

A MATTER OF TRUST

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Nothing says love like jelly. As a kid, my grandma showed she loved me by making peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches every time I visited. Smucker's strawberry jelly, of course. After middle school JV football games, while my dad complained about my "fumble fingers," my mom always lifted my spirits with blackberry jelly on toast. In eleventh grade, my girlfriend cheered me up with cherry Jell-O after big tests—my academic skills matched my athletic ones. Nowadays I'm married, and my wife works jelly into our meals whenever she can. Like the one she just set on the table. Sweet-and-sour meatballs drenched in chili-and-grape-jelly sauce. Yum. If only she hadn't added quinoa and green beans to the meal.

"Enjoying the food?" she asked as I swallowed my fourth meatball.

"Delish." I'd known it would be. Before Jessica left for work this morning, she'd turned on the slow cooker. "Everybody in my Zoom meeting was drooling when I told 'em how good the house smelled." My colleagues and I all worked from home, building and maintaining websites, but none of them had as loving a partner as I did.

“I’m glad.” She nodded the way she always did before broaching a difficult subject, her copper hair cascading over her forehead, shading her dark-brown eyes. She left it alone a moment, like a shield, before tucking it back behind her ears.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Bad day at work?” Jessica earned big bucks as a law firm’s HR coordinator.

“Work’s good. I’m…” She sighed. “I’m worried about you, Ethan.”

My fork clattered against the plate. Jessica flinched as the quinoa grains scattered.

Not this again.

“I’m fine,” I insisted.

“That’s not what Dr. Betke said.”

I pushed away from the table and paced across the hickory floor, fists clenched, restraining myself from punching the wall. I didn’t want to talk about this. Didn’t want to think about it. Damn Dr. Betke and that stupid physical Jessica forced me to get last week. *So what if my blood sugar’s high? I like sugar!*

Grabbing the top of my chair, I tried to squeeze away my anger. “We talked about this. I don’t want to live my life avoiding sweets. I want to enjoy life.”

“Even if it means leaving me alone years sooner than necessary?” Jessica stood as her voice broke. “I love you. I want to live a long life *with* you. I’m not asking you to make big changes. Just add a little exercise to your daily routine. Why don’t you take up biking? Your bike is still in the garage. Please, Ethan. We agreed not to have kids so we’d have money to travel the world when we got older. I don’t want to take those trips alone.”

An ocean’s worth of tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. Damn, the woman fought dirty.

“I hate that you want to change me. Like I’m not good enough for you as I am.”

Unable to stand the anguish on her face, I stared down at the floor, past my stomach, which obscured the view of my feet. When Jessica and I met in our senior year of college, I never would have said anything like that to her—or anyone. I hadn’t cared about being in touch with my feelings and certainly never voiced them. But falling in love with Jessica had changed me. She required honesty, and I’d learned to give it to her. Mostly.

“This has nothing to do with your appearance,” she said.

She stepped closer and lifted my chin. Anger flashed through me. Men lifted women’s chins all the time in movies. Heck, I’d done it myself with shorter girls. Being on the other side was humiliating. Yet when I forced myself to look up into her eyes, still watery with unshed tears, my resentment disappeared as fast as shutting off a light.

“Don’t you know how sexy I think you are?” she said. “It’s why I want you to stick around for as long as possible. It’s certainly not because of your sparkling personality.”

We both laughed. I remembered the first time I heard her laugh. We were on our first date—at a Mexican restaurant that became one of our favorites—and I told a lame joke. A cute giggle had escaped her perfect pink lips, and I was a goner.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess I can fit a little exercise into my daily routine.”

She kissed me, leaning her body into mine so I felt every warm, toned curve. Jessica went to the gym before work each day, while I slept in. I sure did appreciate her just the way she was.

Sliding her hand into mine, she nodded toward the stairs. “How ’bout we start exercising now?”

I laughed again, and we headed to the bedroom. Some things were even better than jelly.

#

The next morning as Jessica backed her green Subaru down our concrete driveway, I padded to a corner of the garage. My yellow bicycle stood where I left it several years ago.

