting you to be somebody else.” The boy didn't say much in response, so Ted took another guess

and said "I will never leave you. Even if you complain sometimes." He saw water in the boy's eyes like fractured glass and he hugged him silently.

A few days after that night, Detective Wong had an update for him.

The cop didn't want to give the information over the phone but asked Ted to meet him at the station, in half an hour. Ted again had an uneasy feeling as though this is what might be said to a suspect, but there was no sign of anything untoward around Wong's desk.

"Mr Curran, we still have not found your wife. But...we have found her car. Actually, colleagues of mine found it and we have been able to make the connection to Mrs Curran. There was no sign of foul play and they did not find anything in the car of the nature of receipts, travel stuff, any clues about why it was where it was found. It was found in Chicago."

Ted looked stupidly at a wall for a few moments. "That's impossible. She wouldn't have gone to Chicago by herself. We always talked about going together. My son wanted to see the Cubs."

The detective remained silent.

"Could this be some kind of 'Gone Girl' situation?" Ted asked, falteringly. "Could she have set things up to cast suspicion on me for her disappearance? Or just a 'Doll's House' situation where she just became tired of being a wife and mother?"

"Well, Mr Curran," Wong said carefully, as if following some script to avoid lawsuits, "in both of those works of literature, there was some precipitating event, or series of events. Scandal, betrayal, lots of arguments. You told me earlier that your marriage was fine and you couldn't recall any arguments. Have you remembered some that you had forgotten?"

Ted thought carefully about this question. "No, nothing. We were fine."

"Further, Mr Curran, we didn't see any clues that pointed any suspicion at you. We currently don't consider you a suspect or even have any evidence that there is a crime involved. Should we?"

"No, no reason to." Ted looked down. "Could it be a case where, for some reason, maybe just for a split second, my wife wished she could be somewhere else, but she wished it so intensely that it happened?"

Wong shifted in his seat. "Mr Curran, I feel I can speak intelligently about fictional situations that are realistic and are set in the same physical world we inhabit. I don't know what to say about that last speculation."

“Sorry.” He looked at his hands. A blue vein was visibly filling and the back of his hands looked like a map of a square state in the interior.

“I need to share another thing, Mr Curran. Though my precinct did not learn of it until today, your wife’s car was found on June 6th. And it looked like it had been abandoned a few days before that. But even June 6th is two days before you contacted us. Are you sure of the day that you last saw Mrs Curran?”

Ted stared and Wong had to repeat the question.

“Of course, how could I not be sure? She was right behind me on the road from the Turnpike. I recognized her face and the make of her car and the license plate. The next day I didn’t go to work – you could check my timesheet.”

“And you couldn’t be mistaken about having seen her that morning? Or the day before?”

“It is burned into my memory. I have been without my wife for five weeks. My son has been apart from his mother. How could I not know when that started?”

The policeman nodded. “I do not mean to increase your pain. I know that when your wife disappeared, whenever that might be, that it was horrible. I could...I could imagine a situation where...she disappeared one day, and your concern, possible lack of sleep, fear, might cause you to believe you saw something and someone you only imagined, or to perceive a different person in a different car in a way, a way consistent with what you wished you were seeing. Perception is tricky.”

Ted swore he was not mistaken, but when he got home his confidence was shaken enough to seek affirmation from his son. “Ray, what do you remember about the last day Mom was home?”

The little boy moved some vegetables around his plate. “Dad, I feel like all the days since the last time we saw Mom have only been one day, and all the nights only one night. One long night that never ends and the day never comes. I don’t really think I can remember about the day before that.”

A few days later, Ted arranged for Ray to spend a weekend with Claire. Ray seemed to enjoy that and came home with some signs of cautious cheer. Claire seemed to benefit even more and did not seem to take the weekend as an opportunity to turn the boy against him.

Ted was paying bills late on a night not long after, scrutinizing the expenses for ones that might have been from Emma, and finding none. He wondered how the bills would be paid when her paycheck

stopped, and then blamed himself for worrying about something so insignificant. When he had finished the payments, he was so weary he walked upstairs without turning the lights off in the kitchen.

When he arrived at the upper hallway, there she was. She was emerging silently from Ray's room, her halo of hair a dull brass in the dimmed hallway light, her green eyes and proud pouty chin unmistakable. She wore a white lace top with a white sweater and a long floral skirt; they looked like clothes she might buy but Ted did not recognize them as clothes she already had. Emma held a slim finger to her lips and said to Ted, "I didn't want to wake him up." Then she moved past him.

In confusion, Ted continued to Ray's door and eased it open. He saw the familiar dark lump under the covers, gently rising and falling with a soft snore like a far-off clock. Ted turned to look for Emma but the hallway was empty.

He listened for noises from downstairs but he heard nothing – no footsteps or drawers or doors. That suggested the bedroom but no living thing was in there. He turned on all the lights to be sure and checked the bathroom and closet. Then he continued downstairs anyway and turned on every light as he entered each room – none were apparently disturbed. There was a basement, and he went down to it, and walked into a mist of spiderwebs. No one was there. He remembered an industrial-sized camp flashlight and shone it behind storage boxes, water heaters, even a damp crawlspace. Then he returned to the ground floor and checked the garage, which was gratuitous, because he would have heard the door to the garage opening from the mud room. He checked every closet again, and also the little hatchway into the attic. At this point he had broken into a clammy sweat. He found nothing, nothing in the house that hadn't been there when he had finished the bills, with one exception. On the kitchen table, there was a rectangular, bone-colored card with a recipe for lemon chicken.

The silence in the house was a warm, living velvet.

Then he had a thought, and returned to his son's bedroom with the flashlight. Under the bed, in the closet, under the desk. There was nothing. No one. He gently pulled back the covers to verify that Emma was not in the bed with Ray. Then he saw a dark shape about the size of a pocketbook on the covers near Ray's blanketed feet. Ted balanced the torch on the dresser; in that position it lit up the bottom of the boy's sleeping face, a miniature version of Emma's protruding lower lip and jutting chin. The shape on the blanket turned out to be a souvenir Cubs cap, attached to a small bag from a gift shop. The bag was unopened but through the plastic he could see commemorative baseball cards, a baseball book, scorecards, and a baseball.

