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GONE GIRL

GILLIAN FLYNN



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NICK DUNNE
THE DAY OF

When I think of my wife, I always think of her head. The shape of it, to begin with. The very first time I saw her, it was the back of the head I saw, and there was something lovely about it, the angles of it. Like a shiny, hard corn kernel or a riverbed fossil. She had what the Victorians would call *a finely shaped head*. You could imagine the skull quite easily.

I'd know her head anywhere.

And what's inside it. I think of that, too: her mind. Her brain, all those coils, and her thoughts shuttling through those coils like fast, frantic centipedes. Like a child, I picture opening her skull, unspooling her brain and sifting through it, trying to catch and pin down her thoughts. *What are you thinking, Amy?* The question I've asked most often during our marriage, if not out loud, if not to the person who could answer. I suppose these questions stormcloud over every marriage: *What are you thinking? How are you feeling? Who are you? What have we done to each other? What will we do?*

My eyes flipped open at exactly six a.m. This was no avian fluttering of the lashes, no gentle blink toward consciousness. The awakening was mechanical. A spooky ventriloquist-dummy click of the lids: The world is black and then, *showtime!* 6-0-0 the clock said – in my face, first thing I saw. 6-0-0. It felt different. I rarely woke at such a rounded time. I was a man of jagged risings: 8:43, 11:51, 9:26. My life was alarmless.

At that exact moment, 6-0-0, the sun climbed over the skyline of oaks, revealing its full summer angry-God self. Its reflection flared across the river toward our house, a long,

blaring finger aimed at me through our frail bedroom curtains. Accusing: *You have been seen. You will be seen.*

I wallowed in bed, which was our New York bed in our new house, which we still called *the new house*, even though we'd been back here for two years. It's a rented house right along the Mississippi River, a house that screams Suburban Nouveau Riche, the kind of place I aspired to as a kid from my split-level, shag-carpet side of town. The kind of house that is immediately familiar: a generically grand, unchallenging, new, new, new house that my wife would – and did – detest.

'Should I remove my soul before I come inside?' Her first line upon arrival. It had been a compromise: Amy demanded we rent, not buy, in my little Missouri hometown, in her firm hope that we wouldn't be stuck here long. But the only houses for rent were clustered in this failed development: a miniature ghost town of bank-owned, recession-busted, price-reduced mansions, a neighborhood that closed before it ever opened. It was a compromise, but Amy didn't see it that way, not in the least. To Amy, it was a punishing whim on my part, a nasty, selfish twist of the knife. I would drag her, caveman-style, to a town she had aggressively avoided, and make her live in the kind of house she used to mock. I suppose it's not a compromise if only one of you considers it such, but that was what our compromises tended to look like. One of us was always angry. Amy, usually.

Do not blame me for this particular grievance, Amy. The Missouri Grievance. Blame the economy, blame bad luck, blame my parents, blame your parents, blame the Internet, blame people who use the Internet. I used to be a writer. I was a writer who wrote about TV and movies and books. Back when people read things on paper, back when anyone cared about what I thought. I'd arrived in New York in the late '90s, the last gasp of the glory days, although no one knew it then. New York was packed with writers, real writers, because there were magazines, real magazines, loads of them. This was back when the Internet was still some exotic pet kept in the corner of the publishing world – throw some kibble at it, watch it

dance on its little leash, oh quite cute, it definitely won't kill us in the night. Think about it: a time when newly graduated college kids could come to New York and *get paid to write*. We had no clue that we were embarking on careers that would vanish within a decade.

I had a job for eleven years and then I didn't, it was that fast. All around the country, magazines began shuttering, succumbing to a sudden infection brought on by the busted economy. Writers (my kind of writers: aspiring novelists, ruminative thinkers, people whose brains don't work quick enough to blog or link or tweet, basically old, stubborn blowhards) were through. We were like women's hat makers or buggy-whip manufacturers: Our time was done. Three weeks after I got cut loose, Amy lost her job, such as it was. (Now I can feel Amy looking over my shoulder, smirking at the time I've spent discussing my career, my misfortune, and dismissing her experience in one sentence. That, she would tell you, is typical. *Just like Nick*, she would say. It was a refrain of hers: *Just like Nick to* . . . and whatever followed, whatever was *just like me*, was bad.) Two jobless grown-ups, we spent weeks wandering around our Brooklyn brownstone in socks and pajamas, ignoring the future, strewing unopened mail across tables and sofas, eating ice cream at ten a.m. and taking thick afternoon naps.