I remembered that frosty late-autumn day. Jessica and I had gone riding together. She loved making the leaves crunch and crackle when she rode over them. I focused on the crunchy chocolate-covered pretzels waiting at home. When the temperature plunged that night, I was delighted. Winter had arrived in earnest, making it too cold to bike. When spring came, I begged off whenever Jess wanted to ride. I was bogged down with work, I always said, but in actuality I was often playing online video games. So she went by herself. Soon she bought a slim road bike, which helped her go faster, and she started cycling with others on weekends, even participating in races. That sleek red bike stood closer to the garage door now. A bit worn but shiny. She cared for it like she cared for me.

I returned my attention to my own bike. It should be dusty, its tires low. But it looked bright and ready to ride. Jess had been busy this morning.

Now it was my turn. *You can do this.* It's not like I was incredibly out of shape. Just sported a little extra padding around the middle. Cycling shouldn't be any problem.

I straddled the bike, secured my helmet, and off I went, down the driveway and onto the street. The trees had leafed out a few days before, and the lawns and gutters were carpeted with recently shed pink and purple petals. A refreshing breeze brushed my face as I rode down the winding neighborhood streets.

This isn't bad at all.

That's what I thought for the first few minutes—until my thighs tired. Then they began to ache. Soon my lungs joined the party. How had I never noticed all these hills while driving through the neighborhood in my Acura? At one point, when I stopped to catch my breath, I

glanced behind me. I could have sworn I'd scaled Mount Everest, but I'd actually pedaled up a gentle slope. Ten minutes later, I was home, mainlining Advil.

#

I awoke the next morning feeling like I'd gone two rounds with a sumo wrestler. I could swear I heard my calves curse me out. *I shouldn't be this out of shape at thirty-four*. If Jessica hadn't been so insistent at dinner that I keep trying, as if biking would be the solution to all my problems, I might have chucked the whole idea. Frankly, I'd still been tempted to. Then she'd surprised me with a dessert of peanut butter-and-jelly bars from our favorite bakery. They'd made me smile—I loved how she loved me—until she added, “Sugar-free, because I don't want to sabotage you.”

Sugar-free. Two nights ago she claimed I didn't need to make big changes. Only add a little exercise each day. That was *all* she'd wanted. But she'd switched to sugar-free jelly pretty damn quick. As if sugar-free tasted the same.

Still, I didn't want to disappoint her. So, after a quick cup of coffee this morning—and more Advil—I trudged out to the garage, hopped on my bike, and pedaled to the street. But today I rode the other way, toward the Lavender Trail, a half mile from my house. It would lead me through Twitchell Park into town. There'd be more pedestrians, cars, and cyclists to avoid, but I'd take those hassles over hills any day.

Like yesterday, things started well. The park was filled with pine and fir trees, and their sweet, refreshing scent invigorated me. My confidence began to wane, however, as I approached a small hill. The park had only a few, but I was still feeling the effects of yesterday's workout, so I feared climbing the darn hill would feel like scaling the highest peak in the Rockies.

Don't get inside your head. My dad used to shout that when I was up at bat during Little League. *Don't overthink it. Just slam it outta the park.* It had been easy for him to yell those words from the stands, with his beer belly sagging over his belt. He followed up after each game, railing in the car about the fly ball I dropped or how I struck out on an “easy pitch.” *You need to try harder. Focus. You're too soft.*

Growling, I shook off the memory and focused on my pedaling. Other cyclists zipped past. *Freaking show-offs.* I kept going, huffing and puffing. Finally, I reached the top. My muscles were screaming, but the rest of the ride would be on fairly level ground, and I knew my endorphins would kick in any moment now, so I pushed through the pain.

Ahead lay the pedestrian bridge that connected the park to downtown. Soon my wheels clack-clack-clacked over the bridge's wooden planks, the sound reminiscent of a roller-coaster car making its ascent. If only I were on a fun ride like that. When were those freaking endorphins gonna kick in?

I rode down a couple of blocks, past shops with awnings Jessica would call “cute.” A light-blue one on the other side of the street caught my eye: Dory's Donuts. Dr. Betke might not approve, but screw him. I needed the break, and Dory's sweet jellies were calling my name.

#

The next day, I took a break. I didn't tell Jessica; no need for her to know how out of shape I was. But the following day I returned to the Lavender Trail—and to Dory's. It was like a siren's call: *One little jelly donut won't hurt. You're entitled. You rode all the way here.* I kept up this every-other-day routine for two weeks. Once the hill became easier to handle, I switched to biking daily. I'd take a quick ten-minute spin into downtown, then spend a relaxing hour at

Dory's, drinking coffee (with sugar), reading the paper, and eating two jelly donuts—sometimes three. Why not? It was breakfast, after all.

