

The Little Things

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When David calls early in the week to see if I can come to poker on Saturday, I ask my wife. Elle gets frustrated when I ask her for things like that, as if I need permission and she's my mother. But it's a simple courtesy. Better to err on the side of caution, I say. She drifts into the kitchen, answering that it's a good night, and I relay the message to David.

The Saturday morning of the game, I find Miriam and Elle in the dining room coloring at the table. Elle's coffee is colored with a touch of Bailey's—a habit she's taken to since Miriam was born, a nip of the good stuff on Saturdays and Sundays. I try not to preach about drinking before noon.

I watch Miriam color a horse leaping over a garden gate and kiss her on top of her head. She mumbles something I don't quite catch.

"Good morning," I say, and Elle shrugs.

"There's coffee," Elle says and takes a sip. She looks drowsy.

"Thanks." I pull a clean coffee mug from the dishwasher and pour myself a cup. Elle's gaze shifts between me and the dishwasher. I open it again and put away the clean dishes.

"Are we going to Nona's house today?" Miriam asks. It's a loosely held tradition that we visit Elle's parents one day on the weekend, and Miriam looks forward to her grandmother's doting and chasing their old beagle, Baxter, around the lawn.

"Not today, honey," Elle says, reaching out and smoothing Miriam's hair.

I finish with the cups and move on to the bottom rack

where I see the knife—an old, wood-handled one that has been passed down to Elle by her folks. Half of the handle is missing. It lies on the bottom of the dishwasher. I freeze. I reach down to touch it, confirm it. The blade is cool against my fingers.

I pull the knife from the dishwasher and fish around in the bottom for the rest of the handle. I turn my back and try and piece it together, but water has worked into the wood and split it clean. It's like joining oil and water.

"What are you doing?" Elle asks. She is up from the table. I turn to her with my palms open, offering up the remnants of the knife. I'm trying my best to wear my own disappointment on my face, but she doesn't give me a second glance. "Oh," she says, "what happened?"

"It went through the dishwasher," I say, shrug my shoulders and set the remains on the countertop.

"What did I tell you?" she asks.

"No knives, no wooden utensils," I say. "I don't know what happened. I don't remember putting it in there."

She takes the pieces in her own hands, fumbling with them, trying to realign them. "It's ruined."

I back away, lean against the counter. I cross my ankles and wink at Miriam to show her nothing's wrong, but she's heard her mother's tone. She turns back to her coloring and I face up to Elle.

"This was my mother's knife."

"I know," I say, "but it's just a knife, right?"

Elle's face screws tight, her eyes and lips drawing into thin slices. I wait, arms behind me, hands holding onto the counter, but I know I must wait this out, wait for the bright slash of her anger before she'll settle into herself again.

"It was my mother's," she says again, working it out in her head. She's still playing with the pieces of the handle.

"I'm sorry," I say. I pick up my coffee mug, see Miriam knock a crayon to the ground with her elbow and bend to pick it up. I sit next to Miriam, opposite Elle, and watch her color. She smiles and moves her elbow so I can admire her

progress. It's a cheap out, using Miriam like this, and I can tell Elle's fuming, but I don't want to get into it. I take a drink of coffee and fix my eyes on Miriam. I hear Elle sigh and the trash can open. She takes a long string of paper towels and rolls it around the knife blade before she nests it in the trash as if she's burying a pet. The lid closes with a click.

Elle walks out of the kitchen and down the hall in the direction of our bedroom, and I know the day is tainted by disappointment. Elle's moods, once set in motion, are hard to derail. I think about going after her, decide against it, and grab one of the coloring books on the table. I glance over my shoulder occasionally, looking for Elle, but it is the furnace ticking on or a bird in the eaves above the front door that I hear, and the hall remains a darkened aperture that I'm reluctant to enter.

Miriam finishes her horse picture, a frog prince, and is working on a mermaid when I refill my coffee. Elle hasn't reappeared. I know I'll find her lying on the bed, flipping through the channels, watching nothing in particular. I give up and go down the hall to talk to her.

"You okay?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed. Her back is to me. I place my hand on the blanket above the rise of her hip.

"Hnn," she says, "Fine."

"You're upset." I run my hand down her thigh and back. There's a static energy to the blanket that is either dry air or Elle's mood.

"It's fine," she says again.

"Sure it is. Why don't you tell me and we can talk about it?" I'm goading her. I want this over. Like a band-aid. Do it quick.

I sit there a moment before she says, "I can't have anything nice."

"Of course you can," I say, "just not until Miriam grows up and moves out." Elle doesn't smile and I rub her thigh again.

