

THE LAST BLUE GLASS

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published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*

April, 2016

It started as a set of six, the wedding present they bought for themselves. Days after returning from their honeymoon in Cape Cod, hours before throwing their first dinner party, they were peeling potatoes and splitting a Coors when they realized they had only three glasses that matched. Cathy's parents had given them stainless steel flatware for twelve, Frank's mother had given them eight sturdy dinner plates, but nobody had thought about glasses. Even Cathy and Frank hadn't thought about glasses.

That struck them as hilarious. Back then, lots of things struck them as hilarious. When they stopped laughing, Cathy said she'd finish making dinner while Frank went to the store. No, he said. This was the first thing they'd be buying for their new home, and they should experience that together. So Cathy called her mother long distance for advice on keeping peeled potatoes from turning brown, Frank got the fifty-dollar gift card his uncle had given them, and they both raced out to the car.

They spent the whole fifty dollars, plus more for tax. Cathy found a set of eight perfectly attractive clear glasses for half that much, but Frank felt drawn to the blue glasses—tall, pale, translucent, gently squared.

Stevens

“They look fragile,” Cathy said.

“They’re elegant,” Frank said. “I really want them, Cathy.”

At dinner, Frank’s mother knocked her glass over with her elbow as she reached for the salt, and it fell to the floor and broke.

“I don’t know why you bought such flimsy things,” his mother said, not glancing down. She salted her potatoes, her chicken, her broccoli, everything on her plate before tasting anything.

“Because they’re beautiful.” Cathy gathered the fragments. A shard cut into her finger, and she pressed it against her palm so the blood wouldn’t show. “I love these glasses.” She walked into the kitchen to hold her finger under cold water. Tonight, the nicotine patch definitely wasn’t doing it. She’d have to raid her emergency pack after their guests left.

She filled a pink plastic glass with ice and water for Mrs. Morrell. When Cathy and Frank had gotten engaged, her parents insisted he call them “Mom” and “Dad.” Mrs. Morrell had never said anything like that, so Cathy still called her “Mrs. Morrell,” even though now Cathy was Mrs. Morrell, too.

“Maybe it’s a good omen,” Faye said. She was a graphic designer for a public relations firm, and she was blonde and slender, with fair skin and incredibly dark blue eyes. As usual, she wore a sleeveless, low-cut dress that showcased her precisely toned arms and invited speculation about other assets. “I mean, you just got married, and Greek people break glasses at weddings on purpose, right? For good luck?”

Stevens

“Not Greek people,” Frank’s older brother said—only four years older, and he’d probably once been as handsome as Frank. But Will was gaunt and sallow now, and his mouth seemed twisted in a permanent smirk. He took a second beer from the six-pack he’d brought as a house-warming present. “Jewish people. I’ve heard about that. Just one glass—the groom crushes it under his foot—and it’s not for good luck. It’s a way of saying you shouldn’t get too excited, because love never lasts.”

“Don’t listen to him, Faye.” Frank touched her hand, lightly, for just a second. “Who’d say that at a wedding? I bet you’re right. I bet it’s for good luck.”

“I went to a Jewish wedding once,” Brian said, establishing himself as the authority. With his height and broad shoulders and confident smile, he never had much trouble becoming the authority. He was Faye’s husband, and he’d been Frank’s best friend for years. “This guy I knew in college. Most things were like a regular wedding, but some were different, and the rabbi explained them. He said they break the glass because the Romans destroyed the temple and made the Jews leave Jerusalem, and that was so sad they always think about it, even at happy times like weddings. He said some things are so sad, and so wrong, you can’t ever get over them. But he didn’t say love never lasts.”

Faye gazed at Frank, tilting her head to the side. “Of course he didn’t,” she said, “because it isn’t true. Anyway, Cathy, the chicken’s great. I love the sauce.”

“The potatoes are underdone.” Mrs. Morrell prodded a slice, making it clear the fork couldn’t go through easily. “You should’ve started them sooner.”

Stevens

I would have, Cathy thought, but Frank wanted me to help pick the glasses. Later, when they'd moved into the living room, while Frank took out his guitar and showed Brian a chord progression he'd just learned, she served lemon pie and thought of the trip to the store. That was a sweet moment, she thought. It'll always be a sweet memory.

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It turned bitter. Nine years later, Cathy again stood in the kitchen—not the kitchen of their apartment in Newton Upper Falls or of their house in Virginia, but of their condominium in Brookline. Once again, Mrs. Morrell and Will, and Faye and Brian, had come to dinner. But Frank was dead now, supposedly in an accident. Really, Cathy thought, it had been suicide by car, suicide by alcohol. Really, it had been murder. She thought back to that first dinner party. Even then, there were signs. If she'd seen them, could she have prevented it? Maybe not. And what she was doing tonight wouldn't really set things right. But it was her only way to strike back against things that were wrong.

She gazed at the last blue glass in the cupboard and touched the small bottle in her pocket. I'll fix a special drink for someone tonight, Frank, she thought, and serve it in the glass we chose together. That's all I can do for you now.

As she basted the chicken, she remembered the move to Virginia. Brian and Faye had helped them pack but hadn't been careful enough. They were never careful enough. Cathy had watched Faye wrap glasses, and she'd cringed but said nothing. Brian and Faye were Frank's friends, more than hers, and Cathy hadn't wanted to seem critical. When she and Frank unpacked their boxes, they'd found another blue glass broken.

Stevens

That was during the third year of their marriage, a hard year. In March, Cathy's father died of a stroke. Six weeks later, her mother managed to catch the flu, and she died, too, quickly. At her father's funeral, Cathy wept. At her mother's funeral, she watched dry-eyed as the coffin was lowered. Now her mother wouldn't have to live with overwhelming grief, wouldn't have to keep searching for reasons to breathe when the man she'd loved since high school was gone. I understand, Mom, Cathy thought. I don't blame you.

