

The Tellers

There's smoke filling the room.

Harold hadn't noticed before now. He'd been lost in the flicker of the fire, watching it burn the broken fragments of his kitchen chair.

He'd been wondering how long it took for something strong—a wooden dowel rod, a marriage, a man—to fall apart.

When had he become this way? Had he always been?

And had she known?

And why, again, was he burning his kitchen chair?

Harold coughs, waves his hand in front of his face, and opens the sliding door. The smoke billows out the door and into the starry sky, rising higher and higher as Harold stands in the freshly fallen snow that covers his back porch. Beyond the banister, their lake is frozen and majestic.

No, not *their* lake. Not anymore.

Harold leaves the door open, crosses the green carpeting of the cottage, and lowers himself into his recliner. The larger flames have subsided. A pool of glowing red embers rests at the bottom of the hearth.

The last time he'd sat in this chair, his wife had been right next to him reading an Ann Garvin novel in her own chair, an exact replica of his, laughing and tugging on his sleeve so hard that he spilled bourbon all over his armrest. And he'd laughed too, but he can't remember why. It had been expensive bourbon and a shameful waste.

As he drags his hand over the upholstery, his mind manifests a dampness lingering in its fibers. Of course it couldn't still be wet—he'd spilled that bourbon months ago—but he wonders if he might still be able to smell his drink in the fabric if he stuck his nose down in it and sniffed.

Hell, he could probably smell her, too.

But for how much longer? How long would her scent linger?

Her hair doesn't smell like that anymore, he thinks. No lavender shampoo. No volumizing hairspray. Just blood and pavement and the cold, cold snow.

You killed her, he thinks to himself. You killed your wife.

The winter breeze blowing through the open doorway thins the smoky haze. A chill lands sharply on the surface of Harold's skin. It's that nipping-at-your-nose kind of cold.

Christmas cold.

He imagines a Christmas without her shopping trips and her obsession with stocking stuffers and her incessant baking of cherry pies—*cherry*, for god's sake!—all December long because that's what her grandmother used to do. He thinks about their grandchildren scampering around and making a mess of his living room and leaving paper and ribbons and cardboard all over his floor.

He thinks of the way she used to smile watching the mess unfurl like ribbon off a spool.

And it didn't have to be this way. She should have known he was capable of something like this. She should have run from him when she had the chance.

Shouldn't she have known this was in him?

Shouldn't *he* have known?

He rocks his chair forward, picks up another broken dowel rod from the floor, and tosses it in the flames. The lacquer catches, bubbles, and melts into the embers below.

What had happened to this chair?

She used to hate when he left the firebox open like this. "You'll scorch the carpet," she'd say. "You'll burn this whole place down. Is that what you want? To burn this all down?"

And maybe he did. All along, maybe that is all he really wanted.

Harold's blood boils as he thinks about her correcting him. He could never get away with talking to her like she talked to him. The lotion, for instance. She had this lotion she wore that gave him migraines every time he had to smell it for more than a few minutes. He'd asked her, *begged* her, to try something different, to please see if there was any other smell that she liked, but she never did. She was a creature of habit. She never changed. Maybe she couldn't change.

He looks at the pictures covering the wall: Black and white photos of her grandmother and grandfather; baby photos of their children, all of whom are well into their adult years now. He looks at the dust-covered cribbage board displayed on the mantle. He'd won it at a raffle, but no

matter how many times he asked, reassured her it was an easy game and she'd enjoy it, she never let him teach her how to play.

And she always insisted on being helpful. Not actually helpful, but emotionally helpful. She would stand next to him as he fiddled with a breaker box or worked on the boat's motor just so she could ask, "Whadduya think?" or tell him she's sorry that he was so frustrated. Maybe if she knew how to find him a wrench or work a power drill, he would have found it *helpful*. But she couldn't. He always wondered why she couldn't just stay back and let him do it.

She always insisted. Even when he told her, "Get back. It's not safe."

She never changed.

Her hair. Her make-up. Her recipes. The way she drank her coffee. The way she cried when it snowed.

"Oh my God, I did it," Harold says. "I really did it. I killed my wife."

Harold sits up and swivels his head around to take in his surroundings. He slowly shakes his head, scratches his beard. None of this is right. This can't be the same place, the same cottage. The same lake. It feels wrong. It's all wrong.