Then one day the phone rang. My twin sister was on the other end. Margo had moved back home after her own New York layoff a year before – the girl is one step ahead of me in everything, even shitty luck. Margo, calling from good ole North Carthage, Missouri, from the house where we grew up, and as I listened to her voice, I saw her at age ten, with a dark cap of hair and overall shorts, sitting on our grandparents' back dock, her body slouched over like an old pillow, her skinny legs dangling in the water, watching the river flow over fish-white feet, so intently, utterly self-possessed even as a child.

Go's voice was warm and crinkly even as she gave this cold news: Our indomitable mother was dying. Our dad was nearly gone – his (nasty) mind, his (miserable) heart, both murky as

he meandered toward the great gray beyond. But it looked like our mother would beat him there. About six months, maybe a year, she had. I could tell that Go had gone to meet with the doctor by herself, taken her studious notes in her slovenly handwriting, and she was teary as she tried to decipher what she'd written. Dates and doses.

'Well, fuck, I have no idea what this says, is it a nine? Does that even make sense?' she said, and I interrupted. Here was a task, a purpose, held out on my sister's palm like a plum. I almost cried with relief.

'I'll come back, Go. We'll move back home. You shouldn't have to do this all by yourself.'

She didn't believe me. I could hear her breathing on the other end.

'I'm serious, Go. Why not? There's nothing here.'

A long exhale. 'What about Amy?'

That is what I didn't take long enough to consider. I simply assumed I would bundle up my New York wife with her New York interests, her New York pride, and remove her from her New York parents – leave the frantic, thrilling futureland of Manhattan behind – and transplant her to a little town on the river in Missouri, and all would be fine.

I did not yet understand how foolish, how optimistic, how, yes, *just like Nick* I was for thinking this. The misery it would lead to.

'Amy will be fine. Amy . . .' Here was where I should have said, 'Amy *loves* Mom.' But I couldn't tell Go that Amy loved our mother, because after all that time, Amy still barely knew our mother. Their few meetings had left them both baffled. Amy would dissect the conversations for days after – 'And what did she mean by . . . ,' – as if my mother were some ancient peasant tribeswoman arriving from the tundra with an armful of raw yak meat and some buttons for bartering, trying to get something from Amy that wasn't on offer.

Amy didn't care to know my family, didn't want to know my birthplace, and yet for some reason, I thought moving home would be a good idea.

*

My morning breath warmed the pillow, and I changed the subject in my mind. Today was not a day for second-guessing or regret, it was a day for doing. Downstairs, I could hear the return of a long-lost sound: Amy making breakfast. Banging wooden cupboards (rump-thump!), rattling containers of tin and glass (ding-ring!), shuffling and sorting a collection of metal pots and iron pans (ruzz-shuzz!). A culinary orchestra tuning up, clattering vigorously toward the finale, a cake pan drumrolling along the floor, hitting the wall with a cymballic crash. Something impressive was being created, probably a crepe, because crepes are special, and today Amy would want to cook something special.

It was our five-year anniversary.

I walked barefoot to the edge of the steps and stood listening, working my toes into the plush wall-to-wall carpet Amy detested on principle, as I tried to decide whether I was ready to join my wife. Amy was in the kitchen, oblivious to my hesitation. She was humming something melancholy and familiar. I strained to make it out – a folk song? a lullabye? – and then realized it was the theme to *M.A.S.H.* Suicide is painless. I went downstairs.

I hovered in the doorway, watching my wife. Her yellow-butter hair was pulled up, the hank of ponytail swinging cheerful as a jumprope, and she was sucking distractedly on a burnt fingertip, humming around it. She hummed to herself because she was an unrivaled botcher of lyrics. When we were first dating, a Genesis song came on the radio: 'She seems to have an invisible touch, yeah.' And Amy crooned instead, 'She takes my hat and puts it on the top shelf.' When I asked her why she'd ever think her lyrics were remotely, possibly, vaguely right, she told me she always thought the woman in the song truly loved the man because she put his hat on the *top* shelf. I knew I liked her then, really liked her, this girl with an explanation for everything.

There's something disturbing about recalling a warm memory and feeling utterly cold.

Amy peered at the crepe sizzling in the pan and licked something off her wrist. She looked triumphant, wifely. If I took her in my arms, she would smell like berries and powdered sugar.

