

Karel and Eva

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I wake up next to Eva again but I don't remember getting into bed with her or how dad's gun got into my left hand which is crazy I know. In my other hand I'm holding her cold left hand and I wonder if I went ahead and did something stupid anyway. I roll my head to the right not knowing what I'll see and she's looking back at me like she's been up all night which is probably true. I let out the breath I was holding and smile.

She says, Last night I thought . . . For a while there I thought that was it.

I don't want to touch that so I let go of her hand and straighten the air hose that's come loose from one of her ears and is blowing into her cheek and I say to her, I'm sorry if I woke you up.

She runs a hand through my hair which is pretty thick even if it is all gray now and she traces the scar shaped like a sickle where the doctor went in and separated the two halves of my brain so I wouldn't shimmy around anymore like a sinner in a tent revival meeting. Used to scare the crap out of the teachers whenever I had one of my fits. That's what they used to call them. *Fits*. That was a long time ago.

Don't be, she says. I like it when you get in bed with me.

Uh-uh. My snoring. It'd keep you up. I shake my head back and forth on my pillow to show her I mean business which makes my head throb and I remember how much beer I knocked back last night even though I'm not supposed to drink because it lowers what they call the

seizure threshold. I haven't dropped and flopped since I married Eva and the doc at the clinic says great let's keep it that way so I say OK doc and then I go home and polish off a six because let's face it I like my beer.

She looks at me with those blue eyes of hers and smiles and I recognize the girl from Czechoslovakia my dad hired to work on the high wire with him after mom died. Time has changed the rest of her and what time couldn't touch the pills have crinkled and puffed and made brittle like the bone china her mother sent with her. She says, Oh I don't sleep much anyway.

I have to move or do something or I'll give in to her like I always do and that wouldn't be good this time so I say, How about some breakfast? You know you need something in your stomach before you take your pills.

I'm not really hungry. And I'd rather lay with you for a while and talk. How would that be?

I ignore her question and I say, How about some tea then? And some toast. Yeah toast will do the trick. I try not to let her see the gun while I get out of bed even though she probably saw it when I got into bed whenever that was and I make for the kitchen as fast as I can.

When I saw him standing in the doorway last night with the gun in his hand I got scared. Not for me, though I can think of more peaceful ways to go, but for him. He wouldn't be able to explain it. He could try to make it look like a suicide, but I know Karel and he can't lie to save his life. And then I had the realization that maybe he wasn't planning on explaining.

Maybe this is his way of telling me that if I go he's going with me. I told myself it's his decision. He's a grown man even if he doesn't always act like it. I know it sounds cold, but I can't afford to let my feelings for Karel get in the way. When you get to the end of your life you accept that there are a lot of things you can't do anything about and what happens to the people you love when you're gone is one of them.

Then he stumbled into the bedroom and right away I knew he was drunk again. He didn't bother undressing, just got under the covers and tucked the gun down there at his side. He was snoring soon and I knew nothing would happen. Oh, I suppose I could have reached over him and taken the gun, but I never fired a gun in my life and probably would've botched it. Instead I ripped a piece of paper from a little notepad I keep by me and wrote him a note. I folded it in half and slipped it in his shirt pocket.

I hear him now muttering and hanging around in the kitchen. He comes in a few minutes later carrying a tray with a cup of tea, a glass of water, some dry toast cut into triangles, and my morning dose of pills. I notice he's used my mother's china for the tea and an old jelly jar for the water. He sits on the bed next to me with his arms folded while he watches me eat and take my pills. My protector. Ever since I asked him to help me end it he sits and talks with me after I eat to make sure I'm not stockpiling pills.

Queenie's pups are getting their teeth, he says. Queenie, she can't lay down for a second without those pups nosing up to her. Cheryl says she's gonna be looking for homes for them any time now.

Tell her you'll take one then, I say.

You mean it? He has a suspicious look in his eye.

Sure. I know how much you want one. And it'll make a great little companion for you.

He squints at me and it takes a moment, but he figures out what I'm trying to do. He shakes his head slowly.

Honey, it's OK, I say. I'm not going to be around forever.

He doesn't look at me. He says, I better go get the mail. And the things from the store. He takes the tray into the kitchen and then helps me with the bedpan, even though I tell him I can probably make it to the bathroom with his help. He just shakes his head. I think he doesn't want me to see the mess in the kitchen.

He stands by my bed with the keys to his truck dangling by a finger. He's wearing a moth-eaten wool jacket and a black watch cap. He stares at me for a minute and then bends down to kiss me. The aftershave he's just slapped on can't hide the smell of stale beer and cheese, but I know my broken-down body smells even worse than his. He asks me if I'll be OK and I smile and nod. I close my eyes and I think I might cry, but no tears come. I feel my sickness drying me up, turning my insides into a desert. I am a husk, an empty wheezing carcass. I will not be OK.