But there are the recliners. There is the cribbage board. The shelving he installed. The hole he'd put in the wall with his foot trying to kill a mouse. The tree outside that has never fallen, even though it always seemed like it was only a matter of time before it would.

There's her sweater. Her slippers. Her favorite throw blanket saturated with the scent of that goddamn body lotion.

It's not different, he thinks. None of it is.

It's you that's not right.

Because there is her blood on your hands, your arms, your chest.

And there are the burning remnants of your kitchen chair. There is the back rest. There is a leg.

You've burned it all down.

Harold had heard once that, in the moment before someone drowns, their whole body relaxes. He finally understands what that means. He feels it now: a deep, suffocating, hopeless calm.

Tires crunch up the driveway. Soon, a red, white, and blue light fills the room.

Harold takes a deep breath. These are Harold's last moments: the Christmas cold, the fire, the blackened fragments of the chair in the hearth, the million little memories lingering like smoke in the pores of this rotten place. He sees them all, smells the foul odor of happy memories made with the woman he'd hit with his car and left on the shoulder of the highway.

He hadn't checked her body, but he hadn't needed to. He'd known in his gut she was dead. He saw it in her eyes. Maybe that's what it means to have a killer instinct: the ability to recognize what's dead instantaneously. Maybe he's had the instinct all along.

Still no footsteps. No flashlights through the windows. No voices plotting to bust down the door and take out the monster who'd killed his wife.

Sooner or later, they'll come. It's just a matter of time.

Harold stands and walks to meet the officers who will soon be standing at his front door. He makes it halfway across the room, then pauses. Something about greeting them, welcoming them, doesn't feel...right. He processes this feeling for a moment, nods his head, and momentarily dips into his bedroom instead.

Because a monster wouldn't go so easily.

So neither will he.

When Harold returns to the living room, he picks up a broken piece of the chair's backrest and tosses it into the hearth. He continues feeding the flame until he hears a knock on the door.

Harold closes his eyes and it hits him again.

He'd killed his wife.

The wood crackles. The smoke climbs the chimney. Flames and police lights illumine the interior of the cottage.

Another knock on the door.

"Mr. Teller, this is the police."

The idea of prison hasn't crossed his mind until now. He thinks of the jeers he'd face, the shame, the endless hoping that one of his children might bring a grandchild and let them sit on his knee.

But of course they won't come. No one will. Why would they?

Harold Teller has killed his wife, and for that, he will be put in a cage, locked up like all the other monsters, and wither away.

Unless he refuses. Unless the monster says no.

“Mr. Teller, my name is Officer Stanley. May we come in and speak with you, please?”

But Mr. Teller is not home. Mr. Teller is a dead man. Mr. Teller’s life ended the moment he punched the gas and plastered his wife onto the pavement.

Mr. Teller is something else now. Something that’s just...not right.

“Mr. Teller, we know you’re there. Please, open the door.”

Harold’s fingers reach the doorknob as the officer on the other side knocks again. The sound echoes off the memory saturated walls, and Harold knows that this is the cleanest, most perfect sound he has ever heard. Harold grips the doorknob, but waits for one more knock before turning it.

It never comes.

“Mr. Teller,” the officer calls out.

Harold opens the door.

“Yes?”

“Mr. Teller, I’m Officer Stanley, this is Officer Carlisle. Do you know where you are?”

Harold opens his mouth, but doesn’t speak.

“Mr. Teller, do you know why we’re here?”

“31460 North Leonard Road. I killed my wife,” is all Harold manages to say.

“Can we come in?” Officer Stanley raises his hands to his waist like someone approaching a stray dog.

Careful, Harold thinks, *I may do it again*.

“I killed her,” he says. “My wife. I killed my wife.”

“We’re going to come inside. Can you sit, Mr. Teller?” Officer Stanley tries to guide Harold back to his chair, but Harold refuses to move.

“Don’t,” Harold says. “Don’t call me that.”

“Okay. Harold then,” Stanley says. “Listen to my voice. Do you remember what happened to you?”

“She never changed. She always insisted. I killed her. Her lotion. Maybe it was her lotion.” He shakes his head. “I killed my wife. I killed my wife.”