Her parents left a few bits to a few charities, everything else to their only child—not much to show for two lifetimes of hard work, but enough to make Cathy and Frank talk seriously about investments, retirement accounts, and other sobering things. During one talk, Frank declared they should have a little fun with her legacy. Nothing extravagant—he made a good living as an insurance agent, she made a slightly better one as an occupational therapist, but they wanted to start a family. This was no time to talk about vacations in Hawaii. They settled on taking a full week off for a slow drive through Virginia, visiting historic spots and then camping in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

They relished the early warmth of a Southern spring, enjoyed lingering at monuments and museums and Presidential homes. One night, they stayed in a very basic motel on the road between Charlottesville and Lynchburg and ended up having drinks at a place called Taps.

They half-expected it to be a redneck bar—they half-hoped it'd be a redneck bar—but it wasn't. It was rustic, but in a deliberate, borderline trendy way. Some customers looked as if they'd feel at home in the cab of a flatbed truck. Others, drawn

Stevens

from nearby colleges and universities, would probably feel more comfortable in a faculty lounge. Across from the bar, on a small stage, a better-than-average banjo-and-fiddle duo played bluegrass. Frank and Cathy ordered beer and nachos, and he sat tall in his chair, caught by the music. After they'd ordered second beers, a near-seventy man stopped by to ask how everything was going.

“Fantastic.” Frank shook his hand. “I wish we had a place like this in Boston.”

“This place might not make it in Boston,” the man said, chuckling. “But we’ve done pretty good here, for almost twenty years. It breaks my heart to give it up—I perform myself, twice a week, and I love that. The wife says it’s time to retire, though, move closer to the grandchildren. If you know any folks who have some cash to invest in a sure thing, have them give Buzz a call.”

Cathy saw new light come into Frank’s eyes, like the light she’d seen when he’d spotted those blue glasses. He didn’t say anything, not yet. He didn’t have to. She knew. They stayed at Taps until it closed and then went to their very basic motel and made love. Even on the flat, aging mattress, she could feel the difference in him. He really wants this, she thought. After he fell asleep, she stepped outside, allowed herself two cigarettes from her emergency pack, and started thinking it over.

They spent two lovely days in the mountains, and she agreed immediately when he suggested staying at that motel again on the way home. Buzz performed at Taps that night—a decent guitarist, not much of a singer. During his second set, Frank took Cathy’s hands in his.

Stevens

“It’s crazy,” he said, “but how about moving here, buying this place? You don’t like your boss, and I’m not sure I want to sell insurance for the rest of my life. Obviously, we’d have to use part of your inheritance, and I don’t have any right to ask you to spend your money on—”

“It’s not my money,” Cathy cut in. “Every cent we have is *our* money. And I can’t stand my boss, and I don’t want you to spend your life doing something you hate.”

Again, she saw that light come into his eyes. He knew he’d won, but he was too tactful, and too smart, to admit it yet. “I don’t hate it. It’s okay. If we bought Taps, though, we’d be building our own business. And I could perform. I know I’m not good enough to be a rock star, and I’m a lousy songwriter. But to play and sing amazing songs other people have written, to make people happy by doing that—I’d love it, Cathy.”

She thought about making mortgage payments and meeting the payroll and cleaning restrooms. Frank didn’t seem to be thinking about any of that. But his happiness mattered more than anything else. She’d always known he was more creative than she was, and more vulnerable. Her parents had loved her, so she’d be more or less fine no matter what she did for a living. Frank needed more. He had yearnings a regular job couldn’t satisfy, things he needed to prove.

She squeezed his hands. “If that’s what you want, I want it, too. I’ll make calls to Charlottesville and Lynchburg to see what positions are open. The winters are so mild here that I won’t mind commuting, and—”

“No.” His voice dipped in alarm. “We’ll run the place together. I’ll tend bar and do the books, and you’ll handle the staff and the cooking.”

Stevens

“The cooking? I can’t. You’re sweet, and you always eat whatever I put on the table, but you know I’m not much of a cook.”

“We’re not talking French cuisine. Just bar food—fries, sliders, chicken wings. And won’t this be a great place to raise kids? No crime, safe schools, low prices. We’ll rent a house—with a yard, so you can get the dog you’ve always wanted. And we’ll spend every day working together. Doesn’t that sound great?”

It sounded wonderful. They extended their vacations, talked to Buzz, met his real estate agent, consulted with banks. They even found a house to rent, a sweet, compact ranch built in the fifties. The kitchen appliances were laughably outdated, but it had a fenced-in backyard where a dog could run and a sunny little bedroom right next to the master. Perfect for a nursery, Cathy thought, and wondered if they’d paint it blue or pink.

Everybody in Boston thought they were making a mistake.

“Bad idea, buddy,” Brian said. He sold insurance, too, at a different agency. “You’re a top earner—I only wish my sales came close to yours. How can you walk away from that to gamble on some backwoods bar?”

“We’d miss you, Frank.” Faye’s dark blue eyes turned wistful. “And Cathy, you’re a professional. How will you feel when you’re just a cook?”

“Cooking can be a profession,” Cathy said. “I just have to get better at it.”

“Oh, you’ll handle the cooking.” Brian dismissed that challenge with a wave of his hand. “The question is, do you *want* to—all day, every day?”

Stevens

“And you’ve lived in Boston your whole life, Frank,” Faye said. “Now, you’re moving to a dumpy little town in the middle of nowhere, in a completely different part of the country. What kinds of attitudes will people have? Who will your friends be?”

Frank’s only response was a shrug, so Cathy stepped in. “I’m sure we’ll meet lots of nice people. And I bet you’ll change your minds when you see Taps. You’ll have to come visit.”

