

The Man Who Killed My Wife

For her, I would wait forever.

I dream about her. Letting my eyelids flicker shut, the darkness becomes my canvas. I wait. One moment bleeding into the next, I stay frozen, immobile. Eleven thirty-four. Tick. Eleven thirty-five. Tick. For her, I would wait forever.

At long last, the darkness wobbles. Like ships emerging from a foggy bay, her slender features appear. I see a narrow shoulder, bent over a marble countertop. I see a pale hand, gripping a checkered dishrag. I see her hands. I see her chin. I see her lips. I see her eyes. And then, all at once, color.

Like in a movie, a floodlight snaps on, bathing the world in battlefield reds and ocean blues. A rosy hue steals into her cheeks, perfectly complementing the pink lips and cornflower eyes. The chipped paint of her fingernails, a brassy, bloody red, matches the dishrag in her hand, and the yellow of her apron pops. As I watch her, she laughs. Head thrown back and eyes on fire, it is the laugh of a teenage girl, pretty and young. Fearless.

Through the window, she looks at me, a lock of honeyed hair falling across her eyes. She pushes it away slowly, her gaze remaining fixed on me. When she smiles, I smile back. Teeth white and expression languid, it is the smile of a starting quarterback, confident and cocky. Immortal.

When dinner ends, my friends are waiting in the red truck. For a moment, a brief moment, I hesitate. The sun has barely set, casting the world in a rosy haze. Where the cracked lot ends, the neon glow of the *Oakridge Family Diner* sign is, so old that it can barely stand, is slowly spluttering to life.

As I stand there, looking at her, she watches me through the diner windows. Hair pulled into a messy ponytail, arms draped loosely at her sides, her gaze bores directly into mine. The red dishrag lingers idly, seemingly forgotten, in her fingertips.

Come to me.

The words are crystal clear in the Texas night. They pierce the waves of heat, seeping from the cracked pavement.

Come to me.

I follow.

Eleven thirty-six. Here and now, his hands are the color of chalk. The fingers are long and tapered, betraying a hint of bourgeois elegance that the bulging calluses belie. His suntan has faded, lapsing into the watery pallor of nightshifts and daytime television. His fingernails, once so stubby and chipped, have grown long and smooth. He is sitting perfectly still. Staring straight ahead, he is pressed

into the hard chair, his fingers seemingly molded to the armrests. Through the thick glass that separates us, he seems oddly fishlike, clownish almost. I look away.

All around me, every surface is immaculate. The walls are an antiseptic white, bleaching industrial cleaner and sterilization smells into the air. Tick. The sound is inexorable, creating a soft thrumming in my head. Eleven thirty-seven. Decades. Eleven thirty-eight. Once more, I close my eyes.

This time, when I see her, she is older, paler, thinner. Lying on the crimson fabric, her hair is a cloud of spun gold. Her hands are limp at her sides, perfectly unmoving. Her lips are sealed. I reach into the coffin, unable to help myself, gently caressing her neck and forehead.

“Don’t do that!”

The words come too late. I felt it. I felt the jagged cut, running from cheek to collarbone. I felt the leathery texture of damaged skin. Helped by a skillful undertaker, the cuts and bruises are long gone. Even so, I know.

Everyone knows.

At that moment, someone grasps my arm, telling me that the time has come. I walk to the wooden pew, studying the wooden floorboards. They are old, polished by a thousand mourners, subdued with age. A moment later, the sermon begins.

We are gathered together to mourn, but also to show our gratitude. Gratitude for the kindness that she showed. Gratitude for the love that she bestowed. And gratitude for the memories that time cannot erase from our hearts.

In the background, the murmurs of the crowd swirl like snow, landing wetly on my sleeve and shoulder, melting without a trace.

He had no idea. He was confused.

Drunk. That’s what everyone says.

Is that an excuse?

No, no excuse. I never said that.

But it was a mistake?

It had to be.

And the door was open?

