

ROBERT MCGUILL

Gifted

By late fall he was living in the mountains. Alone. Three months and a hundred miles from the worst day of his life. He bought a run-down two-bedroom cabin in the woods with the last of his savings and the meager bit of severance the school system had been willing to throw his way to see his sorry ass out the door after they'd learned he'd been arrested on charges of domestic violence.

It wasn't a place he'd ever imagined being. Or a life he'd ever dreamed of living. But it was what he had, and strangely, after all he'd lost, it felt like a blessing. A benediction.

They'd fired him without giving the matter a second thought. He was a PR nightmare the school told him, and there was no way to rehabilitate his image. No way he could be allowed to teach any longer. Not without the district coming under heavy fire from wild-eyed parents.

He was in his late forties. He'd taught shop for twenty years and been respected, if not admired for the easy way he had with students. But on that day his peers had forced him to stand before them like a truant, answering pointless questions, and when the hearing finally adjourned, they terminated his position and abruptly funneled his students into Tuck Heffron's metal shop.

It was little Jess who'd dialed 911. Done it just the way they'd taught her in school. Just the way he'd taught her, long before she was even old enough to go to school. She'd watched him break her mother's nose with the whisky bottle. Seen her mother's blood stain the living room carpet. But she'd risen to the moment, to the terrible seriousness of the occasion, just as she should have, by summoning the police.

He'd appeared before a judge. Stood in front of the bench and shaken his head, explaining that it had been an accident. Bad luck beginning to end, no malice intended. This was his *mea culpa*, the only defense he bothered to offer. An *accident*. Marie had risen meekly and attested to the truth of his absurd tale, admitting to the magistrate that while it was, indeed, a marital row that had landed them here in his courtroom, there had never been a history of violent behavior between them. Her husband hadn't meant to strike her, she'd told the judge. She'd walked into the disaster. Tripped on the edge of the rug, and stumbled face first into the bottle as he thrust out his arms to catch her.

When the white-haired magistrate asked her husband what it was that had precipitated the argument, the accused lowered his eyes and drew his boot, raspily, across the wooden floor, offering a silent gesture of the hand (he made a spout of his thumb, and raised an invisible bottle to his lips) to explain the rest. *John Barleycorn, your honor.*

The judge studied him. Humorlessly. Shook his head and turned his bespectacled eyes back to the woman, who he proceeded to interrogate with a series of finely-pointed questions. When he was satisfied with the answers she'd tendered, he shuffled his papers, noted the time on the wall clock, grimaced slightly, and dismissed them both with a sweep of his hand.

Outside the courtroom, she gripped her husband's sleeve.

Thank you.

For what?

For not...for not bringing up the affair.

He stiffened. What was there to say to that? What did you say to someone with the nerve to utter such a thing? He pulled his arm free and started for the door. But she chased after him, choking back tears, telling him how grateful she was. How terribly, terribly grateful. She knew he hadn't done it for her benefit. That he was only trying to protect Jess. But still, she insisted, the gesture meant something. It proved what sort of man he was, what sort of character he possessed.

Neither of them realized it at that moment, but the gift of silence he'd bestowed on her that day – the one she accepted from him without reservation – would later become a millstone around their necks. A shared curse that turned them into slaves of a well-intentioned, yet disastrous lie.

He never spoke to anyone of the affair. But after Jess had grown up and turned her back on him, he often fell to dark reveries in which he imagined retreating on his promise. Appearing on the prodigal daughter's doorstep, unannounced and unwelcomed, and spilling the story of her mother's romance with the dim-witted, beer-gutted grocery clerk. Only, what good would it have done? Jess was twenty-seven years old now, a grown woman with a life of her own. Anything he might have said would have come across as the desperate lie of a despicable old man.

Are you still happy I never said anything, he imagines asking Marie when he sometimes dreams of her at night. *Does it still feel like a gift, my silence?*

She lies, and tells him *yes*. But the truth is, it weighs on her as well. It weighs on her as much as it does on him, knowing that even though their daughter was spared the humiliation of her infidelities, there could always come a day when he decided to take the gift back.

It's heavy, isn't it, he says, *the burden of our little secret?*

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