“Everything I like gets ruined and you couldn’t give two shits.”

“That’s not fair,” I say. “I like nice things.”

“No you don’t. Something gets ruined you just buy a new one. You don’t take care of anything.”

“I take care of stuff.”

“Oh, really,” she says, rolling over in bed and leaning against the headboard. She looks at me like she looks at our accountant. “The pair of wine glasses I got you for your birthday?”

I knew it. I knew it was going to be those wine glasses. I want to tell her, number one, that I don’t think people should spend \$30 a stem for wine glasses and, two, she was the one who got me drunk that night, filling my glass before it ever emptied and smiling across the table at me like she had plans.

“It was an accident, Elle.”

“You didn’t have them a day and you broke them.”

“What do you want me to say? I’ve apologized for the wine glasses.”

“It just shows what I’m talking about.”

“Fine,” I say, adopting her own mantra. “What if we go buy you a new one? A really nice knife. We could splurge. It’ll be fun. We’ll all go to the mall and get you a new knife.”

“That’s not the point,” she says, “What happens when that one gets ruined? It’s a waste. I just won’t have anything nice anymore.” She crosses her arms and turns back to the television.

“Well, I can’t fix it, so, it’s either a new one or nothing at all.”

“Forget it,” she says, setting her jaw.

“Fine, no knife.” I get up off the bed, shaking my head.

“What?” she says, her voice growing louder.

“Nothing,” I say and leave the room.

We stay home all day. Elle moves about the house, saying little. She brightens for Miriam’s sake, coos over her pictures, reads a story at naptime, and watches from the patio as Miriam and I ride bikes in front of the house. When it creeps

toward six and I've exhausted all the yard work I can think to do, I come back into the house and tell Elle I better get ready.

Miriam is playing on a blanket in front of the television. It's tuned to a nature program that Elle pretends to watch, and she shrugs her shoulders. I wrestle with the idea of asking if it's okay or just leaving.

"Are you sure it's okay that I go?" I ask.

"I said it was fine, didn't I?"

"I'm making sure. What are you going to do?"

"We're just going to hang," she says. "Go. Have fun." She doesn't look away from the television.

When I get to David's house, the driveway is full of pickups I know at a glance. I walk in the front door, knocking as I enter, and hear Addison holler for me to come on in.

"The boys are downstairs waiting for you," she says. She's wearing a tight, black cocktail dress and her hair curls around her face, showing the high line of her blushing cheek.

"You look nice," I say. "You get dressed up for us?"

"No, I'm going out with some girlfriends. You boys will be entirely un-chaperoned this evening." She tucks her hair behind her ear. "I expect the house to be standing when I get back." She laughs, a cascade of high notes that twitters on the edge of nerves and then, as an afterthought, adds, "Keep an eye on David, will you?"

I don't know what to make of the comment, so I nod and leave her standing in the kitchen. The stairs open up into the basement, and I peek around at the stacks of laundry by the washing machine, bags of toys ready for the Goodwill, and in the corner, what looks to be a stack of boxes, one of which is marked "Girls' Room."

"Wait, wait, wait," I hear Bernie say, "How much did you buy in?" I can imagine him reaching across the table for someone's stack of chips to verify the count. It's an informal game, but Bernie scolds us that it is a gentleman's game. The rest of us are just looking for an excuse to get out of

the house.

“God forbid we come up a quarter short,” I say, stepping into the tiny cinderblock room that serves as our poker den.

“It’s about time,” Bernie says without looking over his shoulder and sure enough, he’s bent over the table, reaching for Ezra’s stack of chips. Ezra leans back in his chair, lifts his ball cap, and runs a hand through his hair. Bernie draws the chips across the table and counts them out into even stacks. Ezra’s buy-in is square and Bernie pushes the chips back toward the center of the table.

“Satisfied?” Ezra asks, drawing his chips back to his side of the table and aligning them by color.

“There’s a chair over here,” David says and then adds, “What time are *you* going out?” I hadn’t noticed Addison coming down behind me, and it takes me a moment before I realize he’s talking to her. I can’t help but notice how the *you* rises out of the question and becomes an accusation.

“Eight. Why? Are you trying to get rid of me?” She crosses to his chair and puts her hand on it. She makes a face at the back of his head, arching her eyebrows and sticking her tongue out at him. She flicks him on his ear, eyeing the rest of us.

“Now why would I want to do that?” He tips his head back and seeing her all done up, twists around in his seat, eyeing her up and down. He shakes his head and turns back to the table. Addison looks over at me and shrugs.