Would it have mattered? He had a key.

Of course. But maybe she could have—

Could have what? She did exactly what she could. A pause. Nothing.

Now a quick glance at me.

Poor thing! Three years at war. And on the night that they get married—

This.

I take a deep breath, my eyes drifting open. Eleven forty. A dozen yards away, his head is still bowed. His fingers, the slender digits of an aspiring pianist, are neatly clasped on his lap. I stare at him, clearly remembering the last time that we spoke. It was a week after it happened, and we were on opposite sides of a plastic window, a clock dictating the minutes that we had together. I blinked. Before I knew it, one of the guards was tapping his watch, telling us that time was almost up. I looked at my friend quickly, seeking the words that would make him—

Me—

Anyone understand. But first. “Do you remember the meatloaf?” Miller asked, his voice deadpan. “Yeah.” Saying this, I nodded mechanically, watching my reflection in the plastic.

“It was awful. Fucking awful.”

I nodded again. An instant later, the buzzer sounded. Time up. I had to go.

Walking away, I reached into my pocket. Nothing was there, of course, save the thin cotton of my undershirt. Then I remembered. It had been lost for a week and a day now. Changing shirts at the Atlanta airport, en route from dusty Baghdad to dusty San Antonio, the little photograph had somehow become dislodged. By the time that I had realized it, we were thousands of feet up. The door was closed. Seatbelts were on. There was nothing that I could do.

But closing my eyes, letting the guard lead me away, it made little difference. Behind my eyelids, I could see her vividly.

Here, now, at this moment, surrounded by artificial lights and antiseptic whitewash, I can *still* see her perfectly. She is perched on a rundown picnic table, wearing a dress light and airy like a summer breeze. I am standing at her side, earnestly attempting to stuff some cake, a neon jumble of Duncan Hines cake and an icing rose, into her mouth. One hand is raised, halfheartedly holding me off. A spatter of blue icing clings, desperately almost, to her cheek and chin.

“Who is that?”

I scowl slightly, turning away. It is the day before we are supposed to leave. The photograph is sitting on my lap. “Back the fuck off.”

But before I can stop him, Zion grabs the thing from me, leaping lightly onto the floor. His pants are unzipped, revealing slim fitting briefs and a V of solid muscle. His feet are bare. “Daaaaamm! No wonder you’re always hoggin’ the telephone! Is this your girl?”

Kicking aside a pair of muddy boots, I lunge after him. But before I can take two steps, Frasier tackles me to the ground. Just seconds later, my body is prostrate on the cold concrete.

“What’s that you’ve got?” Frasier calls to the photograph thief.

Zion grins, waving the picture like a flag. “Kirby’s girl.”

“No!” Frasier yells gleefully, tightening his chokehold. I jam my elbow into his ribcage, but my efforts are too late. By now, the entire unit has arrived. Zion. Frasier. Sandman. Weasel. Catman. Colby. Miller. They swarm the bunk, ants to syrup, dancing around the captured object.

“Let me see!” Colby yells.

“Jesus!” Catman says. “Would yeh look at those! They’re the size of fuckin’ cantaloupes.”

I snarl ferociously, struggling to break free. My efforts, however, are futile. Frasier has the build, not to mention the overpowering fragrance, of a dumptruck.

“She’s dynamite. Fucking *dynamite!* What did you do—blindfold her?”

“Hollllaaaaa!” Sandman cries.

After a bit, someone passes the photograph to Miller.

“Well?” Weasel asks expectantly, his expression a bit too earnest. “What do *you* think?”

Trapped underneath Mount Frasier, my world is just a thin strip of feet and concrete floor. From there, all I can see of Miller are his boots, now resting a few feet away. His boots, that is, and his hands, presently undoing the thick laces. When Weasel says this, Miller stops. His feet emerge from the boots. Then he stands. “I’m getting a cigarette.”

So we go outside.