I loved my new routine.

Naturally, Jessica kept asking how things were going. I gave glowing reports:

“I'm building up my stamina.”

“The cycling's getting easier.”

“No, hon, I'm not ready to ride with you on the weekends. You like to bike for several hours, and I'm nowhere near that level. Besides, I need the weekends off for my body to recuperate.”

Maybe I should have felt bad about the lies—she had stressed early in our relationship the importance of honesty and trust—but I didn't. It's not like this was a big deal, and Jessica had backed me into a corner. I was pretty sure she hoped I'd eventually participate in amateur races with her, which I definitely didn't want to do. Cycling for hours was her thing, not mine. The more I thought about how she wanted me to change who I was deep down, the more I needed my daily trip to Dory's for jelly donuts. Donuts don't judge.

I simply had to wear her down. With enough time, she'd tire of asking me to ride with her. Maybe she'd give up on the exercise topic entirely and accept me for who I was—the slothful man she married. Until then, I'd keep fibbing to keep the peace.

#

That worked for a while, until the night I caught Jessica staring at me as we undressed before bed. My shirt was off, and I'd been emptying my pockets, about to set my phone on my nightstand.

“Can't get enough of me, huh?” I said with a leer.

“Your pants should be looser by now.” She said it nicely, quizzically, but it struck a nerve.

“What?”

“They’re still pretty snug in the waist. You are riding every day, right?”

Fortunately, I didn’t have to lie. *I had been* biking every day. Ten minutes to town. Ten minutes back—after I got my sugar rush.

“Of course I am. What, you think I’m lying to you?” Instead of putting down my phone, I found I was gripping it more tightly.

She held up her hands, palms forward. “I was only asking. Carol told me you leave every morning and you’re gone for nearly an hour and a half.” She shrugged. “I thought there’d be a difference by now. That you’d seem...fitter.”

Carol. The neighborhood busybody. Always out gardening. I didn’t realize the woman was also keeping track of me.

“Maybe you’d benefit from switching things up,” Jessica suggested. “Only bike two or three times a week until you’ve revved up your metabolism. You could work with a trainer at the gym on the other weekdays. There’s a really good one, Philippe, who has excellent technique. He told me he could get you into shape.”

I squeezed the phone even harder, my face growing hot. “A trainer? You talked with a trainer about me?”

“Don’t overreact—”

“You said you like me the way I am. You said I don’t need to make big changes. Just add a little exercise to get my sugar under control. Now, suddenly, that’s not enough for you.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like—”

“I’m not working with any damn trainer!”

I flung my phone at the bed. Jessica jumped back, cowering, as the phone bounced inches from where she’d stood.

We stared at each other across the silent room, our king-size bed like an ocean between us.

“I just need more time,” I said finally. “You’ll see the difference.”

I slunk downstairs to my office and sank into my swivel chair, my guilt eating at me. How could I have frightened her like that? Sure, I got into my share of fights as a kid. Some guy disrespects you, you gotta stand up for yourself. Dad had always said that. But I would never hit a woman, certainly not Jessica. Not only because I loved her but because her dad had slapped her mom around while Jess was growing up. It had messed her up. It killed me that I’d scared her.

I snatched a package of chocolate-dipped shortbread cookies from my desk drawer. They weren’t as good as jelly, but they’d do. I leaned back with the half-full box on my bare chest and shoved one cookie in my mouth. Then another. And another...

“You could work with a trainer. There’s a really good one.” Jessica’s voice whispered in my memory, and my guilt started to subside. She’d talked about me with some other guy. And not any other guy. A trainer—which meant he was ripped. No doubt Jessica had noticed. What had she said? He had “excellent technique.” Yeah, I bet he did. Jess said she went to the gym every morning, but she easily could’ve been spending that time exercising horizontally with good old Philippe. No doubt he loved nailing my wife. Who cared if she was married? I know how guys think—and some women too.

Damn it! I crushed the cookie I was holding. Some of the gritty crumbs fell onto my pasty belly, round as a camel's hump. Growling, I tossed back the rest of the crumbs, licked the remnants off my lips, then reached into the box for another cookie.

But they were all gone.

