

Alumni

2800 words

Ed was at a conference in Bakersfield and told me there was a problem with the pet sitter tonight and could I stop by the house and feed the dog her dinner. I'd done it a few times before. Ed was my brother-in-law.

The house was on Hilgard Avenue in the Berkeley hills, near the top of the Le Roy steps, and had a commanding view of the flatlands and the bay and bridge in the distance. As I got the food organized I smelled perfume, pretty strong, coming from somewhere in the house.

Sadie the yellow lab wolfed down her dinner in about thirty seconds and I let her out. I looked around the living room and dining room, peeked in Ed's study, and paused at the edge of the bedroom. The perfume scent was stronger, and there was a warmth, a trace of recent human presence.

My sister Meredith was an executive with AT&T and traveled about a week a month. Right now she was supposedly down south.

I called Ed. "I'm here, everything's in good shape," I said. "Listen, you and Merry want to come over Sunday and watch the Niners? . . . You'll both be back by then, right?"

"Nah, I won't be," Ed said. "The dumb shits keep repeating themselves and it's all running together, but they're making sure to drag it out through the weekend. Mer should be home Friday though."

"Okay then . . . Where is she again? This week?"

"Irving, Texas."

"Ah . . . And that pet sitter? She's been staying here, or no?"

"No, we got a high school kid. She stops in morning and night, which is all we need."

"What happened with tonight?"

"Jesus, what do you care? She'll be back tomorrow. She said she had an SAT study group thing."

I wanted to ask more, did she have a boyfriend and so forth, praying to God it would logically fit together, but I kept my mouth shut and hung up with Ed.

When Meredith answered there was the whooshing sound of road noise in the background. "What's up?" I said.

"I'm taking a chance picking up," she said.

"Everything all right?"

"Just fine on this end . . . So the traffic's bad down there, then."

"Not at all, I'm going 65 at the moment."

"What are you on?"

"Well let me see, not sure . . . you know I'm in Dallas, right?"

"Ed said Irving, yeah . . . You're driving, but you don't know what highway you're on?"

"Okay, here it is, 20 . . . Christ, Wayne. What're you calling for, anyway?"

"I was going to ask you about Mom--you like that place or no?"

"I do. Put it this way, it's the lesser of evils. At least they seem to care about her."

"I guess . . . How's the weather been down there?"

"Fine, especially for almost November."

"Well stay safe," I said.

I fired up the laptop in Ed's study, logged on to *Accuweather* and entered Dallas/Fort Worth, and was informed it had been raining cats and dogs all day.

A week-and-a-half later my wife Jackie and I were having pre-game cocktails on Ed and my sister's deck. The four of us had alumni season tickets to Cal football and it was a ritual. Ed and I had met in the freshmen dorms and Meredith and Jackie lived in a sorority together, and things eventually intertwined.

Ed said, "Everyone know who we're playing today? Which would be unusual."

Jackie said, "You'll be surprised, I did my homework this week. Arizona."

"Close, Arizona State," Ed said.

"It could be a long afternoon," I said. "They've got a guy who's rushed for 100 yards every Pac-12 game so far."

"And he's only five-six," Ed said. "You can't find him."

Jackie said, "Everything okay Mer? You seem preoccupied."

"No I'm good," my sister said. "I'm just unwinding from the week."

"You were around the whole time, right?" Jackie said.

Meredith said, "This week? Yes, in the office."

I said, "You do look shot. Maybe you haven't recovered from Texas yet?"

"Well, that could be," she said.

We left the house an hour before kickoff like always, and walked down to Euclid and across campus and caught up with the marching band and their couple hundred followers as they wound their way up to the stadium. The drumline was shifting through various aggressive beats, with the xylophones chiming in here and there, and it fired everyone up.

There was a tradition where the band stopped playing as it passed the library, and the band members turned to each other and yelled *Be Quiet*. When they resumed playing, Ed and Jackie were up ahead, near the Campanile.

I said to Meredith, "That last business trip, I happened to notice the weather . . . Big storm down there, apparently."

Meredith seemed to flinch just slightly. "It did rain on and off," she said. "You never know what you're going to encounter in other parts of the country. Things happen fast."

"You ever have a break mid-week, when you can come home for a day or so? Or that wouldn't be worth it?"

"Occasionally we do," she said. "But that would never make sense, are you kidding?"

I said, "Well, I'm happy to pinch hit any time with Sadie . . . This high school kid, that who you normally use?"

"Wayne, what's with all these questions? . . . No, this is the first time we've used Heather. It's been sort of whoever we can find."