“Yeah, we will,” Brian said, “because you’ll never be able to visit us. You’ll be working every weekend. Places like that tie you down hard. You’ll never get to go to a game or a concert, or even out for a nice dinner—if there’s a place within fifty miles that serves nice dinners. You sure you’re up for that, Frank?”

“You bet,” Frank said, but his tone sounded forced. He’s having doubts, Cathy thought. We haven’t even started, and he’s having doubts.

“A bar!” Mrs. Morrell said when they told her. “That’s the *last* place where I’d want my son to work. It’s a dangerous mistake, Frank, considering your tendencies.”

“Those were Dad’s tendencies,” he said. “Not mine.”

He glanced at his brother. Cathy knew what Frank was thinking. *And maybe they’re Will’s tendencies, too.* Frank’s father had been a charming, funny man and a successful realtor, but he’d also been an alcoholic who died of cirrhosis. Will wasn’t charming, funny, or successful, but he took after his father in one respect.

“Give it a try, little brother,” he said, lifting his scotch in salute. “We’ll see how long you last. You think it’ll all be strumming your guitar and warbling happy tunes. But running a bar’s hard work. You’re not so good at that.”

Stevens

“Frank’s a *very* hard worker,” Cathy said. “He—”

“Let it go, Cathy,” Frank said. “There’s no point. Look, we know we’re taking a risk, but we’re committed to making this happen.”

“I *thought* you were committed to starting a family,” Mrs. Morrell said. “I guess you weren’t serious about that. Oh, well. You’re probably not serious about this bar, either. It’ll be another thing you start and never finish. I’m warning you, though. I will not bail you out again. So when you’ve run through Cathy’s inheritance and piled up debts, don’t come crying to me.”

“They make me crazy,” Cathy said as she and Frank drove back to their apartment. “It’s not that they exaggerate things. They make things up out of thin air. How can Will say you don’t work hard? You worked part-time straight through college, you’re the top agent in your office, you—”

“It’s okay.” Frank kept his eyes straight ahead. “That’s just Will being Will.”

“That’s just Will lying. *He*’s the one who’s never worked hard at anything, and never finished college, and had to move back in with your mother. And how many jobs has he been through since we met? Five? Six? He’s jealous. That’s why he says those things.”

“Maybe,” Frank said. “Anyway, I don’t care what Will says. Brian’s my real brother. He’s more than a brother.”

“And your mother! What have you ever started that you didn’t finish? She made it sound as if that’s been the pattern for your whole life, but I have *no* idea what she

Stevens

meant. And when have you asked her to bail you out? That's a real question, Frank. Can you name one time when you asked her to bail you out?"

"She probably has something in mind. It's okay. When I was a kid, when she said things like that, I thought if I got straight A's or made Eagle Scout, she'd like me more. But nothing ever made any difference. So I got over it. The stuff she says doesn't bother me now."

Cathy turned in her seat to look at him. "She's your *mother*. Of course it bothers you. If my mother had said things like that to me, I would've cried for a week and felt bad about myself for the rest of my life."

"You had a different sort of mother. Mom—well, she gets emotional. When she strikes out, I understand. The point is, we're moving ahead now."

They moved ahead. They checked out library books on design and watched television shows about renovating restaurants. Cathy checked out cookbooks, too. Buzz's wife had given some recipes, but Cathy also wanted to come up with a signature dish that would draw customers from neighboring towns. By the time they moved to Virginia, she'd tried many recipes and narrowed the possibilities to four.

They closed Taps for two weeks, put in long days with a contractor, and went only slightly over budget on renovations. The re-opening was a huge success. The place was packed, the Charlottesville band Frank had chosen gave a rousing, sweaty performance, and Frank played one set himself. Cathy stepped out of the kitchen to watch him sitting on a stool on the stage, wearing the red plaid shirt he'd bought yesterday and put through the washer five times so it wouldn't look new. His voice rang out clear and

Stevens

sweet, and when he finished, people clapped and hooted. Cathy saw Frank's face flush with embarrassment, with surprise, with happiness. We did the right thing, she thought.

By the time they finished cleaning up, they were too tired to make love. They felt deeply happy, though, and when they collapsed into bed, they chatted drowsily, rejoicing in how well everything had gone and talking about the future. They fell asleep slowly, still holding hands.

The next three years weren't a disaster. People liked the new look of the place, they liked Frank's music, and they loved a dish Cathy had added to the menu. The recipe involved scooping out potato spheres with a melon baller, browning them in butter, and finishing them in the oven. Cathy had practiced making the dish for weeks, experimented until she found the perfect way to spice it. She re-named it Spud Balls, and customers couldn't get enough of it. She'd come up with a signature drink, too, made with fresh lemon juice, scented with ginger, heavily spiked with rum. So now she began every morning by peeling dozens of potatoes and scooping out hundreds, sometimes thousands of tiny spheres, and by squeezing sacks of lemons and boiling gallons of simple syrup. She didn't mind, as long as Frank was happy.

Most days, he seemed happy. The first six months were tense—they used up Cathy's inheritance just meeting the payroll and had to dip into their savings—but then things started turning around. Regulars stayed loyal, word spread, and every weekend new college-types came to order Spud Balls and Ginger Lemon Dreams. Frank started hosting an open mic night. He was charming and funny, many people came from nearby

Stevens

towns to perform, and some became frequent customers. Before the first year ended, Cathy and Frank could pay themselves salaries.

The hours were brutal, though. Cathy went to Taps early to start prep work in the kitchen and tend to the small lunch crowd. Frank came mid-afternoon, and they tried to sit down for a meal together before happy hour started. She'd stay until Frank told her to get some rest. On nights when he performed, she always came back to hear him before going home again. He stayed through closing and cleanup, then joined her in bed until it was time for her to go back to Taps.

