

The Suicide Index

**Putting My Father's Death in
Order**

Joan Wickersham

Orlando Austin New York San Diego London

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Suicide: act of attempt to imagine

IN THE AIRPORT, COMING HOME FROM VACATION, HE STOPS AT a kiosk and buys grapefruits, which he arranges to have sent to his daughters. They will stumble over the crates waiting on their porches, when they get home from his funeral.

It's the last week of his life. Does he know that? At some point, yes. At the moment when his index finger closes on the trigger of the gun, he knows it with certainty. But before that? Even a moment before, when he sat down in the chair holding the gun—was he sure? Perhaps he's done this much before, once or many times: held the gun, loaded the gun. But then stopped himself: no. When does he know that this time he will not stop?

What about the gun?

Has it been an itch, a temptation, the hidden chocolates in the bureau drawer? Did he think about it daily, did it draw him, did he have to resist it?

Perhaps the thought of it has been comforting: Well, remember, I can always do *that*.

Or maybe he didn't think about the gun and how it might be used. There was just that long deep misery. An occasional flicker (*I want to stop everything*), always instantly snuffed out (*Too difficult, how would I do it, even the question exhausts me*). And then one day the flicker caught fire, burned brightly for a moment, just long enough to see by (*Oh, yes, the gun. The old gun on the closet shelf with the sweaters*). He didn't do it that day. He put away the thought. He didn't even take the gun down, look at it, hold it in his hands. That would imply he was thinking of actually doing it, and he would never actually do such a thing.

Some days the gun sings to him. Other days, more often, he doesn't hear it. Maybe, on those stronger days, he has considered getting rid of it. Take it to a gun shop, turn it in to the police. But then someone else would know he has a gun, and it's no one else's business. He hasn't wanted to deal with their questions: Where did you get it? How long have you had it? Besides, how long *has* he had it? Twenty years? Twenty-five? And never fired it in all that time? So where's the danger? What's the harm in keeping it around, letting it sleep there among the sweaters? He doesn't even know where the bullets are, for God's sake. (But immediately, involuntarily, he does know: he knows exactly which corner of which drawer.)

We have to watch him from the outside. He leaves no clues, his whole life is a clue. What is he thinking when he gets up that last morning, showers, and dresses for work? He puts on a blue-and-white striped cotton shirt, a pair of brown corduroys, heavy brown shoes. A tan cashmere sweater. He has joked to his older daughter that all the clothes he buys these days are the color of sawdust. Might as well be, he said, they end up covered in the stuff anyhow, in the machinery business. So he has shaved, patted on aftershave, and climbed into his dun-colored clothes. He's gone to his dresser and loaded his pockets: change, wallet, keys, handkerchief. Maybe he thinks he's going to work. Or maybe he knows, hopes, that in forty-five minutes he'll be dead. It's Friday morning. He's just doing what he does every morning, getting ready.

He may be thinking about it on the walk down the long driveway to get the newspaper. The cold

dry air gripping the sides of his head, the ice cracking under his feet as he tramps along this driveway he can no longer quite afford. It is a dirt road, unpaved, in this town, as his wife is always pointing out, dirt roads have more cachet than fancy landscaped driveways. A dirt road means you are private and acting to protect your privacy. Your house cannot be seen from the road. Your real friends, that delightful, sparkling, select bunch, will know you're in there, hidden in the woods, and they will know your dirt road's ruts and bumps by heart.

Is there something in the newspaper? The front page is the only one in question, since he leaves the paper on the kitchen table folded and unread. More bombings. All this week he's been sitting in front of the television in the evenings, staring at the news. Silent films of Baghdad buildings, fine white-lined *crosses* zigzagging dizzily over their facades, zooming in and centering. Then a long moment, just that white cross holding steady; and then the building falls down, no sound, no smoke or flash of light, just caves in. And that's it. The screen goes blank; the camera doesn't wait around to gloat. Then another building, another filmed implosion: we're getting all these places, relentlessly. We're hunting them down and getting them.

What has he been thinking about this week, watching these films over and over? The silent buildings that simply implode.

The front page of the paper is full of the war. But nothing else that's major. No market crash. Nothing that would lead, directly or indirectly, to his losing more than he has already lost, which is virtually everything.

Maybe that's it, maybe that's what he is thinking, not just on this last morning but all the time: you've lost everything, not at a single blow but gradually, over years, a small hole in a sandbag. You see the hole clearly but you have no way to fix it. No one but you has been aware of that thin, sawdust-colored stream of sand escaping, but now enough sand has leaked that the shape of the bag is changing, it's collapsing. It will be noticed. You will be caught. And then, and then—you don't know what. You want not to be here when that happens.

He makes the pot of regular coffee for his wife, fills a cup, carries it upstairs to her bedside table. The fact that he doesn't make his own usual pot of decaf might mean that he's already decided—or it might mean that he generally makes that second pot when he comes downstairs again. And this morning, he doesn't go downstairs again. He stands at his wife's side of the bed and looks at her, sleeping. He looks at her for a long time.

