

The Bathroom Door

Gillian

I stop in front of the mirror and run my hand over my stomach. Still flat at forty-seven years old. The hair's jet black and shiny, though I have help with that. I turn and check my butt. Not *too* saggy. The lines in my face are the give-away, but they aren't bad. Any other time I'd smile at what I see.

Instead, a shiver passes up my spine because I'm in my apartment's bathroom and Michael's in the bedroom.

The first time I walked out of a bathroom naked to a man, Ted was a junior at college. I was a year behind. We were at his aunt's cabin near Whiteface Mountain that summer. The windows were open that night and the breeze cascaded through the bedroom. A line of storms passed by and the smell of the damp woods was almost as intoxicating as the beer I'd drunk to give me courage. Even with one of the lights on, we could see some of the fireflies speckling the night.

Two years later, on our wedding night, Ted didn't complain at the task of unhooking the forty-four buttons on the back of my dress. We weren't new to each other by then and the wedding-night sex wasn't the best. But we were married and I fell asleep with my head on his shoulder, looking forward to building our lives together.

Part of me still loves Ted.

He took his lunch to work the first two years we were married so we could save the money to see Seattle because I'd always wanted to go there. Then he agreed to move there because I loved it.

He sat wordless with me when we found out I couldn't have kids. He let me be an angry shrew for longer than he should have. Six months later, he held me again when I broke down crying for no reason while we made love.

He never left me during the forty-one hours between my mother's stroke and her death. He handled all the arrangements because he knew I couldn't. No questions asked.

Even now, I feel his hands, thick and powerful. I can feel his breath on my neck as he stands behind me, his arms wrapping me like a shield. I can still smell his earthy, musky scent, the one I'd take a second to breathe in if I was putting his shirts in the wash. He was big and solid and immovable and he made me feel like nothing could hurt me.

And then he took me to hell when I found out what kind of man he really was.

Back in the present, there's noise on the other side of the door. A murmuring.

"What?" I ask.

A couple seconds go by.

"What?" Michael says.

“Did you say something?”

A short delay, then “No.” Not an emphatic *no*, kind of unsure. Ted never seemed unsure.

The sky was turbulent that March Thursday afternoon when everything came apart. Ragged clouds raced inland toward the mountains. The wind that pushed them found every gap in my clothes and made me strain against shivering.

That day, I wore a coffee-colored insulated leather jacket, black slacks, a red turtleneck, and my favorite boots. I don't have those clothes any more. I don't have a lot of the things I had that day.

Three police cars sat in front of our house. Two marked cars and one that wasn't.

When I pulled up, the police were taking him away in handcuffs. They took all of our computers, too. They took my work computer from my hands as I stood there. Explaining that was no fun.

“Mrs. Hyatt?” The detective's eyes were hard on me. She a little younger than I was, thick in the middle, like maybe she'd been able to have kids and couldn't quite get rid of the baby fat. Her iron eyes made me feel small and guilty.

“Wh-what's happening?”

When she told me, my eyes went to Ted's and found nothing. His silence told me everything. The mirage of our lives together staggered me.

Eight-hundred ninety-six counts, they said. One for each picture. I don't know how I found out, but there were eleven hundred sixteen kids in those pictures.

All those years, Ted took me in his arms and made me feel secure. And all those years, he was a monster. He is my worst nightmare. I still try to convince myself I had no clue.

“I love you so much it hurts,” I told Ted the night we moved into my dream house in Seattle. Four bedrooms and a back yard because we didn’t know I was barren. In retrospect, it was better that way.

Twelve years and five months later, the day he was arrested, I found out what that loving till it hurts really means.

I lost the house—lawyers aren’t free. I lost most of my friends. I lost my church and my workout partners and the good will of my colleagues at work. They’d ask how I didn’t know, why I didn’t stop it. It wouldn’t have hurt so much if I weren’t asking myself the same questions.

Everything we built was a lie and I was stupid enough to believe it. Maybe I looked the other way because of how he made me feel.

Kids are abused because guys like Ted want the pictures. And guys like Ted want them because women like me don’t say anything. Maybe I wasn’t a victim. Maybe I was an accessory. That uneasy truth is the worst part.

I don’t like living in Florida. There aren’t mountains and navy blue lakes. The scent of the trees doesn’t remind me of the woods in the Adirondacks all those years ago. The grass doesn’t kiss your bare feet when you walk across it. But down here, people don’t know who and what I am. Down here, I don’t feel their eyes on my back and their judgements on my heart.

As much as I dislike it, down here is best.