#

I woke up grouchy the next morning. Soon after running out of cookies, I'd slid into bed and tossed and turned for hours, while Jessica snored softly beside me. When I'd finally been able to sleep, I'd dreamed of her smiling seductively at me while saying, "Philippe, Philippe, Philippe." In the light of day, I doubted she'd cheat, but I couldn't discount the possibility.

Man, I yearned for a donut. The biggest donut ever made. I dressed and wandered downstairs to grab my house keys from the kitchen counter.

"Morning," Jessica said.

I started. She was sitting at the left side of our oak table, her copper hair in a ponytail, her lips pulled into a thin line.

"Are you sick?" I asked. "Why are you home?" She should have left for the gym—then her office—hours ago.

"I didn't like how we left things last night." She paused. "We need therapy."

Unbelievable. Now I was fat and crazy.

"Don't say no—" Jessica said.

"I didn't say anything."

"I can read you. Look, we're not communicating well. I know talking with a counselor might not be your thing. But it really helped me back in college when I was dealing with...my childhood stuff. I think it could help us get past this. You're so angry and defensive."

“I’m not.”

She rolled her eyes, and I squeezed my hands into fists.

“You just want some shrink to say it’s okay you’ve changed the rules,” I said.

“What?”

“You knew I wasn’t an athlete when we got married. It was good enough for you then but not now.”

Jessica stood, hands on her hips, like an exasperated schoolmarm. “I don’t need an athlete. But I do need a husband who’s not going to keel over from a heart attack at age fifty.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“And you’re being dismissive. This is why we need a counselor. Someone who can help us get past our issues.”

“I. Don’t. Need. Therapy.”

She blew out a long breath. “Fine. You don’t need therapy. You don’t want to work with a trainer. But we’re still in the same position we were before. You need to get your health under control. So *I’ll* help you. I’ll ride with you now, see if I can make suggestions to up your game.”

That was when I realized she was wearing black bike shorts and a royal-blue biking jersey, not her usual gym clothes. Had this been her plan all along?

“I don’t need your help.”

“Whatever you’re doing isn’t working. I’m sure I can—”

“I don’t want you to come riding with me.”

She grimaced. “Why not?”

Because then you’d see my stamina isn’t anywhere near where it should be if I rode for ninety minutes each weekday.

“I just don’t.”

She stared at me for a long time. “Are you hiding something?”

I narrowed my eyes. “No.”

“Great. Then let’s go biking together.”

She walked over and touched my hand, her face softening. That was the face I fell in love with.

“Please,” she said. “It’ll be fun.”

“What about work?”

“I’ll go in late.”

“Fine.” I grabbed my house keys and headed toward the garage, trying to figure out how I was gonna get out of this mess.

“You’re wearing that? Jeans and a polo shirt?”

I stopped short. Jessica had bought me several pairs of tight, stretchy bike shorts with neon shirts, like other cyclists wear. I’d worn them twice, and it was two times too many. I hated how conspicuous they made me feel, as if everyone could see I was pretending to be someone I’m not. It was surprising she hadn’t noticed I hadn’t tossed them into the laundry basket since that first week. With my back to her, I said, “My regular gear’s dirty, so I’m wearing this.”

“I see,” she said quietly. “Okay. Let’s go.”

#

We’d been riding in the park for nearly a half hour, my stomach growling while Jessica shouted encouragements and suggestions. My legs were tired. I was winded. Part of me wanted to tell her the truth, that I hadn’t been out riding for over an hour every day. But I wasn’t gonna give her the ammunition to lord my lies over me. She already thought she was superior.

Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to keep this charade up much longer. *Come on, Ethan. You're a creative guy. You build websites for a living, for God sake. Figure something out.*

Inspiration struck.

I cursed loudly, tipping my bike and falling onto the grass beside the path. Then I grabbed my calf, massaging it through the denim while wincing, trying to get rid of my "cramp."

"Stretch your leg out." Jessica kneeled beside me. "Point your toes up. It'll help."

I did as she instructed, cursing some more, having no idea how well or fast it should work. I'd had leg cramps before, but I'd never known about this toe fix.

"Still spasming?" She reached into her fanny pack. "Open up." She patted my cheek twice.

"What?" I said. Or, rather, I said "Wha—". When I was halfway through the word, she shoved something chalky into my mouth.

I started to spit it out, when she said, "It's Tums. Chew it for as long as you can before swallowing. That'll get the calcium into your system the fastest. It'll work."

