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## The Suicide of Danny Tompkins

On the third Tuesday of every month the guys from work and I got together at Harry's in Middleboro for the best wings in Massachusetts and a couple of drinks. The tradition involved three guys I came up with in the same academy class, and two brothers made along the way. It was a break from wives, kids, responsibilities, and though we talked about work often, a sane reminder that we were friends out of uniform and out of the institution.

We sat out on the patio around a glass table bordered with green plastic patchwork enjoying the sun after a long winter behind the walls and sitting inside.

I decided to toast Danny Tompkins with our fifth round of beers after the meal. All of us knew him and revered him in certain ways. Our glasses climbed and after I said a few simple words the mood became reflective. We shared with Danny Tompkins that odd, dark bond that came with understanding the stresses of our work, of knowing what it was we truly did and the ways it changed you. I wasn't the only one who realized that in the right circumstances we too were vulnerable.

"I've been thinking about making some changes," I said. My audience shifted in their chairs. "The thing with Tompkins really got me to thinking that other than a few things I'm not that happy. I don't do much outside of work and it's not like work's fulfilling. Bill, you've got the bike; Alex, you've got carpentry on the side; Paul's got his car restoration; every one of you have something that makes you forget about all the job's bullshit. I don't. And sometimes I feel it building up. This thing with Tompkins made me realize I had to take control. Dave Harris told me about a 5k he's doing in June, and I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna start running."

The faces at the table were unreadable for a moment. I looked at Bill, a close friend, but also a cynical prick. Everyone at the table anticipated the dry, bitter comment that was sure to come.

"I give it one week," he said. He punctuated the point with a drink and the table laughed.

"Well, I'm gonna start tomorrow."

"A week."

"Good for you, Bobby," Alex said. "You're not the only one here who was upset about Tompkins. I think it hit home with everybody in its own way."

"It's true. If you can't do it for yourself than do it for him," Bill said. ""Is the wife gonna start running with you, too?"

"No, if I know my wonderful wife, she'll think it's just a phase."

"How long does it take something to become a habit, like three weeks?" Bill said.

"She could use a jog, too," I said.

"I'd fuck her over my wife any day," another one said. "You just let me know, and I'll get the day off and come see her."

I laughed.

"Have you guys ever stopped and thought about all of them, though...the suicides?" I didn't need to cite statistics, disturbing enough alone, the cold percentages on discarded employee assistance pamphlets in trash cans all over the DOC. Over the years we'd seen, even at our institution alone, two flesh and blood suicides annually. Men and women with stories we knew. "With Danny I started thinking about reasons. My take is it's bound to happen if you prioritize all the wrong shit and have nothing to fall back on. Talking to Harris the other day, it struck me that I live to work and that I'm not healthy."

"I've got the same fifteen years in you do," Bill said. "You don't see me hanging in a closet do you?"

"What if you got hurt and fell on tough times and had to get rid of the Harley?"

"I can't even think of something so horrible. Good God, you take it back."

I'd grant you that you'd be surprised with the amount of sensitivity this issue got at our institution. You'd also be shocked at the amount of typical responses you'd get: "Why would you kill yourself over a bitch?" was almost a poetic refrain at this point, what the unseen chorus contributed to the tragedy. The usual cowardice associated with these things.

Dave Harris had said it best in the days after, that even in the Department of Correction where the fruits of oblivion were ripe for the picking, you didn't expect to hear about a guy like Danny Tompkins. He was the jolly big-guy type, quick to make you laugh, and somehow not miserable after twenty-five years in the Department. He had this habit of staring at your food when your fork slowed down and saying, "You need any help with that?"

In 1996 there was an orchestrated race riot at our institution. At noon it all popped off in the cell blocks, at the gym, and in the yard: hundreds of men fighting with weapons, fires being set, property being destroyed and thrown off the tiers. When most officers locked themselves somewhere, opting to let the riot tire itself out, Danny Tompkins ran into the fray. He possessed a fearlessness gained through a decade of inmate violence, a trained handle on adrenaline after a time period that long hemming the edges of anarchy. Screams of agony and primal joy coursed through the institution's veins. The music of sending a fist into the soft, glass jaw of The Man clanged around him, rose in heat from the flooring and bled through the walls.

He assisted three officers being assaulted along the institution's main corridor on his way to becoming a myth.

Elisa Ridge, a brave and hardened woman, who worked the units unlike most of her female peers, had been pulled into a cell by a vicious sex offender when the melee broke out. Danny Tompkins beat the inmate to death and prevented unspeakable things from befalling her.