"Oh. I might be worried then, with the key sitting right there under the rock and all. You should change that system."

"Our block is pretty quiet, you never hear of anything. God forbid, but if someone wanted to break in, they wouldn't need the key."

"I wasn't thinking of that, I was thinking more of someone deciding to use the place for a few hours. Or whatever."

"Okay now you're starting to go off the deep end," she said. "Can we just enjoy the game?"

Memorial Stadium was about a third full as the Bears kicked off to Arizona State. "You have to admit," Ed said. \$500 million to renovate the place, but sitting here it doesn't feel all that different."

"But wasn't a large portion of that earmarked for the earthquake retrofit?" Jackie said.

"That, and the weight room under the stadium that stretches for 100 yards," I said.

"Yep, the largest in NCAA football," Ed said. "So that we could recruit all the blue chip prospects we weren't getting before."

"Well, that makes sense," Jackie said. "You do need the facilities to attract the talent, right?"

"We're 2 and 6," I said.

"Merry, you sure you're okay?" Jackie said. "How about a tic tac?"

Meredith held out her hand and thanked Jackie but barely said anything the rest of the game. Cal's quarterback went down and they put in the redshirt sophomore, more of a runner than a passer, and for a while he was able to turn the corner on the option. Cal looked tired in the fourth quarter though, and Arizona State scored on two long drives and won by 19.

"Welp," Ed said as we were filing out, "how bout we go down to Shattuck? They've got a new craft beer place I read about."

"I saw that," Jackie said. "They released a limited edition, and people waited for hours."

"That's ridiculous," I said, "but let's check it out."

Meredith finally opened her mouth and said, "Actually, would you guys be okay if I took a rain check?"

"I knew it, I could tell all day," Jackie said, "You're not right. I'm coming home with you."

"No, don't be silly," Meredith said.

"Let her," Ed said.

"Yeah, what's wrong with that?" I said.

"I'm just tired of socializing," Meredith said. "That came out wrong . . . but please, let me be, tonight?"

Jackie said, "I won't push you then, girl. Call right away though, anything at all?"

"Of course," Meredith said. She peeled off to the right toward the northside of campus where they lived, no hugs or goodbyes, and the three of us headed down Bancroft toward the beer place.

A block into it I said to Ed, "You guys all right? . . . Relationship and so forth?"

"Wayne--" Jackie said.

"No, that's fine," Ed said. "She has her moments, obviously, but things are good. I couldn't script it much better, to be honest."

"Either one of you, I don't know, ever screw around . . . or have the urge to?"

"Jesus Christ, Wayne!" Jackie said.

"Yeah Bud," Ed said, standing still now, "all of a sudden you're getting on my nerves, you know it?"

"It's only conversation," I said. "You wouldn't be the first couple that ever thought about it or did it, is all I'm saying."

"That's enough, shut the fuck up," Ed said.

Jackie said, "Ed, I'm terribly sorry. This is the most bizarre behavior."

"It is," Ed said, his face contorted. "I'm thinking I'll mosey on home myself. We can visit the beer garden when cooler heads prevail."

"Which they will," Jackie said.

"I'm confident you're right," Ed said, and took off.

Jackie watched him disappear across the plaza past the architecture building and said, "I'm speechless Wayne, I truly am . . . A sensible person, hearing you

carry on, with this obsession . . . would conclude it's you that wants to have an affair." Her voice cracked on *you*.

"What it is," I said, "I'm pretty dang sure Merry's doing it with someone."

"Let's run through it again," Jackie said. We were upstairs at Kip's on Durant Avenue, a college joint where all four of us hung out back in the day. The place had slipped a bit, but the booths were comfortable and they left you alone.

"Forget that," I said. "You know I'm right. Anything you want to tell me about, that Ed should know?"

"Well . . . all I can think of, there's this guy at the gym. His name is Casey. He seems to time his workouts to when she's there, and he brings her Starbucks sometimes."

"Oh my God, what a slut. I should have known, the way she played the field in high school . . . You never really change, do you?"

"Okay, let's don't jump to conclusions just yet. I'm thinking out loud . . . There's not that much else to it. Sometimes he helps her with the seat adjustment on the machines, and now and then they'll be chatting at those tables by the magazines."

"Not much else to it? Are you nuts?"

"Wayne, I do that sometimes too. With guys. It's harmless."

"Wait a second. Do *what*?"

"I don't know, make small talk with them . . . what people do at gyms."

"Is that what they do . . . Now something else I gotta worry about, why'd you tell me this?"