They'd stopped talking about having children, even about getting a dog. Those weren't possibilities, not yet. Once the economy really turns around, Cathy thought, profits will go up, and we'll hire a manager and more kitchen help. Then we won't have to work such long hours. The patches still weren't working—she had to resort to her emergency pack every day—so she asked her doctor for a prescription. After two weeks of bizarre, troubling nightmares, she flushed the pills down the toilet and tried gum.

Mrs. Morrell never visited. Will came once and spent a long Saturday night at the bar, downing free drinks, grimacing when Frank performed, chuckling to himself over jokes he didn't share with anybody. On Sunday morning, he slept in late, and he was gone when Cathy came home to make dinner for him.

Brian and Faye visited twice a year, staying in the sunny little bedroom next to the master. Once, after they'd all stayed late at Taps, Frank was so exhausted that he surrendered to sleep seconds after they went to bed. Cathy, too tired to sleep, lay awake

Stevens

for a long time, trying not to listen to the sounds of Brian and Faye making love in the room that should have been a nursery by now.

On the next visit, Brian complained constantly about his boss, and Faye announced she'd been promoted to Creative Strategist. Her hair was shorter and curlier now. Occasionally, Cathy noticed Frank stealing glances at Faye, and she wondered if she should try a shorter style, too. She should definitely diet. She subsisted almost entirely on bar food these days, snacking whenever she had a few minutes free—too much fried stuff, and it was hard to keep track of how much she was eating.

After Frank and Cathy had been running Taps for three years, Brian called, saying he and Faye wanted to visit again. He insisted they all meet in Charlottesville on Friday, so he could treat everybody to dinner at a fondue restaurant Cathy loved. Frank and Cathy hardly ever dressed up anymore, but he urged her to get a new dress, and he bought a tailored shirt and a crisp new tie.

In the restaurant's lobby, they exchanged hugs with Brian and Faye before heading for the secluded table Brian had reserved. Cathy savored the experience of eating here, even more than the food—four leisurely courses, the entrée cooked tableside, drinks and wine and coffee. When the pot of hot, thick chocolate was served, ringed by fresh fruit and hunks of cake, Brian sat forward, locking his eyes on Frank's.

"I've made a decision," he said. "I've had it with letting my idiot boss hold me back. I'm starting an independent agency."

"Good for you," Frank said. "Running your own business is tough—we've found that out—but it's worth it. You're okay with this, Faye?"

Stevens

“Definitely.” Faye dipped a strawberry in chocolate, just barely, and touched it with her tongue. “Brian’s got great ideas.”

Brian kept his eyes fixed on Frank. “The fact is, I need a partner to make this happen. I need a top salesman. And I won’t lie to you—I need a partner with capital. I can’t cover more than half the start-up costs myself. That’s one reason I’m coming to you, but only one. Mostly, it’s because you’re the best salesman I’ve ever known and the best friend I’ve ever had, and I can’t imagine anything better than building a business with you. How about it?”

Stunned, Cathy looked to Frank. His face had frozen; she couldn’t read it. She turned to Brian. “You want us to sell Taps and use the money to help you start an insurance agency. But we’ve put everything we have into Taps—everything my parents left me, almost everything we’d saved. And we’ve worked so hard to make it a success.”

Brian grimaced. “I know. You’ve done a remarkable job. But are you really succeeding? You’re barely turning a profit, and the only way you can do even that is by working inhuman hours. If the economy tanks again, you’ll be left with nothing. If you sell now, though, I bet you could get a good price and make a strong start in something with the potential for *real* success.”

Again, Cathy glanced at Frank. He shook his head slightly but said nothing.

“You staked everything you had on your dream, Frank,” Brian continued, “and you’ve lived that dream for three years. Maybe, someday, you’ll live it again. But for now, what makes most sense for getting the things you want? What’s the best way of being fair to Cathy? I know she wants kids. Can you give her that, if you cling to Taps?”

Stevens

“Yes, I want children,” Cathy said when she and Frank were alone in their room. She kept her voice low—she knew how easy it was to hear sounds from the other side of the wall. “But we’re young. We’ve got time. Brian keeps talking about what a great salesman you are, but he’s a salesman, too, and he gave you one hell of a sales pitch tonight. Don’t let him talk you into something you don’t want to do.”

“I’m not that easy to manipulate.” There was an edge to his voice—was he irritated with her? “Anyway, it’s not my decision. It’s yours. We bought Taps with your money.”

She put a hand on his arm. “It’s not my money. It’s ours. Every cent—”

“Yeah? You were pretty quick to talk about the money *‘my parents left me.’* You just had to remind Faye and Brian I couldn’t have bought this place on my own.”

She took her hand away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have put it that way.”

He winced and embraced her. “No, *I’m* sorry. You didn’t say anything wrong. I’m just on edge. Having this possibility thrown at us—it’s overwhelming.”

“Then let’s put it out of our minds for now,” she said, “and enjoy the weekend. Okay?”

“Okay.” He winced again, and held her closer.

The next morning, when she went to the kitchen, Brian was already there, drinking orange juice and mixing pancake batter.

“I’m making breakfast,” he said. “You do enough cooking at Taps. And when you go over to make your famous Spud Balls, I’ll help. I want to steal your secret recipe.”

Stevens

“It’s not much of a secret,” she said, smiling. “I’ll write it down for you. Frank thought the three of you might go to Lynchburg today and visit Jefferson’s Poplar Forest. Have you ever gone there?”

“No, and I don’t care if I never do. I’m not big on trees. Let Frank and Faye go.” He set down his glass and reached for a frying pan hanging from a hook. “The fact is, I want to spend time with you, give you my sales pitch. You’re the one I really have to persuade. If you say you want to move back to Boston, Frank will cave in fast.”

He swept his arm for emphasis, and the pan knocked his glass to the floor. Swearing, he cleaned up the juice and the pieces of pale blue glass.

“Sorry, Cathy,” he said. “That was one of your special glasses, wasn’t it?”