Nights at Fort Bleeker are cool. We take seats on the porch, leaning against the wooden railing. My gaze, unfocused, rests on the horizon.

“Do you think that the flight’ll be bad?” Weasel asks. “It’s supposed to be commercial. Economy class. Did you hear that? Maybe they’ll have movies. You never know.”

I glance at him, sitting on the hard dirt. One knee is lifted, his arm draped casually across it. Positioned like that, he looks like a smaller version of Miller. Well, except that his face is too tight. His pose is a bit too nonchalant.

When Miller withdraws two cigarettes, I take one. Beside us, Weasel continues to talk.

“Four months. That’s really not too bad. And then we’ll have a rotation out. In fact, I even heard that—”

“Weasel.” In the summer night, Frasier, sitting on my right, sounds calm, friendly even.

“What?” Weasel asks.

“Shut up.”

In reply, Weasel shifts moodily, letting his arm fall against the banister. “My name is Frank.”

“So?” Frasier rumbles.

“So why the hell do you call me Weasel?”

“Why?” Frasier repeats, voice flatter than ever. “What do you mean *why*? Because you look like a fucking weasel.”

At this, Zion laughs loudly, giving Weasel a shove. Weasel shoves back, harder. “What’s your point?” Weasel snapped. “*You* look like a douchebag. And nobody calls *you* that!”

I bite back a snort, tapping some ash onto the ground. “Speak for yourself.”

Frasier, for his part, seems to consider this. “Well, yes. There *is* that.” He pauses slightly, his frown turning to Weasel. “But you’re forgetting something crucial.”

“What?” Weasel asks, warier than ever.

“I’m bigger than you.”

At this point, a gun fires. Ten o’clock. Bedtime. We rise instantly, filing into the rectangular bunkroom. With every moment, ship day looms closer and closer. Only seven more hours now. Boots come off. Covers were drawn.

Lights out.

The next morning, Miller sits next to me. I stay silent, watching the Texas night crash into a baby’s breath dawn.

“Kirby?”

“Yeah?”

“She got a name?”

“Who?”

“Double D.” He rolls his eyes. “You *know* who.”

So he *had* seen the picture. “Yeah.” Pause. “It’s Caroline.”

He nodded. Then, for a moment, we say nothing.

“You gonna marry her?” Miller finally asks me.

“The day after I get back.”

“Good.” There was another pause, this one longer. “Hot day.”

“It’ll be even hotter there.”

Miller nods. Then our bus pulls into the airstrip.

It *is* hotter there. The sun beats down, making me sweat. My pants are slabs of wet concrete encasing my thighs. Next to me, Frasier is sweating bullets.

“What *is* this shit?” Weasel asks incredulously, poking at the reddish mass that is presently filling his plate.

“Dinner.”

“But what *is* it?”

I glance at Miller, now sitting next to me. Miller shrugs. “It’s *dinner*.”

“But what—”

I sigh. "Weasel."

"I'm just—"

"*Weasel!*"

"What?"

"Just eat the damn food."

Weasel makes a face, jabbing his fork into the formless blob. In response, it jiggles ominously, apparently angry at being disturbed. A second later, it gives an ominous glurrrrrrrrk and falls silent. I stand up, suddenly full.

Outside the tent, the sky is a hundred shades of orange. I walk past Zion, now cleaning his gun atop a patch of sandstone. As he works, I can hear snatches of a tuneless song.

"This is my rifle/ this is my gun/ one is for killing/ one is for—"

"Fun."

Zion glances at me, flashing a boyish grin. I just keep walking. A few moments later, I am standing next to Sandman, watching him wave a black Jeep through the checkpoint.

"Anything new?" Sandman asks.

He nods, checking something in his notebook. "Colby took a dinger at about nineteen-twenty."

"Doing what?" I ask.

"Scout duty. He and Catman were standing on the tower, finishing up the afternoon shift, and he must've fallen asleep. Out of nowhere, we hear this crash. Next thing we know, he's lying on the ground."