Did she know I was faking? Was this payback?

"Good," she said. "You must be feeling better."

I cast confused eyes her way.

"You stopped rubbing your calf."

"Oh, yeah. Right." I swallowed the revolting Tums, pulled off my helmet, and lay back on the cool grass, squinting at the sun peeking through the branches of a fir tree overhead.

"Tums works really fast. You should be able to ride now. It's not throbbing anymore, is it?"

"No, but...I mean, yeah. It's still throbbing. I can't ride."

“Let’s give it another minute. Shouldn’t take much longer.”

I sat up. “You should head home, sweetheart. I could be a while. I’ll probably walk back with the bike once I feel better.”

“You want me to leave you here?”

“You need to go to work. I’ll be all right.”

“What about *your* work?”

“As long as I get it done, it doesn’t matter when I do it. I have no meetings today.”

Jessica shook her head. “I’m not leaving you here alone—”

“Oh my God! Stop babying me. Just go.”

She pursed her lips as if holding back words begging to come out. “Fine,” she finally said, her tone clipped. “Have a good day.” In a flash she hopped on her bike and rode off toward home.

I flopped back on the grass, exhausted. *What kind of lame ass are you? Can’t even keep up with your own wife.* I pounded my head against the ground until my dad’s voice faded away. But I didn’t need to hear him to know he was right. With a growing headache, I mounted my bike and pedaled over the bridge into town. I needed a jelly donut in the worst way.

When I reached the counter, before I even asked for my usual, the clerk said, “Sorry, dude. We sold the last jelly ten minutes ago.”

I couldn’t catch a break.

#

Things were strained between us that night. Jessica was frosty. I was stressed. I’d made myself a PB&J sandwich for lunch and an all-jelly sandwich for an afternoon snack, but they

hadn't satisfied me. First time that had ever happened. Maybe I'd gotten used to the juicy, fruity Dory's jellies dusted with powdered sugar. I was craving one with a vengeance.

Since I couldn't get my fix till morning, I figured a distraction would help. So, when I got in bed—Jess was already there, reading—I slid my hand along her thigh. She brushed it away.

“I'm tired,” she said.

Tired? My wife had the sex drive of a teenage boy. She was never tired. And we always used sex as a way to make up.

She set her book on her nightstand, turned off her lamp, and rolled over with her back to me. Didn't even say goodnight. That said it all.

Had she seen me struggle on the bike and lost all interest? Or had she figured out I'd been lying about how much I ride? Or both? Whatever the answer, I'd never be able to compete with Philippe and his “good technique.”

I tossed off the covers and stormed to the kitchen. To my horror, I realized we had only two jars of Smucker's jelly left, one strawberry, one grape. Jessica must have stopped buying them, despite that she'd said I didn't need to cut jelly out. Who was the liar now? I'd have to get a secret stash.

In moments, I was standing over the sink, slurping down the strawberry jelly straight from the jar, spoonful after spoonful.

But no matter how much I ate, I couldn't get full.

#

Eating a jarful of jelly right before bed isn't good for digestion. Between my stomach and the rain and thunder that had been pounding our roof for hours like a giant playing bongos, I'd

been up half the night. I woke tired and irritable—and later than usual. I tossed on clothes, grabbed a hooded jacket, and hurried to the garage. I couldn't miss out on my jelly donuts again.

For a moment, I debated driving to Dory's. I hated biking in the rain. But given it was a quarter to ten, I had no choice. Finding a parking spot anywhere near the donut shop on a day like this could take far longer than biking over. I couldn't risk them selling out of jellies again while I circled the block repeatedly.

The ride over wasn't bad, despite the downpour, because I didn't have to avoid anyone on the trail. I saw only two other cyclists—and a really hardy runner—the entire way. I'd been mostly looking down, trying to keep my eyes dry while watching for puddles, so I didn't notice the commotion outside Dory's until I was practically there. Two patrol cars were double-parked. I smirked, thinking about the old joke about cops and donuts, until I noticed an officer standing under the awning, roping off the door with crime-scene tape.

I screeched to a stop beside one of the cruisers, my toes skimming the pavement.

“What happened?” I called.

The officer turned to me. He sported a red mustache beneath his bulbous nose.

“Robbery.”

“Someone robbed Dory's Donuts?”