I met Michael when he saw me reading a Robert B. Parker at Barnes and Noble.

“I miss him,” he said. “Since he died.”

As soon as I looked up, his eyes dropped, and then came back to me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Ted wouldn't have apologized.

Michael's eyes are brown, not blue. He's small and his hands are thin and soft. I didn't intend to talk to him. I didn't intend to ask him to buy me coffee. I didn't intend to have dinner with him that weekend.

Our first date was four years and sixteen days after I packed everything in my car and left Seattle.

Last week, I told him about Ted. We were walking along the beach at Honeymoon Island. It was cool and there weren't a lot of people there. I don't know why I decided to do it then, but I did. There was no one there to hear—no one to watch as he inevitably walked away from me.

He said nothing as I spoke and when I finished, my heart froze during his long silence. I almost turned to leave, but he took my hand.

"I don't know what happened. But I know you. And you couldn't do that to someone." When he smiled at me, I felt warm inside for the first time since the afternoon they took Ted. That's when I decided to do *this*.

So I'm standing naked in my bathroom, my clothes heaped on the floor like the armor I never really had. And he's waiting for me. Out there. He knows what I am and he's still waiting.

I ought to be happy, but I'm scared. I'm shivering and staring at the door like I'm facing a death sentence, running water in the sink to buy time. But I can't stay in here forever.

Michael's not redemption. He's a salve, a step toward a world where redemption might be possible. He's the first blade of grass when the snow starts to melt.

My hand goes to the doorknob and I take a breath.

Then I turn the knob and step into the rest of my life.

Michael

I've run obstacle courses with live electric wires and vast dumpsters of ice water to swim through. I've gone into meetings fairly certain I'd lose my job. I held my son Roger, this new, helpless little boy in my arms and realized he was dependent on me—the guy who used to get drunk and belch the alphabet—for everything he needed in life. After my wife's funeral, I came back alone to the empty house we'd called a home.

I've done scary things before.

My heart stopped when Gillian decided I could come to her apartment after our dinner together.

So I'm sitting here in the bedroom fully clothed while there's a witty, attractive, fun, sexy, and probably naked woman on the other side of her bathroom door.

And I'm thinking of Vince Lombardi.

He was once recorded saying, "After all these years you'd think I'd be nice and relaxed and look at me. I'm a nervous wreck."

Nothing says romance like thinking about a dead football coach.

For a second, I consider leaving. I'm fifty-two and age can limit a man, if you know what I mean.

"Good, jack ass," I whisper. "Set the mood by thinking of Lombardi and impotence."

"What?" Her voice is soft and inviting from behind the door. And I die a little.

"What?" I say.

There's no way she heard what I said. If I act like I didn't say anything, maybe she won't think I'm a lunatic. Maybe she won't walk out in a formless flannel nightgown and demand I leave.

“Did you say something?”

Dammit.

“No.” It sounds more like a question than a statement.

Actually, it’s not the performance that scares me. What scares me is being naked, stripped of pretense. What scares me is taking down the wall I worked so hard to build after Mary died. I tended that wall like she tended the flowers in front of our house. Like she tended our marriage and our son.

Like she tended me.

She built a life for us that was as colorful and fragrant as the flower beds. She told me I was responsible for all that, too, but in truth, I might’ve built the structure. She made it special.

The wall I’ve built has served its purpose. It’s stopped me from hurting the way I did after she died.

Three years ago, I stayed home from church one Sunday. I’d run a half marathon the day before and then we’d gone out with friends.

“I’m toast,” I told her. “Go without me.”

“Really?” The doubt in her voice was almost all in jest.

“Did you hear me eating Rice Krispies during the night?”

She pulled back at the stupidity of my question. “No.”

“That’s because I didn’t. That was the sound of my legs as I hobbled to the bathroom.”

She sat down on the bed next to me and smiled, her green eyes radiating contentment.

That’s what I remember most about that morning—how content she seemed. She always had an easy smile, but something felt different that morning. I just didn’t pick it up.

“It’s not your legs betraying you. It’s the beer you drank last night.” She swatted my ass through the covers and let her hand stay there a few seconds. It made me smile, having her touch me, even through the sheets.

I buried my face in the pillow. “Leave me alone.”

She kissed me on the back of the head and left for the living room. I knew she was doing her devotional, highlighting the old Bible her grandmother gave her, probably biting her lower lip as she stared down through the half-glasses. I never told her, but I found the lip-biting thing irresistible.

I asked her once if they bothered her—the granny glasses. I was playing with her, expecting mock anger, but I didn’t get it.