The story was that he'd arrived before anything happened, though that seemed improbable. Elisa was an imploded version of herself afterward, the body language and eye contact of the once in-your-face woman

different. She no longer worked the units and softened. She loved Tompkins from that point on. They dated for a while, but it hadn't worked out. He ended up meeting the woman he would marry and have three kids with soon after.

Fifteen years later this woman would throw the sort of curve ball some people can't connect with later in life, cheating with the man she would leave him for. And so, despite his teenaged children, the great Danny Tompkins took the Smith and Wesson .45 out of his gun locker, drove his truck to a Walmart parking lot, and then shot a sizable, all-business caliber round through his temple.

People spoke of Elisa, who would've happily been his second wife, wailing over him and kissing the closed casket at his wake.

"A part of me thinks that if Danny Tompkins could be a statistic, any of us could."

They agreed. I could tell by the way their beers lingered at their mouths and how the conversation petered out with long sips and serious looks. Things like this happened, and they were unpleasant. Like most guys we worked with, they wanted to shake their heads and ask why for a week, and then have time scrub the blemish off. He clearly had some issues, they and others will think. It sucks, but it really isn't my problem.

I wasn't inclined to agree.

The living room couch demanded that I relax when I got home from work the next day. It did everything short of turning on Sox coverage for me and grabbing a Bud light out of the fridge, but I made it by. I found navy blue sweatpants, a white tee in a bedroom drawer, and a pair of Asics.

I felt bulky and foolish at the local high school track as I stretched near the bleachers. There was a field hockey practice happening on the field the track circled, dozens of young, fit high school girls and coaches all over the place. I remembered back to a time when I'd catch a few interested looks doing something like this.

Dave Harris would've felt different in this position, the mastermind behind my being at the track. Even rookies looked at Harris, a man in his thirties, and got self-conscious about the shape they were in, the way his arms, chest, and shoulders pressed the seams.

Harris and I had got to talking about how Danny Tompkin's suicide was making me re-evaluate my life. He gave me the stock advice he gave everyone first, not to drink.

"Drinking breeds more drinking," he'd said. "It's an easy cycle to get stuck in. Why should adult life only be about drinking? Everyone thinks that. There are millions of things people can do to relieve stress."

"I don't have any stress relievers or hobbies. I work, keep the wife happy, and drink."

"You have to take care of that."

"How?"

Then came his suggestion. He told me he was running a 5k to support the Wounded Warrior Project at the beginning of June, and that I should do it with him. We'd run in memory of Danny Tompkins.

"Don't give yourself time to find reasons why you shouldn't. It's April right now. You have over a month to get ready. Start training."

There was a group of three attractive women my age, decked out in colorful athletic clothing and sunglasses that covered their faces, who walked the track. They seemed to walk at the pace I ran.

Half a mile came pretty easy, but as soon as I hit a mile my body realized how foreign the act of running was to it. The breeze which had been pleasant, drying the sweat that formed on my hairline, turned on me. Now the cool wind was intent on forcing itself down my throat. It burned and prevented me from taking it

in. The rubber track caught fire and burnt the arches of my feet, headed up my calves and shins, hinted at cramping my quads.

"You're a goddamn C.O.," I told myself. "Tougher than this. Better than this."

My adrenaline was through the roof at a mile and a half. At one end of the oval track a dizziness hit me. My vision went yellow and wouldn't stop turning yellow. I tried to deep-breathe it away. I staggered off the track, onto the field, where the darkness that came after the yellow exploded into white and gravity brought me to rest in the grass.

I had a full panorama of endless blue sky above me, and the smell of grass filled my lungs that could breathe again. I was alert and felt spiritually alive, a space between happy and silly that confused me. An angelic face, with subtle tan lines where her sunglasses had been, appeared before me, one of the walking women.

"Hon, are you okay? You took a spill there."

She knelt down and waved her hand in front of my eyes. I smiled.

"Can we lay here for a while?" I said.

"You're still out of it. Do you want me to call 911?"

"No, no, look." I braced myself with my hands. "See? I actually feel good. I must've pushed a little too hard."

I thanked her for helping me and she left.

I told my wife about running the 5k with Dave Harris when she got home. I still hadn't told her about Danny Tompkins, because she hated things like that. She said I was lucky when I told her what happened at the track.

"I'm surprised you didn't have a heart attack."

"No, I just pushed too hard. I'm not that big."

"No, you aren't that big."

"I'm not dead yet either. I felt great once I caught my breath. It'll only get easier."

"Good for you, Bobby. It'll be good for you."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"Like what?"

"Sarcastic." I called it sarcastic even though it wasn't. It was that flat, neutral tone women use to humor men.