I check the mail at the end of the driveway and there's nothing but bills and junk. I don't know what I was expecting maybe some more money from the government or a letter from somebody but every time I open a mailbox I think there might be something good in there. I get gas at the little station where the walleyed kid works and he asks me how my wife is doing. People around here like her which is no surprise to me since there's nothing not to like about her. Me that's a

different story. People are as likely to give me the finger as wave at me when I drive by and I don't really care because I never did like most people except for Eva. And maybe Cheryl because she lets me pet Queenie but I have to remember not to pet her while she's nursing those pups because last time I tried she almost bit me. I tell the walleyed kid to give me two gallons which is all I can afford and besides I don't want to talk too much to someone when I don't know which eye is looking at me. Makes me nervous.

I head for the milk store on 31 and I try to remember what we need besides milk. I go the back way where the road is narrow and the houses are all tucked in behind a lot of trees and you can't even tell there are houses there if not for the mailboxes. I almost run over the one belonging to the Wallmans because I'm reaching down to pull out a can of beer from under a bunch of garbage on the passenger side. I downshift into second and then I pop the top and down half of it before I shift into third. I finish it and toss the can on the pile and before I even think about it I pull over on the left and empty out the Sidlicki's mailbox. I hit four more before I get to the store. Sometimes people send money but mostly I like to read the birthday cards and letters. Sometimes I wonder if I'm a good person because I snoop and take other people's money and then I figure what with our measly disability checks and the price of gas and Eva's pills if there's a God he'll forgive me the little stuff.

I sit up and the buzzing starts right away. This, even with my oxygen on. I know it will go away in a few minutes, like bees usually do if you stay completely still. From a sitting position, I can see my pills on the

kitchen counter, right next to the dish rack, a little city of medications with its suburbs of pill cutters and unguents and empty bubble packs. I need to get there, and I need to do it before Karel gets back. I can't count on him to do what I asked him to do. It was unfair of me, but then who *could* I ask if not my own husband?

Slowly, slowly, slowly, I ease my legs off the bed until my feet touch the cold floor. So far, so good. I sit still a moment and breathe. The place smells musty and in need of a good cleaning. I look out the bedroom window and I can see that some apples are already ripe enough to pick. Karel will have to do it himself this year. But who am I kidding? He won't pick them if I'm not there to remind him, and Cheryl, she can't even make it up the road to visit any more with that hip of hers. No, there won't be any pies this year. I picture the apples falling over the next few weeks and Karel just standing in the middle of all that vinegary decay, watching the yellow-jackets hover. It makes me so sad I just want to lie back down and close my eyes. But I don't. I'm through with all the sadness and the wishing. At one time they had their place, but right now they don't do me any good at all. Right now there's just me and the kitchen counter and the expanse of carpet and cheap linoleum in between.

I ease myself down to the floor and then I start to scoot my butt like a dog a few inches at a time. I have to rest a lot because I can hear the bees if I overdo it. I look at the pictures on the walls. There's one of me sitting way up there on the wire in my spangled costume and Karel's father tumbling over me. He never did want me for much more than decoration up there. On the ground it was different matter altogether. I wonder if Karel really knew what he was saving me from when he got me out of that trailer and married me.

Now I'm asking him to save me again but I suppose twice in a lifetime is too much to ask.

I keep going. I play out the tubing as I go, but I come to the end of it when I reach the bathroom. I rest and take in the kitchen. The squalor is breathtaking. I see remnants of last week's spaghetti on the wall by the stove and he's written something above the sink with the sauce. I can't read it because I didn't bring my glasses. Who knew I might need them again?

I walk the three aisles of the store over and over again because I can't remember what we need. I want another beer so I can sit and think it over but if I go out to the truck and then come back Joe will think I'm strange. Well he'll think I'm even more strange. I stop and look out over a shelf of packaged doughnuts and cupcakes and I see some teenagers in the parking lot with their skateboards and I have an urge to go out there and ask them if I can try it. I know it sounds crazy but I have good balance even at my age and even though my dad never trusted me on the wire because of my fits I used to walk that practice wire in the backyard like nobody's business. So what if it was only three feet off the ground.

Joe clears his throat from behind the counter and tells me to check my pockets and I want to tell him to mind his own business but I don't because he knew my dad when he was alive and besides he's right. Usually there's a note in my pocket and sure enough when I check my shirt there's Eva's list of stuff we need so I get down to business. Then Joe checks me out with one of those nifty scanning guns and I want to ask him if I can do it but I don't because I already asked

him once and he said no. He's the same age my dad would've been and he speaks Czech just like my dad did and he looks at me with those same Slavic eyes like I just did something wrong. Joe used to always ask my dad to tell him stories about the high wire and they would stand there and talk in Czech like old friends while the milk got warm. Joe never asks me to tell him stories which is OK because I don't know any.

While Joe bags my stuff I look at the list because I don't really want to make small talk with Joe and I notice for the first time that a lot of this stuff I'm pretty sure I just picked up the day before and I start to get a bad feeling in my gut. It's when I flip the list over and read what else Eva wrote that I run out of the store without the groceries and I can hear Joe yelling but I don't care because there's nobody left for him to tell on me.