“I’m fifty. And in four months I’m gonna be a grandma. The glasses don’t bother me.”

I chuckled. “I’m gonna score with someone’s grandma.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Not if you keep talking like that.”

Our grandson Brock was born four months later, almost to the day. Mary cried as she held him. She told Roger she’d buy everything in Toys R Us and make me pay for it. And she’d spoil the baby and make sure he never doubted her love.

She only got to be a grandma for six months, though she’d probably take the *only* out of that sentence. I’d never seen her happier.

When Roger’s wife Jo Anne said they needed help babysitting Saturday afternoons, Mary beamed in a way I hadn’t seen since she first wore her engagement ring. The best part of babysitting wasn’t the baby, it was watching her tend the baby.

From some reason it was vitally important that we miss the first Saturday of baseball season to take the kid for a walk and see the ducks at a pond not far from our house. It didn’t

matter that there weren't any ducks, or that Brock slept the entire time, or that I missed the Mets win 11-2. I got to see her being a grandma. Roger had given her a gift I never could.

When we got back to the car, she buckled Brock into the front seat carrier and I tried to imprint the moment into my mind forever. The effort was successful.

Mary didn't like driving in the rain, a fact I conveniently let myself forget that Sunday morning. After the accident, one of the cops told me she wouldn't have felt any pain when the truck skidded across the road and hit her head on. I'd love to believe that.

If I close my eyes, I can imagine the fear frozen on her face, the last expression she'd ever have, as the truck obliterated the front of her car. The funeral was closed casket and though the pastor told us all she was in a place where there were no more tears, I struggled to believe it.

"If you'd gone," Gillian said over pizza last weekend, "she'd still be dead. It's just that you would've died, too." Her hand fell on top of mine as she said it and I didn't mind.

She's the first person who could say that without making me angry.

My going to church that morning wouldn't have solved anything. It ought to be that simple. Like taking care of the checkbook or sleeping through the night or seeing a woman who looked vaguely like Mary without feeling like someone ran a hot poker through my chest.

It's been three years and the wounds still feel fresh.

In the bathroom, the water's running now. At some point, Gillian turned it on. She's attractive—hot, even. She smells like cherries and has jet black hair and often looks like she's pondering life's greatest mysteries.

And in spite of everything that's happened to her, she seems to know that she's enough. And she's getting herself ready, only to come out for...for *this*?

I'm in pretty good shape for my age, but holy crap, I'm a mess.

When I thought about this moment, I thought I'd be the man. I'd be lying on the bed, my legs crossed, left arm casually behind my head. My right arm splayed next to my side, ready to pull her to me as she slips into bed.

Instead I'm still fully clothed and it feels like nothing's going to work. Here I am, after all these years, a nervous wreck.

She's gonna walk out with no clothes on. She's gonna have the courage to bear it all for you. You have to at least take your shirt off.

So I do.

We met one rainy Sunday afternoon at Barnes and Noble. She was reading a Spenser—one of the ones written after Robert B. Parker died.

"I miss him," I'd said.

She looked up the way you do when someone interrupts a good read. As I started to look away, embarrassed, I caught something in her eyes. They were green, too, and they made me feel warm under my shirt, even though the store air conditioner was on. But I didn't feel the hot poker. I felt something different.

I forced myself not to look away.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

She studied me for a second, at first suspicious, then less so. And then she smiled back at me. "Buy me a coffee and all is forgiven."

All is forgiven. As if it's that easy.

Last week, she told me about her husband, the jerk. Actually, he's worse than a jerk, but I keep that to myself. That's not about us. I can't imagine her ever hurting children like that, not

after trying so hard to have one. I don't know tons about her but I know she's not her ex-husband.

We've been dating almost five months. Made it to second base a few times, then the inning ended. Sometimes I ended it and sometimes she did. Compelled to go further but too afraid.

It's been a long time since I've looked a woman in the eyes and just let my gaze settle there. Since I've let my hand linger on her cheek. Since I've combed my fingers through her jet-black hair.

If tonight was just sex, it wouldn't be a problem. I've had sex before. But this was revelation. This was baring my soul, allowing this stranger into the place I'd walled off. It was putting her in a position to understand who I am.

To judge me. And maybe find me lacking.

I'm sitting on the corner of her bed, my shirt in my lap. And I can feel my heart beating.

The water turns off and, because there's no other noise in the house, I hear her feet padding across the floor.

The doorknob turns and I take a breath and decide it's too late to do anything but go with it.

And hope I'll pass her judgment.