"No, I mean it. Don't hurt yourself, though, we need that paycheck. And don't let it interfere with our time together."

"Anything else?"

"Nope."

"Okay, thanks for the support."

"It's too bad it's May, if you'd started a month earlier you could've ran the marathon. What? I'm kidding."

Elisa and I worked a unit together later that week. The air conditioning provided comfort during a quiet morning. The unit workers were cleaning, and a wave of inmates had left for their institutional employment. The tables bolted down in the unit flats, the common area in the center of the space, where come night chess, cards, and pinochle would be played with the passions of men with nothing else to be passionate about, were empty.

She talked about Danny Tompkins even weeks after the fact, maybe because she had a fresh pair of ears to listen. I hadn't gotten a chance to sit down with her yet. She'd taken time off after it. She told stories of laughs at work, stories about them together at work outings, stories about the two of them on his boat.

"I didn't realize you two were that good of friends. I knew about what happened, but I guess I didn't know."

"Danny was a special breed. One of the good ones. Fuck, he was the prince that little girls think about going to balls with when they're little."

"He was definitely a good man."

"Bobby, we know each other pretty well....I trust you enough where we can talk about things."

"And with good reason."

Her eyes welled up, and for the first time I noticed the purple signs of sleepless nights below them.

"Danny and I loved each other. We've been romantically involved for fifteen years. It's an open secret around here."

"What? His wife and kids, though. He's been cheating on his wife this whole time?"

"Cheating? No, it wasn't cheating. As I got older those naive outlooks on life changed. There's on the one hand a love that works. It's stable and safe, family, waiting on Medicare and the kids to take care of you. Then on the other there's something much more real. A true love that means more than any of the important administrative bullshit in life. A reckless love that's unavoidable. I think we're all entitled to it."

"But—"

"But what?"

"You guys couldn't have both of those?"

"I guess some people find that. We never talked about it. It went without saying that reality outside the walls would crush what we had. We had our institutional love, one night a week together, and our yearly trip to the Nassau Resort."

"Wait, if Danny had you to kind of fall back on, then why'd he do it?"

"I'll never understand the suicide of Danny Tompkins. There's only one thing I understand now: that my husband and I are retiring to Florida. Twenty seven years is enough is in this business. And with nothing keeping me here I can't do it."

The workouts went well, my distances inching farther in length, my energy up. It was a Wednesday, the same day that I'd gone to the track for the first time. When you work in a prison for any amount of time you start thinking in repetitive cycles, also known as becoming institutionalized. Behind the walls there are things that happen at the same time daily, weekly, and monthly, to the minute. The same has a tendency to happen in your personal life.

I had a feeling as I parked that the girls' field hockey team would be practicing, and that the women who'd been walking would be there, too. I knew that the one I'd asked to lay with me would be there.

I came at them from the rear a lap in, and I was surprised to see the woman who'd helped me slow down as I neared. She put her hands on her hips, maybe trying to look winded, as her friends carried on. I felt nervous around her, the type of nerves my body had forgotten. What I knew was the uncertainty that came with confronting inmates. I knew the adrenaline that reminded you that there was no plan, and that flooded you with the violent, base human emotions as felt by an ancestor outside the cave.

The woman's hair, dyed or not, was a blonde with twice the sun's splendor. Her skin was bronze and healthy and glowed in contrast to her pink sports bra. She looked our age, but had the presence of a woman in her twenties, a quality of aliveness. I stared at the hollow in the small of her back between the pink top and the waistband on her black leggings.

A lazy noon rain shower had laundered the day, and on the freshened air I could smell her perfume, her exotic, feminine energy.

I ran a few yards beyond where she'd slowed to a stop, and smiled back at her.

"Oh, you were expecting me to stop?"

Her eyes crinkled up as she tried not to smile. Within several steps beside her, a cloud passing overhead went by and we walked together into a stretch of sunlight.

"You can keep going if you want."

"I think I'll stay."

"Sure."

"Thank you," I said. "Last week when I was having a tough time."

"For a second when you came to, I thought you were, uh, special."

"Special? As in special ed special?"

Her voice fell to a mocking impression of my own.

"Can you lay with me for a while?"

"Now you'll be surprised as I get smarter and smarter before your eyes. My strategy is to arrive at the bottom so I have nowhere to go but up."

"What a go-getter....I'm kidding, I thought it was childish and adorable. You reminded me of my kids."

"Uh oh, you say it like you have many."

"I'm a nurse. I work with children going through cancer treatment. You reminded me of one of them, holding my hand bed-side and asking me to stay with them. The last thing a child wants is to be left alone."

"Do you have kids of your own?"

