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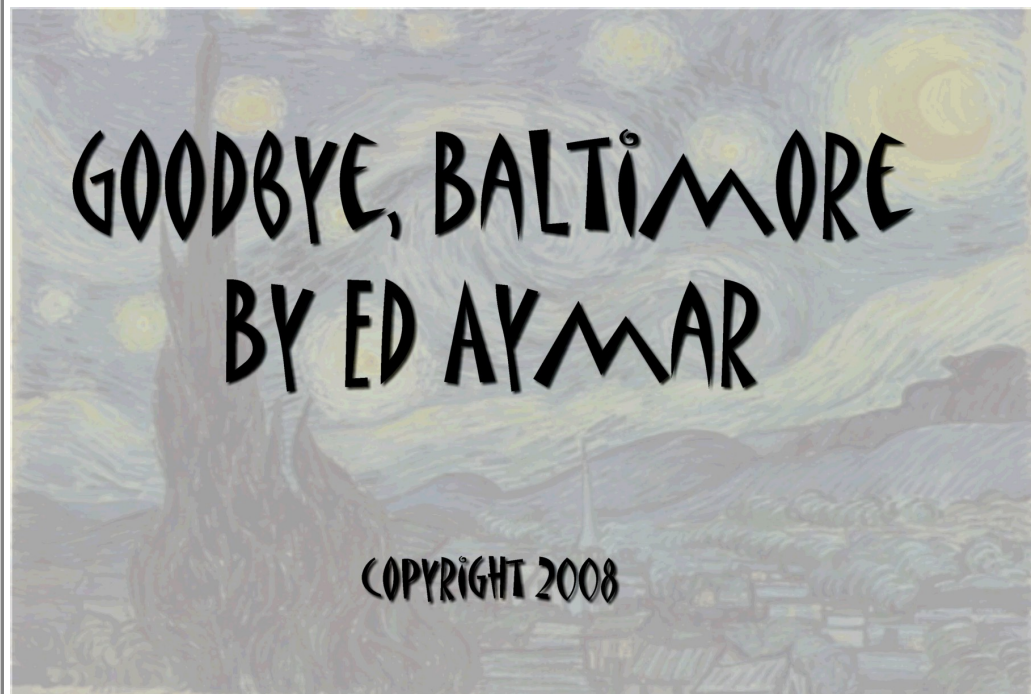
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The world was uncertain. Nothing felt right and I didn't know the cause of my uneasiness. But often, like when I sat in an air conditioned car or at a comfortable desk or lay in bed next to Melanie, I felt a sudden desire to run.

"Mark's having an affair. I found a letter." Anne's voice trailed away, and she stared down sadly into her bowl of soup. When she spoke again, her voice was mechanical, dead. "I found a letter he wrote her. When I asked him about it, he told me that he was seeing, that he has been seeing, someone else. He says it's over now."

I wasn't sure what to say.

"It lasted two years," Anne finished, flatly.

"How do you feel?" I asked, and then I wondered about the stupidity of my question.

"Like I'm in between two worlds," she replied. The world I knew, and the one I'm discovering." Anne paused. "And right now, I don't like either."

Later that night, I told Melanie what Anne had told me.

"He's a bastard," my girlfriend declared. She was a brunette with short brown hair that framed her face like a shell and black deep smoky eyes and a small mole to the side of her right eye that looked like a tear.

"Well, Anne doesn't know everything about the situation yet."

"John," Melanie asked. "What else is there for her to learn? He cheated on for two years." She was silent for a moment and then added, although she and Anne had never met. "I'm sad for her."

So was I. Anne had the type of amiable personality that made it seem, when she was at her happiest, that all of her sentences were punctuated with cheerful exclamation points. And she had soft eyes and light hair that tossed to either side of her head and she carried joy

effortlessly. You couldn't help but like her.

I had known her for just under a year; I was a production assistant and she was an associate producer at the same local television station and, if you don't understand the difference between a P.A. and an A.P., basically, I got the coffee she drank. The pay was shitty but it was the only job I could get after being fired twice since I had come back from Iraq. Chances were, I had only been given the job because I had returned from Iraq, and America was feeling apologetic toward its military.

My grandfather had died in one war and my father had been wounded in another and he never talked much about his service. This silence wasn't something I had understood until I had gone to war myself. I couldn't talk about it either when Melanie asked me about my time away. I wasn't blocking memories or trying to forget the experience. I just couldn't explain it. Explaining Iraq would be like defining America or the Internet or God. It was too much.