When she spied me lurking there in grubby boxers, my hair in full Heat Miser spike, she leaned against the kitchen counter and said, 'Well, hello, handsome.'

Bile and dread inched up my throat. I thought to myself: *Okay, go.*

I was very late getting to work. My sister and I had done a foolish thing when we both moved back home. We had done what we always talked about doing. We opened a bar. We borrowed money from Amy to do this, eighty thousand dollars, which was once nothing to Amy but by then was almost everything. I swore I would pay her back, with interest. I would not be a man who borrowed from his wife – I could feel my dad twisting his lips at the very idea. *Well, there are all kinds of men*, his most damning phrase, the second half left unsaid, *and you are the wrong kind.*

But truly, it was a practical decision, a smart business move. Amy and I both needed new careers; this would be mine. She would pick one someday, or not, but in the meantime, here was an income, made possible by the last of Amy's trust fund. Like the McMansion I rented, the bar featured symbolically in my childhood memories – a place where only grown-ups go, and do whatever grown-ups do. Maybe that's why I was so insistent on buying it after being stripped of my livelihood. It's a reminder that I am, after all, an adult, a grown man, a useful human being, even though I lost the career that made me all these things. I won't make that mistake again: The once plentiful herds of magazine writers would continue to be culled – by the Internet, by the recession, by the American public, who would rather watch TV or play video games or electronically inform friends that, like, *rain sucks!* But there's no app for a bourbon buzz on a warm day in a cool, dark bar. The world will always want a drink.

Our bar is a corner bar with a haphazard, patchwork aesthetic. Its best feature is a massive Victorian backbar, dragon heads and angel faces emerging from the oak – an extravagant work of wood in these shitty plastic days. The remainder of the bar is, in fact, shitty, a showcase of the shabbiest design offerings of every decade: an Eisenhower-era linoleum floor, the edges turned up like burnt toast; dubious wood-paneled walls straight from a '70s home-porn video; halogen floor lamps, an accidental tribute to my 1990s dorm room. The ultimate effect is strangely homey – it looks less like a bar than someone's benignly neglected fixer-upper. And jovial: We share a parking lot with the local bowling alley, and when our door swings wide, the clatter of strikes applauds the customer's entrance.

We named the bar The Bar. 'People will think we're ironic instead of creatively bankrupt,' my sister reasoned.

Yes, we thought we were being clever New Yorkers – that the name was a joke no one else would really get, not get like we did. Not *meta*-get. We pictured the locals scrunching their noses: Why'd you name it *The Bar*? But our first customer, a gray-haired woman in bifocals and a pink jogging suit, said, 'I like the name. Like in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Audrey Hepburn's cat was named Cat.'

We felt much less superior after that, which was a good thing.

I pulled into the parking lot. I waited until a strike erupted from the bowling alley – *thank you, thank you, friends* – then stepped out of the car. I admired the surroundings, still not bored with the broken-in view: the squatty blond-brick post office across the street (now closed on Saturdays), the unassuming beige office building just down the way (now closed, period). The town wasn't prosperous, not anymore, not by a long shot. Hell, it wasn't even original, being one of two Carthage, Missouris – ours is technically *North* Carthage, which makes it sound like a twin city, although it's hundreds of miles from the other and the lesser of the two: a quaint little 1950s town that bloated itself into a basic midsize suburb

and dubbed it progress. Still, it was where my mom grew up and where she raised me and Go, so it had some history. Mine, at least.

As I walked toward the bar across the concrete-and-weed parking lot, I looked straight down the road and saw the river. That's what I've always loved about our town: We aren't built on some safe bluff overlooking the Mississippi – we are *on* the Mississippi. I could walk down the road and step right into the sucker, an easy three-foot drop, and be on my way to Tennessee. Every building downtown bears hand-drawn lines from where the river hit during the Flood of '61, '75, '84, '93, '07, '08, '11. And so on.

The river wasn't swollen now, but it was running urgently, in strong ropy currents. Moving apace with the river was a long single-file line of men, eyes aimed at their feet, shoulders tense, walking steadfastly nowhere. As I watched them, one suddenly looked up at me, his face in shadow, an oval blackness. I turned away.

I felt an immediate, intense need to get inside. By the time I'd gone twenty feet, my neck bubbled with sweat. The sun was still an angry eye in the sky. *You have been seen.*

My gut twisted, and I moved quicker. I needed a drink.