I have to go slower now that I have no oxygen, no life line. It's easier to scoot on the linoleum, but after the first few feet I have to lie down on the floor because I start to gray out. It's filthy down here and I'm sure there are bugs crawling around. I can see a pile of beer cans next to the stove. Karel drinks too much. He's like his father that way. Not in many other ways, thank God. I start to inch myself like a worm around the kitchen table. When I stop to rest something skitters across the back of my hand and I scream. I surprise myself with the girlish sound that comes out of me. I try to catch my breath and I realize that on the wire I always felt a scream coming on. On the ground I was a fearless gymnast who could see all the moves in my head, but on the wire I was just a scared and witless child. Karel's

father knew it and I think he liked it that way. I sometimes wonder how I got to the point where being on the wire with him was more important than whether I lived or died, but then I think about how confident and handsome he was and how young and bored I was with my life in Brno.

I drag myself along. My nightgown collects dirt and lint and pieces of paper. If I could clean this place up before I go I would. I hate to leave it like this. It's not until I round the corner of the table that I can make out what's written above the sink. Just one word. *Don't*. I don't know if he wrote it to me or to himself.

I lie on my side and curl up into a little ball. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, I just know I can't go on like this. I've never been one to look back once I make a decision. I can hear Karel's father telling me the first time I went up on the wire, *Don't think about it, don't look down, just look ahead of you*. But once I make this decision, once I do it, where would I be looking back from even if I had a mind to?

I can hear the tsk-tsk of the ductwork and the beckoning whispers of my oxygen machine in the other room. I'm sweating from all my exertion and I hear the bees in the background constantly now. I think of the apples outside and the warm autumn sun and I think wouldn't it be wonderful to go to sleep out there and never wake up? That's when the defibrillating pop and hum of the motor in our expiring refrigerator startles me and I move on.

Just a few more feet and I'm there, but it's taken a big toll on me. I'm soaked through and shivering at the same time and I'm terribly thirsty. That's when I realize I have no water to take the pills with.

I'll have to dry swallow who knows how many of them. I sit up and lean against the cabinet and right away the bees get loud and angry. I sit very still for a moment and they settle down. The city of pills is right above me, but I can't reach them like this. I take what passes for a few deep breaths and then I get to my knees without thinking about it like taking that first step on the wire and now there is a roaring in my head and my vision gets all snowy, but before I gray out I sweep my arm across the city like a tsunami and take it all with me as I fall down into nothingness.

I drive like a crazy man down 31 without caring who I piss off. I'm passing on the shoulder and blowing the horn and then I realize I have to slow down or I'll have an accident. I don't want to stop for the light at Spruce Run Reservoir, but I have to because sitting there in a squad car cattycorner from me is a guy I went to high school with by the name of Dan Spinks who'll pull me over like he does when I have too much to drink. He always makes me give him the keys and then he takes me home and says if he catches me again he'll throw me in the hoosegow but he never does. That's what he calls it the hoosegow like he's a sheriff in one of those old westerns.

I want to just get out of the truck and run over to his car and tell him to take me home quick before Eva does something stupid but I don't because this is none of his business anyway. He gives me a look and I try to act casual which is hard for me because I've never been what you would call a casual guy and I just look at the note Eva wrote while he drives by going the other way. It says, *You protected me when I thought I wasn't worth protecting anymore. I'll never be able to*

thank you enough for that. You can stop now. I love you. Eva. P.S. Please clean up this place.

I know she's talking about the time I went to get her out of my dad's trailer and my dad knocked me down and then I got up and he knocked me down again and the third time I got up I told him he could knock me down all day because I was used to getting myself off the floor for one reason or another. He had his arm cocked and that was some arm let me tell you but he never pulled the trigger just told me to get out and I got Eva and left and never looked back.

The light turns green and I step on the gas and I don't look back now either because if I look back on all the stupid things I did in my life I'd see nothing but a sea of stupid bearing down on me like the first flood. I get home without crashing which says a lot and even though I'm not scared of much anymore I'm scared of what I'll find inside. I go barreling in anyway and my heart stops when I see her on the floor with a bunch of pill bottles around her and I stare really hard but I don't see her chest moving.

I open my eyes and I see that Karel is holding me in his arms. He's rocking me slowly. I want to be mad at him, but I always liked being held by him. Besides, I'm the one who couldn't resist writing him a note. Did I want him to find me like this? He holds me gently, as if he were holding a kitten. His eyes are closed and he is crying so softly that at first I don't notice. I surprise him by reaching up and touching his face. He smiles down at me.

Karel, you have to let me go, I tell him.

Why? he says, and there is the telltale whine in his voice of the child that never left him.

Because you're not your father.

He looks at me for a long time before he nods his head and sets me down on the floor and gets me a glass of water.

I wake up in the bed again but this time I remember getting in and I remember not feeling right about it and doing it anyway. I remember walking down to the river in the middle of the night with my dad's gun in my hand and I swear I didn't know what I was going to do with it when I got there but I threw it into a deep part and I know I'll never be able to get it back because I can't swim. I'm drinking less and remembering more now and I don't know if I like it but Eva always told me I couldn't run away from what I know. Still and all I look out the window and I can see that it might snow today and I just want to stay in bed all day until Queenie's puppy licks my face. □