“Busy place like this gets more cash than you'd think.” He looked me up and down. “You anywhere around here earlier this morning, sir?”

“No. Just got here.” As bad as I felt for them, I had to ask, “Will they be opening any time soon?”

“We have to dust for prints. Interview the employees and customers who were inside. Gonna take a while.”

But I need jelly donuts! None yesterday, and now none today.

I peered up and down the block, past the boutiques and bookstore, past the shops selling antiques and art. There were two restaurants and even a chocolatier, but they didn't sell jelly donuts. I could buy some at the supermarket, but they wouldn't be the same. *Damn it!* I needed my fix.

I didn't realize I'd been pounding on my helmet until the cop said, "Sir, are you okay? You seem upset."

Heat rushed my face as I calmly grabbed my handlebars and nodded. "Sure. Just trying to wipe the rain off."

He stared at me some more. "Yeah."

I slid off my bike, walked it over to the shop window, and peered inside. The girl who usually waited on me was leaning her elbow on the counter, cupping her forehead. Behind her, trays of donuts were waiting to be sold. The strawberry frosted. The double chocolates. And the jellies, of course. They were calling to me.

Pulling out my phone, I searched for the closest Dory's, then groaned. The nearest one was in New Castleton, a half-hour drive away. That wouldn't work. I had a Zoom team meeting later this morning.

But I needed a Dory's donut! Maybe I could miss the meeting. Say I hadn't been feeling well. I'd become good at lying recently, so I should be able to sell it.

I hopped on my bike and sped toward home. I hadn't gone a block when an SUV zoomed through a huge puddle as it drove past, throwing up a rooster-tail of muddy water that drenched me. "Great!" I snarled.

My wife's having an affair. I'm soaked to the skin, my gray shirt sticking to me like glue. And I missed my jelly donuts for the second morning in a row. Why does everything bad always happen to me?

I rode onto the pedestrian bridge. Beneath it, the stream churned and bubbled as it rushed by. The bridge was deserted except for a guy biking my way. He had plenty of room to avoid me, but he hogged the center, as if playing chicken. It was one insult too many. *You can't let other people push you around.* My dad had told me that more than once growing up, and he'd been spot-on. So as the guy rode past, I clenched my fist and punched his helmet. In my peripheral vision I saw him flying off his bike as it fell.

My knuckles stung, but it had been worth it. Then the clack-clack of tires behind me on the bridge caught my attention. Had someone seen what I'd done? I worried for a second before shaking it off. No one knew who I was, and the road hog had it coming.

As soon as I got home, I parked my bike in the garage and leapt into the car. Screw my meeting. I needed comfort. I drove to New Castleton.

#

It was still raining nearly three hours later as I pulled into the garage. I was surprised to find Jessica's Subaru in the next bay. My Acura was dripping water onto the cement floor, the *plop plop plop* reminding me of melting icicles on a warm winter day. But Jessica's car was nearly dry. Based on the amount of water beneath it, she'd been home for a while.

I found her sitting at the kitchen table with her tablet and phone in front of her. Before I could ask why she was home, she asked, "Where've you been?"

"Driving."

She leaned back and crossed her arms. "Where to?"

I knew she was angry from her tone, but I had no idea why. After all, I'm the one who was rejected in bed last night. If anyone had the right to be pissed off, it was me. "What's with the third degree?"

"You accused me of wanting you to be someone else." She raised her eyebrows. "But I'm beginning to think it's *you* who wants someone else. Who is she?" As I stood with my mouth hanging open, Jessica sprang from her chair. "Don't give me that dopey look. You've been gone for hours when you should have been home working. Who is she, Ethan?"

I laughed. "You think *I'm* having an affair?"

"There's another explanation? I'd love to hear it."

"An explanation for what? Going for a drive? I needed a break."

"Really. A break that took you to a house in Cawood."

"What the—? How do you know I went there?"

To get to Dory's in New Castleton, I'd driven through Cawood. On my way back, I'd pulled off the main road and parked outside some random house so I could participate in my Zoom meeting on my phone.

"How I know isn't important. You have one chance to save our marriage, Ethan. Tell me the truth."

I rubbed my hand over my face, Jessica's eyes widening for a moment. Part of me wanted to tell her about my jelly-donut addiction. That the only biking I did was to and from Dory's. That I'd driven for a half hour this morning so I could get my sugar rush, then had been forced to participate in an hour-long Zoom call with my team—including my boss—from the car because I couldn't get home in time. In the past, Jessica had always had my back. She might be disgusted with me now, but if I told her the truth, maybe she'd forgive my lies and help me.