"No, my hus—ex-husband—and I never got around to it. It's quite possible that he has children with other women, though, if it makes you feel better."

"It does not."

Her friends rounded the far side of the track, watching us without being obvious. Part of me wanted to make a joke about a possible plan being at hand, a "Do your friends always let you talk to strange men?" but I could tell from her body language, a slight perceptible tremble, that she was far from the safe inertia of her comfort zone. Instead I told a lie, that in the moment felt like the truth.

"My wife and I just separated. This is me getting back into shape for the single life."

She pinched at my side, the love handle, and frowned. "A little work to do, but you look good,—"

"Bobby."

"Bobby, I'm Hannah. It's nice to meet you standing up."

"Maybe I'll get to know you lying down."

"Do you have a phone on you? Okay, I'm giving you my number because I see something in you," she said. "It could be bullshit, but it also could be something. I did not give it to you so you could get to know me lying down, just so that's clear. Now goodbye."

She walked away after that with the caricatured strides of a power walker, her arms tomahawking by her sides, off to reunite with her friends.

Good god, I said to myself as I watched her go, you might've just fallen out of and in love again within a span of five minutes.

#

I hugged my wife longer than usual when she got home that night, kissed her cheeks and forehead, hamming it up a bit but being sincere at the same time.

"We're having a nice dinner tonight," I said. "I went to Stop and Shop for ingredients. How does Parmesan-crusting salmon and a salad with a fruity dressing sound?"

I watched the pleasant surprise on her face turn to a genuine smile.

"No, baby. Work was awful today. The last thing I want to do right now is cook. But I'm glad you found the grocery store. How about Chinese?"

"No, I'm gonna cook."

"Do you know what you're doing? I can't even cook salmon."

"Look, it's baking in the oven right now."

"It smells good. If you're trying to turn me on tonight, I'll tell you what: it's working. I think I have a bottle of Yellowtail in the fridge."

"This is what the new me is gonna be like," I began, as she pulled the cork stopper out of the bottle and gave the liquid a weary sniff. She went to hunt down wine glasses in the cabinet above the stove. "I can run all I want, but I also have to start making better food choices to get myself back in shape."

She wet her lips with a sip of wine.

"I like you with a little meat on you."

"Well I don't want any meat on me anymore. I want to lose some weight and do this 5k and from now on live a healthy lifestyle."

"Ugh, you sound like a vegan or something. I don't want you to turn into a health Nazi. You're not gonna go vegan are you?"

"Vegan? No. I made salmon for Christ's sake. Listen, I really need to do this."

"Why all of a sudden? You've been fine with the way things have been for years. Don't get upset with me, Bobby, I'm just curious."

"I just want to change for the better, I guess. To feel good, look good. I want to get at it every day so it becomes routine, and I'd like you to have my back."

"I've never seen you like this."

"Like I said, it's gonna be the new me."

"Okay," she said. She took another sip from her glass, wrinkled her face at it, and then poured the rest in the sink. "Don't be annoying about it and it's fine. I'll support you." She gave me a one-armed hug, and turned to walk to the living room. "We all go through phases," she said, as her hips sauntered out of the kitchen.

The disappointment in my heart was severe. When you tell the grown man you're married to that a life change he wants to make is a phase, what you're saying is that you don't take him serious. All a man asks for is to be taken seriously. Here I'd been, thinking the lifestyle proposal plus a nice dinner and a good lay for both of us could provide the new start we needed.

The salmon ended up overcooked and dry, but the raspberry vinaigrette and the crispness of the romaine lettuce complemented it.

I was rehearsing a phone call to Hannah as we lied in bed. I heard my wife move and then turn on her side. We couldn't see each other in the dark.

"Are you mad at me about this?" she said.

"No, it's fine."

"Are you sure? You'd tell me, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. That's it?"

"That's it."

"I can't stand you sometimes, Bobby. Honestly, if you are mad at me get over it. I'm used to us being a certain way, and doing things a certain way, so I don't have time for this. I'm not gonna change up what's been working for five years."

"Okay."

"I can't," she said. "Oh my God, I can't. I'm tired. Good night."

#

Once again we were at Harry's. I was excited to bring up the topic of Hannah with them, and could see that they were waiting for me to come out with whatever had been putting a smile on my face. We weren't even a beer in.

"I think I need some advice," I said. "It's about a chick."

Skeptical looks. One muttered, "Like...a chick, chick?"

"Her name's Hannah."

At the name Hannah an abrupt clatter of metal chairs stuttering across the patio's concrete slabs began. They all leaned in closer, attent and ready for details.

"Go on," Bill said.

