

Flight
by

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Terry Strum's wife, Marie, worked in the hospital emergency room. An ample woman, in her apple green smock and trousers, moving across their kitchen to the back door, she looked good enough to eat. Terry had in fact tasted her sweetness half an hour ago, half awake in the dark sheets, the heat of their bodies, the fresh cool of the room. The only reason he ever left the bed without a taste of his wife was when he got up at four to go shooting, or when Marie didn't want to, which wasn't often. He didn't brag about his marriage but he knew his buddies envied him. Strum, they'd say, how'd an ugly SOB like you get so lucky?

Marie's shift started at seven; she was on the road by six-thirty. The kids left twenty minutes later for the county high school, the same one where Terry had raised hell, an over-sized gap-toothed wild man, until Marie, a little thing back then, hair the color of a golden retriever's, took him in hand. At the kitchen table, he drank his coffee, strong with plenty of cream, watching Mikey and Bree at the counter, the two of them kidding around, scattering Twinkie crumbs. Mikey was almost eighteen, Bree fourteen months younger. They'd be out on their own soon, gone like the geese in summer, and it would be just Terry and Marie again. "Clean that mess up," Terry told them. Bree pointed at her brother. "Clean it," Terry repeated. Mikey reached for a sponge. Terry would miss the kids when they left, but hell, he and Marie had been together since they were kids themselves. They'd be fine, just the two of them.

After Mikey and Bree left, the house was his for a few minutes. He stepped outside to check the weather. A pale blue glow backlit the sycamores along the creek. Sunrise wasn't until 7:10. He heard geese honking and, farther off, a burst of pop-pops where some lucky bastard was getting in a mid-week shoot. On the weekend, Terry would be out there too, crouched in the silky dark, the only sound the water lapping at the creek bank, so quiet he could hear his heart pumping. Now he stuck his chest out into the morning and breathed.

Back in the kitchen, he set his coffee mug in the sink. Mikey and Bree would be across the river by now, Mikey driving the Merc, the radio screaming, both the kids belted in, the way they'd been taught. Marie would be in the emergency room tending to the god-awful things that happened to people who didn't use their belts or watch their speed. Terry put on his jacket and cap, checked to see he had his keys, wallet, double thick gloves, and he was off.

At Spicer's, he parked his Jeep in the yard. Lee Jones was there with the tree-eater and they got into Spicer's Dodge Ram, Terry driving, and headed north toward the condos on the river. Lee didn't say anything after "How's it goin'?" He was a local boy, a few years older than Mikey, hair a little too long for Terry's taste. His silence always made Terry talk. Today he started telling Lee about what Marie had seen in the ER on Sunday, three teenagers, not yet sixteen, bloody messes after ramming a pickup at the Pineville intersection. Killed the guy in the pickup. The teens weren't drunk, Marie said, just joy riding in an uncle's SUV.

"I heard the kids were tore up bad," Lee said.

“But not killed,” Terry pointed out, like the poor sucker in the pickup. Terry thought about the man. Had he seen the SUV coming? If he had, what had gone through his mind in that final instant? Was thought even possible then?

Lee, closer to the ages of the teens, said, “Shit. Those guys gotta live the rest of their lives.”

Spicer was already at the condo, watching the road as though he’d been waiting for them for hours. That was Spicer for you. He insisted on directing as Terry backed the truck into the driveway, the truck facing out into a cul-de-sac of two-story brick duplexes with glassed-in porches and two-car garages, yards full of pines and silver maples and dogwood. Terry didn’t know the people who lived in the houses, new people, some of them working as far away as Richmond. They’d moved here for the quiet life, the woods and water, maybe the wildlife, though Terry guessed they were golfers rather than hunters.

A man came out of the condo, carrying a briefcase that he put in his car, a shiny red Cherokee. Then he walked over to speak to Spicer. The man was maybe in his thirties, pink skin, already balding. Spicer shoved his hands in his pockets, nodding, while the man talked. Lee was hauling the tree-eater up one of the big pines. The door to the house opened and a little kid toddled out, followed by a woman in a lemon yellow jogging suit. The kid looked to be around two, maybe less. The mom was skinny, taller than Marie but a quarter her width. She leaned against the doorjamb, her arms crossed, while the baby made a beeline for his dad. The dad crouched down and wagged his fingers as the little man staggered toward him, but just when he was almost there, the kid swerved off in another direction. Everybody laughed, including Terry.