"No shit."

"Yeah."

"Is he okay?"

"A few bruises, but nothing bad. His pride?" Sandman just grins.

I contemplate Colby, now staring alertly at the empty roadway. Although standing to attention, his expression does seem vaguely, well, pained.

I try to be nice. "Maybe he had a seizure."

Sandman shakes his head. "I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Catman heard him snoring."

"What!" I say. "Do you mean *before* he fell?"

"Yeah."

"So why didn't he wake him up?"

"He was laughing too hard."

I smile broadly, giving Colby a thumbs up. Seeing me, he walks over warily.

“What?” His voice is laden with suspicion.

“Hi Sleeping Beauty.”

He turns away. “Go fuck yourself.”

A minute later, Miller and Frasier join us. As they do, Sandman and Colby disappear inside, their stomachs already grumbling for the MRE du jour.

Miller slides beside me, adjusting the cuff of his jacket. “Kirby?” His voice is impassive.

“Yeah?”

“What *was* that?”

Without being told, I know exactly what he means. “One word. One lie. Meatloaf.”

He considers this. “So I get that. But isn’t meatloaf usually have a bit more—”

“Car.”

As one, we glance at Catman, now standing on the stumpy watchtower.

In reply, he points at the horizon. “Car. Nine o’clock.”

As the car grows closer, I can see that it is badly dinged. Dust streaks cover the hood and doors, giving the formerly white sheeting a sandy hue. The bumper is covered with dents.

I step slowly onto the road, nodding at Frasier and Miller. For a moment, the car continues unaffected. It zooms closer to the checkpoint, seemingly oblivious to the assembled guards. For a moment, odd premonitions fill my head. Then, breaking my dream, the car stops and the feelings dissipate.

Inside, two men are crammed into the front, skin tanned and turbans bright white. I walk to the backseat, peering into the open window. There, three people are seated on the plastic cushion, now swathed in dark fabric. Two men sit beside the windows, watching me intently, and a teenage girl is hunched between them. I pause. Even underneath her hijab, the girl is a vision. Her skin is a splash of mocha cream, glistening faintly in the evening sun. Her eyebrows, perfectly groomed and full, delicately complement eyes that are like two almonds.

She shifts slightly, rearranging the bundle in her lap, and I see that it is a child. I stare at it. Boy? Girl? I have no idea. It is asleep, its head slightly tilted, its fists tightly closed. The girl murmurs something to it, causing it to stir and open its eyes. She reacts instantly, raising her hands and delicately cupping its head. In the process, her sleeve rolls back slightly, revealing a thin bracelet.

In truth, it is the sort of thing that a child would wear. Some of the beads are pink, the color of bubblegum, and others are Peeps yellow. Still others, sandwiched between them, are the same sort of alphabet beads that schoolgirls adore. I suspect that they spell a name. But before I can tell, her arm drops, and the little bracelet is hidden away.

Miller says something to the driver, tapping the trunk. I shake myself, walking to help him search. It is the same search that I performed yesterday and the day before and the day before that. After

a moment, I glance at Miller, nodding. He nods back. Then we tap the roof of the car, letting it drive away.

Perhaps fifty yards away, something happens. The car fishtails slightly, rapidly gaining speed. Shouting erupts. A warning shot is fired. And then, quite suddenly, gunfire explodes from the vehicle, causing a marine to hit the ground.

Just then, a shrill yell pierces the hot afternoon. It is the yell, I know instantly, of a young child. I raise my arms, trying to stop the inevitable. But I am too late. At that moment, return fire hits the gas tank. And like that, the car explodes.

The car explodes.

The car explodes.

Standing numbly, uselessly at the checkpoint, I can see it clearly.

I can see everything.

That night, no one can sleep. I lie on my bed, staring at the ceiling. At some point, I hear the sound of someone moving. Seconds later, I follow Miller outside.

“We killed her.” His voice is flat, his gaze straight ahead.