Or maybe he doesn't look. Maybe he puts down the saucer and goes for the gun and is out of the room before the coffee stops quivering in the cup.

Suicide: act of bare-bones account

THIS IS WHAT MY FATHER DID. HE GOT UP, SHOWERED, SHAVED, and dressed for work. He went downstairs and made a pot of coffee, and while it was brewing he went outside and walked the long driveway to pick up the newspaper. He left the paper folded on the kitchen table, poured a cup of coffee, carried it upstairs, and put it on my mother's bedside table. She was still in bed, sleeping. Then he went into his study, closed the door, and shot himself.

My mother heard a popping sound. She was up by then, on her way into the shower. The coffee wasn't hot; she drank it anyway. When she was dressed, she took the empty cup down to the kitchen. He wasn't there, but she didn't think he would have left for work without saying good-bye, and there were no breakfast dishes in the sink. Usually he made two pots of coffee, a big one with caffeine for her and a smaller one of decaf for himself. But the smaller pot was empty, cold, clean. She called his name. She saw the paper on the table, unfolded it, and read the front page.

She went upstairs to her study, next to his, and rummaged in the closet for a tablecloth she meant to iron. She set up the ironing board and called his name again. His hearing was bad; sometimes he didn't answer when she called. She went and knocked at his study; she pushed the door open.

She found him.

She called Ted Tyson and told him to come over. She called the police.

Suicide: act of immediate aftermath

I THOUGHT I KNEW WHY TED TYSON WOULD BE CALLING ME AT eight in the morning. My mother had said that he was planning to come up to Boston soon, and I had said he could stay with us. "Really?" my mother had said. "Really?"

"Sure, why not?" I had answered. I was always trying to think of ways to prove to her that I liked him. But I had never really expected him to take me up on my offer.

"Ted!" I said warmly now. "Ted, how *are* you?"

"I have some bad news," he said.

"Oh?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Your father has taken his own life."

We didn't say anything in the car, driving to Connecticut. It took three hours. My husband drove, and I looked out the window. Our three-year-old son sat in the backseat, looking at his truck books, murmuring to himself. He had a music box with him, one that my father had brought him from Switzerland. There was a little man inside, dressed in a clown suit. My son kept passing it to me through the gap between the seats; I kept winding it up and passing it back to him, with the little man dancing, his arms and legs flailing loose and wild.

At Waterbury we got off the highway and pulled into the parking lot of a new hotel. We were early; my husband's stepfather was meeting us at 11:45. We went inside. We wandered through the lobby, along corridors carpeted in undersea green. Men in suits were going into the restaurant. I looked at their faces. My son stood in front of a glass shelf of stuffed animals in the gift shop, looking at them but not touching.

"Isn't he a precious," said the old lady working there. "Isn't he a love." She smiled at me. "I have a little grandson just that age," she said. "He comes to lunch with me every Tuesday."

"Really?" I said.

"There's Neil," said my husband.

"What happened?" Neil asked us in the lobby.

"We're not sure yet," I said. "We think it must have been a heart attack."

We handed him our son's overnight bag, and we all went back out to the parking lot. We moved our son's car seat into Neil's green Rolls-Royce. I watched Neil strap our son in and drive away; the car was so big that I couldn't see even the top of my son's head in the window.

When we got back into our own car, I asked my husband if he thought the body would still be in the house when we got there. I looked at the dashboard clock. "It's been over four hours," I said. "Four and a half by the time we get there. He'll be gone by then, won't he?"

"Oh, I'm sure," my husband said, clearing his throat.

"What do they need to do?" I said. "Look around. Talk to my mother. Take pictures. Do you think they take pictures?"

"I don't know." He cleared his throat again. "Probably."

My parents' house was in a cold pocket. The town was in a deep, rocky valley, and their house lay in a dip in the road. A police car sat at the entrance, between the low stone walls, red and blue lights flashing. We turned in and stopped, and the policeman got out and started walking toward us.

"Get out," I told my husband. "Go talk to him over there."

I didn't look at them while they were talking. I looked out my window, at a white opaque patch of ice on the driveway. My husband got back into the car and rolled down the window.

"You can't go in there yet," the policeman said. He was talking to me. I looked at his black belt, sagging with the weight of a gun in its black holster. "Your mother's over at Mr. Tyson's house. We asked her if she wouldn't rather be with a woman friend, if there was someone else we could call, but she said no. She wanted to be with him."

My mother was sitting in a big blue-and-white striped armchair, in front of Ted Tyson's kitchen fireplace. There was a fire going. There was a plaid blanket over her, and Kleenex in her fist. She held out her hand to me, and I went down on my knees in front of her.

"Oh, the horror," she said, "do you know? The horror."

She was shivering. I rubbed her hand between mine; her skin was loose and very dry, like crumpled tissue paper.