Melanie wore a black simple dress to our holiday party but, with her inside of it, the dress was anything but simple. Employees and families crowded into a ballroom that overlooked Baltimore's curved harbor. Yellow ship lights glittered over the black water.

I introduced Melanie to Anne and Anne introduced us to Mark. Anne was as cheerful as she always was and I was surprised to see her affection toward him; they held hands and whispered to each other and, aside from a quick moment later in the evening when I found Anne sobbing behind a tall plastic ficus tree, she made the most of the night. Mark was older (at thirty-three, Anne was ten years older than I was and he was ten years older than her) with friendly blue eyes and thinned brown graying hair and his voice was deliberate, as if whatever he said had been picked out long in advance. It made me wonder what his voice had been like the nights Anne told me about, after he had revealed the affair and cried and begged her to stay.

The party went the way those parties always do: we met friendly spouses and fidgety children; our conversations related to work in some fashion; the food was a little better than everyone expected. I was so bored that I asked Melanie if she wanted to leave over and over until she finally agreed, probably out of exasperation. She went to the bathroom and I went to the dessert table to load up and Mark suddenly appeared next to me.

"I don't know what I'd do if I lost Anne," he said.

"Mmm?" My back was turned to him and I wasn't sure if he realized I had a mouthful of pastry.

Anne," Mark said, and he nodded in her direction. "She told me that she confided in you."

I swallowed a lump of food so large it hurt my chest.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked.

Mark glanced toward Anne again. She was standing across the room, talking and laughing with a group of women, and the sadness I had seen in her earlier was gone. "I don't exactly know," Mark confessed. "My emotions were stronger than I was."

"You didn't know where your head was at?"

"Preposition," Mark said distantly, and then he looked back toward me with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry, that's a terrible force of habit. English professor, you see."

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I just nodded.

In bed later that night, Melanie turned toward me:

"What did you and Mark talk about?"

I told her.

Our bedroom was dark, and all I could see of Melanie was a shadow of herself, her silhouette leaning on her elbow. It reminded me of the first month when I was stationed outside of Baghdad, and I would look at the city in nighttime and could only see its shape--the ancient towers and spires and domes--reaching into the dark dusky sky. "He should have thought of that," Melanie was saying, "before he did what he did."

I wasn't sure where our conversation had gone. "What?"

"Mark should have thought of how he felt before he slept with someone else," she said, and her finger tapped my chest. "Are you listening to me?"

"Um, yeah. But, you know, as for Mark, us men don't really think too clearly when sex is involved."

"I know. But us women hope that years of being in love will outweigh your filthy little desires. Or else you'll share those desires with us."

"It doesn't really work that way."

Her finger on my chest again. "It better work that way for you."

"Well, I'm different."

Melanie clicked her tongue. "Mark's different. He's distinguished and smart and he's got a really great wife; he should know better. He didn't look like an adulterer, did he?"

"Have penis, will travel."

Melanie flounced back on the bed. "That's the truth, isn't it?"

I stared up at the dark ceiling. "I wonder why Mark told me all that."

"Part of Anne is shut off from him right now," Melanie said, easily. "And that part of her is open to you."

"What's that mean?"

"It means talking to you is the only way he can talk to her. They looked happy, and I think they're both trying, but she's closed to him."

Melanie and I met during our second year at Baltimore Community College; I had asked for

a tutor for a science class and she was the one assigned to me. She was good-looking, smart and popular and we had nothing in common. She was dating someone then, this big guy who wore tank tops and enjoyed working out and hitting her. She had I had been meeting twice a week for a month when I noticed a bruise on the back of her neck and she told me what was happening. I went to her boyfriend's house later that night to straighten him out. We both ended up in the hospital but, even though she was angry with me at first, I also ended up with Melanie.

I didn't have the grades to go away for college at the end of the year and I didn't really know what else to do so I joined the Reserves. Melanie went to the University of Maryland at Baltimore County and I went to Iraq.

Two things I never understood were science and how I managed to get a woman like Melanie. But I did understand that the least I could do for her was love her like nothing else. So I gave her that. It was all I had.