I shake my head, sitting beside him. “Don’t be an idiot.”

Miller says nothing. He is kneeling on the sand, poking a stick into the ground. I watch him.

“I wanted to be a pianist.”

I nod. “I know that.” I had *always* known that. From the day that I had met him, sitting in the Fort Bleeker mess, I had imagined him spending countless hours at a piano bench. I had imagined the polished floors, offsetting tall windows and white curtains that billowed eerily in the wind. I had heard the ghostly music, dripping softly into the afternoon. Somehow, without him saying a word, I had known.

“Not when I was little. I hated the lessons then. I hated the instructor. I hated that my mother would make me do that shit. And I hated that my dad wasn’t there, telling the piano man to go the hell home, running flies and buttonhooks with me. But after a while, well, something changed. It got easier. I started to practice more. When the house was empty, I’d play and play and play. Scales. Bridges. Melody. It didn’t matter. I learned.

“Well, when I made varsity football, she finally gave in. Over a steak, she said that the lessons would finally stop. She was selling the piano. I just kept eating my meat, not really knowing what to say. But later that night, I came downstairs. I put the damper on the piano, so that she wouldn’t wake up. And I just—” He stopped. “I just played. It must have been hours. The next day, the piano was gone.” At this, Miller stops again, staring at his hands.

“You can still do it.” My voice feels heavy. Why? There is cotton in my throat.

“Do what?”

“Be a pianist.”

He shakes his head, starting to dig again. His hole has become the size of a baseball. Looking at him, I want to say something. I want to say that he can. I want to say that he *will*. But the lie refuses to come.

I stand up, descending onto the moonlit road. The night is almost cool now. At the very least, the stifling heat is gone. High overhead, I can see thousands and thousands of stars, more stars than I had ever thought possible, more stars than Texas ever had. I keep walking. Out of nowhere, a flash of white catches my eye. I bend down, and I see that it is an alphabet bead. I clutch it, turning it around and around and around. Moments later, I return to Miller.

“We killed her.” As I say this, I sit beside him.

He nods.

And without another word, I, too, start to dig.

When we pull into the bus station, finally home on leave, it is sunset. There is a crowd gathered, a throng of mothers and fathers and little sisters and wives and cousins. I search the faces anxiously, feeling beads of sticky sweat cover my neck and arms. I wipe my hands on my pants, the same pants that I had once smeared with MRE meatloaf, the same hands that I had used to feed Caroline Duncan Hines cake.

And then, quite suddenly, there she is. She is older now. After just six months, the flowing tresses have become a womanly bob, the high heels receding to flats. But to me, standing there, peering through the window, she is just as beautiful. *For her, I would wait forever.*

“Are you ready?” Miller asks, looking at me. It has been a long month. I see the worry in his eyes. I nod.

When I see Caroline, she asks the same thing. In reply, I want to tell her that I was *born* ready. I want to tell her that I thought about her constantly, day and night and day and night and *night and night and night*.

I wanted to tell her how damn beautiful she is, apple pie and open highways and Sweet Home Alabama all rolled into one.

I want to tell her about the alphabet bead.

But standing there, standing in the Texas sun, the words get stuck. Worse, maybe I never learned them. So I do the only thing that I can. I kiss her.

Getting my bags from the truck, Miller gives me a hand.

“Mercer is only a town away.” He says it calmly, but the worry is still there. I can feel it. “You can always visit.”

“Yeah.” I shoulder my duffel bag. “And you’ll come for the wedding?”

“When is it?”

“Tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

“Why wait?”

For a moment, Miller says nothing. Then he says—“I’ll be there.”

I look at him. And I believe him.

He will be there.

“*Miller!*” Zion calls. “Get the fuck on the bus! We’re waiting.”

He looks at me. “I have to go.”

I know that. I nod. “Right.” I look at him once more. For a second, I think that I see the worry yet again. I frown. Why? But then I look closer, seeing the shadow for what it is, *my* worry reflected in him. I reach into my pocket. “Take this.”