“It’s all right.” The third one to break, Cathy thought. “Anyway, you don’t need to give me a sales pitch. I just want Frank to be happy.”

“So do I,” Brian said. “Let’s talk about how to make that happen.”

He insisted on going to Taps, and they spent the day scooping out Spud Balls and tending to daytime customers. Brian’s sales pitch wasn’t heavy handed, and he made jokes and was a big help in the kitchen. Frank and Faye headed to Lynchburg and didn’t get back until late afternoon. They both seemed quiet; maybe Faye hadn’t enjoyed the forest. At Taps that night, Frank outdid himself when he performed, and people stood and cheered. He won’t be able to give this up, Cathy thought. No way will we go back to Boston.

But they did. The next Sunday, Cathy and Frank sat at their kitchen table, going through the numbers. There were no surprises. Keeping Taps meant continuing to

Stevens

struggle. If the economy improved, things could get slightly better. If the economy soured, things could get much, much worse.

“But if we take advantage of Brian’s offer,” Frank said, “he and I can turn a big profit in no time. You’ll find a better job with a better boss, and we’ll rebuild our savings. And wouldn’t it be great to be with all our friends again, to eat lunch in a real deli and have a corned beef sandwich that actually tastes like corned beef?”

She nodded. Despite the hard work, she’d grown fond of Taps, of people who worked there, of their regular customers. And she loved seeing Frank perform and hearing customers applaud him. Then again, she’d loved being an occupational therapist, too. It wasn’t hard for her to be happy. “But you didn’t really enjoy selling insurance,” she said, “and you’ve been happy here.”

“Sometimes I have. Lots of time, I’ve been exhausted and stressed out, and I’ve felt guilty about you slaving in the kitchen so I can have fun on stage. And working with Brian wouldn’t be like working for some jerk who doesn’t care about anything but the bottom line.” He paused. “Plus there’s the question of having kids.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ve thought about that.”

“Then you’ve realized it’s impossible if we stay. We each work sixty hours a week, seventy, maybe more. If we cut our hours and hire more help, we’ll have higher costs, lower profits. Add the extra expenses of having kids, saving for college—no way.”

“Are you sure? Maybe, in a few years—”

“I’m sure,” he said. “We can’t do it.”

She nodded, sighing. “Brian’s right. You *are* a good salesman. All right.”

Stevens

“Fantastic.” He grabbed her hand, kissed it hard, and grinned. “So I’ve finally found a way to make my mother happy. She’ll love saying she knew I wouldn’t make it. Let’s bet on whether she actually uses the words ‘I told you so.’ Ten bucks says yes.”

Why was he so completely happy? They were giving up something he’d wanted, something they’d worked for. Why didn’t the moment feel poignant to him? She didn’t know why his reaction troubled her, but it did. “Then let’s not give her a chance to say that. Let’s talk this over again. We could try a new approach to—”

“No, you were right the first time. We’ve gotta move on. At least I won’t have to ask Mom to bail me out. I’ll sell Taps myself—I’m not paying some real estate agent a commission. I’ll find the perfect buyer and get a great price. You think I’m a good salesman? Watch me.”

He threw himself into the task, searching the Internet and making calls. Within weeks, he found a retired millionaire in Nebraska who loved country music and yearned for a warmer climate. Frank *did* get a great price—good thing, since Brian couldn’t put together as much money as he’d expected, and Frank had to cover most of the startup costs. Or rather, Frank and Cathy did. When they drew up partnership papers, Frank insisted both he and Cathy be put down as owners of their share of the company.

“After all, it’s your money,” he said, and she cringed but said nothing.

They had enough left for a down payment on a condominium in Brookline—no yard for a dog, and the tiny second bedroom had only one small window, but it could work as a nursery. She found a high-paying job at a state agency. We’re starting the

Stevens

countdown, she thought. She allowed herself one last cigarette—her Hail-Mary cigarette, she called it—then crushed her emergency pack in her fist and threw it away.

As soon as they'd unpacked, they invited Mrs. Morrell and Will to dinner. Mrs. Morrell gazed at the vanilla walls of their boxlike living room and raised an eyebrow.

“So you gave up on the bar,” she said. “I told you so.”

Frank shot Cathy a triumphant glance, and she nearly laughed out loud. Frank had won his ten bucks.

“It wasn't a bad little bar,” Will said, “for a hillbilly joint. You could've made it pay if you'd worked at it. But I guess you'll have more fun lounging around the office, sipping lattes with your buddy. You sure you can trust this guy?”

“I've known him forever,” Frank said. “Of course I can trust him.”

“I wouldn't trust him.” Will held out his glass for more wine. “He's too slick, too smooth. His wife, though—I like that type. Cool on the outside, but you know something's sizzling right under the surface. You know she's—”

“Cut it out,” Frank said. “She's my best friend's wife.”

“Yes, don't be vulgar, Will,” Mrs. Morrell said. “Though I *don't* think the way she dresses is very nice. At any rate, Frank, if you wanted a partner, why didn't you come to your brother? Why not do something for your family for once, instead of your precious friends?”

“Actually, Brian's the one who suggested the partnership,” Cathy said, “so—”

“That's enough, Cathy,” Frank said. “Let's check on dinner.”

“Sorry,” she said when they got into the kitchen, “but she was so unfair.”

Stevens

“She’s *my* mother, okay? I’ll handle her. And I’ve told you nothing she says bothers me.” He ripped into the lettuce. “One thing’s for sure. The first life insurance policy I’m writing is for me. A nice, big one, with you as beneficiary and Brian and Faye as contingent beneficiaries. Same thing with my will. No matter what happens, my mother and Will get nothing. Whatever I have is going to my *real* family.”

