

Don't Forget You Love Me

by Danny Goodman

Hannah took a long lunch and drove through the falling snow towards home. The expressway was clear of traffic but as yet unsalted, and Hannah felt the car, every few moments, gliding just above the road. She ignored the static that had replaced Joan Baez on the radio. It was a song she adored, but one that caused disagreement between her and Ethan, who could never agree on whether the song originated with Baez or Bob Dylan. At this point, nearly ten years on, Hannah no longer cared who was right. The arguing, it seemed, brought her closer to Ethan.

The blinker ticked like an old clock as she exited, and Hannah pressed heavy on the gas. The BMW was nearing its final miles, but Hannah could not imagine getting rid of it, despite the chipping paint and sharp coughs. She enjoyed the way her body settled into the worn leather, the smell of dark roast soaked into the canvas top, the way the shifter would stick between third and fourth gear. Hannah felt her muscles stretch as she depressed the clutch and turned into the driveway. Ethan had shoveled and made a snow angel in the front yard. Alicia had made a small, imperfect angel beside Ethan's. The two angels connected, just slightly, in the middle.

Hannah's heels caught in the wet grass under the snow and brought bits of earth with them into the house. She left them by the front door and sucked in the heat. Everything was still, and Hannah found it unnerving. She called out for her husband and daughter, but neither answered. The hardwood floor held in the cold and made Hannah's toes curl. Both Ethan and Alicia's winter coats had been tossed on the floor at the back door. Hannah heard laughing in the yard and watched Ethan and Alicia trade snowballs. Alicia landed one smack in Ethan's face, which produced a laughing fit so strong it knocked Alicia to the ground. Ethan ran across the yard and tickled his daughter until she swore she'd pee on him. Hannah stepped outside and tiptoed into the grass, the soft snow soaking through the

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feet of her tights. She packed a small snowball and tossed it at Ethan. The flakes came apart and trickled over Ethan and Alicia, who both looked up.

“Hey,” Ethan asked, “what are you doing home?”

“Hi, Mommy,” Alicia said then mushed a handful of snow into Ethan's cheek.

“Thought I'd take a long lunch today,” Hannah said. “Why isn't her coat on?”

Ethan stood and picked up Alicia. As he walked towards her, Hannah felt the urge to slap him. Instead, she put her hand on Ethan's cheek, wiping away remnants of the snow. He hadn't shaved in days, and she liked the way his bristled skin felt on her fingers. He handed her Alicia, and Hannah slid her fingers in between Alicia's.

“She's freezing, Ethan.”

“It was just a minute, honey,” Ethan said, opening the back door. “Nothing to worry over. She's fine.”

“You're so irresponsible.” Hannah kicked the moisture from her feet and walked past Ethan. “I'm tired of being the bad guy.”

Hannah put Alicia down and told her to wash her hands with warm water. The sound of Alicia's footsteps bounding up the stairs shook through the house. Hannah went to the kitchen and rifled through a week's worth of leftovers. A plate of roasted eggplant appeared close to rotten, but Hannah left it alone. The spaghetti was all that looked edible.

“Hey, don't do that in front of her,” Ethan said, stepping up to the refrigerator. “You make her feel bad, like it's her fault.”

“Don't you fucking dare,” Hannah whispered. “Don't you martyr yourself.” She slammed shut the refrigerator door.

“Martyr—what are you talking about?” he asked, pointing a finger at Hannah. “If you have a problem with the way I interact with our daughter, just tell me when she's not around, okay? Until then, do not critique my parenting.”

Hannah kept her back to him and placed a bowl of spaghetti in the microwave. The hum of machine and constant click of rotating

glass temporarily calmed her. She could feel Ethan standing across the kitchen, staring at her. This was what he did, she thought. He delivered a "close," something he felt ended their argument, and then stood. Stoic and silent. It was maddening. *Just talk*, she thought, *you smug bastard. Have the decency to argue with me.* The microwave beeped and Hannah removed the bowl, which burned her fingers. The pasta, however, was cold. Hannah ignored that fact and twirled a forkful. She took a bite, then another, then another. Her back remained to Ethan as she ate and, when she finished the pasta, she turned around to the sink. Ethan, at some point, had walked away.

Hannah stood at the base of the stairs and called for Alicia, who came down with a book in hand.

"Want to read, Mommy?" she asked, holding the book up for Hannah to take.

"That would be lovely," Hannah said, smiling, and took the book from Alicia. "On the couch. I'll be right there."

Alicia skipped into the living room and hopped onto the couch. She giggled and Hannah fought the urge to cry. She went up the first few steps, hoping to face Ethan and continue the argument, but she stopped. Standing in the stairwell, Hannah gripped her daughter's book and wondered why she did this, why she bothered with the long lunches and extra vacation days. None of it seemed to matter anymore. She was jealous of Ethan, of the time he spent at home with Alicia. But that wasn't it. No, it was Ethan. Their marriage. The silences that now supplanted their conversations. He leaned over every night before falling asleep and kissed her shoulder and said, *Don't forget you love me.* The words meant something once, when they were young and perfect. When she couldn't imagine, even for a moment, forgetting how much she loved him. Now, she could barely look at him. He knew, she thought, but he didn't care. Perhaps he had forgotten. She had tried, for some time, to remind him, but everything ended in futility. Something new interrupted them, something unfamiliar and broken. She was at a loss as to what to do next. Leaning against the wall of the stairwell,

she watched her daughter. Hannah took quick, unsatisfying breaths. Her marriage was worn, stuck between gears. It seemed the final miles had already come.