A few minutes later, the dad got into the Cherokee and drove away. The mom wasn't standing in the door anymore. Maybe she'd gone inside to give hell to some poor cleaning woman or phone her hairdresser. Terry didn't have a clue what these new people did. The little man was standing in the yard, baby jeans and tiny blue sweater, hair sticking up at the crown the way Mikey's used to do. Bam! He sat down on his butt like a bag of meal. His mouth opened but he didn't cry. By the time Terry had the saw out of the truck, the kid was playing with pinecones on the other side of the yard. Spicer had left to check on another crew. Lee was up in the tree, adjusting the harness, legs braced against the trunk, ignoring one of the prettiest sights he'd ever see if he lived to be a hundred, acres of glittering pinetops and in the distance, the Bay rippling with light. Terry had seen that view hundreds of times when he was the one who went up. It was that view he'd had in mind when he told Marie he sometimes felt they were living in the goddam Garden of Eden. As he got busy setting up the saw, the mom came out of the garage and scooped up the kid. About time, Terry thought. Then Lee yelled that the first limb was coming down.

At first, as he worked, Terry would catch glimpses of the mom's yellow suit in the garage, where she was moving boxes around. Once he saw her shake her finger at the kid, chewing out the little guy for something. After a while, he stopped noticing anything except the branches he was cutting, his head off in the zone where the saw's shrilling took him. He didn't use plugs anymore, ignoring the government rule. What did the government know? After his ears got a rash from the rubber, he'd thrown the plugs away. He enjoyed the brain buzz that not-hearing gave him. Marie would have a fit if he told her, so he didn't tell her. His hearing always came back. At one point, he looked up and

over his head twenty or thirty geese were flying in their wide V, wings spread, bellies blazing in the sun. He knew they were honking but he couldn't hear a sound. They seemed like little gods, flying up there. Then he noticed Lee up in the tree, holding one arm out and sighting along it, aiming at the geese.

By noon the truck was full of cut branches. Lee rappelled down and walked toward Terry, his mouth moving. Terry pointed to his ears and shook his head, then pointed to the truck and they both got in. It took him a couple of minutes to maneuver the truck out of the driveway. Because of the angle, he had to pull forward into the cul-de-sac, then back into the drive again, cutting the wheels so he could make the turn. As he backed, he felt, barely, the left rear tire go over something soft. It felt like a pile of pinecones. His ears were buzzing. All he could see in the rearview mirror was flat black asphalt. Lee was gesturing for Terry to move forward, pointing at the windshield with one hand and raising his other hand to his mouth as though he was knocking back a brew. Terry pulled out onto the road.

They were almost to the highway before his ears started working again, picking up the drone of the engine, the wheeze of air through the cracked window. But Lee's lips were moving and he couldn't hear a word. What the hell? Terry stuck his finger in his ear. "Gotcha," Lee cackled. Smart-ass kid. Terry scowled at him. "How about we go to Tide's and get us some fried oyster sandwiches," Lee said. Terry nodded okay, though the truth was he wasn't hungry. That bump on the driveway bothered the hell out of him. He'd cleaned all the debris off the drive. He was careful about cleaning up, which was why Spicer liked him to do the ground work. So what had he missed? He and Lee had to go back to the condo after lunch. He'd check it out then.

On the highway he kept the truck at 35, knowing that Lance Higgins liked to park his cruiser next to the ball field. Lance wasn't there today, enforcing the law somewhere else. They drove to Spicer's, where they dumped the wood. While they were stacking it, they heard a siren screaming through town. Lee didn't seem to notice. A second siren screamed a minute later, but Lee didn't look up then, either.

At Tide's, they ate in a booth. The music was on and they didn't talk. Lee kept shaking his hair back so it wouldn't fall into his sandwich. Lee ought to cut that hair. Terry would have told him, but his gut didn't feel good. He tried thinking about Saturday when he and Mikey would go down to the creek before dawn, the two of them waiting in the reeds in the chilly blue until they heard the honk-honking of the geese that would cause Terry's breath to quicken and his chest to swell like a bellows. Then a siren screamed again and he saw an ambulance flash by, heading south toward the hospital. He pushed his sandwich away.

They didn't talk on the way back. The road sparkled in the hard sun. Terry was driving 50 in a 35 zone, then he upped to 65, came back down to 40. Maybe he wouldn't go hunting on Saturday. Marie wasn't keen on hunting. Too many accidents. She'd seen the results in the ER. He tried to picture Marie's face when he told her he wasn't going shooting. "You sick?" she'd ask. "No," he'd say. She'd put her hands on her soft swelling hips. "What, then?"

The sun was straight overhead, no shadows in the woods where the condos were. A police car sat parked on the roadside. Lance Higgins was standing in the yard, talking on his cell. He turned as Terry pulled onto the verge, stood there a minute, then stuck the phone in his belt and started toward them, looking down. Terry got out of the truck and

waited. He didn't see any branches on the driveway. He hadn't expected to. "What, then?" Marie would ask, but when Terry tried to tell her, not a sound came out of his mouth

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