"Can you imagine what I went through, finding him like that?" she said.

I kept on rubbing her hand. There were shelves behind her, built into the corner, filled with square glass bottles of Ted's herb vinegar. He had given me a bottle of that vinegar for Christmas six weeks before. Ted was standing at the counter, stirring something on the stove.

"He was at the desk?" I asked my mother.

"No, in the chair."

"What chair?"

"The armchair."

"There is no armchair in that room."

"Of course there is," she said. "Why would I invent an armchair?"

I couldn't get it out of my head that he'd been at the desk, slumped over the piles of paper that had killed him. "What color is it?" I asked.

"I don't remember," she said.

"Where was the gun?"

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't see the gun. He was sitting in the chair, with his feet on the footstool. His feet were like this." She stuck her own feet out from the blanket, crossing them at the ankles. "He looked so peaceful. You know how they always say that, 'He looked peaceful'? Well, he did. I shook him. I kept saying, 'Paul, wake up.'"

"But you knew he was dead."

Her hand was shaking. "There was all this blood."

"Where? Where was the blood?"

"Here." She took her hand out of mine and drew a shape on her chest, like a bib. "He shot himself in the heart."

I looked over at Ted. There was a woman in the kitchen with him, helping him cook. That must be Annette, the cabaret singer who was always coming up from New York to stay with him. Ted paid her rent when she was short of money, my mother had told me. He got her jobs, he introduced her to people in the record business. She was lazy, she used him, my mother said. Annette saw me looking at her; she smiled at me and raised her hand in a limp little wave. I looked at my mother again.

"Why there?" I said. "Why in the heart?" My hand went to my chest, feeling around for my own heart. "How did he know exactly where to aim? That's risky, the heart. You could miss, or hit a rib. Why not the head?"

The blanket was slipping down; she pulled it up to her chin again. "I guess because he thought it would be less messy. He was trying to spare me. You know how considerate he was."

Ted came over and handed us coffee, in big white china mugs. My mother drank some of hers. "You want to hear something weird?" she said. "He cleaned his closet before he did it. I was asleep, but I heard him. I must have opened my eyes for a second. He was straightening out his sweaters on the top shelf. Isn't that strange? But he was so neat. In thirty-five years I never had to pick up after the man. Not one dirty sock. I want you to say that, at the funeral."

"He was getting the gun," I said.

"What?"

"Was that where he kept it?"

She didn't answer me for a moment. Then she said, "I don't know. I guess maybe it was." Then, "You think so? Oh, my God, why didn't I just wake up? Why didn't I sit up and say good morning? Then he wouldn't have done it."

"Yes he would," I said. "Maybe not this morning, maybe not right then. But sometime."

"No," she said. "The moment would have passed. I could have gotten him through the moment."

She drank more coffee. She told me about the coffee he'd made, how he only made one pot.

"So he knew," I said. "It wasn't just a moment." I thought of him bringing her coffee up the stairs putting it on the night table, knowing. Apologetic, I thought, like a dog bringing its master's slippers when it knows it's done something bad.

"He tried so hard to take care of me," my mother said.

"How can you shoot yourself in the heart with a rifle?" I asked. I remembered that rifle; long ago at our old house in the country, my father and I used to go out to the big field behind the house and shoot targets. We would lie in the grass. My father showed me how to slide back the bolt and put the bullet in and lock it into place, as I balanced on my elbows to steady the gun. I remembered lining up the sights and squeezing the trigger, the gun's small jump as it went off, the satisfying click of the bolt as I released it to let the spent golden shell spring out. The targets, when we went to collect them, were pockmarked with small holes—some wildly isolated at the outskirts of the black concentric rings, but most clustered at the center. Both of us had good aim.

Would you ever use it for hunting? I asked him.

No, he said. Once as a boy I shot a rabbit, and it was so terrible that I decided I'd never kill anything again.

Then why do you have the gun?

For protection, he'd said.

"A rifle?" my mother asked, surprised. "Why would he use a rifle?"

"You think he went out and bought another gun?" I didn't agree with her that he'd done it in the impulse of a moment, but this amount of premeditation was too much for me.

"He had another gun."

"He did?"

"A little one. A handgun. He'd had it for ages. He bought it in the summer of 1964. The summer of Watts. When everyone was saying there were going to be riots all over suburbia."

"But that's crazy," I said.

My mother shrugged. "It didn't seem so crazy back then."

I looked up and smiled in the direction of Ted and his friend. "You must be Annette," I said, in a loud voice.

"That's right," Annette said, smiling sadly at me. She had long pale hair that lay like yellow satin ribbon on either side of her chest.

"Well," I recited in polite exaggerated singsong, "it's nice to finally meet you."

We laughed.

"I'm sorry about your father," Annette said. "He was a lovely man."

"Thank you," I said. "What are you making?"

"Soup."