Ethan called Hannah just before five on Friday and asked her to pick up wine on her way home. Stephen and Kathryn, their neighbors and dearest friends, were coming over for dinner. He assured her that he would cook everything, that she wouldn't have to lift a finger. *Just the wine*, he said. Hannah wasn't much of a cook, but Ethan had spent several years as a line chef during graduate school and still enjoyed entertaining guests. That was another difference between them—Ethan loved people around, the hustle and bustle of a cocktail party or neighborhood barbecue; Hannah preferred quiet. She enjoyed the three of them, side by side on the living room couch, eating off TV trays and watching *Jeopardy!*.

She stopped at a wine shop near the house and bought bottles of Chenin blanc and Zinfandel. Days of snow had turned to a black slush along the streets, and the evening felt unseasonably warm. Hannah opened the window and turned off the heat, letting the car fill with the Locust Valley air. She took a deep breath and thought about the last time Ethan had made love to her. It was weeks ago. The act itself ended quickly, with very little buildup. Hannah had come home for lunch unexpectedly, and Ethan stood in the living room, as if he'd been waiting for her. He kissed her, severe and direct, biting her ear and leaving marks on her neck. Hannah could feel he was already hard, and he slipped off her underwear and took her on the dining room table. Alicia, he said, had gone to a friend's house. He was assertive as he pushed into her. When he came, he dug his rough fingers into her thighs. She had bruises in those spots for days, and she traced them into the shape of Ethan's hand. Afterwards, he smiled and kissed her and went upstairs. Hannah stayed on the dining room table for several minutes before driving back to work. She replayed the moment over in her mind as she pulled into the driveway, wine bottles clicking across the floor. The car refused to shift into first gear, grinding and whining with each

attempt, and Hannah jerked and shoved until, finally, she left the car in neutral.

Kathryn was already on the couch when Hannah arrived, watching television alongside Alicia. Kathryn smiled and waved at Hannah, who closed the door hard, her presence reverberating through the house. Alicia turned and poked her head over the couch. She wore her *Dora the Explorer* pajamas, and her fire red hair was brushed and straight. Hannah could note each freckle on her face.

"You're late," Alicia said, then turned back to the television.

"Well hello to you, too," Hannah said, leaning down and kissing Alicia's head. "Is that any way to greet your mother?"

Alicia ignored the question and cooed at the television. A group of small, rodent-like creatures were gathered around a mound of dirt; the narrator, who sounded like Stockard Channing, referred to each by name and included bits of dialogue. Hannah looked at Kathryn, who sipped at a cloudy martini and grinned much like Alicia.

"What is this?" Hannah asked, confused.

"*Meerkat Manor*," Alicia yelled, then shushed her mother.

"It's a great show," Kathryn said. "Alicia really likes it."

Hannah pretended not to hear the last part. She walked into the kitchen and let the wine bottles clang onto the marble countertop. A variety of cheeses was spread atop the dining room table, and Hannah noted how little she liked the blue, veiny ones. They should be thrown out, she thought, not eaten.

"Have any yet?" Hannah asked Kathryn, pointing to the assortment.

"No," Kathryn said then stood and walked towards Hannah. "We were waiting for you."

"Where are our boys?" Hannah asked. She used one of Ethan's paring knives to cut the foil from the Zinfandel, leaving the edges frayed and sharp. The corkscrew slid in with ease, and Hannah pulled back gently until a pop of air escaping released the cork. The Zinfandel smelled sweet and spicy and reminded Hannah of winter.

“Upstairs. Ethan's showing off his final draft. Stephen was practically drooling.” Kathryn finished her martini, and Hannah poured them both a glass of Zinfandel.

“So it begins,” Hannah said. The two clinked glasses and sipped. Hannah let the wine soak through her lips and tongue. She smiled at Kathryn, the best she could.

Alicia jumped into the kitchen and startled Hannah.

“Over!” Alicia yelled, her arms spread in the air as wide as they could go. She ran to Hannah and wrapped them around her leg.

“Yeah?” Hannah said. “What now, little muffin?”

“Movie!” Alicia said, smiling large at her mother.

Hannah laughed and ran her fingers through Alicia's hair. There was a comfort in that, in her daughter, in the only thing, perhaps, that was still wholly her own. Ethan, she knew, had been shared for some time.

“How about we put one on in your room and you get into bed?”

Alicia seemed to consider the proposition for a moment before bouncing up and down and agreeing. “Can I have juice?” she asked.

“Of course,” Hannah said, handing Alicia a small cup with a top. “Want to pour it yourself?”