This wasn’t an ideal time to bring it up, but Cathy couldn’t resist. “And soon, we’ll start our own family. I checked with Human Resources. There’s a generous maternity leave policy, and I can shift to part-time when—”

“I’ve gotta focus on getting the business established before we think about any of that. You make the vinaigrette? Good.” He poured on too much and tossed the salad, briefly but roughly. “Let’s get the damn food on the damn table, and then they’ll eat it and go away.”

During the next two years, they settled into a pattern. He used the second bedroom as his home office and usually did paperwork for an hour or two after dinner, closing the door so he could concentrate. While he worked, Cathy watched television, read, or walked on her treadmill. She lost twelve pounds and felt proud. Once or twice a week, Frank had to spend evenings with prospects in distant suburbs and didn’t get home until late. On those evenings, Cathy walked an extra mile and went to bed early. When Frank joined her, he’d kiss her forehead and say, “I love you” before rolling over and sinking into sleep.

They didn’t see Brian and Faye as often as Cathy had expected. Sometimes, when Cathy suggested inviting them over, Frank said he was too tired. When they did get

Stevens

together, he seemed subdued. Brian was always in high spirits, though, and Faye paid more attention to Cathy than she used to and complimented her on her weight loss.

Cathy did feel good about the way she looked these days. And Frank—he'd always been handsome, but now he looked better than ever. Since they'd returned to Boston, he'd bought lots of clothes, lots of shoes, and he got his hair cut every week. That made sense. At Taps, he could get shaggy and stick to jeans and tee-shirts. Now, he had a job where appearance mattered. He'd never paid this much attention to such things when he'd sold insurance before, though, and she worried he was spending too much.

He spent money on Cathy, too, often surprising her with gifts—a novel by a favorite author, a DVD of an old musical she loved. One evening, he gave her an iPod.

“It's great,” she said, “but it looks expensive. Can we afford it?”

“Absolutely.” He peered into the bedroom mirror, adjusting his tie, getting ready for an evening meeting with a prospective client in Chelsea. “I'm signing new clients up every day.” He kissed her forehead. “Gotta go. Try the iPod while you're on your treadmill.”

Instead, she sat on the couch, thinking about the gifts he'd brought her. Never jewelry, perfume, or lingerie. Books, DVDs, and now an iPod. All things I can do by myself, she thought, ways to keep busy while he's away. She thought about the evenings he spent in the second bedroom with the door closed, the evenings he spent courting clients, the clothes, the shoes, the haircuts. She thought about how long it had been since they'd made love, about how he'd taken to kissing her on the forehead, about how he

Stevens

never wanted to talk about having a baby. And she thought about how awkward he seemed around Faye, and about how kind to her Faye had become.

She called Brian on his cell phone. "Frank said you'd both be working at the office tonight. I tried to call him, but he didn't answer. Could I speak to him?"

"Frank's not here," Brian said. "He's at a prospect's home, in Dedham."

"Of course. Dedham. I got confused." She paused. "But *you're* at the office?"

"Yeah." He seemed surprised by the question. "I'll be here half the night, doing paperwork on all the sales Frank's bringing in. Your husband's a dynamo, Cathy."

"He certainly is. Thanks." She closed her phone. Poor Brian, she thought.

She drove by Brian and Faye's house, but of course Frank's car wasn't parked outside. They wouldn't risk having Brian walk in on them. They were at a motel, and if Brian came home early and found the house empty, Faye would give him some story about going to comfort a co-worker whose mother was ill.

Cathy thought about cruising motel parking lots. No. Too pathetic. Instead, on her way home, she bought a carton of cigarettes. I'm never going to have a baby, she thought. What the hell.

When Frank got home, around midnight, she was halfway through her first pack, sitting on the couch, drinking a gin and tonic. "How's Faye?" she asked.

He took a step back and tried, once, to salvage it. "What do you mean? I didn't see Faye. I was with a prospect, in Chelsea."

"Dedham," she said. "You told Brian Dedham. You've got to keep your story straight, Frank. So that's why you were so happy about giving up Taps. You wanted to be

Stevens

with her. Is that where it started, in Virginia? On the day you and Faye went to the Poplar Forest? Or maybe you never got there. Maybe you spent the day at a motel.”

He sat down in an armchair, facing her. “Damn, Cathy. I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t think you’d find out.”

“Of course not,” she said. “After all, I’m not very smart. I’m not a Creative Strategist or a clever salesman, just someone who helps people learn how to drink from a cup, how to button a shirt. You don’t have to be a genius to help people do that. You and Faye should’ve been able to deceive me forever. Why did you bother trying? Why not just leave me?”

He held his face in his hands. “Because you’re my wife, and I love you. You’re the sweetest person I’ve ever known. I didn’t want to hurt Brian, either. But this thing with Faye just took over. I *did* try to fight it.”

“You couldn’t have tried hard, not if you had sex with her back in Virginia.”

“I didn’t.” He looked up. “That day was just flirting, and holding hands, and—well, a little more than that. But no sex.”

He looked so miserable that Cathy’s anger softened. “I always knew you liked looking at her. She’s beautiful—any man would like looking at her. When did you start having sex? How long after we moved back here?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Not long. Pretty much right away.”

Pretty much right away. That meant about two years. But if it had only been sex, if it had only been because Faye was prettier, she could forgive it. “Can you promise me

Stevens

it's over? Can you promise you'll never have sex with her again, never hold hands with her, never see her unless I'm with you?"

"I can't." His eyes deepened with yearning, with pity. "I'm sorry. I love her. I love you, too, but I can't give her up. If she leaves Brian, I'll want to be with her."

She threw the glass at him. It missed him by inches and crashed against the wall, pale blue fragments falling soundlessly against the carpet. "Get out," she said. "Don't come back for your stuff until I'm at work. And find yourself a lawyer, because I'm damn sure calling one tomorrow."