"Hannah," I said. "She's a divorcee I met at the track."

He pointed a finger at me.

"Did you bang her?"

"No."

I could speak freely with these guys. The divorce rate at the table was high—Bill at two and counting.

"Do you guys think I should give her a call? She's gorgeous. We've been working out together for a few weeks. Perfect body, looks great for our age."

"I don't know," Alex said.

"I need to start going to the track," Bill said. "Does she have any friends?"

"What don't you know, Alex?"

"You're not built that way," Alex said. "I can't picture you cheating on your wife."

"I think I'm done. The other night something just clicked and I knew I didn't love her anymore. I think I should go for this."

"You're just gonna pull the rug out from under her?"

"I think I have to."

"Holy shit," Bill said. "I hear what you're saying, man. I honestly do, but people can't just change their lives. You're thirty-eight years old, for God's sake. What're you gonna do next, quit the DOC and run away? I don't know, man."

"It's a new start."

"It's messed up," Alex said.

"Listen, if you want to go for a few jogs and break a sweat to get your rocks off, be my guest. But think long and hard about leaving the wife because a Hannah smiled at you. Trust me, divorces suck."

"I almost rather you just cheat," Alex said, and gave an awkward laugh. "You two have been a good team for five years."

"Wait a minute....How would you assholes know that? No, hold on, listen. Have you all been flies on the wall this whole time? Or watching secret security cameras I didn't know about? You, you, none of you, have any right to pass an opinion on another marriage, so shut the fuck up. My wife doesn't take me seriously. It's been like that for a while. When I told her about my new plan she might as well've laughed in my face, cut my balls off, cooked them medium well with a little garlic salt, and fed them to me. What that woman wants is for me to stay doing exactly what I'm doing: nothing with my life but bringing home a fat paycheck. She doesn't value my happiness at all. We don't have any kids and I'm not throwing a custody battle at her,

so if I want a new start in life running with Hannah and shopping at Whole Foods it's my fucking prerogative."

The response was a whispered chorus of "Jesus."

I finished the rest of my beer and left. Hannah's number was ready to call before I got to my car. I needed to turn my feelings of rage into something positive.

Hannah and I met at Davio's a few nights later, an Italian steakhouse at Patriot's Place in Foxboro. She wore a dark blue dress that fitted to her hips with a white shawl over her shoulders and in the bright end of dusk she looked elegant. I smoothed out my striped button-up as I walked up and hugged her.

We bought a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, which Hannah said went well with seafood since I wanted seafood.

"This is so strange," she said.

"Oh, that's good to hear."

"No, I'm happy to be here with you. More than happy. It's just that a marriage can be so...so isolating, I guess. You were married for five years, I was married for twelve. So here I am on my first date, and I keep wanting to do things my ex-husband liked: do mannerisms he thought were cute, or tell our inside jokes."

"It's like you have to undo a marriage's worth of habits."

"That's exactly it. So much of myself was wrapped up in it."

"Just be whatever version of yourself you want, and I feel like I'll like it. Or, if you want, we can drink this bottle of wine in silence and smile at each other."

"I don't know if my jaw could handle all that smiling."

"Let's try it. Don't even stop when the waiter comes back to take our order."

"No, that's ridiculous."

"Just try it."

"What are we ten?"

The waiter came back to the table and pulled a notepad out of his black apron. He hid his confusion well when he saw both of us showing all of our teeth, and when we ordered our meals through clenched teeth, still all smiles.

"Okay," I said. "He's gone now. I'm going to stop so I can take another sip."

"Quitter."

"I said the plan was to smile at each other and drink the bottle of wine."

"That was fun. You're such a kid at heart. I kind of love it."

"Whoa, did you just throw out the L word on our first date?"

"I didn't mean it like that, not like I love you. I just meant I love that you're—"

"I'm kidding. My wife used to love it, too. I feel like everyone loves it until they realize you're an actual man-child. Trust me, you'll get sick of it, too."

"I don't think I would. My ex-husband was serious and moody all the time. I'm not used to any fun. Therefore, sir, I would have a high threshold for your immaturity and manchildery."

"Then I think we'll be a good team."

"Me, too. Life can be hard, and all I really ask for is to feel young at heart. You make me feel young again."

"I'd say we still are young."

"I'd say you're right."

We went to the track together the following Monday. The weather was wonderful. Summer had arrived early and forgot to pack its humidity. My stamina had improved over the weeks, and we ran at a pretty good pace.

The goal for the day was to run two miles, walk one, and then run the fastest mile possible. Hannah's body glistened with a sheen of sweat as we slowed down for the walking portion.