"Chicken soup," Ted said. "Your father's chicken soup, as a matter of fact. He made it for me a few weeks ago when I had the flu, and I asked him for the recipe."

"Fresh dill," I said.

"That's the secret," said Ted. The phone rang, and Ted answered it and brought it over to my mother. "Eric Parsons calling you back."

"Who's Eric Parsons?" I asked.

"The lawyer," Ted told me.

I went and stood at Ted's kitchen window while my mother left the room to talk to the lawyer. I looked out at the hillside where his back garden was. When I'd come here at Christmas, my mother had walked me up the hill through the garden, which was studded with dozens of metal rings supported by wires, like haloes in a school Christmas play. Peonies, my mother had told me. Ted's parents had in thirty-seven different varieties of peonies.

I didn't know there were thirty-seven different varieties, I'd said.

Well, apparently there are. Even Daddy's impressed, she'd said.

The garden now looked exactly as it had that day: a bare rocky brown hillside caked with ice, each peony waiting invisibly beneath its frozen glittering cage.

The floor trembled under my feet; my mother was walking into the kitchen, replacing the phone in its cradle.

I turned to look at her. "What did he say?"

"He was appalled. That's what he kept saying, *I'm appalled*. Fuck him."

"You need a different guy," Ted told her. "Call my guy. He's terrific."

"Who is he to be so fucking appalled?" my mother said.

"He was appalled," Ted said. "Gee, that's too bad."

"Fuck him," I said.

"Yeah, fuck him," said Annette.

We went on like that: for a few moments Ted's kitchen was filled with "appalled"s and "fuck"s, murmured over and over until all of us were smiling, as if at some distorted message in a game of Telephone.

Finally I said, "But did he have any advice?"

"Advice?" my mother said. "What about?"

"I don't know."

"Call my guy," said Ted.

The doorbell rang and Ted went to answer it. My sister came into the kitchen. She was carrying a suitcase. Her face was puffy and her eyes were red. I stared at her. She and I hugged for a long time. I didn't want to let go of her; I didn't want to start talking again.

"You poor girls," my mother announced. "Your father."

"Well," I said, releasing my sister. "Your husband."

"But *your father*;" my mother said. She sat down in the striped armchair and pulled the blanket up over her lap.

My sister said, "What happened?"

My mother told her. *He got up, showered, shaved, and dressed for work ...* She put in all the details I'd prodded her on before—the handgun, the blood on his chest, his feet crossed at the ankles. When she finished, my sister was crying, soundlessly. My mother stroked her arm and got up and went into the bathroom.

My sister whispered to me, fiercely, "He brought her the coffee."

"I know," I said. I told her what I'd thought before, that it was like the dog bringing the slippers.

"No," she said, "it was like 'fuck you.'"

When my mother came back, my sister said, "Was there a note?"

"A note?" my mother said. "No, there wasn't any note."

"On the desk?" I said.

"I didn't look," she said. "The desk was a mess. You girls don't know. He hadn't cleaned it for months. I used to say to him, 'Let me help you, I'll sit down with you and we'll spend an evening sorting it out.' But he wouldn't." Her voice was rising. "He was so damned secretive. He never told me anything. I was always saying to him, 'I really should know what we have and where it is. What if something happens to you?' But he would never tell me. You know what he said finally? He said he was afraid that if I knew, I would leave him. Can you believe it? He thought if I knew where the money was I would take it and leave."

My sister looked at me and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing: maybe there wasn't any money. Maybe that's what he didn't want you to find out; maybe that's why he thought you would leave.

"That desk is such a mess I don't know how anyone could find anything there!" She was screaming now. "Oh, my God. You think there was a note? You think he left me a note and I didn't see it?" She looked at my sister and me. "What if the police find it and read it? What could it say?"

"I thought Monday for the funeral," my mother said. We were back in our places: she in the armchair without the blanket now, my sister and I on what looked like ancient wooden milking stools that Ted had produced from somewhere.

"Daddy wouldn't want a funeral," I said.

My mother shook her head, blinking. "Yes, he did. He wanted them to play the Mozart *Requiem*."

"Well, we're not having the Mozart *Requiem*," I said loudly. Then, trying to explain my vehemence, "If we do anything, we have to make it something we can get through, and that's something I couldn't bear."

"I agree," my sister said.

"I mean, Ma, whatever he may have said to you about wanting a funeral, these circumstances—"

My mother cut me off. "He's dead. Never mind how. A lot of people are going to miss him."

"I know that, but—"

"There's a Unitarian church. It's very simple inside. We could do it there, Monday morning."

"You mean with a coffin and everything?" My voice was rising, beginning to shake.

"No," my mother said calmly; it seemed we were taking turns, the three of us, being the calm one. "He wanted to be cremated."

I took a breath and tried to match my mother's tone. "We can wait until spring, then, to scatter the ashes. We could do it in Long Island Sound, where he sailed."