“You let your wife go out looking like that? I have two words of advice for you, David,” Ezra says, leaning forward, “Muu muu.” David shoos Addison from the room and she feigns insult and saunters out.

“I have to say, David, you got balls,” Ezra says. Ezra grabs a deck of cards from the center of the table and starts shuffling. Bernie’s rapt attention is on the carrying case of chips, and David sits back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head like he’s the king of poker-dom. His only response is a juicy belch. I seat myself between Bernie and David, drop a twenty dollar bill on the green felt and wait

for Bernie to count out my chips.

The night runs standard. I start off slow, folding two low hands that could have taken the pot before I realize that these guys are full of shit and rarely have anything to back their bets. It's a bluffing game with these guys, and we play dealer's choice for most of the night.

Eventually, I get lucky and score the pot from a five dollar all-in tournament and the chips stack high next to me. I'm doing good, up a little on the night but not drawing too much attention to my chips.

"Read'em and weep, fellas," Bernie says laying out a full house—queens over eights.

"Son of a bitch," David says throwing his cards into the middle of the table, "Jacks over fives." He's down to his last two dollars in chips and he pulls his wallet from his back pocket, searching for more cash.

"What can I say, boys, I got the touch tonight," Bernie says. We eye his pile of chips, plotting against him. So far, it's a losing battle. David slouches against the table, his hand against his forehead.

"Fuck you, Bernie."

"Time to break into the college funds, boys." Bernie stacks his chips with a smile that grates on us all. He's the only one without a wife and kids, and he clicks each chip down on top of towering stacks with a righteousness employed only by the single or the evangelical.

"You're such a prick," David says reaching for a fresh beer.

"Ah, don't be a sore loser, David," Bernie says. It's Bernie's deal and the rest of us are stuck waiting for him to arrange his chips. David watches Bernie with a look beyond envy.

"Like you need the money," David says. He sits back in his chair, glowering now and a little of the smugness drips off Bernie's smile.

"Just a friendly game, David," he says, but he pulls the pile of chips toward him, leaving the rest of the stacking for later and takes up the cards, shuffling quickly and dealing them around the table. The room has gotten quiet except for

the radio playing “Sister Christian.”

“Texas Hold’em,” Bernie says, bringing the second round of cards around the table. Everyone picks up their cards and holds them tight to their faces. I can see Jesse’s eyes, blank with beer, passing over Bernie to David and back again. He looks confused and I’m wishing him silent with a single thought, *don’t*. It’s like he hears me because he turns his eyes back to his cards and waits for the betting to begin.

“I fold,” David says, pushing back from the table and leaving the room. We watch him go, not a word passing between us.

We hear him mount the stairs and when he is out of ear shot Bernie says, “What was that?” We stare at our cards. Adam avoids the question by betting fifty cents, Jesse sees him, Ezra splashes the pot with his bet, and I tuck my cards, face down, into the pot. I push myself up, feeling the tightness in my knees from sitting too long, and go after David saying, “I’ll be right back, deal me out on the next round.” I hear a door close somewhere upstairs.

I can’t find David in any of the open spaces upstairs, and the next place I check is the bathroom. The door is open and no one is inside. Moving through the kitchen, I peek into the backyard and see David sitting in the girls’ swing set. He holds his head in his hands and leans forward as though he’s inspecting the grass.

Outside, the night has grown colder, and the air hangs thick with impending rain; clouds creep across the sky. There isn’t a star to be seen, and the only light comes from the streetlights behind the neighbor’s house. In the dim glow, David is an outline against the pruned row of arborvitaes. He rocks himself in the swing but his feet remained planted.

“You all right?” I say, stepping toward the swing set and leaning against one of the uprights.

He tells me he’s fine, but the word stumbles over a thickness in his throat. I watch the dark clouds slip across the sky, moving east toward the mountains, and I ask, “You

sure?"

"I hate that guy," he says.

"No you don't," I say, "It's Bernie. He's a lousy winner."

"I could give a shit if he wins a couple of bucks off of me. It's his attitude. He's a smug little bastard."

I shrug. "You're preaching to the choir," I say. "I wouldn't trade places with him." I stop myself and wonder if it's true. If I could erase the last few years with Elle, with Miriam, and be Bernie, would I do it?

"It doesn't mean anything if it's easy," David says. He lifts his head, squinting at me, and the shine of his eyes make him look empty. "Addison's leaving," he says. I turn my gaze back to the sky and settle against the upright, bracing myself against the news. "She's moving back in with her folks, taking the girls. She's already packing," he says.

"What the fuck," I say. "What's going on?"