"You're doing the 5k with me in a few weeks," I said. She didn't answer. "Wouldn't it be fun to accomplish it together?"

"I want to do it, don't worry....You would've thought that you were proposing to me or something the way you said it."

"I think it's a little soon for you to bring up marriage, since you did already use the L word on our first date."

"Shut up, shithead. I'm happy you want me to be part of it with you."

"You've technically been there since day one, as far as my running goes, so it makes sense."

She put an arm around my waist. Her hair blew into my face when her head hit my shoulder and the scent of windblown lavender stunned me. I kissed her on the temple, and then we stopped walking, and began kissing. The lonesome track loop surrounded by fields and more fields and in the distance the high school up on the hill receded away from us. When I kissed her there was a warmth and a life affirming connection that I wanted more of. I wanted her in different ways.

"Did you say your husband has the kids this week?"

"Ex-husband, but yes."

"So there's an empty house and a bed where we could do this, is there not?" I stroked an invisible beard, a detective deducing the facts at hand.

She took a step back and her jaw dropped open.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," she said. The thought that my suggestion turned her off terrified and caught me of guard. "Do you think I'm just a hot piece of ass you can fuck and chuck?"

"Fuck and chuck? Fuck and chuck? I've never heard you talk like that."

"Is that all this is?"

"No, no, of course—"

"You're too easy...last one to the car buys dinner after."

She fled from me at a sprint, laughing at my shock, toward our side-by-side cars in the rock dust lot.

#

The following weekend Elisa Ridge made an innocent mistake. She called me from the institution because she was trying to figure out the time off she would need for her summer calendar.

I was putting together a combination futon/day bed for my wife, a cute idea she'd had for our spare bedroom that she wanted to turn into a guest room. "We aren't gonna have kids any time soon," she said. "I guess some visits from friends would be nice."

There were other things I would've rather been doing than forcing the arched wooden supports into the bed frame, so when my wife held out the home phone and said it was Elisa, I told her to take a message.

"She says she didn't want to bother Dave Harris because he's on vacation, but she's just curious when you're doing the 5k. She says she wants to do it in memory of Danny Tompkins, too."

I stopped working on the shitty futon and dealt with Elisa.

"Why didn't you tell me Danny Tompkins died?" my wife said.

"You're busy. I didn't think you would care."

"I know that you knew him, Bobby. I'm not gonna pretend I knew him, but I wish that you would tell me things. What happened to him?"

"He committed suicide. That's why I didn't tell you, I know you hate that stuff."

"You should've told me, though. It explains a lot."

"Don't."

"Don't what?" Her voice rose, a just noticeable rise at first, but on its way to a high-pitched feverish madness. "If you can't tell your wife something like that, what can you tell her? Don't you understand that I want to know this stuff so I can be there for you? Now I understand why you've been running and wanting to make changes. If you'd just been up front with me in the first place we could've dealt with this together."

That was the last thing I wanted. I tried to think of the perfect thing to say to her in an awful conversation like this to end it. I ran through the database of my wife's moods and emotions, of her self-righteous principles and expectations, to find what she wanted to hear.

"I do want to deal with this together. It's just that it's so fresh to me. Can I have a little time to process it, and then we can talk?"

I watched her absorb that.

"Were you guys that close?"

I felt myself grimace, but forced a smile.

"Yes," she said, and hugged me. "Do you promise to tell me when you're ready, though? Take the time you need, but remember how healthy it is to open up like this."

"I promise."

Hannah and I met at her house for an early dinner that Monday, after we got off work at three. The two-story house sat at the entrance to a cul-de-sac, and the backyard had seen a lot of work put into it. There was a concrete patio behind the house with an outdoor sectional and a stone island grill, and farther back an in-ground pool. The afternoon air was still and comfortable.

Hannah lay on the sofa, her head propped up by a hand, enjoying me work my magic on the grill. The onions, red and green peppers, and steaks cooked.

"Did you notice how empty the house feels? I didn't realize how much of our stuff was my ex-husband's. Isn't it eerie?"

"It might be a little too big."

"This yard is great, though, and the pool's nice. I wouldn't want to give that up."

"Why is it still closed? Don't most people open their pools on Memorial Day?"

"Do you want to open it for me? I didn't think so. I'll get around to it."

There was a bite in her words that made me turn toward her.

"Is everything all right there, beautiful?"

She sat up and forced a big smile.

"Oh, yeah. Everything's fine."

"Are you sure? You look like somebody kicked your puppy."

"It's just, I don't know....Can we talk about something?"

"Out with it."