My sister said, "I don't want him in the water. There needs to be a place."

"There's an old graveyard up on Diamond Rock Road," my mother said.

"Why?" I said. "Why does there need to be a place?"

"So we can visit it," my sister said. "I want to be able to take my kids there."

"Well, I'm not going to visit it," I said.

"Don't," my sister said.

"If he's dead then let him be gone," I said, my voice cold, hard.

My mother put her hand on my wrist, fingering the end of my sleeve. "We'd better start calling people. Get Ted to give you some paper. We'll make a list."

The paper Ted gave me had a tiny red pineapple printed at the top, with his initials underneath. I wrote down names with a black felt-tip pen: my mother's brother and his wife and their grown children. My mother's other brother. I chewed on the top of the pen for a moment and then wrote down the name of my father's business partner.

"Let's see, who else," my mother said.

"Kurt," said my sister.

"Kurt?" My mother frowned. "God, I forgot about him. I suppose you have to call him."

"Of course we do; he's Daddy's *brother*," I said, annoyed; I'd forgotten about him, too, but my hand, writing his name, was shaking. "You should call him, Mom. You should be the one to tell him. I hardly know him."

"No, no, you do it. I can't deal with him now."

"Well," I said. I looked at my watch. It was nearly three o'clock. He must be gone by now, I thought; they must have finished and taken him away. I didn't want to make the phone calls; there was something limbo-like about sitting there in Ted's warm kitchen. My father was sort of dead, but not all the way yet; we hadn't told anyone in the family; something might still change.

"Use the phone in the study, upstairs," my mother was saying. "Ted will show you where."

All these studies, I thought. I said, "Do you want me to tell people how?"

"What do you mean?" my mother asked.

"I mean when they ask what happened. Should I say it was suicide, or should I say a heart attack?"

or something?" I was aware, suddenly, that I was trying to pick a fight: my mother would say heart attack, and I would argue for telling the truth. My sister, I thought, would back me up.

"Why should we hide it?" my mother said.

"I just thought—you know, because Daddy was so private—"

"We've got nothing to be ashamed about," said my mother, and my sister said:

"If he hadn't been so private, maybe he'd still be alive."

My husband came with me to make the phone calls. I let him do the talking, pulling people out of meetings. It's an emergency, he said.

Yes, it is, I thought; and there was something of a relief in hearing him say it. This was not a debatable emergency, like calling the pediatrician on a Sunday morning when our son had a fever; this was emergency in its starkest, purest form. We had a perfect right to interrupt meetings, to shock people out of the ordinary progress of the day. I liked it that they came to the phone a little ruffled, a little worried, but unprepared for what my husband was about to tell them. I listened to him explaining over and over that my father was dead and how it had happened, and I felt a startling calm sense of power that was almost a thrill, as my cousins and aunts and uncles went over the road that I had already traveled that morning. They were innocent, then they were shocked and saddened; they were out on that rainy, windy road but I was farther along than they.

"What did they say?" I asked my husband after each call was over.

He told me: They were upset.

No, no, I wanted details. How did their voices sound, what words had they used exactly? They were mobilizing, he reported. One cousin would drive up from the city tomorrow, another was leaving the office right now to go break the news to my mother's eldest brother and his wife. My uncle was sick, he had heart disease; he and his wife had adored my father, and the cousin thought someone had better tell them the news in person. Good, I said, pleased to have set so much in motion. Things were happening, after the eerie stillness of the morning; people were scurrying, waves were rippling out from the spot where the stone had hit the water.

The sky was getting dark behind the bare tree branches at Ted's study window. The lights of the rooms below made pale wedge shapes on the frozen stones of the terrace. The day was receding; the last daylight my father had seen would soon be gone.

"Who else?" I asked.

"Just Kurt."

"Try him at the theater." I flipped through my mother's black address book and found the number. I stood up and wandered around Ted's study while my husband dialed. The silvery barn-board walls were covered with photos of Ted when he was younger, chiseled and aloof, leaning on a Jeep, running

on a beach. A series in black-and-white, Ted standing in jeans and a white shirt against a crumpled paper backdrop. My mother had told me that Ted had been a model when he first got to New York. He must have been gorgeous, my mother had said. He looks like Montgomery Clift in those pictures.

"Oh," my husband was saying, "well, do you know where I can reach him?"

At the top of Ted's stairs, in the corner, there was a stair-climbing machine. I went over to it and held on to one of its chrome railings. There was a lamp next to it; I switched it on and the room was filled with stark yellow light, throwing huge sudden shadows among the eaves high above.

My husband hung up. "He's not there. They said he's probably on his way in, for tonight's performance."

"Try him at home anyway, just in case." Let him not be there, I thought; please make him be out. But I heard my husband say, "Oh, hi, Kurt. Listen, um..." He went on to tell Kurt who he was and why he was calling. Then, "Yes, he's dead ... No, nothing like that. He killed himself ... no, with a gun ... no, we're pretty sure it was instantaneous ... Yes, this morning ... sometime before seven." There was a long silence; then my husband said, "Kurt. I know ... I know. Kurt." He took the phone away from his ear and covered the receiver. "He wants to talk to you."