“Sir, you’re not in trouble. Everything is going to be alright.”

“No,” Harold says, bristling at the sound of the officer’s soothing voice, the gentleness of his every move. Harold doesn’t deserve this. This isn’t the

way you treat someone like Harold. This isn't how you treat a monster. Is this how they'd handle a drug bust? A prostitution raid?

"I killed my wife," he says again.

Harold feels a tickle on his back and pictures himself reaching for the gun in his belt. Holding its weight out in front of him. Firing one shot, then two. Then a third. A fourth.

"Sir—"

Harold's right-hand twitches, like it *wants* to reach, *wants* to grab it, *wants* to pull the trigger. "She never listened. I told her to let me do it."

"Sir, please breath."

"I did it because of the lotion, maybe. Because she wouldn't change. She always insisted. She always tried to *help*."

"Sir, you're in shock, I need you to—"

"But I didn't need her help," Harold says. His hand drifts towards the small of his back until his fingertips are mere inches from the grip. "I killed my wife, because she wouldn't listen. She insisted. She wouldn't let me—"

"Sir, there was a witness at the scene," Officer Stanley says. "She saw what happened."

Harold blinks. His hand freezes at his hip.

He hadn't noticed anyone else. His wife was on the ground with dead eyes and blood-stained hair. He has no memory of anyone else.

Just his wife. Just his sweet lady.

"A woman at the gas station across the street said she watched you throw quite a bit of mud trying to get your truck out of the snow. She was on her way over to help push when she heard the car rev, the wheels catch, and then a thud."

The word *thud* makes Harold shudder. He imagines Leslie's head splitting as it hit the pavement. He imagines

remembers

her eyes staring back at him through the windshield.

Oh God, they'd said. What have you done?

You monster, what have you done?

"The woman called us. Said you held your wife for a long time before you got up and took off in your car. We got there right after you left."

"I killed my wife," Harold says.

“Do you remember seeing Mrs. Dellamy? Veronica Dellamy? She told you she called the ambulance. She said you were in hysterics.”

“I killed her, Officer. Oh, God I...I...”

“She said you were crying. She said it was clearly an accident.”

There’s a stuffiness in the room, a staleness, as if the memories of her have already faded into sun-washed versions of themselves, the corners of the impressions she’d left on him upturned and brittle.

And suddenly he remembers it all.

He remembers pulling over so she could look at a deer in the forest.

He remembers the way she’d covered her face when the tires started to spin.

He remembers telling her it’s fine, sweetheart.

He remembers her laughing when he’d told her to ask the deer if it could push.

And he remembers grabbing the first thing he could get his hands on when he’d gotten home and smashing that chair into pieces against the floor.

He remembers crying. He remembers screaming what have I done? My sweet lady, he’d said. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

“Mr. Teller, you haven’t done anything wrong,” says Officer Carlisle.

“Don’t say that,” Harold says. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare say that.” Sweat beads on Harold’s cheeks. He doesn’t know if he’s hot or cold. He just...hell, he doesn’t know what he feels. It’s nothing. It’s everything. It’s anger. It’s fear. It’s heartbreak.

It’s hopelessness. It’s death.

It’s rebirth.

Because, one way or the other, he is a monster now.

Careful, he thinks. *Don’t get too close. Who knows what I might do.*

“Mr. Teller—”

“Stop. Calling me that. I killed my wife. Because of the lotion. Because she always—”

“Sir, please calm down.”

“—insisted that she would just be with me.”

“You clearly loved each other. I’m sure she knew—”

“No. No. I killed my wife,” Harold growls. “I killed...my...”

Harold draws the gun. His first shot hits Officer Carlisle square in the forehead. As Carlisle falls to his back, Harold Teller turns to find Officer Stanley fighting with the snap of his holster. Harold fires again. No longer concerned with the holster or the gun contained within it, Officer Stanley presses both of his hands to the blood pouring out of a gaping hole in his neck. He coughs as he drops to his knees.

When Harold fires at Officer Stanley a second time, it's as if he's staring into Leslie's terror-stricken eyes once more.

My God, they say. What have you done?

You monster. What have you done?

And Harold knows they're both dead.

He doesn't even have to check.