But I couldn't stop thinking about her accusations and wondering how she knew I'd been in Cawood. Did she actually think I'd been in bed with someone there? She was projecting. Had to be. *She* was having an affair with *Philippe*, and to keep me off her trail, she'd accused me of her own bad behavior.

"This is rich," I said. "You leave our bed every morning at the crack of dawn to go *exercise*." I made air quotes around the word. "Then you suggest I start working out with your boy toy. Why? So he can have a good laugh at my expense?"

Her nostrils flared. "Don't you dare accuse me—"

"Of what?" I yelled. "Of humiliating me? How long have you been stepping out on me, Jess? And if you have someone else, why'd you bother begging me to exercise? Clearly, you're not in it for the long haul."

I shoved past her, grabbed a spoon, yanked the last jar of jelly from the fridge, and dug in.

"Is that what you really think of me?" she asked.

"What else am I supposed to think?" I mumbled around a mouthful of Smucker's grape. I'd have to buy more that afternoon.

"You're supposed to think I'm your wife and I love you and I've never given you any reason to doubt me. Unlike you, driving to a strip mall in New Castleton. Did you meet your lover for breakfast before going to her place? Tell me the truth. After all these years, I deserve it."

I slumped back against the granite counter, my mouth wrapped around the spoon as I tried to wrap my mind around what she'd said. "Did you hire a PI to follow me?"

"So you admit it."

“Answer me. How’d you know where I was?”

“You answer me,” she demanded.

“I’m not having an affair!” I hurled the jar at the wall.

Jessica recoiled as it crashed, exploding, the jelly and glass coating the floor, counters, and walls. She stared at me for a long time, as if I were a deranged stranger you’d pull your child away from on the street. Like she didn’t know me at all.

“The other night,” she admitted at last, “after you nearly hit me with your phone, I put a tracking app on it. Considering that Carol said you were gone for a while every morning, but your biking wasn’t producing weight loss, I wanted to see what you were up to. When I woke up yesterday, I felt bad about doubting you and invading your privacy. I was going to remove the app, but you were so eager to get rid of me in the park, I decided to leave it. Then I sat in my office this morning, watching your progression through the park, into town, and then back home. I knew you must have gotten in your car when your icon started moving much faster, heading out of town, so I drove home to watch. And wait.”

“I’m not having an affair,” I said again, calmly this time. “I’ve...I’ve got a problem.”

Once she’d started talking, I felt I could fess up too. I told her how I’d been going to Dory’s Donuts instead of biking. How it had become a compulsion. How Dory’s was robbed that morning, so I came home to drive to the one in New Castleton. How I couldn’t get home again in time, so I parked on a side street for my Zoom.

When I finished, she skated around the jelly and broken glass and dropped into a kitchen chair with the exhaustion of a marathoner who crossed the finish line. “That explains your biking into town this morning and coming back so quickly. And why you went to New Castleton.”

“And why I stopped in front of that house in Cawood.”

“And why you have jelly, not lipstick, on your collar.”

I tugged my shirt away from my neck. Fantastic. I’d looked this way for my meeting with my boss. “So, you believe me?”

“Is that everything? You’re not keeping anything else from me?”

“Nothing.”

“How’d you hurt your hand?”

I glanced down at my cracked knuckles. “It’s not important.”

She was quiet for a bit. “Do you really think I’ve been cheating on you?”

I shrugged. Now that my secrets were out, I didn’t have the energy to believe the worst of her anymore. “I guess not.”

“We need therapy, Ethan. You have to promise me there will be no more lies. No more secrets. And you have to get your temper under control.” She tilted her head toward the sticky mess on the floor. “I can’t live with someone who’s violent. I won’t.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Years ago, Jess cut her father out of her life because he beat up her mom one too many times. Jess wanted to call the cops, but her mom begged her not to. She didn’t want the public embarrassment. Jess didn’t care about that, but she did care about her mom, so she relented, even though her mom had nothing to be embarrassed about. I loved how strong and caring she could be.

“Okay.” She released a deep breath. “I’m going to my office. I’ll try to find us a therapist. And I’m going to have dinner with a friend, so don’t wait for me.” I reached to touch her arm as she passed, but she pulled away. “I’m not ready. You should move into the guest room until I can learn to trust you again.”