AMY ELLIOTT
JANUARY 8, 2005

– Diary entry –

Tra and la! I am smiling a big adopted-orphan smile as I write this. I am embarrassed at how happy I am, like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone with my hair in a ponytail, the bubble above my head saying: *I met a* boy!

But I did. This is a technical, empirical truth. I met a boy, a great, gorgeous dude, a funny, cool-ass guy. Let me set the scene, because it deserves setting for posterity (no, please, I'm not that far gone, posterity! feh). But still. It's not New Year's, but still very much the new year. It's winter: early dark, freezing cold.

Carmen, a newish friend – semi-friend, barely friend, the kind of friend you can't cancel on – has talked me into going out to Brooklyn, to one of her writers' parties. Now, I like a writer party, I like writers, I am the child of writers, I am a writer. I still love scribbling that word – WRITER – any time a form, questionnaire, document asks for my occupation. Fine, I write personality quizzes, I don't write about the Great Issues of the Day, but I think it's fair to say I am a writer. I'm using this journal to get better: to hone my skills, to collect details and observations. To show don't tell and all that other writery crap. (*Adopted-orphan smile*, I mean, that's not bad, come on.) But really, I do think my quizzes alone qualify me on at least an honorary basis. Right?

At a party you find yourself surrounded by genuine talented writers, employed at high-profile, respected newspapers and magazines.

You merely write quizzes for women's rags. When someone asks what you do for a living, you:

a) Get embarrassed and say, 'I'm just a quiz writer, it's silly stuff!'
b) Go on the offense: 'I'm a writer now, but I'm considering something more challenging and worthwhile – why, what do you do?'
c) Take pride in your accomplishments: 'I write personality quizzes using the knowledge gleaned from my master's degree in psychology – oh, and fun fact: I am the inspiration for a beloved children's-book series, I'm sure you know it, *Amazing Amy?* Yeah, so suck it, snobdouche!

Answer: C, totally C

Anyway, the party is being thrown by one of Carmen's good friends who writes about movies for a movie magazine, and is very funny, according to Carmen. I worry for a second that she wants to set us up: I am not interested in being set up. I need to be ambushed, caught unawares, like some sort of feral love-jackal. I'm too self-conscious otherwise. I feel myself trying to be charming, and then I realize I'm obviously trying to be charming, and then I try to be even more charming to make up for the fake charm, and then I've basically turned into Liza Minnelli: I'm dancing in tights and sequins, begging you to love me. There's a bowler and jazz hands and lots of teeth.

But no, I realize, as Carmen gushes on about her friend: *She* likes him. Good.

We climb three flights of warped stairs and walk into a whoosh of body heat and writerness: many black-framed glasses and mops of hair; faux western shirts and heathery turtlenecks; black wool pea-coats flopped all across the couch, puddling to the floor; a German poster for The Getaway (*Ihre Chance war gleich Null!*) covering one paint-cracked wall. Franz Ferdinand on the stereo: 'Take Me Out.'

A clump of guys hovers near a card table where all the alcohol is set up, tipping more booze into their cups after every few sips, all too aware of how little is left to go around. I nudge in, aiming my plastic cup in the center like a busker, get a clatter of ice cubes and a splash of vodka from a sweet-faced guy wearing a Space Invaders T-shirt.

A lethal-looking bottle of green-apple liqueur, the host's ironic purchase, will soon be our fate unless someone makes a booze run, and that seems unlikely, as everyone clearly believes they made the run last time. It is a January party, definitely, everyone still glutted and sugar-pissed from the holidays, lazy and irritated simultaneously. A party where people drink too much and pick cleverly worded fights, blowing cigarette smoke out an open window even after the host asks them to go outside. We've already talked to one another at a thousand holiday parties, we have nothing left to say, we are collectively bored, but we don't want to go back into the January cold; our bones still ache from the subway steps.

I have lost Carmen to her host-beau – they are having an intense discussion in a corner of the kitchen, the two of them hunching their shoulders, their faces toward each other, the shape of a heart. Good. I think about eating to give myself something to do besides standing in the center of the room, smiling like the new kid in the lunchroom. But almost everything is gone. Some potato-chip shards sit in the bottom of a giant Tupperware bowl. A supermarket deli tray full of hoary carrots and gnarled celery and a semeny dip sits untouched on a coffee table, cigarettes littered throughout like bonus vegetable sticks. I am doing my thing, my impulse thing: What if I leap from the theater balcony right now? What if I tongue the homeless man across from me on the subway? What if I sit down on the floor of this party by myself and eat everything on that deli tray, including the cigarettes?