"She's out right now with her girlfriends," he says, "probably trying to find some sap to take my place." He laces his fingers together between his knees and stops rocking in the swing, steadies himself, head bowed, praying against the darkness.

"What happened?" I ask.

"I don't know. She says it's been coming for a while. It's the little things. Lots of little things, she says." He studies his hands as if the answer is written in the creases of his balled fists.

I find myself wondering what Elle's doing, if she's sitting in bed, reading, watching her cell phone to see if I'll call sloppy drunk, wanting a ride, the evening having gotten away from me.

The tendons in David's neck rise against his skin, and he squeezes his hands together until the color bleeds out of them. I reach out and put a hand on his shoulder, and I hope he'll relax.

"Look at this place," he says. "What a pain in my ass. Do you know how much time I spend out here? Planting bulbs, weeding, spraying? I spend more time in this yard than I do

with my own daughters. Isn't that ridiculous? She's always telling me that I don't spend enough time with them. But when I get home, what does she do? She puts me to work out here. Tells me it's got to be done. Got to, get it? Mandatory, no argument, no debate." David swings his arm over the beds. "Do you see all these ferns? Addison had me dig them up and transplant them here from Mount. Hood. Couldn't buy a fern, had to dig the fuckers up. It's how *she* wanted it. And what do I get for it? Nothing. Now she's taking the girls." He stands up, and I straighten, but he only looks out over his perfectly groomed yard. How ridiculous that I envy it so much. I'm constantly fighting moss and dandelions, but his yard is a smooth plain of green that ends in abrupt edges. The smell of mulch rises up into the night. The beds are clean of weeds and I can make out the red of the bark he's laid. The rhododendrons are trimmed and fresh with the first blooms of spring.

His eyes are shaded but I can see his forehead wrinkle with a frown and he steps up to a rhododendron, reaches out his hand as if to pluck one of the blooms, but he wraps his hand around it. "And this little bastard, trimming and mulching, trimming and mulching. Got to trim these bad boys right after they bloom, you know? Typical. Wait until their all used up, and then it's snip, snip, snip." His hand closes over the flower, the petals pressing out between his fingers. He pulls at it, plucking it free. He reaches for the branches, his hands sliding over them. He reaches again, grabbing deeper into the bush, snaps off a branch and throws it onto the mowed grass. Again and then again he reaches for the bush.

When I realize what he's doing I decide against interfering. When he has ripped one side of it apart, he settles to his hands and knees and starts in on the daffodils, sinking his hands down past the bark and into the dirt, digging up the bulbs, tearing new growth out of the ground.

He talks in a low voice but it grows louder with each new handful. "I didn't want this," he says. I watch his neighbors'

darkened windows, waiting for lights to switch on or for faces to appear floating behind glass.

"I didn't want this," he repeats, but this time it is as if something has torn loose inside of him. His voice raises an octave and then he's swearing at the plants, throwing handfuls of bark and dirt. Digging up plants whole, he's up to his forearms in dirt. He reaches for one of the ferns, pulls the fronds loose, digs at the dense center with his fingernails. The fern holds. He pulls and grapples with it, but its heart is solid and firm.

When he finally gives up—winded, sweating, bits of dirt in his hair—he sits in the bed, leaning against the house. He rests his elbows on his knees, and his hands forage around in his thick hair, grasping at it as though to uproot it as well. His eyes glass. I stand in the center of the lawn, the carnage of his yard strewn around me and feel the first drop of rain.

"Better?" I ask.

David nods and looks at his hands. Another couple of rain drops fall, I can feel them on my scalp through my thinning hair. I look up at the sky, grown darker with the storm, and sit in the grass across from David, picking up a frond of the fern, and running my fingers over the underside, feel the spores. Goosebumps rise on my arms and I look at David. "That's it?"

"That's it," he says, and his eyes drift away from me toward the streetlight.

"So, what's next?"

"We don't exactly have a plan."

"Are there lawyers or just talk?"

"Just talk." David wipes under his eyes and leaves a smear of dirt across his cheekbone.

"That's good. Keep it simple."

David looks up at me and I can tell he's pissed. "What is that supposed to mean? My fucking wife is leaving."

"You're right," I say, "I'm a dick. I'm a great big ole dick."

David's mouth twitches but he doesn't look at me.

"I'm a great, big, hairy, low-hanging, wide-swinging dick."

You got me nailed.”

We laugh but it falters quickly. “What would you do?” he asks.

“You mean, if it was Elle?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think I’m just buying time, running from one narrow escape to another. They get so mad over piddly-shit.”

“It’s the little things,” David says and leans his head against the siding. The rain is coming a little faster now, but neither of us makes a move toward the house.