I shook my head and walked quickly to the stairs.

"She can't talk right now ... Well, because it's been a long day, and everyone is tired." His voice rose. "I know, but we didn't call *anyone*. There's been a lot to do, and—Kurt. Kurt, calm down." His voice was rough, angry.

I started down the stairs. Behind me my husband said, "No. In the heart."

The police were there, in Ted's kitchen. Three of them, two wearing uniforms and one in a khaki raincoat. "You're the older daughter?" one of them said to me. "Do you mind coming with us into the other room?"

They took me into the living room. There was a fire going in there, too. I sat on a green velvet couch. The man in the raincoat sat down on a spindly wooden chair and asked me to tell him my name, my address, whether I was married, how many children I had. He said, "Can you think of any reason why your father might have done this?"

"He was having some business problems," I said.

"What kind of problems?"

"He was in the machinery business, and they weren't selling any machines. It's a low-volume, high-end business—if you sell one or two a year, you're fine, but if you don't..."

One of the uniformed policemen was sitting in another spindly chair, writing down what I said on a small yellow pad. The third policeman wasn't there; he must have stayed in the kitchen.

"And there were some product liability suits," I said. "Some people had gotten hurt, using the machines. ~~They didn't use them right, they were careless and they got hurt. Or maybe they weren't hurt—maybe they were faking. You know how people get when they want to do a lawsuit.~~"

"Uh-huh," said the detective. His tone was neutral, but it made me scrutinize my own words; I was telling him what my father had told me, but now it sounded defensive, rationalizing.

"Anyhow," I said. "My father kept having to go to court and testify, and I think it was very upsetting to him. I think he took it personally."

"Right," he said. "Your mother told us the same thing. How was the marriage?"

I folded my hands together and looked past him, at Ted's big black piano topped with silver-framed photographs.

"Fine," I said.

"They didn't fight or anything?"

"Nope." In the corner of my eye I saw the other policeman silently making notes.

"Never?"

"Well, sometimes," I said. "But it was always—like she would say, 'I'll clean up the kitchen,' and he'd say, 'But you made dinner, let me clean up the kitchen.' And she'd say, 'But you've been working all day, you're tired, let me do it.'" This particular fight was dredged up from my childhood; it had happened probably twenty years ago, but the policeman didn't have to know that. I looked at him and smiled: See how benign?

He didn't smile back at me. I took a breath and said quickly, "But there's something else, something my mother doesn't know. There was a loan, a big one, not for the machinery business but for this other company he was starting, with three other guys. They took out this big bank loan and they'd been making the payments, but then they missed a couple of payments. It wasn't their fault—the bank didn't bill them for a couple of months so they stopped paying, but they would have paid if they'd realized—" I stopped myself; both policemen were looking at me curiously, with that same solemn pity I thought I'd seen when I was telling them about the product liability suits. I clasped my hands together more tightly. "Anyway," I said, "a few weeks ago the bank called the loan."

It was as though we'd all let out our breaths, invisibly, silently. A collective sigh was in the room. *Oh, dear*, it whispered, and at the same time, *Thank God. Now we can say: We know why he did it.*

"And how big was this loan?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't tell me. But I know it was big. And I know he didn't tell my mother."

I sat and the uniformed policeman wrote. How gentle these policemen were; they probably had families. They would go home tonight and someone would ask, How was your day?

"Should I tell my mother now, do you think, or would it be too much for her?" I asked.

"That's up to you," the detective said. "When was the last time you talked to your father?"

"Two days ago. Wednesday night."

"What did you talk about?"

I looked away from him, over his shoulder, blindly. For the first time that day, I felt as though I might cry. But it occurred to me as an idea, rather than a sensation—huh, I might be about to cry—*and* the instant it surfaced, it was gone.

(I had been talking to my mother, and then, on impulse, I'd asked to speak to him. He was hurt, sometimes, I knew from my mother, when my sister or I called and didn't ask for him; but guilt hadn't been driving me that night: I had suddenly wanted—needed, it now seemed to me—to talk to him.)

"Not much," I said. "I was planning to grow some roses this summer, so I was asking him for advice."

"He sounded normal?"

"Oh, if anything, he sounded better than usual. Sometimes we'd have these long conversations but he didn't talk—whenever I asked him a question he'd turn it around so we were talking about me instead of him. But Wednesday I asked him how he was, which usually he wouldn't really answer—he'd say, 'Okay—how are *you*?' But this time he said, 'Lousy,' but he said it in this kind of, I don't know, cheerful, funny kind of way. I asked him what he meant, and he said, 'Oh, I spilled Mom's coffee all over myself going up the stairs this morning, and the day was just downhill from there.'" I smiled at the detective: You see how elegant, the way he just laughed at all these disasters? And I felt the smile dissolving, falling off my face.