"I feel like I keep bringing these really serious things up with you, and I don't mean to, because it isn't like me to be so...clingy, but I have been wondering about this. I know you and your wife are separated, but we haven't exactly talked about your living situation."

"I moved into an apartment, for now at least."

"You know I'm not naive, right? I know that there are a couple of reasons a man wouldn't want to bring me back to his place, and a woman's one of them."

I put the spatula on the serving dish and sat down next to her on the sofa.

"Hannah, I don't think you understand how happy you've been making me. I wouldn't do that to you." Half-truths and half-lies seemed to make for less painful pretenses in the moment. "This means a lot to me."

"It means a lot to me. I like where this is going and I trust you. I just wanted to give you a chance to be up front with me about anything you need to be up front about. If you had something—anything at all—to tell me, we could talk about it and move forward from there."

I stood up.

Innumerable instances of lying came to mind, almost all of them at the institution. A thing I was so accustomed to that it had become an oversight. The learning curve in the early years, having inmates lie to your face about everything, everything, never a straight word, and finding out from others with experience they had lied. The jaded lessons learned through experience: spotting lies, not believing anything secondhand, telling lies of your own with the same grace that convicts had. I almost smiled, possessing the twisted knowledge that regardless of my sincere feelings for this woman I could believe anything I said.

"Why are you so hell bent on there being something I have to tell you?"

"That's not what I'm trying to say. I obviously just have a hard time trusting since my husband, so of course I'm going to be skeptical if something seems too good to be true."

"You're right. I would be, too."

"Tell me I'm wrong and I'll shut up."

"You're not wrong for being smart. But you are wrong if you don't think I'm committed to you."

She hugged me. Her eyes were misty when she pulled away.

"If we're committed to each other then I don't want you living in some crappy apartment, not when I have all this space here. What do you think?" She watched me. "Bobby? Does that sound good to you?"

"I mean, yeah, I should just talk to my landlord."

"He'll be fine. Tell him he'll find another tenant in no time. Are you sure you want to? I felt like we were on the same page, but if not—"

"No, I do."

The grill's flames had engulfed the peppers and onions, started to char the steak, and we heard the loud sizzling.

"Look, don't burn our food," she said.

I psyched myself up for the conversation with my wife on the way home. She was still in her work clothes, setting the table for supper, two paper plates and a bag with two subs in it.

"I hope subs are okay. It's not the healthiest, but today's been hectic."

"I agree, today has been hectic."

"I just finished a project and already got assigned a new one. 'It's because we know you can handle it,' they say. I could also handle a raise. How are you? What's on your mind?"

"Nothing, I'm just starving."

I didn't have it in me.

#

Dave Harris picked me up on the morning of the race in his dark blue Jeep Wrangler. The doors were off for the season and a warm southwestern wind roared around as we drove on the highway. The sky was a bright gray overcast, the light behind the clouds almost able to burn them off.

"I am really impressed, man," Dave said. "Can I be honest with you? I thought you'd go running a couple of times, maybe struggle through the race with me, and then everything would go back to the same as it was before. But now that I see what you're turning into, I can tell you're serious."

"You gave me the idea, you stud."

"No, take the credit you deserve."

"I invited somebody else, if that's alright."

"The more the merrier."

"She's a new friend of mine, a lady friend."

He laughed at that.

"A lady friend? I don't think I've ever been around somebody who could say that with a straight face before."

"Her name's Hannah."

"Okay then," he said with a couple of nods. "Who am I to judge, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it, man. It's not like I know your wife...plus you're in the DOC."

"That's fucked up, isn't it?"

"It makes sense. After enough time—hell, I think it only took me two years—the rules, you know, the rules rules, start to go out the window for us. We put ourselves in harm's way every single day, to deal with the people society can't handle. We help them live, just to live, and do their time, even though they're ungrateful pimples on the ass of life. Sure we signed up, but how the hell are we not supposed to get a little bitter toward the world for the sacrifice? And we don't get any of the respect or pomp cops get, either. I'm a firm believer in taking what we want in life, Bobby. You're not gonna find me sitting here thumbing down my nose at you for a little side tail, brother. No, sir."

"I've never really thought about the DOC like that before."

"Explains a lot, doesn't it?"

"Sure."

The race course started at Mansfield High School and looped through a main road and a couple of nearby neighborhoods. The run was in support of the Wounded Warrior Project, and there were uniformed military personnel who would run the race with full gear and boots. A class from the police academy was there also, along with many other supporters.

Dave and I met Elisa and Hannah at the registration table. Elisa, who looked much younger and healthier out of uniform, was ecstatic to meet Hannah.

"You're the reason that Bobby's been in such a good mood lately. I think I'd be in a good mood, too, and I'm straight," was the way she'd put it.