"Babe, I'm only pointing out -- Mer's behavior doesn't seem unreasonable. We can't crucify her because someone likes to bring her coffee."

"Fine. And bedding down the guy mid-afternoon when you're supposed to be fifteen hundred miles away, that reasonable as well?"

"We simply don't know that," Jackie said.

"Okay, what you do?" I said. "Find this Casey and tell him you need to get a hold of Merry right away."

"That makes no sense."

"Don't worry about it, let's see who blinks here."

Tuesday night I picked up burritos and had a fire going when Jackie came home in her workout garb. "I'm realizing you don't sweat much," I said. "Shouldn't you be dripping wet, all the time it takes?"

"Wayne, knock it off now. I do a yoga class and walk on the treadmill, what can I tell you. For your information, I did speak to Casey."

"Oh yeah, Jesus. And what?"

"He said he has no idea how to get in touch with her."

"Looking you right in the eye. The prick."

"I believe him, Wayne. He's just a nice guy. I watched him tonight, talking to guys as much as women, helping some of them with seat adjustments too."

"Oh man . . . Tell you what, you're her best friend. Call her up."

"And say what, exactly?"

"Okay . . . enough bullshit. I'll call her myself. I'm obviously the only one around here with a backbone."

"I see," Jackie said. "That makes two of us who can't stand you now, and it's about to be three. Asshole."

I waited until the morning so I'd catch my sister at work. I needed an extra cup of coffee to straighten myself out, since I'd ended up spending the night on the couch.

I said, "Mer, I'm not going beat around the bush. It's been tugging at me for two weeks. How could you do this to Ed?"

My sister laughed, and then lowered her voice, serious. "You think I'm cheating on my husband? Is that it? . . . You have a lot of nerve, Wayne . . . Maybe you need to look somewhere else, you ever consider that?" She clicked off.

I was stunned, and mixed-up thoughts were racing around. I wandered into the bedroom and was aware of the perfumes all neatly lined up on the back of the bureau.

I called my wife and gave her the gist of the conversation. "Why that little bitch," Jackie said. "Tell me exactly what she said."

I told her word for word, except I substituted 'look under your own roof' for the 'look somewhere else' part.

"Unbelievable," she said.

"What, 'that little bitch' because she accused you of something? . . . Or because she's lying?"

"Both things, obviously . . . Wayne, what do you think I am?"

"So when you say she's lying, that means you know what's going on."

"Okay, you're twisting everything now . . .
Someone's here, I have a meeting."

"Well I'm glad we cleared the air," I said.

At around two I drove back up to the house on Hilgard and let myself in the side door with the key that was under the rock. At least Sadie was happy to see me. In the little foyer off the kitchen there was an antique secretary that had belonged to our grandparents. It was a tall cabinet with glass doors on top and a writing surface that folded down, and drawers underneath, and I began poking around in it.

The voices caught me off guard. Two teenage kids were coming out of the bedroom, a boy and a girl. The boy had pimples and was putting on a baseball cap. They were across the living room and almost at the front door when the girl saw me and shrieked.

I put my hand up and spoke quickly. "It's fine, I'm Meredith's brother . . . Mrs. Jameson's . . . I didn't break in or anything."

The girl calmed down and said, "Are you going to tell my parents?"

"I wasn't planning on it," I said. "Just have this be the last time though, okay?"

"Oh we will," the boy said. "Thank you."

"Yes, thank you so much," the girl said, and they were out the door.

I closed the cabinet and realized I was starved and made myself a sandwich. Again, from the kitchen I could smell perfume working its way out of the bedroom, though it seemed to have a tropical fragrance, not the more traditional European scent I pictured last time, though what did I know?

Ed called that night. I was watching *House Hunters* and Jackie wasn't home yet. Ed didn't sound good.

"They say a man can only go to the well so many times before the bucket breaks," he said.

"Speak English," I said.

"Merry told me about the affair. I get it now, you were looking out for my best interest."

"Wait a second, what affair?"

"What the fuck," Ed said.

"Well I confronted her on it, and I pieced it together. I was wrong."

"Some dude from New York? . . . She didn't say anything?"

"No."

"She runs into him on the road . . . He's in software . . . She said she ended it in Dallas."

I didn't know what to say. I was trying hard to wrap my head around it when Jackie walked in. I looked up at the clock and it was quarter to eleven. Jackie was grim, going about her business as though I wasn't there. When she passed by on the way to the fridge I caught a slight touch of her perfume. I thought it had a classy European quality to it, but I wasn't sure.