“I ruined a knife,” I say.

“What?”

“I ruined a knife, old wood-handled thing. Put it in the dishwasher. Now we’re fighting. She can’t have anything nice, ya know?”

David laughs. I smile but I’m serious. It’s the moods. One mood can last into weeks of facing Elle’s sleeping back.

“Don’t let it go too far,” he says.

“Sometimes nothing helps.”

“Hmm,” David says. I lie back in the grass and watch the rain fall down on me; the drops appear out of the gray night just a few feet from my face like bubbles rising in water. We sit for a while like that. I can hear the guys in the basement arguing over a hand. Bernie is the loudest. He’s trying to mediate the racket.

Bernie can cut and run, get while the getting’s good, and I think David envies him that now. I’m not sure I don’t.

The sky opens and a single sheet of rain that is everywhere at once drenches us. We stay where we are and David hoots out into the night. I answer with a short call of my own, and soon we’re baying and howling up into the rain, calling it down on us. I wish for it to wash away the debris in the yard and repair the gouged earth, but I know it’s a false hope.

If the guys come looking for us, they’ll wonder what we’re doing sitting in the rain, but I can bet they won’t ask

questions. I imagine them joining us, sitting in the rain like fools, grown men out of their minds, sopping wet, and all of us hooting into the night. But it's a moot point because no one comes for David, or for me, and the rain continues on until I can't see.

David quiets, holding his knees tight to his chest and looks at the scarred mess of his flowerbed. The wet soil blooms out of the red bark.

"I'm soaked," David says, and it sounds remarkably like a laugh.

"Yeah. Me too."

I smile at David, wipe a wet sleeve across my eyes.

There's talk when we go back downstairs about us standing in the rain, but David dismisses it. He doesn't mention the ferns. We play a couple more hands, but the evening is broken, and I'm too wet to pay attention to the cards flying around the table.

On the way home, I'm aware of each bump and turn in the road, no longer on autopilot, and I can feel David's house receding into the night. In the darkness of the four lane highway, not a street light for miles, I think about Elle and Miriam and how I would react if we were in David and Addison's shoes: split incomes, split houses, split child even—gearing up for even more complex negotiations than marriage provides.

There will be visitation schedules, planned payments, and holiday itineraries to navigate, and it seems like trading the beast you know for one you don't. Like I said, I'm not a gambler. I turn on the radio but in the late night hours, there is nothing much but ballads and hip-hop. I turn it off.

I know these roads. The abandoned marina, the woodworker's shop carved into a forested bank, and the river turning and falling away behind the run of hills. When I drive these roads, banking the car through turns before I realize what I've done, I get nostalgic for the things I know, which aren't many. I know that Adam will try and buy the

pot time after time with a hand full of nothing, that David is the best player at the table when he has his head about him. I know that Ezra and Jesse are there for the beer, Bernie loves bragging rights, and that I wouldn't give a damn about poker if it wasn't these guys sitting at the table. I know that even knives are important.

I pull into the driveway of the house, careful to shut off the headlights so they don't shine into Miriam's window, and I kill the engine before I can even put it into park. The storm darkens everything and my house is a shapeless black form in the night. By memory, I make my way to the back gate and let myself into the backyard. I find the leather strapping threaded through the hole in the post, a thin thread that opens the first glimpse of my life, my property. The dandelion spotted lawn, the weed filled beds, and a failed patch of dirt that had begun as a garden. The rain gathered in the leaves of the dogwood double their efforts to wash me clean and what little dryness I've achieved in the drive home disappears. The patio light shines out over all of this. Elle has left the light on for me.

Inside the house, I strip down in the mudroom and throw my clothes into the hamper by the washing machine. Naked and shivering, my hair dripping down the nape of my neck, I make my way down the hall. I watch Miriam sleep from the doorway of her room. She sleeps open-mouthed and she smacks her lips, a habit left over from her thumb-sucking days.

I sneak into our bedroom and find Elle curled up, the covers pulled up to her eyes. The dim glow from the street presses through our blinds, and I can see a tousled crop of hair. I stand above her, shivering, listening. She fills the room with her breath. That's one thing I can add to the things I know, I know her breathing while she sleeps, the smooth slide of air. The shifting under the blankets that lets me know she somehow senses me here, standing above her. I'm tempted to rouse her, to tell her I love her, but I don't. I watch the soft rise and fall of her breath. I know I'll wake

in the morning and find my family gathered here, but even the things we know, things we've known for years, the slight bends and turns like the rise of a hip under a blanket, these things can at any time appear uncertain, even perilous.