"I don't know what to do about Mark," Anne told me at lunch a few weeks after the holiday party. We always ate at the same restaurant in Federal Hill, a diner that specialized in Natty Bo, breakfast all day long and a view from the harbor to Highlandtown. "I can't stop thinking about what happened. I want to leave."

"We don't have our food yet."

"I mean leave Baltimore. I can't stay with him, and I don't know what to do." She drew in a ragged breath. "And I'm being selfish I haven't even asked you how you're doing."

I had confided to Anne that I was having some problems adjusting from the war; memories had started bothering me. Once Melanie and I were walking around Fells Point and we had passed a homeless man sleeping on a corner and I flashed back to the first corpse I had ever seen, a fat man rolled on his side on a corner in the Washash neighborhood of Baghdad, his hands holding his knees, as perfectly balanced and as still as a rock. One time Melanie turned up the heat in the house and a nearby vent overwhelmed me with hot air and, for a moment, the Iraq sun was beating me down. And if that wasn't enough, my body reacted to these fantasies my arms tensed, my head turned, my feet tried to run. And nightmares constantly shook me awake when I slept, so much so that I was sore in the morning.

"I'm fine," I lied, and then added, "Honestly, besides, I'd prefer to talk about you."

Anne looked at me.

"Really."

"You know," she said, and her eyes were so worn that they made me sad. "I don't think I can get over it. I really think I have to go somewhere else."

"Like where?"

"Maybe back home to the Midwest," she said. "Maybe somewhere else entirely. It's kind of nice to think that I can go anywhere or become anything." She took another sip from her beer. "It's like I get a chance to start over."

I looked at the bar's mirror. An old shotgun, with the muzzle sealed shut, hung above it. "Is

that what you want? To start over?"

"I don't know," Anne said. "I don't know how happy I was before. Maybe I only thought I was happy. It's hard to remember. Every time I think about what happened, it's like a big wave of emotion comes and hits me." She reached for her beer again, but let her hand rest on the table instead.

"There are these moments," Anne continued quietly, "when I feel like all I can think about is what happened when Mark was with her, how he lied during all those trips he took. And when I think of why it happened, when I look for reasons, yeah, I know that things had slowed down at home, that we weren't sleeping together as much." She cleared her throat. "I know this sounds dumb, but I think I could have understood if it had been once, just a one-night stand or whatever. But two years that doesn't even seem possible. Does it? I can't understand how he kept it from me for two whole years. Seven hundred nights and the entire time, honestly, I don't think I suspected. You know how some women say they knew that their husband was cheating? I didn't have a clue. And I can't stop thinking about that, either, how everything should have been so obvious." She swirled her beer, set it down and announced: "I'm going crazy. So I need to leave, to get away from everything and away from him and see what I should do next." She glanced at me. "You finished your drink."

"What's going on with you?" Melanie asked, one night when she came home and I was lying upside down on the couch.

"Sorry?"

"What are you doing?" She stood in front of me and I looked down her body, from her face to her breasts to her knees to her small boots.

"I'm watching television."

"How much have you been drinking?"

"Lots."

"Why?"

I shrugged, and the effort sent me catapulting to the floor. I had never enjoyed the taste of alcohol much before, but there were a few nights in Baghdad when some of us got stinking drunk and it felt really good. Most of the guys could drink more than I could, and drank more than I did, and it wasn't something I figured I'd return to if I made it home. But Melanie had graduate classes after work a couple of nights each week and I was bored with TV and the Internet, so I went down to the mart and brought back a six-pack. By the time she came back, I was passed out. And I didn't dream.

"Did you go to work today?" Melanie asked.

"No," I said, from underneath the coffee table.

"Why not?"

I stared up at the wood.

"Why not?" Melanie asked again, and when I didn't answer she kicked my foot, sighed, and

I watched her feet walk out of the room. The door to the bedroom slammed shut.

My new boss was a stern older man who had been to war himself and wasn't much impressed with my service, which was unfortunate, because I was making a lot of mistakes and could have used the pity. I understood the job but I was bored, bored beyond belief. I had never thought that anything could be as boring as the military, but it was hard to come to terms with civilian life and, after Anne left Baltimore, our department ran itself ragged trying to replace her. And, for some reason, the more panicked people grew at the television station, the more I grew detached. No one panics the way people in television do. They like to tell you that their work is being watched and judged the way nothing else is, and everything has to be perfect, but television seemed, to me, to be the most imperfectly run business ever created. It was hard for me to care, but it wasn't just the job. I had stopped caring about everything.

