

THE PLAN

Secretly, Susana had always wished for this day. The call came midmorning just after she cleared the breakfast dishes, and put the baby down for his first nap. There wasn't time for a shower, so she pulled her hair into a ponytail, washed her face, and put on a little lipstick and mascara, all the while her heart raced and her hands shook. She moved quickly but quietly. Acting calm, she asked her neighbor, Moya, if she could stay in the apartment while the baby slept.

"Will you be long?" Moya was an older Indian woman, who often needed a ride to the fish market or the specialty spice store.

"I don't think so," Susana tried to sound nonchalant. "It's probably just a flat." Moya nodded, but wrinkled her brow in confusion, then waved Susana off and closed the door.

Now in the car, Susana took some deep breaths. While she waited at a traffic light she thought of all the jokes she had made about divorcing Mark, or being the mother of three children living in a two-bedroom condo. It was like sharing a shoebox with the Green Giant and three little giants only no one was jolly. Everyday brought the same fights, the same silences. Eventually, fighting was too tiring and sarcastic comments became her way of venting. Mark took those better, and got over them faster, than if she tried to have a conversation. He saw it as her just blowing off steam, not as a sign of any real unhappiness.

When the light changed, she felt compelled to race through it, but then thought it better to slow down and be careful. How awful would that be to get into an accident this

morning of all mornings? She remained calm and contemplated the call. Mark was in an accident and the police needed her to come down. Thinking logically, she concluded Mark didn't make the call therefore he probably couldn't. On the other hand, the officer didn't say he was hurt or to meet at a hospital so it can't be that bad. Susana checked her gas gauge. She had less than a quarter of a tank. She could probably make it there but possibly not back, or anywhere else for that matter. There was a gas station that was sort of on the way. To go there would mean she couldn't take the parkway unless she backtracked slightly. She stopped at the next red light. To turn or not to turn, that was the question. When the light turned green she told herself it's now or never. She quickly put on her blinker, much to the dismay of the line of cars behind her, and rolled into the intersection. She checked the clock. She had only been driving fifteen minutes. How long did the police expect it would take for her to get there, she wondered.

While at the gas pump she thought about their morning. It started with the typical stress of getting the kids ready for school and packing lunches. Mark always got up with the kids and made breakfast, half dressed as to not risk his shirt or tie getting splattered by food. Justifiably so since he would lock their one year old in the high chair for far too long, while he berated the older ones for dawdling. By the time Susana came downstairs Mark would be thoroughly fed up and storm away to finish getting ready. She always perceived that as his time to recharge so he could yell at them all the way to the car for misplacing a sneaker, or losing their pizza money before leaving the house. How different would he have been today had he known he would never see the kids again?

On the way to the accident Susana took a side street through a residential neighborhood. When she passed the local middle school she could see the kids in the

schoolyard having recess. There were a few boys playing basketball, and some girls jumping rope. She drove slowly, thinking about how bitter and angry Mark had become. She knew he was stressed about work and the kids were a lot to handle sometimes, but generally his life was good. She tried to keep an orderly house, cook healthy meals, and have his suits and shirts readily available for him. They used to be the happy go lucky couple that always had people over for a barbeque in the winter, or spontaneously drove to small towns in Connecticut to have dinner. Before they had kids, they'd go into the city and catch a show at the last minute, then find a bar and drink with the people there. Mark would buy round after round, and they'd make out in the cab on the way to the train station. Nowadays when he drinks he gets sarcastic and self-deprecating, kind of depressing in fact. His whole attitude toward their life angered Susana. He would always point out their shortcomings; the kids had no manners, the house was so unorganized, they were always late. There was never extra of anything; flashlights, batteries, baby wipes. She took all his complaints very personally, which only added to her daily grind of cooking, cleaning, and planning. She felt like she was under such scrutiny, and resented his constant criticism. And now, there was the possibility of that being gone forever.

The road went through a woodsy area behind the school and old tudor houses. The winter was just about over but the trees were still barren, and the streets were speckled with small dirty patches of snow. Susana recalled how relaxed she felt when Mark was away on business. She would set her own pace for chores and there was less tension around meal times. The kids were so much more agreeable about doing homework and pitching in around the house. When they were asleep she didn't seem to

mind cleaning up or doing the ironing. If Mark were home, she'd iron while he had a beer and got on the computer. Then he'd retire to the bedroom to watch ESPN, and be asleep by the time she came up. When he was away, Susana would take a long bath and maybe do some knitting. Once in bed she sometimes thought about how her life would be if Mark never came home. There would be no heavy silences, or avoidance tactics. No obligatory sex.