'Please don't eat anything in that area,' he says. It is *him* (bum bum BUMMM!), but I don't yet know it's *him* (bum-bum-bummm). I know it's a guy who will talk to me, he wears his cockiness like an ironic T-shirt, but it fits him better. He

is the kind of guy who carries himself like he gets laid a lot, a guy who likes women, a guy who would actually fuck me properly. I would like to be fucked properly! My dating life seems to rotate around three types of men: preppy Ivy Leaguers who believe they're characters in a Fitzgerald novel; slick Wall Streeters with money signs in their eyes, their ears, their mouths; and sensitive smart-boys who are so self-aware that everything feels like a joke. The Fitzgerald fellows tend to be ineffectively porny in bed, a lot of noise and acrobatics to very little end. The finance guys turn rageful and flaccid. The smart-boys fuck like they're composing a piece of math rock: This hand strums around here, and then this finger offers a nice bass rhythm . . . I sound quite slutty, don't I? Pause while I count how many . . . eleven. Not bad. I've always thought twelve was a solid, reasonable number to end at.

'Seriously,' Number 12 continues. (Ha!) 'Back away from the tray. James has up to three other food items in his refrigerator. I could make you an olive with mustard. Just one olive, though.'

Just one olive, though. It is a line that is only a little funny, but it already has the feel of an inside joke, one that will get funnier with nostalgic repetition. I think: *A year from now, we will be walking along the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset and one of us will whisper, 'Just one olive, though,' and we'll start to laugh*. (Then I catch myself. Awful. If he knew I was doing *a year from now* already, he'd *run* and I'd be obliged to cheer him on.)

Mainly, I will admit, I smile because he's gorgeous. Distractingly gorgeous, the kind of looks that make your eyes pinwheel, that make you want to just address the elephant – 'You know you're gorgeous, right?' – and move on with the conversation. I bet dudes hate him: He looks like the rich-boy villain in an '80s teen movie – the one who bullies the sensitive misfit, the one who will end up with a pie in the puss, the whipped cream wilting his upturned collar as everyone in the cafeteria cheers.

He doesn't act that way, though. His name is Nick. I love

it. It makes him seem nice, and regular, which he is. When he tells me his name, I say, 'Now, that's a real name.' He brightens and reels off some line: 'Nick's the kind of guy you can drink a beer with, the kind of guy who doesn't mind if you puke in his car. Nick!'

He makes a series of awful puns. I catch three fourths of his movie references. Two thirds, maybe. (Note to self: Rent *The Sure Thing*.) He refills my drink without me having to ask, somehow ferreting out one last cup of the good stuff. He has claimed me, placed a flag in me: *I was here first, she's mine, mine*. It feels nice, after my recent series of nervous, respectful post-feminist men, to be a territory. He has a great smile, a cat's smile. He should cough out yellow Tweety Bird feathers, the way he smiles at me. He doesn't ask what I do for a living, which is fine, which is a change. (I'm a writer, did I mention?) He talks to me in his river-wavy Missouri accent; he was born and raised outside of Hannibal, the boyhood home of Mark Twain, the inspiration for *Tom Sawyer*. He tells me he worked on a steamboat when he was a teenager, dinner and jazz for the tourists. And when I laugh (bratty, bratty New York girl who has never ventured to those big unwieldy middle states, those States Where Many Other People Live), he informs me that *Missoura* is a magical place, the most beautiful in the world, no state more glorious. His eyes are mischievous, his lashes are long. I can see what he looked like as a boy.

We share a taxi home, the streetlights making dizzy shadows and the car speeding as if we're being chased. It is one a.m. when we hit one of New York's unexplained deadlocks twelve blocks from my apartment, so we slide out of the taxi into the cold, into the great What Next? and Nick starts walking me home, his hand on the small of my back, our faces stunned by the chill. As we turn the corner, the local bakery is getting its powdered sugar delivered, funneled into the cellar by the barrelful as if it were cement, and we can see nothing but the shadows of the deliverymen in the white, sweet cloud. The street is billowing, and Nick pulls me close and smiles that smile again, and he takes a single lock of my hair between two

fingers and runs them all the way to the end, tugging twice, like he's ringing a bell. His eyelashes are trimmed with powder, and before he leans in, he brushes the sugar from my lips so he can taste me.