“Yes yes,” Alicia said and opened the refrigerator door.

As she slowly filled her cup with orange juice, a bitter smell filled the kitchen. Hannah closed the door and hoped no one, especially Kathryn, would notice.

Alicia finished and grabbed Hannah's hand. “Come, Mommy.”

She pulled Hannah into the living room, found *Lilo & Stitch*, and ran upstairs. Hannah turned on the movie and tucked her daughter into bed. The comforter was tight around Alicia's thin frame, and Hannah kissed her on the tip of her nose. She raised her forefinger and used it to softly trace the invisible lines connecting her daughter's freckles. Hannah stood and turned off the light.

“Goodnight, booger,” Hannah said, making Alicia giggle.

“Tell Daddy to come in,” Alicia said and took a sip of juice.

Hannah said okay and watched the television light dance over Alicia's face. She left the bedroom door open just enough to remain there, unnoticed.

Upon coming downstairs, Hannah found everyone at the dining room table.

"Your daughter wants you to say goodnight," Hannah said.

Ethan turned to her, kissed her on the cheek. "Hello, young lady," he said.

"You should go now before she falls asleep."

"I'll go up in a minute," Ethan said, moving in and out of the kitchen with various dishes.

"Everything smells brilliant," Kathryn said.

Hannah hated when Kathryn said *brilliant*. It was one of many words that she had adopted while living in London some years before. Hannah was unsure how anything could *smell* brilliant.

"Do you mind?" Stephen asked, reaching for the bottle of Chenin blanc.

"No," Hannah said, "by all means."

No one spoke as each of them filled their plates with food and their glasses with wine. There was a familiarity between the four of them, having been close for so many years, and often Hannah found that the long bits of silence were the most satisfying of their dinners.

"There's something rotten in your fridge," Kathryn said, interrupting the sound of silverware against porcelain.

"You don't say," Hannah said, annoyed and embarrassed. She tried to make it sound polite.

Ethan sipped his wine and held the glass to his mouth for a long moment. Hannah watched him, his eyes, as he stared at Kathryn. It was only for a few seconds, but Hannah felt as if hours had passed. The dinner continued this way, with Ethan and Kathryn exchanging hasty, unassuming glances. Hannah could not remember the last time Ethan really looked at her. Stephen seemed unfazed, concerned instead with complimenting various elements of Ethan's new novel.

"How long did it take to write the ending?" Stephen asked.

“Not long,” Ethan said. “I knew from the start how things would end.”

“Isn't it hard to write that way?” Kathryn said, finishing her wine. “Kind of takes all the mystery out of it.”

“It's the only way I know,” Ethan said.

Hannah kept her gaze on her plate and separated each item so that none was touching. She hadn't done that since she was a child, and she felt unsure as to why. Everything needed its own place, she thought. The table filled with the ting of silverware against plate. Someone needed to say something.

“Do you ever think about how weird it is,” Stephen asked, “that we're still so close?”

Hannah knew Stephen became terribly uncomfortable in silences.

“What does that mean?” Ethan said. He turned and crossed his legs, as if to give Stephen his full attention.

“I don't know,” Stephen said. “There aren't a lot of people who stay friends this long, are there? It should make us grateful that the people we're surrounded by are the people most precious to us.”

Kathryn reached over and took Stephen's hand. She gripped it for a moment then released.

“Well those are the only people here,” Hannah said.

Ethan finished his wine and rubbed at his beard.

Kathryn raised her glass. “We're very lucky.”

Just then, Stephen looked up at Hannah. His eyes, filled with resignation, were different than Hannah had ever seen them. He knew, she thought, about Kathryn and Ethan. He knew as well as she did. Had he always known? Hannah thought back to previous dinners, nights out between the four of them. She couldn't remember Stephen looking that way before. Perhaps the look had been there, though, buried all along beneath a pile of naiveté and old friendship. In any case, something had changed, and she stared back at Stephen, who looked, to Hannah, like he might fall to pieces.

Hannah stood and began clearing the table. She announced that, afterwards, she would empty the contents of the refrigerator.

"That seems a bit much," Kathryn said. "Just throw away what's rotten."

"Maybe," Hannah said. "Maybe. But it's the only way I know."

Hannah went into the kitchen and turned on the faucet. She let the water become hot and run over her hands and wrists. She drizzled soap over the dirty dishes and scrubbed. She scrubbed well beyond when necessary. The conversation continued in the dining room, more talk about Ethan's novel, Kathryn's latest sale, Stephen's new softball league. It was the same conversation they'd had for years. Nothing had changed. Hannah hated it all, the silence and banter. Everything had become rotten. And yet, she found herself incapable of movement, incapable of forgetting the worn, familiar ridges of their friendship.

That night, Ethan climbed into bed long after Hannah. He leaned into her, pushed his chest into her back, and gently kissed her shoulder. *Don't forget*, he said. Hannah leaned back into him, letting his beard press against her skin. She imagined, if she could only stay like that, things would be okay. She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep, listening to Ethan breathe in and out, in and out. She took comfort in the sound.