Miller frowns, staring at the key. “What? Why? I can’t do that. You won’t have one.”

“I have another one. It’s fine.” *Take it.*

Our eyes meet. When I try to speak, a hoarse silence emerges.

Miller takes it. “See you tomorrow.” Seconds later, the bus leaves.

It happened the following night. We came home, intoxicated with wedding cake and cheap champagne. I looked in the refrigerator, the Heinz ketchup and French mustard and hotdogs. We were had no more beer. “Be right back.”

The store was nearby. I clunked into the parking lot, accidentally parking my truck on the drugstore flowerbed. I ran inside, quickly buying what I needed. A moment later, I was in the car again, turning the key in the ignition. But just as I did so, I saw my hand. I saw the thick fingers. I saw the veins, lurking just beneath the hair and flesh. I saw the bump on my wrist where a bracelet would have been. I cut the engine.

This is my rifle/ this is my gun/ one is for killing/ one is for—

Fuck.

Head slumping against the steering wheel, I reached into the paper bag. I started to drink.

A few hours later, I regained consciousness. My world was a blur of booze and sleep. But somehow, even through the haze, I knew that something was wrong. Everything was too silent. I walked into the foyer, stumbling on the threadbare carpet. And there she was. One arm was curled behind her head, the other pressed to her side. Lying awkwardly on the floor, her knees were slightly bent and her legs splayed. There was blood on her knees, clinging to her thighs, seeped into the rug.

No.

I fell to her side, cradling her head in my lap.

No.

Time blurred, the phone suddenly falling into my hands.

Is this an emergency?

Yes.

What happened?

I don't know.

Lying on the hospital bed, she looked so small. There was no laughter now. There was no smile. There were just bruises, pocking her forearms and sides, a cut on her collarbone.

Policemen were everywhere. They were talking to me. They were taking pages and pages of notes.

What happened?

I went to the store.

What were you buying?

Beer. Cigarettes. I don't remember.

And then what?

I walked into the room.

And?

I saw her.

I open my eyes. Eleven forty-two. In the quiet room, my breathing comes short and fast. I look at the glass window, clenching my fists. *Forgive and forget. Jesus said so.*

But what if Jesus was wrong?

They buried her a week later. Sitting in the church, my ass numb from the hard wood, I heard the pastor delivering his sermon.

We are gathered together to mourn, mourn the loss of a daughter and wife, but also to show our gratitude. Gratitude for the kindness that she showed. Gratitude for the love that she bestowed. And gratitude for the memories that time cannot erase from our hearts.

I shifted slightly, feeling the grip of my companions faintly tighten. Closing my eyes, I could hear the murmurs of the crowd.

He had no idea. He was confused.

Drunk. That's what everyone says.

Is that an excuse?

No, no excuse. I never said that.

But it was a mistake?

It had to be.

And the door was open?

Would it have mattered? He had a key.

Of course. But maybe she could have—

Could have what? She did exactly what she could. A pause. Nothing.

Now a quick glance at me.

Poor thing! Three years at war. And on the night that they get married—

This.

Silence. Then—I still don't understand. He looks so, well, normal.

Who?

Who do you think?

Well, he is. Sort of.

How can you say that?

I just mean, well, he's not the first. Did you hear about Fort Bragg? There was something like this.

What—a rape and murder?

Four of them. In less than six weeks, too.

You're kidding!

It was the same thing. Home for a couple of weeks, maybe even less. Seemed totally fine at first, glad to be home, glad to see everyone. And then they just—

Lost it?

Yeah.

But why?

I don't know. Something inside of them just, well, breaks. That's what they say.

Another silence.

Someone should do something about it.

Yeah.

After a while, I stopped listening. Seated in my pew, I closed my eyes, and I saw her face. I saw the honey blonde hair. I saw the blue eyes and smooth skin.