"This isn't a surprise, is it?" my boss asked after he had summoned me to his office.

I was a little drunk. "What do you mean?"

He looked at me distastefully. "You come in late when you come in at all, your lunches are lasting longer and longer, there's a pile of tapes under your desk that everyone spent a week looking for you used to do just enough to get by, and now you're not even doing that. So, again, are you surprised to be in here?"

"Getting fired isn't much of a surprise anymore."

All he did was flick his fingers, dismissing me. I turned toward the door, trying not to stumble.

"When I got out of the first Iraq war, I had a family to take care of. You don't have a family, do you, John?"

"No."

"I didn't have the luxury to feel self-indulgent," he said. "I had to get my act together."

I still hadn't turned toward him. I was looking out the tempered glass, at the wavy lines of my former co-workers outside.

Anne sounded shocked. "Fired? Are you kidding?"

"I was canned."

"Why?"

"It's not something I want to talk about." I crawled under the bed, holding the phone to my ear, until I reached the box that held my gun. "Anyway, how are you doing?"

"What?"

"I leaned toward the phone and pulled my gun out. How are you?"

"Well, I'm fine," Anne said, but she sounded alarmed. "Were you really fired?"

"I was, but I'm okay," I told her. "We'll talk about that later. Are you enjoying Topeka?"

She sounded like she was going to ask me about being fired again, but instead she sighed and said: "It's not so bad. I was never really a Baltimore girl at heart; I just moved there when Mark got the job teaching at Goucher. It's nice to be back home, and see my family well, sort of nice. I mean, it's nicer with my good friend Mister Prozac."

I nodded. "Has it helped, being away from Mark?"

"You know, I came here because I thought it would help me start over, but I don't feel like I have yet. I wanted to do something cleanse myself somehow, and that just hasn't happened."

"You wanted to cleanse yourself in Kansas?"

Anne paused. "It's like, back in Maryland, I felt like I was being strangled. And I still feel that way."

The front door downstairs opened. I heard Melanie walk in.

"I need to go," I said, and I hung up.

I slid the phone across the floor and watched it bump against the closed bedroom door. I held the gun in both hands and stared down the sight until I could see the curved white plastic of the telephone. The white plastic seemed to expand and fill my vision until it was all I could see, a growing target. I slowed my breathing so that my heart calmed. Melanie walked upstairs. I squeezed the trigger and it clicked.

She knocked on the door. "John, why is the door locked? John?"

I stayed under the bed, lying perfectly still and staying quiet, holding the gun. I kept my eyes trained on the target.

There was a knock on the front door the next night. I was surprised to see Mark when I answered.

"Anne thought it might be a good idea for me to check up on you," he said. "She told me that you sounded rather rough last night."

Mark looked rather rough himself, wearing an orange trucker's hat and an open jacket over a stained t-shirt and blue jeans and untied shoes. We walked into the living room and he sat on the sofa and I took an armchair adjacent to him.

"Orioles!" he said brightly, when he saw what I had been watching. "Are you a fan?"

"I like baseball."

"Then you're not a fan of the Orioles."

I laughed a little. "I thought you smart guys didn't like sports."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "But some would say I'm not that smart."

"You mean, like Anne?"

"What?"

"Just a joke."

"Oh." We watched Melvin Mora strike out in three straight pitches, and then Mark turned toward me and said, casually: "Anne's not the only one concerned about you. Someone else is. Someone close to you."

I felt uncomfortable. "Are you that someone?"

He shook his head. "Melanie called Anne this morning."

"She did?" This surprised me. Melanie hadn't said much after I had hidden the gun and unlocked the bedroom door. She had just made a few comments about her day, asked me about mine, realized I was drunk and slept on the couch.

"She did," Mark confided. "She worries about you, and doesn't know what she can do to help. She says, and Anne concurs, that you refuse to discuss your time in Iraq."

"Not much to say."

He turned toward the television and watched a commercial for some type of beer. He twisted his cap so that it was on backward and looked surprisingly young. His mouth hung a little open and his eyes were engrossed by the television and I felt a moment of friendliness toward him. He seemed helpless.

"Do you want a drink?" I asked.

"No. Well, no."

"You talked to Anne? How did that go?"

"She didn't call. She sent me a text note on my cellular. It was curt."

"You miss her?"