When she got home the next day, she saw he'd taken some clothes, some shoes, his guitar, nothing else. For the next three days, she went to work, came home, made dinner, and watched television until she fell asleep on the couch. She couldn't stand to sleep in their bed. She tried not to think, didn't tell anyone about what had happened, didn't call a lawyer. On the fourth night, while she was flipping channels, he let himself in and turned off the television. He was drunk. She could see that, even before he spoke.

"She won't leave him," he said. "He still doesn't know, and she doesn't want him to. Neither do I. It's over. I'll make any promises you want. Please let me come home."

She tried to despise him. "So now you'll make promises, now that she's dumped you and you couldn't be with her anyway. That really means a lot, Frank."

"I know." He gripped his face with both hands and started to cry, bending forward. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. Please, give me another chance. I don't know where to go, I don't—oh, God!"

Stevens

He broke down completely. She couldn't stand it. Damn it, she still loved him. And she couldn't imagine her life without him. If her parents were alive, if she had a sister, a brother, a baby—but for so long, Frank had been the center of everything. She sighed and walked over to him.

“Come on.” She put an arm around his shoulders. “Let's get you to bed.”

He sobbed, gasped. “Thank you, Cathy. You're so good to me. I want to have a baby with you. I want to have one right away.”

“Well,” she said. “We'll see.”

She slept on the couch and woke at six to find him making coffee, showered and shaven and sober. He put his arms around her.

“Sorry about last night,” he said. “I knew I'd had too much, but it was the only way I could work up the courage to face you. And I'm sorry about so much else. But this'll be a great new start for us. Let's celebrate. How about dinner at Anthony's?”

She hugged him briefly and stepped away. “I took chili out of the freezer yesterday. If we don't eat it tonight, it'll go bad. Excuse me. I should get dressed for work.”

She tried, and so did he. But the hurt and the guilt were always there. They were nice to each other and went through the motions, even made love. From time to time, cautiously, Frank talked about having a baby. Cathy shrugged him off. No way would she have a baby with a man she couldn't trust. They still got together with Brian and Faye, but not often—it was too awkward, for everyone except Brian. He was as cheerful as ever, even when the others were mostly silent. He still doesn't suspect, Cathy marveled.

Stevens

Frank drank heavily during those evenings—just to get through them, he told Cathy. He drank more in general now. At first, Cathy assumed it was temporary. She knew he felt guilty about betraying her, about betraying Brian—it must be hard to work with Brian and then come home to her. He was probably still stinging from Faye’s rejection, too. He’ll get over it, Cathy thought, when things get back to normal.

But nothing got back to normal, and his drinking got worse. One night, when his mother and brother came to dinner, Frank got so drunk he dropped the fifth blue glass and cried when it broke. Mrs. Morrell said ‘I told you so’ again, Will laughed, and the two brothers almost came to blows.

Frank’s sales started slipping, and he missed appointments with clients and fell asleep at his desk. When Brian wanted to hire a new agent, Frank resisted, then gave in. It depressed him and made him drink more. Everything made him drink more. Cathy tried to persuade him to get help, but he always responded by storming out. The next morning, she’d find him snoring in his car.

Brian called her. He felt horrible, he said, because Frank was like a brother, but he had to face facts. Frank’s heart wasn’t in sales anymore, and it wasn’t doing him any good to hang on. The new agent was a dynamo, racking up amazing sales. He and Brian could buy Frank’s share in the business, and maybe that’d be best for everyone. Maybe she and Frank could find another place like Taps. Brian wanted Cathy to think about it.

She did think about it, and she tried talking to Frank, but he stormed out again. She called Brian back. “Maybe *you* should talk to him,” she said.

“You bet,” Brian said. “First chance I get.”

Stevens

That was on a November Wednesday. The snow started mid-afternoon. By the time she drove home from work, roads were slick. She made lasagna and walked on her treadmill while it baked. At 7:00, she called Frank's cell phone but got no answer.

Around 10:00, he called. "Cathy?" he said

The word was slow, slurred. He was drunk, even drunker than usual. "Where are you?" she asked.

"Damn," he said. "I'm so ashamed. None of it was real. None of it. Why did I believe it? How could I be so stupid? But you never lied to me—you're the only one who never did. I was wrong about absolutely everything else, absolutely everyone else, but I was never wrong about you. You're the only one who ever loved me."

All past tense—that frightened her. "Where are you?" she asked again. "Are you close to home?"

"Not so far," he said. "Let's see if I can make it back to you."

"No. It's snowing. You shouldn't drive. Tell me where you are, and I'll come to you."

"I love you, Cathy," he said. "I'm sorry."

He shut down the connection. She called back, many times, but he never answered. She called 911, too. She gave the dispatcher Frank's license plate number, said he was drunk, and asked if the police could watch for his car. She didn't know just where they should watch, though, and the dispatcher didn't seem terribly interested. So Cathy sat coiled on the couch, smoking, until three in the morning, until the sad-faced officers came to tell her about the car skidding off the road and crashing into a tree. My darling,

Stevens

she thought. Thank God you didn't crash into another car. Thank God nobody else died because of this.

After the funeral, Faye clutched Cathy's hands. "I don't know how much he told you," she said. "I'm sorry. Things shouldn't have gone that far. But he was so *cute*."

Cathy did online research, smoked her last real cigarette, and bought electronic cigarettes instead—nowhere near as satisfying, but that wasn't the point.

She saw a lawyer, saw the bright young agent who was doing so well at the insurance agency, sold the condominium. Then she visited an old friend in Philadelphia, interviewed for a job there, secured it, and paid a security deposit on an apartment. Brian wanted to buy her share in the business—Frank's share—but she wouldn't sell.

Instead, she invited Brian and Faye to dinner, and Mrs. Morrell and Will. She made the same chicken dish she'd made on that night nine years ago, with the sauce Faye liked. She made broccoli, too, and Spud Balls. Even Mrs. Morrell wouldn't be able to say they were undercooked. Cathy was an expert at these. After her guests arrived, Cathy took out her electronic cigarette and inhaled deeply.