She turned onto the street that led to the small central business district. She came to a stoplight in front of city hall. She would never remarry, she thought. The idea of having to take care of another person on top of subjecting her children to a separate authority figure made her think getting a dog would be less work. Most likely, she'd sell the condo and move back to the west coast, closer to her sisters, and a lower maintenance climate. It was always a goal to get back to Southern California but somewhere along the way they became dug in, settled in the suburbs of New York and forgot to look back. Susana was still young, under thirty-five, and could just date once in a while. The chances of some guy wanting to sweep her off her feet, with three kids, and a dog were pretty slim anyway. If she dated, she wouldn't have to spend the night with the guy or make sure his shirts were pressed. The ball would be in her court. She could go to bed alone, comforted by the fact that he wasn't expecting breakfast in the morning. Her life would be virtually the same but with a few dinners out, where there were no confrontations on how to deal with the kids. After all, Mark didn't really help that much around the house anyway. The only plus to having him is that she can leave the house without bringing the kids, which one of her sisters could easily do if she lived closer to them.

She would have to go back to work, however. Full-time employment was never really her thing, but Susana was actually pretty good at sales. In fact, she was making more than Mark at the time they got married. Once their first child was born she decided to walk away from the money to raise a family. He had always assumed that she would stop working, but then never really made up the lack of income. Could she go back to having a boss, reporting for duty in the morning, dressed and made up to meet with clients? Susana caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror. Her eyes looked brighter with the mascara, and her lipstick gave her mouth a nice sultry look. If she grew out her hair she'd look a few years younger. A little more effort and she could sell ice to Eskimos. Going back to work would mean drinking coffee and reading the paper in an office. Even a cubicle sounded nicer than her sink full of dishes, and the laundry spilling into the hallway. Thinking it through, Susana asked herself when would all that other stuff get done? "At night!" she said aloud. "Just like it does right now!"

Her foot hit the gas harder than she expected when she thought about how many times she stayed up late folding laundry while Mark and the kids went to bed. There were countless Sundays when she'd take the kids to church then to the grocery store alone. Mark would stay home watching football, claiming it was his only day to himself. Single parenthood was starting to sound amazingly similar to her day-to-day existence; only she had this other obligation called marriage. It wasn't what she thought it would be. She really thought they would be more of a team, leaning on each other, coaching one another on how well they were doing. Instead she felt like Mark was the coach, and she was the flailing quarterback, constantly throwing interceptions. If she caught another one of his disappointed looks one more time her head was going to pop off. Susana was

riled up just thinking about it. Why were so many of their days like that? She let out a sigh of frustration, and drove slowly past the library and fire station. For so long she had thought about a moment like this. In her mind, it almost became a fantasy but she told herself it was just a plan she needed to have “in case anything happened.” Here it was, as if everything led up to this moment. She would know what to do. She had her plan. She could be strong.

From where she was stopped, Susana could see the sign pointing to the parkway entrance closest to where the accident occurred. There were a couple of cars in front of her and the post office was on her left. A stray tan and black dog was in the parking lot, sniffing around the trashcan outside the entrance door. It was such a rare sight in the suburbs, but by the look of how skinny and young the dog was Susana sensed that someone dumped it in a local park hoping a kind soul would take him home. She watched the dog for minute; it had no collar and Susana could see a small patch of mange forming on his hind leg. His ears would perk up at anyone approaching, eyes pleading. A few men in suits walked by with their briefcases in one hand, and their newspapers in the other, paying no mind to the furry being as they made their way to the train station two blocks away.

Men were so clueless, she thought. They faithfully went to jobs every morning in order to maintain a life that slowly unraveled as soon as they walked out their front door. Did they think it was all cupcakes and pjs at home? It was a job like any other; only there were no co-workers with whom to commiserate. Susana knew Mark hated his job but felt he couldn't leave because they needed the healthcare benefits. It occurred to her how difficult that must have been for him. How many times had she wondered how *his* day

went? Not often. Mark was a good man; worked hard and loved his kids in his own way. He very well could have been as depressed as she was and possibly tried to kill himself in the car. Was his life with her and the kids so bad that he would do that? Could he have acted so selfishly and just cut out like that? Suddenly Susana imagined he could; that he would not have thought at all about how she'd feel, and somehow would have justified it in his mind that she was better off without him; that she was still young and could start over. The car behind her honked and the thoughts of resentment and bitterness rushed out of her mind as she approached the parkway entrance.

Flashing lights and police cars lined the shoulder of the road when Susana arrived at the accident. She could see Mark's car pulled to the side. It was smashed in the front and along the passenger side. There was glass everywhere but she couldn't tell if the windows were broken or just all open. The airbag had released. Susana rolled down her window to speak to the officer directing traffic.

She told him who she was and he showed her where to park before pointing to the ambulance. While walking toward the paramedics she watched them lift a gurney with someone lying on it into the back of their van. She quickly ran around the open door to climb in and but then realized the person on the gurney wasn't Mark. When she turned around she saw him, leaning against a police car and talking to an officer. He wasn't hurt. In fact, he was hardly disheveled. Upon seeing her, he just shook his head. She saw that familiar look of disappointment in his eyes, but it wasn't about her. He nodded at the officer and was dismissed. Susana forgot about football on Sundays, and grocery shopping with the kids. She forgot about the West coast, and going back to work. As Mark hugged her, she simply forgot all about her plan.