"Terribly," he said, and he looked down at his knees. "Half the time I'm depressed, and the other half I'm out of my mind."

"If you want," I offered, "you and me can raise some hell. Run around the neighborhood screaming and set things on fire and stuff?"

"I'll pass," Mark told me, and then he reconsidered. "Well, for now, anyway."

Two Oriole players were chasing a ball hit high and ran into each other. The baseball

landed between them while they lay stunned on the ground.

“So why'd you fuck someone else?” I asked. “Did you think you were in love?”

Mark flashed a quick angry look toward me. “It's not,” he began, and his voice calmed. “I didn't think I was in love until, maybe, the middle of the relationship. Although I'm hesitant to even call it a relationship. A two-year affair seems like you have another life, a full life, with someone else. This was more sporadic.”

“You two kept breaking up the entire time?”

“I did try to end it at several points. It was only consistent, it only felt like a relationship, occasionally.” He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. “I realize that's a hard thing to differentiate.”

“Probably impossible for Anne.”

“Probably so.”

“Sometimes it felt like it was everything, though, huh? Like an addiction?”

Mark opened his eyes. “When I hated myself for what I was doing, that's exactly what it was.” He leaned over to me. “It was essentially sex. Desire, probably because of some emotions that I don't want to discuss now, but those emotions had nothing to do with Anne. She makes me happy. I regret what happened, and I'm afraid of it, because it seemed to come from somewhere other than love. What's to say that I might spend the rest of my life in blissful love with Anne, and still have this temptation come across?” He shifted uncomfortably. “That does worry me.”

“You told me that your emotions were stronger than you. You worried about losing control again?”

“You bet,” Mark said, as offhandedly as if he was commenting on the score of the baseball game. “You and I are going to lose everything if we don't figure out how to get control. I probably already have.”

Melanie always did the same routine when she got back from work: she set her heavy oversized purse on the floor, sighed, listened to the answering machine, opened the refrigerator, took a quick drink of water, closed the refrigerator and walked into the living room.

“John,” she asked, “what did you do?”

I pushed a couch cushion aside and glanced out to her. “I made a fort,” I confided, and I pulled the cushion back.

“I see that,” she said. “Where did you get all these pillows?”

“I had to buy them.”

“How many?”

"Forty-seven, to get it to reach the ceiling."

"I see," she said again, and her voice sounded sad. "This is what you did all day?"

"Uh huh. Yup. You betcha." I paused. "Do you want to come in?"

"Okay," Melanie said, and one of the bottom pillows shook and was pulled away and she crawled inside. She was wearing a black skirt and black pantyhose and a white blouse and her long hair was held back with a clip so it narrowed and then spread and she looked beautiful kneeling next to me. She picked up a bottle of water from a stack in a corner.

"Why do you have so many bottles of water?" she asked.

"Provisions."

"Ah."

"You need a lot of water in the desert. It's important to hydrate. They made us drink water even when we couldn't drink anymore. I drank and drank and drank so much that my dick hurt when I peed. But they were right to make us. This one guy in my unit, Williams, he didn't drink before we went on patrol and he got so dehydrated that he started sweating buckets, these amazing amounts of water, and then he vomited up blood and brown shit and then he shook uncontrollably and died. After that, I drank no matter how I felt."

Melanie watched me, sitting with her knees drawn to her chin and her ankles crossed and her arms wrapped around her legs.

"Do you want to go outside of the fort?" I asked. "It's not very comfortable in here."

She was scratching her knee, and she looked up at me, as if surprised.

"I want to stay," she said.

Anne and I went to lunch when she came back to Baltimore the following month.

"It's what I have to do," she told me while we waited for our food.

"Is it what you want to do?"

"It's never been something I wanted to do. I never thought I'd get divorced."

"Then why?"

"Because I think about what I am now, and I don't know how I'll ever be anything different. As long as I'm with him, I'm always going to be hurt, and angry, and alone. No matter how much I still love him." She paused. "Do you think that will ever change?"

I looked away from her. Winter had come to Baltimore that morning. Snow lay thick on the ground, muffling the city as if the city had been placed inside in a glass case. A car drove sluggishly past the restaurant window, the driver holding the wheel with both hands and leaning forward to peer through his windshield. An ancient brown building across the street glistened. Kids ran past. Gigantic snowflakes fell clumsily from a white sky to the street,

dissolving as they touched.

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