Mrs. Morrell scrunched up her nose and waved a hand in front of her face. "Put that filthy thing away! I do *not* want to breathe second-hand smoke!"

"It's not smoke," Cathy said. "Just water vapor. It can't hurt you. My supervisor used these to quit smoking."

"Those things are expensive," Will said. "How much do cartridges cost?"

"I use refillable cartridges," Cathy said. "I buy liquid nicotine. It comes in lots of flavors; lemon's my favorite. That's cheaper." She pointed to the liquor cabinet. "I keep

Stevens

it there—all my vices in one convenient location. Well! I'm glad you could all come tonight, so I can see you before I start my new life in Philadelphia.”

Mrs. Morrell waved her hand in front of her face again. “That’s a heartless way to talk.”

“It’s healthy,” Brian said. “We all feel terrible about Frank, but Cathy needs to move on.”

“I hope you’ll be happy, Cathy,” Faye said, her face wistful. “Maybe you’ll meet someone new.”

“Who knows?” Cathy said. “Maybe I will.”

“Heartless!” Mrs. Morrell said again.

Cathy smiled at her. You’re a bitch, Mrs. Morrell, she thought. You’re a horrible mother. And if Will had been a decent brother, maybe Frank wouldn’t have been so desperate for Brian’s affection and approval. You both damaged Frank, but he was a grownup. After a certain point, we can’t keep blaming our families for our problems. She stood up. “I’ll get drinks. I want you to try my specialty, Ginger Lemon Dreams. Brian, remember that day you helped me at Taps? Want to help again?”

In the kitchen, she pointed to the top cupboard shelf. “I’ve packed most of my glasses—only odds and ends left. Could you reach them for me?”

He took them down—two clear glasses, two pink ones, the blue one. “It’s still hard to believe,” he said. “I still miss him, every day.”

Cathy minced ginger. “That last day, the day he died, you said you’d talk to him. Did you?”

Stevens

“Never got a chance. I had a late appointment, and by the time it ended, Frank was gone.”

“Too bad. He called that night and said some odd things. I hoped you could explain them.”

Brian gave her a sharp look. “He called you? What did he say?”

“He said ‘none of it was real’—he said that twice. He said he’d been stupid to believe it. I wonder what he meant. What wasn’t real? And he said he’d been wrong about everyone but me, and I was the only one who’d never lied to him, the only one who’d loved him. Odd, isn’t it?”

Brian shrugged. “He’d been drinking. That was the liquor talking.”

Yes, she thought, he’d been drinking. You supplied the drinks, didn’t you? And you said things that would make him not want to work with you anymore, that would make him sell his share of the business. You must have, or he wouldn’t have known you and Faye had lied to him and never loved him.

So you said his affair with Faye had been a scam. You told him you’d helped me at Taps that day so he and Faye could be alone together. You admitted you’d told her to flirt with him so he’d come to Boston and give you start-up money for your business. Maybe you hadn’t thought that they’d go as far as they did, that they’d have sex, but you must have realized it. I don’t think you cared. As long as Frank brought in sales, you were willing to share your wife with him.

And after you had your start-up money, after he stopped bringing in sales, you got rid of him. You knew he was already torn apart by guilt because he’d betrayed us, and

Stevens

you pushed him over the edge by saying that you'd betrayed him, too, that you didn't care about him and Faye had never loved him. That's why he said those things to me. Maybe you didn't know he'd kill himself, but you were willing to risk it. And I bet you're relieved.

She didn't place all the blame on Brian. I always gave in to Frank too easily, she thought, even when I knew he was making bad decisions. I gave in because I loved him, but he needed me to be stronger. Most of all, I shouldn't have given in when he asked me to take him back, not if I couldn't forgive him with a whole heart. I held onto him out of weakness, not out of kindness, and I let the guilt wear him down. It would've been better for him if I'd thrown him out.

"Damn," she said. "I forgot the rum. Will you get it? You know where the liquor cabinet is."

While he was gone, she took the bottle from her pocket and poured the lemon-flavored nicotine into the blue glass. The *New York Times* article had said a tablespoon would be a lethal dosage for an adult, and she had over three tablespoons here. She wanted justice, the kind she couldn't reasonably expect from any court, but there was no need to prolong the unpleasantness. She wiped the bottle off and threw it in the trash. When Brian returned, she was pouring lemon-and-simple-syrup mixture into all the glasses.

"My secret concoction," she said, smiling. "Now I'll add rum, for everyone but Mrs. Morrell. Will you carry the glasses out? Be sure to give me the blue one. I'm feeling sentimental tonight."

Stevens

“You bet.” He picked up the glass, then paused. “Cathy, I wish you’d reconsider. It doesn’t make sense for you to hold onto your share of the agency. If you sell, you’ll really be able to make a fresh start.”

“I *am* making a fresh start.” A new job, a security deposit on a new apartment, reconnecting with an old friend, another attempt to quit smoking—anybody looking at the facts would conclude she was planning to move ahead, not on the verge of suicide. “And I’m respecting Frank’s wishes. You and Faye were contingent beneficiaries in his will and his insurance policy. Now, you’re my primary beneficiaries. I put the American Cancer Society down as contingent beneficiary. As Frank always said, you and Faye are our real family. So if I die, you two get the business. You get everything.”

Motive, she thought. You bastard. Your fingerprints are on the glass, you could’ve gotten the nicotine when you got the rum, and I’ve given you one hell of a motive. Faye probably won’t get charged as an accessory. Fine. She’s a slut, but that’s not a criminal offense. You’re the one who murdered Frank. You won’t go to prison for that, but with any luck you’ll go to prison for murdering me.

Brian looked confused. “Thanks, I guess, but that’s a morbid way to think. You’re only thirty-four. Why would you die?”

She grinned at him. “I’m a smoker,” she said.

END