"That's all? He spilled the coffee?"

"Well, but there was more than that. The business stuff." I frowned. *Literal, this fellow, isn't he?* The thought came to me in my father's voice, the faintly English-accented one he used for irony and puns; for an instant it was as though my father and I were sharing a joke.

"But nothing specific? What else did you talk about?"

"Oh. My son. We talked about him for a while, and my father said he thought my husband and I were doing a wonderful job with him..." I looked at the piano again. That was the good-bye, I thought.

The policemen were getting up. The quiet one had shut his pad. I said, "Is he—I mean, have you finished up at the house?"

"No, not yet. It shouldn't be much longer. We'll let you know."

"And do you know of any—is there some kind of cleaning service we could get in there tonight? And I want that chair out of the house before my mother goes back."

The detective said, "We can remove the chair, but I don't think you'll need a cleaning service." He cleared his throat. "It's really not that bad."

We all stood for a moment, looking down at the floor.

The detective said, "We asked your mother if there was a woman friend we could call—you know, someone to be with her now. But she seemed to want Mr. Tyson."

"Uh-huh," I said.

In the next room, my mother was screaming. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" I pushed open the door and ran in. "Oh, my God!" my mother cried, holding out one hand to me and pointing with the other at the third policeman, the one who'd stayed in the kitchen. "He was on the *woodchipper* murder!"

"What's the woodchipper murder?" I asked.

"It's the *book* I've been reading. You know how I like those true crime books? I just *finished* it. The man who killed his wife and then put her body into the woodchipper. It happened just north of here. And I just remembered why his name was familiar—he was the policeman in the book!"

I nodded politely at the policeman, who looked down and shifted his weight from one foot to the other and then back again.

When the police left, I felt tired, or disappointed—I couldn't tell exactly what the feeling was, the loss of momentum, perhaps. The day had gone along as a procession of things that needed to be done; the prospect of the next task had felt, oddly, like hope. But now the tasks were completed; the anticipated relief had not come. There was no obvious next step.

It was the dinner hour. Ted and Annette were setting the long dining room table with heavy peasantry ceramic dishes, blue-and-white checked place mats, blue linen napkins. My mother was ladling the soup into a big flowered tureen. My husband was mixing a salad.

"What is this, a dinner party?" my sister muttered to me in the little passageway outside the kitchen.

"Ted's been cooking all day. It's his way of trying to help," I said; but my sister's face was dark and her red eyes glittered.

I went into the dining room and stood by the table.

"That's where your father spilled the wine on New Year's Eve," Ted said softly behind me. I looked down at a dark splotch on the porous blond wood of the table; I put my hand on the stain.

At dinner my mother and Ted did witty repartee, as though their dialogue were being documented—Look at us, we're doing witty repartee! My sister's face was frozen. Annette lit candles, handed dishes silent and beautifully grave, a Vermeer maidservant. I couldn't eat, but occasionally I joined in the talk, casting apologetic glances at my sister: I know it's horrible to talk and laugh, but Mom and Ted

are trying so hard, and if this is how they want to play it, then it's our job to help them out.

We were all still at the table when the phone rang; it was Kurt.

"You'd better talk to him," I told my mother. "He was upset before. I think he feels shut out."

"I can't help how he feels," my mother said, but she got up and took the phone from Ted and went with it into the kitchen.

The rest of us cleared the table. I put down a stack of plates on the counter and heard my mother say, "No!" a couple of times; then, "Kurt, I don't think you understand, we don't *have* the body, the police have it, I don't know where it is." Then, "Kurt, there's nothing to see, this is not a body you'd want to see ... Kurt. No. Kurt." She held the phone away from her. "He wants to drive up here tonight."

"Tell him no," I said.

"He hung up," said my mother.

"Call him back," I said. "I'll talk to him."

"Don't bother. He won't come."

"What if he does?"

My mother shrugged. "He doesn't know where to find us."

"Mom," my sister said. "Let's at least call him back and tell him where we are."

"He won't come," my mother said again. "He always gets lost. He always says he's coming—Christmas, Daddy's birthday—and then he doesn't show up. If he cares so much, then where was he when Daddy was alive?"

"This is different," my sister said.

"He's hysterical," my mother said.

"It's his brother," I said.

"Well, it's my husband," she said.

A few minutes later I went upstairs and tried calling Kurt at the theater, but they said he had just gone onstage. I left a message saying that I hoped he'd drive up and see us tomorrow.

But all that night I wondered if he was in his car, driving along dark, frozen, unmarked roads, winding up by blind instinct at my parents' house, banging at the door.

"So, should we tell her about the loan?" I asked my husband. We were back upstairs, whispering, in Ted's study.

"I don't know," he said. "There's nothing she can do about it tonight. It might just upset her."