The race was set to start in ten minutes, and people already began to crowd at the starting line.

My phone rang and it was my wife. I walked out of ear shot from the others.

"I have a surprise," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I said I have a surprise. Turn around and find me in the parking lot."

I must've stammered. Hannah flashed me that healthy smile of hers as I backed toward the parking lot. I held up a finger.

"I know you've been acting differently lately because you want me to be a part of this with you. So here I am."

"You wait until today to make a big romantic gesture?"

"Late is better than never."

She was indeed there in the parking lot, her face present and surreal amid the hoods and trunks and windshields...in a place that in my mind I'd reserved for Hannah and I. She stood by her car, parked miraculously far away from the starting line because of how late she was.

"Baby." She pulled me into a warm hug. "Aren't you glad to see me? Can you believe I did this?"

She looked pleased with herself, and also a little ridiculous in the tight athletic clothing she'd materialized.

"I'm shocked."

I turned back and did a quick scan of the cluster of people at the starting line. Hannah wasn't looking my way, not at the moment at least. She talked to Elisa and Dave.

There was no way she hadn't been looking, though, wondering why I'd walked past Dave's Jeep.

"I have to talk to you about something," I said. I led her behind her car. A view of us from the starting line was now obscured by an SUV in front of her. "This is such a surprise. No, don't smile. Listen, I'm running the race with other people that you know, but one of them is a new friend."

"A new friend."

"Her name's Hannah."

"Like a lady friend?"

"Yes."

"Why else wouldn't I know about one of your friends? Did we not just talk about how you need to tell me—your wife—these things? Did we not—?"

"Lower your voice."

"No, I will not lower my voice."

"I beg you not to make a scene."

"You're seriously telling me that you're cheating on me? This is really happening?"

"Please stop."

"No." Her voice was loud at this point, head-turning loud. "Fuck you. What am I supposed to be mature about this?"

"You know what? No, fuck you. Too little, too late. I wasn't happy with you. I've already decided to leave you."

I took a step back, expecting shrapnel from that explosion.

"This is how you do it?" she said.

"Well—"

I looked. I made eye contact with Hannah and watched as Elisa turned her away with a firm hold on her shoulders.

"You're running the race with her," my wife said. "She's here right now. Oh my God, I'm gonna be sick. She staggered and I went to help her. "Don't touch me, you jerk, you asshole scumbag. I can't believe this."

The tears came, the hyperventilation, the whole act. I thought to back away.

"Where is she? She can have you but I want her to know how much of a scumbag Bobby Hanlon is. Tell me, where is she? Oh my God, Bobby, I knew this had nothing to do with Danny Tompkins. I knew it." She let out a long, low moan. "You've always been selfish, always," she said with sad conviction.

The runners at the starting line had their knees bent and looked primed for the race to begin. I had not wanted to deal with any of this, and now that it was here, I wanted even less to be a part of it. I thought that I'd be able to have a foot in both worlds, old and new, and that a reconciliation of the two would just happen. I never wanted them to split like this, and in turn force me into a split, rip me apart. My wife looked like she might give chase as I began to back away toward the starting line.

There was a moment of near silence, complete if not for my wife's defeated moans, before the overcast sky let go. Thick rain drops began to make hollow thuds on the hoods around us, apart from one another at first, and then together. The stream was soon constant.

Then a crack went off, the starting gun. I took off toward the others, flooding past the starting line. When I caught up I watched amazed as the rain streamed down Hannah's face, the natural beauty of it, no makeup, no flaws. Hundreds of us ran like kids playing in the rain. Hannah smiled, maybe at me or maybe at the adult thrill of being caught in a torrential downpour you don't mind. I may have been reading into that smile, but it didn't seem as full. I wondered how disappointed she was.

The farther we got from the high school the more the clouds dissipated, the shower passing and being replaced by sun. Hannah remained by my side, and my legs felt great as I ran next to her, but...but I found myself disappointed. I wondered about a woman who'd seen what she'd seen and not gone home, not left me. It struck me as desperate. Yes, she needed me to be the resolution for her husband...but still.

I felt uncertain again. This was another type of uncertainty than the one I'd known before, which she'd briefly sent into remission. The base emotions that came with situations not foreseen, fight or flight with only false catharses and effects that lingered. Those would always seethe within me. In regretful tones this new uncertainty whispered to me its opinion that no matter how many drinks I skipped, how many healthy choices I made, or how many Hannahs there were, I may forever run a loop, threading a noose around my used up time.

My heart beat a little fast now, but I reminded myself to breathe and go at an easy pace.

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