They were being silly, all of them. Tomorrow at dawn, she would laugh at them. She would glance at me, cornflower eyes dancing like candles, and we would laugh together.

I glance at the clock. Eleven forty-six. A strange chill comes over me. But for the pane of glass, he is a dozen feet away. For a moment, I try to remember his name, his first name, his given name. After a moment, I give up. He was always Miller to me. The man who played the piano. The man who—

Forgive and forget. Jesus said so.

For a moment, I almost can and almost do. I imagine the scene in my head. I imagine the faint clicking of the lock, causing the door to swing open. I imagine the smell of whiskey and beer, clinging to his mouth and shirt. I imagine the pounding blood and the roar of gunfire. The sights and smells of burning rubber, burning gas, burning flesh. I imagine the eyes of a Muslim girl, pleading silently with me. For what? I have no idea. We speak different languages. *Allah.*

Allah, please.

I cannot understand what she says.

She saw him. In the eerie detachment of the police station, the coroners recreated the scene. He was framed in the doorway, backlit eerily, one hand gripping the doorframe for balance. My wife saw him there, framed, drunken, staring blindly at her, eyes unfocused and black. And maybe she spoke. *Kirby.*

Kirby, please.

But Kirby, his mind, his head, his heart was miles away. His mind was in a flowerbed, soaked in beer, tossing empty cans into the shrubbery. *Kirby.*

Kirby, please!

But Kirby was gone. His mind was in Kirkuk, his fingers digging holes in the sand. His heart was miles away, dreaming about a blonde girl with a crooked smile and a red dishrag.

Forgive and forget. Jesus said so.

I almost can. And for a moment, I almost do. But then I look at the slender fingers, now folded deadly in his lap. I look at the tapered nails. I look at them hard. And I know, deep inside, that I never can.

All at once, I feel terribly alone. Now *I* am being silly. Like the mourners, that day in the church, I, too, have lost my mind. She is sitting beside me now. She is holding my hand. She is whispering in my ear. *Come to me.*

Eleven fifty-seven. Now the door opens. The men enter. I watch them, watch the orchestrated pantomime. This is not the first time. For them, there will be others. For me, not so.

I shiver once, closing my eyes. When I open them, he is still immobile. Through the glass, his hands are pressed stiffly against the chair. He is watching staring at them, jaw clenched, muscles tensed. Eleven fifty-eight.

Every moment has become heavy, time splintering at the edges. Eleven fifty-nine. And now finally, finally, *finally* he looks at me.

I'll be there.

I know.

So Miller had said, exiting the bus. Had he known then? Seeing my face, the shadows in my gaze, had he known what would happen next?

I'll be there.

I know.

And he *had* been. He had come to check on me, just as I had asked him to. Once the wedding was over, the guests dispersed, he had driven by my house, planning to say a quick hello, planning to make sure that everything was okay. But nothing was.

When he had arrived, there was no need for the key that I had given them. The door was already open. Picking across the shattered glass, he had found me in the foyer, crouched beside her. My face, tearstained. My shirt, beerstained. My hands, bloodstained.

He had shoved the phone to my ear, frantically grabbing a cloth to stop the bleeding. When the ambulance came, he had stood next to me. He had held my hand.

What happened? I asked him,

He shook his head. *Shhhhh.*

Yes. He *had* come. Miller had come, but he had come too late. Too late for her, too late for me, a goddamn year too late.

I look at him now, seeing the pale hands and pale face, the long fingers, the long eyelashes. I look at him a final time. And then, softer than a pinprick, it comes. I wait, gaze on my arm, gaze on the men surrounding me. For her, I would wait forever.

At long last, the process is complete. I reach for her, feeling the honeyed hair and smooth skin, hearing the laugh that filled my dreams. She smiles. It is the smile of a married woman, grown old with her best friend and lover. Trusting. Fearless.

In the rising darkness, she gently touches my hand. *Come to me.*

I follow.