"It might make her feel better, to know that's why he did it."

"We don't even know how much it is." He took a deep breath. "We need to call Neil."

"Maybe we should."

I stood beside my husband as he made the call. I listened as he told Neil that it wasn't a heart attack; it was suicide. My husband said, "We know there was a loan that you guys took out to start the door company. We know that the bank had called the loan—is that right? We need to know how much it was."

I pushed a piece of paper under my husband's hand, and gave him a pencil from the silver cup on Ted's desk. I waited for the figure to appear: millions, a number that would throw my mother into debt, that would clang like a giant bell tolling, a number that would explain everything. I watched as my husband wrote down: *\$220,000*.

I said out loud: "His share?"

My husband shook his head and wrote: *The whole thing*.

I divided in my head by four, for the four partners in the door company. I said, "You mean his share was fifty-five thousand?" I wrapped my arms around myself; I went into the next room, Ted's bedroom. I sat down on the big bed, which was the only piece of furniture in the room. The walls were lined with built-in drawers and cupboards, one of which gaped open to show a row of hanging shirts, grouped by color. I saw white shirts, blue ones, striped ones, dark plaid flannels. My husband came in. I said, "We could have given him that. We could have taken out a second mortgage and given him a check. *He* could have taken out a second mortgage. My God. *Neil* could have covered it, without blinking an eye."

"Maybe that's what he was afraid of, that Neil would have to cover it," my husband said. His face was white. "Maybe he was ashamed at having gotten Neil into the deal."

"I thought when we knew how much the loan was, we'd understand," I said. "All day I've been thinking that was the reason."

"Maybe it was," my husband said again.

I stood up. "Fifty-five thousand? That doesn't explain anything." I began to walk around the room; I slammed the cupboard door shut. "That is not a reason."

"Sssh." My husband came toward me with his arms out. I ducked away from him.

He said, "Should we tell your mother?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

"There's something else," he said. "Something the police told me. There was a note. Well, not a note exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Something on the desk. An envelope. He'd written your mother's name on it."

"What was in it?"

"I'm not clear exactly. Financial information. A list of bank accounts. Should I tell your mother?"

"I don't know," I said. I went over to the window, saw my own reflection, turned away. Behind me in the study, the phone was ringing. "I want this day to be over," I said. "I want things to stop happening."

"I know," my husband said. Then: "So, should we tell her?"

I said, "Well, now she'll know what she has and where it is."

My husband moved to leave the room. I said, "Wait," and I stood for a moment on Ted's threadbare Persian carpet, trying to purge myself of meanness before I went downstairs.

My sister and Ted were trying to talk my mother out of going home for the night.

"What are you making such a big deal for?" my mother was saying. "I don't have any problem going back there."

"Sleep here tonight," Ted said.

My sister looked at me.

"Go home tomorrow," I said. "Not tonight."

"I'll stay here with you," my sister said.

"We can't go back there anyway," I said. "The police are there."

"They've finished," said my mother. "They just called, to tell us they're leaving."

"Okay," I said slowly. And I felt another, final, surge of organizational energy. I looked at my husband. "You go over there and pack a bag for my mother. Get a nightgown and her toothbrush and— and, Mom, you tell him what you need."

"I'll go with you," Ted said.

"Oh, that's all right," said my husband.

"No, let him go with you," I said. "Mom, give Ted a list." I pulled my husband into the back hall and whispered to him, "Make sure the chair is out of there. The police told me they would get rid of it but make sure they did. And take some paper towels and some, I don't know, Windex or Fantastik or something. All right?"

"All right," he said, and I could see that he knew what I meant, but I didn't want to take any chances.

"Get rid of all the blood," I said. "I mean it. Check the baseboards, the stairs. They probably took him out in one of those bags, but check anyway."

"I will," he said.

Annette had finished in the kitchen and gone to bed. I sat with my mother and sister by the dying fire waiting for my husband and Ted to come back.

"He always took such good care of me," my mother said sleepily. "Even today. Did you hear about the list he left?"

"How do you know about that?"

"The police told me," my mother said. "Do you think he sat there this morning, making the list?"

We didn't answer her.

"No," she said, "this morning he acted in the moment. He must have made that list some time ago, and this morning he just put it into an envelope for me and left it on the desk." She looked at me. "Are you planning to stay here tonight?"

"Of course," I said.

"It's just that I don't think Ted has enough beds. Annette's in the guest room, and there's the other little guest room down here, for me." She looked at my sister. "And you can sleep on the couch."

"Oh," I said. The thought of going back to my parents' house frightened me. I did not want to be there, sleepless, where my father had slept the night before; I did not want to be there tomorrow morning, watching the clock creep around to the last minute of his life. Yet I also knew that if I went there I would be as close to him as it was still possible to be.

"And you must want to see the baby," my mother went on. "You could drive there tonight and still be back here in time for breakfast."

"Drive where?" I asked.

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