

CLINIC

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I thought the place looked familiar, but I wasn't sure. I put down my plate of eggs, grabbed the TV remote, and turned up the sound. It was an abortion-clinic bombing: one bomb to lure the law, a second bomb to blow them up. I finished my eggs and got ready for a long day of hype and second-guessing and yellow tape. I'd been a TV reporter for fifteen years, and I'd grown to hate big stories: the competing pack of journalists, the producer's threats, the pressure to learn something that no one else knew, *anything*.

When I got there, I knew. It was the same clinic. The building was on a hill, set back from the street, camouflaged by trees. From behind the roadblock I could see the top of its two gray stories, rectangular pillars holding up the overhang. The scene was nothing like when I'd been there before. Federal agents searched the surrounding lots for a third bomb. Red cones marked debris and evidence, some of it three hundred yards away. But this *was* the place, and my heart hardened a little more at the memory of what would have been my child, and the hung-over morning when I cared about nothing except having another drink.

I drove, but I didn't go in. Marybeth led Martha into the building while I sat in the car, reading the paper and smoking. Martha and I had been together for about a year. I'd met her the same place I met everyone else: at the end of a bar. I was in my midthirties and had a good job, which made me attractive to women who were looking for ambivalence with a paycheck. At twenty-five, Martha wasn't beautiful. She was cute, small, and playful, with a quick smile and a chesty laugh. And I'd already cheated on her. In fact, I'd fucked Marybeth while Martha watched. It didn't start out that way, but that's how it ended up. And I didn't care, nor did I care when Martha told me she was pregnant. I was a real catch.

The only reason I came along at all was because Marybeth's folks owned a lake house up north, and we were going there afterward. Martha could recuperate, soothed by the water lapping the dock. I could drink. Sounded fair, with the exception of forfeiting my Friday-night boozing for the early-Saturday-morning departure. But I didn't want to appear completely inconsiderate.

Marybeth's father was insane. He saw ghosts. The lake house had been his retreat, until the ghosts got wind of it. Now it was empty for the most part, and the walls were covered with the father's delusional messages and ravings. I figured that alone was worth the three-hour drive, as long as I could drink and no one said a word on the way.

When they emerged from the clinic, Martha looked anemic. Marybeth held her arm. They walked across the lot like two people who'd just been in an accident: baby steps, heads down. I got out of the car, flicked my cigarette to the ground, and opened the back passenger door. Marybeth eased Martha inside.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said, as dispassionately as possible.

I tuned the radio to a classic-rock station, and for a song or two I forgot what this was all about. But no one sang along. No one wanted a beer. So I started to stew and pound the cans back, to dispel this funereal feeling. I checked on Martha in the rearview mirror. She didn't look particularly sad. She'd been through this twice before, that I knew of: once with a guy in an all-black rock band, and once with a boozier who later woke up on a train track with no legs. But there was something about her face, something missing, some part of her personality that wasn't there. It was just a face, and it pissed me off, her self-

indulgent pose of someone who really gave a shit. But I didn't say anything, just watched the wind play with her brown hair.

One exit past the billboard that invited us to "heaven," I stopped to buy more beer. "Them girls with you?" the man behind the counter asked, looking past my shoulder.

I was reading his T-shirt, a quote from an old hymn: "a wretch like me." The words stretched over his belly and into his pants. I looked back at the gas pump. Marybeth and Martha were standing by a dumpster, staring at the interstate.

"Yeah," I said and put a twenty down on the twelve-pack.

"Pretty," he said, and he hit the cash register with the heel of his hand. "Both of them."

I played with a pack of "energy pills," wondering if they worked.

The store was empty of customers, the floor littered with lottery-ticket stubs. The man took his time. He had the beet pink face of an unrecovered drinker, the snapped corpuscles. His head looked as if it were about to pop: cheeks pushed out, lip protruding, hairline receding. His arms looked like balloons twisted at the wrists. He tried to cross them but gave up.

"Amazing Grace," I said.

"What's that?" the man asked.

"Your shirt."

He looked down at it, pinched the material.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound," I said, "that saved a wretch like me."

He handed me my change. "Don't know nothing about that," he said. "My wife give it to me from the thrift."

I was disappointed. I don't know why.

"How far is the lake?" I asked.

"Twenty miles," he said. "Taking them girls up there?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Here you go, then." He threw the pack of pseudoephedrine with a flick of his wrist, and it hit me on my heart, hard.

"Have a good time," he said to my back. "You're gonna need all the amazing grace you can get, son."

The lake house wasn't a house at all. It was a trailer, a faded green coffin on cement blocks with a little deck that appeared to be made out of pallets. Had the weeds been higher, the scene would've looked pastoral, a composition of yellow and green with the gray background of the lake and a sky of storm clouds reflected in it. As it was, it just looked neglected, a forgotten hideout for a rusted mower and a crazy man.

(end of excerpt)