More than my compulsion to drive over twenty miles for donuts, more than the rage that had propelled me to smash the jelly jar, more than my self-loathing for causing her to be afraid of me, those last few words from Jessica hurt most of all.

As I heard her open the door to the garage, I gazed at the glass and jelly all over the kitchen. Just like my life, I didn't know how to clean up the mess.

#

Jessica came home close to bedtime. The prior evening I would have thought she'd been out doing the nasty with Philippe. Now I knew better. Jessica would never have an affair. How could I have thought otherwise? I wanted to tell her that, to say so many things. But she went straight to our bedroom and shut the door.

When I awoke the next morning, Jessica was gone, as usual. I fought the urge to call her. She needed space, and I wanted to give her that. To give her whatever she needed. To be the man she deserved. So I ate one of her energy bars, put on the fancy biking clothes she'd bought me, and went riding in the park—only the park. I didn't go anywhere near Dory's. I rode for twenty minutes, rested a while, then biked for twenty minutes more. It was hard, but I felt invigorated as I pedaled up our driveway. I was going to become the man she wanted me to be. I'd never be a competitive cyclist like my wife, but I would get my sugar under control so I could live a long time by her side.

I planned to tell her that tonight, but for now, I'd shower, make coffee, and focus on work. Once I had a full mug in hand, I padded to our kitchen table. It overlooked the front lawn, which had been yellowing before yesterday's rain but now was thick and green. Reborn, like I hoped our marriage would be once I proved to Jessica that I was serious about keeping my promises.

When I sat down in my usual chair, I noticed an envelope with my name on it in Jess's handwriting propped up between the salt and pepper shakers. With dread, I opened it. Inside were two sheets of paper, the first a printout of an article from our town's newspaper, today's online edition. The headline read: "Cyclist Killed in Attack." My hands shook as I read on:

Twitchell police are calling yesterday morning's death of cyclist Dean Krogan a homicide, spokeswoman Stephanie Stone said.

A witness reported seeing Krogan, 40, riding his bicycle over the Twitchell Park Bridge toward downtown about 10 a.m. when a cyclist riding in the opposite direction allegedly punched Krogan's helmet as the two crossed paths. The force of the blow caused Krogan to sail off his bike, over the railing, and into the Whitetop Stream below, where he subsequently drowned, Stone said.

"This was a vicious attack. The heavysset assailant rode off on a yellow bicycle into Twitchell Park," she said. "We have reason to believe it was the same agitated man one of our officers saw outside Dory's Donuts on Orchid Street a few minutes before. That man was Caucasian, also heavysset, in his thirties, and riding a yellow bicycle. He wore blue jeans, a gray shirt and helmet, and a black jacket. We urge anyone with information about this attack to reach out to our office."

Stone said it's unknown if the suspect was involved in the armed robbery at Dory's, which happened a half hour earlier.

Krogan's family could not be reached for comment.

I was hyperventilating by the time I reached the end. *No, no, no. I didn't mean for that to happen. I didn't realize he fell over the railing.*

I turned to the next sheet. A handwritten letter.

Ethan,

Maybe I could have forgiven your accusations and your lies about your diet and exercise. But I can't forgive you for killing a man because your temper once again got the best of you. Before you deny it, the tracking app told me it was you. At ten o'clock yesterday, you, your split knuckles, and your yellow bike were on that bridge.

If you'd told me the whole truth, I would have stood by you. But once again you lied, so we're done. I've left you a couple parting gifts. One should arrive shortly. The other's in the fridge.

Jessica

I closed my eyes. *I've lost her. I can't believe I've lost her.*

On wobbly legs, I made my way to the fridge and peeked inside. Front and center sat a box from Dory's holding a dozen jelly donuts. On its lid was a Post-it Note that said "Eat up."

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I bit into one. As the jelly oozed onto my tongue, I heard my dad whisper, *you're pathetic*. I devoured the donut in six bites. Then I ate another and another and another. I was licking jelly off my lips when motion outside the window caught my eye—a police car with flashing lights pulling into our driveway.

My second parting gift had arrived.

There probably wouldn't be jelly donuts in prison, but I bet there'd be exercise bikes.

And my dad, of course. No matter where I go, he comes with me.